



MONUMENTAL HEAD OF SEKHMET

*Egypt (probably from Karnak)
New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty, 1550-1292 BC
Granite
Height: 63 cm*

The goddess is wearing a striated tripartite wig covering her mane, the stylized whiskers and ruff are carved in shallow relief. A dorsal pillar backs the sun disk, which has a channel for the insertion of a bronze cobra uraeus, now missing.

Sekhmet was the most important of Egypt's leonine deities. She was originally a Memphite goddess who came to be associated with the Theban goddess Mut. She had two distinct facets to her personality, on the one hand a dangerous and destructive aspect and on the other a protective and healing aspect. Her name means 'powerful' or 'the female powerful one'. Because Sekhmet was said to breathe fire against her enemies, the hot desert winds were referred to as the 'breath of Sekhmet'. She was typically depicted with a human female body sheathed in a tight-fitting gown and a lion's head often crowned with a sun disk.

Most surviving large-scale images of Sekhmet were sculpted during the reign of Amenhotep III, 1391-1353 BC. More than 600 seated and standing statues of the goddess survived from this period. They were originally set up within Amenhotep III's Temple of Mut at Karnak, as well as in the king's mortuary temple in western Thebes. Perhaps 365 Sekhmet statues were on the east bank of the Nile and served the daytime while a similar number on the west bank served the night. Her statues required the ritual performance of liturgies twice daily.

Provenance

Former private collection Y. P., France, acquired in 1975 in Luxor, Egypt

Literature

*Kozloff, Bryan, and Berman, "Royal and Divine Images in Animal Form," for a recent discussion of these representations, Chapter VII, pp. 215-236,
A. Kozloff, Amenhotep III, Cambridge University Press, 2012*