

Interwoven: The Art of Indigo & Silver

By Kaminer Haislip

Leigh Magar and I have been friends for over fifteen years in Charleston, South Carolina, and I have always admired her authentic creativity and artistry. Therefore, I was very excited when we both were invited to participate in the 2015 Carolina Makers exhibition at the South Carolina State Museum. The exhibition featured contemporary craft artists of various mediums and it was an honor to be included. Leigh was chosen for her indigo textile art, and I was selected for my silver hollowware and functional object designs.

Milliner turned textile artist, Leigh has an art and design studio named Madame Magar that incorporates history, nature, and art. Her “Seed to Stitch” project is inspired by the rich yet tangled history of indigo on her Johns Island, a sea island near Charleston, home property. Leigh was inspired by the story of a young girl, Eliza Lucas Pinckney, who had the vision of planting indigo. With the work of the enslaved, Pinckney was able to cultivate it into a cash crop in South Carolina during the mid 1700s.

Leigh interweaves design and nature in her home garden where indigo is grown and then hand processed

to dye one-of-a-kind textiles. Her work includes hand-dyed and hand-stitched garments and goods, textile art, and installations. Leigh is inspired by traditional and simple sewing techniques, such as quilt making, rag quilting, and hand sewn textiles, which she interlaces with contemporary, non-traditional elements.

I am the only practicing silversmith in Charleston who continues to employ traditional metalworking techniques and tools that have been used for centuries. As a contemporary silversmith, I am inspired by as well as motivated to carry forth the city’s long-standing silversmithing tradition,

which was vital to Charleston’s economy during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With a nod to the past, my designs focus on today’s domestic rituals and enhancing daily life through the creation of functional handcrafted silver objects that are entirely contemporary in form.

While participating in the Carolina Makers exhibition together, Leigh and I began discussing how both of our artwork relates to historic South Carolina mediums, but transforms materials important to past traditions into contemporary art. Our wheels started turning and we began developing the concept for our exhibition



Fig.1 Nest Bowl by Kaminer Haislip and *Blue Baskets* by Leigh Magar, Silver and Twine with indigo dyed yarn and fabric. Photograph by Jack Alterman

Interwoven: The Art of Indigo and Silver.

Once we had a theme established, we invited Charleston photographer Jack Alterman and curator Brandy Culp to collaborate with us on the first version of the exhibition in 2018 at Charleston City Gallery. In the spring of 2023, we brought a second version of the exhibition to Aiken Center for the Arts in historic downtown Aiken, South Carolina that coincided with the legendary Masters golf tournament in nearby Augusta, Georgia. Leigh and I were the only collaborators for the Aiken exhibition, which focused solely on our artwork.

Interwoven: The Art of Indigo and Silver brought together Leigh's and my contemporary perspectives on historically significant materials. Not only were our original, handcrafted pieces included in the exhibition, but we both highlighted the details of our inspiration and how our processes relate to the early history of South Carolina indigo and silver through didactic text panels with images. Additionally, I received an artist grant from the South Carolina Arts Commission for a film project about my silversmithing that debuted with the exhibition. I demonstrate how I create my unique

silver designs and discuss my work in the films, which can now be viewed on my website.

Leigh and I worked together closely on two important features of the exhibition that linked our mediums together both visually and conceptually. The first was an installation inspired by the silhouette and miniature, which are both popular eighteenth and nineteenth century art forms with established Charleston traditions. We visited the exceptional holdings by the Gibbes Museum in Charleston of these commissioned portraits by notable



Fig. 2 Leigh Magar in her indigo garden on Johns Island, South Carolina. Photograph by Johnny Tucker

Fig. 3 Kaminer Haislip working in her studio. Photograph by Paul Cheney



artists to research the topic and glean inspiration.

Leigh stitched fabric dyed in indigo produced by her own labor to create a silhouette likeness of each of us and I created silver frames to hold the portraits. I made the frames from thick silver wire in the form of an embroidery hoop, which alludes to Leigh's textile art. A custom-sized silver screw mechanism I made with a tap and die tightens the outer frame around an inner structure to secure the fabric. As a reference to the past miniature portraits worn as a pendant either around the neck or on a chatelaine, Leigh combined scrap indigo dyed fabric woven with stainless steel wire to create a long chain for them to hang from on the gallery wall. Through this thoughtful collaboration, we took a fresh look at important historic

mediums and created an original, contemporary art installation.

