

INDIGO



LIVING COLOUR

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Indigo is one of the world's oldest dyestuffs. The appeal of this, the purest of deep blue dyes, stretches back into the dim distant past, from time immemorial used as a colorant for cave paintings and ancient artefacts. Across centuries indigo has had religious and superstitious significance for the tribal civilisations who have used it for body decoration and war paint. It was over 4000 years ago that man first experimented with indigo for dyeing wool.

More recently, indigo has been adopted as a popular dyestuff for all types of textiles and clothing. Today it is acknowledged and appreciated universally for its unique properties — the 'living colour' which fades gradually and naturally during wear. The use of indigo is still the subject of development and innovation among the world's leading designers and manufacturers.

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The History and the Mystery

Indigo was originally produced from the leaves of *Indigofera*, a plant widely found through tropical climes. Although it was known to the Greeks and Romans, it was comparatively rare in Europe through the Middle Ages until the 16th century, when the trade routes to the East were opened up by the Portuguese.

Both China, and India, the natural home of the plant, first cultivated and processed indigo commercially. The fermented leaves were granulated and ground to a paste in the traditional open-vat methods, then dried and cut into bricks' to be stored in barrels alongside spices and precious metals for trade by the wealthy merchants in Europe, where the depth and clarity of the colour



were much prized by the dyers of wool and, latterly, cotton fabrics.

Even so, the introduction of indigo dye in the West met with the resistance of protectionists in some quarters, as it was feared that the market for inferior but nevertheless home-grown staple dyestuff, woad, would be usurped. Supporting superstitions and rumours that

Indigo was poisonous and associated with witchcraft, more serious embargoes were contrived by the authorities; in France, where there was a substantial home production of woad to protect, the use of indigo was at one point punishable by death, whilst Napoleon later took it upon himself to offer half a million francs to the finder of an alternative colourant

for his army's smart uniforms. At the same time the doughty burghers of Nuremburg insisted that dyers took an annual oath forswearing the use of indigo.

The English, who imported most of their dye requirements, had no such scruples and were the first to adopt indigo widely. Perhaps characteristically, this was also at a time when market

prices began to fall; partly a result of new sources of supply opening up from their own colonies in America.

In the New World the early Virginia settlers of 1622 had in-

troduced the crop to the main-land, though it was really not for another 150 years that a successful strain was developed, ironically from a variety imported

from the neighbouring French West Indies, where cultivation was now also under way. In 1754, 215,000 lbs were harvested and processed on the slave plantations of South Carolina and by

1770, more than 1 million lbs were being shipped annually. However,

this lucrative trade was soon curtailed by the American Revolution and by 1780 India

once again became the chief source of supply, commanding world markets with an output

of 3,500 tons by 1815.

This situation continued until 1897, at which point the German chemist Adolf von Baeyer perfected the formula for synthetic indigo after

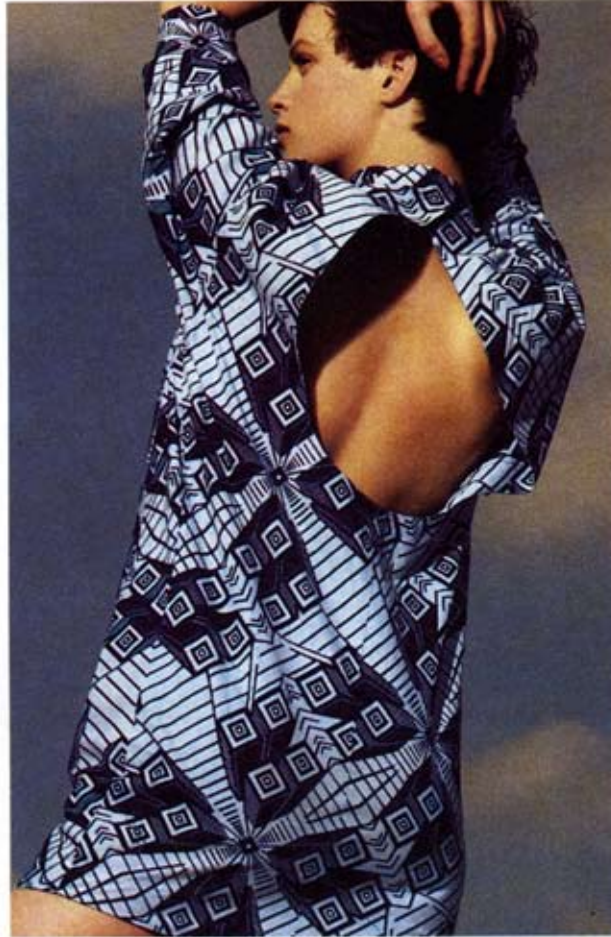
twelve years' exhaustive research into the matter. Before long the synthetic indigo was being produced and marketed, which was cleaner and had more stable dyeing properties than its natural counterpart, a move which sounded the death knell for the old, traditional and messy methods of production.

