

Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, Case 11 (2022-2023) Egyptian Limestone Group Statue for Mehernefer and his son, Old Kingdom, c.2400-2300 B.C.	
Statement from Expert Adviser	<p>Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the statue meets Waverley criteria one, two, and three.</p> <p>See below</p>
Statement from the Applicant	<p>Statement from the applicant referencing the three Waverley criteria against which the Committee will consider whether an item referred to it is of national importance.</p> <p><i>a) Is it so closely connected with our history and national life that its departure would be a misfortune?</i></p> <p><i>b) Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance?</i></p> <p><i>c) Is it of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history?</i></p> <p>The applicant did not dispute that the object met the Waverley Criteria.</p>
Note of case hearing	See below
Press release	<p>A press release was issued by the Secretary of State on 19 January 2023</p> <p>https://www.gov.uk/government/news/ancient-egyptian-sculpture-at-risk-of-leaving-uk</p>
Recommended price	£6,014,500
1st Deferral period	18 May 2023
2nd Deferral period	
Note of outcome	See below

RCEWA – Egyptian Limestone Group Statue for Mehernefer and his son, Old Kingdom, c.2400-2300 B.C.

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the statue meets Waverley criteria one, two, and three.

Please note that images and appendices referenced are not reproduced.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of object(s)

What is it? Egyptian group statue for Mehernefer and his son, Old Kingdom, c. 2400–2300 B.C.

What is it made of? Limestone

What are its measurements? Height: 64.5 cm. Width and depth not stated in the catalogue.

Who is the artist/maker and what are their dates? Anonymous

What date is the object? Old Kingdom, mid- to late 5th Dynasty, c. 2400–2300 BC

What condition is it in? Heavily restored from badly broken fragments, with some artistic licence. A third figure, or what remained of it, existed to Mehernefer's left and represented his wife. The latter's figure was cut away, more likely in modern than ancient times, because the hieroglyphic caption identifying the seated man was destroyed in the process.

2. Context

Provenance:

Most probably originally from a tomb in Saqqara, because the statue is stylistically datable to the late 5th Dynasty, when kings had their pyramids built in Saqqara, surrounded by the tombs of courtiers.

Sir James Porter (1710–1786), Ambassador to the Sublime Porte of the Ottoman Empire in 1746–1762, Constantinople, by whom the statue was presented to the following.

George III, King of England (1738–1820), by whom the statue was given to the following.

Thomas Worsley (1711–1778), Hovingham Hall.

Thence by descent

Christie's sale (London) of 7 July 2022, lot 10. The price realised is £6,014,500.

Key literary and exhibition references:

Not previously published or exhibited, except in the Christie's sale catalogue. However, the piece is described in Thomas Worsley's 1778 catalogue of works of art at Hovingham Hall as 'Two Egyptian idols Isis & Osiris brought by Sir James Porter from Constantinople & given by him to King George III who gave them to me.'

3. Waverley criteria

Which of the Waverley criteria does the object meet?

All three criteria apply.

Very briefly why?

The statue is of outstanding significance for the branches of Egyptology, art-history, and the study of early human societies.

It is strongly connected to Britain's modern history. The statue was first acquired by Sir James Porter (1710–1786), Ambassador to the Sublime Porte of the Ottoman Empire in 1746–1762, Constantinople. He presented it to George III, King of England (1738–1820), who in turn presented it to Thomas Worsley (1711–1778), Hovingham Hall (thence by descent to the present owner).

This is one of the first Egyptian antiquities to have reached British shores, well before the birth of Egyptology in 1822 with the decipherment of the hieroglyphic script. The statue's acquisition was also well before Egypt became a popular destination for early British and European travellers.

The United Kingdom is home to only a handful of stone figures from Egypt's Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BC). This means that there is almost no sculpture in this country from one of the world's first flourishings of human civilisation.

The statue's workmanship is exceptional, and its iconography highly unusual.

DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of object(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

What does it depict?

