

# Faience: The Bronze Age Invention in Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Indus Valley and the Chinese Civilizations



Finds of early faience are relatively rare, appearing suddenly in the Central plains along with the rise of the Western Zhou dynasty (1040-771 BCE). For about a millennium faience was used across a wide area mostly in form of beads or pendants in burial contexts. Since the 1980's, interest in the material rose from the excavations in Yu kingdom tombs and Bailu graves of the Western Zhou, Shaanxi province, where thousands of faience beads or fragments were uncovered. These beads were worn by ordinary people which led to them being interpreted as local production.



Faience appeared in Mesopotamia in the fifth millennium BCE and it later spread throughout the Near East. Wall decoration in glazed, colored, sometimes molded, bricks was developed during the first millennium BCE. Some of the finest examples come from Babylon and date from the sixth century BCE. The Ishtar Gate, Processional Way, and part of the royal palace were decorated with panels of colored bricks depicting palm trees and symbolic animals, such as lions, dragons, and bulls, alternating with abstract symbols.



In ancient Egypt, objects created with faience were considered magical, filled with the undying shimmer of the sun, and imbued with the powers of rebirth. For Egyptians, the sculptures, vessels, jewelry, and ritual objects made of faience glimmered with the brilliance of eternity. This man-made substance allowed the Egyptians to make a wide variety of objects covered in shiny, bright blue glaze—a color that was closely linked with fertility, life, and the gleaming qualities of the sun.



A wide variety of faience ornaments including beads, bangles and jewelry have been retrieved from the major ancient cities of Mohenjo-daro, Harappa and Chanhu-daro. The ancient artisans of the Indus Valley Civilization appear to have almost exclusively utilized efflorescence technique to manufacture faience. No other region in the ancient world is known to produced this type of glassy faience.