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The Earliest Peoples and their Colors

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Coloring is the sunshine of art, that clothes poverty in smiles, and renders the prospect of barrenness itself agreeable, while it heightens the interest and doubles the charm of beauty.

-- Opie

Foreword

From time immemorial men must have been intrigued by the glowing scarlets and oranges of the setting sun, delighted by the mystery of the rainbow, entranced by the deep and fathomless blue of the zenith sky, a blue not too different from that of child eyes. The peacock's proud plumage, the golden browns and russets of autumnal foliage, the yellow-greens of luxuriant growing vegetation in shadow and in bright sunlight, the flickering yellow light of a tallow lamp in the deep recesses of early man's caves painting restless shadow-pictures on their walls, the deep red of spilled blood; -- all these were but a few of the vibrant notes in the stirring color-symphony of life.

The brilliantly colored corollas of the flowers which constituted nature's embroidery on the dress of her landscape, were also throbbing accents in a more drab chant. Gay insects or otherwise repulsive beetles of prognathous mien were garbed in richly chromatic green and gold scales whose iridescence delighted the eye. Earthy clays yielded to our ancestors the cave men, and even to his forbears, warm red and yellow ochers; and we have found the bone tubes in which he carried grease paints made from these for decorating his body. Forerunners of Cleopatra spread malachite green on their cosmetic palettes wherewith to shade and embellish their eyes. Noting that life ebbed and fled when too much red blood was spilled by lance, stone mace, fang or claw, it was natural for primitive minds to reason that red substance was life-giving: So the men of the last Ice Age buried their dead in red ocher or painted the bones with red paint, starting a custom which lasted many thousands of years, as we shall see. Such was the provenance of the "Red Lady of Paviland," found in a Welsh cave in 1823 along with periwinkle shells and ivory implements to make her happier in the after-life. But really she was no lady at all; for debunking Science proved "her" to be a youth.

But women have played a role in our color-drama in a less spurious way, if not from the very beginning, at least from an early stage. For there is little doubt that they were the makers and the decorators of the infinite variety of pots and vases, a task included with their many other chores so as to leave their lords the men free to bear the weapons necessary for fighting and food provision in the chase. At least this was the case till pottery-making became commercialized.

Brilliant dyes too were to be had when savage men had reached the state less advanced even than that we dignify with the name "civilization": indigo, scarlets from insects and vegetable sources; royal purple from a mollusk. The excavator of the Royal Tombs of Ur of the Chaldees told us how 68 women, on the death of their husband the king, donned their scarlet-dyed garments, their wrought-gold ornaments, their silver hairpins, their beads of blue ultramarine and red carnelian, walked calmly into the death-chamber of their lord, chewed

hashish (probably) till unconscious, and were laid down gracefully in regular formation to await death and eternity happily with their master while workmen sealed up the tomb. The legend of the discovery of the priceless purple so prized by ancient royalty, though suffused with quaint whimsy, illustrates also that basic truth in some elements of legendary lore which it has been recently science's roll often to confirm. A second-century writer told us that in the old days of Hercules, hero of the Twelve Labors, a nymph of Tyre was one day walking along the shore of the sea with her lover, Hercules, and her dog. Suddenly the dog darted after a shell fish and bit into it. The dog's lip was dyed a rich purple! The nymph immediately expressed a desire to possess a gown of that color. (If she were a modern, she would have demanded that it be "of that exact shade.") Hercules, who could accomplish anything, even the pleasing of women, brought her wish to fulfillment.

During the last century man has competed with nature's dyemaking, and from the viscid black tar of the coke-ovens he has brought forth a myriad of dyes whose hues rival those of the rainbow or Joseph's cloak.

