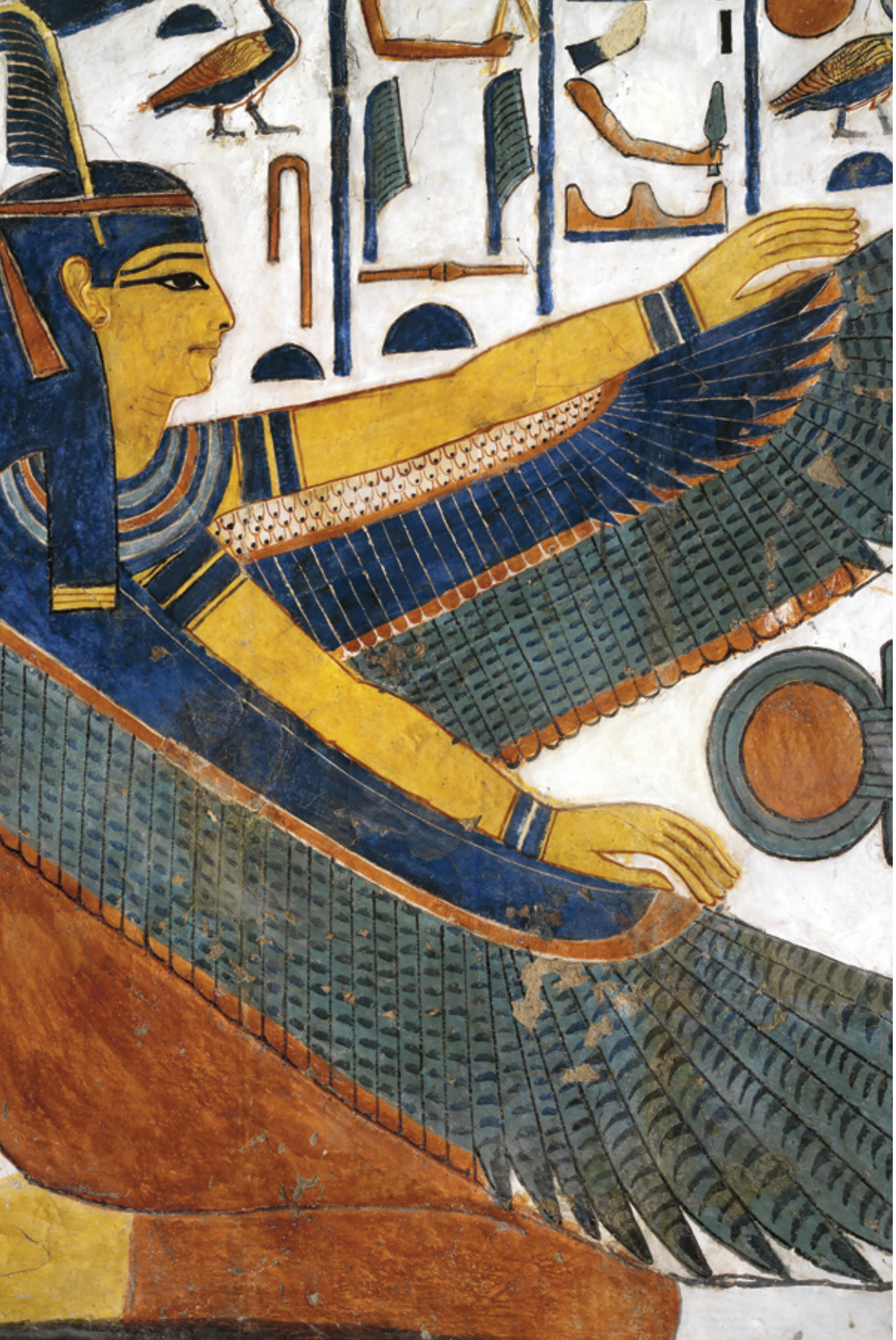

# QUEEN NEFERTARI'S EGYPT

This exhibition celebrates the role of women—goddesses, queens, and artisans—in Egypt's New Kingdom period (c. 1539–1075 BCE), when Egyptian civilization was at its height. These women, including great royal wives, sisters, daughters, and mothers of pharaohs, are brought to life through refined statues, exquisite jewelry and personal objects, votive steles, stone sarcophagi, and painted coffins, as well as items of daily life from the artisan village of Deir el-Medina, home to the craftsmen who built the royal tombs. Drawn from the Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy, one of the most important and extensive collections of ancient Egyptian works in the world, these treasures showcase the legacy of these amazing women—whose status often verged on divine—and also trace the journey of discovery made by the Italian archaeologist Ernesto Schiaparelli on the banks of the ancient Nile.

Nefertari, whose name means "beautiful companion," was one of the most celebrated queens of ancient Egypt and the favorite wife of pharaoh Ramesses II (reigned 1279 –1213 BCE). Until the early 1900s, Nefertari was known only through a few sculptures, tomb paintings, and hieroglyphs related to Ramesses II. In 1904, Schiaparelli, then director of the Museo Egizio, discovered her tomb—the most richly decorated in the Valley of the Queens—establishing Nefertari's revered status. Although the contents had been looted in ancient times, the brilliant murals decorating the tomb depict the perilous journey Nefertari had to make on her path to immortality. Schiaparelli made other significant discoveries in the village of Deir el-Medina that reveal what daily life would have been like for the artisans who constructed Nefertari's magnificent tomb.

*Queen Nefertari's Egypt* casts light on royal life in the palace, the roles of women in ancient Egypt, the everyday life of artisans, and the powerful belief system and ritual practices around death and the afterlife.

