

Blue — Cungaq, Cungaasqaq

QAPILAAT CUNGARTUT. – THE MUSSELS ARE BLUE.



Image: Koniag Mask, painting by Helen J. Simeonoff, 1995. Alutiiq Museum Collection, AM459.

In the Alutiiq language, the colors green and blue are not differentiated. A single term describes both colors, reflecting the fact that Alutiiqs traditionally interpreted blue as a shade of green.

Despite the use of a single color term, recent research suggests that Alutiiq artists used blue and green paints differently in decorating masks. Green paint was widely used. It was a common background shade and the only color used to paint eyeballs. In contrast, artists used blue paint more sparingly to color facial features and create designs.

To Alutiiqs, *cungaq* is a powerful color. It is associated with the supernatural, particularly the worlds below the sea. Green pigment was never used in body painting. However, green paint adorned hunting hats, and hunting amulets were green. Whalers, the spiritually potent hunters of giant sea mammals, carried blue or green stones. These were said to be illuminating. A story from Afognak tells of a whaler who found such a stone, which glowed in the dark. He killed many whales while he kept the stone. Then he fell in love, got married, and lost the stone. His ability to kill vanished, and he and his wife died shortly afterward.