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## Goddess Maat

RISD Museum

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I am Gina Borromeo, Curator of Ancient Art at the RISD Museum. Today we are looking at the Egyptian bronze figure of the goddess Maat.

Seated on an openwork altar, her hands are resting on her knees and her legs are drawn close to her body. On her head is an ostrich feather, her symbol, which also represented truth in ancient Egypt.

Maat was both a personification and a concept. Maat was considered a cosmic force that held chaos at bay. It was the force of truth and order. But Maat was also the personified form of those very concepts, and as such, she was a goddess who was able to receive worship.

This figure demonstrates the strong connection, the inter-relatedness, of text and image in ancient Egypt. This figure is not only a three-dimensional representation of Maat, but in profile it is the hieroglyph, the sign, for Maat. I have always been drawn to this figure—how it's so self-contained and symmetrical and balanced. And I think that even if you didn't know that this figure represented the goddess Maat or that in side view it was the hieroglyph for Maat, you would still be pulled in to engage with it. The figure represents balance and harmony, and to me it represents Maat literally and figuratively.

Hi. I'm Ingrid Neuman, Museum Conservator at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum. I'm here today to talk about Maat, an Egyptian sculpture that you can see at the RISD Museum.

Maat is an interesting ancient sculpture that is composed of bronze, and it was cast in antiquity.

What fascinates me about Maat is the surface of the sculpture. Currently, Maat has a rich brown coloration, which is not necessarily how it would have been seen in ancient times, or at the time of excavation.

It was very popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century to clean off the original encrustations and the corrosion that would have been there from antiquity. The reason why archaeologists might have done this type of cleaning was because they wanted to look at the surface detail of the sculpture. Originally, there most likely would have been a lot of precious metal inlay. And when I examined this sculpture under the microscope, I was able to see some black delineation around the eyes of Maat, which is still extant and is most likely original.

So what we see today on Maat is more of an 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> century surface. It's a very beautiful velvety brown, a very rich, shiny surface, which is gorgeous to our eye. But we have lost some detail, except around the eyes, so I would really encourage visitors who come here to look very closely at the sculpture and try to discern the black delineation which is still present.

So in spite of this sculpture's undoubtedly long history of burial and excavation, ownership, conservation, restoration, care, I think this sculpture is stunningly beautiful and is being safely preserved here at the RISD Museum.