

EGYPTIAN FAIENCE STATUETTE OF A HIPPOPOTAMUS

Egyptian, Middle Kingdom (Dynasty 11-13ca. 2040-1650 B.C.)

Faience

L: 20.3 cm

Reference: 17159



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The statuette was molded in faience, a combination of ground copper, lime, and quartz. When fired, the substance produced the glassy finish highly prized by the Egyptians. The color of the faience would vary, depending on the mixture of the main components. This lovely shade of blue-green is reminiscent of the waters of the Nile. The lotus buds and blooms that decorate the animal's skin recall their ubiquitous presence along the river; their black outlines are partially visible, especially when viewed against the light. The specific color arrangement on the pachyderm's body probably results from a problem that occurred during the firing process: the back of the animal is now grayish, while the abdomen and lower neck are blue and covered with a thick crust where the glaze has accumulated. A seemingly docile animal, the hippopotamus was an ever-present danger to the ancient Egyptians. It inhabited the swampy banks of the Nile and was capable of decimating crops and injuring people. Images of hippopotamuses, however, whether painted on tomb walls or crafted as amulets and statuettes, embodied both malevolent and benevolent forces. A female, for instance, frequently represented the goddess Taweret, patroness of childbirth, while a male was often regarded as a harmful presence associated with the god Seth.

During the Old Kingdom, pharaohs were expected to slay a hippopotamus, a symbol of chaos, possibly to help maintain order in the universe. By the Middle Kingdom, statuettes of hippos were included in private burials, perhaps to allow the deceased the chance to kill the animal, thereby increasing their chances of gaining entrance to the afterlife. The waters of the Nile, as well as the lotus plant that opened and closed daily with the rising and setting sun, were potent symbols of rebirth and regeneration. Perhaps the animal was adorned in this manner in a further effort to ward off evil and chaos, and to reinforce these themes, which were so central to Egyptian burial

practices.

PROVENANCE

Ex-Ben Heller collection, New York, 1978; ex-Bernard H. Friedman collection, New York – East Hampton, acquired from Charles Ratton, Paris.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Several parallels:

FAZZINI R. et al., *Art for Eternity : Masterworks from Ancient Egypt* (New York, 1999), p. 69.

FRIEDMAN F.D. (ed.), *Gifts of the Nile, Ancient Egyptian Faience*, exh. cat., Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence (London, 1998), p. 238, nos. 142-145.

SALEH M. et al., *Official Catalogue, The Egyptian Museum, Cairo*, (Mainz am Rhine, 1987), nos. 82-83.

On Thouéris:

BUNSON M., *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt* (New York, 1991), p. 257.

On the plants that adorn the animal:

BAUM N., *The Representation of Polygonum Senegalense Meisn.*, in *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 74 (1998), pp. 248-252.