A second important element to the exhibition linking our indigo and silver artwork together was a pedestal case placed in the center of the gallery as you entered the show. It included Leigh's *Blue Baskets* created from twine with indigo dyed yarn and fabric and my sterling silver wire hand woven *Nest Bowl*. The pairing of these two objects directly related to the show's central conceptual theme of weaving. Additionally, the case held raw indigo material in the form of powder and cakes that Leigh had cultivated in her garden and processed by hand and my one of a kind silver *Indigo Tester* that I custom made for the exhibition.

During her research for the first version of *Interwoven: The Art of Indigo*

and *Silver* in 2018, curator Brandy Culp discovered the silver indigo cup in Diderot's plate "OEconomie Rustique, Indigoterie et Manioc" ("Rural Economy, Indigo Plantation and Manioc") from *Encyclopedie de Diderot et d'Alembert* of 1765 and made a historic connection between the two materials. The plate included an illustration of indigo vats on a plantation and a rendering of the silver cup. The plate mentioned the use of the silver cup twice, and below is that text.

"The principal artist, or the indigo maker (as he is called in the islands) takes care to provide himself with a small silver cup, well polished, which he uses to make tests on the dye, as one will say it instead."



Fig. 4 *Interwoven: The Art of Indigo and Silver* exhibition at Aiken Center for the Arts. Photograph by author. Artwork on wall from left to right: *Madame Magar Silhouette Pendant* and *Kaminer Haislip Silhouette Pendant* by Kaminer Haislip and Leigh Magar, Silver, brass, hand-dyed indigo cotton scrap and *Self Portrait* by Leigh Magar, hand-dyed indigo cotton scrap

“...the indigo maker carefully observes the various phenomena which take place in the work of the battery, and in order to ascertain the exact point of separation, he takes from time to time, with a very clean silver cup, a little of the tincture...”

It was an exciting discovery and a clear link between silver and indigo that tied in directly to our exhibition. Based on the description and illustrations from Diderot’s plate, I designed and created my own contemporary interpretation of the silver cup. The label text Brandy wrote for my silver *Indigo Tester* based on her research is as follows.

“Beginning with the processing of indigo in the French West Indies in the 1600s, growers used silver sampling cups to test the readiness of the indigo liquid held in large vats. Silver was the best material for this purpose but also served as a symbol of status and power on the plantation, only available to the wealthiest planters. After enslaved workers toiled to agitate, or add oxygen by stirring, this foul-smelling liquid, the planter would dip his silver cup into the murky water and check the density of pigment released in processing.

Today, the indigo sampling cup is a forgotten form, and if surviving examples exist, they have likely been mistaken for

wine tasters, which are almost identical in shape and size. Thus, Kaminer has reimagined this historic form and based the handle on indigo plants from Leigh Magar’s garden. This object is a literal connection between indigo and silver as well a contemporary reflection on tools of social control and power.”

Additionally, she included on the label the following two quotes she found referencing the silver indigo testing cup when researching it.

“When we wish to judge the disposition of [the indigo]...[t]his experiment is done by means of a cup of silver, round, furnished with



Fig. 5 Center case clockwise from top left: *Blue Baskets* by Leigh Magar, Twine with indigo dyed yarn and fabric and indigo cakes and raw material. *Nest Bowl* by Kaminer Haislip, Silver. Leigh Magar's indigo powder in bottle and oyster shells. *Indigo Tester* by Kaminer Haislip, Silver. Leigh Magar's dried indigo leaves in indigo painted vessel. Photograph by author

a handle, like those of the Wine Merchants, which are filled with this water about a third or so: the inside of this cup must be very clear; for it is on this bottom that we must judge the state of the tank.²¹

