



VISUAL ARTS & ARCHITECTURE Nubia, ancient Egypt shared artistic practice

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REVIEW

"Lost Kingdoms of the Nile: Nubian Treasures From the Museum of Fine Arts Boston"

Through Aug. 31. Donations accepted. 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Tuesdays-Saturdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays. Michael C. Carlos Museum. 571 S. Kilgo Circle, Emory University, Atlanta. 404-727-4282; www.carlos.emory.edu

Bottom line: A rare opportunity to discover the ancient civilizations of Nubia and the value of archaeology, which revealed that a culture that had been a mere footnote in art history deserves a chapter of its own.

Ancient Nubia was a mystery when the Egyptian government invited archaeologist George Andrew Reisner to explore an area soon to be flooded by the Aswan Dam in 1906.

Through excavations there and in the Sudan between 1907 and 1932, he and his colleagues uncovered the remains of a sophisticated and dynamic civilization stretching back nine millennia.

Reisner reconstructed the history of Nubia through the finely crafted sculpture, jewelry and pottery hidden in richly appointed tombs -- including those beneath great pyramids. Two hundred of the very same objects retell that story, still largely unknown to the public, at Emory's Carlos Museum in "Lost Kingdoms of the Nile: Nubian Treasures From the Museum of Fine Arts Boston."

Nubia's rich gold deposits made it a crossroads and destination for traders across the ancient world. Its history is especially entwined with that of Egypt, its closest neighbor. They took turns ruling and influencing each other through the centuries, sharing religious beliefs, fashion and artistic practice.

In fact, it is often difficult to tell their art apart. The stone statue that greets visitors, for example, is a dead ringer for Egyptian art, both in its blockiness and striding stance. Ditto the head of a mummy case, similar in headdress and decorative patterns to those on view in the museum's Egyptian galleries one floor below.

The cultures were not identical, however, and neither was the art. Because Nubia was largely desert, its people were hunters and herders rather than farmers. This geographic and economic difference is reflected in imagery, such as the legs of a burial bed fashioned carefully to resemble cow's legs and hoofs, and artifacts on view.

Unlike the more hidebound Egyptian art, Nubian craftsmen were open to ideas that traders brought from their countries and adept at adapting or, in the case of Roman bronzes shown here, copying them.

Their exceptionally thin-walled, burnished black and red pottery has no equal in Egypt. That the pottery links Nubia to southern Africa adds to its significance.

Nubians were, apparently, the feminists of the ancient world, an attitude manifested in politics, religion and the related art objects on display.

The show is important on many levels. It introduces ancient Nubia and broadens understanding of the history of the continent. It also teaches humility, and skepticism: If Nubia was just a footnote a mere hundred years ago, you have to wonder what else we don't know, and what else we've gotten wrong.

Photo

These Gold signet rings date between 270 B.C. and A.D. 320. Nubia's rich gold deposits made it a crossroads and destination for traders across the ancient world.