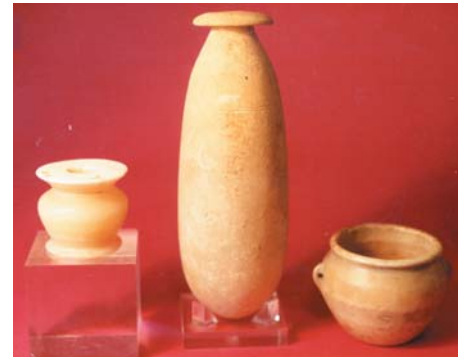




A group of three pre-dynastic pottery vessels including a black top vase and beaker. Prices around £400 each.



A group of three vessels. Speckled diorite mortar. Faience cup. Blue marble kohl jar. All Middle Kingdom. Prices £200 to £300 each.



A group of three alabaster vessels. Kohl jar for eye make up, alabastron for perfume or oil, jar for powder. All middle Kingdom. Prices £200-£300.



Black top pot. Pre-dynastic period. £395.



A seated bronze figure of Harpocrates wearing the lock of youth. Late Dynastic period. £300.



A brown coarse ware pot found at Naquada. 12th dynasty. Price £150.

Collecting Ancient Egyptian Antiquities. Part I - the higher end of the market

by Vincent McCarthy

The massive pyramid of Cheops; the enigmatic Sphinx; the grandeur of Karnak ...mind blowing sites much visited by tourists from Roman times to today. The ancient Egyptian civilization continues to amaze and fascinate us. Well-heeled tourists in Victorian times made the Grand Tour, bringing back many souvenirs, including many especially produced for them by the enterprising Egyptians! Today's tourist would be best advised to avoid looking for genuine artefacts in Cairo or Luxor. It is simply too risky and obviously illegal. There is an absolute wealth of genuine material already here in the west, brought in over several centuries by travellers, diplomats, engineers and military men and simply waiting to be housed in modern day collections.

Amongst the earliest artefacts are pottery vessels. Before the introduction of the wheel they were hand made by the coil and smooth method. The most distinctive of the early Pre-Dynastic period (c3500BC) are the red burnished jars and bowls with blackened tops and interiors. These are popular with collectors and though scarce can usually be found at prices ranging from £300 to £500 for good examples.

Slightly later in date we find a range of buff coloured bowls and taller pots decorated with circles or wavy lines in reddish pigment. Again these are popular types and can be priced around £250 to £400. Most of this pottery was made for daily use in storing food and liquids but some of the better pieces have been found in burials.

The potter's wheel was introduced during the early Dynastic period but the pottery loses something in the process. There are some elegant forms in red burnished wares but they are not easy to find. As we progress through the later periods we do find some simple and uninspiring coarseware sometimes on the market for £100 or a little more for smaller items.

A particular type of pottery vessel is the Canopic jar. These were made in sets of four to contain the internal organs of the mummified deceased. Their stoppers were made in the form of heads of the sons of Horus, and these pottery or wood stoppers are

often found on their own. Complete sets of four jars are seldom offered for sale but individual jars are sometimes found.

Apart from pottery, the Egyptians also made vessels from stone, including coloured marbles and creamy alabaster. These were particularly attractive and thus popular for personal and cosmetic uses. Facial make up was much used by Egyptian ladies and we find examples of palletes for mixing colours; kohl pots for eye make up, powder bowls and tall slender containers for holding perfumes or oils. Most of these stone vessels come from the Middle and New Kingdom periods and can be quite readily found for £100 and upwards, depending on style and sheer attractiveness.

During the course of a three thousand years history the Egyptians paid homage to a whole pantheon of deities. Some of these were national and others of local importance at certain places and certain times. Luckily for today's collectors some of the most popular deities are found modelled in bronze, almost all dating from the late Dynastic to Ptolemaic periods. Roughly 900 to 300 BC.

Amongst the most widely found are figurines of Osiris, the lord of the underworld, Isis the great mother goddess, Harpocrates as the young Horus, Ptah, creator of the world at Memphis, and Bastet the cat headed goddess of Bubastis. Animals are popular, especially cats which command disproportionately high prices. The artistry and attention to detail of some bronze figures, especially those from the 26th dynasty makes them very collectable. Price depends on size and quality. For instance a 7 or 8 inch high figure of Isis depicted suckling the infant Harpocrates and from the Saite period could easily make £1,500 or more. On the other hand a smaller figure of lesser style from the later Ptolemaic period might be had for £300 to £400. Even smaller bronze figurines of amuletic type with suspension loops for wearing are still seen at £200 or so. The range of bronzes ensures that there is certainly something to suit most pockets.

The ancient Egyptians believed that the physical body needed to survive for the person to enjoy an afterlife and this leads to the importance of burial rituals and mummification. In early times bodies were simply buried in the desert sand which proved to be a natural method of preservation. However, in time, the richer people tended to be interred in stone built tombs so some preparation was needed to aid drying out. A huge business grew out of this as embalmers developed the art of using aromatic resins and oils to prepare bodies for the long process of binding in multiple layers of linen bandages. The earliest mummies appear around 2500 BC and continue for thousands of years so the processes changed. However the end results were similar.

One of the best known artefacts is the ushabti figure. These little fellows made of stone, wood or more commonly a glazed composition material known as faience are known from the Middle Kingdom to Ptolemaic times. They are made in the form of mummified figures and hold agricultural implements such as a flail or hoe or seed bag and are substitutes for the deceased person to perform any work in the afterlife. At first there was only a single figure but through the ages a full set of workers appeared, complete with overseers, as many as 365 workers, one for each day of the year.

A good many of these ushabti figures are named after the dead person. We may find a priest or scribe or possibly an army general and of course these are much sought after. The figures often have inscribed on them a magical formula which can be invoked when the person is needed to perform some task and will respond saying 'I are here...'

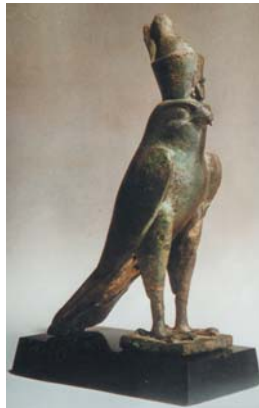
Prices can vary greatly. A small uninscribed figure of crude style from the later Ptolemaic period can still be found for less than £100, whilst a taller figure with hieroglyphs of better style will be £500 or so. The colour and condition of the glaze is important and can vary from pale eggshell blue through mid turquoise to deep sea blue. In short we can say that good size, good style and clear inscription will always be a high price. Admirals, generals and priests can always be expected to be expensive. £2,000 or so is not unusual with even more asked for a good provenance.

Mummified animals are also found. The Egyptians loved their pets so we find cats, hawks, ibises and even crocodiles, all elaborately wrapped in bandages. Such things were popular in Victorian collections but are not to every collectors taste these days.

In the March/April 2004 Edition I will continue with a further selection of smaller antiquities at more modest prices.



A bright blue glazed ushabti of the 22nd dynasty. Price £295.



A bronze figurine of Horus as a hawk. 26th dynasty. Price £695.



A tall jar with painted net decoration. Late pre dynastic. Price £450.



A large inscribed ushabti of a priest excavated by Petrie at Hawara. c£2,000.



A bright blue glazed ushabti. Ptolemaic period. Price £295.



Pale green glazed ushabti figure. Late dynastic period. Price £495.



A fine bronze figure of Osiris. 26th dynasty. Price £895.



A tall and slender uninscribed ushabti figure. 26th dynasty. Price £495.



Ushabti of Padi-pep. Late dynastic period. Front and rear views with inscription. Price £600.