

CHAPTER 1

MAN'S PREHISTORIC AND HISTORIC USE OF COLOR

Early Human Use of Color

For thousands of years, man has extracted pigments from the natural environment to decorate himself, his clothing, and the items used in his everyday and ritualistic life. Archaeological excavations of early human habitations and a large body of prehistoric artifacts attest to this widespread and frequent use. Color discovered in ancient textiles, basket fragments, pottery sherds, funerary remains, implements, adornments, and rock art gives abundant visual testimony that the application of dyes and pigments was an integral part of early human culture (Weigle 1974), and implies that this practice could be as old as man himself.

Universal Use of Color

Early humans' use of colorants was not only frequent but geographically dispersed. Throughout the world, prehistoric multi-colored rock art provides ample proof of primitive man's application of pigments to derive aesthetic pleasure and to convey symbolic and religious ideas. For example, red ochre, believed to have been used for aesthetic and ritualistic purposes, has been found in a 35,000-year-old burial site in Europe (Encyclopaedia Britannica vol., 5, 1974, p. 129). Such large quantities of red ochre were discovered in the graves of early inhabitants of the East Coast of America that they have been called "The Red Paint People."

The Paleo-Indians, who inhabited the Lower Pecos regions of Texas 9,000 years ago, used pigments of red, yellow, and orange ochre, white clay, black manganese oxides,

and carbon to draw shamanic and other symbolic pictographs on the limestone walls and overhangs of their shelters (Shafer 1986, p. 138, 142-166). By contrast, in a peatbog in Cheshire, England, high levels of copper ions and aluminum found on ancient pieces of human skin suggest the use of body paint by at least one human interred there (Bohn 1991, p. 84). As new discoveries are made of early human habitations, the body of archaeological evidence grows, revealing the very early, widespread, and ubiquitous use of color by man.

Many civilizations, from the very early stages of human development to modern cultures, attached symbolic meaning to color. Man has painted his body, masks, totems, dwelling places, and other prized objects with designs and symbols to serve as magical protection against evil forces, as well as a form of purification and preparation for participation in ceremony.

The Pre-Columbian Mayans used color to symbolize the four cardinal points with specific colors (east-red, north-white, west-black, and south-yellow) (Schele 1986, p. 42). The American Sioux painted their faces red to represent the many wounds inflicted and received, and a red feather could be worn by any Sioux if he had been wounded. The Chippewa men in mourning painted their faces black, while the Salish painted the faces of their dead red and black. The Cherokees wore blue to signify grief or depression of the spirit (Minor et al. 1972, p. 214-215).

These examples are but a few of the many that could be given. They demonstrate that the application of color is unique to each culture, and that the variations in use depend on their belief systems, type of environment, and the resources available.

Modern Use of Color

Many of today's indigenous people demonstrate a wonderful sense of form and color. Inspiration derived from the natural environment and the use of bright primary pigments can still be found among many remaining geographically dispersed primitive and peasant peoples of the world. The chromatic feast of the Mexican, Central American, and South American markets demonstrates the regional craftsmen's affinity for bright hues. In South America, the Djuka Bush Negro of Surinam paint their homes and canoe paddles in geometric designs of bright primary colors, while the Amerindians of this same region can be found attired in bright red cloth.

Half-way around the world, color is used to beautify and establish clan and tribe distinctions among the indigenous of Africa. Multi-colored glass beads encircle the necks of many of Africa's aboriginal people, while they and others paint their bodies in an array of pigments for identification, adornment, and ceremonial purposes. In the Pokot tribe of Kenya circumcised adult males bedaub their heads with varied colored and patterned clay caps to demonstrate clan affiliation.

It can easily be stated that man everywhere, from the earliest times, on occasion took delight in the vivid colors that surrounded him in his environment. It follows that persons actively sought to capture, for permanent possession and use, this color in whatever form possible. One can deduce from the evidence given that people throughout time and space, driven by this human desire to capture color, discovered and perfected the use of dyes and pigments.

History of Natural Dyes

Human use of dyestuff can be traced along with the advancement of civilization and the woven textile. It is most likely that the earliest dyes were discovered in nature by accident as stains from gathered wild food, and almost exclusively came from vegetable sources which were readily available in the immediate environment. In the earliest stages,

pigment was crushed and mixed with a sticking substance such as egg yolk, clotted blood, tree resin, or saliva to form a paste, which was then pressed, rubbed, or stuck on to the cloth. Also, a simple paste was made of the dyeing substance, such as crushed berries, and painted onto the cloth. These first attempts to use dyeing pigments were not true dyeing, but must have led to the discovery of the dyeing process, through much trial and error (Robinson 1969, p. 20).

Without written documentation one can only speculate, but it is reasonable to believe that very early dyeing procedures were carried out by the immersion of fabric in a dyebath prepared by the addition of suitable plants and roots to boiling water. Experimentation must have served to instruct early man in the process which produced the desired results. In the earliest times of dyeing, the fabric was usually dyed after it was woven, but as dyeing techniques evolved, the yarn or fiber was dyed before weaving (Robinson 1969, p. 20).

Even though primitive man was limited by his knowledge and the materials available, very early civilizations became remarkably sophisticated in the art of dyeing and weaving. Evidence derived from modern techniques to determine the presence of pigments in prehistoric textiles tells us that man reached very high technical levels in the application of dyes to his woven goods. The sources of dyestuff used reached nearly one thousand different plants, vines, shrubs, trees, shell fish, and insects (Leggett 1944, p. vi).

It is easy to assume that over a great span of time, and possibly even before archaeological evidence can be used, dyed textiles were an integral part of man's everyday life and culture. It is known that the art of dyeing developed in every country, and was practiced by every race of mankind. Wherever woven goods were used, dye was employed to add color, beauty, and interest (Pellew 1928, p. 8).