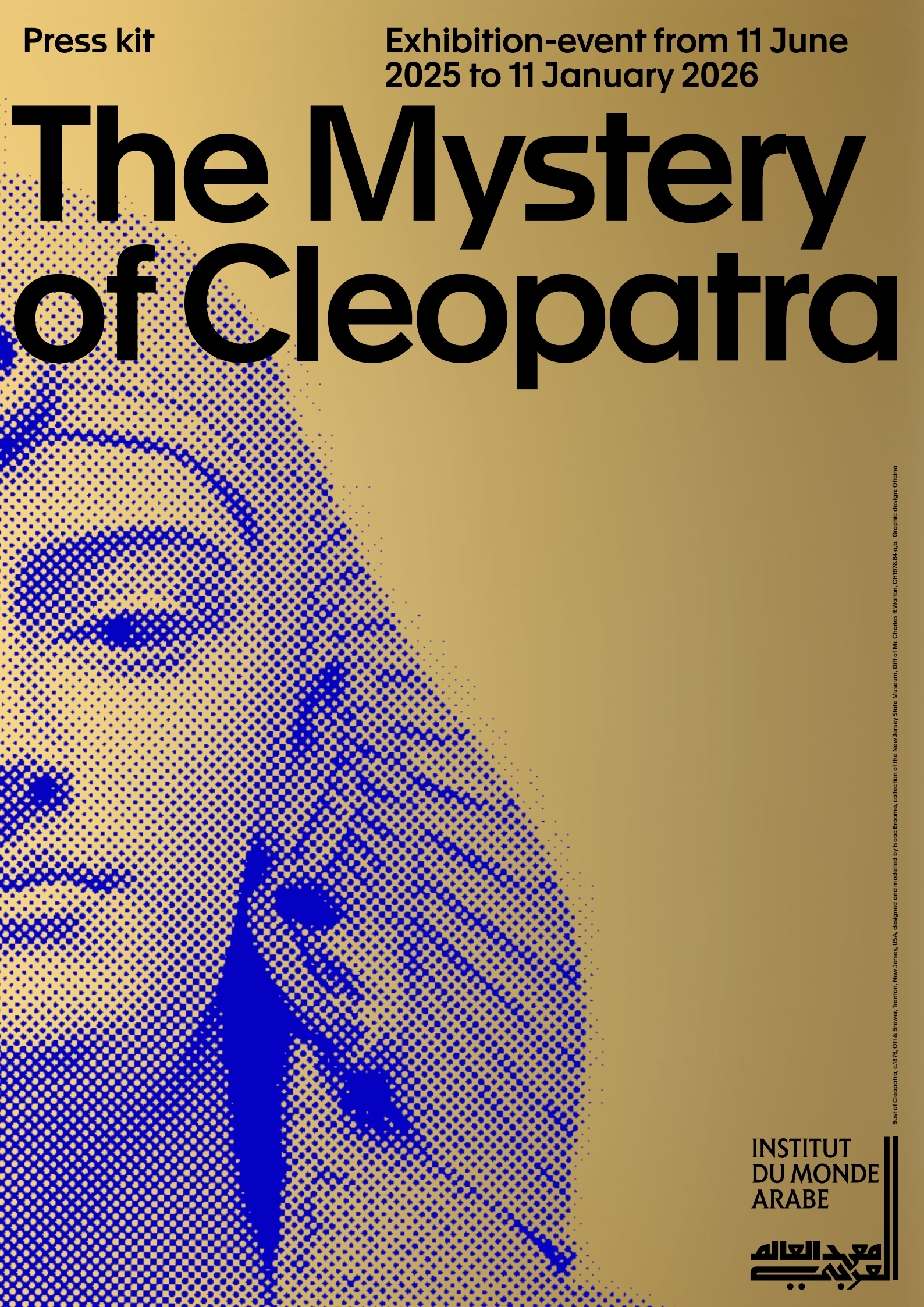
Press kit

Exhibition-event from 11 June 2025 to 11 January 2026

The Mystery of Cleopatra



Bust of Cleopatra, c.1876, Ott & Brewer, Trenton, New Jersey, USA, designed and modelled by Isaac Broome, collection of the New Jersey State Museum, Gift of Mr. Charles R.Walton, CH1978.84 a,b. Graphic design: Oficina

INSTITUT DU MONDE ARABE

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Table of Contents

Jack Lang, President
of the Institut du Monde Arabe

Cleopatra: woman of heart, woman of state

In presenting a major exhibition dedicated to Egypt's most famous queen, the Institut du Monde Arabe is following in the tradition of its past exhibitions on ancient and modern Egypt, such as *Pharaohs* (2004), *Osiris* (2015), *The Epic of the Suez Canal* (2018), and *Egypt – Egypt* (1989).

The discovery of ancient Egypt gave pride of place to a civilisation that was the foundation of our history. Geopolitics placed it at the centre of the world, between the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean at the crossroads between the East and West.

Cleopatra embodies this duality. She was both Greek and Egyptian, born in Alexandria but welcomed in Rome. She was a power figure embodied by a great female head of state and enlightened sovereign, learned in science, literature, the arts and architecture.

What is the mystery that surrounds this woman, one of the most famous in the history of the world? The answer lies first and foremost in science. The exhibition curators present the latest findings from archaeological and historical research. However, many details, and not insignificant, still remain in the dark. For example, like the tomb of Alexander the Great, that of Cleopatra has yet to be found.

This stateswoman, who was also a woman of heart, paid dearly for her acts of resistance to the Roman invasion. She, who almost became empress of the Roman Empire alongside Caesar, preferred to take her own life rather than surrender to Octavian, whose phallocratic vengeance, once as Emperor Augustus, permeated and spread through the writings of Greek and Roman authors. This gave rise to a Cleopatra "black legend" and the triumph of a monarchical conception that excluded women from power, one that would prevail in Europe until their rights were recognised in the 20th century.

Thus, came to an end the Egyptian tradition of king-queen co-rule, such as Nefertiti and Akhenaten, which guaranteed balance and wisdom.

A thousand years of oblivion went by until the legend of Cleopatra resurfaced during the Renaissance. Writers and artists amplified the queen's qualities of heroism, authority, and seduction. She became a kind of collective creation, a combination of black and pink legends tinged with the transgression of the forbidden, of religions and monarchies.

With the advent of cinema, the legend became a universal myth, and Cleopatra a heroine for the liberation struggles of subjugated nations and repressed social classes alike. Cleopatra is therefore a true icon, whose transcendent and inspiring evolution is revealed in this exhibition.

I'd like to share with you the unforgettable memory of my meeting with the "icon of all icons", Liz Taylor, to whom I had the honour of awarding the French Commandeur des Arts and des Lettres in 1985.

The Institut du Monde Arabe is indebted to the many contributors without whom this ambitious exhibition would not have been possible: foreign and French museums, the Louvre, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France and private collectors. The result is a wide variety of paintings, sculptures, written and printed documents, artifacts, sound and visual archives. The partnership with Ubisoft even offers a walk through the reconstructed city of Alexandria.

The IMA teams have planned a number of activities in connection with this powerful and inspiring exhibition-event.

Will the Cleopatra mystery be solved? This showcase can only help to shed some light.

Attributed to Jean-Baptiste Goy, *Cléopâtre mourant, debout (Cleopatra Dying, Standing)* 17th century, Versailles, Palace of Versailles and the Estate of Trianon © Palace of Versailles, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Didier Saulnier

The Cleopatra mystery

Isn't it extraordinary that, from a scientific point of view, so little is known about the life of perhaps the most famous woman since Antiquity?

Archaeology attests to her passion for constructing temples. This endeavour requires a strong personality, and so the caricature of her as a mere capricious courtesan can be ruled out.

In Rome, the statue Julius Caesar had erected of her in the Temple of Venus bears witness to her presence, elevated to the status of a divinity. Only a single papyrus reveals what may be her signature, and there is no trace of her palace or tomb.

However, the many chronicles written by Roman authors must be read with a critical eye. They are infused with the vengeance of Octavian, who eliminated his own half-brother Caesarion and tarnished the figure of Cleopatra. She did her utmost to spare Roman power and preserve her kingdom, but at a price for Rome: give up half the Mediterranean.

The fury of Octavian and the Senate against this effective secession is what led to war. Isn't it strange that Plutarch, Virgil, Horace, Propertius and Tibullus, who were all reputed to be serious scholars, should indulge in the proliferation of salacious remarks about Cleopatra's supposed lust? Egyptian accounts do not appear until later on. In the late 8th century, John of Nikiou, a Coptic bishop, wrote the Chronicle, translated into Arabic, in which he cites Cleopatra as part of the history of the world. However, this account remains rather insubstantial.

The coins issued by the Egyptian queen, featuring her effigy alone, or with Marc Antony, or even the profile of her son Caesarion, bear more accurate witness to her history and portrait. The child born of her affair with Caesar became the rival of Octavian, the former's adopted son and heir. Cleopatra promised Caesarion a royal destiny by placing him on the throne at the age of three, and was content with being his regent for the remainder of her days.

Wasn't Caesar's son, who became Pharaoh, destined to bring Rome and Alexandria together, a feat that Caesar and Cleopatra were unable to achieve? Coins don't lie. In fact, they were the main means of communication for kings and queens. Octavian, who arrived in Alexandria in 30 BC to put an end to the reign of the cursed couple, hastened to issue a coin substituting Cleopatra's profile for his own. He declared victory over the queen and her half-brother, whom he had executed. The Egyptian people would know this as they waited at the bakery, fiddling with the coins bearing the victor's effigy.

