

A close-up profile of an ancient Egyptian black granite head, likely a statue of a deity or pharaoh. The head is dark and polished, with a prominent eye socket containing a stone eye. The features are finely carved, showing the nose, lips, and ear. The background is a plain, light color.

Exploring the Art of Ancient Egypt

Freer|Sackler Educator Resource

FREER | SACKLER



Smithsonian

About This Work of Art

Whose portrait head is this? His name is unknown, but the headgear, incised moustache, and a chipped false beard identify the figure as an Egyptian pharaoh. The tall crown with rounded top, known as the White Crown, signifies his rule over Upper (southern) Egypt. The sculpture was originally painted, and the finely modeled features included inlaid eyes held in place by a copper rim. Broken at the neck, the head originally belonged to a full, most likely standing statue. The body may have featured a **cartouche**, an oblong shape enclosing a king's name, which would have revealed this figure's identity. See an example of a cartouche on the bottom right.

In ancient Egypt, such statues were placed in tombs to serve as eternal images of the deceased and as repositories of the ka, the "life force" or spirit of the pharaoh. Sculptors sought to convey a pharaoh's divine character through idealized representations, yet they also experimented with naturalistic rendering of facial features, as seen here in the cheeks, lips, and stone and copper inlay for the eyes. These elements, along with the moustache, suggest that the statue was made in Dynasty 5 (ca. 2500–2350 BCE) or Dynasty 6 (ca. 2350–2170 BCE), toward the end of the Old Kingdom (ca. 2675–2130 BCE). Few royal statues survive from these dynasties, making this head a rare example.

COVER AND POSTER, HEAD OF A PHARAOH

Egypt, Old Kingdom, Dynasty 5 or 6

Greywacke and copper

22 13/16 x 6 15/16 x 10 9/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment

Freer Gallery of Art F1938.11

RIGHT, AMULET IN THE SHAPE OF A CARTOUCHE

Egypt, New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, reign of Akhenaten,
1539–1075 BCE

Faience (glazed composition)

13/16 x 3/8 x 1/8 in

Gift of Charles Lang Freer

Freer Gallery of Art F1907.165

This **cartouche** was used as an amulet, which provided protection to the person who wore it. The oblong shape encloses the inscription: "Re-Harakhti lives, rejoicing in the horizon."



Royal Statues in the Old Kingdom

Ancient Egypt's Old Kingdom lasted about five hundred years (Dynasties 3–6, ca. 2675–2130 BCE) and was one of the most flourishing periods for the arts, especially architecture. The iconic Great Sphinx and Pyramids at Giza were erected at this time. Sculptors excelled at working in stone, wood, and metal, and they began to depict realistic forms achieved through skilled observation of the natural world. This naturalism is evident in life-sized figural sculptures from the period—the first such works in ancient Egypt.

An Egyptian royal sculpture was not an exact representation of the pharaoh but a depiction of idealized, divine aspects to legitimize his role as the ruler. Old Kingdom sculptures were axial and frontal, meaning they were divided symmetrically along a central axis and depicted as facing the viewer. Rounded faces and wide eyes are typical of this time, along with modeled, full lips and lines on either side of the mouth.

Pharaohs in the Old Kingdom

“Pharaoh” is a Greek term based on the Egyptian word *per-a'a*, which means “great house.” The ancient Egyptians did not utilize “pharaoh” until the New Kingdom (ca. 1539–1075 BCE), but modern-day historians have applied the term to all ancient Egyptian rulers. More than just rulers of the people, pharaohs were revered by the ancient Egyptians as divine intermediaries to the gods. Most importantly, to the Egyptians of the Old Kingdom, the pharaoh was the physical son of Re, god of the sun. Familial descent conditioned the legitimacy for rule. Pharaohs had many wives, but the purest line to Re was maintained within the family, resulting in some brother-sister marriages.

Social Order in the Old Kingdom

Ancient Egyptian society was organized into complex class systems defined by power, birthright, and profession. The royal family and the elite (national ministers, higher officials and nobles, and royal priests) were stationed in Memphis, the capital city during the Old Kingdom. Artisans, farmers, local and sub-elite priests, traders, and peasants made up the remaining social groups.

Individuals could hold many offices or positions, regardless of their status. One could advance in society based on circumstantial needs and work ethic. Only the positions of pharaoh and slave were strictly hereditary.



