

NEWS RELEASE

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
WASHINGTON, D. C.

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WASHINGTON, January 29: David E. Finley, Director of the National Gallery of Art, announced today the opening on January 30, of the exhibition of the Gulbenkian Collection of Egyptian sculpture to public view. "At the request of the United States Government," Mr. Finley said, "Mr. C. S. Gulbenkian has generously sent his collection of ancient Egyptian sculpture to Washington on indefinite loan. These pieces of the greatest beauty and importance were exhibited at the British Museum in London both before and after the Second World War. The Trustees of the National Gallery of Art deeply appreciate this friendly and generous gesture by one of the greatest of European collectors."

In commenting on the individual pieces John Walker, Chief Curator of the Gallery, pointed out that together they illustrate about three thousand years of creative activity, a period longer than the time between the earliest records of the Acropolis and the present day.

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"The earliest piece in the collection, a fragment of a relief showing two girls, can be dated from the Fourth Dynasty (c.2700 - 2560 B.C.), while the latest pieces, among which is a mummy case representing a cat with her kittens, belong to Hellenistic times (c.663 - 30 B.C.). The most important single work of art in Mr. Gulbenkian's collection is the famous portrait of Amenemhat III known as the Macgregor head. This is one of the greatest examples of portraiture in the history of sculpture," Mr. Walker said. "Once Claude Phillips, the celebrated English critic, very fittingly applied to this head Shelley's well-known lines:

'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

Two other portrait heads, one of a Nubian official of the Middle Kingdom and the other of a tight-lipped inquisitor from the Saite period, are also indications of the psychological insight shown in Egyptian portraiture. At no period in history have artists characterized their sitters with more skill."

The Gulbenkian collection also contains a number of delightful and precious small objects, especially from the period of the New Kingdom. Among these an ivory toilet spoon is outstanding. It is the kind of delicately wrought utensil sent by royal messenger from the Egyptian rulers to the potentates on the borders of the Empire. Such works of

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Egyptian craftsmanship were in great demand, as we know from the so-called Amarna letters, in one of which the Kassite king of Babylonia writes King Akhenaten:

"Let trees be made of ivory and coloured! Let field plants be made of ivory and coloured, so as to resemble one another, and let them be brought!"

Carving in ivory continued to be one of the most exquisitely practiced of Egyptian crafts. The famous ivory panels from a cabinet in the Gulbenkian collection have long been considered as the best example of the return of the Saite sculptors to the ancient forms of the Old Kingdom. Yet these simply composed and beautifully cut ivories, probably the finest that have been preserved from this time, are masterpieces of design which develop a great tradition rather than imitate an earlier style.

Almost to the end of its history Egyptian art remained virtually impervious to foreign influences, and even with the conquest of Alexander and the spread of Hellenism, the Egyptian artists continued to resist the Greek style. For three thousand years they maintained their own vision and their own methods, characterized as one can see in every piece in the Gulbenkian collection, by a harmonious sense of the relation of form to material and to scale.