# THE PHARAOHS, GODDESSES, AND THE TEMPLE

The ruler of ancient Egypt was known as the pharaoh, a title and position inherited by royal birth. The pharaoh served as the empire's spiritual, judicial, and political leader. While living, the pharaoh was considered the incarnation of Horus, son of the sun god Ra, temporarily dwelling among mortals. Death would transform the pharaoh into a full god, Ra, but while on Earth, he was charged with maintaining justice, truth, order, and cosmic balance. His duties were a combination of practical and ritual. The pharaoh, or his representatives, officiated in the temples, presided over the law courts, and defended the country from enemies both external and domestic.

Pharaohs built huge stone temples to honor the gods and to immortalize themselves. Due to the prosperity during his reign, Ramesses II was the most prolific builder of large-scale monuments in Egyptian history. Along Egypt's southern border, he built the twin temples of Abu Simbel. The Great Temple celebrated the pharaoh.

The companion Lesser Temple was dedicated to the goddess Hathor but honored the almost divine role of Queen Nefertari.

The ancient Egyptians lived with forces they did not understand. In the face of frightening, enigmatic storms, earthquakes, floods, and droughts, they developed a huge pantheon of gods and goddesses who they thought governed all aspects of life. Egyptians appealed to their deities through various rituals, ceremonies, and celebrations. They built elaborate temples dedicated to the gods and made daily offerings there. In exchange, they believed that the gods would grant life, health, and strength to the land and its people

One of the most frightening Egyptian deities was Sekhmet, the lion-headed goddess of divine wrath and the plague. Daughter of the sun god Ra, she personified the sun's rays, with the power to give life or take it away. Worshippers made offerings to a different statue of Sekhmet each morning and evening of the year to ask for her protection and to ensure that she remained in her gentle, domesticated form: the cat goddess Bastet.

This monumental sculpture depicts the great pharaoh Ramesses II seated between the sun god Amun, on the left, and the goddess Mut, on the right—the two patron deities of Thebes. The figures are all the same size, showing that, in this instance, god, goddess, and king were considered equally important. Statues like this represented the role of the pharaoh as an intermediary between humans and the gods, preserving cosmic balance. The pharaoh is identified by the nemes headdress, a striped head cloth worn by royalty, and the uraeus, an upright cobra said to spit fire at his enemies.