Why Is Ancient Egyptian Art at the Smithsonian's Museums of Asian Art?

Charles Lang Freer (1854–1919), founder of the Freer Gallery of Art, made his fame as a collector of Chinese and Japanese art and the works of James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903). Freer's goal for the Freer Gallery of Art was to, in his words, “unite modern work with masterpieces of certain periods of high civilization harmonious in spiritual suggestion, having the power to broaden esthetic culture and the grace to elevate the human mind.”

As a result of his three visits to Egypt from 1906–9, Freer fell in love with ancient Egyptian art and monuments. His first trip convinced him that his collection would be incomplete without examples of ancient Egyptian sculpture in stone and wood. “I now feel that these things are the greatest art in the world,” he wrote to Colonel Frank J. Hecker, his Detroit business partner and close friend, “greater than Greek, Chinese or Japanese.” Freer also considered ancient Egyptian art and Whistler's works to be aesthetically related, as demonstrated in the image above.

ABOVE, PORTRAIT OF CHARLES LANG FREER

Alvin Langdon Coburn (1882–1966); 1909; autochrome; Charles Lang Freer Papers; Freer|Sackler Archives, FSA A.01 12.01.2. Works depicted in image (left to right): Figure of Anubis; Egypt, Dynasty 26 (664–525 BCE) or later; bronze; 9 1/2 x 2 11/16 x 2 1/16 in; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; Freer Gallery of Art, F1908.52. *Resting*, James McNeill Whistler (1834–1903); 1870–75; chalk and pastel on brown paper; 5 15/16 x 3 in; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; Freer Gallery of Art, F1902.176. Figurine of Neith; Egypt, Dynasty 26 (664–525 BCE) or later; bronze; 8 3/8 x 1 1/2 x 2 11/16 in; Gift of Charles Lang Freer; Freer Gallery of Art, F1907.1

Guiding Questions

Use one of the following thinking routines to engage your students with *Head of a Pharaoh*. These routines and accompanying explanations are from the Harvard Project Zero Artful Thinking program. For more information, visit pzartfulthinking.org.

Think/Puzzle/Explore

What do you **think** you know about ancient Egypt? About this artwork?

What questions or **puzzles** do you have?

What does the artwork make you want to **explore**?

This routine helps students connect to prior knowledge, stimulates curiosity, and lays the groundwork for independent student inquiry.

I See/I Think/I Wonder

What do you **see**?

What do you **think** about that?

What does it make you **wonder**?

This widely used routine works well with almost any artwork or object. It is versatile, easy to use, and almost never fails to deepen students' interest in the topic at hand, whether students have lots of background knowledge or none at all. Many teachers like to use this routine at the start of a lesson, or as a first step in a more extended activity.

Additional Resources

We invite teachers of all levels and disciplines to adapt this resource. Use the poster to spark classroom discussion or inspire assignments in a variety of disciplines.

Related Artworks

open.asia.si.edu

To study other works from ancient Egypt in the Freer|Sackler's permanent collections, search Open F|S, our digitized collections, by date, medium, artist's name, etc.

Freer|Sackler Online Resources

Asian Art Connections: Freer's Gift
archive.asia.si.edu/explore/teacherResources/ConnectionsSpr06.pdf

Examine a teaching poster about another ancient Egyptian sculpture in the museums' permanent collections, and learn more about collector and museum founder Charles Lang Freer.

