





# ANCIENT EGYPT IN PHILADELPHIA

*The Pharaonic Collection of the University of Pennsylvania  
Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology*

**by Lucy Gordan-Rastelli**  
*Photos courtesy the Museum*

**L**ike the Egyptian collection on the Arno in Florence, the Egyptian collection on the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia is a section within a large archaeology museum. The three-story, red-brick Italianate University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology also houses collections of other ethnic and ancient cultures: native Alaska and the American Southwest, Mesoamerica, Polynesia, Africa, China, Japan, Mesopotamia, Canaan and Israel, Greece, Rome, and Etruria. "Founded in 1887," according to its information brochure, "the Museum has conducted more than 400 research expeditions around the world and

Penn masterpieces previously published in *Kmt*: Opposite, clockwise, Late-18th Dyn., post-Amarna greywacke statue of Amen, provenance unknown; Early-18th Dyn. sandstone block statue of Sitepehu from Tomb D9, Abydos; Unusual post-New Kingdom steatite statuette of the snake-goddess Renenutet, from Memphis; Detail of a 12th-13th Dyn. basalt statue group, provenance unknown; & diorite-porphry head of Osorkon II (22nd Dyn.), from Tanis. Above, l. to r., Bronze statuette with gilding, late-18th Dyn., possibly representing Tutankhamen, provenance unknown; Early-18th Dyn. diorite statue of a scribe, from Buhen; & Limestone sunk-relief face of a man, 26th Dyn. (?), from Memphis.



collected nearly a million objects, many obtained directly through its own field excavations or anthropological research."

Although not the only nor the first American University to teach Egyptology, this tradition at the University of Pennsylvania goes back to the 1850s, when three graduate students published their own translation of the text on the Rosetta Stone. So it should come as no surprise that in 1889 the provost of the University, Dr. William Pepper, and the chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, Dr. Charles C. Harrison, had strong backing in establishing the University Archaeological Association. Its eager and generous associates were members of the University staff or of the upper-crust Philadelphia community with a keen interest in archaeology, especially Egyptian.

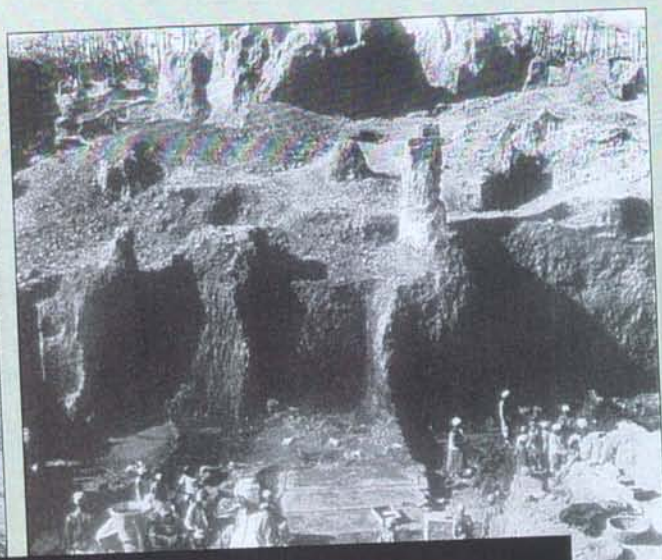
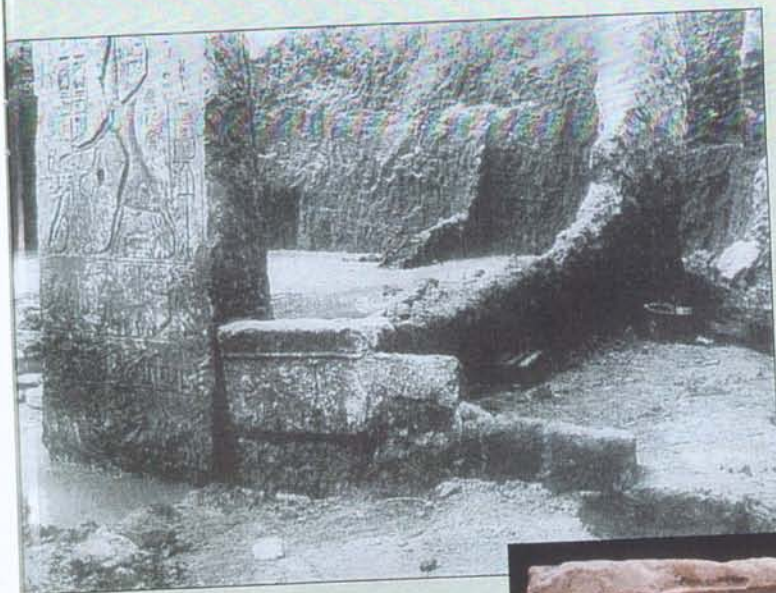
The following year several members of the new Association and other benefactors donated artifacts for educational purposes, thus forming the core collection of the Museum's newly created Egyptian and Mediterranean Section; and Sara Yorke Stevenson (1847-1921) became its first curator, although the nature of her Egyptological background is unknown. A dynamic, tenacious mover-and-shaker, Stevenson was the first woman in the United States to hold the position of curator of an Egyptian collection. As David Silverman (Eckley Brinton Coxe Jr. Professor and the present curator-in-charge of Penn's Egyptian Section) wrote in the introduction to *Searching for Ancient Egypt* — catalogue for the Museum's recent (1998-2000) traveling exhibition of Egyptian objects —: "During the fifteen years of her tenure, she set the course that the University of Pennsylvania Museum in general and the Egyptian Section in particular would follow over much of the next century. Her goal was to build quickly a substantial Egyptian collection for the use of scholars, educators, and students which could also serve 'the people at large who can enjoy at home some of the benefits derived from travel.'"

