

# color is...

BY JUDE STEWART

## Blue Is Everything—and its Opposite, too

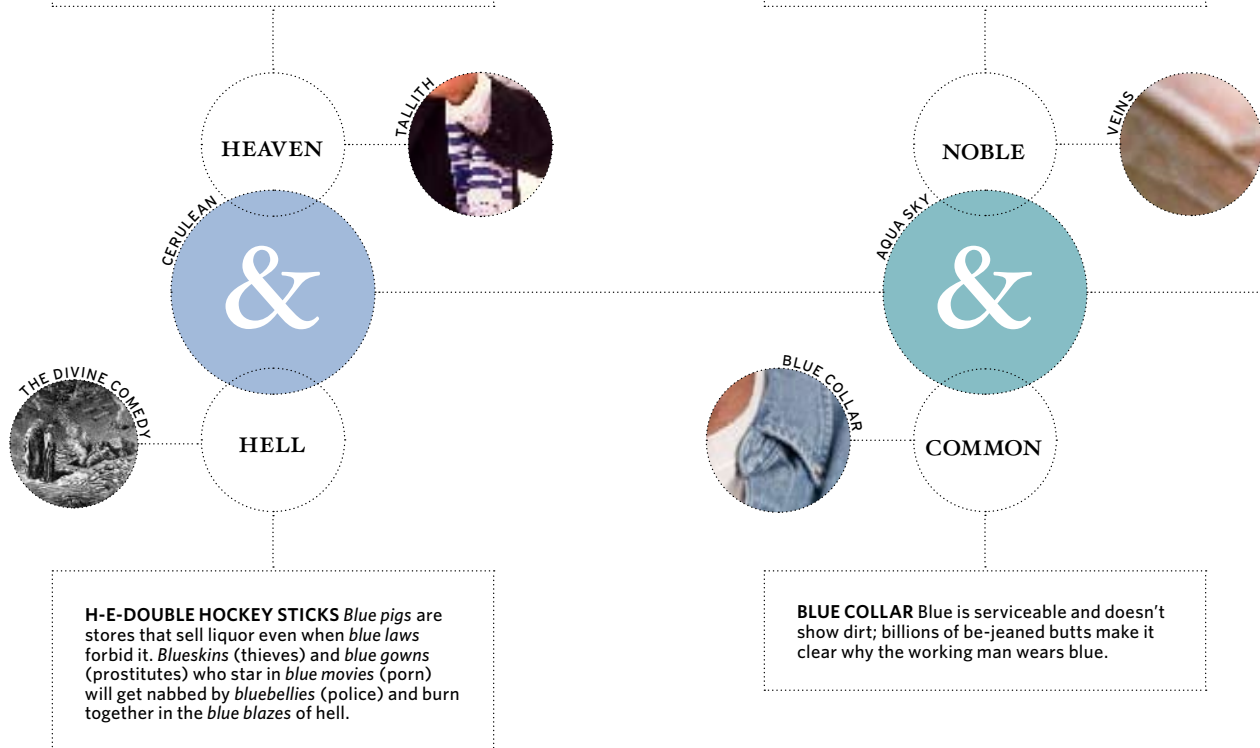
**NUMBER ONE FOR NOW, NUMBER FIVE FOREVER** Pantone fingers blue as *the* color of 2008—a switch only in hue (iris) from the blue that was *the* color of 2000 (cerulean), 2003 (aqua sky) and 2005 (turquoise). *The New York Times* agrees: Watch those verdant-green eco-products all shift, to a canister, into blue packages next year. [1]

Yet, as linguists Brent Berlin and Paul Kay demonstrate in their book *Basic Color Terms*, not all languages include names for every

color English recognizes. All languages differentiate between colors, but the words for colors always enter a language in the same order: first black and white, then red, then green or yellow, then in fifth place, blue. Dig this: That means there are whole languages out there that never recognize blue as a separate color from green. In fact, the ancient Greeks could stand on a hilltop encased in Mediterranean sea and sky and argue with us 'til they're green in the face: They see no blue here, because they had no word for it. ■

**PARADISE** Orthodox Jews stare at the blue threads twisted into the fringes of their prayer shawls to take them deeper into meditation—into blue, a “pavement of sapphire, like the very sky for purity,” a likeness of the throne of God, according to the book of Ezekiel. Count the Blue Mosques among Muslims and grow dizzy with the fecundity of Allah. Turquoise beads absorb the sin of Buddhists; the beads’ darkening with age mirrors the dimming of our own lives, into death.

