



**For Immediate Release
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**Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art
Spotlights Roles of Powerful Women in Ancient Egypt**

Brooklyn, NY— Hatshepsut, an Egyptian Queen, did something completely unprecedented around the year 1450 B.C. she declared herself Pharaoh and succeeded in claiming and retaining the throne. Today, more than three and a half millennia later, feminism has emerged as a force within Egyptology, leading to revisions in established interpretations of the story of Hatshepsut and that of other historical and mythological figures, such as Cleopatra, Nefertiti, and Isis. This sea-change is the subject of *Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses: Feminism's Impact on Egyptology* on view from March 23, 2007 to September 2007 at the new Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum

Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses is the first of a series of biographical shows the Center will present on an ongoing basis in tandem with its major permanent installation, Judy Chicago's *The Dinner Party*. A milestone in American art, *The Dinner Party* is a survey of the contributions of women to Western civilization over the millennia. Several of the powerful women whom Chicago cites in her large-scale installation feature in this gathering of 32 portraits, statues, seals, and amulets, all portraying female figures and all drawn from the Museum's world-renowned holdings of Egyptian art. The exhibition is designed to encourage visitors to make visual and historical connections between the objects on view in the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art and others that also reflect the lives of powerful women, on view in the Museum's long-term installation, *Egypt Reborn*.

"A century ago, scholars first characterized Hatshepsut as a scheming woman who claimed the kingship illegally. Today, Egyptologists conclude that Hatshepsut acted to preserve her family's claims on the throne," says Edward Bleiberg, Curator, of Egyptian, Classical and Ancient Middle Eastern Art, and an exhibition co-organizer with Maura Reilly, Curator, Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. Dr. Bleiberg concludes, "So, as well as changing the world we live in, feminism has also changed modern understanding of the ancient world."

Dr. Reilly adds, "How could a woman gain power in ancient Egypt? This is one of the primary questions we ask in this exhibition. And the objects on view suggest both the real influence a woman could wield and the limits placed on female power."

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The centerpiece of the exhibition is a black granite portrait bust of Hatshepsut in which the divine form of the pharaoh, a falcon, may be discerned in remnants of carved wings and incised feathers, still visible to one side of the head cloth. *Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses* also features one of a very small number of early representations of the female king. Although Hatshepsut usually chose to be depicted in male attire, a carnelian seal, small enough to fit in the palm of a hand, portrays her wearing both the ceremonial crown of a Pharaoh and a dress.

Several objects will be seen on display for the first time in many years. One is a likeness of Nefertiti, Akhenaten's principal queen and mother of his six daughters, carved in relief on a sandstone block with two attributes usually associated only with kings: an upright cobra worn on the forehead, and the hand of the god Aten, bestowing life.

The most recent of the ancient works of art on view is a marble portrait bust created sometime in the three centuries before the Christian era. The head is believed to portray Cleopatra VII, the legendary last ruler of the Ptolemaic dynasty whose life still fuels the imagination of popular culture today. Reflecting the influence of Classical art in its softened, more flesh-like forms, the portrait shows an idealized view of a ruler whose ambition is interpreted differently today than in decades past. "Today Cleopatra, whose reputation among the ancient Romans, as well as many historians since, was essentially negative, is recognized as the legitimate guardian of her country's political interests," says Dr. Bleiberg.

The exhibition brings to light some quite human moments, including one suggested by a reddish-brown sandstone statue of Queen Tiye, the mother of Pharaoh Akhenaten. Tiye's political power is evident from references in diplomatic correspondence dating to her son's reign. In one dispatch, Tushratta, the king of Mitanni, a state north of present-day Iraq, advises the young king to consult his mother if he doesn't take his, Tushratta's, word on a particular issue.

While modern-day understanding of ancient Egyptian female rulers has changed greatly in light of feminism, interpretations have changed less in the supernatural realm, where Egyptologists were always more willing to recognize the power of women. Several objects in *Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses* depict the goddess Isis, in Egyptian mythology a single mother who raises her child until he is old enough to claim his deceased father's throne. Worship of Isis spread throughout the Mediterranean during the Roman Empire, and the goddess is one of the powerful women whom Judy Chicago includes in *The Dinner Party*. Isis is represented in several objects in *Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses*, including a small bronze seated statuette showing the goddess holding Horus, her child. In another object that depicts Isis nursing Horus, the goddess wears a cow-horned crown with a sun disk that connects her to the goddess Hathor, giver of maternal milk. In turn, Hathor is seen in the exhibition in several objects.

Along with Isis and Hathor, other goddesses represented in the exhibition are Wadjet of Buto, a cobra goddess already known in the first dynasty; Neith, an ancient deity of war and hunting; and Tefnut, who, as Judy Chicago recognized, represented the female principle in the creation of the earth, and was represented as a lioness and the divine eye.

Says Maura Reilly, "The Brooklyn Museum is blessed with extraordinary collections, representing a wide range of cultures. We at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art hope to bring fresh perspectives to the understanding of many of these areas of art-making and, in turn, to benefit from the insights of our colleagues, in exhibitions and activities to come."

Pharaohs, Queens, and Goddesses: Feminism's Impact on Egyptology will be accompanied by a series of school and public programs.

GENERAL INFORMATION

Admission:

Contribution \$8; students with valid I.D. and older adults \$4. Free to Members and children under 12 accompanied by an adult. Group tours or visits must be arranged in advance by calling extension 234.

Directions:

Subway: Seventh Avenue express (2 or 3) to Eastern Parkway/Brooklyn Museum stop; Lexington Avenue express (4 or 5) to Nevins Street, cross platform and transfer to the 2 or 3. Bus: B71, B41, B69, B48. On-site parking available.

Museum Hours:

Wednesday through Friday, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m.; First Saturday of each month, 11 a.m. to 11 p.m.; all other Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.; Sunday, 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Closed Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day.