

EGYPTIAN FAIENCE ALABASTRON

Egyptian, Late 6th-4th century B.C.

Faience

H: 20.7 cm

Reference: 24905



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The form is classic: the body has a profile of an ogival curve and a rounded base (the vase does not stand on its own and does not have handles), with a small cylindrical neck and a broad circular mouth whose upper side is inclined toward the inside to avoid wasting the contents. Such an elegant, perfectly executed shape required no decoration; except for three incised lines (on the shoulder, lower mouth, and rim), nothing interrupts the flowing line of the elongated, slender profile.

The word now used to indicate the form of this vessel derives from the ancient Greek ????????? and refers to alabaster, the yellowish white-veined translucent stone of which many Egyptian examples have been found. In the ancient world, the alabastron was one of the main types of pottery intended for the transport and the storage of perfume and cosmetic oils used for personal hygiene. According to notes inscribed on some Hellenistic pieces, these vessels contained various materials of plant origin, such as extracts of myrrh, iris, cinnamon, cypress resin, etc. Made in Egypt according to some scholars and in Phoenicia according to others, these vessels were certainly spread via the Phoenician world to other parts of the Mediterranean, where they were adopted in the early centuries of the first millennium B.C. Alabastra existed in many formal versions with squat and low or elongated and thin body, with or without small handles, with flat or rounded base, with flat or splayed lip, etc. and in many materials (stone, glass, terracotta, gray or black bucchero, metal, etc.).

For the manufacture of this form, the use of faience is relatively rare, and even more rare are specimens made of frit. The closest parallel for the present vessel is one from the former Norbert Schimmel collection, a piece that is squatter in shape and lacks a circular rim. The Phoenix Gallery example can be dated to the early fifth century B.C. (during the Persian domination of Egypt) by a cartouche inscribed with the name of

Darius I (550-486 B.C.) in hieroglyphic signs located between the handles, which are modeled in the shape of lion protomes.

CONDITION

The vessel is complete and virtually intact: only a vertical crack is visible along the body. The matte porous surface is covered with a light grayish brown patina.

PROVENANCE

Acquired by M. Sleiman Aboutaam in London in 1981 and then in the family collection.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On alabastra:

ALGRAIN I., L'alabastre attique. Origine, forme et usage (Bruxelles (ULB Thesis), 2011), Chap. 1-2 (origin of the form).

BERMAN L. (ed.), Catalogue of Egyptian Art, The Cleveland Museum of Art, (Cleveland, 1999), p. 486, nos. 382-383 (made of alabaster).

CAUBET A. (ed.), Faïences de l'Antiquité. De l'Égypte à l'Iran (Paris, 2005), p. 129, nos. 344, 346-347 (faience examples coming from Naucratis or Rhodes).

PIERRAT-BONNEFOIS G., L'alabastre, un vase à parfum d'origine égyptienne? in Dossiers d'Archéologie 337 (Jan.-Feb. 2010), pp. 28-32.

The frit specimen from the ex-N. Schimmel collection:

SETTGAST J. (ed.), Von Troja bis Amarna, The Norbert Schimmel Collection (Berlin, 1978), no. 256.