

COCHINEAL: A BRIGHT RED ANIMAL DYE

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ABSTRACT

The natural red animal dye cochineal has been in use for at least three thousand years. It was one of the ten most frequently used ancient dyes. Cochineal was used by the Aztec, Mixtec, and Zapotec Indians when Cortez arrived in the New World. It has always been very valuable to the indigenous who used the dye and was frequently given as a tribute. The Spanish capitalized on this valuable dye, and for three hundred and fifty years cochineal was shipped to the European markets. Sale of cochineal dye fell drastically when natural dyes were replaced by aniline dyes. Today, cochineal is in demand as a coloring agent in foods, medicines, cosmetics, and laboratory stains. The coloring substance of cochineal dye is carminic acid. In recent years the quantity being imported by the United States has increased due to the decline in the use of some synthetic dyes. In Oaxaca, Mexico, the major supplier of cochineal during Spanish Colonial days, there has been an effort to re-establish the cochineal industry. Today the bulk of cochineal comes to the United States from Peru.