

Art, Egypt

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Inhabitants of the Nile Valley produced artifacts of high artistic quality from very early times. Their production was to develop over four millennia. Egyptian art is the fruit of religious thinking, which explains the cosmic order, and of a funerary belief system based on the survival of the components of this order. These values created a concern to reproduce an eternal world for the next life. To do this, the Egyptians chose imperishable materials such as stone, aiming to transpose the daily surrounding into an eternal one; it is this work in stone which has mostly survived. But it would be incorrect to say that Egyptian art is essentially funerary in nature, because the temples provide testimony to a religious art as well, and remains of palaces and dwellings bear witness to comfort and aesthetic concerns.

For example, the officials' houses at Tell el-AMARNA were as richly decorated as the Theban tombs, whose painted walls we admire so much. Furthermore, the village of craftsmen and artists at DEIR EL-MEDINA, far from being an agglomeration of huts, was made up of comfortable houses built of stone, decorated with paintings, and provided with altars for the worship of the gods. We know that the royal palaces gleamed every bit as brightly as the divine temples, whose original splendor is inferred from archaeological remains.

The earliest attempts to perpetuate scenes of daily life, the environment, or significant events are expressed as rock carvings along the Nile, representing boats, huts, and animals, as well as in rock carvings and paintings on former water banks, today completely transformed into remote desert areas, such as Uwainat, Gilf Kebir, El Obeid, and other parts of the Eastern and Western deserts. Here animals of the desert, such as giraffes, ibex, gazelles, oryx, ostriches, and elephants, are shown among negative hand-prints, while gracious bodies of swimmers make their way

between fabulous animals (*see* ROCK ART). Subsequent scenes depicting hunting, fishing, and domesticated cattle reflect the emergence of hunter and shepherd in this early society and, although anonymous and not precisely dated, these depictions mark the earliest artistic manifestations of art in ancient Egypt.

In the early settlements of the Nile Valley, Egyptian art manifests itself towards the beginning of the fourth millennium, already revealing the multiple facets of artistic creativity. Remarkable cultures flourished in the Delta and then Upper Egypt, named after the modern villages where they were first found and attested: Merimde and Maadi in the north, Badari, Tasa, Gerzeh, and Nagada in the south. These areas have successively flourished to constitute the Prehistoric and the Predynastic periods of Egypt (*see* PREDYNASTIC PERIOD, EGYPT). At a recently discovered site, Tell el-Farkha, in the East Delta, Polish excavations have revealed an important deposit of divine figurines carved of hippopotamus tusks, as well as male statuettes in gilded stone with inlaid eyes, thereby increasing our knowledge of the plastic arts of this era.

Ceramics are attested in an extraordinary range unparalleled at any other period: red polished ware with a metallic sheen, dull red-ware with traced white decoration, buff colors with painted decoration in purplish red, displaying geometric motifs in addition to schematic figures, animals, plants, and human beings. There are innumerable stone vases and molded vessels, whence originate little theriomorphic vases, in a combination of skill and inventiveness.

Human figures in two and three dimensions imply the birth of the cult. Dancers and idols appear simultaneously in sculpture in the round, modeled in clay, along with schematic figurines of men in ivory or stone, and statuettes of animals in clay or stone.

Lithic tools reach the height of perfection, with sharp edges masterfully cut with regular microscopic teeth. They are inserted into elaborate handles, some of them in ivory,

ornamented with representations of birds, animals, men, and boats. This practice leads to the first masterpieces of the art of bas-relief, such as the Gebel el Arak knife (Louvre E11517). The first mural painting (NAQADA II), in a tomb at HIERAKONPOLIS, reproduces in four natural colors (red and yellow ochre, white chalk, and black soot) the daily occupations of hunting, farming, and navigating, while the figure of a chieftain striking down foes in the presence of bound captives anticipates future depictions of the victorious Egyptian king.

