

ETERNAL EGYPT

A LANDMARK TRAVELING EXHIBITION FEATURES MASTERWORKS FROM THE BRITISH MUSEUM'S COLLECTION OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

By Doug Stewart, *Smithsonian*, June, 2001



Rendered in a non-Egyptian, Hellenistic style, this Roman-period portrait of a young woman in Greco-Roman dress was made as a mummy mask.

Among the most exquisite examples of Roman painting to have survived from ancient times is a portrait of a stylish young woman who lived in Roman-occupied Egypt around A.D. 170. Painted from life using colored beeswax on wood, the portrait typically would have been bound by linen strips to the outside of the woman's mummy. Egyptian households of the day sometimes included recently deceased members standing erect and tightly wrapped in a place of honor, perhaps in a narrow cupboard with a small door at the top for viewing their painted likeness. Romanized Egyptians thus managed to blend two very different traditions: the Roman use of portraiture in venerating one's forebears and the already ancient Egyptian custom of preserving their bodies for the afterlife.

That mummification persisted well into the Roman era is just one example of how Egyptian culture, though varying in its details over time, remained in its broad outlines almost unimaginably consistent for more than 30 centuries. The young woman's portrait is part of an enthralling new traveling exhibition, "Eternal, Egypt: Masterworks of Ancient Art from the British Museum." The three-year, eight-city tour includes treasures representing every stage of ancient Egyptian civilization, from the time of the First Dynasty some 5,000 years ago to the Greco-Roman period of Alexander the Great and Cleopatra.

"These works reveal how extraordinarily sophisticated the artistic talent of ancient Egypt was," says Sandra Knudsen, associate curator of ancient art at the Toledo Museum of Art, where the show premiered in March. The artwork on display runs the gamut from colossal to

miniature, world famous to obscure: statuary in stone, bronze and wood, relief carvings, coffin lids, jewelry, glass, and delicate paintings on papyrus. Referring to the exhibition's oldest piece, a weathered, stoop-shouldered ivory statuette of what may be a First Dynasty king (*right*), she adds, "It's as if ancient Egyptian art burst into existence in 3000 B.C. with an already high level of technical skill. The style can change over time, but the level of talent and imagination you can see in this exhibition is fabulous."

The sprawling London institution houses the largest and most important collection of Egyptian art outside of Cairo. In the early 19th century, however, its trustees were slow to accord the stone pharaohs and animal-headed deities of the Nile Valley the status of "fine art" that they easily granted to Greek and Roman work. As with more than a few museum-goers today, the stylistic conventions of Egyptian tomb and temple art—the squared shoulders, the "silent march" with left foot advanced, the flattened perspective—impressed the gentlemen as stiff and a bit primitive, if not barbaric. In 1810 Henry Salt, the British consul general in Cairo, asked to be reimbursed for the superb collection of antiquities he'd been amassing on behalf of the museum—from an extravagant strand of silver and electrum amulets to a 3,000-pound head of Amenhotep III (*p. 5*). The trustees dithered for years before grudgingly paying what Salt deemed "the miserable sum of two thousand pounds"—GCP 33,000 less than they'd just paid Lord Elgin for his Athenian marbles.

"There is a kind of austerity to Egyptian sculpture which to people brought up on Greek sculpture can be difficult to appreciate," says Vivian Davies, keeper of the British Museum's Department of Egyptian Antiquities. "Personally, I find Greek sculpture rather fussy, but I'm coming at it from a very different point of view."

By the late 1800s, the British Museum had a staff of trained Egyptologists, and the collection was growing in volume and scope. By the 1920s, the Egyptian galleries contained 57,000 objects. Today, there are more than 100,000, many from the museum's ongoing excavations in Egypt and Sudan.



The small figure of a king is from 3000 B.C.E.

The task of distilling 145 objects from 100,000 fell to the show's curator, Edna R. Russmann of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, where she is a curator of Egyptian, classical and ancient Middle Eastern art. Some of her choices, however, were vetoed as too fragile or precious to leave England. (The Rosetta stone is staying put.)

