

NESKHONSOU IPOUY AND HIS WIFE TAKHARYT

EGYPTIAN, 2ND INTERMEDIATE PERIOD,
17TH DYNASTY, 17TH-16TH CENTURY BC
GRANODIORITE

HEIGHT: 33 CM.

WIDTH: 23 CM.

DEPTH: 14 CM.

PROVENANCE:

*FORMER BRITISH COLLECTION OF LADY
V.S. MEUX (1852-1910), THEOBALD'S
PARK, HERTFORDSHIRE.
SOLD WITH THE COLLECTION IN 1911.
ON VIEW AT THE YVONNE MOREAU-
GOBARD GALLERY IN 1977. FORMER
FRENCH PRIVATE COLLECTION OF
MR. GUY DELBÈS (1928-2019)
SINCE THE 1980S.*



This granodiorite sculpture represents a couple holding hands. The figures are leaning against a slab that hides their back. Their portrayal respects the canons of Egyptian art: the woman, on the left, is slightly smaller than her partner and they are shown strictly forward facing, heads high, feet side by side. The couple is hand in hand at the centre of the sculpture, while their other arms lie flat along their sides in perfect symmetry. This sculpture is thus known as a dyad, a couple of interacting subjects. There is a harmony conveyed by their position as well as their faces and hairstyles, which are nearly identical. They are both wearing smooth wigs, which cover their shoulders and frame their round faces, the features of which are now faded. The canons of their bodies are also similar: large hands and feet, and curvy figures with high, pronounced waists. The woman is clothed in a sheath dress, which clings to the curves of her body and is etched with a seam that goes from the point of the V neck to her ankles. The man is bare chested and dressed in a long loincloth tied under his chest and falling to his calves, a garment traditionally worn by the officials of the Middle Kingdom. Of a rigid appearance, it was probably starched to keep its triangular shape. Our figures are sculpted in fine grained dark grey granodiorite that is



flecked and strewn with larger white veins. This volcanic Egyptian stone, which is very hard to work with, gives the sculpture a characteristic stiffness. The shapes of their bodies hardly stand out from the dorsal pillar, but they are highlighted by a deep outline. Despite the few details, the sculptor took care to represent each finger and toe, the features of their faces and their clothes. This work emanates a sobriety that is almost geometric, in both its composition and detail.



Given its style, this sculpture dates back to the 2nd Intermediate Period, and more specifically, the 17th Dynasty. The 2nd Intermediate Period was a time of great instability in pharaonic Egypt. The Hyksos then dominated Lower Egypt, in the Nile Delta, and the country was divided. The 17th Dynasty reigned over the region of Thebes

and Upper Egypt at the end of the period, but its sovereigns then managed to reunify the country and thus inaugurate the New Kingdom. Those political struggles impacted art production in Egypt, leading to smaller, rather standardised private sculptures. Moreover, artists took more liberties in their artistic choices by distancing themselves from classical canons and reinterpreting the styles of previous dynasties.



Our dyad fits perfectly within that artistic context. There were already dyads of private individuals leaning against wide dorsal pillars at the end of the Middle Kingdom, like the anonymous sculpture conserved in London (ill. 1). The sculpture of the wab priest Sahi and his wife, conserved at the Egyptian Museum in Turin (ill. 2), is not quite as old and dates back to the 2nd

Intermediate Period. Sculpted in granodiorite like our sculpture, the figures are in the same position, holding hands at the centre of the composition and with their forms almost melding into the dorsal pillar. The man's garb is different as he is wearing a short loincloth and has no wig. Another statue conserved in Elephantine (ill. 3) and dated to the beginning of the 2nd Intermediate Period again has a very similar composition with the characteristic handholding gesture. In the Boston example conserved (ill. 4), dated to the 17th Dynasty like our sculpture, the dorsal pillar is very large, encompassing the heads of the figures, and hieroglyphs are placed on the front of the stele. The sculpture of Neskhouso Ipouy and his wife Takharyt is thus in line with the private statuary of the end of the Middle Kingdom and the 2nd Intermediate Period. It is a particularly complete and well conserved example.



