

Master of Blue Jeans

Today there is a lot of interest in the colour indigo. Early 2013 Centraal Museum of Utrecht devoted an exhibition on our Blue Jeans with all kind of historical facts that have to do with this beautiful and mysterious colour. I was invited to give some indigo workshops so i was able to see the exhibition a few times. A very good exhibition it was.

The museum borrowed 2 paintings from an unknown master: „ Master of Blue Jeans” a Viennese curator gave it's name, and previously exhibited in Lugano and Paris by Canesso Galerie. According to experts the unknown master belonged to Neapolitan School and were painted around half 17th century.

One painting shows a begging woman with two children. She is wearing a long skirt popularly called Denim. The other painting depicts a little boy wearing a Denim jacket. Now, what's so special about these paintings? The skirt and the jacket do resemble so much today's denim clothing, with it's characteristic fraying and cracks that you almost have to believe that at that time approximately 1650-1700, people were wearing jeans and skirts.





But I can't help to doubt it's authenticity. Why this doubt?

Denim as we know is woven in twill weave. This kind of twill produces a remarkable strong and solid piece of cloth. It's warp consists of indigo dyed cotton yarn. It's weft is a white cotton yarn. Cotton these days is plentiful, but in the 17th century this was not the case at all.

In the 17th century one could use some cotton but it was unsuitable on a bigger loom because cotton fiber was too short to make a strong warp. If ever cotton was used the warp had to be linen, which is a strong fiber. But even more important is the fact that cotton has to be spun. Well, in the 17th century spinners still used to spin on a spinning wheel with only 1 spindle. It was until 1760 the first hand spinning machine with more than 1 spindle, in this case 8, the Spinning-jenny was used. It means that if one had to spin a lot of cotton around 1650, it needed a lot of spinsters; a lot of work; a lot of effort.

Naturally all the work could have been done by workers in countries of origin but prior to spinning, cotton needs to be planted, harvested, pitting of the seeds and all by hand. Where there enough plantages in those times? Enough slaves to do the work? I am still speaking of the midst of the 17th century. And let's suppose cotton was brought to Europe on a bigger scale, should it not have been very expensive? And what is expensive is not intended for the poor like the woman on the painting.

Besides, Europeans learned to make strong cotton (to be used as warps) around 1799 when the Mule-jenny was invented.

Not to mention, Denim is coloured with indigo. The color is taken from mainly two plants: *Isatis tinctoria*, also called Woad and *Indigofera tinctoria*. Now, producing this pigment needs a lot of space, time, people, knowledge and experience. Europe always used Woad as an indigo dye until indigo from the *Indigofera tinctoria* was introduced and that at first, took embargo's, rules, and punishments. One tried to cultivate *Indigofera tinctoria* in Europe but it failed because the plant needs drought and does not like humidity at all. Only between the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn this valuable plant grows properly.

Real indigo has always been expensive. Even now. To prepare and maintain an indigo vat it needs meticulous work and experience. Because dyeing indigo, compared to dye with other natural dyes is totally different.

Someone who I explained the above said: „ Maybe the woman [on the painting] got this skirt as a leftover”. I also doubt this. The skirt is a large piece of cloth and I am wondering if someone would be so generous to give a beggar such an expensive cloth. Don't we look to much with our 21th centuries eyes to the 17th century?

I am also having troubles with the anonymity of the painter. He has no name. One can't give an anonymous painter a ‚life'. Isn't that quite convenient?

Personally I believe it is a publicity stunt. No doubt a very good one!

Reflecting these paintings, master forger Han van Meegeren came into my mind. He copied some Vermeer's, sold them and had to admit in 1947, (according to a short film I have seen on Boymans van Beuningen Museum' website), he committed forgery to avoid death penalty...

Anyway, to copy old masters is an art as well (some Chinese seem to be masters in it). Advanced technics today, make it almost impossible to do so but what if...a painter has no name? What if intermediaries are payed to say that...What if?

Marijke Eken 2013/2014 ©, textile artist, dyer specialized in indigo dyeing.

Sources:

Florence Montgomery, *Textiles in America, 1650 - 1870*

Nathalie Rothstein, *Woven Textile Design in Britain to 1750*

Jeanne Balfour-Paul, *Egyptian mummies to Blue Jeans*

Catherine McKinley, *Indigo, in search of the color that seduced the world*