



Detail of the Ishtar-Gate (a reconstruction of the Babylonian gate in Berlin's Pergamon Museum): showing a lion, symbol of the goddess Ishtar. [Credit: Wiki Commons]

Colour Symbolism in Ancient Mesopotamia

By Andrea Sinclair

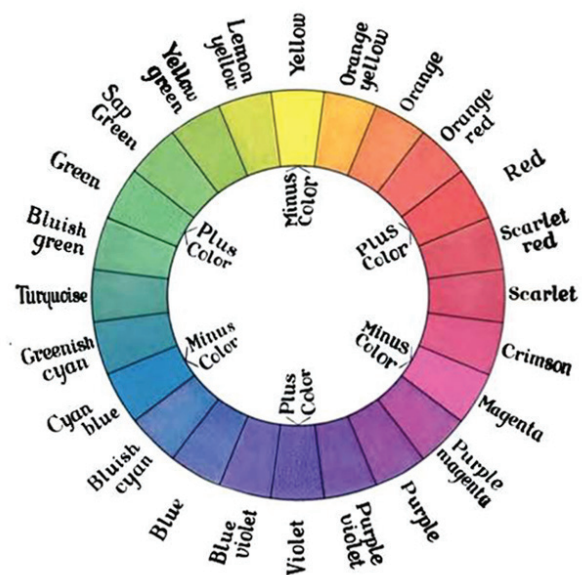
This article is designed to give a general introduction to a less scrutinized aspect of Near Eastern iconography; the use of colour, and makes a brief assessment of the available evidence for symbolic values for colour from ancient Mesopotamian texts, art and architecture.

Colour is a universal visual ingredient of all human culture and is now understood to bear symbolic qualities for human cognition far beyond mere aesthetic values. However, colour itself permeates our modern culture in ways which make an assessment of its value in antiquity less straightforward.

In contemporary culture we are surrounded both in the media and in our environment by vivid unsaturated hues, and instructed in the complexities of the shadings of the colour palette in our early school years. (Not to mention that moment of self doubt when one stands before a home decoration paint colour display in search of that perfect shade for the living room).

For a modern audience, colours are scientifically defined, partitioned and categorized with obsessive and sometimes even arbitrary precision. The significance of colour in antiquity, however, was simpler and not distanced from the symbolic and esoteric worlds, but

rather was embedded within the nature and value of materials and objects. In addition, bold colours would not have been as universal as the modern audience now experiences.



Basic Colour Wheel [Credit: Wikimedia Commons]



Dedicatory cuneiform inscription in blue and white glazed brick from Babylon, reign of Nebuchadnezzar, 600-560 BCE, Pergamon Museum, Berlin. [ICredit: Wiki Commons]

In antiquity, bright colour would instead have been more restricted to (what we may now perceive as clichéd) elements of the natural environment such as flowering plants, the ocean, sunsets, stones, clays and other natural phenomena. Beyond the natural world, the only theatre for the performance of vivid colour would have been via the polished stones, forged metals, vitreous glazes and mineral pigments used to produce the spectacular artefacts from monuments, treasuries, temples and palaces.

Academic studies of Mesopotamian visual design have in the past focused on issues of artistic style to the exclusion of this essential component of all visual art and architecture, the employment of colour in the construction of an artefact. This article shall, instead, make an assessment of the evidence for symbolic values for colours from the ancient Near East.

