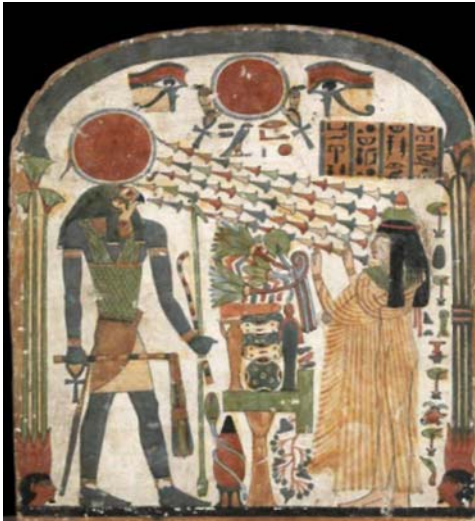


Press release

March 6–June 29, 2009

Napoleon Hall



Funerary stela of the Lady Taperet, Stuccoed and painted wood, H. 31 cm; W. 29 cm; Th. 2.6 cm. Uncertain provenance, probably Theban region, Dynasty 22–25, c. 850–690 B.C. Musée du Louvre, Paris, E 52-N 3663 © 2008 Musée du Louvre / Georges Poncet

This exhibition is sponsored by the Total Foundation and by Deloitte

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“The Gates of Heaven”

Visions of the World in Ancient Egypt

In the language of the ancient Egyptians, “the gates of heaven” refers to the doors of a sanctuary housing the statue of a divinity. Symbolizing a portal to another world, this expression was also used to refer to other passageways between the different building blocks of the universe as conceived by the Egyptians. This exhibition therefore invites visitors on a journey through spaces demarcated by gates of heaven, which for the ancient Egyptians implied a host of conditions or limitations affecting all who would seek to move through them. It is important to remember that in many languages the same word is used for the sky, the expanse of space perceived from the Earth, and heaven, the divine dimension. As visitors follow the exhibition’s itinerary, including more than 300 works, most of which belong to the collections of the Louvre, supplemented by some 70 masterpieces on loan from major European collections of Egyptian antiquities (some of which have never been shown before in France), they will venture forth on a cycle akin to a segment of eternity, assimilating their exploration to a moment in the perpetual movement of the universe, a fundamental concept in ancient Egypt.

This exhibition of Egyptian antiquities is highly unusual: instead of focusing on a specific site or an aspect of Egyptian culture, it turns its gaze on particular places or viewpoints (organized around the theme of the sanctuary), through representations of these places, themselves borne by objects discovered in the actual or virtual places evoked. Four such places or viewpoints, which remained constant over the 5,000 years of Egyptian civilization explored in the exhibition, delineate its itinerary. A repertory of shapes, signs and symbols is associated with each place, which may then be evoked in other spaces. The objects displayed date from the Old Kingdom through the Roman period.

In order to understand the concept of the exhibition, one needs to appreciate the ancient Egyptian mindset, entering, if only for a brief moment, its fascinating and many-sided mental universe: this art of profuse juxtapositions, far from Cartesian dualism, combines material elements with a world inaccessible to ordinary mortals, as suggested both by the title of the exhibition and the sanctuary itself, which although built by human beings is the repository of the divine. The exhibition’s deconstruction of the sanctuary provides a genuine window into this civilization, a physical melding of time and space.

By offering a perspective on these various places through their representations and artistic production, the exhibition embarks on a hunt for signs, symbols and iconography, emphasizing the play of references and pointing up contrasts. One of its main objectives is to return objects familiar to visitors to their appropriate social, religious and artistic contexts, thus showing the diversity of this art form, mistakenly considered as fixed and immutable, its ability to effortlessly adapt to changes over the ages.

Exhibition curator: Marc Etienne, curator, Department of Egyptian Antiquities, Musée du Louvre.

The motivations behind *The Gates of Heaven* are the result of recent findings by Egyptologists running counter to many received notions, which continue to be disseminated by textbooks and other non-academic works intended for wider audiences. The aim of the exhibition is to offer a perspective on ancient Egypt very different from that which we feel we know so well.

This subject matter is given a thematic presentation encompassing the entire exhibition. The museographic itinerary has been conceived so as to reinforce the visitor's experience of this journey through places familiar to the ancient Egyptians: it is therefore composed of particular domains, precisely marked off by the very configuration of the exhibition space in the Napoleon Hall. These places are separated from one another by transitional zones, assuming the role of passageways between worlds, indicated by a work representative of the space to which it serves as the introduction. This passageway serves both as a strong demarcation and as an educational pause in which one finds a panel explaining the theme developed. The passageway's purpose is to convey and reinforce the concept of the exhibition and to encourage the visitor to explore it dynamically.

