



Walking hippopotamus

On display

Title/Description: Walking hippopotamus

Born: 1880 c. BC

Object Type: Animal, Figure

Materials: Faience

Measurements: h. 90 x w. 184 x d. 70 mm

Accession Number: 306

Historic Period: Dynasty XII (c. 1880 BC), 18th century BC

Production Place: Africa, Egypt

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Hippopotamus figurines of this kind are peculiar to Middle Kingdom burials where they may have served as amulets to protect the tomb or assist the rebirth of the deceased. The apotropaic function, to avert danger, may be connected to the fact that the hippopotamus in its natural state was a hazard to the early inhabitants of the Nile Valley, destroying crops and trampling fields.

Bothmer (1951), in describing a comparable example in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, discussed the religious significance of the animal, and referred to the absence of depictions of hippopotamus hunting in the Middle Kingdom — the period of these tomb statuettes — whereas they occur both before and after this period. He also noted that extant figurines are presented in one of four poses: standing, walking (as here), recumbent or sitting back on its haunches.

The plastic qualities of this sculpture owe much to the fact that it was modelled, not carved. Egyptian faience is a paste composition of granular quartz, fused with alkali and coloured with a blue-green copper compound, or, in the case of the black and red, with oxide of iron. Objects could be modelled or mould-made, with additional tooling in the case of sculpture. In the case of vessels, they could be thrown on the wheel.

This example (illustrated in Aldred, 1961: pl. 28) is decorated with the usual Nilotic flora, *Nymphaea caerulea* (blue lotus), *Nymphaea lotus* (white lotus) and *Potamogeton lucens* (pondweed), characteristic of the marsh areas the animal once inhabited. The designs were originally drawn under the apple-green glaze in manganese-brown line, but, owing to the loss of glaze colour, except on the forepart of the right side, it is impossible to recover the pattern completely. Apart from the faded colour and some abrasions, the condition is good.

Cyril Aldred & Geoffrey T. Martin, 1997

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997.)

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of Lionel Edwards.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from Sotheby's auction in 1950, lot 177.

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