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Sara Yorke Stevenson, above, served as the first curator of the University of Pennsylvania Museum's Egyptian & Mediterranean Section, which benefited in its formative years from financial contributions to the excavations by William Flinders Petrie (left) on behalf of the Egypt Exploration Society, thereby ensuring that objects from his discoveries entered the Museum's Egyptian collection.





Soon after its inception, the University Museum Egyptian Section began conducting its own excavations in Egypt. One of its most significant early finds was a ceremonial palace at Memphis belonging to Rameses II's successor, Merneptah. Above, Two views of the 1915 excavations. The Museum was awarded with numerous monumental sections of the structure, including the limestone window at right, which measures 128 x 19 cm.

**A**t the time the Egyptian government had for several years been relinquishing a portion of excavated artifacts to foreign expeditions working there, and Stevenson strongly endorsed that philosophy. She felt that such a generous arrangement would be a very appropriate way to add artifacts to "her" core collection, as it would ensure the authenticity of objects with established provenances. Thus, with almost supernatural energy and dedication, Stevenson helped organize archaeological expeditions funded by the Museum itself or by its affiliated group, the American Exploration Society. She also purchased high-quality artifacts from other institutions digging in Egypt; and she financially supported the excavations of the British-based Egypt Exploration Society conducted by William Flinders Petrie, thus ensuring that selections from his discoveries would find their way into the Museum collection. She additionally engaged several scholars to act as her agents in Egypt.

The first Penn-excavated Egyptian objects to arrive in Phila-







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Left, Door jamb from the University Museum-excavated Palace of Merneptah at Memphis, with a sunk-relief depiction of the king ritually smiting Egypt's foreign enemies. Above & below, Details of reliefs on other portions of the palace in the Museum's collection.





delphia in 1898 were forty-two boxes from Dendera, containing reliefs from the Old Kingdom, First Intermediate Period and early New Kingdom tombs of officials in that area. These showed that there was armed conflict between the north and south in Egypt at an earlier time than scholars previously had believed.

Stevenson campaigned hard to find an appropriate exhibition space for the expanding Penn collection, which had already outgrown its temporary home in College Hall. By 1895 a site had been selected for a huge structure, not unlike in appearance the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, to be called the Free Museum of Science and Art. It took another year of fundraising before construction could begin, with the first building phase being completed in 1899. But because almost three-quarters of the budget had been used up, the final structure had to be scaled back to about one-fourth of the original overly ambitious plan. In 1913 its name was changed to the University Museum; during the 1990s it was changed again to the tongue-twister it is today.

