

On the Status and Purposes of Ancient Egyptian Art

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No term in the ancient Egyptian language corresponds neatly with Western usages of 'art', and Egyptologists have often argued that there is no such thing as 'Egyptian art'. Yet aesthetically organized structures and artefacts constitute the majority of evidence from Egypt, a legacy created mainly for a small élite. The genres of these materials, all of which had functions additional to the purely aesthetic, are similar to those of many other cultures. They constitute a repository of civilizational values, related to the system of hieroglyphic writing, that was maintained and transmitted across periods. Civilization and artistic style are almost identified with each other. Funerary material constitutes one central context for artistic forms; others are temples and such poorly-preserved locations as palaces. The importance attached to artistic activities in Egypt, high-cultural involvement in them, and idiosyncratic developments can be illustrated from many periods. Egyptian art is a typically inward-looking and almost self-sustaining product of a professional group. It is no less 'art' for the wide range of functions and purposes it fulfilled.

The definition and evaluation of works of art and of art as a phenomenon continue to vex archaeologists, among others. What is intuitively seen as art looms large in the material and textual record of recent millennia and responds ill to analyses that ignore either its élite character or its symbolic and aesthetic meanings. The oldest, Palaeolithic contexts in which such meanings are at issue have been discussed in this journal by Bednarik (1992), Chase & Dibble (1992), and Davidson (1992). Their discussion focuses on artefacts derived from what can only be non-complex societies; while their symbolism is crucial, their social divisiveness and social status are not. In addition to questions of symbolism, issues of definition and status are insistent for many complex societies, in part because art may be embedded in those societies in ways that many see as different from those of the contemporary world. These contrasts do not affect the prominence of artistic phenomena — however defined — in the record; so far as ancient and modern contexts can be compared, they often appear more prominent than analogous phenomena in contemporary societies.

In studying many societies, especially those approached through the material record, it is desirable to seek clarity — final agreement is beyond reach — in these matters of the definition, and still more of the status, of art. Ancient Egypt offers a paradigm example, both because artistic phenomena are so salient in its preserved record and because of the pattern of modern discussion.¹ The background within Egyptology is well illustrated by the opening of the first paper in *Studien zur altägyptischen Kunstgeschichte*, which derives from a conference on Egyptian art history in 1987 (the author encapsulates a view rather than subscribes to it):

Strictly speaking, there can be no 'art history' — that is, academic documentation and interpretation of 'works of art' and study of the development of their motifs, forms, and styles — in our field, because, according to the general view, there are no Egyptian works of art, in the common understanding of a category of things distinct from other artefacts . . . (Junge 1990, 1; trans. John Baines)

Egyptologists, especially the linguists among them, have observed that there was no indigenous

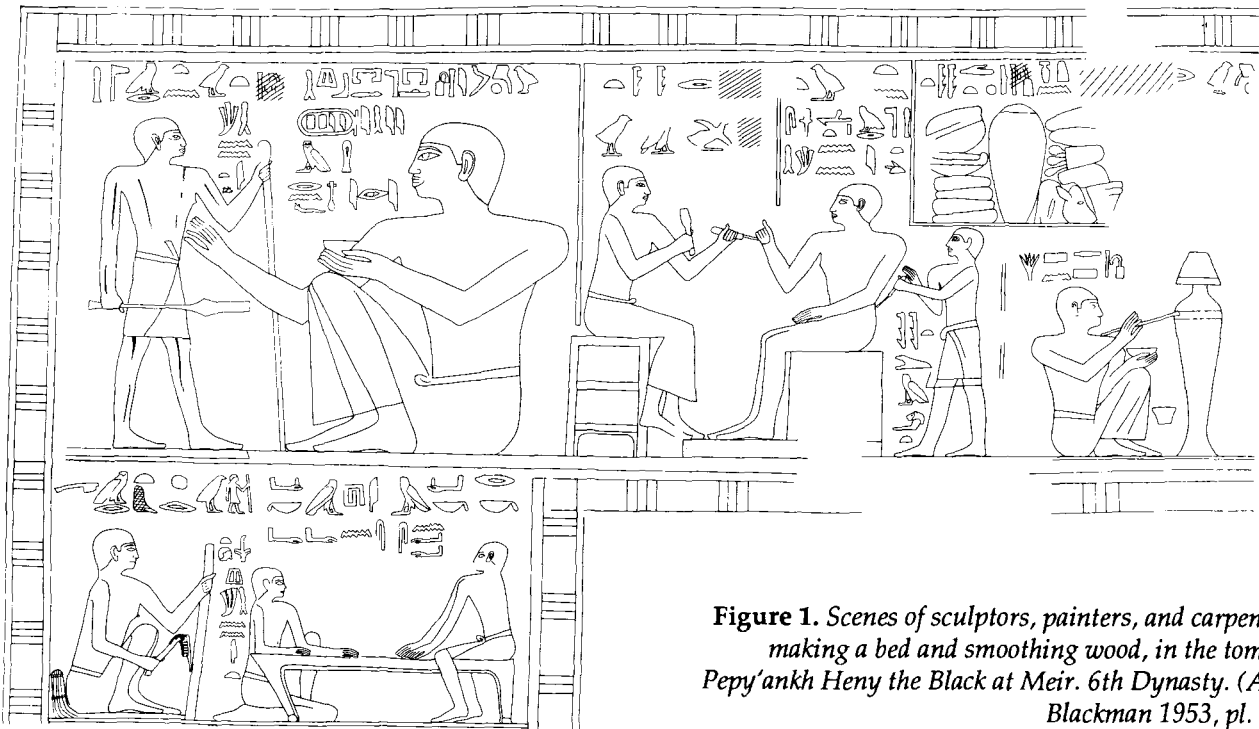


Figure 1. Scenes of sculptors, painters, and carpenters making a bed and smoothing wood, in the tomb of Pepy'ankh Heny the Black at Meir. 6th Dynasty. (After Blackman 1953, pl. 18.)

Egyptian category of 'art', the nearest approach to such a thing being the word *hmt*, which is normally rendered 'craft' (see also n. 5 here). Thus, the argument runs, not only can works of art not be identified as a distinct group, but the Egyptians had no notion of 'art'. The statement just quoted can be contrasted with an article on 'Artists and artisans in pharaonic Egypt', which uses a different approach and mode of reasoning to assert that:

The majority of what is preserved from ancient Egypt consists of the products of artisans and artists who mastered techniques of working with, and giving a pleasing form to, such materials as wood, stone, metal, ivory, glass, leather, faience, and clay. . . . Today most people assume automatically that these pieces belong to the category of 'art'. (Drenkhahn, in press)

My initial aims here are to suggest ways of bridging the gap between these two statements and to consider how a definition of the status and character of art can profitably be related to its social context. The first quotation is an extreme formulation of a view most favoured by linguists, in part because of its correlation with arguments about the word *hmt*; it is unlikely to command wide acceptance. The formulation is, however, valuable because it exemplifies the problems of reconciling largely philological evidence with the chiefly artefactual basis for the position summarized in the second quotation, and with approaches that focus on art as a social institution.

Theoretical context and definition

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of how to define art. What is relevant here is the widespread perception that art is a virtual universal, not because everyone is an artist or a connoisseur, but because most — perhaps all — societies exhibit phenomena of extremely diverse character that can be interpreted as 'art'. This is despite problems of evaluation and disputes over what is and is not 'art'. Contrary to the first sentence of E.H. Gombrich's renowned *The Story of Art* (1972, 4), I would argue that there is 'such a thing as art'. Although some modern critical attitudes may suggest otherwise, art is a social more than an individual phenomenon, and works of art have their primary significance and interpretation in their originating society, as against the secondary aesthetic response of a modern viewer which Rosemarie Drenkhahn evokes in her acute formulation. Both the art historian and the iconologist need to seek a definition or a frame of reference that is oriented towards the patrons, creators and consumers of art in the producing society and to the institution of art which they create and sustain.

It seems hardly possible to arrive at a rigorous and generally acceptable definition of art; approaches such as that of Wollheim (1980) relate to different issues from those I address here. But this difficulty does not imply that the phenomenon of art does not exist, any more than the great difficulty linguists experience in defining the 'word' means that words do

not exist. As in much humanistic study, there is an unavoidable circularity in processes of identification and circumscription.

An initial weakness in the Egyptological view cited earlier relates to the linguistic argument derived from the word *hmt*. If a word for 'art' — or, as is more often proposed, 'craft' — is identified and its meaning analyzed, this may not be revealing for the question of which phenomena in the ancient society should be called 'art'. Instead, it may principally provide a foil for discussion of the modern term 'art', whose meaning itself changes. While familiar Western meanings have parallels in the Classical world, they hardly date farther back than the Renaissance or even the nineteenth century. Such problems of fit between concepts and usages of different periods may be best met by adopting a middle ground.

To object to seeing Egyptian art as 'art' because the etymology or 'true' meaning of Egyptian *hmt* is 'craft' is in any case incorrect. Etymology is not a good a guide to usage and meaning, and moreover there are parallels, not least in Western tradition, for an evolution from ideas of 'craft' to more value-laden ones of 'art'. In the reverse direction, the word *hmt* has usages parallel to those of Western 'art', as when the skills of a doctor or lector priest are termed his *hmt* (e.g. Erman & Grapow 1929, 84), like the Western 'physician's art'; but since in such cases only the high prestige of the contexts leads one to render 'art' rather than 'craft', this alternative throws the burden of interpretation away from particular genres and back on social factors. These analogies do not in themselves imply that the Egyptian word or concept had a spread of meaning comparable to those of 'art' in modern times, but they leave the question open. Without wishing to pursue this issue further, I suggest that it is legitimate to use the extraneous category of 'art' to explore ancient material, provided that the term's fragility in any context is kept in mind and an institutionally based understanding is sought. Models of actors' perspectives on the institution of art should include the positions of both patrons and executants. It is possible to approach these perspectives through extant works and their social context, as well as through descriptive texts or the analysis of ancient terminology.

The second Egyptological objection to employing the concept of art, presented by Friedrich Junge in the first quotation above, is that works of art did not form a single category or perform a single function (I return to this issue on p. 76). The same, however, applies in essence to many or most forms of artistic production, although there are distractingly

paradigmatic exceptions in Classical and Western societies where a premium is placed on the artist and on high-value mobile works of art. At a lower level, such phenomena as the material acquired in the contemporary world for its local or touristic interest also form exceptions. For many traditions, the fact that works have definite and various functions and can be analyzed in terms of those functions is not seen as detracting from their status as 'works of art' or as lessening the desirability of analyzing them in artistic as well as functional terms. In any case, rather few categories of artefact have only one function. Architecture is essentially functional, while remaining the premier art form for many societies.

