



Educator packet for the special exhibition

Unearthing the Truth: Egypt's Pagan and Coptic Sculpture

on view at the Brooklyn Museum, February 13–May 10, 2009



Figure 1

Description of the Artwork



This rectangular stone sculpture is the oldest work in the special exhibition *Unearthing the Truth: Egypt's Pagan and Coptic Sculpture*. It is carved on one side. On its face is a scene framed by two columns that support a triangular pediment. At the center of the scene is a forward-facing human figure wearing a short robe belted beneath his round stomach. His hair dangles on one side of his head in a fashion scholars refer to as a “sidelock of youth.” His plump cheeks and belly, as well as his hairdo, suggest that he is a young boy. He holds a small bucket or basket in his left hand and an oval object in his right.

Two shelves flank the boy, each jutting out from a column at the height of his shoulders. An animal perches on either shelf, a pointy-eared dog on his right and a bird with a crown on his left. At his feet is a third animal with the body of a lion and the wings of a bird.

While the slab was once painted, no colors remain, revealing the marks of the artist's tools. Beneath the scene is an inscription of four rows of writing.

Background and Analysis

Before it was excavated, this stela, or decorated stone slab, marked the grave of the three-year-old boy depicted in the scene. He is identified in the stela's inscription as Gaius Julius Valerius. The inscription also names the boy's father, Gaius Julius Severus, a Roman soldier stationed near Alexandria, Egypt. Valerius' Roman parentage is illustrated by his clothing, the classical architectural setting, and the Latin inscription on his tombstone. His mother is not named in the inscription, but it is likely that she was Egyptian. Her heritage can be seen in the boy's hairstyle and the inclusion of two Egyptian deities, the jackal god Anubis and the crowned falcon Horus. The vessel Valerius holds may be for collecting water from the Nile River. The object in his right hand is likely food he takes from an altar to sustain him in the afterlife.

Although the stela incorporates iconography common in ancient Egypt, like Anubis, the god of mummification, and Horus, a powerful sky god, it uses Roman religious symbols as well: the winged griffin was a way of depicting the goddess Nemesis, who holds a “wheel of fortune” to show how she distributes life and death. The scene's architecture also demonstrates a blend of influences: the boy stands in a Roman-style temple with columns and a triangular pediment; the capitals of the columns, however, are Egyptian in style, and resemble the tops of papyrus plants that flourished in and along the Nile River.

This grave marker offers an example of the merging of competing religious and cultural imagery characteristic of the Late Antique Period in Egypt. This era saw the decline of Egypt's ancient religion and the shift from pagan to Christian religious practice. While the term *paganism* usually connotes any belief in non-Christian gods, in the context of this exhibition the term is used to describe Greek and Roman religions prevalent during the Hellenistic era. In the period following the production of this gravestone, some Egyptians began worshipping Greco-Roman deities, even as Christianity gained influence and spread through Egypt. The branch of Christianity arising in Egypt was known as Coptic Christianity. The word *Coptic* comes from the same word as “Egypt,” but today refers to the Egyptian Christian church, its believers, and the associated liturgical language.

Questions for Viewing

What evidence can you find that indicates this artwork was made a long time ago? What parts look like they have been damaged? What might have caused this damage?

Where do you see evidence of the artist's tool marks?

Describe the setting where the boy is standing. What kind of place do you think this might be?

This object was made to commemorate the death of a young boy. What do you see to support this idea?

Describe the different animals you see. What is unusual about these animals?

The three animals are responsible for guarding the young boy. What do you see to suggest they are protecting him? What do you see to suggest that these animals are powerful?

The inscription written in Latin at the bottom of the stela includes the boy's name: Gaius Julius Valerius. Can you find his name in the inscription? What clues did you use to locate it?

Ancient Egyptians believed that once they died they would be reborn into an afterlife. What has the artist included that may be useful to Valerius in his afterlife?

Imagine moving your hands slowly over the surface of the stela. What would it feel like? Which parts of the stela are in highest relief (closest to you)? Which areas are recessed (farthest from you)?



Figure 2

Unearthing the Truth



This work was probably created in the twentieth century but was made to look like it is about two thousand years old. The work convinced people for a long time, but recently scholars have found several clues that identify it as a forgery and not an artwork from the Late

Antique Period. This sculpture apparently intends to depict an event from the Gospel of Matthew in which Joseph flees to Egypt with Mary and the newborn Jesus. However, few known works of art from the Late Antique Period show this subject matter, which gave scholars reason to be suspicious of its authenticity. The shoddy craftsmanship and the artist's unusual choice of nummulitic limestone also alerted scholars that the work might not be authentic. The forger may have thought that the pocked limestone would make the work look old, since ancient sculptures often show signs of wind or rain erosion if they were placed outside. However, ancient artists never used such poor quality stone. While portions of stone are missing from the edges, the raised figures do not show evidence of the same damage, even though they should be vulnerable to breakage.

