

Color and the Cane Corso

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The Cane Corso has appeared in many tones and colors that history and tradition have passed down through the ages. During the recovery of the breed four basic colors were identified, one was not to be preferred over the other. Modern dog fancy would dictate a heavier aesthetic preference. Fortunately for the Cane Corso this was not the case in the rural Italic countryside that was the bastion of the breed's salvation. These basic colors were; black, brindle, grey and red these basic colors can also appear brindled. These four basic colors and their various dilutes are well represented and supported by a rich and vast Iconographical heritage;

Cane Corso, Obtuse and short head, very big snout, ears leaning on the top, ash-colored down, obliquely stripped in black, little intelligence. "Catalogo dei Mammiferi della Sicilia" (Catalog of Mammals of Sicily) (Palermo 1868)

Corso, A species of big and ferocious dog with black fur. "Dictionary of Italian language from N. Zingarelli (1922)

The Roman Villa of Casale as Piazza Armerina (3rd-4th century A.D.) Mosaic depicts a fawn Corso type dog with the traditional ear crop pouncing on a boar during the hunt.

The painting Fernando I On a wild boar hunt Depicts a pack of dogs on a boar hunt and among them are brindle and fawn Corsos

Figurines' from the 18th century that depict Cane Corso's include Gruppo del Sammartino (fawn), Napoletano (fawn Corso with a black mask) and Cuciniello (formentino Corso with a gray mask)

Many superstitions were attributed to coat color and the dog's particular specialty. So much so that actual "tribes" were created of the same color with the same function. These tribes were a somewhat provincial dialect, directly associated with the regions soci-economic activities. In the years prior to the recovery of the Cane Corso the people of Southern Italy were/are by nature very suspicious of strangers, historically nothing good came of strangers to this region. They guarded their breeding stock jealously (as well as their hunting and training techniques) so essentially they had a philosophy of geographical line breeding. They never sold or exchanged the pups, choosing instead to keep only the ones that would prove useful, the rest were eliminated. These provincial dialects of corsi were a morpho-functional tool of the various respective regional trades.

Pig and goat herders preferred the black dog. The reason for this was it was easier to distinguish from the white/pink pig. The same is true of the shepherd who worked mostly with the white Maremma-Abruzzese sheep dog. Sheep herders also preferred black or brindle dogs for the same reason. This was also the color of choice for the old Italian cowboy, who was charged with herds of semi-wild horses. The black or brindle dogs blended in with the terrain camouflaging them and making it easier to surprise predators or those of ill intent.

Corsi that were used for the hunt were generally brindle or fawn with a black mask, colors that made it easy to blend in with the vegetation of the meridone (southern Italy) These dogs were strong and resolute of character. In some regions they were referred to as “Dogo” DR. Flavio Bruno an essential participant in the breeds recovery offers this description of the dogo; *“the color of the dogo was tiger-striped or tawny striped with huge jaws”* One superstition was that a white stripe on the bridge of his nose was prized as an especially strong hunting instinct. Hunting badger can only be done at night, preferably after 10 PM to give the quarry enough time to venture far enough away from his subterranean den. The fawn or wheaten dog was used exclusively for the badger hunt as in the dark it would be difficult if not impossible to tell a brindle dog from the badger.

Perhaps the employment that best showcased the Cane Corso’s vast diverse talents and utilizations was that of the dog of the Masseria (farm) Here is where he truly shined. All of his abilities came into play in this mini agro-pastoral society were the Cane Corso ruled with an iron grip and stead fast temper. During the day he was chained, at night he was freed to roam and protect the structure from predators both two legged and four. He was indispensable in the swine husbandry, as the sow went to thicket with her piglets he was sent in to incapacitate her with a viselike grip to her ear or snout, thus enabling the farmer to retrieve the piglets and the sow once released tamely followed her brood. He was employed in the castration of the bull once old enough; once again his viselike grip was utilized to incapacitate the bull so the farmer could perform the castration. Months later this exercise would be repeated when the fattened bull was to be butchered. Again, DR. Bruno offers us his insight *“The Cane Corso of the farm was sometimes called the straw stack dog-“Cane da pagliaio” when its function was to watch the straw stack, everything thing there was inside such as wheat, fodder, hay, and forage, so the “Cane da pagliaio” means watch dog. The straw stack was a functional unit of the farm in that, during winter, it worked as the shelter of all animals, cats and dogs included. The preferred color of this dog was straw like, because old people thought that the character of a straw colored dog was “flammable” like the straw”*

As the breed’s recovery took hold, a disbursement of different provincial lines began. These “tribes” began to come in contact and cross over with each other, thus creating a cornucopia of colors and blends. To quote Flavio Bruno in his tome *“Il Cane Corso studiato nella razza, nella storia, nella famiglia e nella societa. (The Cane Corso studied in breed, in history, in family and in society) “The Cane Corso’s physical and attitudinal characteristics are similar in the whole species, the difference is with the color of the coat: some of them are gray-black striped, tawny (once it was very common), clear and dark tawny, dear tawny, yellow, honey (mixed yellow or white and tawny hairs) brown, ash gray (black and white hairs), dark and light gray, slate (blackish gray), tiger striped on a grizzled background, three tiger striped colors: black gray and brown, coffee brown softened to dark, tiger striped and black. There are white spots on the breast, on the tips of the paws and on the nose”*