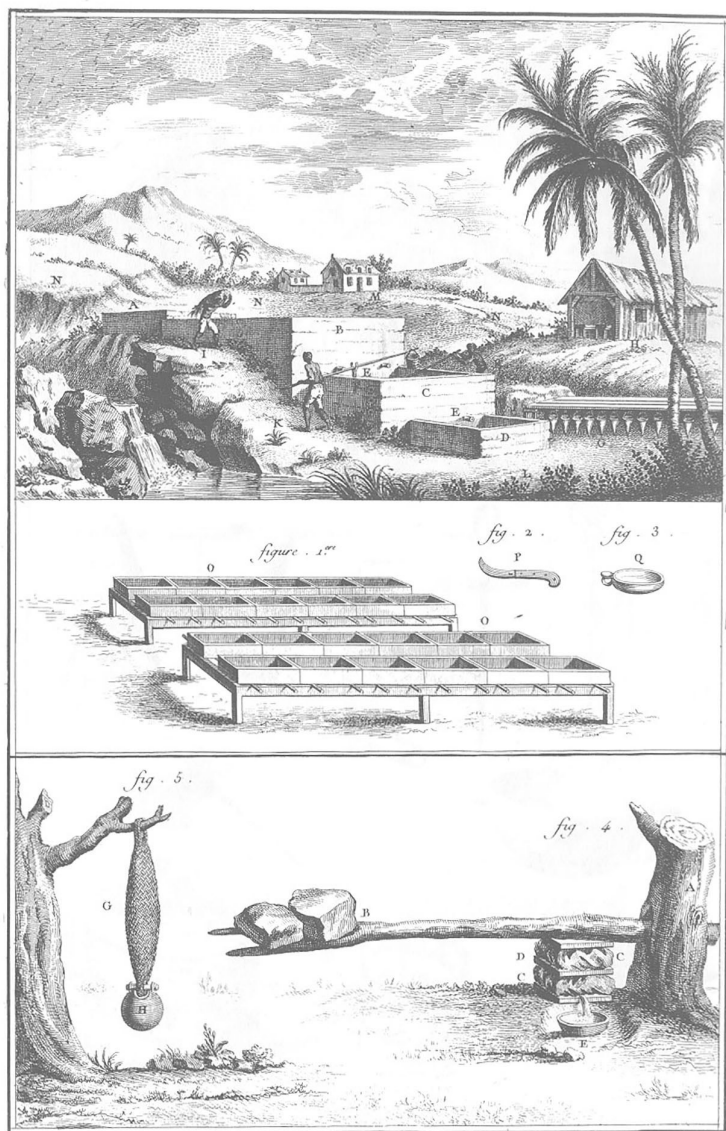
"It is useful to find a little cup of silver destined solely for this purpose; it is filled with this water while the Negroes beat it, and when it is noticed that the starch rushes to the bottom of the cup, or that it remains scattered throughout one ceases, or one continues to beat."²²

The first quote is from M. de Beauvais-Raseau's *L'Art d'Indigotier* (*The Art of Indigo*) published in 1761. The author served as captain of a company of soldiers in Saint-Domingue and most likely learned the craft in that French colony. The book includes eleven engraved plates illustrating the indigo plant, the machines used to extract the dye, the harvesting by the enslaved, and the tools used to collect the plants.

Father Labat and his trip to the American islands is cited in Diderot's plate "O'Economie Rustique, Indigoterie et Manioc" ("Rural Economy, Indigo

Plantation and Manioc"). In 1694 Father Jean-Baptiste Labat, a French ordained priest and missionary, was on the French island of Martinique. The second quote above comes from the memoir he wrote about his travels and the indigo processing he saw while there.

The inside of the silver indigo tester's bowl was highly polished and smooth in order to see the color and liquid consistency clearly, so my contemporary interpretation of it has a high shine, mirror finish. The indigo tester illustrated in Diderot's plate, like historic wine tasters, had a looped handle, so I



OEconomie Rustique, Indigoterie et Manioc.

