

WHEN THE GREEKS RULED:
EGYPT AFTER ALEXANDER
THE GREAT
THE GENESIS OF THE EXHIBITION
AT THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO

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“... many Hellenes came to Egypt—some probably for trade, others to fight in the war, and others merely to see the sights of this country for themselves.”¹

Ancient Egypt was favored by its geography. Protected by sea and the surrounding desert, and nurtured by the annual flooding of the Nile River, the country was able to develop into an incredibly stable and complex civilization that flourished for more than thirty centuries. When Alexander the Great seized Egypt as part of his mission to conquer the Persian Empire in 332 BCE, he was one in a long line of Greeks bedazzled by Egypt’s ancient culture. Fundamental to the Greeks’ fascination was the Egyptian religion and its belief in a real life after death guided by a pantheon of gods. The rich imagery and colorful rituals of this tradition provided a stage where the Greek victors, in the person of Ptolemy, one of Alexander’s generals, transformed a foreign occupation into Egypt’s next line of pharaohs. Ptolemy ingratiated himself to the populace by honoring Egypt’s established culture while at the same time creating a sumptuous royal court in the new capital of Alexandria. The three hundred years

of the Ptolemaic dynasty, which ended with the suicide of Cleopatra VII in 30 BCE, proved to be an era of curiosity and experimentation in which Egypt’s artistic integrity survived and prospered. When Rome added Egypt to its empire, the older civilization again observed, but did not necessarily adopt, the foreign aesthetic. These moments of cultural encounter and artistic exchange were the foci of the exhibition *When the Greeks Ruled: Egypt after Alexander the Great*, at the Art Institute of Chicago in 2013–14. The material was explored thematically in three chronological sections: Iconic Egypt, with a focus on the arts created prior to the Ptolemaic period; Foreign Rule, highlighting works produced during the period when the Greeks and, later, the Romans occupied the country; and Eternal Egypt, centered on the art and concepts that persisted or adapted to change.

ICONIC EGYPT

Standing at the beginning of the Chicago installation were the stone *Block Statue of Shebenhor* (seen at left in fig. 1–2; checklist no. 118) and the bronze *Statuette of the God Re Horakhty* (at right in fig. 1–2; checklist no. 103) two works that clearly

1–1 Mummy Head Cover. Cartonnage, gold leaf, and pigment, H. 46 cm; W. 33.3 cm; D. 28 cm, Egypt, Roman period, 1st century BCE. AIC: 1910.221. William M. Willner Fund.

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communicated a recognizably Egyptian aesthetic to museum visitors. Basic to that aesthetic was the Egyptians' religion and its conviction that life after death was a real and tactile afterlife, one that mirrored their life on Earth. Sculptors, painters, goldsmiths, scribes, glassmakers, and architects were employed to outfit Egyptians with tombs and funerary goods that would serve them in eternity. Most of the objects displayed in the introductory section of the exhibition were designed specifically for tombs, such as a large wooden model of a river boat, a set of canopic jars, and an illustrated papyrus from the Book of the Dead.² Egyptians also stocked their tombs with a least one *shabti* (fig. 1–4 and checklist

no. 113), a figurine meant to act as a servant for the deceased. The sheer variety of surviving examples, made from rare wood as well as the simplest faience, convey the importance of these figurines. Even the poorest citizens provided themselves with some kind of funerary furnishings, even if only a simple *shabti*.

Egyptian artists were not praised for innovation; instead they followed the same time-honored conventions that carried on the distinctive visual culture of their ancestors. Generations of artists repeated the iconic forms for centuries, forms whose repetition echoed the very concept of immortality. One of the oldest such traditions was the composition of the human body, which was reduced to its fundamental, most recognizable shape, as illustrated by the oldest object in the exhibition, the *Wall Fragment from the Tomb of Thenti* (fig. 1–3). The custom of representing the entire human body simultaneously involved depicting one eye and the shoulders frontally and

1–2 Installation in the Mary and Michael Jaharis Galleries of Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Art of *When the Greeks Ruled: Egypt after Alexander the Great* at the Art Institute of Chicago, October 31, 2013–July 27, 2014.



the head, nose, and mouth in profile. While these formal conventions continued to be honored after the Greeks came to rule Egypt, the new kings also imposed their own taste. On one quintessentially Ptolemaic-period artwork, the *Relief Plaque Depicting a God or a King* (fig. 1–5), the face is in profile but the eye and the chest are depicted frontally. The soft flesh of the face and the small, rounded nose are drawn from naturalistic Greek sculpture that would have been seen at the court of the Ptolemies in the new capital of Alexandria.

