

## What Color is "White Star Buff"?

In describing TITANIC's towering presence over the docks, the Southampton and District Pictorial wrote on April 10, 1912: "Perhaps the most striking features of the great inert mass of metal are the four giant funnels of the vessel -- huge tawny-brown and black-capped elliptical cylinders of steel ..."

"Tawny brown"? Webster's dictionary defines "tawny" as "a brownish orange to light brown that is slightly redder than sorrel," while "sorrel" is defined as "a reddish brown." This would seem to be a bit of a departure from most other period descriptions of the unique hue of White Star's funnels. Usually simply called "buff," the color was also sometimes referred to in print as "yellow," "tan," "flesh," "salmon" and even "pink."

"Tawny brown" is, I believe, the darkest description I've read. But it shows how varied the color must have appeared to eyewitnesses at different times of day, in different weather conditions, and at varying distances. These and other factors will alter a color considerably. A sunny day will bring out the warmer, more yellow hues, with more red at sunrise and sunset. A cloudy day does the opposite. And distance is important—the farther away, the more atmosphere is between the observer and the ship, and the more bluish an object will appear (yellows and reds are the first to "dull" with distance).

And then there's the inevitable fading and oxidizing (chalking) of paint caused by ultraviolet (UV) light. UV fading, caused by daylight, affects warm colors first. We've all seen old posters in windows, now faded to only an aqua color, with the reds and yellows long gone. Thus, a once warm-colored buff funnel when freshly painted may be a considerably less warm hue a year or two later.

So, the funnel color surely varied somewhat under different conditions. But as an artist and perfectionist who has studied TITANIC's appearance for all of my adult life, determining the actual paint color has always been of prime importance. Photos show painters touching up TITANIC's funnels in Southampton, so fading and oxidizing cannot be a factor on her maiden voyage. The paint was fresh and vibrant. What would the color have really been if we were given a fresh paint sample to hold in our hands?

As I know of no surviving chips of paint from a White Star funnel, and Harland & Wolff was unable to provide any formula to me, I have been left to determine the color based on what surviving evidence there is from the period. This falls under five categories:

### MODELS:

I have been fortunate to see several unrestored, period models of White Star ships, either before or during cleaning. In 1975 the 1:48-scale builder's model of BRITANNIC, now "restored" to resemble TITANIC and displayed at the Merseyside Maritime Museum, was decidedly unrestored. The model had been altered after BRITANNIC's loss to loosely represent the "new" OLYMPIC. Although the result was an implausible blending of two distinct ships, the funnels remained intact and with their original paint. A friend took many good photographs. The color was a surprisingly dark, rich, almost brownish hue. (The funnel

color now displayed at the museum could not have been sampled from this original color. It is far too light and pinkish.)

Years ago, at the Science Museum in London, I came across a large, detailed model of OCEANIC. Its scale suggested it was the builder's model. A small sign said that it was soon to undergo restoration. One small area of one of the funnels had been cleaned. Here, again, was the model's original, virgin funnel color, not much different from what I had seen on the huge, unrestored model at Merseyside.

And there have been other models, many of them. More credence must always be given to the unrestored ones. Restorers can be careless in their matching of original colors, if they even try at all. Instead of painstakingly matching hues as I would, I've seen museum employees casually buy paint off a store shelf, saying, "Oh, that'll be close enough."

Models restored or built after the White Star era cannot be entirely trusted for correct colors. But after studying many a period model, one gets a sense of what the correct funnel color probably was. Those craftsmen creating definitive "builders' models" surely were under the watchful eye of White Star and carefully endeavored to match the correct colors.

#### **ORIGINAL PAINTINGS:**

As with models, I place no particular credibility in the funnel colors seen in artwork created after the mid-20th century. I trust artists who were there—studying, sketching and painting the actual vessel at hand. I've studied many such paintings, and although there is inevitably some variation in the colors used and perhaps some fading over the years, one gets a sense of the probable funnel color after a while.

#### **PUBLISHED ARTWORK:**

Printed illustrations such as post cards and posters are helpful, although funnel color often varies wildly from one illustration to the next. Printers' inks are more susceptible to fading and alteration than the paint used on models or canvas. One must always be skeptical of any single illustration. But after seeing enough well preserved published artwork, again, one senses a general, predominant funnel color.

#### **PHOTOGRAPHS:**

This applies not only to color images taken following the popular introduction of color film in the 1930s but, believe it or not, black and white film. As with color printing inks, the dyes used in color photographs (both transparencies and prints) are unstable. And they were dramatically more unstable prior to 1938. When Kodachrome was first introduced commercially in 1935, it was soon learned that the resulting slides did not hold their images very long. This was painfully evident in a series of richly colored Kodachromes taken at the scene of the HINDENBURG disaster in May of 1937. The more dramatic shots were published—in color—in Sunday supplements at the time. That's a good thing, because all those original slides have faded completely away, according to the Eastman Kodak Museum .

Kodachrome was quickly made more dependable, and slides taken in 1938 that have been kept in a cool, dark place can look as if they were shot yesterday. I was stunned by the vividness of slides my grandfather took in Berlin in 1945. But if a slide is left where

sunlight—or simply daylight—can strike it, its colors will change dramatically. This is the issue with any slide: Has the color shifted at all? Was it ever left on a table near a window? How do we know?

Until recently, color prints were subject to color changes and fading even worse than transparencies, sometimes even though they are kept in a dark place. So, despite the existence of a few color photographs of GEORGIC and BRITANNIC (the only White Star vessels to last into the color-photography age), how much one can trust the colors we see is debatable.

