

Amenirdas I, the Divine Consort



Artist Unknown
Egyptian; Kushite (Nubian)

Amenirdas I, the Divine Consort
Third Intermediate Period, 25th Dynasty, 700 BCE
granite, height: 25 1/4 inches. Museum Purchase

Amenirdas I, the Divine Consort is a black granite frontal fragment of a full-length female portrait statue. The high standard of commemorative portrait sculpture maintained during the Late Period (700 BCE to 100 AD) is reflected in this work. It also demonstrates the independence, position of responsibility, and respect commanded by certain women in ancient Egyptian society. The Napatan style recognized as an early stage of Nubian art is characterized by rectilinear abstraction and stressed angularity of the figure's face, arms, and fingers. Nubian ethnicity is apparent from the broadened facial features. Her eyebrows and other cosmetic lines surrounding the eyes are drawn in heavy relief. Also evident is the "Kushite fold," or the curving line that extends from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth, accentuating the fleshing cheeks.

Amenirdas I, the Divine Consort wears a simple sheath dress with halter straps that cover her breasts. A heavy tripartite (three-part) wig topped with a crown formed by a ring of uraeus (sacred serpents) or cobras reflects the calm majesty for which the best of pharaonic sculpture is renowned. A uraeus once adorned her brow, but is now broken, as is the tip of her nose. Her right arm is missing below the elbow while only the upper left arm remains. She holds a lily scepter in her left hand, symbolizing Upper Egypt, and it also often described as a lotus (symbol of femininity). Hieroglyphic signs carved into the back of the sculpture form part of a title proclaiming her as the Mistress of Upper and Lower Egypt.

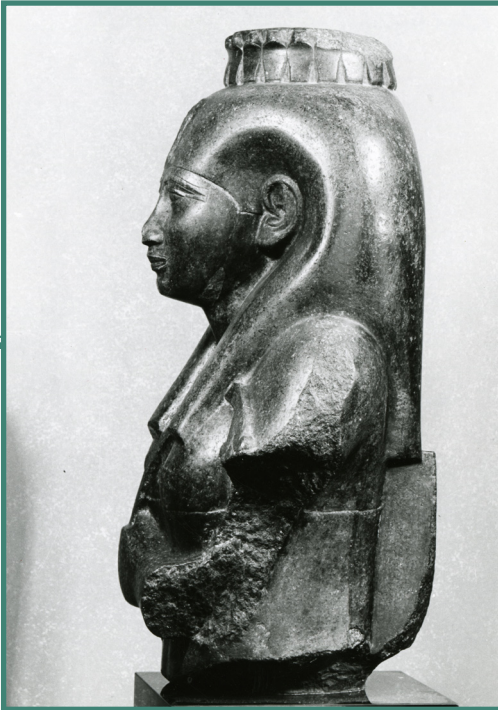
Provenance

- The sculpture was brought from Egypt to Paris by General Le Marois (Comte le Marois) during the Napoleonic campaigns c. 1801.
- The sculpture stayed in the general's family in Normandy until it was acquired from his great-grandson by Paul Mallon, the collector.
- Mallon sold the piece to Joslyn Art Museum in 1953.

When Amenirdas first arrived at Joslyn Art Museum in 1953, she had been misidentified as the goddess Isis, the queen of the gods in Egyptian mythology. Dr. Bernard Bothmer, assistant curator in the department of ancient art at the Brooklyn Museum, and former director of the American Research Center in Egypt, traveled to Joslyn in 1958. His intention was to view the bust as he planned to borrow it for a special exhibition, *Egyptian Sculpture of the Late Period*, at his museum in 1960. He discovered the gaffe and revealed her true identity as Princess Amenirdas I. Three clues led Dr. Bothmer to the conclusion: 1. The crown of cobras—"most often a regal attribute in Egyptian art and is not usually a godly attribute;" 2. She holds a lotus scepter; 3. The inscription on the back is "practically identical to the inscriptions" on the other known Amenirdas depictions. When the show opened in 1960, Joslyn's *Amenirdas I, the Divine Consort* greeted museum visitors at the first international show of Egyptian art held in the United States.

