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CAT. 61

Hand Mirror

New Kingdom, Dynasty 18 (about 1550–1295 BCE)
Ancient Egyptian
Copper alloy; 20 × 10.3 × 2.2 cm (7 7/8 × 4 1/16 × 7/8 in.)
The Art Institute of Chicago, purchased with funds provided by Henry H. Getty and Charles L. Hutchinson, 1894.725

This mirror has a nearly circular disk attached to a handle in the form of a papyrus plant. The graceful curves of the mirror's handle represent the spreading umbel of the papyrus. Incised lines above a double band depict the calyx from which the fronds emerge. The copper alloy disk would have been polished to a highly reflective sheen. Egyptian mirror disks always have a tang at their bottom that allowed them to be secured to the handle with a rivet. Judging from the weight of this mirror, both pieces were solid cast.

Mirrors were associated with both men and women, although more frequently with women because they were symbols of female beauty and eroticism. In tomb reliefs, stelae, and drawings on papyri and ostraca, a mirror may be shown in a woman's hand or, more frequently, under her chair. A woman carrying a mirror is a motif found in Middle Kingdom figurines of offering bearers and what are believed to be erotic scenes related to Hathor.[1] The link between Hathor, a goddess of love and sexuality, and mirrors is made very clear from examples with handles that bear the face of the goddess.[2] The papyrus plant employed for the handle of this and many other mirrors also has connections with Hathor, who is often shown emerging from a papyrus-filled marsh. In a relief in the tomb of Mereruka (fig. 1), four youths dance as they hold mirrors and scepters in their hands. Although the exact symbolism of the scene is unknown, the hieroglyphic caption mentions Hathor.

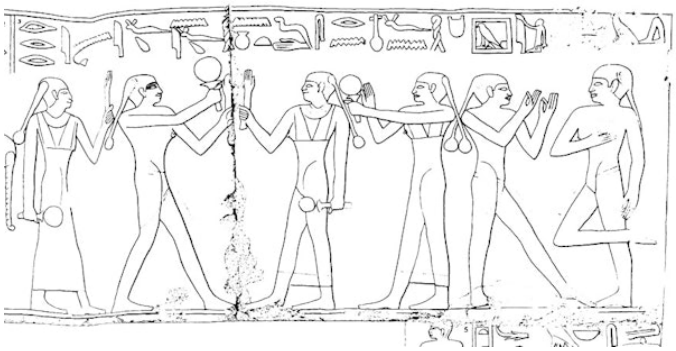

Fig. 1

The "Mirror Dance" shown in the tomb of Mereruka, Dynasty 6, about 2330 BCE. From Sakkara Expedition, The Mastaba of Mereruka, Part 2: Chamber A 11–13, Doorjambs and Inscriptions of Chambers A 1–21, Tomb Chamber, and Exterior (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938), pl. 164.

Mirrors are also depicted in other contexts. A scene in the New Kingdom tomb of the official Kenamun shows the presentation of mirrors and other gifts to the king during the New Year celebration.[3]A few reliefs from the Third Intermediate and Late Periods portray the dedication of a mirror to Re-Horakhty, Mut, and other deities. In the Late Period and afterward, a ritual is shown in which the king offers goddesses two mirrors that represent the sun and the moon.[4] In the New Kingdom, mirrors were a feature of dream interpretation. Seeing one's face in a mirror in a dream was indicated to be a "bad" sign that meant "another wife," although there is no elaboration upon this forecast.[5]

Mirrors were part of funerary furnishings because the image of a disk rising from a papyrus umbel was an allusion to the rising of the sun each morning, and hence to eternal regeneration. Indeed, the word for mirror is “ankh,” the same word as “life”; here, the papyrus handle, the umbel, and the disk imitate the shape of the ankh sign, 𓋹. In the Middle Kingdom, mirrors were wrapped within the bandages of some mummies or placed in coffins with the deceased.[6] They also were often included among funerary furnishings depicted on First Intermediate and Middle Kingdom coffins. The value of mirrors is suggested by images of them protected by formfitting carrying cases or wood cosmetic cases.

Mirrors from as early as the Early Dynastic Period are known to us today, although only the disks survive. Many examples also come from the Middle Kingdom.[7] Mirrors of the New Kingdom have a range of handles, including papyriform (as this one) or a simpler, club-like handle.[8] Some handles incorporate the face of the goddess Hathor or the figure of the god Bes, while others take the form of a standing, nubile girl.[9] In the Middle and New Kingdoms, handles were commonly made of metal, ivory, or stone.

Mirrors of the style exemplified here have been assigned a narrow date of Dynasty 18. This one has the same type of handle, with double lines below the calyx, and approximately the same shape of disk, as an example excavated from a Dynasty 18 tomb in Thebes, as well as other examples.[10]

ADDITIONAL VIEW OF CAT. 61

Cat. 61, back.

Provenance

Reverend Chauncey Murch (1859–1907), Luxor, Egypt; sold to the Art Institute of Chicago, 1894.

Publication History

Thomas George Allen, *A Handbook of the Egyptian Collection* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1923), 109 (ill.).

ENTRY BY EMILY TEETER

NOTES

1. Joseph A. Omlin, *Der Papyrus 55001 und seine Satirisch-Erotischen Zeichnungen und Inschriften*

(Turin: Edizioni d'Arte Fratelli Pozzo, 1973), pls. 5, 11, 13, 16, 17.

2. Edward Brovarski, Susan K. Doll, and Rita E. Freed, *Egypt's Golden Age: The Art of Living in the New Kingdom, 1558–1085 B.C.*, exh. cat. (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1982), 185, cat. 213.
3. Norman de Garis Davies, *The Tomb of Ḳen-Amūn at Thebes* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1930), 27, 29, pls. 18, 20, 23.
4. Claire Derriks, "Mirrors," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, vol. 2, ed. Donald B. Redford (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 432–22.
5. Papyrus Chester Beatty III, in William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger, eds., *The Context of Scripture*, vol. 1, *Canonical Compositions from the Biblical World* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 54.
6. These mirrors were found in burials of both women and men. Adela Oppenheim et al., eds., *Ancient Egypt Transformed: The Middle Kingdom*, exh. cat. (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015), 142.
7. Christine Lilyquist, *Ancient Egyptian Mirrors from the Earliest Times through the Middle Kingdom* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 1979).
8. The club handle is also referred to as the *hem* handle, because it resembles the *hem* hieroglyph that means "majesty." Derriks, "Mirrors," 420–21. In the New Kingdom, the word "ankh" (mirror) was determined by the club-shaped *hem* sign,  .
9. See the many examples in Brovarski, Doll, and Freed, *Egypt's Golden Age*, 184–88.
10. William C. Hayes, *The Scepter of Egypt: A Background for the Study of the Egyptian Antiquities in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, pt. 2, *The Hyksos Period and the New Kingdom (1675–1080 B.C.)* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1959), 64, fig. 33. For an example with double lines and falcons, see ibid., 63, fig. 32. For an example with double lines and Hathor head, see ibid., 139, fig. 75. For a very similar example dated to Dynasty 18, see W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Objects of Daily Use* (London: British School of Archaeology in Egypt, 1927), 31, table no. 6; pl. 25.6.

HOW TO CITE

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