

## Workshop

### Dying with Tyrian shell purple

Aalto University, School of ARTS

19.04.2023



Co-organised by:

ERC-Refashioning the Renaissance &  
Fashion History Lab

Tyrian purple, a reddish-purple natural dye obtained from several species of 'Murex' sea snail, is one of the most expensive dyes that ever existed. The dye was especially highly prized in antiquity and its production continued in Europe in the Byzantine area until Constantinople was conquered in 1453. Due to the complex dye procedure and the bright and durable colour it produced, Tyrian purple became closely associated with wealth and power. Textiles and garments dyed with sea shell purple dye were regarded as status symbols and their use was regulated by sumptuary laws. By the fourth century AD, sumptuary laws in Rome permitted the use of the Tyrian purple only for the emperor. Hence, the colour is also known as 'Imperial purple'.

Tyrian purple was greatly valued for the stunning colour. Unlike its *purpura* imitations that substituted some of the dye with madder-red, the purple colour created with shell dyes did not fade easily but in fact became just brighter in sunlight. However, the shades varied, depending on the dye method, the type of shells or the quantity of the dyestuff used. The most prestigious shade verged towards black, resembling 'clotted blood'.

The production was exploited so much that, by the late fifteenth century, murex shells had become virtually extinct in Europe and purple as the colour of power gradually became

replaced with brilliant and durable reds dyed with rare insect dyes (Kermes, Lac dye, and European or, later, American cochineal).

The shell pigment is still highly valued today but it is produced by just a handful of people around the world. The cost of the dyestuff is still incredibly high: just a gram of the dyestuff can cost up to 2500 euros. Despite its rarity and expense, the *Refashioning the Renaissance* and *Fashion History Lab* projects were able to acquire a small test batch of the pigment extracted from Murex shells from Mohamed Ghassen Nouria, a Tunisian craftsman who examines the possibilities of preserving and using the precious colour in a sustainable way.

This workshop is organized around the precious dyestuff. The purpose is to explore the historical uses and meanings of the expensive shell purple in Europe, and to carry out a dye experiment using the shell purple dye. By testing the dye, our aim is to explore the dye process and gain access both to the experience of dyeing as well as to the range of colours that can be obtained using the precious and prestigious dye.

### **Programme:**

#### **Session I: Shell purple dyes in historical context**

*Location: Ekonominaukio 1, 1004 Kyösti Järvinen*

Coordinator and chair: Paula Hohti

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| 9.00        | Coffee   |
| 9.30-10.00  | Mohamed Ghassen Nouria: Tyrian purple in contemporary production and practice    |
| 10.30-11.00 | Paula Hohti: Shell purple dyes in historical context                             |
| 11.00-12.00 | Berit Hildebrandt: Power-dressing and the meaning of purple in the classical age |
| 12.00-13.00 | <i>Lunch (at own cost)</i>   |

#### **Session II: Shell purple dye experiment**

*Location: Väre studios, Dye Kitchen.*

Coordinator: Kirsi Mantua-Kommonen

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| 13.00-17.00 | Dye experiment |
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Participants: Paula Hohti, Kirsi Mantua-Kommonen, Dustin Neighbors, Elise Piquemal, Kirsi Niinimäki, Pirjo Kääriäinen, Paavo Hohti.

\*This workshop is part of the Refashioning the Renaissance project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Grant agreement No. 726195)