

Portrait of an Ideal Ptolemaic Queen

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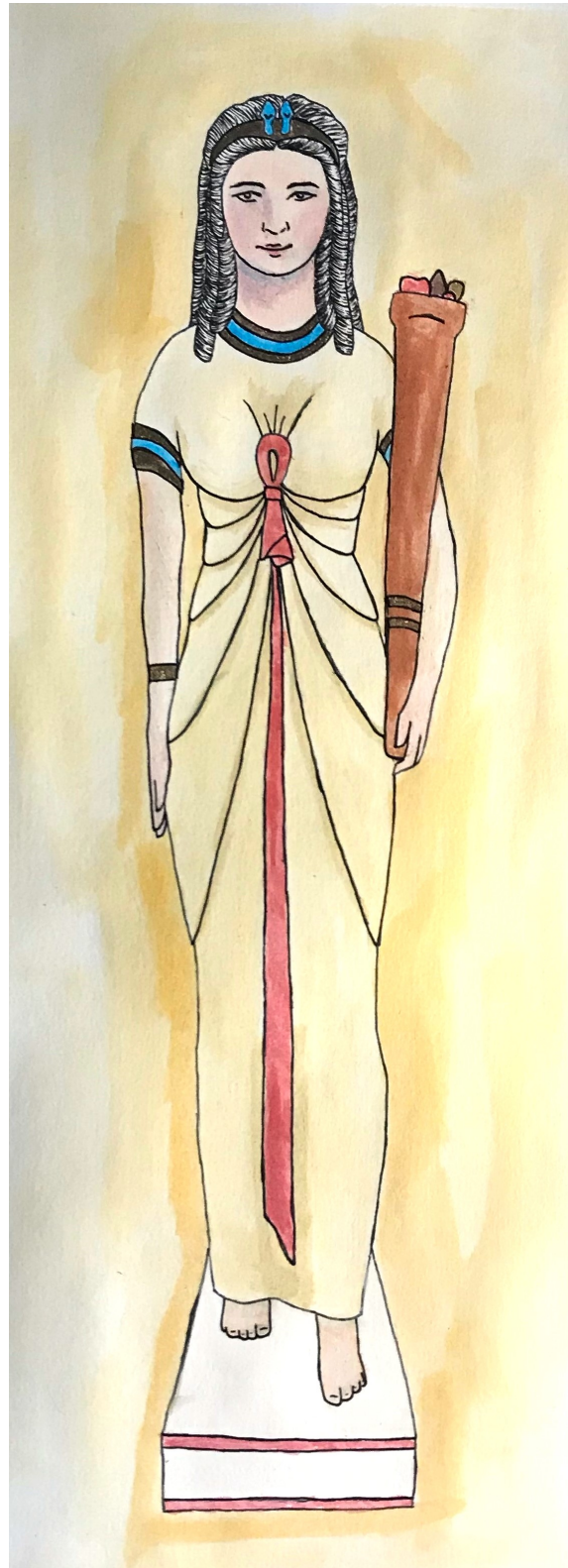
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Epic Threads

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Materials: Gouache, ink, and enamel on paper

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Royal portraiture has always been about far more than simply achieving a likeness of the subject. Portraiture of the Ptolemaic queens of Egypt was regularly used as a political tool to further Ptolemaic interests by presenting an idealized image of the queen. Queens sometimes co-ruled with their husbands and were often presented as sharing in the king's royal power, so it was essential for the queen to be depicted as a good wife and a capable ruler. Important characteristics for a Ptolemaic queen included divinity, beauty, fertility, and nobility. As the Ptolemaic dynasty joined together Egyptian and Greek cultures, the rulers had to legitimize their rule over Egypt while also retaining their essential Greekness. Therefore, Ptolemaic portraiture frequently combines Egyptian and Greek art styles. The Ptolemies drew connections between themselves and Egyptian and Greek gods, which over time led them to represent themselves as living gods. This can be seen in portraits of the queens that include symbols of goddesses like Isis and Hera. As the Ptolemies frequently practiced sibling marriage, evoking the divine sibling marriages of Isis and Osiris and of Hera and Zeus legitimized the practice and created an image of a divine, unified royal couple. While researching Ptolemaic queenly portraiture, I became fascinated by how every element of a portrait was carefully chosen to construct an ideal image for the viewer and influence their opinion of the actual queen.

This piece is my interpretation of what the ideal Ptolemaic queen might have looked like. For inspiration, I consulted existing portraiture of Ptolemaic queens and considered how ideal queenly traits could be depicted. For my portrait, I tried to illustrate multiple characteristics of the ideal Ptolemaic queen. I used rich colours, such as gold and blue, in the clothing to demonstrate the queen's wealth. I also tried to emulate the elegant simplicity of ancient portraiture through my linework. Since the Ptolemies were ethnically Greek, I based the facial features on mid-period portraits with a strong Greek influence, which often featured rounded faces, soft smiles, and oval eyes with thickened eyebrows.¹ The following images show some of the ancient artistic depictions of Ptolemaic queens that visually influenced my own piece.



