

The Egyptian Palette

Ancient Egyptian artists used just six colors: red, green, blue, yellow, black and white. That was their *palette*, art term indicating the range of colors used in a particular painting or by a particular artist. *Properly, palette* is a board, typically with a hole for the thumb, which an artist can hold while painting and on which colors are mixed.

Color 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. 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, 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.

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.

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. **Silver** 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.

Blue (Ancient Egyptian name *'irtyu'*) was the color of the heavens, the dominion of the gods, as well as the color of water. 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.

Green (Ancient Egyptian name *'wahdj'*) was the color of fresh growth, vegetation, new life, and resurrection.

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. **Gold** (Ancient Egyptian name *'newb'*) represented the flesh of the gods and was used for anything which was considered eternal or indestructible.

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

<http://africanhistory.about.com/od/egyptology/ss/EgyptColour.htm>, 2009