

EGYPTIAN AMETHYST FIGURE OF THE GODDESS TAWERET

Egyptian , New Kingdom

Amethyst

H: 4.9 cm (1.9 in)

Reference: 35056



The relatively large size and beautiful natural hues of amethyst make this representation of the hippopotamus goddess Taweret an extremely attractive gem-stone sculpture. It was likely a piece of jewelry considering the dimensions and the presence of a loop at the back side and could be set as a central amulet of a necklace. Taweret ("the great [female] one" in Egyptian) is considered as one of the most important household deities. Along with the goddess Meskhenet, and the god Bes, she was called upon to protect women in childbirth and their infants. Her iconography combines human arms, sagging breasts and a protruding belly, which suggests pregnancy, with a female hippopotamus, lion's legs, and crocodile's tail. The larger figures represent Taweret standing and leaning on a magic knot, which symbolizes protection, and sometimes holding a torch to dispel darkness and to expel demons. She wears a tripartite wig; the rear portion of which extends down the body and to the ground gradually becoming a long tail.

The known amethyst figurines of animals (lion, hawk, monkey, hippopotamus, cat, also scarab and female sphinx) are shaped as sealstones or charms which have a loop for suspension. In this figurine the loop is flattened and received the same vertical incisions, which indicate the long parallel strands of the wig. The carving of the amethyst is both delicate and precise; especially skillful in the modeling is the naturalistic rendering of the head with its long and rounded muzzle, large round nostrils,

bulging eyes, and small pointed ears placed horizontally, all characteristic for a hippo's anatomy.

The representations of animals, both wild and domesticated, constitute a very significant part of the entire imagination in Egyptian art. Such images were closely related to the cults of deities, and figurines were often deposited at the temples and sanctuaries as votive offerings in hope of the gods' protection or to appease them. In daily life, several objects of diverse function (furniture attachments, vessels, palettes, scale weights, gaming pieces, and jewelry adornments) were skillfully shaped as animal figures. The variety of forms was equally accompanied by a wide choice of the materials: faience, wood, ivory, gold, bronze, and different stones and minerals. However, figurines made of amethyst as this present one are extremely rare. The Egyptian artisans attracted by amethyst's unique color started to employ it in the Pre- and Early Dynastic periods, but it was not until the Middle Kingdom when the use of that mineral became more popular. The amethyst mines were known to be in the rocks from the Eastern and Western Deserts of Egypt. As a mineral, amethyst has natural color layers of different intensity, and color zoning within a single amethyst crystal that could vary from a pale pinkish violet to a deep purple. The surviving examples of ancient Egyptian works in deep purple amethyst are very small in size, and these are mostly beads. At certain locations, amethyst grows as a second generation on older crystals of a colorless quartz, smoky quartz and rock crystal; such a combination of relatives from the same geological family is found in this carved figurine.

CONDITION

Excellent condition; complete despite natural cracks in the stone structure; some encrustations on the surface.

PROVENANCE

Ex- American private collection, acquired in New York, 2000.

EXHIBITED

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2000 – 2016 (L.2000.34.1)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

FAY B., *Egyptian Museum Berlin*, Mainz, 1990, p.6, no. 4.

NICHOLSON P.T., SHAW I., *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, Cambridge, 2000, p. 51.

ROBINS G., *Women in Ancient Egypt*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993, p. 63, fig. 19.

SALEH M., SOUROUZIAN H., *The Egyptian Museum Cairo: Official Catalogue*, Mainz am Rhein, 1987, no. 248.

WILKINSON R. H., *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, London, 2003, pp. 185-186.