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true blue

A MALIAN ARTISAN KEEPS AN ANCIENT
INDIGO **TEXTILE TRADITION ALIVE**

When Malian artisan Aboubakar Fofana recently displayed his bespoke bedspreads, table runners, and scarves on a table at New York's ABC Carpet & Home, shoppers gathered for a closer look. Soon only his bobbing dreadlocks were visible in a sea of blue as textile lovers unfurled fabric dyed with natural indigo.

It is the green leaves of the plant *indigofera arrecta* that produce a surprising range of beautiful blues, from pale sky to deep, dark

midnight. "It depends on the age of the dye bath and how many times you dip," explains 41-year-old Aboubakar, who easily glides from speaking French to English to Mali's Bamanan.

After 20 years of dipping and redipping, his fingernails are permanently stained inky blue. "No two blues are alike and, for me, every color is a different emotion or feeling," he says. In Mali, "we have many, many names for blue." ▶



Left: Indigo-dyed yarn in the hands of master dyer Aboubakar Fofana.
Above: Dried balls of crushed indigo leaves.
Right: Indigo to dye for—blankets and pillows made in Mali and sold at ABC Carpet & Home, New York.



The royal hue goes back some 5,000 years and touches many corners of the globe. The earliest African indigo dyeing was practiced in the 11th century in the Bandiagara area of Mali, according to textile historians. Aboubakar has set up workshops in Mali's capital, Bamako, where he was born. Everything he and his talented team touch, from organic cotton to sun-dried indigo, is produced in Mali. In 2006, the National Museum in Bamako exhibited his textile creations.

"The exhibition validated my efforts to keep the tradition alive," explains Aboubakar, who studied in Paris where he lives part-time. "My family thought I would become a lawyer," he laughs. Instead, he paints, practices calligraphy, and "learned about indigo dyeing before all the knowledge was lost."

Indigo went from royal to rugged thanks to Levi Strauss, who invented indigo-dyed blue jeans worn by miners and prospectors in the 19th century. Most jeans makers, however, had switched to cheaper, petroleum-based synthetic dye by the 20th century. Aboubakar tracked down the world's master dyers

in Mali, Ghana, and Japan to learn more about the mysterious process. "The secret recipes are passed down from one generation to the next by word of mouth," he explains.

Beyond blue, he values the human touch. "We hand-weave our own hand-spun cotton, then we hand-stitch and hand-dye each wrap and blanket," he says. "The methods and materials are all natural."

His designs use the resist-dye technique, a bit like tie-dyeing, but he stitches together pleats before dipping ("stitches are like brushstrokes"). Unbound, the blue-on-white pattern feels painterly and multi-culti chic. ■



INDIGO BASICS

The blue hue develops through fermentation of bacteria. "You must cultivate and nourish the bacteria to keep them alive," explains Aboubakar Fofana, who feeds them honey and dates. "If there are no bacteria, there's no blue." He sounds like an alchemist when describing the labor-intensive process. "The dried leaves ferment in a vat, and each dye vat has a nine-month life cycle, like pregnancy." After the fabric is dipped, it turns yellowish. "It only turns blue when it's removed from the vat and hits the air," he explains. That's when the indigo oxidizes and becomes colorfast (or "locks to the fabric").

Indigo is thought to have medicinal qualities. "We believe it repels snakes and insects," says Aboubakar. Some cultures prize its antiseptic power. To learn more, check out *Indigo* by Jenny Balfour-Paul (Archetype Books). Or tap into Aboubakar's Web site (aboubakar-fofana.com).