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Ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern Acquisitions and Loans from the Horace L. Mayer Collection

DOWS DUNHAM

During frequent sojourns in Europe, chiefly in France, Germany, Switzerland, and Italy, Mr. Horace L. Mayer and his wife became interested in collecting Egyptian antiquities. They assembled their gradually increasing acquisitions in their home in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In 1930 Mr. Mayer began to consult the Egyptian Department of the Boston Museum and at the same time to place objects on loan for exhibition or for study. Thus developed the Mayers’ close association with the department, during which they have generously made available to us more than three hundred and fifty objects as either loans or gifts. Since Mr. Mayer’s death in February 1968 Mrs. Mayer has continued her interest and support.1

The major part of the Mayer collection (one hundred and eighty-six items, some of them still on loan to the museum) was acquired from the “Vassalli Collection.” Luigi Vassalli (1812–1887) was an Italian artist-antiquarian who settled in Egypt in 1859. He became an assistant to Auguste Mariette, founder of the Black Museum (predecessor of the Cairo Museum) and of the Egyptian Antiquities Department in 1858. Through his association with Mariette in the latter’s pioneering excavations and his position as conservator in the newly established museum, Vassalli had the opportunity to assemble an extensive collection of his own at a time when the Department of Antiquities was still in the process of organization.

Chosen for special mention here are only a few of the objects that are of outstanding historical or artistic significance and that have added greatly to our collection.2

In 1931 Mr. Mayer lent us for study two fragments of linen bearing ink inscriptions in cursive hieroglyphs (fig. 1). These proved to have come from the famous Deir-el Bahari cache discovered by Mariette in 1881 and formed part of the mummy wrappings of King Tuthmosis III of Dynasty 18 (the major parts of which are in the Cairo Museum). The fragments had come into the possession of Vassalli shortly before 1885.

1. Fragment of mummy wrappings of Tuthmosis III. Dynasty 18. Linen; 1.1 x 53 m.

Gift of Horace L. Mayer. 60.1472.

3. Portrait head of a Ptolemaic ruler. Blue glass inlay; 2 x 1.5 cm. Lent by Mrs. Horace L. Mayer. 52.59.


5. Plaque showing Apis bull. Ptolemaic. Mosaic glass; 2.8 x 2 cm. Lent by Mrs. Horace L. Mayer. 54.59.

7. Signet ring. Dynasty 22 or later. Gold; 2.2 x 1.9 cm. Lent by Mrs. Horace L. Mayer. 49.59.

8. Scarab of King Sheshonk II. Dynasty 22. Lapis in gold ring; diam. 3 cm. Lent by Mrs. Horace L. Mayer. 51.59.

and passed thence into the collection of Clemente Maraini, from whose heirs they were acquired by Mr. Mayer about 1928. Mr. Mayer generously permitted me to publish them and eventually made them a gift to the museum in 1960.

Among our most precious examples of the jeweler's art is the gold pendant representing a youthful king seated on a lotus, together with its original gold chain (fig. 2). The obverse of the figure was originally inlaid with lapis lazuli and colored glass or paste, but many inlays have fallen out, and we can no longer see their full effect. The reverse is of gold, the details in relief or chased, and it still retains its full delicacy. This beautiful necklace was bought by Mr. Mayer from Spink and Sons in London and is said by them to have come from Abu Gurob in the Fayum. It was lent to us in 1964, but after Mr. Mayer's death in 1968, Mrs. Mayer made it a gift to the museum in memory of her husband. The figure is thought to represent King Rameses II of Dynasty 19, and since it shows him wearing the sidelock of youth, it may well have been made at the time of his accession to the throne, ca. 1300 B.C.

In 1959 Mr. Mayer lent to the museum extremely interesting examples of glass, lapidary, and goldwork. They include a tiny, blue glass inlay portrait head of a Ptolemaic ruler (fig. 3), a black glass inlay head of a jackal (fig. 4), a fused mosaic glass plaque representing an Apis bull (fig. 5), a gold necklace with pendants (fig. 6), a gold signet ring (fig. 7), a lapis lazuli scarab of King Sheshonk II swiveled in a gold ring (fig. 8), and a magnificent solid gold vulture head once part of a queen's headdress (fig. 9). This last has recently been made a gift by Mrs. Mayer.

Bronze figures of deities are well represented by loans and gifts from Mr. Mayer in some twenty examples. Illustrated here is one of the best, originally lent to us in 1930 (fig. 10). It is a seated figure of the goddess Isis, crowned with disk and cow's horns, nursing the child Horus. The figure may be dated approximately to the Late Egyptian Period. Because of its exceptional quality, Mrs. Mayer made it a gift after her husband's death.

Another bronze of special interest is the kneeling figure of King Necho II of Dynasty 26 (fig. 11). The piece was acquired from a dealer in Switzerland and had previously been in the Michaelides collection. Mr. Mayer lent it to us in 1965, and in 1970 Mrs. Mayer made it a gift.

One piece of royal sculpture has come to us from the Mayer collection, a small kneeling statuette in glazed steatite, representing King Amunhotpe III of Dynasty 18. Mr. Mayer acquired it at the Sotheby sale in November 1965 of the Filmer collection and lent it to the museum in the following year. After her husband's death Mrs. Mayer generously made it a gift.

While Horace L. Mayer's primary interest was in Egyptian antiquities, his acquisitions were not exclusively in that field. Instances of his wider interests are evidenced by two of his pieces that have been added to our small but growing collection of Ancient Near Eastern art.

In 1958 he lent us a little figure of a recumbent lion in gold over a paste core, its mane inlaid with blue glass. It was at first thought to be Egyptian, but further study
10. Seated figure of the goddess Isis nursing the child Horus. Late Period. Bronze; height 20.5 cm. Gift of Mrs. Horace L. Mayer. 1971.749. (Photo John F. X. McKeon.)


has led to the conclusion that it would be more accurately classed as Syro-Egyptian, perhaps of the fourteenth century B.C. In 1962, Mr. Mayer made it a gift and it is now exhibited in our Near Eastern gallery.\(^8\)

In 1958 also Mr. Mayer kindly lent us an Achaemenian bronze bowl with fluted exterior in perfect preservation. It may be dated to the fifth century B.C. This fine, small vessel, exhibited in the Near Eastern gallery, was made a gift in 1962.\(^9\)

NOTES

1. From 1930 to 1966 seventy-two objects were lent. Between 1956 and 1971 fifty-three pieces on loan were made gifts, and, in addition, two hundred and thirty-four came to us as outright gifts.

2. This short text, illustrated with black and white photographs, can scarcely do justice to the beauty and color of some of these pieces. The special exhibit "Gifts and Loans from the Horace L. Mayer Collection," September-November 1972, represents a more fitting tribute both to the Mayers' generosity and to the quality of their collection. The fine selection of objects displayed includes gifts to the Departments of Classical Art as well as to the Department of Egyptian and Ancient Near Eastern Art.


