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# Adoration and art: Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome

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Adoration and Art: Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome

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An Honors College Project Presented to  
the Faculty of the Undergraduate  
College of Visual and Performing Arts  
James Madison University

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by Fiona Michelle Wirth

Spring 2018

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Accepted by the faculty of the School of Art, Design, and Art History, James Madison University, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Honors College.

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

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PUBLIC PRESENTATION

This work is accepted for presentation, in part or in full, at The Lisanby Museum on April 4, 2018.

## BEGIN HERE

### *Adoration and Art: Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome*

#### Sacred Spaces and Ancient Artifacts

Throughout history, humans have constructed spaces for the purpose of worshipping deities and carrying out religious rituals. Ranging from grand temples to humble shrines, these sacred spaces are uniquely constructed and influenced both by religious beliefs and spatial needs. In antiquity, sacred spaces were typically filled with objects that provided a focal point of worship. While many of these spaces are now in ruins, the objects that were once placed within them can offer insight into the power and function of these sites.

In this gallery you will encounter objects from three pre-modern Mediterranean cultures: Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Ranging in date from circa 1365 BCE to 200 CE, the artifacts in this exhibition reveal the essence of and give context to the historic places of worship according to their respective cultures. Discover the gods of ancient Egypt and their importance through enduring temple statues. Explore aspects of Greek temples through religious imagery. Finally, observe the grandeur of the Roman empire through votive offerings and temple treasures. Together we will explore the connections between these artifacts and the religious spaces in which they were used.

#### Gods of Egypt

Standing in stark contrast to the desert sky, ancient Egyptian temples are stone reminders of divine myth, with architecture physically representing stories about the creation of the world and the lives of the gods. Colonnades decorated with images of papyrus plants would have ushered devotees into the temples. Dark and narrow passages reflected the concept of *zepi*

*tepi*, the moment of creation in which a mound of earth emerged from the chaotic primeval water to form the fertile land of Egypt. The temple floors gradually sloped up towards the inner sanctuary, while painted landscape scenes on the walls and ceilings reflected a cultural connection to nature. However, not every Egyptian was allowed to explore these halls. In fact, commoners could only pray to the god through ears carved on an exterior wall. Priests and members of the upper class could enjoy the outer courtyards, but the inner sanctum was reserved for royalty and the high-priests. It was in this sacred space that the god lived. Every day the divine statue was fed, bathed, clothed, and worshipped. This exhibition features a range of religious statues. From the state gods of Amun-Re and Isis to the maternal figure of Tauret, each of these statues represent a deity essential to life in ancient Egypt.

**Statue of Osiris**, c.650 BCE

Egypt: Late Period, 26th Dynasty (664-525 BCE)

10.55 x 2.6 x 1.3 cm

Copper alloy

MAC 76.1.375

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

This figurine depicts the ancient Egyptian god Osiris (“He who sees the throne”), the legendary first king of Egypt. Three aspects identify Osiris as an Egyptian king: the Atef crown, the crook in his right hand, and the flail in his left. The Atef crown combines the crowns of Upper and Lower Egypt, signifying authority over both domains, while the crook and flail represent kingship and agricultural fertility respectively. Osiris is shown mummified, a common representation, as myth states that Osiris was murdered by his jealous younger brother, Set, before being magically resurrected by his sister-wife, Isis. Because Osiris was a king reborn from death, his authority continued from the afterlife, making him the king of the Duat, or Egyptian underworld. Though the discoloration of this statue is a result of oxidized copper, Osiris was

typically portrayed with a greenish tint. This dually represented his mummification and his dominion over fertile agriculture.

The cult of Osiris was focused in the city of Abydos. This is significant because many early pharaohs were buried in the city, causing the area to be referred to as “the land of the dead.” Though not much remains of the temple complex today, it is known to have contained multiple individual chapels to Osiris and was referred to as the “Terrace of the Great God.” An annual public procession of the temple deity would lead from Abydos to the supposed tomb of Osiris at Thebes and was a source of much festivity for his worshippers.

