

CHRISTIE'S

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SEKHEMKA

To be Offered at Christie's London Exceptional Sale on 10 July



London – Christie's announces the Northampton *Sekhemka* (estimate: £4–6 million, *illustrated left*) will be offered in *The Exceptional Sale* in London on 10 July. Over 4,500 years old, this exceptional Egyptian painted limestone statue (29½ in./75 cm. high) dates to the Old Kingdom, Late Dynasty 5, *circa* 2400–2300 B.C. and comes probably from Saqqara in Lower Egypt

It depicts a man called Sekhemka, who we know from the inscription on the statue's base was the Inspector of the scribes of the royal court. This statue would have been placed in his tomb's chapel as a 'living image' with the depictions of offerings in carved relief around the sides of his seat sustaining his soul for eternity. His wife, Sitmerit, sits at his feet clasping his leg in a gesture of affection. On the opposite side his son Seshemnefer holds a lotus flower, the symbol of rebirth.

The sculpture was originally acquired by the 2nd Marquess of Northampton during his travels in Egypt in 1849-50 and was given to the Northampton Museum either by the 3rd or 4th Marquess of Northampton prior to 1880.

An exceptional Egyptian painted limestone statue for the Inspector of the Scribes: Sekhemka Old Kingdom, Late Dynasty 5, circa 2400–2300 B.C., estimate: £4–6 million

Georgiana Aitken, Director and Head of Antiquities, Christie's London: *"Christie's is honoured to present the Northampton Sekhemka, which ranks as the most important Egyptian sculpture ever to come to market. Sculpture from this early period in Egyptian art set the canon for all subsequent generations of Egyptian art. This sculpture, over 4,500 years old, is remarkable in terms of its exceptional quality, near perfect condition and impeccable provenance. It is unquestionably a masterpiece of Egyptian art."*

Statues such as the present lot were installed in tomb chapels accessed only by priests and members of the immediate family in order to honour their ancestors. Their chief purpose was to receive offerings that would help the departed live for eternity in the afterlife, and so they received incense and nourishment from visitors. Not intended as portraits, they served a more timeless purpose, expressing the Egyptian fundamental belief in eternal life after death.

Stylistically, these statues were crafted to give an impression of a living person caught in a moment of stillness. Rather than looking to recreate naturalistic movement, the symmetry, heavy lines and angular frontality emphasise the permanence and immortality of the subject. The conventions established during the Old Kingdom were highly influential upon all subsequent generations of ancient Egyptian art.

G. Max Bernheimer, International Head of Antiquities, Christie's, comments: *“The artistic conventions of ancient Egyptian art were strict and focused on symbolic meaning while remaining minimalist. The mixed emotions of the fear of death and hope for an ever-fulfilled afterlife are visible in the eyes and gaze of the figures in the present statue. This transcendental look, as well as the wish to show a family and couple's intimacy, is what sets Egyptian sculpture apart”*. There is one other statue of Sekhemka, Inspector of the Scribes, in the Brooklyn Museum. The similar quality of the carving links the two pieces. Both statues were brought out of Egypt at around the same time; Dr. Henry Abbott, the original owner of the Brooklyn Sekhemka, returned from Egypt in 1851.

The Northampton family made significant contributions to British intellectual life in the 19th century. As well as being part of numerous scientific associations, the family were important patrons of the arts. Spencer Joshua Alwyne Compton, 2nd Marquess of Northampton (1790-1851) was president of the Royal Society, the Geological Society, a founder member and President of the Archaeological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, and a member of the British Association for the Advancement of Science. He travelled considerably in Europe, but waited until later in life to embark on a journey to the mysterious Nile Valley. He was accompanied on his 1849 expedition to Egypt by his son and daughter and may have met another famous traveller visiting Egypt at the same time: Gustave Flaubert, who, along with Maxime Du Camp, was capturing Egypt on film for the first time with his Calotype camera.

During his travels the Marquess was enamoured by several ancient artefacts, which he acquired and sent on to the British Museum, as documented in a letter dating to the 5th of April 1850 to Samuel Birch, Keeper of the British Museum. On his return to England in 1850, and having been inspired by all he had experienced in Egypt, the Marquess presided over the annual meeting of the Archaeological Institute of Oxford between the 18th and 25th of June 1850. He dies six months later in January 1851, whereupon his son, Charles Douglas-Compton, succeeded him as 3rd Marquess of Northampton.

Christie's Top three prices at auction for an Egyptian Antiquity

An Egyptian Greywacke Isis, Late Period, Dynasty XXVI, *circa* 664-525 B.C., Christie's, London, 25 October 2012, price realised: £3,681,250

An Egyptian Limestone Statue of Ka-Nefer, Old Kingdom, Dynasty V, *circa* 2465-2323 B.C., Christie's, New York, 9 December 2005, price realised: \$2,816,000 (£1,706,328)

An Egyptian Granite Falcon, Late Period, *circa* 664-332 B.C., Christie's London, 2nd May 2013, price realised: £1,125,875