

EGYPTIAN BRONZE STATUE OF AN IBIS

Egyptian, 3rd - 1st century B.C.

Bronze

L: 34 cm

Reference: 19309



Reference **19309**

Great attention has been paid to the accurate and skillful rendering of the anatomic details of the ibis. Incised decoration replicates the structure of the bill, the eyes and the feathers and skin of the legs. The long, curved beak is harmoniously in proportion to the body, which has been simplified and streamlined to the point where it is an exercise in pure form. The bone structure of the beak and the head are represented through carefully nuanced modeling. The graceful contours of the neck flow into the body, of which only the outlines of wings, modeled on the underside as a slight ridge, are visible. The stylized mass of tail feathers was made separately and then inserted into the body, creating an opening through which the hollowed inner chamber of the ibis could be accessed. One can see traces of solder at the join that was used to permanently attach the tail to the body, sealing the opening.

This last feature indicates that this ibis was not a mere statue but had a purpose in the funerary sphere: the body cavity would have held a mummified ibis, and the whole object would have been either dedicated at a temple or entombed with the owner as a way of invoking the favor of the god specific to the animal.

The practice of mummifying sacred animals and/or leaving bronze votive statuettes became quite popular during the Late Period, although the practice was known from earlier times. This was reflected by an increasing fascination and emphasis throughout the 1st millennium on Egyptian deities and their animal counterparts. Millions of votives, from very simple terracotta figures to the most elaborate gold and silver statues have been found throughout Egypt. The practice remained popular and continued under Roman rule.

Our bronze ibis coffin would probably have been dedicated at a temple to Thoth, Egyptian god of writing, magic and wisdom, whose sacred animal was the ibis, and who often appeared as a man with the head of an ibis. As the creator of mankind, Thoth was one of the most important gods in the Egyptian pantheon. His main sanctuary was located in Hermopolis, a city that was known for its wealth. Hermopolis benefited greatly from the rule of the Ptolemies, the Greek kings of

Egypt, who commissioned large building projects for the city, thus solidifying Hermopolis's identity as a luxurious resort town. A bronze such as our ibis would have undoubtedly been commissioned by a wealthy patron or king, who had access to the best workshops and quantities of good bronze. Our ibis is not only larger than the average ibis votives found, it is also of a higher level of artistic quality than those in many museum holdings: one of the closest parallels in terms of size and style is a Ptolemaic bronze ibis in the Brooklyn Museum (no. 49, 48).

CONDITION

A beautiful and large bronze statuette of a seated ibis. This figure was hollow cast in multiple parts – the body, the tail and the forelegs (now lost) – which were then soldered together. Two projecting tenons at the leg joints indicate that the ibis would have been mounted onto the top of a pedestal or box, probably also in bronze. The bronze is in very good condition with only two holes piercing the body cavity where their walls are at their thinnest. The surface is covered in an attractive

PROVENANCE

Ex-Bela Hein Collection, Paris, collected before 1931.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

ARNOLD, D., *An Egyptian Bestiary*, in Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin, New York, 1995.

ROBINS, G., *The Art of Ancient Egypt*, New Haven, 1998.

For other Late Period and Ptolemaic bronze ibis statuettes, see:

British Museum BM n. 64095 (1939, 0211.1)

Cleveland Museum of Art, no. 1940.667.