

BRITISH MUSEUM MAGAZINE

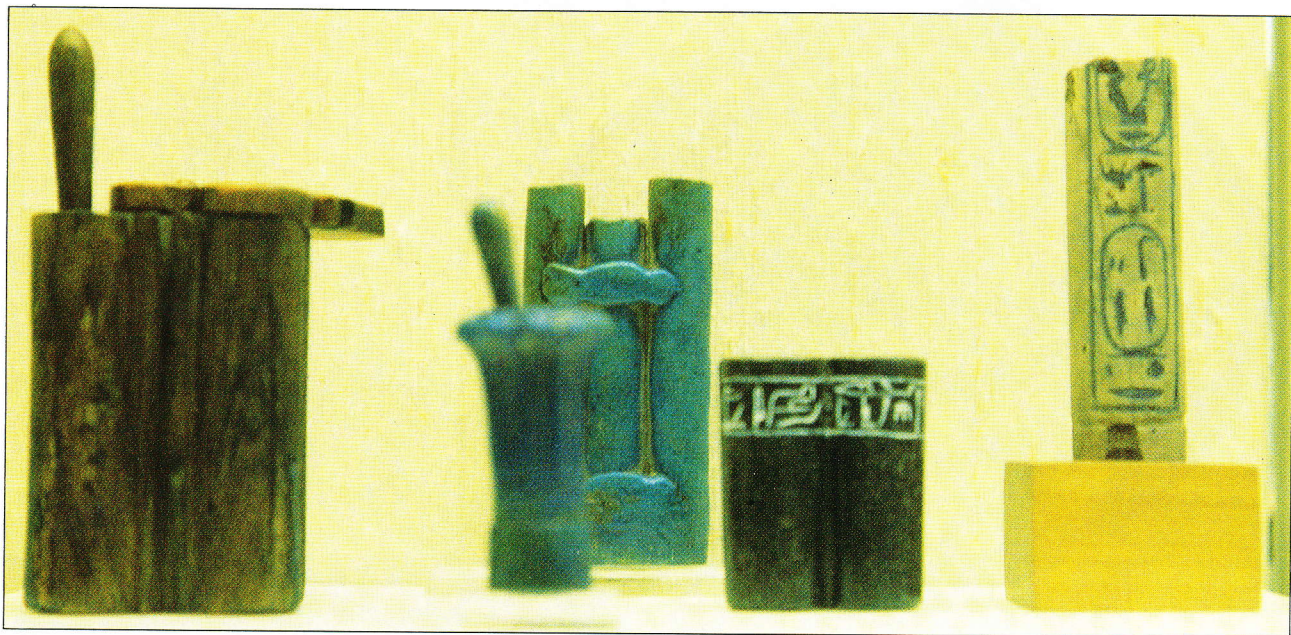
The Journal of the British Museum Society

Number 11 Autumn 1992 £2



Cosmetics in Ancient Egypt

Lise Manniche shares secrets from the past



▲ Kohl containers, 14th century BC. Royal Scottish Museum.

Cosmetic vessels are among the earliest grave goods found in Egypt, dating as far back as 4000 BC. In the days of the pharaohs the custom of painting the face was already well established. Cosmetics nowadays are big business, although

the magico-religious reasons for their use have somehow receded into the background.

The early Egyptians ground lumps of green malachite (copper ore) on cosmetic palettes, then applied the powder to the eyes. Such was the

BERNARD QUARITCH LTD.

Books and manuscripts

*5-8 Lower John Street, Golden Square,
London W1R 4AU*

Tel: 071-734 2983

Fax: 071-437 0967



▲ Man with wig and kohl. Theban tomb no. 261, c 1425 BC.

