

Student Activity Guide

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN CULTURE

VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS



Welcome to ancient Egypt at VMFA. Have fun using this guide in the galleries, in school, or at home. If you're using this guide in the galleries, the seven looking-activities featured will enhance your exploration. The gallery map on the back of this guide includes corresponding numbers to help you find objects. Please use only pencil in the galleries.



Egyptian Civilization and the Nile

Egyptian civilization remained largely unchanged for over three thousand years, from about 3100 BC to 30 BC. Located in northeast Africa, ancient Egypt was surrounded by natural borders: deserts to the east and west and the vast Mediterranean Sea to the north. The king, or **pharaoh**, ruled over ancient Egypt and was considered the representative of the gods on earth and a link between gods and humans.

The **Nile River**, which flowed from the south, flooded every year. Ancient Egyptians viewed the flooding as a gift from the gods and a symbol of life. The resulting rich dark soil was ideal for growing fruits, vegetables, and wheat. Ancient Egyptians used wheat to make bread, a staple of their diet.

Bake Like an Ancient Egyptian

Here's an easy recipe for flatbread.

- Ingredients:
- 1 cup wheat flour
 - 1/3 cup water
 - 1/3 cup honey
 - 1 tablespoon olive oil

Preheat oven to 350°. Mix all ingredients together. Pour batter into a baking pan. Bake for 25 minutes until bread is golden brown.

Hail to thee, O Nile! Who manifests thyself over this land, and comes to give life to Egypt!

—from Hymn to the Nile, ca. 2100 BC



Statuette of a Fish with Crown of Isis, 14th c. BC, Egyptian. VMFA, Gift of Evelyn M. Pope in memory of her husband, Edward J. Pope

1

Look at the map of Egypt. Can you find Giza? Giza is the place where the three largest pyramids were built and still stand today. Draw pyramids on the map and include an arrow pointing to the famous city.

2

In the gallery, locate the small statue of the god Thoth, scribe of the gods. Thoth is represented with the head of what type of bird?

Scribes wrote on papyrus like this example from the VMFA collection. **Resurrection of Osiris** (detail), 950–730 BC, Egyptian. VMFA, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund

Ancient Egyptian Writing

The ancient Egyptians developed their own writing system by creating **hieroglyphs**—symbols for sounds, words, or concepts. There are over seven hundred hieroglyphs! The word *hieroglyph* comes from the ancient Greek word meaning “sacred carving.” The ancient Egyptians called their writing *medu-netjer*, which means “words of god,” reflecting their belief that the god Thoth invented writing.

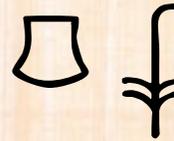
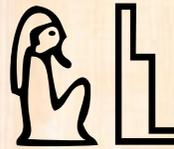
Scribes, who recorded the important business of Egypt, were some of the only people who could read and write. They attended a special school to learn how to use hieroglyphs, and their skills and position were passed down to the next generation.

The Egyptians invented a type of paper made from **papyrus**. Papyrus was made from a tall plant that grew along the Nile. To make papyrus, the softer interior part of the plant was separated from the outside, cut into strips, laid in multiple layers, and then pounded together and dried. Papyrus documents were usually rolled up into scrolls. Did you know the English word paper comes from the Egyptian word “papyrus?”



Write Like an Ancient Egyptian

Practice drawing several hieroglyphs below.



Scribes, like the one seen here, are most often shown seated cross-legged with a writing board on their laps. **Scribe, Sematawytefnakt** (detail), 663–525 BC, Egyptian. VMFA, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund



3

In the gallery, find the eyes on the coffin of Tjebty (cheb-ee), VMFA's own resident mummy. These eyes were called *wedjet* eyes, or the eyes of the god _____, (fill in the blank) and were believed to keep evil away and protect the person.

