

# COLOUR FROM THE NEOLITHIC TO NOW: VISUAL STORIES FROM ÇATAL HÖYÜK, TURKEY

Adrienne Momi

## INTRODUCTION

When I was little, one of the best presents I received was a box of coloured crayons; to my young self, those crayons were magical. What I remember most vividly was the colour magenta. Hair, clothes, and flowers all could be magenta in my imaginary world. Although I hardly use magenta these days, the allure of colour, in general, has informed my work throughout my practice. I use colour in my printmaking and painting to create a mood, evoke a memory, or delight the viewer's eye. The emotional impact of colour is undeniable. Colour and place are seductive; the landscape and environment in each case inform the colour palette. For example, the prints made in Firenze are characterised by sombre ochre tones and illuminated with gold. Prints made on the California coast, with their vibrant blues and muted greens, evoke a smell of the sea. The prints made in California respond to wildfires, using red/orange that are hot--hot as the actual flames.

I was privileged to gain an artist's residency at Çatalhöyük (2000-2005), an archaeological site in a Neolithic village in South Central Turkey. I examined the Neolithic artefacts during the residency and pondered their possible contextual meaning. The landscape and geology of the Konya plain that once informed the colours for the Neolithic artists 9000 years ago certainly inspired me - rich earth tones, chalky whites, blood reds - to explore colour as part of my residency.

The installation on site was a monumental spiral (100 m. diameter) using paper, enhanced with drawings and handmade paper additions. It was a. An "artistic excavation" designed to explore the significance of the Neolithic imagery. I had previously used this method of making art about art at a Neolithic site in the Czech Republic in 1998-99, described in an earlier article published in the first online issue of Impact Journal, "Call and Response." Now, I had another opportunity to apply the methods previously used. During the residency at this particular archaeological site, I was less

interested in quantifying the number of figurines discovered, the site placement of the wall paintings, or the layers of houses whose roofs were collapsed, but more interested in the sense of place, history and storytelling. Upon completing the residency, I returned to my studio in the US inspired by images, artefacts and colours. Having saturated my memory with the experience of living on the site, spending every day working on the land, touching the soil and interacting with the archaeologists, I knew I had not yet finished my work.

I began to make mixed media prints reflecting my impressions. They became an artist's book, "Stories



Figure 1



Figure 2

Figure 1: Stories and Images of Çatal Höyük, book front cover (2010) by Adrienne Momi, plaster, mixed media, 457 x 304 mm.  
 Figure 2: Stories and Images of Çatal Höyük, centerfold (2010) by Adrienne Momi, collagraph, relief and mixed media, 457 x 609 mm

and Images of Çatalhöyük" (457 x 304 mm.), containing collagraphs, solar plates, monotypes and drawings. Each image may stand alone as a wall fragment, a pottery shard discovered in the soil, a small quantity of broken sculpture, or a remembering of a geometric pattern. Human figures (some headless) surround an auroch. Are they dancers? Hunters? Spirits of the dead? Enigmatic twin leopards on the book cover remain a puzzle for archaeological researchers.

## REFLECTION ON PIGMENTS AND PAINTINGS IN ÇATALHÖYÜK

The urge to make images is ancient—older than 30,000 BC in caves and 8000 BC on Çatalhöyük's wall. Imagine the discovery of pigments and how to use them to create these images. According to "Pigment Use at Çatalhöyük" in *Near Eastern Archaeology* (Schotsman, Bennison-Chapman et al., 2020), a wide range of pigment sources existed within reach of the site. Ochres, cinnabar, blue azurite, calcite, and carbon black were found. The resulting colours have been identified on pottery, statuettes, walls and skeletons.

The making of paint has involved the same process for millennia. Raw pigments must be pulverised and mixed with a binder to adhere to a surface. They must be viscous enough to spread on the surface using different tools. Evidence of grinding surfaces, palettes and bone "brushes" has been identified. How did early painters learn which stones or ash could be used and how to use them?

Moreover, a millennia later, artists are connected to the earth through the same pigment production and use. We depend on the earth for the tools needed to express our awareness and interpretation of memory, expectation and reality. Heretofore, many contemporary artists traced their lineage to the European Renaissance. Knowing that the pigment colours we use today are the same as the ones used in Neolithic times extends our lineage back to that much earlier time.

## COLOUR AND STORYTELLING

The magic that drew me to these painted images is that they are the earliest recorded paintings onto human-built walls—not caves, as they were painted upon in Palaeolithic times. Most of these wall paintings were discovered during the early excavations, directed by James Mellaart (1976).

A significant component of the wall paintings is the use of colour; painted on the house interior walls plastered with white calcite, carbon black appears to be the most widely used pigment. Often, red ochre appears on pillars painted to give an accent. Found sculptural elements included low-relief animal figures or bull's horns embedded in walls or on platforms.