**Statue of Amun-Re, c.1365 BCE**

Egypt: New Kingdom, Late 18th Dynasty (1550-1292 BCE)

33 x 5 x 8 cm

Wood and bronze

MAC 76.1.396

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

The god Amun was first worshipped in the city-state of Thebes in the Middle Kingdom (circa 2030-1650 BCE). Meaning “the hidden one,” he was merged with the sun god Re in the New Kingdom (c. 1570- c.1069 BCE) to become the popular state god known as “the hidden light.” Here Amun-Re’s crown consists of double-plumed feathers and a sun disk near the base, signifying his position as a sun deity. In his hands he likely once held an *ankh* and a *was* scepter, traditional signs of Egyptian gods and representations of life and power. This statue is made from the finest materials including wood from Syria with bronze accents on the beard, eyes, and crown. Notice the rounded hips and swelling belly. These are remnants of the Amarna style which flourished under Akhenaten (r. 1353–1336 BCE), allowing it to be dated near the end of the eighteenth dynasty.

The great temples of Karnak and Luxor were built in honor of Amun-Re and used in formal ceremonies that united him with his wife Mut (the Great Mother) and their son Khonsu (the Moon). As one of the largest religious complexes in the world, the Karnak temple not only housed the worshipped figure of Amun-Re, but also a living estate community for the god's priests.

**Isis and Horus, 1307-1196 BCE**

Egypt: New Kingdom, 18th/19th Dynasty (1292-1189 BCE)

16 x 4.5 x 5 cm

Copper alloy

MAC 76.1.431

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

In this statue, Isis wears the cow horns and sun disk typically seen with the earlier mother goddess, Hathor. Isis touches her left breast, emphasizing the matrilineal aspect of Egyptian culture. Horus sits upon his mother's lap, allegorically sitting upon the throne of Egypt, signifying his role as the legitimate heir and future ruler of Egypt. Horus wears a side-lock hairstyle, an indication of childhood.

The name 'Isis' comes from the ancient Egyptian word for "throne," specifically indicating that this goddess symbolizes the right to rule Upper and Lower Egypt. The name of her brother-husband Osiris means "He Who Sees the Throne," an indication of his marriage to Isis and his position as mythical first king of Egypt. Their child is Horus, who later battled his uncle Set for the Egyptian kingdom.

The most famous of Isis' temples is the Temple at Philae, an island located in the shallow lengths of the Nile and today in the reservoir of the Aswan Dam. This temple complex was not solely dedicated to Isis, but also maintained chapels to other Egyptian gods. Within the

complex, the vast majority of carvings and decorations depict stories of Isis and Horus, mainly focusing upon their connection to the royal family and their guidance of Egyptian politics.

**Tauret**, c. 300 BCE

Egypt: Ptolemaic (305-30 BCE)

18.5 x 6 x 7.5 cm

Diorite

MAC 76.1.398

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

Tauret is the ancient Egyptian goddess of childbirth and protection for pregnant women. As Tauret was thought to have the strength and maternal devotion of the hippopotamus, crocodile, and lioness, she was usually depicted as a woman with various animal parts. Known as “The Great One,” she was believed to frighten malicious spirits away from mothers and their newborn children.

In this statue, Tauret is depicted in an upright position wearing a wig and holding a *sa* staff, a hieroglyph that symbolizes protection. The use of black diorite stone also references the fertile black silt brought by the annual flooding of the Nile. Diorite is extremely difficult to carve, and because of this an intricate statue like this would most likely have been worshipped in an important location such as a temple or made for an extremely wealthy and influential individual.

There were no large state temples to Tauret in ancient Egypt. She was likely worshipped in smaller chapels within temple complexes devoted to other gods. She was considered a goddess of the common people, and so she was often worshipped at small altars inside homes. Though she may not have had a state temple of her own, she was frequently depicted on the exterior walls of temples as protection against evil spirits.

**Bastet**, c. 300 BCE  
Egypt: Ptolemaic (305-30 BCE)  
10 x 3.5 x 5 cm  
Copper alloy  
MAC 76.1.408  
Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

This copper-alloy statue of Bastet depicts the goddess in her cat form, wearing an elaborately beaded collar. Bastet was believed to protect against contagious diseases and evil spirits. The fact that Bastet was a feline goddess may indicate that Egyptians had some understanding of plague transmission through rodents and the usefulness of cats in helping to keep communities free of disease. Because the economic system of ancient Egypt was mainly based upon agriculture and the storage of surplus crops, cats were also important for protecting against rodent damage.

