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Cosmetic spoon with papyrus bundle decoration



Fig. 1. Cosmetic spoon with papyrus bundle decoration. FGA-ARCH-EG-0683.

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A mere utensil in its primary function, the spoon is nevertheless a luxury item – sometimes of exquisite quality – in ancient Egypt. This spoon was perhaps used for the preparation or the application of cosmetic products: it belonged to the intimate sphere of its owner. It is carved in a particularly noble material, elephant ivory, and is decorated with vegetal motifs in fine, raised relief; two birds with open wings stand on its bowl.

It is not surprising that an artefact as precious as this one, both because of its material and rarity, caught the expert eye of the Countess de Béhague, the famous owner of a splendid home in Paris who built a world-renowned collection of art.

Cosmetic spoon with papyrus bundle decoration

Provenance unknown

New Kingdom , 19th-20th dynasty (ca 1291 – 1075 BC)

Elephant ivory

18,6 cm long, 9,3 cm wide, 1,5 cm deep

FGA-ARCH-EG-0683

Provenance

Collection of the Countess Martine-Marie-Octavie Pol de Béhague (1870-1939), Paris ;

By descent to her nephew Octave Marie Hubert Ganay de Béhague, 7th marquis de Ganay (1888-1974) ;

By descent to his son Jean Louis Sébastien Hubert, 8th marquis de Ganay (1922-2013) ;

Sotheby's *Antiquités et Objets d'Art : Collection de Martine, Comtesse de Béhague, provenant de la succession du Marquis de Ganay*, Monaco, 5 December 1987, no 97 ;

Sale *Archéologie*, François de Ricqlès, Drouot Richelieu, Paris, 8 December 1995, no 166 ;

With Charles Ede, London, 1997-2002 ;

Private collection, USA ;

Private collection, Netherland ;

Bought at Christie's, sale *Antiquities*, London, 7 July 2021, no 23.

The spoon, a most ancient invention

The spoon we present here dates back to the New Kingdom period of ancient Egypt; it was probably carved in the 19th or 20th dynasty (13th-12th century BC). The invention of this particular type of utensils finds its origins much earlier: in Egypt, spoons were already made during the so-called 'Badarian' period (5th millennium BC) and were discovered in burials by archaeologists. Even at this early stage, they were already carved in materials that suggest they were luxury items, such as ivory. The zoomorphic decoration added to some of the most beautiful examples emphasise the prestigious nature of these objects: species such as the hippopotamus and Nubian ibex can be found at the extremity of the thin, long handles. Animals were often shown with highly stylised outlines, such as on a spoon from Mostagedda



Fig. 2. Cosmetic spoon from the Badarian period found by Guy Brunton at Mostagedda. British Museum EA62177.

(fig. 2), where the ibex can nevertheless be recognised by its exaggeratedly large, rounded horn with pronounced bosses.

Spoons continued to be made and used during the following centuries. However, it is during the New Kingdom that they became a lot more frequent and sought-after fashionable items: over half of all known spoons from ancient Egypt were manufactured during that period¹. Unlike in our modern cultures, it appears that spoons were not used as feeding items. They were used for the preparation of cosmetic products and were therefore intimately associated with body care, beauty, and thus, sensuality.

This may explain, at least in part, why spoons were luxury objects only accessible to a small, privileged elite. Only the wealthy members of the higher social classes could afford cosmetic products, such as malachite that was ground into a powder, unguents, or perfumes.

The spoon acquired by the FGA was carved in ivory. This pale material allows the sculptor to render highly detailed decoration, and its surface can be neatly polished to a shine so as to become soft to the touch: ivory items are very tactile! Egyptian artisans had two available sources for ivory: hippopotamus and African elephant tusks. The former animal has straight incisors and curved canines that can grow to impressive dimensions. This species lived in the Nile Valley and was readily available. On the contrary, elephants were an exotic species that roamed the land further south, and their tusks frequently figured among tributes brought from the kingdom of Kush (northern Sudan). The size of the FGA spoon strongly suggests that it was carved out of an elephant tusk, which emphasises the luxurious and prestigious nature of this object. To the naked eye, it would have been almost indistinguishable from a spoon made of hippopotamus ivory, easier to source, unlike elephant ivory that had to be brought back from far-away, southern regions!