Our sculpture is engraved with fine hieroglyphs, which are difficult to read, at the feet of both figures, as well as larger, more ornate characters on the back of the dorsal pillar (ill.5).

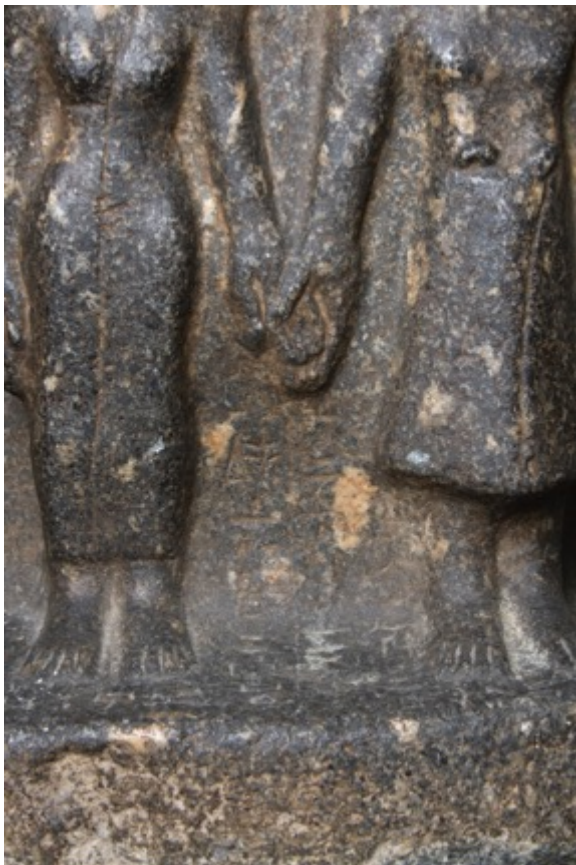
It can be translated as follows:

1. *May the king make an offering to Amun, Mut, Khonsu and Ptah, lord of Upper Egypt*
2. *so that they make an invocatory offering [of] bread, beer, cattle, poultry, fresh water, incense and all good and pure things on which a god lives*
3. *for the ka of the favourite of all the masters of Thebes Osiris Neskhouso Ipouy, justified*
4. *[and for] his wife, the mistress of the house and singer of Amun, Takharyt, justified.*

This precious inscription gives us the name and status of each dead person represented, Neskhouso Ipouy and Takharyt. Both occupied an important rank in Thebes, from which the sculpture very likely originated. Neskhouso Ipouy was certainly a high official to a sovereign of the 17th Dynasty, as he is described as the “favourite of all the masters of Thebes”. His wife was a singer of Amun, an important sacerdotal function in the Theban cult of Amun, performed by noble women.

These private statues had a funerary purpose. Placed in tombs, they could be found in mortuary chapels, accessible to funerary priests, or deposited right next to the sarcophagus. These statues were considered living images containing the ka of the dead – their soul – and were worshipped to enable them to live in the afterlife. Before the funeral, the “Opening of the Mouth”

ceremony was performed on the statue by a priest to magically endow it with the vital senses enabling it to receive offerings such as food and incense, which the deceased person would consume. These sculptures were not intended to be seen, as only the priest in charge of the cult of the dead had access to them. They were not portraits as such, but rather ageless images, in accordance with traditional canons elaborated at the beginning of the pharaonic period. This explains the limited repertory of attitudes, as movement was banned. The deceased, in their contained expressions, were sublimated for eternity.



This sculpture was part of the famous Lady Meux's Egyptology collection. Valerie Susan Meux, née Langdon, was a socialite who lived in England during the Victorian era. Born in Devon in 1852, she claimed to have

been an actress, but worked mostly as a barmaid and banjo player at the 'Casino de Venise' in Holborn, London. There, she met Sir Henry Meux, third baronet and rich heir at the head of one of the largest breweries in the country. They married in 1878, to the great dismay of the Meux family and the whole of the London elite, who saw in her only a common banjo player and never accepted her. A scandalous and eccentric figure, she was known for personally driving her zebra drawn carriage. Her husband commissioned the painter Whistler to carry out three portraits of Lady Meux, one of which is famous, now conserved at the Frick Collection (ill. 6). Lady Valerie and Sir Henry Meux lived at Theobald's Park, their luxurious residence in Hertfordshire.



