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Upper Part of the Inner Coffin Lid of Horsaiset

712-525 BC, 25th-26th Dynasty, Late Period, Egypt, probably Western Thebes

Wood, Polychromed and Stuccoed, Linen

Height: 47 cm, Width: 45 cm

The upper part of the lid for a wooden inner coffin, carved into the form of a male head and upper chest. The head sports a large tripartite wig painted with gold and blue stripes that follow the line of the wig as it parts on either side of the face and ends just above the end of the false beard. The false beard itself is painted turquoise and incised with diagonal lines to represent the braid. The top portion of a patterned ousekh collar, in the same shade of turquoise, can be seen on the chest behind the beard. The skin of the head and neck is painted a deep red. The facial features modelled three-dimensionally, with a wide, slightly upturned mouth, broad nose, and narrow, slightly recessed eyes. The eyes and eyebrows are outlined in thick black lines, the heavy cosmetic lines extend a fair length from the outer corners of the eyes. The round ears sit in front of the wig on each side. On the sides of the wig, the turquoise stripes alternate with red.

The crown of the head is painted with the image of the goddess Nephtys, kneeling with her wigs outstretched, against a solid gold background. This is divided from the rest of the wig with a black border. The reverse is densely painted with eight registers of hieroglyphic inscription; the inscriptions continue over the vertical sides, and vertically below the horizontal registers (both of which are cut off at the bottom). The text includes a number of traditional offering formulas to various deities, wishes concerning the owner's afterlife, and the formula of goddess Nut. The owner is identified as Horsaiset, son of Irtyrou, Prophet of Thoth, master of strength, Prophet of Khnum, lord of the great battle, and Prophet of Sobek, lord of the land of the trees. Painted in the centre of the reverse, below the text, is the face of the goddess Nut, facing to the right with arms raised.

The earliest symbolic role of the ancient Egyptian coffin was as a 'house' or eternal dwelling for the deceased. Outer coffins tended to be rectangular, imitating the shape of a tomb or shrine, while inner coffins were mostly anthropoid in form from the Middle Kingdom onwards. From the New Kingdom, coffins showed an increased resemblance to the living, in both form and dress, demonstrating the link between coffins as separate to, but one aspect of, the self. Wood was used as a material for coffins since very early in ancient Egyptian history. Cedar was the most prestigious wood, as it provided long, straight planks. However, it had to be imported into Egypt from the Lebanon, making it highly expensive and, therefore, a sign of high status. Coffins made from local woods, generally sycamore fig, had to collate smaller, irregularly shaped pieces using wooden cramps and dowles, which had to be secured at the corners with leather thongs.

Literature:

Archéologie, Pierre Bergé, 30 May 2015, Lot 39, pp. 39-41.