

THE MAGIC OF KOHL

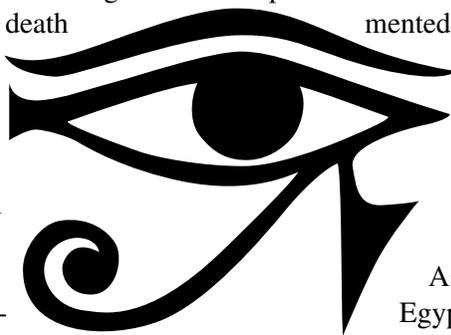
THE ANCIENT Egyptians expressed their love of beauty in their art and grave goods. The glow of the gold in Tutankhamun's death

mask, off-set by vibrant blue stripes of lapis lazuli, has become an icon for the boy king, as well as the craftsmanship of the time. It's not only the precious metals and gems that one remembers, however, but also the dramatic eye makeup.

In ancient Egypt, the eyes of both men and women — and not just royalty — were lined top and bottom with a thick black powder known as *kohl*, *kajal*, or *mesdemet*. The outlined eye resembled the almond-shaped eye of the falcon god Horus observed in the Eye of Horus (*utchat*) glyph. This shape invokes the god's protection, warding off evil spirits and diseases of the eye.

Galena and antimony

Kohl was typically made from galena (lead sulfide), the most common of all lead minerals, and is still made this way in North Africa and the Middle East. Tables of magical correspondences list lead, which is associated



with the planet Saturn, with protection and defensive magic. Talismans and protective seals of Saturn were documented in the *Key of Solomon*.

Antimony, possessing similar color and magical properties, is another mineral commonly used to make kohl in Egypt.

As early as 3100 BCE, Egyptians were using anti-

mony sulfide in eye cosmetics, so much so that the ancient words for antimony have kohl as their chief meaning. Other materials found in kohl could include aluminum, carbon, iron, zinc, camphor or menthol.

Illegal products

Though the ancients believed that kohl provided protection from evil and illness, high concentrations of lead in the finished product are quite dangerous. As recently as 2012, Boston Children's Hospital discovered a case of infant lead poisoning. Beginning when the baby was two weeks old, the parents had applied a Nigerian formulation to his eyes. Testing revealed that the preparation was 83% lead.

The US Food and Drug Administration bans kohl made from lead-containing ingredients; in other words, lead-based kohl is illegal in the United States. When you see an eye pencil labeled "kohl" on the shelf of your favorite cosmetic counter, the word



refers to the shade or style of the pencil and does not mean that it is traditional kohl. Still, some illegal products do find their way to the shelves of shops specializing in imports, so check the label or ask the shopkeeper.

Soot and sandalwood

In India, kohl was made with soot rather than lead and contained ingredients believed to have medicinal properties in the Ayurveda and Siddha systems. This alternative preparation doesn't contain ingredients associated with Saturn, but was still considered effective against the Evil Eye and malevolent spirits.

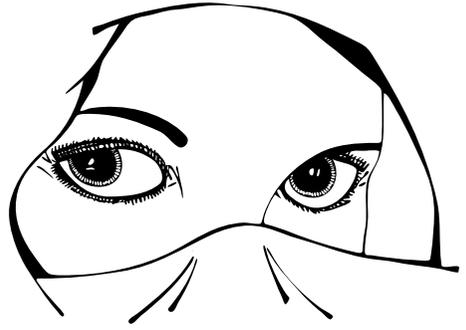
One home recipe involved dipping an approximately four by four inch clean white muslin cloth in a sandalwood paste. The juice of *Alstonia scholaris* and *Manjal karsilanganni* are sometimes used instead of sandalwood.

Castor oil or ghee

The cloth is then dried in the shade, until sunset. At that time, a wick is made from the cloth and used to light a clay lamp filled with castor oil. A brass vessel is positioned over the flame, leaving enough room for air to circulate, so that the flame doesn't die out. This is left to burn overnight.

The next morning, one or two drops of castor oil or ghee (clarified butter) was added to the soot that had formed on the brass vessel. This mixture was stored in a clean, dry box.

What of the belief that the lead-based kohl of ancient Egypt



was healthful? Surprisingly, when made properly with the correct proportions, it does have medicinal properties. Low doses of lead promotes the production of nitric oxide in the skin, which helps strengthen the immune system against eye diseases then common. However, as observed from the example of the 83% lead preparation used on the child in 2012, this can have the opposite effect when used in high doses.

Anti-glare stripes

The dark color of the kohl reduced the damage derived from sun glare, in much the same way that anti-glare stripes are thought to protect the eyes of American football players. (The jury's still out on that, however. Two relatively recent studies came to exact opposite conclusions.)

Do the modern no-lead concoctions have magical properties? Yes. Painting the eyes in the shape of the eyes of the falcon god still invokes his protection, and the color, likened to lead, still invokes the protection of Saturn.

– MORVEN WESTFIELD

