



Human figure modelled in wax

Not on display

Title/Description: Human figure modelled in wax

Born: 2000 c. BC

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wax

Measurements: h. 197 x w. 45 x d. 30 mm

Inscription: Hieroglyphics

Accession Number: 305

Historic Period: Dynasty 11 or 12 (Middle Kingdom), 21st century BC

Production Place: Africa, Egypt

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Simple-looking objects can be more significant than they at first appear. Modelled in wax, this human figure faces forward with its legs together and its arms tight to its sides. A vertical line of hieroglyphs, written in ink down its front, seems to give the name of a man named Intef, son of a woman named Nefru-Hor. Intef was a common name for men in the south of Egypt, between 2100 and 1600 BC, hence the suggested date of around 2000 BC for this enigmatic figure, which fits comfortably in a hand.

Traces of a hard, dark substance, probably a tree resin, suggest that the figure may once have been anointed with the resin-rich oils used in ancient Egyptian religious practices, often in conjunction with linen cloth. Linen wrapped and protected potent objects before they were shut away in containers (like boxes or pots), and sometimes buried.

As a natural substance that can be liquid or solid, and pressed into shape with the warmth of human hands, wax often appears in instructions associated with magic rituals. The magician - usually an Egyptian priest with special training - would mould a figure in wax while reciting the words of a ritual, for instance to protect a person or place, or help with healing. Magic was an everyday aspect of Egyptian medicine and religion. Although we don't know what kind of magic spell or ritual this wax figure took part in, it seems to have been aimed at Intef, the man named in the inscription. Let's hope it did the trick.

Further Reading

Steven Hooper, ed., Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol III, Pre-Columbian, Asian, Egyptian and European Antiquities (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), pp. 310-11 (cat. 232).

Christina Riggs, *Ancient Egyptian Magic: A Hands-On Guide* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2020)

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1956.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