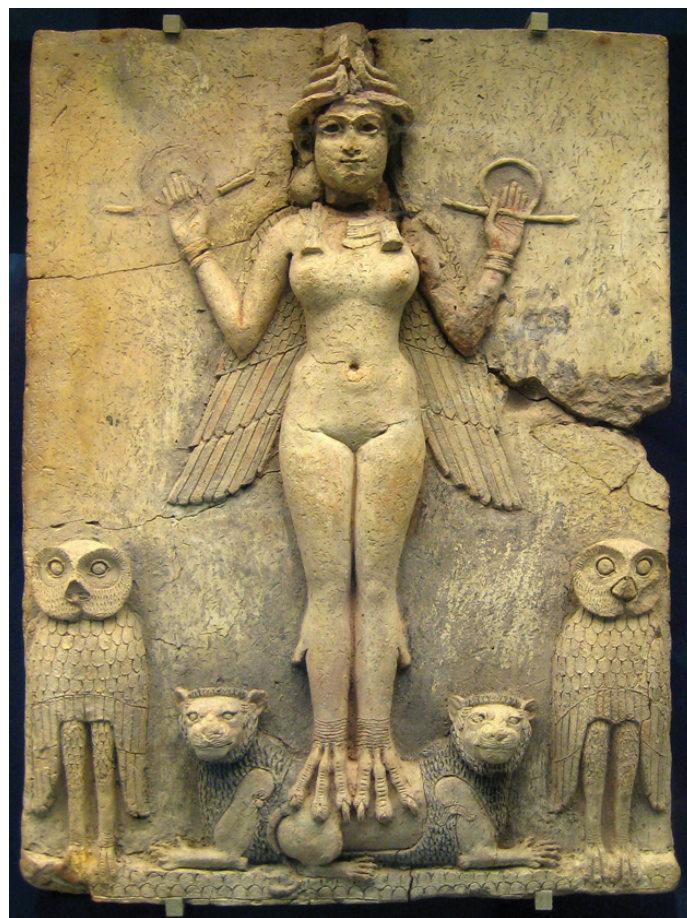
But before we dive headlong into this tantalizing subject, I shall briefly define the boundaries both geophysical and chronological that will limit the discussion. The title 'ancient Near East' refers to the city states and cultures of Mesopotamia ('between the two rivers') in the region of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, and constitutes the regions of modern Iraq, Iran and Syria. Accordingly, the time frame covered by this examination shall encompass the 3rd to 1st millennia BCE (Before Common Era), which is approximately the period from 4000 BCE until around 500 BCE.

While the great cultures which rose and fell during this time frame are many and include the Sumerian, Assyrian, Mitannian, Babylonian, the Kassite and Persian, the native language system itself remained relatively consistent throughout the entire region. There were two languages written using the cuneiform

script that were employed for literature, correspondence and account keeping. The earliest is Sumerian and the other is Akkadian, its successor, which came to be employed as the lingua franca for the entire Near East in the 2nd millennium. It is these two scripts which supply us with the material for understanding a perception of colour and colour symbolism in Mesopotamia. For it is by examining the employment of colour terms in texts which provides the clues to their possible meaning and value in antiquity.

Near Eastern scholars have identified five core linguistic terms for colour in Mesopotamian texts. These terms do not match modern notions of hue, but are relatively consistent with the theoretical model developed by Brent Berlin and Paul Kay in the 1970s. This model argued that cultures evolve a linguistic vocabulary for colour as social complexity develops. They established a clear seven stage pattern for colour word evolution which begins with the simplest concept, the notion of light and dark; the colours white and black. Subsequently a language then acquires terms for red, either yellow or green, green or yellow, to blue, then brown and so on until finally the more blended tints like grey, pink, orange and purple.

Berlin and Kay's model is a theoretical template which is a valuable guide to approaching an analysis of colour terminology in developing societies. However, it should be emphasized here that this model is not 'set in stone' and has, in fact, been disputed in scholarship for not applying to specific ancient cultures. Indeed, it is based on linguistic grounds and therefore may not necessarily apply directly to the discussion of a perception of colour from antiquity. It does, however, provide a solid guide for demonstrating that colour terms in a language first develop systematically out of a simple pairing of contrasting light and dark shades without specific emphasis on hue.



The 'Queen of the Night (Burney) Relief', 1800-1750 BCE, British Museum, London; Recent examination of chemical residues from this baked clay plaque have established that it was originally overlaid with red, black and white paint pigments. The background behind the figure was black while the 'underworld' goddess figure (Inanna or Ereshkigal) was painted red. Feathering on both the goddess's wings and the owls' were patterned red, black and white. [Credit: Wiki Commons]

In this article it is not my intention to give you an extended analysis of philological approaches to Mesopotamian colour vocabulary evolution, this has been ably handled by others in the past. My object with this discussion is to address the practical significance of colour use and therefore shall attempt an analysis of the symbolic function and value of colour in visual design from Mesopotamia. It will therefore be necessary to employ the linguistic evidence in combination with the visual.