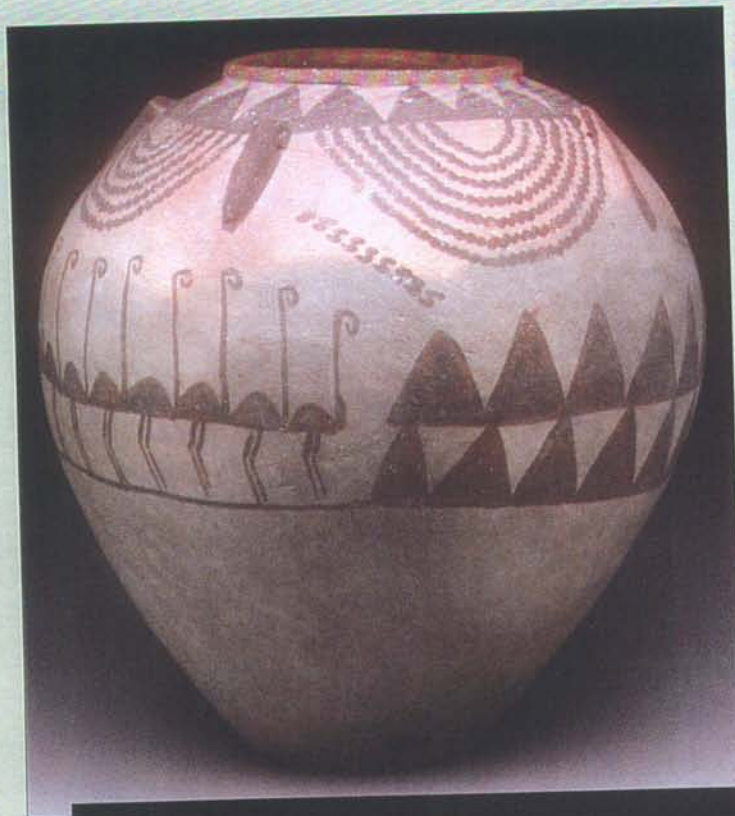
In addition to Sara Yorke Stevenson, the Penn Egyptian collection had another guardian angel in the person of Eckley Brinton Coxe, who contributed a good portion of the Museum's budget during its first decade. His financial generosity allowed the University of Pennsylvania to carry out many archaeological excavations in Egypt during the early part of the Twentieth Century: at Dendera, as mentioned; at the sacred site of Abydos (where Penn, Yale and the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University still share a joint concession today); on the Giza Plateau (which for a time was another joint Penn/Yale dig); at Memphis, Meidum and Dra Abu el Naga (Luxor), as well as in Nubia: Shablul, Areika, Karanog, Aniba and Buhen. The endowment Coxe bequeathed the Egyptian collection has ensured that the study of Egyptology will continue at the University of



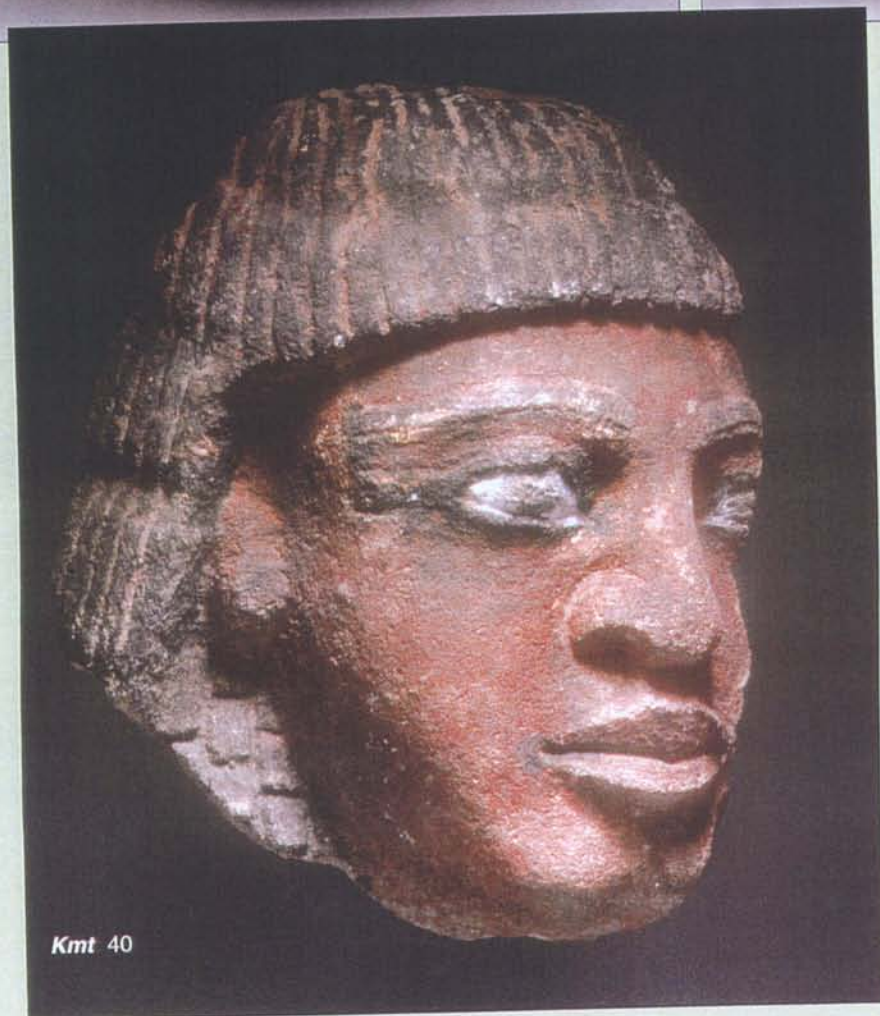
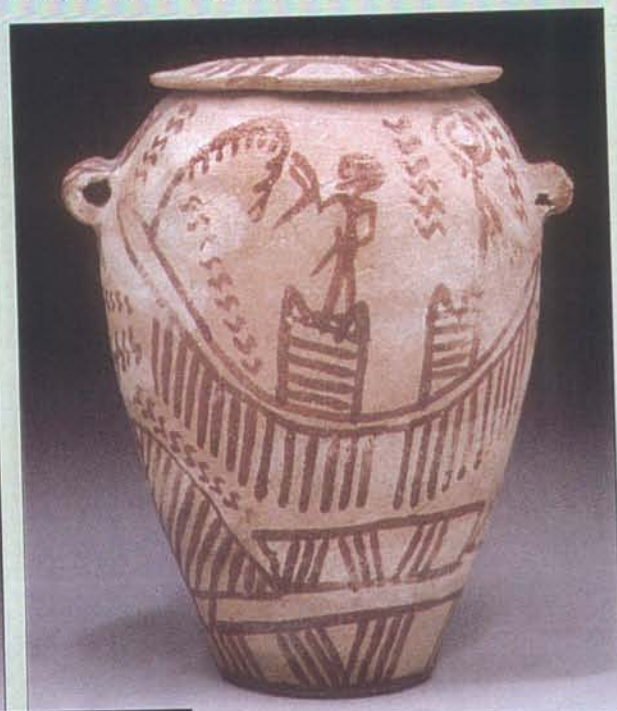
Excavated at Sakkara in 1903, the 5th Dyn. Tomb Chapel of Kaipura was exhibited at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition in St. Louis the following year, a portion of which was purchased for \$2,000 by John Wanamaker, who then presented it to the University Museum. Above, The chapel's false door: Right, Raised-relief detail of a butchering scene.