Today indigo lives on as the world's most popular dyestuff, with more than 9 thousand tons being produced annually. Its unmatched richness of colour cannot be imitated and the natural fading characteristics of garments and fabrics continue to maintain widespread consumer appeal at all levels of the market.



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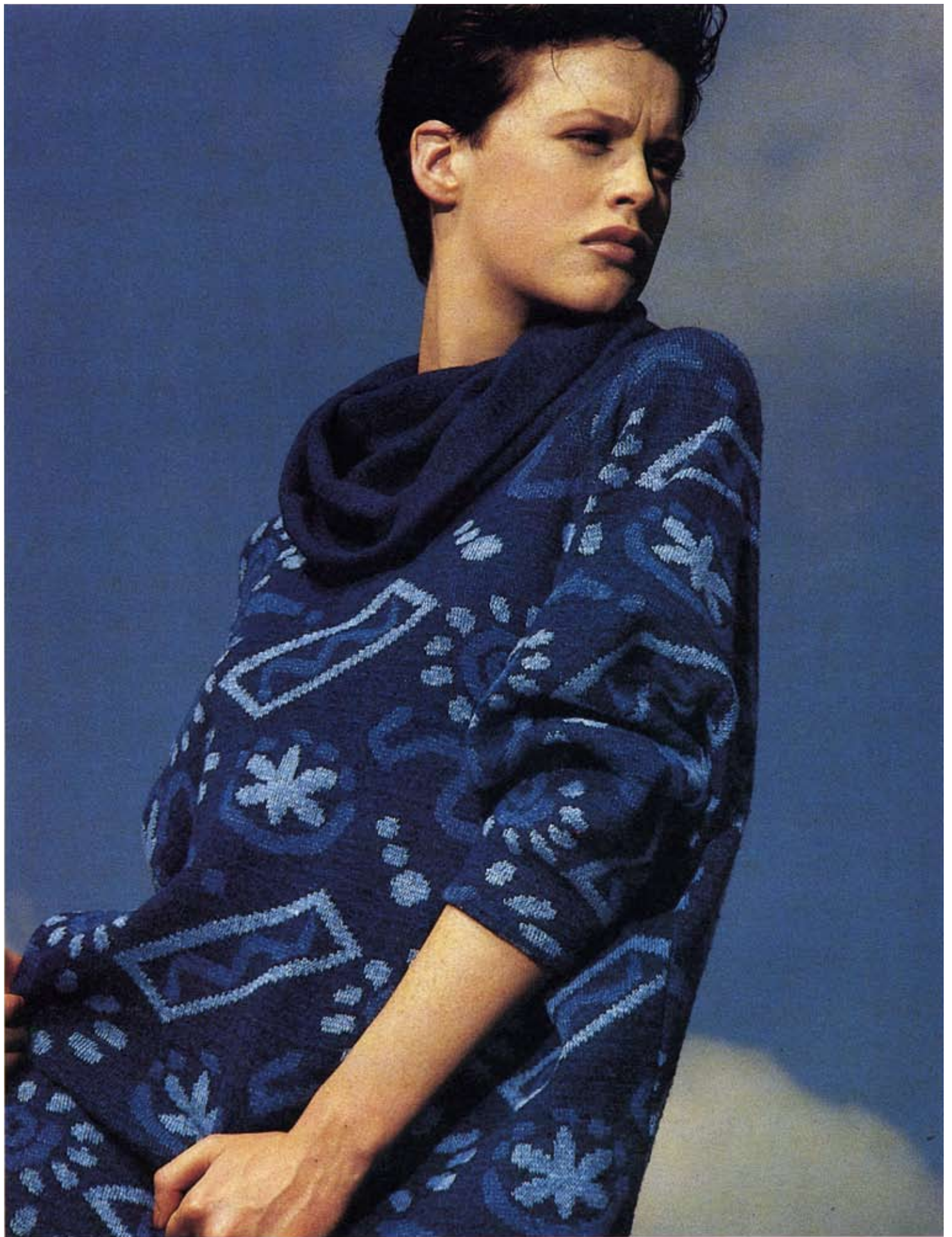
To the uninitiated 'indigo' means denim, but that's just one of the uses to which this most popular dyestuff is put, for indigo is used for a whole range of fabrics and in shades from the most delicate pastel to the deepest midnight blue and just about every variation in between. Of course, denim is known to all as that hardy workwear fabric which has a timeless appeal first made so popular by Levi Strauss' ubiquitous 501 jean. But now it has reached a high level of sophistication and is offered in many different fabrications from fine 4oz shirtings to the 15oz heavyweights in a multitude of different finishes — plainweaves, twills, hopsacks, chambrays and doubleweaves; furthermore, denim is printed, wrinkled, crinkled and woven into stripes and checks and other patterns.