Bastet's cult was centered in the city of Bubastis, or modern day Zagazig. The Greek historian Herodotus (c. 484–c. 425 BCE) visited the Bastet temple in the fifth century BCE and described it as surrounded by water on three sides and enclosing a grove of tall trees that sheltered a statue of the goddess. He also wrote of a festival to Bastet where 700,000 people sang, danced, and drank to the goddess.

### **Worship in Ancient Greece**

The temples of Greece are some of the most iconic aspects of the ancient culture. The Greek people referred to their temples as *ὁ ναός* (*ho naós*), meaning "dwelling," alluding to the temples as the homes of their gods. For this reason, the temple interiors were seen as private locations for the god and their priests. Most worship took place in open or public spaces rather than inside the temple, often fixating upon activities considered sacred to a specific god. The temples were also seen as centers for cultural devotion such as festivals, parades, and even

demonstrations of military strength. For this reason, city-states would compete by erecting large and extravagant temples through which they could show their wealth and prosperity. Temples were often rebuilt upon the foundations of older structures as cities expanded. Their designs were also elaborated over time in order to foster public pride. Some of the artifacts in this section are tied to formal temples, while others are connected with ritual-based activities; together, they showcase the twofold nature of worship spaces in ancient Greece.

**Oil Lamp with Sculptor**, c. 200 CE

Crete, Greece: Greco-Roman Period (332 BCE - 395 CE)

Press mold ceramic

6.5 x 11 x 18.4 cm

MAC 76.1.505

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

This is an unusually large ceramic oil lamp, which would have burned olive oil that was poured into the lamp through the hole in the top. The typical lamps used for everyday use by ancient Greeks were generally less than ten centimeters in length and featured only a single nozzle. These lamps would be decorated with scenes from daily life as well as legendary stories. Notably, this lamp features three nozzles, each of which would have held a wick. On top of the lamp, we can see a sculptor carving a grotesque head; such heads were called *gorgoneion* and were representative of the monster Medusa. *Gorgoneia* were also found in ancient Greek temples, adorning the outer walls as they were believed to scare away evil spirits. Both the number of nozzles and the image suggest that this lamp may have been used in a temple, as it would have produced more light than regular lamps.

In the Greco-Roman period, candles made of beeswax and tallow existed but were used mainly by the wealthy upper class. Lamps fueled with inexpensive olive oil were mass-produced

and reusable. For this reason, most Greek temples relied upon lighting from lamps to illuminate their vast open spaces.

***Kylix with Satyrs and Maenads*, c. 450 BCE**

Greek: Classical Period (510-323 BCE)

Wheel-thrown ceramic

6 x 24 x 18 cm

MAC 76.1.563

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

A *kylix*, or shallow cup, was used to serve wine at communal events, often symposia. Participants would pass the cup from person to person, using the side handles while another held the single-legged base. A symposium was an event in ancient Greece used to discuss issues of ethics and morality, frequently interspersed with games, music, and other frivolity. Symposia were also important as occasions of worship for the wine god Dionysus. Simply taking part in the symposium, with its drinking and raucous behavior, was pleasing to the god. The shallow cup of the *kylix* is specifically shaped to play *kottabos*, a game in which participants flung wine dregs from their cups at the target. The images on *kylix* are particularly important as they represent the worshippers of Dionysus, specifically male satyrs and female maenads.

The imagery of this *kylix* fixates upon the ethics and morality discussed at symposia. Satyrs, half-man half-goat creatures, are pictured dancing with Maenads, the wild women worshippers of Dionysus. The codes of conduct for women in Greek society were ignored by the Maenads, causing anxiety for the patriarchal leadership. As the consumption of alcohol would frequently lead to intoxication and less than ideal behavior at symposia, the scenes on this *kylix* would have served as warning signs to those who drank from it. The implication was that intoxication would make them as satyrs and maenads; less than human.

