

Mantua's Civic Museum of Palazzo Te, which houses the city's Egyptian collection. Below, Polychrome-wood Late Period coffin in the collection.



EGYPT IN MANTUA, ITALY



by Lucy Gordan-Rastelli

Photos courtesy the Museo Civico

Founded by the Etruscans in the Sixth Century BC and surrounded on three sides by artificial lakes created during the Twelfth Century, Mantua is the capital city of the Italian province with the same name in Lombardy. This derives from the Etruscan Underworld god, Mantus. The city was conquered by the Romans between the First and Second Punic Wars and later populated by the Emperor Augustus's veterans. Its most-famous citizen in ancient times was the poet Virgil, who was born nearby in 70 BC.

Speaking of its citizens, Mantua's historic power and influence under the Gonzaga family made it one of the main artistic, cultural and, notably, musical hubs of northern Italy during the Renaissance. The first Duke of Mantua was Federico II Gonzaga (1500-1540), who was given his title by Holy Roman Emperor Charles V in 1530. This courageous warrior — as

well as *bon vivant* and syphilitic lady's-man, who was passionately in love with his mistress, Isabella Boschetti — commissioned the much-admired architect and painter Giulio Romano (1499-1546),¹ a student of Raphael, to design and decorate with frescos the famous Renaissance Palazzo Te as his summer palace on the edge of the city. Today it is the Museo Civico and, since 1986,² its top floor houses Mantua's Egyptian collection of some 500 artifacts, almost all of which are on display.³

“What makes Mantua's Egyptian collection different from all others is its allocation,” Dr. Stefano Benetti, the native-son director of Civic Museum of Palazzo Te since 2009 and of the Museum of the City of Mantua, as well as a frequently-published author of works about local history and the Risorgimento (or the Unification of Italy), the 150th anniversary of which is being celebrated in 2011. “I know of no other such collection displayed in a Renaissance palace completely frescoed by a world-famous artist, who'd been a pupil of an even-more famous artist.” It is possible to visit the palace itself and its four collections all on the same entrance ticket: full price 8 euros (www.palazzote.it). On average Palazzo Te gets 150,000 visitors per year.

The Egyptian collection is housed under the eaves and above Giulio Romano's Loggia delle Muse; unfortunately, there's no wheelchair access. It's displayed in two rooms with the second of these also divided into two, so in actual fact three rooms. The displays are thematic rather than chronological. The first room houses sculptures; the second and third artifacts pertinent to the Afterlife. Each artifact is well-explained in Italian and English labeling.

With the exception of three artifacts, Mantua's collection was donated to the city in 1840 by its colorful, more-or-less native-son Giuseppe Acerbi. Those objects are: 1) the bottom half (the feet and legs up to the knee) of a black-granite statue of the goddess Uto of Lower Egypt, known as “the lady of the north” or “the green

Contemporary portrait of Giuseppe Acerbi (1773-1846)



one,”⁴ dedicated by Rameses II (cat. no. 6, inv. 442); 2) a marble, clearly Roman emperor in pharaonic garb (cat. no. 14, inv. 20),⁵ both of which were purchased by the Gonzagas in Rome and had been displayed in Mantua's Accademia delle Scienze e Belle Lettere since the 1780s; and 3) the wooden highly-decorated polychrome coffin with a violated mummy of Ankhekhonsu,⁶ a *wab* priest of Amen, dating to the Twenty-second Dynasty, which is on long-term loan from the Archaeological Museum in Bergamo.⁷

Giuseppe Acerbi was an adventurer, naturalist, composer, explorer and the Austrian consul general in Egypt from 1826 to 1834, when, because of eye disease, he returned home and spent his final years teaching science in Milan and raising silkworms, as well as caring for his collections in his hometown of Castelfranco about twenty miles from Mantua.⁸ At the time of his death on August 25, 1846, he was composing his Egyptian experience, which for obvious reasons was never completed.



Above & below, Mantua Cat. 240 and 241, a very rare copper basin and pitcher (missing its cover) are the oldest artifacts in the Acerbi collection. They date to the end of the Old Kingdom/beginning of the Middle Kingdom. The pitcher fits comfortably into the basin, so they very probably originated from the same tomb.



A Bes figure, hare & ibis are among Mantua's large collection of faience amulets.



