

## Press Release

### **FALCONS, CATS, CROCODILES – FAUNA IN ANCIENT EGYPT**

24 June – 14 November 2010, Novartis Gallery

**From the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Egyptian Museum in Cairo come around 100 depictions of birds and animals, created over a period of 3,000 years, that show breathtaking quality and finesse in their artistry.**

The animal kingdom was very important to the ancient Egyptians. Creatures were admired for their elegance and beauty, feared for their strength and, most significantly of all, worshipped. Many were regarded as manifestations of divine power because they possessed abilities humans did not. The Egyptians believed their nature – alien, puzzling and mysterious – was the work of the gods. Entire species were thought to be living incarnations of particular deities. Horus, for example, was made manifest in the falcon, Bastet in the cat, Sobek in the crocodile. Birds and animals were thus portrayed as carefully and accurately as possible in Egyptian art.

This belief became especially strong in the first century B.C.E., leading to the custom of presenting the gods with embalmed and mummified animals and birds as gifts.

Evidence of this can be seen in the exhibition in the form of a beautiful gilded ibis (no. 66). The ibis was seen as the holy bird of Thoth, the god of wisdom and patron of scribes. It is likely that the gilded figure originally stood on a wooden base that also served as a sarcophagus for a mummified ibis. It most probably comes from the necropolis of Tuna el-Gebel, where thousands of ibises were brought as sacrifices.

The exhibition shows the fauna to be found at the time in the vast expanses of desert, the waters of the Nile and the fertile wetlands. The creatures are arranged according to their habitat. While the focus is on zoological aspects, the creatures' cultural significance is also dealt with in detail.

The extent of ancient Egypt's biodiversity is amazing, whether in the water, the marshes or the desert. It is a world that no longer exists today. Climate change, excessive hunting and the increasing cultivation of the landscape by its human inhabitants have had a negative impact on the wildlife. The more demanding large animals headed far south: these days, the elephant, lion, hippopotamus and crocodile can only be found as far down as central Africa, where the sights of ancient Egypt from several millennia ago live on.

Among the stand-out objects of the exhibition is the Buchis stele (no. 67). King Ptolemy V (205-180 B.C.E.) presented this stele – which has retained its original colourful paintwork – to the holy bull Buchis, a manifestation of Monthu, the god of war. It was discovered in a necropolis in Armant, where the earthly

embodiments of Buchis were buried. The central scene shows Ptolemy V writing the hieroglyph for “country” on a golden image of Buchis the bull. No less impressive is the falcon statue (no. 77) of King Nectanebus II (360-342 B.C.E.). The statue is an expression of the ancient Egyptian belief that the king embodied the sky god Horus, who took the form of a falcon. Finally, from the Greco-Roman era, comes the snake of the god Asclepius (no. 7). The curled-up reptile is lifting its head up high to defend itself. A small slot can be seen in one of the coils of its body. The snake was clearly part of a sacrificial altar in a temple of Asclepius, the god of healing. Pilgrims hoping to have their ailments cured would have made their entreaties to the resident divinity by way of the slot.

This exhibition is exclusive to the Museum Rietberg Zurich and offers a unique opportunity to see unparalleled works from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

## **SPONSORS**

This exhibition in Zurich was made possible by the generous financial support of Andermatt Swiss Alps Ltd.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

Accompanying the exhibition are a brochure and an extensive catalogue in German:

*Falken, Katzen, Krokodile – Tiere im Alten Ägypten* (Falcons, cats, crocodiles – fauna in ancient Egypt)

Museum Rietberg Zurich, 104 pp., 105 colour illustrations, 30.5 x 22.5 cm

CHF 30, ISBN 978-3-907077-47-4

## **GUIDED TOURS**

### **Art history aspects**

Guided tour of the exhibition from an art history perspective.

Every Sunday at 2 p.m.

### **Zoological aspects**

Scientists from the University of Zurich's Zoological Museum shed light on the Egyptian animal kingdom.

Every Wednesday at 12.15 p.m. and on the following Saturdays at 2 pm:

28 August, 18 September, 30 October and 13 November.

### **Cost**

All guided tours are included in the price of admission to the museum.

## **WORKSHOPS**

### **Egyptian workshop**

Every month, inspired by the items in the exhibition, a creature will be brought to life using new materials and techniques: the hippopotamus in August, the falcon in September, the crocodile in October and the cat in November.

Wednesday, 25 August, 22 September, 27 October, 17 November, 2-5 pm

Saturday, 28 August, 18 September, 30 October, 13 November, 2-5 pm

**Open workshop**

Plasterboards will be carved and painted and thus transformed into Egyptian reliefs (from 5 September 2010).

Every Sunday, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

**Cost**

CHF 10 per person plus material costs. For children aged 5 or over and adults. No reservations.

**INFORMATION AND CONTACT**

Further information and download of photographs on [www.rietberg.ch](http://www.rietberg.ch)

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Opening hours: Tues – Sun 10 am – 5 pm | Wed and Thurs 10 am – 8 pm

Admission: adults CHF 16 | reduced CHF 12 | up to the age of 16 free

Public guided tours  
(in German): Sun 2 pm

Guided tours in English: + 41 44 206 31 11 / 31

Parallel Events: [www.rietberg.ch](http://www.rietberg.ch)

Access: Tram 7 (direction Wollishofen) to the «Museum Rietberg» stop (4 stops from «Paradeplatz»). No parking; disabled parking available.

RailAway offer  
By train to Museum Rietberg: [www.railaway.ch](http://www.railaway.ch)  
20% reduction for train tickets, transfer and admission.