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Indigo In Flow at Hampi Art Labs

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7 Min Read

A new exhibition titled 'Blue Futures: Reimagining Indigo' explores the dye as artwork, imagination, textile and political labour

When you step into Hampi Art Labs (HAL), the gallery and artist residency located an hour away from Karnataka's historic temple town, you are immediately welcomed by a distinct smell—a little tart, slightly earthy, but unmissable. Meera Curam, the director at HAL, guides you to the source of this fragrance: an installation of an indigo vat, a small clay vessel that is used to store and ferment the blue pigment. Lifting the baked lid off the vat, she dips her finger into the thick navy-blue solution and instantly surprises everyone by taking the coloured tip to her lips. "The best part about indigo is that you can touch, smell and taste it, that's how you determine the health of the dye," she says, urging her audience to do the same.



Sangita Jindal, Chairperson, JSW Foundation.

and dyes—is nothing short of a tactile explosion, like invisible fish nibbling at your skin. “The bubbling feel is from the bacteria in the vat that keeps the colour alive; this is why we say that indigo is a living being,” explains Curam. This sensorial exploration of indigo is part of HAL’s newly launched exhibition titled Blue Futures: Reimagining Indigo, curated by Curam. Running from November to January 28 next year, it is the second major show at HAL since chairperson of the JSW Foundation Sangita Jindal founded the red-brick gallery in 2024 to promote conversations about art and design.



(L) Neel Basanta by Ajit Kumar Das; (R) Pillars of Creation by Savia Mahajan with Ashok Sijju.

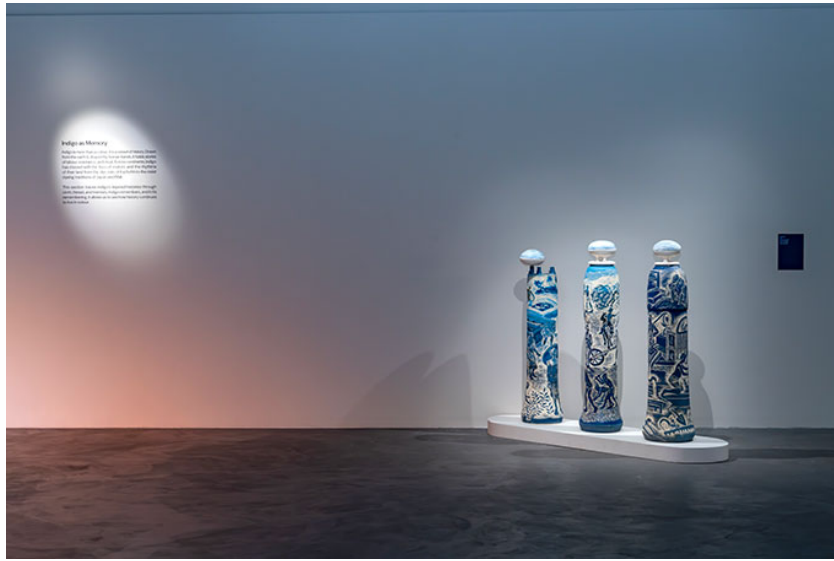
Unity In Diversity

Presently home to a blue haven, the gallery’s collection features mixed media artwork, installations and textiles created by indigo enthusiasts from India, Japan, Mali and beyond. “I want to look at it beyond being a blue textile. It has such harsh (colonial) history, you cannot look at indigo without thinking of the farmers who were exploited. So, I wanted to open it up to different materials and appreciation. I want contemporary and traditional artists to interpret indigo through politics, ritual, resistance, imagination and beyond,” says Curam.

This diversity of thought comes through in the curation spanning the three interconnected rooms. In the first, Mumbai-based ceramic artist Savia Mahajan merges the blue dye with clay in a piece called ‘Pillars of Creation’. The maker hand-built abstract structures using porcelain, paper and yarn and then dipped them in indigo, juxtaposing a dye typically seen on soft fabrics with brittle material. “It makes you wonder if the art is hard or soft to touch. I found this blend novel as it is a new practice for the contemporary artist and the generational artisan-dyer (Ashok Sijju from Kutch, Gujarat) she worked with,” Curam says.

This modern interplay also comes to life in Tamil artist Alwar Balasubramaniam’s piece ‘Wind Swirl’, created together with research

liquid is stirred or beaten to oxygenate the pigment. Dasabramaniam evokes this image by drying resin moulded by the movement of wind and subsequently dipping it in indigo.



Roop Katha by ceramicist Upendra Ram.

A Political Move

A series of artists also dwell on the political impact of indigo. In 'Roop Katha,' by Bihar-based ceramicist Upendra Ram, you see hand-painted indigo illustrations of colonial rulers forcing Indian farmers to grow the pigment instead of food crops on a trio of cream-coloured ceramic pots. Ram wanted to highlight how indigo once created loss of food and livelihood across his home state and the neighbouring state of Bengal.

