MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Isis Unveiled

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

Odilon Redon (French, 1840–1916)
Je suis toujours la grand Isis! (*I am still the great Isis!)*
Nul n'a encore souleve mon voile! (*No one has yet lifted my veil!)*
Mon fruit est la soleil. (*My offspring is the sun.*), 1896
Lithograph on paper
Gift of Joanne, Jerry, and John-Ross Berneche
in memory of Jonathan R. Hinkle (82.301)

Odilon Redon was associated with the Symbolists, an art movement whose interests could include mysterious, arcane, and supernatural subject matter. In the Museum's lithograph, Redon presents the goddess Isis with her back to the viewer as a black veil billows about her, further shrouding her in mystery. Mysteriousness aside, Isis was one of the most accessible and recognizable goddesses of antiquity. Her meteoric trajectory, from local Egyptian goddess to one of international fame, would not fail to impress any Hollywood agent. Furthermore, she would ultimately become a goddess with a mind-boggling array of titles and incarnations. A papyrus from Oxyrhynchus* attempts to invoke the goddess by all of those, literally *hundreds* of them. Suffice it to say, that papyrus reveals a goddess who had achieved a superstardom that would be the envy of any ambitious celebrity, then or now.

Known as "Aset" or "Iset" to Egyptians, the goddess we know as Isis (her Greek name) is younger than some of the other goddesses of the Egyptian pantheon. Isis makes her debut in texts of about 2350 BCE, and the hieroglyphic symbols that formed her name included a throne, a symbol that would also appear atop her crown in other images. This crucial link between Isis and the pharaoh strengthened as the dynastic age advanced, and she would steadily expand in stature and power, gradually absorbing roles and accoutrements of the other goddesses, including the enormously popular Hathor. By the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Isis had achieved a popularity that surpassed all other goddesses *anywhere*. In his *Of Isis and Osiris* (ca. 100 CE), Plutarch adeptly sums the goddess' all-encompassing appeal, labeling her "she of countless names," the one who "takes on all shapes and forms" and "becomes everything and receives everything: light and darkness, fire and water, life and death."

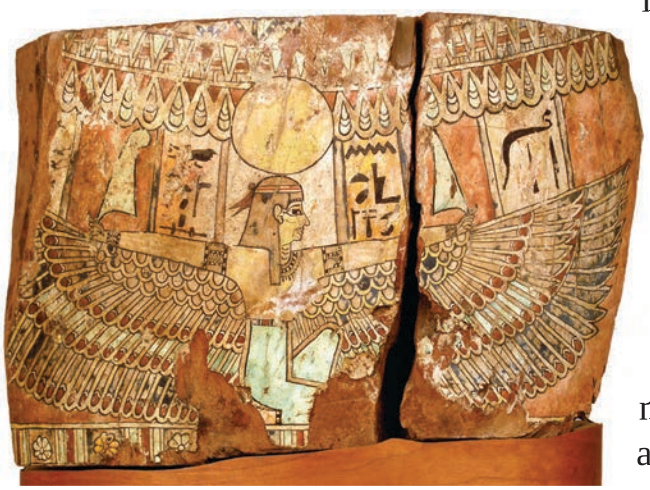
(Continued on page two)

MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

Statuette of a Standing Woman (Isis?)
Egyptian, Late Period, Dynasty 26, 664–525 BCE
Wood with traces of paint
Gift of Mr. Leonard Epstein (58.15.12)

This statuette has a socket in the head that probably held the solar crown surrounded by cow horns, while the closed hand held an ankh. Both Hathor and Isis show these accessories, but Isis had become the more popular goddess by this period.