The motif that ornares the handle is purely Egyptian. We can see a bundle of papyrus stems with open flowers; their varying sizes and organisation allows maximum use of the available space. Two birds, partly damaged and eroded, stand on the bowl of the spoon: they are most likely falcons, perhaps depictions of the god Horus. Their deployed wings can be understood as a sign of symbolic protection, not of the spoon itself, but rather of its contents – the cosmetic products prepared in the bowl.

¹ See WALLERT, Ingrid, *Der verzierte Löffel*: 382 are listed, of which about 210 date to the New Kingdom.

The Countess de Béhague, tireless builder and collector



Fig. 3. Portrait of Martine de Béhague, early 20th century.

The FGA spoon was no doubt crafted by a skilled artist in a renowned workshop. Made of expensive ivory, it must have belonged to a high-ranking individual, perhaps the member of a powerful clergy or of the royal court. After it re-emerged in modern times, it was acquired by a high-society Parisian woman: different times, but same attraction for beauty and prestige!

Unfortunately, nothing is known about the archaeological context where the spoon was found, at what time, and how exactly it arrived in Europe. Its modern history is however partly known : in 1987, it was sold by Sotheby's in Monaco, together with a large number of artefacts that had once been part of the collection of archaeology and decorative arts owned by Martine-Marie-Octavie Pol de Béhague (fig. 3)².

Her father, Octave, had himself constituted an notable collection of prints and rare books, that had been sold

at Drouot in 1880³, shortly after his untimely death. Since early childhood, Martine likely inherited from her father her insatiable appetite for collecting the rare and the beautiful!

Martine was born in an extraordinarily wealthy family: her mother Laure was the daughter of the banker and French-naturalised Austrian baron Samuel Fr. von Haber. On her father's side, she is descended from earl Amédée de Béhague, a renowned agricultural expert who managed to farm vast expanses of wasteland. Despite his title, he did not inherit a pre-revolution title from the old regime: he was made an earl during the Second Empire⁴ and owes this ennoblement to his own merits. His son Octave, and later his grand-daughter Martine, therefore had at their disposal virtually unlimited means to satisfy their passion for collecting art, both ancient and modern.

² SOTHEBY'S, *Antiquités et objets d'art*, no 97.

³ See DROUOT, *Catalogue des livres*.

⁴ Amédée de Béhague was granted his title of *Hereditary Earl* by the duchesse Marie Louise Thérèse d'Artois in 1856 (or 1859), the then-regent of Parma; Napoleon III confirmed this title.

The family is renowned and with considerable wealth come opportunities for good marriages. Both Martine and her older sister Berthe married heirs of noble French families⁵. Sadly, Martine's union, celebrated in 1890, was not to be a happy one: she rapidly separated from her husband, and they divorced at long last in 1920. She kept for herself her extraordinary Parisian residence, or *hôtel particulier*. Her grandfather, then a still fairly new earl, bought an expanse of land where he built two mansions in 1866-1868. Following the death of his son Octave, Martine inherited the lot. She progressively and radically modified and, by the end of the century, rebuilt the two buildings, transforming them in a spectacular townhouse (fig. 4). She even endeavoured to have the largest private theatre of the capital inserted within its walls, the *Salle Byzantine*. Decorated with old wood panelling recycled with taste, l'Hôtel Béhague (or Béarn), can be found at 123 Rue Saint-Dominique (Paris 7th ward)⁶. It was the perfect setting for the precious decorative arts, books, antiquities, and other artefacts collected during her life by the Countess.



Fig. 4. The grand dining room of the Hôtel de Béhague : the *Birth of Venus* by Boucher faces the fountain of Neptune (visible in the mirror, left).

⁵ Titles of the old regime no longer have actual values since the French Revolution. Berthe de Béhague (1868-1940) married Charles Aimé Jean de Ganay, (sixth) marquis of Ganay (1861-1948) ; Martine's husband is René Marie Hector de Gallard, born in 1862, (sixth) earl of Brassac de Béarn.

⁶ After the death of Martine on 26 January 1939, the mansion was sold on 27 March to the Romanian state, which established the seat of its embassy there. The building has kept its diplomatic status to this day.



How did the Countess acquire the ivory spoon we present here? Nothing is known for sure. Her collection was constituted in many different ways; a number of dealers and merchants used to visit her when she was in Paris to present her with the best from their stock of artworks and antiquities. She is also a regular visitor and customer of galleries and also bought at the sales, such as Drouot... On occasion, she has also exchanged pieces directly with other collectors⁷.

