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Egyptian, Late Ptolemaic Period ca. 100 – 30 B.C.,
Polychrome Cartonnage Mummy Mask

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EGYPTIAN, LATE PTOLEMAIC PERIOD,
CA. 100 – 30 B.C.

POLYCHROME CARTONNAGE MUMMY MASK

Cartonnage, wood and gesso
41.9 cm; 16 1/2 in.

Provenance

Mathias Komor (1909-1984), New York, U.S.A, Inv. No. C823;
Acquired on November 9th, 1968, by a Private Collector from the Midwest, U.S.A;
Master Paintings & Sculpture from Four Millennia Part II, Sotheby's New York, February 2026, Lot.
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This striking polychrome mummy mask belongs to the final phase of Ptolemaic rule in Egypt and exemplifies the remarkable persistence of indigenous funerary traditions during a period of profound cultural and political transformation. Intended to be placed over the head and upper torso of the wrapped mummy, such masks provided the deceased with an idealised and eternally recognisable visage. Their function was therefore simultaneously commemorative and regenerative: they protected the body while presenting the deceased in a perfected form suitable for rebirth in the afterlife. The face is framed by a blue-green tripartite wig whose broad lappets descend symmetrically on either side of the head. The facial features are carefully articulated through both modelling and paint. The rims and pupils of the eyes are picked out in black, extending into long cosmetic lines, while tapering painted eyebrows reinforce the strongly symmetrical structure of the face. This combination of wide, commanding eyes and carefully controlled cosmetic detail belongs to a long-established Egyptian visual language in which the face was transformed from individual likeness into an enduring funerary image. Sotheby's describes the mask specifically as wearing a blue-green tripartite wig with black-painted eye rims, pupils, cosmetic lines and eyebrows, features that give the composition much of its graphic intensity.

Cartonnage was particularly well suited to this purpose. Generally constructed from layers of linen impregnated with plaster or paste and subsequently painted, the material could be moulded into relatively lightweight yet durable forms. Comparable Ptolemaic cartonnage preserved in the Metropolitan Museum of Art demonstrates how painted and sometimes gilded elements were applied directly over mummy wrappings to create elaborate protective ensembles. The use of cartonnage also provided a smooth surface upon which colour, ornament and divine imagery could be precisely applied. The blue-green colouring of the wig carries particular resonance within Egyptian funerary culture. Blue and green were closely associated with fertility, regeneration and renewed life, concepts central to Egyptian conceptions of the hereafter. The emphasis upon large, carefully delineated eyes similarly reflects the importance of sight and restored bodily faculties after death. Rather than representing the deceased in a state of mortality, the mask presents an idealised, rejuvenated being prepared to participate eternally in the divine realm.

The work was produced during the final century of Ptolemaic Egypt, when rulers of Macedonian Greek descent governed the country while continuing to support, and participate in, traditional Egyptian religious institutions. Funerary practice remained fundamentally rooted in pharaonic concepts of bodily preservation and resurrection. Ptolemaic mummies could still be equipped with masks, cartonnage panels, amulets and protective religious imagery, demonstrating the extraordinary longevity of Egyptian beliefs concerning death and regeneration. Complete examples preserved in major museum collections confirm the continued importance of painted and gilded cartonnage throughout the Ptolemaic period. With its controlled symmetry, brilliant polychromy and commanding gaze, this mask encapsulates that continuity. It belongs to one of the last great manifestations of an artistic tradition that had shaped Egyptian funerary culture for millennia, transforming the mortal face into an enduring image of protection, identity and eternal renewal.

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