

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

## First Exhibition Devoted to Iconoclasm in Ancient Egypt Offers New Avenues for Understanding Iconic Objects and their Role as Agents of Cultural Meaning and Power

*Striking Power: Iconoclasm in Ancient Egypt* Opens Mar 22, 2019;  
Organized by the Pulitzer in collaboration with the Brooklyn Museum

PRESS PREVIEW: Fri, Mar 22; 10am



*Scribe and Treasurer, Sety,*  
ca. 1479-1458 BCE

**ST. LOUIS, MO, JAN 22, 2019**— What is the potential of images to shape memory and legacy, and how do they function as instruments of religious, cultural, and political conflicts? These questions are at the heart of *Striking Power: Iconoclasm in Ancient Egypt*, an exhibition examining specific moments from the rich history of one of the world's oldest and longest-lasting civilizations, periods when clashes between competing leaders, religions, and ideologies resulted in damage to and destruction of sacred and political images.

Comprising some 40 masterpieces on loan from the Brooklyn Museum, this revelatory exhibition will show how exploring the motivations behind the destruction or defacement of objects can open avenues for a more expansive understanding of the art of ancient Egypt, where images functioned not only as a means of representation, but also as containers of intense and powerful spiritual energy. Moreover, in examining what appear to be random acts of destruction that are in fact carefully considered and targeted actions intended to deactivate an image's strength, the exhibition raises timely questions about the power of images and their role in shaping memory and legacy.

*Striking Power: Iconoclasm in Ancient Egypt* is on view from **March 22 through August 11, 2019**. It is organized by the Pulitzer Arts Foundation in collaboration with the Brooklyn Museum, and is curated by Edward Bleiberg, Senior Curator of Egyptian, Classical, and Ancient Near Eastern Art at the Brooklyn Museum, and Stephanie Weissberg, Associate Curator at the Pulitzer.

Pulitzer Arts Foundation Director Cara Starke says, “The Pulitzer is delighted to bring these masterpieces of ancient Egyptian art to our audiences and, with a focus on iconoclasm, to provide a novel way of looking at them. In exploring the types of damage inflicted on these objects, as well as the motivations behind them, *Striking Power* offers an opportunity to reflect on our relationships with the monuments of our own day. We are deeply grateful to the Brooklyn Museum for sharing objects from their collection with us, and to its curator Edward Bleiberg for bringing his expertise to bear on this provocative exhibition.”

Dr. Bleiberg adds, “The most common question I am asked about the Brooklyn Museum’s collection of Egyptian art is ‘Why are the noses broken?’ This exhibition grew out of my search for the answer to that question. By observing the patterns of damage on many sculptures and reconstructing what was once there, we gain insight into the original contexts in which these objects existed. Together, the works on view in *Striking Power* open a window onto their role as instruments of political and cultural power, both at the time of their creation and through centuries of changing cultures and beliefs. It is a millennia-old story, and one that is as resonant today as ever.”



Hatshepsut, ca. 1478–1458 BCE

## Exhibition

*Striking Power* examines iconoclasm in Egypt during three eras: the Pharaonic Period (3000–30 BCE), with a focus on the legacy of Hatshepsut, ancient Egypt’s best-known female Pharaoh (reigned ca. 1478–1458 BCE); Late Antiquity (200–642 CE), when the systematic destruction of objects and temples was undertaken by early Christians; and the Islamic period (642 CE to the present), when statues were sometimes re-appropriated as building materials. Through thoughtful pairings of damaged works, from fragmented heads to altered inscriptions, with undamaged examples, it will illustrate the myriad ways in which multiple cultures came into contact with the objects, while enabling viewers to observe patterns of destruction.

The exhibition opens with a granite head of Hatshepsut that demonstrates how images that were created to legitimize the power of the figure they represent could later be damaged in ways specifically intended to undermine that power. Following the early death of her husband, Thutmose II, Hatshepsut reigned jointly as pharaoh with her stepson, Thutmose III. When Hatshepsut died, Thutmose III wanted to transfer the line of succession to his own bloodline rather than that of his stepmother, and to make his son Amenhotep II the next pharaoh. He thus launched a campaign to erase the memory of Hatshepsut as pharaoh, which was pursued through a variety of acts of destruction, many of them seen in the example here: For example, the *uraeus*, a sacred cobra that was an emblem of divine power and was once affixed to Hatshepsut’s headdress, was damaged in order to disable its protective power. Hatshepsut’s beard, a symbol of royal legitimacy, was removed to invalidate her rule, and her nose was damaged to prevent her

spirit, believed to live within the sculpture, from breathing. Finally, the head was severed from the body, effectively de-activating power inherent to the sculpture.