Wooden gaming board inlaid with white shell, lapis lazuli and red limestone, 'The Royal Game of Ur' from the Royal Cemetery at Ur in southern Mesopotamia, 2600-2400 BCE, British Museum. [Credit: Wiki Commons]

With regard to the visual evidence, our view of Mesopotamian art and design is influenced by the passage of time. Unlike Egypt, where conditions were favourable to the preservation of pigment colours, Mesopotamia supplies us with meagre material for a practical analysis of colour. Wall paintings are scarce and where extant the damage and fading of original colours is extensive. This means that when we view Mesopotamian art we tend to perceive a more monochrome vision of the past. It is difficult to put this impression aside and embrace what was in actuality, an artistic palette of rich and translucent colour. It is this paucity which necessitates examining the textual evidence for the significance of colour and brings us to the main discussion.

The Mesopotamian language had five core terms which may be associated with colour. These included the complementary shades, white and black, and the warm and cold hues, red and green. In addition, there was an isolated term used to describe the idea of coloured or patterned. It is worth noting that core colour terms may be identified by their existence as a stand alone word not derived from a proper noun for an object of a given colouring. To illustrate this idea one may

compare the English core terms, red and blue against the derived terms, turquoise (a blue-green stone) and orange (a fruit).

Note: For the following, all colour words written in bold face represent the Sumerian form and all italicised, the Akkadian (but not all variant spellings, for the lexical citations see Black et al. 2000).

WHITE

BABBAR or *pešu* was equivalent in value to the colour white and was used to describe concepts of light, shine, brilliance, radiance, holiness, ritual purity and occasionally uncoloured (devoid of colour).

It was an auspicious colour, the name of the sun god Utu/Šamaš, the noun for 'day' and was derived from a notion of brightness. The ideogram (sign) evolved from an early representation of the rising sun. In addition, white was symbolically equated with the precious metals silver and antimony. It was also applied as an epithet for the moon god Nanna/Sîn and the planet Venus/the goddess Inanna, and should therefore be interpreted as a quality of lightness, or radiance, particularly



Black, red and white conical mosaic pegs decorating architectural columns in the courtyard of the Eanna temple of the goddess Inanna from Uruk in southern Mesopotamia, 3400-3100 BCE, Pergamon Museum, Berlin. [Credit: Wiki Commons]

associated with the heavenly bodies.

BLACK

GE6, or *šalmu* embraced dark, sombre hues; ranging from dark grey and dark blue, through to black proper.

šalmu was considered inauspicious and associated with the night, gloom and shadow. It was used to refer to a 2nd millennium Hurrian underworld deity and demon, the Goddess of Darkness, whom scholars consider to be a northern adoption of the Mesopotamian demon Lamaštu. Predictably, the ideogram, when doubled (*kukku*, 'darkness') was one of many names for the netherworld where the

dead were thought to reside. As an abstract concept the noun embraced all subtleties relating to concepts of darkness, misery, sombreness and shadow. This does not, however, infer that the colour was avoided in visual representation, for it was not, on the contrary it was an important component of visual design in compositions with white and red.

RED-BROWN

SU4 or *sāmu* was broadly equivalent to the colour red, but leaned heavily towards dark red and the colour brown.

It was auspicious and considered to ward off



Yellow, blue, black and white glazed brick frieze of Persian warriors from the palace of Darius at Susa, 500 BCE, Pergamon Museum, Berlin. [Credit: Wiki Commons]

hostile forces. Red was a colour specifically associated with the representation of divinity, particularly in describing the physical features of gods. The goddess Inanna/Ištar bore the name 'red lady of heaven', a title reflective of her character as goddess of the morning and evening star, the planet Venus. The planet Mars was also associated with this colour for, similar to our usage, it was called the 'red planet'. *sāmu* was also used to describe the colour of the heavens at both sunrise and sunset and, like white, was equated with the idea of brilliance and radiance. The semi-precious stone carnelian, which was popular for use in jewellery, bore this noun as its name.

