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## Egyptian treasures in the US

Nevine El-Aref , Tuesday 7 Jul 2020

“The Treasures of Ancient Egypt: Sunken Cities” exhibition opened this week at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in the US



After more than three months of closure during the worldwide Covid-19 pandemic, Egyptian archaeological exhibitions abroad have resumed, and visitors to the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in the US can now enjoy some of the most astonishing underwater discoveries of all time for the next six months in the “Treasures of Ancient Egypt: Sunken Cities” exhibition that has been touring major cities.

This is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see treasures recovered from two powerful ancient Egyptian cities that sank into the Mediterranean more than 1,000 years ago. Destroyed by natural catastrophes in the eighth century CE, Thonis-Heracleion and Canopus were once mighty centres of trade where Egyptian and Greek cultures merged in art, worship, and everyday life.

In the centuries since their demise, these two cities were known only by scattered mentions in ancient writings. No physical trace of their splendour and magnificence was found, and even their true names grew obscure. But today maritime archaeologist Franck Goddio and his European Institute for Underwater Archaeology (IEASM) have given new life to these sunken cities. Presenting nearly 300 objects from IEASM’s discoveries from the Mediterranean waters of Abu Qir Bay off Alexandria and some of Egypt’s most important museums, the exhibition allows visitors to reconnect with these once-lost cities.

Goddio, the leader of the underwater archaeological missions that recovered the artefacts, said that the IEASM’s underwater excavations had fundamentally changed our understanding of the cultures, faiths, and history of Egypt’s Mediterranean region. The exhibition features a staggering array of objects from these excavations, supplemented by treasures from museums across Egypt. The objects on view piece together the economic and cultural significance of these destroyed cities and showcase the artistry, religious practices, and traditions of their people.

Thonis-Heracleion was once Egypt’s premiere centre for trade with the Greek world, while the nearby city of Canopus drew pilgrims from across the Mediterranean, particularly for rites dedicated to the god Osiris. Artefacts from these cities attest to the range of human experience in this ancient land, and visitors can

gain insight into Egypt's powerful Ptolemaic kingdom, the Graeco-Egyptian blending of cultures, and the god Osiris, who figured prominently in everyday life.

The Virginia exhibition is the last stop before the objects return to Egypt, and the works of art on display include everything from jewellery and coins to utilitarian and ritual objects and from coffins and steles to the colossal statue of the fertility god Hapy, the largest discovered representation of an Egyptian god. The exhibition offers a rare opportunity to experience first-hand the material culture of Ptolemaic Egypt, a golden age of human creativity in science as well as the visual and literary arts. Film footage and photographs illustrate underwater expeditions and dramatic rediscoveries, as deep-sea divers solve a 1,000-year-old mystery through archaeological research and innovation.

According to Mustafa Waziri, secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) in Egypt, the Virginia Museum is permitting only 35 visitors every 15 minutes in order to implement physical distancing between people in the wake of the coronavirus crisis. It has taken all necessary precautionary measures to maintain the hygiene and safety of visitors, and visiting hours have been extended from 9am to 10pm in order to prevent crowding.

Waziri said that the exhibition displays 293 objects excavated from beneath the Mediterranean. Enormous care had been taken in recreating the Alexandrian theme, he said, and the different galleries of the exhibition had been designed to resemble the sunken cities in Abu Qir Bay, with all the galleries painted light blue and dark sandy-red to reflect the colours of the sea and sand.

Giant plasma screens showed films documenting the progress of marine archaeologists as they uncovered the mysteries of Alexandria's ancient Eastern Harbour within the display. A prologue and an epilogue provided information about the underwater missions of the IEASM that discovered the treasures and the natural disasters that had led to the submergence of the area more than 1,000 years ago, he added.

The block-busting nature of the show has been underlined in a US city that already boasts one of the world's finest collections of Egyptian antiquities. "The exhibition of these Egyptian treasures is one of the cultural highlights of the year," Goddio earlier commented, adding that the exhibition was an ideal opportunity to encourage people to visit Egypt and to explore its art and culture.

He said that the design of the exhibition in Virginia was different from earlier outings in Paris and London and the United States. It had a different sonography focusing more on museological techniques and history than on a spectacular ambience, he said.

It is divided thematically, and among the objects on show are three giant pink granite colossi featuring the Nile god Hapi, a statue of a Ptolemaic king, and an unidentified Egyptian queen dressed as Isis.

There is a customs stela from Heracleion with inscriptions in hieroglyphics and Greek, a black granite sphinx representing king Ptolemy XII, father of the more famous Cleopatra, a head of Serapis, and the "Naos of the Decades", a black granite shrine covered with figures and hieroglyphic texts relating to the ancient calendar.

Pots and pans, knives and forks, and bottles and plates are exhibited alongside navigational instruments, cannons, swords and guns from the French general Napoleon's fleet, sunk by the British admiral Nelson during the Battle of Abu Qir off Alexandria in 1798. Golden rings, earrings, necklaces and bracelets are also displayed.

A bronze statuette of a Pharaoh discovered in the temple of Amun-Gereb in Thonis-Heracleion is an undoubted masterpiece. It depicts a Pharaoh in a striding, confident pose wearing the blue crown and royal headdress of ancient Egypt.

His belt buckle is roughly inscribed with the Pharaoh's name. "It is difficult to read, but it suggests that the statuette was probably an already ancient object when it was placed in the temple of Amun-Gereb as a symbol of dynastic continuity," an exhibition curator told the Weekly.

Amun-Gereb was revered as the god who granted the pharaohs the sacred right to rule, and masterpieces from several Egyptian museums, such as the Apis bull from the Serapeum in Alexandria, are also on show in the exhibition alongside magnificent recent finds from the sea.

One such piece is a stunning sculpture from Canopus representing the eldest daughter of Ptolemy I, the founder of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, Arsinoe II. This Graeco-Macedonian queen became a goddess beloved of both the ancient Egyptians and the Greeks after her death, and she is depicted in the statue as the embodiment of Aphrodite, the ancient Greek goddess of beauty.

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<http://english.ahram.org.eg/News/373920.aspx>