

DYLON INFORMATION SHEET

THE HISTORY OF DYEING

FIRST DEVELOPMENTS

Dyeing is a very ancient art, practised as early as 3000 BC in China. It was recorded in the Bronze Age in Europe (2500 – 800 BC), also by 2500 BC in India, and wide ranges of colours were apparent in Egypt by 1450 BC.

The primitive way of decorating fabrics was by sticking natural products, such as leaves, flowers or sticks onto fabrics with albumen or clotted blood. A second method was to rub crushed pigments into cloth that proved to be fast to light but not fast to water or wear. The demand for permanent fixing of colours stimulated experiments. Crushed fruits and berries were boiled into the fabric but still this did not produce fast colours. Finally natural dyes were discovered which actually coloured the fibres, not just coat them.

The majority of natural dyes were extracted from plants, lichens etc. Examples were woad (blue leaves), saffron (yellow/orange petals or stigmas) and indigo (deep blue roots). Red could be obtained from blood or cochineal from crushed insects. The most coveted colour was Tyrian purple, obtained from certain shellfish, which was seen as a mark of nobility.

During Norman Times, London built up a substantial dye trade. By the latter part of the 12th Century, a Guild of Dyers of London was established. The dyeing method in early times was not in essence different to that of today: the items to be dyed, first made wet, were immersed in a hot solution of the dye and held there, for an hour or more with appropriate stirring and agitation to achieve even treatment.

THE DEVELOPMENTS OF SYNTHETIC DYES

The history of dyeing is divided by the date of 1856, the year in which William Perkin discovered 'mauvine' during laboratory work trying to synthesize quinine.

Stimulated by Perkin's experiments, around 500 new dyes were created in laboratories in many countries by 1900, Great Britain, Germany and France being the most active. Consequently this second period saw almost complete replacement of natural dyes by synthetic dyes and the appearance of revolutionary methods of dyeing.

By the end of the 1900's the new dyes enabled the dyeing of cellulosic and proteinic fibres, but the commercial launch of cellulose acetate in the 1920's revealed that this new fibre was undyeable by the existing methods. The problem was overcome by the development of disperse azo dyes. This resolved the problem of poor solubility in water, which could be diffused into acetate with assisting chemicals. Today, disperse dyes are the main way of colouring polyester fibres.

Importantly, the 1950's saw the invention of reactive dyes, which form strong chemical bonds with the fibre and consequently have good fastness properties and give bright colours.



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