If you count blue as your favorite color, you have company.

Americans and Western Europeans have strongly favored the color over others of the spectrum since the nineteeth century.

But blue was not always so popular—or very common in artwork—and has quite a storied history. Blue was elusive: Recipes to make the color were not common knowledge but, rather, highly regulated and carefully guarded secrets. The color was difficult to produce even when materials could be acquired—a challenge in itself. And once achieved, the blue was unstable, quickly losing its vibrancy and character. This tour will acquaint you with the evolution of blue—its preparation and uses in art—through select pieces from the Museum's Collection.

More details about the art.

Mummy Coffin of Pedusiri, ca. 500–250 BC, Egyptian [Late Dynastic or Early Greco-Roman Period]. Plastered, polychromed, and gilded wood. Purchase. Photo by Michael Tropea

Nardo di Cione (Italian, ca. 1320–ca. 1365 or 66), *Madonna and Child*, ca. 1350. Tempera and gold leaf on panel. Purchase, Myron and Elizabeth P. Laskin Fund, Marjorie Tiefenthaler Bequest, Friends of Art, and Fine Arts Society; and funds from Helen Peter Love, Chapman Foundation, Mr. and Mrs. James K. Heller, Joseph Johnson Charitable Trust, the A.D. Robertson Family, Mr. and Mrs. Donald S. Buzard, the Frederick F. Hansen Family, Dr. and Mrs. Richard Fritz, and June Burke Hansen; with additional support from Dr. and Mrs. Alfred Bader, Dr. Warren Gilson, Mrs. Edward T. Tal, Mr. and Mrs. Richard B. Flagg, Mr. and Mrs. William D. Vogel, Mrs. William D. Kyle, Sr., L.B. Smith, Mrs. Malcolm K. Whyte, Bequest of Catherine Jean Quirk, Mrs. Charles Sorenson, Mr. William Stiefel, and Mrs. Adelaide Ott Hayes, by exchange.

Refusing the Gifts of the Samnites, ca. 1530–60, Brabant-Brussels, Belgium. Wool and silk weft and linen warp. Gift of William R. Hearst Foundation. Photo by Larry Sanders

Nef Ewer, late 16th century, (Murano, Italy). Colorless cristallo and blue glass with gilded ornamentation. Gift of Gabriele Flagg Pheiffer. Photo by John Nienhuis

Claude Monet (French, 1840–1926), *Waterloo Bridge, Sunlight Effect*, ca. 1900 (dated 1903). Oil on canvas. Bequest of Mrs. Albert T. Friedmann. Photo by John R. Glembin

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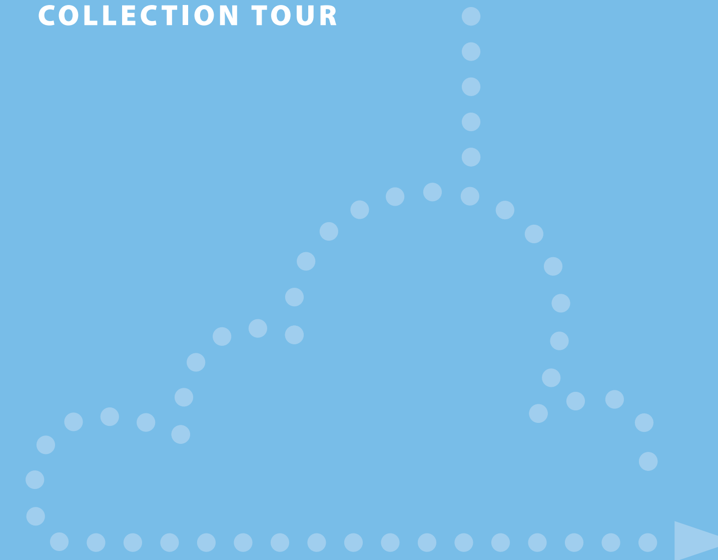
The Blues

