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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.

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.

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

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