



Isis with infant Horus figure (fake), in steatite

Not on display

Title/Description: Isis with infant Horus figure (fake), in steatite

Born: 1960 - 1970

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Steatite

Measurements: h.148 x w. 82 x d. 85 mm

Accession Number: 604

Production Place: Africa, Egypt

Credit Line: Purchased with support from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1975

A mother cradling her baby to her breast is one of the most familiar images in Christian art. When the Sainsbury family purchased this small sculpture in 1975, however, it was considered to represent the Egyptian goddess Isis nursing her son Horus. The most important goddess in ancient Egyptian religion, Isis was a powerful figure of motherhood, magic, and protection. The worship of Isis spread from Egypt to the Aegean islands in the 7th century BC, eventually becoming a major religion in the Roman Empire. Many representations of Isis from Hellenistic and Roman times show her more or less as she appears here, in flowing robes (usually knotted on her chest) and 'corkscrew' curls that fall in fat locks over her shoulders.

But not all works of art are what they appear to be. This piece, carved in a soft stone called steatite, is almost certainly a forgery created in the late 1960s or early 1970s. Several quirks of the carving indicate the sculptor's uncertainty over what, exactly, he was meant to depict. The forger probably worked from a photograph that showed only the front of a sculpture used as a model for this piece.

Alternatively, the model might have been one of the many terracotta figures of Isis and the infant Horus, which were made by pressing clay into moulds and had little or no details on the back. Therefore, on the Sainsbury piece, the goddess's throne follows the curve of her back and buttocks, leaving empty space underneath when it should have had a solid base and four legs. The decoration on the back of the throne is also indistinct, as if the forger had a general idea of what might appear on an ancient sculpture (two deities with snake-like bodies, on some examples) but no precise model to follow when carving this piece.

The condition of this sculpture also raises doubts. The back corners of the throne are broken away, something is missing or knocked off at the front of the goddess's forehead, the child has lost his left arm, and all the edges are bashed. It is difficult to imagine how the piece could sustain this much damage without the goddess's head, hair, and robes also showing its effects. In fact, the cutting of the goddess's toes seems to continue over the dented edges at the base, which would not happen if the damage occurred long after the carving.

The common name for steatite is soapstone, because it is so easily carved and scratched. In ancient Egypt, it was fired in kilns with a glaze to make it hard. Only in modern times has it been used to make statues, which are sold as replicas for the tourist market but have also been sold as if they were genuine antiquities.

In the 1960s, dozens of limestone sculptures purporting to show Roman and early Christian themes flooded the European and American art market. They were said to come from a village in Egypt called Sheikh Ibada, and a number of museums, especially in Germany and Brooklyn, New York, bought them. At that time, several books and exhibitions explored possible links between ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Roman art - such as Isis nursing Horus - and early Christian imagery, known in Egypt as Coptic art. The Sheikh Ibada sculptures have since been recognized as fake; some were created by carving new surfaces over eroded originals to make them more attractive to buyers - and more expensive. The visibility of those forgeries in the 1960s and early 1970s may have inspired the creation of this steatite sculpture and certainly added to its appeal. A mother cradling her baby is a familiar theme, in life as in art. Unfortunately, so is forgery.

Christina Riggs, August 2021

Provenance

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia from Peter Sharrer in 1975 as Roman Period, first century AD out of funds provided by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury.
