

COLNAGHI



Mummy Case
Egyptian, Ptolemaic Period, 320 - 30 B.C.

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EGYPTIAN

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MUMMY CASE

Cartonnage

42 cm (with stand)

16 1/2 in.

Provenance

Private collection, France;
Beaussant Lefèvre, Paris, France, 23 May 2014, lot 6;
Private Collection, UK;
Private Collection, Belgium.



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This fragment of painted cartonnage preserves a broad, sweeping wing, its long flight-feathers laid out in overlapping registers and rendered in vivid turquoise, deep red and golden yellow over crisp black outlines, the whole spread across the chalk-white ground of the gessoed surface. The feathers are drawn with great assurance, the outermost row long and tapering, the inner rows shorter and banded, so that the wing seems to arc and unfurl across the panel. At the upper left survive the remains of a further motif in red, white and yellow, in the form of a small cellular grid, suggesting the beadwork of a broad collar, bordered by a band of yellow and blue-green. The broken edges expose the fibrous linen-and-plaster core of the material, and, despite the losses, the pigments retain an extraordinary freshness, their colours scarcely dimmed by the passage of more than two thousand years.

Cartonnage was the characteristic material for Egyptian mummy-cases. Layers of linen (or discarded papyrus) were stiffened with plaster and moulded to shape into a pliable substance not unlike papier-mâché, which was then coated with a white ground and painted. By the Ptolemaic Period, the covering of the mummy was typically composed of a set of separate cartonnage panels rather than a single case: a mask with gilded or painted face and blue wig, a broad collar across the chest, panels over the torso and legs, and a case for the feet. The present fragment, with its great wing and the vestige of a collar, belongs to the chest region of such an ensemble.

Mummy cases were often decorated with apotropaic and protective imagery. Over the breast of the mummy lay the *usekh*, the broad beaded collar, frequently closed with falcon-head terminals that invoked the god Horus and, crowned with the sun-disk, the solar god Re-Harakhty. Below it spread the wings of a tutelary deity. Often the great goddesses of the dead, Isis and Nephthys, who guarded the head and the foot, and above all the sky-goddess Nut, who stretched her winged arms across the breast, they were shown enfolding the deceased in their plumage, a gesture that promised shelter, rebirth and safe passage through the netherworld. The attributes of these goddesses were freely interchanged, and winged forms of the scarab and the sun-disk carried the same assurance of regeneration. The colours themselves carried symbolic resonance: the blue-green of turquoise and faience evoked the heavens, the waters and the renewal of life, gold the imperishable flesh of the gods and the light of the sun, and red the force of vitality and protection.

Our fragment belongs to the Ptolemaic age, when Egypt was ruled by the Macedonian dynasty descended from Alexander's general Ptolemy, and when the ancient funerary religion continued to flourish beneath the new Greek order, its cartonnage more brightly and elaborately painted than ever. Even reduced to a single wing, the piece preserves both the consummate decorative sense of the Egyptian craftsman and the enduring promise at the heart of the funerary art, the sheltering embrace of divine wings extended over the dead.

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