Temple of Amun, Karnak
New Kingdom, 19th dynasty, reign of Ramesses II (about 1279–1213 B.C.E.)
Granite
Museo Egizio, Turin

Statue of the Goddess Sekhmet, Thebes
New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, reign of Amenhotep III (about 1390–1353 B.C.E.)
Granodiorite; Museo Egizio, Turin

Temple of Amun, Karnak
New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, reign of Thutmose I (about 1493–1483 B.C.E.)
Granodiorite; Museo Egizio, Turin (Cat. 1374)

# WOMEN
# IN ANCIENT EGYPT

In ancient Egypt, women were active participants in all spheres of society, from the fields and courtrooms to temples and palaces. Men and women were treated as equals in the eyes of the law. All women—commoners, queens, and goddesses—had the right to own property, run businesses, and bring cases before the courts of law. However, despite their unusual legal equality, women were primarily tasked with raising children and running the household.

From predynastic times, the pharaohs of ancient Egypt married multiple wives to emphasize their wealth, facilitate diplomatic alliances, and ensure their line of succession. The pharaoh's many wives and other dependents of all ranks—his mother, sisters, aunts, and children, along with their servants and attendants—lived together in a place called the royal women's palace.
By the New Kingdom, the palaces were economically independent female communities, and their estates were used for farming and manufacturing textiles.

Egyptian women paid great attention to beauty and fashion, and the wealthy delighted in sporting the latest clothing, hair, jewelry, and makeup styles. Many Egyptian names—such as Nefertari—incorporate the word "nefer," which means "beautiful." The warm, dry, dusty climate dictated fashion choices and beauty routines. For example, kohl, ground from the black mineral stibnite, was applied around the eyes not only to make the wearer beautiful but also to provide protection from bacteria, infections, and the harsh rays of the sun. Beauty and care were therefore essential for health and well-being. A pleasant appearance also symbolized perfection and harmony.

Egyptians wore necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and rings, both for protection and to show prosperity and status. Jewelry was made of materials ranging from humble shells and earthenware beads to expensive gold and semiprecious stones. Jewelry was not only worn for decoration; it also had a superstitious or ritual purpose. People wore amulets to protect against evil influences and bad luck or to promote positive qualities like fertility and prosperity.

Statue of the Goddess Mut
Unknown provenance
New Kingdom, early 19th dynasty (about 1292–1250 BCE)
Limestone
Museo Egizio, Turin

Kohl Pot of Queen Tiye
Unknown provenance
New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, reign of
Amenhotep III (about 1390–1353 B.C.E.)
Faience
Museo Egizio, Turin

Bead and Amulet Necklace
Unknown provenance
New Kingdom, 18th–20th dynasty (about 1539–1075 B.C.E.)
Semiprecious stones (carnelian, quartz, lapis lazuli, amphibolite)
Museo Egizio, Turin

Hathor was one of ancient Egypt's most popular and widely worshipped goddesses. Associated with rebirth in the afterlife, she reflected the ideal feminine traits of fertility, motherhood, and domesticity and, as such, was the mythic counterpart to human queens. This goddess of love, sensuality, maternity, joy, and music was worshipped by commoners and queens alike. Hathor was often portrayed as a cow, symbolizing her maternal and celestial aspect. She could also be depicted with a woman's face, cow's ears, and a curled headdress.

Stela with the Face of the Goddess Hathor
Unknown provenance
New Kingdom, 19th dynasty (about 1292–1190 BCE)
Painted limestone
Museo Egizio, Turin

# THE ARTISAN VILLAGE OF DEIR EL-MEDINA

Ancient Egyptian homes were built from mud-brick, an inexpensive but impermanent material, therefore few domestic sites still exist today. The workers' village of Deir el-Medina is a notable exception. Located on the west bank of the Nile near Thebes, it is within walking distance of the Valley of the Kings (to the north), various funerary temples (to the east), and the Valley of the Queens (to the west). It is one of the rare locations where Egyptian items of daily life can be found outside of a funerary context.

