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**AN AGE OF CURIOSITY AND EXPERIMENTATION CHRONICLED**

**IN WHEN THE GREEKS RULED EGYPT**

**Over 75 Works at the Art Institute Span Three Millennia and Show Inventiveness of Art in  
Egypt During Greek Rule**

Ancient Egypt, protected by sea and desert and nurtured by the Nile, thrived for over 30 centuries with remarkable political, religious, and artistic continuity. Alexander the Great seized Egypt on his mission to conquer the Persian Empire in 332 B.C.; when his general Ptolemy came to rule Egypt, he found it wise to adapt to the much older culture. His dynasty, which ruled for the subsequent 300 years, oversaw an age of profound curiosity and rich experimentation where Greek and Egyptian conventions converged. Drawn primarily from the Art Institute's permanent collection with key loans from private collections and the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago, ***When the Greeks Ruled Egypt***, on view in **Gallery 154 through July 27, 2014**, explores this confluence of cultures through over 75 artworks including gilded mummy masks, magical amulets, and stunning portraits in stone and precious metals.



*When the Greeks Ruled Egypt* begins with a range of remarkable works created in the 3,000 years before the arrival of Alexander the Great in Egypt. Centered on the belief of a real and tactile afterlife that mirrored life on earth, sculptors, painters, goldsmiths, scribes, glassmakers, and architects created beautiful funerary goods to serve rich and poor in eternity. Religious belief that had changed very little in over three millennia meant artwork was remarkably consistent and abided by time-honored traditions that carried forward the distinctive visual culture of past generations, including the

iconic Egyptian convention of representing the human body. *Wall Fragment from the Tomb of Thenti* (Egyptian, Old Kingdom, Dynasty 5, 2504–2347 B.C.) is just such a representation that simultaneously depicts the frontal and side views of the body; the eye and shoulders are frontal while the head, nose, and mouth are shown in profile. Other artworks show meat, vegetables, vessels full of libations, and inventories of linen to assure abundance for the deceased in life after death. To ensure protection in the afterlife, Egyptians stocked their tombs with security-giving amulets and figurines like the *Ushabti of Nebseni* (above right; Egyptian, New Kingdom, early Dynasty 17, about 1570 B.C.), which were thought to act as helpful servants.



The exhibition moves from such representative Egyptian expressions to the intermingling of artistic traditions under Alexander the Great and his successor in Egypt, Ptolemy. The Greek rulers in Egypt claimed kinship with the Greek Zeus and the Egyptian Amon and also invented a totally new god, Serapis, who oversaw Egyptian grain production so crucial to Greeks and later, the Romans. The exhibition showcases the fusion of two artistic traditions with works that incorporate the Classical (Greek and Roman) interest in naturalism with millennia-old Egyptian practices. Reliefs from the

Ptolemaic period in *When the Greeks Ruled Egypt* show subjects that are traditionally Egyptian, yet subtly introduce the true-to-life style of the Ptolemies. New coinage, modeled on Greek standard weights, used classical imagery but with Egyptian characteristics like the ram's horn of Zeus Amon curled around the ears of the rulers depicted (as seen in the *Coin Portraying Alexander the Great*; at left).

The exhibition also includes works from the Roman period, which began in 30 B.C. after Octavian's defeat of Mark Antony and Cleopatra, the last actively ruling pharaoh of the Ptolemaic dynasty. Mummy portraits painted during Roman rule adhere to Roman tastes for realistic portraiture, but indicate how assimilated into Egyptian life some Greeks and Romans became by practicing mummification, albeit with the slight variation of a portrait as face cover.

Throughout the exhibition the voices of ancient authors appear alongside artworks and bring the Greek encounter with the ancient and alluring civilization of Egypt to life. The 5th century B.C. Greek historian Herodotus wrote of Egypt, "This country has more marvels and monuments that defy description than any other." *When the Greeks Ruled Egypt* vividly chronicles the Greek fascination

with the luxury and ritual of the grand court of the Egyptian kings.

*When the Greeks Ruled Egypt* is curated by Mary Greuel, Elizabeth McIlvaine assistant curator of Ancient Art in the Department of Ancient and Byzantine Art at the Art Institute of Chicago. Additional research was provided by Emily Teeter, Egyptologist at the Oriental Institute Museum at the University of Chicago. Exhibition funding is generously provided by the Jaharis Family Foundation, Inc.

**Images:** *Ushabti of Nebseni*, New Kingdom, early Dynasty 17, (about 1570 B.C.). The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Henry H. Getty, Charles L. Hutchinson, and Norman W. Harris; Greek. *Tetradrachm (Coin) Portraying Alexander the Great*, 306-281 B.C. The Art Institute of Chicago, Gift of Martin A. Ryerson.

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The Art Institute of Chicago gratefully acknowledges the support of the Chicago Park District on behalf of the citizens of Chicago.