During the period of unification of Egypt, around 3150 BCE, when writing made its first appearance, the conventions of Egyptian art were already established. Ceremonial palettes shaped in the form of animals or decorated with themes such as hunting and battle scenes, with human and animal representations arranged in extraordinary compositions, take on such importance that they become votive gifts of great size deposited in divine temples. The well-preserved palette of NARMER from the temple at Hierakonpolis, now in the Egyptian Museum Cairo, shows the beginning of narrative art and established the canon of Egyptian art. On it, scenes carefully sculpted in bas-relief depict sequences of official representation, divided into episodes that are distributed in registers. They show the king in heroic scale, smiting his enemies, performing ceremonies, or visiting a temple before which lie slain captives. The conventions for two-dimensional representations are already installed. The head and the body are shown in profile, but the eye is fully frontal, and the two shoulders appear in frontal view. When the subject is standing, one foot is always advanced, and it is the farther one for the observer. Hence, if the represented man faces to the left, his right leg is advanced; if he looks to the right, his left leg is advanced. This convention differs from the three-dimensional representation in the round where, in the case of a male subject, it is always the left foot that is set forward. However, in divine sculpture, certain deities have their feet joined, like MIN, the

god of Coptos, to whom, at this early stage, three colossal statues were dedicated in his temple there. Hence monumental statuary had made its appearance.

The kings of the first two dynasties have their burials at ABYDOS and SAQQARA. Two large stelae in granite or limestone bearing their name mark the superstructures of the tombs in Abydos, with funerary equipment stored in rooms of the substructure. This includes various objects, ranging from furniture, ornamented with ivory legs imitating bull's or lion's feet, to tools and weapons, jewelry, games with magnificent game pieces in the form of lions and dogs, abundant pottery with wine and oil jars, whose mud seals bear impressions or are accompanied by small ivory or bone labels sent from different domains, and bearing marks of the workshops: elephant, dog, palm. Larger examples are more elaborate and comprise the king's name, types of oil, and a date of issue commemorated by an important festival, or historical event (e.g., the plaque of king Aha in the Cairo Museum).

Very little sculpture is left from this period; the ivory statuette of a king from Abydos, today in the British Museum and representing a striding king wearing the Upper Egyptian white crown and a ceremonial cloak with rhomboid decoration, is the best preserved example of royal sculpture in the round. A large sized limestone royal torso from Hierakonpolis, today in Oxford, attests to monumental royal statuary.

The earliest royal tombs at Abydos were surrounded by satellite tombs, whose owners are depicted kneeling, or sometimes standing on small limestone stelae bearing their names or titles. Towards the end of the 1st Dynasty, high officials are endowed in Saqqara with large tombs containing a stele with their representation, names, and titles, like that of Merka, and rich funerary equipment. Smaller tombs in Saqqara and other Memphite necropoleis such as Helwan and Abu Rawash, hold small niche slabs bearing a scene carved in bas-relief and representing the tomb owner seated at the table of offerings.

At the end of the 2nd Dynasty, the royal tomb was already a complete complex comprising the façade of the palace, the royal apartments, and the numerous magazines for the afterlife. Royal sculpture reveals masterworks such as the two statues of king Khasekhemwy in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo and in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford. Funerary equipment ranges from provisions of oil in terracotta jars to delightful little unguent vessels in alabaster, schist, or carnelian, and includes funerary vessels of all shapes using all kinds of stones.

At the beginning of the Old Kingdom (*see* OLD KINGDOM, EGYPT), in the 3rd Dynasty, monumental architecture in stone is successfully realized at Saqqara during the reign of DJOSER in his funerary complex, where the pyramid makes its first appearance above the royal tomb, remaining the most dominant form in Egyptian architecture. The monument is very complex, consisting of elaborate substructures and several buildings, in addition to the pyramid forming the superstructure. The artistic masterpiece of this complex is the statue of Djoser in painted limestone, representing the king seated on a throne, wearing a pleated *nemes* headdress upon a large striated wig, and wrapped in a jubilee cloak. Private statuary emerges in officials' tombs, still in rudimentary seated and standing attitudes, or, more rarely, kneeling (Hetepdief in Cairo). Large mastabas develop, like that of Hesyre, with exquisite wall paintings depicting furniture and matting, together with extraordinary wooden panels representing the owner in different costumes and accompanied by his name and titles, all finely carved in bas-relief. Other mastabas (e.g., priest Khabausokar's) contain limestone niches decorated with representations of the owner and his wife, where again each detail and hieroglyphic sign are masterfully treated as individual sculptures.

In the 4th Dynasty, after going through a transformation from step pyramid to the definitive flat-faced monument in the reign of Sneferu at DAHSHUR, the pyramid reaches its most glorious culmination at GIZA, under the

reigns of Khufu (*see* KHUFU (CHEOPS/KHEOPS)), followed by Khafre and Menkaure (*see* KHAFRE (CHEPHREN); MENKAURE (MYCERINUS)). In the plastic arts during this time, the conventions inherited from the archaic period become solid rules, which develop further during the Old Kingdom. Sculpture in the round produces masterpieces, and representations in low relief are among the best productions of all times, especially in mastabas of royalty and the elite.

