

Ancient Egyptian Eye Makeup

By Judith Illes

Gaze at the myriad portraits of ancient Egyptians and what looks back? Consistent meticulously and beautifully outlined and ornamented eyes. It is virtually impossible to find a portrait of an ancient Egyptian whose eyes are not decorated. During all periods and dynasties, eye makeup was a daily prerequisite for both men and women.

Although we know the Egyptians possessed the equivalent of our rouge, lip-gloss and nail polish, these were used only upon occasion, apparently as a matter of personal preference, style and fashion. The ancient Egyptian tradition of outlining the eyes with pigment to create an almond or feline shape and the importance placed upon this practice, however, transcends the Western concept of eye makeup. "Makeup" to modern Westernized ears has the ring of something frivolous, something optional. Although cosmetics were certainly used for the purpose of beautification, in ancient Egypt, eye makeup did more than paint a pretty face.

As we have seen to be typical of the ancient Egyptians, they took a truly holistic approach to the concept of eye makeup. Not only was it decorative and ornamental, the practice also served medicinal, magical and spiritual practices.

The Egyptians used two types of eye makeup:

- **Udju** was made from green malachite (green ore of copper) from Sinai. Sinai and its mines were considered under the spiritual dominion of Hathor, ancient goddess of beauty, joy, love and women. She bore the epithet "Lady of Malachite."
- **Mesdemet**, a dark gray ore of lead, was derived from either stibnite (*antimony sulphide*) or, more typically, galena (*lead sulphide*.) Galena was found around Aswan and on the Red Sea Coast. It was also among the materials brought back by Pharaoh Hatshepsut's famed expedition to Punt and was given in tribute by Asiatic nomads.

The packaging and preparation of eye makeup was quite different from what we are used to today. Today, we have the choice of liquid, powdered or cake eye makeup. If you find yourself all thumbs at applying liquid eyeliner, no problem, you can just purchase a pencil instead. We have a vast array of colors available to us. Although the nuances of color are virtually endless, very rarely do we know precisely what our makeup is made from, what's actually in the makeup or how it was made. Once the product is purchased, it's ready to be used: all you have to do is open the package and apply the stuff to your eyes.

In ancient Egypt, preparations were a little more extensive. The cosmetic material had to be powdered on a palette and then this powder mixed with a substance, (analysis indicates that these were usually ointments derived from animal fat) to make the powder adhere to the eye.

Eye makeup equipment (palettes, grinders, applicators) has been found among the earliest burials of the pre-dynastic period and seem to have been essential items for the afterlife.

Even the humblest graves consistently contain at least a simple palette. Small containers of galena have been found in tombs alternately stored in leather or canvas pouches, small jars, conch shells or within hollow reeds. What separated rich from poor was not the existence of makeup but the expense and luxury of containers and applicators. *Everyone* had galena powder however while the poor resorted to sticks to apply it, the wealthy had intricately carved and bejeweled containers of ivory or other precious materials.

That the Egyptians decorated their eyes with great aesthetic care is immediately obvious. Eye cosmetics bestowed beauty and style as well as other gifts, perhaps less immediately apparent to modern eyes.

Galena possesses disinfectant and fly-deterrent properties. It is believed to offer the eyes protection from intense sun. The medical papyri frequently prescribe *mesdemet* for assorted complaints of the eye.

Eye make up provided psychic protection as well. The Egyptian word for eye-palette seems to derive from their word for "protect." An unadorned and thus unprotected eye was believed vulnerable to the Evil Eye. Outlining the eyes thus became a personal protective amulet drawn right upon the skin; an amulet that once applied could not be lost or misplaced.

There may very well also have been further spiritual dimensions to eye makeup. Perhaps wearing malachite placed one solidly under Hathor's protection and Hathor was a very prominent goddess, with centers of worship throughout Egypt and as far a field as Byblos. In modern India, henna powder (mehendi) is believed to contain something of the essence of the goddess Lakshmi, who, like Hathor, was a powerful goddess of beauty, good fortune and benevolence. When henna is applied to the body, some small measure of Lakshmi's sacred presence and protection is to be imparted to the wearer. Thus the potential for transforming an everyday activity such as eye makeup application into a personal, sacred and protective ritual. The associations between Hathor and malachite were very strong. Perhaps applying the powder to one's body was to partake of something of the essence of Hathor herself. Certainly kohl, as galena is known today, contains spiritual significance to many modern North African women. It is a material and substance to be treated with awe and respect: in a Moroccan tradition, for instance, kohl serves as a reminder of the Kaaba, Islam's holy black stone housed in Mecca.

Galena is still used in Egypt under the name kohl. It is easily and inexpensively purchased in the marketplace. Outside of Egypt, it is easily purchased through vendors that supply accessories to Eastern dancers. Buy from reputable dealers only (and the little old ladies in the marketplace who mix up their own kohl may be the most dependable and reliable of all) to ensure that what you are purchasing is not made from cheap, harmful, eye irritating materials.

Although it is impossible to authentically and exactly reproduce ancient Egyptian perfumes, the kohl that is available today is basically the same thing that was familiar millennia ago. Applying kohl to your own eyes allows you to transcend the barriers of time. Even the kohl applicators and containers have not changed over the centuries. Real kohl usually comes in a little box containing a stick-like applicator and a compartment for the make up itself. An ancient Egyptian woman time-traveling to the present would surely find much to puzzle her but hand her a modern kohl container and stick and she would know exactly what to do with it. On the other hand, a modern woman, used to conventional methods of eye makeup application, might be a little perplexed by the box and stick. Learning to apply kohl the traditional way can be a little tricky as most modern people have been indoctrinated since early childhood about the dangers of putting a stick anywhere near the eye* but with a little practice, it's easy to get the hang of it.

Instructions for Applying Traditional Kohl Eye-Makeup

1. Dampen the stick.
2. Twist it in the kohl until the makeup adheres. (Give it a little shake or a tiny flick of the wrist so that the excess drops off.)
3. Place the kohl stick in the inner corner of your eye.
4. Close your eyes (lightly- don't squish them shut- you'll distort the line)
5. Gently draw the stick outwards, between your closed lids: the kohl will leave a smudgy line on both the upper and lower eyelids.

* A genuine kohl stick should have a slightly rounded bulbous end, kind of like a polished wooden q-tip.