Russmann, in any case, made her selections with the eye of an art historian, not a traditional inscription-loving Egyptologist. "Years ago, a famous Belgian Egyptologist gave a lecture on some statues he was studying," she says. "For the whole hour, as I recall, he showed slides only of the backs of these statues, where the writing is." Russmann, who avoids the term "artifacts" as subtly demeaning to works of art, wants visitors to "Eternal Egypt" to come away with an appreciation for the sheer visual appeal of these objects and the mastery with which they were fashioned.

The classic conventions of Egyptian art were literally set in stone during the Old Kingdom, the age of the pyramids (SMITHSONIAN, September 1999). By the 27th century B.C., the Old Kingdom was centered around the ancient city of Memphis, near modern-day Cairo. The pharaoh, regarded by his subjects as divine and all-powerful, was a central focus of both art and religion. Artists were often, in effect, state officials charged with showing the king's greatness and virility: "smiting scenes," in which the king personally annihilated his enemies with a mace, were a particular favorite.

Pharaohs and their families led pampered lives, attended by royal hairdressers and royal manicurists. Still, the comforts of the Old Kingdom were relatively basic. The 4,600-year-old figure of what is probably a young princess, elegantly modeled in translucent Egyptian alabaster, is slim but muscular. "It's a reminder of how simple life was," Russmann says. "Even a royal woman still got around mostly by walking." The knee-hobbling dress the young woman wears is evidently a fiction. "Linen is the least stretchy fabric I know of. How could she have gotten into a linen dress that tight, much less moved in it?" Linen dresses recovered from tombs of the period are just baggy tubes with shoulder straps.



The Old Kingdom Egyptian alabaster statue likely depicts a woman of royal birth.

The great mass of Egyptians were tenant farmers. The state owned all their fields, which the flooding Nile fertilized every summer. "Only the towns remain above water, looking rather like the islands of the Aegean," wrote the Greek historian Herodotus in the fifth century B.C. Trees were scarce, so houses and even palaces were built of unbaked mud brick. Low-status men usually tilled the fields; their wives ground grain, baked bread, brewed beer and laboriously wove and washed (continually, according to a much-impressed Herodotus) the family's all-linen clothes.

Compared with the mass of peasants, even a provincial bureaucrat held an exalted rank. One such official, a man named Meryrahashtef, had himself immortalized in a single block of imported ebony (*left*)—one of a number of small wooden statues of nonroyal subjects that appeared toward the end of the Old Kingdom. The nude figure is nothing like the chesty, symmetrical pharaohs one usually associates with Egyptian art. The man's slender torso bends forward and twists tensely to one side as his elongated left leg takes a giant stride forward. Radiating coiled energy, Meryrahashtef seems to be rushing to an appointment. The redoubtable Sir W. M. Flinders Petrie, the father of scientific archaeology, unearthed the remarkable piece in a debris-filled burial shaft near Cairo in the winter of 1920-21. As a funerary sculpture, it may have played some role in currying favor with the gods who ruled the afterlife, but precisely what is a mystery.



This Old Kingdom striding figure of the provincial official evokes a sense of tension.

Egyptian statues and inscriptions—whether sealed off in crypts or displayed outside temples—were always utilitarian. They invoked spells and charms and ensured admittance to the afterlife (welcomed as a pleasant continuation of one's natural years). In a funerary ceremony known as the "opening of the mouth," priests anointed a statue's lips and nose to allow it to drink, eat, speak and breathe, and thus live forever, once inhabited by the soul of the deceased. Mummies received the same treatment. Despite their art's religious purpose, however, it would be wrong to think the Egyptians had no conception of artistic beauty. New Kingdom visitors to older tombs in several cases scratched graffiti on the walls remarking that what they found was "more beautiful than anything."



Sesostrius' distinctive features are artfully chiseled in this famous granite statue.