1–3 Wall Fragment from the Tomb of Thenti. Limestone, H. 55.9 cm; W. 87.6 cm; D. 11.4 cm, Egypt, V Dynasty (2524–2400 BCE). AIC: 1920.265. Museum Purchase Fund.

1–4 Shabti of Psammetichus. Faience, Egypt, XXVI–XXX Dynasty (664–343 BCE). AIC: 1942.647. Gift of Theodore W. and Frances S. Robinson. Checklist no. 114.

FOREIGN RULE

While the gods provided protection and guidance to the living and the dead, Egypt's pharaohs, thought to be gods on Earth, were responsible for providing the governmental organization that brought prosperity. When he came to Egypt, Alexander the Great assumed the power and status of the pharaohs as well as their claim to kinship with gods. Alexander's early death resulted in wars among his rival generals, known as the Successors, which pitted Greek against Greek. Egypt fell to Ptolemy, who, like Alexander, adopted specific Egyptian customs to conciliate his Egyptian subjects. Also like Alexander, the Ptolemies understood the importance of public display. During his reign Ptolemy II decreed that his sister-wife, Arsinoe II, was to be worshiped in temples throughout Egypt. To ensure that both Egyptians and Greeks would be able to identify the *Fragment of a Cult Statue of Queen Arsinoe II*,³ the titles of



the queen and lengthy Egyptian-style names were incised in hieroglyphs on the top of its base, while a simple label in Greek, reading “Arsinoe Philadelphos [brother-loving],” was carved into the front (checklist no. 150).

The new kings also made themselves known to their citizenry through portrait statues. Centering the Chicago exhibition were three portraits (fig. 1–6) that exemplify the changes that Egyptian art underwent with the coming of the Macedonian Greeks. The oldest example, the granite *Head of an Official*, was neither a portrait nor an idealization of a public servant. It was a surrogate for a real man who wanted to be identified in his afterlife by his status. The idealized

marble *Head of a Successor of Alexander the Great* (checklist no. 65) is an example of the Greek ideal of beauty popular during and after Alexander’s lifetime. The fact that it is a Roman copy created in the second century CE is a testament to the strength of this model of royal portraiture. The basalt *Head of a Ptolemaic Pharaoh* (checklist no. 61) can trace its form to the Greeks’ desire to create a new aristocracy led by a pharaoh of Greek blood. The family of Ptolemy produced two different kinds of portraits of themselves: in those destined for public or religious spaces, the king appears in the pharaonic royal *nemes* headdress and with idealized features. On their coinage, however, the Ptolemies resemble the Macedonian kings of their heritage, complete with the simple Macedonian circlet and true-to-life profile images (as seen in fig. 4–6).

1–5 Relief Plaque Depicting a God or a King. Limestone, Egypt, 305–30 BCE. AIC: 1920.257. Museum Purchase Fund. Checklist no. 74.

In the royal court of the Ptolemies, the classical interest in naturalism, including attention to realistic



anatomy, confronted Egypt's art. Any mingling of styles, however, was subtle and did not do away with traditional Egyptian forms. Works of art in both styles were placed side by side in the Chicago exhibition, allowing viewers to make visual comparisons between the cultures. A key pairing was the juxtaposition of two reliefs created a thousand years apart. The rendering of the stone *Fragment of a Relief Portraying Neferhotep* (fig. 1–7) and the limestone *Relief Plaque Depicting a Queen or Goddess* (see fig. 4–10) illustrate the difference in Egyptian carving before and after the arrival of Greek craftsmen who worked at Ptolemy's court. The fragment

showing Neferhotep is a beautiful example of traditional Egyptian carving: flattened and almost two-dimensional, with only simple outlines representing the facial features, wig, hands, and body. Made twelve hundred years later, the relief of a queen or goddess bears the influence of the naturalistic Greek carving style introduced by the Ptolemies. The subject and clothing are traditionally Egyptian, but the fleshy skin of her cheeks, mouth, and neck are softly modeled. Her eye, however, is still shown in Egyptian style—as if seen from the front.

