

# Alutiit Kraas'kait – ALUTIIQ COLORS



The world's societies interpret colors in different ways. The Alutiiq language has just four basic color terms: *Kavirtuq* (it is red), *Tan'ertuq/Tamlertuq* (it is black), *Qatertuq/Qat'rtuq* (it is white), and *Cungagtuq* (it is blue). Alutiiq/Sugpiaq people recognized a broader range of colors, but their traditional language describes most hues with these four terms. For example, green is a shade of blue. Alutiiq speakers also describe colors by their similarity to common things. For example, an Alutiiq speaker might say that a brown object is the color of dirt.

## IT IS RED – *Kavirtuq*

Alutiiq people manufactures red pigments from minerals and plants. They ground ochre, a soft, naturally occurring iron oxide, into a fine powder and mixed it with oil to make paint. On Kodiak, people produced a reddish-brown dye by boiling alder bark. In Prince William Sound, people boiled hemlock bark or a mixture of cranberry and blueberry juices to produce a dark red dye. Widely used in body painting and to decorate objects, the color red may represent ancestral blood.

## IT IS BLACK – *Tan'ertuq/Tamlertuq*

Historic sources indicate that Alutiiq people collected a specific stone to make black pigment. They also produced black pigment from a copper ore and from wood charcoal. With black paint Alutiiq people painted faces, particularly of people in mourning. Black paint also adorned masks, both as a background color and as a design component. Black paint often outlines facial features or illustrates brows and eyes.

## IT IS WHITE – *Qatertuq/Qat'rtuq*

Alutiiq people made white pigment from limestone obtained in trade with the Alaska mainland, grinding this soft rock into a powder and mixing it with oil to create paint. At winter hunting festivals, the faces of the first two dance performers were often painted white and red, and masks were often decorated with white.

## IT IS BLUE – *Cungagtuq*

To the Alutiiq, blue is a powerful color. It is associated with the supernatural, particularly the worlds below the sea. Blue pigment was never used in body painting. However, a blue-green paint adorned hunting hats, and whalers, the magical hunters who pursued giant sea mammals, carried blue or green stones.



*Payulik – Bringer of Food, painted wood and leather mask, Pinart Collection, Musée Boulogne-sur-Mer, France.  
Photo by Will Anderson.*