

Colors of the Sea

by Konstantina Spyropoulou

What charms me most about the sea is that she always changes her dress. June's sea shimmers under the scorching sun, wearing a lace dress colored like oil-pasted fishing boats. July's sea appears crystal clear, adorned with multicolored pebbles on the shore. The majestic August-sea is forever charming lovers with the full moon dissolving in her waters like honey. The sea of September holds her breath while summer takes its last. Winter's sea bites the rocks with steamy exhalations ascending to the frozen sky. For centuries, the sea licks the beaches indolently, often vehemently, but tirelessly and without complaint.

It's blue. It has always been blue, when you stare at it from the seat of an airplane and when you try to find it on a map. Deep blue, cerulean, azure sometimes, sapphire if you're lucky. Cobalt the deeper you go, navy when you say goodbye.

The Aegean—a sea as old as human history itself, its ancient waterways to this day awe-inspiring and unexplored. It is the sea of kings and epic heroes, a passage to brave new worlds, bridging East and West. Scented with the morning breeze of Zephyrus over its crystal waters and the fragrance of spices from the Levant falling like silver morning dew on the placid water veil, signaling the dawn of a new day.

Long before its serenity was disturbed by the oars of passing ships, before the treasured cargo of nard, myrrh, and linen from Egypt reached every bustling Mediterranean harbor, adding colorful sprinkles to its expanse, it was simply known as “The Water.” No one had thought of painting it; no painter had signed it off with their name. When humans heard the wind whispering its secrets and learned about the beauty and power it possessed, they made a vow to tame it, and they built vessels, and for the first time sailed its waters to a new, untrodden, and fertile land. It was then it appeared to them as golden, luminous against the scorching morning sun, and as pearl-white as the night, radiant with moonlight. And so it was seen for centuries, a sea of gold yielding to the power of humankind. The seaways of the Triremes blazing a trail to rich new places, filling ships with textiles, crops, metals, and other luxuries.

The time came, according to ancient legend, when the gods assembled on Mount Olympus and allotted areas of governance among the heavens and earth. When Poseidon was chosen to reign over the sea, it devotedly surrendered to his authority, and whatever he commanded, it obeyed. At times, it raised waves as high as Acropolises, wiping away civilizations and drowning islands; most times, however, it remained calm and let traders reach the corners of the world undisturbed.

King Aegeus of Athens thought highly of “The Water” too. He encouraged citizens to learn the trade of the merchant, master the crafting of Triremes, become skilled rowers conquering the seas like Odysseus, or embark on voyages to uncharted lands like the Argonauts. His kingdom's prosperity and stability very much relied on the sea of his city and its golden waters. The gods were pleased with his achievements as a ruler, and the people worshipped him and sculpted his statues, and sang songs and wrote poems

about him. They prospered because Aegeus didn't forget to thank the goddess Athena every morning, recognizing her favor as crucial to his success. Rarely did he ever thank the sea. His neglect in acknowledging Poseidon constantly reminded the sea-god of his defeat by Pallas and of his rejection by the Athenians, who had favored her gift of the olive tree over his foaming and bitter waves. The waves were still bitter, yet patiently rippling as the boats went through, revealing their displeasure to those who cared to listen and to the seagulls nestling against the rocks, Leucothea's devoted messengers instructed to never leave their sight.

But it wasn't long before its waves were upset by war. The day dawned when the Cretans, seeing the gold in the seaways, declared war on Athens and Aegeus' loyalty to his city's ideals was tested. The king of Crete, Minos, wasted no time and arrived at Megara with his fleet to besiege Athens. The loss of his son at the hands of Athenian soldiers fueled Minos' thirst for revenge. In response to the civilians' pleas to respect their holy city and its temples, Minos demanded a heavy toll: Athens must offer seven young men and seven young women of noble birth every nine years as a sacrifice to the Minotaur, the vicious monster living in a maze at his palace. Left without an alternative, Aegeus accepted the conditions. For decades, the sea was darkened by the black sails waving on the Athenian Triremes as a sign of mourning for the death toll imposed on their people.

Still, the sea had no colors of its own. It was scarcely heard and was comforted by the thought that the seagulls always returned, like the calm after a night of storm. Such were the nights Aegeus' son, Theseus, passed at sea, when enraged and offended by the behavior of the Cretans, he proposed to sail to Crete, kill the Minotaur, and release his city from its bondage to Minos. Aegeus, distressed at the thought of the possible fate awaiting his son, hoped to lift the dark veil clouding the sea by giving Theseus white sails to put on his ships as a sign he was coming home alive and victorious. No one asked, and despite its disapproval, the sea led his fleet safely to Crete.

Guided by the wisdom of the goddess Athena, Theseus killed the Minotaur and rescued the young prisoners from certain death. On his return, however, excited as he was with his success, and while celebrating with his comrades aboard the ship, he forgot to put up the white sails for his father. Aegeus, awaiting anxiously the return of his son from the highest point in Cape Sounion, saw the black sails coming from afar and gave way to mourning, believing his son had been devoured by the Minotaur and lost forever.