Beset by feudal bickering, the Old Kingdom finally crumbled after 500 years. A family from the provincial city of Thebes managed to undercut its rivals and reunify the country around 2000 B.C., inaugurating the Middle Kingdom. The Thebans promoted an obscure local god, Amun (later Amun Re), to a central spot in the ever-changing Egyptian pantheon. Royal likenesses became more naturalistic and, to the modern eye, more expressive. But the brooding, almost haunted-looking visage of Sesostrius III in dark granite (*left*) may not really express very much about Sesostrius the man, in the sense that we look to a modern portrait to reveal a subject's inner self. Sesostrius was, after all, a powerful and successful ruler in stable, prosperous times. But literature of the period warned that people could not be trusted and that kingship was a burden. "This was apparently the way it was thought suitable for a king to look in the late Middle Kingdom," says Russmann, "as a ruler who is suffering in order to care for his people."

Fractures in the granite further mar the king's face. The statue once stood outside a Theban temple honoring the Middle Kingdom's founder, Mentuhotep II. Sometime in antiquity it and five almost identical statues were tossed in a heap outside. Varying amounts of damage, in fact, are evident throughout the exhibition—not just gouged eyes but heads cracked from bodies, smashed lips, missing noses. Some of the damage is no doubt due to early methods of collecting. If a seated stone figure, for instance, couldn't be carted off, its head could always be pried free. But other mutilation occurred in ancient times, Russmann says. Rulers pillaged, usurped or remodeled earlier temples and tombs, either to equip their own edifices or to erase a predecessor's memory. Because a statue needed to breathe during the afterlife, its nose was its Achilles' heel, so to speak. "Smashing it was a way to kill the statue and interfere with a person's afterlife," explains Russmann.

Eventually, the Middle Kingdom disintegrated in turn, to be followed, after an interim, by Egypt's glorious 500-year imperial age, the New Kingdom. One of its heroes was the 15th-century king Thutmosis III. A builder of the great temple at Karnak, Thutmosis has sometimes been called the Napoleon of Egypt (his mummy measured only 5 feet 3 inches). Having idled 20 years in the shadow of his imperious stepmother, the renowned woman pharaoh, Queen Hatshepsut, Thutmosis finally assumed the throne and roared into the Near East and across the Euphrates at the head of the Egyptian army, smiting foes. (He also smote every image and mention of his stepmother he could find.)

Powerful queens were exceedingly rare in Egypt. To assert her legitimacy, Hatshepsut sometimes had herself portrayed in a pharaoh's false beard. With a few exceptions, Russmann says, "Women essentially had no public life in ancient Egypt, which has kept us from knowing very much about their lives." Women bought, inherited and bequeathed property and sometimes merited their own tombs. A well-connected woman in the 18th Dynasty



The hairstyle of this servant bearing a cosmetic box suggests she was a foreigner.



Made of cartonnage—linen cloth stiffened with plaster—the richly gilded mask (c. 1500 B.C.) boasts attributes of the gods—gold skin, and dark blue hair the color of lapis lazuli.

named Satdjehuty was high ranking enough to rate her own spectacular mummy mask (*right*) painted and extravagantly gold-leafed to match the golden skin of the gods.

Couples married by setting up house together, without benefit of religious or civil ceremony. Divorce, too, was rather perfunctory: one or the other moved out, whereupon either could remarry. Women routinely protected their assets before marrying by signing prenuptial agreements. "This is far and above what women could do in any other ancient society we know, including the ancient Greeks," Russmann says.

Nonroyal men had a higher public profile than most women. During the Middle Kingdom, many ordered block statues of themselves. These were stripped-down, almost modern-looking cubes representing a male with arms folded and a modest cloak pulled across his knees. Some match perfectly the pose of Egyptian villagers killing time today, Russmann points out. Such statues were placed in temples or tombs, their flat surfaces filled with prayers, spells and testaments to the subject's piety. Pictures and hieroglyphic writing were deeply intertwined in ancient Egypt. Both had religious meaning. An inscription carved on a statue was thought to enhance its spiritual power. The statue itself was, on a symbolic level, a sort of three-dimensional hieroglyph.