Above: Indigo batik wax print cotton dress

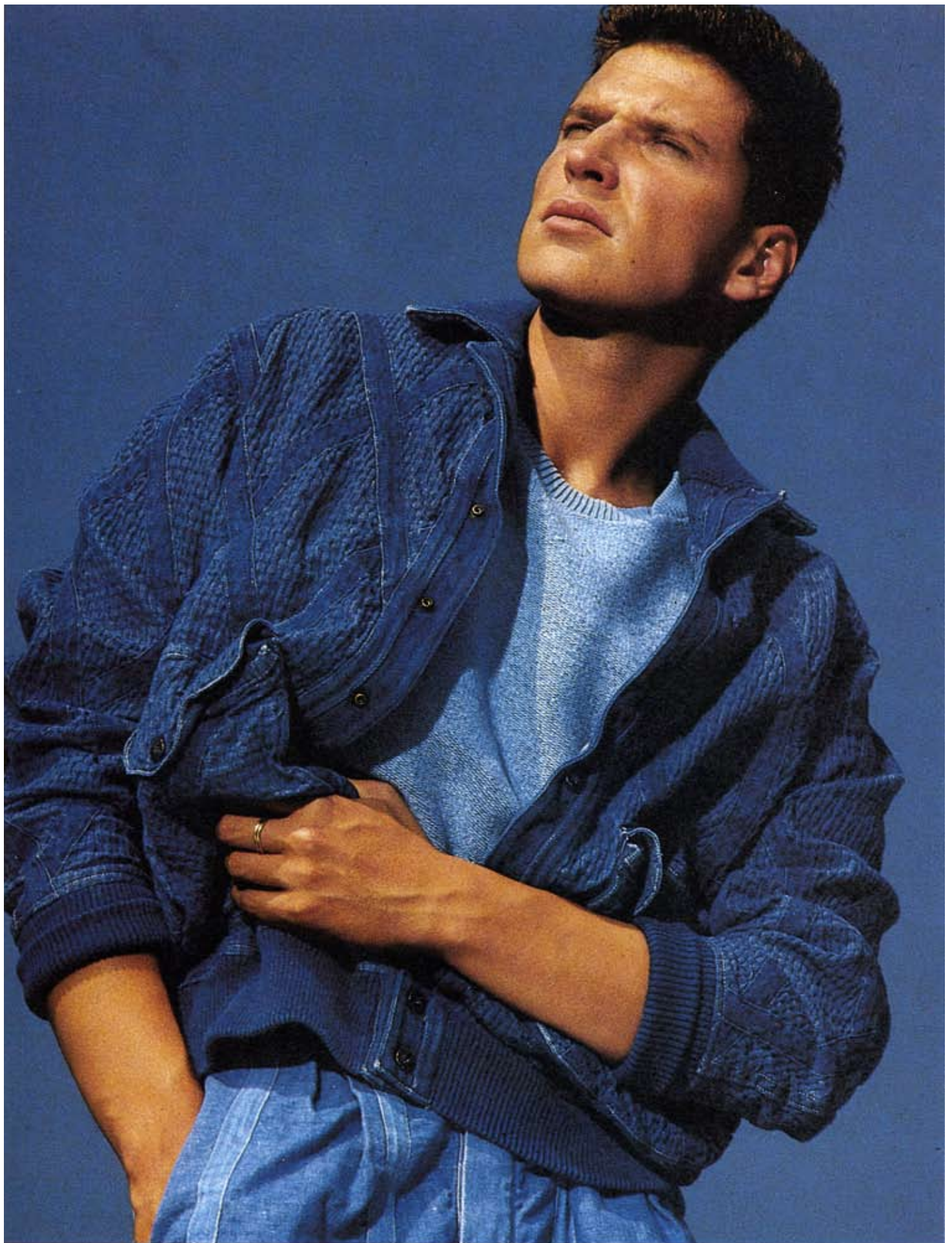
Opposite: Him: Batik print cotton shirt, indigo jacquard jacket and indigo solidweave pants.

Her: Indigo Aran knit sweater, indigo batik print denim skirt.





Above: Indigo jacquard dress.



Above: Denim chambray jacket, bleached indigo knit sweater, pants
trimmed with denim webbing.







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Now that indigo yarn is available on the cone it has further uses beyond knitting — for instance, it can be used in the weft, rather than just the warp, of woven fabrics so as to produce 'blue-on-blue' effects, deep indigo fabrics with the characteristics of denim, and denim checks and plaids. Further applications are special fabrics for footwear, belt webbing, braids and other trimmings, all in that inimitable indigo blue that fades characteristically with age. Indigo has a long and proven pedigree, trusted and well loved by peoples throughout the world — note the reluctance of most to part with even a pair of well-worn jeans. The story of indigo continues today, as we show in this booklet: there is a wealth of colour and texture in indigo — the only true 'living colour'.

Above: Chunky indigo Aran knit dress and jacquard leggings.

Opposite: Him: Rubber-backed Indigo cotton raincoat, viscose denim pants

Her: Rubber-backed Indigo cotton jacket, Indigo batik cotton skirt and top