Discussion Questions

- What themes can be identified in ancient Egyptian art?
- How were women perceived in ancient Egypt?
- Why do you think this sculpture of Amenirdas I was created?
- Discuss the connection between the material chosen for this sculpture with the idea of permanence in ancient Egyptian beliefs.
- Why was it important for Egyptians to be sustainable?
- Why is provenance important when studying ancient objects?



PRINCESS AMENIRDAS I: Deciphering the Back Panel



What... is the office of the Divine Consort?

In ancient Egyptian periods, women had opportunities to serve and, at different times throughout the history of ancient Egypt, received income for their pastoral support in various cults. The Divine Consort was the supreme religious office of the land of Thebes, and the female who held this position was also considered the earthly bride of the state god, Amen. History shows that in the Middle Kingdom, Queen Ahmose-Neferetari, from the 18th Dynasty, was known to be the first "God's Wife." During the New Kingdom, the Divine Consort was married to the king and bore his children, however, the God's Wife in the Third Intermediate Period remained celibate and passed the title on to her adopted heir. This prevented dynastic control over the priestly office.

When Amenirdas arrived in the spiritual capital of Thebes, Shepenupet I, who was the daughter of the last native king, held the Divine Consort position. Due to the Kushite conquest, Shepenupet I was obliged to adopt princess Amenirdas. Then by nature of this relationship, Amenirdas inherited this most powerful female priesthood position and was

installed as God's Wife. Amenirdas I, as she was known since becoming the Divine Consort, was the first Kushite female to hold this title.

As God's Wife, the Divine Consort was responsible for officiating at daily temple ritual. Male equivalents, "God's Fathers," were priests of Amen. Together, they would stand behind the king on the approach to the Great God Amen-Ra's sanctuary. God's Wife was allowed to cleanse in the sacred lake and join the high priest to burn effigies of the king's enemies. Other duties included calling the gods to meals and representing the royal family. Considering their importance to the government, the God's Wife served as regent in the royal rulers' absence. She was also charged with supervising various tradespeople such as bakers, brewers, gold workers, storehouse keepers, and treasurers. During the 450 year long Third Intermediate Period, Egypt was politically disjointed, and it was at this time the office of God's Wife gained great political power as well as religious importance.



The Story of a Princess and Her People



As early as 7000 BCE, farming communities had settled along the banks of the Nile River sustained by predictable, annual floodwaters that soaked the earth and left behind a fresh deposit of rich dark silt. The "Gift of the Nile" – its life sustaining and predictable rebirth year after year – defined ancient Egypt.

As early as 3100 BCE, with the unification of Upper Egypt in the south and Lower Egypt in the north, Egypt was ruled by pharaohs (kings) whose divine power was periodically threatened. Perhaps it was ancient Egypt's enviable stability and fertile land that made her susceptible to attacks from other nations such as the Assyrians, Romans, Libyans, and Kushites, all of whom wanted to conquer and gain control of this rich and productive land.

The land south of the Nile's first cataract near Aswan, now southern-most Egypt and Sudan, was called Nubia. To the Egyptians, this area was known as Kush. For years Egypt exploited Nubia's natural resources of gold, copper, and semi-precious gems. They profited from Nubian mines and imported captives for labor and slave markets. Countless artworks from ancient Egypt illustrate the natural resources of Nubia – especially the Egyptians' desire for gold – and the degree to which Nubians adopted Egyptian culture.