A more tangible change came with coinage, which played an important role in the Chicago exhibition. Tiny portraits issued by new rulers circulated throughout the empire providing portable messages of power and royalty. Unique to Alexander's image is the ram's horn curling around his ear, as seen on a silver tetradrachm (fig. 1–8). It portrays Alexander the Great as the son of the god Zeus Ammon,

1–6 Installation of three portrait heads, left to right: Head of a Successor of Alexander the Great (Checklist no. 65), Head of a Ptolemaic Pharaoh (Checklist no. 61), and Head of an Official, Granite, H. 33.8 cm; W. 46.3 cm; D. 26 cm, Egypt, XIII Dynasty (1794–1648 BCE). AIC: 1920.261. Museum Purchase Fund.



a combination of the Greek god Zeus and the Egyptian god Amun. By including the ram's horn, Alexander capitalized on the Egyptian tradition in which pharaohs were thought to be gods on Earth. Roman emperors who controlled Egypt when it was a province of Rome also utilized the power of coins to advertise change in rulership. The silver *Denarius Depicting a Crocodile*, issued by Octavian in 28 BCE, showcases his triumph over the Roman general Mark Antony and Queen Cleopatra with the bold inscription "Egypt [is] captured."⁴

E T E R N A L E G Y P T

A civilization with a three-thousand-year history would not be discarded lightly. Although reduced to a province in the massive Roman Empire, Egypt maintained its unique customs and traditional religious practices. Artists, with adjustments for foreign taste, created the images of gods in the forms of amulets and other accessories for burial just as they had for thousands of years. Materials such as glass were made into luxury objects to suit Egyptian and Greco-Roman preferences. Especially valued were colorful glass inlays in furniture, wooden shrines, jewelry, and mummies. The designs of the glass inlays reflect the multicultural society of the Ptolemaic period, for the floral motifs (fig. 1–9 and checklist nos. 133, 136, 142–46) and theater masks (fig. 1–11 and checklist no. 140) appealed to the Greek elite, while repeated geometric patterns (fig. 1–10 and checklist nos. 137, 139) appealed to the Egyptians.

1–7 Fragment of a Relief Portraying Neferhotep. Stone, H. 38.5 cm; W. 23.75 cm; D. 5.75 cm, Egypt, XXIX Dynasty (ca. 1292–1202 BCE). AIC: 1924.579. Lois H. Culver Fund.

1–8 Tetradrachm. Silver. Obverse: Head of Alexander the Great. Minted in Ephesus, 306–281 BCE. AIC: 1922.4924. Gift of Martin A. Ryerson. Checklist no. 37.



Dominating this section of the Chicago exhibition were objects devoted to the worship of Osiris and his wife and son, Isis and Horus, three deities associated with death and renewal. The Egyptians believed that every deceased person whose soul was judged worthy by the gods became the god Osiris and dwelled forever in an afterlife. To acquire magic protection during their lives, and security after death, believers wore amulets, essentially tiny statues, made

of a variety of materials including faience, carnelian, glass, and gold and often depicting Osiris's family as well as other gods. At death various amulets were added to the mummy wrappings. Drawn from the Art Institute's extensive collection of over seven hundred amulets, the sheer variety of surviving examples illustrates the many forms in which these small figures were produced. In addition to deities, they could be made in the form of parts of the human (or divine) body, animals, plants, and objects of everyday life. Amulets were such an important part of Egyptian religious beliefs that they were made over several thousand years, well into the Ptolemaic and even Roman periods, which attests to the widespread belief in their efficacy but which also makes their precise dating difficult.

- 1–9 Fragment of Floral Inlay. Glass, Egypt, 1st century BCE–1st century CE. AIC: 1949.1289. Gift of Theodore W. and Frances S. Robinson. Checklist no. 134.
- 1–10 Fragment of Checkerboard-Patterned Inlay. Glass, Egypt, 1st century BCE. AIC: 1949.1299a. Gift of Theodore W. and Frances S. Robinson. Checklist no. 138.
- 1–11 Fragment of Inlay Depicting a Theater Mask. Glass, Egypt, 1st century BCE–1st century CE. AIC: 1894.783. Gift of Henry H. Getty and Charles L. Hutchinson. Checklist no. 147.

A bronze *Statuette of the God Osiris* (checklist no. 91) dated to the Late Period was displayed beside a Ptolemaic-period wooden *Statue of the God Osiris*.⁵



The bronze version is shown enveloped in his mummy shroud. The wooden example is elaborately painted in imitation of a beaded net that covered the mummy's shroud. This later statue was made for a woman whose name translates as "Osiris Is the One Who Made Her." Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris and depicted as a falcon or a falcon-headed man, first appeared about 3000 BCE and continued to be revered throughout ancient Egypt's history. Each Egyptian king was considered to be the "Living Horus on Earth." The majestic basalt *Statue of the God*

1–12 Statue of the God Horus as a Falcon. Basalt, Egypt, 305–30 BCE.
AIC: 2002.632. Gift of the Alsdorf Foundation. Checklist no. 107.

1–13 Statuette of Horus or Maahes. Bronze, Egypt, 305–30 BCE.
AIC: 1894.972. Gift of Henry H. Getty and Charles L. Hutchinson.
Checklist no. 104.



