The Egyptian Collection

At the Penn Museum you can see one of the largest collections of ancient Egyptian and Nubian artifacts in the United States. We have over 40,000 artifacts from settlements and cemeteries in Nubia, Memphis, and Thebes. The fact that most of the objects in the Egypt collection were unearthed and recovered by archaeologists from the Museum is one of the things that makes our collection so unique.

The Museum has conducted excavations at many different kinds of sites including royal cemeteries, palaces, temples, towns, sanctuaries and settlements. The collection spans the entire history of ancient Egypt, from the Pre-dynastic period (about 4000 BCE) through to the Greco-Roman period and the Coptic period, which ended in the 7th century CE. In our collection, you can see architecture, sculpture, and objects from everyday life, in addition to textiles, papyri, pottery, jewelry, weapons, grave goods, and mummies!

In addition to their own excavations, the Penn Museum also helped to fund the work of the Egypt Exploration Fund (later Egypt Exploration Society), a British organization responsible for archaeological excavations throughout Egypt. It funded the work of Sir William M. Flinders Petrie, one of the foremost archaeologists working in Egypt at the time. As a result, the Museum obtained a significant portion of the material awarded to this project by the Egyptian government.

Egypt (Mummies) Gallery

The Museum’s Egypt collection is divided into two galleries: the Egypt (Mummies Gallery) and the Egypt (Sphinx) Gallery. In the Mummies Gallery, you can see mummies and many of the tools that ancient Egyptian embalmers used. There are also mummified animals including cats, crocodiles and birds.
In the Mummy Gallery you can also see some incredible examples of Egyptian sculpture. There are carved relief, stone coffins, and exquisite three-dimensional sculptures, which exemplify the skill of Egyptian artists and sculptors.

Highlights of this gallery include:

> Two statues of the goddess Sekhmet, who is the goddess of both war and healing. She is portrayed as a lioness or lion-headed woman, and was the daughter and defender of the sun god, Re. Although she’s known for her ferocity, the Egyptians revered Sekhmet because she protected the people from the sun god’s wrath.

> Sculptures, amulets, and votive offerings in the shape of animals which exemplify how cats, falcons, serpents, and scorpions were portrayed in Egyptian art and iconography. Many gods were depicted in animal form.

> Small-scale sculpture, which includes inlaid bronzes of Osiris, god of the afterlife, and the warrior goddess Neith, patron deity of the site of Sais.

> Several statues portraying non-royal officials. Statues of this type, which come from tombs, provided a resting place for the \textit{ka}, or life force, of the deceased person in the tomb.

> A statue of a seated official representing the Old Kingdom. The well-preserved paint gives the statue a life-like appearance.

> A seated statue of an unnamed man enveloped by a long cloak. This statue is characteristic of the sculptural style of the Middle Kingdom.

> A statue of Merymaat, a barber for the temple of Amun in Thebes. The name of this god is carved on Merymaat’s right shoulder.

\textbf{The Seated Ramesses II}

It’s hard to miss the seated statue of Ramesses II in the middle of the gallery. This statue is from the temple of Harsaphes. Originally, it was carved for a Middle Kingdom pharaoh, but it was usurped and the head was recarved to look like Ramesses II. This is the reason the head is not in proportion with the rest of the body.
The cartouches around the base of the statue were also reworked, so that they identified Ramesses II as pharaoh.

Ramesses II is also immortalized in the massive white limestone head from a monumental statue. Originally, this statue would have been 15 to 20 feet high, and stood at the entrance to a temple at Abydos, which was the cult center of Egypt’s god of the afterlife, Osiris. Much of the original paint is preserved, which demonstrates the rich pigmentation of Egyptian sculpture in antiquity.

The door socket, pictured below right, provides a powerful psychological glimpse at the Egyptian’s attitude toward their foreign rivals at a very early point in their history. Depicted in hard black stone is an enemy who lies on his stomach with his arms bound behind him. A wooden temple door turned on a pole, which fitted into the circular depression in the captive’s back. In this way, it symbolically crushed the enemy of Egypt beneath its weight. The prisoner’s face, with the corners of his mouth drawn down, seems to express contempt.