The clays with which nature coated the eroded surfaces of her hard rock yielded not only paint-pigment for man to use in decorating his body or his dwelling, or for woman her cosmetic; they served as plastic bases for the vases which in many times and climes were colorfully ornamented. Patient archaeologists excavating the ruins of ancient cities and settlements, to dig up and reveal the remains of early cultures in the Near East, from whence flowed slowly into Europe to build its civilization -- our civilization -- have long used pottery wares, especially color-decorated vases, as criteria for identification of racial elements and cultures and their interacting influences; also as means wherewith to date and trace the origins of the many civilizations. Hence we shall speak of Painted-pottery cultures; Buff-ware, Red-ware and polychrome-ware cultures. ("Red-ware" by controlled firing could be made black, or gray in imitation of silver vessels, or parti-colored red and black). Such cultures and others spread over great areas and were measured not in decades but in centuries, before even the history of ancient Egypt began! The decorative schemes of pottery served, as has been said, not only for identification, characterization, dating and tracing of origins; but can serve to illustrate how universal and inevitable is the urge to take a hand in nature's decoration and coloring of our environment, and thus of our lives.

Because of the great diagnostic importance of pottery in the identification and dating of peoples and their cultures, it is appropriate to consider here the process of pot-making and coloring. Although pottery was a relatively late invention, one might almost say that (after the earliest beginnings) prehistoric archaeology and "pre-history" are founded on the study of pottery. While the varied forms and techniques are of prime importance, the colors too very often have important diagnostic value. Before the invention of pottery, liquids were contained in gourds, baskets lined with clay or leather bags. Naturally, therefore, we find early pots in hemispherical gourd form, decorated with zigzag lines imitating the old carrying-sling for the gourd; basketry forms with "geometric" patterns derived from the old woven work (checkers, etc), and leather-bag or bottle forms often with lines to represent the old girth-band and rows of impressions to imitate seams and stitching. The "invention" of pottery itself may have evolved from the use of clay-lined baskets, the plastic clay at first being hardened by the sun, later by controlled firing.

The vase colors depend both on the chemical nature of the available clay and upon the

firing. The most important "impurity" in ceramic clays is iron (ferric) oxide, whose presence on firing yields red to brown colors, even though the original unfired-clay color may have been yellow, green, blue or black. If 4% to 15% ferric oxide is present, proper firing at 900°- 1050° will produce a beautiful deep red. By "proper" firing we mean usually slow firing within the indicated temperature range with the use of an oxidizing atmosphere (plenty of air). Over-firing may yield "muddy" browns, while under-firing may produce grays, buffs or mottled colors. The iron of clays has a chameleon-like nature, for it can produce also variously tinged buff colors, as well as oranges, brick red and dark gray. If less than 3% iron oxide is present, the color may vary between buff and a poor white. If too much calcium or magnesium is also present, the color may be yellow, drab or gray. Too much aluminum replacing iron yields a pink, cream, ivory or white color. When the iron is present as hydroxides (or "hydrated oxides") the colors tend toward yellow to cream; when as carbonate, toward gray. Organic matter (bitumen, oil, etc.) in the clay tends to give dark grays, blacks and browns; but alternatively, a smoky fire (reducing atmosphere) by depositing carbonaceous matter in the pores of the clay, also produces grays and blacks, even blue-black.

A potter may apply a clay wash containing iron to obtain the red may color or he may fire the vessel upside down in the embers of the kiln, or in other ways, to produce a black-topped ware, with other parts red. He may incise or impress patterns on the plastic clay and emphasize them by white filling or use other colors ("incrusted ware"). He may burnish the whole vessel, or parts of it in patterns, to enhance the color by means of added glossiness. He may go further and give the vessel a "slip," that is, a coating of finer and more vividly colored clay which is fired on the vessel (perhaps changing color thereby). This may be left on portions only of the vase surface, by wiping off some of the slip to disclose the body-clay color ("reserved-slip ware"). He may use both slip and burnish, as was done in some very early pottery found at Jericho in Palestine. It is well to distinguish here a slip from a "wash." Both are clay of the consistency of cream, but the wash is a cheap substitute for the slip, containing lime, ocher or other pigment. But, unlike the slip, the "wash" (when the term is correctly used) is never fired; it is applied to a plain vessel after the firing.

