**Eternal Egypt:**
*Masterworks of Ancient Art from The British Museum*

No ancient civilization has left a larger or more varied artistic legacy than Egypt, yet exhibitions of Egyptian art have traditionally emphasized its importance as historical document rather than as an extraordinary flowering of art. *Eternal Egypt* will be the first major exhibition to take an art historical approach to this great culture, and the first in this country to be drawn solely from the British Museum's outstanding collection of Egyptian antiquities. Both renowned masterpieces and little-known treasures will provide an overview of the richness and scope of this premiere collection of Egyptian art.

Selected by guest curator Edna R. Russmann in conjunction with W. V. Davies, the British Museum’s keeper of Egyptian antiquities, the nearly one hundred fifty objects in the exhibition will span the full range of pharaonic history, from shortly before the First Dynasty, about 3100 B.C., to the Roman occupation of the fourth century A.D. The works will be arranged chronologically to reveal the development of Egyptian art over its long duration of thirty-five centuries. The four periods into which ancient Egyptian history is divided—the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, the New Kingdom, and the Late Period—will form the underlying structure of the exhibition. Within each section the unique and innovative aspects of the period’s art, as well as its characteristic styles, forms, and genres, will be demonstrated.
Egypt's earliest pharaonic art will be shown in the section of the exhibition devoted to the art of the early dynasties and the Old Kingdom (ca. 3100-2150 B.C.). Among the themes explored will be the establishment of artistic conventions and standards; the rise of kingship and its decisive role in the formation of Egyptian art; the simultaneous developments in art and hieroglyphic writing and the interplay of these modes of expression; and the way in which Egyptian religious and magical beliefs led to the centrality of the human figure in Egyptian art. Included here will be a selection from the period between the collapse of the Old Kingdom and the beginning of the Middle Kingdom. Though notoriously provincial and often naïve, these intermediate works preserved the artistic conventions of the Old Kingdom for later generations.

The section of the exhibition devoted to the Middle Kingdom (ca. 2060-1633 B.C.) will focus on the important developments in relief and freestanding sculpture, including the introduction of greater naturalism and new artistic forms such as the block statue and the anthropoid coffin. Also featured will be Egyptian portraiture, an invention of the early Old Kingdom that became a recurrent genre in Egyptian art. While the exhibition will include examples of portraiture from every period, the full importance and function of portraiture in Egyptian art is best appreciated during the Middle Kingdom, with such great portrait images as those of the ruler Sesostris III (ca. 1878-1843 B.C.) and slightly later portrait-like statues of non-royals.
The New Kingdom (ca. 1550-1070 B.C.), which witnessed the imperial expansion of Egypt during the Eighteenth Dynasty, the religious revolution of the Amarna Period, and the Ramesside Nineteenth and Twentieth Dynasties, will be represented by statues and personal possessions of famous pharaohs including Amenhotep III, Akhenaten, and Ramesses the Great, as well as some of their followers. The growing sophistication that occurred during this period was reflected in newly elaborate self-imagery; the creation of colossal royal figures; the startlingly exaggerated stylistic innovations of the Amarna revolution; and the revisionist art of the counterreformation that followed. This section will also include examples of the jewelry, mirrors, cosmetic containers, and other luxury items that were so widely produced during the New Kingdom.

The Late Period is the longest, most complex, and least defined of Egypt's historical eras, spanning from 1070 B.C. to the Roman occupation in 30 B.C.-A.D. 395. For much of its long history, Egyptian art remained relatively impervious to foreign influences and ideas. That changed only in the Late Period under the Ptolemies (ca. 305-30 B.C.), when Egyptian art was increasingly influenced by Hellenistic style. This section of the exhibition will examine the complex interaction between these two strong but very different artistic traditions. Examples of the "mixed" style will show how the two traditions could either enrich or contradict each other, as in Roman-period mummies, which were wrapped in traditional Egyptian fashion while their attached shrouds or face panels were painted in Greco-Roman style and costume.

Despite its increasing political weakness during the Late Period, Egyptian culture retained much of its strength and art continued to show remarkable vitality. A key theme of this final section will be the ways in which Egyptian art
was able to renew itself, primarily through archaism—the imitation of its own past art. While archaism was always an important factor in Egyptian art, in Late Period works the full range of Egyptian archaism will be explored, from the question of which models were chosen and why, to the use of archaism as a vehicle for creativity and change.

The exhibition will be accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue including a major essay by the guest curator on such topics as archaism, portraiture, and stylistic innovation in Egyptian art; an essay on the formation of the British Museum’s collection of Egyptian antiquities by Harry James, former keeper of Egyptian art at the British Museum; and entries on individual objects in the exhibition.

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