Each place has its own museographic setting with a distinctive architectural vocabulary, with its own atmosphere—colored, bathed in light, or encircled by shadows and darkness—depending upon its physical or symbolic characteristics. Special emphasis has therefore been placed on lighting as an aspect of the exhibition design, guiding the visitor in his or her exploration of these worlds and recalling the importance of the Sun and its radiance for the ancient Egyptians.

Upon entering the rotunda, the visitor is greeted by a stone sanctuary from the Temple of Isis at Philae. This sanctuary sums up the various aspects considered and divided among each of the quadrants of the exhibition space within Napoleon Hall. This particular sanctuary's gates of heaven have not survived, offering the visitor a direct view into the divine space embodied by the recessed area that once held the statue. The space underneath contains a representation of heaven underpinned by the image of the pharaoh. This vertical structure—Earth, ruler, heaven, divinity—is the reflection of the structure of the Egyptian universe.

I/ The Universe: Sanctuary of the Gods

This first section deals with the principles according to which the universe is established and in particular those of the two eternities: Earth's longevity and the immutable cycle of the stars. It delves into the creation of the world through the main accounts and myths, particularly those presenting light and sound as the vehicles for the birth of the universe. It is important to note that for the ancient Egyptians a word is the equivalent of an image and its mental or oral expression is an act of creation. The presence of gods on Earth and their representation through the figure of the pharaoh is also illustrated in this section. The establishment of perpetual cycles and the two gods associated with them, Ra and Osiris, are treated by way of iconography and divine emblems. This section closes with the western gate of heaven, the "Beautiful West", the last passageway on the Sun's daily journey. For human beings, two invisible portals have a very perceptible impact: the Sun rises in the East and sets in the West, beginning its plunge into the underworld. Egyptian necropolises are always located to the West so that the dead may be carried away into the Sun's cycle of resurrection.

II/ Heaven Underground: The Mysterious Afterlife

The daily cycle of the Sun's regeneration and rebirth in the afterlife is associated with the doors of the sanctuary, closed at night, and the room in which it is contained, shrouded in darkness until the next morning. This afterlife traversed by the Sun during the night and by human beings when they pass away, is structured as a series of spaces, by turns hostile and pleasurable, accessed through portals attended by their guardians. This section presents the various conceptions of these spaces and the representation of their topography and inhabitants, including the one at the heart of this underworld: the abode of Osiris. Funerary papyri and representations included in sarcophagi (notably that of Sopi, containing an extremely complex depiction of the afterlife) are displayed here in connection with the definition of these spaces and developments over the period examined in the funerary concepts of ancient Egyptians. Among the features of this section is the reminder that the purpose of mummification was to make of the body an inviolable entity, thus transformed into a sanctuary itself.



Sarcophagus of the Lady Tanhetep
(open view),
Diorite, D
39, Musée
du Louvre
© 2006
Musée du
Louvre /
Georges
Poncet

III/ Entry and Exit: The Tomb's Chapel

The tomb's chapel is a specifically delimited earthly space, considered as a "heaven on Earth". The passageway between the worlds of the dead and the living, it is highly evocative of the divine sanctuary. The reopening of the gates of heaven each morning marks the return of the light and is, in this sense, a rebirth, a reawakening. Coming out during the daytime is for the deceased the purpose of eternal life, just as the Sun rises each day with renewed strength and vigor. The tomb's chapel located on Earth is, for those inhabiting the underworld, a heaven towards which they must ascend. Like the sanctuary, it contains an object of worship. This section presents the various elements that may be found near and within the chapel, taking into consideration an often neglected component: the price of these materials. Despite what we might think, the sarcophagus, even at its most ornate, is not the most costly element. In all cases, the most expensive object found in an Egyptian tomb is the Book of the Dead, a genuine indicator of the wealth of its inhabitant (its price being the equivalent of more than six months' wages), which immortalizes the ideal life of the deceased. It also illustrates an essential role of this type of monument, which is to maintain the link with the living and perpetuate the legacy of the deceased. In this way, the deceased is not forgotten and remains anchored in the social reality of the living.

IV/ The Gates of Heaven: At the Temple Entrance

The monumental entrance of the temple, at the heart of which is found the sanctuary, marks the boundary between public and sacred spaces. These gates of heaven may be seen by everyone but, in ancient Egypt, only the priest could penetrate within the temple. For this reason the open-air vestibule in front of this entrance is a favored location for approaching the divine and removing obstacles separating the divinity from believers, thus establishing a direct contact that would otherwise be impossible: the idea is to spur dialogue with the sacred being behind the closed doors of the sanctuary, in particular by offering a representation of the divinity that can only be imperfect (as the god or goddess has no particular appearance, he or she has them all, hence the composite images), a reflection in the other world, that populated by human beings.