These pictures and sculptural elements reflect life during the early period (7100-6700 BC), and we can only imagine what they describe.



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

Figure 3: Stories and Images of Çatal Höyük, p. 14 (2010) by Adrienne Momi, collagraph, relief, drawing on handmade paper 457 x 304 mm.

Figure 4: Stories and Images of Çatal Höyük, p. 14 (2010) by Adrienne Momi, collagraph, relief, solar plate on handmade paper, 457 x 304 mm

Figure 5: Stories and Images of Çatal Höyük, p. 13 (2010) by Adrienne Momi, collagraph, solar plate, drawing, 457 x 304 mm.

However, their existence extends our understanding of storytelling back to at least this time. Of course, we don't know what the stories were—but stories, they are true. Cessford suggests these paintings and sculptures provide “connections between daily practice, social memory and ancestors” (Schotsmans, et al., 2020). In other words, they tell stories.

## STORIES AND IMAGES OF ÇATALHÖYÜK

The pages of “Stories and Images of Çatalhöyük” are inspired by my observation of Çatalhöyük's walls and the recording of the colours which reflect the earth's colours and the landscape around the site.

The book's cover aims to recreate a wall in one of the decorated houses, where the plastering appeared uneven after being deeply buried for millennia. Geometric patterns are prevalent across the site. I also incorporated a bull's head with the geometric addition. (image 1—cover of book)

The centre pages feature a yellow ochre bull, which is prominent in both wall paintings and as a low-relief sculpture in the walls. Various horns embedded in walls appear in several houses. The bull's energy is a crucial component and appears in many of the paintings. I have incorporated stylised geometric horns on a brown ochre background in my work. (image 2—centerfold) Likewise, the dominant red and brown ochres of the Leopard encountering a bull meet on this page. (image 3—p. 14)

Other works in the book include images of the residents of Çatalhöyük. Inspired by a large wall painting and shown with a bull, these warriors or dancers appear to tell a story of ancestral or contemporary activities. (image 4—p. 5). A similar print illustrates residents of Çatalhöyük trading—possibly obsidian items. Furthermore, the site is located at the confluence of at least two rivers. Now, (and then) a fertile plain resulting from the river's sediment was/is a prominent geographic feature. (image 6—p. 16)

Fragments of the past are all we can see after excavation. It is the viewer's job to put the fragments in order if the desired outcome is to create meaning. Otherwise, we can observe that they remain fragments, and we cannot know their meaning. (image 5—p. 13)

This geometric wall design fragment mimics the three-dimensional placement of auroch (bull) horns. How does this repetitive pattern affect the viewer's response to the image? Do colour choices influence the experience? (image 7—p. 10)

## CONCLUSION

The pages in my book are inspired and informed by continued visits to the site and five years of studying these images had a profound effect on me. Images and symbols became embedded in my memory through constant exposure to the source material. How powerful these elements



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

must have been for the Neolithic makers and viewers. We can never know their intended significance. However, the colours and shapes continue to resonate and communicate through the millennia. Colour choices generate memory, affect the collective unconscious and even hold stories. Hopefully, the imagery selected from “Stories and Images of Çatalhöyük” and their presentation can allow the 21st-century viewer to observe and perhaps participate in a Neolithic spiritual experience.

It is remarkable that in the 21st century, I am making printed and painted images inspired by an 8000-year-old house wall using the pigments prepared using a process similar to that of my Neolithic predecessors. (image 8-back cover)

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## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Trained as an oil painter in the 1960s, twenty years later Adrienne Momi began her journey as a printmaker in Florence, Italy, Embracing etching, monotype, collagraphy, woodcut, pochoir, she often prints on her own handmade paper. Taking a sabbatical from studio art in 1994, Momi worked “in the field”, creating monumental paper installations in Europe and Turkey. Returning to the US, she founded Momi Lani Paper Arts, a school for printmaking, book arts, and papermaking and published “The Amazing Adventures of Radish Toe,” a children’s book. Relentlessly exploring new ideas, Momi pushes the limits of tradition while maintaining a quirky aesthetic. She has added letterpress and book arts to her repertoire, and recent experiments have also included the addition of fabric and stitching. The range of possibilities is endless as her work evolves and grows.

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IMAGE GALLERY



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Figure 5: Stories and Images of Çatal Höyük, p. 13 (2010) by Adrienne Momi, collagraph, solar plate, drawing, 457 x 304 mm.

Figure 6: Stories and Images of Çatal Höyük, p. 10 (2010) by Adrienne Momi, collagraph, relief on handmade paper, 457 x 304 mm.



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Figure 7: Stories and Images of Çatal Höyük, p. 10 (2010) by Adrienne Momi, mixed media, collagraph, 304 x 457 mm.

Figure 8: Stories and Images of Çatal Höyük, book back cover (2010) by Adrienne Momi, plaster, mixed media, 457 x 304 mm.