

3245

Alexander the Great

Arnold Lehman: Take a look at the white, alabaster bust in the center of this case.

Edna Russmann: If you were to see a picture of this statue you would think it is much, much bigger than it actually is. It represents Alexander the Great. Alexander was out to conquer the world. He reached Egypt in 332 B.C. and quickly took it over. But he didn't stay very long because he had other countries to conquer. So after just a few years he headed east and died not too much later in Babylon. But despite Alexander's short life and the very, very small part of it he spent in Egypt, he had an enormous effect on the future of Egypt in many respects. For one thing, he had the effect of bringing Greek culture to Egypt in a way that had not happened in the past.

This bust of Alexander shows him in the Greek Hellenistic style, and features more organically done and combined than we usually find in even the finest works of Egyptian sculpture. The head is also a portrait of Alexander—that is to say, a representation of his official likeness, which probably is very much the way he actually looked. The curly hair is long and thick and rather wild. His eyes are large and round and very deep set. His lips are slightly parted. And he is definitely in motion. He is turning not only to his left, but he is looking upward.

By all accounts, Alexander the Great was a genuinely charismatic, striking person. And that tradition was preserved in official likenesses like this, which was made probably a century or more after his death. So thoroughly Greek is it that we wouldn't necessarily be certain that it came from Egypt, except that it is carved in Egyptian stone. Whether the artist was Greek or Egyptian I couldn't possibly say.

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