

Two sides of the same stone
About the duality of lapis lazuli
By Veerle Driessen

In Florence in 2011, I am standing in front of a medieval fresco of the crucifixion. The sky and Mary's cloak are painted in a striking blue known for its appearance in an overwhelming number of biblical scenes. The guide points out the unusual strokes of red that are a dramatic 'addition' to the sky and cloak. He explains that these red strokes, which appear in several frescoes, have long been interpreted as a symbolic addition, referencing the blood of Christ, his death, and his suffering.

The red strokes are, however, not original to the fresco. The blue was scraped off the wall to sell the pigment. Blue was a difficult colour for frescoes, the acidity of the wet stucco reacting with the pigment. The only reason it was possible to scrape off the blue, or ultramarine to be precise, is because it was painted on the wall 'al secco'. By applying the blue on dry stucco, the desired intensity for which ultramarine is so famous could be achieved.

It was through this experience that I learned about lapis lazuli, never forgetting its symbolic and economic value. Before the invention of a synthetic version in 1826, grinding the rare lapis lazuli stone was the only way to produce this blue hue that was associated with the sky and sacrality. It was worth scraping off a little blue because the pigment is so outrageously expensive a little bit of it could earn you a significant amount of money. Although the stone can be found in a few places around the world, the best quality of it comes from the Sar-e-Sang mines in present-day Afghanistan, where it has been mined for more than a whopping 6000 years. Lapis lazuli was found on regal artifacts all over the world, its price, and reputation close to that of gold.

The work *Consignor Consignee*, which can be seen in the front room of the gallery, is made from lapis lazuli that the artist Pieter Paul Pothoven brought from Afghanistan himself. Although he bought most of the stones from a merchant in Kabul, he took some of them straight from the mine shafts. He spent three days there, wearing a shalwar, collecting the nuggets, talking to miners, and taking pictures, with the dull sound of explosions used for the mining operations in the background.

His visit to the mines was already in 2009, and because of Pothoven's long-term project on RARA (Revolutionary Anti-Racist Action), an anonymous activist collective that fought against racism in the 1980s and 1990s – he has not paid attention to the rare pigment for a long time. This changed in the past year. It was a difficult period

for him. Someone from RARA, with whom he collaborated, died, and his daily life was, like everyone's, affected by the pandemic. During a clearing session of his studio, he came across the jars of pigment, the lapis lazuli stones ground by the VU University of Amsterdam.

'It made me realize I wanted to work with this physical material again', says Pothoven. The RARA project mainly consists of intangible material with interviews being a big part of it. Working with his hands allows him to work more instinctively, which contrasts with consciously engaging with RARA. 'Working with my hands feels, like cleaning up, very therapeutic', he finds.

To underline the main role of physical material in the series, Pothoven consciously kept the materials he worked with as raw as possible. Instead of mixing the pigment with a binder like oil or tempera, he merely glued the pigment on the medium in two layers. As a result, you see some loose granules in the frame that have fallen off.

I was surprised by the number of colours that lapis lazuli can produce. The almost luminescent blue of *Consignor Consignee (TK 15223) 90 – 120 µm* is the ultramarine I know and associate directly with the blue I described in the introduction. The light blue of *Consignor Consignee (TK 15223) 20 – 32 µm 2,43 sink* is much more modest, reminiscent of the color of the sky on a hazy summer day. The blue of *Consignor Consignee (TK 15223) 20 – 90 µm 2,43 float* is the most intense colour of the series, made of the purest lazurite, the mineral in lapis lazuli that is the source of the blue.

The shade of blue in the pigment is determined by two factors. The first being the quality of the lapis lazuli, that is, exactly how much lazurite is present in the stone. The lazurite can be separated from the rest of the minerals in the stone by a method called heavy liquid separation, giving you the most intense shade of blue. The words 'float' and 'sink' in the titles of three of the works in the series refer to the fact that these pigments are separated by this method, the colour determined by the weight and thus the amount of lazurite present.