The principal concern of a work of ancient art is its representative ability. In three dimensions, the statue is frontal, combining all of the characteristics of a living person. The poses are limited: the king traditionally appears standing or seated majestically. The painted limestone statue of Sneferu from the valley temple of Dahshur illustrates the first attitude: the king stands with his left foot advanced, wearing the pleated *shendyt* kilt and the white crown; in the seated attitude, the ivory statuette of Khufu from Abydos represents the king holding a flail against his chest and wearing the short kilt and the red crown, while the diorite effigy of Khafre depicts the king in heroic size and majestic posture with hands on his knees, holding a kerchief in the right hand and wearing the *nemes* headdress, protected by the falcon god Horus. Between these two reigns, Djedefre has left a fragmented statue in quartzite where he is enthroned, accompanied by his consort seated near his feet (today in the Louvre). These statues show respectively variants of the seated type. Menkaure continues the tradition and enriches the repertoire with a dyad of the king with his consort, as well as triads representing him with the goddess HATHOR and a NOME deity. On monumental scale, the great SPHINX of Giza hewn in the rock in the quarries of the pyramid of Khufu combines for the first time the head of a king with the body of a lion.

The courtiers imitate their king, but with their own costume and attributes. Like him, they appear individually and in group-statues with family members. Vivid colors, when preserved, enhance their liveliness. Even when they are lost, some effigies strike by their

extremely lifelike appearance, such as the statue of prince Hemiunu from Giza (Pelizaeus Museum Hildesheim), with his extraordinary vigor and singular corpulence. The cross-legged “scribal” type, newly invented in private statuary, finds great favor among officials, while *RESERVE HEADS* provide evidence for portraiture (*see* *PORTRAITURE*, *PHARAONIC EGYPT*). Rectangular slabs decorated with the representation of the deceased seated at the offering table at the façade of their mastabas, provide the two-dimensional version of such representative depiction.

In the wall decorations of mastabas, relief displays its own set of conventions. Here the figure appears in profile, but the different elements of which it is composed are viewed from the front. A canon of proportions and conventions for two-dimensional depictions is observed. In order to represent several people or animals, one simply aligned them behind each other. Instead of superposition or subtleties of real perspective, Egyptian relief sculpture preferred to use an original code of perspective in order to give the maximum amount of characteristic and recognizable components. That which was intended to be on both sides of a figure was represented above and below it. Or both the plan and the section of an object were successfully combined into a single composition. Scenes are generally divided into registers, with a particular code for “reading;” the term is apt even when no hieroglyphic text is provided. Registers are generally read from the bottom up, but we also find that within one register, simultaneous action can occur both from right to left and from left to right.

Both sculpture in the round and bas-relief are almost always covered with a final layer of stucco and enlivened with color. The representations painted upon stuccoed walls follow the same rules as apply to painted bas-relief.

In the 5th and the 6th Dynasties, artistic production follows the heritage of the recent past. For the royal funerary complexes in Abusir and Saqqara, and for the sun temples (*see* *TEMPLES*, *PHARAONIC EGYPT*), the royal

workshops produce an extraordinary range of finely sculpted scenes along the causeways, the courts, and the halls, with ritual, festive, and naturalistic themes, which help establish and maintain cosmic order. In royal statuary, apart from traditional effigies, two 6th Dynasty copper statues discovered in the temple of Hierakonpolis represent king Pepi I in two variant poses of the standing type (*see* *PEPI I AND II*) and are striking for their impressive facial features, slender physiognomy, and by the extraordinary technique of the hammered metal and its beautifully polished surfaces.

Private/elite statuary proliferated in mastabas, which increase not only in number but also in size. False doors, niches, façades, and walls are covered with reliefs and paintings, depicting domestic activities, agricultural scenes, offering bearers, etc.

The Memphite ateliers maintain the artistic tradition locally during the First Intermediate Period, while a provincial art style flourishes in autonomous centers far from the capital. Sometimes naive and maybe clumsy, this style brings a new freshness within the tradition. Forms were elongated, colors were enlivened; a new canon of proportions replaced the classical one; and a new ideal of beauty emerged. During this period, small wooden models appeared, replacing more traditional sculpture and eventually, in many instances, substituted for mural representations.

