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Exhibition Review: 'Sacred and Profane: Treasures of Ancient Egypt'

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The world renowned Barber Institute of Fine Arts is playing host to a unique collection of ancient Egyptian art. While the objects exhibited are not something we usually see at the Institute, the 'fine art' represented by the small Egyptian collection fits nicely into the themes represented around the galleries.

Sacred and Profane is a bijou collection of ancient Egyptian artifacts collected by Major William Joseph Myers during his service in The British Army in Egypt. On his untimely death in 1899 at the Battle of Ladysmith his entire collection, which had been looked after by his sister, was bequeathed to his old school – Eton College.

The collection, of some 3000 items has remained at Eton College and lacked a permanent exhibition space. In recent years the collection has toured around the world, most recently to Japan. The collection on loan to the Barber Institute is only a small portion (74 items) of the Myers group, another exhibition at the Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore, USA, is also housing part of the collection. A small amount of objects have also been retained by Eton College for teaching purposes. The overall aim of this splitting of the collection is to increase its global stature and improve public access. Eventually, through communications between the three institutions (The University of Birmingham, Johns Hopkins University and Eton College), the whole collection will be available in a virtual museum, with help from Birmingham's Visual and Spatial Technology Centre (VISTA) who have scanned all of the objects ready to be uploaded. Finally the collection itself will be re-housed at Eton College in a permanent exhibition space.

While not impressive in size the items are overwhelmingly aesthetic, betraying Myers' clear love of Egyptian blue faience – non-clay based ceramic produced by the heating of quartz, sand, salt and limestone resulting in strong blue, green and turquoise colours. To unlock the research potential of the collection the exhibition is accompanied by a PhD project which will identify an element of the exhibit to research more fully. To further compliment the exhibition various lunchtime gallery tours and lectures are held in the Barber Institute and a book, named after the exhibit title, also accompanies the collection.

On entering the exhibition area one realizes the small nature of the space the collection is presented in, this allows guests a more intimate experience with the sacred and profane lives of the ancient Egyptians. Visitors are immediately greeted by the smugly upturned lips of Amenhotep, the Master Builder. His timeless gaze, presented on his 18th Dynasty coffin, stares over to the case opposite a picture of Major William Joseph Myers, who must have found this coffin fragment and seen its true beauty – its gilded golden face juxtaposed with the resin soaked wood topped by a golden vulture with her wings outstretched over Amenhotep's chest.

The collection does not continue chronologically, but thematically, leading the visitor into the realm of the Egyptian cosmos. A model funerary barge of the Middle Kingdom, one of the larger items, serves as our mode of transport into understanding how the realms of the Egyptian sacred and profane overlapped. Various symbolic items such as amulets of Egyptian deities and cosmetic palettes of magical significance show everyday Egyptian communication with the divine. Offering vessels and chalices, wooden gift bearers and faience ushabti figures (human figures placed with the deceased to perform tasks in the next world) exhibit the connections between living and dead.

Perhaps the most interesting objects are the rare collection of Hathoric drinking and offering bowls and chalices made of faience. These were used to give liquid libations

and offerings to the dead but were also used in religious rituals for the goddess Hathor.¹ One in particular shows the goddess in her cow form in the rushes of the fertile Nile Valley.

While the collection is small, comprising only six displays, it exhibits some very personal objects regarding the ancient Egyptian's attitudes to the realms of the sacred and profane. The objects are astounding in their beauty and are displayed in such a way as to allow the visitor an invitation to the world of ancient Egypt.

Not only is the visitor educated about Egypt by this exhibit, they are also acquainted with the man who put it together, Major William Joseph Myers. We are introduced to the mind of a nineteenth century antiquities collector, caught up in the Egyptomania sweeping across Europe, and blown away by the sheer beauty of ancient Egyptian everyday objects. His dairies are also an integral part to the history of this collection, and will also be available in the virtual museum in the future.

The exhibition at the Barber Institute of Fine Arts will continue until January 2012 and must not be missed. From here the objects will be available in the virtual museum and at Eton College.

Bibliography.

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¹ Pinch 1993: 308-315.