Beyond these bits and pieces, what do we really know about Cleopatra? Did she really speak seven languages? Did she really hide in a carpet to go meet Julius Caesar? Did she try to seduce Octavian after his victory at Actium? Can we even say for certain that she committed suicide? Her death has been recounted in so many different versions. Could it not have been invented to conceal a murder?

Facts and hypotheses collide to explain the Cleopatra mystery, turned universal myth. Other women have ruled throughout history: Queen Hatshepsut, the Queen of Sheba, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Blanche of Castille, Catherine de' Medici, Elizabeth I of Great Britain, and many others. These female politicians gained fame but without ever reaching the heights of the Cleopatra myth.

Hers is a story that trails off in conjectures. Had Caesar not been murdered, would he have ruled the empire with Cleopatra? Was Caesar murdered because Cleopatra came to Rome, showing off her wealth and her son, thus upsetting Roman Republican restraint? A man and a woman capable of ruling the entire Mediterranean, upholding the pharaonic tradition of mixed governments: Is that not a setup that is in total opposition to the macho conception of Roman power? Egyptian tradition offered another vision of rule, which is embodied most notably in the reign of the famous couple Nefertiti and Akhenaten.

The Ptolemies adopted this power structure. The victory of Octavian, self-proclaimed Caesar Augustus, marked the advent of undivided male sovereignty in the Mediterranean world, a power model that was then claimed by the princes and kings of the West, who adhered to a male-based father-son succession!

This model remained in place during the era of Napoleon, who became a Caesar despite the French Revolution

legacy, in the French Third Republic among influential figures, and even right up to De Gaulle, a kind of a Caesar and who finally granted women the right to vote.

Cleopatra's enduring memory is thus the result of one woman's struggle against a patriarchal and paternalistic power system that dates back to over two thousand years ago. This woman of character's struggle was naturally justified by the pharaonic and Hellenistic traditions of the Ptolemies. The figure of Cleopatra hits the source of an Eastern art of living. Isn't a ruling couple more tolerant, less warlike and, ultimately, more respectful of women's rightful place in society? Cleopatra's position is thus exemplary. Her daughter Cleopatra Selene followed in the tradition of her dynasty and family lineage by co-ruling Mauritania (present-day Algeria and part of northern Morocco) with Juba II. Nevertheless, the spirit of Rome prevailed in the end.

This tradition of a woman and a man sharing power disappeared with Octavian's victory. Wasn't Cleopatra's legacy amplified by the upheavals of the early years of our era, when the fate of the Mediterranean was at stake: that of its first political unification from east to west and north to south? This was a geopolitical ambition that Cleopatra first attempted with Caesar, then with Marc Antony. Does her failure live up to the expectation of ambition and disappointment that has lived on in our collective memory?

The last queen of Egypt was driven by a charismatic destiny confronted with human – or rather superhuman – impulses that put her above ordinary laws. She who knew how to bring about death was not afraid to inflict it upon herself to escape the grips of dishonour. To succumb meant to bow to submission, but she chose audacity, to go out with a bang! Destiny is guided by a lucky star, but heroism meant breaking with the course of events and giving oneself a voluntary death. The ultimate sacrifice consecrates the inanimate body, reserving it for the sacred, in a way that can be described as eternal.

In 1431, Joan of Arc, another mysterious woman whose statue stands in over a hundred countries, was accused at her trial of wearing men's clothing, a crime the judges deemed punishable by the death penalty. Undergoing threats, she agreed to wear a dress, but the guards tried to rape her. She then put her men's wear back on, knowing that this act of resistance would lead to her death. Like Cleopatra, she sacrificed herself to keep her dignity intact, and in so doing, she acquired a dose of eternity. With the act of dying, both women, in contexts of unrestrained violence – Roman civil wars, the Hundred Years' War –, become exemplary.

However, the Cleopatra mystery cannot be summed up by her heroism. Heroes do not automatically gain entrance to mythology's Elysian Fields. Jean Moulin, when being tortured, refused to succumb to betrayal: He became a hero. André Malraux's words earned this hero renown in the Pantheon. Yet he did not achieve the universal popularity that Cleopatra did. This is the story of so many other heroes, from Achilles to the Unknown Soldier, a kind of anti-hero despite himself.

The secret of this mystery lies even further afield. The facts of Cleopatra's life remain largely unknown. In a show of pride, dignity and the spirit of resistance, she held her head high even in the face of death. The abrupt interruption of the thread of her life explains why her story has remained succinct: She gave everything to her son and joined Caesar in his fate. Regardless of the details, the tragedy can only be dramatic. It inspired Shakespeare and so many others. Roman authors called her a prostitute, just as Joan of Arc was accused of being a witch. Men of little honour know how to disguise their killings by fabricating a false history, tarnishing women in an attempt to conceal their vileness. The ruse is easy, but the scenography is so beautiful and the example so powerful that the story eventually turns against them.

During the Renaissance, the story of Cleopatra resurfaced as interest in Antiquity was renewed. From the 16th century to the present day, Western artists and writers gave free rein to their creativity. Cleopatra became an ideal figure, a blend of romantic images, tinged with sexuality, that were all the more risqué and taboo given the morality of the time period. They occupy a sort of libertarian and political, feminist, and liberating opposition to power, which their creators, from all walks of life, slip like a splitting wedge into the tight wood of absolutism. Over the centuries, literature and art give shape to the legend of Cleopatra.

Painters and writers disseminate their universal vision of the story through the magic of theatre (where Sarah Bernhardt gains success) and the power of 20th-century cinema (Liz Taylor... and her emulators). The paucity of historical sources and the diversity of interpretations have in some ways facilitated the richness of the legend and the amplification of myth.

Whether for better or worse, authors insisted on Cleopatra's power of seduction. To stand up to powerful men, she had to be irresistibly beautiful! However, the coins, with their rough designs, do not really prove her beauty. Although, Blaise Pascal does give in to the illusory, overwhelming power of her nose, which he deems, with some phallocracy, to have sufficed in gaining her success. Do we attribute Caesar's victories to his good looks? Doesn't Jansenism rather unconsciously suggest the influence of the queen's charm, which is a subjective virtue, impossible to verify from a profile etched into the side of a coin? Charm reveals personality. Female authors, to contend with authors of the opposite sex,

1.
"Cleopatra's nose, had it been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed." In those days, a long nose was a sign of beauty...

Eugène-Ernest Hillemacher, *Antoine rapporté mourant à Cléopâtre* (*Dying Antony is Brought to Cleopatra*), 1863, Centre National des Arts Plastiques, on deposit at the Musée de Grenoble, Domaine public/ Cnap, photo credit: Grenoble, Musée de Grenoble – J.L. Lacroix

point out Cleopatra's spirit of resistance, her political intelligence, skill, ability to influence – in short, her charm, which is the equivalent of charisma for men. This propelled her to serve as an example for the liberation of women and oppressed countries, even though it is erroneous to claim, as some sometimes do, that she had black skin. Both men and women have made her into an exemplary story, enriched by a variety of interpretations to build a myth that leaves nobody indifferent. They have done so to such an extent that the story slips into the excesses of caricature and sinks into the delights of consumption society, which leverages the image of Cleopatra to its own advantage, transforming her into a brand that sells.

However, the beauty of the Cleopatra mystery persists: a woman who moved through the epic history of men and the world, leaving few traces in the wake of her steps. She stands at the crossroads of a momentous era: the end of ancient Egypt, which also coincides with the end of Greece, the two great Mediterranean civilisations, and the eruption of the Roman Empire upon the ashes of the Republic. Cleopatra is a victim of the construction of *Mare Nostrum*. She stood up to her adversaries with determination, skill, diplomatic success abroad and political determination at home. This is the foundation of her popularity everywhere, the resistance of the eternal feminine to the perpetual masculine. She became the collective creation of the ideal woman, idealised by the exemplarity of her life.

For the secret of the myth lies in a sufficiently strong dose of mystery and audacity, capable of nourishing every dream. The Cleopatra mystery lies in the ability to remain centred while allowing the darkness to swirl around on all sides. It lies in the ability to centre all aspirations in the belief that the impossible is possible. This great stateswoman in the history of the world became the first star of contemporary popular entertainment.

In 1899, Georges Méliès chose the first actress that would play Cleopatra on the silver screen. The following year, the French filmmaker cast that same actress to play Joan of Arc. They both went on to produce *A Trip to the Moon* (1902). At the end of this cosmic voyage, the actress changed her name to become Jehanne d'Alcy. Méliès invented cinema as a machine for making the invisible visible. He ended up marrying the woman who played Joan and Cleopatra! Mystery can take all forms of creation and go far beyond expectations. Jehanne d'Alcy spent the last of her days selling sweets in Montparnasse and assisted by her partner, the great filmmaker Méliès. These are the contrasts between the mirages of beauty and the realities of life. Perhaps when it comes down to it, what is essential is believing in the power of myth, even succumbing to its resilience, while still seeking the traces of truth.

Esmeralda Kosmatopoulos, *About 2 Inches Long*, 2020 (production 2025), marble, artist's collection, Cairo
© Esmeralda Kosmatopoulos

Christiane Ziegler
Egyptologist, scientific curator of exhibition

Was Cleopatra really that beautiful? What ancient testimonies have to say.