Two objects presented to the Museum by Wm. Flinders Petrie:  
Left, Painted ceramic jar of mid-Naqaada II date, found at Hu; &  
Below, Painted ceramic jar of same period, found at Ballas.



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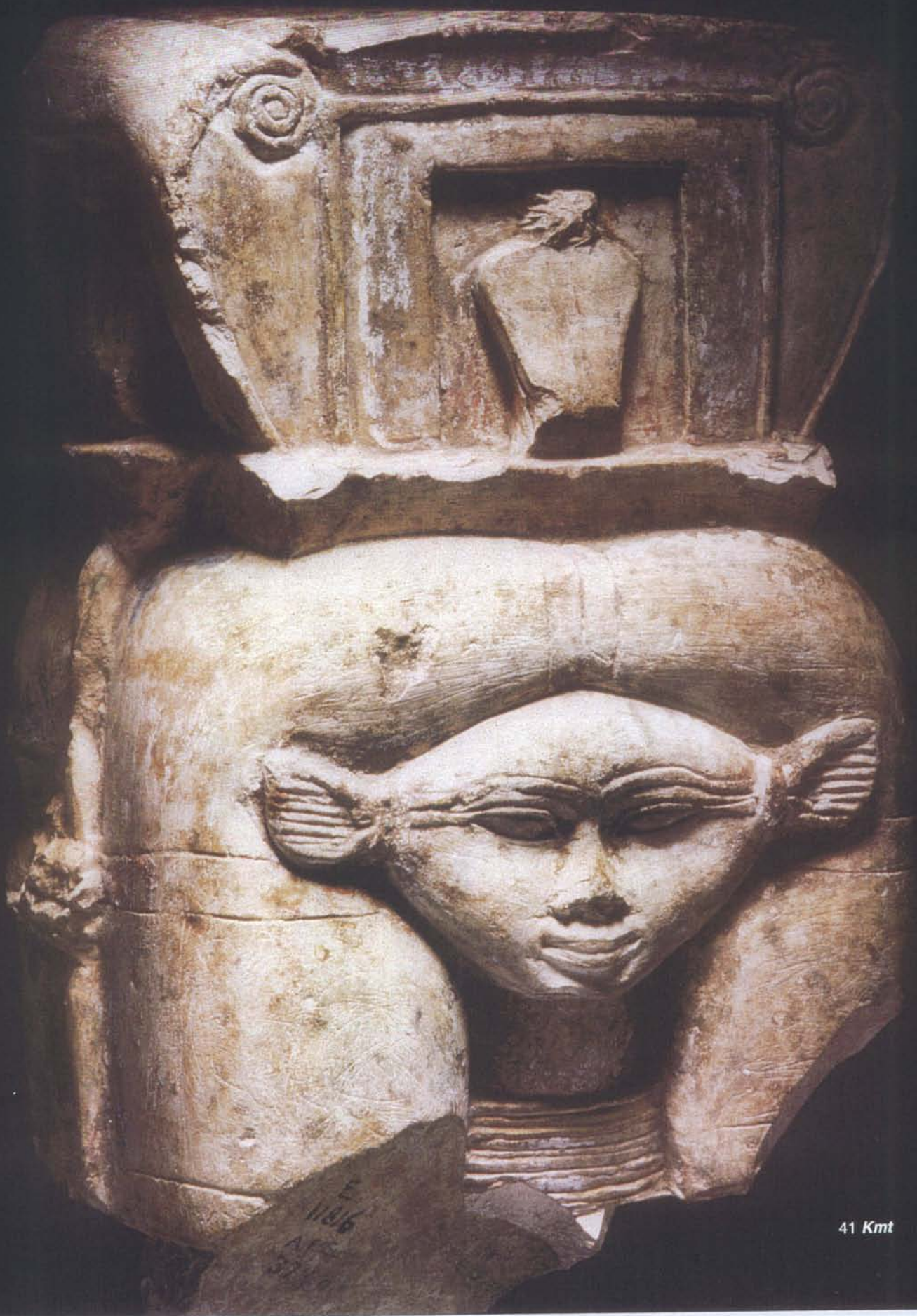
Left, Half-life-size painted sandstone head of a male with Nubian features, excavated from the 19th Dyn. Tomb of Nakhtmin (TT282) at Dra Abu el Naga (Luxor) in 1921 by a Museum expedition. Opposite, Small limestone Hathor capital, probably 18th Dyn. from Deir el Bahari, presented to the Museum by the Egypt Exploration Fund (1903-1907).