Amarna: Ancient Egypt’s Place in the Sun

Artifacts from the time of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, famous for his revolutionary religious beliefs and innovative artistic style, include a wall relief that stands as testimony to his monotheistic beliefs. The king is worshipping the symbol of the solar disk, the Aten. After Akhenaten’s death, all the monuments erected during his reign were defaced or razed. The original inlay would have been brightly colored, but it has been pried out.
The Egypt (Sphinx) Gallery houses one of the finest collections of Egyptian architecture on display in the United States. A monumental granite sphinx dominates the gallery. Surrounding the sphinx are the gateway, columns, doorways, and windows from the best preserved royal palace ever excavated in Egypt.

The palace was built for the Pharaoh Merenptah at the city of Memphis in Lower Egypt. Merenptah was the 13th son and eventual successor of the famous Ramesses II. Penn Museum is the only museum in the world to exhibit such a significant portion of an Egyptian royal palace.

The palace was excavated by Clarence S. Fisher, who was one of Museum’s early curators of the Egyptian Section. The columns originally stood beside the temple of the Memphite creator god, Ptah. The exhibited elements of the palace provide insight into the religious, political, and social beliefs of the Egyptian people. For the Egyptians, the palace served as a metaphor for the universe: the floor, decorated with floral and faunal motifs, represented the earth, while the towering columns with their floral capitals seem to grow toward the heavens. The hieroglyphic symbols on the lower portion of the columns depict the inhabitants of the earth giving praise to Merenptah, while the upper portions show the king presenting offerings to the gods.

On the massive gateway at the rear of the gallery, the king is in a ritual smiting pose, which expresses domination over Egypt’s enemies. This image is prevalent on royal monuments throughout pharaonic history.

The stone doorways are topped by images of the winged sun disk. There are still remains of the original gilding, which is the earliest example ever found in situ on an Egyptian building.
In front of the columns is a 12-ton granite sphinx. It is the largest in the United States and is believed to be the third largest outside of Egypt. It, like the palace, is from the ceremonial center of Ptah at Memphis. The fine red granite was quarried near Aswan in the southernmost part of Egypt, and transported by river some 600 miles to Memphis.

The image of the sphinx, in which the pharaoh is portrayed with the body of a lion, is one of the most enduring symbols of Egyptian kingship. The inscriptions on the chest and around the base identify the pharaoh depicted as Ramesses II, while his son and successor Merenptah added his own cartouches on the shoulders. It has been suggested that Ramesses II usurped this sphinx from an earlier ruler and had his inscriptions added.

Standing along the wall in the center of the gallery is the partially restored black basalt stela of one of Egypt’s earliest rulers, King Qa’a of the 1st Dynasty (who ruled approximately 2915–2890 BCE). Nearly 5000 years old, his stela supplies a rare example of the monuments erected by the earliest Egyptian kings in front of the low mudbrick structures that marked the royal burials at Abydos. The decoration consists of the serekh, a schematic representation of the niched façade of the palace, in which the king’s name is inscribed. Atop the palace sits the falcon god Horus, of whom the king was believed to be a living manifestation.

At the end of the gallery, visible through a window, are the eastern and southern walls of the tomb chapel of Kaipure, a treasury official of the late Old Kingdom. The painted limestone chapel was the inner of two rooms in the tomb’s superstructure, and served as the center for Kaipure’s memorial cult. The actual burial would have been located in a subterranean shaft. The preserved decoration on the walls focuses on the large figures of Kaipure.

On the south wall, he sits before a table of offerings, while on the east wall he stands in the center of the wall itself. The scenes of people slaughtering cattle and bringing offerings of food and living animals were intended to guarantee a perpetual source of sustenance for Kaipure in the afterlife.