For centuries, Cleopatra has been synonymous with extraordinary beauty, a lethal weapon that enabled her to seduce the most powerful men of her time, Caesar and Marc Antony, and win them over as allies. "Cleopatra's nose, had it been shorter, the whole face of the world would have been changed," wrote Pascal. To reduce the queen to her mere physical appearance and attribute her success with powerful men to her condition of being a woman is to follow in the footsteps of Octavian and his hostile propaganda. It denies far more important aspects of her character: Cleopatra was the sovereign of the richest kingdom in the ancient Mediterranean and an intelligent, cultivated woman who conducted herself like the head of state that she was. That being said, was Cleopatra really that beautiful?

The literature of her time makes no mention of her physical appearance, not even in Caesar's writings. Plutarch, who never knew her and defends Marc Antony's memory, paints a mixed picture: "For her actual beauty, it is said, was not in itself so remarkable that none could be compared with her, or that no one could see her without being struck by it, but the contact of her presence, if you lived with her, was irresistible; the attraction of her person, joining with the charm of her conversation, and the character that attended all she said or did, was something bewitching." To Cleopatra's charms, Plutarch contrasts the prim and youthful beauty of Octavia, Octavian's sister. Much later, Cassius Dio revived Plutarch's description, but with a few additional lines on the queen's physical appearance. Recounting her meeting with Caesar, he wrote: "She was a woman of superior beauty"; he adds later that "indeed, her mourning garb wonderfully became her."

Artistic evidence is just as scarce. Only coins issued by the queen or bearing her name give any idea of her appearance. The bronze coins minted in Alexandria and Cyprus are the most realistic. They depict Cleopatra with an elongated face, a rounded forehead, prominent nose, downturned mouth, small protruding chin, and a long neck. She wears her hair braided in a "melon" hairstyle, gathered into a bun at the nape of her neck, her head girded with the royal diadem. The silver denarii minted by Marc Antony following his conquest of Armenia show Cleopatra with an aquiline nose and pointed chin. On a silver coin issued shortly before the Battle of Actium, Cleopatra's face is more delicate, with a long neck and a prominent but rounder nose. Whether in Greek or Egyptian style, no statue or bust remains that can be attributed to the queen with any certainty. The first sculpture that can be compared with these portraits is a Hellenistic head kept in the Vatican and found along the Appian Way in 1784. Despite the missing nose, the work is of high quality. Another head of unknown provenance that is comparable is intact and kept in Berlin. A full-length statue in New York is an example of the mixed Greco-Egyptian style: leaning against a back pillar, the queen is standing, holding a cornucopia in her left hand. Her face is framed by a wig from which a few curls hang down. Her forehead is

adorned with three uraei cobras, the symbol of royalty. The authenticity of the cartouche on the right-hand side reading “Cleopatra” is questionable. The most beautiful Egyptian statue attributed to Cleopatra is the one in the Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg: Carved in black basalt, the queen stands majestically in an attitude similar to that of New Kingdom queens. She wears a tripartite wig adorned at the front with three uraei. Her face is angular, with a square chin, downward-curving lips and originally inlaid eyes. Her body is moulded in an impalpable sheath that reveals the voluptuous shape of her body. It was first believed that the statue represented Arsinoe II. Its style and the presence of the three uraei were later used as dating criteria, enabling a series of other statues to be attributed to Cleopatra, including those preserved in the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, California and in The Louvre. Neither is it possible to determine her appearance from the highly idealised bas-reliefs adorning the temples built by Cleopatra.

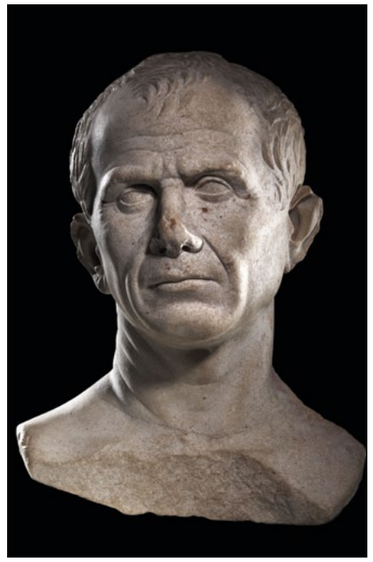
Attempts have been made to reconstruct her face from coins and a skull falsely identified as that of her sister, Arsinoe, but we know nothing of her skin tone, eye colour or hair colour. Mystery even shrouds Cleopatra’s birth: We do not know who her mother was. Was she Cleopatra VI Tryphaena, wife of Ptolemy XII? A Macedonian aristocrat? The daughter of an Egyptian high priest? A Nubian origin is unlikely: Had Cleopatra inherited the features of an “Aethiopian” mother, Roman propaganda would not have failed to emphasise her origins. Shakespeare, a lover of the exotic, suggests that Cleopatra was tawny, but there is no reason why she could not have been blonde. The Ptolemies were originally from northern Greece, and a poem by Theocritus praises the “blond Ptolemy II”, an ancestor of Cleopatra. And still today, doesn’t the hair of Berenice, Ptolemy’s wife, light up the night sky with its golden reflections?

Elizabeth Taylor in *Cleopatra*, directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1963, credit: Everett Collection/Bridgeman Images © 20th Century Fox Film, Corporation Everett Collection Bridgeman Images

Cleopatra, head of state

1

Cleopatra meets Julius Caesar



The year is 48 BC and the turmoil of civil war is stirring the atmosphere in Rome and the Mediterranean. In pursuit of Pompey, his rival consul, Caesar finally defeats him in Greece at the Battle of Pharsalus. But Pompey manages to escape to Egypt, where he thinks he will be protected while Caesar continues his pursuit. Pompey is taken in by Cleopatra VII's brother-husband Ptolemy XIII. However, the king has him assassinated and offers Caesar his rival's head, believing her gesture will please him. However, Caesar does not appreciate the gift; Pompey was, after all, his son-in-law. He was also looking forward to showing him off during his triumph in Rome. Cleopatra, wanting to set things straight, smuggles herself into Caesar's home quarters and wins his heart. He establishes her on the throne in place of her brother. They go on a genuine honeymoon cruise on the Nile. For a time, Caesar indulges in the luxury of the Alexandrian court but finally decides to return to Rome, knowing that Cleopatra is about to give birth to their child.

Portrait présumé de Jules César (*Presumed Portrait of Julius Caesar*), mid-1st century BC, Dokimeion marble (Asia Minor), Arles, Musée Départemental Arles Antique

2

Cleopatra's presence in Rome up until Caesar's assassination

About two years later, Cleopatra arrives in Rome with great fanfare, accompanied by her son Caesarion, whom she intends to make the heir of her union with Caesar. Under the disapproving eyes of the senators, Caesar and Cleopatra seem poised to rule the Roman and Ptolemaic Empire stretching from Brittany to Egypt and the Levant. With the help of accomplices, two senators, Brutus and Cassius, decide to assassinate the man they consider a tyrant. Caesar is killed on 15 March 44 BC. A new era dawns on Rome with the emergence of two of Caesar's loyal followers, Octavian and Marc Antony. They pursue the murderers and defeat them at the Battle of Philippi in October 42 BC.

Statue d'un prince ptolémaïque (*Statue of a Ptolemaic Prince*), possibly Caesarion, Ptolemaic or Roman period, 1st century B.C. – 1st century AD, property of Drassm – Deposited at the Musée de l'Ephèbe & d'Archéologie Sous-Marine of Agde © Pierre Arnaud

3

Cleopatra and Marc Antony meet in Tarsus

After their victory at Philippi and under the watchful eye of the Senate, Octavian and Marc Antony divide up control over Rome between the West and the East, around the *Mare Nostrum*. Marc Antony travels to Asia Minor. There, he summons Cleopatra, whose submission he seeks. However, he yields to her charm and she imposes herself as queen. From Rome, Octavian, fearing Cleopatra's hold over Marc Antony, insists he marry his sister Octavia. The new couple settles in Athens until Cleopatra finally succeeds in winning him over. Marc Antony repudiates Octavia and settles in Alexandria. From Egypt, he and Cleopatra rule all the East and gradually come into competition with Octavian and the Senate in Rome. Marc Antony infringes the limits imposed on consuls and donates territories to Egypt, an act which leads to secession. Octavian goes to war against Cleopatra

Tête d'homme, dit pseudo Marc Antoine (*Head of a Man, Pseudo Marc Antony*), end of 1st century BC. – early 1st century AD, marble, discovered in Narbonne (sanctuaire des Moulinasses) © Musée Narbo Via

4

Death of Cleopatra

The two rivals clash in Greece, where the Roman civil war is being waged. It is 31 BC and the great naval and land Battle of Actium is underway.

To take on the Roman fleet of light ships, the Egyptians assemble a considerable but less manoeuvrable armada of different sized vessels. From her flagship, Cleopatra watches the battle from afar. Sensing an imminent defeat, she decides to return to Alexandria. Marc Antony follows her, abandoning the battle, and this sets the stage for a rout that was by no means certain.

