

Celebrating Nature and Its Many Treasures Using Strip Cloth

by Liz Hewitt

My love of African strip cloth started in 2005; it's a fabulous organic cloth, made from 100% hand spun cotton from Burkina Faso or tree cotton/tree silk, similar to kapok, from The Gambia. It is a delight to hand stitch and dyes beautifully. The making, use and meaning associated with strip cloth (right) fascinates me.



Over the last few years, I started to look for ways to make my work more environmentally friendly, using less acrylic paint and Procion dye, more in keeping with traditional use of strip cloth, coloured by naturally occurring pigments. Strip cloth is coloured with iron rich mud, producing Bogolan (mud cloths, see right). It is endlessly intriguing that these are thought to have healing, protection and comfort properties.



First, cloth is immersed in a mordant made from leaves, colouring it yellow (mud cloth materials, see below). The artist paints the design onto its surface with mud that has been aged for up to a year. Tannins in the mordant react chemically with iron oxides in the mud to create the

black design. Mud is washed off and any yellow mordant that has not been coloured black is bleached back to white with a solution of millet bran, peanuts and caustic soda. Repeating this many times deepens the shade of black. I initially tried using an iron rich mud collected locally around Bristol but, without the African mordant, it proved unsuccessful. I decided more research was needed into using mud to colour the cloth.

After seeing Regina Benson's work at FOQ in

2009, I researched how to use rust to colour and stain cloth. I started by using salt water, the best source being the sea.

I wrap strip cloth around rusty bits collected on walks along the Cornish coast, then tie it very tightly into a bundle (top of page 21) before dunking it into the sea, while trying not to get soaked. I get very strange looks from people who wonder what on earth I am trying to catch!



Leaving the bundles wet for a couple of days results in lovely orange marks, never the same twice. Take care – if left too long, it will transfer a layer of rusty metal to the cloth or eat through it. Also, please be very careful when handling rust; always wear gloves to prevent getting pieces in your skin and be careful not to inhale the dust. Vinegar gives very quick results but the fumes can be harmful as I found to my cost. It may take longer with salt water, but it's well worth the wait! Rust dyeing works well on all natural fabrics, including strip cloth.



Alice Fox and India Flint introduced me to using tea with rust to mark fabric and paper. It produces a much more inert form of rust, and a lovely rusty orange plus greys, brown and blacks.

I soak the cloth in a tea solution and then wrap it around rust, leaving it for a minimum of 24 hours or add a cloth and rust bundle to my Eco-dyeing (of which more in my next article). For the result of using tea with rust, see *Reflection* (left).

Most of my rust dyed pieces are inspired by the marks left behind by the tin mining and fishing industries on the coastal landscape of Cornwall. The rust pieces are collected on walks along the beaches and coast path, especially near old mine ruins, then dunked in the Cornish sea or dyed with tea made with Cornish soft water, which yields the most wonderful marks in just a few hours. The marks giving an impression of past times, creating long strip maps of the area.



The rust-stained cloths are patched, pieced, heavily stitched and sometimes combined with strips of West African mud cloth (Flow, detail right). I also rust dye Khadi papers (cotton rag) with tea, which are then made into books, as little documents of my walks (see Khadi paper page 22, top right).

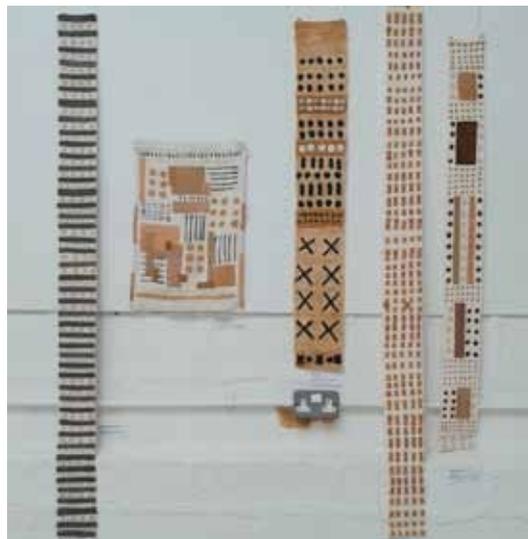


Recently I found a way to create my own mud cloth using natural pigments to make paints. At first, I mixed commercially refined pigments with homemade soya milk or gum arabic but now, I collect my own ochres. It's a long process but it means my work has a stronger sense of place (Natural Pigment Cloths, below left).



As well as colouring strip cloth with the minerals in mud, it also dyes successfully with pigments from plants. A country girl at heart, I have always used nature and, in particular, trees as inspiration, with a special interest in the myths and uses people have found for botanical material throughout the centuries. Eco-printing and natural dyeing are two ways in which leaves and flowers can be used to create wonderful colours and images; these will be the subject of the next part of my article, in September. See Woodland Walk, below right. In the meantime, there is so much more to learn and, this year, I am starting to grow my own dye plants; perhaps by the next Newsletter, I will have some results. I hope I will be able to show you how you can make your work more ecologically sustainable; the unpredictability is so exciting, with different results every time.

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Photography by Needlevision photography and Bob Urwin

A Quilted Tribute to a Family Hero

by Joyce Smith

I made this A3 quilt in 2014 in memory of my grandad, Frederick Coupe, who was awarded the Military Medal for 'Laying and repairing telephone lines under heavy shell-fire, 20th September 1917'.

He signed up with two of his brothers to the Loyal North Lancs Regiment and was sent to France. With the help of research from various websites, my husband was able to establish roughly where grandad's regiment had been stationed, east of Ypres on the French/Belgian border.

We travelled there in October 2010 to see where grandad had been and what it was like now. We looked out across green agricultural land, dotted with small trees and the occasional farm; hard to imagine that it had once been a battlefield. Out of many small cemeteries in the area was one, Wielje Farm Cemetery, that we looked for and found. It contained a memorial stone to two unknown soldiers from the Loyal North Lancs Regiment, so that confirmed in our minds that we were in the right area.

My quilt includes quotes from postcards my grandad sent to his brother. One says, 'It is hard lines on Dick isn't it?' This understatement refers to their other brother, Dick, who had been killed in action. Of course, we know letters home were censored so he couldn't say what he really felt. To reassure others, he said on another occasion, 'Just to let you know I have come through alright.' He mildly commented about comforts for the troops, 'Fags are a bit short at present', and often signed off, 'Your affie brother Fred' (affie short for affectionate).

We also visited the Arras 'Memorial to the Missing' and found Richard (Dick) Coupe listed there.

Techniques for the quilt

The background fabric is mostly transfer-printed from those patterned paper bags we used to be given in card shops. I understand the paper was printed with the ends of runs of printing furnishing fabrics to use up the ink.

The messages are from postcards and I've stitched down photographs printed on fabric. I've hand stitched trench lines for context and the Regimental Badge was hand embroidered.

It was a true labour of love in tribute to my grandad whom I remember fondly.

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