Although it is impossible to define art to general satisfaction, some indication of what is meant here is needed. I suggest that ancient Egyptian works of art are products, created for any purpose, that exhibit a surplus of order and aesthetic organization which goes beyond the narrowly functional. Such a definition is not intended to be evaluative of quality, as against ordering and aesthetic intent, and it hardly addresses genre or the cultural significance of works of art. It can, however, incorporate rituals and performing arts. In essence it is close to the characterization of Drenkhahn cited earlier. It is also probably compatible with the usage of *hmt*, but it focuses on the product rather than the skills which went into its making. The definition is partial in taking this focus and in appearing to neglect the social institutions that made, utilized, and valued the products. An awareness of this social dimension is indeed necessary for a full definition, but it cannot easily be incorporated into a brief formulation.

This definition should be contrasted with two offered by Egyptologists. Both of these focus on representation. Junge (1990, 15–19) proposes that one thing which makes Egyptian representational work into 'art' is that its practitioners were not engaged in a craft pursuit but in rendering an almost Platonic 'idea'. Although representational works tend to derive from one another more than to copy nature, and Junge's approach does not effectively address this aspect, it does render some justice to the conceptual nature of representation. Yet representation has such a nature in many or most artistic traditions and it is difficult to see in what way Junge's position would bring ancient Egyptian and Western art under a single rubric.² Roland Tefnin (1991b, 76–8), who concentrates on two-dimensional works, takes a still more restrictive view, seeing as most strongly 'art' those works which exploit and make play with normal representational conventions to achieve unusual effects.



Figure 2. Colossal statue of Min from Koptos. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1894.105e. Limestone. Late fourth millennium. (Courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum.)

These definitions respond to the elaborate and high-cultural character of traditions in complex societies, but they do not relate representational works to

their use by patrons or to the commonality of purpose and style between architecture, representational art, and decorative arts. Furthermore, play with representational forms is also characteristic of strongly decorative traditions that are very different from that of Egypt, and it is not uniquely high-cultural. Thus these definitions describe aspects of Egyptian art that can be paralleled in traditions and societies of many types. The centrality of style to high-cultural traditions is nonetheless vital. A civilization and a style are nearly coextensive. A style is a crucial vehicle of discourse and of the maintenance of a society's identity; development of and rupture with styles are matters of great importance. This role of style, which is easily perceived in Egypt, is less dominant in many later traditions.

Social contexts and divisions

Art and exclusion

If the majority of the preserved Egyptian record has a deliberate aesthetic organization, and definitions of art can accommodate that point, it is desirable to establish an interpretive framework that will incorporate this aesthetic character, and to set it within the ancient society and its values.

The record focuses on monumental tomb complexes and temples. The materials used in both were generally more durable than those used in structures designed for the living. Tombs were sited where possible in the desert and thus have a disproportionate chance of survival. Although this bias in the sources is not accidental and says something about what mattered to the élite, tombs and temples do not exhaust the contexts in which art might be located. Other important but largely lost loci include palaces (e.g. O'Connor 1993) and the houses and estates of the élite;³ fortresses, too, are highly patterned and not narrowly functional (cf. Trigger 1993, 75–7). Wherever static art was set up, mobile art was probably present and, at least in relation to Egyptian influence abroad (e.g. Teissier 1988), was evidently most important; yet it is very largely lost.

Characteristically Egyptian artistic culture of the Dynastic Period (from c. 3000) transformed its prehistoric precursors, and the new art and culture were available only to the élite (Baines 1989b). Not only was the transformed élite art specialized in its techniques, style and iconography, it was also a typical art of a professional group. Its mode of execution, its choice of materials (which required great expenditure of resources and technical specialization) and its complex and complete integration of writing removed

it from the purview of all but the *élite*, who could commission works or receive them as largesse and could in principle read what was written on them. (The works' potential for imparting status could have been independent of whether patrons comprehended them aesthetically or iconographically.)

What cannot be established, and indeed seems unlikely, is that the life and even the death of those outside the *élite* — that is, of most people — included much that was aesthetically formed. As in most complex societies, art was mainly of and for the *élite*, and it excluded the rest of society, who hardly had access to its products. So far as the non-*élite* subscribed to *élite* values, they were deprived of the potential to exploit artistic forms, partly by wealth and partly by genre. In respect of genre, enduring artefacts that might have been typical of the non-*élite* seem to have been largely eliminated from the acknowledged repertory or to have been devalued in importance. The daily activities of the non-*élite* are unlikely to have included much that was artistic, except among those who made artistic products or served the *élite*. Whether there were distinctive artistic activities and traditions outside the *élite* can hardly be known. While the non-*élite* could have possessed artistic forms in perishable materials that leave no record, and have used them in settlements that are inaccessible to archaeology, the prestige attaching to *élite*-controlled materials and contexts makes it improbable that the *élite* would have valued such things highly. A comparable phenomenon that does seem to have occurred is that a few activities relating to certain areas of human activity, such as fertility, lay outside standard high-cultural forms. Fertility figurines do not conform to general representational conventions, yet their use appears to have been common to all accessible strata of society (Pinch 1993, 198–234).

This issue can be formulated in terms of how far one can speak of 'two cultures' or of a counter-culture. Jan Assmann (e.g. 1991, 16–31) has proposed that there were 'two cultures' in Egypt, the monumental, religious and aesthetic on the one hand and the everyday on the other, and that these are characterized by the use of stone, or of mud brick and perishable materials, respectively. He further suggests that this distinction is part of the Egyptian orientation towards permanence and towards the next world, and is thus especially characteristic of Egyptian civilization. Yet such privileging of particular forms and materials occurs in many societies and is not confined to complex ones; a selective privileging of architectural genres also has parallels in other civilizations. I suggest rather that the institutions on which

Assmann focuses were even more socially exclusive than he implies, since they prescribed the correct cultural forms and materials as constituting societal values and surrounded central cultural practices with a barrier of expertise. The only chance those outside the *élite* had to participate in artistic culture was by imitating the forms of their betters in materials and styles that were not appreciated. This barrier separating high culture from the rest was modelled through a system of decorum that circumscribed the content of representational art and focused ultimately on the world of the gods.⁴

Thus the *élite* appropriated resources and restricted materially and symbolically what was available to others. Deprivation by poverty is typical of complex societies, but probably less characteristic of non-complex ones where wealth, which tends to take the form of people as much as of things, often imposes on its possessor the obligation to exploit and disburse it for general consumption. In this sense, the phenomena considered by Assmann typify complex societies, which also exploit powerful means of creating value and social definition through style.

This specialization of artistic culture and aesthetic deprivation of the non-*élite* can be seen in various contexts. The basic living quarters in planned settlements attached to major constructions of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms (e.g. Hölscher 1934, pl. 2; 1951, 13–15) have an almost industrial uniformity in layout and style (for implications, see Kemp 1989, 111–80; Richards 1992, 37–46). Ceramics of most periods, which were used by everyone, had few aesthetic pretensions and were very seldom decorated. The *élite* could look to containers in metal, stone and Egyptian faience (which may have been a rather more widely distributed luxury ware), whereas mass-produced pottery is virtually all that survives from other people. The highly uniform ceramics suggest provision or organization by the centre or a strongly hegemonic non-high culture. This drab uniformity removed the aesthetic potential of a vital and universal material. The aesthetic devaluation of ceramics, as is generally found, for example, in Mesopotamia, contrasts with their contemporaneous development in the rather less complex and centralized polities of Nubia and Sudan, where they remained aesthetically significant (see e.g. Bourriau 1981, 97–112).

This evidence addresses the non-*élite* only to a limited extent. Any aesthetic life the agricultural population outside national and regional centres may have enjoyed, perhaps largely in ephemeral media, is almost unknown. The evidence of pottery points



Figure 3. Statue base of Djoser from the entrance colonnade of the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara; the inscription on the left names the 'chief sculptor Imhotep' Limestone. 3rd Dynasty. (Rephotographed from Firth et al. 1935, pl. 58.)

towards their participation in universal forms, but hardly towards access to the more aesthetic manifestations of those forms (for a valuable range of material, see Pinch 1993). So far as they partook in central forms, their limited access to the appropriate materials and arenas constituted a cultural deprivation, reinforcing the exclusive position of the small élite group who could participate more fully.

Artistic genres and executants

Thus, the inevitable concentration of studies of art on central élite works has its full meaning only if the exclusivity of those works and their problematic relation with the remainder of society are borne in mind, especially where the legitimizing role of art is concerned. Drenkhahn continues the passage quoted on p. 70 by noting the vast amount invested in 'artistic' production — including decorative arts as well as the core genres — from the beginning of Egyptian history onwards. The proportion of resources dedicated to this purpose seems to have increased for several centuries in the early third millennium. The majority of works fall into the widely familiar categories of architecture, sculpture in the round, relief, and painting, those which have just been alluded to as 'core genres'. The order of these is, I think, also an order of relative significance in the culture. The range of major genres can be varied and supplemented for different periods and contexts. Supplements include stone vase production, both figured and plain, in late Predynastic and Early Dynastic times (late fourth–

early third millennium; el-Khouli 1978);⁵ metal vessels, which succeeded stone ones and became extremely important (e.g. Schäfer 1903; Insley Green 1987); and jewellery (e.g. Aldred 1971a; Wilkinson 1971). The latter two raise the problems, familiar from other ancient cultures, of metals and other precious materials and how far their almost complete loss distorts the archaeological and artistic record.

Decorative arts extend the role and functions of art to areas that cannot easily be assessed but were clearly important. The use of much-recycled precious materials again lessens the number of objects preserved, in comparison with such genres as statuary and stone vases. Decorative arts are pervasive in the funerary record (e.g. D'Auria et al. 1988; Brovarski et al. 1982), encompassing all but the most basic grave goods — of which relatively few seem to have been deposited — while non-élite tombs are generally under-represented. Furthermore, there was a general aestheticization of the life of the gods (for example in their cult images), of royalty, and of the élite (cf. Assmann 1991, 200–34), which extended through such categories as jewellery and furniture to clothing (whose value could be extremely high), cosmetics, perfumes, and performing arts. All these other artistic activities will have accentuated the division of the ruling group from others, except insofar as some of the others made works of art, performed them, and in metaphorical and literal ways danced attendance on the fortunate. An acknowledged characteristic of Egyptian artistic culture, which encourages one to

view it as a whole, is its consistency of style from the largest work of architecture to the smallest piece of decorative art (e.g. Schäfer 1986, 9–68). The consistency of art forms is part of the hegemony of élite culture and may not have furthered general social integration.

