

Colours of the Past

Emerging slow fashion designer Kinyan Lam is on a quest to preserve traditional textile- and garment-making techniques through his embrace of natural dyes *By Madeleine Mak*



Avocados, pomegranates and chestnuts may be more familiar for their flavours than their hues, but Hong Kong-based designer Kinyan Lam is on a mission to reveal the true colours of these gifts from Mother Nature at his eponymous slow fashion label.

Putting a contemporary spin on traditional natural dyeing techniques, Lam uses fruit, flowers, roots and insects to add vibrancy to garments handmade from light, breathable materials such as linen, organic cotton and chiffon. Cochineal, a native South American insect that feeds on the prickly pear plant, is ground up to create a daring red, while a bold magenta results from using sappanwood, a common traditional Chinese medicinal herb. As for those delectable avocados, pomegranates and chestnuts, their pigments have allowed Lam to experiment with palettes of light pink and brown hues.

“People’s first impression of natural dyes are that their colours are only grey and earth tones but that’s not the case,” Lam says. “The intention of some of our pieces is to show that the colour range of natural dyes is actually very diverse.”

The emerging designer’s unique focus on a traditional and more sustainable approach to garment making is garnering attention. In fact, the debut Kinyan Lam collection, for autumn-winter 2024, found its way into showrooms during Paris and Shanghai fashion weeks. Now entering its second year, the brand already boasts stockists in Paris and Osaka, as well as at Shanghai’s Labelhood, Beijing’s Common Place and Joyce in Hong Kong.

Lam’s story begins in a village in Guangdong. His mother tells him he would scavenge the great outdoors for colourful rocks to draw on the ground with. After moving to Hong Kong at the age of ten, the designer-to-be continued exploring his love for craft and creating by drawing and painting, then headed to the Hong Kong Design Institute (HKDI) and London College of Fashion to study fashion design.



Clockwise, from top left: Kinyan Lam *I Was Once a Tree* collection; natural dye samples; *I Was Once a Tree* collection; embroidery elements. **Opposite page:** Designer Kinyan Lam

“I actually didn’t aim to make beautiful clothes or focus on sustainability,” Lam admits. “I was driven by techniques—stitching, dyeing and patchwork—and I’ve always liked natural things. Even right now [at Kinyan Lam], the cutting may not be loud but our fabric has a lot of passion and heart in it. It just so happens to be sustainable and I see this as a bonus.”

Lam first encountered the wonders of natural dyes while studying at HKDI; he describes witnessing the organic matter transform and then be used on fabrics as “magical”. Even after his initial excitement dwindled, he found himself inspired by the technique’s rich and diverse cultural history, with links to ancient China and Egypt.

Spurred by this new-found passion, Lam shadowed French Moroccan natural dye expert Michel Garcia and plunged into research

on the subject. In 2022, he opened Genau Studio—a dedicated centre for natural dye services, experimentation and educational workshops—while juggling a full-time teaching position at HKDI. At first, creating clothes and other products was just a way to raise awareness of the craft. After garnering positive feedback, Lam decided to put teaching on the back burner and launched his namesake label in 2023. “I wanted it to be a space where different communities of people can come together and engage with natural dyes,” Lam tells *Tatler*.

Lam’s desire to preserve traditional natural dye techniques is heavily influenced by his trips to the mainland province of Guizhou. Home to the Dong ethnic group, the mountainous area is renowned for the production and use of indigo dye, a practice with roots in the Qin (221-206 BC) and Han (206BC-220AD) dynasties. Since his first visit in 2019, Lam has connected with local artisans from whom he has learnt the details of their industry. As well as indigo dyeing, the craftsmen practise a delicate form of embroidery and sun-bleaching of fabrics that are first treated with persimmon.

“I found their preservation of old traditions very charming,” Lam says. “Now, the area is starting to develop and a lot of the new generation don’t want to learn. As a designer, I want to maintain some of their craft; even if we just incorporate some of their techniques, we can help preserve their craftsmanship.”

Take his spring-summer 2025 collection *I Was Once a Tree* as an example. Exhibited in Paris, the designs take inspiration from a cultural practice unique to Guizhou’s Biasha people. The designer explains that, when a baby is born in the community, a pine tree is planted in his or her



Traditional Indigo dye fabrics. **Right and opposite page:** Kinyan Lam *I Was Once a Tree* collection

name. Once that individual dies, the tree is cut down and the wood used to make their coffin. “I felt this story was very meaningful,” Lam says. “It serves as a reminder of the indescribable connection that we have with trees.”

This ode to the Biasha is further demonstrated in Lam construction of the season’s garments. As well as paying tribute to the province’s dyes, the traditional hand embroidery was used to depict a patchwork of roots and blooming flowers on handwoven dresses, trousers and two-piece sets. “All the techniques we used were their



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heritage techniques,” Lam explains. “I don’t think we need to use new techniques because we believe this is already good enough.”

Lam’s embrace of natural dyes is not without its unique challenges, however. For starters, techniques such as sun dyeing are highly weather dependent. The outcome of the dyes can also vary depending on the source of a given material. This has led to an issue of quality control—a particular concern for Lam, who tells us that some of his designs take up to three weeks to handmade. Due to this, Lam does not share the same profit-driven motivations as most in the industry.

“We don’t want a lot of people to suddenly know about the brand or get a lot of orders,” Lam says. “We are a small business and I want to go slow so we can control our quality. Our quality has to be good.”

Customers have also been quick to question whether the concentrated hue of his garments will last. But Lam says fading colour is a reality they will have to accept. “It’s like a pair of jeans,” the designer explains. “When you wear it for a while, it will have bits of your personality in it. I find it really

beautiful and, besides, nothing lasts forever.”

Despite these setbacks, Lam has his sights set firmly on the future. Along with preparing for his upcoming autumn-winter 2025 collection, he has set up a new space in Kwai Fong that puts his design studio and natural dyeing centre under one roof. He also has plans to start an art project that will celebrate the natural wear and wash effects that are left on his designs after a year.

More than anything, Lam hopes to give back to the very communities that have helped him get where he is today. He wants to provide stable financial support for communities in Guizhou to encourage them to stay connected with their craft, while in Hong Kong, he is striving to elevate sustainable fashion practices by empowering fashion students through internships and job opportunities at his eponymous label.

“In truth, I’ve been so tired the last two years and sometimes I feel helpless,” Lam admits. “But seeing people like my designs and want to buy them is very fulfilling.”