Freer in Focus

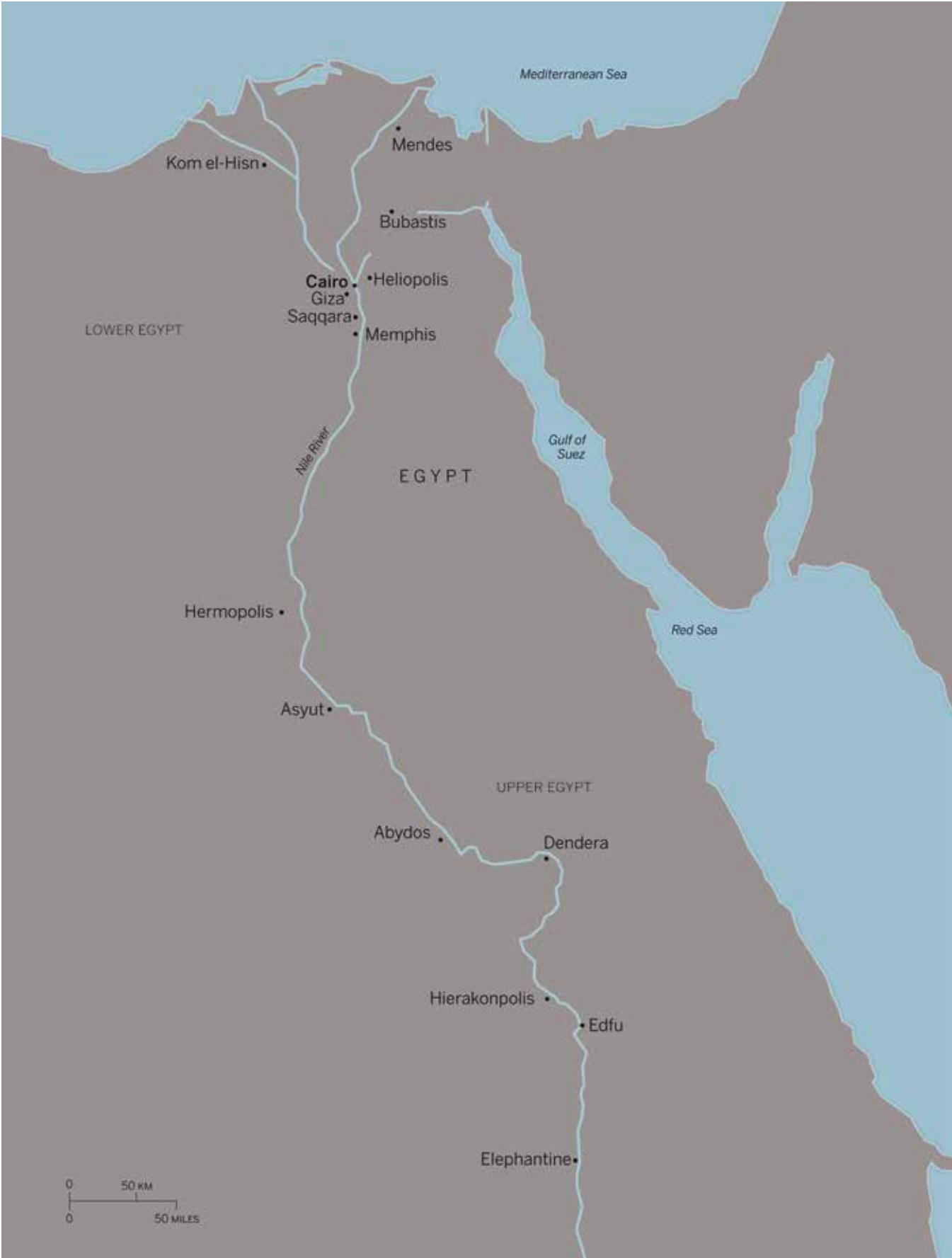
youtube.com/watch?v=gU_PUHUIfNU

Watch a seven-minute video about *Head of a Pharaoh* as explained by a Freer|Sackler docent.

Freer|Sackler Print Resource

Gunter, Ann C. *A Collector's Journey: Charles Lang Freer and Egypt*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution, 2002.

Map of Egypt during the Old Kingdom



Learning Standards

NCHS

World History Era 2, Standard 1A. The student understands how Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley became centers of dense population, urbanization, and cultural innovation.

Gr. 7–12. Compare the development of religious and ethical belief systems in ancient Egypt and how they legitimized the political and social orders.

NCSS

D2.His.3.6-8. Use questions generated about individuals and groups to analyze why they, and the developments they shaped, are seen as historically significant.

D2.His.13.6-8. Evaluate the relevancy and utility of a historical source based on information such

as maker, date, place of origin, intended audience, and purpose.

Common Core

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.