The artist-scribes who created the texts by which all Egypt was ordered—the tallies of sheep and cows, the records of battles fought and taxes due, the prayers to Amun-Re—were powerful men. In a largely illiterate land, literacy was a rare privilege. "Be a scribe," wrote one, "so that your limbs may become sleek, that your hands may become soft, that you may go forth, admired, in white attire and that courtiers may salute you." Scribe school was no picnic, however. One schoolmaster wrote of his teaching philosophy: The ear of a boy is on his back. He listens when he is beaten."

Skilled artisans occupied a social rung somewhat below scribes. Archaeologists have pieced together a wealth of information from papyri and ostraca (leftover stone chips used as a poor man's papyrus) found in the ancient Theban village of Deir el Medina. The town was full of painters, sculptors, carpenters and other skilled laborers who put in eight-day shifts decorating the rock-cut tombs of the Valley of the Kings. They left behind records of crimes, seductions and the world's first-known strike. (Workers were paid not in money but in food, drink and other amenities, delivered by slaves. In this case, deliveries were running late.) An eye-opening example of a Theban artist-scribe working in a lively, whimsical style is a scroll (*right*) depicting animals behaving like humans, possibly as a gibe at the ruling class.



An antelope and a lion pair up to play a friendly board game in this papyrus with satirical vignettes (c. 1295-1069 B.C.). Many such scenes were done in Thebes during the New Kingdom.

Perhaps the most famous of all Egyptian illustrated texts is the Papyrus of Ani (c. 1200 B.C.), acquired by the British Museum's flamboyant Sir E. A. Wallis Budge at Thebes in 1888. After grabbing the 78-foot scroll in a late-night tomb visit, Budge was placed under house arrest on suspicion of smuggling antiquities. The storehouse where he'd stashed the papyrus and other finds was sealed off, and sentries were posted at the entrance and on the roof. Before the police got around to searching the place, however, Budge arranged for a brigade of villagers to tunnel into the storehouse basement from an adjoining hotel and liberate his treasures.

Of a genre known today as a Book of the Dead—a compilation of text and illustrations to help the deceased in the afterlife—such scrolls were often buried with well-to-do citizens. In addition to the usual charms and incantations, Ani's scroll includes meticulously painted scenes of crucial stops on the road to eternity. At the moment of truth, the jackal-headed god Anubis weighs Ani's heart, the seat of intelligence, against a feather symbolizing truth and order, as a jury

of mummiform gods looks on. Should his heart fail to



For ancient Egyptians, entering the afterlife was literally a moment of truth. This scene from the c. 1200 B.C. Book of the Dead, Papyrus of Ani, portrays the weighing of the royal scribe's heart against a feather representing truth.

balance the feather, the Devourer, a hippo-lion-crocodile hybrid, is poised to gobble it up.

Russmann notes that works like this were not a sign that Egyptians were obsessed with death and dying. These were, rather, a kind of magical passport to a comfortable future. Another aid to the afterlife were shabtis—figurines left in tombs to perform whatever manual labor might be asked of the deceased. Taking no chances, kings and nobles sometimes had hundreds of shabtis buried with them.

A centerpiece of the new exhibition is Henry Salt's massive head of Amenhotep III (*right*). Amenhotep ruled during the New Kingdom at the height of Egyptian power and built much of the Temple of Luxor. His colossal head was once part of a 26-foot-tall statue, one of ten. Fifty other statues of the king were at least nine feet tall. "You can't help but think there's a certain amount of egomania in all this," Russmann says. Pharaohs until now had always been considered deified men. Amenhotep wanted more, she emphasizes: he presented himself as a full-fledged god in human form. "This statue was meant to be worshiped."



Amenhotep III's upstaging of the old Egyptian gods foreshadowed the heresies of his son, Amenhotep IV, who tried to do away with Amun-Re and the rest altogether. The new king announced that he worshiped only the sun disk, or Aten. He renamed himself Akhenaten and moved the royal court north to Amarna. As part of his revolution, the king and his wife, Nefertiti, were depicted in statuary and reliefs as shockingly unpharaonic, with thin, elongated noses and chins, thick drooping lips, and slumping, potbellied torsos (*left*).

