Traditions in Baltic Amber: Color

an essay by Sean McLaughlin, used with permission

Sorting through our amber collection, I was again amazed at the diversity of amber's colors. Yellows, golds, reds, oranges, browns, whites, soft-greens, blacks, greys, feathers of blue and clear transparent pieces like uncolored glass, gleamed in the gentle light of my thoughtful room. I reflected on the diversity and also on my days studying with amber masters.

It was folk tradition that we were taught in the 1970s and 80s as we sat in amber studios and listened. Even my dear teacher taught me that white amber was among the oldest of ambers, but not the eldest, and why that was important, even when we knew that white amber is caused by massive amounts of air inclusion.

Debates would occur in the different studios over which amber was the best healer, rough or polished. There were always discussions of how each type of amber healed, linking each color to a part of the body and linking each energy of an amber to a blessing. A rough identification of a hundred types of amber with a working vocabulary of about 40 names never really touched the individuality of each little perfect pendant we discussed, nor named each piece properly.

Gemologists divide amber's colors into two initial classes: 1) aerated: amber filled with air bubbles and therefore opaque, and 2) non-aerated: amber without air and transparent. The chemical nature of each tree species plus the 'contamination' of the resin by organic matter and the earth wherein the resin was deposited give amber its colors.

But we were taught a simpler way...to use honey to speak of amber's diversity. Bees by clover make golden honey. Bees by buckwheat make reddish brown honey. The 'little sisters' by basswood make a wonderful water clear honey. All honey can be whipped white, and so it is with amber. One tree makes gold amber, while another tree makes brown.

Baltic folk tradition is often irrational and conflicting, but it is always simple and beautiful.

Golden clear amber, on master taught us, came from the beloved short needle pine, the funerary evergreen, and is the amber of the Sun, the one called the sun stone.

Gentle water-clear amber came from the equally gentle balsam tree and its small amounts are used by a master to create works about birth and renewal. If water-clear is touched by white pollen, then it is called ice amber, and is used to heal hearts frozen by pain and fear.

White amber, Georgs taught us so long ago, is among the oldest of ambers but not the eldest. It is an amber purified by time, the dross simply evaporating away in the hundred million years of its existence until, in the end, it is the lightest of all ambers and the least connected to the material world.

Flat transparent brown ambers, the eldest of all ambers, are the tears of trees that have borne the greatest amount of time in our world, he went on to say. Pressed down and condensed, these small pieces of amber are the very heart of the earth and carry her great blessing.

"Magic, Science and Religion," Malinowski's old but still formidable essay, bids us to remember that the strands of beliefs that come to be reflected in folk tradition, often cross one discipline and slip into another.

Thousands of years ago, when the Balts and the Kaszubes burned fires on the beaches, they learned that amber, encased in sand, far enough away from flame so that it would not burn, could be made dark red by heat. Red

Continued on page 5

Amber *continued from page 4*
amber then, when transformed by the skill of a master, not dyed, but heated in sand without damage, became the amber for strength. For what else really describes an ability to survive fire, to be whole but suddenly totally changed, with the symbol of that change being reflected in the world as the color of blood and courage?

A thousand stories we have gathered about us, but they are just a part of that moving, changing river of folk tradition. They are graciously born from a people who lived with nature, were open to curiosity and discovery and were shaped by continuity, by that 'longer sense of self in space and time.'

I was given a black lump of 'forest fire' amber, which the masters always talked of. It was a part of a set of ambers recovered from a blue clay deposit that had been subjected to great heat. On a bad day in the heart of the world, in my little thoughtful room, I held it in my hands thinking of how it was so black. It was not until I accidentally held it just right against the last light of the gloaming that it shot out a single ray of pure brilliant-red light…for me another meaning of amber was shaped.

Traditional Meanings of Color in Baltic Amber

Clear Transparent Gold = Clarity, the Sun Stone
Clear Transparent Red = Strength
Clear Transparent Brown = the Richness of the Earth
Water Clear = Birth, Renewal, Completion
True Green, not dyed = Growth, Abundance and Renewal
Grey = Simplicity and Calmness
White = Spirit
Opaque Yellow = Joy, Celebration and Stability

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Museum of the Town of Gdynia, excerpts

Tomasz Rembalski; translator Stanisław Frymark

After five years of construction, the Museum of the Town of Gdynia (Muzeum Miasta Gdyni) has a new home and is open to the public. Several celebrities attended the official opening ceremonies on the 16th of November 2007 including Polish President Lech Kauczynski, Gdańsk Metropolitan Archbishop Tadeusz Gocłowski and Gdynia mayor Wojciech Szczurek.

The first home of the museum was a small house often referred to as "Abraham House" which opened in January 1983, and housed artifacts from the History Public Library.

Construction began in 2002 on the new building which has five levels of exhibits displaying: Gdynia as a village of farmers and fishermen; as a popular site for sea vacations in the beginning of the XXth century; building the city and harbor after WWI; the German occupation and political turbulence after WWII; Solidarity and the visit of Pope John Paul II in 1987; space for temporary exhibits. Modern touch screens are located throughout the galleries to allow visitors a more in depth exploration of the topics. There are plans to establish a Naval Museum in an unoccupied section of the new building.

For more information: ***muzeumgdynia.pl*** *To learn more about Gdynia:* ***gdynia.pl***