

Egyptian art: craftsmen, techniques, and conventions

Egyptian civilization lasted for more than 3,000 years, yet art from any period during that long time span can instantly be identified as being from Egypt. Even though there was considerable variation in style, Egyptian art seems relatively static in comparison to the radical changes in Western art over a much shorter period. This conservatism of artistic style is due to the fact that art was a function and tool of a religious system striving to maintain perfect order in the universe. The creation of the universe was considered to be a state of initial perfection that should be emulated and preserved; thus, there was little value placed upon dramatic innovation in art, for modification moved art away from perfection. This reverence for the past is apparent in the Late Period, when artisans carefully studied and copied the then 2,000-year-old scenes in Old Kingdom tombs.

In contrast to the art of the Western world, which is valued primarily for aesthetics ("art for art's sake"), artistic skill, or viewer appreciation, Egyptian art was produced to fulfill the religious function of substitution through which a representation of a thing or a person could function as the object depicted (see chapters 6 and 10). Therefore, though the ancient artists were highly skilled and certainly appreciated art for its sheer beauty, paintings and reliefs in tombs and temples were more than simple decorations – they represented events and people in an idealized world independent of time and space. For example, a statue of a person was believed to be a permanent abode for the spirit of that individual and guaranteed his or her eternal life after death. Thus a sculptor was considered to "give birth to" a statue or "to cause the statue to live." Similarly, scenes depicting the king smiting his enemies were potent guarantors of the ability of that king, or any subsequent king, to defeat the enemies of Egypt. Many seemingly simple scenes, such as fishing and fowling in the marshes, are in fact elaborate allegories that refer to the maintenance of order in the cosmos. Virtually all Egyptian art is an allusion to timeless order and the stability of the world.

Artisans, tools, and techniques

Artists were members of the craftsman class, generally holding no special status and plying their trade in the towns and villages of Upper and Lower Egypt. Artists of exceptional skill might fall under the patronage of the king and work for the palace, while other craftsmen, considered to be under the

patronage of the creator god Ptah, worked for the temples producing ritual objects and embellishing temple walls. Individual artisans were specialists (e.g., draughtsman, relief carver, painter) who worked with other artisans as a team to complete a single project. Unlike modern works of art that reflect the personal tastes and inspiration of a single individual, the products of the Egyptian atelier bear the imprint of many, and therefore very few works of art are signed. Indeed, only a few artists are known by name.

The type of Egyptian art probably most familiar to us today is the painted or carved walls of tombs and temples. For both painted and carved scenes, preparation of the wall surface was the same. First the wall, whether excavated or built of stone blocks, was flattened with ever finer chisels. Flaws in the stone were patched with plaster to provide a smooth surface. If the surface was of particularly poor quality it was coated with a thick layer of mud mixed with chopped straw and covered with a wash of plaster. After the surface was prepared, a series of lines was marked on the wall to assist in positioning and drawing the figures. These guidelines and grids were either ruled on the wall or made by laying a length of string dipped into red pigment across the surface at the appropriate level and snapping it against the wall. (In many unfinished tombs, these lines are still visible.) A draughtsman then made a preliminary sketch of the scene on the wall in red pigment. These sketches were sometimes executed by a team of artists working on different parts of the composition under the supervision of the master draughtsman. Once the outline was done, the master draughtsman corrected and finalized the designs in black.

If the scene was to be painted, color was applied with coarse brushes made from bundles of palm fibers doubled over and lashed together at the doubled end to make a handle, or pieces of fibrous wood chewed or beaten at one end. Finally, the entire scene was finished by redrawing the outlines and the details within them with narrow reed brushes similar to those used by scribes.

Dry pigments were prepared by crushing various substances in a mortar or on a grinding palette with a stone pestle. Reds and yellows were obtained from ochre, a mineral of clay and iron oxide that ranges in color from light yellow to brown or red. White was made from gypsum (calcium sulfate) or calcium carbonate, which, like ochre, occurred naturally in Egypt. Some blue came from azurite, a carbonate of copper present in Sinai and the Eastern Desert, but more often it was made from a compound of silica, copper, and calcium. Malachite, a copper carbonate also found in Sinai and the Eastern Desert, produced bright greens, while black was made from soot. To make paint, the dry pigments were mixed with an adhesive compound, normally a water-soluble gum or egg white. Artists generally worked with these colors, but there was considerable variation, and intermediate shades could be

obtained by laying one pigment over another. During the New Kingdom subtle tints were not uncommon, and there are examples of shading. By Roman times, Egyptian artists had developed the technique of encaustic (pigmented wax) painting, which allowed for a larger range of pastel hues. Some tomb paintings and paintings on wooden surfaces such as coffins were covered with a transparent varnish of diluted resin.

If the scene was to be carved in relief before being painted, the outlines of the figures were incised with a sharp tool. Two main kinds of relief, raised (*bas relief*) and sunk (*intaglio*), were employed by the Egyptians. In raised relief, the background was cut back leaving the figures standing out from the surface of the stone. In sunk relief, on the other hand, the surface of the figure was cut into the stone. Because sunk relief involved cutting away only the figures rather than the entire background area, it was preferred for hard stones such as granite and quartzite that are more laborious to work than limestone and sandstone. Even on softer stones sunk relief was often employed when there were large areas to decorate because it was quicker to execute than raised relief. Because shadows tend to flatten the contours of sunk relief, it was particularly suitable for use in the bright sunlight of exterior surfaces, while raised reliefs were often reserved for scenes within a temple or tomb. In both techniques, the figures were often carved in great detail. After the carving was completed, the surface was covered with another thin layer of plaster and the background and the figures themselves were painted. To complete the scene, the fine details on the figures together with their final outline were touched up with a fine brush.

