Did the ancients see the same colours as us?

One of the mysteries of consciousness is colour perception. For example, science can never prove whether I experienceexactly the same thing as you when I see the colour red (for example). The colours we can perceive are our brain's wayof categorising different frequencies of light that are within the range of our eyes.

However, if we could see a broaderrange of frequencies, no doubt we could see new colours. Try to imagine that! It's very difficult to imagine a totally newcolour without just imagining a different shade of a colour we already know. Probably the only way we could do this isin a dream.

Also, not all animals perceive as many colours as us, some perceive more, and some only perceive black andwhite, or none at all! Equally, some people are colour blind, meaning that they are unable to distinguish between somecolours.

Men are more likely than women to suffer from this, in fact almost one in ten of the world's men (8%) are colourblind (although men are more likely to be superior in other areas of visual perception).

It is thought that women probably evolved a more exact ability to distinguish between different colour as during the vast majority of our history, ashunter-gatherers, women would have needed to be very careful about which fruits and berries to pick, and a good ability to distinguish between different colours is obviously of benefit in that.

However, to ask whether the ancients didn't see the same colours as us may seem ridiculous.

Yet things aren't quite assimple as they seem when it comes to

colour perception. Whilst we may not be able to ever know whether another person experiences the same thing as us when they look at the same colour, to some extent we are able to investigate the subject with how people describe colours. I'm sure you've had the experience of calling something one colour, and someone else thinks it's another colour. This is particularly common with colours that are similar, such as blue and purple. Studies of thewritings of the ancient Greeks reveals that they didn't have words for pure blue or pure yellow. Homer describes the 'bluehair of Agamemnon', when he means black, and the 'wine red Aegean sea' when he means the blue sea. Does this mean that the ancient Greeks saw colours differently? Or perhaps it just means that they simply didn't have words for particular colours,just as today some cultures have words for many different variations of a colour that we lack in English. Yet, to me, red is very different from blue, and black is very different from blue. I can't see how anyone could confuse the two. And if they simply lacked the words for blue and yellow, but could still see them, why not invent words for them? If you can see a colour, would you not want words to describe it? Of course, our choice of particular words for colours defines how we see them as separate, whereas in fact colours are not really separate, discrete things, but points on a continuous spectrum of light. Nevertheless, having words for a particular colour undoubtedly draws our attention to it. An example of this is how in the 19th Century people became aware of the colour Mauve – a form of light purple. Surprisingly, before then this colour wasn't recognised and we didn't have a word for it. That didn't come until 1856 when the Chemist William Henry Perkin coined the word, after inventing an dye of this colour (called Mauveine). The colour quickly spread as it was used in colouring clothes, and was highly fashionable in the 1890s. It soon then became associated with homosexuality,as a number of prominent homosexuals in the arts, such as Oscar Wilde, took to wearing it. Interestingly, an example of how our consciousness about colours shifts over time is that by the 1950s Lavendar was then associated with homosexuality,and by the 1970s, pink. Ultimately we probably will never know for sure whether people in the past saw colours differently, but with more research through the historical archives we might be able to at least

gain some more insights and cluesinto this mysterious subject.