Introduction to Harquus: Part 2: Kohl

Kohl as traditional women's adornment
in North Africa and the Middle East

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Detail: 181 – Egyptian Types and Scenes – an Arab Woman; Levy et Neurdfin, 44, Rue Letellier, Paris
Author's private collection

19th century Egyptian woman with kohl painted eyelids and eyebrows

Henna and tattooing have been used in combination with black eye and eyebrow cosmetics since the Bronze Age. Eye paints were nearly universal across North Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia. The black paint provided relief from the glaring sun and

reflection from the sand before sunglasses were invented. Lamp-black was the most common source of pigment, though galena, (lead sulphide), and stibnite (an antimony compound), were also used for black, and copper compounds for blues and greens. These metals were toxic to bacteria carried by flies and contaminated water, so they provided some relief from conjunctivitis and other bacterial eye infections. The irritation from having soot in one's eyes caused tearing, which kept the eyes washed clean of contaminants, grit, and bacteria. However, these toxic metals also entered the bloodstream of the wearer and the traditional formulae with these metals should never be used when there is safer cosmetic eye paint available.

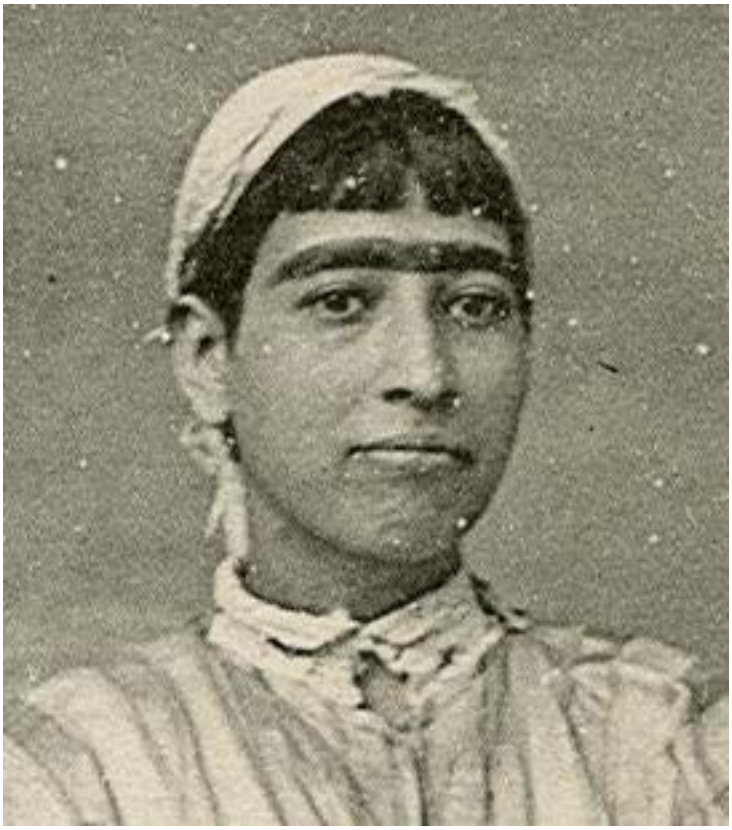
Detail: 7050 Scenes & Types du Maroc, Type de Femme du Souss – LL, Levy fils a Cie, Paris
Auhor's private collection

Women from early 20th century Souss, Morocco, with kohl applied in a straight line across her eyebrows, over a forehead tattoo, and western style lipstick.

In the Bronze Age Sumer, women used eye shadow made of finely ground malachite, a green-blue mineral. Malachite occurs naturally as a surface mineral in the Sinai, and was carried across the trade routes into Egypt and the Middle East. Canaanite women painted their eyelids with stibnite. Stibnite occurs in large deposits near Lake Urmia, in Armenia and Afghanistan, so it was also available across the trade routes. The black cosmetic remnants found in tombs in Ur contained magnese dioxide, turquoise, and lead (probably

galena). Egyptians used galena (lead sulphate) and powdered malachite to outline their eyes. Ancient Egyptian men and women wore eye paints from childhood, throughout their lives, and were adorned in death. They laid eye cosmetic pouches and applicators in tombs for use in the afterlife. Even the statues of Egyptian gods had their eye paints reapplied daily.

