

BRECCIA BOWL

Egyptian, ca. 2900-2649 B.C.

Breccia

Height: 10.5 cm Diameter: 20 cm

Reference: 29111



This convex-sided, deep bowl with incurved, plain and thick rim carved from a single piece of breccia, is an example of a known type attributed to the Early Dynastic Period in Egypt. Breccia, the composite stone from which this bowl was made, is a material that was particularly popular since the Predynastic Period. Breccia was obtained in Upper Egypt, specifically in the sedimentary limestone deposits flanking the Nile Valley. Its structure contains large, angular fragments of white limestone in a matrix of iron-rich, reddish calcite, which produce a multicolored appearance that the early Egyptians prized; because of such a natural composition, this stone is especially difficult to work as the inclusions are often not well cemented in the matrix.

In Ancient Egypt the stone vases were considered as first rate luxury objects: they appear only in the royal tombs as well as in the graves of the elite. The art of vessel carving had already reached its peak as far back as the Old Kingdom: for example, the artisans working under the pharaoh Djoser can be credited with tens of thousands of vessels that were placed in the magazines of the step pyramid of Saqqara – we are referring to 30 – 40,000 vases of various shapes and materials, the majority of which were found broken. The creation of these objects is a frequent subject on Old Kingdom painted murals, but very few ancient workshops have been discovered. The iconography seems to indicate that the carving commenced with the sculpted exterior using copper tools, before piercing the interior with the help of the hard stone drill, a stick would forked at one end to hold an abrasive stone. To assure even and centered drilling with the most stability, the rotation was achieved by alternating the drill, from one direction to the other. These different steps were accomplished by placing the vase in a hole in the ground or on a worktable. The final polishing involved rubbing the surface with a hard stone, wet sand or emery. The art of the early Egyptian carvers was rarely surpassed in later periods, particularly in the making of similar hard stone vessels. This particular vessel was skillfully carved and the surface was polished to reveal most successfully the natural structure and the contrasting colors of the stone.

These stone vessels were used as containers in daily life; they also played a prominent role in the religious ceremonies (as offerings in the temples for frequent anointment of statues and other cult objects) and

the funerary rituals (for the preparation of the mummies). Therefore, it is not surprising that a significant number of stone vessels were regularly deposited in sanctuaries and funerary settings. On some occasions they were sent abroad as diplomatic gifts. Archaeological finds confirm that the Egyptian stone vases were desirable trade products in the Levant and Crete, where they have been also imitated in the local workshops. Many of them have been found inside the royal tombs and the treasury rooms of the palaces as high esteem and prestige goods.

PROVENANCE

Ex- Paul Walraf collection, prior to 1991.

Sotheby's New York, June 1991, Lot 13

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