



# Rhapsody in blue

## Ruth Brown demonstrates the process of cyanotyping

AS WITH SO many important things in my life, I discovered cyanotyping quite by accident. I was browsing the books on a stand at a show when I came across Barbara Hewitt's book *Blueprints on Fabric* (Interweave Press Inc., 1995). I bought some ready-treated fabric, tried it out and just knew it was going to be important to me: I was hooked. I fell in love with the gorgeous, subtle, classic blue and white images, and have been working with and teaching the techniques ever since. That was around 15 years ago and I haven't got bored with it yet – it's such a flexible technique that it can be adapted to do almost anything you can think of.

### How to do it

The basic process is very simple. Mix up a light-sensitive solution, apply it to your fabric and allow it to dry. Then put design elements on top of the treated fabric, expose

it to ultraviolet (UV) light, then rinse in water. That's it – you don't need a darkroom or an enlarger to produce traditional, detailed photographic images on your fabric. There are many variations possible at each stage of the process which gives huge potential for creating beautiful fabrics.

### Prepare the light-sensitive solution

You simply dissolve ferric ammonium citrate and potassium ferricyanide in water. If the names put you off, don't worry, they're safe – I wouldn't use them otherwise and certainly wouldn't teach with them. (You can find details on the Health & Safety page on my website: <http://stonecreektextiles.co.uk/cyanotype-health-safety/>)

### Apply the solution to the fabric and leave it to dry away from direct light

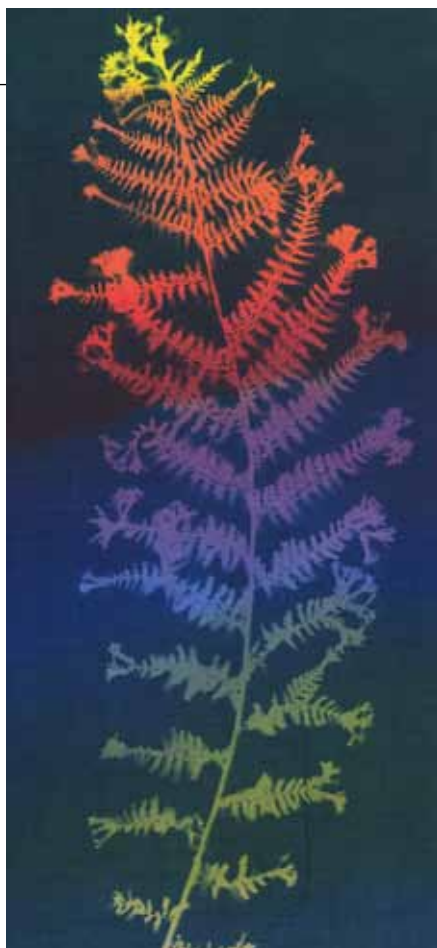
You can pin the fabric to a frame while you paint the solution

Above:  
Cyanotype of fern fronds: the varying shades were obtained by leaving fronds on the fabric for different lengths of time (see pages 33–34)

Right:  
Bluebell on silk from a digital negative



“The exposed areas turn a glorious Prussian blue. Magic!”



**Far left:**  
Photogram on cotton showing fishing net, lace, bubblewrap, hat brim stiffener and knitting yarn

**Left:**  
A cyanotype of bracken which has been overpainted

**Below left:**  
Lady with parasol; glass negative onto silk

on, which will give a smooth background. Or you can use a variety of methods to give a textured background, such as sponging the solution onto the fabric. Or you can lay the damp fabric onto a textured surface to dry – you will see a ghost of the surface texture in the background of the image.

### Place something on the sensitised fabric

The range of things you can use as your design elements is *huge*. Anything that will stop the light getting to the fabric will create an image. Things we've used in workshops include lace, yarns, bubblewrap, flowers (fresh and dried), leaves, jewellery, pasta, glass, moulded clay and stencils. And this is before we start with digital, glass and hand-drawn negatives. I really like using natural forms like sprays of foliage with small leaves such as the branch of ivy used for the front cover of my book (see page 34).

