

Egyptian Faience

History

The earliest faience workshop was found located at Abydos, dating 5500 BCE and continues to occur in various forms in our present day. It may have been invented in the ancient Near East due to the development of alkaline glazes on quartz stones. However, its technological refinement was accomplished in Egypt. Earliest faience objects were beads, small temple offering and royal tomb objects. Faience can also be found inlaid into furniture and into walls as tomb and temple decorations.

The color choice is also of importance because Egyptian faience might have been developed to simulate highly prized materials and rare semi-precious stones like turquoise, allowing them to make a variety of objects covered in the shiny, bright blue glaze. Objects created with faience were closely linked to fertility and were considered magical as they appeared to be filled with the undying shimmer of the sun. Therefore, objects with faience came to be associated with the power of rebirth, fertility, life, and the gleaming qualities of the sun.

Description

It is called "Egyptian faience" to distinguish it from the tin-glazed pottery from Faenza, Italy. Egyptian faience is a ceramic material that contains silica sourced from quartz pebbles and sand, and a translucent glaze that is commonly turquoise blue or green in color. This glaze must be fired in a kiln at a temperature ranging between 1598°F (870°C) and 1688°F (920°C).

Faience also contains other components including water soluble alkaline salts, such as sodium carbonate (soda ash and soda crystals), and lime. Importance was placed on this medium because of the brilliant blue color that could be created with those humble materials. These dry materials are ground to a fine powder and mixed with water to form a thick paste that is formed into a shape. As soon as the paste is formed, it's good to note the difference between faience and clay.

Faience is thixotropic, which means that the paste appears to be solid but becomes more fluid and slumps as it is modeled. A good point of reference is a paste made from corn starch and water exhibit similar behavior. Faience is also non-plastic, it cracks when bent and has little ability to support its own weight. Because of these physical properties, faience cannot be treated with the same technique as potters clay.

Throwing faience on a wheel to make vessels is possible, but this technique was only used to a limited extent. Small amulet and beads could be formed by hand-modeling, but one of the most common ways to shape faience was with clay molds. This is evidenced by the multitude of faience molds found in archaeological record.

The paste can also be worked into a slab by shaking and patting to create flat objects such as inlays or tiles. Another technique for working with faience is to form the paste around an organic core that burns away during firing. A layer of paste was either modeled around the combustible core or it was dipped into a slurry (a semi-liquid mixture) of faience ingredients. For example, there's evidence of hollow faience fruit that were made by coating actual fruits! The holes in these objects correspond to where the stem was located.

Larger objects made of Egyptian faience do exist but are less common because such objects would have been more challenging to create. To bypass this, these objects were likely hand-modeled rather than made in molds. Strategic methods, such as modeling separate parts that were then partially dried and joined together, would likely have been used. Therefore, examples of large faience objects indicate a high level of mastery of the medium and reflect the maker's intimate expertise of the material and the firing methods needed.

Source

Riccardelli, Carolyn. "Egyptian Faience: Technology and Production." Metmuseum.org, Dec. 2017, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/egfc/hd_egfc.htm.

Sunken Cities Connection

Parts of a foundation deposit from the temple of Khonsu-Thoth. Thonis-Heracleion.

Wood and faience, XXXth dynasty. Naos in wood, height 13 cm. Faience amulets: Harpocrates, height 7.9 cm; Papyrus column, height 13 cm; double hes-vase, height 7.3 cm; Shu, height 5.8 cm; wadjet eye, height 4 cm. uraei, height 4.2 cm; faience plaque, length 8.4 cm.

This deposit, composed of a child god with his small wooden naos surrounded by amulets, was discovered in the northeast corner of the Khonsu temple, which stood in the northern area of the grand temple of Amun-Gereb at Thonis-Heracleion, and which was active from the early 4th century until the middle second century BC. Apart from the wooden naos, the remarkably fine faience objects, all in the same style were manifestly made at the same time and with the intention of being placed together.

The juvenile god, standing in the nude and wearing a uraeus is recognized by the classical lock of hair on one side and the finger to his mouth.

The amulets that surround the young god, turquoise green before the sea watered altered their color, protect and to give new life to him: a double vase (purification by the water of the Nile), a little papyrus column (revitalization and health), the god Shu bearing the sun on his head, to support heaven (the cosmic god controlling the stars and therefore the god of destiny protecting the sun's heir), uraei (rising cobras) and a wadjet eye (wholeness of body).

Source

“In the Sacred Barque: From the Temple of Amun-Gereb at Heracleion.” Osiris: Egypt's Sunken Mysteries, by Franck Goddio et al., Flammarion, 2018, p. 76.

Connection to Collection

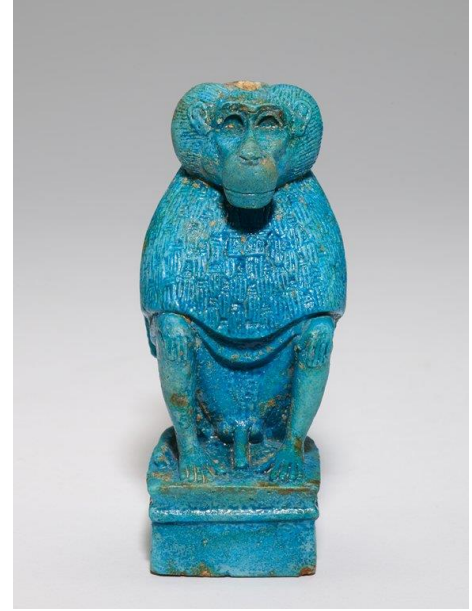


This broad collar with falcon head terminals is made of Egyptian faience, a glazed ceramic made not of clay but silica, one of the ingredients of glass. Its characteristic green color was likened to new plant shoots and was symbolic of regeneration, while its luster evoked the brilliance of the sun. Because Egyptians believed they could be reborn into the afterlife, these associations made faience the ideal material for funerary jewelry.

Broad collar, 2040-1783 BCE | Ancient Egyptian | Gallery 250

Source: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/328/broad-collar-ancient-egyptian>

Monkeys were kept as costly pets by the elite in ancient Egypt, yet their regal appearance and imposing presence also made them useful representations of gods in the Egyptian religion. The baboon was usually associated with Thoth, one of the moon gods. This animal has a hole in the crown that once held a lunar disk sitting on top of a crescent moon, an attribute of Thoth. For a 2,600-year-old artwork it is in remarkable condition, and though the animal is small in size, its posture and expression command authority.



Baboon (Moon God Thoth) | 7th - 6th century BCE | Ancient Egyptian | Gallery 250

Source: <https://collections.artsmia.org/art/126884/baboon-egypt>