Decorative arts also affect modern perceptions of ancient artists. Drenkhahn (1976; in press) argues, against Junker (1959), that the pattern of representations of artists and/or artisans (between whom it may not be advisable to distinguish), especially in non-royal tombs of the third millennium, shows that they were of similar status whether they were making beds and boxes or statues, and hence that neither the Western-style ‘Artist’ nor his aesthetically concerned patron existed. While some representations may favour such a conclusion, caution is necessary. The argument could as well also be reversed, so that the cabinet maker would be an ‘artist’ almost as much as the sculptor in wood near whom he was shown in a tomb scene (e.g. Fig. 1). While this interpretation addresses a frequent commonality of technique and personnel among those who worked in the same media, it does not take into account questions of the design of major projects, of iconography, or of the general significance of artistic production and the amount of resources it absorbed.

A distinction can also be observed between sculptors and other craftsmen shown in these scenes: only the sculptors are frequently captioned with titles and personal names, and these raise their status in relation to the others (material presented by Eaton-Krauss 1984, §§ 43, 44, 53, 53–4, Cat. 43–4). On a minimal reading, the sculptor who created the simulacrum through which the tomb owner was to exist in the next world had a more personal relationship with the tomb owner and hence a higher status than the cabinet maker enjoyed. I think it likely that this point extends further, and that the former’s activity was seen as more broadly significant than the latter’s. But this does not imply that the cabinet maker or jeweller was undervalued, because their professions were part of the same élite high-cultural complex as the sculptor’s and shared his underlying aesthetic. Their products too could exhibit the highest levels of technical and artistic skill and should be accorded a commensurate value.⁶

What the approach of Drenkhahn valuably highlights is that artists were not the free agents driven by ideas of originality and progress familiar from modern stereotypes. Those typically Western stereotypes are far from universal, and their absence in Egypt does not mean that there were no ‘artists’, or that

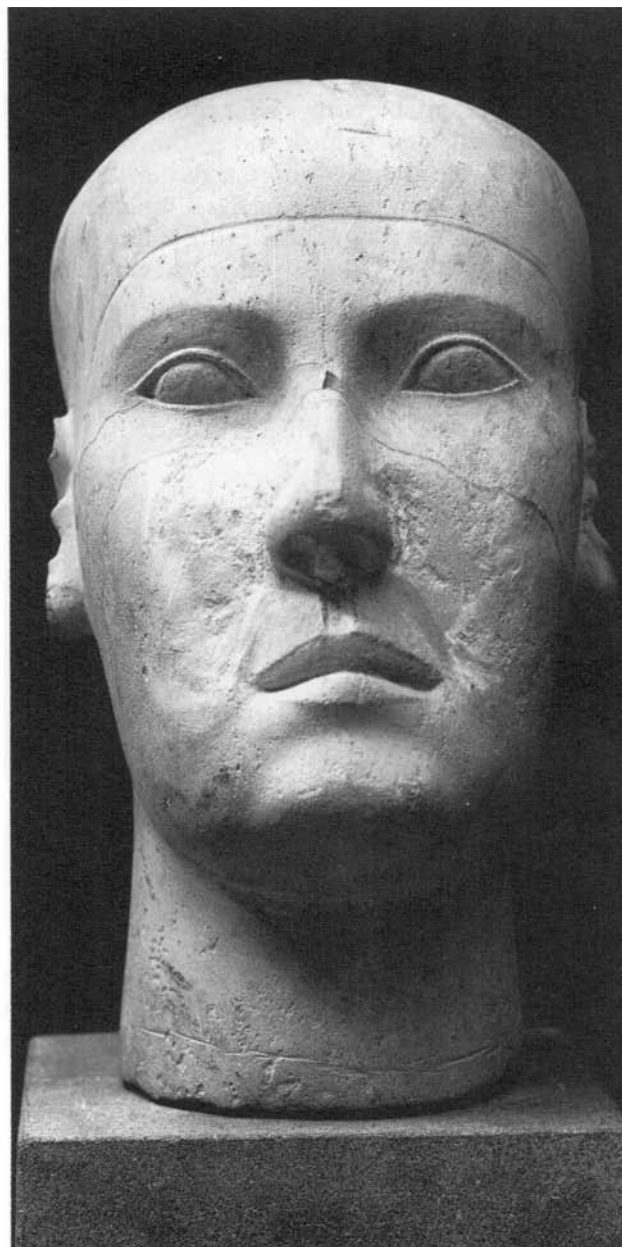


Figure 4. *Reserve head. Boston Museum of Fine Arts 14.718, from Giza (MFA negative C4362). Limestone. 4th Dynasty. (Courtesy Boston Museum of Fine Arts.)*

there exists a single type of ‘the artist’, or still less that there was no originality or innovation. Clear evidence exists for a positive role for innovation, even though textual support from among those who created or supervised works of art is sparse (but see e.g. Dziobek 1992, 52–4). Apart from these difficulties of comparison, the evidence from non-royal tombs covers only a limited number of genres of artistic activity. The creation of major and large-scale stone

sculpture is seldom represented and the design and decoration of temples and other major monuments not at all. For a variety of reasons, the preserved scenes are not suitable contexts for showing the most prestigious artistic activities, and so cannot provide evidence for the status of those activities and their executants. Nor can the role of the ultimate patron, the king, be seen in this material, which derives principally from the élite; few suitable royal contexts are preserved, and in any case restrictions of decorum make it unlikely that these things were widely depicted.

In its admirable aim to avoid imposing Occidental categories on the ancient materials, an ap-

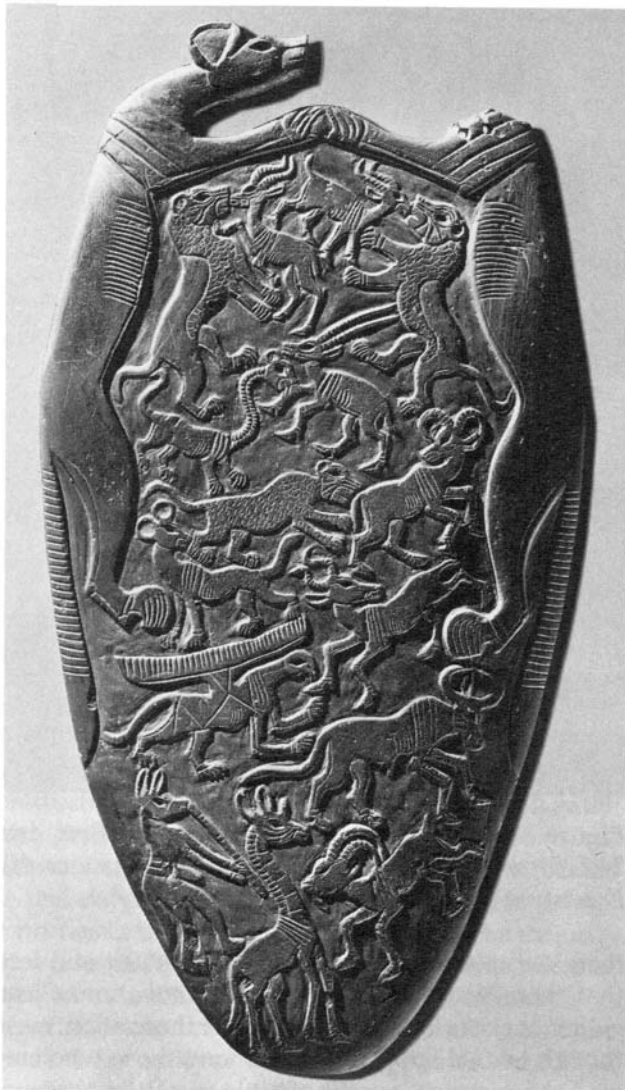


Figure 5. *The Two Dog Palette from the main deposit at Hierakonpolis. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum E.3924. Schist. Late Predynastic/Dynasty 0. (Courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum.)*

proach such as Drenkhahn's risks becoming reductive. If interpretation sticks closely to the preserved record, insufficient allowance may be made for the context and for the improbability that evidence would survive for other possibly relevant contexts. The character of discourse in the ancient society may be underestimated. It is difficult to identify discourse directly comparable to that of Western artists and commentators on art, and it can too readily be assumed that such things did not exist, rather than the more likely possibility that they were not written down or that they took different forms from those of some other cultures.

There is also the problem that writing about art is never easy — few of the greatest writings of most cultures are treatises on art. Visual art is best comprehended by viewing it and by doing it. Societies with a restricted range of written genres and subject matter may not develop a tradition of discursive writing about art, and for Egypt it is hard to see where such texts might belong. The character of Egyptian discourse about art was probably different from that of the modern West, but such discourse could still have had a comparable role or function, both among the élite and among the executants who created the works which sustained the traditions and whose workshop continuity and regroupings will have affected development profoundly. In addition to specific evidence for such discourse (see p. 77), I would allow more broadly for its presence.

The role of art in historical developments

Discussion in society and social uses of art

One difficulty for scholars who approach Egyptian art from a theoretical and actor-oriented perspective has been the rarity of texts with evidence for attitudes to art or pointers to its intrinsic significance, coupled with clear evidence for non-artistic functions of works of art. This lack of explicit statements is, however, part of the difference between ancient Near Eastern and modern Western styles of discourse: the former do not feature substantial amounts of mid-range theoretical discussion. Neither the lack of texts nor the presence of a function provides grounds for arguing that narrowly artistic concerns did not affect the production of the ancient works. Buildings, sculptures, reliefs, and paintings had specific non-artistic functions, such as to act as temples or tombs, to be objects of veneration or means of persuasion, or to be vehicles through which a deceased person's identity would receive offerings. Such a line of reasoning would also be reductive: words are a problematic

medium, yet the argument has tended to run that since in surviving records people seldom formulated a topic in words, the topic did not exist or must have had a culturally idiosyncratic meaning. In any case, the large gaps in the written record make it unwise to argue from silence. Furthermore, insistence on a single function ignores uses of works that are different in kind but have a significance of their own, such as being the locus of display or competition within a group and a mark of division between groups. Multifunctionality is to be expected.