Pennsylvania for a long time to come.

In addition to ongoing excavations at Abydos (the Middle Kingdom cemetery area) and Dra Abu el Naga, the Museum has been excavating in an area behind the Step Pyramid at Sakkara since 1990. "The tombs that we are working on, near the Dynasty Six Pyramid of Teti," said Silverman, "are actually those of early Middle Kingdom officials who were high-ranking priests in the funerary cult of an earlier pharaoh, as well as the reigning one."

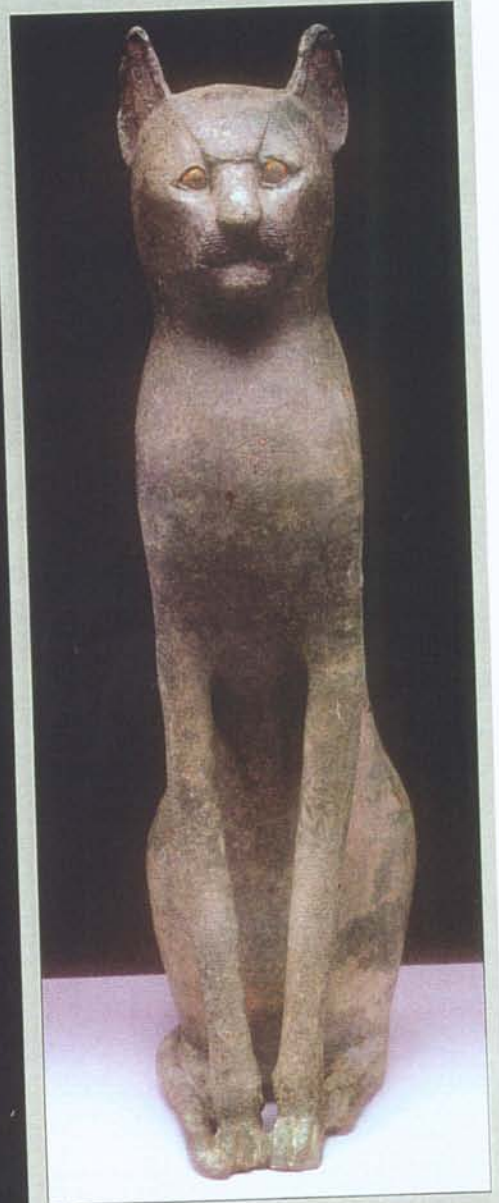
"The Metropolitan probably houses the largest Egyptian collection in the United States, with every period of ancient Egyptian history represented," said Silverman. "The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston has perhaps better Old Kingdom material and is fairly well rep-







Museum purchases include (1926) a life-size red-granite head of Thutmose III, said to be from Karnak (nose restored) & (1925) a Late Period bronze cat with gilding, of unknown provenance.



representative; Brooklyn," he continued, "would probably come third, with a really great collection of artifacts — real jewels, but not necessarily full historical coverage. Then the Cleveland Museum of Art. We come in as having the largest amount of excavated material, which is extremely important because most of our pieces came from excavations and not through purchase. Since the late 1960s, however, our finds are being left in



Egypt, which is how it should be. Egypt is trying to beef up its local museums — Aswan, which is one of the most beautiful museums in the world, Elephantine Island, Giza, Luxor...

