

The Charms of Ancient Egypt

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Reviewed: *Les Portes du Ciel: Visions du monde dans l'Égypte ancienne* an exhibition at the Louvre, Paris, March 6–June 29, 2009. **And** *L'Égypte ancienne entre mémoire et sciences* by Jan Assmann



Funerary stela of Lady Taperet, Third Intermediate Period, circa 850–690 BCE. Lady Taperet is praying to Atum, god of the setting sun, in the hope of eternally accompanying him on his daily journey. The hieroglyphs above her exhort the god to grant her everything she will need in the afterlife. The sky is represented by the blue body of the goddess Nut, who swallows the sun every night and gives birth to it every morning.

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With its splendid new exhibition “The Gates of Heaven” (“Les Portes du Ciel”), the Louvre promises a view of ancient Egypt through ancient Egyptian eyes, and it delivers on that promise with captivating style. Originally the museum had planned to mount a show dedicated to its excavations at Saqqara, but curator Marc Étienne eventually proposed a completely different idea: a broad thematic exploration of the Egyptians’ beliefs about life and death, focusing on the entire culture rather than on one specific place or period. As Étienne notes, scholarly understanding of Egypt has changed considerably in recent years; as further proof, in addition to the catalog, the Louvre has also published a lecture series delivered in connection with the exhibition by the Egyptologist Jan Assmann, whose work in the field has been particularly wide-ranging and insightful. Assmann’s lectures (the first in a new series called the Chaire du Louvre) are as exciting as the show itself; they begin by comparing Egyptian religion with the book of Exodus and with Christian theology, and end in a penetrating analysis of Verdi’s *Aida*.

The whole undertaking—show, lectures, publications—aims high, assuming a public mature enough to grasp subtle arguments and enterprising enough to think flexibly about subjects like magic, monarchy, and fertility. Early in the show’s itinerary, the label on a case containing a sistrum (a bronze rattle), some statuettes, and what looks like an ivory back-scratcher reveals that these instruments were used to relive the moment of cosmic creation, when the primeval god begot the celestial deities Shu and Tefnut by an act of masturbation. The object that looks like a back-scratcher turns out to be one of a pair of clappers carved from a hippopotamus tooth, decorated with a bas-relief head of Hathor, the cow-eared “mistress of pleasure,” and ending in a hand. (There are other such clappers upstairs in the permanent collection; the hand is an indispensable feature to make the clapper clap in a literal sense.)

Suddenly the jingle and slap of these percussive instruments become the music of the spheres—as ecstatic as the tiny bells on Indian bangles or a flamenco dancer’s castanets. One tiny elderly lady, elegant in a Chanel jacket, stood before the museum case for some time with a faraway look, contemplating the primal mystery—the seemingly ideal viewer for a show that charms brain, eye, and spirit.

Other cases and other labels tie the members of Egypt’s extensive pantheon to the habits of the animals that represent them: the flight pattern of the peregrine falcon, with its sharp climbs and precipitous dives, reminded the Egyptians of the sun’s habits and became the divinity Horus; the chatter of baboons at dawn and dusk turned these creatures into the greeters who send the sun disk on its morning journey across the vault of heaven, and its nighttime journey deep beneath the earth. The dogs who haunt graveyards find immortality in the funerary hound Anubis, sleek, needle-nosed, and whippet-thin, to glorify a legion of scavenging mutts.

In a land where infant mortality and death in childbirth were high, a company of goddesses embodied eternal motherhood: Hathor the cow by giving milk, Isis by fiercely protecting her husband Osiris and their son Horus in life and in death, Bastet the cat by her endless fertility, signaled both by her outrageous behavior in heat—hence the presence of little bronze cats perching on the crossbars of all those sistrums that rattle in the act of creation—and by her care for her kittens, who are often shown nursing in an orderly row (as in the exhibition) or (as in two statuettes on display in the permanent collection) playing with their mother’s whiskers and tail. It quickly becomes clear that the Egyptians, far from being obsessed with death, were captivated by life in all its forms: animal, vegetable, human, and cosmic.

It is the cosmic life cycle that gives form to the exhibition, set in the underground hall beneath I.M. Pei's glass pyramid known as the Hall Napoléon (the connection with the twentieth anniversary of Pei's pyramid turns out to be entirely coincidental). The show guides its viewers through four different aspects of Egyptian religious experience, each cued unmistakably by colored walls and a series of thresholds, both real and thematic. Its funneling effect is not so much a reflection of Euro Disney's techniques for moving people through a show as Euro Disney is itself a late reflection of all the great mystical initiations, from the temple of Karnak or the mysteries of Eleusis, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, Australian walkabouts, Siberian shamanic séances, and the secret rituals of the Freemasons, all of them meticulously measured passages from light to darkness, life to death, and back again, journeys that instruct as they disorient, terrify, and restore to sanity.

