



## Death and Resurrection

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

**G**reek mythographers report that Nyx, the mysterious goddess of night, gave birth to twin gods, Hypnos (Sleep) and Thanatos (Death), who made their home in the Underworld. Every night Hypnos left the realm below to soar over the earth strewing poppies, bringing sleep to the world. But sometimes his brother Thanatos went with him, bringing the sleep from which we do not return. Sleep and death thus became inextricably linked and, without modern medical equipment, deep sleep or comas could be mistaken for death. Being buried alive became a legitimate fear, one fueled by grisly accounts such as those of women who had given birth in their coffins. By the eighteenth century, undertakers advertised “safety coffins” fitted with alarm mechanisms in the event someone were to awaken in the grave. Over the centuries, accounts of live burials also gave rise to fantastic stories of the dead resurrecting from their graves.

Ancient mythologies had no shortage of such tales, and they were often linked to deities or mortals with miraculous abilities. One of the most enduring myths of ancient Egypt relates how Isis resurrected her dead husband Osiris by beating her wings over him to inflate his lungs and resuscitate him. The Greek hero Herakles (Hercules) physically battled Thanatos for the life of a woman whose husband had done Herakles a good turn. Herakles himself died, but was resurrected by Zeus (his father) and granted immortality. Some characters from Greek myth became particularly known as death-and-resurrection symbols, and their resurrections were celebrated annually. Adonis, a lover of Aphrodite, was gored by a wild boar and died in Aphrodite’s arms. He did not physically resurrect, but women commemorated his death by planting potted “gardens of Adonis,” which they placed on their rooftops in the hot sun. The plants sprouted, but quickly withered and died. The women then mourned the death of Adonis with dramatic displays of grief. Attis was also a handsome youth loved by a goddess, but the boy rejected



**Fragment of a Sarcophagus with the Goddess Isis**  
Egypt, late Ptolemaic period, ca. 100–50 BCE  
Polychromed wood  
Gift of Philip Pearlstein (82.433 A-B)



**Bust of Hercules**  
Roman, ca. 200 CE  
Terracotta  
Gift of Mr. Leonard Epstein (58.15.8)

*(Continued on page two)*

Visitors to the Museum are **REQUIRED**  
to wear masks and practice social distancing.  
Groups are limited to no more than 6 individuals.

Website: <http://maa.missouri.edu>

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CLOSED Mondays



the love of the goddess Cybele, since he was already betrothed to a princess. Angered at the rebuff, Cybele sent madness upon Attis, causing him to self-castrate so he could not consummate with his beloved. Attis died from his wounds, but Cybele regretted her rashness and beseeched Zeus to resurrect the boy. The request was granted, but apparently *all* of Attis did not resurrect, and he was thereafter known as the castrated consort of Cybele. Attis was commemorated in Asia Minor with a spring festival using garlands of violets, which were said to have sprouted from his blood. The god Asklepios, a son of Apollo, was known as a benevolent healer, and great healing sanctuaries were erected around the Mediterranean world in honor of this god. But Asklepios became so skilled with his medicine that he was able to raise a man from the dead. Zeus, angered by this perceived arrogance, struck down Asklepios with a lightning bolt.

Judaeo-Christian tradition also contains stories of miraculous returns from the dead. The prophet Elijah, for example, prayed to God, who then resurrected a young boy from the dead. But the most celebrated of the death-and-resurrection figures in the western world is Jesus himself. Not only did he have the power to resurrect the dead, such as Lazarus, but Jesus himself would also undergo a resurrection. In the Roman Catholic Church, Christians celebrate Easter as the Resurrection of Jesus while Orthodox Christians know it as Pascha. Though a “moveable feast,” Easter is celebrated traditionally in spring, a time synonymous with rebirth, and the word may derive from *Ēostre*, an ancient Germanic goddess of spring. All four gospels contain passages about the Resurrection but the moment of the event itself is not described. In Christian theology, the Crucifixion, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus became mainstays of the faith. As the apostle Peter explained, anyone who chooses to follow Jesus receives “a new birth into a living hope through the Resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.” Traditional Christians were thus never cremated, as they believed the physical body would rise again, just as Jesus

*(Continued on page three)*



**Attis**  
Roman, late 1<sup>st</sup>–3<sup>rd</sup> century CE  
Bronze, silver  
Museum purchase (76.32)



Anonymous (French, 15<sup>th</sup> century)  
*Raising of Lazarus* (detail)  
From *Opening of the Office of the Dead*, manuscript  
Ca. 1460, probably made in Paris  
Ink, tempera, gold paint, and gold leaf on vellum  
Gilbreath-McLorn Museum Fund and Gift of  
Museum Associates (2006.76)



# MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

had. Symbols for the Resurrection, still recognized today, have ancient origins. Eggs, symbolic of new life and rebirth, were allegedly dyed red in early Christian communities of the Near East to symbolize the blood shed by Jesus, but an egg could also symbolize the empty tomb. A tradition also arose that white lilies sprung up in Gethsemane upon the Resurrection of Jesus.

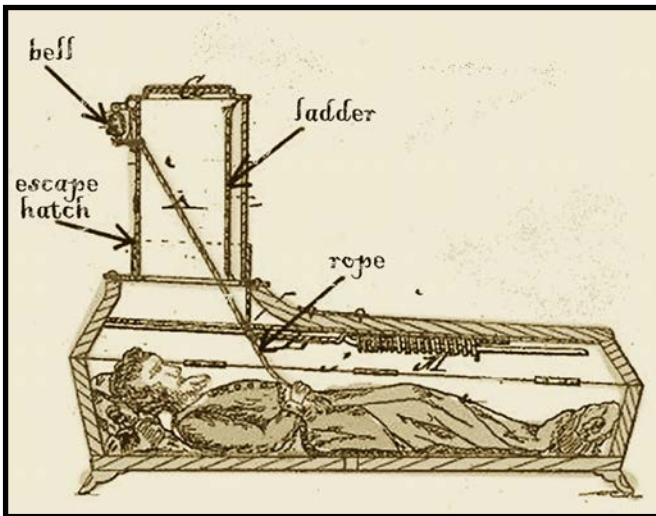
Mary, the mother of Jesus, also underwent a resurrection. In the Orthodox Church, the event known as the Dormition is specific about her physical death and resurrection, paralleling her son's. Catholic dogma explains that "when the course of her earthly life was finished, [she] was taken up body and soul into the glory of heaven." Whether Mary had a physical death is unspecified, and Catholics hold both views. Neither the Assumption nor the Dormition is mentioned specifically in the New Testament. In the fourth century, Bishop Epiphanius of Salamis (d. 403 CE) searched for evidence concerning the fate of Mary but finally conceded that "no one knows her end." The Catholic Church expanded Marian Dogma to include the Assumption in 1950. ■



Anonymous (Flemish, 17<sup>th</sup> century)  
*Resurrection of Christ*, ca. 1675–1700  
Brown ink with brown wash on paper  
Museum purchase (64.89)



François Verdier (French, 1651–1730)  
*Assumption of the Virgin*, ca. 1688  
Red chalk on paper  
Museum purchase (76.72)



Ad for safety coffin patented by Frank Vester, 1868