For the first time, in front of Aegeus' misty eyes lay only the vast expanse of water that appeared not golden, not silver, not pearl-white, not sapphire, but blue. Just blue, an endless blue extending to the sky with numerous black dots on the horizon. It was too late, he thought, realizing how wrong he'd been about the sea before him, but she understood. It had always been a she—mother, goddess, Fate, Charis, Nereid. She was welcoming him and had forgiven him. Without hesitation, he let himself fall from the rock at Sounion and drowned his sorrow in her blue. It was the kind of blue that gives life and takes it ruthlessly away. Not cyan, not cerulean; just blue. His son, grandsons, generations long after him, and people around the world today, remember the blue of the sea he fell into, the one that adopted him and kept his name—the Aegean Sea. He gave her his name, and she gave him life, not only as a son of Poseidon to be worshipped by the Athenians at the Acropoles but also as a spirit-guardian of her waters.

And so he continues to live through her to this day. Travel with the winds and crush against coarse rocks, kiss sandy beaches, and stir up the currents on the seafloor. Though he no longer has eyes to see, you can perceive the sea in any color you choose to paint it. As you lean closer to the sound of the waves, you can hear his soft whispers: "But it's blue, it's blue... She's blue..." his voice ultimately dissolving in the air, becoming one with the cries of the seagulls flying among masts and broken sails and the creaking of fishing boats as they enter the harbor. These faithful witnesses carry his eternal echo, having known it all along.

They can still be heard as they fly above the unending mass of blue, signifiers of the whiteness that never fails to complement it. That's why the modern-day bewildered traveler encounters Cycladic alabaster houses adorned with cobalt-painted shutters, cerulean roofs, and azure-colored doors. For most tourists, in their straw hats against the blazing sun, the sea is nothing other than cyan and turquoise, because that's what looks good in photographs. For the solitary fisherman waking up at the crack of dawn and the seasoned mariner whose clothes are saturated with saltiness, it is not painted in one but in various shades of blue, with occasional touches of burgundy, yellow, pink, and mauve on its canvas.

Its color is a canvas painted in your mind, shifting with the pulse of the waves. It's no wonder it has never been described in the same way by anyone who has seen it. We know it's blue; this the seagulls know best of all when they dive shrewdly as they spot a seabream sliding and glistening in the deep and resurface victorious.

Frequently inaccurately described, often misrepresented, its color remained yet another symbol in the eyes of a constant observer, a passerby, an artist gazing upon it for inspiration. It is rather the impression it made in the ecstatic eyes of the poet Odysseus Elytis when he found it little and green, like a thirteen-year-old girl going to school, full of life. It was rather the longing of Homer's Odysseus for Ithaca and his love for Penelope and his son Telemachus that made him call it a "wine-dark sea," sparkling against the sunlight, alluring and beguiling to the senses like unspoiled pure wine. Some three thousand years ago, it was described as *polie* by Homer in the *Iliad* when the Achaeans sailed its waters to Troy. *Polie*, white, colorless; it lacked nothing and possessed nothing in excess. It promised a lot, and they could paint their legacy on its blank canvas in any colors they desired.

Maybe Homer was right, because history has often tinted its waters with dark and somber shades. Few remember the ash-gray and muddy-green of stormy nights when it raged and wept for its lost souls. What color did it glimmer in the eyes of thousands of refugees who hopelessly roamed its waters defenseless and desperate? It was flaming red back in 1922 when the Great Fire of Smyrna devoured a hundred thousand, deprived over three million of their homes and forced them into the sea. It was ebony and menacing when the City of Cities fell in 1453 and Constantinople's Bosphorus became Istanbul's Boğaz. It was as azure as the sky when the shipwreck of Antikythera was found, and with it—one bright morning in 1902—the first analog computer, the famous Antikythera mechanism, which saw the face of the sun for the first time since 205 BCE.

In 2023, it still glimmers sapphire, turquoise, indigo, silver, and green, observed through the various colored sunglasses on clammy heads during a hot summer afternoon. Its color changes constantly in the imagination of children building sandcastles on the shore, the change noticeable to the eyes of a lifeguard who knows how to scan his territory well. It is not the same to the wandering merchant diligently making his way through the stretched and tanned bodies of bathers, selling refreshments with one hand and seashell necklaces with the other.

It is not the same to the ex-ferryman either, diving deep within his sea of memories from the top of his lighthouse, with no watch on his wrist or on the wall, for his experience has taught him to tell time based on the sea's colors. You can see him now as he puts on his old sailing cap and runs his wizened hands through his rough white bristles. He always has one window open, to look straight into the sea, to hear her whispering. Not an unnamed mass of water anymore, it never fails to bring Aegeus' voice back to his tired ears. Yes, she is blue; but only a few are privileged to know. She is the same sea he has known all his life and yet she is not. Maybe it is just his old and bleary eyes, but he has never seen her bluer. On the horizon, he can faintly spot some seagulls following

the waves back to the harbor. There is going to be a storm. His snowy beard is reflected on the transparent glass as the first raindrops fall and he shuts the window. The seagulls have now taken refuge at the lighthouse. She is thanking him for looking after them so well. He thanks her with a motion of his pale head, as she waves back and he feels the throb of her pearl-white waves foaming beneath his feet. Whiteness had always complemented the blueness of the sea, he thinks, as he gazes once more at the deep blue laid before him, and smiles.