**Aphrodite, c. 450 BCE**

Greek: Classical Period (510 - 323 BCE)

Cast copper alloy

12.3 x 4 x 2.5 cm

MAC 76.1.706

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

This small bronze statue depicts the goddess Aphrodite. Women were infrequently shown naked in Greek art, but Aphrodite's role as goddess of love and beauty allowed her to be depicted in more revealing ways than other women. Aphrodite is shown wearing an elaborate hairstyle typically worn by married women. The modestly arranged drapery indicates that she has just stepped from a bath, likely the traditional bath taken by Greek brides on their wedding day. Due to the small size of this figure, the statue was likely given to a temple of Aphrodite as an offering by a bride-to-be, in hopes of invoking the goddess's blessing for her marriage.

Women particularly worshiped Aphrodite in Greek society. As most women were married to men whom they had never met, young girls would pray to Aphrodite that they would fall in love with their husband at first sight. Married women would in turn pray for the means to please their husband and live as respectable matrons.

**Tetradrachm, c. 300 BCE**

Greek: Hellenistic (323 - 31 BCE)

Die-struck silver

2.9 cm diameter

MAC 1997.1.17

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

Coins are more than a system of monetary exchange; they include cultural information within their imagery. This particular coin is a tetradrachm, equivalent to four drachmae in ancient Greek currency and used in trade throughout Greece and its occupied lands. On the obverse side is a portrait in profile of Alexander the Great with his characteristic unruly hair.

Alexander claimed that his true father was actually the god Zeus, granting him the status of demigod. Here he appears dressed as another son of Zeus, the legendary Herakles (also known as 'Hercules' to the Romans). Alexander's lion skin helmet is a reference to the Nemean lion, a creature with impervious skin that Herakles slew as part of his many labors in the service of King Eurystheus. The reverse side depicts the statue of Zeus from his temple at Olympia. To the left of Zeus is Nike, the goddess of victory, and an inscription which reads "Of Alexander" in Greek. This statue of Zeus was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, which was destroyed in the fifth century CE. Coins such as this documented its exact appearance, allowing scholars to study the statue as an aspect of an influential Greek temple.

These coins were minted under the authority of Alexander and used throughout his empire as currency long after his death. Coins like this cemented Alexander's role as emperor, unifying his people under a common exchange and referencing a close relationship with the gods.

### **Artifacts of the Roman Temple**

Roman temple architecture was heavily influenced by the style and design of Greek temples. Rome inherited its love of Greek architecture and art from the Etruscans, an Italian tribe the city won independence from in 776 BCE. The Romans continued to adopt many other aspects of Greek religion into their society, such as the Greek pantheon of gods. Greek and Roman gods therefore are incredibly similar in their devotions, distinct only in name. Unlike Greek temples, where architecture focus was devoted to symmetry and equal visual focus, Roman temples emphasized entrances by only placing highly decorated facades and columns in the front. The main space of a Roman temple, called the *cella*, is where a deity's statue would

reside. The back section of the temple, or the *opisthodomos*, was used as a work space for temple priests and attendants. Much like the Greek temples, ceremonies were open to the public and occurred outside just beyond the temple entrance. Many animals were sacrificed during festivals; processions began and ended at the temple, with a public offering of a live animal at the climax of the festival. More routine sacrifices of animals also took place on altars within the temple complex but outside of the god's main dwelling.

**Ram's Head, c. 50 CE**

Roman: Imperial Period (27 BCE - 284 CE)

Press mold ceramic

9 x 10.5 x 12.2 cm

MAC 76.1.655

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

This press mold ceramic depicting a ram's head was made through the use of molds to shape clay into a cast of the animal. While Romans did use press-molded drinking cups in the shape of animal heads similar to this piece, the unfinished back of this object indicates that it was used as decoration on an altar. The presence of the distinctive molding between the ram's horns, known as egg-and-dart, identifies this object as a section of decorative molding.