It is, moreover, possible to point to significant Egyptian discourse about works of art that focuses on their general positive and symbolic qualities, as against their narrow functionality. Maya Müller (1990) has collected passages describing works of architecture, including the graffiti of later visitors, which show an aesthetic appreciation that also assimilates them to ideal and quasi-cosmological canons that have close parallels in integral features of the buildings' decoration and inscription. These statements do not form a sophisticated critical vocabulary, but there is no reason why they should do so, any more than would be expected of eulogies accompanying the opening of modern buildings or of the captions to picture postcards of them. Moreover, a few texts point towards more profound meanings (e.g. Assmann 1970), and the well-attested complex artistic uses of the past (e.g. Baines 1989a; Leahy 1988, ch. 6; Leahy 1992) must have involved much discussion (see also pp. 89–90 here). Some of the most important works and contexts were subject to restrictions of knowledge and access that would have made them unsuitable for public discussion. The only text that presents an artist's skills is so obscure that it appears deliberately to allude to things without revealing them (Barta 1970; see Baines 1990, 8–9).

The methodological scruples of theoreticians which I have discussed here have generally been ignored by Egyptologists working with traditional methods, and by many museum curators. These scholars categorize, analyze and evaluate works in the central genres according to methods, generally similar to those used for numerous other cultures, that

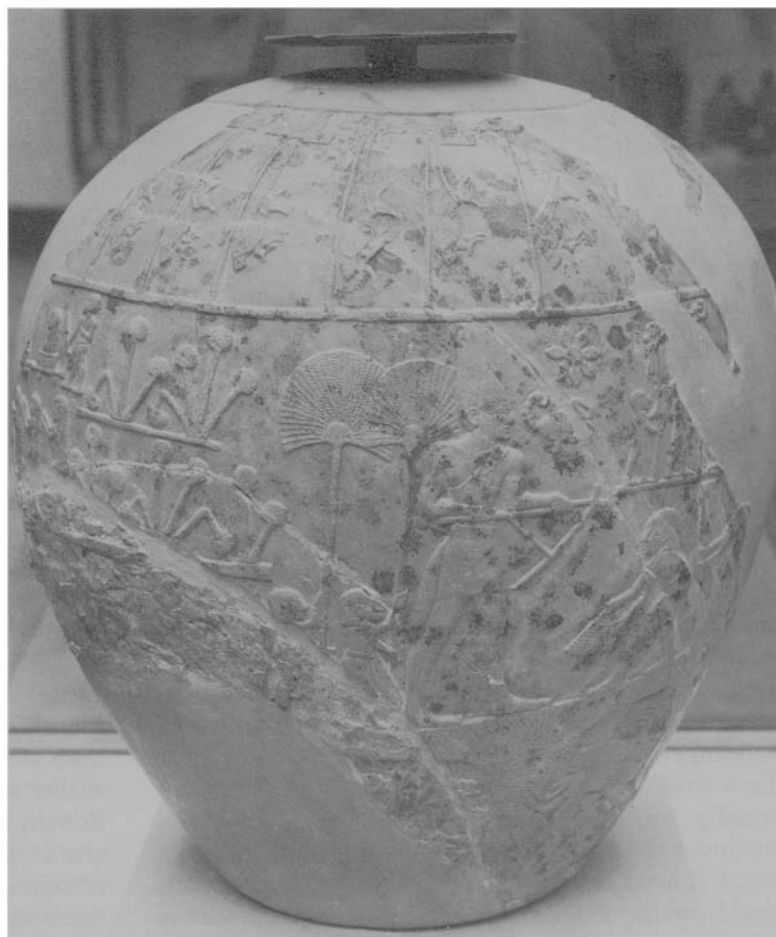


Figure 6. *The Scorpion mace-head from the main deposit at Hierakonpolis. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum E3632. Limestone. Dynasty 0. (Courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum.)*

are often grouped under the term 'connoisseurship'. While artistic traditions should not simply be lumped together and there is no reason for assuming that connoisseurship is a universal method, this intuitive approach points to an issue that is essentially the same as the one raised by Drenkhahn. Egyptian works of sculpture and relief (and architecture) respond to traditional modes of art-historical analysis — more 'radical' ones have hardly been tried on them — whether or not their status and functions were different from those of superficially comparable works in other departments of the same museums. This argument from the cross-cultural comparability of genres again highlights the reductiveness of denying the status of 'art' on grounds of function.

This point can be exemplified by reversing the argument about function and asking why the Egyptians used major works of art for 'utilitarian' purposes. Such a formulation emphasizes that those



Figure 7. Three stone vases, provenance unknown. Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum 13213, 12778, 12779. Greywacke. 1st Dynasty. (Courtesy Ägyptisches Museum Berlin.)

purposes are symbolic, not narrowly instrumental. It is hardly meaningful to ask whether the rituals performed upon a cult statue were directly causative, but the food placed before it was taken away and ultimately consumed by the priests, who must have known that the material nutrition it contained was available to them. The same point can be made about the supposed 'magical' and recreative function of statues (e.g. Russmann 1989, 3), or in another sense of buildings. These works underwent an 'opening of the mouth' ceremony in order to render them functionally effective (e.g. Blackman & Fairman 1946). However the actors may have comprehended this ritual, it need not have been completely different in kind from the consecration of a church, which makes it fit for its ceremonies but does not affect its status as a multifunctional and polysemous work of art that is comparable in this respect with the Egyptian one.

Thus, it seems justifiable to see Egyptian art as a phenomenon analogous in many ways with the art of other traditions. The centrality of the production of aesthetic objects to many periods of Egyptian history, notably some materially rich times that exhibit major cultural or political tensions, makes it worth reviewing the role of works of art in the discourse of the ancient élite. The importance of sculpture and rare materials as early as the fourth millennium can be illustrated by such objects as a statuette of lapis lazuli from Afghanistan found at Hierakonpolis (Porada 1980; this could have been made in the Near East or in Egypt). The colossal statues of Min from Koptos (Fig. 2), which date to the late fourth millennium and were originally about four metres high, were probably set up outside a temple and thus suggest indirectly the presence of an imposing artistic and architectural context (e.g. Williams 1988; Dreyer, in press).

Among periods within Egyptian dynastic civilization that exemplify these issues are the formative

time of Dynasties 0–1 (c. 3150–2900 BC), which can be contrasted with the 3rd–4th Dynasties and their development of pyramids and associated works of art and architecture (c. 2650–2500 BC); the 12th Dynasty with its highly distinctive sculpture (c. 1940–1760 BC); and the century or so from the time of Amenhotep III to that of Sety I (late 18th–early 19th Dynasty, c. 1400–1275 BC). Late Period artistic modes (715–332 BC), although generally less extravagant than earlier ones, display complex and significant relations with earlier traditions. The great temples of the Graeco-Roman Period (320 BC–c. AD 200) surviving in southern Upper Egypt document a vast expenditure of resources by culturally alien rulers on monuments of the traditional culture deep in the provinces. These periods, which I pass quickly in review in the following sections, can illustrate various aspects of the role of art in society.

Dynasties 0–1 and the 4th Dynasty

a) Defining styles and artists

The Egyptian state coalesced during the earliest of these periods. Around the time of political unification, there was a great transformation in artistic styles and content, leading to an iconographic definition of the Egyptian cosmos which set the pattern for later periods. During the 1st Dynasty, large numbers of votive offerings were deposited in temples. Many were in precious materials also used for royal funerary equipment (materials such as gold are naturally seldom preserved). This production of élite objects must be very imperfectly represented by what survives, many others being deposited in lost locations. The architectural context which would have conveyed vital meaning to people beyond the small numbers with access to temple sanctuaries can hardly be reconstructed for this period (Friedman, n.d., has presented a late Predynastic case) and is much better known for mortuary complexes (e.g. O'Connor 1989;

Dreyer 1990) than for temples (but see O'Connor 1992).

What is most significant for art here is the largely iconographic formulation of ideology and cosmology (e.g. Baines 1989b). Although the hieroglyphic script was integral to pictorial compositions, it did not record continuous language until centuries later, so that crucial meanings were conveyed through representational and architectural modes. While we cannot identify specific artists who created the works which embodied the new conventions, it seems inconceivable that an enterprise of such cultural importance as the definition of a style for the civilization and the encoding of its values was not under central direction. At the core of the new system was the politically dominant figure of the king.

More can be said about artists and their position in the first pyramid age of the 3rd–4th Dynasties, but some issues are disputed. The royal pyramid complexes exhibit comprehensive planning as works of art and, on a minimal evaluation based on levels of craftsmanship, display standards of execution going far beyond the 'functional'. Techniques and styles evolved quite rapidly over a century or so and most complexes show major alterations in design. In the case of the 3rd Dynasty Step Pyramid complex of Djoser (c. 2650 BC), we have the name of the likely designer or chief architect in the inscription on the front of a royal statue plinth found in the entrance, which names the 'chief sculptor' Imhotep (Fig. 3; Wildung 1977, 5–9; see also e.g. Junker 1959, 76–9). It is irrelevant here whether Imhotep carved the statue or rather supervised its production. What is relevant is that he had a quite exceptional status, as is shown by the fact that non-royal individuals are never otherwise named on royal statues. In exercising this privilege, he placed next to his name the title of chief sculptor and not that for an administrative office. Imhotep later became a culture hero, and may have been held among other things to have overseen a reform of Egyptian writing — and thus of artistic conventions — in the time of Djoser (see Wildung 1977, 88–9 for an opposite view).

Although evidence for those who directed work on 4th Dynasty pyramids is not so direct as with Imhotep, it can hardly be doubted that those undertakings, which will have involved much of the population in one way or another, were controlled by leading members of the élite. Some of these, who were the sons of kings, are known by name; their tombs at Giza were among the principal non-royal monuments of the necropolis arranged to east and west of the Great Pyramid.⁷



Figure 8. Ivory cylinder with relief decoration from the 'Main Deposit' in the temple complex at Hierakonpolis. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum E.164. 1st Dynasty(?) (Courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum.)