In the Pulitzer's expansive main gallery, a group of mostly freestanding sculptures provides an overview of the types of damage inflicted during each of the three periods in question. Highlights here include *The Stela of Setju*, a limestone relief that was once part of a tomb. It depicts the tomb's occupant, the nobleman Setju, seated at a table and reaching with his right hand for food required for his survival in the next world. Damage inflicted on Setju's face and right hand was



Crown Prince Khaemwaset,  
ca. 1279-1213 BCE

likely carried out by those—perhaps tomb raiders or political enemies—who wished to disable his source of nourishment and power in the next life, so that he could not seek retribution for their crimes against him. Additionally, the abrading of the hieroglyphs that spell Setju's name at upper left indicates the image was targeted in the Pharaonic Period, when this type of writing was still understood.

During the Late Antique period, Christians systematically disbanded ancient Egyptian temples and damaged the objects that occupied them, in the belief that they hosted dangerous spiritual forces. *Striking Power* includes a statue of a queen or goddess that was originally situated in a temple. Dating from the Roman period in Egypt, she is depicted in mid-stride, wearing a close-fitting draped garment. She holds a staff in her right hand and a cornucopia, or horn of plenty, in her left, enabling her to distribute food to her worshippers as she passed them. The extensive harm inflicted on this statue—the head and feet are removed, the entire surface is pitted, and the left shoulder, top and bottom of the cornucopia, and tip of the thumb and first finger of the left hand are all damaged—suggests that the figure was attacked in order to render its original purpose impossible.

During the Islamic era, incidents of deliberate destruction seem to have been due not to concerns about the spiritual power that a statue or other image was intended to hold, but rather to the objects' value as raw material. A statue of the crown prince Khaemwaset, fourth son of Ramesses



Sarcophagus Lid for Pa-di-Inpu,  
ca. 305-30 BCE

the Great, for instance, originally depicted the prince kneeling before a god. Yet the body above the waist has disappeared, and the whole has been reduced to a single block. The fact that the inscription was not targeted may indicate that the damage here was undertaken after the Pharaonic period, when hieroglyphs were no longer understood, while the rectangular shape of what remains suggests that the intention was to reuse the granite, rather than to control the image's power.

In the next gallery, two objects—a complete sarcophagus lid and the remnant of a face and shoulder once belonging to a sarcophagus—are paired in order to help visitors see what is missing from the fragmented face and shoulder. In ancient

Egypt, a sarcophagus, like a statue, was believed to contain powerful strength and energy. The individuals depicted on anthropoid sarcophagi wear the beard of the god Osiris, which, along with rituals, enables the deceased human to become one with the god and thus divine. Here, a comparison of the fragment to the intact sarcophagus makes the damage to the latter clear. Not only have the face and shoulder been removed from the body, but the ears, an eye, and the nose have been damaged, and the beard of Osiris has been removed. All of this was most likely intended to prevent the deceased from seeking retribution against tomb robbers.

A gallery on the museum's lower level is dedicated to Akhenaten (reigned ca. 1353-1336 B.C.E.) and his efforts to end the worship of many gods in favor of the sole veneration of the god Aten. In a relief depicting male and female figures standing next to an offering table heaped with food, we can see that while the figures remain intact, a portion of hieroglyphic text has been intentionally removed. The remaining traces of the text suggest that it initially contained the names and titles of officials of the temple of the god Amun, whose name has been abraded. The erasure therefore suggests that the damage was inflicted when Akhenaten introduced the cult of Aten.



*Akhenaten and His Daughter Offering to the Aten, ca. 1353-1336 BCE*

After Akhenaten's death, his successors returned to the worship of many gods, and systematically attacked images of him and Aten. A finely carved relief showing Akhenaten and his daughter offering a bouquet to Aten demonstrates the strategies used to disable the image's power in order to restore the primacy of Amun. The bouquet was damaged, and the figure of Aten was removed to prevent him from receiving the offering. Akhenaten's face and crown have been destroyed, as have the cartouches on his body that contained his name—depriving him of royal legitimacy. Finally, the hieroglyphs behind Akhenaten's head that would have described the scene have been removed.

The exhibition's final gallery contains a number of objects depicting the making and receiving of offerings. Mostly created for temples, they were most likely damaged during the Late Antique era by early Christians, who believed that these objects were host to a powerful, perhaps malevolent spiritual energy. For example, a granite sculpture depicts the royal scribe Khaemat kneeling—suggesting that he is in the presence of a deity—and holding a stela containing a prayer to the sun god. His head and neck have been broken off, the front of the plinth upon which he rests is missing, and the stone is marked by a number of large cracks. Scientific analysis has concluded that the fissures are the result of the formation of rust due to water exposure, suggesting that the sculpture may have been disabled via drowning.

Finally, two limestone sculptures depicting the scribes Amunhotep and Djehuti are paired, encouraging visitors to observe and compare the patterns of damage. Both figures are seated, with each holding in his lap a papyrus scroll inscribed with a hymn. Both bodies contain incised lines on the abdomen, representing rolls of fat that identify them as well-fed, wealthy men. A closer look at the two statues reveals the choices that iconoclasts made: Amunhotep's head is intact, but his nose has been chiseled away, whereas Djehuti's head has been entirely removed. In



Left: Amunhotep, Son of Nebiry, ca. 1426-1400 BCE  
Right: Djehuti, ca. 1539-1390 BCE

other words, Amunhotep's spirit is prevented from breathing by the removal of the nose, while Djehuti's statue is deactivated by decapitation. The difference in the damage inflicted on these two statues might be attributable to the two men's hairstyles. Amunhotep's hair extends over his shoulders and reinforces his neck, which would have made it difficult to remove his head, while Djehuti's short hair made it easier to break off the head at the neck.