Pliny and Discorides describe the manufacture of another black eye paint by Ancient Egyptians: galena was pounded with frankincense and gum, and then mixed with goose fat. It was put in dough or cow dung and burned. The burning drove sulphur out of the galena to form lead oxide. This was quenched with milk, and then pounded in a mortar with rainwater. This was decanted several times and the finest powder was collected, dried, and divided into tablets. Each woman would pulverize these and keep them in her cosmetic jar for application.



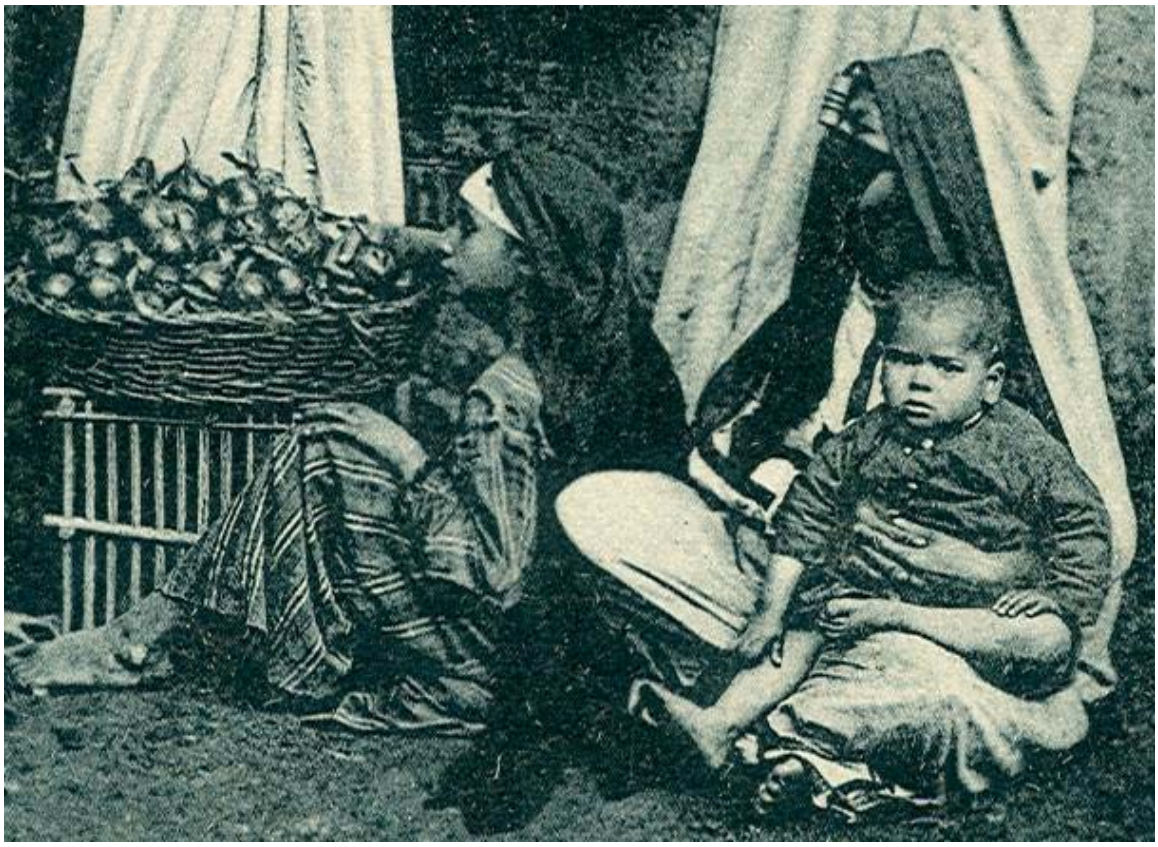
Detail: 1331 Tunisie – Scenes et Types Femme Arabe
Author's private collection

19th century Tunisian woman with painted eyebrows and eyelids

In Rome, women painted their eyelids and brows with a black eye cosmetic, "*Illa supercilium, madida fulgine tactum oblique producit acu, pingitque, trementes Attolens oculos.*" They applied the color to their eyes by dipping a feather into prepared soot and pulling it between their nearly closed eyelids.

