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Breaking the Color Code

Breaking the Color Code

by Anita Stratos



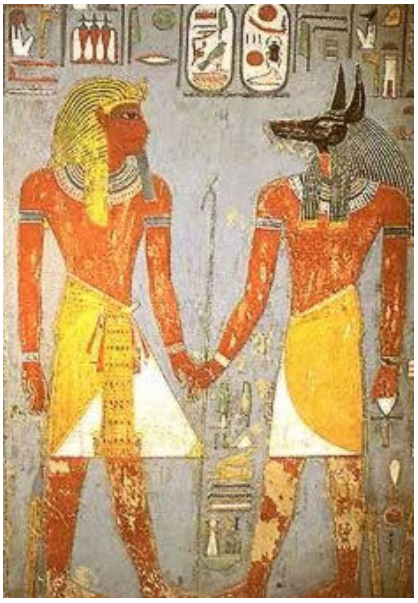
If you walked into an Egyptian museum exhibit today, what would you see? Youd probably marvel at the beauty of the handwork and skills that created such intricate pieces of jewelry. Youd carefully inspect the painting and carvings on various objects such as amulets and pottery. And youd be impressed with the richness of color throughout it all. But even with all you may know about Egyptian history (/ehistory.htm), youd only be getting half the story if you dont know how to "read" the color code.

Deciphering Egyptian codes, from hieroglyphs to the meanings of amulets, is key in completely understanding the messages left behind by ancient Egyptians. Symbolism was everywhere, and almost everything they created had a deeper meaning, including the gemstone colors of the jewelry they wore, the colors used in tomb reliefs, and the materials used to make amulets. Colors were very important, because the Egyptians believed that not only did colors revealed the true essence of a person or a thing, but they also could provide them with protection or other magical properties. So just what were these complex ancient people trying to say?



To the ancient Egyptians, color was an essential part of life. If a god was considered to have no color, then the meaning was that the god could never be thoroughly understood. The magic of color dates back to prehistoric times (/ehistory.htm#Prehistory). Red is referred to in the Old Testament, and the Romans believed that the healing power of coral came from its red color. Amulets were used throughout the prehistoric world, but amuletic magic became an actual science when the first civilizations developed in Egypt.

The Egyptian palette had six colors: red (desher), green (wadj), blue (khesbedj and irtiu), yellow (kenit and khenet), black (khem or kem), and white (shesep and hedj). Most of these colors were made from mineral compounds, which is why they retained their vibrant colors throughout thousands of years. And most of the gemstones they used were semi-precious and chosen not as much for their beauty as they were for the symbolism or the perceived magic they contained. Whether these materials were carved into everyday jewelry or ground down and painted on tomb walls, their colors were not used randomly. Great forethought was given to the colors used on the deity being portrayed, the deceased persons afterlife requirements, or living Egyptians protection.



From ancient times into the 21st century, many people have put their faith and belief in the power of gemstones and color for various purposes: To attract a mate, for fertility, for victory, to improve health, and just about any need. In ancient Egypt, both royalty and average citizens wore jewelry with religious or magical significance; in fact, almost everyone, including infants, wore at least one amulet (/featurestories/amulets.htm). Wearing an amulet made from a particular stone with a specific motif engraved upon it would encircle the wearer with the magic of that amulet. For example, scarabs were carved from many types of stones and were worn to guarantee continued existence in this life as well as in the afterlife.

As with most ancient Egyptian symbols, there are many variations to the interpretation of color. Interpreting the symbolism of colors used in paintings or on objects many times depends on the context in which they are used, much the way hieroglyphs are understood through context. Here are some of the more commonly accepted understandings:



Green was believed to be the color of new life, growth, vegetation, and fertility. A person was said to be doing "green things" if his behavior was beneficial or life producing. The power of green to guarantee new life or resurrection is why many depictions of Osiris (/godsofegypt/osiris.htm) show him with green skin, referring to his resurrection and power over vegetation. Chapter 77 of the Book of the Dead (/featurestories/bod.htm) makes reference to the deceased becoming a falcon "whose wings are of green stone", referring to new life and rebirth. Also, the common "Eye of Heru" amulet (/featurestories/amulets.htm) is often green characterizing the color as one of healing and well-being in its association with the eye. But the most important green amulet was the heart scarab, which was placed in the heart cavity in case something happened to the deceased persons actual heart. The heart was vital because it was considered the seat of emotions and intellect, and it was believed that the heart (/featurestories/heart.htm) had a will and existence of its own. Several chapters in the Book of the Dead are dedicated to the preservation and protection of the heart.

Wadj, the word for green, which also meant to flourish or be healthy, was used for the papyrus plant as well as for the green stone malachite. Green malachite was a symbol of joy. In a larger reference, the phrase "field of malachite" was used when speaking of the land of the blessed dead

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Another green stone, which was a favorite among Egyptians, was turquoise. The word for this greenish stone was mefkat, which meant joy or delight. The use of turquoise has been traced back to the beginnings of civilization. When the tomb of Egyptian Queen Zer (5500 BC) was excavated in 1900, archaeologists discovered a turquoise and gold (/featurestories/gold.htm) bracelet on her wrist.

In ancient Egypt, if no turquoise could be found, glazed quartz was used as a substitute. It was the representation of the color, more than the actual material itself that mattered.