Lady Meux, who was fascinated by Egyptology, accumulated a sizeable

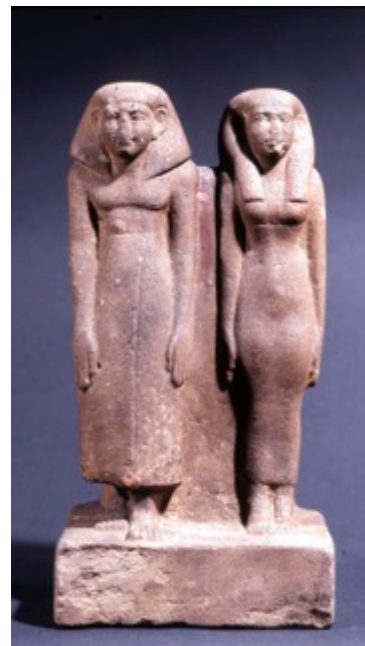
collection of more than 1,700 pieces. The Egyptologist Wallis Budge published a catalogue of them in 1896 (ill. 7). She wished to bequeath her collection to the British Museum, but due to her scandalous reputation, the institution declined, and upon her death in 1910, the collection was sold and scattered. Our sculpture would then have been sold in Amsterdam in 1923, then in Paris, at the Yvonne Moreau Gobard gallery in 1977, before being acquired by Guy Delbès (1928- 2019). A Syria born Frenchman, he was a diplomat, working for the French ambassador to Morocco, for instance, and managed oil companies in the Middle East.



As an orientalist and Arabic speaker with a passion for history, he was also an associate member of the Société Asiatique (Asiatic Society) and the Académie des Sciences d'Outre- Mer (Academy for Overseas

Sciences), as well as the author of a book on the recent history of the Near East entitled *Minorités mystérieuses d'Orient* ("Mysterious Minorities of the Orient"). He had a gorgeous collection of Egyptian works in his house in Lot-et-Garonne, this sculpture being one of the highlights.

Comparatives:



Ill. 1. Statue of a Couple, Egyptian, Middle Kingdom, 12th - 13th Dynasty, red quartzite, H.: 31 cm. British Museum, London, inv. no. EA66835.

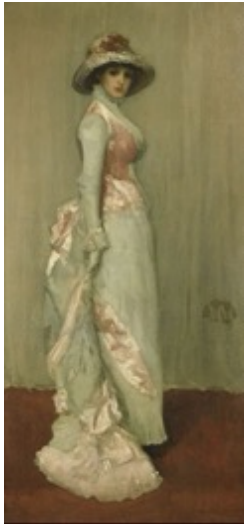


Ill. 2. Dyad of the Priest-orb Sahi and his Wife, Egyptian, 2nd Intermediate period, 13th - 17th Dynasty, granodiorite, H.: 30 cm. Museo Egizio, Turin, inv. no. S. 1219/1.



Ill. 3. Dyad of Iy, Son of Iymer and the Princess Redjitneseni, Egyptian, late 18th Dynasty, granodiorite, H.: 20 cm. From Elephantine, Ptolemaic temple foundations. Museum of Elephantine, inv. no. K 258 b.

Ill. 4. Anonymous Dyad, Egypt, 2nd Intermediate period, 17th Dynasty, found in Kerma, Sudan, sandstone, H.: 17.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. no. 20.1317.



Ill. 6. J. Abbott McNeill Whistler, *Harmony in Pink and Grey (Portrait of Lady Meux)*, 1881, Frick Collection, New York, inv. no. 1919.1.132

Publications:

- E.A. Wallis Budge, *Egyptian Antiquities in the possession of Lady Meux at Theobald's Park, London, 1896.*

