



BY Amy Spungen

## *Peter Horjus*

### HERE'S TO BLUE

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Peter Horjus's patio in the friendly, funky Marigny neighborhood of New Orleans — just a ten-minute walk to the famous French Quarter — is the perfect place for dyeing the fabric he uses in his quilts.

This gifted Renaissance man began globetrotting as a survey statistician for the United Nations World Food Programme after receiving a master's degree in public health at Tulane University in 2003. Fifteen years later, he has logged countless miles in places like Afghanistan and Mozambique, all while keeping one foot firmly planted in Louisiana.

Before he became a textile artist, if you had told Peter that one day he'd be plunging yards of fabric into a vat of indigo dye and explaining its chemistry for a quilt magazine story, he might have been a tad skeptical.

Michigan-born Peter Horjus earned his master's in public health at Tulane, then made New Orleans his artistic home.



: A hand-dyed linen scarf; a handmade Mardi Gras costume. **OPPOSITE:** Portrait quilts give Peter a chance to get personal.

### way to quilting

er's enthusiasm and creative vibe were ent from the moment he greeted us. Tall and with a mop of curly hair and thick, horn-d glasses, the artist wore orange pants he himself. Leading the way down a harlequin- ned walkway, he gestured us into the ard he shared with his neighbor. Around us ed a lush little Eden of palm, Meyer lemon, atsuma trees; bamboo; vines; and brimming of herbs and vegetables. On the patio table l the dye vat that soon would hold our ion. For now, though, we ascended a few onto a cool and spacious porch at the back house, filled with quilts.

er's introduction to quiltmaking came in the of a baby quilt project, as with so many first- quiltingers. One baby quilt — made for a friend, inger machine he purchased at Target — led

to another, then another. "I started appliquéing on these baby quilts, and then I got into portrait quilts," Peter said. "[Then] I needed a bigger, better machine, so I got a good one worth more than my crappy car." Peter pointed to the sleek, high-end Elna sitting in his house, surrounded by Mardi Gras costumes he creates every year.

Peter makes three main types of quilts: those portraits he mentioned — a series of six large-scale, intricately detailed quilts called *The Men*; whole-cloth quilts Peter creates from East Indian printed linen coverlets; and whole-cloth quilts made with indigo-dyed linen. All of his work is striking, but the indigo quilts, uniquely Peter's own, are especially fascinating: radiating patterns of indigo blue from the lightest robin's egg hue to the deepest twilight navy, on linen with a fine, soft hand from the many washings of the cloth.





ABOVE: The longer fabric stays in the dye vat, the stronger the contrast to the resist. OPPOSITE: Peter's screened-in porch was the place for show and tell.

*Peter gets the blues*

Peter's indigo obsession began at the Crosby Schoolhouse, an art studio and living space he co-founded with Karen Gadbois and Kate McNee in Crosby, Mississippi. When Karen mentioned her interest in working with indigo, "That was the spark," said Peter, "and we both started dyeing."

Peter specializes in the Japanese shaped-resist dyeing technique of *shibori*. Japan has a centuries-long history of indigo dyeing; the practice was especially prevalent from the 17th to the mid-19th century, when lower classes were banned from wearing silk and turned to cotton for their clothes. Indigo dye worked well with cotton and, in countries such as Italy and France, became associated with sturdy work clothing.

There are different types of shibori, and Peter uses *itajime*, a shaped-resist technique in which the cloth is folded multiple times, clamped tightly between two objects, then dipped into the indigo tub. The shape of the clamp on either side of the folded fabric creates unique "relief" patterns. Peter

has used objects like metal washers, large circular wood, wood boards, slats, and other items.

Once his quilt "sandwich" is ready — s top, batting, and backing — Peter sits before machine and the quilting magic begins. He raw-edge appliqué and contemporary free-motion techniques on his portraits and whole-cloth. For his indigo-dyed shibori quilts, "I use a w foot for my straight lines, and then free-motion circles," he said. "I've tried to perfect my q circles, though they are never perfect." It little imperfections, of course, that help to handmade quilts unique. And Peter's imper quilted indigo-dyed quilts perfectly captivate who behold them.

The time-consuming technique of resist-c his fabric and then quilting it, along with the quality of the linen fabric and wool batting, for a product that doesn't come cheap. Last one of Peter's indigo quilts retailed for s thousand dollars.



ABOVE, L-R: Before being submerged, shapes are clamped in place with a vise; after the dip. OPPOSITE: Peter in his backyard w

### *A dyeing art*

On that slightly overcast afternoon, Peter returned to the vat of dye on his patio, orange rubber gloves up to his elbows. He prepared to plunge clamped linen fabric into it as his audience gathered around. "Indigo is extracted from all sorts of different plants, but it's the same chemical whether natural or synthetic," he told us. Peter uses natural indigo from India and would love to grow his own indigo one day.

Peter took a breath and immersed the material in the dye bath, gently massaging it for a couple of minutes. "Some leave it in much longer," he said,

lifting the dripping fabric out. "But you can see it's already starting to change on the surface."

The fabric changed from a bright chartreuse to a darkening shade of blue within seconds. Once the oxidation was complete, Peter hurriedly draped the freshly patterned fabric over some scattered wooden chairs to dry, unfazed that the dyed cloth would be scattered onto the dusty patio, since multiple washes would dispense with any dirt. Peter rinsed his gloves with a hose and pulled them off, satisfied that everything was in order as he took a final look around his verdant laboratory.



dyed fabric ready to hang for drying.



A few of Peter's finished quilts.



ABOVE: Peter in his sewing room. OPPOSITE: Detail, portrait quilt.

*Expanding horizons*

Dyeing demonstration complete, we moved inside the colorful house Peter shares with his partner. Art from visited countries hung on the walls, prompting the question of whether his travels have inspired his own art. "I've wondered if things I saw have influenced me," he said. "In West Africa, [I've seen] people wear indigo-dyed clothes forever. I've spent all this time working there but never really thought about it until I began dyeing."

Though he loves traveling, Peter feels grateful to call New Orleans home. "The city is inspirational to artists and very respectful and appreciative, so it's a good place to start — and to end up, when one is established," he said.

In a big, wide world of quilting possibilities, Peter

seems ready to embrace them all. What next? "gosh — I want to do *everything!*" he said, laughing. "I want to improve my actual quilting in general, I love to get a longarm quilting machine. I'd like to do (...) more complex, large geometric designs, possibly thread-only portraits." Then there's piecing, graph quilt "studies" based on his studio work, and much more. His only challenge seems to be finding the "time and means" to transform fiber art visions into reality.

It's easy to envision a future Peter surrounded by the bold, beautiful labors of his quilting partner. The specifics may be a bit fuzzy, but that's the anticipation of new Peter Horjus quilts — more exciting.