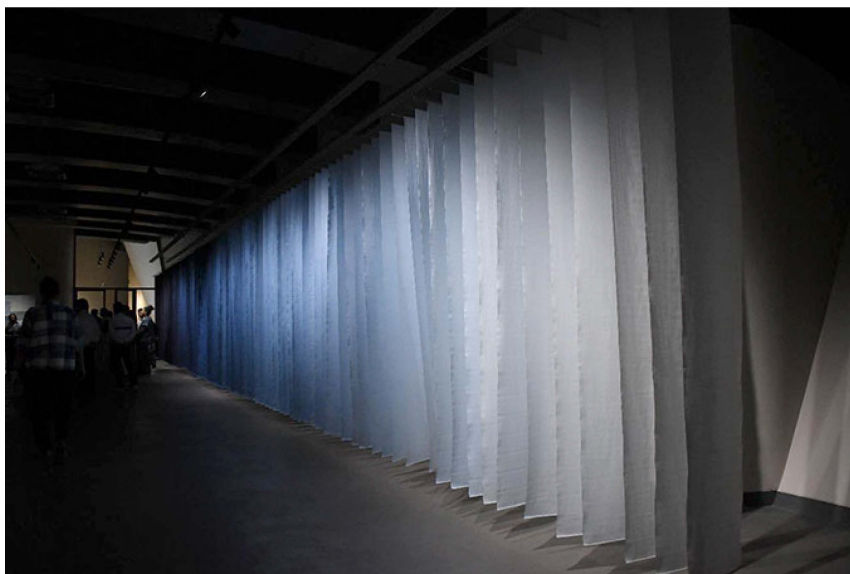
Elsewhere, this engagement with history is more covert, like the textile experiments by West African indigo dyer and designer Aboubakar Fofana. The artist, who belongs to a Malian family of herbalists and healers, first encountered indigo as an antiseptic ointment rather than a coloured dye. "I'm aware that indigo is not just a beautiful shade, it is a symbol of oppression where many West Africans were enslaved in the United States for their labour and knowledge about growing the plant into a dye," shares Fofana.



Tapestries by Takuma Slow Fabric (L) utilizing natural indigo and shibori techniques, displayed alongside "Midnight in Bamako" (R) by artist Aboubakar Fofana.

"My grandmother dyed tunics in indigo not for its fashion, but for its therapeutic purpose for your skin, body and spirit. I am reclaiming indigo by finding healing in its process and by experimenting with its materiality," he adds. Fofana's diptych piece titled 'Midnight in Bamako' shows how the indigo dye interacts with black and brown pigments obtained from mineral mud found in his hometown.

While most of the installations at HAL are on loan from other galleries and private collections, Fofana is among the handful of creatives who also visited the Hampi facility to host a dyeing workshop for the present batch of artists in residence. Curam says, "We have five visiting artists working with indigo. Along with creating their own pieces, they also get to engage with masters whose art is on display. (Indian textile artist) Ajit Kumar Das was here, now we have Aboubakar and next week, Japanese artists from (textile studios) Slow Fabric and Buaisou are coming in."



100 Shades of Indigo by Buaisou.

The Japanese Connection

The curator emphasises that it would be impossible to pay homage to indigo without spotlighting the dye's Japanese manifestations. An

An expansive section of the third room is dedicated to shibori artwork created by Shiga-based textile studio Slow Fabric. The designers pleat, stitch and dip-dye cotton to create fabric art reminiscent of Mount Fuji, the sea and other natural landscapes, without ever employing a paintbrush. Meanwhile, Tokushima-born art studio Buaisou experiments with resist-dyeing techniques. The artists meticulously hand-cut stencils, lay them on fabric and trace them with indigo-resistant rice paste. Then the textile is dipped in blue pigment to create intricate designs that resemble hand-painted knots.

Yet, the most striking installation is reserved for the end. Through 2024, Buaisou spent 11 months painstakingly dip-dyeing strands of fabric to display 100 unique shades of indigo. The deepest cobalt could easily pass off as black, while a weak eye would struggle to spot hues of blue in the lightest cream. "You can only catch a glimpse of the blue in certain lights," Curram points out. "Most exhibitions are open in the day but we invite people from 4pm to 7pm so they can observe how the indigo changes with sunlight. It is just another magical quality of the pigment."

Banner: Featuring visitors at the Indigo exhibit.

'Blue Futures: Reimagining Indigo' is on display at Hampi Art Labs, opposite JSW, Vidyanagar Township, Karnataka until January 28, 2026.

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HAMPI ART LABS INDIGO EXHIBITION