Statues used as votive offerings show an astonishing variety of approaches to this appropriation of the sacred. They are brought together here in a thematic presentation of this space at the limits of two worlds, through representations of the sanctuary itself or of the divine statue, which must remain a complete mystery, anonymous and unknowable, or instead of the royal and private statues associated with the mercies expected to be received in return from the sacred world. Some royal figures had themselves represented seated, waiting for their wish to be fulfilled, or else holding out their hand so that passers-by could present offerings: they thus saw themselves as intermediaries between gods and humans. The juxtaposition of varied types of statuary as well as differing inscriptions underscores the change and development in mindsets, in particular with respect to the intensity of the personal connection with the divinity. This section is designed to help visitors understand the special status of images, which are symbols first and foremost. They are used in a highly elaborate fashion both as real images in actual life and within an idealized virtual world. The establishment of this virtual system, providing a measure of the complexity of Egyptian thought, was a source of great fascination for the Greeks.

The visitor then exits through the door leading to the rotunda housing the sanctuary as if he or she had passed through these gates of heaven after having completed a journey that the Egyptians considered as a segment of eternity.



Left: **Seated statue of Ptames**, Quartzite, N1790, Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Florence © Soprintendenza archeologica per la Toscana – Firenze



Right: **Cube statue of Kha**, Quartzite, A 65, Musée du Louvre © 2001 Musée du Louvre / Georges Poncet



Stela fragment depicting Osiris and his sisters,

Limestone, Ap 37, Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden © Rijksmuseum van Oudheden

Seti II seated,
Sandstone,
New Kingdom,
Dynasty 19,
1279–1213 B.C., EA 26, British Museum, London © The Trustees of the British Museum



Visitor information:

Place

Napoleon Hall, Musée du Louvre

Press opening

Tuesday, March 3, 2009, from 2:30 p.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Hours

Open daily except Tuesdays, **from 9 a.m. to 8 p.m.** and until 10 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays

Admission fees

The Gates of Heaven exhibition only: €11

Permanent collections + *The Gates of Heaven* exhibition: €14 before 6 p.m., €12 after 6 p.m. on Wednesdays and Fridays

Free admission for youths under 18, the unemployed, and holders of the "Louvre Jeunes", "Louvre Professionnels", "Louvre Enseignants", "Louvre Etudiants Partenaires" or "Amis du Louvre" cards.

Further information: +33 (0)1 40 20 53 17
www.louvre.fr

Related events and publications

Publications

- Exhibition catalogue *Les Portes du Ciel. Visions du monde dans l'Égypte ancienne*, edited by Marc Etienne, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Somogy

- Exhibition album, by Marc Etienne, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Somogy

The publication of these two works was made possible with the support of ArjoWiggins.

- *Objets d'Égypte. Des rives du Nil aux bords de Seine*. An archaeological itinerary, edited by Guillemette Andreu-Lanoë, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Le Passage

- *Le poignard égyptien dit « du Gebel el-Arak »*, by Elisabeth Delange, "Solo" collection, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Somogy

- *L'Égypte ancienne*, by Sophie Labbé-Toutée, "L'histoire au musée" collection, co-published by Musée du Louvre Editions and Hachette Jeunesse

Events in the Auditorium du Louvre

- **Conference presenting the exhibition** by Marc Etienne, Monday, March 9 at 12:30 p.m.

- Related films

The Tomb of Perneb at the Metropolitan Museum of Art and *Le dernier regard : portrait du Fayoum. L'Européenne*, Friday, March 13 at 12:30 p.m.

- "La Chaire du Louvre": a new academic lecture series

Ancient Egypt: Between Historical Account and Science

A series of five lectures by Professor Jan Assmann, on Monday May 4, Thursday May 7, Monday May 11, Thursday May 14, and Monday May 18, all at 7 p.m.

This year, the Louvre launches a new major event focusing on recent developments in art history research.

With the support of Laboratoires Septodont and its president, Henri Schiller.

Within the exhibition

Multimedia guide for family visits

An itinerary designed for children and adults invites them to explore ancient Egypt, guided by commentaries on a selection of the works displayed.

In cell 7 at the group reception desk (under the Pyramid)

Film at the Louvre: *La Pyramide du roi Djoser à Saqqarah*, Directed by Stan Neuman, 2008, 26 min. co-produced by Arte, Les Films d'Ici and the Louvre, "Architectures" series. From March 2 to June 29, daily except Tuesdays and Sundays: showings at 4:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m., and in the evening on Wednesdays and Fridays, at 6:30 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Available on DVD and broadcast on Arte: June 2009