

13 October 2016

NGV NEWS | Blue: Alchemy of a Colour

NGV International | 6 November 2015 – 20 March 2016 | FREE



Blue: Alchemy of a Colour will explore the meaning and history of the colour blue through highly detailed textiles, ceramics, and exquisite works on paper from the 7th century to the present in a new exhibition at NGV International.

One of the most highly prized and sought-after of the colour spectrum, its rarity and the laborious process often used to extract and create the colour, secured its place in some of the finest works of art. Its incorporation was laden with meaning – from signifying prestige in the Chinese court, to symbolising the infinity of the Hindu god Vishnu – blue in all its guises, from Prussian to cobalt and indigo it has long been a powerful hue in art.

For the exhibition the walls, ceiling and floors of the Rio Tinto Gallery of Asian Art will be painted in three shades of blue, and display more than seventy works selected from the holdings of private lenders and the NGV Collection. Works highlighting the beauty of the colour include Japanese indigo dyed garments, a lustrous indigo Burmese jacket, an eighteenth century English cotton bodice, detailed Japanese woodblock prints and exquisite examples of cobalt blue and white Chinese and European ceramics.

Tony Ellwood, Director, NGV, said, '*Blue* explores one of the most beguiling colours in art history. Drawing on some of the finest works from the NGV's Asian Art Collection the exhibition will trace the trade of the colour blue within Asia and across the world, and delve into the exchange of motifs and designs on these intricately detailed ceramics, works on paper and textiles'.

Both globally and historically, the two most important blue pigments, cobalt blue and indigo, and their origins are investigated in the exhibition:

- **Indigo blue**, sourced from plant species found across the world, is used as a textile dye and paint pigment. Intricately patterned and expertly crafted indigo textiles from Egypt, Japan, China, Central Asia, India, Indonesia and Italy are on display.
- The mineral **cobalt**, which has historically significant sources in Persia, Saxony and China, is crushed into a blue pigment used in ceramic decoration. Cobalt has been influenced by various cultural exchanges, which have resulted in blue and white wares coveted across the globe.
- **Prussian blue**, synthesised in 1724, was one of the first artificially made blue pigments. The dark blue was widely used in Japanese woodblock prints from the 1820s, to replace the paler hues of dayflower blue. A woodblock print by Utagawa Hiroshige, one of the first Japanese artists to use Prussian Blue in a landscape series, will be displayed in the exhibition.
- **Ultramarine blue** is derived from lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone, and is consequently very expensive, but prized for its vivid colour and general stability. Several paintings in the exhibition depict the Hindu god Vishnu, the god of preservation, and his avatars Krishna and Rama as sky blue figures in this blue. Like the sky or the sea, Vishnu is believed to be infinite.

One notable piece in the exhibition is a blue and white Delft jar from the Netherlands, which not only exemplifies the exchange of ideas through trade, but also the interchange of cultural and artistic practices across continents in the 17th century. The large jar is European in design but incorporates a decorative blue and white Chinese motif and landscape scene. Inspired by a Japanese copy of a Chinese vase the earthenware vase was glazed in white to evoke the look of porcelain, then decorated in the highly coveted cobalt blue.

Intriguingly, the now famous blue and white Chinese porcelain was first popular in Persia in the 12th century, and Persia's cobalt blue pigment was used by Chinese potters making the wares for export. The blue and white palette became popular in China by the 14th century and an early example of blue and white Chinese imperial porcelain is included in the exhibition.

Indigo dye is used across Asia where it is commonly grown and many examples are displayed in the exhibition. The Dong people of Burma beat indigo dyed cotton to impart a lustrous finish which signifies wealth and in Central Asia, the age and marital status of Turkmen women indicated the colour of their embroidered mantles, with indigo blue the appropriate colour for young, married women.

Blue: Alchemy of a Colour showcases the richness of the NGV collection through one of the world's most intriguing colours. From ultramarine, one of the most expensive blue pigments, derived from a semi-precious stone, to Prussian blue, which was an accidental discovery, *Blue* showcases the history and formation of the colour through 13 centuries of artwork, textiles and decorative arts.

Blue: Alchemy of a Colour will be on display at NGV International from 6 November 2015 to 20 March 2016. Open 10am-5pm daily. Free entry.

The NGV is grateful to Rio Tinto for providing support for this exhibition.

IMAGE CAPTION:

JAPANESE

Summer kimono, Yukata Meiji period 1868-1912
cotton

145.3 x 133.3 cm

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne

Purchased with funds donated by the Hon. Michael Watt
QC and Cecilie Hall, 2013

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