Dyeing Experiments Using Hair Dyes

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Dyeing a variegated yarn using three bowls of hair dye *Photos: Jan Singleton*

Capillary action allowed the wool to take up the hair dye

Hank of variegated yarn ready to use

Since I was a very young child, botanical dyeing has held a fascination for me. My godmother gave me a book on natural dyes – the book is sadly now lost to time, however the interest and desire to experiment with colour has remained with me.

Remembering that when I was younger I used henna dyes of many hues to colour my hair, I wondered if the same dyes would be suitable to colour wool. Unfortunately, henna hair dyes are no longer widely available, and therefore I speculated whether modern hair dyes, the chemical kind available in myriad colours, would work? The obvious answer should be yes, because human hair and wool are both protein fibres, but I was unsure what the effect would be of the other chemicals often found in hair dyes in order to lighten and brighten the colour when used on darker tresses. So, the experimenting began.

Modern Hair Dyes

The modern range of colours available as hair dye is astounding – everything from subtle shades of blonde through browns and dark black, as well as any colour of the rainbow plus a few more. Hair dye is also readily available to purchase everywhere from supermarkets, chemists and even the corner shop, without having to resort to online shopping.

Armed with several packages containing colours from what appeared to be the whole spectrum, I started to experiment using wool yarn. As with any dyeing, care needs to be taken, therefore I not only followed the instructions from the hair dye manufacturers, I also observed all the necessary rules which need to be applied when handling and dyeing wool.

Wool v Hair

Unlike hair, which can withstand the robust working-in of the dye with the fingertips as well as sudden changes of temperature, the structure and texture of my yarn called for more sensitive handling. Spun woollen yarn, with its absorbency and twist, required a gentler approach in order to avoid felting, and I had to work out the best way to work with it. Different types of woollen yarn also required separate approaches. A lightly spun pencil roving absorbed the dye well and responded best to being gently sprayed with minimal handling. A rickrack spun yarn – a single plied with a cotton thread, was much tougher, strengthened by the cotton binder, which allowed for a more robust working in of the hair dye to achieve the final colours.

Variegated Yarns

I also wanted to experiment with dyeing a variegated yarn. In order to allow the dyes to merge with one another, I arranged a circle of dipping bowls, each containing about half a litre of water. To aid capillary action and allow the dye to flow through the yarn I created a very diluted emulsion of dye in each bowl.

This technique resulted in some amazing effects, although some took time to develop and resulted in several surprises due to the random merging of colours. The way in which the colours flood into one another is always different, and unexpected colours can emerge.

On some skeins, I applied blobs of pure colour onto different parts, to form a more controlled repetitive patterning of the colours.

Handwoven sample showing the variety of shades achieved using hair dyes

Woven sample using hair dyed yarn, incorporating small beads

The Future

I used my yarns to make experimental woven wall hangings. On some I have applied semi-precious stones, following the tradition of hair braiding.

The intense, as well as the subtle, hues achieved provided inspiration and evoked plenty of new ideas. I found that there were so many variations that I just want to continue experimenting with colour blends and colour changes, as well as different yarn types.

While it is impossible to fully anticipate the results of any dyeing experiment, as a glutton for colour, this experiment has offered me a source of dyeing which is fairly simple and yet full of potential. I am sure there is still much to explore with regard to the use of hair dyes on wool.

Notes on Health and Safety

When using any natural or synthetic materials for dyeing, dyers should fully inform themselves as to the possible toxicity of the substances they are choosing to use. They should be aware of local environmental law on the collection of material from the wild – and adhere to it. For information on recipes, safe handling and disposal of substances used in dyeing, dyers should consult the most up-to-date dyeing reference books or company material safety data sheets and refer to their health and safety sections. Older information may be inaccurate, or otherwise misleading. Also note that equipment used for dyestuff preparation and dyeing should never be used for any stage in food preparation or cooking. More information can be found at: *www.hse.gov.uk/textiles/dyes-dyeing.htm*

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