



From left: Bronze cat, Late Period, ca. 664 to 332 BCE; Queen Nefertari watercolor by Howard Carter, 1908; *Ay as a Fan Bearer* plaster on limestone with polychrome, New Kingdom, reign of Akhenaten, 1353 to 1336 BCE. Opposite, from top: Brooch featuring a skiff and blossoms, with a plaquette from ca. 1539 to 1077 BCE and gold mount from late 1800s or early 1900s; Sekhmet gold ring, New Kingdom, ca. 1539 to 1077 BCE.



PHARAONIC FINDS

The wonders of Egyptian jewelry come to life in a new book and exhibition from the Worcester Art Museum in Massachusetts.

BY PHYLLIS SCHILLER

During a trip to Egypt in the early 1900s, Laura Marrs and her husband Kingsmill developed a fascination with the country’s history and culture, eventually amassing a stellar collection of antiquities that were later bequeathed to the Worcester Art Museum (WAM) in Massachusetts. The impressive array of scarabs, amulets, necklaces, pendants and other pieces graces the pages of a new book, *Jewels of the Nile: Ancient Egyptian Treasures from the Worcester Art Museum*. A companion catalog to an upcoming exhibition at WAM, the volume not only delves into the history of the ancient kingdoms and the details of Egyptian jewelry, but also charts the museum’s efforts to preserve these centuries-old finds.

The book’s authors are also the co-curators of the exhibition: Peter Lacovara — director of the Ancient Egyptian Heritage and Archaeology Fund in Albany, New York — and Yvonne Markowitz, the Rita J. Kaplan and Susan B. Kaplan curator emerita of jewelry at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

“Yvonne wrote on technology and Egyptomania, and I did the historical background both for ancient Egypt and the formation of the Marrs collection,” explains Lacovara.

What sets the Marrs collection apart, he observes, is its “breadth and quality.” Looking through the records, he found that Howard Carter, who later discovered King Tutankhamun’s tomb, had advised the couple in their collecting. “You can see Carter’s hand in the selections,” he says. They chose pieces “not just for their beauty, but also for their artistic, historical and technological importance.” And by covering such “a broad period of ancient Egyptian history, the collection reflects not only chronological changes, but also technical innovation, foreign influence and the development of Egyptian religious belief.”

‘A SWEEPING PICTURE’

The WAM exhibition is set to run from June 2022 through January 2023 — a time frame that marks 100 years since the discovery of King Tut’s tomb, Markowitz notes. Found on

November 26, 1922, the tomb “took many months to clear,” she says.

Among the approximately 200 adornments on display will be “small antiquities incorporated into wearable jewelry during the early decades of the 20th century,” Markowitz continues. The exhibition will also include items from outside sources: The Mineralogical & Geological Museum at Harvard University is lending mineral samples that the Egyptians used, and there will be “an outstanding group of Egyptian revival jewelry on loan from Tiffany & Co.”

The pieces from WAM’s own permanent Egyptian collection will “help set the framework of the show,” explains Lacovara. “The layout will basically be chronological, but there will also be thematic installations on Howard Carter and the Marrses, ancient jewelry technology and funerary customs.” The number of objects on view, many of which have never been shown before, allows for “a sweeping picture of over 2,000 years of ancient Egyptian history.”

Indeed, affirms Markowitz, “our goal is to present a wide range of ornaments popular over the long course of Egyptian history.”

DESIGN HERITAGE

One of the sections will focus on “the influence of Egyptian design on future generations of jewelers,” according to Markowitz. With an incredible range of techniques, materials, stones and motifs, she says, the design component is the main reason behind Egyptian jewelry’s enduring appeal. Egyptian craftsmen were master lapidary artists and metalsmiths, “all working with the most rudimentary equipment under challenging conditions. Some techniques, such as granulation (a surface-decoration technique in which tiny spheres of precious metal are attached to a substrate), are often beyond the capabilities of contemporary jewelers.”

Some of her favorites from the exhibition include blue-glazed ball bead necklaces, “often worn in multiples during the Middle Kingdom. They were as prized in ancient Egypt as they would be today on a *Vogue* model.” She also cites a “carnelian and gold fly necklace. The iconography is so unusual that one can’t help wanting to explore its meaning.”

Lacovara points to “the signature piece for the exhibition, a golden brooch featuring a skiff with lotus [blossoms] framing an ancient plaquette. It marries both ancient Egyptian jewelry and the revival interest in it. As archaeological work in Egypt was featured in the popular press in the 19th and early 20th centuries, it created a craze for pharaonic ornaments and styles that inspired the Marrses to collect.”

He also highlights the Sekhmet ring, which “illustrates not only the ancient Egyptian veneration of felines, but also the skill of the ancient artisans using Egyptian faience — a very difficult medium to work with, composed of crushed silica and mineral pigments. Other very important pieces include a beautiful red granite head of Amenhotep III, one of Egypt’s most prolific



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builders; a fragment of one of the earliest known glass vessels from the Valley of the Kings; and a tiny head of a Nubian carved out of carnelian, similar to decorative elements from the tomb of Tutankhamun.”

INSPIRING TODAY’S ARTISTS

While revivalist jewelers “had appreciation of popular Egyptian motifs and the Egyptian love of symmetry in design,” some modernist jewelers have also taken inspiration from Egypt, says Markowitz. For example, “the neckpieces of American jeweler Barbara Witt draw on Egypt’s woven bead collars, while Japanese-born Yoshiko Yamamoto incorporates small antiquities into her designs. More importantly, contemporary jewelers are the inheritors of a rich and diverse legacy of artists who have absorbed, admired and reinterpreted Egyptian motifs.”

Markowitz hopes the exhibition/publication “will introduce and further inform the public as to Egypt’s esteemed place in the history of timeless design, unique messaging, and superb craftsmanship.”

For Lacovara, *Jewels of the Nile* stands out by “placing Egyptian ornaments in the context not only of history, but also how the culture changed and developed over time and how that was reflected in how and what people used to adorn themselves.”

Jewels of the Nile: Ancient Egyptian Treasures from the Worcester Art Museum is published by the Worcester Art Museum in Worcester, Massachusetts, in association with D Giles Limited. ■



IMAGES: WORCESTER ART MUSEUM