The treated fabric is sensitive to UV light – i.e. sunlight, sunbeds, sunlamps – but not to other forms of light, so you can usually work for as long as you like in artificial light to prepare your design.

### Do the exposure

When you've arranged your design materials onto the treated fabric then you're ready to do your exposure. You either need a bright day or access to a sunbed or sunlamp. You don't need sun, as such, just brightness. When the original yellow/green of the solution has changed to a slightly greenish-grey then the print is done. The timing will vary a lot depending on the light source – it could be as quick as 5 minutes in the midday sun in June or as slow as a couple of hours on a bright day in winter. I use a sunbed when I'm teaching as I never know if it's going to be suitable weather. This is a lot more predictable but, somehow, just not as much fun as working outdoors in the sunlight.

Once you have an idea of how long an exposure is taking then you can vary the shade of blue by varying the length of the exposure. Basically, you either take away some of your design elements during the exposure or you add elements during the exposure. Either way, some areas are exposed to the UV light for longer periods than others, resulting in varying shades of blue. This can give a lovely feeling of depth, such as in





the print of fern fronds (see page 32, top). I started off with all four fronds in place and then about halfway through I took off the darkest blue one and nearer the end took off the paler blue fern. The white ones were left on for the whole time.

### Process the prints

This couldn't be simpler – just rinse the exposed prints in plain water until no more colour comes out. The solution in areas of fabric that have been covered up will be rinsed out, leaving the original colour of the fabric, while the exposed areas turn a glorious Prussian blue. Magic!

### Varying the colour

Although the blue and white of cyanotypes are stunningly beautiful, it may not suit your project for the image to be blue. Luckily it's possible to use a variety of techniques to change the colour. You can use fabric that is already dyed, which on yellow fabric would give you, for instance, a yellow image on a green background. You can tone the prints brown by 'bleaching' them using soda ash and then steeping them in strong tea or coffee. You can also paint your cyanotypes with a translucent

paint, such as a silk paint, to 'glaze' your print with colours.

### Mixing it up

You can mix and match cyanotyping with other techniques to give even more potential. In the piece shown above right, I rusted a piece of fairly coarse linen and then cyanotyped it with Virginia creeper and finally painted it with silk paints to give it rich, warm colours.

As we are using fabric we can also manipulate our 'flexible medium' to give us textures and patterns. For instance, you can scrunch the fabric up and open it at intervals during the exposure to get varying shades of blue. This gives a beautiful crystalline pattern (above left). You can get similar textures using dyeing techniques but they don't have such lovely sharp edges and dramatic planes.

I hope this very brief look at cyanotypes will have whetted your interest in this lovely process. It can open your eyes to details around you that you wouldn't normally notice, like the tiny individual seeds falling from a poppy seedhead or the translucent petals of a bluebell. It should, however, come with a health warning – it can be addictive.  
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Above left:  
An example of scrunched fabric opened out gradually during its exposure

Above:  
Virginia creeper cyanotype on rusted fabric that was then painted

### Cyanotypes on Fabric

A blueprint on how to produce ... blueprints by **Ruth Brown**  
96 pages p/b, £19  
ISBN-10: 0955464706  
ISBN-13: 978-0955464706

*This full-colour title leads the reader through producing wonderful subtle blueprints on*

*fabric. Following a brief overview of how cyanotypes are made, comprehensive chapters explain the processes in detail. Topics include: how to choose and prepare your fabrics; creating smooth and textured backgrounds, and using resists; myriad ways of making prints; varying exposures times; combining cyanotyping with other methods such as manipulating fabric, overdyeing, overpainting...*

*There are also lots of handy tips and suggestions of things to try and experiment with. Along with images illustrating the techniques covered, there are also photographs of gorgeous inspiring works by Ruth and other textile artists, which demonstrate both how versatile cyanotyping is and how a traditional technique can be given contemporary twists.*

You can buy *Cyanotypes on Fabric* from: [www.stonecreektextiles.co.uk](http://www.stonecreektextiles.co.uk)



Find out more about Ruth, her courses and workshops, and her books and kits, at: [www.stonecreektextiles.co.uk](http://www.stonecreektextiles.co.uk)