

Hands On Learning

with Reading Museum Service

EGYPTIAN JEWELLERY

AH41/B

This box contains some examples of jewellery from ancient Egypt. Jewellery was very popular with the Egyptians and was worn by men, women and children, rich and poor. It was worn not only for decoration but also because it was thought to magically protect the wearer. Many people were buried with their jewellery so that it could continue to protect and decorate them in the afterlife. Jewellery often had images of the gods or sacred symbols on it. Minerals and metals were also identified with certain gods or thought to bring good luck. Rich people would have worn jewellery made of rare and precious metals and stones. Especially popular materials were silver, gold, turquoise and lapis lazuli (a dark blue stone shown in the picture on the right). Poorer people would have had jewellery made of materials such as clay and faience.



Faience was made by adding lime and ash to crushed sand. Water was then added and the paste could be shaped by hand or pressed into a mould. Sometimes minerals were added to produce strong colours. The object would then be baked in a hot oven. When it was taken out of the oven it would have dramatically changed colour and developed a shiny finish. This transformation was probably one of the reasons why it was thought to be such a special, magical substance. Indeed the Egyptian word for faience was *tjehenet*, which means dazzling or gleaming. The blue-green colours on the beads in this box would have been achieved by adding copper to the mixture before it was baked. Green was especially popular as it reminded people of growing plants and therefore new life. Blue was also a favourite as it was the colour of the heavens and the life-giving waters of the river Nile.

Case 1

Blue-green coloured beads

The blue-green coloured beads on this long necklace are made of faience. Look how small and tightly packed the beads are. It must have been very difficult to drill a tiny hole in the centre of each bead so that they could be threaded onto the string. Do you think you could estimate the number of beads on this necklace?



String of red beads

The small string of red beads may have been a bracelet. It is probably made of carnelian, which is a naturally occurring gemstone found in parts of Egypt. People were attracted by its colour, which was associated with life and victory.

Cream coloured necklace

The small disc-shaped beads in this necklace are made of clay. Clay can be easily shaped when it is wet but becomes extremely hard when fired. This makes it an excellent material for making delicate beads.

Case 2

This beautiful necklace or pectoral is mainly made of faience beads. Some beads of baked clay are used as spacers. Three of the beads are in the shape of small scarabs and are decorated with designs on their undersides. The blue scarab in the centre has hieroglyphic symbols on it. The large three-part pendant is in the form of a winged scarab. Scarabs were considered to be sacred by the ancient Egyptians and images of them were thought to bring good luck. Scarab beetles lay their eggs in a ball of dung, which they then roll around. The motion of the ball being rolled reminded the Egyptians of the way the sun moves across the sky. Indeed, the Egyptian god of the rising sun was known as Khepri, and he was often shown as having the head of a scarab beetle. The pictures below show a seated Khepri and a dung beetle rolling a ball of dung.

Very often jewellery is found in tombs where it was placed so the dead person could wear it in the afterlife. It is possible that these examples came from a tomb. Pectorals like this one of a winged scarab were sometimes placed upon the breast of mummies.

