Audio Guide Transcript

Nubia: Treasures of Ancient Africa

April 18–August 22, 2021
Main Exhibition Galleries

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM
STOP 1

Introduction Gallery: Director’s Welcome

Speaker:  Brent Benjamin
          Barbara B. Taylor Director
          Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I’m Brent Benjamin, Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum. It is my pleasure to welcome you to the audio guide for Nubia: Treasures of Ancient Africa. The exhibition presents the history and artistic achievements of ancient Nubia and showcases the collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, through magnificent jewelry, pottery, sculpture, metalwork, and more. For nearly 3,000 years a series of Nubian kingdoms flourished in the Nile River valley in what is today Sudan. The ancient Nubians controlled vast empires and trade networks and left behind the remains of cities, temples, palaces, and pyramids but few written records. As a result, until recently their story has been told in large part by others—in antiquity by their more famous Egyptian neighbors and rivals, and in the early 20th century by American and European scholars and archaeologists. Through art, this exhibition addresses past misunderstandings and misinterpretations and offers new ways of understanding Nubia’s dynamic history and relevance, which raises issues of power, representation, and cultural bias that were as relevant in past centuries as they are today.

This exhibition audio guide offers expert commentaries from Denise Doxey, guest curator of this exhibition and curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. The guide features a selection of objects from various ancient Nubian kingdoms and shares insights into the daily life of the Nubians, their aesthetic preferences, religious beliefs, technological inventiveness, and relations with other ancient civilizations. These observations will also touch on archaeology as practiced in the early 20th century, when the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and Harvard University jointly performed the first scientific excavations of Nubian sites.

We encourage you to experience this guide in any order you like, whether chronologically or on an object-by-object basis. Each featured work can be located by following the floorplan on this webpage or by identifying the audio icon on the object’s label in the exhibition. Whether you’re listening from home or in the Museum galleries, I hope you enjoy this audio guide and your visit to Nubia: Treasures of Ancient Africa.
Hi, I’m Denise Doxey, the curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern art at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the guest curator of this exhibition. Welcome.

Cattle played a significant role in both the economic and religious life of Kerma. Kerma was a pastoral culture, and herds of cattle were a form of wealth and status that could move from place to place with their owners. But cattle also played an important role in funerary beliefs and practices, as the bed in front of you demonstrates. For centuries the people of Kerma had buried their dead on top of, or wrapped in, cattle hides. By the Classic Kerma period, from about 1700 to 1550 BC, Kerma’s wealthiest inhabitants were laid to rest on beds with legs shaped like those of cattle and a mattress made of woven leather. The beds themselves virtually never survive, and this bed is a modern reproduction.

Three rows of animals made of ivory typically decorated the footboard. In this case, animals native to the region—ibexes and hyenas—form the upper and lower rows. In the center is Taweret, a fearsome-looking goddess with the body of a pregnant hippo, pendulous human breasts, and the spine and tail of a crocodile. Despite her appearance, Taweret was a benevolent deity who protected the sleeper—or in this case, the deceased—from harm. The bodies regularly lay on these beds curled in a fetal position on their right side, with the head supported by a headrest. They appear to be sleeping comfortably or perhaps are ready to be reborn in the afterlife.
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Kerma Gallery: Glazed-quartz Jewelry

Speaker: Denise Doxey
Guest Curator and Curator of
Ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern Art
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Nubian jewelers consistently produced magnificent and technically masterful works, and the jewelry of Kerma is no exception. The objects in this case illustrate some of the popular materials used at Kerma. One of the most common media for relatively mass-produced beads was faience, a material that originally was used in Egypt. The main components of faience are sand or ground quartz, ash, calcium, and copper ore or copper. When fired at a high temperature, the copper rose to the surface to form a hard, shiny blue or blue-green glaze. Unique to Kerma are beads in which artists used a faience-like glaze to coat beads made of clear quartz crystal to create a beautiful translucent effect. Creating beads such as this requires a high degree of skill, as the temperature needed to create the glaze can easily cause the crystal to crack. Nevertheless, Kerma’s craftspeople created these beads by the thousands. The belt in front of you features a blue-glazed quartz crystal in its natural shape, strung along with spherical faience beads.