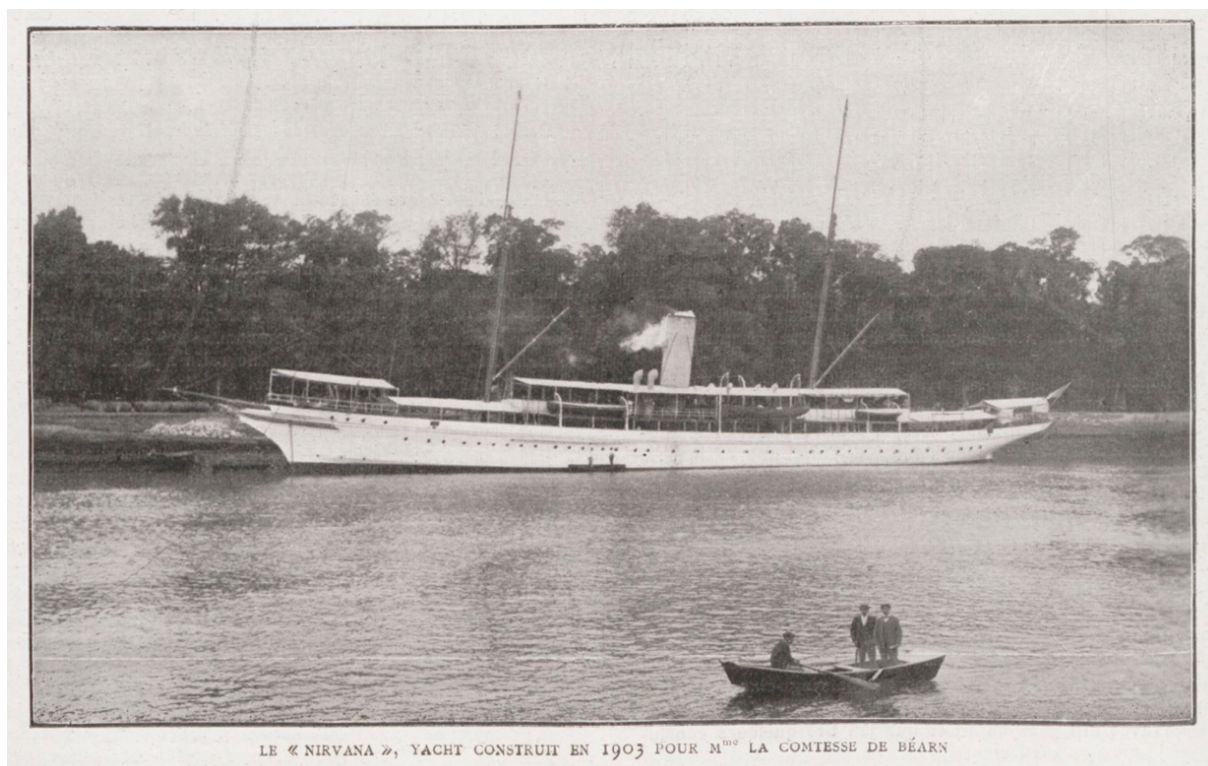


Fig. 5. Martine de Béhague's yacht, the *Nirvana*. *Le Sport Universel Illustré* 443, 15 January 1905, p. 46.

Her favourite hunting grounds for antiquities were her frequent and far-away travels. She had at her disposal a fabulous yacht, the *Nirvana*, on which she sailed around the Mediterranean and further (fig. 5)⁸. In late 1913, the Countess spoke at a dinner, attended by Henri de Régner, of her plans to undertake an ambitious voyage on the Nile the following year.⁹ Her stated aim is to travel upriver to Khartoum, capital of the present-day Republic of Sudan, and onward to Fachoda, the then-capital of the kingdom of the Shillouks¹⁰. Did Martine de

⁷ See STASI, Laure, *Le mécène oublié*, p. 442, 446.

⁸ See for example DE RÉGNIER, Henry, *Escales en Méditerranée*; the writer shares his memories of a cruise onboard the *Nirvana* together with the Countess de Béhague during the summer in 1906.

⁹ DE RÉGNIER, Henry, *Les cahiers inédits* 1887-1936, p. 696, cited by STASI, Laure, *le mécène oublié*, p. 85.