**BLUEBLOOD** Historian Robert Lacey nicely explains the origin of this term for nobility in his book *Aristocrats*: “The Spanish nobility started taking shape around the ninth century in classic military fashion, occupying land as warriors on horseback ... for more than five hundred years, clawing back sections of the peninsula from its Moorish occupiers. A nobleman demonstrated his pedigree by holding up his sword arm to display the filigree of blue-blooded veins beneath his pale skin—proof that his birth had not been contaminated by the dark-skinned enemy.”



[1] Dec. 20, 2007; [www.nytimes.com/2007/12/20/garden/20over.html?pagewanted=1&\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/20/garden/20over.html?pagewanted=1&_r=1)

**TIPPLING** Fix your Parisian bartender with a beetle-bright eye and ask for “la bleue,” or, if you’re more skittish, query the time: “Could it be 10 ‘til noon?” A cloudy storm of bluish-green absinthe will appear silently at your elbow. (After absinthe was outlawed in 1907, it could only be served surreptitiously.) Raise your glass to those wan blue faces nursing their gins across the English Channel, a toast of your “green fairy” to their “blue ruin.”

**NEELKANTHA, THE ONE WITH THE BLUE THROAT**

Here’s how the Hindu god Shiva got his eternally blue throat: To score a nectar of immortality buried deep in the oceans, the gods banded (uneasily) with the demons to fashion what was arguably eternity’s biggest and most divine of mixers—a monstrous serpent god lashed to an equally monstrous mountain, like a spoon tied with yarn to a madly active mixmaster.

And so they churned the sea for a hundred years, yielding all kinds of fascinating booty from its depths—jewels, goddesses teetering on lotus flowers, a lovely crescent moon that Shiva snatched for his forehead—unfortunately all laced with venom spewing from the punch-drunk serpent. As the ratio of venom to treasure hit alarming proportions, the gods appealed to Shiva the Destroyer to step into the breach and save them from further annihilation. And Shiva drank the world’s poison down like it was a malted milkshake ... but he did not swallow. The world’s poison hangs like a tangle of malignant thread, glowing blue with Wrong through his skin, stoppered forever in his throat.

Perhaps this legend alludes to the fact that blue is rare in the animal kingdom—a creature of said tint is often signaling an unpalatable or poisonous nature via its color.

**HANKY CODE** Shade matters among gay men who signal their sexual preferences discreetly with a bandana stuffed into a back pocket or looped through a belt (or G-string). Light blue invites oral sex when the intended tone might be robin’s-egg blue, for 69. A simple medium blue signals a predilection for dressing like a policeman during sex, but just a dash more turquoise may find one having sex in water instead. Check uniform for colorfastness first.



POISON

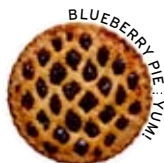


MALE



FOOD

FEMALE



**BLUE FOOD** A meal composed of naturally blue foods would be odd, scanty and have to be assembled from far-flung environs. For an appetizer: Scoop out the moldy veins of a Stilton cheese and pair them with Kadarka grapes from Hungary. (Or in England, visit Devonshire on May Day for the customary meal of blue eggs and diabread.) Entrée: Take a flatbread of Native American blue cornmeal, dust it with blue pumpernickel seeds from Turkey, the Netherlands or Tasmania, then gently nestle a bluepoint oyster on top. Dessert we all know: good ol’ blueberry pie, with an arctic sliver of vanilla ice cream.

**BLUESTOCKING** The first circle of Bluestockings—ladies just a little too learned for men’s comfort—was formed around 1750 by coal heiress and *salonnière* Elizabeth Montagu in London. The ladies favored intellectual chat over card games and simple dress over furbelows. The Bluestockings’ nickname suggests more their mannish directness of style than their actual dress: The term refers to the blue-gray tradesman’s hosiery that metaphorically replaced a gentleman’s black silk stockings. Bookish or not, Mrs. Montagu knew how to cut a rug. She explained her nickname “Fidget” as having been bestowed for her dancing, with this quip: “Why shall a table that stands still require so many legs when I can fidget on two?”