Deir el-Medina was home to the artisans who worked on royal tombs during the New Kingdom. The residents included masons, draftsmen, painters, and other craftsmen, as well as scribes, administrators, and service workers. Preserved tools, sacred objects, and other artifacts uncovered at Deir el-Medina provide a glimpse into the way ordinary people lived and died.

When a new pharaoh came to power, a team of about sixty people was assigned to dig his tomb and decorate its walls, preparing his "residence of a million years" for his eventual death.
First, stonemasons excavated the tomb. After the walls were smoothed with stucco, draftsmen drew grid lines and made preparatory sketches on pieces of limestone – called ostraca – for the painters to apply the decoration.

Due to the isolation of the workers' village, its inhabitants developed religious practices and cults that differed from the rest of Egypt. A few local deities were worshipped only in the village, such as Pharaoh Amenhotep I and Queen Ahmose-Nefertari, who, after their deaths, were venerated as protector gods. Their likenesses often appear on stelae and other religious objects.

Deir el-Medina's villagers were buried in tombs dug into the hillsides. These tombs typically comprised a small chapel decorated with brightly painted funerary scenes, preceded by a courtyard and surmounted by a small pyramid. Funerary stelae (carved or inscribed stone slabs) were often dedicated as offerings in the chapels and courtyards of these tombs. Workers also kept such stelae in their homes to worship and make offerings to their deceased family members.

Funerary stelae such as this decorated stone slab often depict the deceased receiving offerings to sustain them in the afterlife or bestowing offerings to gods and goddesses to attain eternal life. The top register of this stela shows the deceased craftsman Nakhi making an offering to the two main deities of the afterlife: Osiris, the god of the underworld, and the jackal-faced Anubis, the god of the dead, who guides the deceased in the afterlife. The middle register depicts Nakhi and his wife receiving offerings of food and drink from their children. The bottom register illustrates Nakhi's other children holding lotus blossoms, symbols of resurrection.

***Stela of Nakhi***
Probably from Deir el-Medina
New Kingdom, late 18th dynasty (about 1300 B.C.E.)
Painted sandstone
Museo Egizio, Turin

***Statuette of Ahmose-Nefertari***
Deir el-Medina; New Kingdom, 18th dynasty (about 1539–1292 B.C.E.)
Wood; Museo Egizio, Turin

***Ostracon Depicting the God Horus***
Deir el-Medina; New Kingdom, 18th–20th dynasty (about 1539–1075 BCE)
Painted limestone; Museo Egizio, Turin

# THE AFTERLIFE

Egyptians believed that life continued after death in the afterlife. To ensure that they reached spiritual paradise, Egyptians developed an elaborate set of funerary beliefs and practices. These beliefs were largely associated with the myth of Osiris, god of the underworld. When a person died, their body was carefully preserved through the process of mummification, just as the body of Osiris had been. The body was placed inside a coffin, which was placed inside a tomb filled with provisions for the afterlife. The most crucial were the trappings of the body such as protective amulets, jewelry, and scarabs. Also included were shabtis, small statuettes shaped like mummies and holding implements who performed manual labor for the deceased in the afterlife.

The spirit of the deceased embarked on a journey through the underworld, a dangerous realm overseen by Osiris, its lord and ruler. The spirit had to complete certain tasks to pass through the halls of Osiris and reach the afterlife. The deceased was aided in these tasks by funerary texts like the *Book of the Dead*. In the afterlife, the spirit was reunited with the body, and life continued in perpetual bliss.