The projects for the pyramids display other artistic characteristics, of which I cite one. Between the Step Pyramid (e.g. Smith 1981, 53–64) and the mid 4th Dynasty pyramid of Khephren at Giza, architectural vocabulary and style moved from adaptations in stone of earlier plant-based forms to a near-complete geometrical abstraction that a modern critic might see as exploiting the 'natural' properties of the stones. The new style lasted only two or three generations, being replaced in the 5th Dynasty by a more representational one (e.g. Smith 1981, 95–100, 129–33). This double stylistic transformation cannot well be interpreted only as a consequence of changes in religion and symbolism, even if they played a dominant part; it must have included an aesthetic component.⁸ Such a development towards and away from

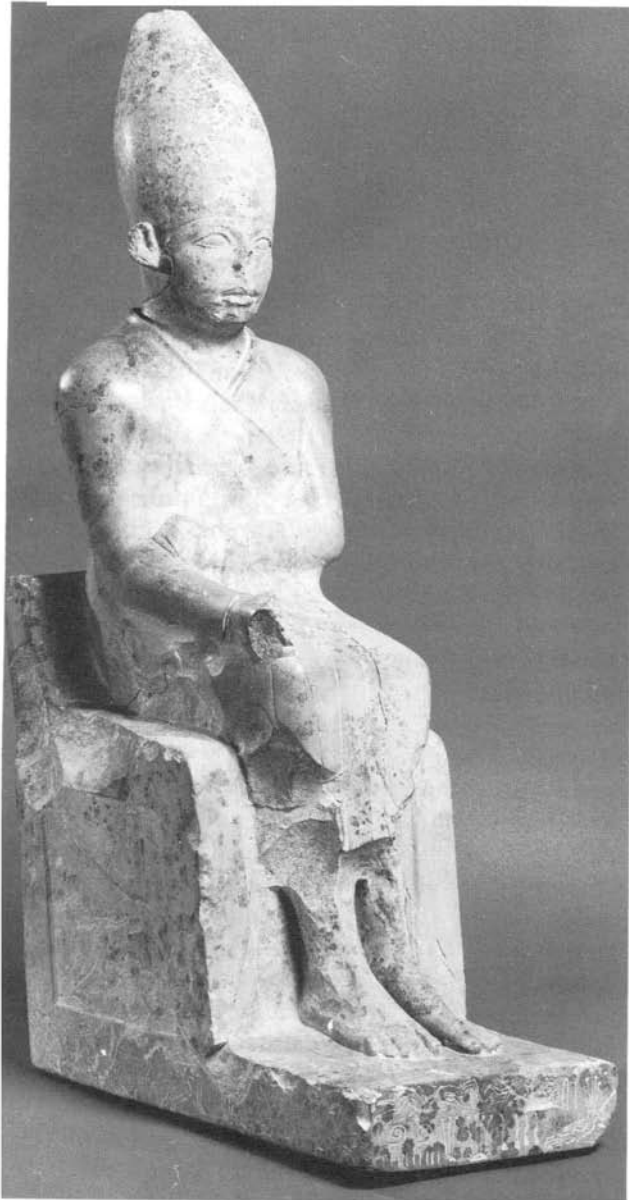


Figure 9. *Limestone statue of Kha'sekhem from Hierakonpolis. Oxford Ashmolean Museum E.517. (Courtesy of the Visitors of the Ashmolean Museum.)*

austerity and abstraction has parallels, not least in the Modern Movement with its epigone the Post-modern; it seems to be a natural way in which a tradition can develop and then move on again by returning to and developing older forms.

b) Access to works of art

The 4th Dynasty poses strongly the issue of access, and hence of audience. This applies even to vast pyramid complexes, but I review it in relation to statuary and relief. It too is relevant to many cultures.

One of the principal objections to seeing Egyptian creations as 'art' has been the fact that many works were invisible in their final positions. Since they were not viewed, it is implied, they could not be intended to be 'art'. The 'reserve heads' of this period (Fig. 4), separate near-life-sized sculptures apparently lacking a context of installation and coming from the bottoms of tomb shafts, were subject to some ritual mutilation before they were deposited (Tefnin 1991a), while some of the 'slab stelae' forming the cult focus of elite tombs were walled up to make them invisible — and hence are remarkably well preserved (e.g. Smith 1981, 84 figs. 76–7; Reisner 1942, 64–5). This walling-up is only the most striking of many invisible contexts in which sculpture and reliefs were placed.

To deny the status of 'art' to these works is to rely too much on a single criterion. The context of patron and executant exists for such objects whether they are seen or not, and even whether they are to be conserved or destroyed. Moreover, while the uses to which these works were put often differed from those of modern times, they do not seem to have affected their appearance greatly. Apart from the mutilation of the reserve heads, two- and three-dimensional forms of objects destined to be seen are similar or identical to those which were to be invisible. This situation can be compared, almost at random, with the vast amount of sculptural and pictorial decoration in large medieval churches and cathedrals, much of it virtually invisible when completed and incorporating inscriptions that only the keenest-sighted among the literate few could read.⁹ Invisibility also had little effect on the formation of traditions or on interactions of later periods with earlier works.

The issue of access also concerns the palettes (Fig. 5) and mace-heads (Fig. 6) which embody the evolving state's ideology and cosmology and were dedicated in temples just before the 1st Dynasty. These include works of the highest quality and technical mastery, whose relative merits can be suggested by a comparison — across media — with the rather earlier and far cruder wall painting in Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis, which probably itself belonged to a ruler (Quibell & Green 1902, pls. 75–9; see e.g. Williams & Logan 1987). The style and the technique of the palettes and mace-heads are devised for their dimensions, context and materials, and could not easily have had larger and more public counterparts, so that the pieces must be evaluated as the votive objects they appear to have been and not in relation to putative monumental propaganda pieces of which they might be small-scale representatives.

Two implications of these finds could no doubt be paralleled elsewhere. First, the audience of the gods, to whom were dedicated votive offerings in addition to temple construction and decoration, was as integral to the objects' meaning as was a human audience. Second, the group of artists was close to the ruling and commissioning élite, and the forms were developed between patrons and artists. Production for the gods paid due respect to them, as well as enhancing the status of the donor, who was principally the king. For the executant, the aim to produce works of high quality could apply indifferently to pieces that were large or small and destined to be visible or invisible, and might be exacted by the patron or donor in either case. Motivation towards excellence must, however, ultimately be internal to the executant and can originate within him.¹⁰

The patron's and artist's search for quality does not explicate sufficiently the meaning of the works. The Narmer Palette crowns a development in which royal dominance, relations between the king and the gods, and the structure of cosmos and society were incorporated iconographically with the utmost sophistication (e.g. Baines 1989b, 472–5 with figs. 1–2). The palette may stand on the margin of ideologically more central developments of temple relief and painting, in which the king was shown interacting with deities, both sides being depicted — as later — in human form at the same scale; but any such works there may have been are lost.¹¹ The self-contained nature of the palette and its votive function may have required it to bridge symbolic domains and to condense a great deal of meaning. They do not alter its status as a work of art, but they do throw into relief the great weight of symbolism which it bears.

A striking aspect of the palettes and mace-heads

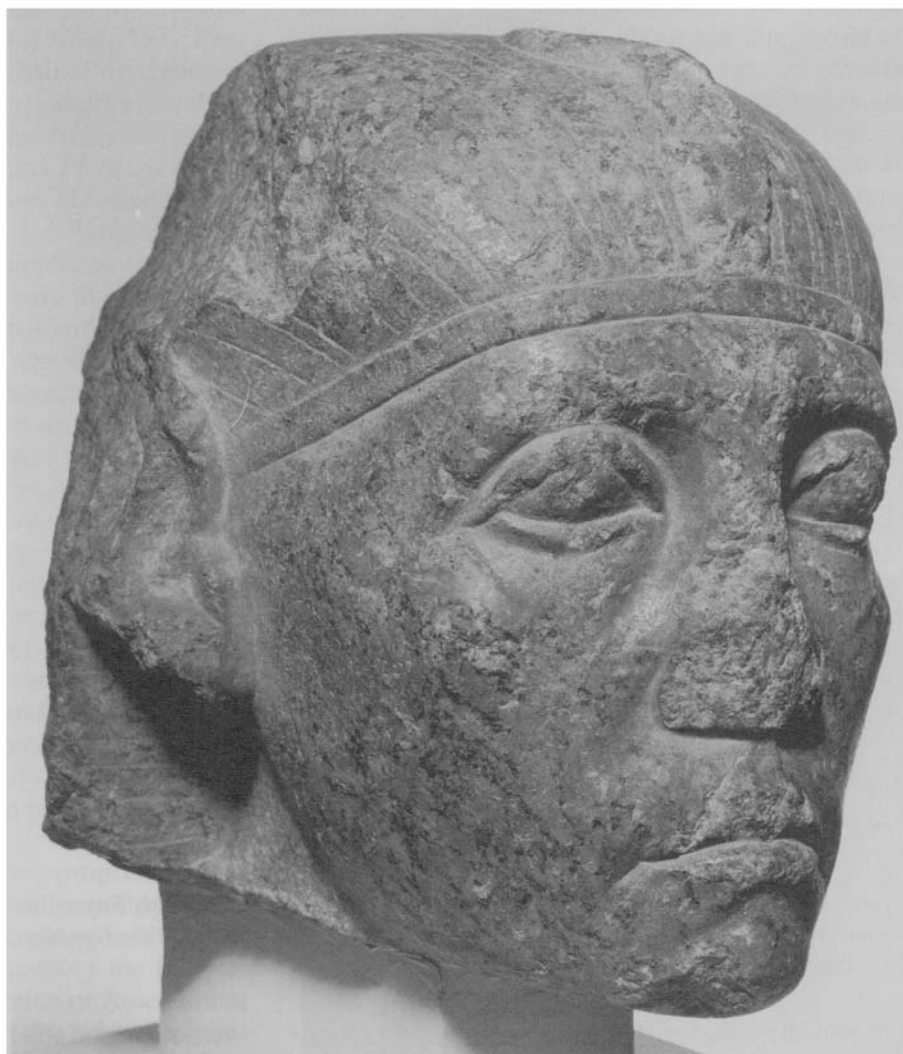


Figure 10. *Head of Senwosret III, provenance unknown. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum E.37.1930. Pink granite. 12th Dynasty. (Courtesy of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum.)*

is that, despite their quite rapid evolution and centripetal role in the emergent state, they come at the end of a development, not at its beginning. With the 1st Dynasty their production ceased, and preserved royal reliefs are confined to tomb stelae (e.g. Schäfer 1986, pl. 10) and ivories. Reasons for this change probably include: developments in the use of materials, so that precious substances that are lost from the record began to carry meanings and implications of status previously associated with other media; the location of some artistic activities in lost contexts, principally temples and palaces within the floodplain; and, most importantly, a general restriction of the public contexts of art. The legitimizing functions of representational art could be complemented by other



Figure 11. Head of Amenemhat III, provenance unknown. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum E.2.1946. Dark shelly limestone. 12th Dynasty. (Courtesy of the Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum.)

forms of display, including the increasingly monumental scale of architecture. Rituals, such as the sacrifice of retainers at 1st Dynasty royal funerals (e.g. Dreyer 1990, 67), demonstrated the power of king and state in the most peremptory fashion. Art appears to have retreated progressively within the élite and to have acquired an introspective character that related it less to the wider society than was the case in some later periods. Few surviving pieces from the first two dynasties could clearly have functioned in social competition or have belonged to genres distributed throughout the élite. Competition and ranking can, however, be seen in architecture. The highest levels of society appear to have been strongly stratified, with not more than one or two people at a time constructing the most elaborate tombs, notably in the Saqqara necropolis, next to the capital of Memphis.¹² There are more modest cemeteries with architecturally constructed tombs at a number of sites in the country, showing that wealth was not centralized to an extreme degree.