Giuseppe Acerbi is not a stranger to *Kmt* readers, inasmuch as he made several donations to Milan's Egyptian collection, including two fake papyri, discussed in detail in "Egypt in Milan," *Kmt*, fall 2007. In addition to Mantua and Milan, Acerbi donated artifacts he had collected in Egypt to other museums in northern Italy. His gift of Coptic fabrics to Milan's Natural History Museum was destroyed during a bombing

raid in World War II, but others — a coffin with mummy (inv. 2165), a Fayum portrait (inv. 2411) and a well-known relief (inv. 5412) — are in Firenze's Egyptian collection; a papyrus in demotic dating to the reign of Ptolemy III is in the Malaspina Museum in Pavia's Ducal Palace; and a mummy in a coffin decorated with hieroglyphs belongs to the Botanical Gardens in Padua, to which Acerbi donated plants



Two views of a bronze head of either Arsinoe III or the goddess Aphrodite, in the Hellenistic style.

from Egypt. It is also possible, although not certain, that the stela dating to First Intermediate Period in the small Museo Bellini in Asola came from him.

Acerbi was born on May 3, 1773 to Giacomo Acerbi and Marianna Riva. He studied law at the University of Pavia, but his real passions were nature and geography. At age twenty-five, he traveled to Germany, Denmark and Sweden with Bernardo Bellotti, a wealthy gentleman from Brescia, whose father was a banker. He stayed on in Sweden and — in the company of a certain Colonel Skjöldebrand, a highly respected landscape painter — was definitely the first Italian to reach Lapland and the North Cape. Although the two men ended their trip as enemies, in 1802 Acerbi published — first in English in two volumes, which were later translated in their entirety into German and French, and in a condensed Italian version — his account of this experience, titled *Travels through Sweden, Finland, and Lapland to the North Cape in the years 1798-99*.⁹

The book brought him so much fame that, during his return trip home in 1803, he was received by Napoleon, who offered him a job as Addetto alla Legazione della Repubblica Italiana

Kmt 76



Mantua's black-granite bust from a Middle Kingdom statue of a nameless male.

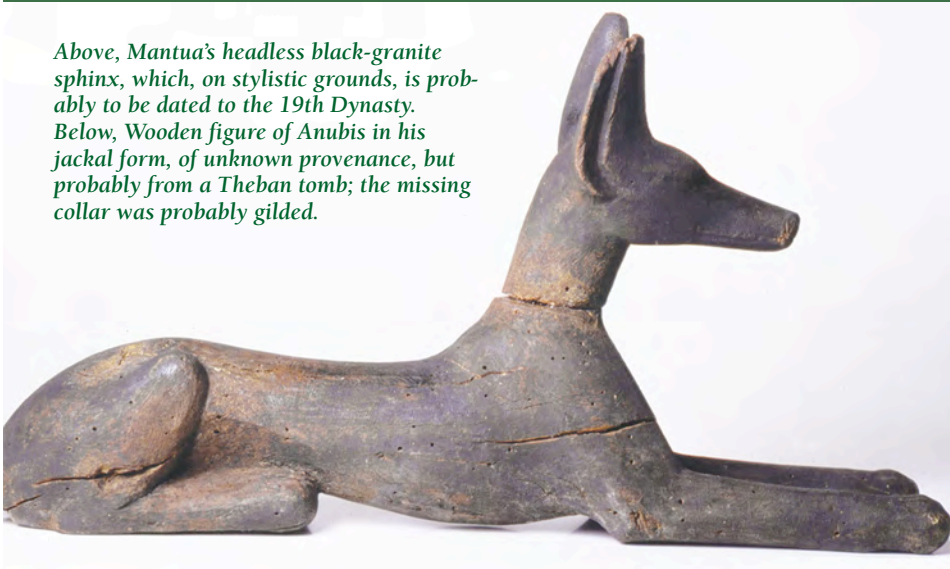
(Officer in the Legation to the Italian Republic); Acerbi accepted the position but never started it. The reason for this was that the Swedish government considered some of his published observations so offensive that the French government was persuaded to issue a warrant for Acerbi's arrest. He was forced to flee France and return home to Ca-

stelgoffredo, where he stayed for several years, not only producing wine but also writing a pamphlet, *Delle viti italiane*, about Italian wines. He subsequently moved to Vienna.