Red was a powerful color, symbolizing two extremes: Life and victory as well as anger and fire. Red also represented blood, and in Chapter 156 from the Book of the Dead (/featurestories/bod.htm) (as translated by Dr. Raymond Faulkner), protection is sought through the blood (power) of Isis (/godsofegypt/isis.htm):

Chapter for a knot-amulet of red jasper

You have your blood, O Isis; you have your power, O Isis; you have your magic, O Isis. The amulet is a protection for this Great One which will drive away whoever would commit a crime against him.

Mummies (/featurestories/mummification.htm) of the pharaohs contained a tiny reproduction of the human heart, which was always made from a precious or semi-precious red stone. This represented the Ba (/featurestories/soul.htm), and it

was placed in the heart cavity with the Scarab. The Ba was also carried by people who suffered from a heart condition, or by those who wanted to protect their hearts from injury.



The Shen was a very important amulet (/featurestories/amulets.htm), which was associated with the sun god Re (/featurestories/re.htm). It appears as a disk with the rim resting on a straight line, symbolizing the sun on the horizon. When it was worn as a personal charm, it ensured long life for the wearer. This amulet was usually made of either carnelian or another type of red stone, and sometimes from lapis lazuli.

In its negative context of anger and fire, red was the color of the god Set (/godsofegypt/set.htm), who was the personification of evil and the powers of darkness, as well as the god who caused storms. Some images of Set are colored with red skin. In addition, red-haired men as well as animals with reddish hair or skins were thought to be under the influence of Set. A person filled with rage was said to have a red heart.



For some reason, the red stone carnelian eventually came to be considered an ill-omened stone. Its name, herset, meant sadness.

Dark blue, also called "Egyptian" blue, was the color of the heavens, water, and the primeval flood, and it represented creation or rebirth. The favorite blue stone was lapis lazuli, or khesbed, which also meant joy or delight. It is thought that blue may have had solar symbolism because of some objects made from blue faience that carry a solar theme. There is also a theory that blue may have been symbolic of the Nile (/egypt-info/magazine-mag05012001-magf4a.htm) and represented fertility, because of the fertile soils along the Nile that produced crops. Because the god Amen (/featurestories/amun-re.htm) (also spelled Amon or Amun) played a part in the creation of the world, he was sometimes depicted with a blue face; therefore, pharaohs associated with Amen were shown with blue faces also. In general, it was said that the gods had hair made of lapis lazuli. In a tomb painting of the Opening of the Mouth ceremony (/featurestories/open.htm), depictions of both the mummy and Anubis (/godsofegypt/anubis.htm) are shown with blue hair.



Beads made from lapis lazuli have been found dating back to the Predynastic Period (/ebph5.htm). Since lapis lazuli was imported from the Euphrates area because it was not native to Egypt, these early specimens show that extremely ancient civilizations had already formed trade routes.

Yellow designated the eternal and the indestructible, also considered to be qualities of the sun and of gold (/featurestories/gold.htm). Many statues of the gods were either made of gold (/featurestories/gold.htm) or were gold-plated; in fact, Egyptians believed the gods skin and bones were made from gold. Tomb paintings showed gods with golden skin, and pharaohs sarcophagi were made from gold, since the belief was that a deceased pharaoh became a god. Some chapters of the Book of the Dead (/featurestories/bod.htm) require that funerary jewelry be made from gold, and many golden mummy masks have been found. When the Shen (see "Red" for meaning and description) was made as a funerary amulet (/featurestories/amulets.htm), it was always made of gold and placed inside the mummy wrappings above the breast. It was dedicated to Re (/featurestories/re.htm) and symbolized that the person would be restored to life and live as long as the sun shines, rising again like Re himself.



At times the color yellow was used interchangeably with white, and at those times it took on the symbolism of white.

Predynastic Egyptians were already fashioning simple beads from gold (/featurestories/gold.htm), but within a few centuries, goldsmiths became highly skilled and were able to make amulets, diadems, pectorals, finger rings, pendants, and every type of jewelry from gold.

Black symbolized death, the underworld, and the night. We see this reflected in Osiris (/godsofegypt/osiris.htm), who was referred to as "the black one" because he was king of the afterlife, and also with reference to the god of embalming, Anubis (/godsofegypt/anubis.htm), who was portrayed as a black jackal or dog. Because Queen Ahmose-Nefertari was the patroness of the necropolis, she was often shown with black skin.

In a rather unusual about-face, black could also represent fertility and resurrection because of the dark silt left behind by the annual Nile flood (/featurestories/nile.htm). From the most ancient Egyptian times, Egypt was known as Kemet, or "the black land", because of the

dark soil of the Nile Valley; therefore, the color black symbolized Egypt itself. When used to represent resurrection, black and green were interchangeable.



White denoted purity and omnipotence, and because it had no real color, it represented things sacred and simple. White was especially symbolic in the religious objects and ritual tools used by priests (/featurestories/priests.htm). Many of these were made of white alabaster, including the Apis Bulls (/featurestories/bull.htm) embalming table. "Memphis (/memphis.htm)", a holy city, meant "White Walls", and white sandals were worn to holy ceremonies. White was also the color used to portray most Egyptian clothing. Hedj, one of the words for white, was also a word used for silver. When silver (/featurestories/silver.htm) was used together with gold (/featurestories/gold.htm), they symbolized the moon and sun. Because red and white were opposites in meaning, they were at times placed together to symbolize completeness.

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