Thus the 1st Dynasty, rather like the 4th, appears to have restricted the range and use of significant works of representational art, and in a different way of architecture, to very few people. The stone vases characteristic of the period (e.g. Fig. 7; see el-Khouli 1978) do not affect this pattern significantly, because vast numbers were deposited in the tombs of the kings and of rather few others. What is striking in terms of categories of material is that the vases are much superior in execution to the rare preserved fragments of sculpture in the round, except for ivories (Fig. 8; see e.g. Quibell 1900, pls. 5–17); major stone sculpture seems not to have developed significantly until the later 2nd Dynasty (notably Fig. 9; wood could have been important: see Emery 1958, 10, pl. 27). The skills which went into creating the palettes and mace-heads may have been closely related to those used on vases, and the

vases attained still higher levels after the palettes and mace-heads ceased to be made, becoming the most significant mobile art preserved from the period and perhaps taking over traditions and personnel from other media. Some inscriptions on stone vases from the Step Pyramid, however, relate to their earlier use among the living, probably in temple rituals (e.g. Roth 1991, 145–95), reminding us that the range of preserved contexts is very incomplete. It seems thus that the vases must have been major symbolic resources for the cult, as well as being deposited as grave goods. (Such objects as large granite vases can hardly have had a practical everyday use.)

12th Dynasty royal sculpture

Some of the most striking Egyptian images are the haggard figures of the 12th Dynasty kings Senwosret III (Fig. 10) and Amenemhat III (Fig. 11). A fairly consistent stylistic development can be seen, from the statuary of Amenemhat I and Senwosret I at the beginning of the 12th Dynasty to the time of

Amenemhat III, after which evidence for royal works is sparse (Evers 1929; Aldred 1971b; Tefnin 1992; Fay, in press). Some works of the first half of the dynasty, notably large hardstone statues, have more individual physiognomies than those of earlier times, and pieces from the entire dynasty have ears of exaggerated size. The highly individual features of Senwosret III and his successor nonetheless exhibit a marked change. Statues of the two can mostly be told apart on the basis of facial type. Both share the worn look, which is especially typical of Senwosret III; distinctions between them suggest that the kings' personal physiognomies contributed to the sculptural norm, but they do not demonstrate that an ideal of 'true' portraiture suddenly appeared. As is shown by the marked contrast between the king's head and his body, which remains trim and muscular, the new type did not run counter to the principle that most people, and particularly kings, were shown in idealizing and 'perfect' guise. This point applies strikingly to cases where the same facial type occurs on a sphinx. To modern eyes these create a strong contrast between the specificity of the face and the generality of the body. This apparent difference may illuminate further the relation between body and face on anthropomorphic statuary: in some sense the worn facial type should convey an ideal.

This iconography, as one can appropriately term the facial treatment, should signify a quality of the king. The form has an evident analogy in the royal instruction texts of the period, notably the Instruction for Merikare and the Instruction of Amenemhat (e.g. Lichtheim 1973, 97–109, 135–9), which emphasize the burdens of the king's office and the responsibility he must bear. Statues with the highly characterized faces come from temples (e.g. Naville 1907, pl. 19 — four from a single temple), where this aspect of the king's role would be displayed to the gods, while among humanity only priests had access to inner areas. But this 'intimate' interpretation should not be overstressed, because some of the same features occur in softened form even on a perhaps more public colossal head (Romano 1979, no. 40), where such a treatment might seem surprising. The temple context can, however, be contrasted with a mortuary one, because a statue of Amenemhat III from his pyramid complex lacks any of the new features (Evers 1929, pls. 102–4). The focus of this iconography appears therefore to be this-worldly.

There are two principal ways of viewing this development. As an approach to depicting the king's face, it could have originated near the beginning of the dynasty and have strengthened later. Alterna-

tively, it could have been introduced under Senwosret III as a specific statement about the king's role and responsibility, and thus have made a statement about Senwosret III in particular. Tefnin (1992) has suggested that the iconography of royal eyes and ears signifies the king's responsible role in relation to humanity, and he has integrated the facial presentation with the notion of royal 'propaganda', ascribing to it the same kind of meaning as I do (Tefnin 1991c; for propaganda, see further Baines, in press). While this interpretation is tempting, the limited public access to the works restricts its focus so far that the term itself becomes problematic. It seems better to view the iconography as part of a dialogue between the king and gods on the one hand, and between the king and the élite group responsible for producing and giving meaning to statuary on the other. The



Figure 12. Colossal quartzite head of Amenhotep III, from his mortuary temple on the West Bank at Thebes. British Museum EA7. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)



Figure 13. Black granite statue of the goddess Sakhmet from the Mut temple complex at Karnak, probably first set up in the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III on the West Bank at Thebes. British Museum EA45. Reign of Amenhotep III. (Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)

latter could have consisted, in addition to the king himself, of officials in charge of furnishing temples and mortuary complexes and of the leaders of workshops. These people were presumably steeped in values, of which we can see another expression in literature, that formed part of the same overall high-cultural complex. It seems that they wished to incorporate those values into the king's sculptural image.

In this context of production within a small élite group for exacting royal and divine patrons, the works will have had a specifically artistic focus — a concern with visual form and its realization of meaning — while retaining their broad ideological significance. This focus can be seen in the influence exerted by the royal statuary. Many non-royal statues of the late 12th and 13th Dynasties have similar casts of face to royal pieces. The royal style was disseminated to contexts where its iconographic implications could hardly have been the same, although its sober and serious qualities probably had their own value (see e.g. Vandier 1958, pls. 77–92; large group: Habachi 1985, pls. 50–109; see also Sourouzian 1991, pls. 48–52). Some owners may also have seen their local role as sharing elements with that of the king, but they could hardly have entertained his cosmic aspirations. The tendency of the non-royal to follow the royal is widespread within and outside Egypt and is unsurprising. This case is revealing because a specific iconography changed as it was transmitted into something that was mainly a prestigious association. Royal statuary was influential despite its inaccessibility in its destined position. Here, the large numbers of royal statues should be borne in mind: they must have been produced for many temples in a variety of sizes and types, and the most important temples contained a number of them. Some of their influence may have passed directly through workshops, stimulated either by members of the élite who were involved with them or by the sculptors themselves, who will have applied and spread their training and stylistic predilections broadly.

This dissemination and elaboration within a restricted context can be observed in many periods; the most striking example may be the development of temple relief and iconography in Ptolemaic and early Roman times (c. 320 BC–AD 200; e.g. Sauneron & Stierlin 1978), when the ubiquitous hieroglyphic writing in the wall scenes was in a form very few could read, while the overall design and details of the interiors were largely invisible once they had been completed (as had always been the case). Much of the motivation for these developments was religious, but artistic aspects were also crucial. In comparison with 12th

Dynasty royal sculpture, the Graeco-Roman temple forms had relatively little impact outside, in part because they were so highly specialized and in part because of a gradual withering of the native élite.

Both for the 12th Dynasty and for Graeco-Roman temples, the institutional position of art should be borne in mind. Whereas the creation of enormous monuments such as the great pyramids self-evidently required huge resources and many people, the more regular pattern of production of statuary and relief involved high degrees of skill and of artistic decision and design. As might be expected, artistic and iconographic concerns were significant to the development of these genres at least as much as considerations relating more closely to contexts of use. A straightforward notion of propaganda may not be appropriate for the interpretation of statuary and relief.

The late 18th and early 19th Dynasty

The third period I review briefly runs from the later 18th Dynasty to the early 19th (c. 1400–1275 BC). This begins with the reign of Amenhotep III, during which more works of architecture and representational art were created than in almost any other (for all the following, see Kozloff & Bryan 1992, *passim*). Unlike most kings, Amenhotep seems to have worked on projects at an undiminished or increased pace up to his death. Surviving works from his reign include royal and non-royal, as well as major and decorative forms; the great quantity preserved can be only a small fraction of what was created. Among the king's major undertakings was his stupendous mortuary temple, which was decorated with many hundreds of hardstone statues of himself (Fig. 12) and of deities (Fig. 13) and sacred animals. The temple may have been the largest single one built to date, and in front of it stood the largest transported statues ever made in Egypt, the quartzite Memnon Colossi, which were carved in an extremely hard stone and brought hundreds of miles upstream to be set in position. These feats were recorded in inscriptions set up in the temple which presented them as being integrated into the design of the whole city of Thebes (Helck 1961, 195–9, 272–3). While these texts hardly address narrowly artistic concerns beyond general expressions of the temples' beauty and of the rich materials used in their construction and decoration, they do form an iconological commentary on their significance and thus supply some discourse — probably simple in comparison with its oral background — surrounding the king's whole project to remodel the country's religious capital and hence to extend a substantially aesthetic design beyond the core of temples and pal-

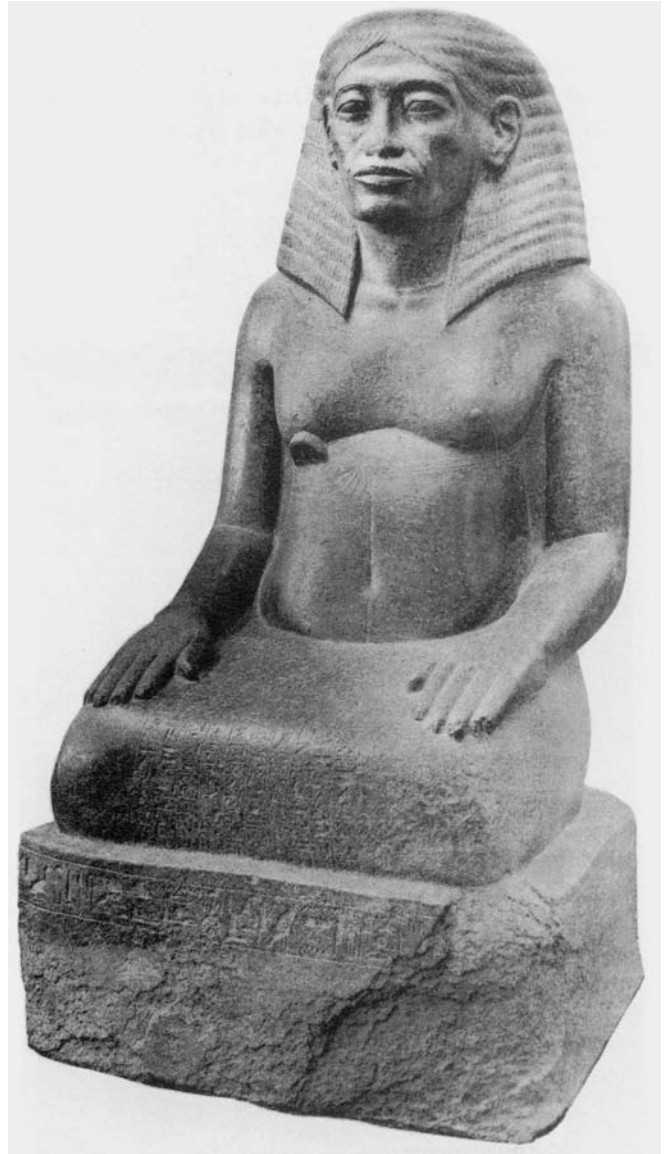


Figure 14. Seated statue of Amenhotep Son of Hapu, based on Middle Kingdom models (nose area recarved in antiquity). Cairo Museum CG 42127. From Karnak. Grey granite. Reign of Amenhotep III. (Rephotographed from Legrain 1906, pl. 76.)

aces (O'Connor, in preparation).