Coffin of Tjebty (detail), 2258–2052 BC, Egyptian. VMFA, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund



Answer: Horus



The Afterlife and Mummification

The ancient Egyptians believed in another life after death. Bodies were preserved for the afterlife in a process called **mummification**. This was a very lengthy and expensive procedure that not everyone could afford. Mummies were wrapped and placed in coffins and buried in tombs or graves. Magic spells and special instructions were often written on the coffins in hieroglyphs to offer protection and ward off evil; sometimes the name and title of the deceased were included.

Packing for the Afterlife

Objects from daily life were placed with the dead for use in the afterlife. Objects included vases for food, shoes, games, and even razors for shaving. If you were an ancient Egyptian, what objects would you take with you? Make a list.

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____



Gods and Goddesses

The ancient Egyptians believed in hundreds of gods and goddesses! Egyptian **deities** (gods) were often represented as animals or as partly animal and partly human. A god or goddess was usually associated with a particular animal for its important qualities or characteristics. Cats, for example, were valued not only as sacred to many goddesses but also as favorite household pets that kept mice and rats away from crops. Cats were so important that some were even mummified!

Word Search

Many Egyptian gods and goddesses are represented in the VMFA collection. Find their names here.

- ANUBIS** god of funerals and mummification; shown with a dog's head
- BASTET** kindly goddess with motherly attributes; shown as a cat
- BES** protector god who helped in childbirth; shown as a dwarf
- HORUS** sun-god and protector of Pharaohs; shown as a falcon
- ISIS** the great mother-goddesses; shown with cow's horns
- KHNUM** creator of mankind from clay; shown with a ram's head
- NEITH** goddess and protector of coffins and canopic jars
- OSIRIS** god of the Dead; shown as a mummified king
- SEKHMET** protectress of Egypt; shown with a lion's head
- THOTH** scribe of gods; inventor of hieroglyphs; shown with a bird's head

U Y Q U S X A V Y F K L
 T S Y U B J N Q F U H V
 U F R Y E Z U X Y O N Y
 B O E K S W B U Y I U J
 H M Q E C S I U E P M S
 J N M U I B S Y U H E O
 U I E R L C A Q I K J T
 M B I I X I I S H Z O J
 W S K M T S U M T M T U
 O N B P I H E S K E R P
 E G W S X T H T O H T A



The goddess Bastet, known as a protector, is represented either as a domestic cat or as a woman with the head of a cat. **Bastet**, 663–525 BC, Egyptian. VMFA, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund

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Locate the gallery case that features gods and goddesses. How many cats do you see?

Answer: 5

Trade

Ancient Egyptians **traded** or **bartered** (exchanged without money) with peoples from other lands.

Located in northeastern Africa, Egypt became the center for trade routes to and from western Asia, the Mediterranean, and central Africa. For trade within Egypt, the Nile River served as the main route. Egyptians traded goods such as grain and papyrus for gold and spices. The most famous trading expedition in Egyptian history occurred during the reign of the pharaoh Hatshepsut (ca. 1490–1468 BC). She sent ships south to the land of Punt, believed to be near the present-day Somali coast. From Punt they received luxury items that included spices, ivory, myrrh trees, and wild animals such as baboons. This expedition was recorded on the large VMFA wall relief where figures stand out from their background.

Cast of Punt Reliefs, from **Temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el Bahri** (detail), 20th c., original ca. 1480 BC, Egyptian. Lent by the Metropolitan Museum of Art



5

In the gallery, look for the *Cast of the Punt Relief*. How many fish can you count below the bottom row of boats?

Coloring Activity

While you color this line drawing of men on a trading ship, think about how the crew might have prepared the ship for sailing.





Egypt Is in Africa

Although the Sahara desert separated ancient Egypt from the rest of Africa, the people of this multicultural **continent** shared some common ideas as well as long-distance trade. For example, today the Yoruba (yo-roo-buh) people of West Africa, like ancient Egyptians, link their rulers to the divine.



Yoruba kings wear robes made of colorful coral and glass beads. **King's Beaded Robe**, 20th c., Yoruba. VMFA, Kathleen Boone Samuels Memorial Fund, and the Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund



Egyptomania!

Egyptomania refers to the fascination with ancient Egypt that began soon after the time of the pharaohs. The ancient Egyptians influenced the world in many ways, including architecture, the calendar, and written language. Artists throughout history have also been inspired by ancient Egyptian culture.

