



CIRCLE OF LIFE STUDIOS: INDIGO SEED TO DYE PROJECT

by Debra Ketchum Jircik



ROWLAND RICKETTS

I have been growing *persicaria tinctoria* (Japanese indigo) in northern Wisconsin since 2014. It was a natural direction as process-oriented art has been at the core of my artistic practice. I have been a papermaker for more than 25 years, often processing locally grown and harvested plants. My research into indigo growing methods led me to the work of artist and indigo dyer **Rowland Ricketts**, who apprenticed in Japan and learned traditional techniques of growing and processing indigo. Each year since, I have grown, harvested, dried and saved plants with the intention of making my own small-batch indigo and a traditional Japanese-style indigo vat. Unlike other dyes, indigo is not water-soluble, and it is necessary to extract the color from the leaves. This process can be accomplished in different ways across many cultures. In Japan, it is traditionally done by fermenting a minimum of 400 pounds of dry leaf matter for 120 days. Composting a large

volume of leaves maintains the level of heat necessary to break down the leaves, in order to extract maximum color to make the dyestuff known as sukumo.

In early 2017, I applied for the Personal Development Grant from **Surface Design Association** to support my travel to Japan where I would immerse myself in the study of traditional Japanese indigo processes. To my great surprise and delight, I was awarded a grant.

In mid-October 2017, with a dear friend who is a quilt maker and natural dyer, I set off for Japan. We began our trip with a 10-day intensive course in indigo dyeing and Japanese textiles with **Bryan Whitehead** of **Japanese Textile Workshops**. Bryan, a native of Canada, is well known through his blog (Japanese Textile Workshops). The workshops took place in

a 150-year-old silkworm farmhouse located in the mountains about an hour and a half outside Tokyo in Fujino, Kanagawa.

Bryan is an exceptional teacher, guide and storyteller as well as a gifted artist and writer. Having lived in Japan for 30 years, he provides both cultural and historical context for indigo and the Japanese textile techniques we practiced. **Hiromiti Yano**, also an artist, co-hosts the workshops. While Bryan lectures and teaches, Hiro offers warm hospitality in the form of exquisite ikebana and incredible food. In addition to living and working in the most spectacular countryside, we were also treated to many adventures, among them a day experiencing indigo katzome (rice paste resist through a hand cut stencil) dyeing with **Noguchi-san**, a sixth-generation dyer of textiles for yukata (traditional summer kimono).

Between lectures around the table, special tours to Tokyo antique textile collectors and the **Folk Craft Museum**, visits to

local artisans and an onsen (Japanese hot spring), phenomenal meals, and one night spent with a bag packed by our bedsides in anticipation of a possible typhoon evacuation, we worked from morning to night on stitched resist shibori projects and katzome preparation.

Just before twilight one morning, our first day of indigo dyeing came at last. After dipping each textile ten times in the indigo vat, we made our way by foot to the nearby river. Climbing down a metal ladder to the river and fish ladder below, we rinsed our textiles in the traditional way, barefoot in cold water, slapping the wet cloth against the rocks and concrete to remove unfixed indigo.

Left page: *Persicaria Tinctoria* beginning to flower in Fujino, Kanagawa, Japan. Photo: Bryan Whitehead.

Japanese Textile Workshops in Fujino, Kanagawa, Japan. Photo: Bryan Whitehead.





Left side, top: **Bryan Whitehead** of Japanese Textile Workshops doing katzome dyeing in his indigo vat. Photo: Bryan Whitehead.

Left side, bottom: Picking stems out of dried indigo leaves to prepare to make sukumo at Circle of Life Studio, Wisconsin. Photo: Norma Dycus Pennycuff.

Right side, top: Cleaning stems out of dried persicaria tinctoria leaves to prepare to make sukumo at Circle of Life Studio, Wisconsin. Photo: Norma Dycus Pennycuff.