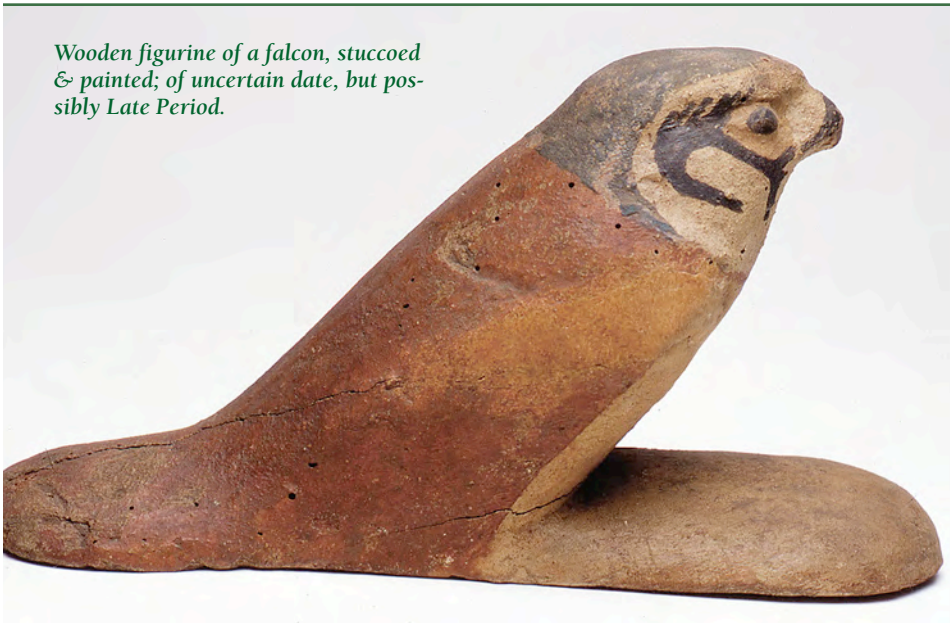
In 1815 Acerbi was appointed Austria's consul general to Lisbon by Clemens Metternich, but he never went to Portugal. Instead, in 1816, he trav-



Above, Mantua's headless black-granite sphinx, which, on stylistic grounds, is probably to be dated to the 19th Dynasty. Below, Wooden figure of Anubis in his jackal form, of unknown provenance, but probably from a Theban tomb; the missing collar was probably gilded.



Wooden figurine of a falcon, stuccoed & painted; of uncertain date, but possibly Late Period.



A particularly well-sculpted slate ushabti of the scribe Ramesse, which stylistically may be dated to the 19th Dynasty.



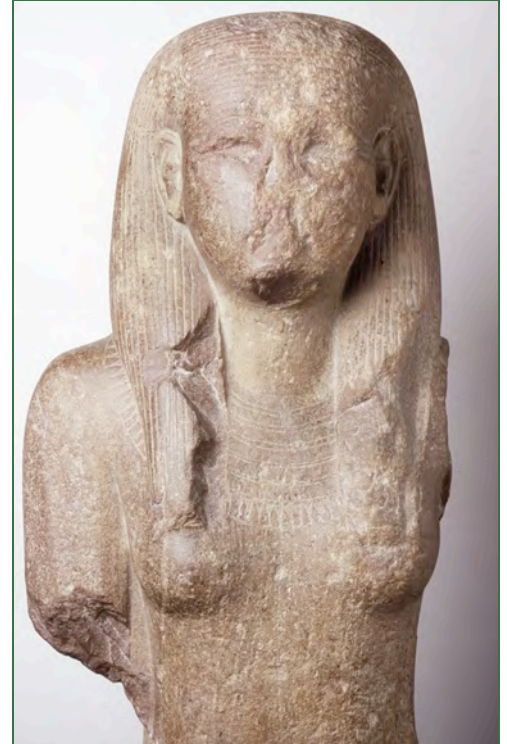
eled to Milan, where, with the Austrian government's approval (Lombardy, and thus Milan and Mantua, being under Austrian rule at the time), he founded, directed and wrote for the prestigious literary magazine *Biblioteca Italiana* (Italian Library) until — tired of the most-probably unfair and unsubstantiated attacks that he was pro-Austrian, pro-Church and anti-Italian by the editors and writers of the rival publication *Conciliatore* — he accepted the appointment of Austrian consul general in Alexandria. He was the highest-ranking



Kmt 78

Austrian official in Egypt, because the Austrian ambassador to the Ottoman Empire — of which Egypt was a province — was stationed in Constantinople.

In actual fact Acerbi never stopped writing for *Biblioteca Italiana*. Upon his arrival in Egypt in 1828, he was immediately caught up in the new enthusiasm for its ancient culture, the Rosetta Stone, hieroglyphics and archaeology. He befriended the Franco-Tuscan Expedition, became a personal friend and supporter of Jean Francois



Left, Calcite canopic vessel dating to the 26th Dynasty, with stopper-head of Qebeshenuf. Above, 20th Dynasty yellow-quartzite statue fragment of an unidentified goddess, dedicated by Rameses III. Right, Once-painted wooden figurine of a ba bird, of unknown date.





