



A brief history of dyeing

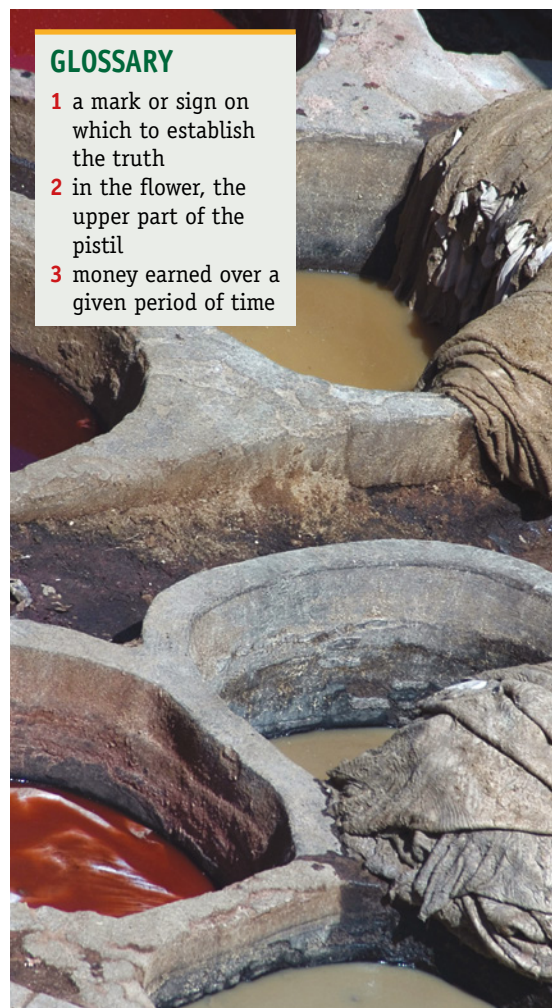
Dyeing is an ancient art which precedes written records, and the first evidence¹ dates back to the Bronze age. Primitive dyeing techniques included sticking plants to fabric or rubbing crushed pigments into cloth. Little by little methods became more sophisticated and new techniques were developed: for example natural dyes were taken from crushed fruits, berries, and other plants, which were boiled into the fabric and gave light and water fastness (resistance). Ancient dyes include madder, a red dye made from the roots of the *Rubia tinctorum*, blue indigo from the leaves of *Indigofera tinctoria*, yellow from the stigmas² of the saffron plant, and dogwood, an extract of pulp of the dogwood tree. The Phoenicians prepared a lot of natural dyes, among which the famous and precious Tyrian purple, noted in the Bible, a dye obtained from the mucus of shellfish. A bright red called cochineal was obtained from an insect native to Mexico. Natural dyes, mainly of vegetable and animal origin, were in use until the mid-19th century. Nowadays dyeing has become a complex, specialised science. Nearly all dyestuffs are now produced from synthetic compounds, and therefore costs have been greatly reduced and certain characteristics have been enhanced. In the West synthetic dyes are used in all commercial applications and natural dyeing is now practised only as a handcraft. Some craft spinners, weavers, and knitters use natural dyes as a particular feature of their work. On the other hand natural dyes are an important economic source for many of the world's developing countries, besides offering a rich and varied source of dyestuff: the production of natural dyes give the Native people the possibility of an income³ through sustainable harvest and sale of these dye plants. In parts of the world where synthetic dyes, mordants (fixatives), and other additives are imported and therefore relatively expensive, natural dyes are an important alternative.

However the knowledge required for sourcing and extracting such dyes and mordants is not available everywhere. Zambia for example is rich in plants for the production of Indigo natural dyes, but there is no knowledge of the processes involved in harvesting and processing the plants: the consequence is that little use is made of this natural resource. In some other countries, such as India, Nigeria and Liberia, where some research has been carried out, or where there has been a long tradition of natural dyeing, natural dyes and mordants are used widely.

(Adapted from www.practicalaction.org)

GLOSSARY

- 1 a mark or sign on which to establish the truth
- 2 in the flower, the upper part of the pistil
- 3 money earned over a given period of time



ACTIVITIES

1 Answer the following questions.

- 1 Is dyeing a recent technique?
- 2 How were dyes obtained from fruits and berries?
- 3 Which ancient civilisation was famous for the dyes they prepared?
- 4 Why are synthetic compounds common today?
- 5 Who uses natural dyes today?
- 6 Is natural dyeing important for the economy of the world's developing countries?
- 7 Does Zambia produce natural dyes? Why/Why not?
- 8 What are some of the countries in Asia and Africa that produce natural dyes?

2 Find in the text the words or expressions that have the following Italian equivalents.

- 1 Resistenza all'acqua
- 2 Resistenza alla luce
- 3 Composti sintetici
- 4 Artigianato
- 5 Filatore
- 6 Tessitore
- 7 Magliaio
- 8 Paesi in via di sviluppo
- 9 Raccolto
- 10 Additivo