The Romans frequently used images of sacrificial items as decoration on their altars. The *Ara Pacis*, an altar created under the rule of Caesar Augustus (r. 27 BCE – 14 CE), is a well-known example of this, with heavily laden swags of braided fruit and flowers linked by heads of rams and bulls. The depiction of sacrificial animals as a decorative motif within religious structures stems from earlier Greek tradition, an example of the link between these two cultures.

**Votive Bull Statue, c. 50 CE**

Roman: Imperial Period (27 BCE - 284 CE)

Press mold ceramic

14.5 x 7 x 22 cm  
MAC 76.1.672  
Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

This press mold ceramic bull statue likely would have stood in as a sacrificial animal for an individual who could not afford to offer a live animal. Statues such as this would have been purchased by worshippers, presented to the god's temple, and added to the temple treasury.

Romans often honored their gods through animal and blood sacrifice. While pigs and sheep were common, the offering of bull was generally reserved for more important ceremonies. Festivals honoring the gods relied upon bull sacrifices as offerings for the prosperity of Rome. Bull sacrifice was also thought to purify the land in hopes of a good harvest.

**Juno Regina**, c. 200 CE  
Roman: Imperial Period (27 BCE - 284 CE)  
Carved marble  
63 x 29 x 10 cm  
MAC 76.1.754  
Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

This statue represents the goddess Juno Regina, or Juno the Queen. The goddess gives off a regal aura through her elongated stance and commanding, raised arm. The draped robes she wears indicate her high status. This statue is a pastiche, or multiple sculptures combined to form a whole. Inspection of the raised right arm of the statue and the neck base reveal irregular proportions, variations of marble color, and shallower clothing folds. This all suggests that the head and arm came from a different block of marble than the body and were added at a later date.

The goddess Juno was known as queen of the gods and the wife of her brother-husband Jupiter. Along with Jupiter's daughter Minerva, the three formed the Capitoline Triad, three supreme gods worshipped together within prominent temples. As queen of the gods, Juno was also seen to represent the consort of the Roman emperor, therefore worship of Juno was seen as

also showing respect to the empress. Juno was also known as patron and protector of women through marriage and childbirth, knowing their struggles as the exemplary wife and mother. Due to her powerful patronage of the home, many Romans equated her to a protector of the entire Roman Empire.

**Denarius of Julius Caesar, 49 BCE**

Roman: Republic (509 - 27 BCE)

Die-struck silver

2 cm diameter

MAC 1997.1.53

Gift of Drs. John and Bessie Sawhill

Denarii were silver coins used in ancient Rome. In the early Roman Empire (around 27 BCE), one denarius would have been equivalent to the daily wage for an unskilled laborer. The obverse side features an elephant trampling an object or creature. This may be a horned serpent, which represents the enemies of Rome or perhaps a Gallic war trumpet, which represents the defeat of the Gallic people by Julius Caesar (100 - 44 BCE). The elephant was representative of Julius Caesar's family, underlined by the inscription of "Caesar" beneath this scene.

The reverse side portrays religious implements including the *culullus*, *aspergillum*, axe, and apex. These instruments were utilized by Caesar in performing his sacred duties as *Pontifex Maximus*, or high priest, of the Roman empire. While these implements were used as political symbols of Caesar's power, as seen on this denarius, they were also holy symbols of the religious power held by Caesar, which was bestowed from the gods.

Julius Caesar had this set of denarii minted to commemorate his crossing of the Rubicon river in January of 49 BCE in order to defeat his political rival, Pompey (106 - 48 BCE). These denarii were then used to pay his soldiers. A bankrupt Caesar looted the treasury of

the Temple of Saturn in Rome for the silver to mint these coins, an extreme offense in Roman tradition and law.

## **Conclusion**

This exhibition illuminates connections between the religious artifacts of ancient Mediterranean cultures and the sacred spaces in which they were used. From decorative offerings to more practical items like coins and lamps, it is clear that religious practices are reflected in the material culture of ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Over time, the sacred spaces in which these objects were housed have succumbed to the ravages of time and become disconnected from their initial use. However, the religious artifacts in this exhibition reflect the original nature of these spaces, giving context to the temples and spiritual practices of their respective societies. While the atmosphere of sacred spaces from antiquity may be difficult to replicate, objects such as these help us to understand the historical significance of these ancient temples.