THE EGYPTIAN MOTHER GODDESS

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One of the chief duties of the craftsman in ancient Egypt was to produce statues, both large and small, of kings, gods, and sacred animals for the decoration of temples or tombs and also for use as votive offerings and amulets. Religious considerations demanded that such figures be in traditional, conventional style, and we assume from the few extant scenes of craftsmen at work that they were made in large workshops, usually under the control of the state or the temple. Even in the details of technique there was little freedom for the individual artist. Yet each man must have taken some degree of pleasure and pride in the perfection of his workmanship, whether he was carving wood or stone. In the case of the sculptors of stone, their mastery of their material has never been excelled, and it is still a matter of wonder how they worked their hard stones without steel tools.

In looking at much of the religious sculpture a certain education of the eye is necessary to recognize its full value. But there is one type of statue that does not need a trained eye to be appreciated, since its appeal is through its subject matter rather than its form. This is the figure of the goddess Isis, sister and wife of Osiris, the supreme god of eternity, suckling their son, Horus. It was one of the favorite representations of this goddess, who symbolized motherhood and the faithful wife, and it has something of the charm of early European madonnas. There are examples made of various materials in almost every Egyptian collection. Figures cast in bronze, sometimes inlaid with other metals, are the most common. Figures made of faience occur more often as amulets than as statuettes. Stone suitable for carving was also used, as in a pale green serpentine statuette recently acquired by the Museum (ill. on the opposite page).

In accordance with his belief that the gods and goddesses were not so very different from human beings in appearance, the Egyptian sculptor showed the goddess Isis wearing the long, close-fitting, sleeveless garment that was the common dress of Egyptian women from early times. Her hair or wig, which is separated into a larger mass hanging down her back and two smaller masses brought forward over her shoulders, is covered with a striped, fitted headcloth to protect it. On her forehead is the uraeus, a symbol of royalty, and around her neck a broad, bead collar with drop pendants. Her crown, made in a separate piece, possibly of metal, and attached by means of the tenon on the top of her head, is missing. It was probably the hieroglyph for her name, the “seat” or “throne,” seen on the two faience statuettes on page 242, which was her distinctive headdress. Or it may have been the solar disk between cow’s horns, which was more commonly worn by the goddess Ḥat-Ḥör. As the headdress of Isis it usually occurs on bronze figures like the one shown in the center. As we shall see, the two goddesses were often identified with each other. The child god Horus is represented nude, according to the custom of allowing young children to run about without clothing. On the right side of his otherwise shaven head is the heavy, braided side lock customarily worn by small boys, and on his forehead is a uraeus. Around his neck on a cord hangs a double-pear-shaped amulet such as Egyptian babies wore for their protection.

The idea of the mother goddess shows itself first in Egypt in the crudely modeled women’s figures connected with some form of primitive fertility or nourishment cult. Such figures were placed in graves, serving as charms to ensure the care and protection of the dead. At the beginning of dynastic history the mother figure
The goddess Isis with the child Horus. Serpentine, Saite period. Rogers Fund, 1945. Height 5 3/4 inches

was linked with the goddess Ḥat-Ḥōr. Ḥat-Ḥōr, whose name means "House of Horus," that is, the abode of the sun god, was the goddess of the sky. In primitive Egyptian art the sky was represented as a huge cow, and Ḥat-Ḥōr often appeared in that form. As food-producer she was looked upon as the divine representative of women and appears early in Egyptian history as the patron deity of the southern people who unified Egypt about 3200 B.C. From this time on there is evidence that these mother-goddess figures were worshiped and were used either as votive offerings or charms.

Although representations of the mother goddess suckling her baby are rare before Late Dynastic times, there are many examples of the king being suckled by Ḥat-Ḥōr or by the other chief goddesses, and particularly by Isis, who in process of time had gained first place in general veneration. The king, since he considered himself a divine heir, became identified with Horus, and eventually the privilege once enjoyed by
Faience and bronze statuettes of Isis and Horus. LEFT, from the Carnarvon collection, Gift of Edward S. Harkness, 1926; CENTER, Gift of David Dows, 1945; RIGHT, Purchase, Rogers Fund, 1944, formerly in the collection of J. P. Morgan. Height of center figure 7½ inches

royalty alone—divine nourishment—was extended to the owners of the votive statuettes. By Late Dynastic times—about 600 to 30 B.C.—when the serpentine statuette on page 241 was made, many people owned such figures, and the Isis-Horus group is among the objects that have come down to us in greatest numbers from that period. Thus the history of the mother goddess is seen to range throughout the length of ancient Egyptian history.

The hieroglyphic inscriptions around the base of the serpentine statuette bear out the charm idea, that is, the protection of Isis. They show that the figure was made for a man named ĈAnkh-Ĥör (meaning “Horus lives”). The inscription on the right reads: “Isis says: ‘I give life and health to ĈAnkh-Ĥör, son of Pe-rekh-Ba-neb-Djedet, born of Heryet-ib.’ ” On the left the inscription is: “The Great Mother of the God (Isis) says: ‘I give life and health to ĈAnkh-Ĥör, begotten of Heryet-ib.’ ” The names of the owner and his mother are common in the Late Dynastic period, and in that same period names similar to the father’s are known. The fact that Ba, the ram god of the city of Mendes in the Delta, is a part of the father’s name may indicate that the owner of the statuette lived there. Nothing is known of its finding place, and in any case such figures have rarely been found where they were made or used.