

EGYPTIAN FAIENCE PLATE WITH LOTUSES

Egyptian, end of New Kingdom-Third Intermediate Period (late 2nd-early 1st millennium B.C.)

Faience

D: 15.5 cm

Reference: 23877



The form is surprisingly simple: the upper part is circular and flat, while the bottom is slightly rounded; the plate has no handles. The decoration, as essential as the shape, is limited to three flowers drawn in the shape of a calyx with pointed petals, of a type that Egyptologists call lotus; they are arranged in a triangle, with the largest lotus surmounted by two smaller ones, the three connected by an S-shaped stem. Black lines outline the edge of the plate, whose lower part is undecorated. Even though the form of this plate is not related to that of a cup, the general type and the painted motifs may be connected to a class of more or less deep bowls that are often designated Nun cups because of their color and decoration, which are reminiscent of the swampy banks of the Nile. (According to ancient Egyptian belief, Nun was the primordial oceanic abyss that generated all forms of life). Along with the lotus flower, a symbol of the sun and rebirth, another archetypal motif for this type of vessel was the tilapia (Nilotic carp), fish known to protect their eggs by carrying them in their mouth until the young hatch – as if the species would self-generate – a potent sign of rebirth and regeneration.

Attested especially in the early New Kingdom, Nun cups were sometimes included in the tomb furniture of middle- and upper-class graves, often in women's tombs, where they were placed directly in the sarcophagus. But most of these vessels, often fragmentary, were excavated in the sanctuaries of the goddess Hathor; elements deriving from Hathoric iconography are present in the painted motifs of many specimens.

The exact use of this group of faience cups and the practices to which they were linked remain unknown. Did they serve as libation cups, as plates for the lotus offering to the deity, or as a last sacrament given to a dying person? Their connection to rituals that were performed in the context of Hathoric and/or funerary cults seems certain, along with a meaning related to the ideas of birth and rebirth

Although the edge is partially chipped, the plate is complete and in good condition. The glaze retains its original luster and light blue color. The motifs were painted in black (with manganese oxide). In places the surface is covered with groups of small superficial holes.

PROVENANCE

Ex-Baron Empain (1852-1929) collection, Belgium.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On the subject in general:

STRAUSS E.-C., *Die Nunschale, Eine Gefäßgruppe des Neues Reiches*, (Munich, 1974).

Some parallels:

Ägyptens Aufstieg zur Weltmacht, (Mainz am Rhine, 1987), p. 169, no. 84.

BERMAN L. (ed.), *Catalogue of Egyptian Art, The Cleveland Museum of Art*, (Cleveland, 1999), pp. 278-281, nos. 200-101.

FRIEDMAN F.D. (ed.), *Gifts of the Nile: Ancient Egyptian Faience, exh. cat.*, Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (London, 1998), pp. 211-212, nos. 76-79.

ROEHRIG C.H. (ed.), *Hatshepsut, From the Queen to Pharaoh*, (New York, 2005), p. 176-180, n. 101-105.

CONDITION