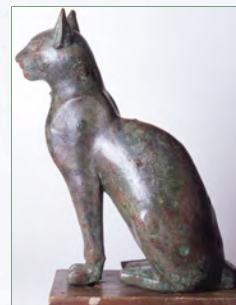
Wooden ushabti of Seti I, possibly found by Giuseppe Acerbi in the ruler's Valley of the Kings tomb when he accompanied the Franco-Tuscan Expedition there in 1829.

Champollion, and sent prolific dispatches home about all contemporary discoveries, both linguistic and archaeological, which were published in *Biblioteca Italiana* and elsewhere and helped to popularize Egyptology.

Acerbi's new-found love for archaeology was not limited to writing about it. In 1829 he accompanied



Mantua's life-sized bronze votive statue of a cat, dating to the Late Period. It was probably once adorned with a now-missing gilded necklace.



the Franco-Tuscan Expedition to Upper Egypt; and in 1830 he explored Lower Egypt, traveling from the Fayum to Arabia,¹⁰ bringing back from his trips rock samples, plants and animals — for first and foremost he was a naturalist — as well as ancient artifacts, which, as noted, he generously donated to several museums in northern Italy. That same year, on a return home, he even visited the Egyptian Museum in Turin — although he never donated anything to that institution. “*The reason for this is simple,*” explained Dr. Benetti. “*Acerbi was a diplomat at the service of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and all his gifts were made to collections in Florence, Lombardy or the Veneto, which were under Austrian control at the time. He never would have made a gift to a collection which belonged to the King of Savoy, an enemy.*”

Unlike most of the Nineteenth Century diplomats in Egypt, Acerbi collected for his own pleasure and not for profit. In fact, his Egyptian collection in Mantua’s Palazzo Te is mostly made up of small, not spectacular, artifacts, for the most part ushabtis¹ and amulets, along with some canopic jars.

“*The weaknesses of our collection are several,*” said Benetti. “*Firstly, most of our artifacts date to the New King-*



Above, Black-granite fragment of a statue of a king wearing the Khepresh crown, which, on stylistic grounds, probably dates to the late 18th Dynasty.

Left, Schist head possibly depicting Ptolemy II, with particularly well-carved Nemes headdress.



dom and Late Dynastic Period. We have no artifacts from the Predynastic, Early Dynastic Period, the Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period, in short, very few artifacts which date before the Middle Kingdom; and, until the Archaeological Museum in Bergamo lent us the coffin of Ankhekhonsu, we had no coffins or mummies. Nor do we have any papyri and little jewelry. This is a serious weakness from the didactic point-of-view. However, the lack of Predynastic and Early Dynastic artifacts is normal for an early-Nineteenth Century collection. The first Italians to be interested in such early artifacts were Pigorini and Schiaparelli. Secondly, it’s true,” continued Benetti, “that Acerbi kept diaries, but he bought his artifacts for his personal pleasure and not from archaeologists; so for most of them we do not know their provenance,

which is a serious weakness from a scientific/archaeological point-of-view.”

In spite of these shortcomings, of particular interest is Acerbi's modest collection of sculptures on display in the Museo Civico's first room which, although small (fourteen artifacts), includes pieces on several subjects — gods, kings, private individuals, a sphinx — made of several different materials (granite, quartzite, bronze and wood), covering several periods of history: Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom, 3rd Intermediate Period, Late Dynastic Period and the Graeco-Roman era.

A highlight here — and also among those of the whole collection — is a very-rare bronze pitcher (cat. No. 240, no inv. no.) in excellent condition, dating to the end of the Old Kingdom/beginning of the Middle Kingdom; and a very-rare one-piece bronze basin (cat. no. 241, no inv. no.), also in excellent condition and dating to the end of the Old Kingdom/beginning of the Middle Kingdom. These fit together nicely and so are almost certainly from the same tomb; they are also Mantua's oldest objects.

Another first-room object is a beautifully executed gray-granite fragment of an Eighteenth Dynasty pharaonic head (cat. no. 2, inv. 186), possibly from a full-length statue of Akhenaten wearing the *Kheperesh* or “Blue Crown.” Still another object, probably dating to the reign of Rameses II, is a fairly well-preserved black granite sphinx (cat. no. 6, inv. 442). Its exhibition card explains that, if it still had its head, we could probably identify the pharaoh it represents. Its original cartouche has been scratched away and replaced with that of a pharaoh of the Twenty-sixth Dynasty; but the statue is most definitely earlier, likely Nineteenth Dynasty, because of the style of its tail and its paws.