◀ Fig. 6 “Agriculture and rural economy – Indigo plantation and manioc.” The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d’Alembert Collaborative Translation Project. Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2010. Web. 10 Oct. 2023. <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0001.343>>. Trans. of “Agriculture et économie rustique – Indigoterie et manioc,” Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, vol. 1 (plates). Paris, 1765.

also included that feature in my design. Additionally, in Diderot’s plate the indigo tester had an indentation on the top of the handle for the thumb to sit in. Many past wine tasters also have that element, so I incorporated it into my *Indigo Tester* handle. I forged the indigo leaf-shaped handle from a thick stock of sterling silver to create a broad space for the thumb rest. The dimensions of my silver cup are 4 1/8" length from bowl to handle by 3.5" diameter bowl by 0.75" height. Since I did not have a physical indigo tester to go by for measurements, I used the dimensions of historic wine tasters as my basis for scale.

Because the forms are nearly identical, my silver *Indigo Tester* can also function as a wine taster or tastevin to examine wine for its clarity and quality. The high shine, mirror finish on the interior of the bowl creates the perfect reflective surface for making such judgments. The looped handle allows for it to be worn suspended from a ribbon or chain. Developed by Burgundy winemakers, past European documents make reference to the tastevin and in the late seventeenth century they became popular with the affluent French. Still popular today with sommeliers and winemakers, my design can be perfectly adapted for use as a contemporary tastevin.

The silver indigo tester is not the only historic silver form that has inspired my artwork. I am passionate about history and really enjoy researching past silversmithing objects and how colonial silversmiths

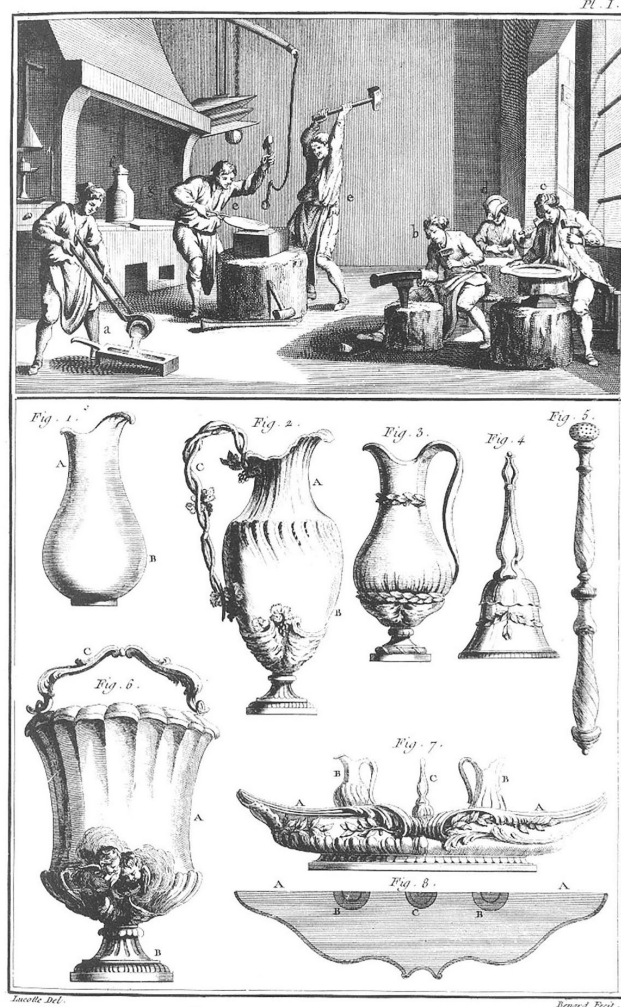
crafted them. The Charleston Rice Spoon in particular has been a focus of several of my designs and included in *Interwoven: The Art of Indigo and Silver* was my *Flight of Fancy Charleston Rice Spoon*.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, rice was an extremely important cash crop to Charleston’s economy, and the silver rice spoon was created due to it being a dietary staple. The Charleston Rice Spoon, derived from the

Fig. 7 *Indigo Tester* by Kaminer Haislip, Silver. Photograph by Paul Cheney



▲ *Fig. 8 Flight of Fancy Charleston Rice Spoon* by Kaminer Haislip and *Blue Baskets* by Leigh Magar, Silver and Twine with indigo dyed yarn and fabric. Photograph by Jack Alterman



Orfèvre Grossier, ouvrages

English stuffing, basting, or gravy spoon, historically had a long handle around 14-16" in length. My design inspiration was based on that historic object and its dimensions. A popular wedding gift in the Charleston Lowcountry for generations, my contemporary interpretation gives a nod to tradition while still looking forward.