"So, not to digress further, we don't have the kind of aesthetic quality that you find in the other four institutions I mentioned, although we do have some beautiful pieces. We've not been the beneficiary of large collections of artifacts, although we received as a gift from John Wanamaker the Old Kingdom Tomb of Kaipura from Sakkara. It was on display at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904, and for the relatively modest sum of \$2,000 he was able to purchase one room of the above-ground chapel of this late Fifth Dynasty treasurer to the king. In 1953 Helena Rubenstein, who was a big collector, gave us, among other objects, a gold mummy mask from the Ptolemaic or Roman periods."

Penn's Egyptian collection displays a fairly good chronological development, if not the highest artistic quality. That is because professors at the University were among the first archaeologists to do urban archaeology. "You don't get many beautiful artifacts from urban excavations," Silverman explained. "You dig up the special things at burial sites."

But the University Museum's urban excavations produced a truly unique find — in fact, there is nothing like it in any other museum in the world —, part of the royal palace of New Kingdom pharaoh Merneptah, successor of Rameses II, discovered by Clarence Fisher at Memphis in 1915. This royal dwelling was not decorated with all the finesse found in a great temple, but it is historically important, nonetheless, and the Museum's mis-

Top left, 26th Dyn. limestone statue of a female serpent-deity of unknown provenance, purchased by the Museum in 1957. Left, Late Period faience plaque depicting the god Bes purchased in 1926 (unknown provenance). Top right, 18th Dyn. painted-limestone statuette of Hednakht presenting a stela, on permanent loan to the Museum (provenance unknown). Right, Bronze statuette of King Necho II (26th Dyn.), gifted to the Museum in 1914 (provenance unknown).







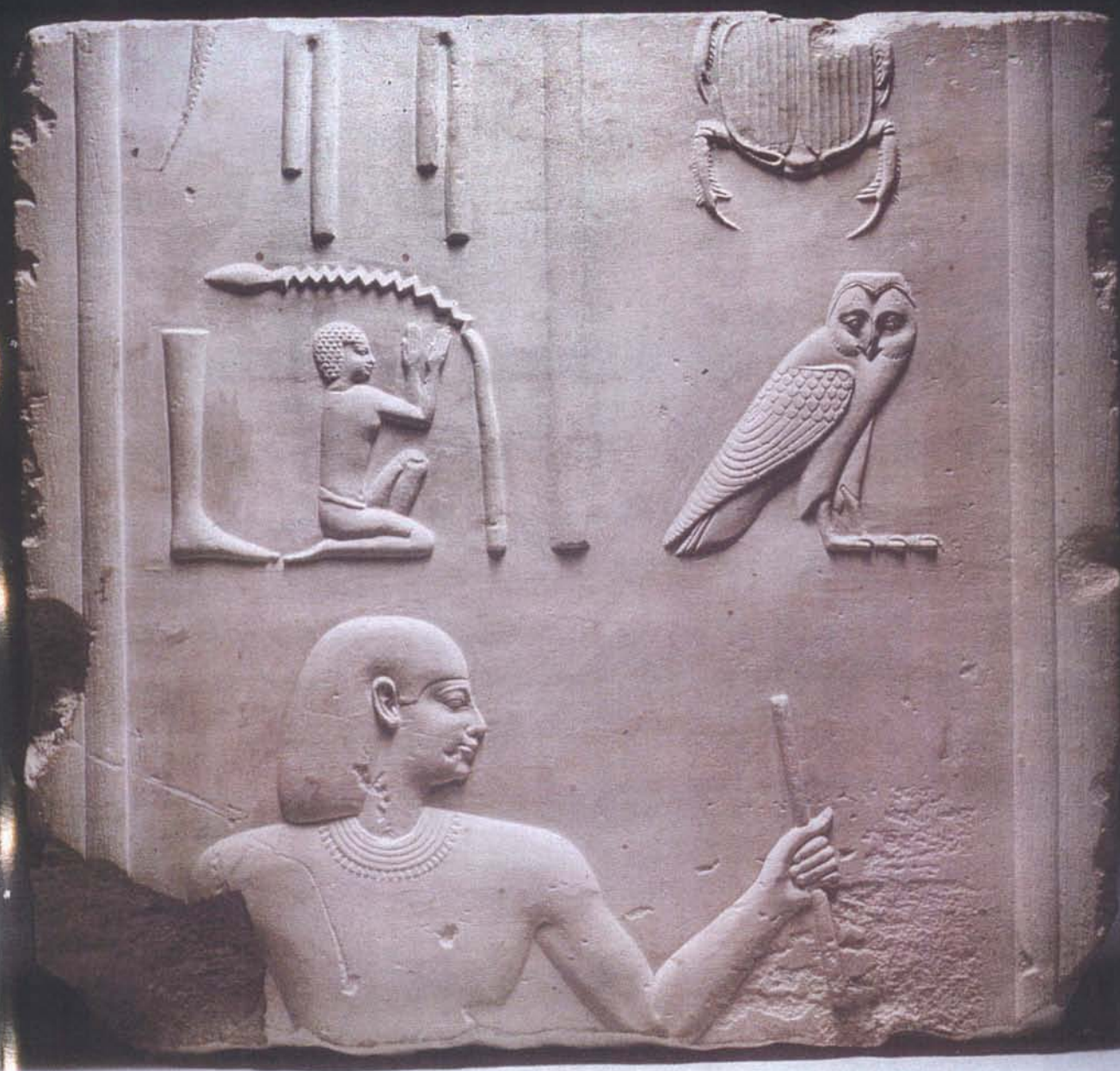
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*In 1953 cosmetics mogul Helena Rubenstein donated to the Museum a Ptolemaic or Roman period gilded-cartonnage funerary mask (left), its provenance unknown. In 1924 the Museum purchased a 21st or 22nd Dyn. painted-cartonnage-on-wood mummy case of Nebnetcheru (below).*



