



Community in the Weave: Sara Goodman's Fabric Art

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Photography by TOM McNEILL

It's all chemistry. Formulas, molecules reacting with other molecules, a complex dance of substance and proportion. But, standing in Sara Goodman's light-filled studio in Lyme, N.H., it's easy to believe that the strip of cotton she just dunked in a vat of indigo dye and now holds up in the sun is turning from green to blue because of magic, not chemistry.

"It's the oxygen reacting with the indigo," she explains as she hangs the fabric up to dry. "This is a good vat." Apparently, not all indigo vats are created equal, and Goodman is pleased at the blue color she has achieved with this batch of natural dye.

A few minutes later, though, she unwraps a length of cloth from a PVC pipe, which she dipped in indigo the day before. Shibori is the ancient Japanese art of wrapping, tying, twisting, bunching, stitching and pulling cloth before it's dyed to create resist patterns;

Goodman is hoping this piece of cloth will fit into a Shibori wall hanging in progress. "That doesn't look like I thought it would," she says at the result. Her voice is not resigned, or even disappointed. Instead, she sounds thoughtful, patient and eager for the next try.

THE FIRST CUT

Goodman's first experience with textiles was as a child growing up outside New York City when her grandmother taught her to crochet. Later, in the 1980s, after studying at various schools including Haystack Mountain School of Arts and Crafts, Goodman found herself in Corinth, Vt., working as a weaver, making and selling her work as fast as she could. "These were wonderful years," she says. "I tell people I did it backward — I retired first and then I went to work."

Eventually, though, Goodman decided she needed a change. "I needed to pay my car loan!" she laughs. "And it's very difficult to be a production weaver and a creative artist at the same time. I make something once — I don't always want to make it again." After much soul searching, Goodman decided to give up her weaving business and head to UC Berkeley — where she met her husband, David — for her doctorate in education.

After a stint at Harvard, the couple moved to New Hampshire so Goodman could coordinate the Dartmouth Elementary Teacher Education Program while she worked on her dissertation. "But then I had a baby instead of writing my dissertation."

Goodman went to work as an elementary school teacher, but there was something missing. "I missed weaving," Goodman remembers. "So I bought a spinning wheel and promised myself, if I use it, after a year I'll buy a loom." She used her spinning wheel and, eventually her new loom, so much that after a few years of trying to balance teaching, parenting and weaving, she made >>>>



Above: Artist Sara Goodman works in her Lyme, N.H., studio, showing the Indian wood blocks she uses to print patterns on cloth with natural dyes. Draped over her shoulder is a bolt of her own handwoven silk/bamboo fabric.

Left: Goodman shows the folds made by arashi shibori on silk as it comes off the pole after indigo dye.

the critical choice to give up teaching. “David’s work was going so well he told me ‘Just stop, just weave.’”

While the internet was a valuable tool in her quest to find the fabrics she loved all over the world, she wanted to go further. “My first trip was in 2005. I dragged David and our then-ten-year-old son to Indonesia!” There she connected with William Ingram and Jean Howe who operate Threads of Life, which is described on its website as “a fair trade business that uses culture and conservation to alleviate poverty in rural Indonesia.” For Goodman, it was the perfect combination of textiles and community.

Two looms, one with eight shafts and another with 24, occupy a significant amount of the floor space in her studio. The scarves, coats, and pillow cases she produces are exquisite examples of the craft. Deb Cardow, gallery director at the League of NH Craftsmen in Hanover, says of Goodman’s work, “Her choice of colors is excellent — they are neutral enough to go with almost any other color, but not dull, very earthy. Her work is timeless.

It isn’t something you’d buy and just wear for one season. It will last forever.”

While she still makes use of her looms, Goodman’s focus has shifted somewhat from weaving to dyeing and design. It’s the fabric she loves. And it was in service to the fabric that five years ago she made the fateful commitment to use exclusively natural dyes.

GOING NATURAL

“It really brought my work to a halt,” says Goodman. “I’d been hearing so much

about the environment. And whenever I’d go to Indonesia, I’d see all the workers there using only natural dyes. I decided that’s what I needed to do.”

You get the feeling, listening to Goodman, that it wasn’t just artistic impulse that made her switch. She speaks about the village women she’s met, who spend their lives producing the kind of color and pattern she strives for, in a way that’s almost reverent. She has a vast amount of respect for the way these people serve their craft, and perhaps her decision to delete chemicals from her own

new tools. “I wanted to get the same range of color as I had with chemical dyes,” she says.

