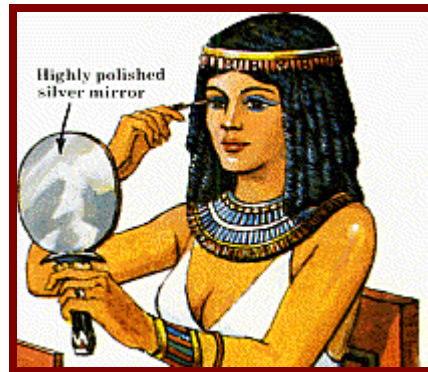


Sormeh (Kohl or Kuhl)- 16th Century Safavid Persian



Description

Sormeh is an eye enhancing cosmetic known throughout the centuries across the Middle East by many names including kohl, kuhl, mesdemet, kajaal, sirma, etc. Its roots lie in ancient Egypt where it beautified and protected the eyes of both men and women. Egyptian mesdemet much like its ancestor, Persian sormeh, came in many forms including powdered minerals or powdered soot. “Everyone had galena powder however while the poor resorted to sticks to apply it, the wealthy had intricately carved and bejeweled containers of ivory or other precious materials” (Illes).

In both the ancient Egyptian and Safavid Persian (1501-1722) cultures the powders were believed to have medicinal qualities outside of their cosmetic uses. In her article on “Ancient Egyptian Eye Makeup” Judith Illes mentions that “Galena possesses disinfectant and fly-deterrent properties” and that “the medical papyri frequently prescribe *mesdemet* for assorted complaints of the eye.” Safavid Persians also utilized the compound for medical purposes. Sormeh (kuhl) was one of many forms of ocular compound remedies described in medieval Persian ophthalmologic manuals such as Hunayn ibn Ishaq’s Ten Treatises on the Eye and Ali ibn Isa al-Kahhal’s Memorandum Book for Oculists (Pormann).



“There is little information on what rich Sassanian (dynastic precursor to the Safavids) women would use for cosmetics. However the Roman sources contain a wealth of information and the women of Persia would have used almost the same ingredients and mixes. All ancient formulas were still in use with new ones added...Eyeliner (sormeh) was made from soot or antimony powder” (Price). These would have been crushed to a fine powder and stored in pots designed specifically for its storage. Application of the sormeh involved dipping a dampened stick of wood, metal, or glass into the pot containing a variant of powder. The individual applying the makeup would then shake off any excess powder and place the kohl stick in the inner corner of the eye. While gently closing their eye, the applicator would then draw the stick towards the outer edge of the eye slowly and carefully leaving sormeh on both the upper and lower eyelids. **Please see photographs with my display & in my appendix of how this is done.**

¹ Detail of Safavid Persian eyes: The Seated Princess by Mohammadi c.1565

How I mixed my Sormehs

Mineral Powder variant



This particular compound of sormeh is now known to be toxic and may be harmful if dust is inhaled or swallowed. It is also a skin, eye and respiratory irritant.

**Please do not use the Antimony Powder kohl
IT IS TOXIC!**

Antimony Sulphide

Period Mineral Powder

The first of two types of sormeh used by Safavid women was a ground mineral based powder of either galena or antimony. “Mesdemet, a dark gray ore of lead, was derived from either stibnite (*antimony sulphide*) or, more typically, galena (*lead sulphide*)” (Illes).

My Mineral Powder

I purchased raw pre-ground antimony sulphide to avoid as much contact with the mineral as possible due to its toxic nature. I have placed this material in a glass container for viewing purposes with latex gloves available for those who might wish to handle it.

Soot Powder variant

Period soot collection method

This sormeh used by Safavid women was created using any number of materials. Eyelids could be blackened with soot obtained from burning animal fat or nuts like almonds and pistachios. Some women soaked fine woolen wicks in butter and then burned them to obtain soot; others used goat fat or bone marrow from cattle. The nuts or fats were burned in a lamp with a plate held over the flame, so that the soot would collect on it (Yarshater).

My soot collection method

I filled a modern oil lamp with melted ghee (clarified butter) as well as a small amount of almond butter and placed a steel tower made by another artist for this purpose over the top of the flame. Soot formed on the steel as the soaked cotton wick burned over the course of several hours. I used multiple wicks to accumulate enough soot for use. I collected the soot from the steel using a razor blade. Finally, I placed my product into a modern Moroccan kohl pot for easy use.

Tip: soak wicks in the ghee/almond butter mixture for several days prior to burning.

Conclusion

My purpose in mixing period sormeh as would have been used in Safavid Persia was both for personal gain and as a knowledge seeking exercise. I utilize modern kohl cosmetic consistently as a re-enactor and wished to mix my own for personal use as a safety precaution. Modern kohls have recently come under the scrutiny of medical scientists regarding their effects on the eye and the minerals used in mixing them. Many have been banned from import to the United States based on possible health risks that the minerals they contain can induce. I wish to avoid any concerns for my health while still utilizing this incredible cosmetic. It was very exciting to gain an understanding of the various compounds used in period to create the beautiful effect of kohl and I look forward to utilizing the “recipe” for many years to come.



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² 18th Dynasty Egyptian glass kohl tube c. 1340BC

³ Iranian Bronze Kohl pot c. 701-1000 BC

⁴ Kohl pot Syria c. 601-800 AD

Sources Cited

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Project Photographs



My oil lamp filled with ghee (clarified butter) and almond butter. The burning cotton wick is creating soot on the steel.



Collected soot