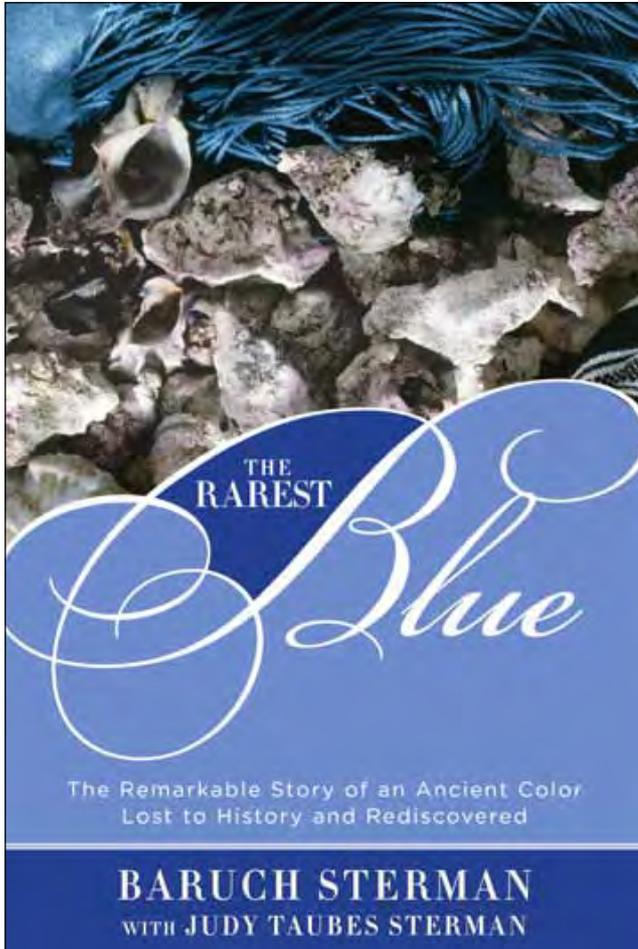


november



### **The Rarest Blue**

The Remarkable Story of an Ancient Color  
Lost to History and Rediscovered

**BARUCH STERMAN**

**WITH JUDY TAUBES STERMAN**

978-0-7627-8222-2 ■ November 2012

\$24.95 US/\$27.50 CAN ■ US, Canada, and open market ■ Cloth

5½ x 7½ ■ 304 pp ■ 12/CTN

color inserts, illustrations ■ Lyons Press

HISTORY

## Discover how a sea snail and the ancient dye that it produced colored the course of history.

For centuries, dyed fabrics ranked among the most desirable objects of the ancient world, fetching up to 20 times their weight in gold. Few people knew their complex secrets, carefully guarding the valuable knowledge. *The Rarest Blue* tells the incredible story of *tekhelet*, or hyacinth blue, the elusive sky-blue dye mentioned throughout the Hebrew Bible. Minoans discovered it; Phoenicians stole it; Roman emperors revered it; Cleopatra adored it; and Jews—obeying a Biblical commandment to affix a single thread of the radiant color to the corner of their garments—risked their lives for it. But with the fall of the Roman Empire, the technique vanished. Then in the nineteenth century, a marine biologist saw a fisherman’s shirt smeared with snail guts, marveling as the yellow stains turned sky blue. What was the secret? At the same time, a Hasidic master obsessed with the ancient technique posited that the source wasn’t a snail but a squid. Bitter fighting ensued until the chief rabbi of Ireland discovered that one of them was wrong. But had an unscrupulous chemist deliberately deceived him?

**Baruch Sterman** is cofounder of the Ptil Tekhelet Association and was instrumental in developing the modern techniques for dyeing *tekhelet* used today. He has written



numerous articles on the subject in several languages and is considered a world expert on snail dyeing. He divides his time between Israel and New Jersey with his wife, Judy Taubes Sterman, and their seven children.

*As Lacaze-Duthiers would discover, three snail species were used for dyeing in ancient times, and all three belonged to the same family of mollusk. They were known as Murex trunculus, Murex brandaris, and Thais haemastoma. Found along the Mediterranean coast, these small creatures have a small gland, part of the snail’s digestive system, a secretion from which is the source of the dye. From these three mollusks it is possible to produce a broad spectrum of colors ranging from sky blue to reddish purple, depending on the specific snail, the amount of dye used, and the varying conditions under which the dye is prepared. On the purple side of the spectrum is Tyrian purple, known in the ancient world as argamman, while on the blue side is the color that has been described as Biblical blue, or tekhelet.*

*Each murex provides only a few drops of the precious secretion; it takes more than 20,000 snails to produce just one kilogram of dyed wool. The procedure for extracting the glands is time consuming, and the methods of dyeing are exceedingly complicated and somewhat unpredictable. It is therefore no surprise that in the ancient world the price these dazzling purple and blue dyes could command was equally dazzling. Records show that at one time, wool dyed with the shellfish dye was worth more than twenty times its weight in gold. Naturally it soon became a status symbol, a sign of wealth and prestige, and it embellished the robes of emperors and kings.*