



Queens of Egypt: About the Exhibition

The exhibition is divided into seven thematic sections.

Introduction

The exhibition will take you mainly to the Thebes (now Luxor) region, the primary centre of power in the New Kingdom (1539–1076 BC). On the east bank of the Nile, you will visit a royal palace, a temple and a harem. Crossing over to the west bank, you will find the Valley of the Queens, where many royal women are buried, the village that was home to the artisans who built the tombs, and the tomb of Nefertari, a moving tribute to the queen.

Palace

For 3,000 years, over the course of many dynasties, pharaohs exercised absolute power over Egypt from the palace where they lived with their senior officials. Believed to be of divine origin, the king was the son and representative of the Sun god on earth, as well as the mediator between humans and the deities. By ensuring the kingdom's stability and prosperity, and protecting its borders, the pharaoh kept the world in balance by triumphing over the forces of chaos.

Sharing the king's divine nature as mothers or wives, queens were often associated with goddesses such as Isis, Mut and Hathor, themselves divine mothers or wives. Taking advantage of this divine status, several queens played a major political role. They did so by strengthening, through marriage, alliances useful to Egypt, by exercising power as regents of princes who were too young to reign, or by taking part in delicate negotiations. And, even though the position of pharaoh was a male one, sometimes it was a woman who ascended the throne.

During the New Kingdom, the power held by royal women was asserted more strongly than before. As you tour this "palace," you will encounter the seven queens presented in this exhibition.

Temple

Religion was omnipresent in the life of the Ancient Egyptians. They worshipped a large number of deities and erected temples to several of them.

The embodiment of the god Horus, the son of the Sun god Amun-Ra, the pharaoh was the high priest who interceded with the deities to ensure that universal order would continue to prevail against the forces of chaos. This critical religious role included numerous tasks that the pharaoh accomplished with the help of priests: worship of certain deities, celebrations, funeral ceremonies...

The queens were the ones through whom a future pharaoh could come into the world. They thus ensured the transmission of power from one generation to the next and the continued presence of the divine on earth. The feminine aspect of this divine royalty, they were often depicted with the attributes of goddesses. Queens also took on several religious functions, either accompanied by the king or alone, particularly during the New Kingdom. Some of them, such as Ahmose-Nefertari, were even deified.

Harem

The Ancient Egyptian harem is an institution that was very different from what usually comes to mind when we hear the word “harem.” In this part of the palace or large autonomous estate, women could come and go freely.

Governed by the “Great Royal Wife” and a director, women of all backgrounds and their children lived in the harem. These included the pharaoh’s many queens and “Beauties,” their servants, and those who spun and wove the “royal linen.” It also housed a prestigious daycare/school to educate young princes and princesses, Egyptian and foreign alike, in their future duties.

The harem was an elegant space decorated with frescoes, beautified by gardens, and refreshed with pools filled with colourful fish. On luxurious tables were jars of perfume, tubes of makeup, mirrors, jewellery...

Valley of the Queens

The Valley of the Queens is a necropolis where New Kingdom queens and other members of the royal family were buried deep in tombs dug into the Theban mountain.

Called the “Place of Beauty,” the Valley of the Queens was considered to be the womb of the goddess Hathor, the celestial cow whose body the sacred mountain represented. Those interred there thus had the honour, like the pharaohs buried in the nearby Valley of the Kings, of being incorporated into the goddess’s body and reborn with the Sun.

Here, through exceptional objects, you will discover fascinating Ancient Egyptian funeral rites and the perilous journey that queens, princes and princesses undertook to gain eternal life.

Village

It is on the Nile's west bank — between the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens, where pharaohs and queens were buried — that Amenhotep founded a village to house the labourers and artisans who worked on the enormous construction sites of the royal tombs.

Much remains of the simple stone and mud-brick houses, which is unusual for such an ancient village. Many objects have also been found in private tombs dug into the neighbouring mountainside and topped with pyramid-shaped funeral chapels.

Vases, both opulent and modest, paintbrushes still coated with “Egyptian blue,” reports from scribes, and colourful funerary steles tell the story of how the inhabitants of this unique village lived, worked, prayed and died.

Nefertari's Tomb

Over 3,000 years ago, Ramesses II ordered that a tomb be dug in the Valley of the Queens, on the west bank of the Nile, for his favourite Great Royal Wife, the lovely Nefertari. It is one of the most beautiful Ancient Egyptian tombs ever uncovered. Its hieroglyphic texts and admirable frescoes relate the journey undertaken by the deceased to reach the realm of the dead — over which Osiris presided — and, by doing so, gain eternal life.

The burial chamber, which contained the queen's coffin, was where the gestation and rebirth of her “soul” took place. The soul could then “come forth by day” forever, like the sun at dawn.