Questions for Viewing

Compare this sculpture with the stela for Gaius Julius Valerius. What similarities do you see? What differences can you find?

Look carefully for evidence of damage on this sculpture. Where does it appear? Do these marks seem to have been made accidentally or intentionally? What do you see to support your answer?

Where can you find the sculptor's tool marks?

Shabby chic is a style of interior design where objects are favored because they look worn or distressed instead of brand new. Why do you think some people like shabby chic? What elements of shabby chic does this object have?

What would motivate someone to create an artwork intended to deceive its viewers?

To determine the authenticity of an object it is helpful to know where it came from, who found it, who owned it, and where it has been since it was found. This list of information is known as an object's *provenance*. How could you go about researching an object's provenance?

Scientists can test the age of a stone. Would this help to date the artwork? Why or why not?

Activities

Art Activity

Griffins were used by ancient Greeks and Romans as guardian figures, sometimes to protect a great fortune, a home, or a tomb. Griffins were later used in Christian imagery and have acquired secular associations as well. The Philadelphia Museum of Art has adopted the griffin as its symbol. Invent your own guardian figure. What features does it need to offer protection? What or whom will it protect? Sketch the figure. Then, place your sketch on top of a piece of metal foil. Use a plastic or wooden stylus to engrave your sketch into the metal foil. What are some of the differences between your metal foil relief and the two stone sculptures?

History Activity

Find a plaque in your neighborhood that includes a carved inscription or image. Prove you were there by creating a rubbing. First, cover the plaque with a piece of paper larger than the area you have chosen. Then use a crayon or pencil to rub onto the paper. This will create a transfer of the plaque. Be careful not to move the paper once you have started. This kind of rubbing is successful because most inscriptions are carved in relief, like the stela. Research the historic event or person that your plaque commemorates. Share your findings.

Note: If the plaque is on private property, such as a church or a cemetery, ask permission first, and be sure to follow the institution's guidelines. Most brass plaques can be rubbed without harming them, but very old stone can be damaged by the pressure of rubbing.

Economics Activity

The art market has always followed the rules of supply and demand. In the 1950s, when genuine Late Antique Egyptian sculpture began to appear on the market, *forgeries*, counterfeit artworks made to look like they were created long ago, also appeared. Manufacturers of fakes produced these forgeries in part to satisfy buyers' interests in certain subjects. The Brooklyn Museum forgeries (including 77.129) depict several narrative Christian biblical subjects not typically treated by Late Antique artists. Use catalogues from auction houses such as Christie's and Sotheby's to research the monetary value of artworks. How do age, artist, and medium affect their market value? What do you think is the highest dollar amount a museum or individual has paid for a work of art? What if they discovered it was a forgery?

Science Activity

One of the techniques museum professionals use to find out whether an object is authentic or not is to test any remnants of paint on the object's surface. Tests can identify whether the paint is composed of modern synthetic or natural materials. Then researchers can find out if these materials were commonly used at the same time and in the same region as the artwork. What were pigments made from in Roman Egypt? Try making your own pigments from natural materials.

Resources

http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_hb3226/is_ai_n29420391
"Chemistry and Archeology: Analysis of Ancient Pigments"

www.benaki.gr/index.asp?id=10104&lang=en
Selections from the Benaki Museum's collection of Coptic art

www.copticmuseum.gov.eg/english/default.htm
The Coptic Museum in Cairo, Egypt

www.irubny.com
The Web site for the Community Arts Initiative I Rub NY. You can watch a demo video on how to make a rubbing, then upload your rubbing to the site.

Figure 1:

Funerary Stela of C. Julius Valerius. From Egypt, exact provenance unknown. 3rd century c.e. Limestone, traces of paint, 14 1/16 X 10 3/16 X 1 13/16 in. (35.7 X 25.8 X 4.6 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Evangeline Wilbour Blashfield, Theodora Wilbour, and Victor Wilbour honoring the wishes of their mother, Charlotte Beebe Wilbour, as a memorial to their father, Charles Edwin Wilbour, 16.105

Figure 2:

The Holy Family. Provenance unknown. Probably 20th century c.e. Nummulitic limestone, 11 7/16 X 20 1/16 X 3 9/16 in. (29 X 51 X 9 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mrs. Jacob Kaplan, 77.129

Brooklyn Museum

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