

DAVID AARON



Amethystine Quartz Ointment Vase

Egypt

2040 to 1782 B.C., Middle Kingdom

Amethystine

H:9.4cm D:6.6cm

From the Old Kingdom onwards, many descriptive wall reliefs and paintings can be found depicting the production of various stone vessels. We can infer from these portrayals that the craftsmen started by firstly cutting the stone into the basic desired shape of the vessel, presumably with hammers and copper chisels. Pieces discarded in an unfinished state show that the outside of the container was fully finished and smoothed by rubbing with a hard stone. Only after the exterior shape was achieved did the craftsman start to hollow out the interior. This vase, in a classic conical form with everted lip is created from amethyst, a hard quartzite stone with translucent and white opaque striations. The entire exterior and interior of the vessel has been buffed and burnished to give it a perfectly smooth and extremely tactile surface. The use of amethyst for such a sizable piece is extremely rare, as this semi-precious stone was usually reserved for small scarabs, personal tokens and amulets. The Egyptians believed that precious stones were imbued with talismanic properties would give protection against all manner of evil and negative influences. During the Middle Kingdom there was a surge in popularity in the use of amethyst, much of which was mined from the Wadi el-Hudi, in the south of Egypt near Aswan. Which in modern times is an important archaeological site due to its high number of rock inscriptions and stelae.

It can be presumed that this vase originally had a simple, low profile round lid, also carved from amethyst. Small jars of this style were placed within tombs to hold various ointments and unguents, many examples found are inscribed with the names and titulars of Kings. The custom of burying stone, faience and pottery vessels inside the tombs of kings and other individuals of high status goes back to the late Predynastic and the Archaic Period. As the development of tools and use of materials evolved, the styling of these vessels changed. There are a number of examples of noticeably similar vessels which come from the same era of Egyptian history, two of which can be found in the Metropolitan Museum in New, York (see accession numbers: 26.7.1439a,b and 04.18.48a,b). And although both served the same purpose and have a striking simplistic beauty, neither has the same presence or importance of this remarkable amethyst vessel.

Exhibitions

Ancient Egypt: Masterpieces from Collectors and Collections, 5th-10th June 2012, Brussels, Belgium.

Literature:

Agyptische Steingefasse der Sammlung Rudolph Schmidt Solothurn (Agyptologische Hefte des Orientalischen Seminars der Universität Zurich 2), Zurich, 1988, No. 78.

Ancient Egypt: Masterpieces from Collectors and Collections, 5th-10th June 2012, Brussels, Belgium, p41.

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