

Archaeology of Ancient Egypt — *A Virtual Exhibition of Ancient Egyptian Jewelry & Cosmetics*

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Make Me in Kohl and Gold

To adorn oneself is to make a statement of oneself. For ancient Egyptians, jewelry and cosmetics modeled the mundane as ritualistic. Religion was an essential component of every day life for Egyptians. The extravagant events of Egyptian kings and queens remain one of the most alluring aspects of ancient Egyptian culture, but often overlooked is how ritualism was embedded within every facet of their daily lives (Shaw, 2012: 74). Through analyzing jewelry and cosmetics, one can appreciate a deeper understanding of a robust culture.

An important feature of ancient Egyptian adornment is its popularity among both women and men. Jewelry worn by women and men ranged from collars and earrings to anklets and girdles (Aldred, 1971: 14). In a society often recognized for bequeathing power to men, it is noteworthy that precious resources were not reserved solely for men. In fact, some items of adornment were made specifically for women. Women were perceived as having the ability to connect with gods and goddesses through aspects of rebirth.

Ancient Egyptians perceived jewelry to be of great importance. Burial tombs would include as many jewelry goods as possible (Aldred, 1971:14). Individuals with less resources would secure even the scantest of items for their tombs. A more simple item, for example, would be a string with a few beads (Aldred, 1971:14). Jewelry went beyond aesthetics as it served as a way for Egyptians to protect themselves. Amulets were worn in order to keep unknown threats away from an individual, and charms were tied to more vulnerable parts of the body, like wrists and waists (Aldred, 1971: 15). This

occurrence will be addressed in catalog entries four and five.

Ancient Egyptians regarded choice of material for jewelry and cosmetics as significant (this is further discussed in catalog five). Gold was thought to be the flesh of gods as it is a marvelous and malleable material. Gold can be relatively easily worked and reconstructed into shimmering new forms (Aldred, 1971: 15). Egyptians valued resiliency which is why materials such as gold pervaded throughout their lives. Kohl is another material found throughout ancient Egyptian culture. Kohl provided various beneficial properties such as, deterring flies, working as a disinfectant, and protecting eyes from the sun and eye disease (Alchin, 2015: 1). In addition, kohl was used on infants for health and protection from evil eye (Alchin, 2015:1). Ancient Egyptians also applied eye make up for religious and other traditional purposes. Green eye make up was believed to call upon Horus, god of sky and protection (Alchin, 2015:1). Wearing jewelry and applying cosmetics were a way for Egyptians to draw strength and endure in the afterlife.

Everyday use of jewelry and cosmetics was a way for ancient Egyptians to wholeheartedly incorporate their belief system into every fashion of their lives. The rich depth of thought placed into every feature of ancient Egyptian life including power bestowed upon inanimate objects, quite possibly, may be unparalleled by any other ancient civilization.

Archaeology Ancient Egypt: Catalog Entry 1
Menyet amulet of beads

Date: XVIII Dynasty

Material(s): Bronze, faience, stone, and glass

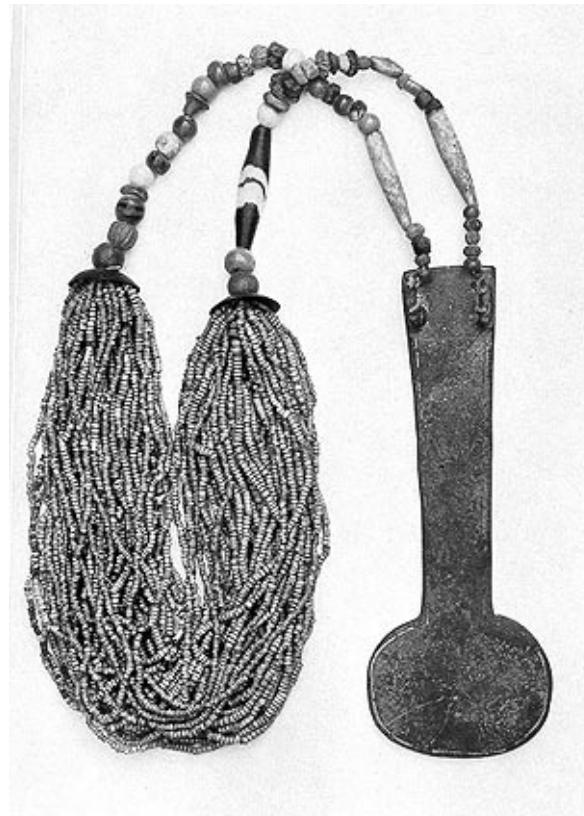
Dimensions: Length: 14.5 cm.

