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Liberté, égalité, fraternité, et la mort!¹ (Egyptian Antiquities from the Louvre. Journey to the Afterlife)

With a true sense of *liberté*, one should put aside issues relating to colonialism, orientalism, tomb robbing, Middle Eastern politics, and mummy's curses, and similarly not let Agatha Christie, Indiana Jones or Napoleon divert us when viewing the exhibition *Journey to the Afterlife*. The baggage that we all too often bring to ancient Egyptian exhibitions is often distracting, and gets in the road of our truly engaging with the objects.

So too can the expectation that it will be yet more of the same. The ancient Egyptian sense of aesthetics, composition, colour, material and design is generally familiar, and leads us to imagine that no new surprises await. But amongst the 202 objects on display are some of the finest antiquities collected to date, and they are a joy to behold. Given these were selected from some 60,000 in the Louvre's vast Egyptian collection, the high quality and variety is not surprising.

What is particularly striking is the enduring nature of these objects. They exhibit a confidence and sophistication that is both opulent and simultaneously restrained. Both in the form of a baboon and The Divine falcon are majestic and powerful evocations created by masters of their craft. No detail is extraneous. Pure form and economy of line define these figures.

Equally remarkable is the skill with which the workers moulded the intractable materials from which many of the objects are made. Despite the hardness and unpredictability of stone such as obsidian, granite, quartzite and basalt, many pieces exhibit an astonishing degree of subtlety and precision. Mourners at funerals is a particularly elegant sculpture, with a surprising degree of movement in the composition. Cut in the 'sunk relief' method, the figures appear in relief within a slight depression that creates an outline around the silhouette. This mastery of working within a narrow depth of field is evident throughout the exhibition, including the Funerary priest in limestone, where his plaited wig and side-lock have a surprising dimensionality.

In contrast to the larger pieces, I enjoyed looking for the remarkable in the smallest, such as the lapis and turquoise in the Ba amulet, the three mates together in *fraternité* in Penimen and his colleagues, the bird's protective wing in Funerary servant of a reclining man with his ba, and the questionable ears in the baked clay Lid of a sarcophagus.

Given that the exhibition is in an art museum, and the visual strength of the collection, it is disappointing that the interpretation focuses primarily on the civilisation and the object's cultural associations. Only rarely is any aesthetic interpretation offered. The power of these objects emanates as much from the sheer virtuosity of the workmanship and the sophistication of the designs, as it does from the fascinating stories they form a part of. One catalogue essay explores this, but unfortunately it is not extensively brought into the gallery space. It would have been terrifically interesting to learn more about the lives of the *fraternité* of crafts workers and their techniques, or about the stylistic developments through 3,000 years. Regardless, it is still a compelling exhibition.

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Egyptian antiquities from the Louvre: journey to the Afterlife

National Gallery of Australia, Canberra
<http://egyptianantiquities.com.au/Journey/default.cfm>
27 November 2006 – 25 February 2007

Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide
<http://www.artgallery.sa.gov.au/content-exhibitions.html>
21 March – 1 July 2007

Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth
<http://www.artgallery.wa.gov.au/exhibitions/Egypt.asp>
21 July – 28 October 2007

Published in *Object* magazine,
Australian Centre for Craft and Design April 2007

¹ Liberté, égalité, fraternité, ou la mort! (Freedom, equality, brotherhood, or death!) was the slogan of the French Revolution.