¹⁰ Fachoda, today known as Kodok, lies on the banks of the White Nile, in modern-day Republic of South Sudan. The town is known for having been held for a while by a French expeditionary troop in 1896 before being given back to the British.



Béhague really reach these remote areas? This is not certain, but she did however sail the Nile in Egypt. In Cairo, she benefited from the guidance of the Swiss Egyptologist Édouard Naville. She acquired a number of antiquities in the gallery of the famous dealer Maurice Nahman¹¹. Did she buy the ivory spoon on that occasion, or elsewhere during this travel, on the advice of the famed Swiss specialist? It is certainly possible, but we cannot exclude that she came across that object in Europe, where she was in contact with another celebrated Egyptologist, the Belgian Jean Capart¹².

Display and scattering away

Where did the Countess de Béhague this fine ivory spoon? Her Parisian home seems the logical answer. Indeed, a large number of artefacts from an array of cultures and historical periods were presented there, notably in her *Salle Byzantine* and in showcases on the first floor. However, her great-nephew Jean-Louis Ganay¹³ mentioned the presence of Egyptian antiquities in another residence of Martine's, *La Polynésie*, in the Var region in Hyères, built according to her every wish from 1924 onward¹⁴.

Although the precise details of the whereabouts of the spoon during its time in Martine's ownership are hard to come by, we know that it belonged to an exceptional collection of art that continues to arouse the passions of collectors, even so long after her death. It is said that Sheikh Saoud Bin Mohamed Bin Ali Al-Thani tried to especially trace and buy pieces from her collection¹⁵. Several museums, notably the Musée du Louvre, received and acquired pieces



Fig. 6. Body of a goddess, perhaps Neith. Third Intermediate Period, ca. 1069-664 BC. Musée du Louvre, inv. E27430. © Musée du Louvre.

¹¹ The Countess de Béhague penned a letter on 31 January 1914 from Cairo to Gustave Schlumberger ; see STASI, Laure, *Le mécène oublié*, p. 428 and note 680 ; see also p. 427 ; Maurice Nahman is erroneously named *Nowman. This dealer had then a gallery on 20, Sheikh Abu el-Siba street ; see ABDULFATTAH, Iman R., A forgotten man, and BAEDEKER, Karl, *Egypt and the Sudan*, p. 41.

¹² See STASI, Laure, *Le mécène oublié*, p. 412, 431.

¹³ Cited by STASI, Laure, *Le mécène oublié*, p. 424.

¹⁴ About this villa, first a summer abode, then the main residence of Martine de Béhague, see STASI, Laure, *Le mécène oublié*, p. 147-148.

¹⁵ Sheikh al-Thani died in 2014. See STASI, Laure, *Le mécène oublié*, p. 274.



that had belonged to Martine de Béhague, including ancient Egyptian artefacts. As far as Egyptian antiquities are concerned, the spoon was part of a splendid group of objects, such as, among others, the body of a bronze statuette representing a standing goddess, with gilded details (fig. 6), and the exceptional silver and gold figurine of a pharaoh offering Maat.¹⁶ The acquisition of this exquisite spoon by the FGA allows us to peep into the intimate life of Martine, who was, on many counts, a woman out of the ordinary. She threw some memorable parties, such as a grand Egyptian Ball held in her *Salle Byzantine* in 1914, no doubt inspired by her travel in Egypt!

After the death of the Countess in early 1939¹⁷, the ivory spoon remained in the family for about half a century. Berthe passed away less than two years after her sister; her son, Octave Marie Hubert, marquis de Ganay, inherited the property of his aunt. Following the sale of her townhouse, the Hôtel de Béhague, to the Romanian state, it is likely that Martine's art collection was moved to another property, perhaps the castle of Courance. This residence had been bought by her grandfather, the banker Samuel von Haber. Jean-Louis de Ganay was the last descendant to own the collection, before offering it up for sale in 1987. The ivory spoon changed hands several times in the following decades before entering the FGA collection in 2021. This piece is a particularly good example of how much an artefact can tell us about the past, even in the absence of a specific archaeological context, thanks to a well-documented modern history.

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¹⁶ Musée du Louvre, E27431.

¹⁷ Laure Stasi (*Le mécène oublié*) mentions that an inventory was made after her death. We haven't had the opportunity to check this document; it is possible that the FGA ivory spoon is listed therein.



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