

Studying the Color Preferences of Ancient Cultures through Science

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Abstract:

A fascinating topic related to ancient cultures and art history is the study of the colors produced by ancient societies on various objects – especially dyed textiles – for artistic, religious, and regal purposes. Towards this end, we need to investigate the make-up of these colors, their sources, and how they were processed. For that purpose, an interdisciplinary approach that combines humanities (anthropology, history, archaeology, religion) with the sciences (botany, entomology, marine zoology, and forensic-style analyses) is needed. The “fashionable” color preferences of ancient peoples through the course of time can be better understood by studying the various archaeological textiles and other objects of different eras that have survived. Further, the investigation of historically important natural dyes and pigments from flora and fauna sources leads to a better understanding of international commerce in antiquity, especially in the movement of dyestuffs, of dyed goods, and of dyeing technologies from one geographical region to another. Case histories of historically important colorful objects that I analyzed from ancient Egypt, Phoenicia, and Israel, spanning 4,000 to 2,000 years ago, will be highlighted in my talk.

Keywords:

Natural dyes and pigments, plant and animal colorants, ancient textiles.