Adjectives of intensification were often applied for shades of red, such as 'dark' and 'bright', and terms derived from nouns, such as 'blood', are in evidence (*dāmu*); also embracing ideas of brightness, darkness,

passion and heat (Landsberger 1967, pp. 146-7). As one example, *ḪUŠ* or *ḫušša* was a derived term which favoured bright red and was employed in the context of blood, fire, the metal copper, storm, battle and the emotion of rage. The goddess Inanna/Ištar, also bore the epithet 'she of the red face', again a title reflective of her aspect as goddess of the planet Venus (Barrett 2007, pp. 25-6), but equally this may reflect her role as patron of battle and warriors. This colour then included the aggressive and destructive nature of divinity.

GREEN-YELLOW

SIG7 or *warqu* embraced the range of hues from yellow through to green.

It was auspicious and employed to convey notions of freshness, fertility and ripeness. It

described plants, ripened fruit, trees and, on occasion, was also used to describe the sky. This usage has provoked an argument that it must extend out to include the colour blue (perhaps a light blue). Green also functioned as a simile for brilliant, radiant or luminescent with the noun *warqu* originally stemming from a word for plant or vegetation. As white was symbolically equated with silver, green-yellow was associated with the precious mineral gold. In visual design however, it was less common, and primarily appears as yellow proper rather than green. Interestingly, yellow was often used specifically for the depiction of 'forces of chaos', such as lions, demons and hybrid monsters.

Having examined the four preceding terms for colour, the reader may be interested to note that there was apparently no core term for the primary colour blue and that yellow (another primary colour) was subsumed within the colour green. This fits reasonably neatly into the theoretical model nonetheless, but we are subsequently confounded by the apparent absence of a core term for blue. It would be pointless to suggest that the complete absence of a word for blue is an indication of an indifference to the colour, as Landsberger argued in 1967, for there is copious evidence for a distinct value for blue in Mesopotamia from both ancient texts and archaeology.

BLUE: *uqnu*

The colour blue as a separate entity was instead expressed by employing the term for the blue stone lapis lazuli; ZA.GIN/*uqnu*.

This precious stone and the colour blue were eminently auspicious and associated as symbols of opulence and holiness for both gods and kings. *uqnu* was employed to describe dark blue, dark purple and even black materials and yet again was associated with notions of brilliance and radiance. It is the usage of this name for a precious stone which

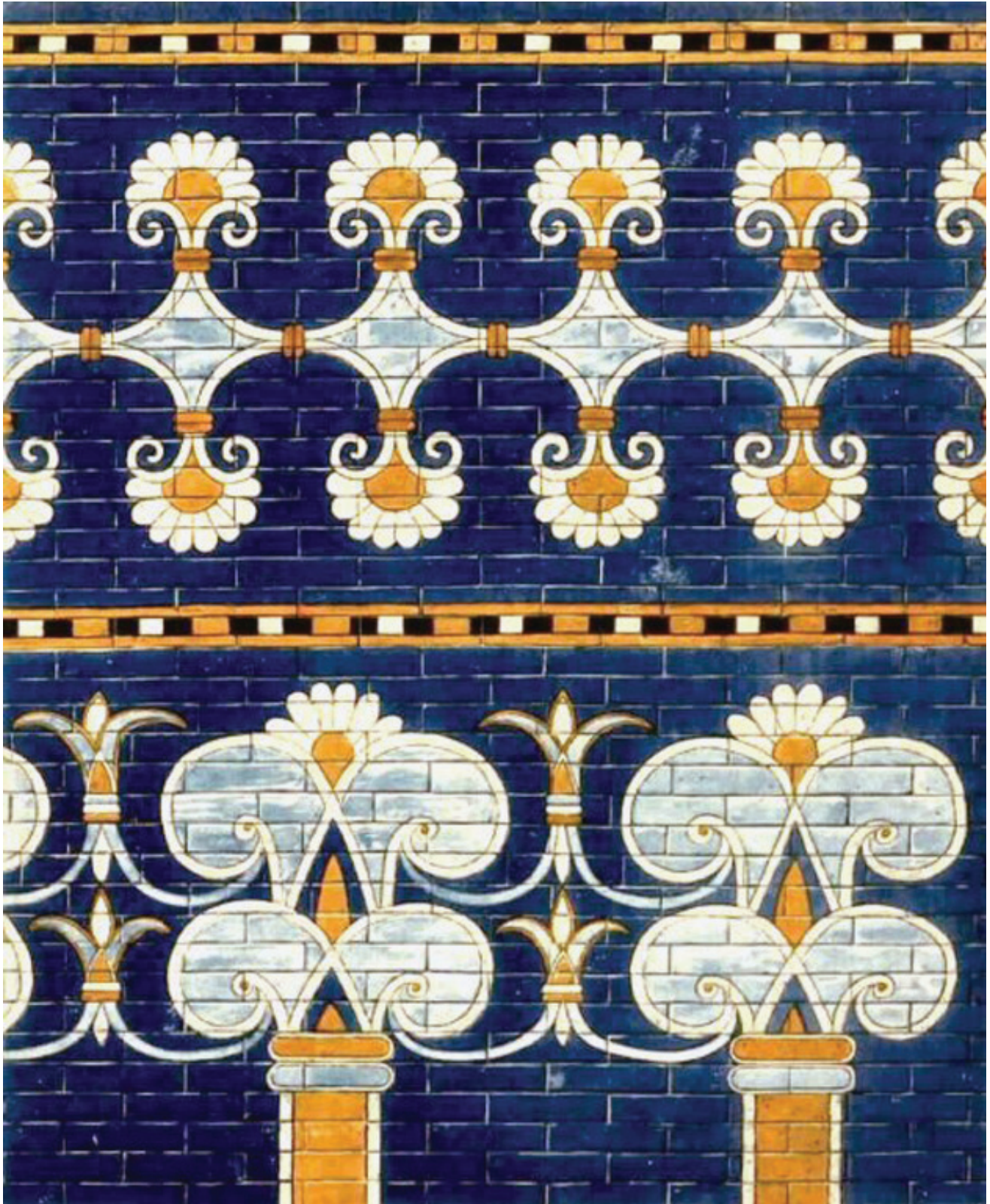
reflects the esteem that the colour blue held in Mesopotamian thought, for lapis lazuli was exceedingly valuable throughout the ancient Near East due to its rarity and attractive visual lustre. The stone itself is visually enhanced by small flecks of silvery pyrite and white calcite within the matrix of dark blue. These give the mineral a shimmering quality perhaps reminiscent of the night sky.