At its very beginning, then, "The Gates of Heaven" plays an old initiatory trick: a stark monumental entrance, made of two converging slabs of stone, draws us to its single focus, a sculpted gate (actually, as we will learn, a series of three gates nested within each other), but to find the entrance to the show proper we have to look behind us. There, in a room colored brilliant yellow, we discover "The Universe, Sanctuary of the Gods."

Objects of widely varying medium, size, and date illustrate the Egyptian pantheon. These include a series of choice loans from other European museums to round out the Louvre's own magnificent holdings, many of the pieces restored for the occasion to such gleaming splendor that they seem to have been made yesterday rather than in the Bronze Age or the age of Alexandria: a sleek black basalt statue of Horus the falcon, with yellow inlaid eyes, is pure Art Deco; a palette for eye makeup has geometry as clean and stark as any work of modernism. From images of the first creation and the endlessly various embodiments that this sun-drenched society devised to account for, and pay homage to, the chief star in our firmament, we come at last to humanity's position within this grand structure. Many people are familiar with most of the basic solar symbols of the Egyptians—the great sun disk, the solar boat, the scarab who rolls his ball of dung, Horus the falcon, the human figure of Amon-Re with his pillbox hat—but there are also arresting variations on these well-known themes.

Several paintings of the solar disk show it spilling out droplike rays of light, as if sunlight were as essential a fertilizer as rain—which, of course, it is. According to a number of natural philosophers in the European sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Egyptians were first to believe (as they believed themselves) that the sun's rays carried their own fertilizing power, a male spermatic force that met its willing mate in the female earth. Their own languages, whether Italian, French, German, Greek, or Latin, would remind them with every flicker of thought that the sky took a masculine noun and earth a feminine. Hence these early modern thinkers never quite registered, as we can, the fact that the Egyptian sky god was a voluptuous goddess, Nut, while her husband Geb, the personification of the earth, was the male. There was, however, a moment, as we have already noted, when spermatic force really did call the universe into being.

The Egyptian pantheon not only upset some of the usual early categories of divinity (the sky in Mesopotamia was male, and the earth female, as in Greece and Rome), but it also divided the world into a bewildering variety of localized and specialized divinities. The rising and setting suns were venerated as two separate gods; the latter, with his waning strength, colored blue. Every night he prepared to make a journey underneath the earth from which his people could only hope that he would emerge again in his guise as the rising sun. Human beings were destined to head for the same realm as the setting sun, an ominous time of day but one of particular beauty; hence the Egyptians personified "the Beautiful West" as a gorgeous young woman, lithe and sensual.

A permanent link with the world above could be maintained by preserving the body through mummification and commemorating individual lives through grave markers that were themselves small shrines. The exhibition's collection of tomb shrines ranges in size and splendor from pharaonic to middle-class, but it was a stroke of

genius to include among them a loan from the Berlin Museum: the tomb shrine of Bak (or Bek—Egyptian vowels are not always easy to supply), the great sculptor who created the most strikingly unconventional portraits of the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten in the Eighteenth Dynasty, who died around 1335 BCE.

One of Bak's colossal images stands upstairs in the Louvre's permanent collection to provide the measure of this man's talent (see illustration on page 56). It is taken from a wall of the temple at Karnak, and once showed Akhenaten standing with pharaonic crook and flail; in the Louvre, little more than his face remains, the face of a man who believed that he was the incarnate sun on earth, his almond eyes fixed on his own eternity, his nose and jaw unusually long, his full lips fixed in an enigmatic half-smile, a man so strange that he could only be immortal. Whatever Akhenaten may have been in life, Bak has made him, by his very strangeness and the beauty of his lines, into an immensely impressive figure. There is no question that Bak was one of the greatest and most original artists in the history of human endeavor.

As a sculptor, however, as a craftsman in a deeply hierarchical society, Bak knew his place; his self-portrait with his wife Tahery is about thirty centimeters high, the size of a Barbie doll. Yet even at the diminutive scale of this miniature portrait, there is no reason to think that Bak's prodigious belly, powerful shoulders, and sensitive hands are taken from anything but life. Tahery, stately and slightly plump, is as tall as he.

From the sun-golden world of the living, "The Gates of Heaven" plunges its public into a black-walled room to symbolize the subterranean world of the dead, of the sun's nighttime transit, and of the unknown monsters that inhabit this deep unknown realm. The Egyptians' funeral rites have fascinated outsiders at least since Herodotus in the fifth century BCE. Rather than mummies, however, the Louvre presents us with a series of funerary portraits ranging over fifteen hundred years of persistent belief, including an elaborately bearded Middle Kingdom grandee, rendered in paint on stuccoed cloth; a beaten gold mask from the New Kingdom; and a haunting series of panel-painted faces from the Roman period, striking for their realism. Large-eyed and painfully young, all of them, these souls of cosmopolitan Alexandria seem as ready for a poem by Cavafy as they do for the hieroglyphic inscriptions that still covered their coffins in the era of Caesar and Cleopatra. Dozens of tiny amulets accompanied the dead, one of the reasons that the Egyptians enjoyed such a reputation for superstition among their contemporaries. Brilliantly colored, in red carnelian or turquoise-glazed faience, in gold or bronze, each one is a beautiful little work of sculpture, as lively and engagingly individual as Zuni fetishes.

