

Ancient cultures: the importance of information held within art.

Art has been used to document our surroundings, our lives, our cultures and our ways of living for thousands of years which is evident from the earliest cave paintings in which Neanderthals would document the prehistoric beings that lived amongst them, for reasons unbeknownst to us, prehistoric man portrayed these images and humans have continued to do so since this. Exploring our history and the various subcultures that have existed on earth could be successfully explored from generations of knowledge yet in some cases, knowledge can only be deciphered from ruins or ancient texts or even art that has been left behind, for example, the vast finds in Egyptian art allows us to decipher their beliefs and religion and how this formed their culture and vice versa. Religious finds can present a great amount of information as cultures have been heavily influenced by religion for centuries, however, great finds can be found without heavy religious undertones, such as art recovered from the ruins of Pompeii, in which recovered artwork reveals the significance of wealth and leisure and how the majority of the population might have lived and what their values were.

Any piece retrieved from ancient Egypt is instantly recognisable due the strong use of golds, warm colours contrasting blues and the vast amounts of symbolism that's structured so much of the ancient society. Many artefacts convey a wide image of how these early Egyptians lived and what sort of rituals they participated in, how their beliefs impacted the lives they lived, for better or worse, as well as how sentimental they were. The sentiments that the Egyptians held over life and death in itself created a major culture in itself not just for ancient Egypt, but also for Ancient Greece and even modern-day culture, with elements of Egyptian beliefs scattered throughout in popular literature, film entertainment and computer games such as The Kane Chronicles and Assassins Creed.



(britishmuseum.org, 2017)

Deciphering the ancient literature of the Egyptians and unique visuals painted upon their tombs was a key moment in how art had helped this long-gone culture survive. The Rosetta Stone, found in 1799, was an artefact found in the city of Rosetta, known now as Rasheed, was deciphered by Jean-François Champollion, who had confirmed the hypothesis that Egyptian Hieroglyphs visually indicated phonetic sounds, Jean-François Champollion used his understanding of Coptic, an Egyptian language, to successfully decipher the hieroglyphic text of the word "to give birth". (Foy Scalf, n.d.) The hieroglyphics on the Rosetta Stone showed a decree about king Ptolemy carved into it, the

decree was engraved three times in three different languages. The first language was in hieroglyphs which was to be read by a priest, the second language was demotic which commoners would read and the last was Greek, which administrators would read as Greek was the widely understood language around the time the Rosetta Stone was created. Historians had used their understanding of Greek and applied this to the hieroglyphs to understand more about the Rosetta Stone as well and hieroglyphs overall. (Charles Q. Choi, 2022)

It is widely understood that Egyptians had based many of their sculptures, artworks and hieroglyphs around their belief system, not just religious but that of honour, power and respect. English Egyptologist Cyril Aldred, believes this statement to be true where he states, "Egypt, like all other nations of antiquity, was profoundly influenced by magic, by a belief in the existence of all-pervading, invisible and superhero forces" (Aldred, 1980, p. 11) this ideology falls into the Egyptian afterlife care, in which it is known that organs would be distributed through canopic jars, each had their own lid which held a god. These gods are known to be Duamutef, Hapy, Imsety and Qehbesenuf. Hapy protected the lungs, Duamutef guarded the stomach, Imsety protected the liver and Qehbesenuf protected the intestines (Maydana, S. 2023).



(Egypt-Museum.com)

Proceeding with the idea of power and respect in mind, during the intermediate period of Ancient Egypt the kings of the Twelfth Dynasty had hired not only publicists but skilled sculptors to aid in their propaganda to justify their reasons to claim the throne as reported by Cyril Aldred (1980, p. 124). The sphinx that characterises such power and respect is that of King Ammenemes III, a black granite sculpture which has been described by Egyptologist, Cyril Aldred as "giving great authority during the half century of his reign". Similarly, approximately 2000 years later at Pompeii, arts and sculptures were used to showcase great power, not at the extent of kings but similarly in terms of wealth. The Casa Di Octavius was first excavated in 1916-1921, its contents were grand sculptures and decorated gardens and were excellent starting points in documenting an ancient life, as the dispositions of the artefacts suggest that the homeowner was a cicerone, understood now as a guide (Tronchin, 2011). Multiple statues had been found in the garden, 7 being of Egyptian influence,

others such as the statuette of a sleeping intersex person that was placed along the south end of the garden, hinted at by Tronchin to be a humorous surprise for more open-minded guests.



(Pompeii: Art, Industry and Infrastructure, p. 39.)

The Casa Di Octavius is a prime example of theories promoted from Wilhelmina Jashemski, that the gardens of Pompeii were used for not just pleasure but profit (Berry. J. 2007, p. 181.) Berry continues on stating,

“The houses of Pompeii were much more than the shells that can be seen today, but a fair degree of imagination is necessary for the visitor to appreciate their complexity . . . There are the large and luxurious houses of the wealthy elite, the smaller and nicely decorated homes of those with social aspirations . . .”

It's clear to see that following the research of Jashemski, the importance of decorating, not just within the interior but exterior also, had evoked ideas that gardens were a vital part of life and socialising in Pompeii, these ideas relate to how Tronchin states that the intersex depicted statue was hidden away for a select few, creating a greater image as to how the life of this Pompeii resident through the findings of artistic artefacts as it eludes to an idea that the owner of this house had possibly opened his garden to a select few, leading only the more prejudice free guests to his more prized possessions. Building upon this idea, it wouldn't have just been one person who had used these grandly decorated gardens and homes for socialising, but also many other Pompeii residents.



(www.metmuseum.org, 2022)

Ancient maya ceramics are also great tells into how people of the past documented a wide range of topics, especially life milestone from victory of battles to dowry negotiations, pots were also commissioned when noble people would die, the pots were to be placed within the tombs. (Miller. M. E, 1999) ancient maya traditions in the fourth century AD, included lidded basal flange bowls that had become very popular and a very important vessel shape, usually the knobs are seen to have been sculpted to take the shape of a mythical or real creature. These painted vessels could have possibly been made for funerals or dedication rituals (Miller, M. E. 1999), most likely acting as offerings to deities or similarly to Egyptians, where they'd embody gods in their pieces whether it'd have deeper meaning or not. Author Mary E Miller states that "The most elaborate examples of the basal flange vessels and related hybrids provide evidence of share religious concepts in the works . . . "this informs us as modern humans what practises ancient civilisations took in order to portray their beliefs and how art aided this. These bowls were outdated once the fifth century notations carried more detail while also described as discursive due to the issue that the lids couldn't support the continuity of narration. (Miller, M. E. 1999). Maya vessels were elaborate in information regarding how mayas used cosmic representations, similarly to these bowls, the introduction of the "screw top" jars and the representations upon them granted theories to come that valuable offerings would be placed within these jars that had were God effigies. (Miller, M. E. 1999)

To conclude, discussing 3 major and dominant civilisations and the work that was born throughout these times are key in understanding how important physical artwork is for aiding in surviving a culture, especially an ancient one. For these artefacts to not only survive time, but to then be studied, deciphered and theorised about is crucial in understanding the importance of the creatives in these times, without these we would simply not understand as much as we do now, whether the stories held within are deemed less important than more widely deemed important stories. Learning is important and understanding the reasonings behind each artefact carries great respect for the maker, for the culture and for its purpose which was a goal set thousands of years ago when these artefacts were made.

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