No doubt the high value related to this stone's rarity and therefore made it an ideal symbol for royal prerogative, for the power for obtaining and distributing lapis lazuli resided with rulers. However, it is not blue in isolation that was necessarily ubiquitous to Mesopotamian colour schemes. Rather, it was the employment of a balanced composition of colours which had its greatest impact on design. And this idea is reflected in the value of our final core colour term, *burrumu*.

MULTICOLOURED

DAR or *burrumu* 'polychrome' was a separate colour concept in its own right and while equating with the word 'colour', was perhaps most focused within an idea of variegation, patterning or ornamentation, a word common to other ancient cultures (ancient Greek: *poikilos*/ποικίλος and pharaonic Egyptian: *seb/s3b*), but not necessarily engaging to contemporary western culture. *burrumu* was associated with ideas of speckling, ornamentation and 'intricate', was an epithet of the goddess Inanna/Ištar (but also was confused with red) and was represented by the ideogram for a bull's horn.

A sense of the concept is perhaps conveyed by its usage to describe the patterning on animal hides or embroidered textiles, and would also explain the Mesopotamian preference for variegated stones such as agate, jasper and chalcedony for luxury jewellery. In addition, the term places a much higher value on patterning as a unique colour concept, one



Detail of the predominantly blue glazed brick ornamental frieze from the throne room of the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II, Babylon, 604-562 BCE, Pergamon Museum, Berlin. [Credit: Wiki Commons]



