

## Feeling Blue

On casting an eye around our galleries there is an interesting colour palette. Milky-white travertine, red and black clay, and warm russet carnelian. The colour which appears to be most heavily featured, however, is blue. There are shabtis, scarabs, amulets, bracelets, and necklaces all showcasing beautiful blues ranging from sky blue, through turquoise to rich dark blue with golden flecks. Visitors often ask, “Why so much blue?”



*Just some of our blue items. Photographs - Author*

“The human eye can distinguish literally millions of colours following the indefinite chromatic gradations in the environment” (Baines in Davies:145). However, it appears that no language distinguishes more than eleven or twelve basic colour terms (ibid).

In Egypt “*km* was black, *hd* white, *dsr* red and *wzd* was green/blue. *Hsbd* may also have been a term for blue, but it was used with the qualifier “true” which may indicate lapis lazuli” (Pinch in Davies: 182). Of this material we shall speak later.

*Wzd* has much in common with the Greek term *chloros* which similarly describes both blue and green. Coincidentally the Welsh word *glas* in earlier times fulfilled a similar function. *Chloros* is in many ways a concept as much as a colour. It means “fresh and full of sap” (ibid:183). It is possible, therefore, that this colour concept represents vitality and *wzd* amulets and shabtis seems shiny and almost alive in their range of fresh greenish blues (ibid:183). This opinion is echoed in John Lyons’ Darwin lecture on “Colour in Language” (Lamb & Bourriau: 220).

Among the most famous blue elements is the true blue mentioned earlier – lapis lazuli. Now relatively cheap to purchase, in Ancient Egypt the story was very different. It was extremely valuable, not least because it needed to be imported. Originating from the Persian name for the gem – *Lazward* (Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary) it was mined from the 7<sup>th</sup> millennium BCE in the Sar-i-Sang mines in present day Afghanistan.

Used for high status items, it was depicted in a relief being offered to Thutmose III (1479-1429 BCE).

It is easy to see why the mineral was so highly prized as not only is its colour wondrous, but it often includes tiny specks of iron pyrites that shine like gold. It symbolised the night sky and was linked to the goddess Maat. When ground, it was used to create a pigment called ultramarine.

In 21<sup>st</sup> century Britain we may say “all that glistens is not gold” and similarly in Ancient Egypt “all that is blue is not lapis lazuli” is equally true. So how were blue colours achieved without using this precious substance?

“Green/blue pigments are probably defined as scarce or valuable since they are partly or fully artificial and in early times had been rare, although more common in the New Kingdom. In a development which culminated in the Greco-Roman period, blue became a prestige colour especially in religious contexts” (Davies 2001:147). So how were the pigments made?

When fabrics were coloured blue, it is likely that the dye indigotin was used, probably from woad, *Isatis Tinctoria*. It was produced from the leaves of the plant in combination with ammonia from urine. An excellent dye for cloth, it is probably more famous as a tattooing agent used by the pre-Roman Britons. This use has become less likely following research which shows that the dye would streak and flake off skin (Lambert 2018, O’Brien 2004).

For faience and glass, copper or cobalt were used (Nicholson 1993: 80). Cobalt was used until the end of the New Kingdom as a frit to create blues and violets. It was long considered to have been imported, but more recently a source has been found in the Eastern Desert and the *Dakleh* and *Kharga* oases (ibid: 43). Copper was used similarly, as its oxide is a blue/green colour and is still used today to colour modern glass.

It is ironic that in English the term “feeling blue” has a connotation of sadness whilst in Ancient Egypt it symbolised life, vitality and divinity as can be witnessed in our many beautiful blue exhibits.

*Written by Sian Charlton*

## References

Davies, W.V. (ed.) 2001. Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt British Museum Press, London.

Hall, R. 2001. Egyptian textiles, Shire, Risborough.

Lamb, T. & Bourriau, J. (eds) 1995. Colour: Art and Science, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Lambert, S.K. 2004. 'The Problem of the Woad'  
<https://dunsgathan.net/essays/woad.htm> Accessed May 2024

Nicholson, P. 1993. Egyptian Faience and Glass, Shire, Risborough.

O'Brien, L. 2018 'Celtic Woad – an Authentic Resource?' <https://loraobrien.ie/celtic-woad-an-authentic-resource/> Accessed May 2024