

Brooklyn Museum

Teacher Resource Packet

To Live Forever: Art and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt

February 12–May 2, 2010



To Live Forever

Art and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt

About the Exhibition

Two of the primary cultural tenets through thousands of years of ancient Egyptian civilization were a belief in the afterlife and the view that death was an enemy that could be vanquished. *To Live Forever: Art and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt* features objects that illustrate a range of strategies the ancient Egyptians developed to defeat death, including mummification and various rituals performed in the tomb. The exhibition reveals what the Egyptians believed they would find in the next world and contrasts how the rich and the poor prepared for the hereafter. The economics of the funeral are examined, including how the poor tried to imitate the costly appearance of the grave goods of the rich in order to ensure a better place in the afterlife.

This Teacher Resource Packet provides background information for two funerary objects and questions for viewing that consider how each object provided its owner with the necessary tools for the afterlife.

Background Information

Ancient Egyptians believed that life on earth was only one part of their existence. Following death, ancient Egyptians began a challenging journey to the afterlife led by the sun god Re (also known as Ra). If the journey was successful, they would live forever in the afterlife. Re was thought to be responsible for providing daylight and, therefore, life on earth. During the twelve hours of night, Re lit the *Duat*, or netherworld. Throughout the night, each hour Re and the deceased would encounter challenges as they traveled through the *Duat*. Funerary objects purchased during life on earth allowed for safe passage through the night. At sunrise, the deceased would arrive safely in the afterlife with all of the belongings necessary for eternal life.

All ancient Egyptians, from pharaohs to farmers, invested in preparing for the afterlife by purchasing the objects necessary for eternal life. Funerary objects belonging to the elite are vastly over-represented in museum collections. Gold funerary masks, canopic jars, and monumental stone sarcophagi (or coffins), which are most commonly associated with ancient Egypt, are actually representative of a very rare level of wealth. Few ancient Egyptians could afford to commission a coffin. Most wrapped the deceased in a linen

shroud. Acquiring a sarcophagus or a funerary mask was possible only for the upper middle class; even then the owner would need to negotiate a reasonable price for materials, decoration, and cost of construction. In order to afford the commission, people could request the use of less expensive materials or an artist with less training than those affiliated with royal or temple workshops. There is evidence also that ancient Egyptians used miniature versions of certain funerary objects to save money, or *deben*. These replicas were adequate for what they needed in the afterlife. Regardless of the quality of materials, amount of detail, or experience of the artist, these funerary objects all guaranteed life after death.



Description of Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman

This gilded mummy cartonnage (or container) is a bust-length funerary portrait of a woman adorned with elaborate jewelry and clothing. Blue faience (a ceramic material made mostly from sand) surrounds both of her eyes and forms her eyebrows. Partly covered by a painted head

scarf, her hair has been sculpted into three rows of tight, intricate curls close to her brow and then smoothes out towards the crown of her head. The figure wears an ancient Greek- or Roman-style shawl over her shoulders. Her jewelry includes earrings, necklaces, rings, snake armbands, and bracelets. Her right hand rests on her chest, holding a loop-shaped bouquet of flowers. In her left hand she holds several stems of wheat. Strips of linen cloth are visible along the bottom edge of the figure.

About the Artwork Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman

Several details on this cartonnage are protective symbols that would help the deceased pass safely into the afterlife. For example, the flowers held across the figure's chest are shaped into a protective symbol, known as the *sa*. Her shawl is tied with a knot representing Isis, goddess of motherhood and magic. The blue faience that outlines the figure's eyes and eyebrows may refer to the life-giving Nile River. The gold applied across the entire surface of the bust was believed to be flesh of Hathor, goddess of feminine beauty and motherhood. The wheat in her left hand symbolizes motherhood and fertility.

This cartonnage dates from the first century C.E. Many of the stylistic details are indicative of this period, when Greeks and Romans were settling in Egypt. The figure's soft, realistic features, shawl, and jewelry all demonstrate this influence.

Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman is an example of the ostentatious tastes of the elite class. But despite the woman's prosperity, the materials used for this cartonnage suggest that its design was affected by budgetary concerns. Its owner was able to afford a significant amount of gilding; however, the cartonnage is made of linen, a type of cloth, rather than solid gold. The blue faience that decorates her eyes is a substitute for lapis lazuli, which was prohibitively expensive because it was imported from distant lands. Similarly, the glass accents are substitutes for precious and semiprecious stones.

Questions for Viewing *Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman*

What do you notice about this figure?

An artist can include information about the subject of a portrait using the sitter's clothing, pose, and facial expression. Describe this figure's clothing, pose, and facial expression. What do these details tell us about her?

An attribute is an object associated with a figure that is meant to help identify or represent that person. Find two attributes in this funerary portrait. What more do they tell us about this woman?

This funerary object was made in part to help protect its owner in the afterlife. What items do you notice that might symbolize this protection?

Although the cartonnage appears to be solid gold, only the outer layer is gilded; its inner layers are made of linen. Why do you think the owner tried to create the illusion of a solid-gold cartonnage? If the owner could not afford to gild the surface, what other materials could be substituted?



