



VISUAL ARTS: Deeper look at Egypt Layers expose ancient life

BYLINE: CATHERINE FOX
Staff

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REVIEW

Renovated Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern art galleries at the Michael C. Carlos Museum, Emory University. \$7 suggested donation. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays. 571 Kilgo Circle, Atlanta.. 404-727-4282. www.carlos.emory.edu

Verdict: Beautiful and enlightening. Take your time, and you will be rewarded.

The galleries of ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern art at the Carlos Museum are themselves an archaeological site, layered with collection history.

William Arthur Shelton of the Candler School of Theology, who helped found the museum in 1920 as an adjunct to biblical study, hunted for artifacts in an armored Mercedes, dodging battling Britons and Arabs. Curator Peter Lacovara went no farther than Niagara Falls in 1999, but he bested the founder in collection-building when he scored the contents of a funky museum there, which counted 10 painted coffins and 10 mummies among its 80 artifacts.

A perennial fascination, the mummies and coffins were given pride of place in the reinstallation of the galleries in 2001. But they alone can't tell the story of ancient Egypt's beliefs, history and artistic legacy.

Over the ensuing years, Lacovara has been quietly expanding the collection's depth and variety. He has integrated them into the galleries, which underwent renovation and reopened this fall. In fact, almost half of the objects are new -- acquisitions, gifts and loans selected to better build a portrait of three millennia of Egyptian civilization from the Neolithic period to the first century A.D.

Mixing new and old pieces, in one case, Lacovara summarizes the arc by juxtaposing coffin faces and steles (markers) from three historical moments -- 1000 B.C., 600 B.C. and the first century. The earliest era, an economically depressed period, shows Egyptians painting funerary images on wood because carving stone is too expensive. The middle represents a flourishing civilization, reflected in the quality of the aesthetics and materials. In the third, the Romans have turned Egypt into a province. The imagery is the same but done in the more lifelike Roman style: art reflecting politics.

A perfectly preserved papyrus, "The Litany of Re" (also known as Ra), is one of the most important new acquisitions. The linear piece follows Re, the sun god, from sunset to sunrise in a series of images deployed like the frame of a comic strip. The cycle symbolizes death and rebirth, and the belief in eternal afterlife, which was, of course, the impetus for the mummies everyone loves.

So much of Egyptian art is (forgive me) so dead serious that the carved frieze of a dwarf walking his dog was intended as a bit of comic relief. Though the man holds a leash, the pharaoh hound (a breed still extant) is almost his size, and it's unclear who is leading whom. Surely, this image will be reborn as a New Yorker cartoon.

A beautiful bronze cosmetic pot fashioned as the head of a Nubian man contains a lot of information. Its Negroid features represent ancient Egypt's ethnic diversity, something Lacovara wants to underscore through future acquisitions. The piece also demonstrates that the stylized, idealized features in portraits of kings on mummies and sculptures represented an aesthetic and symbolic choice, not a lack of ability.

Lacovara has beefed up the galleries devoted to the Near Eastern cultures, too. The tiny but exquisite ivory carving of a sphinx exemplifies the skill of Levant (now Syria and the Palestinian lands) craftsmen, so respected that they were brought to work on Solomon's Temple.

Pleasing to the modern eye are two newly acquired stone tablets inscribed in cuneiform -- an alphabet comprising triangles in different combinations that was widely used in the ancient Near East. One, found in Nimrud, extols an Assyrian ruler's virtues. The other is adoption "papers" -- but not for a child. According to Lacovara, the adoption of an adult was a common ploy to get around a law requiring that land could be sold only to a family member.

Political propaganda and legal maneuvering have a long history. Civilizations may come and go, but human nature, it seems, endures.

Photo

Above, a cosmetic vessel from the Greco-Roman period, circa 200 B.C. to the third century, represents ancient Egypt's ethnic diversity.

Photo

"The Litany of Re" (aka Ra) follows the sun god from sunset to sunrise. The cycle -- read from right to left -- symbolizes death, rebirth and belief in eternal afterlife (funerary papyrus, 1075 to 944 B.C.).

Photo

The Falcon mummy (head and X-ray at left) is from circa 664 to 30 B.C.

Pictured: the X-ray

Photo

The Falcon mummy (head and X-ray at left) is from circa 664 to 30 B.C.

Pictured: the head