Funerary books such as the *Book of the Dead* provided guidance for the dead to reach the afterlife safely. These texts supplied spells or utterances that would help the deceased negate threats and overcome obstacles on the long and perilous journey through the underworld.

While the *Book of the Dead*, with about two hundred spells (or "chapters"), is the most well-known Egyptian funerary text, several other texts, known collectively as the Books of the Underworld, were also used. These books follow the voyage of the sun god Ra through the netherworld during the twelve hours of night, until his successful rebirth the next morning. They also detail the geography of the afterlife. Although described as books, the spells were written and lavishly illustrated on papyri, coffins, and tomb walls as well as decorated amulets and *shabtis*.

***Statue of Idet and Ruiu***
Probably from the Theban Necropolis
New Kingdom, early 18th dynasty (about 1480–1390 B.C.E.)
Painted limestone
Museo Egizio, Turin

***Book of the Dead of Hor***
(detail of the left had side with scene of weighing the heart)
Thebes
Ptolemaic Period (332–30 BCE)
Papyrus with ink
Museo Egizio, Turin

***Scarab Amulets***
Tomb of Khaemwaset (QV 44), Valley of the Queens
Third Intermediate Period or Late Period (about 1075–332 BCE)
Faience
Museo Egizio, Turin

Shabtis were ritual objects placed in the tombs of all Egyptians, rich and poor alike. These small statuettes were shaped like the mummy of the deceased and were intended to perform manual labor on their behalf in the afterlife. Shabtis were believed to be animated by a spell contained in the Book of the Dead. Some burials only contained a few shabtis, while others contained hundreds. Shabtis could be made of stone, wood, or faience and were often depicted holding hoes and carrying baskets on their backs.

***Shabti of Amennakht***
Deir el-Medina
New Kingdom, 19th dynasty (about 1292–1198 BCE)
Painted wood
Museo Egizio, Turin

# QUEEN NEFERTARI'S TOMB

Queen Nefertari's tomb was constructed around 1250 BCE, at the height of New Kingdom craftmanship. Pharaoh Ramesses II had the large and elaborately decorated "house of eternity" tunneled into the Theban Necropolis for his most beloved Great Royal Wife, Nefertari.

The tomb consists of two primary parts: the upper antechambers and the lower burial chamber, connected by two descending staircases. The structure of the tomb was meant to evoke the convoluted path that the deceased had to follow to reach the afterlife. The vivid wall paintings represent elements of the journey that the Queen's spirit would have made through the underworld in order to finally rest with the god Osiris. Also illustrated are various spells from the Book of the Dead. A historic wooden model, complete with paintings reproduced at one-tenth scale, built shortly after archaeologist Ernesto Schiaparelli uncovered Nefertari's tomb in Egypt's Valley of the Queens in 1904, is featured in the exhibition.

When Schiaparelli opened Queen Nefertari's tomb, he found that robbers had looted nearly all its contents soon after it was sealed. The objects that were recovered, however, hint at what must have been a magnificent treasure trove of furniture, precious oils, and supplies for the afterlife. Almost all that now remains of Queen Nefertari's burial treasure is presented in the exhibition: fragments of the lid of the massive pink granite sarcophagus—the stone container that protected the coffin of the queen, thirty-four wooden shabtis, a pair of mummified knees that may be the queen's only surviving mortal remains, and a pair of simple fiber sandals (U.S. women's size 9) that might have been worn by the queen. A beautiful gold and faience amulet in the shape of a djed-pillar, an ancient Egyptian funerary symbol for stability, said to represent the spine of Osiris and suggest eternal life for the deceased, inscribed with nefertari's name and title, was the only object found in place in the tomb.

The *djed*-pillar is a common funerary symbol for stability, said to represent the spine of Osiris, god of the underworld. The back of this *djed*-pillar amulet is inscribed with Nefertari's name and title. It may have stood on one of four protective magical bricks (not preserved) that would have been placed at the corners of the tomb chamber. According to the *Book of the Dead*, a spell was "to be said over a *djed*-pillar amulet of faience . . . set firmly on an unbaked clay brick." This object was the only one found in place in the tomb.

