

The final image (LEFT) used indigo made from woad and white from crushed shells. Last-stage grinding (RIGHT) produces a luscious red.



VISUAL ARTS

LOCAL COLOUR

Christopher van Donkelaar paints gleaming Byzantine-style icons when he's not designing websites, but last year, the 34-year-old artist put himself on the pigment equivalent of the "100-mile diet."

He came up with the idea after reading a book by the same name by Vancouver writers Alisa Smith and J. B. MacKinnon. Their experiment — to eat only food grown within a 100-mile radius of their Vancouver apartment — motivated van Donkelaar to challenge his dependence on commercially made natural pigments. So he set out to scour the terrain around his home near Cambridge, Ont., for alternative materials.

But paint formulas developed by medieval craftsmen are not particularly compatible with the geology of southwestern Ontario. Take ultramarine. For centuries, icon painters came by this penetrating shade of blue by mixing egg

yolks with crushed lapis lazuli, a semi-precious stone from Afghanistan's Hindu Kush. Pigment merchants in the Middle Ages often referred to the colour as "blue from across the sea" because of how far it had to travel by ship and caravan to reach Europe.

An outcrop of lapis has been discovered on Baffin Island, but for van Donkelaar's purposes, this was still a world away and a long carbon trail by air. Gold, a staple in icons, was also out, because the closest deposits are in Sudbury.

The painter credits government geologists, rockhounds, art conservators and quarry-pit managers for suggesting local sources and advising him on the best methods for extracting and preparing them. In the end, he says, "everything

I needed was right under my feet."

With ultramarine out of reach, van Donkelaar went with indigo, planting a small patch of woad (wild mustard) in his backyard and boiling the sprightly yellow flowers into an eye-popping blue liquid. Next, he made lemon yellow from black magnetized sand scooped from the shores of Lake Huron and roasted in a bloomery fashioned out of cinder blocks. Terra verde from Sebright provided him with green, while crushed



seashells from Lake Huron's Point Clark made a nice pearly white.

The project came to a halt, however, after van Donkelaar's failed attempts to make black from pyrite. "What I really wanted was ivory black," he says, "but, c'mon, where was I going to find an elephant?" Right up the road, as it turns out. The Earth Sciences Museum at the University of Waterloo houses the remains of an 11,000-year-old woolly mammoth. It was found in 1982 near West Lorne, on the shores of Lake Erie, says curator Peter Russell, who agreed to procure a tiny piece of tusk for van Donkelaar, who successfully fired it into a velvety black.

Van Donkelaar mixed the pigments with yolks from the eggs of a flock of silver grey dorkings in his backyard and painted the Biblical scene of Adam Naming the Animals on a slab of local poplar.

As the Old Testament story goes, God created the Earth's creatures and handed Adam the task of naming them to make him aware of each animal's special characteristics — an apt subject for a project exploring the world's diversity and embracing the richness of one's own backyard.

Alison Garwood-Jones



Christopher van Donkelaar collects pyrite at Kettle Point, Ont. (LEFT), part of a failed attempt to make a black pigment.

CHRISTOPHER VAN DONKELAAR