

Coats of Many Colors

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"I've never seen one that color - I thought they were all gold!"

This is a frequent comment from spectators when they first see a deep-red sable, black, or particolored Lhasa Apso. But historically, this breed comes in a variety of colors. Many with dark tippings and beards. Preference is left to the eye of the beholder.

In 1895, an article in *The Ladies Kennel Journal* (of England) described the "Bhutan Dog" - as Lhasa Apsos were then called - as a color that "would seem to be blue, with chest and paws, as is invariably the case, inclined to whitish fawn, (with) shading off the crown of the head and sides of the body to silver grey." Based on photos and descriptions of the day, the blue color described is likely similar to that of a Yorkshire Terrier.

The English standard adopted in 1901 stipulated: *Colour: Black, dark grizzle, slate, sandy or an admixture of these colours with white*. Writings of the early 20th century indicate that the Tibetans prized smaller specimens, with little mention of color preference.

Partiality toward "lionlike" colors grew in the Western world and became official with adoption of the 1935 Kennel Club (U.K.) standard. It listed colors, in descending order of preference, as golden, sandy, honey, dark grizzle, slate, smoke, particolored, black, white, or brown. That same year, the American Kennel Club adopted its first Lhasa Apso standard, which mimicked the English standard in color preference. Both standards listed black tips and beard as an asset, and called for a black nose and dark eyes.

In succeeding decades, the established color hierarchy led to trends that were not positive for the breed. All sorts of colors were called "golden" on AKC-registration applications. For example, in the early 1970s, one prominent male who was a deep slate with a small amount of gold on his legs was registered as a "smoke gold." This kind of creative color definition makes tracing color inheritance a challenge when researching pedigrees.

The more serious issue, however, was the effect of color preference on quality, which often played second fiddle to color in the show ring and whelping box. Many judges and breeders selected away from superior darker-colored and black dogs in favor of lesser golden dogs: Black puppies were routinely sold as pets by some breeders. The effect of this adverse selection was magnified because this breed has limited foundation stock.

Revision of the color preference was a major concern among breed advocates, and when the AKC standard was revised in 1978, it read: *All colors equally acceptable, with or without dark tips to ears and beard*. This was an improvement, but we know that all colors are not acceptable. Chocolate and a true blue occur in the breed but cannot carry the black nose and dark eyes specified in the standard.

The preponderance of lovely, clear colors now seen in the show ring requires that we again examine how color selection is affecting the breed. While dark tips have not disappeared, heavy, dark beards and black masks are increasingly uncommon and must not be lost.

A good dog is whatever color it happens to be, but we must always be mindful to preserve the "coats of many colors" that are an important part of this breed's heritage.