

MFA

Museum of Fine Arts
ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

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MAGIC OF ANCIENT EGYPT TRANSFORMS THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA, WORKS HAVE AMERICAN PREMIERE

This landmark exhibition brings to life one of the greatest civilizations in the history of the world. *Ancient Egypt—Art and Magic: Treasures from the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art*, on view from December 17, 2011-April 29, 2012, spotlights astonishing objects of every kind.

Mummy cases and sacred works in diverse media, tomb and temple reliefs, papyrus fragments, alabaster vessels, and rare objects comprised of precious stones make this one of the most dramatic shows ever presented at the MFA. The 100 works demonstrate the genius of ancient craftsmen, and the magical or spiritual qualities of the objects are revealed at every turn. The internationally respected Egyptologist Dr. Robert Steven Bianchi is the guest curator.

A magnificent red granite torso of Rameses the Great honors one of the most celebrated pharaohs in history. A large stele, or funerary marker, commemorates his son Rameses III. Other key works include a tomb relief of the nobleman Nefer-Hotep, a relief from the Amarna Period from a temple erected during the reign of the Pharaoh Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti, and a fragment from a temple relief paying tribute to Alexander the Great.

A limestone sphinx is similarly impressive. The sphinx, with the head of a pharaoh and the body of a lion, points to the profound interrelationship of humans and nature in ancient Egypt. The natural world was not something apart for the Egyptians, and neither were the deities, who could take the form of animals and natural forces such as the sun.

Ancient Egyptian art centers on transformation, renewal, and eternal life. These objects were invested with visual and symbolic power. Hieroglyphics, the ancient Egyptian written language, were, by themselves, a high form of artistic expression.

The mummy cases or sarcophagi are the largest works in the exhibition. One is covered in colorful images—like a brilliant painting—and was designed to honor the

status of an unidentified court official and to assure his eternal life. Another, more than six-and-a-half-feet tall, includes inlays of alabaster or limestone, as well as hieroglyphics, and has a monumental presence asserting the authority of a certain Hor-Em-Akhet. This impressive object was in the collection of French fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent at the time of his death.

“The Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg is proud to bring these distinguished works of art to America,” said Museum Director Kent Lydecker. “The quality of the objects will be a revelation to scholars and the public. We are indebted to the Fondation Gandur pour l’Art, to Dr. Bianchi, and to our exhibition sponsors for making this extraordinary project possible.”

THE MAGIC OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

Magic and spirituality infused every aspect of Egyptian art. Instead of providing a chronological survey, Dr. Bianchi has emphasized the objects’ sacred qualities. Priests accompanied the workers to gather natural materials and conducted specific rituals upon entering and leaving the quarries.

According to Dr. Bianchi, “for the ancient Egyptians, all stones were considered to be a privileging material, because they symbolized eternity, permanence, immutability, and incorruptibility...Any object created in stone or any text inscribed into stone remained intact and immune to the agents of time. Stone, possessed of a vital energy, was alive.” Statues of gods and pharaohs possessed their animating spirit.

In antiquity, expeditions to *the Red Land*—the desert, a place of chaos, evil, and demons—were ordered by pharaoh. The materials were returned to *the Black Land*—named for the rich silt deposited by the Nile—where the ancient Egyptians lived and thrived.

Craftsmen then converted these raw materials into fascinating and timeless objects representing cosmic order. *The Black Land* was the world of civilization, and the color black signified rebirth. These objects always had an elevated purpose and meaning, but they can be appreciated for their sheer beauty alone.

ABOUT THE FONDATION GANDUR POUR L’ART



FONDATION
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Jean Claude Gandur, a Swiss citizen living in London, is one of the world’s most generous philanthropists. He has followed in the family tradition of business success and devotion to the arts and is increasingly sharing even more of his wealth and collection with the public. He has avidly and astutely collected Egyptian, Greek, and Roman antiquities; twentieth-century paintings; and decorative arts.

In 2010, he established the Fondation Gandur pour l’Art and formed a partnership with the Musée d’Art et d’Histoire du Genève, which has the largest public collection of antiquities in Switzerland. The foundation is underwriting the planned renovation of the

museum and the addition of a new wing, designed by Jean Nouvel, the winner of the 2008 Pritzker Prize.

Mr. Gandur has a strong commitment to increasing understanding of ancient Egypt and its art. He will meet with school groups in St. Petersburg during the exhibition's opening events. Extensive educational materials and programs about ancient Egypt will enhance enjoyment of the exhibition.

ABOUT THE GUEST CURATOR

Dr. Robert Steven Bianchi, one of the world's foremost Egyptologists, has mounted many international exhibitions of ancient art. He has nearly 300 journal articles and reviews to his credit and has written more than 50 books. His college textbook, *The Daily Life of the Ancient Nubians*, is one of his most recent publications. He has presented his scholarship to a wide public, appearing as a principal in more than 60 television programs broadcast on three continents.

Dr. Bianchi received his Ph.D. from New York University's Institute of Fine Arts in 1976, having previously been an assistant in the Egyptian Department of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. He served as the curator in the Department of Egyptian, Classical, and Ancient Middle Eastern Art at the Brooklyn Museum for 15 years.

ABOUT THE CATALOGUE

Dr. Bianchi is the author of the handsome, pioneering catalogue, which features an illuminating essay, striking reproductions of all the objects in the exhibition, and engaging entries. The catalogue provides an accessible introduction to the spirituality of the ancient Egyptians, as well as an examination of materials, color, and hieroglyphics. It will be available in the Museum Store and can also be ordered by mail. For more information, please visit the MFA website, www.fine-arts.org.

EXHIBITION SPONSORS

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ABOUT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA

The MFA at 255 Beach Drive N.E. has an encyclopedic collection of art from around the globe and across the centuries. The approximately 18,000 objects include important works by Monet, Gauguin, Renoir, Morisot, Cézanne, Rodin, O'Keeffe, and many others.

Also on view are ancient Greek and Roman, Egyptian, Asian, African, pre-Columbian, and Native American art. The photography collection is one of the largest and most significant in the Southeast.

The Museum is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Monday-Saturday and noon-5 p.m. Sunday. Admission is \$17 for adults, \$15 for those 65 and older, and \$10 for students seven and older, including college students with current I.D. Children under seven and Museum members are admitted free. Groups of 10 or more adults pay only \$12 per person and children \$4 each with prior reservations.

The MFA Café is open from 11 a.m.-3 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. The Museum Store has been named the area's best by the *duPont Registry*. For more information, please call 727.896.2667 or visit the website at www.fine-arts.org. For café reservations, please call 727.822.1032.

Credit lines for the images:

Lid from a Sarcophagus
Wood, gessoed and painted
Dynasty XXI-XXII, 1080-720 BC
Collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art

Sphinx
Limestone with traces of red pigment
Ptolemaic Period, 305-30 BC
Collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art

A Head of a Ram
Wood with black-and-white stone inlays and bronze additions
Dynasty XXV-XXVII, 745-404 BC
Collection of the Fondation Gandur pour l'Art