

# The Art of Ancient Egypt

Created for eternity, the art of ancient Egypt emerged fully developed around 2900BC and remained essentially unchanged for three thousand years.

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Edfu Temple

It encompassed a wide range of genres including wall painting, sculpture, both free standing and relief, decorative arts, jewellery, hieroglyphics and unique architecture. Egyptian pharaohs believed that life was so good on earth they wanted to carry images of life in the Nile Valley with them into the next life creating the blueprint for the happy eternity they expected.

The Egyptian pharaoh aimed to continue life, in all its richness, after death, which explains why so much care was taken to preserve the body of the dead pharaohs through mummification. To contain their coffins, pharaohs of the Old Kingdom (2575-2152BC) built massive stone pyramids covering all surfaces of the burial chamber with magic spells and information to aid the pharaoh's entry to the afterlife. Over time change occurred to burial practices with visible and costly pyramids giving way to secret tombs where both pharaoh and treasure might be safe from plunderers. Commemorative temples were built separate from the tomb and became sites where customary priestly rituals took place.

The era which provides the most fantastic evidence of Egyptian art was the eighteenth dynasty (1550-1307BC) when the establishment of a successful empire brought undreamed of power to Egypt. Pharaohs became military as well as religious and political leaders so their tombs and temples became massive monuments to their power. Stacked within the tomb was everything that the pharaoh would need for a comfortable eternity from ushabti substitute figures of the pharaoh lest he be needed to do any labour in the afterlife, food for the journey, gilded beds and chairs, combs and mirrors, spare clothing and jewellery, even board games for his daily amusement. The pharaoh's embalmed body was encased in a series of solid gold caskets inlaid with semi precious stones such as lapis, carnelian and



turquoise. His organs were placed in exquisite canopic jars carved out of alabaster. Within the tomb was the perfection of ancient Egyptian culture which was what the pharaoh would experience in the afterlife when his spirit or KA was animated.

Walls within the tombs and temples became places for the well known scenes of ancient Egyptian art; scenes of everyday life, of feasting and music, fishing and gardening, of animals and nature and the harvesting of crops. The pharaoh was shown in his journey to the afterlife meeting

with the god Osiris in the final judgement having his heart weighed on the scales of justice (Ma'at). Even the ceiling was decorated in the rich blue tints of the night sky covered with hundred of golden stars with the ship of the dead crossing the sky

Top left: Opening of the Mouth - Tutankhamun  
Top right: Weighing of the heart of Hunefer – green skin (rebirth) Ma'at – feather Anubis and crocodile headed gos/priests also shows registers  
Above: Egyptian Harvest





Anubis attending the mummy of Sennedjem



Pond in a Garden from the tomb of Nebamun

from sunset to sunrise symbolizing the pharaoh's journey in death.

Because of the vast wealth which trickled down through Egyptian society at this time, burial rituals such as embalming and tomb building became more widespread throughout the wealthier classes of society. The workmen's cemetery at Deir El Medina has examples of perfectly preserved tomb art built by the tomb workers for their own burials in a better state of preservation than many of the noble and royal tombs.

The artist who created these visions was a high status member of Egyptian society who learnt his trade as a skill or craft strictly guided by a set of rules, or an "artistic canon". The artist communicated traditional religious and cultural ideas rather than interpreting reality from his own standpoint and every aspect of Egyptian art was symbolic. For example, the pharaoh was invariably larger than other figures although his size was equal to the gods.

Whilst his first wife might be the same size as him, subsequent wives were smaller. He could be depicted wearing a variety of headwear which would communicate the role in which he was to be seen. He might be drawn as a lion, a falcon or a bull and shown carrying a whip or a staff or any one of a range of symbolic objects. The pharaoh's enemies were

literally trampled underfoot; a footstool from the famous Tomb of Tutankhamen is decorated with the images of bound servants upon which the young king could rest his feet. Children were depicted in miniature often not reaching the knee level of an adult and shown sucking a thumb or displaying the long ponytail before the first haircut.

Colours also had a symbolic meaning and pigments were obtained from minerals such as malachite (green), gypsum (white), and arsenic trisulphide (yellow). White was the colour of purity and power, blue skin tones symbolized rebirth, whilst green was the colour of vegetation and new life. Yellow, the colour of gold, a symbol of eternity, was used to portray the afterlife. Gestures, too, communicated important ideas, raised hands palms out were a symbol of praise and submission and a symbolic embrace of a wife towards her husband might mean a "union" of a political kind.

Traditional rules of representation determined the famous Egyptian stance which mixed frontal and profile views of the figure. Every part of the body is shown from the viewpoint which reveals it most characteristically. The head is shown in profile but the eye is shown frontally, the only way the whole image of the eye - iris, pupil and

white - can be shown. The neck is shown in profile and slightly twisted whereas the shoulders are frontal with the waist at an angle in transition to the profile view of the lower body. The female chest is therefore shown at a forty-five degree angle giving it the most flattering shape, one breast flattened and one slightly rounded in profile. More important figures are portrayed in complete conformity to the rules of art whereas lesser figures, such as workmen in the fields, might be portrayed in full profile or even with their back to the viewer.

The same "law of directional straightness" applied to landscape views and objects. A scene of a pool surrounded by trees for example would show the pool from a bird's eye view with the trees surrounding being laid out flat - the only way the pure characteristic of the trees can be shown. Likewise objects on a table are piled one upon the other rather than in perspective with the table shown as a four legged, flat, square surface. Because it was simply not possible for the Egyptian artist to organise a large scale scene into perspective, large compositions like battle scenes, expeditions or building projects were organised into registers or layers, one on top of the other, each with its own baseline. This system did not change for 3000 years.

Egyptians had an intense love of

nature that is evident in the intricate observations of animals, birds, fish, trees and plants in tomb paintings, statues and reliefs. Hunting scenes were common in the tombs and temples. Birds were minutely detailed, each one with a different design but conforming to a set pattern of frontality showing the characteristics of the bird to full effect.

The commemorative temple building was nothing less than a re-creation of the beloved Egyptian landscape with two huge pylons at the entrance of the temple representing the two banks of the Nile River. The central processional aisle with its highly polished, reflecting granite surface, signified the Nile River itself sparkled in the intense Egyptian sunlight. Beside the central aisle were massive sandstone columns with capitals or tops carved and painted to resemble reeds of papyrus

and lotus, themselves the symbols of the "two lands" upper and lower Egypt. The end point of the elevating processional aisle was a sanctuary situated on the highest point of the temple floor which symbolized the creation myth of Egypt and the mound of earth which became visible upon the subsiding waters of the flood.

For most of its 3000 years Egyptian civilization was cut off from its neighbours by harsh deserts and long distances allowing it to develop its unique and spectacular form of art in isolation. Painting in tombs and temples is just one aspect of ancient Egyptian art which gives us a glimpse into the working life of the people, their landscape, their environment, their customs and beliefs. The ancient Egyptians wanted their way of life to live on after death never dreaming that that is exactly what has happened, although not how they intended. ■



Tomb of Nebamun- Funeral Offerings