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—Aristotle

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What do “BCE” and “CE” mean?

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In today’s global society, constant interaction between people of all religious beliefs requires a shared, or common, way of reckoning time. Although the terms BCE and CE have their origins in the Christian calendar, they are now widely used by people of many faiths and cultures.

For this reason, the Memorial Art Gallery has adopted BCE and CE for use in its galleries.

This gallery guide and the reinstallation of the ancient collections were made possible by Helen H. Berkeley, with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts and public funding secured by New York State Senator Joseph E. Robach.

To learn more about works of art in the Gallery’s collection, school programs, and upcoming exhibitions and events, visit our website at mag.rochester.edu.

Memorial Art Gallery
of the University of Rochester
500 University Avenue
Rochester, NY 14607
585.276.8900

Collection Connections:
Facing the Past | Embodying the Divine
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Embodying the Divine

It has the makings of a mystery story: a visiting expert spies a broken statue of an unknown Egyptian king, and recognizes its matching fragment in another museum. But this is a true story of a mystery solved in 1974, when this statue’s top half was united with a replica of its lower half from the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo. The symbols carved on the statue base, in front of his right foot, identified this as King Ny-user-ra, who ruled Egypt during the Fifth Dynasty, just after the building of the Great Pyramids. Sculpted from Ny-user-ra’s favorite red granite, this is one of only two known statues inscribed with his name.

The story of the god Osiris, the most important in ancient Egyptian culture, is full of human melodrama. Osiris, king of the gods, is killed by his jealous, evil brother, the god Seth. Osiris’ wife, the goddess Isis, and her sister-goddess Nephthys search the earth for Osiris’ body, find it, wrap it in linen strips, and magically bring him back to life. Isis and Osiris’ son, the god Horus, grows up to avenge his father, defeating Seth to become the first legendary king of Egypt. As the crook and flail of kingship, symbol of his dominion over the fate of gods and humans.

The ancient Greeks endowed their many gods with human forms as well as human behaviors and emotions. The Greeks told stories of their gods interfering in human affairs, appearing in earthly disguises, and bestowing advantages on favorite heroes and cities. The young god Dionysus spent his childhood on earth, and later taught humans the art of making wine from grapes. Appropriately, this Greek wine-drinking cup features Dionysus and his companions, half-man half-goat satyrs and female dancers known as maenads, participating in one of the wine-drinking ceremonies and festivals held throughout the Greek world in the god’s honor.

The Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero said “…an old man that has something of the youth. may be old in body, but can never be so in mind.” Perhaps the Roman artist who sculpted this elderly man’s head, celebrating his grizzled features, baldness, and wrinkled skin, had Cicero’s words in mind. The importance of individual identity and accomplishment in ancient Roman culture inspired such specific, recognizable “warts-and-all” portraits of public figures as well as relatives. Such sculptures, displayed in the home, demonstrated a Roman noble family’s connections to important citizens, sometimes all the way back to a god or goddess.

People of the ancient world told stories of gods and goddesses to explain the unexplainable, such as the sun and moon, thunder and lightning, and changing of the seasons. But in art, even these powerful gods and goddesses assumed familiar human forms, as well as human emotions including jealousy, love, hatred, and sorrow.

Facing the Past

Human beings are born with a need to connect with each other. Works of art with recognizable features of the human face capture our attention and draw us in. Whether idealized, stylized, or precisely detailed, the faces of people from cultures long ago and far away help us to make personal connections across the ages.

The theft of a visiting expert spies a broken statue of a mummified, resurrected king of Egypt. As the first legendary king of Egypt, Osirys holds the crook and flail of kingship, symbols of his dominion over the fate of gods and humans.

Cupid, the young Roman god of love and desire, is, like Peter Pan, a little boy who never grew up. To this day he appears in art as a chubby, winged child, causing mischief with his bow and love-tinged arrows. The theater mask Cupid carries here may refer to disguise and mistaken identity, common themes that caused chaos in comic romance plays popular in the Roman world. The engaging image and brilliant “Pompeian red” of this fragment once enlivened the wall of a Roman house in Pompeii. Remarkably, it survived the disaster of August of 79 CE, when the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius killed the inhabitants of Pompeii and other nearby villages.
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The Arts of Ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome

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