The entire operation was organized by Amenhotep Son of Hapu, a non-royal official who inscribed a version of the events on one of his statues (Helck 1961, 272–3). He had the highest non-royal status in the land and was granted the unprecedented privilege of a mortuary temple of his own (Wildung 1977, 286). On the East Bank, opposite the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III, was the Luxor Temple, whose meaning seems to have focused on the kingship itself

(Bell 1985). The hardstone stela of the twin brothers Suty and Hor, the 'architects' of that temple, is preserved (Edwards 1939, pl. 21). Several features of the stela, notably the innovative solar hymn, show that



Figure 15. *Stela of the sculptor Bak and his wife Tahere, provenance unknown. Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum 1/63. Quartzite. Reign of Akhenaten. (Courtesy Ägyptisches Museum Berlin.)*

they were among the leading people of the age. Apart from this biographical flesh which can be added to the bones of the monuments and their builders, there was a high level of innovation in architecture, in the style of some statuary, and in the elaborate reliefs of non-royal tombs. Variety and quite rapid development in art parallel a great diversity in religious texts and support the assumption that the artistic changes form part of a wider ferment (Baines, forthcoming). Certain features looked to the past, for example in the performance of ancient rituals (Epigraphic Survey 1980, 43, pl. 28) and in the Middle Kingdom model for a major statue of Amenhotep son of Hapu (Fig. 14; Sourouzian 1991).

Art should be seen both as an essential medium through which these changes were formulated and as a goal: it was constitutive and not accessory. The ultimate purpose of Amenhotep III's projects may have been religious and political, being connected with solar religion and with raising the king's status in relation to people and to the gods. Such goals were realized through art and architecture, and in the king's grand remodelling of capital and country as a divine cosmos with a superhuman royal protagonist (there is naturally less evidence for the likely counterpart of all this in living ceremonial).

This prominence of art, and of people who can be termed artists, continued during the 'revolution' of Amenhotep III's successor Akhenaten. In a graffito at Aswan, where they may have supervised the extraction of granite for statuary, the father and son sculptors Men and Bak commemorated their work for both kings, differentiating between the artistic styles of the two (Habachi 1965, 86 fig. 11; Krauss 1986, 18 fig. 8). Bak's own mortuary stela (Fig. 15; Krauss 1986) exemplifies the new style in a strong form. Later in the reign, the chief sculptor Thutmose, who occupied a large house compound at the new capital of el-Amarna, headed the studio which created numerous heads (e.g. Fig. 16), including the renowned Berlin bust of Nefertiti. The compound contained stabling for chariot horses — hardly a requirement for sculpting — and the object with the sculptor's name and titles that identified the tenant was an ivory horse blinker (Krauss 1983). In a city laid out for ceremonial chariot journeys to and from the suburbs where the king resided overnight (O'Connor, in preparation), a chief royal sculptor could ride the streets with the other members of the élite.

Men, Bak and Thutmose are important also because they came at the beginning and end of Akhenaten's radical artistic style. Men and Bak were active through the formative period of the new style,

whereas the works from Thutmose's studio show a softening and a partial return to a traditional manner. Since Akhenaten was not himself an artist, he must have relied on people like these to make a reality of his ideas, and they in turn probably had a decisive impact on the particular direction of artistic development. The graffito of Men and Bak states that the king had instructed them personally, and this has sometimes been taken literally, but Rolf Krauss has demonstrated (1986, 40–2) that such statements are conventional in inscriptions of builders and architects — the earliest related text dates to the Old Kingdom (Roccati 1982, 181–6), and an instance is known from el-Amarna itself — and so need not show anything distinctive about Akhenaten. What is said is likely to contain some truth by coincidence, since Akhenaten must have indicated that he wanted radically new artistic forms and may have influenced their direction.

Where Amenhotep III and Akhenaten agreed, or more probably took things for granted, was in using artistic production to formulate and propagate their differing ideas. The scale of Amenhotep III's works hardly diminished under Akhenaten; nor did standards, at least in statuary. But, just as the small-scale works of Dynasty 0 do not seem to have addressed a wider audience, even the colossal and relatively public — or at least highly visible — structures of Amenhotep III were ultimately aimed only at those who could visit the temples, or in their greatest dissemination at those who would partake in the life and ceremonies of the capital. They may not have had much message for the people of the country as a whole. There is no strong sense in which they were propagandistic to the widest public — although such propaganda would be hard to identify and might not be expressed in art.¹³ What they do show is that radical change necessarily involved the artistic forms which were part of the civilization's definition.

Art remained significant for religious and other change when Akhenaten's reforms were rejected after his death, but not in a straightforward way. There was an almost immediate return to traditional forms, and this has an obvious symbolism, but for at least a generation styles continued to be influenced by Akhenaten. Some developments in style and in the rendering of nature before and during the time of Akhenaten (e.g. Russmann 1980) were not lightly abandoned and artists — like ourselves — may not have seen them as specific to the ideas which were being repudiated. But under Sety I (c. 1292–1279 BC), when the rejection of Akhenaten and the return to enriched traditional forms culminated (Fig. 17), there

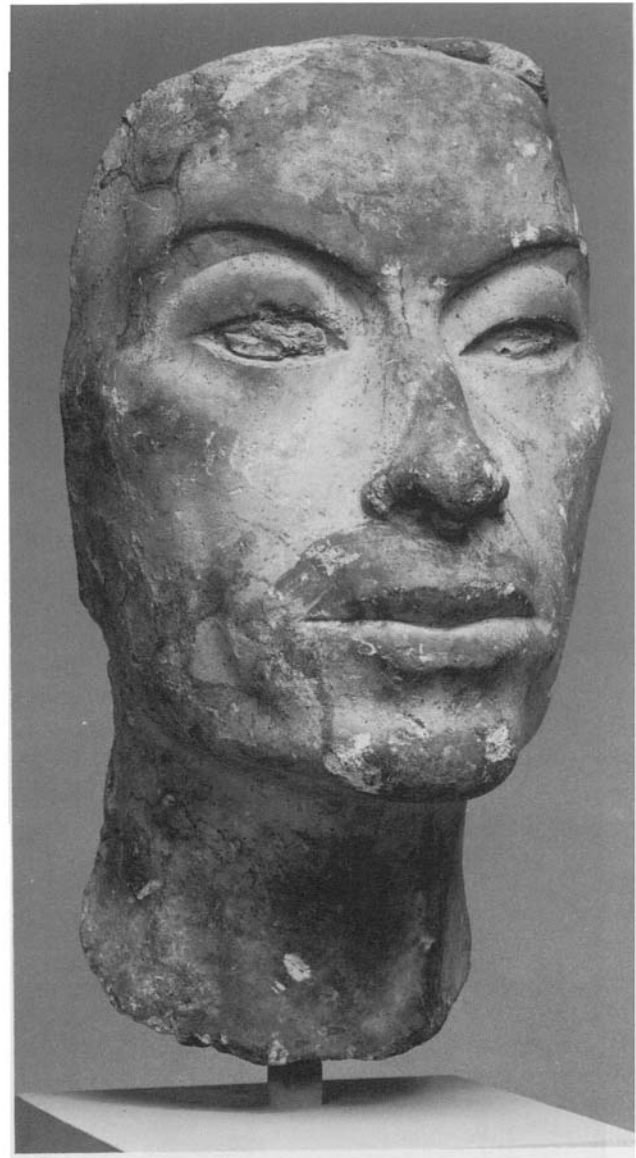


Figure 16. Plaster head, possibly of the later King Aya, from the house compound of the sculptor Thutmose at el-Amarna. Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum 21350. Reign of Akhenaten. (Courtesy Ägyptisches Museum Berlin.)

was a generally stronger contrast with the styles of Akhenaten than at the end of the 18th Dynasty (e.g. Calverley & Broome 1933–59; Hornung 1991). In his relatively short reign, Sety constructed and decorated many major works, principally temples and his tomb, continuing the artistic focus of Amenhotep III in particular. The principal difference, and one that is in keeping with the aims of Sety I, is that his art was not strongly innovative. His military reliefs constitute an important exception here (Epigraphic Survey 1986). Sety's artistic achievements are noteworthy also since



Figure 17. Relief of Sety I offering to Sokar, north wall of the Hall of Sokar and Nefertem in his temple at Abydos.

Figure 18. Group of offering bearers on the lintel relief of Djeho from Heliopolis. Cairo Museum Journal d'Entrée 29211. Fourth century BC. (Rephotographed from Maspero 1907, pl. 34.)

he mounted numerous military campaigns (e.g. Murnane 1990), and so might have had fewer resources to devote to art than rulers in periods of peace. This expenditure is a measure of the continuing centrality of art, which was not an adjunct of other activities and purposes, but was a partly autonomous institution with its own patterns of development.

The Late Period

The times of stability and prosperity between 700 BC and 300 BC were fewer than in earlier epochs. Only small numbers of major monuments survive from the period, in part because they were concentrated in the Nile Delta where preservation is poor. The relevance of this period to the argument here is especially in its uses of tradition. A 'revivalist' artistic style began to appear in the late eighth century, before there was any lasting political change or reunification of the country's fragmented territories (M.A. Leahy 1992; Russmann 1974). The extent of revival in the later 25th and 26th Dynasties was, however, much greater than earlier, and it encompassed many spheres (e.g. Brunner 1970), including the reuse of ancient texts and royal titularies, and more generally a return to a rather more austere style characteristic of much earlier periods and not of the late New Kingdom (c. 1200–1070 BC) or Third Intermediate Period (c. 1070–730 BC) (see in general: der Manuelian 1993).