Horus as a Falcon (fig. 1–12) is an example of how the Ptolemaic kings adopted the image of kingship as a way of presenting themselves to their subjects as a continuation of the line of native Egyptian rulers. Statues of Horus like this example were set up in temples as part of the cult of the king, who was worshiped in the form a falcon. Egyptians commonly depicted their gods with human bodies and animal heads. The animal referred to the god's personality or characteristics. For example, the *Statuette of Horus or Maahes* (fig. 1–13) is shown with a lion head, expressive of power. The Greeks and Romans, however, took these mixed forms literally rather than symbolically, and some Classical authors, accustomed to gods in human form, derided the Egyptians for their "ridiculous" gods, dismissing them as "dog-faced Egyptians, dressed up in linen."⁶



Portrait of a Man (fig. 1–14) conforms to both the Egyptian funerary practices and the Roman taste for realistic portraiture. This is a true likeness of the deceased. His portrait, painted in pigmented wax and likely made from life, was probably hung in the man’s home during his lifetime. At his death the portrait was adorned with a gold-leaf wreath and then wrapped in the mummy bundle. By this time certain Greeks and Romans had become so assimilated into Egyptian life that some practiced mummification with the slight variation of a portrait as a face cover. And while some of the Egyptian gods—notably Osiris, Isis, and their son, Horus—were incorporated into the world of Classical gods and goddesses in the Roman period, it was not until Christianity arose, echoing the Egyptian promise of life after death, that eternal Egypt’s gods died, the temples closed, and the traces of Ptolemy’s dynasty faded away.

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The Chicago exhibition concluded with two examples of the some of the most dramatic of funerary accouterments—mummy head covers. The head was thought to be one of the most important features of the body to be preserved for use in the afterlife. The mummy head cover in figure 1–1 is typical of traditional Egyptian burial practice in its use of symbols to communicate the deceased’s journey into the afterlife. The skin is gilded like that of the gods, and the face is unspecific and idealized. The surface is richly decorated with painted amulets that magically protected the body. Although made when Rome ruled Egypt, the head cover is thoroughly Egyptian. Created for the same purpose, a painted *Mummy*

1–14 Mummy Portrait of a Man. Pigment and wax on wood and gold, H. 39.4 cm; W. 22 cm; D. 3.5 cm, Roman, Egypt, Fayyum region, 2nd century CE. AIC: 1922.4798. Gift of Mrs. Emily Crane Chadbourne.

FURTHER READING

Alexander, Karen. "A History of the Ancient Art Collection at the Art Institute of Chicago." In *Ancient Art at the Art Institute of Chicago*. Special issue, *Museum Studies* 20, no. 1, 7–13, Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1994.

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More information on works of art in the Art Institute of Chicago collection can be found on the museum website: www.artic.edu/aic/collections/ancient.

NOTES

- 1 Herodotus, *Histories* 3.139.515, in *The Landmark Herodotus: The Histories*, ed. Robert B. Strassler (New York: Pantheon, 2007), 271.
- 2 *Model of a River Boat*. Wood with pigment, 63.5 × 114.3 × 17.1 cm, Egyptian, Dynasty 11–12 (ca. 2046–1794 BCE). The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Henry H. Getty, Charles L. Hutchinson, Robert H. Fleming, and Norman W. Harris, 1894.241. *Canopic Jars of Amunhotep*. Terracotta, pigment, 41.5 × 25.4 × 25.4 cm, Egyptian, Dynasty 18 (1550–1292 BCE). The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Henry H. Getty and Charles L. Hutchinson, and Norman W. Harris, 1892.38a–b; gift of Henry H. Getty, Charles L. Hutchinson, and Norman W. Harris, 1892.36a–b, 1892.39a–b, 1892.37a–b. *Scene from the Book of the Dead*. Papyrus, pigment, 24.5 × 101 cm, Egyptian, Dynasty 21 (1070–946 BCE). The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Henry H. Getty, Charles L. Hutchinson, Robert H. Fleming, and Norman W. Harris, 1894.180.
- 3 On loan from the Oriental Institute of Chicago, OIM E10518.
- 4 *Denarius (Coin) Depicting a Crocodile*. Silver, diam. 2.1 cm, 3.52 g, Roman, issued by Octavian, 28 BCE. The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of William F. Dunham, 1920.3046.
- 5 *Statue of Osiris*. Wood, preparation layer, pigment, gold, and textile, 62.9 × 27.3 × 12.7 cm, Egypt, Hellenistic (305–30 BCE). The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Phoenix Ancient Art, S.A., 2002.542.
- 6 Lucian, *Decorum concilium* 10–11, cited in *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many*, by Erik Hornung, trans. John Baines (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), 15.