

Mummy and Pharaoh 'Magic Pencil' Pendants

by Diane Fitzgerald

I began to collect these delightful little objects a few years ago when I came across a tiny magic pencil in the shape of a mummy only about an inch (2.5cm) in length. The dealer at Kempton Racecourse thought it was an insignificant little thing and charged me only £7 for it. I knew nothing about these pencils at the time and didn't even know the bauble had a pencil inside it, but within minutes (much to my amazement) I came across another one. This dealer was more informed and told me that a similar pencil had just sold at Bonham's for £350! He was asking £175 but his pencil, which was identical to the one I

Although they occasionally are available on eBay, I've purchased all my pieces on trips to England. I've only seen one in the U.S. which a friend found at an antique show. I've paid anywhere from £7 for one in good working condition to over £100. According to Crosby, mummy pencil prices range from £65-75 while larger obelisk pencils would go for £100-150.



Photo: Diane Fitzgerald

had just bought, was in poor condition. Since I didn't need another one, I passed it up. On my next visit to England, I found another one at an antique show and so my collection began to grow. I've also found tiny hinged mummy pendants with the mummy still inside, a mummy pocket knife, and a 'Moses in the basket' pendant and so my collection as grown to what you see here.

Little has been written about these pencils. The only information I've been able to track down was in the book *Victorian Pencils: Tools to Jewels* by Deborah Crosby. According to Crosby, Victorian pencils were not only a practical device used for writing, but they were prized by their owners and often worn as jewelry by both men and women. They had various names – mechanical, ever-pointed, propelling, screw, automatic or magic pencils. The firm of Sampson Mordan was the first to patent an ever-pointed or propelling pencil in 1822, although the firm later lost the patent.

The Egyptian theme pencils were sometimes made in combination with other tools such as knives, rulers, toothpicks, buttonhooks, watch keys and even scissors. Magic pencils in the shape of mummies began to appear in the 1880's following the archaeological discoveries in Egypt, the completion of the Suez Canal in 1870 and the popularity of Verdi's *Aida* (1871), and Egyptian themes became prevalent in the decorative arts including jewellery and silverware at the same time. Until recently, such pencils were thought to have been made in the 1920's after the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb, but these unusual pencils were actually made earlier and purchased as souvenirs as wealthy people made their 'grand tour'.

Since mummy or pharaoh pencils can still be found at antique shows in England and occasionally in America, we can assume that they must have been made in large quantities. Most pencils do not have a maker's mark but some may be marked '800' meaning the metal has 800 parts of silver per thousand. Mordan Sampson is one company known to have made obelisk pencils in the 1880's. Beyond this, little seems to be known about these pencils and the related items such as charms, which sometimes open to display a smaller mummy inside the mummy case.

If anyone has further information about magic mummy pencils, I'd love to hear from you and you can contact me at: dmfbeads@bitstream.net



Bibliography

Crosby, D. 1998 *Victorian Pencils: From Tools to Jewels* (Schiffer Publishing Ltd. ISBN 0 764304 13 5)