***Djed-Pillar Amulet***
Tomb of Nefertari (QV66), Valley of the Queens
New Kingdom, 19th dynasty, reign of Ramesses II (about 1279–1213 B.C.E.)
Gilt wood and vitreous paste
Museo Egizio, Turin

***Sandals***
Tomb of Nefertari (QV66), Valley of the Queens
New Kingdom, 19th dynasty, reign of Ramesses II (about 1279–1213 B.C.E.)
Vegetal Fibers (Palm Leaves)
Museo Egizio, Turin

***Sarcophagus Lid of Queen Nefertari***
Tomb of Nefertari (QV66), Valley of the Queens
New Kingdom, 19th dynasty, reign of Ramesses II (about 1279–1213 B.C.E.)
Granite
Museo Egizio, Turin

# EGYPTIAN TOMB

Egyptian tombs, known as “houses of eternity,” were vital in the journey to the afterlife. They protected the coffin of the deceased and contained all the items necessary for sustaining life after death. Because tombs were intended to last forever, they were built of durable materials like stone.

According to Egyptian funerary beliefs, without the body, the spirit of the deceased could not survive in the afterlife. Egyptians developed the process of mummification as a means of preserving the body and its remains. Mummies were created in the image of the god Osiris, said to be the first mummy, who was bound in linen bandages by the god Anubis and reanimated by the goddess Isis after his death.

Once the body of the deceased was preserved through the process of mummification, it needed to be provisioned and prepared for burial. The body was adorned with amulets and jewelry, then topped with a funerary mask or mummy board. The whole assembly was placed inside a coffin, or a series of coffins, intended to protect the body. The coffins were placed inside a stone sarcophagus, which was then relocated into the tomb of the deceased.

The shape and decorative style of coffins changed considerably over time in ancient Egypt. By the time the New Kingdom started, coffins had taken on an anthropoid (human) form. The features of the deceased were sculpted or painted onto the lids of coffins in this style. The eyes were shown open, as if the deceased were still alive, a tradition that spanned from the Old Kingdom until well into the Roman period.

While excavating in the Valley of the Queens, Ernesto Schiaparelli and his colleagues discovered the tombs of two sons of pharaoh Ramesses III. Their tombs were constructed during the 20th dynasty (c. 1189 – 1077 BCE) but reused five centuries later during the 24th and 25th dynasties. Dozens of coffins were piled inside the tombs, many belonging to the families of two temple priests. The exhibition closes with a number of these beautifully decorated coffins.

***Coffin of Namenekhetimenipet***
Valley of the Queens, Thebes
Late Period, 25th–26th dynasty
(about 722–525 B.C.E.)
Stuccoed and painted wood
Museo Egizio, Turin

***Coffin of Asetemhat***
Valley of the Queens, Thebes
Late Period, 25th–26th dynasty
(about 722–525 BCE)
Stuccoed and painted wood
Museo Egizio, Turin

***Lid from Outer Coffin of Bes***
Valley of the Queens, Thebes
Late Period, 25th–26th dynasty
(about 722–525 BCE)
Stuccoed and painted wood
Museo Egizio, Turin

On this inner coffin lid, elaborately painted decoration surrounds funerary texts related to the journey of Secheperamon in the afterlife. The center of the lid shows the mummy of the deceased receiving life and warmth from the rays of the solar disc, while the sky goddess Nut stretches her wings above the weighing of the deceased’s heart. Meanwhile, Thoth, the ibis-headed god of wisdom, leads Secheperamon toward a company of other deities.

***Lid from the Inner Coffin of Secheperamon***
Valley of the Queens, Thebes
Late Period, 25th–26th dynasty (about 722–525 BCE)
Stuccoed and painted wood
Museo Egizio, Turin