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Egyptian, Late Dynastic Period, Ptolemaic
Period, 30th Dynasty, ca. 380 – 330 B.C.,
Sculptor's model of a royal bust

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CA. 380 – 330 B.C.

SCULPTOR'S MODEL OF A ROYAL BUST

Limestone
12.7 x 10.6 cm; 5 x 4 1/8 in.

Provenance

Charles Dikran Kelekian (1899-1982), New York, U.S.A, inventory sticker 'No. 390' on reverse;
Acquired by Jack Josephson (1930-2022) in 1982, New York, U.S.A.

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This finely carved limestone bust represents an Egyptian pharaoh wearing the *nemes* headdress and belongs to the distinctive class of objects conventionally described as sculptors' models or trial pieces. Produced during the final centuries of pharaonic civilisation, such works preserve unusually direct evidence of the technical sophistication of Egyptian sculptural workshops. The broad dating of the present piece, from the Thirtieth Dynasty into the Ptolemaic Period, reflects the remarkable continuity of traditional Egyptian royal imagery during an era of profound political change.

The king is represented frontally, the striped *nemes* falling in broad lappets on either side of his face and descending onto the chest. A simple band passes across the forehead, from which rises the royal uraeus. Both attributes immediately establish the figure's status. The *nemes* was an explicitly royal headdress, while the rearing cobra represented Wadjet, the ancient tutelary goddess of Lower Egypt and a powerful embodiment of divine protection and legitimate kingship. Positioned above the king's forehead, the uraeus proclaimed his supernatural authority and his capacity to repel the enemies of Egypt.

A further raised element at the crown may represent a highly stylised scarab beetle. Although this identification must remain cautious, comparable royal models incorporating a scarab-like element are known within the corpus of Late and Ptolemaic sculpture, including the example discussed by Paul Edmund Stanwick in *Portraits of the Ptolemies: Greek Kings as Egyptian Pharaohs*. The scarab, associated particularly with the god Khepri and the regenerative rising sun, would have introduced another potent image of renewal and divine kingship.

The exceptional quality of the carving is concentrated in the face. A softly modelled brow descends towards precisely outlined eyes with crisply delineated lids. The nose is straight, the ears carefully defined, and the mouth possesses the restrained, slightly smiling expression characteristic of idealised Late Egyptian royal portraiture. Rather than describing an individual physiognomy in the modern sense, these features participate in an established visual language through which kingship was communicated as timeless, youthful and divinely sanctioned. The sculptor nevertheless avoids rigidity: subtle transitions across the cheeks and brow give the face a convincing sense of volume beneath the geometrically ordered headdress.

The object's unfinished or specialised physical character supports its traditional identification as a workshop model. The reverse is completely flat, as are the outer sides of the shoulders, indicating that it was never conceived as an independently finished sculpture in the round. Comparable limestone models depicting royal heads in *nemes* headdresses are preserved in major Egyptian collections and similar examples are catalogued by Nadja Samir Tomoum. The precise function of such objects, however, remains debated. Tomoum's study demonstrates that pieces traditionally called "sculptors' models" may have served variously as workshop exercises, teaching aids or prototypes, while some may instead have possessed votive or devotional functions. The term should therefore be understood as describing a recognised archaeological and artistic category rather than proving a single function in every instance.

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This ambiguity is particularly compelling in the context of the Late and Ptolemaic periods. Following the Thirtieth Dynasty, the last native dynasty of independent Egypt, Egypt came successively under Achaemenid, Macedonian and finally Ptolemaic rule. Yet the Ptolemies adopted the visual apparatus of pharaonic kingship with extraordinary commitment. Egyptian temples continued to portray them according to deeply rooted indigenous conventions: wearing traditional crowns and headdresses, presenting offerings to Egyptian gods and participating in the reciprocal rituals upon which cosmic order depended. A small royal model such as the present work therefore belongs to an artistic tradition that remained remarkably resilient despite transformations in political authority.

The sculpture survives without restoration. Dendritic staining spreads naturally across portions of the limestone surface, while minor losses include chips to the tip of the nose and uraeus and the absence of the proper right lower corner. These imperfections do little to diminish the remarkable clarity of the facial modelling or the sculptor's technical precision.

Its modern history is recorded directly upon the object by an old label on the reverse inscribed 'Collection Charles Kelekian No. 390.' The documented provenance identifies it with the collection of Charles Dikran Kelekian, before its subsequent passage into the distinguished collection of Egyptologist and connoisseur Jack Josephson. Combining refined craftsmanship, royal iconography and tangible evidence of workshop practice, the bust offers an unusually intimate encounter with the processes through which the enduring image of the Egyptian pharaoh was created during the final centuries of ancient Egyptian art.

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