"Scholars keep coming up with new diseases this king must have had," Russmann says, "but in fact his chief sculptor early in his reign, when the style was most exaggerated, left an inscription that said, 'The king told me how to do this.'" The young pharaoh evidently thought an unorthodox official image would help sell his unorthodox theology. After his death, Akhenaten's successors branded him a heretic and had most of his statues smashed.

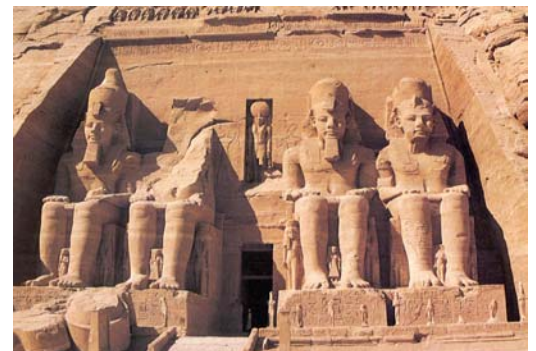
A century later, a 19th-Dynasty king, Sety II, was portrayed in sandstone with the well-toned musculature and erect posture of the Old Kingdom pharaohs, and no hint of a slouch. The statue's near-pristine condition is a tribute to another well-conditioned man, Giovanni-Battista Belzoni, who found it in 1816. A onetime carnival strongman, Belzoni was renowned for hauling colossi overland with a small army of laborers for shipment on to London. His own bulk was sometimes a liability. In his memoirs, Belzoni described losing his balance while squeezing through a tomb passageway, and toppling onto a pile of desiccated mummies.

Though Egypt's imperial power would soon decline, the New Kingdom's 18th and 19th Dynasties were a time of lavish spending, public and private. Ramses the Great (1279-1213 B.C.) built the great temple at Abu Simbel. The society's elite enjoyed an affluence the world had never seen before. Its fashion principle, says Russmann, was "more is better." Men and women now wrapped themselves in elaborately pleated layers of starched linen, and even the men took to wearing earrings and anklets. Sculptures from this period include a basalt bust of a young woman with a braided, tasseled wig and a beaded pectoral the size of a small millstone, and a custom-made luxury item of the day: a wooden cosmetic box (*page 3*) in the form of a chubby young servant carrying a chest on her head.

Cosmetics had long been a staple of Egyptian life—their absence as payment in kind was a chief grievance in the Deir el Medina strike. Cosmetics were more than a beauty aid. Men used them as a sunscreen and skin lubricant. Both men and women painted their faces from brow to nose in green and, later, black paint, in part to mimic the protective eye of the



This 3,000-pound quartzite head (c. 1390 B.C.) of Amenhotep III capped a colossal statue.



god Horus. For special occasions, they would wear greasy cones of perfumed ointment on their heads. As a banquet warmed up, the fragrant cones would ooze down into their wigs.

Soon after Ramses the Great, Egypt entered into a long limbo of weak kings, invasions and occasional foreign rule. A string of Macedonian kings, the Ptolemies, ruled Egypt following the arrival of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. In an unfinished granite statue of one of these kings, a fleshy, pouting Hellenistic face tops a traditional Egyptian body. "He was presenting himself as an Egyptian pharaoh," says Russmann. "This was absolutely necessary in order to rule Egypt. You had to slot yourself into the divine pantheon."

Nonroyal statuary of the Ptolemaic Period often shows a similar mismatch of head and body. "It was Roman portraiture that many 19th-century collectors were interested in," says Russmann. "The Egyptian-style torsos detracted from that." Some dealers of the day obliged by cracking off the heads and ditching the bodies.

Art lovers are more enlightened today, owing to a vastly heightened interest in the epic sweep of Egyptian civilization. Through the endless rise and fall of dynasties, Egypt remained at heart the land of pharaohs ruling with left foot forward. Thanks to the disciplined creativity of its artists, generation after generation, the grandeur of Egypt can still astonish us today, as it must have astonished the world in the days of Thutmosis and Ramses.

The author's most recent art story for this magazine took a look at Orientalism.

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