



Fragment from the handle of a musician's rattle, in faience

Not on display

Title/Description: Fragment from the handle of a musician's rattle, in faience

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Faience

Measurements: h. 83 x w. 70 x d. 40 mm

Accession Number: 904

Historic Period: Dynasty XXVI (c. 650 BC)

Production Place: Africa, Egypt

Credit Line: Purchased with support of the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust, 1985

Sesh-esh-et, sesh-esh-et, sesh-esh-et. It may look like a tongue-twister, but these rhythmic syllables approximate how the ancient Egyptian word for this object sounded – which in turn approximated the sound the object made. With the face of the goddess Hathor on either side, this fragment is part of a musician's rattle known as a *sistrum*, a Latin word derived from the Greek verb 'to shake'. In its complete form, the rattle had a cylinder-shaped handle (extending from below the goddess's beaded collar), which women musicians held in one hand and shook, gently rattling the beads that would have been strung on metal wires or cross-bars in the lost, upper part of the *sistrum*.

More complete examples of similar rattles suggest that on top of the goddess's head was a rectangular doorway, as if to a temple or shrine [1]. The empty space inside the doorway accommodated the instruments' jingling, beaded wires, with a rearing cobra at the threshold of the doorway for protection. On the Sainsbury fragment, cobras appear either side of the goddess's head, each framed by a sun disk.

The goddess Hathor was a daughter of the sun-god Re. She was associated with women, music, love, sex, and death, making it especially appropriate for her face to form part of a musical instrument. In religious rites, women musicians or priestesses shook the *sistrum* – in Egyptian, the *sesheshet* – to calm and soothe goddesses like Hathor. The face of the goddess has delicately fluted ears like a cow, which was her sacred animal. A thick bundle of hair, gathered with ribbons, frames her head and neck and echoes the curve of the beaded collar that covers her chest.

The striking blue-green material used to make this rattle, and similar examples, is known as faience and was a specialty of ancient Egyptian craftsmanship. Consisting of crushed quartz, plant ash, and copper-based glazing materials, it was pressed into moulds to make crisply detailed objects, from amulets and jewellery, to tableware and small sculptures. Fired in a kiln, like pottery, the glazing material formed a glossy blue-green surface that ancient Egyptians likened to stones like turquoise and lapis. Even with some of the bright blue surface chipped or discoloured in places, the rich colour and fine finish of this *sistrum* fragment does justice to a goddess whose beauty was unsurpassed.

Christina Riggs, August 2021

[1] The following are closely comparable pieces:

<https://art.thewalters.org/detail/18835/naos-sistrum/>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/549513>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/552831>

<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/550961>

<https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/354559> [extremely similar to SCVA piece, sold through Charles Kelekian, New York, 1970s]

Further Reading

Carolyn Graves-Brown, *Dancing for Hathor: Women in Ancient Egypt*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010.

Steven Hooper, ed. 1997. *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol III, Pre-Columbian, Asian, Egyptian and European Antiquities*. New Haven: Yale University Press, p. 332 (cat. 254).

Lise Manniche, 'Sistrum' in Donald Redford, ed., *Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001 (online edition).

Provenance

Purchased by Peter Sharrer at Sotheby's, London in 1984.

Purchased by the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia on the advice of Robert Sainsbury from Peter Sharrer in 1985 out of funds provided by the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Art Trust.