sion is education first and foremost. In fact, the sites which Penn archaeologists have dug at have been carefully selected to further a better understanding of ancient Egyptian culture. The Museum's curators have always functioned in a tripartite arrangement: as professors and curators, but also as field archaeologists.





*Another Museum purchase (1926), the limestone fragment from a 30th Dynasty tomb door-jamb, provenance unknown.*

**T**he Egyptian collection of the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology numbers some 40,000 objects, only 800 of which are actually on display. Over the years — to give the collection greater exposure — there have been several traveling exhibitions, the most recent being “Searching for Ancient Egypt,” which had venues in Dallas,

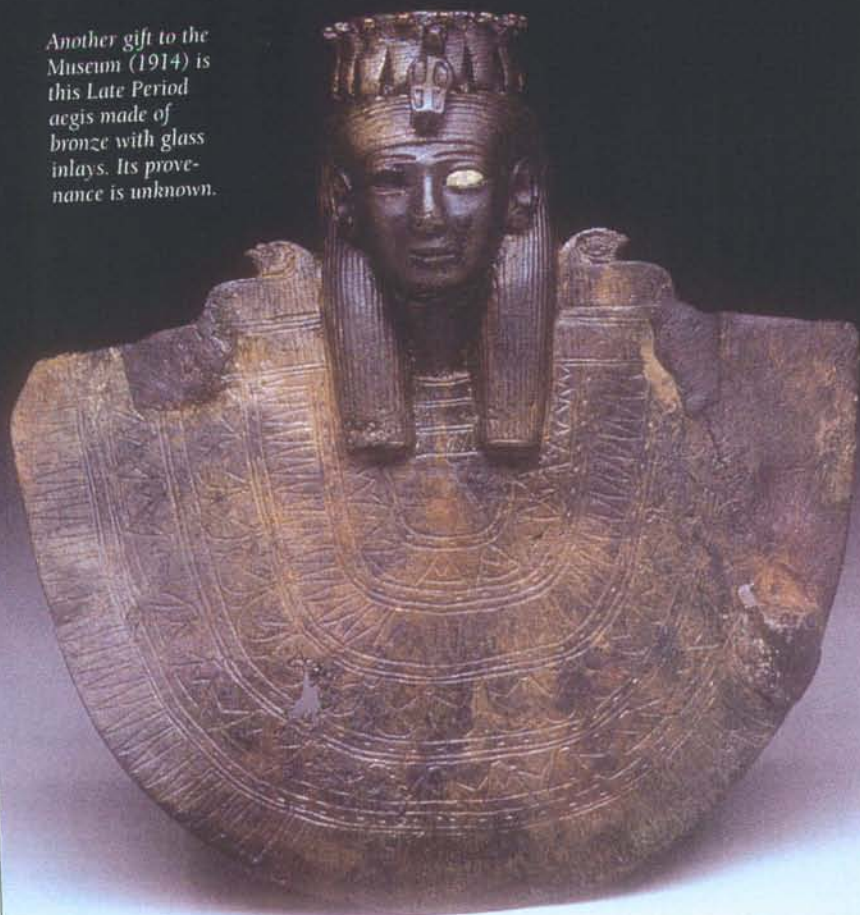
Denver, Seattle, Omaha, Birmingham and Honolulu. Earlier traveling exhibits were “Ancient Nubia: Egypt’s Rival in Africa” (1994-1996); “The Artifacts of Ancient Egypt” (1985-1986), which went to Taiwan; “The Egyptian Mummy: Secrets and Science” (1983-1985); and “Archaeological Treasures of An-