Chronologically last in the room, but magnificent, is a large bronze head probably of a full-length statue of Queen Arsinoe III (cat. no. 390, no inv. no.), wife of her brother Ptolemy IV (222-209 BC), known as Philopator; thus — although made in Alexandria during the last quarter of the Third

Century BC — it is not Egyptian, but Hellenistic in style.¹²

In the second Museo Civico room, the star is a Late Dynastic Period (Twenty-fifth/Twenty-sixth Dynasty) life-size bronze votive statuette of a cat (cat. no. 9, inv. 178), the symbol or mascot of Acerbi's collection. “*Indeed the bronze, once probably covered in gold leaf, cat, photographed on the cover of the collection's first 1983 catalogue,*” continued Benetti, “*can certainly be considered one of the stars of Acerbi's collection, because it is one of the finest and best-proportioned (when compared with real-life cats of similar size) examples of this animal sacred to the goddess Bastet still in existence. It does not have the common earring in its left ear, or even the hole for it, but rather bears traces of a five-strand necklace with a floral motif around its neck. It's also missing its eyes made of glass paste.*”

Other stars in the second room, confirmed by the catalogue — a collection of essays dated 2008 compiled by Massimiliana Pozzi and titled *La raccolta egizia a Palazzo Te: Nuove proposte e Riflessioni* by Dr. Benetti — are three ushabtis. The finest of these, belonging to the scribe Ramesse, is made of beautifully carved black slate (cat. no. 99, inv. 203) and is displayed alone in a mirrored case; it shows so much detail (including a pleated skirt, belt, three-part wig and necklace), that it seems new, although it dates to the later New Kingdom. The other two, made of wood and more worn, and definitely made in haste, also date to the New Kingdom (cat. no. 98, inv. 220). Although there is no definite proof, arch-aeologists like to think that Acerbi may have found these two artifacts himself, when he visited the Tomb of Seti I (first explored by Giovanni Belzoni in October 1817), in the company of Champollion and Ippolito Rossellini, during the Franco-Tuscan expedition there in 1829.¹³

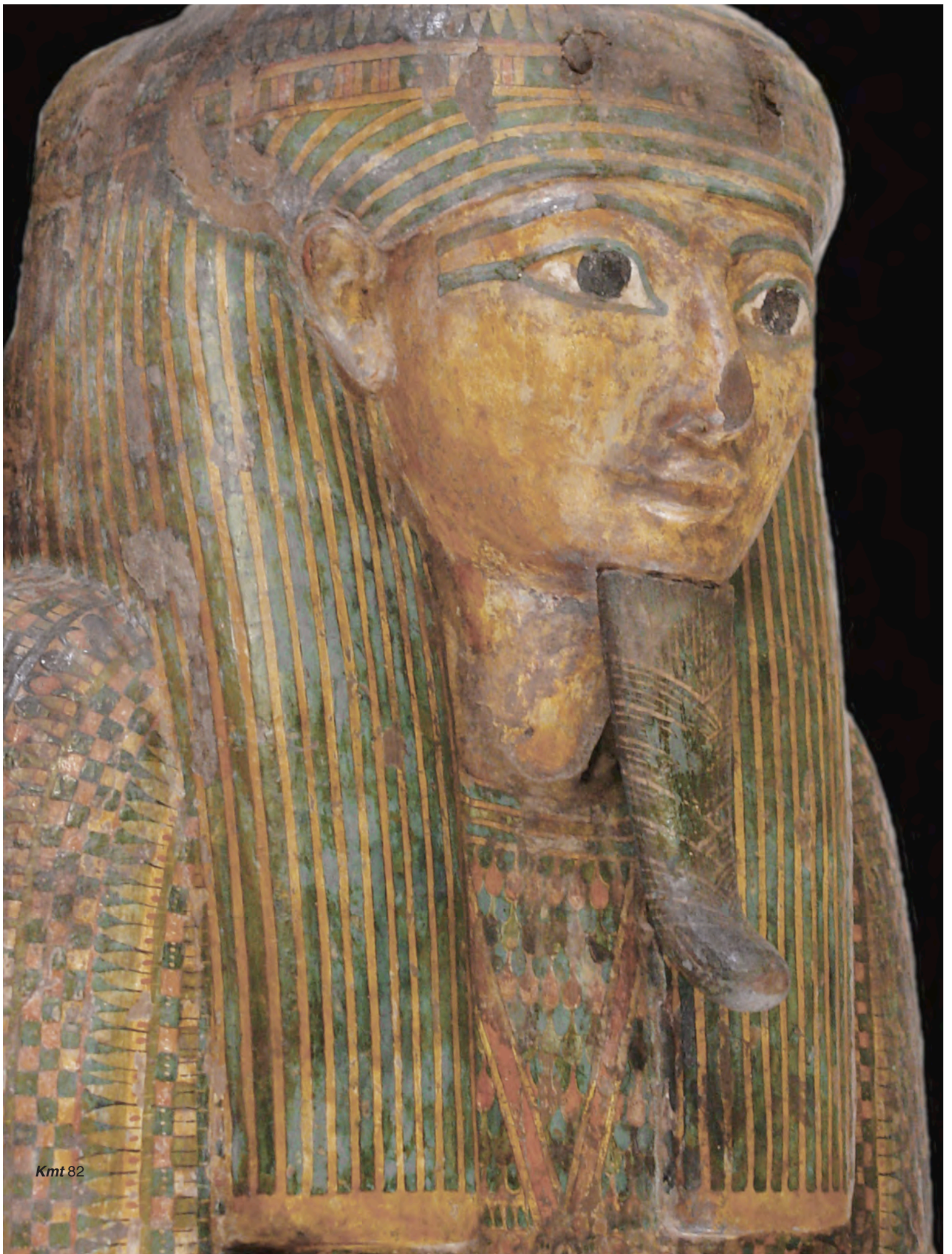
Other second-room highlights include four beautiful calcite canopic jars. One (cat. 225, inv. 13) with a jackal-head lid of the god Dua-