The bird wing-inspired handle was hand formed with thick silver wire and has a hammered surface that makes it very strong. The serving spoon bowl has a smooth, high shine mirror finish, which creates a beautiful contrast between it and the textured handle. In 2017 it was honored by the Daughters of the American Revolution with an American Heritage Award. Additionally, this rice spoon is part of my *Flight of Fancy* series that includes two condiment spoons, a serving spoon, a pair of salad servers, a baby cup, and two baby spoons. Throughout the collection the handle design inspired by the shape of a bird's wing is continued.

In addition to historic silver objects, traditional silversmithing techniques and tools as well as Charleston's extensive history of silversmithing influence my work. Throughout colonial times,

◀ *Fig. 9 "Metalsmith."* The Encyclopedia of Diderot & d'Alembert Collaborative Translation Project. Translated by Oliver Wunsch. Ann Arbor: Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2010. Web. 10 Oct. 2023. <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.did2222.0001.579>>. Trans. of "Orfèvre grossier," *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers*, vol. 8 (plates). Paris, 1765.



Fig. 10 Silversmithing stakes in Kaminer Haislip's studio. Photograph by Paul Cheney



Fig. 11 Kaminer Haislip planishing a silver serving spoon bowl over a spoon stake. Photograph by Paul Cheney



Fig. 12 Kaminer Haislip's jeweler's bench with hand tools and tray for catching silver scrap. Photograph by Paul Cheney



Fig. 13 *Corresponding to an echo as it travels (Coffeepot III)* by Kaminer Haislip, Silver and purple heart. Photograph by Paul Cheney



Fig. 14 *Corresponding to an echo as it travels (Pitcher II)* by Kaminer Haislip, Silver. Photograph by Paul Cheney



Fig. 15 Interwoven: The Art of Indigo and Silver exhibition at Aiken Center for the Arts. Photograph by author



Fig. 16 Interwoven: The Art of Indigo and Silver exhibition at Aiken Center for the Arts. Photograph by author



Fig. 17 *Interwoven: The Art of Indigo and Silver* exhibition at Aiken Center for the Arts. Photograph by author

the silversmithing trade grew and by the 1850s there were around 285 silversmiths working in South Carolina. Charleston had the largest number of silversmiths due to its wealth and population, which was fueled by the internationally traded cash crops of indigo, rice, and cotton.

For my Bachelor of Fine Arts in Jewelry and Metals and Master of Fine Arts in Silversmithing degrees at Winthrop University, I studied under Alfred Ward, an internationally acclaimed English silversmith. He taught me the traditional silversmithing processes that have been used for centuries to create hollowware, flatware,

and other functional home objects. Those classic British techniques form the basis of my working style and all of my designs are crafted entirely by hand through forming, raising, forging, and fabrication. The tools and equipment in my studio are almost identical to the implements an eighteenth-century silversmith had in his workshop, such as my hammers, stakes, leather sandbag, wooden stump, and workbench with tray underneath to catch silver filings. Inspired by the connection between my handcrafted methods of production, English family heritage, and Charleston's extensive silversmithing tradition, I

am dedicated to carrying forth that legacy as a contemporary silversmith in Charleston.

Interwoven: The Art of Indigo and Silver was a dynamic and innovative exhibition that focused on the cultural heritage of place and emphasized the symbolism of two colonial era commodities that still resonate today. Leigh's indigo textile art and my silversmithing designs both tied together and stood on their own within a shared space and theme. This interdisciplinary collaboration strove to educate the public on indigo and silver and create an appreciation of past crafts through contemporary art.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. M. de Beauvais-Raseau, *L'Art d'Indigotier*, 1761
2. Jean-Baptiste Labat, *Nouveau voyage aux Iles de l'Amérique*, 1722

Kaminer Haislip is a contemporary silversmith and jewelry designer located in Charleston, South Carolina. Her work includes functional objects, jewelry, and custom commission pieces in silver and gold. Visit her website www.kaminerhaislip.com to view her designs.