

# EGYPTIAN FAIENCE STATUETTE OF A HIPPOPOTAMUS

Egyptian, ca. 2040-1650 B.C.)

Faience

L: 18 cm

Reference: 16043



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The animal, whose head was certainly directed forward, stands firmly on its short, squat legs. Enlivening the surface of its skin are vegetal patterns that imitate Nilotic plants lilies and papyrus here, while insects, frogs, or birds appear on other examples. The direction of movement is suggested by the arrangement of the legs (the animal is walking) and by the plant elements that seem to float on the skin, as if the hippopotamus were moving on the bottom of the river or preparing to leave the swamp, among the rich vegetation of a thicket. The potter's sharp sense of observation is also reflected in the extremely accurate and proportionate rendering of the body's volumes, which correspond closely to the anatomy of the species: rounded croup, delineated shoulders and thighs, bulging abdomen, thickness of the skin highlighted by rolls of fat, and small triangular tail. An animal both familiar and feared, the hippopotamus, which appears frequently and from earliest times in Egyptian iconography, caused extensive damage to agriculture in devastating the crops; because of its size and aggressiveness, it was dangerous for men and for navigation. Discovered mostly in undecorated tombs, these statuettes could be substitutes for painted scenes, according to some scholars: their origin, although often uncertain, usually indicates a date between the late First Intermediate Period and Dynasty 12. To the Egyptians, hippopotamuses had an ambivalent meaning: the male was generally associated with Seth, the god of evil, while the female, known as Hedjet, the white, had a positive image related to childbirth and infancy, which she protected in the form of Taweret, a fertility and mother goddess. Hunting hippopotamuses was also synonymous with achieving victory over evil and maintaining order in the universe.

## CONDITION

A charming example of a type of figurine found in many Middle Kingdom tombs, this hippopotamus strides forward on four legs. Rolls of fat hang from its neck, powerful jaws hint at the large teeth within, and great bulging eyes peer forward. Except for the ears, now lost, it is complete, but it has been partially reglued (the left foreleg, probably ancient, might come from another statuette). In this type of statuette, the legs of the animal were often broken, perhaps to paralyze the creature

## PROVENANCE

Ex- Lionel Edwards Esq. collection, London, prior to 1950; Sotheby's, London, July 24, 1950, lot 177;

Ex-Swiss private collection

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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