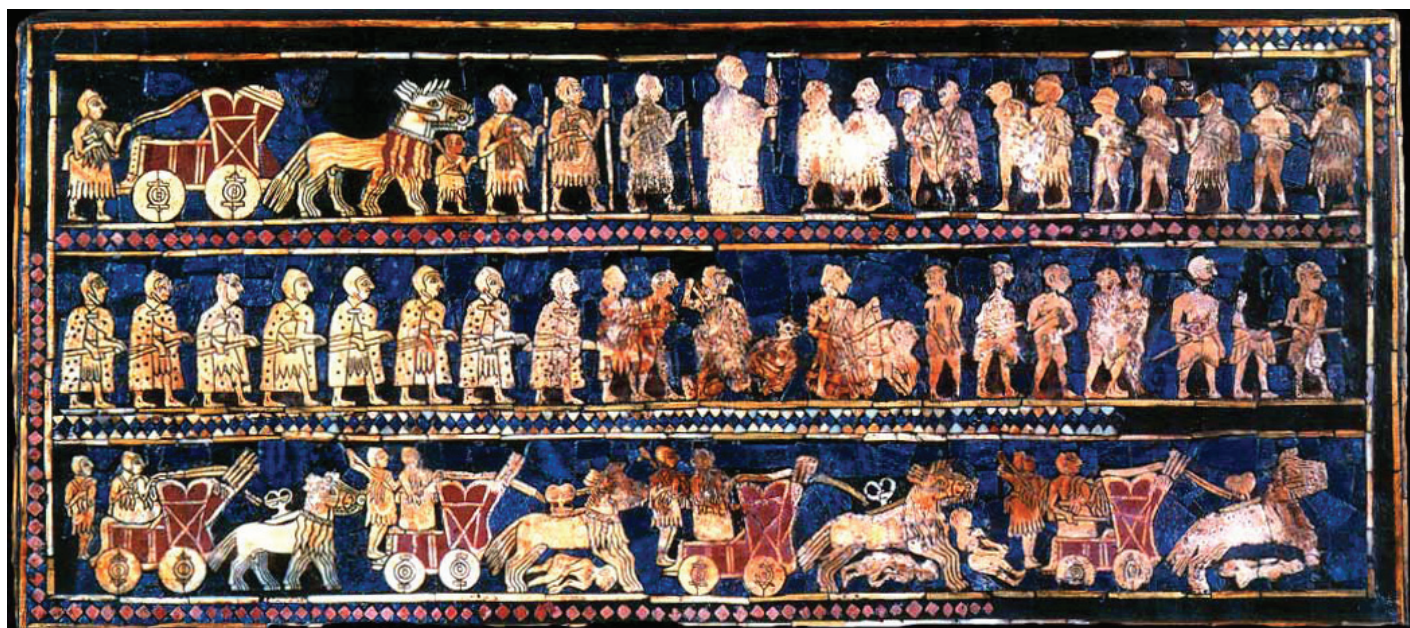
Necklace of onyx, lapis lazuli, carnelian, obsidian and gold from southern Mesopotamia, 3000-2000 BCE, Pergamon Museum, Berlin. [Credit: Wiki Commons]

on which we ourselves do not place the same value. Mesopotamian visual design outwardly reflected both social and religious thought and placed emphasis on ornamentation as a tangible reflection of abstract ideals of universal harmony and abundance (Winter 2002).

For patterning, the colours white, red and blue are ubiquitous to Mesopotamian representation throughout the long period under discussion. This colour convention does not appear to be accidental and may reinforce the idea of the necessity for balance between the three cosmic elements, heaven, earth and the underworld; for Mesopotamian religious

thought perceived the universe as composed of three spheres, in which the heavens where the gods dwelt lay above the human sphere and the realm of the dead below (Bottero 1992).

Apart from this tricolour pattern, the dominant colour combination in Mesopotamian design was the pairing of red with blue (or black). This dichotomy has been argued as symbolic of the fundamental dualities, the masculine force balanced with the feminine, heaven with earth, and the divine sphere with the human realm (Winter 1999; Barrett 2007). In this instance both colours, alone and together in combination, appear to reference varying



Detail of the 'War panel' on the 'Standard of Ur' from the Royal Cemetery at Ur in southern Mesopotamia, lapis lazuli, shell and red limestone, 2600-2400 BCE, British Museum [Credit: Wiki Commons]

notions of divinity and the realm of the gods.

Red and blue may also have functioned as a metaphor for the divine pairing of the goddess Inanna/Ištar and her male partner, the shepherd god Dumuzi/Tammuz, where the female element is inferred by the colour red and the male by the colour blue. Perhaps this equally referenced the goddess of love and war's androgynous nature, as her (red) figure was traditionally represented adorned with lapis lazuli jewellery (Barrett 2007).

To further illustrate this association of red and blue with the divine sphere; in a text describing the heavens, the highest, belonging to the sky god An/Anu, was composed of red carnelian, also the throne of the god was considered to be composed of lapis lazuli and lit with amber (Rochberg 2009). Red paired with blue therefore conveyed strong visual messages of divine presence and worldly harmony.

