



Attachment for a sacred boat (Mut), in bronze with glass and gilding

On display

Title/Description: Attachment for a sacred boat (Mut), in bronze with glass and gilding

Born: 0700 c. BC

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Bronze, Enamel, Gold

Measurements: h. 112 x w. 100 x d. 130 mm

Accession Number: 319

Historic Period: Third Intermediate Period or Dynasty 25 / Late Period

Production Place: Africa, Egypt

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

In ancient Egypt beliefs, the gods travelled by boat on heavenly rivers that resembled the Nile. In temples up and down the country, small statues made in precious materials represented the gods on earth, kept in the innermost rooms of temples where priests offered them prayers, fine textiles, sweet incense, and food and drink. Those statues travelled by boat as well, with the priests' help. During religious festivals, they carried sacred boats on their shoulders in procession, and each boat held a shrine in which a god's statue - wrapped in floral wreaths and linen robes - could safely make an appearance to the townspeople who gathered along the parade route.

This attachment, representing the goddess Mut, is all that remains of one of those sacred boats. Made of hollow-cast bronze, it probably slotted into the front part of a wooden boat (the prow), by means of a channel on the underside. All the incised details visible in this small sculpture - the hair texture, a vulture that covers part of Mut's head, and the lines of a bead-and-flower collar on her chest - were first modelled in wax to create a mould into which metalworkers poured a molten mixture of copper and tin. Pieces of white and black glass were set into the bronze to make the lifelike eyes, set off by blue-glass rims that look like eyeliner. On top of her head, Mut wears a circlet of eighteen cobras, their hoods flared and ready to strike. These were protective symbols; the cobras spat flames at any evil force that might approach a god or goddess, king or queen.

The gods and goddesses of Egypt had gold skin, which is why traces of gilding remain on the sides of the neck, ears, and around the eyes and eyebrows of Mut's face. In its original condition, the entire face and the cobras had gold applied over a surface of textile held in place with a thin layer of plaster (gesso). Mut was the partner of the creator-god Amun, and their chief centre of worship was at ancient Thebes, modern Luxor. Mut was a powerful goddess in her own right, associated with the female role in creation and with motherhood.

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. 330-31 (cat. 253).

Marsha Hill, Gifts for the Gods: Images from Egyptian Temples (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007)

Provenance

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1960.

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