

A casserole of Egyptian blue

Serves plenty – the highlight in any dining room or banquet

Needs:

One bucket of clean white sand; ½ bucket of good limestone (crushed marble or sea shells will also do); 1/4 bucket of Flower of Copper (or burnt bronze scrap from your local foundry). One ladle of natron. Needs large casseroles or saggars that can be stacked on top of each other; large wood-fired kiln.



Preparation:

Grind the sand, limestone and Flower of Copper very finely (it's good when you don't feel any grains anymore between your fingers). Add the natron, and mix well until evenly grey. The mixture keeps for years when stored in a dry place. For use, dampen a large quantity with some water, beer, or gum Arab and kneed thoroughly. Form into bean-sized pearls and put them on a tray in a sunny place to dry.

Baking:

Take several large ceramic casseroles or saggars; coat liberally on the inside with a lime wash to prevent contents from sticking. When dry, fill the vessels to the top with the prepared pearls; be careful not to squash them. Stack saggars in a kiln one atop the other, covering the uppermost one with a lid. Fire to a dark red glow for a couple days, or until the content is bright blue (beware the heat when removing a sample). When ready, remove saggars from kiln, allow to cool, and retrieve the Egyptian blue pearls as needed.

Serving suggestion:

Used best as finely ground pigment with ochre, cinnabar, lead white and carbon black for fine wall paintings on a light plaster coat. Mix with extra lime for lighter shades of blue; use coarse powder for dark blue. Point out to your guests that this is the only blue pigment worth having, after lapis lazuli.

***Special tip*:**

Dampen the finely-ground powder with gum Arab or egg white and shape into beads, pendants or small vessels and fire a second time; makes fantastic trinkets and special gifts. Inlay with yellow for colour effect.

Caption for image:

Vessel for the production of Egyptian blue. Egyptian blue was first made more than 5,000 years ago in Egypt, and was widely used throughout the Greek and Roman world. It remained the only artificial blue pigment until the invention of synthetic indigo in the late 19th century AD.

Nile silt ceramic (brown-red) with lime-rich parting layer (pale white); Egyptian blue (blue pearls).

Diameter ca 20 cm; height of vessel originally ca 40 cm.

Memphis / Kom Helul, Egypt. Ptolemaic or Roman period. Excavated by WMF Petrie. Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UC47311.

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