Figure 1. Head of a Queen, Perhaps Cleopatra II or Cleopatra III. 140-120 BCE. The Walters Museum.

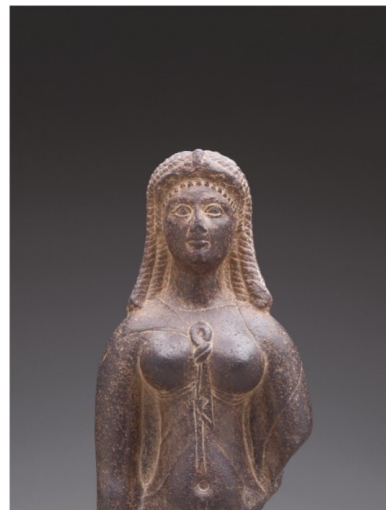


Figure 2. Late Ptolemaic Queen in the Guise of the Goddess Isis. 80-50 BCE. Yale University Art Gallery.

Hair had deep significance for the queens, and full hair was regarded as feminine and divine, demonstrating the queen's fertility and her link to goddesses like Hathor and Isis.² For my own art piece, I chose a corkscrew-curl wig for the hairstyle. I felt that the full, luxurious black curls would be a strong visual signifier for viewers of the queen's youth, wealth, and femininity. The corkscrew-curl wig, seen in Figures

¹Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, 70.

²Kim, "(Be)Holding the Beautiful Bodies of Ptolemaic Queens," 139.

1 and 2, was an important symbol of Ptolemaic queenship and is heavily associated with Isis.³ By wearing the guise of Isis, queens could emphasize their divinity and maternal nature.

The queen's body in portraiture can also be used to visually depict her fertility and role as a wife and mother. A loving relationship with the king and the ability to produce and raise heirs were essential attributes for the queen; thus, she needed to appear both desirable and maternal. As seen in Figure 2, the bodies of Ptolemaic queens were frequently sexualized in portraiture and presented as beautiful, youthful, and feminine, with exaggerated hips and breasts, which I tried to emulate in this portrait.⁴

The diadem is the most prevalent headdress for the Ptolemaic queens, and it is often augmented with one or more uraei.⁵ The diadem is a signifier of royalty in both Greek and Egyptian culture, but it appears more frequently in Greek-style Ptolemaic portraiture, and the wider diadem has Greek origins.⁶ While the uraeus is a symbol of power used to identify the pharaoh as the rightful ruler and protector against chaos, the symbol was also used for queens and deities. The double uraeus could represent the close relationship between the queen and her brother-husband.⁷ I included the diadem and double uraeus in the ideal queen portrait to highlight her connections to both Greece and Egypt, as well as to show her power as a ruler and the strength of her marriage.

The garment in the portrait is strongly associated with Isis and is regularly worn in queenly portraiture to emulate the goddess.⁸ It includes a tunic undergarment and an overmantle knotted distinctively at the breast in a tyet,⁹ with elaborate drapery below.¹⁰ An example of the tyet and draping style in ancient art can be seen in Figure 2. The connection to Isis emphasizes the queen's divinity, and the elaborate knotting and draping demonstrate her wealth and austere nobility.

The queen holds a cornucopia in the portrait, which is a significant symbol of Ptolemaic queenship. It was originally associated with the cult of Arsinoë II and symbolizes abundance and fertility.¹¹ As ruler and protector of Egypt, an association with wealth and abundance was a highly positive trait for a queen to have.

This portrait displays many of the traits of the ideal Ptolemaic queen. These traits highlight the queen's devotion to her husband, her role as a mother, and her deification. In my depiction, I drew on many of the features of ancient royal portraits, such as full hair, luxurious clothing, and divine symbolism. The attributes illustrated here all combine to create the image of a noble, beautiful, divine queen of Egypt who could lead her kingdom and be remembered for centuries to come.

³Kim, "(Be)Holding the Beautiful Bodies of Ptolemaic Queens," 141.

⁴Kim, "(Be)Holding the Beautiful Bodies of Ptolemaic Queens," 138.

⁵An uraeus is a rearing cobra.

⁶Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, 35.

⁷Carney, *Arsinoë of Egypt and Macedon*, 8; Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, 34.

⁸Kim, "(Be)Holding the Beautiful Bodies of Ptolemaic Queens," 141.

⁹A tyet is an Isis knot.

¹⁰Kim, "(Be)Holding the Beautiful Bodies of Ptolemaic Queens," 141; Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, 37.

¹¹Stanwick, *Portraits of the Ptolemies*, 37.

References

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Image Sources

- Figure 1: Head of a Queen, Perhaps Cleopatra II or Cleopatra III. 140–120 BCE. The Walters Art Museum.
<https://art.thewalters.org/object/22.407/>
- Figure 2: Late Ptolemaic Queen in the Guise of the Goddess Isis. 80–50 BCE. Yale University Art Gallery.
<https://artgallery.yale.edu/collections/objects/4694>

