

Coffin of Pedi- Osiris—Burial in Ancient Egypt

Egyptian, Coffin of Pedi- Osiris, Ptolemaic period, 305–30 B.C., wood with polychrome and gold, 86 1/8 x 26 x 18 inches, museum purchase with funds provided by the Alice Pratt Brown Museum Fund, 2000.560.A.,B.

Egyptian coffins are characterized by:

- A size large enough to encase mummified bodies.
- Richly painted decoration using elaborate and detailed scenes and descriptions (hieroglyphs) of deities and burial rituals.

Artist

The creator of this coffin is unknown, but was probably male. The goal of the ancient Egyptian artist was not to create a work of art, but rather to present scenes associated with life after death in order to ensure successful rebirth. The ancient Egyptians were deeply religious and had an overwhelming desire to secure and perpetuate in the afterlife the “good life” enjoyed on earth. It was the Egyptian artist’s duty to adhere to the universally understood visual iconography associated with that desire.

Subject Matter

Standing over seven feet tall, this coffin is proportionately broad, indicating that the mummy of Pedi-Osiris had been elaborately prepared and wrapped in multiple layers of linen cloth. Pedi-Osiris was a priest of Osiris, god of the dead, associated with resurrection and the afterlife. The face on the coffin is gilded gold, with exotic black-lined eyes, an ornamental beard (a status symbol of dignitaries), an elaborate head-cloth painted the rich blue color of lapis-lazuli, numerous necklaces, and a vermillion cloak covered with a net of painted beads. On each shoulder, to assure eternal life, a baboon raises its paws and shrieks to cause the sun to rise. At the center of the cloak, *Nut*, goddess of the sky, kneels with her wings extended over a temple wall inscribed with hieroglyphs. Above *Nut*, the winged scarab *Khepri* pushes the morning sun to rise in the East. The scarab beetle is thought to move in the same pattern as the sun as it moves its dung ball across the ground. The *Four Sons of Horus* (the falcon god) are deities that protect the internal organs of the deceased, and are presented here in rectangular panels bordered in blue, red, and turquoise. At *Khepri*’s wingtips are human-headed *Imseti* (liver), and baboon-headed *Hapi* (lungs), and at *Nut*’s wingtips are jackal-headed *Dua-mut-ef* (stomach), and falcon-headed *Qeheb-senu-ef* (intestines). At the base of the coffin sit two images of jackals, representing *Anubis*, the god of embalming, whose task it was to glorify and preserve the dead. On the central back panel of the coffin, the body of Pedi-Osiris lies on a majestic, lion-shaped funeral bed.

Style

This coffin was created with a strong sense of order and symmetry. The surface of the robe of Pedi-Osiris is organized and subdivided into pictorial panels using a number of geometric patterns and shapes. The various deities are depicted with consistent characteristics and each is given a ground line on which to stand or sit. The artist has also incorporated all three of the standard viewpoints used in Egyptian art: frontal, profile, and aerial. For example, Pedi-Osiris is shown in the same static, frontal pose often used in royal statuary to suggest the cessation of time. The deities on his robe are depicted in profile, which, to the Egyptian artist, meant the torso and eye are shown frontally, while the head and lower body are shown in profile. This viewpoint allowed the artist to present the most comprehensive view of the deity. The scarab beetle is shown using an aerial viewpoint.

Context

The ancient Egyptians believed that death was a passageway to the afterlife, and that preserving and protecting the body were essential to that transition. The process of mummification was developed for the purpose of preserving the body, and could take up to ten weeks from death to burial. The body was dried in a mineral salt and was then washed in water from the Nile River. Brain tissue was removed through the nostril. The heart was left in the body, but other soft organs were removed through an incision in the abdomen and placed in canopic jars such as those shown beneath the funeral bed on Pedi-Osiris’s coffin. The body was then anointed with oils, elaborately wrapped with strips of linen, and placed in the coffin to protect it. Instructions for the journey through the underworld to the afterlife were inscribed on the coffin in order to protect and assist the deceased in his journey.



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Discussion Questions

- Look carefully at this coffin and discuss the composition of the painted surface. What words would you use to describe the organization of the imagery? Where are the bilateral and radial lines of symmetry? Do you see any organic shapes on the coffin?
- What are the dominant colors you see here? Why do you think this artist used such a limited color palette?
- As demonstrated in this coffin, Egyptians communicated using a complex vocabulary of symbols and iconography. Look carefully at each symbol and deity on the coffin. How do we use symbols in our own culture? What symbols do you immediately recognize? Do symbols from our culture have anything in common with Egyptian symbols?

Classroom Ideas

- Research the iconography on this coffin. How did the ancient Egyptian know that it belonged to an important person? Are the symbols and icons on this coffin similar to those found on the coffin of a less important person in Egyptian society?
- Using heavy cardstock, glue, and paint, create a small coffin. Remember that it must be able to stand on its own and be proportionately wide enough to accommodate a standing, wrapped mummy.* Also remember the ancient Egyptian artist's guidelines for depicting viewpoints, and the prevalent use of geometric shapes and symmetry when painting your pictorial scenes.

**This hollow coffin measures 86 1/8 x 26 x 18 inches, and consists of four separate pieces of carved wood. The upper front section is approximately one-third of the length of the coffin and is attached to the bottom front section. The upper back section is slightly longer than its front counterpart, and the lower back section is slightly shorter than its front counterpart. The coffin is hinged along its vertical side so that it opens along its length.*

For Further Study from the MFAH Kinder Foundation Teacher Resource Center

SP620

The Art of Ancient Egypt: A Resource for Educators

CD-ROM, 40 slides,
2 posters, text
E/M/H/A
Created to provide an understanding of ancient Egyptian art and its central role in Egypt's civilization, this resource focuses on the ideas of life after death, gods controlling the universe, and the divine power of the king.

CD612

Annabel's Dream of Ancient Egypt

CD-ROM
E
This award-winning, multimedia program for children ages 5–10 introduces Annabel the cat and her sisters. Annabel dreams of ancient Egypt and meets the Lady Bastet, who teaches Annabel two secrets of life: courtesy and happiness. Activities include unique learning games that explore Egypt, language arts, music, and social skills; an introduction to the opera *Aida*; a hieroglyphics word processor; excavating a trash basket; and making paper.

VC1082

The Quest for Immortality

Video: 12 minutes
H/A
This short film illustrates ancient Egyptian practices that were based on cultural beliefs about the journey from death to immortality. It includes location footage of pyramids in Cairo, tombs near Luxor, and other sites.