The statue group represents a seated man and his son, who stands beside him to almost the same height. The son is represented naked, wears a 'youth lock', and holds the index finger of his right hand to his mouth. In the modern restoration, the

son places his left hand on the father's right shoulder. It should be noted, however, that the latter's wife was probably once shown standing to his left, and it may well have been her who originally placed her right hand on the father's right shoulder, exactly as seen in a very similar statue group now preserved in the Brooklyn Museum, evidently a work by the same sculptor:

<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/3544>. Note that the Christie's catalogue states that, also in the Brooklyn statue, the hand on the seated man's shoulder belongs to the son; the placement of the thumb makes clear that that hand belongs to the wife. In the Christie's statue, a hieroglyphic inscription on the base to the father's left, now almost completely lost, gives his name as [Meher]nefer, and his titles include that of 'priest of (the vulture goddess) Nekhbet'. The fully preserved inscription to his right, likewise on the base, identifies the son by the same name. The younger Mehernefer, while iconographically defined as a child, served already as a 'priest of (the snake goddess) Wadjet' and as an 'agent of the king in Nubia', a partly colonised region to the south of Egypt. It is worth noting that the goddesses Nekhbet and Wadjet were associated with kingship over Upper and Lower Egypt, respectively; the pair appear together, for example, on the forehead of Tutankhamun's gold mask.

What does it tell us about that period?

The statue is a masterpiece, informing us on the high quality of sculpture accomplished by artists active in Memphis, then Egypt's capital.

Who made it/painted it/wrote it?

We will probably never know the identity of the sculptor responsible, as Egyptian artists did not normally sign their works.

Number of comparable objects by the same artist already in the UK, in both public and private collections?

The artist's hand can be recognised in other sculptures of the same date, including a second group statue at Hovingham Hall, as well as the aforementioned statue in the Brooklyn Museum.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the object(s).

Significance of figures associated with the object(s): maker/client/owners?

The maker cannot be identified by name because it is nowhere preserved. The man who commissioned this statue and the one held at Hovingham Hall is unknown to us from other sources, but he and his son held clearly high status within Egyptian society. Both belonged to the king's entourage, as can be deduced from the quality of the statues (pointing at a state-controlled workshop) and from their titles. Father and son were priests of Nekhbet and Wadjet, the heraldic

goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt, which together comprised the king's realm. From the statue in Hovingham Hall, we know that the father held ceremonial duties in the city of Nekheb (now called Elkab), which was Nekhbet's cult centre. The present statue tells us that the son was moreover an official involved in the administration of southernmost Egypt and Nubia during the late Old Kingdom. This means that he would have played a key role in the management of trade and mining expeditions.

Significance of subject-matter?

The statue is of outstanding quality and holds considerable interest both for its artistic merit and its unusual iconography:

In Egyptian sculpture, a child is not normally represented on the same scale as the parents; children are usually depicted in miniature. The only parallel for this of which I am currently aware is the aforementioned statue in the Brooklyn Museum, which was made by the same sculptor. The pose of affection seen in our statue, with one of the son's hands resting on the father's shoulder, is also noteworthy, but the Brooklyn parallel has raised my suspicion that the restoration is incorrect here. The statue is of exceptional art-historical interest, due not only to its aesthetic appeal and design, but also to its being attributable to the same Old Kingdom artist as a handful of other statues. A third statue, now in Brooklyn and collected by an American Egyptologist in the early 19th century, is likewise attributable to our sculptor, but it likely derives from a different tomb. Egyptian works of art were not signed by their makers, so the only way to detect and trace the work of the same hand is through the meticulous study of works to spot recurrent combinations of diagnostic traits.

The statue holds exceptional charm and aesthetic appeal, as well as offering significant educational potential to wider audiences. The father and son's titles provide important clues about the organisation of Egyptian society, and about the status, resource control and influence of the men depicted.

Significance of materials/process/usage?

The statue is of limestone, the material of choice for private sculpture from the Old Kingdom. It was originally placed in a tomb.

Is/are the object(s) of local/regional/national importance?

As mentioned, apart from its close connection with British history since the 18th century, the statue is important aesthetically and archaeologically. Stone sculpture from Old Kingdom Egypt, and thus of early civilisation in general, is poorly represented in the UK.

Summary of related objects in public/private ownership in the UK

As mentioned, the artist's hand can be recognised in other sculptures of the same date, including a second group statue at Hovingham Hall, which was acquired at the same time. The two statues were undoubtedly commissioned simultaneously for the same tomb. Together they represent three generations of the same ancient family.

Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, note of case hearing on 9 November 2022: Egyptian Limestone Group Statue for Mehernefer and his son, Old Kingdom, c.2400-2300 B.C. (Case 11, 2022-23)

Application

1. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (the Committee) met on 9 November 2022 to consider an application to export an Egyptian Limestone Group Statue for Mehernefer and his son, Old Kingdom, c.2400-2300 B.C. The value shown on the export licence application was £6,014,500 which represented the hammer price at auction of £5,000,000 plus the buyer's premium of £1,014,500. The expert adviser had objected to the export of the statue under all three of the Waverley criteria on the grounds that its departure from the UK would be a misfortune because (i) it was so closely connected with our history and national life (ii) it was of outstanding aesthetic importance and (iii) it was of outstanding significance for the study of Egyptology, art-history and early human societies.

2. Seven Committee members and two independent assessors, acting as temporary members of the Committee joined in person and inspected the object on the day of the hearing. One Committee member and one independent assessor joined remotely having viewed the object before the hearing on 4 November 2022. The Chairman explained that the binding offers mechanism was applicable for this case.

3. The applicant was informed that there was currently an interim process in place for Committee hearings. The Committee was still holding hybrid meetings but any Committee members, including the independent assessors, were required to attend in person and inspect the object under consideration prior to discussing the case and voting. Any permanent Committee members or independent assessors who were not able to view the object in person were not able to vote.

4. It was established at the meeting that the value did not include VAT and that VAT of £202,900 on the buyer's premium would be payable in the event of a UK sale which could be structured in such a way to enable an eligible UK institution to reclaim it. It was also established that there would be a benefit from a tax free private treaty sale to a UK institution. The applicant confirmed that the owner understood the circumstances under which an export licence might be refused.

Expert's comments

5. The expert adviser stated that they had nothing to add to their submission. When questioned about the extent and time period of restoration of the statue, the expert replied that it was difficult to differentiate restoration from the original work without intensive inspection, which had not yet been possible. Further to

this, it was unknown whether this affected the placement of the hand on the father's shoulder, as it would have been reassembled from fragments, and the amount of restoration was not totally known.

Applicant's comments

6. The applicant did not contest the opinion that this item met the Waverley criteria.

Discussion by the Committee

7. The expert adviser and applicant retired and the Committee discussed the case. They agreed that this was a fascinating Old Kingdom sculpture of extremely high quality and completeness with a distinguished history in British collections. The rarity of the pose, in particular the prominence of the son standing nearly as tall as his father, was highly unusual.

8. The Committee then discussed the statue's importance within British national history. They noted the inclusion in the collection of King George III, and that it was extremely rare for any antiquity to have a royal connection, and the statue shed important light on George III's collecting policies early in his reign. Overall, they agreed that this was a statue of outstanding aesthetic importance, and that it met all three of the Waverley criteria.

Waverley Criteria

9. The Committee voted on whether the statue met the Waverley criteria. Of the 11 members, all voted that it met all three of the Waverley criteria. The statue was therefore found to meet the first, second and third Waverley criteria for its outstanding significance to the study of the archaeological and social history of Old Kingdom Egypt and human civilisation as well as British and Royal collecting of this material.

Matching offer

10. The Committee recommended the sum of £6,014,500 (plus VAT of £202,900) as a fair matching price.

Deferral period

11. The Committee agreed to recommend to the Secretary of State that the decision on the export licence should be deferred for an initial period of four months. At the end of the first deferral period, if the Arts Council received notification of a serious intention to raise funds with a view to making an offer to purchase the statue, the owner will have a consideration period of 15 Business Days to consider such offer(s). The Committee recommended that there should be a further deferral period of six months that would commence following the signing of an Option Agreement.

Communication of findings

12. The expert adviser and the applicant returned. The Chairman notified them of the Committee's decision on its recommendations to the Secretary of State.

13. The expert adviser agreed to act as champion if a decision on the licence was deferred by the Secretary of State.

Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest: Note of outcome: Egyptian Limestone Group Statue for Mehernefer and his son (Case 12, 2022-23)

At the end of the initial deferral period, no offer to purchase the statue had been made and we were not aware of any serious intention to raise funds. An export licence was therefore issued.