In art, the striking feature of this revival is the use, principally in its initial phase, of models from widely differing periods. There are examples of the copying of standing monuments both in temple relief (e.g. Baines 1973) and in non-royal monuments, the combination of different styles in single pieces (e.g. der Manuelian 1985, 110–12), and the commissioning by the rich of statues of themselves in a variety of styles (e.g. Leclant 1961, pls. 1–33; Bothmer 1960, nos.



13–14). A copy of a Middle Kingdom tomb inscription that was known in modern times on a Roman Period papyrus shows such material interchanging with the great stream of literary tradition (Baines 1992, 254 with n. 41). Some of these features have more limited parallels from earlier periods, as with the statue of Amenhotep son of Hapu cited earlier, but their extent is new, as is their rather more public and self-conscious character. These are exemplified in an inscription in the tomb of Ibi at Thebes which invites the reader not just to read it out but also to copy it (Kuhlmann & Schenkel 1983, 71–3). This tomb is also striking for its decoration, sections of which were closely based on the 6th Dynasty tomb (more than 1500 years older) of a namesake at Deir el-Gabrawi, about 300 kilometres to the north (Kuhlmann & Schenkel 1983). It would not have been very taxing to make suitable transcriptions of the old reliefs, but what is remarkable is that the later Ibi knew about the older tomb. Unless this was a matter of chance, it implies that someone had a detailed knowledge of not very prominent ancient provincial monuments. Even if it was chance, the fact would remain that such tombs were being explored. Although there is no evidence for art exhibitions or museums — analogous phenomena may occur elsewhere in the

Ancient Near East (Roaf n.d.; Cooper 1990; Beaulieu 1989, 138–41) — these practices come close in their deliberate seeking out of ancient works.

This example is one of many. The Late Period use of the artistic past involved a more explicit and varied recourse than in earlier times, but there was not necessarily a difference in kind. It implies the presence of attitudes and treatments that can be paralleled in artists' methods in many cultures, and is a visible analogy for the verbal practices of criticism whose absence from the record scholars have taken to suggest that a sense of 'art' was lacking — while continuing tacitly to analyze the works as art; as will be clear, I believe that this strategy is correct and that they are wrong to have such scruples. It also allows a considerable measure of innovation, as is visible notably in the tomb reliefs of the fourth century BC (Fig. 18; see L.M. Leahy 1988). A crucial point here is that, whether or not such developments were prompted by, or intended to incorporate, other ideological matters, their formulation was artistic. The culture and tradition of art created a world that referred in the first instance to itself for its meaning, and was able to articulate its discourse in terms of differential recourse to past or contemporaneous models.

Thus, while recourse to the past was a broad phenomenon, in art it is likely to have contributed to the insulation of the institution from other cultural activities. This separation has clear social implications. Those who can comprehend the use of old styles are a small, learned minority, in this case probably a smaller group than in the New Kingdom. Only they count as truly competent to judge; in their own eyes, only they count at all. Despite the use of divergent models, the social divisiveness of art becomes more evident than the cohesiveness it offers by presenting a single cultural definition. These tendencies probably reached their high point in temples of the Graeco-Roman Period (Fig. 19), some of whose inscriptions are almost literally indecipherable. These esoteric creations received massive patronage and were deeply serious in intent. They were also very complex works of art, and in considerable measure their *raison d'être* was in their artistic character. In the long term, a situation emerged in which traditional artists were answerable only to a small native priestly élite and through them to the rulers. In one way, this is everything artists can ask for. In the end, however, it may be the death of art because too many people may come to see a specific form of art as dispensable or abhorrent. In Egypt this happened during the Roman Period. When Christianity came, it too worked through art, necessarily rejecting tradi-

tional Egyptian style and subject matter along with the religion and civilization to which they had been integral.

Conclusion: the institution of art

The significance of art can be seen in many facets of Egyptian civilization, and is commensurate with the preponderance of aesthetically formed material in the record. Art served the ordered cosmos, which was celebrated on behalf of the gods and which humanity (as represented by the king) and they defended against the forces of chaos. It defined, encapsulated and perpetuated that cosmos. At the same time it served the perpetual destinies of ruler and inner élite and circumscribed their lifestyles in relation to the rest of society. The focus of artistic production on these central activities, many of them secret and exclusive, reinforced and legitimized the position of art, which in turn legitimized religious dedications and much of the underlying social division, in a mutually sustaining cycle. In this context, the role of hieroglyphic writing in art is important (Fischer 1986; Baines 1989b). Writing brought representational forms together with high verbal culture, while also limiting access to that culture by incorporating it in a style of writing available only to a minority even of the literate, most of whom used the cursive form of hieratic. The reinforcing cycle of official religion and art also favoured the internal, self-regarding focus of both. What mattered in maintaining the order of things was the activity of the small group who commissioned, designed, and perhaps executed the works of art within the context of élite high culture. Only those involved comprehended the activities and their significance fully. A wider legitimation for their position is one that is general to élites: on behalf of society they assume responsibility for portentous matters and appropriate the necessary resources.¹⁴

Within continuing artistic culture, the uses of tradition reinforce this focus on the élite and their artistic interests. There is ample evidence from Egypt for artistic change, variation and innovation, so that interpretations of the fundamental aim of artistic conventions as being to maintain 'invariance' (Davis 1989, *passim*; Assmann 1992, 169–74) do not take an actor's perspective. The perpetual dialogue with the past and the use of different past models with diverse implications characterize an artistic discourse that is internally self-sustaining and uses this characteristic to assert its significance to the wider society. This internal discourse, which provides an analogy within the culture for the

Figure 19. View of the temple complex of Hathor and Isis at Dendara, from southwest. First century BC–second century AD. (Rephotographed from Chassinat 1934, pl. 11.)

relative insulation of Egyptian civilization from its surroundings, is both a legitimization of art and a way in which artists create a context in which only their own concerns matter. As such, it is a typically professional phenomenon.

Professions, both ancient and modern, are exclusive and assume that only their members can judge the validity of what they do, avoiding recourse to a wider constituency. This applies strongly to the Egyptian élite, and hence to the status of the art whose production they organized and which they or their masters, the king and the gods, consumed. The élite was a professional class, a group of administrators rather than a nobility. Artists might be designers and supervisors, or possibly executants, who were part of that central group, or they could be subordinate artisans who worked for them. Either way, they depended principally on the king and the élite, and far less on the rest of society. Their livelihood came from state or élite incomes that were appropriated from producers to the centre by way of taxes, rents, or levies of labour (see e.g. Janssen 1975). The artists had little constituency in the wider society. As people who did not wield supreme power in the state, they have left little individual trace in the record, any more than evidence bearing upon the grandees of many other periods and cultures would include much about artists.

The split between the groups involved in artistic production and consumption and the rest of society is complemented by the scarcity of artistically-formed evidence from outside the élite. The scale of some artistic undertakings was so great that a large proportion of the population must have been affected by them. Such people often have little say in



what is imposed on them, but they must have participated more or less willingly in these activities, and to a considerable degree they must have accepted the importance of what was done, that is, its official legitimations. To that extent, the works and the institution of art will have exerted persuasive power over everyone. The archaeological record of the First Intermediate Period (c. 2150–2000 BC), in which there was a proliferation of crude but characteristically artistic forms among a larger group than in centralized periods (e.g. Seidlmayer 1990; Dunham 1937), supports the assumption that artistic forms had such power. The tomb stelae and statuary of this period served a traditional élite function and inherited forms were adopted with the function. Similarly, votive bronzes, which proliferated in the Late Period and were probably dedicated by a relatively large social group, remained within established artistic conventions, although with widely varying levels of artistic execution (e.g. Roeder 1956).

The forms created in the first few dynasties continued to constitute much of the definition of the Egyptian cosmos and society; no alternative was available. This indissociable identification of art and civilization, which is a measure of the significance of art in Egypt, says something important about the role of

art rather than showing that so multifunctional and multifarious a phenomenon cannot be termed 'art'.

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Notes

1. For a treatment of similar themes for the Ancient Near East, see Gunter 1990.
2. Junge's two other criteria, of 'reality' and 'beauty' (1990, 19–25), may be specifically appropriate to Egyptian art, but although they address the function of works, again they are not very distinctive, and they do not address the commonality of character between Egyptian and other artistic traditions. The criterion of 'reality', however, can be related to the marked 'realism' of Egyptian representation (Baines 1985), which it does not share, for example, with Mesoamerican traditions.
3. El-Amarna, the principal site at which such houses have been recovered, is less informative than might be hoped because it was deserted deliberately rather than being abandoned in a hurry. (For material, see Borchardt & Rieke 1980.)

4. Some aspects: Baines (1990). Gay Robins (e.g. 1993, 180–90) has extended the notion of decorum to gender, demonstrating the pervasiveness and subtlety of conventions that privileged men.
5. Here it is significant that the hieroglyph for *hmt* 'art/craft' (𓆎 or 𓆏) shows a drill used for producing stone vases. At the time when the script was designed, this was a, or the, premier 'artistic' activity.
6. One indication of the prestige of representations of jewellers is that they are shown a number of times as dwarfs, who were a luxury of inner élite life (Dasen 1993). The notion that an individual should have his own jeweller's workshop is in itself testimony to the importance of aesthetic matters and of this genre of 'decorative arts'.
7. Strudwick (1985, 218 nos. 34 and 96) cites evidence for 'overseers of all the king's works' from the 4th Dynasty. Other Old Kingdom holders of the title were of the highest status, often viziers.
8. The variation in style does not seem to be technically motivated, although there was enormous technical change in the 3rd–4th Dynasties. Some later buildings, such as the cenotaph of Sety I at Abydos, seem to take up a 4th Dynasty style, apparently without technical motivation.
9. Thus, for example, Bryson's interpretation of these images as narrowly didactic (1981, 1–5) neglects the context in which they were located.
10. There are naturally instances where concealed work was less carefully done than what was more visible. This is often the case in the temple of Sety I at Abydos.
11. The earliest preserved temple reliefs date to the late 2nd and early 3rd Dynasties. They appear to be fully within 'classical' Egyptian conventions.
12. One such tomb, belonging to a person who held the highest titles, also had wooden statues in a chapel and a stela (Emery 1958, 10, pls. 27, 39; Kemp 1967, 26–30).
13. There may be a case for seeing the comparably grandiose projects of Ramesses II in the following century as being more oriented towards a public.
14. This role for the élite in maintaining traditions is visible in religious and literary texts of the period. See Derchain 1990, 25–8.

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