

Blue-dye Fabric in Hungary: A Living Tradition

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Abstract

From the second half of the 18th century, imported blue-dyed cotton fabrics were used by wide sections of Hungarian society. The Hungarian name *kékfestő* refers to the technique that consists of printing a dye-resistant white paste onto a cloth before dyeing it over with indigo dye. It was a popular product throughout Eastern and Central Europe mostly used by peasants and country town citizens.

In the middle of the 19th century, blue-dyed calico acquired a specific ideological meaning and importance. In these years, supporting local industry and products was crucial for Hungarian politicians and patriots.

Following the upper classes' brief fad, the blue-dyed calico continued to be used in lower-class attire and folk costume, especially in regions with a population of German origin. As part of high fashion movements, it was worn again more widely between the two World Wars and in the second half of the 1970s.

There are still some family-owned workshops, run by the second to seventh generation of printers. This appreciated traditional knowledge was inscribed in 2018 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, by UNESCO.

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Indigo dyeing as Cultural Heritage of Humanity

Thanks to an exemplary Central-European collaboration, in 2018, the *kékfestő* tradition, that is, the technique of blue-dyeing, was added to the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO. An international committee consisting of 24 members assessed the multinational petition entitled *The Blaudruck/Modrotisk/Kékfestés/Modrotlač, a reserve-process block printing and indigo dyeing in Europe*. The committee unanimously agreed on the craft's significance, as well as the importance of its preservation. The petition resulted from a collaboration between Hungary, Germany, Austria, Czech Republic, and

Slovakia. The listed countries do not only share the duties and the success, but also the responsibility to preserve this heritage. In a quickly changing world, when there are so many differences that separate us, it is important to find threads that connect. In my short presentation, I cannot aim to elaborate in detail on the history of this more than three-hundred-year-old craft, its diverse motifs differing from one region to another, or its role in fashion and home decoration. My goal is to give an outline of those significant historical events and developments in fashion history that influenced the use of blue-dye fabrics in Hungary.

Technique

Blue-dyeing as a technique refers to the practice consisting of printing a dye-resistant paste onto a cloth before dyeing it over with indigo dye. The resistant paste preserves the white colour of the washed, dried, calendered cotton fabric. To apply the pattern onto the cloth, craftsmen use hand-made wooden block. Eighteenth-century patterns sometimes eternalised the popular silk designs of the age. The application of the paste (*pap*, in Hungarian), which was coloured slightly green for the sake of visibility, was first carried out mainly by hand, by block printing, but the execution of patterns covering the whole surface of the fabric could happen with the help of machine force. The patterned fabrics were dipped into vats filled with dissolved indigo, and then the paste was removed by putting the cloth into an acidic solution. Subsequently, the drying and usually the calendaring followed (**Fig. 1**).

The importance of indigo dyeing in the 19th century

This technique reached Hungary through German mediation, and by the 1840s it survived exclusively among the peasantry and the working class. This tendency was changed by the activity of the Protective Association, founded by political reformer Lajos Kossuth; this organisation aimed to support and revive the underdeveloped Hungarian industries, including textile manufacture. The association's activities and the ways in which high society women supported it and purchased Hungarian textiles were frequently covered by the press. Due to the low quality and the limited variation of available products, it was a real sacrifice on their part. Some fashion plates and their descriptions, published in the popular Hungarian magazine *Pesti Divatlap*, depicted blue cotton dresses for elegant young ladies (**Fig. 2**):

One of the ladies is wearing a simple blue cotton dress with puffy batiste sleeves, white and blue fur strings and a lace apron; the other appears in a red velvet and gold waist, and white satin skirt. (Pesti Divatlap, January 23, 1845, 118)

One of the ladies is wearing a black velvet or silk coat and a dress made of domestic textile. The other, the lady with an angelic face, has an also beautiful and simple gala or ball gown, and it made of blue calico or chintz would be really nice for our Hungarian ladies. (Pesti Divatlap, January 1, 1845, 23)

