

Fantastic faience

Egyptians loved rare gems and stones, like bright blue lapis lazuli, but they were rare and expensive. Faience was a cheap substitute because the Nile provided the raw materials needed to make it [see ingredients, overleaf]. Faience was first made in Mesopotamia in the 5th millennium bc and was used in Egypt from the 4th millennium bc.

The Ancient Egyptians used faience to make everything from jewellery to wall plaques. Its shiny blue-green surface reminded them of the Nile and its ingredients came from this river, so faience symbolized the Nile and its connection with rebirth. Faience was therefore used for rebirth rituals, such as funerals and as new year's gifts.

We find small faience pieces in poor people's graves and lots of faience in rich people's graves. Faience objects – beads, ushabtis or game pieces – are usually small [Egypt 5, 8–11, 17; Death 5, 11]. But there were also some large faience pieces: the pharaoh Akhenaten (King Tut's father), for example, had a faience footstool.

The Egyptians didn't keep all of their faience in graves, but also took it overseas. Faience was a good item to trade because it was cheap to make, easy to transport (not as breakable as glass) and looked exotic.

Leslie Bonaventura



Blue faience hippopotamus, ca. 2000 bc (11th dynasty)
in Vienna (Kunsthistorisches Museum).

Faience recipe

Faience, like pottery, is moulded and then **fired** (cooked). Otherwise it is very different from pottery. It is made from a special mixture, not **terracotta** or clay. And while pottery glaze or decoration is applied on the surface, part of the 'magic' of faience is that its shiny blue-green surface appears while it is being fired.

Ingredients

- Crushed quartz (sand) or crystal) with copper
- Natron (a mineral similar to salt, found in the Nile)
- Water

Technique

1. Mix all ingredients into a paste.
2. Form paste into any shape you like (you can shape it by hand or push it into a mould).
3. Put it aside to let it dry. When it is dry, the piece will be covered with a powder. This is because, as it dries, natron rises to the surface taking the copper (source of colour) with it.
4. Put the dried piece in a kiln to fire it. As the piece heats up, the powder will **fuse** (melt and become unified).

Let it cool. The blue-green surface will become hard and shiny.