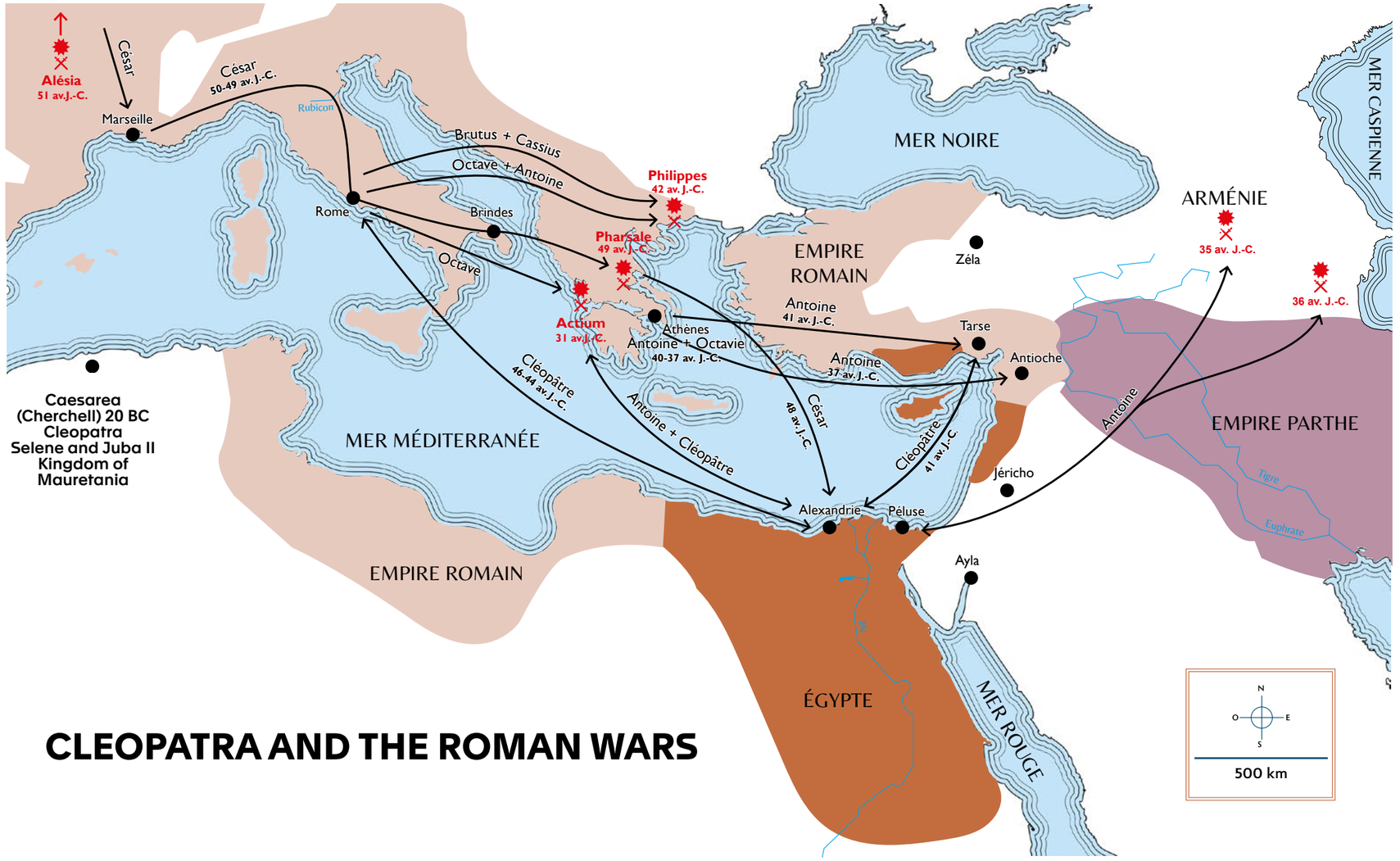
Within two days, the Egyptian army surrenders both on land and at sea. Marc Antony and Cleopatra are back in Alexandria, while Octavian and his army scour the eastern Mediterranean coast, re-establishing Rome's authority. Octavian eventually lays siege to Alexandria. Does Cleopatra try to seduce him, like she did Caesar and Marc Antony? She witnesses the agony of Marc Antony, who fails to commit suicide. Cleopatra refuses to submit and succeeds in taking her life, paving the way for the birth of a universal myth that chimes the end of the Ptolemaic dynasty. She is the last descendant of the lineage started by Alexander the Great.

Drachma of Cleopatra VII, minted in Alexandria (Egypt). Right: bust of Cleopatra wearing a diadem. Backside: eagle on a thunderbolt, crown of Isis at its feet, laurels on its wing, 47/6 BC, silver. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Paris, Département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques © BnF

Christian-Georges Schwentzel

Historian, scientific curator of exhibition

The Mediterranean and its surroundings in Cleopatra's time (52-30 BC)



CLEOPATRA AND THE ROMAN WARS

The conflict between Caesar and Pompey (52-49 BC)
Alexandria, capital of the kingdom of Egypt, 52 BC: Cleopatra, aged 17, is named heir to the throne by her father, King Ptolemy XII. At the same time, Julius Caesar crushes Vercingetorix at the Battle of **Alesia**. Soon thereafter, the conqueror of the Gauls takes on Pompey, the other strongman of the Roman world. Both are equipped with their own armies. Caesar travels to Italy, where he crosses the Rubicon river marking the border between Cisalpine Gaul and Roman territory. He lays siege and Pompey flees to Greece.

Caesar's victory over Pompey (49-48 BC)
The two armies clash at **Pharsalus** in Thessaly, on the eastern coast of Greece. Pompey, defeated, manages to embark for Egypt, where he hopes to receive help. He arrives in **Pelusium** (Nile Delta).

Pompey's death at Pelusium, Egypt (48 BC)
Pompey is assassinated on the orders of Cleopatra's brother, who has dismissed his sister. Caesar is furious at the assassination of his adversary, whom he wanted to see vanquished during his Romain triumph. At the royal palace in **Alexandria**, where he settles, he becomes Cleopatra's lover.

Caesar leads military expedition to Asia Minor and returns to Rome (47 BC)
Caesar admires Cleopatra's charm and political skills, and reinstates her to the throne after eliminating Ptolemy XIII. He returns to Cleopatra the island of **Cyprus**, which her father was forced to cede to the Romans. A few months later, he travels to **Zela**, where he crushes Pharnaces II, King of Bosporus (modern-day Turkey). The campaign is short-lived, prompting him to declare: «*veni, vidi, vici*» (I came, I saw, I conquered). Then he goes to Rome and is appointed dictator by the Senate. In his absence, Cleopatra gives birth to a son, named Caesarion.

Cleopatra and Caesarion settle in Rome until Caesar's assassination (46-44 BC)
At the height of his glory, Caesar is assassinated in 44 BC, the result of a plot hatched by the senators. Cleopatra and Caesarion hurry back to Alexandria. Octavian, Caesar's adopted son and grand-nephew, inherits the late dictator's wealth, to the detriment of Caesarion.

The triumvirate: Octavian, Marc Antony, and Lepidus (43-42 BC)
Marc Antony (40), Caesar's lieutenant, joins forces with the young Octavian (20), and Lepidus, Caesar's other heir. All three of them found the triumvirate. Their army pursues the assassins, Brutus and Cassius, as far as western Greece. At the Battle of **Philippi**, the latter are defeated. They commit suicide. The three victors divide Roman possessions among them: the west goes to Octavius, the east to Marc Antony, and North Africa to Lepidus.

The triumvirate: Marc Antony reorganises eastern Roman territories (41 BC)
Marc Antony summons Cleopatra to **Tarsus** in **Cilicia** (now Turkey). They immediately become lovers. They spend the winter of 41-40 BC in Alexandria, where they throw lavish parties.

Marc Antony torn between Octavia and Cleopatra (40-37 BC)
At Octavian's request, Marc Antony leaves Cleopatra in 40 BC and marries his sister Octavia. The couple settles in Athens. On his return to Syria in 37 BC, Marc Antony once again becomes Cleopatra's lover, and bestows upon her new territories: **Phoenicia** (Lebanon), Cilicia (southeastern Turkey), the territory of **Jericho** (West Bank) and the port of **Ayla** (southern Jordan).

Marc Antony's disastrous Parthian campaign (36 BC)
Marc Antony launches a vast expedition against the **Parthian Empire** (located east of the Euphrates, in present-day Iraq and Iran, as well as in Central Asia) with financial support from Cleopatra. He is defeated and loses a third of his army. It is a huge disaster, but the following year he defeats **Armenia**. In 34 BC, he triumphs in Alexandria, before proclaiming Cleopatra «Queen of Kings» and Caesarion «King of Kings».

The war between Octavian and Marc Antony (35-30 BC)
Together, Marc Antony and Cleopatra govern the Roman Near East. They issue common currencies. In 32 BC, Octavian declares war on Cleopatra, whom he sees as a dangerous foreign queen. In 31 BC, Marc Antony and Cleopatra are defeated at sea at the Battle of **Actium**, in northwestern Greece. On land, their army surrenders without a fight.

The death of Cleopatra and Marc Antony (30 BC)
After his victory at Actium, Octavian, along with his army, travels throughout the Roman eastern territories, taking possession of them. He seizes Alexandria in the summer of 30 BC. Marc Antony and Cleopatra prefer to commit suicide rather than suffer humiliation. Octavian has coins minted with his profile, confirming his conquest of Egypt. In 27 BC, he becomes Augustus, emperor of the reunited Roman world.

Cleopatra Selene (circa 20 BC)
In 30 BC, Octavian exiles Cleopatra Selene, daughter of Cleopatra and Marc Antony, to Rome. At the age of ten, her education is entrusted to Octavia, Octavian's sister and Marc Antony's former wife. Around 20 BC, she marries King Juba II, appointed by Octavian, and becomes the queen of Mauritania (present-day Algeria and Morocco). In her capital, **Caesarea (Cherchell)**, she continues the tradition of the enlightened and intellectual queen embodied by her mother.

Exhibition pathway

Alexandre Cabanel, *Cléopâtre essayant des poisons sur des condamnés à mort* (*Cleopatra Testing Poisons on Condemned Prisoners*), modello, 1883 (detail) Galerie Michel Descours © Galerie Michel Descours/ Didier Michalet

Of the few great female figures in history, Cleopatra VII, the last ruler of the Greco-Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty (323-30 BC), is the most well-known. Since her death more than two thousand years ago, she has continuously gained fame – a reputation all the more surprising given that no ancient biography gives credence to the stories told about her.

