

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Beyond The Nile: Egypt and the Classical World — The Getty Center

Allon Schoener · Wednesday, August 1st, 2018

This is an astonishing exhibition – the caliber of exhibitions that one might expect to see in great art exhibition venues such as: Petit Palais in Paris, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Scuderie del Quirinale in Rome, Palazzo Strozzi in Florence and The British Museum in London. Curatorial selections manifest an outstanding group of appropriate artifacts; the installation, along with lighting, is sympathetic to the objects, and there is an illustrated scholarly catalogue.



Obelisk honoring Emperor Domitian and Isis, currently on view in the Entrance Hall of the J. Paul Getty Museum as part of the exhibition Beyond the Nile: Egypt and the Classical World. Roman, AD 88–89, Benevento, Museo del Sannio, 1916 Photo credit: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2018

It is the kind of exhibition to which Los Angeles audiences are seldom exposed – a loan exhibition drawn from some of the most outstanding museum collections of Egyptian, Greek and Roman antiquities. That The Getty has mounted an exhibition of this calibre confirms its position as a major force on the international museum exhibition circuit.

The exhibition's theme is concise: to confirm the interaction between Egyptian civilization on the African continent with European culture: primarily ancient Greece and Rome along with associated island based cultures situated in the Mediterranean Sea. Over millennia, the Mediterranean which might be described as an inland ocean, hosted a broad array of European and African based cultures. In 2005 when the new library opened in Alexandria, *Mediterranean City: Dialogue Among Cultures* was organized with activities occurring in: Alexandria, Athens, Barcelona, Beirut, Genoa, Istanbul, Marseilles, Naples, Rome, Tunis and Venice confirming the intersection of varied cultures over an extended period of time. Consequently, the message of this exhibition should resonate broadly because today, we live in an era of expanding international connections.

Until its conquest by Alexander The Great in 322 Egypt had established a millennia old great independent civilization. With the founding of city of Alexandria, in the wake Alexander's conquests, Egypt became a Hellenistic colony ruled by the Ptolemys. From that time, there was an increasing amalgamation of the distinct cultures of Egypt and Europe. With Julius Caesar's conquest in 47BC, Egypt became a Roman colony. Typical of Roman victories, the vanquished territory was denuded of its most valuable possessions that were later displayed in Rome in gigantic public ceremonies called Triumphs. Consequently, ancient Romans were exposed to the treasures of Egyptian culture. Still standing today, there are eight Egyptian obelisks to be seen in

public places in Rome including one that is the tallest obelisk in the world.

Evidence of the amalgamation of the two cultures can be seen in numerous objects on display in this exhibition. One remarkable example is a mummy portrait in which the exterior of a traditionally embalmed human in the form of a mummy bears a Roman face. *Antonius as Osiris*, a Roman marble bust of about 130, amalgamates a classic Roman portrait style with a traditional Egyptian headdress. A basalt sarcophagus, a traditional Greek or Roman above ground burial chamber, assimilates Egyptian sculpture.

There are dozens, if not hundreds of portraits of Alexander the Great. Although clearly idealized, the one in the exhibition from The British Museum, is considered to be one of the more authentic. The *Head of a Man*, Egyptian, Ptolemaic, about 100-75 B.C., with curly hair, suggests contact with lower Africa. The 2nd Century Hippopotamus is a Roman sculptor's characterization of one of the exotic animals brought to Rome for public display in the Colosseum.

Although she does not enter into the content of this exhibition, Cleopatra VII, was a symbol of the amalgamation of Egyptian and Roman culture. She was the last of the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt. During her reign, she forged political alliances and became romantically engaged with two Roman leaders: Julius Caesar and Mark Antony. In 48BC Julius Caesar sailed into the port of Alexandria with 4,000 soldiers. As occupier and lover, he took Cleopatra on a Nile cruise accompanied by 400 ships. This was a deliberate display of Roman military power. In 46 Caesar invited Cleopatra to Rome with their son and provided them with a villa. After Caesar's assassination in 44, she returned to Egypt with their child. Subsequently, she formed a liaison with Mark Antony with whom she later committed joint suicide. The British Museum's 2001 exhibition, *Cleopatra of Egypt*, provided a detailed record of her intersections between these two cultures.



Unknown Antinous as Osiris, about 130 Roman Marble Object: H: 90.5 x W: 68.6 x D: 34.9 cm (35 5/8 x 27 x 13 3/4 in.) © Musée du Louvre, Dist. RMN-Grand Palais / Daniel Lebé / Carine Déambrosis / Art Resource, NY EX.2018.4.6



Unknown Marble head of Alexander the Great, 2nd–1st century B.C. Egyptian, Ptolemaic Marble Object: H: 38.1 x W: 22.9 x D: 24.1 cm (15 x 9 x 9 1/2 in.) © The Trustees of the British Museum EX.2018.4.28



Unknown Sarcophagus of Wahibreemakhet, 664–525 B.C. Egyptian Basalt Object: H: 230 x W: 94 x D: 105 cm, 4000 kg (90 9/16 x 37 x 41 5/16 in., 4 tons 818.4 lb.) Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden EX.2018.4.119



3. 4. 1. 2. Unknown Head of a man, about 100–75 B.C. Egyptian, Ptolemaic Siltstone Object: H: 24.2 x W: 20 x D: 23.1 cm (9 1/2 x 7 7/8 x 9 1/8 in.) © The Trustees of the British Museum EX.2018.4.26



Unknown Hippopotamus, 2nd century Roman Rosso antico Object: H: 77 x W: 120 x D: 38 cm (30 5/16 x 47 1/4 x 14 15/16 in.) Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen. Photo: Ole Haupt EX.2018.4.7

**Beyond The Nile: Egypt and The Classical World @ The Getty Center
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(Note: All photos were provided by The Getty along with their specified captions.)

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