

Colors of Ancient Egypt

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Color (Ancient Egyptian name "*iuwn*") was considered an integral part of an item's or person's nature in Ancient Egypt, and the term could interchangeably mean color, appearance, character, being or nature. Items with similar color were believed to have similar properties.

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Color Pairs

Colors were often paired. Silver and gold were considered complementary colors (i.e. they formed a duality of opposites just like the sun and moon). Red complemented white (think of the double crown Ancient Egypt), and green and black represented different aspects of the process of regeneration. Where a procession of figures is depicted, the skin tones alternate between light and dark ochre.

Purity of color was important to Ancient Egyptians and the artist would usually complete everything in one color before moving on to the next. Paintings would be finished off with fine brushwork to outline the work and add limited interior detail.

The degree to which Ancient Egyptian artists and craftsmen mixed colors varies according to dynasty. But even at its most creative, color mixing was not widely spread. Unlike today's pigments which give consistent results, several of those available to Ancient Egyptian artists could react chemically with each other; for example, lead white when mixed with orpiment (yellow) actually produces black.

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Black and White Colors in Ancient Egypt

Black (Ancient Egyptian name "*kem*") was the color of the life-giving silt left by the Nile inundation, which gave rise to the Ancient Egyptian name for the country: "*kemet*" – the black land. Black symbolized fertility, new life and resurrection as seen through the yearly agricultural cycle. It was also the color of Osiris (‘the black one’), the resurrected god of the dead, and was considered the color of the underworld where the sun was said to regenerate every night. Black was often used on statues and coffins to invoke the process of regeneration ascribed to the god Osiris. Black was also used as a standard color for hair and to represent the skin color of people from the south – Nubians and Kushites.

White (Ancient Egyptian name "*hedj*") was the color of purity, sacredness, cleanliness and simplicity. Tools, sacred objects and even priest's sandals were white for this reason. Sacred animals were also depicted as white. Clothing, which was often just undyed linen, was usually depicted as white.

Silver (also known by the name "*hedj*," but written with the determinative for precious metal) represented the color of the sun at dawn, and the moon, and stars. Silver was a rarer metal than gold in Ancient Egypt and held a greater value.

Ancient Egyptian pigments:

Black - '*kem*' (Translit: *km*) 



Lamp black



Ivory black

White - '*hedj*' (Translit: *hḏ*) 



Chalk white



Lead white



Silver - '*hedj*' (Translit: *hḏ*) 

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Blue Colors in Ancient Egypt

Blue (Ancient Egyptian name "*irtyu*") was the color of the heavens, the dominion of the gods, as well as the color of water, the yearly inundation and the primeval flood. Although Ancient Egyptians favored semi-precious stones such as azurite (Ancient Egyptian name "*tefer*" and lapis lazuli (Ancient Egyptian name "*khesbedj*," imported at great cost across the Sinai Desert) for jewelry and inlay, technology was advanced enough to produce the world's first synthetic pigment, known since medieval times as Egyptian blue. Depending on the degree to which the pigment Egyptian blue was ground, the color could vary from a rich, dark blue (coarse) to a pale, ethereal blue (very fine).

Blue was used for the hair of gods (specifically lapis lazuli, or the darkest of Egyptian blues) and for the face of the god Amun – a practice which was extended to those Pharaohs associated with him.

Ancient Egyptian pigments:

Blue - 'ir^{tyu}' (Translit: *ir^{tyu}*) 



Egyptian blue
(various tones)



Azurite - 'fe^{fer}'

(Translit: *tf^r*)



Lapis lazuli - 'khes^{bedj}'

(Translit: *hs^{bd}*)



Indigo

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Green Colors in Ancient Egypt

Green (Ancient Egyptian name "*wahdj*") was the color of fresh growth, vegetation, new life and resurrection (the latter along with the color black). The hieroglyph for green is a papyrus stem and frond.

Green was the color of the "Eye of Horus," or "*Wedjat*," which had healing and protective powers, and so the color also represented well-being. To do "green things" was to do behave in a positive, life-affirming manner.

