

COLNAGHI



Egyptian, Middle Kingdom, 11th – 12th
Dynasty, 2134 – 1782 B.C.,
Kohl Vessel with Monkeys

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EGYPTIAN, MIDDLE KINGDOM, 11TH – 12TH DYNASTY,
2134 – 1782 B.C.

KOHL VESSEL WITH MONKEYS

Anhydrite
6 cm; 2 3/8 in.

Provenance

The Estate of the Late Erich Bier, Copenhagen;
Anonymous Sale, Sotheby's London, 10th December 1996, Lot. 77.
Private Collection, Europe, 1996 – 2013;

Exhibitions

The Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen, 1974 – 1996.

Publications

Anonymous Sale, Sotheby's London, 10th December 1996, Lot. 77.

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An especially charming pot that exhibits a highly polished surface of a hard mineral substance, a feat so characteristic and impressive in the undertaking of ancient Egyptian craftsmen. The vessel has been fashioned from anhydrite, sometimes referred to as 'blue marble', a term that is evocative of its aesthetic effect on the beholder. Its probable source is the Eastern Desert of Egypt. The body of the container is decorated with two monkeys in low relief, their knees bent, arms outstretched and merging in the centre of the vessel's circumference; the heads of the animals are turned to one side. A collar can be discerned around their necks, identifying the monkeys as pets, most likely the species Guenon, a primate indigenous to Sub Saharan Africa, and subsequently domesticated in Egypt. As such, they were suitable depictions on vessels in houses and palaces. Above these the body gently curves into a narrow flat shoulder and a subtly concave narrow collar with a thin rim. Inside, the vessel is smoothly drilled to produce the hollow of the container itself.

In terms of its function, the pot would have been used to contain kohl, the black cosmetic that decorated the periphery and lashes of the eyes from Predynastic times onwards (circa 3100 B.C.). Immortalized in popular culture by Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*, 1963, kohl was effective in protecting the eye from the harsh sun, persistent windblown sand and with its antibacterial properties, from bacteria and disease after the annual flood of the Nile. The quality of the vessel indicates that its patrons enjoyed a high social status, since kohl was the preserve of elite citizens in ancient Egypt. The date of the vessel corresponds to the period in which monkeys were introduced to the decorative repertory of vessels for the first time. A number of similar examples are known, such as in the Brooklyn Museum (Inv. no. 52.55); the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Art (Inv. nos 66.99.16 and 07.228.93); the Museum of Fine Arts Boston (Inv. no. 49.1073); the Rhode Island School of Design Museum (Inv. no. 83.026); and the Petrie Museum, London (Inv. no. 2386).

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