Around her persona, first a black legend emerged. Later came the image of a universal iconic figure, combining passion and death, voluptuousness and cruelty, wealth and war, politics and feminism, that shed light on the West's contrasting views of Pharaonic civilisation and, more generally, the status of powerful women.

These countless facets inhabit our imaginaries in all creative fields – writing, painting, sculpture, music, cinema, even consumer products. However, Cleopatra was in fact a competent head of state, who fought for her kingdom and ensured its prosperity for 22 years.

The Cleopatra Mystery unveils current historical and archaeological knowledge, while underlining the contrast between the paucity of sources and the abundance of legends, right up to the ones still existing today. How do we go from a legend to a myth, from a myth to a powerful and multifarious icon?

Detail of the façade of Dendera (Tentyra). Temple of Hathor: the outer wall of the temple of the goddess Hathor in Dendera (southern Egypt) was decorated by Cleopatra. She is depicted as a pharaonic queen, with her son Ptolemy Caesar, known as Caesarion, represented as a pharaoh. Partial reproduction of photograph by Félix Teynard in *Égypte et Nubie, Sites et Monuments… Atlas Photographié… Servant de Complément à la Grande Description de l'Égypte,* Part I: Egypt, Goupil (Paris), 1858, image 73: F. 32. Pl. 24. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Department of Prints and Photography, RES PHOTO UB-203.

1 The history

Cleopatra was born in Alexandria, the prestigious capital of the Ptolemaic Kingdom, in 69 BC. The city had been founded two and a half centuries earlier by Alexander the Great, Greek king of Macedonia. After the death of the conqueror, Ptolemy, one of his generals, assumed power and founded the Egyptian Ptolemaic dynasty. The royal family reigned for almost three centuries, ending with its seventh and last ruler– Cleopatra. At the time of her birth, Cleopatra's father Ptolemy XII, an unpopular ruler, was in power but had little in common with his glorious ancestors, aside from his wealth: His kingdom had become a Roman protectorate. For Cleopatra VII, the stakes would lie in maintaining Egypt's relative autonomy. An astute diplomat, she rose to power as a skillful political leader in a male-dominated world wrought by incessant crises. Fully aware of Rome's inexorable rise to political and military power, she forged ties, both sentimental and political, with Julius Caesar, then Marc Antony. After eliminating her rivals with whom she reigned (her brother-husbands Ptolemy XIII and Ptolemy XIV), she named Ptolemy XV Caesar, known as Caesarion, her son from Julius Caesar, co-ruler. She would later have three more children with Marc Antony. Defeated at the battle of Actium by Octavian, Cleopatra committed suicide in August 30 BC, bringing an end to the Ptolemaic dynasty.

Cleopatra, head of state

When Cleopatra took power in 52 BC, Egypt, a Roman protectorate, had lost part of its territory. The queen's ambition was to restore her country to its former glory. Of Macedonian descent, she adopted ancient pharaonic customs. She knew how to choose her allies and surrounded herself with loyal collaborators who enabled her to exercise her diplomatic talents. In 46 BC, she followed Caesar to Rome then went to negotiate with Marc Antony in Tarsus in 41 BC. Thanks to the ties she forged with the two men, she was able to acquire new territories. She then modernised the navy to defend her land. As a shrewd political administrator, she rallied Egyptian and Greek priests to her cause, supporting temple construction and granting financial privileges. She issued a series of laws protecting peasants and punishing corrupt officials. She also carried out a monetary reform. Involved in the war against Rome, Cleopatra, perched aboard her ship, witnessed the defeat of Actium in 31 BC.

The Lighthouse of Alexandria in the video game Assassin's Creed Origins. Assassin's Creed TM & © Ubisoft Entertainment.

The wealth of the Ptolemies

Egypt was the richest kingdom on the Mediterranean. Prosperous in agriculture, it was the region's granary. Natural resources, minerals, and quarries abounded, and crafts and trade flourished. Products from Africa (gold and ivory) entered via the Nile, while those from Arabia (spices) and India (cinnamon, perfumes, and pearls) were transported via the Red Sea. Alexandria, a trade hub, exported these products to Greece and Rome. The Ptolemies ran the country as their own personal property. They levied taxes on all activities and in particular on wheat-growing lands. The economy was meticulously managed and the use of currency was widespread. Exports and imports were regulated with customs.

Diversity of cultures

In the wake of Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt, Greek colonists and soldiers settled on the land they were given. Although they did not impose their culture, their tongue became the language of administration. However, Egyptians made up the bulk of the population in Upper and Lower Egypt, and stayed faithful to their cults and clergy. They preserved their traditions and adapted in order to succeed in society, with some learning Greek. Their gods were still venerated in temples, embellished by the Ptolemies, and governed by a powerful clergy. As such, Greek and Egyptian divinities coexisted within this bicultural universe. Alexandria offered a snapshot of this cosmopolitan diversity: Greek citizens lived alongside the Egyptians, the Jewish community, travellers, and merchants from distant lands.

Alexandria, the capital

Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BC. Located between the coast and Lake Mariout, it lies on the edge of the Nile River delta. The largest city in the Mediterranean basin, it boasts two ports that ships were able to reach thanks to the Lighthouse of Alexandria, one of the wonders of the ancient world (see video reconstruction by Ubisoft* in the exhibition). Alexandria was a new Greek-style city, surrounded by ramparts and criss-crossed by streets lined with porticoes and sumptuous monuments. The first Ptolemies made it the symbol of their power. In the northeast quarter, they built the great library and museum, a veritable research centre. Nearby were the royal palaces, the temple of Isis and Cleopatra's tomb, which still today has never been found. These buildings, decorated with Greek and Egyptian sculptures and surrounded by parks have since been swallowed by the sea.

*** As part of the exhibition, Ubisoft has created a short film based on its video games *Assassin's Creed Origins* (2017) and *Discovery Tour: Ancient Egypt* (2018). The film takes viewers on a guided tour of the splendid city of Alexandria.**

François Barois (1656-1726), *Cléopâtre mourant (Cleopatra Dying)*, 1700, Paris, Musée du Louvre
© GrandPalaisRmn (Musée du Louvre) / Stéphane Maréchalle

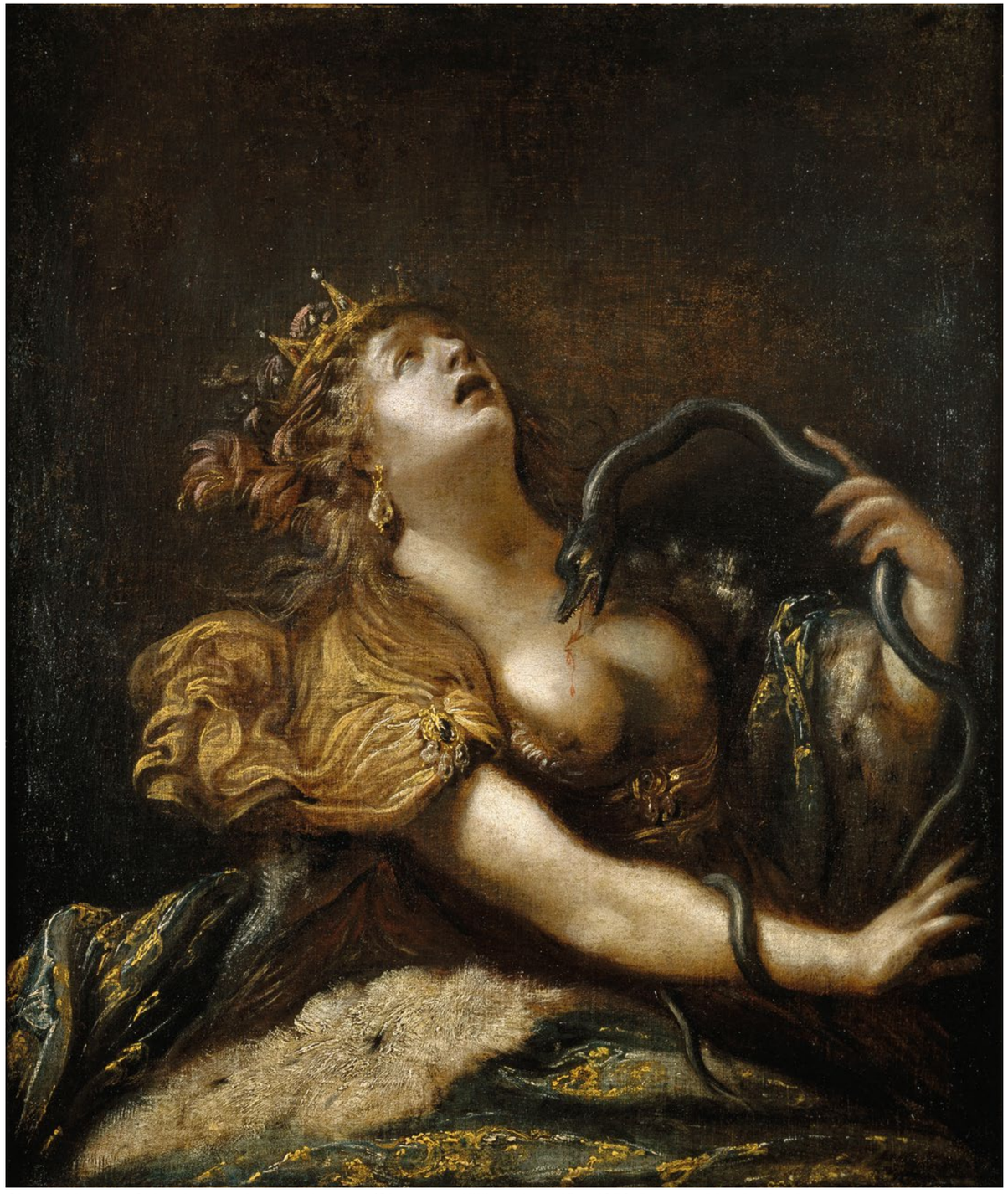
2 The legend

Defeated at the Battle of Actium by Octavian, Cleopatra committed suicide in August 30 BC. While her Egyptian and Greek subjects saw her as a living goddess and warrant of the prosperity of her kingdom, Roman authors, parroting the victor's propaganda, described her as a *regina meretrix* or "prostitute queen". In contrast, Arab writers of the Middle Ages portrayed her as a motherly figure, protector of her people, and an erudite and learned woman. In the West, from the 16th century onwards, Cleopatra has enjoyed exceptional posthumous fame in literature and the arts. The dramatised representation of her death, constantly readapted and reappropriated, spans the centuries, in a long chain of interwoven works that echo and are born of one another to produce an ongoing string of new Cleopatras "post-Cleopatra".