LIGHT: *namru*

Beyond the value of patterning, both the popularity of the pairing of red with blue

and the combination of red, white and blue, the highest value for colour in Mesopotamia appears to have been the quality of light and brilliance. Terms for bright or radiant are common for descriptions of valued objects such as jewellery, weapons and cult statues and also tend to function as similes for both purity and sanctity. As would be expected, these nouns often stem from the sign for sunlight and therefore, the colour white; UD/pešū.

The emphasis on brightness over hue in languages is not an isolated occurrence, for focus on colour is also a relatively recent linguistic development for the English language. This changeover appears to have occurred during the Middle English period, 1000-1400 CE (Hardin and Maffi).

In opposition or balance with this value for light is the idea of dark as an essential complementary negative force. After all, dark colours shared equal footing in visual representation and therefore were considered necessary components of a composition. Terms for dark colours such as *adaru* and *da'mu*, while arguably representing negative and destructive influences, were

equally essential elements to a balanced and harmonious design.

Here the function of dark colours may again incorporate the idea of an ordered universe, with evil influences harnessed by the light. Just as similarly the motif of a ruler demonstrating control over the forces of chaos was an important feature of royal iconography in the ancient Near East. A neat example of this idea from contemporary culture is the blue and white glass bead which is still used throughout the Middle East as an amulet to avert the evil eye and bring luck to its bearer.

Perhaps it is worth noting that it is common for academic literature to equate lightness and radiance with the usage of terms for shininess. I would emphasize that lightness and darkness values do not automatically align with the value of shine as opposed to matt. To illustrate this point, dark stones like lapis lazuli may nonetheless be polished to a high degree of shine and gloss, and this factor should be taken into account when assessing colour perception in antiquity.

"Year in which Hammurabi the king fashioned a magnificent dais-throne,

perfected with gold, silver, eye chalcedony, chalcedony of GIR.MUŠ type and ZA.GIN.TA (lapis lazuli)

shining like radiance for Inanna of Babylon to complete her chariot."

(Name of Year 14, reign of Hammurabi, Babylon, 1792-1750)

In Mesopotamia the visual qualities of an artwork, that is the shine, colour and patterning, outwardly demonstrated the object's spiritual and aesthetic value. This value was not just about the careful choice of colour, in addition, luminous colours themselves were considered manifestations of the presence of divinity and of divine sanction and they broadcast to the world notions of holiness and ritual purity (Winter 2002). Therefore minerals, such as lapis lazuli, carnelian, silver and gold which

could be worked and polished to a glossy and translucent finish were highly prized for the construction of precious objects (Winter 1999).

"The outermost battlement was white, The second, black, the third, dark red, The fourth dark blue, the fifth orange.

In this manner the entire circumference of the ramparts was coloured. And the two innermost walls were one entirely plated with silver And the other with gold."

Herodotus (Historiae, I.98.25) describing the walls of the Median citadel at Ekbatana, ca. 450 BCE, translation by the author.)

In summary, the preceding discussion noted that while the Mesopotamian language had a limited linguistic scope for concepts of colour, materially the colour vocabulary was rich and meaningful. Emphasis, however, lay in qualities of light and shine which equated with notions of spirituality, and in patterning which advertised ideas of harmony and world order. In addition, specific colours held important symbolic associations, such as red with divinity, green with abundance and, importantly, the colour blue with ideas of divinely sanctified power and opulence.

In reflection, it appears that in ancient Mesopotamia the choice of colour in the construction of an object was not at all random, but rather, it was a conscious decision in the entire construction of meaning and value. Perhaps next time you, the reader, view an artefact in a book or at a museum, think about the impact of colour and light on the object of your interest. In addition, think about how the choices made in the design may reflect tangible manifestations of the divine in Mesopotamian thought.

Further Reading

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Web Links

ePSD, Pennsylvania Sumerian Dictionary Project: <http://psd.museum.upenn.edu/epsd/nepsd-frame.html> [Last edited: 06/26/06, accessed 12/01/12].





The bull in the bas-relief on the Ishtar Gate at the Pergamon Museum in Berlin. [Credit: Wiki Commons]