

Statuette of the Cat Bastet

H: 17 cm

Bronze

Egypt

664-332 B.C., Late Period, probably Saite Period (664-526 B.C.)

An extremely well-modelled bronze figure of a cat from ancient Egypt. The cat sits in the typical pose for these statuettes, facing ahead with the forepaws placed in line with the rear legs. The tail curls around the true right side of the cat's flanks, resting with the tip just in front of the right forepaw. The cat's musculature is supple and smoothly curved, with particular naturalistic details such as the line of the shoulder blades on the back, and the V-like diagonals of the rear haunches finely articulated. The facial features are similarly well-defined: angular cheekbones frame the nose and jaw, with the minutiae of the nostrils and philtrum rendered in clear incised lines. The angular eyes are recessed, and were likely originally inlaid with stones or other precious material. The two large ears, damaged at the tips, are pierced with small holes that would have held earrings. The figure is hollow, with an ovoid opening at the base, and a rectangular shaft protruding downwards which would have been used to affix the statuette to another object.

Cats were the sacred animal of the goddess Bastet – originally a lion-headed goddess who eventually became the gentler counterpart of the warrior goddess Sekhmet and more associated with the domestic cat. Bastet was a protector of Lower Egypt and defender of the pharaoh and the sun-god Ra; she is often represented battling Ra's enemy, the snake Apep. She was one of several deities associated with the apotropaic symbol of the right wedjat-eye, or Eye of Ra. Bastet was a goddess of protection against contagious diseases and evil spirits, and a goddess of pregnancy and childbirth. Many bronze cat statuettes were dedicated to Bastet in temples throughout Egypt, centring in

the city of Bubastis in the Nile delta. Bubastis was home to a large population of cats who were cared for by Bastet's devotees, and buried in the temple precincts when they died. Hollow statuettes, such as this one, may have held mummified cats that were placed in Bastet's temples as votive offerings.

Cats were originally domesticated by Egyptians in the Middle Kingdom, who used them for their hunting abilities, but by the New Kingdom they had become valued household companions. The earliest three-dimensional representation of a cat dates from the Middle Kingdom, and was used as a cosmetic vessel (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1990.59.1). Painted tomb scenes depict cats seated beneath their owner's chairs and on hunting boats, where they assisted their masters by flushing out the birds in the Nile marshes.

Literature:

Collection A. Raifé. Antiquités, Monnaies & Médailles, Hôtel Drouot, Paris, 18-25 March 1867, p. ix, either Lot 212 or Lot 213.