The other factor is grain size, referred to in the titles as µm. If you look closely, you can clearly see the different grain sizes between the *Consignor Consignee* works, which define not only the texture, but also the refraction of light and thus the colour. There is an ideal fineness of grains that makes for an ultramarine that appears solid, but when ground finer, the colour becomes paler.

The shades of blue you see in *Consignor Consignee* are an ode to the natural pigment, which, although it reads as a solid colour at first glance, is incredibly rich in different shades. It is, Pothoven tells me,

in great contrast with the synthetic colour. When discussing the (synthetic) colour blue, we cannot ignore International Klein Blue, a synthetic blue pigment that Yves Klein developed in collaboration with a chemist, that made him famous as an artist. Due to the fame of Klein and his pigment, it now in fact influences all artists who are working with the colour blue, much to the frustration of Pothoven.

‘Klein is talking about every grain of blue being expressed in his paintings’, he says, ‘but, comparing his blue to the natural pigment, the opposite seems true. Klein appropriated the history of the colour blue with a dull, synthetic surrogate – the grain is pretty much uniform due to its industrial manufacturing process – that just cannot compete with the multiformity of the natural colour’.

With this in mind, Pothoven thinks you could say Klein worked on the immaterialisation of the colour, focusing on it representing the endlessness of the sky, the void. Pothoven wants to re-materialize it.

To complement the rawness of the pigment, the frames are raw as well. The wood used for the frames comes directly from crate TK15223, in which the stones were transported from Afghanistan to the Netherlands, and in some works, you can still see the staples used for the application of the transport labels. One of them is printed on this handout and is still on the back of the frame of, for example, *Consignor Consignee (TK 15223) 20 – 90 µm 2,43 float*.

The crates also carry a different story. ‘I cannot separate my stay in Afghanistan and the transport of the stones from the military infrastructure that was there at the time, and the bureaucratic presence of the Netherlands.’

After Pothoven had collected the stones, the cultural attaché of The Netherlands in Afghanistan arranged for their transport. Pothoven delivered the heavy bag of stones to the embassy in Kabul by bike and could collect them months later at the naval base in Amsterdam.

The journey of the stones reveals a part of the socio-political story of Afghanistan, which has been mired in violent wars since the 1800s. For a long time, the Dutch involvement in the recent occupation of Afghanistan made Pothoven feel uncomfortable.

He started working with the pigment again because lapis lazuli still holds a huge attraction for him. ‘Nevertheless, you have the uneasy social economic sides of lapis lazuli, and I wanted to make a work that puts them side by side.’ This duality is important to him in *Consignor Consignee*. A duality he made visible in the works by the contrast between the perfect blue plane, disturbed by the legs of the staples, which have been shot into the wood without any aesthetic thought. A duality that is also in the pigment itself, which has a rock-solid value

due to its rarity and reputation, but comes from a very unstable area. Not only because of the socio-political situation but also because of the geology, the area being tormented by frequent earthquakes.

Pothoven cautiously states that he might think of his lapis lazuli project, which he has been working on since 2009, as a coming-of-age project. By coincidence, he had traveled extensively throughout the 'Middle East' before visiting the mines. He realizes that he was able to make the special journey through a certain boldness which, although he does not describe it in so many words, he now finds naive. The overconfidence that comes with the freedom of movement that only a white privileged man has. Now, more than ten years later, that boldness has given way to a caution befitting a new consciousness determined by a realisation that connectedness is more important than the things you have achieved as an individual.

Perhaps it is this realisation that has made him receptive to the effect ultramarine can have on you. I asked him if he thought lapis lazuli would be so popular if it was not as expensive. He thinks for a moment. 'Nowhere in the Bible it is stated that Mary has a blue cloak', he replies, 'Textiles could only be realized in this particular blue after the invention of synthetic ultramarine. The fact that Mary wore blue is therefore a painterly invention. It is because of this explanation that I, for a long time, thought that holiness and sacredness were values derived from the economic value of the colour. I now really believe that people experience something when seeing the colour, maybe because I dare to admit that I myself experience this material in a different way, and that it is this experience that adds to the economic value of it. It is maybe too easy to hide behind a rational socio-economic explanation, to base yourself on something that you can demonstrate, instead of having to justify yourself based on your own experience'.

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