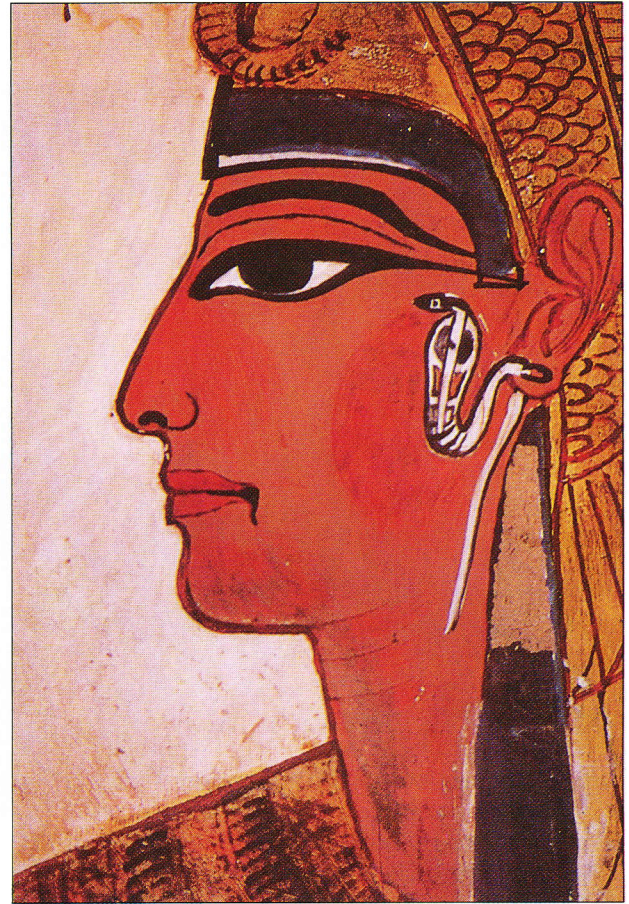
importance of this custom that a palette would become a royal ceremonial object. One such is one of the first truly Egyptian works of art: the Narmer palette in the Cairo Museum.

Black eyepaint, which soon became even more popular, was kept in crude lumps, made into a paste with gum and water, or, most frequently, stored in powder form in a closed container with an application stick inserted. It was made of galena, a dark grey ore of lead. A similar *kohl* consisting of antimony has been used in the Arab world for centuries, though black soot is also favoured by the descendants of the ancient Egyptians.

Black eyepaint could be applied around the rim of the eyes only, or the cosmetic line could be prolonged horizontally to terminate in a fine pointed line towards the ear, or a broad line drawn almost to the edge of the face. In some representations, as for example the golden mask of Tutankhamun, blue is substituted for black to suggest the luxury of lapis lazuli.

Kohl enhanced the dark eyes of the Egyptians, but it was also believed to cure or prevent disease. For overnight treatment, an eyelid paste was prescribed containing equal parts of both black *kohl* and green eyepaint, powdered lapis lazuli and ochre, bound together with honey.

Evidence for lip paint is more scarce, but not entirely lacking. In tomb paintings the lips are generally shown in a darker shade than the rest of the face, and in a drawing on a papyrus scroll a girl is



▲ Queen Ahmose Nejerteri wearing rouge, c 1250 BC.

shown painting her lips whilst at the same time engaged in sexual activities.

The paintings also reveal the use of rouge for the cheeks. This would be in the form of powdered ochre, an idea taken up by modern cosmetic manufacturers and marketed under different names relating it to ancient Egypt. It also came in the form of a solid substance, for cosmetic jars have been found to contain a mixture of red ochre and fatty matter.

In most primitive societies hair has a distinct erotic significance. This was also the case in Egypt where they went so far as to use wigs in erotic situations. "Don your wig and let us go to bed", a man is quoted as saying.

The Egyptians used cosmetics to improve on nature, to make them attractive to the opposite sex. "Like eyepaint is my desire," says a girl in a love poem, "When I see you it makes my eyes sparkle." But when seen in the context of grave goods and tomb decoration make-up takes on a deeper significance.

The Egyptians were almost obsessed with the idea of eternal life. To achieve the transformation from death to re-birth sexuality was of crucial importance. The Egyptians expressed this indirectly in texts and pictures. Cosmetics and scents played an important part in this game, not only in daily life, but also, as wherever Egypt is concerned, for eternity.

Dr Lise Manniche is the author of many books on ancient Egypt, including An Ancient Egyptian Herbal (BMP 1989).