The painting of simple geometric designs on the vessel was presumably a development of the use of a slip, in an attempt to imitate ancient parti-colored materials such as basketry. Basketry itself is marked by symmetry and "rhythm" in a geometric design, while leather work which was the origin of another tradition of pottery-painting, is less symmetrical. The pigments employed of course had to be stable to the high firing temperatures, in some cases after first changing color somewhat, so that the painter had to think in terms of the final colors rather than the colors as applied. Hence inorganic others, umbers, siennas and other native "earths" were used. Organic matter, however, was also used, applying the pigment after firing ("crusted ware"). The potter usually desired to produce sufficient contrast for variety along with harmonious color effect, so often used red, dark brown or black on a "ground" color which was pale buff, pink or other light color.

The use of parti-coloring (as red and black), contrasts of slip color with the natural color of the baked clay, and polychroming arose from an urge for variety combined with sufficient sense of order in the ensemble not to be confusing, the whole leading to a pleasing sense of contrast. That such color contrasts were pleasing in the work of ancient craftsmen is also evidenced in the existence in early times of the processes of cloisonné, champlevé, inlay,

repoussé and chasing. The first two of these are the opposite of each other. In cloisonné work, open cells made usually of flattened wire are fastened to the metal surface, generally by means of solder. The cells are then filled in with inlay or enamel. Often semi-precious stones such as garnets, carnelians, lapis lazuli (natural blue ultramarine), or even glass, are put between the cloissons. In champlevé work, recesses are cut into the metal surface by means of chisel or graving tool, and the troughs so formed are filled in with the material of contrasting color. In repoussé work, the proximate aim is at relief, but the ultimate aim is no doubt by means of punches in the metal to roughen the surface and so diffuse the light reflected from it as to secure contrast of texture. "Repoussé" strictly refers to work done from the back, "chasing" to work done from the front of the metal.

After this brief digression from pottery-color contrasts to color-contrasts in other fields, we return briefly to pottery to remark that pottery was a relatively late human invention. Thousands of years before its advent our "cave-dwelling" ancestors, as we have indicated and shall briefly describe, had developed a cave mural art, culminating in a great polychrome animal art. Formal burial customs perhaps originated still earlier; and we have mentioned the constantly recurring red-ocher interments. Sporadic glimpses of still earlier times reveal uncertain evidences that such earliest documented utilizations of color were preceded by early man's decorating of his own body and his implements. The craving for beauty is a deep-seated human urge. Beauty is not resident merely in color; but one does not have to be a sophisticated color-devotee to realize, after reviewing the age-old evidence, that the love and appreciation of color is firmly ingrained in the human consciousness. Perhaps a more basic urge for variety along with a sense of order, at which we have just barely hinted, is an important ingredient of the age-old love of color. But that is a subject for the color-psychologist and the theorists of esthetics. However, it is neither platitude nor extravagant statement to assert that from remote times to the present, color has played fascinating and ever more potent roles, both utilitarian and esthetic, in the drama of life.

The scope and function of this work precludes our treatment of the origins of art and color in anything more than sketchy outline form. Nor is this a history of color merely, much less of art. Though we must leave to others the psychological, social and artistic aspects of the Why of color usage, we shall regard it as our task to review briefly how men have used color throughout the ages, how they applied colors to their invented products, the coloring agents and gamuts that were available, and perhaps even the combinations employed and enjoyed by various folk in various periods.

The ubiquity of color and the universality of its influence in all pre-historical and historical periods fails to astonish the color-specialist; indeed he regards such primacy of interest as inevitable in the nature of color experience. He is equally confident that the layman, made consciously aware of the facts, will find the subject absorbing and even fascinating. For the dominant role played by vision in our acquisition of knowledge and experience is too well known even to the layman to need elaboration; and the color-specialist knows, that every visual sensation is in part at least a sensation of color. As stated by the psychologist Ewald Hering, "Our visual world consists essentially of differently presented colors; and objects as seen, that is, visual objects are nothing but colors of different nature and form." Or, as expressed by Clerk Maxwell, physicist, "All vision is color vision, for it is only by observing differences of color that we distinguish form."