In the 6th century, Alexander of Tralle described kohls made of burnt cadmium, copper, acacia gum, aloes, spikenard, opium, myrrh, lead, burnt ebony and copper, roses, and rainwater. In the 17th century, Celsus described twenty-six formulae for kohl and collyria. Five used stibnite, eight used burned copper, and others used lead, ash from fragrant woods, verdigris, and copperas.

Some women believed that blackening their eyelids and eyebrows would protect them from the glance of the Evil Eye, and also prevent them from transmitting the Evil Eye to another person. Most women applied kohl every week, or for any social occasion, except during Ramadan, when kohl and all hennas were set aside.



Detail: Marchand d'oranges, Union Postale Universelle Egypte Carte Postale
Author's private collection

Early 20th century woman and children from Cairo: The daughter's palms and soles are dyed with henna; the baby's soles are dyed with henna. The mother and daughter have kohled eyebrows and eyelids. The baby's eyebrows appear to be painted with kohl.

Mothers applied kohl to their infants soon after birth. They blackened the baby's eyes, dabbed kohl on their umbilical cord, and darkened their eyebrows. Some mothers did this to "strengthen the child's eyes," and others did it to prevent the child from being attacked by the Evil Eye. Mothers often marked the tip of the baby's nose with a dab of kohl. Moroccan Jewish mothers drew a line in harquus or kohl across their infants'

forehead to protect them from the Evil Eye. Mothers applied kohl to their children, both male and female, until they were old enough to apply it themselves. As adults, females used kohl more frequently than males.

Detail: 1097 Scenes et Types Ouled-Nails, IMP, Levy fils a Cie, Paris, late 19th or early 20th century
Author's private collection

Ouled-Nail woman with eyelids painted with kohl, kohl or harquus extending the eye line from the corner of the eye to the hairline, eyebrows painted with kohl or harquus, and kohl or harquus dots accenting her forehead tattoo and eyebrows.

Women often adjusted their eyebrow and eye paints to compliment their tattoos. The woman preceeding, an Ouled-Nail, has a forehead tattoo, but has also made dots with kohl or harquus to accent the tattoo, and dots over her eyebrows also. She has a chin tattoo that is not visible without high magnification, and that tattoo is not accented with kohl.

Detail: 1567 L'Afrique du Nord – Type de femme, Comber-Macon
Author's private collection

Early 20th century Algerian woman with eyebrows painted in kohl and a pigment paint dot above and between the eyebrows, over a forehead tattoo

Indigenous eye paints were often created by collecting accumulated pot-black (the velvety carbon coating left on a vessel heated over a flame) and mixing it with oil. In rural western Iran, women prepared eye makeup by carbonizing cotton soaked in goat fat between two saj, to make velvety soot. This was scooped up with a rooster tail feather, kept in a little packet made of chicken skin leather, and applied with a *mil* (a small blunt applicator) whittled from wild sheep bone.

In Afghanistan, women made surma by pounding antimony with almond oil to make a paste, and applying it with a small wood stylus, called a *mikh*. Antimony was believed to strengthen weak eyes. Felix Howland wrote from Kabul in 1936, that students often

came to school with blackened eyes, as a claim that they had studied so hard they had strained their eyes.

Most women created their own cosmetics. Wealthier people used soot from burning amber or aloe wood to make their eye paints; poor women used common pot-black and animal fat. Jews were often formulators and sellers of cosmetics through North Africa and the Middle East. Jewish women were allowed to bring their cosmetic wares into harems to sell to the women who were not permitted leave the house and who didn't trust their husbands to purchase good cosmetics in the market for them. Women also made paints made from various iron oxides and earths for complimentary red, white and yellow cosmetics. Tattoos were the basic ornament for everyday life, and these were augmented with henna, kohl, harquus, and other cosmetics in escalating amounts for more important occasions, the most complex adornment being reserved for a bride at her marriage.

Unfortunately, the eye paint preparations containing lead and antimony are toxic and quite dangerous for women and children. Present day commercial kohl, kajal, and surma preparations often contain dangerously high levels of lead and other toxins! If you wish to recreate these traditional adornments, do not put anything in or near your eyes that does not have complete ingredient labeling. Be certain that the products you use are safe cosmetic products produced and tested under strict regulations.

Please see these online resources about the toxicity of kohl and surma before using any imported eye cosmetic!

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US Food and Drug Administration
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