

Mushrooms for Color...An Artist's Palette

By Wesley D. Price

This April the Boston Mycological Club welcomed Susan J. Hopkins to the Harvard Herbaria to teach a workshop on harnessing the power of mushrooms for color. This workshop was nothing short of amazing.

At first glance, one may not suspect the incredible palette of colors available to us through our mushroom friends. The world of fungi, at every turn, seems to offer new, surprising uses and benefits for us who dare to take the time to notice.

While considering how to begin this article on the fascinating and magical world of mushroom fiber arts, I kept returning to the idea of the world of sight and blindness. In the 1970's my grandfather, the Reverend Wesley G. Price, was the executive director for the Protestant Guild for the Blind in Boston, Massachusetts. My parents met each other while working at a summer camp for the blind in Scituate. My paternal great grandmother lost her sight when I was very young and used to recognize me by sound and touch. And so it is with this growing awareness of the gift of sight that I write this article.

In the early 1970's, the late Miriam Rice, began experimenting with mushrooms for dyeing natural fibers. In 1974, Miriam wrote the book, *Mushrooms for Color*, which started what has now become a growing international movement. A movement which inspires our curiosity and requires not only experimentation and innovation but also good old fashioned mushroom identification skills.

The main guidelines for mushroom dyeing, as explained by Susan, our gracious workshop leader, are pH, water temperature, time, the right mushrooms and the use of mordants to pre-treat the fiber. A mordant is a "reagent, that fixes dyes to cells, tissues, or textiles or other materials."⁽¹⁾ We used alum and iron mordants. Tin, copper and other metals may also be used as mordants. When choosing to work with heavy metals, metal toxicity should be carefully considered.

A look into the chemistry of using mordants reveals an interaction between the metal ions (metal salts) and the chosen fiber, which enables the fiber and the dye to bond. An article titled, *Chemistry of Natural Dyes*, by Padma S. Vankar, explains, "Natural dyes are substantive, requiring a mordant to fix to the fabric and prevent the colour from either fading with exposure to light or washing out... They are of three types: metallic mordants, tannins and oil mordants." Padma continues, "The trick is to choose the right dye from the right source, that gives not only beautiful tones, but colourfast shades as well." This is where learning from the trials and errors of others is invaluable.

When explaining the process of mushroom dyeing to the class, Susan made sure to tell us that she was no expert. Given her level understanding combined with her easygoing ability to transfer that understanding to her students, I have to respectfully disagree with her; She is an expert (albeit a humble one) who recognizes the truth that she is always learning.

Throughout the two day workshop, Susan walked us through all the steps required to make us budding textile artists. The class was also introduced to mushroom based watercolor paints and many of us took the opportunity to paint our own pictures using the mushroom watercolors provided.

Thanks to Susan and the BMC for putting this workshop together. I now have another reason to love mushrooms, another reason to walk in the woods, another reason to appreciate the wonders of color and sight and most importantly another reason to be in awe of this amazing kingdom that we are only beginning to understand.

1. www.thefreedictionary.com