The Protective Association organised a ball in February 1845 that thrilled women throughout the country. At this event, which received great media publicity, guests were expected to wear garments of Hungarian production. This requirement caused much difficulty to ladies

who wished to shine and dance in comfortable clothes, with good absorbent capacity. The fabric of silk ball dresses could be purchased from Hungarian manufacturers even though they did not offer such a variety as was provided by imported products; however, light cotton clothes suitable for young, unmarried women were not produced in the country—the only type of Hungarian cotton fabric was the blue-dyed calico, favoured by the peasantry. The press showed great enthusiasm, regularly reported on the party preparations, and encouraged ladies to have their Hungarian design ball dresses manufactured from domestically produced fabrics. For this reason, and as a source of inspiration, newspapers came to be enriched with fashion illustrations. According to the reviews, many ladies made compromises and opted for the blue-dyed calico, which was also known as ‘kitchen’ fabric, due to its perceived inferiority. Although we cannot see any blue-dye dresses in the only extant picture of the ball organised by the Protective Association, the initiation was documented, and Count Gyula Batthyány’s representation of the event, painted in the 1930s, shows a composition full of blue costumes. Although social efforts made in order to develop the Hungarian textile industry were swept away by the 1848 Revolution, memories of the movement and the war of independence were kept by blue-dye print blocks and related textiles showing Kossuth’s portrait and the coat of arms named after him.

Indigo dyeing as part of everyday life

Blue-dye fabrics survived as folk clothing after their brief heyday. In some villages, they were also worn as holiday garments, and due to their colour, they were proper attire in times of mourning as well; in Nógrád County, they were even called the ‘Kossuth mourning dresses.’ Most of the time, however, they served as ordinary attire for busy workdays. Their functioning as working clothes is proved by the ensemble of a blouse, a skirt, and an apron held by the Textile Collection of the Hungarian National Museum, the discoloured, worn-out, and numerously mended fabric of which evokes years of hardships and suffering (**Fig. 3**).

At the turn of the century, the middle class used blue-dyed fabrics for home textile, daily work, and home attire, because of its durability and affordable price. The earliest examples of breakfast and brunch clothes printed with figural patterns, pastries, coffee cups, and spoons appeared in middle-class households. German-speaking residents constituted the first considerable clientele in the countryside. German people who settled in Hungary after the expulsion of the Turkish troops played a significant part in the craft’s spread and preservation. Although my family no longer wore this type of garments when I was born, the sight of the elderly women of the German villages of South Baranya, dressed in blue-dye costumes, is a strong childhood memory of mine (**Fig. 4**).

Between the two World Wars, besides the active craftsmen working in the countryside and mostly satisfying local demands, there was a considerable production of blue-dye fabrics in the factories of the capital city as well. The excelling Goldberger Company itself developed from the family’s blue-dye manufacture in Buda. City residents first utilised block-printed cotton fabrics primarily as home textiles, or as indoor clothing and summer dresses material. As a result of the Hungarian Dress Movement initiative, these garments were more and more often made after Hungarian design and of local materials (**Fig. 5**). Following the tragedy of Trianon (1920), the urge to preserve national traditions influenced the way of dressing as well. The Movement launched design competitions and encouraged costume designs and

materials that fit the national tradition. The most successful fairs were run by Klára Tüdös (Fig. 6).

Raise of indigo dyeing in the 1970's

The 1970s saw the next flourishing of blue-dye fabrics in Hungary, thanks to the experimentation of talented decorative artists and folklore popularity in the field of international fashion. The artist Ilona Bakó created her modern, practical attires, primarily for women, using traditional motifs. She said in 1973:

We can design excellent, folkish modern clothes if we utilize tradition by adopting both ornament and the technique of the production. Blue-dye clothes are manufactured in this manner, in their case I aimed for consistently following this principle. (Ez a divat 1973, 6. no. 4.)

Her colleague, Irén Bódy, was devoted to blue-dyeing craft. She learnt to use this technique by herself and developed fruitful collaborations with several craftsmen and collections. Her first solo exhibitions were organised in 1962 and 1967. She also arranged an exhibit at Budapest's Museum of Applied Art, in 1970. Enriching fashion with folklore motifs was a dominant international trend in the 1970s (Fig. 7). Accordingly, Hungarian designers worked under the influence of folklore ornaments and dress patterns. Besides Kalocsa and Matyó-style embroideries, blue-dye motifs quickly gained popularity as well. The glass artist Márton Horváth even designed a jewel collection inspired by blue-dyeing, which was internationally recognised and valued by professionals. The year 1975 marked the peak of the technique's popularity. Blue-dyeing-inspired dresses were frequently seen on the runway and in public spaces by both domestic and international audiences. But popularity soon caused quality to decline. Because of the high demand, blue-dye-inspired fabrics appeared in factory mass production and were often produced in low quality and with unimaginative designs. Irén Bódy made a significant contribution to the innovation and, therefore, preservation of this technique. She experimented with applying the pressed patterns on various fabrics other than cotton (Fig. 8).