During the Middle Kingdom’s 11th Dynasty (*see* *MIDDLE KINGDOM*, *EGYPT*), with the rise to power of the Theban princes, a provincial style was promoted at the new capital of Thebes, in which force and vigor became the ideal, far from the fineness and majesty of the Memphite style. In Thebes, the mighty rulers built temples for the Theban gods *MONTU* and *Amun* (*see* *AMUN*, *AMUN-RE*) and carved their rock-cut tombs on the west bank under the peak of the Theban mountain, preceded by vast funerary complexes. The temple of Mentuhotep II (*see* *MENTUHOTEP I-VII*) at *DEIR EL-BAHARI* reveals statues of the ruler standing (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) or seated (Cairo Museum), hands crossed on the

chest and wearing the short jubilee cloak. The temple decoration shows ritual scenes sculpted in bas-relief and painted. Adjacent chapels in the mountain housed the burial of the royal women, decorated with colorful scenes of daily life, their funerary equipment comprising large stone sarcophagi decorated in sunk relief. During the 12th Dynasty, when the capital alternated between the Memphite region and the FAYYUM, art combined both of these previously conflicting styles, and their fusion engendered unprecedented masterpieces. Colossal effigies of the powerful monarchs, with austere facial features and dynamic physiognomy, emerged in the temples, along with colossal sphinxes. New statue types appear, such as the Osirid statues of the mummiform king, the double statue of Amenemhat III as a Nile god (see AMENEMHAT I-VII), or the statue of the same king as standard bearer. Luxurious furniture and sophisticated jewelry accompany burials of queens and princesses buried near the royal pyramids at Dahshur.

In provincial courts, during the first half of the 12th Dynasty, powerful nomarchs (province governors) constructed elaborate tombs. The tombs of Beni Hasan, Meir, and Qau el Kebir in Middle Egypt or Qubbet el Hawa in Aswan reflect the extraordinary wealth and influence of such nomarchs in their provincial courts. Paintings with vivid colors animate the walls of the rock-cut tombs and sarcophagi. A new statue type, the block-statue, emerged, remaining popular through the Late Period. Due to internal political unrest and the foreign domination of the Delta by the HYKSOS, a perceptible impoverishment of the arts can be observed during the Second Intermediate Period.

At the end of the 17th Dynasty, a cultural rebirth begins with the reunification of Egypt and the start of the New Kingdom (see NEW KINGDOM, EGYPT). It reveals the survival of the artistic tradition with such pieces as the stela of Ahmose, which adds the beauty of hieroglyphic text to the finesse of relief sculpture, and the funerary furniture and jewels of queen Ahotep at Thebes.

Under the first New Kingdom rulers at Thebes, royal tombs were cut into the mountain, with their temples located at the desert margin. The artistic creations that started in the reign of HATSHEPSUT reach technical perfection and a harmonious aesthetic of rare elegance by the time of Thutmose III (see THUTMOSE I-IV), reaching their apogee under Amenhotep III. A new taste for monumentality is reflected in the expanding constructions of the temple of Amun at Karnak, as well as in the funerary temples on the west bank of the Nile. Royal sculpture reaches ever increasing colossal proportions under Amenhotep III.

Animated scenes in two-dimensional representations provide narratives of particular expeditions and annual festivals. The decoration of private tombs, carved in relief or merely painted, gradually liberates itself from strict pictorial conventions, depicting daily life as well as funerary beliefs. Narrative representation reaches its apogee under the reign of AKHENATEN (AMENHOTEP IV). However, a sharp break marks the artistic conventions and the official style, provoked by a passionate change in religious belief. The sun, the unique god worshipped, is represented as Aten, the sun disk, receiving the offerings of the king, who is his sole intermediary upon earth. With this, the "Amarna style" was initiated to culminate in the newly founded residence at el-AMARNA. The elongated face and deformed bodies with sagging bellies, buttocks, and thighs, animated under the omnipresent rays of the Aten, clash completely with previous tradition.

After Akhenaten's reign, the return to orthodoxy engendered an original, expressive art style, in which tradition resurfaces, but contains persistent vestiges of the Amarna heresy. The relief sculpture and mural painting long continued to bear the imprint of the Amarna taste for motion and love of nature. Statuary imbued with a spirit of piety produces new themes in royal iconography and new poses in the iconography of private individuals.

