



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.)

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

If visitors to the Sainsbury Centre mistake the smooth curves of this figure for well-polished stone, I always assure them that its ancient Egyptian makers would have been pleased. Its round body, squat legs and powerful head were in fact mould-made from a paste containing ground quartz and a copper-rich glaze. Next, the artist used a thin, white glaze (based on manganese) to draw water lilies up the sides of the hippopotamus and add details to its eyes and snout. The figure was then fired in a kiln, like pottery. Intense heat brought the copper glaze to the surface, fusing into a shiny green with the drawings, which the kiln turned black. In English, this material is known as faience, after the Italian city of Faenza where majolica ware was produced. But in ancient Egypt, it was called *tjehenet* - 'dazzling brightness' - the same word used for rare stones such as turquoise and lapis lazuli.

Alone in its display case on one of the sightlines that criss-cross the Living Area gallery, the figure

represents a hippopotamus striding forward on its left foot - a convention used throughout Egyptian art. The hippopotamus was a threatening animal, dangerous to crop fields and river transport. Representing it in faience and placing it in a tomb magically corralled its power for the benefit of the dead. The effects of time and, perhaps, a damp burial environment have worn away some of the figure's colour and lustre. It still dazzles, none the less.

—

Christina Riggs, Professor, Durham University

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.