mutef (responsible for protecting the embalmed stomach of the deceased) belonged to a royal scribe. A second (cat. 226, inv. 14) with a baboon-head lid of the god Hapi (responsible for protecting the deceased's embalmed lungs) belonged to a priest named Kheper. Both date to the Eighteenth Dynasty. The two others (cat. 227-8, inv. 182) with human-head lid of the god Imseti (responsible for protecting the embalmed liver) and the falcon-head of the god Qebeshenuf (who protected the embalmed intestine), date to the Twenty-sixth Dynasty.

Another star object of the room is a wooden New Kingdom statue of the jackal-god, Anubis (cat. no. 85, inv. 177), which is featured on the cover of Pozzi's collection of essays. It is of unknown provenance, although it very likely originated in a Theban tomb, like the aforementioned ushabtis. Its missing collar may have been gilded, which might account for its absence. This Anubis was on loan by Mantua to the Cremona exhibition.

Still another highlight is not an artifact but the layout of the collection with two types of well-written explanations: one for the visitors with little time and the other, in more detail, for scholars and enthusiasts. Although it was necessary to ignore chronology, a particularly imaginative and fascinating display case exhibits how amulets would have been distributed on the mummy's body and in its wrappings. Another is the exhibition case with the head of Akhenaten half-buried in sand, to show how an archaeologist might find an artifact in the desert.

“Perhaps a third weakness of Mantua's Egyptian collection,” said Benetti, “is that since Acerbi's, there have been no other donations or acquisitions and no temporary exhibitions, because all of Mantua's artifacts are on permanent display in a space too small for additional artifacts on loan.”¹⁴ However, during the past decade the collection has generously participated with loans to the following temporary exhibitions: “Egypt. From the Pyramids to Alexander the Great” in Milan's Library in Via del Senato from December



5, 2002-May 18, 2003; in Cremona's Civic Museum Ala Ponzone/Palazzo Stanga from September 25, 2004- March 28, 2005 [see article in *Kmt*, winter 2004-05]; "Queen Arsinoe: A Bronze Ptolemaic Portrait from Mantua to Rome," in Rome's Capitoline Museums, 2008; "Nefer: The Woman in Ancient Egypt," in Milan's Palazzo Reale from January 27 April 9, 2007 and in Turin's Palazzo Cavour April-August 2007 [see *Kmt* article, summer 2007]; "Aegyptiaca, From the Nile to the Strait," in Reggio Calabria's National Archaeological Museum, from June 29-September 30, 2008; and now, until October 2, "The Fascination of Egypt," in Orvieto's Museum of the Foundation of "Claudio Faina." "To Orvieto Palazzo Te," said Benetti, "has been loaned a small votive statue of a naos-(with a relief of Osiris) bearer, dating from the end of the Twenty-sixth/beginning of Twenty-seventh Dynasty (cat.11, inv. 226) and the two ushabtis from Seti I's tomb, which Acerbi may have found himself."