The art of the 18th Dynasty also discovered, no doubt through contact with Asia, its taste

for luxury, which reflects a certain concern for refinement and beauty. Elaborate costumes and sumptuous dresses are invented. The simple garments in use since the Archaic Period give way to abundant fabrics of transparent, pleated linen wrapped around seductive silhouettes. The overlapping kilts worn by men display loose panels and long pleated belts, terminating in fringed edges. The coiffures for men and women alike reach a high point of refinement: enveloping wigs with long locks, curls, or tresses (*see* HAIR, HAIRSTYLES, PHARAONIC), encircled with floral diadems and surmounted by fragrant cones. Highly wrought jewelry adorned its wearer from the ankles up to the wig, including the ears. A profusion of toilet articles in the most inventive forms were manufactured for both the living and the deceased.

In the 19th Dynasty, especially under the reign of Sety I, there is a concerted return to tradition. The plastic arts are characterized by a serene beauty; relief sculpture returns to purity of line, elegance, and perfection. A Ramesside art style proper then develops, with grand architectural projects initiated by Sety I and RAMESSES II (*see* RAMESSES I–XI). In royal statuary, iconographic themes are diversified and depict the king slaughtering his enemies but also stretching out prostrate to present an offering to a deity or appearing in dyads, triads, and groups of more deities. Individuals' personal piety emerges, hand-in-hand with the devotion displayed by pharaohs. Private statuary multiplies in the temples, including traditional types enriched with statue types invented in the New Kingdom, such as the naophorous and stelophorous statues. A new repertoire covers the walls of the private tombs: scenes of daily life are replaced with religious themes based on life in the netherworld.

The Third Intermediate Period, with the royal residence now in the Delta, developed its own style, inherited from the New Kingdom, but lacking in creative attempts to break new ground. The only notable changes, such as the institution of falcon-headed coffins for kings, and the highly decorated coffins for

elites, especially priests, reflect changes in religious beliefs.

The 25th Dynasty, of Kushite/Nubian origin, adapted and added to the Egyptian legacy with the contribution of artistic realism from the south. Thereafter, in the Saite Period, the indigenous 26th Dynasty researched and rediscovered the grandeur of the past (*see* LATE PERIOD, EGYPT). Vast tombs for high officials were adorned with relief sculpture copied from the ancient corpus. Archaizing statuary was produced with extraordinary skill and sophistication. Divine statuettes, in stone or bronze, display a remarkable technical perfection. Statues of priests, admirably polished, with clean-shaven heads bearing a meditative expression, radiate high spirituality. During the succeeding period, diverse foreign influences, among them a Persian intervention, gradually infiltrated Egyptian art and altered it temporarily. The 30th Dynasty strove to imitate the 26th Dynasty.

In the Hellenistic Period, new tendencies were introduced in Egyptian art, and aspects of Greek aesthetic are added to the Egyptian core. Nonetheless, an effort to maintain native traditions is observed down to the Roman Period, with the construction of great temples in which the façades of the pronaos, formed of columns with lower inter-columnar walls, replace the massive pylons, columns with composite capitals diversify the traditional lotiform, papyriform, and palmiform types. Thus architecture gained in airiness, but the plastic arts were now imbued with a new aesthetic and sometimes lacked their pharaonic vigor. Nonetheless, great ensembles, such as the scenes adorning the temple of KOM OMBO, or the sculpted and painted decoration of the tomb of Petosiris at Tuna el-Gebel find their high point in this mixed aesthetic. Likewise, in the sculpture in the round, the profusion of sculptors' models show that technique and proportion could still be learned, and great works are still produced with competence and in colossal scale, like the colossal statues of the Ptolemaic couple found in the sea near Herakleion. Some extraordinary sculptures,

representing goddesses worshipped in the Greek Period, are produced with great skill and care in black granite: the example of the fabulous torso of a Ptolemaic queen discovered during underwater excavations in East Canopus (Abukir), represented emerging from the water like *APHRODITE* but draped in a transparent dress, which shows her admirably sculptured body, suffices to demonstrate that mixed conventions and aesthetics could achieve in the hands of great sculptors as great a masterpiece as the ones of the past. Eventually, in the twilight of the Roman Period, even a funerary mask, an Egyptian element *par excellence*, winds up as a portrait painted in Roman fashion on a wooden board.

Nonetheless, the conventions and rules of representation that surfaced at the start of Pharaonic history survived the many changes in style down to the Roman Period. From the quarrymen to the sculptors and painters, the same techniques were at work. Similar instruments were used, the same ores ground and then diluted in the painters' palettes. The same organization of teams divided into phyles alternated under the surveillance of the chief of works.

If the Egyptian artists remain for the most part anonymous, their creative spirit is manifest in the works of art that they created throughout the millennia.

SEE ALSO: Aten/Aton; Sety (Seti) I–II; Third Intermediate Period, Egypt.

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