

# Metropolitan Museum Presents Egyptian Metal Statuary.

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Opening at The Metropolitan Museum of Art on October 16, 2007, Gifts for the Gods: Images from Egyptian Temples is the first exhibition ever devoted to these fascinating yet enigmatic works. On view will be some 70 superb statues and statuettes created in precious metals and copper alloys including bronze (an alloy of copper and tin) over more than two millennia.

Through their long history, the ancient Egyptians used copper, bronze, gold, and silver to create lustrous, graceful statuary for their interactions with their gods ? from ritual dramas in the temples and chapels that dotted the landscape to festival processions through the towns and countryside that were thronged by believers.

The exhibition will bring to New York masterpieces from around the world, including seven extremely rare inlaid and decorated large bronzes from the first half of the first millennium, the so-called Third Intermediate Period (1070 ? 664 B.C.), the apogee of Egyptian metalwork. Among these will be the astonishing bronze statue of the priestess and noblewoman Takushit, the treasure of the Egyptian Collection of the National Archaeological Museum in Athens. Measuring some 27 inches (70 cm) in height and covered with a luminous latticework of divine figures and imagery in precious metal, this work has never before left Greece. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from

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the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Understanding the precious metal and bronze statuary of ancient Egypt poses particular challenges. Reverently decommissioned and buried in large temple deposits after long use, the statues often lack historical inscriptions or, indeed, any contextual information. Metal statuary also reveals a somewhat surprising view of Egyptian art, because it represents different cultural, social, and production structures than those of Egypt's stone creations, with which we are more familiar. For instance, the depiction of Hapu (National Archaeological Museum, Athens) with full natural hair ? as opposed to the traditional wig ? marks him as a member of a newly visible group, probably a soldier in the wars of the early New Kingdom (ca. 1550–1478 B.C.). Through their recent studies of metal statuary, scholars have been able to elaborate a new framework for metal statuary and gain a new appreciation of these works of art.

The exhibition will present an updated understanding of the development of metal types over the centuries. Special emphasis will be given to its time of great flowering, the Third Intermediate Period, revealing that the term "intermediate" does not coincide with the artistic importance of this era.

While remarkable metal creations from the Old Kingdom (ca. 2575–2100 B.C.) do exist, notable use of copper and its alloys ? including bronze for divine and royal statuary ? emerges in the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2040–1650 B.C.), possibly due to an increasing extension of royal patronage to temples. Particularly charming is the figure of the young Princess Sobeknakht nursing her infant son (Brooklyn Museum of Art). Under the powerful and rich pharaohs of the New Kingdom, with its growth in international trade and relations, the temples saw great accumulations of riches, which are mostly lost and known only from representations. The sly crocodile metamorphosing to a richly inlaid ritual implement and the large

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dramatic Seth in the exhibition are rarities from this period (Musée du Louvre, Paris, and Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek, Copenhagen, respectively). At the same time, evidence of a growing royal attention to religious performances oriented toward a wide public is preserved in the series of kneeling kings (The Metropolitan Museum of Art; University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology).

These works probably figured on the decks of boat-shaped (barque) shrines borne on carrying poles by priests so that the divine image, sheltered under a baldachin and hidden by hangings, could venture out into the midst of an adoring jostling populace in processions on festival days.

At the center of the exhibition are surprising works created during the Third Intermediate Period (ca. 1070–664 B.C.), when political disunity and shifting religious beliefs gave new importance to the temples. The Metropolitan Museum's lithe golden Amun is an astonishing divine image from this time. The shimmering color and animation of the religious observances that surrounded such divine images are evoked by large figures of kings Pedubaste and Pami (Museu Gulbenkian, Lisbon, and British Museum, London, respectively) and of noble women, including Takushit, who were placed in service to the temples as divine companions and served as musicians and choir members. A remarkable phenomenon of the period is the elaborate figural decoration on the bodies of statues. While Takushit's decoration was perhaps intended to create a cultic space around a divine image she accompanied, Osiris (the god of the afterlife) and his symbols decorate the body of another large female statue (Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin). Subtle coloristic use of alloys in several statues and other technological practices attest to a sophisticated technology that is inseparable from the artistry of these statues.

During the Late Period (664–323 B.C.) and Ptolemaic Period (323–30 B.C.), the temples

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accrued enormous authority. Although a unified kingship was reestablished, it was the king's identification with the divine child of great gods within the temples that preserved his aura through the political vicissitudes of the first millennium, which saw frequent invasions and precarious internal consensus. Royal images of King Amasis with soft, childlike features ? a figure kneeling to offer to the gods (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) and a head wearing an elaborate collar and forming part of a cult implement (Egyptian Museum, Cairo) ? exquisitely express this understanding. Already in the Third Intermediate Period, and even more so during this period, the participation of individuals in offering practices surged, resulting in the prodigious quantities of statuary whose variety points to diverse sites of production and influences, resulting in an art full of vitality and variation.

The exhibition will include information about the place and use of the statuary in the temples from clues provided by the statues themselves or from archaeological evidence. Ancient texts preserve ritual prescriptions for the treatment of what seem to be isolated and unique cult images, which were fed, dressed, given jeweled offerings, and covered for protection from dangers at night. Miniature gold collars and bracelets directly reflect such practices, and some statues preserve clues to their placement and movement during ritual performances. However, the actual thousands upon thousands of works that were buried in sacred deposits overwhelm any simple linear comprehension. New archaeological finds, such as the Metropolitan Museum's small Harpokrates with a finger to his mouth from Saqqara, and their interpretation begin to illuminate the widespread phenomenon of offering divine statuary in Egypt during the first millennium: a recent discovery, for instance, revealed hundreds of such donations, from the finest to the poorest, carefully housed in a chapel in the innermost part of a temple. A chapter in the catalogue will show that, even if their function or status still remains

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unclear to us, the temple in fact accepted and maintained all these statuettes as repositories for divinities.

A variety of education programs will be offered in conjunction with the exhibition, including gallery talks, a Sunday at the Met on December 2 featuring lectures by John Taylor, assistant keeper of antiquities at The British Museum, London, and Regine Schultz, curator of ancient art at The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore. Gifts for the Gods: Images from Egyptian Temples was organized by Marsha Hill, Curator of Egyptian Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Exhibition design is by Daniel Kershaw, Senior Exhibition Designer; graphics are by Sue Koch, Senior Graphic Designer; and lighting is by Clint Ross Coller and Richard Lichte, Senior Lighting Designers, all of the Museum's Department of Special Exhibitions, Gallery Installations, and Design. --  
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