A mix of locally produced beads and imports from Egypt makes up the necklace and bracelet in this case. The necklace combines clear quartz and carnelian beads, both favorites at Kerma, with a silver cylindrical bead from Egypt. Interestingly, amulets like this typically belonged to women in Egypt, but based on the objects found with it, this necklace seems to have belonged to a Nubian warrior. The amulet may have been a souvenir from a raid on Egypt.
You might notice that the sculpture in front of you does not resemble any of the other objects in this gallery. The reason for this is that artists from Kerma did not create sculptures of people or of deities in human form. This sculpture is among a significant number of statues and statue fragments imported from Egypt and buried in the tombs of Kerma’s last and most powerful rulers. This exceptionally well-preserved example illustrates the style of statuary that was popular late in Egypt’s Middle Kingdom, about 1775–1650 BC. It is not a portrait but rather reflects the features of Egyptian royal monuments. Typical of these features are a solemn expression, drooping mouths, high cheekbones, heavily lidded eyes, and huge ears. The shoulder-length head covering and the wraparound garment were fashionable among men at this time. Because linen was time-consuming to make and costly to buy, the thickly wrapped outfit indicates that this is a man of considerable wealth and importance. The inscription on his chair requests gifts for the official from the king, the sun god Ra, and the canine god Anubis, protector of the cemetery. If you look closely, you will see Anubis near the top of the right-hand column. Unfortunately, the text breaks off just above the man’s name, so he remains anonymous.

Statues like this one often served as votive offerings in temples and sanctuaries. Exactly how this sculpture made its way to Kerma is unclear, but most likely it was taken from a sanctuary in southern Egypt during a military attack on Egypt. It was already an antique at the time, as the tomb in which it was found originated more than a century after the statue’s creation.
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Neighbors on the Nile Gallery: Portrayals of Nubians

Speaker: Denise Doxey
Guest Curator and Curator of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern Art
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Egyptian royal ideology portrayed neighboring lands and their people as inherently inferior to the Egyptians, as the works in this case demonstrate. Images of foreigners appear on objects such as footstools and sandals that enabled the king to trample on them figuratively. The colorful glazed tile seen here is part of a series of tiles from the palace of Ramesses III, Egypt’s last great warrior king. These tiles depicted Egypt’s enemies at the time, including Nubians, Hittites, Philistines, Libyans, and Sea Peoples. Each figure appears in elaborate traditional clothing and regalia but with their arms bound or shackled, indicating that they are captives. Their assorted garments gave the artist the perfect opportunity to exploit the possibilities of polychrome faience.

These figures are not historical records of people conquered by Egypt but are instead symbolic and ritual in purpose. The tiles, placed at the base of a doorway, enabled Ramesses to crush his enemies symbolically, perpetuating their defeat for eternity. The Egyptians believed that, like wild animals, peoples living outside Egypt’s borders represented the forces of chaos. It was the pharaoh’s divinely ordained mission to subdue and control them, preserving the harmony of the universe. Such images should not be taken at face value. We know from both historical and archaeological sources that Nubians and other foreigners could, and did, live peaceful and successful lives in Egypt, even obtaining highly ranked positions in the administration.

To see more, one Egyptian object in the Saint Louis Art Museum’s permanent collection similarly used stereotypical and unflattering images to distinguish foreigners from Egyptians. Using finely carved lines, an Egyptian artist depicted a Nubian man bound
with ropes around his neck, indicating that he is a prisoner of Egypt. The object is currently on view in the Museum’s Main Building Egyptian gallery.
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Neighbors on the Nile Gallery: Middle Kingdom Forts

Speaker: Denise Doxey
Guest Curator and Curator of Ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern Art
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

The objects in this case come from Egyptian fortresses that once stood along the Nile at the border between Egypt and Nubia. The earliest forts, dating to the early 12th Dynasty, about 1900 BC, functioned primarily to control access to gold mines and trading routes. Later in the dynasty, King Senwosret III greatly expanded the fort system in the face of the rising threat from Kerma. The wives and families of Egyptian soldiers often lived with them at these sites, and material from nearby cemeteries suggests that some of them married local women. The small statue of a couple seen here, found at the fort at Semna, is probably the work of a local, provincial sculptor, as the proportions of their bodies indicate.

The other items in the case are utilitarian but provide a fascinating glimpse into the working lives of the fortress at Uronarti. The three small stone objects are weights used to document shipments of gold on its way to Egypt from Nubia’s mines. Each weight bears a hieroglyph for “gold” and a series of strokes marking the amount of gold to which the weight corresponded. The green serpentine weight represented 74.5 grams of gold; the granite weight, 66.3 grams; and the large limestone weight, 116 grams. Each stroke would therefore account for 12 to 14 grams of gold. The wooden ration tokens—the ancient Egyptian equivalent of a paycheck—list the quantities of bread they could redeem. The circular token, which bears the date of year 23 of King Amenemhat III, was worth 70 loaves, while the triangular one was worth 60.
This statue comes from Gebel Barkal, known in antiquity as the Pure Mountain and the most sacred location in Nubia. A sandstone mesa nearly 400 feet tall dominates the otherwise flat desert landscape. Nubians of the Napatan period believed Gebel Barkal to be the home of the ram-headed god Amen of Napata, the most powerful deity in their pantheon.

Over the centuries, they commissioned a series of temples at the base of the cliff, expanding on a temple complex originally built by the Egyptians centuries earlier. King Senkamanisken, whose statue you see here, was the grandson of Nubia’s greatest king, Taharqa, and the father of Kings Aspelta and Anlamani. Excavators found statues of all four of these kings, some of which are colossal, in a pit outside the principal temple at Gebel Barkal. They had been broken deliberately, possibly during a raid on Napata by the Egyptian king Psamtek II in 593 BC. When the Nubians restored the temple, they buried the sacred statues.