(Tawny would mean yellowish-brown)

I believe you have to know where you come from to know where you are going, so now that we know where the Cane Corso comes from, let us turn our attention to the present;

AKC standard for the Cane Corso;

Color- Acceptable colors are black, lighter and darker shades of gray, lighter and darker shades of fawn, and red. Brindling is allowed on all of these colors. Solid fawn and red, including lighter and darker shades have a black or gray mask; it does not go beyond the eyes. There may be a white patch on the chest, throat, chin, backs of the pasterns, and on the toes. *Disqualification: Any color with marking pattern as seen in black and tan breeds.*

Black- Black as with the other base colors in this breed will often present a brindling. Solid black with no white or brindling is considered rare. The white on a black dog (and other colors as well) is preferred when it is confined to places described in the standard. There should be no white on the muzzle. A black dog should have a darker eye. A rule of thumb in this breed is that the eye should be self coloring; the eye color match's the coat color. Dark coat, darker eye – light coat, lighter eye. It is important to note that the Cane Corso should never have the black and tan (or blue and tan) color pattern associated with the Rottweiler. Nor should he display these markings with brindle in lieu of solids

Red/Fawn- In actuality the dilute fawn is more common than red. Red/fawn Cane Corso's will have a black mask. The mask must never exceed the eyes, if so that is evidence of defilement from another breed. Sometimes in puppies this phenomenon is present, but fades over time. Younger reds and fawns will often have a blue or black saddle; this too will fade as the dog matures. The eye color once again matches the coat. One of the more interesting color patterns that the Cane Corso occurs in would be blue fawn, in Italy this color pattern is referred to as Formentino (slang for the color of fermented wheat) This is essentially a washed out or carbon colored fawn that will have a blue nose and mask. This is a unique color to the Corso and should be given full consideration. The Cane Corso should never have a red or violet colored nose. The color of the formentino's eye is light, it would almost appear clear.

Gray/Blue- This color comes in different shades that range from plumb, slate to light gray. They also have self coloring eyes, in some cases the eye is as dark as brown but generally is a shade of amber. As a dilute color, blue dogs will have a blue nose and toe nails. Blue puppies will usually have a blue eye; however that eventually darkens with age. Just as common if not more so would be blue brindle. Again the eyes are self coloring, as with all brindle dogs the eye will match the color of the brindle. Interestingly, in the European standard there is no reference to a blue dog. The color is described only as gray, and it is treated as a fully pigmented color with a black nose and toe nails. Funny thing happened to me on my way to Italy, I have yet to see a gray Cane Corso with pigmentation, either domestically or in Europe. While researching this article I could find no documentation that would support gray as a base color, only references to it in tandem with blue as a dilute of black.

Brindles- Brindle dogs may have a mask that is the color of the darkest part of the brindle. In a brindle dog it is less common to see brindling to the tip of the muzzle, but it does present itself. The opposite is true of a blue or gray brindle dog where it is common to see the brindling reach the tip of the muzzle. The eye, again, is self coloring matching the lightest shade of the brindle. This color pattern in Italy is sometimes affectionately referred to as "Tigrato" because of the spectrum of brindles can vary much like the big cat. It is said that no two tigers have the same pattern of striping, perhaps the same can be said for the Cane Corso.

I would be remiss if I didn't discuss coat in this treatment on color. The AKC standard states; Coat-The coat is short, stiff, shiny, adherent and dense with a light undercoat that becomes thicker in cold weather. The Cane Corso should not have a short coat like the boxer. His coat is somewhat longer, and in colder climates significantly heavier to protect him from the elements. The breed can present a light fringe on the thigh from beneath the tail to above the hock joint. In an interview I did with DR Paolo Breber in 2003 he described the breeds coat *"What I found interesting was the coat, this short but not very short coat, and this very thick hair almost like bristles. It was smooth along the body; it wouldn't stick out at an angle. The dog had this wooly undercoat in winter. This was obviously an adaptation to outdoor life. It wasn't this sort of fine velvety coat like a Boxer or Doberman"* The old-timers used to describe this coat as "cow hair" or "wire hair" The coat is not plush nor would you say soft to the touch. In blue dogs the coat tends to be less dense. While armed with a sturdy under coat the Cane Corso suffers the cold and is not equipped to live out doors unsheltered.

In conclusion; we have the Cane Corso that survived in antiquity in small pockets of the southern Italian hinterland. He was a jealously guarded secret held in the highest esteem, an intricate part of the socio-economic landscape of the meridone. The Cane Corso is unique in the fact that his beauty is expressed in so many beautiful shades, tones and colors. The breed is not limited to one ridged color pattern or limited to a couple of colors. However, the real beauty for me is that his variety was forged, molded in his indispensable aid of man. Proving that age old adage "form follows function" in the Case of the Cane Corso, beauty is more than just skin deep.