At the introduction of decorative artists, various unique designs could be seen. In the first picture, we present one of the most interesting models, made from a winter blue-dye fabric, that is, a sporty ensemble designed in blue-dye pattern microcord velvet [...] the skirt with large motifs, and the polka dot coat. The novel fabric was designed by Irén Bódy, decorative artist, and the model, by Margit Szilvitzky, who was awarded the Munkácsy prize. The coat can be fastened with a yellow zip, the lady is wearing a yellow sweater and a tight cap. (Ez a divat 1974. 11. no. 5.)

Irén Bódy used silk and velvet bases as well. Thicker clothes decorated with blue-dye motifs could be worn in colder weather. Suits made from blue-dye corduroy and shirts manufactured from blue-dye cotton were aimed at male audiences. Young men mostly wore these in dance halls, completing their outfit with jeans.

An exclusive novelty for young people is the "blue-dye" corduroy suit with printed ornament, combined with blue-patterned white batiste shirt or blouse. Both for girls and boys. (Ez a divat 1975. 3. no. 4.)

Irén Bódy saw possibilities in blue-dye fabrics in fields other than fashion, too. She designed home textiles and created textile artworks as well. Her tapestry, *Hussar*, was awarded at the World Exhibition of Decorative Arts in Toronto. In another large-scale tapestry, she depicted the blue dyeing manufactures that were still active in 1975. By the 1980s, blue-dyeing lost much of its popularity, and was almost forgotten.

New perspectives

Nowadays, however, there are several progressive initiatives. In her thesis work 'New Dimensions of Blue Dye,' in 2021, Rózália Tóvaj experimented with the 3D printing of blue-dye motifs. She said:

my masterwork is a reinterpretation of the Hungarian blue-dye tradition. Its purpose is to pass on rich cultural resources, to rethink sample systems, and to adapt them to the present. Its ultimate result is the transcription of the blue sculptures with 3D printing on soft materials. The experimental material collection presents the traditional compositional methods of the blue paint sample categorized. They are displayed in different spatial effects, materials, and indigo painting in traditional blue and white color combinations.
(Kókai 2018, 20)

In the year of its UNESCO listing, the Hungarian Gypsy fashion brand Romani Design revived and popularised Roman customs by fusing vibrant flower designs with blue-dyed textiles. In 2022, the Sugarbird brand launched modern synthetic fabrics with printed blue-dye motifs. A couple of smaller companies are similarly committed to modernising and preserving this tradition (**Fig. 9**).

Today there are five active blue-dyeing manufactures in Hungary; most of these are based on family tradition and pass on their specialised knowledge from generation to generation. The Kovács family from Tiszakécske and Szentendre, the Horváth family from Tolna, the Gerencsér-Tóth family from Győr, the Skorutyák family from Bácsalmási and the Sárdi family from Nagynyárádi are all exponents of the blue-dyeing craft in Hungary. Learning this profession, both in theory and practice, is only possible in these manufactures.

Blue-dyeing craft is traditionally celebrated every summer in an international festival organised in Nagynyárad.

Besides craftsmen, museums also take a substantial part in securing the survival of this technique, tracing its history, and passing on the related knowledge: primarily the Blue-Dye Museum and the Goldberger Textile Collection located in Pápa.

The clue might be to make the national traditions part of everyday life (**Fig. 10**).

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Fig. 1

János Skorutyák in his blue dyed workshop, Bácsalmás, 1984.

Fortepan/Gábor Viktor, Photo number: 194563



Fig. 2

Fashion Plate, 1845. Pesti Divatlap, January 23.
Hungarian National Museum



Fig. 3

Kékfestő dress, around 1955.
Inventory number: 1986.74.1-3.

Hungarian National Museum, Early Modern Textile Collection

Fig. 4

Children wearing blue dyed dresses, 1941.

Fortepan/Chuckyeager tumblr, Photo number: 143733



Fig. 5

Erzsébet, Haranghy: Holiday dress.
Fashion design Around 1937.

Inventory number: 1973.68.

Hungarian National Museum



Fig. 6

Printed cotton sampler, around 1935.

Inventory number: 1973.151.1.

Hungarian National Museum,
Early Modern Textile Collection





Fig. 7

Woman wearing blue dyed dress,
Budapest, 1973.

Fortepan/Urbán Tamás, Photo number: 88097



Fig. 8

Bleu dying dresses designed by Irén Bódy, 1979.

Ez a divat. Évkönyv, 137.



Fig. 9

The author's daughter, 2019.



Fig. 10

Kékfestő workshop,
'Örök kék' manufacture, 2024.