Notes

1. The hieroglyphs which Giulio Romano painted in his frescoes on the ceiling of Palazzo Te's Loggia delle Muse are not imaginary or invented, but were copied directly from Egyptian monuments and statuary he had seen in Rome. On page 31 of the guide, *Palazzo Te a Mantova*, published by Skira in 2011, it specifies that Giulio Romano had seen these hieroglyphics on two ancient Egyptian sphinxes then in Rome, but which are now in the Louvre in Paris.
2. Dr. Stefano Benetti, the director of Palazzo

Te, explained that the Palazzo Te, aside from being a monument in its own right, houses four art/historical collections: the Gonzagas' collection of weights and measures and coins; Acerbi's collection of Egyptian artifacts; Ugo Sissa's collection of artifacts from ancient Mesopotamia, the only of its kind in Italy; and the publisher Arnoldo Mondadori's bequest of paintings by Zandomenighi and Spadini.

Acerbi's collection was housed in the Seventeenth Century building, the Museo Patrio, until 1915, when it was moved along with all the collections that belonged to the city of Mantua to the Palazzo Ducale, or Ducal Palace, where the Gonzagas had lived during the winters. This move was looked upon by Mantua's citizens as a usurpation of power by Italy's central government, which owned and still owns the Ducal Palace, over local authority. During the late 1920s and 1930s, only a few of Acerbi's artifacts were displayed. Then rather oddly, at the end rather than at the beginning of World War II, the collection was crated and put in the cellar for safekeeping until 1978, when only some of its artifacts were again put on display, but exclusively for school groups. Beginning in 1983, when the national government returned the Acerbi collection's ownership to the city, the whole of it was put on display on the second floor of Palazzo Te, although its present arrangement dates to 2008.

Acerbi's books, travelogues, notes and drawings are housed in Mantua's Biblioteca Teresiana, the city's public library, where they are available for consultation by scholars.

3. Benetti specified that Acerbi's collection is made up of 523 artifacts, 500 of which are in good condition and on display. They

include statues, little bronze statues of the gods, ushabtis, other funerary statues, canopic jars, amulets, seals, scarabs and coins. To the best of Benetti's knowledge, none are fakes.

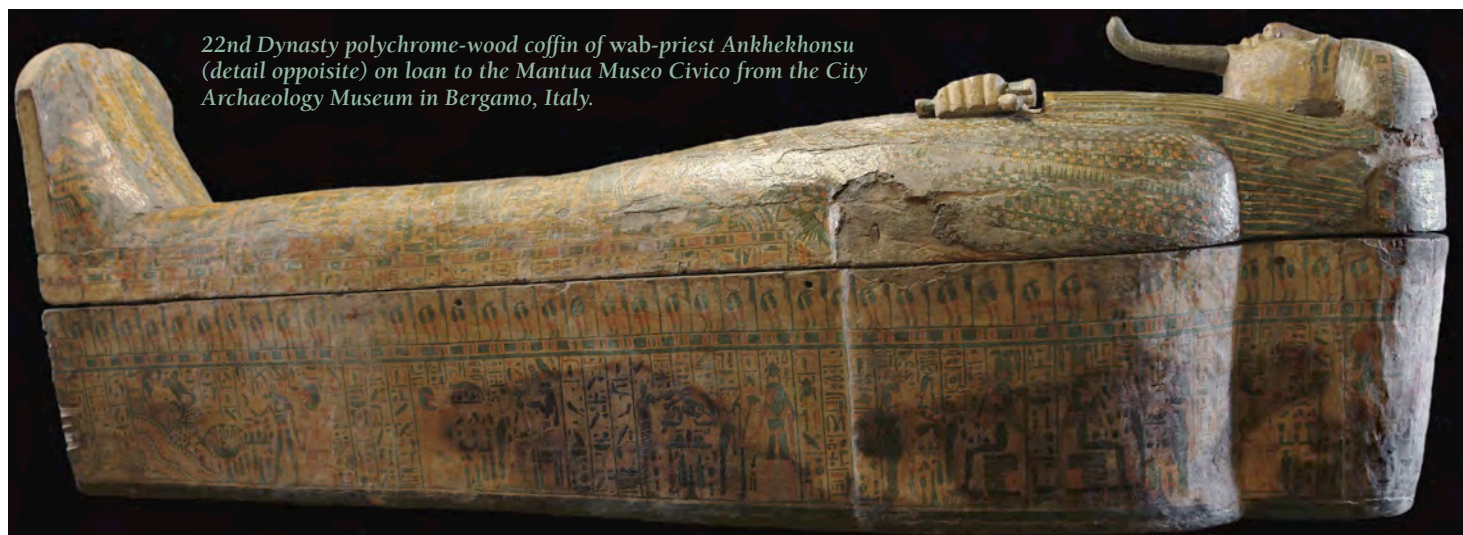
4. The exhibition card next to the statue explains that her name "the green one" derives from the hieroglyph of a papyrus flower, which is visible next to her left leg and on the back of the pilaster. Uto is often represented as a cobra or a lioness.