A long box on her studio table holds an extensive collection of cards with instructions on each one about how to achieve a certain color. “These are like recipes,” Goodman points out. “And getting the colors you want is much like cooking. The more you do it, the more of a feel you have for it.”

Not only does Goodman have to consider the injection of beautiful color into her fabrics, she also has to



Left: Goodman’s fabric samples with her dye recipes. Right: Goodman inspects the indigo vat for correct pH, temperature, and oxygen reduction. Far right: Goodman prepares silk fabric for arashi shibori by wrapping it with string around a PVC pipe and then pushing it into tight folds to create a resist pattern when dyed with indigo.

art is partly in appreciation of theirs.

Goodman’s approach was to quit chemical dyes cold turkey, which meant all of a sudden she had very little to work with. She had to change her entire process. And so began her extensive education in working with what the earth has to offer.

Marigold from her own yard. Cochineal, a bug that grows on cacti in Mexico. Lac, an excretion from another kind of insect which can be found in parts of Southeast Asia. These were some of her

think about the lifespan of that color. Without what’s called a mordant, the dyes will fade quickly from the cloth. Mordants, too, she wants natural.

Goodman found the solution in Symplocos powder, which she and a group of like-minded colleagues are now working to bring from Indonesia to the U.S. in marketable quantities, providing a natural, sustainable product for those who need it and, at the same time, creating a steady income >>>>



for the islanders who produce it. “I went to the village on the island of Flores this past January,” Goodman remembers, smiling. “We went into the jungle and helped collect the leaves — they don’t pick the leaves, they wait until they’ve fallen from the tree.” A product produced with such minimal environmental impact — for Goodman, it’s a dream come true.

Goodman’s studio, affectionately named House of Dreams, is where Goodman both practices her own craft and teaches others. “Sara is an incredibly thorough teacher,” says Suzanne Jones, Director of Craftstudies at the League of NH Craftsmen. “She knows her subject and can teach extensively on the actual stitching methods, as well as how to use the various dyes and materials. Students often get to work in her home studio which allows them to see what she is currently working on.” Goodman also teaches at the League studios.

WALKING ON ART

When Goodman shows you pictures of her recent trip to New

Zealand, you might be surprised to find yourself looking at tiny pebbles planted in a beach, closeups of plant-covered rocks, or wavy ribbons of sand. “Now I see rugs in everything,” she laughs.

In 2011, Goodman was approached by Kesang Tashi, founder and owner

of Khawachen/Inner Asia, the Tibetan carpet store in Hanover, N.H., who invited Goodman to design her own line of carpets. “What Sara brings to the table is an attention to detail, along with a very wide range of interests,” says Tashi.

With Shibori, Goodman can produce patterns that look woven, that look like sunlight on water, that resemble birch bark. The rugs from Goodman’s Shibori Collection are designed from photographs Goodman took of the pieces of fabric she dyed in her studio. Those photos are

in deplorable conditions, even chained to the loom. Humanitarian workers with GoodWeave inspect those factories that have agreed to comply to their standards, which prohibit child slavery; not only are the children rescued, but they are fed, educated and advocated for.

“Sara is really an interpreter — we live now in a global village of arts and crafts,” Tashi says. “Shibori is an ancient Japanese craft, and she’s using it to design rugs that are then woven in Nepal. She’s using cross-cultural components to rein-



Left: Goodman submerges silk fabric wrapped on pvc pipe into a vat of indigo dye. Right: A carved wood block from India used to print a solution of iron mordant paste on cotton cloth which is then dyed with ground root from the madder plant.

transferred into carpet designs and woven in Nepal using naturally dyed yarn. The finished product is beautiful, durable, and marked on the back with a label from a nonprofit group called GoodWeave.

“With GoodWeave I can combine my passion for fabric with another passion — child welfare,” she says. GoodWeave works to interrupt the cycle of child slave labor in carpet factories around the world. Too often, children living in poverty are sold into slavery by their families who can’t afford to feed them. These children are forced to work long hours

interpret something new.”

And while Goodman claims to see rugs everywhere she looks, she later makes a more accurate statement about her approach to the world. “I think in fabric,” she says, shutting her eyes. Surrounded in her Lyme home studio by the physical manifestation of those thoughts — pillows, quilts, coats, and yards upon yards of dyed fabric waiting patiently for turns at the sewing machine — it’s not difficult to imagine that the inside of Goodman’s mind is just as vibrant. **UVL**

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