

## Museum Exhibition Review

*Cleopatra. Roma e l'incantesimo dell'Egitto / Cleopatra. Rome and the Magic of Egypt*

Rome, Chiostro del Bramante

12 October 2013 – 2 February 2014

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Not far from Piazza Navona, where tourists mill around an Egyptian-inspired obelisk commissioned by the Roman emperor Domitian, the complex relationship between Rome and Egypt is explored in an ambitious new exhibition. With *Cleopatra. Rome and the Magic of Egypt*, the Chiostro del Bramante assembles a wealth of important objects usually scattered across various European collections, presenting them in an informative and attractive display.

The exhibition successfully points up the manifold connections between Rome and Ptolemaic Egypt even if its sweeping scope occasionally works against a cohesive narrative.

Admirably, the show begins by stating its goals: 'We'll try to understand how this exotic conquered land [Egypt] was considered by the Romans – and the influence that Egyptian religion, art, and culture had on Rome'. The show also takes pains to explicitly distance itself from two of the largest recent exhibitions devoted to Cleopatra: *Kleopatra und die Caesaren* and *Cleopatra of Egypt. From History to Myth*.<sup>(1)</sup> And while several objects in the current show are familiar from the previous ones – the Vatican and Nahman portraits of Cleopatra were similarly paired in *Kleopatra*; and the racy Pygmy painting from the House of the Physician in Pompeii appeared in both prior shows – these are a minority among the 180 total pieces. Two portraits never before displayed publicly receive special emphasis, one apparently having been partially reworked from a head of Octavia into one of Cleopatra.

The chic design of the exhibition was masterminded by a firm whose experience in displaying modern art (including five exhibitions currently showing in Rome) is well evident. Uniformly black walls and strongly-lit objects instantiate the dramatic 'chiaroscuro' lighting increasingly popular in museum displays. Truncated obelisks provide a clever accent, looming behind in-the-round sculptures or, hollowed out at the middle, acting as display cases for the smaller objects. Hieroglyphics carved into them lend subtle visual interest as well as an appropriate thematic touch (several of the signs being novel creations of the Ptolemaic period). Another well-implemented motif highlights the exhibition's touchstone object, a marble head of Cleopatra or Isis (no secure identification is possible) wearing a vulture crown. A profile silhouette of the head – stylized, enlarged to over two meters tall, cut out from black board, and lit from behind – adorns most of the rooms, adding a note of visual consistency.<sup>(2)</sup>

One surprisingly successful component of the display is the series of short videos spaced throughout the galleries. In each of the four film segments, an affable and energetic host introduces the viewer to key themes in the galleries – often by recounting lively anecdotes from ancient textual sources. The host stands before a black background and speaks directly to the viewer, accompanied only by the occasional floating image or film clip. That this simple staging never slides into a stultifying 'talking head' performance is due entirely to the casting: Valerio Massimo Manfredi carries it off impeccably, innervating the intelligent script with his engaging manner (already well-known to many for his work as a professor, prolific

novelist, and public face of Italian archaeology). In view of these merits, subtitles in English translating the Italian audio track would have been a worthwhile addition.

Happily, the stunning objects and sensational presentation will unquestionably spark public interest in this rich material. At the same time, the potential for these pieces to elucidate the relations between Egypt and Rome is not fully realized. This is partly due to the scarcity of explanatory texts for individual objects, forcing the visitor to grasp for connections between objects and wall texts. An extraordinary marble statue of Anubis-Hermes Psychopompos presumably embodies the ‘New Gods’ named on the wall but deserves a fuller exegesis. (By contrast, object texts are handled beautifully in the *Augusto* exhibition open contemporaneously with the Chiostro’s *Cleopatra* and a nice pendant to it).<sup>(3)</sup> Linking objects to themes in this way may have been easier given a strong thesis; but the show’s purview is too broad to allow for one. Although nominally ‘this exhibition aims to redefine the true “portrait” of Cleopatra, placing it in a historical context’, in so doing it ends up trying to introduce both Ptolemaic Egypt –including its religion, art, culture, and history since Alexander the Great – and the Roman response to it. As a result, many objects and even entire galleries seem only loosely related to each other. Upon entering the room titled ‘Cults and Funerary Rites’, arrayed with mummy cases and other Egyptian funerary objects, one searches for a connection to Rome – as does the audio guide, which suggests merely that after 30 BC ‘burial rites influenced by Roman practices rapidly spread through the local population.’ Similarly, isolating jewellery in one room and portraits in another breaks any potential narrative link between them. The portrait head of Caesar, sitting in a static group of stone heads collectively labelled ‘Key Figures’, may have better served alongside the video discussing the first meeting between Caesar and Cleopatra, five rooms earlier in the sequence.

In fact, the exhibition could have relied more heavily on the common thread suggested in its title. Cleopatra may dominate the posters and video displays but is rarely palpable in either the objects or the texts of the galleries. It may have been profitable, for instance, to develop Manfredi’s assertion in the first video that Cleopatra pursued a ‘political project’ throughout her dealings with Rome. Cleopatra’s superb skill as a ruler is still often undervalued, as exemplified by the ongoing misconception that her duties were so paltry as to allow her two years of luxuriating in Caesar’s villa.<sup>(4)</sup> Such an injustice to the brilliant politician finds partial redress in Manfredi’s video script but nowhere else in the exhibition. Indeed, an additional short video about Cleopatra’s incarnations as a vixen on the silver screen seems to affirm rather than decry the tradition of portraying the queen as a mere *meretrix*. Perhaps the ‘formidable character’ introduced so rousingly by Manfredi will be the subject of a future exhibition – for which this show, beautiful and engaging, has paved the way.

(1) *Kleopatra und die Caesaren* (Bucerius Kunst Forum, Hamburg, 2006-2007); *Cleopatra of Egypt. From History to Myth* (Palazzo Ruspoli, Rome, 2000 and The British Museum, London, 2000-2001).

(2) Photographs of the exhibition are available in a web gallery created by the design firm: <http://www.pinterest.com/ArthemisiaGroup/cleopatra-exhibition/> [accessed 16 January 2013].

(3) *Augusto* (Scuderie del Quirinale, Rome, 18 October 2013 - 9 February 2014).

(4) Skillfully refuted by Erich S. Gruen, ‘Cleopatra in Rome. Facts and fantasies’, in David Braund and Christopher Gill, eds, *Myth, History and Culture in Republican Rome. Studies in Honour of T.P. Wiseman* (Exeter, 2003), pp. 257-74.

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