## Catalogue

*Striking Power: Iconoclasm in Ancient Egypt* will be accompanied by a fully-illustrated catalogue containing essays by Weissberg and Bleiberg, as well as extensive installation photography. The publication will be available in summer 2019.

## About the Brooklyn Museum

Founded in 1823 as the Brooklyn Apprentices' Library Association, the Brooklyn Museum contains one of the nation's most comprehensive and wide-ranging collections enhanced by a distinguished record of exhibitions, scholarship, and service to the public. The Museum's vast holdings span 5,000 years of human creativity from cultures in every corner of the globe. Collection highlights include the ancient Egyptian holdings, renowned for objects of the highest world-class quality, and the arts of the Americas collection, which is unrivaled in its diverse range from Native American art and artifacts and Spanish colonial painting, to 19th- and early 20th-century American painting, sculpture, and decorative objects. The Museum is also home to the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art, which is dedicated to the study and exhibition of feminist art and is the only curatorial center of its kind.

The Brooklyn Museum is both a leading cultural institution and a community museum dedicated to serving a wide-ranging audience. Located in the heart of Brooklyn, the Museum welcomes and celebrates the diversity of its home borough and city. Few, if any, museums in the country attract an audience as varied with respect to race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, educational background, and age as the Brooklyn Museum.

## About the Pulitzer Arts Foundation

The Pulitzer Arts Foundation presents historic and contemporary art in dynamic interplay with its celebrated Tadao Ando building, offering unexpected experiences and inspiring new perspectives. Since it was established in 2001, the Pulitzer has presented a wide range of exhibitions featuring art from around the world—from Old Masters to important modern and contemporary artists—and exploring a diverse array of themes and ideas. Highlights have included the exhibitions *Ruth Asawa: Life's Work* (2018-19); *Blue Black*, curated by artist Glenn Ligon (2017); *Medardo Rosso: Experiments in Light and Form* (2016-17); *raumlaborberlin: 4562*

*Enright Avenue* (2016); *Reflections of the Buddha* (2011-12); *Urban Alchemy / Gordon Matta-Clark* (2009-10); and *Brancusi and Serra in Dialogue* (2005). In addition, these exhibitions are complemented by programs that bring together leading figures from fields ranging from art, architecture, design, urban planning, and the humanities.

Located in the Grand Center Arts District of St. Louis, Missouri, the Pulitzer is free and open to the public between 10am–5pm on Wednesday through Saturday, with evening hours until 8pm on Friday.

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Image Captions:

Page 1

*Scribe and Treasurer, Sety*, ca. 1479-1458 BCE

New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, reign of Thutmose III. From Egypt

Limestone, pigment

13 × 4 × 7 1/2 in. (33 × 10.2 × 19.1 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 37.263E (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

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Hatshepsut, ca. 1478-1458 BCE

New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, reign of Hatshepsut. Said to be from Thebes, Egypt.

Granite

10 1/2 × 8 1/2 × 4 3/4 in. (26.7 × 21.6 × 12.1 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 55.118 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

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*Crown Prince Khaemwaset*, ca. 1279-1213 BCE

New Kingdom, Ramesside Period, reign of Ramesses II. From Karnak Temple, Egypt

Diorite (probably)

25 1/2 × 15 × 35 in. (64.8 × 38.1 × 88.9 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 36.615 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

*Sarcophagus Lid for Pa-di-Inpu*, ca. 305-30 BCE

Ptolemaic Period. From the cemetery at el-Tarmakiya, Hardai (Kynopolis), Egypt

Limestone

82 × 26 × 15 in. (208.3 × 66 × 38.1 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 34.1222 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

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*Akhenaten and His Daughter Offering to the Aten*, ca. 1353-1336 BCE

New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, Amarna Period, reign of Akhenaten. Made for a temple in Hermopolis Magna, Egypt

Limestone, pigment

8 15/16 × 20 5/16 × 1 1/4 in. (22.7 × 51.6 × 3.2 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 60.197.6 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

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*Amunhotep, Son of Nebiry*, ca. 1426-1400 BCE

New Kingdom, Dynasty 18, reign of Amunhotep II. From Thebes, Egypt

Limestone, pigment

25 3/8 × 14 5/16 × 14 3/8 in. (64.5 × 36.3 × 36.5 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 37.29E (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)

*Djehuti*, ca. 1539-1390 BCE

New Kingdom, early Dynasty 18. From Thebes, Egypt

Limestone

16 5/8 × 14 3/16 × 12 13/16 in. (42.2 × 36 × 32.5 cm)

Brooklyn Museum, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, 37.30E (Photo: Brooklyn Museum)