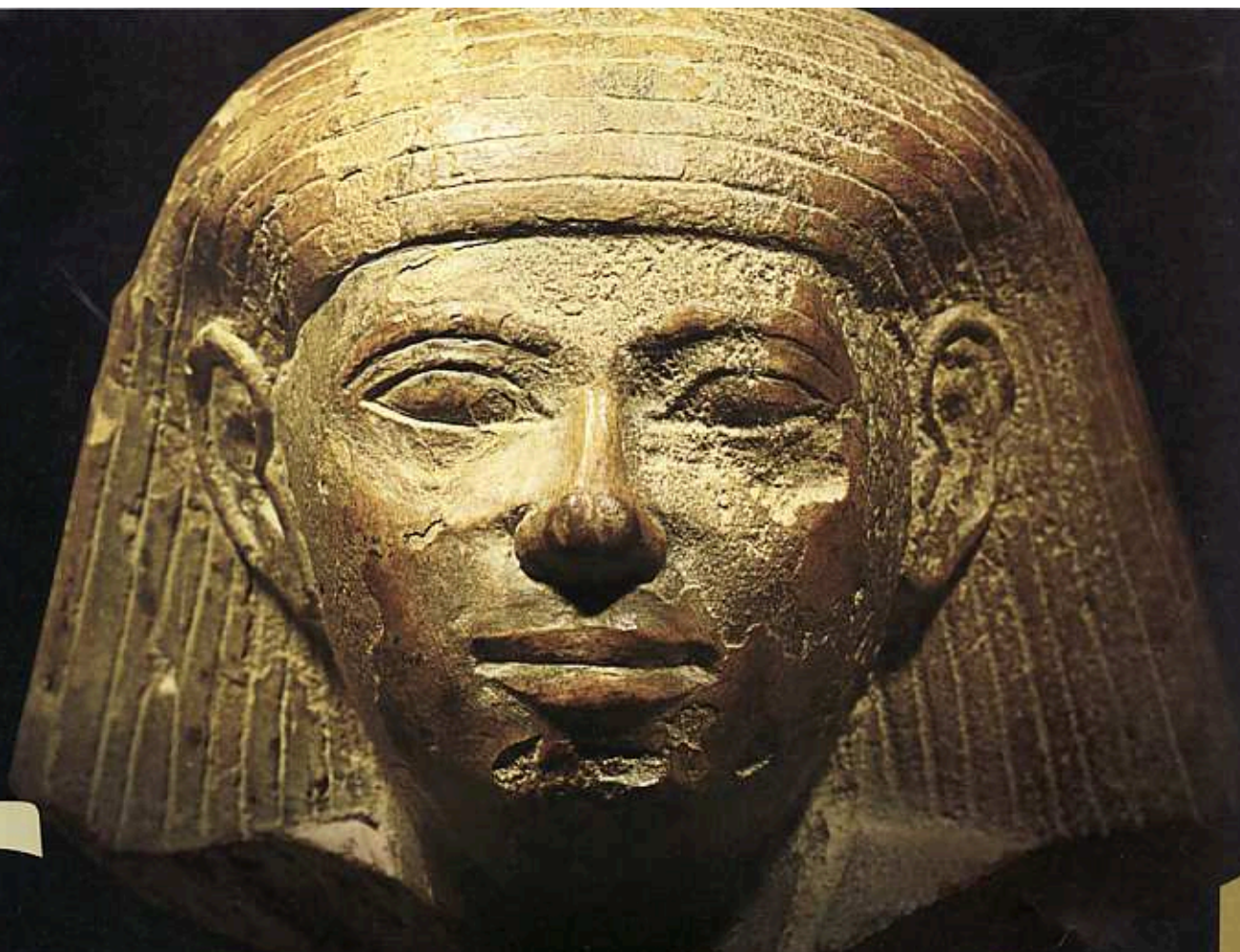


The Lure of

Art objects from one of the world's oldest and most mysterious civilizations are within the reach of today's collectors.



Egypt

BY JOHN DORFMAN

From left: Turquoise faience ushabti of Nakht-Nes-Tawy, 21st Dynasty, 1080-945 B.C.; detail of a mummy case (shown on next spread), Third Intermediate Period, Thebes, 21st Dynasty, circa 1000 B.C.; limestone head of a man, 18th Dynasty, probably from the period of Tuthmosis III, 1479-1426 B.C.



From left: Funerary mask of a young woman, decorated in polychrome, third-fourth century A.D.; limestone relief of a male figure, Old Kingdom, Fifth-Sixth Dynasty, 2498-2181 B.C.

domination (332 B.C.–395 A.D.) start at around \$500, and heads broken off such small statues start at \$100 or so. One area of collecting that is currently popular is ushabti—small, mummiform figurines intended to function as servants to the dead in the afterlife. (A properly equipped tomb was supposed to have 365 ushabtis plus 36 overseer ushabtis, who carried little whips.) Ushabti were sometimes wooden or stone, but most often were made of faience, a glasslike material that is blue or blue-green in color. Prices for these are usually in the \$5,000–15,000 range. Bronze is another medium favored by the Egyptians. According to Bernheimer, deities in bronze can be found for around \$5,000–7,000. Common subjects are Osiris, Isis nursing her baby son Harpocrates, Osiris and the cat-goddess Bastet.

“I particularly love Egyptian art because there is this huge cross section of materials,” says Ede. “Jet, amber, all sorts of different woods. That’s the most exciting part of it.” The Egyptians were masterful at exploiting the special properties of various materials. Ahead of Christie’s antiquities sale in New York in December, Bernheimer was particularly enthusiastic about a very ancient, Early Dynastic-period (circa 3000–2575 B.C.) serpentinite vessel in the form of a frog. The stone’s texture and greenish color seem to mimic the skin of the amphibian, and the artist discovered aspects of its anatomy in the natural shape of the stone and then cleverly enhanced them. The sculpture was estimated at \$20,000–30,000.

Despite the generally stylized and formal quality of Egyptian art, there is a tendency toward realism, foreshadowed very early on by sculptures like the frog vessel. Ede points out that Egyptian art “veered into naturalism” three times. The first was during the Middle Kingdom (11th–13th Dynasties, circa 2040–1790 B.C.). “Look at the portraits of the pharaohs, like Sesostri III,” says Ede. “These were men you really wouldn’t want to mess around with. Their portraits are very moving.” The second efflorescence of naturalism was during the Amarna period in the late 18th Dynasty (circa 1350 B.C.), so called because the pharaoh Akhenaten established the city of Amarna as his capital when he founded a new monotheistic religion centered on the sun god Aten. Typical of Amarna art is the sometimes uncomfortably realistic portrayal of Akhenaten and his family, who appear to have inherited some physical oddities, such as over-elongated chins and unusually full lips. Associated with the reverence for the sun in Akhenaten’s religion was a reverence for nature, which led to close observation and careful representation. Not surprisingly, the Amarna period is very popular with collectors today.

The third and last period of Egyptian naturalism was the Ptolemaic (305–30 B.C.), when a Greek dynasty associated with Alexander the Great ruled the country and adopted Egyptian culture. Ptolemaic portrait heads, which combine Greek and Egyptian characteristics, are beautiful and expressive and can seem almost shockingly mod-

“Provenance is important and becoming increasingly so. Happily, there are many hundreds of thousands of objects that have been on the market for up to 500 years.” —Jamie Ede, Dealer