The black legend (1st century BC – 3rd century AD)

The authors of this legend were close supporters of Octavian, who became Emperor Augustus, and used it to spread violent insults and slander against Cleopatra. The poet Virgil condemned the despicable foreigner who had charmed Marc Antony. Horace described her as "a fatal monster" and a "demented queen", fortunately defeated by Octavian, saviour of the Roman world, at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. Other writers portrayed the queen as sex-obsessed and even as a nymphomaniac, whose desire was insatiable. She was said to sleep with her slaves, whom she then had murdered in the early hours of the morning. For her conqueror Octavian, the perpetrator of this ill-fame, the aim was to discredit the queen and present Caesarion, his potential rival, not as Caesar's child, but rather as the son of an eastern prostitute. During the same time period, oil lamps were decorated with obscene caricatures to illustrate Cleopatra's sexual appetite. In the early 2nd century, Plutarch described Cleopatra as a femme fatale who led Marc Antony to his demise.

Jean-André Rixens, *La Mort de Cléopâtre (The Death of Cleopatra)*, 1874, Toulouse, Musée des Augustins



Claude Vignon, *Cléopâtre se donnant la mort (Cleopatra Killing Herself)*, c.1650, Rennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts
© MBA, Rennes, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Patrick Merret

The golden legend (8th – 12th centuries)

The black legend proliferated by Roman authors hostile to Cleopatra did not, however, reach Egypt. In the late 8th century, John, Coptic bishop of Nikiou, wrote a chronicle in which he presented a description of Cleopatra based on Egyptian oral traditions, conveying her as a competent political leader and remarkable architect. Later, the Egyptian historian Ibn Abd al-Hakam (803-871) credited Cleopatra with building a mighty wall around her kingdom to protect it from invaders. The queen, an ideal mother figure, ensured the well-being of her subjects, whom she kept well fed and protected. Al-Masudi (circa 896-956) depicted her as a philosopher and scholar. Other authors described her as an alchemist, while Murtadha ibn al-Khafif, circa 1200, as an advocate for freedom who preferred death over submission to a foreign power.

Cleopatra and the arts: from original temptress to eastern seductress

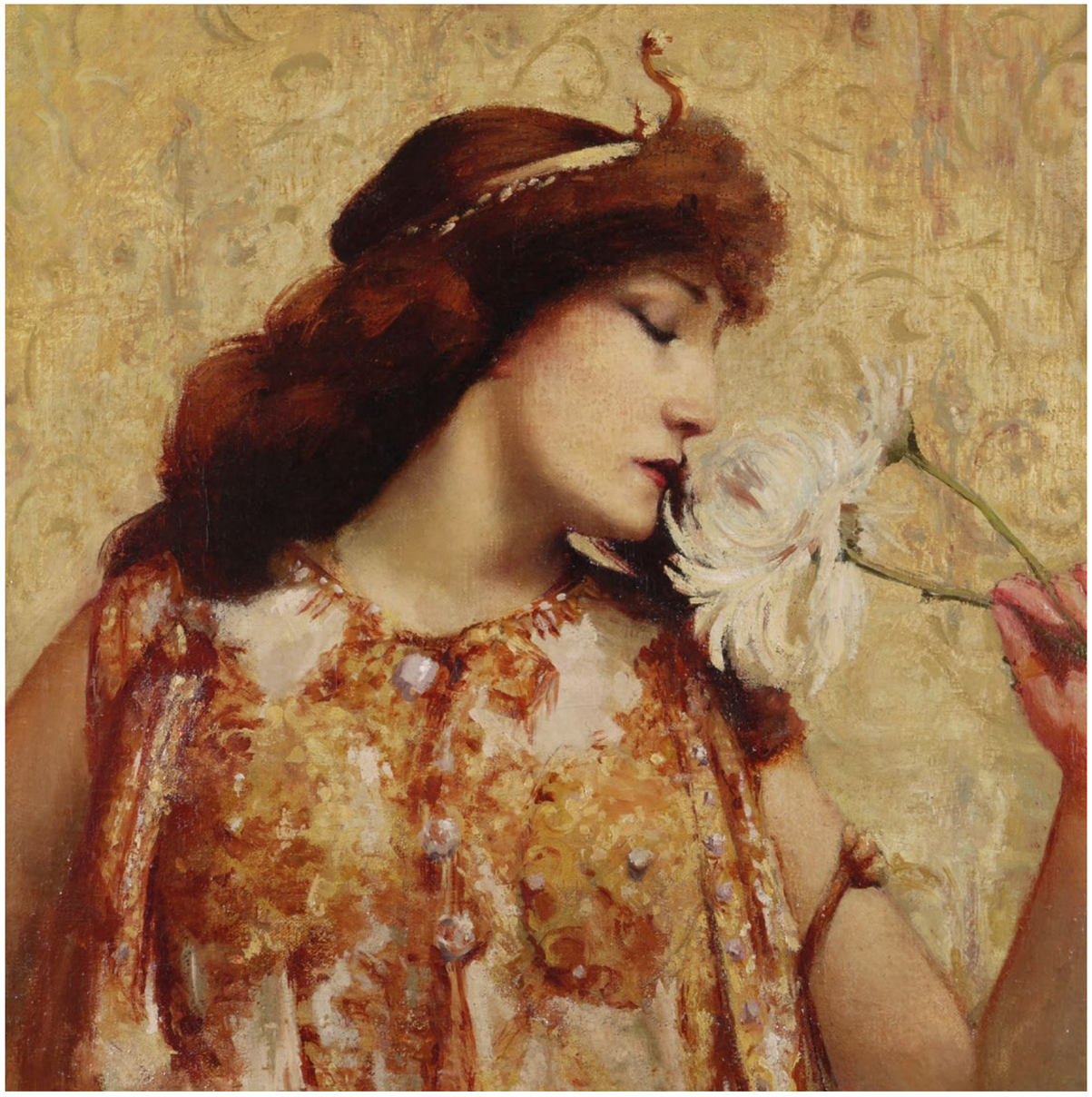
In the Western world, Cleopatra became a topic all her own. Assimilated to Eve, the serpent temptress of the Bible, she was tagged with the misogynistic narrative of patriarchal cultures, and her death was the moral consequence of her condition. Between Eros and Thanatos, iconographic ambivalence proliferated: Cleopatra enjoys dying. With the onset of the history painting genre and its lofty subjects, she acquired admirable nobility that was more political than courtesan and more loving than seductive. After Bonaparte's Egyptian campaign (1798-1801), interests in the subject were renewed but were heavily rooted in popular Egyptomania rather than scholarly egyptology.
At the Salon art exhibitions in Paris, picturesque renderings based on exoticism and historicism took centre stage. Orientalism revived Augustan propaganda against the "foreigner," following the rhetoric of a civilised, rational West versus a barbaric, sensual East. Cleopatra embodies the sovereign of this colonial Egyptomania. Her story becomes a thing of legends, of mystery but also despotism, fatalism, indolence, and above all decadence.

3 The myth

Although Shakespeare's tragedy *Antony and Cleopatra* popularised the "mythistory" of Cleopatra on the stage, it was great actresses, from Sarah Bernhardt to Liz Taylor, who gave mass appeal to the queen's destiny in the media age. However, Cleopatra, despite her rising in the ranks to sole headliner, was still portrayed as the phantasmal embodiment of an eastern faraway land. With the proliferation of images, the glamorisation of the star system, the massification of culture via theatre, cinema, advertising, television and comic strips, this mythical figure became a household word. An object of consumption, Cleopatra was transformed into a beauty queen, fashion muse and even an advertising brand... All social classes were able to identify with her and her astonishingly modern image. As she became one of the world's most well-known women, myth prevails over fact. Our historical knowledge of the head of state was thus clouded by persistent confusion and even haphazard distortions.

Cleopatra on stage, from tragic heroine to Eastern star

With the revival of classical tragedy, the theatrical figure of Cleopatra became the embodiment of fervour, a dramaturgical moral dilemma: Will the heroine be overwhelmed by her passion, or will she decide to die with dignity? Plays, opera librettos, and ballets appeared in abundance. Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* (1607), inspired by Plutarch, remains a major reference of the entanglements between love and politics. Later, set and costume designers referred to scholarly publications for the sake of accuracy (*Description de l'Égypte*, 1809-1813; *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie*, 1835-1845). These spectacular theatrical productions (Sardou's *Cléopâtre* in 1890, Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* in 1898) foreshadowed the cinema's peplum craze. Most notably, the queen was no longer dressed in Greek style. In line with the Egyptomania trend, she was given an Egyptian style, which Sarah Bernhardt would embed in our imaginaries for a long time to come.



