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Ancient Egypt AH51

Representations of animals

The Egyptians believed that a balanced relationship between people and animals was an essential element of the cosmic order. Animals, both domesticated and wild, were therefore a source of spirituality, companionship, and sustenance to the ancient Egyptians.





Hawk figure

This figure is probably a representation of the Egyptian god Horus. Horus is usually represented as a falcon, or a falcon-headed man. The name Horus also translates as 'falcon'.



There are lots of different forms of Horus, which are regarded as separate gods by Egyptologists. The commonly known family relationship describes Horus as the son of Isis and Osiris but in another tradition Hathor is his mother and sometimes known as his wife. Horus served many functions but is probably best known as the god of the Sky, god of War and god of Protection. This figure was carved from wood and painted with gesso.

Gesso is a primer applied to porous surfaces like wood, so that paint can be applied on top. Without this first coat, the wood would absorb the paint. The word 'gesso' comes from the Italian for chalk. The Egyptians would probably have known it by a different name at the time.

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Dolphin

This was originally a handle for an incense tray or bowl. It is made from bronze and shaped like a dolphin. This object is Romano-Egyptian and dates back to the third century. The collector who owned it acquired it in Cairo in 1932.



Dolphins are among the most intelligent animals. Their often friendly appearance and seemingly playful attitude have made them popular in human culture. Accounts exist, from both the ancient and the modern world, of dolphins helping people. In many areas of the world, dolphins co-operate with fishermen by driving fish into nets, a relationship that is often generations old. In many cultures, whales and dolphins are associated with divine powers and are seen as superior beings. In ancient Greece, to kill a dolphin was equal to killing a human and was a crime punishable by death. In Egypt, dolphins were sometimes associated with the goddess Isis.

Oil lamp

This pottery lamp is Romano-Egyptian. Lamps like this were produced all over the Greek and Roman world. It shows a winged figure driving a chariot pulled by two horned animals.



Chariot racing was one of the most popular sports in the ancient world. However, it was often dangerous to both driver and horse as they frequently suffered serious injury and even death. The image on the lamp could represent a chariot race or a mythological scene.