In a variety of media, we see how the deceased were laid out between protective life-size images of the Beautiful West beneath them and Nut arching overhead, with guardian deities sitting watchfully along the sides of their sarcophagi. As eternal resting places, these are as comforting as human ingenuity can make them. Tremendous expense went into the crafting of Egyptian graves, and the exhibition cleverly gives us a selection of tomb equipment with the prices for each piece calculated in workdays, a unit of measure that translates without difficulty over the millennia.

By far the most expensive piece of tomb equipment was the Book of the Dead, the papyrus scroll that contained instructions for how to navigate through the underworld. The book describes how forty-two divine judges waited to examine the soul of the deceased in a hall whose architecture is carefully delineated in many of the papyri, along with the underworld's other physical and architectural features. Some of these—for example, rock promontories and audience halls—are very much like those of the terrestrial world. Others—the realms of monsters—are terrifyingly different. The papyri on display range as widely in time and space as the other



Bronze votive statue of the Egyptian goddess Isis, Late Period, 664–332 BCE. Isis, the protectress of the dead, is depicted with vulture's wings, a vulture headdress, and a crown of cow's horns enclosing a solar disk.

artifacts, and by transcribing a certain number of texts, the curators ensure that we understand how very much these highly literate monuments have to tell us.

In order to complete its tour of the Egyptian cosmic cycle, the exhibition must release its public, like the sun, back into the world of the living, and the last two sections of the show—walls decorated in gray and then in a wash of light—demonstrate how temples, and then individuals, maintain the bond between upper and lower worlds. Communication between the two realms is effected above all by the offerings the living provide to the memory of the dead. Among the shrines we see ranged above stone tables to accommodate offerings of food (these, we are informed, were carefully parceled out among the priests so that nothing was wasted) is a little temple to Hercules, his hair coiffed in Greek ringlets, his lion skin draped over his shoulder, his club at rest, his stocky figure lounging in classical contrapposto; this is the beauty of Roman Egypt, a land where, for many years, the most diverse peoples and religions lived side by side and mingled more often than not.

The last pieces in the show are figures of people begging for an offering. One simply holds out his hand with the insistence of a street beggar, although he is clearly a person of far greater wealth and status. One, however, fears that passersby will fail to get the point—so he bites his own hand, from hunger or, more likely, perhaps, from frustration at human folly. We come out of the show with our backs to its entrance gate, having made, like the sun, a full circle, and the light of the real sun filters down through a twentieth-century pyramid. “The Gates of Heaven” manages, in the end, to provide literal illumination as well as the metaphorical kind.

Perhaps the most tantalizing aspect of the Egyptology on display in this magnificent show is the way it connects, in its sense of mystery, back to the old Egyptology of the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries, the age when more recent scholars have often assumed that people knew nothing about Egypt except the fairy tales told by writers of the Roman period: figures like the Greek Plutarch, the Alexandrian Jew Flavius Josephus, the Roman Macrobius, the Egyptian Horapollo, and the collection of texts that were probably written sometime between the second and third centuries CE but are ascribed to Hermes Trismegistus, “Thrice-Great” Hermes, the cosmopolitan version of the Egyptian god Thoth.

Yet those ancient writers and their early modern readers seem to have picked up some threads of truth along with their web of fables. Like some of their seventeenth-century predecessors, some modern scholars, Jan Assmann among them, argue that these classical writers have preserved genuine Egyptian traditions along with their fables—and the exhibition bolsters this argument through actual objects: the shrine to Hercules with its Egyptian offering table shows, for example, that cross-pollination could occur between Greek and Egyptian cults without entirely distorting either their Greek or their Egyptian character.

Writers like the Roman Macrobius and the early modern natural philosophers Giordano Bruno and Athanasius Kircher wrote about the sun's fertilizing power, tracing the idea back to ancient Egypt—and we can see that same idea developed in detail in “The Gates of Heaven” (even if the genders of sky and earth are reversed). Christian writers decried the ancient Egyptians' propensity to superstition, their armloads of amulets to ward off every conceivable threat to well-being—and we can see what they were talking about when we look at some of the Roman-period mummy cases, although our reaction may well be beguilement rather than shock. We are lucky that we can now read the hieroglyphs with great accuracy, whereas our early modern predecessors only pretended to read them, and we are lucky that we, at least, will not face the wrath of the Inquisition if we voice

what we think about it all (though it is sobering to remember what Christian and Islamic fanatics have done to suppress ancient Egyptian culture over the centuries). In one respect, however, our immediate forebears had it right: we can still learn from, and be excited by, the wisdom of ancient Egypt.