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Red-Polished Jar,
Egyptian Predynastic Period, Naqada II, ca. 3500 – 3200 B.C.

RED-POLISHED JAR

EGYPTIAN PREDYNASTIC PERIOD, NAQADA II,
Ca. 3500-3200 B.C.

Ceramic and faience

22.2 cm; 8 3/4 in.

Provenance:

Caroline Ransom Williams (1872-1952), Toledo, gifted to The Toledo Museum of Art, 1943,
accession no. 1943.54;
Toledo Museum of Art, 1943-2016;
Private Collection, United States of America.

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The present *Red-Polished Jar* belongs to one of the most refined and visually distinctive ceramic traditions of Predynastic Egypt. Produced during the Naqada II period, approximately 3500–3200 B.C., it dates to a transformative phase in Egyptian history preceding the emergence of the unified state and the establishment of the pharaonic monarchy. Its restrained form and highly polished surface exemplify the sophisticated understanding of proportion, material and finish already achieved by Egyptian potters more than five thousand years ago.

Red-polished ware is characterised by its rich red or reddish-brown surface and subdued, lustrous finish. The effect is deceptively simple. Predynastic vessels of this type were made by hand from locally available Nile clay, with considerable skill required to achieve a regular, symmetrical profile. The vessel was shaped and smoothed before its surface was treated with a fine red slip, generally produced from iron-rich material, and subsequently burnished to create the characteristic sheen. The resulting surface transforms an otherwise utilitarian ceramic into an object of considerable tactile and visual sophistication.

The form of the present vessel is particularly eloquent in its economy. Its gently swelling body, controlled shoulder and comparatively narrow opening establish a carefully balanced silhouette, while the absence of painted decoration places emphasis upon the relationship between contour, colour and surface. Such restraint is characteristic of the finest red-polished vessels, in which decoration is effectively displaced by the material itself. Light travels softly across the burnished exterior, revealing subtle variations in tone and the traces of the handmade process beneath the polished surface.

A closely comparable vessel is preserved in the Egyptian Art collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The Met's *Red polished ware jar*, dated ca. 3500–3300 B.C., measures 24 cm in height and was excavated at Hierakonpolis (Nekhen), in the Fort Cemetery (Fig. 1). Its chronology, scale and treatment place it particularly close to the present example. The Met collection contains numerous further examples of Naqada II red-polished pottery, demonstrating the importance and consistency of the ware across Predynastic Egypt. Another jar, dated ca. 3650–3300 B.C., likewise derives from Hierakonpolis and measures 25.5 cm in height.

The archaeological context of such vessels is crucial to understanding their significance. Predynastic pottery was not confined to a single sphere of use: vessels occur in settlements as well as funerary contexts, suggesting that ceramics participated in both everyday and ritual activities. Their inclusion within burials indicates that vessels could accompany the deceased into the afterlife, while their refined appearance and considerable investment of labour suggest that some examples possessed a status extending well beyond purely practical function. The distinction between functional and symbolic object was therefore not necessarily rigid.

Naqada II itself represents a period of profound cultural and technological development. Increasing regional interaction, expanding craft specialisation and the consolidation of elite centres contributed to an increasingly sophisticated material culture. Pottery provides particularly important evidence for these developments, with specialised wares demonstrating both technical experimentation and increasingly controlled production. The Petrie Museum similarly identifies polished red pottery as one of the principal ceramic categories of the Naqada period.

The enduring appeal of the present jar lies ultimately in the remarkable correspondence between function and form. Its smooth surface, warm colour and measured silhouette possess an almost modernist austerity, yet these qualities are the product of an ancient technology rooted in the Nile Valley. More than five millennia after its creation, the vessel retains an immediacy that transcends its archaeological distance: a testament to the sophistication of Predynastic craftsmanship and to the extraordinary aesthetic sensitivity already present on the eve of ancient Egypt's historic age.



Fig. 1 *Red polished ware jar*,
Predynastic Period, ca. 3850–2960 B.C.
Pottery, 34 cm; 14 1/2 in.

From Egypt, Northern Upper Egypt, Abadiya, Cemetery B, Tomb B32, EEF excavations 1898–99
Gift of Egypt Exploration Fund, 1899, Inv. No. 99.4.134

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