

Color and Materials in Jewelry

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To the ancient Egyptians, materials and colors that reflected certain ideas had symbolic meaning. Pigments and raw materials were obtained from many sources in the Nile Valley and as trade goods from people who lived around the Mediterranean Sea and beyond. Below is a list of the colors and their symbolism most important to the ancient Egyptians.



Red could mean anger or fire, but also life forces like blood and the sun. To “do red things” meant to do evil. Carnelian, jasper, and other similar reddish minerals and pigments were found in the Egyptian desert which was known as the red land (red = *deshet* or *deshret*).



Blue was associated with the blue lotus, the waters of the Nile, fertility, rebirth, and protection. The semi-precious stone lapis lazuli was traded from Afghanistan. Turquoise was obtained from the Sinai. “Egyptian Blue”, one of the first artificial pigments, was a frit (glass that has been fired, fused, and ground) developed from the manufacture of faience (blue = *hesbedj*).



Yellow and gold evoked the sun, the eternal, the imperishable, and purity. The ancient Egyptians believed gods had skin of gold and bones of silver. Nubia was the main source of gold for the ancient world. Ochre, a natural earth pigment, was used to create yellow as was orpiment, an arsenic compound mineral (yellow = *mnst* or *knit*).



Green represented life, growth, and resurrection. To do “green things” meant to do good deeds. Malachite was used as a pigment and for cosmetics, while peridotite, green jasper, and other greenish or blue-green stones like microcline feldspar were often used for scarabs, amulets, and jewelry as well as statues (green = *wadj*).

White stood for ritual purity and sacredness. White gypsum plaster was used as a colorant was the mineral huntite. White also referred to silver or the alloy electrum (white = *hedj*).



Black was associated with night, death, and fertile soil. Carbon black, bitumen, and the mineral galena were used in painting. Black stones including granite and obsidian were imported from Ethiopia or the Mediterranean (Black = *kemet*). Egypt was called Kemet after its remarkably rich soil.