Provenance: Palace of Amehotep III, Malkata, Western Thebes (or Western Luxor), Egypt

On loan from The Metropolitan Museum, New York

This menyet piece was excavated in the palace ruins of Amenophis III. It is an object used, worn, or carried by Queens and other women of significant roles when officiating as priestesses (Aldred, 1971: 227). The menyet is specifically associated with Hathor the goddess. Priestesses represented the goddess when holding the emblem (Aldred, 1971: 227). Men have also been noted to have worn or carried the menyet, but this was much less common (Aldred, 1971: 227). The emphasis on women being associated with this piece supports the idea that officiating was not reserved for men. Moreover, mensets were used by women other than the queen. One may perceive that priestesses carried out a plethora of imperative administrative and religious tasks since mensets were a commonly found associated with women throughout ancient Egyptian history.

The style of the menyet changed over time. Initially the necklace was comprised of small beads on numerous strands. The beaded strands were then caught into two



strings of heavier beads to serve as a counter weight (Aldred, 1971: 227). Statues of earlier periods of ancient Egypt depict the menyet worn in this fashion. However, by the beginning of the New Kingdom menyets were combined into one weight where two counterpoises were seamed together (Adred, 1971: 227). Analyzing the intricate production of menyets, in terms of form and function, helps to convey how ancient Egyptians used varying materials to deepen their relationship with their belief system.

Officials were a vital component of Egyptian society. Menyets represented status and power. Looking at the menyet one can see how it reflects the sociopolitical hierarchy of Egyptian society. For example, some officials of Amenhotep III would be trusted and expected to care for temples. Priestesses ceremoniously carried out daily duties in a meaningful manner and treated each act with great respect and dignity — much like the artist who carefully crafted each menyet. This artifact not only shows how ancient Egyptians used symbolism in objects and jewelry to signify an important event, including their connection to goddesses and gods, but also expresses how objects evolved in style over time.

Archaeology Ancient Egypt: Catalog Entry 2
Statuette of a Nubian Woman with Attendant Apes Wearing Nose-Rings

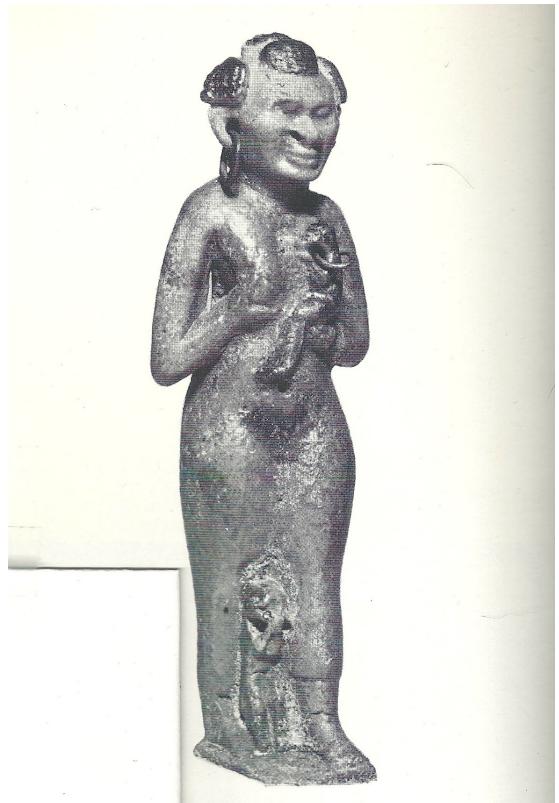
Date: XXV Dynasty

Materials: Blue and black faience

Dimensions: Height: 14.6 cm.

