The Hut of Curiosity

Artist Nabil Ali
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A small mid-19th-century brick hut is located in the middle of Cambridge University Botanic Garden and is a space that stages an installation depicting dyes placed in glass vessels with dyed silk fabrics. It is dark. Looking deep through the depths of the doorway of the Custodian Hut into a world of colour, obscurities and our reflections from a fragile world that is forever changing. It is an installation that runs alongside Cambridge Botanic Lights winter trail, that comes alive during the cold nights – lighting up the plants in the garden and waiting for the sun to return its journey from the Winter Solstice in supporting life in the coming year.

The Hut of Curiosity (THOC) is a space which expresses colour made from plants growing in Cambridge University Botanic Garden. The plants were collected by artist Nabil Ali and processed into dyes and colourants that will be catalogued into a dye research database.
Some of the plants have been used in different cultures for thousands of years on textiles and as paint and are mentioned as dye plants in historical manuscripts across the periods of time.

The display will organically transform and morph throughout the artist residency to develop into additional art installations connected to nature, dyes and a world of colour. Nabil is working with the seasons and exploring the garden’s Living Collection of plants whilst seeing the garden in a different way.
Custodian Hut – Mid c.19th
Harlequin Glorybower – *Clerodendrum trichotomum*

The small Asian tree produces delicate pinkish-red flowers in Summer-Autumn with the ripe vivid blue berries used as a dye and last to fall after the leaves and petals. No mordant is necessary when processing the berries as a dye which creates a soft bluish-green colour on silks.

Portuguese Cherry Laurel – *Prunus lusitania*

An evergreen shrub or small tree produces plentiful of dark berries late Summer and was used to create a purple dye to dye silks. The berries can also produce a solid deep blue colourant from the fresh berries and when a tin mordant is added it becomes a pinkish-purple.

Weld – *Reseda luteola*

This is an old dye plant that produces a stable yellow dye from the whole plant and grows as a weed on disturbed ground. Several 15th-century weld dye recipes can be found in Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense, Ms.1793
and also in the Middle-English Gloucester, Cathedral Library, Ms. 34. Add. ff.168v–172, which focuses on staining methods and techniques.

The National Library of Scotland holds a 15th-century manuscript – Adv. Ms. 23.7.11 that explains recipes to dye yellow silks using weld with a simple dye method of heating the plant in water with an alum mordant to make a yellow. Silks in the Hut of Curiosity have been dyed using weld collected from the botanic garden with a small amount of verdigris pigment added to the weld dye in the glass vessel to make a subtle green.

The weld dyed silks were also over-dyed using the madder root and produced soft orange hues, which can be seen in the vessels in THOC. This over dyeing technique can also be done using woad dye and is an old method to reduce a solid green fabric.
Harlequin Glorybower  Ripe Berries – Clerodendrum trichotomum
Silk dyed with Clerodendrum trichotomum
Madder Root – *Rubia tinctorum*

The plant has been cultivated since early cultures, through Christian periods to the flamboyancy of the Renaissance, up to contemporary thinking. Red. It has been with civilisation since the dawn of time and has been growing in Cambridge University Botanic Garden for decades.

Previously, madder dye have been found on artefacts from ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, and was included in dye production in earlier cultures of Persia and Mesopotamia.

In the 12th-century manuscript *De diversis artibus*, London, British Library, Ms. Harley 3915 describes how to stain elephant, stag and fish bones red using the madder root. A later 15th-century Middle-English manuscript – *San Marino, Huntington Library MS HU 1051* – explains how to make a madder red using vinegar, an alum mordant which is mixed with some brazilwood. Madder is the chief of organic reds and has been used in The Hut of Curiosity as red and mixed with organic yellows to produce oranges on silks.
Buckthorn Berries – *Rhamnus cathartic*

The unripe berries of the buckthorn plant produces a strong yellow dye and perfect as an over-dye with woad or indigo to make a good green colour.

The dye can be mixed with chalk hand-collected from an English quarry to produce a yellow paint using similar techniques described by the first-century architect Vitruvius in his ‘*Ten Books on Architecture*’ treatise on producing a Attic Ochre colour using the viola plant (*Viola lutea*).

Traditionally, the berries were made into a yellow dye – also named Giallo Santo – with ‘azure’ (blue) added to form a green dye as described in the 15th-century manuscript *Paris, Bibliothéque Nationale de France, Ms.Latin 6741. ff.43-51*. This manuscript was re-written by Jehan Le Begue; and in the *Segreti per Colori, Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, Ms. 286*. 
Portuguese Cherry Laurel
Silk dyed with Portuguese Cherry Laurel
Weld – Reseda luteola
Horticultural staff digging up Madder root
Rubia tinctorum | Madder Root

Fresh Madder Root
Silk dyed with Madder Root
Silk dyed with the unripe Buckthorn Berries
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‘The Hut of Curiosity’ – is an Art Installation inside a c.19th Custodian Hut. It is part of the DYE, Nature, Myth & Climate project that is included in the Cambridge Botanic Lights winter event from 1st–22nd Dec 2023.

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www.nabil-ali.wixsite.com/artist
artistnabilali@gmail.com