Notice that the inscriptions on this object are in the Egyptian hieroglyphic script. After conquering Egypt in the mid-8th century BC, Napatan rulers adopted the script as their own. Other Egyptian elements include the pose and the style of the kilt, while the headdress is distinctly Nubian. Nubia had lost control of Egypt following the reign of Taharqa, but his successors continued to proclaim themselves the kings of Upper and Lower Egypt and the rightful heirs of Amen.
The objects in this case come from the graves of horses belonging to the Napatan kings Shebitka and Shabaka. Their predecessor, Piankhy, having conquered Egypt, recorded his exploits at the Gebel Barkal temple. In the text he described his horror at finding malnourished horses in the stable of the vanquished local ruler, Nimlot of Hermopolis. He rescued the horses and returned with them to Napata. While the purpose of the account was to show the king’s kindness, it does suggest a particular fondness for horses.

Piankhy and the other kings interred at el-Kurru buried teams of horses not far from the royal pyramids. The horses stood upright, adorned with elaborate trappings. Shebitka’s horses wore jewelry arranged in layers, with bronze ball beads at the top of the neck and beads in the shape of cartouches bearing Shebitka’s throne name below. Next came a string of faience wedjat eyes, amulets believed to promote healing and well being. Lower on the neck were floral pendants that must have produced a jingling sound when the horses trotted or cantered. Longer strands of beads draped around the horses’ chests feature a large, central wedjat eye bead and alternating groups of smaller wedjat eyes and cowrie shells, the latter symbolizing fertility. Shabaka’s horses wore beads similar to those of Shebitka, some of which the jeweler incorporated into bead nets like the one you see here. Some of the beads feature the head of the fertility goddess Hathor. Others include floral pendants and cartouches. This is only part of a net that was once considerably larger, probably continuing around the horse’s shoulders.
At first glance, these funerary figurines might look very similar to one another. A closer look, however, reveals some intriguing variations. Because these objects, known as shawabties, derive from Egyptian funerary figurines intended to perform agricultural chores in the afterlife, they typically portray their owners carrying hoes and bags for produce. The texts inscribed on their bodies originated from the Egyptian Book of Going Forth by Day, better known today as the Book of the Dead. These words call upon the shawabties to answer the call for labor. In Nubia, however, shawabties became a strictly royal privilege, new attributes emerged, and the purpose appears to have changed.

King Taharqa’s shawabties are unsurpassed for size, quality, and variety. Carved in travertine, magnesite, and serpentine, they are works of sculpture on a par with full-sized statuary. While many carry the traditional hoes, others hold scepters in the form of a shepherd’s crook and flail, emblems of divine kingship. Many wear the more common bag-shaped headcloth, but others wear the distinctive, striped nemes headdress recognizable on Egyptian kings from thousands of years earlier. The serpentine and magnesite examples are now faded, but Taharqa’s shawabties would once have been brightly colored in red, white, green, and brown.

The shawabties of King Senkamanisken, who ruled after King Taharqa, are made of either serpentine or faience, and they also vary, although less dramatically. The faience examples usually wear a long wig and carry a hoe, but those in serpentine often wear the nemes headdress with the characteristically Napatan double uraeus cobra on the brow. Made a century after Taharqa’s shawabties, those of King Aspelta are made entirely in faience and favor the nemes headdress exclusively. Notice that each figurine
has distinctive facial features and expression. Can you identify the hands of individual artists?
Meroitic artists produced some of the finest jewelry from ancient times. They experimented with innovative materials and techniques, becoming masters at gold working, enameling, glass making, and stone carving. When you consider that they created these objects without modern tools or a means of maintaining consistent temperatures, the results are even more remarkable. The excavators at Meroe recovered a wide range of necklaces incorporating beads of varying shapes and materials. One style characteristic of Meroe features complex hollow gold beads strung with carnelian, a favorite gemstone. Others have a contemporary look and could easily be worn today.

Finger rings were very popular, and the people of Meroe enjoyed wearing more than one per finger. The most common types were precious metal signet, or seal, rings with engraved decoration on the bezel. A smaller number of rings were three-dimensional, and some were inlaid with colored enamels. Several earring styles were worn in Meroe—disk-shaped ear studs, ram-headed-shaped ear studs, wire hoops with pendants, and cast penannular earrings with a small gap that slipped over the earlobe. The majority were made of gold, and many were decorated with minute gold balls, called granules, or with fine wires and sometimes enamel. Bracelets were also popular and were often worn in multiples. The delicate gold and carnelian strap bracelets you see here demonstrate the intricacy achieved by their makers. Finally, the hinged gold bracelet with an image of the goddess Hathor is a tour de force of colored enamel.