cient Egypt” (1983-1984).

And the Museum has frequently lent objects from its collection to large independent exhibitions, such as the recent “I Faroni,” held at Palazzo Grassi in Venice (see *Kmt*, 13:4, winter 2002-2003). “We have also recently lent objects to the South Florida State Museum in West Palm Beach,” said Silverman, “and to the African-American Museum here in Philadelphia.



Another gift to the Museum (1914) is this Late Period aegis made of bronze with glass inlays. Its provenance is unknown.



We are now working on a loan to the Met, which will be having an exhibition of ancient Egyptian bronzes. Then the Met and two other institutions are putting together an exhibition on Queen Hatshepsut, to which we are loaning materials. Temporary exhibitions are rarely displayed here because we have no temporary exhibition space. Sadly Philadelphians don't get to see the wonderful traveling exhibits we do, unless they travel, too."

Just as in the 1890s, when Mrs. Stevenson's "collection" had outgrown its first home in College Hall, plans have been drawn up for a complete reinstallation of Penn's Egyptian objects, along the lines of the recent reinstallations of the Museum's Greek, Etruscan and Roman collections. The next step is raising the funds to make this happen. Although their presentation will change dramati-

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cally with the new reinstallation — besides the Merneptah palace elements and Wanamaker's tomb gift — other highlights of the Museum's Egyptian holdings include:

- A twelve-ton granite sphinx of Ramesses II, which, while not in the best of condition, is the largest sphinx outside of Egypt.
- A small "black bronze" kneeling figure, probably depicting King Tutankhamen, which still has some of its original gold inlays. Purchased in 1924, part of a larger composition, it is (along with pieces of the Merneptah palace) currently in Paris, where a smaller version of the "I Faroni" exhibition is scheduled to open at the Institut du Monde Arabe.
- A four-sided free-standing stela from the Middle Kingdom, excavated by Petrie at Abydos, is unusual inasmuch as a stela is usually thought of as being set in a niche. In this case, howev-

er, the "stela" of the royal-purification priest Sasopedu-Lienhab is not only inscribed on all four side, but the top, as well. There are only seventeen such objects in existence.

- A headless statue of a man named Korax. "He" had originally been thought to be the goddess Hathor, because of the rather prominent breasts; but in-depth research revealed that the statue was neither a goddess nor a woman, but an important priest in Ptolemaic times, and was one of a series of such male figures with pronounced breasts.

- The very oldest example of political propaganda: a door socket from Hierakonpolis dating to around 3100 BC, depicting a prisoner lying flat on the ground with his arms bound behind him at the elbows. The socket is in the figure's back so that he is magically subjected to unending agony and humiliation.

In the near future David Silverman and his Museum colleagues will be devoting a good deal of time to raising funds for the Egyptian collection's reinstallation. "It's hard to know," he said, "when our reinstallation will be completed, because a new director of the whole University Museum takes office on July 1. Once the Museum's climate control system is finished, we can begin the fund-raising. These plans are really beautiful and will double our permanent exhibition space. Come and see it when we're finished."

(The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology is located at 3260 South Street in Philadelphia. Hours are 10:00 AM to 4:30 PM Tuesday-Saturday, and 1:00 to 5:00 PM Sunday. Closed Monday, holidays and summer Sundays from Memorial Day through Labor Day. Entrance fee is \$8.00 adults, \$5.00 students and seniors. For more information, call 215-898-4000, or see [www.museum.upenn.edu](http://www.museum.upenn.edu))

About the Author Lucy Gordan-Rastelli is an American translator and journalist living in Rome. She contributed the summer 2004 article on the Egyptian collection of the Museo Archaeologico, Florence.



One of the University Museum's signature pieces is this painted-limestone bust from a Rameses II osiride figure. It comes from Abydos.

Photo: Kmt/Forbes