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I was hungry for a chance to learn indigo processing methods, and discovered that Bryan's assistant **Ishii Takayuki**, was teaching a class to Japanese students in traditional Japanese indigo from seeds to dye, as part of a local project which encourages a new generation to continue these traditions. I was fortunate to participate on a day they made sukumo. There were two composting piles of indigo: one with about 70 kg of dried leaves covered with tatami mats, and another of 7kg of leaves in a wooden barrel. I helped turn the moist, rich, blue-black mounds of decomposing indigo leaves while someone applied water. After we finished, we placed tatami mats over the larger pile and wrapped the smaller amount in a light gauze on a bed of rice hulls, which were put in the wood barrel and covered with rice straw, to retain the heat for the decomposition. The composting plants filled the air with an ammonia smell; it was incredibly thrilling to be there with the Japanese students. I was filled with hope that I might process indigo on a small scale, something I had been experimenting with at home in a salvaged Styrofoam cooler behind my wood stove during the winter months.

The indigo study trip would not be complete without a visit to Tokushima on the island of Shikoku, known as the island of the 88-temple pilgrimage. Awa (the historical name for Tokushima)



is the place where indigo flourished historically, where 50 families continue to farm indigo and where five families still produce most of Japan's sukumo. On the last day of October we visited the eighth-generation **Awagami Paper Factory** and the farm-to-closet artisans at **Buaisou**.

We spent the morning immersed in aizome washi (indigo dyed paper) with Awagami's master dyer, and wife of the family patriarch, **Mieko Fujimori**. Mieko-san taught us about the process of dyeing washi with Awa-ai (Tokushima produced sukumo).

After lunch we arrived at Buaisou and were greeted by the women of the team, operations manager **Kyoko Nishimoto** and **Gwen Chan**. Gwen served us indigo tea while she told us the story of their business and process. We each dyed a furoshiki (traditional Japanese wrapping cloth) in the sukumo vats. Touring the studio, greenhouses, nedoko (traditional "sleeping room" for sukumo production) and walking the fields gave us a glimpse of the hard work that goes into keeping this tradition alive. I also came away with a copy of "Awa Natural Indigo"

(recently translated into English), which has proven to be an invaluable resource.

Our last essential indigo destination was **The Little Indigo Museum** in Kita, an enchanting village of 200-year-old, thatched-roof farmhouses in the mountains of Miyama. It takes two trains and a bus ride from Kyoto Station to get there. Hiroyuki Shindo has a collection of indigo textiles from around the world. He took the time to show us his studio on the lower floor, with traditional in-floor vats of indigo and his inventive equipment and shared his dye processes. It was an honor to meet Shindo-san and his wife, who are both welcoming, generous and humble. One would never know he is an internationally acclaimed artist with work exhibited in the **Museum of Modern Art**.

Since returning from Japan, Ishii Takayuki and I have stayed in contact through Instagram messaging and translation apps. He

View of Mount Fuji from the road near Japanese Textile Workshops, Fujino, Kanagawa, Japan. Photo: Bryan Whitehead.





currently runs his own seeds-to-dye studio, **Awonoyoh** (“Blue’s Effect”), in Fujino, where he shares his passion for preserving traditional indigo culture through teaching. He even used Instagram to walk me through the building of a traditional vat.

In September 2019, Takayuki and his wife Tomo visited northern Wisconsin to share the traditions of Japanese indigo. Their visit was made possible through sponsorship from our local community college and community partnerships. We organized a two-day gathering with indigo growers and dyers from all over Wisconsin. Using Taka’s methods, by the end of two months I had sukumo. It is currently aging, waiting for the vat I will build in late spring. With care and some luck, I hope to be able to use the dye through the end of 2020.

I am filled with gratitude as I contemplate this trip in all its rich layers, from the beauty of the landscape, to the fantastic

public transportation system, to the kindness and generosity of the Japanese people. I am currently researching and planning my next visit.

japanesetextileworkshops.blogspot.com

—Debra Ketchum Jircik is an artist, hand papermaker, teacher, and student of natural dyeing. She grows and processes indigo in northern Wisconsin. circleoflifestudio.com

Left page: Katazome dyeing in the vat, Japanese Textile Workshops, Fujino, Kanagawa, Japan. Photo: Bryan Whitehead.

Debra Ketchum Jircik Ai (How Do You Say Love) (diptych) 2019, handmade paper, indigo-dyed, sumi ink, blue denim rag, stitched. Photo: Kitty Sookochoff.