Description of the Artwork *Head and Chest from a Sarcophagus*

This red terracotta fragment depicts a figure adorned with elaborate jewelry and clothing. The figure's nose, ears, and lips were sculpted into the terracotta in low relief. Her eyes, hair, and adornments, including a broad striped collar and several necklaces

with red and black stripes, plant motifs, and diamond-shaped decorative patterns, were applied to the surface with paint. Although both men and women wore jewelry in ancient Egypt, this figure's long hair and the absence of a beard suggest that it depicts a woman. The bottom edge of the artwork is fairly rough, and the original red terracotta has been exposed in several areas.

About the Artwork *Head and Chest from a Sarcophagus*

The damage along the bottom edge indicates that this object was a bust-length portrait of the deceased, or part of a body-length coffin or mummy board, much like *Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman*. Though both objects date from the same period, *Head and Chest from a Sarcophagus* provides unique insight into the burial practices of the middle class, whose funerary objects were, by necessity, far less expensive to produce. Sculpting by hand, rather than using a mold, the artist could produce a work at less cost, but the result is less uniform. Other budget-conscious decisions include painting the terracotta surface with red, black, brown, and white paint rather than more expensive pigments such as blue and green. Just as limestone might serve as a sufficient substitute for a harder, higher-quality stone such as granite, in this instance terracotta serves the purpose of an expensive wooden or stone coffin. For ancient Egyptians with an even smaller budget, the use of second-hand coffins was a frequent practice.

Questions for Comparing *Head and Chest from a Sarcophagus* with *Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman*

Compare *Head and Chest from a Sarcophagus* with *Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman*. What similarities do you see? What differences can you find?

Compare the paint colors used in each object. How do you think the choice of paint color could affect the price of the coffin? Consider the natural resources required for producing these pigments as well as how they would be obtained.

Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman was made out of linen, gilded gesso, glass, and faience. *Head and Chest from a Sarcophagus* was made with terracotta and paint. Which object do you think was more expensive to create? Why?

Do you think the difference in the quality and materials of these objects affected the owner's journey to the afterlife? Why or why not?

What evidence can you find that indicates this artwork was made by hand?

Activities

Balancing the Budget

Like ancient Egyptians, people today make decisions based on what they are able to afford. For example, some families may buy or lease a pre-owned compact car rather than a new, luxurious sport utility vehicle. Establish an imaginary budget to be applied to purchasing items from a clothing or toy catalogue. Discuss different strategies that may save or earn money. Locate second-hand items, trade, or make other choices that will make possible the purchase of that object or a similar, less expensive one. Make an expense sheet that tracks the original items, the budget allowance, the savings and/or earnings made, and any further purchases. Discuss this process. Did anything surprise you about the assignment?

Contracts 101

Papyri (sheets of thick paper-like material produced from the pith of the papyrus plant) have survived from ancient Egypt that document the agreements or contracts artists prepared for purchasers of funerary objects. Prepare a contract agreeing to make an artwork for a classmate. Be sure to note what materials you intend to use and the associated costs. Consider what you are willing to trade for or charge for your artwork. Will the buyer be permitted to make any decisions about the work? How would you negotiate with a buyer who is not satisfied with your product?

Design Time

Imagine that you have unlimited funds to design your own bedroom. What objects would you select for your room? What symbols would you use to decorate your space? Who would be invited to share or visit your room? How much do you think it would cost for your design to be implemented? What would you want your room to say about you?

The Myth of Re

A storyboard is a visual, scene-by-scene narrative with one event depicted in each panel, like a comic strip. Read one version of the myth of the sun god Re and create a storyboard that illustrates each hour of the deceased's journey through the afterlife.

Resources

www.brooklynmuseum.org/kiosk/egyptian/ancient-egypt/

Explore objects from the Brooklyn Museum's world-class Egyptian collection. This Web site includes a portrait gallery, a glossary, an illustrated list of ancient Egyptian gods and goddesses, a timeline, a map, and more.

Bleiberg, Edward, with an essay by Kathlyn M. Cooney. *To Live Forever: Egyptian Treasures from the Brooklyn Museum*. London and New York: Brooklyn Museum in association with D Giles Limited, 2008.

This exhibition catalogue discusses funerary fashions, the choices Egyptians made when furnishing their tombs, and the ways we know about what Egyptians spent preparing for the afterlife.

David, Rosalie, and Rich Archbold. *Conversations with Mummies: New Light on the Lives of Ancient Egyptians*. London: HarperCollins, Madison Press, 2000.

The authors explore how modern medical technologies can be used to learn more about mummies.

Grajetzki, Wolfram. *Burial Customs in Ancient Egypt: Life in Death for Rich and Poor*. London: Gerald Duckworth & Co., 2003.

This book examines evidence from burials across different time periods and social classes.

To Live Forever: Art and the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt is organized by Edward Bleiberg, Curator of Egyptian Art, Brooklyn Museum, and drawn from the Museum's collections.

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Cover (detail) and pages 2, 5. *Mummy Cartonnage of a Woman*. From Hawara, Egypt. Roman Period, 1st century c.e. Linen, gilded gesso, glass, faience. Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 69.35

Pages 3 (detail) and 6. *Head and Chest from a Sarcophagus*. From Egypt. Roman Period, 4th century c.e. Terracotta, painted. Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 83.29

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