The invasion of Egypt by the Hyksos (HIK-soh) c. 1600 BCE severely weakened Egyptian authority and opened the door for the Kushites who seized the opportunity to expand their own power. They took control of the trade routes and enjoyed considerable cultural expansion. Once the Hyksos were expelled, however, the Egyptian kings regained their footing and re-colonized Nubia. During the 18th and 19th dynasties of the New Kingdom (1550-1070 BCE), Egyptians asserted their dominance by building imposing temples throughout the

land. Ramses II's colossal rock-cut tomb at Abu Simbel, for example, adorned with four huge seated statues of the god-king, proclaimed to the Nubians his authority as well as his identification with the gods Amon and Ra.

The Kushite King Kashta (KAHSH-tuh), a devoted follower of the god Amen (sometimes written as Amun or Amon), started the Egyptian invasion along with his sons Piankhi (pee-AHNG-kee) and Shabako (SHAH-ba-kuh).

In 730 BCE troops commanded by Piankhi stormed the great walled city of Memphis with flaming arrows. Claiming the same divine right as the Egyptian pharaohs, Piankhi triumphed over the northern chiefs, united all Egypt under Nubian rule, and ushered in an era of artistic development and political influence.

Piankhi was the first of the so-called black pharaohs—a series of Nubian kings who ruled over all of Egypt for almost a century. He became first foreigner in a thousand years to rule such a large part of Egypt. His reign marked the beginning of the Late Period (730 BCE to 100 AD) as well as recognized the family as 25th dynasty.

Amenirdas (ah-MEN-ir-das, sometimes written as Amenirdis), daughter of King Kashta, arrived in Egypt with the invasion of her brother King Piankhi who positioned her as his regent in Thebes, the spiritual capital of Egypt. At the time of the conquest, Shepenupet I (sometimes written as Shepenwepet), the daughter of the last native king, Osorkon III, adopted Amenirdas, lending legitimacy to her brother's claim of the house of Kush to the kingship of Egypt. Once installed as the Divine Consort, the supreme religious office in the land, she was known as Amenirdas I, the earthly bride of the state god, Amen. She held this position from about 730 to 701 BCE ruling jointly with Shepenupet I the first thirteen years.

After 80 years, the dynasty was eventually conquered. One of the legacies of the Kushites is a rebirth of Egyptian portrait sculpture. Prior to their rule, sculpture embellished tombs, but under the Kushites it was



The only two other known sculptures of Amenirdas are located in Cairo, Egypt, and Sydney, Australia. *Amenirdis (Amonirdis) from Kamak* (pictured) is thought to be Ethiopian in origin, as the heavy lines suggest, and the figure harkens back to the 18th Dynasty's appeal of female sculptures.

Amenirdis (Amonirdis) from Kamak is as a life-size statue in which she is cloaked in a tightly fitting robe. Upon her head is a long wig of curls with three uraei and a crown of the sacred snakes. Most likely, the top of the crown was finished with the sun-disk, the horns of the Hathor cow and the double feathers of Amun. In her left hand, the Divine Consort holds a bent flail, and in her right hand, which hangs by her side, she holds a bead collar. Her ankles and wrists are decorated with ornamental bracelets.

Egyptian. *Amenirdis (Amonirdis) from Kamak*. New Kingdom, 25th Dynasty, alabaster, height: 66 inches. Egyptian Museum of Cairo.

placed in temples to inspire awe. Another important stylistic difference with Nubian portraiture is an interest in individual character rather than the idealization of a figure. To achieve an image in stone, the skilled craftsman would pound, hammer, and bruise the granite using stone tools. The final step in production involved polishing the stone with quartz sand to produce a desired luster.

Royal women such as Amenirdas I, who held the Divine Consort position, commissioned a number of monumental inscriptions as well as funerary monuments and tombs. One of the best examples is the chapel of Amenirdis I at Medinet Habu containing exceptional raised relief decoration. The inscriptions identify her as the Mistress of Upper and Lower Egypt.



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THIRD INTERMEDIATE PERIOD, 25TH DYNASTY, 700 B.C.E.

GRANITE, MUSEUM PURCHASE

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