Which brings me to black and white photographs. We're all aware that the lower part of TITANIC's funnels look very dark (almost black) in many photos. This is caused by the orthochromatic nature of film at that time—warm colors, particularly reds, photographed darker than cool ones. This also explains why the deep-yellow sheer stripe and name at the bows and stern disappear in most photographs. It took bright sun to adequately bring out a decent "value" (brightness vs. darkness) of funnel color in 1912 B&W photography.

But how can B&W photography be of any help in determining color? First, using the best-quality, first-generation images, notice how much darker the buff is compared with the white features of the superstructure. Even in the lightest images (see pages 246, 247 and 273 of McCluskie's *Titanic and Her Sisters*, for example), the funnels are considerably darker than the white objects, which gives us at least a minimal gauge for how dark the buff color was. Clearly, at least, it wasn't some pale, pastel color. (The photo on p. 273, taken with the sun almost directly behind the photographer, is printed extra light, "burning out" the rigging and distant hills and allowing the stern lettering to show unusually well, so perhaps this image should not be considered as a faithful representation.)

Second, it seems to me that there is photographic evidence that White Star's funnel color was lightened around the time of the merger with Cunard. B&W photos of OLYMPIC taken just before her withdrawal from service show funnels that appear almost white, lighter than they could possibly be made to look today photographing through the deepest of amber filters. In other words, even the improved B&W film of the 1930s doesn't explain such light funnels if they were the 1912 color.

More evidence of this comes from the existing post-World-War-II color photos of GEORGIC and BRITANNIC. These images show funnels that are considerably lighter than the early 20th-century ship models and illustrations. And their masts are unquestionably painted a much lighter hue. Using B&W film to photograph these last White Star ships, no amount of deep-blue filtration (simulating early orthochromatic attributes) could possibly produce funnels as dark as we see in some of the 1912 photos.

Why would White Star or Cunard alter original, historic funnel colors? Because they could. The Christmas-red funnels of QE2 and QM2 today bear little resemblance to the distinctive orange-red hue of earlier Cunarders.

If color photos of post-merger White Star ships show funnels and masts that are clearly lighter than the paint used in 1912, we can use them as a "control" and be sure TITANIC's funnels were darker.

#### EYEWITNESS DESCRIPTIONS:

The least dependable source of information is, of course, personal memories. As I said, people have written that White Star buff was everything from "pink" to "tawny brown." But there are two eyewitnesses who I hold in high esteem.

Bill Evans, who was a child at the time of TITANIC and whose father was the chief White Star pilot in Liverpool, had a good memory for detail. He was often on the ships and hanging around the White Star offices on James Street. He met J. Bruce Ismay and saw him on several occasions, who he remembered never wore a hat. And he even met Captain Smith, who he described as a "stubby man," not very tall, but friendly. I've known many TITANIC survivors, but non had actually been introduced to the captain. When I met Mr. Evans in the early 1980s, I could hardly believe I was shaking the same hand that had once held Capt. Smith's.

His having such a keen memory, I wanted his opinion of White Star buff, of course. I brought out an envelope full of numerous potential color swatches. I still have the one he selected.

The other gentleman whose memory I trust is Walter Lord. As we know, he sailed in OLYMPIC at the age of nine. When I first began corresponding with him in the late 1960s he wrote that he sat up on Boat Deck with his colored pencils and tried for hours to capture that peculiar hue of buff which he wrote had an almost indiscernible touch of pink in it. Typical of his generous nature, he did his best to recreate that color for me from memory, again using colored pencils. I cherish this little swatch today.

—

Why not recover a small piece of a TITANIC funnel and take some scrapings of her actual paint to settle the issue once and for all? In the interest of recording her accurate history and appearance, I tried to influence RMS Titanic, Inc., to do just that in 2000 when I was out there with them. I know that paint remains in plate seams and next to rivets, and I also know where many funnel fragments can be found. Unfortunately but understandably, my request was not considered a high priority during the busy recovery schedule.

All in all, after some 38 years of study, I have what I believe to be a fairly good sense of what TITANIC's funnel color must have been. I cannot claim to know exactly. But it was certainly not "yellow." I have been appalled many times by how the funnels in my artwork are reproduced when published, sometimes turning a sickening lemon yellow (see the dust jacket of Titanic: An Illustrated History). For readers who may have the book Ken Marschall's Art of Titanic, I would direct you to pages 54, 60-61 and 67 for what I believe to be good funnel color. Also, James Cameron's TITANIC set designers and model builders matched swatches I provided and reproduced the color very well.

At Günter Bäbler's request I recently gave him a sample of my preferred color, and he had his printer try to match it for the spine of Titanic Post's cover. He tells me it was quite a challenge. Although there will likely be some variation in how this color is printed with each issue, the buff color running along the spine of issue Nr. 50 is almost a perfect match.

But should modelers and artists paint their funnels the "true" color or, knowing how distance (atmosphere) affects warm colors, add the smallest touch of pale blue to the mix? The true color we would see up close would become "cooler" as the ship grew more distant. As models

[www.titanicfiles.org](http://www.titanicfiles.org)

are usually viewed from hundreds of meters away (in scale), some argue that their colors should be dulled a bit to simulate what an observer would actually see from such a distance.

I understand this logic. Atmospheric effects must be incorporated when doing a painting. But I tend to be a purist when it comes to models. Anyone who paints a model's funnels the same color as that reproduced on the cover of Post Nr. 50 would satisfy this perfectionist.

For further information, I recommend the online article White Star Buff: Weighing the Evidence, by Art Braunschweiger (<http://titanic-model.com>)

Editor's Note: For prints of Ken Marschall's artwork see [www.transatlanticdesigns.com](http://www.transatlanticdesigns.com).

© Ken Marschall

Contact: [www.titanicfiles.org/impressum\\_english.htm](http://www.titanicfiles.org/impressum_english.htm)