Georges-Antoine Rochegrosse, *Sarah Bernhardt dans le rôle de Cléopâtre (Sarah Bernhardt in the Role of Cleopatra)*, after 1890 © Private collection

"Cleomania" in films

On the silver screen, Cleopatra took her revenge on Caesar and Marc Antony. As early as 1899, the first actress to play her – the ghost of her mummy desecrated by a tomb raider – was Jehanne d'Alcy in Méliès's silent trick film *Robbing Cleopatra's Tomb*. The queen became a major character in the star system. In 1917, Theda Bara (anagram for Arab Death) etched the image of her as an erotic femme fatale onto the screen. A series of charismatic actresses spread Cleomania throughout film in grandiose productions with sumptuous costumes and anachronistic make-up: Claudette Colbert (1934), Vivien Leigh (1945), Sophia Loren (1953) and, above all, Liz Taylor (1963). This mythical role set Cleopatra's codes in fashion, design, and pop culture. Nearly earning the studio bankruptcy, Mankiewicz's over-budget blockbuster put a stop to the trend of extravagant Hollywood peplum. However, that did not deter some 220 films (parodies, TV movies and even erotic films) from being made between 1963 and 2023, proof of Cleopatra's cinematic posterity, for better or for worse.

Shourouk Rhaiem, *Cleopatra's Kiosk*, 2025, Paris, artist's collection © Alberto Ricci

Comic strips

The Cleopatra myth made its high-profile debut in comics in 1965. Inspired by Mankiewicz's film, René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo created a graphic parody of the Hollywood blockbuster. On their album cover, which mimics the film poster, Asterix takes the place of Julius Caesar, while Obelix poses as Marc Antony alongside the queen, dressed in the style of Liz Taylor. More recent comics, such as *Cléopâtre, la Reine Fatale* by Thierry Gloris and Joël Mouclier (2017-2023), take a more historical approach to the queen's life. Cleopatra is also reincarnated in the world of manga, notably in the work of Osamu Tezuka, where she becomes the quintessence for all human aspirations to beauty, power, and immortality.

Cleopatra, queen of marketing

Known the world over, the name Cleopatra inspires dreams. An effective marketing lever, it appears on over 1,500 registered trademarks. Soaps, packets of rice, cigarettes, olive oil, even tattoos – the mere mention of the queen sells. Since the release of Mankiewicz's 1963 film, her popularity has continued to grow, transcending borders and cultures. She can be found in France, England, Poland, the United States, the Philippines, and Russia, promoting a variety of products accessible to all, in advertisements often tinged with humour. Two common denominators stand out: the queen remains a symbol of beauty and sensuality. Her kitsch, stereotyped image is systematically portrayed in fanciful Egyptian guise. This blend of ancient exoticism and Hollywood glamour anchored the mythical figure of Cleopatra in the collective imaginary.

4 The icon

Alongside the popular and glamorous depictions of her on the silver screen, another identity was emerging: Cleopatra, the head of state and erudite queen. For 22 years, this strong, independent woman asserted herself in a male-dominated world, preferring to die rather than surrender. From this act of resistance and through the prism of emerging political struggles came the icon of identity and emancipatory movements. More than just a historical figure, she embodied powerful historical ideals, claims, and aspirations. In Egypt, the queen was a nationalist emblem of resistance to British imperialism (1882-1956), a way to affirm the country's ancient heritage. In the United States, she was a source of pride for the African American community, notably in the anti-slavery struggle during the American Civil War (1861-1865). More broadly, feminist movements have rehabilitated her image as a woman of power who was able to assert her voice, and condemn her portrayal, and even invisibilisation, as shaped by the male gaze.

Egyptian nationalism

Following the high-profile discoveries of the bust of Nefertiti in 1912, sent to Berlin where it remains today, and the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1922 by British archaeologist Howard Carter, Egypt's ancient civilisation became a major topic of cultural reappropriation during the rise of Egyptian nationalism against colonial powers. The Pharaonism of the 1920s brought this nationalism into the arts with Mahmoud Mokhtar (1891-1934), who erected large sculptures inspired in Egyptian history. In 1954, the new president Nasser began nationalising industries whose names and logos referred to ancient Egypt and its great rulers such as Nefertiti, Ramses, and Cleopatra. Even today, coins bear the effigy of the queen. The embodiment of the national imaginary, Cleopatra illustrated the pride of a prestigious past and the claim to a powerful Egyptian identity.

Inspiration for African American emancipatory struggles

In the 1840s, the United States was torn apart by conflicts around the status of women and the abolition of slavery. These culminated in the American Civil War (1861-1865), which pitted the abolitionist states of the North against the slaveholding states of the South As part of the civil rights movement following this war, sculptors – including Edmonia Lewis, the first sculptor of African American and Native American descent (1844-1907) – expressed their political opinions by taking Cleopatra as their subject. This African ruler's suicide was seen as an act of bravery and resistance by a leader who preferred death to submission, freedom to slavery, enshrining her as an abolitionist symbol even today. Barbara Chase-Riboud used this inspiration to create *Cleopatra's Chair* in 1994, presented here: Her empty throne, a veritable extension of the queen, symbolises the strength and fragility of royalty and feminine power, rooted in an African identity. Cleopatra is a source of pride, an icon for African American women and, more generally, for all women with whom she resonates.

A feminist icon

Cleopatra, as a feminist icon, embodies the struggle against the patriarchal Roman society that tarnished her image in antiquity, the effects of which are still visible today. Because ancient history was written by men, they trivialised her role as head of state of a prosperous kingdom and propagated a distorted, hypersexualised, and manipulative image of her. However, in the 21st century, she is reclaiming her identity, one that is not hidden in the shadows of the Roman rulers. Five women artists from this movement form a close-knit avant-garde committed to repairing her image. They question her representation in the arts, and reveal the misogyny to which she was subjected. Today, Cleopatra's fame far exceeds that of the men who were in her life, whether they were for or against her.

Egyptian coin, 50 piastres Queen Cleopatra, year 1442, 2021 © Private collection, Paris

Nazanin Pouyandeh, *La Mort de Cléopâtre (Death of Cleopatra)*, 2022, private collection © Gregory Copitet

Barbara Chase-Riboud, *Cleopatra's Chair*, 1994 © Private collection

On the sidelines of the exhibition

Publications

Exhibition Catalogue
Le mystère Cléopâtre

Edited by Claude Mollard, Christian-Georges Schwentzel and Christiane Ziegler, the exhibition catalogue – lavishly illustrated with over 200 images – includes essays by more than twenty specialists from all horizons, providing a comprehensive overview of the latest research on Cleopatra, from the fields of archaeology to artificial intelligence.

Co-publication Skira – Institut du Monde Arabe
240 pages
€29

A special edition of *Beaux-Arts Magazine*
Le mystère Cléopâtre
La légende face à l'histoire

124 pages
€11.90

Children's booklets
Le mystère Cléopâtre

Throughout history, Cleopatra has been portrayed in many different ways. She is a mysterious queen, a skilful head of state and a cunning woman, whose memory has lived on throughout every era since Antiquity. Both hated and adored, the last queen of Egypt sparks fascination. Through the works in the exhibition, the booklet aims to tell the story of this universal figure, between myth and reality.

Edition Institut du Monde Arabe
32 pages
€6

Meetings and debates

IMA Thursdays

A series of 4 round-table discussions bringing together interdisciplinary perspectives, from the fields of history, archaeology, Egyptology, art, and literature, on history's most popular female figure. Moderated by Christian-Georges Schwentzel, professor of Ancient History at the University of Lorraine, co-curator of the exhibition *The Cleopatra Mystery*, and author of several books on Cleopatra (Payot, PUF) and eroticism in Antiquity (Payot, Vendémiaire).
Free access subject to availability

Cleopatra, goddess, queen and stateswoman — 19 June 2025, 7pm
Recent research shows that Cleopatra, far from the image of the perverse femme fatale disseminated by ancient Roman authors, was instead a competent political leader who sought to regain control of her kingdom and restore its power. Regarded as a living goddess by her people, and the guarantor of her kingdom's prosperity, she was the architect of economic and monetary reforms little known to the general public. She also had temples built and was a military leader at the command of an extensive war fleet.

With
Christiane Ziegler, Egyptologist, general curator, honorary director of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the Musée du Louvre and director of publications for the Musée du Louvre's archaeological mission in Saqqara.
Thomas Faucher, archaeologist and numismatist, director of CEALex, Alexandria.
Bernard Legras, professor of Hellenistic Greek history, director of the Sorbonne School of History, Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University/ UMR 8210 ANHIMA. Author of *Cléopâtre l'Égyptienne* (Les Belles Lettres).

Cleopatra, women and the «weaker sex» — 26 June 2025, 7pm
Does Cleopatra disprove the misogynistic stereotypes that condemn women to being the «weaker sex»? Should we consider this queen to be a historical exception, at a time when political power was most often held by men? What was expected of a woman in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome? Why and how did certain women achieve positions of power – be it political, military, amorous or sexual – without this appearing abnormal in the eyes of their contemporaries?