COLLECTION TOUR



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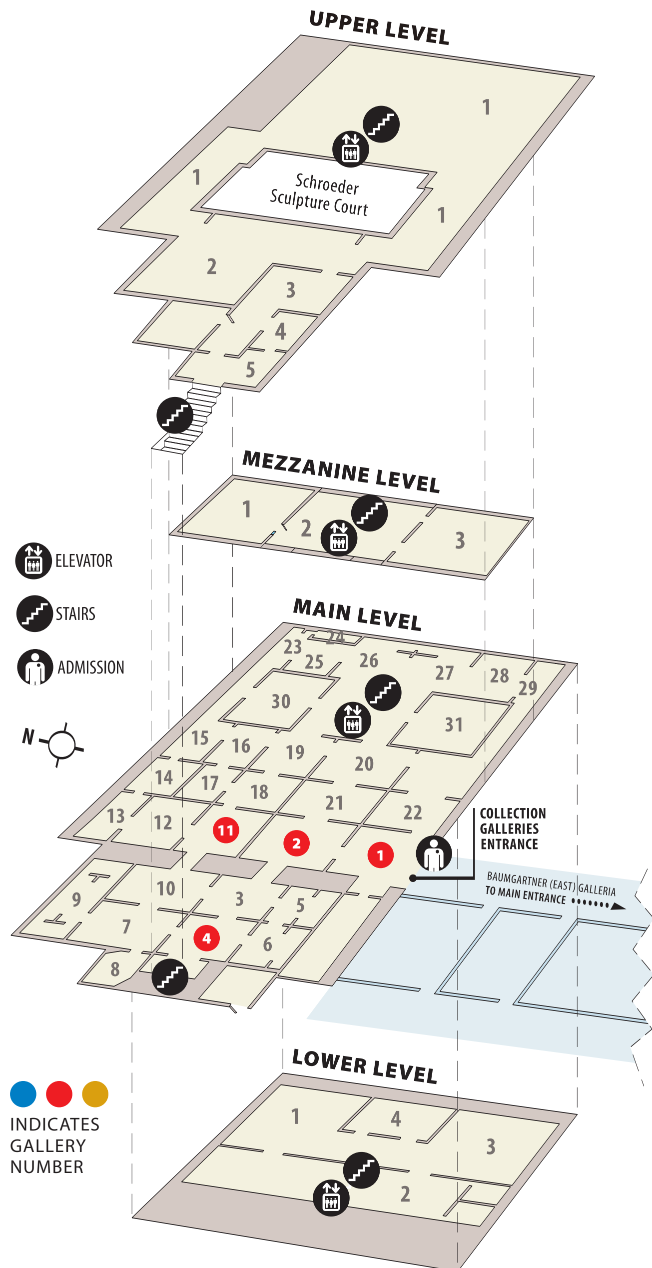

Egyptian

Mummy Coffin of Pediusir, ca. 500–250 BC

1

Blue took a backseat in most ancient cultures; red, white, and black were far more important. Still, ancients such as the Egyptians knew how to get blue out of stone. Called *frit*, this Egyptian blue was created by burning lime, quartz sand, and copper ore. The method was eventually lost and not rediscovered until the early twentieth century. This ornate mummy case, with blue head cloth and hieroglyphics, was likely used to bury a priest or high-ranking official.

Nardo di Cione

Madonna and Child, ca. 1350

4

Mary's robes were not always blue. The Romans saw blue as an inferior color, associated with barbarians and bad traits; neither the Romans nor the Greeks even had precise language for the color. But in the twelfth century, blue saw a jump in its cultural value, a shift marked by its increasing association with royalty and the Virgin Mary. Producing a blue more expensive than gold, the stone lapis lazuli was imported from Afghanistan and underwent a long extraction process to make a vibrant, stable blue called *ultramarine*. The best quality pigments from the process were reserved for Mary's robes.

Flemish, Brabant-Brussels

Refusing the Gifts of the Samnites, ca. 1530–60

2

Now established as a first-rate color, blue's high demand resulted in competing methods of production. Two botanical sources for blue, woad and indigo, were often used in textiles. A weed grown in Europe, woad rose in popularity alongside that of blue's in the thirteenth century. But as travel routes to India and China opened up, indigo became more accessible in Europe. Despite attempts to ban it, indigo—the cheaper and stronger pigment—won out, and woad was rarely used past the early 1600s. The blues in this tapestry were achieved with woad, and the color has faded significantly over the years due to light exposure. When it was first dyed, the blue would have been at least as bright as Mary's robe in the Nardo di Cione painting.

Italian, Murano

Nef Ewer, late 16th century

2

The *Nef Ewer*, one of only three in the world, is a rare instance of Venetian glassmaking. Its blue accents are derived from cobalt, a metallic element related to iron and nickel. Smalt, a pigment made from ground cobalt-colored glass, can be seen in the center pattern and interior rim of *Nef Ewer*'s neighboring piece, the *Tazza* (1500–25). The shallow bowl shows the influence of Islamic and Byzantine glassmakers who immigrated to Venice. Ceramic glazes of cobalt blue were common and can also be found in the Museum's American Collection on the Lower Level.

Claude Monet

Waterloo Bridge, Sunlight Effect, ca. 1900

11

Discovered by accident in the early 1700s, a synthetic pigment called *Prussian blue* revolutionized the use of blue in artwork. The pigment's contents were kept secret for more than a decade, but the method was eventually published and Prussian blue was produced throughout Europe. Offering a range of shades and great versatility, Prussian blue—although susceptible to aging as were all blues up to this point—rapidly replaced the other blue pigments. Monet and successive artists readily adopted this new blue, which, apparent today, became a common color in painting and can now be located on the shelf of any local art store.

Today's museums are dynamic. Works of art are loaned for exhibitions throughout the world, and their location within the museum itself often changes. Works not on view may be traveling, being cleaned, or having a rest. If you come across a work of art that is not in its designated spot, please just continue your tour.