Her infinite and mysterious power notwithstanding, Isis' most celebrated roles were as mother, wife, and healer. The miraculous story of Isis, her husband-brother Osiris, and their son Horus, was (and is) one of Egypt's most memorable myths, and Plutarch recorded the most complete version of it. He describes a mythical age in which Osiris and Isis happily ruled Egypt as king and queen. But Osiris' brother, Set(h), "angry and troubled," was jealous of his brother and contrived a trick by which Osiris was sealed in a chest, which Set then cast into the sea. Isis searched tirelessly for her husband, finally locating his body in Byblos (Lebanon). With great effort, the weary, grieving goddess returned to Egypt with the chest containing her husband's remains so that he might be buried in his homeland. But Set discovered the coffin interred in the desert sands and violently hacked his brother's body into countless pieces, scattering them far and wide. Undaunted by the gruesome task, the ever-devoted Isis launched yet another search, this time to find her husband's dismembered parts, finally recovering all the pieces except his penis, which had been flung into the Nile and eaten by fish. With her powerful healing magic, Isis regenerated the penis, and then sprouted wings so that she could fan them over Osiris' body to resuscitate him. The pair immediately copulated, and nine months later Isis bore their son, Horus, who would eventually take the throne from his usurper uncle. Osiris was unfortunately doomed to the land of the dead, where he would preside over judgment of souls. But Isis would survive in the world of the living, where she became the exemplar for motherhood and marital devotion, in addition to being the very symbol for the continuity of the divine kingship, signified by that throne in her hieroglyphic name.



Sarcophagus Fragment with Winged Isis
Egyptian, Ptolemaic, ca. 2nd–1st century BCE
Wood with paint and gesso
Gift of Philip Pearlstein (82.433 A & B)

Needless to say, a woman who could regenerate a man's penis would make any patriarchal culture sit up and take notice. Through merchants, sailors, travelers, and

(Continued on page three)

Lamp with Bust of Isis
Roman, 2nd–3rd century CE
Pottery
Museum purchase (70.125)

The bust wears the solar crown and the corkscrew curls known by archaeologists as "Isis locks," which contrast with the highly stylized representations of wigs in traditional Egyptian images of Isis.

Coin of Cleopatra I as Isis (obv)
Greek, Ptolemaic, 204–180 BCE
Minted in Alexandria
Bronze
Museum purchase and partial gift of
Mrs. Mary Frances Osborne Davis and
Mrs. Susan Ann Davis Aulgur
in memory of John H. Townsend (69.318)

immigrants, the story of the miracle-working Isis was carried to all three continents converging on the Mediterranean, and her worship naturally followed. If we can believe the papyrus mentioned earlier, she was known as far away as Persia, and Romans knew her as far north as London. Not only had Isis usurped the Egyptian goddesses, but she would also give the Greek goddesses a run for their money when she arrived in their homeland by the late fourth century BCE. Later authors would imply that Isis' myriad attributes matched Athena's wisdom, Demeter's maternal devotion, Hera's fidelity to a brother-husband, Tyche's luck bringing, and Aphrodite's beauty and fecundity. Could any human woman possibly compare? They would certainly try, and it would be the formidable Ptolemaic queens who realized that channeling Isis was a stroke of PR genius. Cleopatra I (ca. 204–176 BCE) suddenly found herself ruling alone when her husband (Ptolemy V) expired mysteriously at age 29. Coins from this period show a lone female head thought to be the regent-queen styled with the telltale bangs and corkscrew curls of Isis in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Cleopatra II followed suit, and Cleopatra VII (the famous one) had herself proclaimed the "New Isis."

The New Isis turned out to be regrettably mortal, but her death in 30 BCE would not diminish the worship of the real deal. On the contrary, the cult of Isis, Osiris, and Horus flourished wherever it went. Indeed, this divine trinity became the center of a "mystery religion," one with secret rites for initiates that promised salvation in the afterlife. In Apuleius' *Golden Ass* (ca 150–180 CE), which details some practices of the Isis cult, initiates take purifying baths and confess their sins. It comes as no surprise that such cults threatened nascent Christianity, the practices of which evolved into something conspicuously similar. Moreover, Isis as the divine healer (*Isis medica*) and bringer of salvation was uncomfortably similar to the healer at the center of the new religion. In the end, Christianity would triumph, but Isis had achieved an immortality not easily forgotten. ■

*Oxyrhynchus papyrus XI.1380