Cleopatra VII, the last queen of Egypt, who ruled 56–31 BC, has been one of the most popular subjects in art. Cleopatra was queen at a time when Greeks ruled Egypt. Although Cleopatra was Greek, not Egyptian, she represents the glory of ancient Egypt for many people.



Legends about Cleopatra have inspired artists through the centuries. **Banquet of Cleopatra** (detail), ca. 1720s, Giovanni Battista Pittoni (Italian). VMFA, Arthur and Margaret Glasgow Fund

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In the African gallery, on *King's Beaded Robe*, can you find the face symbolizing Oduduwa?

What's Your Symbol?

A **symbol** is something that stands for something else. What symbol would you choose to represent yourself? Draw it below.

7

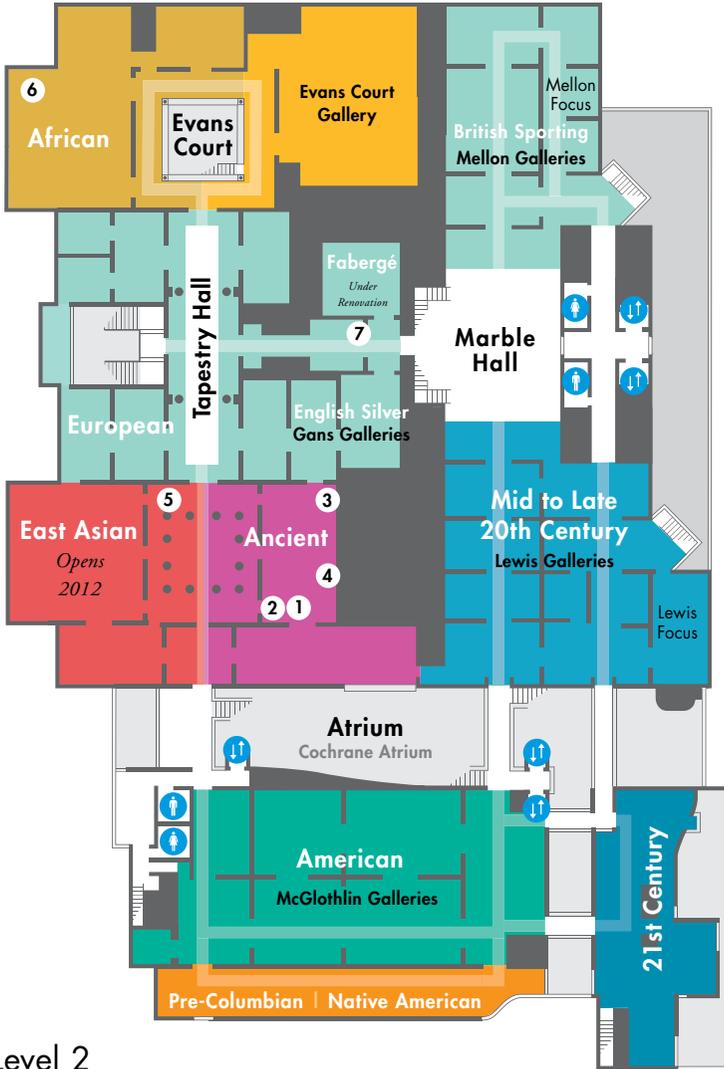
Find this painting near the VMFA Marble Hall and look closely to see what Cleopatra is holding.



We hope you had fun using this guide and learned a lot! Explore the rest of the museum and see what other examples of Egyptomania you can find!

MeadWestvaco Foundation is proud to partner with VMFA to bring ancient Egyptian art to students. Whether in the galleries, the classroom, or the home, VMFA and MWV have provided resources and educational opportunities that will enrich curricula, foster academic success, and broaden cultural horizons for citizens of the Commonwealth and beyond.

On the cover: **Coffin of Tjebty** (detail), Egyptian. VMFA, Adolph D. and Wilkins C. Williams Fund
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Level 2



It's your art.