5. Again the exhibition card next to the statue explains that because the statue is made of Italian marble and the male figure has a typical Imperial Roman haircut, but an Egyptian headdress and body posture, it is now believed that this statue was made in Rome by an Egyptian artisan, to decorate one of the many temples in Rome dedicated to the cult of the goddess Isis.

6. A series of x-rays has shown that the mummy of Ankhekhonsu was violated in an undetermined time. It was unwrapped, its amulets and jewelry stolen, and the bones rewrapped for appearance sake, but not in anatomical order.

7. Bergamo's Civico Museo Archeologico houses around forty ancient Egyptian artifacts, mostly ushabtis, small bronze statues, and a few scarabs and amulets. The provenance is known for only four or five of these.

Before sending the polychrome coffin of Ankhekhonsu to Mantua on long-term loan, Bergamo's Archeological Museum loaned it to the temporary exhibition, "Egypt: From the Pyramids to Alexander the Great" held in Cremona from September 2004 to March 2005. My article on this exhibition, "Egypt and Egyptology in Cremona," *Kmt*, vol. 15, no.4, explains that the coffin, considered the star of that exhibi-



22nd Dynasty polychrome-wood coffin of wab-priest Ankhekhonsu (detail opposite) on loan to the Mantua Museo Civico from the City Archaeology Museum in Bergamo, Italy.



Section & detail of Giulio Romano's fresco decoration of the loggia of the Palazzo Te, incorporating ancient Egyptian motifs & hieroglyphs copied from sphinxes he had seen in Rome.

tion, had been in very poor condition and was extensively restored for display in Cremona. Benetti told me that the loan to Mantua will terminate in June 2011, but there is hope that it will be extended.

8. On page 23 of Massimiliana Pozzi's collection of essays, it is reported that, until the 1960s, two statues of the lion-headed

goddess Sekhmet flanked the front door of Acerbi's residence in Castelfelfredo. These two statues had been personally found by Acerbi at the Temple of Mut at Luxor and taken by him to Alexandria, where they'd flanked the front door to the Consulate. When he left Alexandria, they were given to him. Their present-day whereabouts is un-

known.

9. This book was the first to describe the Finnish sauna. While there, Acerbi collected some Finnish folk melodies, one of which he included in a concerto for clarinet that he composed. This was the first Finnish melody to be used in classical music.

10. See page 17 and its footnote 17 in the second edition of the collection's original catalogue 1995, *La raccolta egizia di Giuseppe Acerbi*.

11. "The numerous ushabtis in Mantua mostly date to the end of the New Kingdom (from the Nineteenth Dynasty onwards) and to the Late Dynastic Period (from the Seventh Century BC onwards)," said Benetti. "In several cases the dating is very accurate, because the ushabti often bears its owner's name and titles."

12. Instead, in an article published in *Gnomon* in 1934, the scholar Georg Lippold identifies her as Aphrodite, because of her hairdo, which is similar to that of a First Century BC statue of the goddess of love in the British Museum. This splendid head was the centerpiece of the 2008 exhibition "Queen Arsinoe: A Bronze Ptolemaic Portrait from Mantua to Rome," held in Rome's Capitoline Museums, as well as to Milan's "Nefer: The Woman in Ancient Egypt."

13. "It's been estimated," said Benetti, "that Seti I's enormous tomb contained 700 ushabtis. Almost every Egyptian collection owns ushabtis from Seti I's tomb."

14. Although not Egyptian Ugo Sissa's collection of 279 ancient Mesopotamian artifacts, all on display nearby Acerbi's Egyptian collection, should not go unnoticed. It was deposited in Palazzo Te in 1994 and acquired by the city of Mantua in 2009. It had belonged to Ugo Sissa (1913-1980), an artist, architect, photographer, painter and cultured traveler from Mantua. During the years 1953-1957, when he worked in Baghdad as the government's architect-in-chief, he collected these rare artifacts of different provenance, time-frame and use, shedding light on daily life, architecture, writing and religion in ancient Mesopotamia. Their time frame ranges from c. 6,000 BC to 1,000 AD. Of particular interest are cuneiform inscriptions, a brick with the stamp of King Nebuchadnezzar, amulets and votives. The only other ancient Mesopotamian collections in Italy are in Rome's Museo Barracco (see my article, *Kmt*, fall 2008, about the Egyptian collection there) and the Egyptian Museum in Turin.

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