Provenance: Not known

In The Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh



The first cataract of Egypt established in late predynastic times served as a political boundary. The nome South of Gebel el-Silsila housed two main towns which were Aswan and Kom Ombo. The area recognized as a separate region was referred to and recorded as Nubia (Baines & Malek, 2000: 20). This statuette expresses dress attire and jewelry, in addition to the demographic and political culture of this time. Egyptians were not known to wear nose-rings as often as the Cypriots and the Hebrews; however, there was at least one account of a woman excavated to be known wearing a nose-ring at an Abydos site (Adred, 1971: 242). The woman found at Abydos may have been from a foreign origin such as Nubia since Nubians were more frequently known to have worn nose-rings (Adred, 1971:242). With Nubia being in such close proximity to important regions of ancient Egypt, one can see how the likelihood of cultures blending with each other came to be.

The statuette depicts a godling being metamorphosed into the goddess Bast while nursing Bes, a demi-god, and kittens. The Nubian woman is recognized as Nubian origin through the detail of her hair being in bunches of curls (Adred, 1971: 242). It is noteworthy to recognize that jewelry has the potential to tell a story, portray a setting and reveal characters. In the case of the *Statuette of a Nubian Woman with Attendant Apes Wearing Nose-Rings*, the artist may have created characteristics particular to Nubian peoples in order to distinguish their population from other populations. When a numerous occurrence of a specific type of jewelry is found to be worn by a particular group of individuals, one may be capable of identifying a subculture of peoples within a greater community. Just as jewelry worn by royal and elite individuals have been known to express which activities were of great importance in a particular society, simple details found in distinguishable pieces like a nose-ring can display how Nubians desired to make their appearance distinct from others. One may also find a higher occurrence in individuals wearing symbolic jewelry at border towns for the very reason of separating themselves from other groups of people. Individuals who migrate to border towns for access to more resources may also decide to wear distinctive jewelry to portray and take pride in their cultural origins.

Archaeology Ancient Egypt: Catalog
Entry 3

***Women with Collars, Detail of a
Relief of Nefer-Seshem-Psmtik***

Date: XXX Dynasty, fourth century BC

Materials: Lintel and limestone

Dimensions: Length: 30 cm., Height: 30 cm.

Provenance: Carved in a low relief,
from the tomb of Neferseshem-
Psamtik at Memphis

In The Cairo Museum, Egypt



The scene on this door lintel relief reveals two women bringing collars to the owner of the tomb (Aldred, 1971: 243). The inscription portrays a ceremonious act (Aldred, 1971: 243). This piece is unique because there are a variety of outmoded elements expressed. For example, both women are wearing garments historically worn by men. In addition, their facial features are rendered in Amarna style where lips, chins and necks are emphasized (Adred, 1971: 243). The jewelry is also outdated. The menkhet counterpoise, broad collar with tie-strings, and collar necklace with sweret bead, stylistically, are attributed to the Middle Kingdom (Aldred, 1971: 243). All of which raises questions — why did the artist convey a scene contrary to contemporary time?

Memphis has often been referred to as the only "real" city of its time. The king and elites, along with their burial sites, resided here. The center of government was established in Memphis as well (Snape, 2014: 20-21). Rather than limiting the tomb scene to a more typical rendition of its time period, perhaps the artist wished to display

the greatness of Memphis and Egyptian culture through depicting a more encompassing portrayal of Egyptian life. This may also explain why the artist included a woman with Nubian features, as she is distinguishable on the left (Aldred, 1971: 243).

The jewelry stands out in this relief with its central location in the scene. The enlarged collar necklaces and floating pieces draw the eye into the center which may express the importance and value of jewelry in Egyptian society. In addition, the women seem to be interacting with each other while holding the jewelry as they are making their offering. Jewelry is posed as a communicative object. Since inscription denotes an offering to the tomb-owner, one may view jewelry as a necessary item to be included in ones tomb. Offerings often consisted of objects the deceased needed in order to go on into the afterlife. Both religion and aesthetics play a large role in ancient Egyptian society.

