
Title of Object

Pair of Clappers

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: unknown

Country: Egypt

Date of Object: About 1550-1292 BCE

File Created: 2/15/2018

Accession Number: 2012.64 A,B

Author of File: L Hicks

Material/Medium: Hippo Ivory

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Africa

Last Updated/Reviewed: 3/26/2018

Culture: Ancient Egyptian

Tour Topics

Music, Ancient cultures, Egypt, Celebration, Instrument, Hippopotamus, Animals, Funerary/Afterlife, Entertainment

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

These are used by Ancient Egyptians as clappers. How do you think you would hold and use them? (Have everyone clap hands in a beat.)

Why do you think the Egyptians would have these? What kind of event would you need to use these?

When you look at these closely, what are some details you notice?

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

Hippo ivory was not an uncommon material at the time for use. The curved shape and matching growth lines show that these two clappers were made from a single, rather large hippopotamus tusk, sawn down the middle. Hippos were once abundant in the Nile River, and the use of their ivory reflects their importance to the ancient Egyptians. A hippo's tusk is deadly, but it's also a symbol of sexual virility and fertility. (ArtStories)

Looking closely at the surface of the clappers, we can see how finely detailed the hands are, with defined fingernails. It looks like there are also bracelets carved as decoration on the hands, right at the wrist.

The most beautiful known examples of clappers are carved from hippopotami canine teeth (as are Mia's). The relative curve of the object is determined by the natural shape of the tooth. Other, simpler clappers in wood exist. The inside surface of this pair of clappers is flat. (Louvre)

Some clappers show clear signs of wear, a proof of repetitive use. However, as is the case for many Egyptian objects, the distinction between everyday objects and ritual objects, which were heavily charged with symbols and magic, is not always easy to determine. For Egyptians, these instruments were probably far more than mere musical instruments. (Louvre)

These clappers, shaped like curved rods, seem to be the first musical instruments to have been depicted on vases, as early in the predynastic period. Clappers with hands appeared in the Middle Kingdom, yet it seems that the most beautiful of these objects can be dated to the New Kingdom, particularly those representing a head of Hathor. Music and dance played an important role in ancient Egypt, as illustrated by the decoration of tombs and temples from the Old Kingdom on. Large numbers of the most diverse musical instruments - harps, lyres, flutes, tambourines, clappers, and sistrums - were discovered in burial vaults, but unfortunately, we do not know the sounds and rhythms they made, as the Egyptians did not have any system of musical notation. (Louvre)

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Carved from a hippopotamus tusk, this pair of human hands was designed as a musical instrument, an ancestor of the modern claves. Clapped together as a rhythm instrument, the tusks would have accompanied an Egyptian orchestra of harps, pipes, lyres, and lutes. The noise of the clappers helped drive away hostile spirits, keeping celebrations joyful. (ArtStories)

Not all clappers are carved in the shape of hands. Many are decorated with images of Hathor, a multitasking ancient goddess. The goddess of joy, love, birth, and rebirth, she was also the patroness of music and dance, protector of women and children, and physically, the "hand" of the Egyptian god of creation, Atum—as Eve sprang from Adam's rib, Hathor sprang from Atum's hand. (ArtStories)

This intricately carved bracelet is reminiscent of those worn by ancient Egyptian dancers in lively celebrations full of music. Dancers often played clappers, either by hitting them together like modern-day claves or by holding two in their hands like castanets. In fact, clappers were so closely associated with dancing that the hieroglyphic symbol for dance contains a clapper, and the rhythm of the music is embodied in a glyph meaning "palpitation of the heart." (ArtStories)

From www.britannica.com: Clappers are a musical instrument consisting of pieces of wood, bone, or metal either held in both hands or, fastened together, held in one hand, sometimes with a handle, and struck against each other. Clappers have been played throughout the world since ancient times, often with a ritual or signaling function. Varieties include spoons, bones, castanets, and small, tuned finger cymbals. Some Egyptian ivory sets (c. 2000 bc) are shaped like arms and hands, implying that clappers began as extensions of natural body sounds like hand clapping.