NAEA National Core Arts Standards

Anchor Standard #7:

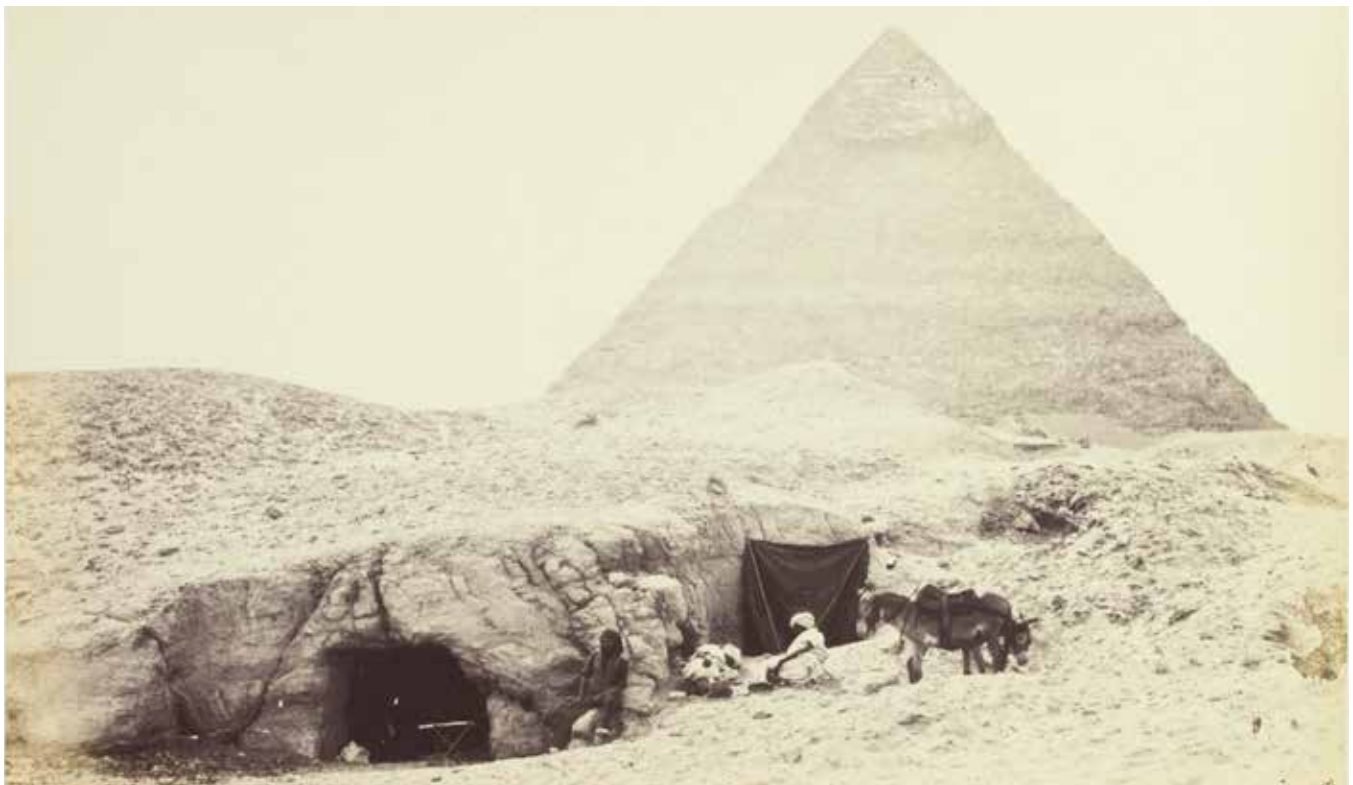
Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard #8:

Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard #11:

Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.



This photograph, taken in 1857, depicts a view of the Giza pyramid complex. The rock-cut tombs in the foreground served as burial places for royal family members and court officials, while the pyramid in the background served as a tomb for a pharaoh. Rock Tombs and Belzoni's Pyramid; Francis Frith (1822–1898); Egypt, Giza, 1857; albumen print; Freer|Sackler Archives, FSA A2016.02

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Smithsonian Institution

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1050 Independence Ave SW
Washington, DC 20560-0001

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tours, and public programs

Reserved Tours for Students

Schedule a tour at least four weeks in advance
at freersackler.si.edu/visit/schooltours.asp.

Self-Guided Groups

If your group of ten or more plans to visit the museums on its own, please let us know by registering at least a week in advance at freersackler.si.edu/visit/selfguided.asp.

Educator Workshops

The Freer|Sackler offers a variety of professional development workshops for educators throughout the year. Visit freersackler.si.edu/teachers to see and register for our current offerings.

General Information

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Other questions? Call 202.633.1012