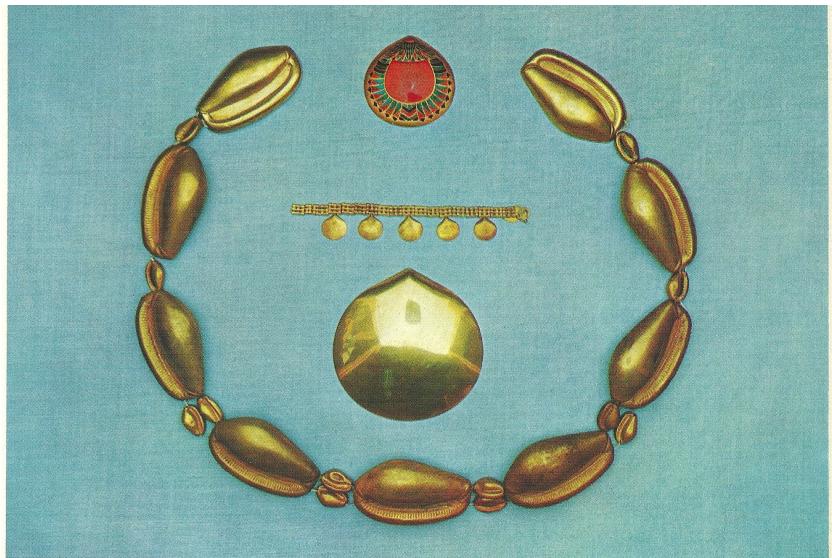
Archaeology Ancient Egypt:
Catalog Entry 4
***Girdle and Shell Pectorals of
Queen Mereret***

Date: XII Dynasty

Materials: Gold

Dimensions: Length (of each shell) 5.7 cm. (9 shells)

Provenance: Near the brick pyramid of Sesostris III at Dahshur



In The Cairo Museum, Egypt

During the XII Dynasty women of the royal house wore girdles similar to this piece (Alder, 1971: 196). Here we have representation of how the Queen and other women used jewelry functionally as well as for embellishment. Queens and ancient Egyptian women, in general, wore jewelry for a greater purpose as well. The exactness and extra details in this piece are showcased by the cowrie shell clasp (Alder, 1971: 196). Because ancient Egyptians carried out numerous daily activities in a ritualistic manner, branding jewelry as solely a religious piece can prove to be difficult. Even mundane daily actions of kings, queens and court societies displayed some element of formality. For example, a king would spend a fair amount of time properly dressing and grooming. Shaving daily was a symbol of status (Shaw, 2012: 74).

The settlement, Dashur, provided residence for individuals working on pyramid sites (Snape, 2014: 178). Analysis of jewelry can reveal which materials were made available to create such objects. Comparing raw materials found at different sites helps

to understand differing regions. For example, the deserts of Egypt and Nubia had large amounts of gold deposits (Alder, 1971: 70). Gold items, such as this girdle, can be used to trace trade and transportation of raw materials. Gold found its way into many symbolic items.

Gold or jewelry worn around the waist was used to protect women during pregnancy (as shown in catalog five). Design and material are often studied to understand hierachal systems. Since the girdle shown here is made of gold and intricately executed, one may believe an object such as this would be owned by the queen or women of the royal house.

Archaeology Ancient Egypt: Catalog Entry 5
Black Steatite Statuette of a Girl Holding a Kohl Pot

Date: XII Dynasty (approximately 1963-1787 BC)

Materials: Black steatite

Dimensions: Height: 7.8 cm

Provenance: Thebes, Egypt (*vessels similar to this piece have been found at Lish in the twelfth dynasty)



This statuette exhibits a young girl holding a pot while in squatting position (British Museum Organization, 2013:1). There is sign of wear on the pot which conveys the use of this piece as a kohl pot (British Museum Organization, 2013: 1). She has a fish pendant hanging from the back of her hair, and she is wearing a girdle with a cowrie shell design (British Museum Organization, 2013:1). The structure of the cowrie shell, shown with an indented lip that is slightly closed but not completely shut, alludes to having the ability to ward off evil eye (Alder, 1971: 16). Other objects similar to this piece are found in Lish, in the twelfth dynasty (British Museum Organization, 2013:1). The fact that kohl pots have been discovered in other capital cities expresses that individuals from various areas of Egypt were known to wear this type of cosmetic.

Ancient Egyptian cosmetics which include eye paint, oils and face-paints were used in some of the earliest time periods (Lucas & Harris, 2012: 80). Malachite and galena were the most common types of eye-paints. Malachite is a green ore of copper. Galena is a dark ore of lead. Both materials have been found to stain items in graves.

Through analyzing residue left on an object, one may be able to determine a time frame in which the object was being used. Whereas malachite has been known to be used predominantly in the predynastic periods until around the nineteenth dynasty, the use of galena has been known to occur after the predynastic periods and well into the Coptic period (Lucas & Harris, 2012: 80). Artifacts such as this can reveal more than just a time period, but the culture of an ancient civilization as well.

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