Egypt's New Kingdom was the 3rd Golden Age of Egypt, when it was one united country, ruled by strong and efficient kings. Large architectural sites were under construction, like the Temple of Hatshepsut and temples at Luxor. Akhenaten and Tutankhamen as well were from this Kingdom as well. (Janson, History of Art)

Music is a particularly effective medium through which to communicate, as almost anyone can appreciate it and it comes in many forms. The study of ancient Egyptian music reveals that it is filled with elements of communication: for instance, imported types of instrument suggesting trade of ideas as well as objects (the form of the lyre), and the art known as 'chironomy', whereby a series of hand-gestures would direct the musicians, akin to modern conducting. (Simmanee, University of Birmingham)

Music and Musicians in ancient Egypt: The social status of musicians is demonstrated in three ways. First are the monuments that the musicians erected or dedicated on their own, like the tomb of the flutist Ipi in Dahshur from 2600 BCE. Some musicians are mentioned or depicted on objects in the tombs of others, like the harpist Hekenu and the chantress Iti, portrayed on a false door and dating to 2470 BCE. In addition to the archaeological record, the status of musicians is obvious from their designations like 'head of a group of musicians,' sometimes even together with official or administrative titles. Texts indicate that male and female musicians were connected to the royal court or to a temple, and some female singers have the title "chantress of a god." But, like today, vocalists could also be booked by private individuals. Uniform occupational clothing for musicians is not attested. Sometimes, female musicians are depicted splendidly dressed, sometimes rather scantily. From time to time, tattoos are seen adorning female musicians. Moreover, no special hairstyle is known for Egyptian musicians.

A great number of instruments were used in Ancient Egypt. There was no musical notation system in Ancient Egypt. Therefore, no melodies are known, the Egyptian music has faded away. But song texts have survived, and the analysis of original instruments and their depictions give valuable hints. In these early periods, musical instruments were not only restricted to funerary contexts, but appear in religious settings. Which function they had in the tomb or temple rituals, or how the ceremonies were practiced, is not known. No depiction, even from later periods, shows the use of clappers at a burial. These only appear occasionally in depictions of religious feasts. In the early periods music is not attested for private entertainment, such as within domestic or family group. But this absence does not imply that music was not practiced in the private context and during everyday events, only that it was not reflected in two- and three-dimensional art. Moreover, at present there is still no evidence for music used as entertainment at the royal court. But there is evidence for music in the religious context. The practice of

religion is an important means for individual participants, since it strengthens the emergence and development of a common identity. In early Egyptian history, music as part of religious rituals might have supported the emergence of the Egyptian state as a unit. (Köpp-Junk)

In Old Kingdom tombs, it is noted that clappers were also used to provide a beat during the treading of grapes in vats during wine production. Musicians beating a rhythm with clappers are seen sitting and facing each other inside a circle or perhaps on a platform in numerous tomb paintings. By the New Kingdom, though, no musicians with clappers are depicted in wine production. (Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology, page 587)

A note on the provenance of the clappers: The 1970 UNESCO Convention established a documented provenance benchmark, meaning all artworks purchased after this date need a complete record of ownership. For artworks whose provenance has been established but cannot be substantiated, a list was set up to allow the country of origin to file a claim for returning the work. Mia put these clappers on the list, as there is no precise date of acquisition or documentary confirmation of their provenance prior to 1990. Egypt could claim them if proof emerges that they were illegally obtained. (ArtStories)

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

These delicately carved forearms, found in a three-thousand-year-old ancient Egyptian tomb, are percussive instruments. Their curved shape and matching growth lines show that they were made from a single hippopotamus tusk, sawed down the middle into two equal pieces. Music was an important part of ceremonies and banquets in ancient Egypt, and the noise of clapping, banging, and rattling was thought to drive away hostile forces. While we will never know exactly how ancient Egyptian music sounded, there are hieroglyphs and wall paintings that show us how these *clappers* were played: struck together just as one would clap hands.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Pair of Clappers, ArtStories, Mia: <https://artstories.artsmia.org/#/o/115320>

Pair of Clappers, Louvre: <https://www.louvre.fr/en/oeuvre-notices/pair-clappers>

History of Art by HW Janson

Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology, Ed. by Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Shaw, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Heidi Köpp-Junk, *The Earliest Music in Ancient Egypt*, *The Ancient Near East Today*, January 2018, Vol. VI, No. 1: <http://asorblog.org/2018/01/16/earliest-music-ancient-egypt/>

Eleanor Simmance, *Communication Through Music in Ancient Egyptian Religion*, University of Birmingham: <https://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/connections/Essays/ESimmance.aspx>

Clappers: <https://www.britannica.com/art/clapper-musical-instrument>

Pair of clappers from British Museum, with Hathor shown:

