

Brooklyn Museum

A YEAR OF YES

Press Release

November 2016

A Woman's Afterlife: Gender Transformation in Ancient Egypt

Opens December 15, 2016

Part of *A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum*

The ancient Egyptians believed that to make rebirth possible for a deceased woman, she briefly had to turn into a man. In *A Woman's Afterlife: Gender Transformation in Ancient Egypt*, the Brooklyn Museum presents new research—inspired in part by feminist scholarship—to tell this remarkable story of gender transformation in the ancient world. Opening on December 15, the exhibition showcases 25 works from the Museum's celebrated Egyptian collection to explore the differences between male and female access to the afterlife. The exhibition is part of *A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum*, a yearlong project celebrating a decade of feminist thinking at the Brooklyn Museum.

Egyptian medicine taught that an entombed woman faced a biological barrier to rebirth. The ancient Egyptians believed that in human reproduction it was the man who created the fetus, and transferred it to the woman during intercourse. This ultimately made rebirth impossible for a woman alone. To overcome this perceived problem a priest ritually transformed a woman's mummy into a man long enough to create a fetus. The ritual for this transformation required representing a woman with red skin on her coffin—the color normally assigned to a man. Furthermore, artisans inscribed the coffin with spells that addressed the woman in masculine pronouns for a priest to recite. The use of "male" color and strategically



Amarna King, circa 1352-1336 B.C.E. Limestone, paint, gold leaf, 8 ³/₈ x 1 ⁷/₈ in. (21.3 x 4.8 cm). Gift of the Egypt Exploration Society, 29.34. (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

inflected language had the power to change her gender in the coffin. A woman later returned to her original female state and incubated herself for rebirth into the afterlife as a woman.

This exhibition was sparked by fresh research, published by scholars Professor Kathlyn M. Cooney (University of California Los Angeles), Dr. Heather McCarthy (New York University), Professor Gay Robins (Emory University), and Professor Ann Macy Roth (New York University). "This research has led to a better understanding of the logic behind this unexpected gender transformation by discovering



that women were *intentionally* represented with red skin and with masculine pronouns. Previously, these representations were regarded as mere mistakes,” said Edward Bleiberg, Curator of Egyptian Art. “Feminism has changed the questions we ask of ancient history as well as the answers we offer. This is a striking example of how feminism has provided a basis for new scholarship that reinterprets an ancient puzzle.”

The centerpiece of the exhibition, a painted coffin box and mask of the woman known as *Weretwahsut*, is a prime representation of a deceased woman with gendered red skin. The exhibition also features objects representing women with elaborate wigs and close-fitting dress, to indicate a subsequent return to their female state in the afterlife.

About *A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum*

A Year of Yes recognizes feminism as a driving force for progressive change and takes the transformative contributions of feminist art during the last half century as its starting point. The Museum-wide series imagines next steps, expanding feminist thinking from its roots in the struggle for gender parity to embrace broader social-justice issues of tolerance, inclusion, and diversity. *A Year of Yes* begins in October 2016 and continues through early 2018.

A Woman's Afterlife: Gender Transformation in Ancient Egypt is organized by Edward Bleiberg, Curator of Egyptian Art, Brooklyn Museum.

A Woman's Afterlife: Gender Transformation in Ancient Egypt is part of *A Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum*, a yearlong series of ten exhibitions celebrating the 10th anniversary of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Leadership support is provided by Elizabeth A. Sackler, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, the Calvin Klein Family Foundation, Mary Jo and Ted Shen, and an anonymous donor. Generous support is also provided by Annette Blum, the Taylor Foundation, the Antonia and Vladimer Kulaev Cultural Heritage Fund, Beth Dozoretz, The Cowles Charitable Trust, and Almine Rech Gallery.