With
Géraldine Puccini, senior lecturer (HDR-qualified) in Latin language and literature at Bordeaux Montaigne University, translator of Petronius's *Satyricon* and Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* (Arléa). She is the author of *La Vie Sexuelle à Rome* (Points).
Violaine Sébillotte Cuchet, professor of Greek history at Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne University and specialist in women's and gender history. She is the author of *Artémise, une Femme Capitaine de Vaisseaux dans l'Antiquité Grecque* (Fayard) and *Les Femmes d'Athènes* (PUF).

Cleopatra: legend, myth and icon — 3 July 2025, 7pm
Cleopatra is not just a name in ancient history. Since her defeat and death, over the centuries she has become a universal figure who has never ceased to fascinate, whether for the better or for the worse. Everything has been said about her— or almost everything. An inexhaustible inspiration of dreams and fantasies in both the East and the West, she is present in every art form. Her persona, constantly readapted and reappropriated, has travelled through the centuries to reach us today in a long chain of interwoven works echoing each other and born of one another. It is an exceptional destiny for the most famous woman in history.

With
Luisa Capodieci, professor of modern art history at the University of Lorraine, organiser of the three-part international colloquium *Immortal Egypt. The Afterlife of Egypt in Early Modern Visual Art* (London- Rome-Paris, 2023) and author of *L'Oeil d'Osiris. Visions de l'Égypte dans l'Art Profane de la Renaissance entre France et Italie* (Droz, 2025).
Lauren Malka, author of *Mangeuses. Histoire de Celles qui Dévorent, Savourent ou se Privent à l'Excès* (Pérégrines). She contributed to the book *Elles ne Sont pas Celles que Vous Croyez. Un Regard Féministe sur l'Histoire* (Rageot/Causette), in which she takes a fresh look at Cleopatra.
Esmeralda Kosmatopoulos, multidisciplinary artist who works on the notions of identity and femininity between the East and West.
Mathias Auclair, director of the music department at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, and musicologist.
Iman Moinzadeh, collection and exhibitions manager at IMA

Cleopatra and the queens of the East — 10 July 2025, 7pm
Other powerful women of the ancient eastern world, whether real or mythical, have been compared to Cleopatra. What is the origin of the legendary Semiramis, queen of Babylon, builder, warrior and conqueror? Was the Nabataean queen Huldu, adorned with the crown of the Egyptian goddess Isis, a Nabataean Cleopatra at the time when Al-Khazneh, the emblematic monument in Petra, Jordan was being built? Who was Zenobia, who according to a long-standing false tradition is depicted as the queen of Palmyra, the Syrian town from which she came?

With
Nathalie Bondil, associate curator, director of IMA Museum and Exhibitions, art historian and 19th-century specialist.
Sophie Laribi-Glaudel, PhD in ancient history, lecturer at the University of Lorraine and history teacher at the Lycée Claude Gellée in Épinal.
Maurice Sartre, former professor of ancient history, specialist in the Greco-Roman eastern Mediterranean from Alexander to the Islamic conquest; author of a biography of Cleopatra (Tallandier) and co-author of another on Zenobia (Perrin).

IMA Literary Events

***Moi, Cléopâtre, Dernière Reine d'Egypte, Éditions Dargaud & Cléopâtre. Mémoires Secrets,* Éditions Plon** — Tuesday 17 June 2025, 7pm

Through these two different works, a common thread emerges: the challenge of embodying, in the first person, Egypt's most emblematic queen. She is a figure about whom we know both little and a great deal. Despite a fictional aspect, which allows the authors to take certain liberties when it comes to areas where historical accuracy is impossible to achieve, their incarnations of Cleopatra retrace the major historical events of her life with precision and rigor. However, their attempts reveal an essential fact: Cleopatra, although a historical figure, is also, and above all, a fictional character.

With
Isabelle Dethan (script, drawing, colours)
Sydney H. Aufrère (author)

Educational activities and outreach

Guided tours

How did the myth of history's most popular female figure come to be, and what forms did it take on over the centuries? To answer these questions, a docent will take visitors on a journey through time, from Antiquity to contemporary societies.

Individuals (all audiences)
14 June to 26 October 2025, Saturdays at 4:30pm and Sundays at 2:30 and 4:30pm

Reservations at imarabe.org

Groups
From 11 June 2025 to 11 January 2026, Tuesday to Sunday 10am to 4pm

Reservations for schools:
groupes@imarabe.org
Passculture@imarabe.org
Social sector:
champsocial@imarabe.org
People with disabilities:
accessibilite@imarabe.org

Tours in LSF
Visits in French sign language in collaboration with the association Signes de Sens
Sundays, 5 September and 7 December 2025 from 3 to 4:30pm

Reservations:
accessibilite@imarabe.org

Awareness-raising tours
For outreach workers in the social, disabilities and healthcare fields
Tuesday, 1 July 2025 from 11am to 12:30pm, and Wednesday, 17 September 2025 from 4:30pm to 6pm.

Social sector: information and reservations at champsocial@imarabe.org
Disabled visitors: information and reservations at accessibilite@imarabe.org

Workshops

Popup workshop: Build your own pyramid! Led by Natalie Janer
Based on the illustrated books *Petit Chou et la Momie qui Perdait ses Bandelettes* and *Petit Chou et les Voleurs de Pyramides*, this workshop invites children and parents to work together to create a pop-up pyramid they can personalise and which folds in and out of an Egyptian decor. Followed by a book signing.

Ages 7+
Saturday, 28 June 2025 at 3pm

Drawing workshop with the authors of *Les Petits Mythos*. Led by Christophe Cazenove and Philippe Larbier
Based on the special issue of *Les Petits Mythos Présentent: la Mythologie Égyptienne*, participants will learn how to draw their favourite characters and how to depict ancient Egyptian gods (like Isis) with a taste of humour. Followed by a book signing.

Ages 7+
Wednesday, 9 July 2025 at 3pm.

Hieroglyphics workshop: Deciphering the secrets of the pharaohs. Led by Amandine Marshall
Learn how to write your name in hieroglyphics: an introduction to hieroglyphics led by Amandine Marshall, Egyptologist and scriptwriter of *Petit Chou et la Momie qui Perdait ses Bandelettes*, and co-writer of *Petits Mythos Présentent: la Mythologie Égyptienne*. The program includes a fun, interactive introduction followed by an immersive workshop.

Ages 7 to 99
Saturday, 27 September 2025 at 3pm.

And also… scented, guided outreach activities.
More information at imarabe.org

IMA warmly thanks the TotalEnergies Foundation for its support of IMA's educational activities, and Givaudan for its support of artists and scented outreach activities.

The bookshop

In addition to a wide selection of books for adults and children celebrating the legendary figure of Cleopatra, the bookshop is inaugurating for the first time in its history a **pop-up store**. Arts and crafts, objects and goodies inspired by ancient Egypt, refined stationery and original creations will be available for purchase.

The library

To extend the exhibition visit, the library offers a rich collection of books and films about Cleopatra. Literature, history, documentaries, major films and cartoons are available to help visitors understand the many facets of the queen of Egypt. Books and films can be consulted on site, or borrowed and taken home. The library also owns the 18 volumes of the *Description de l'Egypte* published between 1809 and 1818, some of which are featured in the exhibition.

Space rental

IMA's space rental service offers special tours of the exhibition for companies. Further information: espaces@imarabe.org / +33 (0)1 40 51 39 78

Institut du monde arabe

Jack Lang,
President

Philippe Castro,
Director of the President's Office

Inès Ben Kraïem,
Diplomatic adviser to the president

Chawki Abdelamir,
General director

Annette Poehlmann,
Secretary general

Museum and Exhibitions Department

Elodie Bouffard,
Exhibition manager

Léa Brüzek,
Production manager

Garance Panerai,
Exhibition assistant

David Briend,
Technical registrar

Fabienne Hereng,
Administrative coordinator

Scenography

Agence Clémence Farrell

Curatorship

General curator

Claude Mollard,
Special advisor to the president

Scientific curators

Christiane Ziegler,
Egyptologist, honorary director of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the Musée du Louvre

Christian-Georges Schwentzel,
university professor of ancient history, director of the University of Lorraine History Department

Associate curators

Nathalie Bondil,
director of museum and exhibitions, IMA

Iman Moinzadeh,
collections and exhibitions manager, IMA

Communications department

Martin Garagnon,
director

Mériam Kettani-Tirot,
head of communications and media partnerships

Yann Pichonnière,
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Marion Toulat,
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Practical information

Access

Institut du monde arabe
1, rue des Fossés-Saint-Bernard
Place Mohammed V – 75005 Paris
+33 (0)1 40 51 38 38 / www.imarabe.org

Metro access:
Jussieu, Cardinal-Lemoine,
Sully-Morland

Bus :
24, 63, 67, 75, 86, 87, 89

Exhibition from 11 June 2025 to 11 January 2026

Temporary exhibition rooms
(levels 1 and 2)

Opening hours

From 11 to 30 June 2025 and from 1 September 2025 to 11 January 2026

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 10am – 6pm
Wednesday: 10am – 9:30pm (night visits)
Saturday: 10am – 8pm
Sunday: 10am – 7pm

July / August 2025

Tuesday, Thursday, Friday: 11am – 7pm
Wednesday: 11am – 9:30pm (night visits)
Saturday: 11am – 8pm
Sunday: 11am – 7pm

Ticket offices close 45 minutes before closing time
Closed on Mondays

Prices

Full price: €15, €13 (reduced), €7 (under 26 yrs),
€34 (family, 2 adults/2 children)
and under 12 yrs free

Join IMA on social networks: Facebook,
Instagram, TikTok, YouTube

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