When written with the determinative for minerals (three grains of sand) "*wahdj*" becomes the word for malachite, a color which represented joy.

As with blue, the Ancient Egyptians could also manufacture a green pigment – verdigris (Ancient Egyptian name "*hes-byah*" – which actually means copper or bronze dross (rust). Unfortunately, verdigris reacts with sulphides, such as the yellow pigment orpiment, and turns black. (Medieval artists would use a special glaze over the top of verdigris to protect it.)

Turquoise (Ancient Egyptian name "*mefkhat*"), a particularly valued green-blue stone from the Sinai, also represented joy, as well as the color of the sun's rays at dawn. Through the deity Hathor, the Lady of Turquoise, who controlled the destiny of new-born babies, it can be considered a color of promise and foretelling.

Ancient Egyptian pigments:

Green - 'wah^{dj}' (Translit: *w^{3d}*) 



Malachite - 'wah^{dj}'

(Translit: *w^{3d}*)



Verdigris - 'hes-byah'

(Translit: *hs-bi³*)



Chrysocolla



Turquoise - 'mef^{kaht}'

(Translit: *mfk^{3.t}*)



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Yellow Colors in Ancient Egypt

Yellow (Ancient Egyptian name "*khenet*") was the color of women's skin, as well as the skin of people who lived near the Mediterranean – Libyans, Bedouin, Syrians and Hittites. Yellow was also the color of the sun and, along with gold, could represent perfection. As with blue and green, the Ancient Egyptians produced a synthetic yellow – lead antimonite – its Ancient Egyptian name, however, is unknown.

When looking at Ancient Egyptian art today it can be difficult to distinguish between lead antimonite, (which is a pale yellow), lead white (which is very slightly yellow but can darken over time) and orpiment (a relatively strong yellow which fades in direct sunlight). This has led some art historians to believe white and yellow were interchangeable.

Realgar, which we consider to be an orange color today, would have been classed as yellow. (The term orange didn't come into use until the fruit arrived in Europe from China in medieval times – even Cennini writing in the 15th century describes it as a yellow!)

Gold (Ancient Egyptian name "*neub*") represented the flesh of the gods and was used for anything which was considered eternal or indestructible. (Gold was used on a sarcophagus, for example, because the pharaoh had become a god.) Whilst gold leaf could be used on sculpture, yellow or reddish-yellows were used in paintings for the skin of gods. (Note that some gods were also painted with blue, green or black skin.)

Ancient Egyptian pigments:

Yellow - 'khenet' (Translit: *hnt*) 

 Orpiment  Lead antimonate

 Yellow ochre - 'sety' (Translit: *sty*)

Yellow-red mineral - 'qeny' (Translit: *knit*)

 Ochre  Realgar

 Gold - 'nebw' (Translit: *nbw*) 

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Red Colors in Ancient Egypt

Red (Ancient Egyptian name "deshr") was primarily the color of chaos and disorder – the color of the desert (Ancient Egyptian name "deshret," the red land) which was considered the opposite of the fertile black land ("kemet"). One of the principal red pigments, red ochre, was obtained from the desert. (The hieroglyph for red is the hermit ibis, a bird which, unlike the other ibis of Egypt, lives in dry areas and eats insects and small creatures.)

Red was also the color of destructive fire and fury and was used to represent something dangerous.

Through its relation to the desert, red became the color of the god Seth, the traditional god of chaos, and was associated with death – the desert was a place where people were exiled or sent to work in mines. The desert was also regarded as the entrance to the underworld where the sun disappeared each night.

As chaos, red was considered the opposite to the color white. In terms of death, it was the opposite of green and black.

While red was the most potent of all colors in Ancient Egypt, it was also a color of life and protection – derived from the color of blood and the life-supporting power of fire. It was therefore commonly used for protective amulets.

Ancient Egyptian pigments:

Red - 'deshr' (Translit: *dšr*) 

 Red Lead

 Red ochre - 'ded' (Translit: *dd*) 

Dark red dye - 'demy' (Translit: *dmi*)

Blood red dye - 'ines' (Translit: *ins*)

 Madder lake

 Kermes (Carmine) lake

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