Sculpture in the round also followed a process of several steps. After the block was delivered from the quarry, the general outline of the statue was marked in red, and apprentices roughly cut the block to size with saws and chisels. The block was then turned over to more experienced stonemasons to define the shape. Progressively more fine work and detail were added with fine picks, and the final polish was done with smoothing stones (fig. 11.1). The tools of sculptors were similar to those used by stone masons: copper chisels of various sizes, saws, drills, and stone pounders. Bronze tools were gradually added to the repertoire in the first millennium BC.

Like reliefs, most statues were originally painted in bright hues of red, yellow, blue, green, black, and white. In addition to paint, sculptures – both relief and in the round – were often decorated with other materials. Startling life-like eyes made of rock crystal, obsidian, and quartz were added to some statues, especially during the Old Kingdom, and sections of stone relief were sometimes hollowed out and filled with bright faience inlay. A precursor of this technique appears in the Dynasty 4 tomb of Nefermaat and Itet at Meidum, in which the deeply cut sunk relief scenes were filled with brightly colored paste.

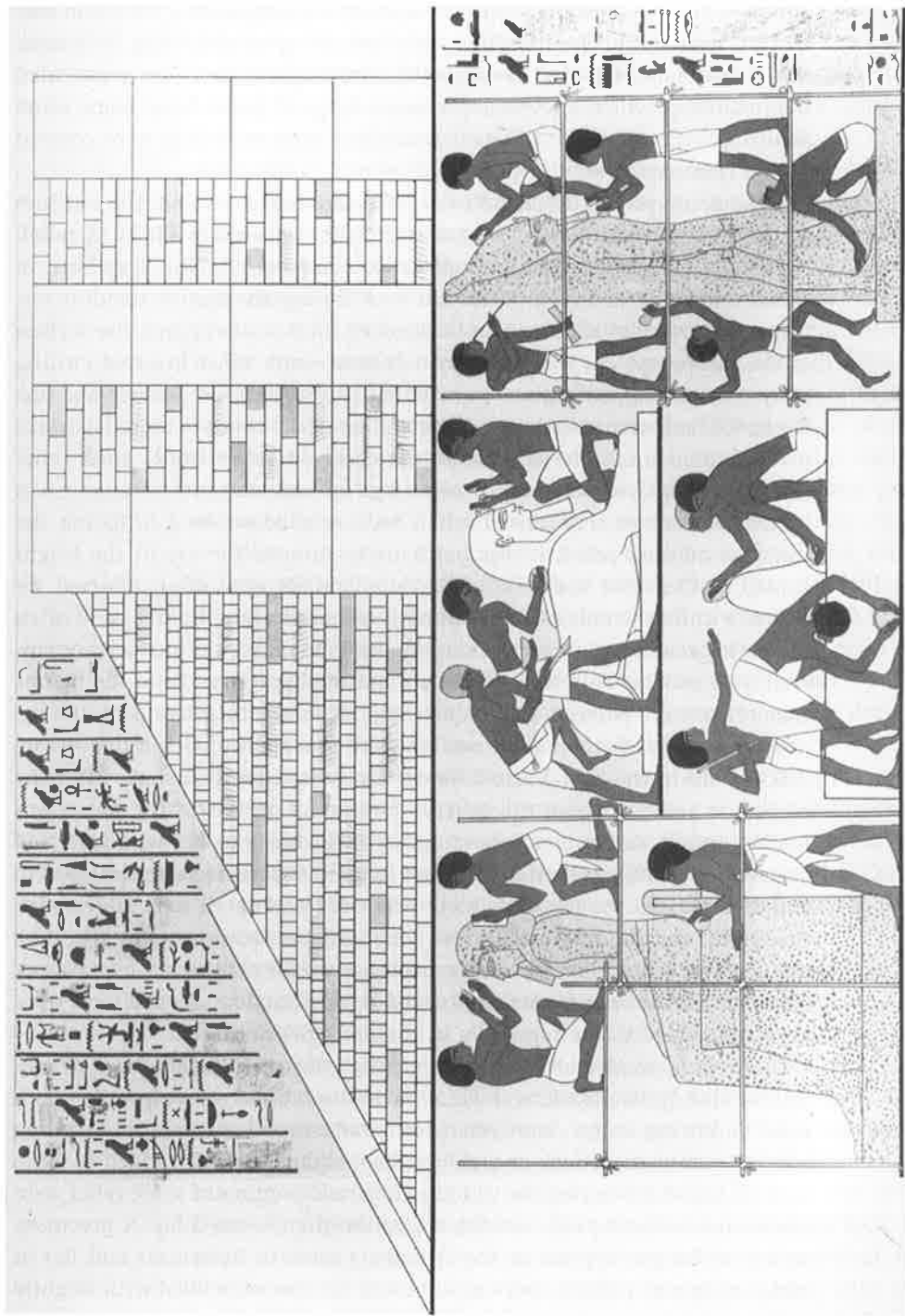


Fig. 11.1. Artisans finishing granite statues of the king and a limestone sphinx and offering table with rubbing stones, tomb of Rekhmire at Luxor (Dynasty 18). An artist, standing on a scaffold, inscribes the back pillar of the king. The upper register shows a pillared hallway with brick fill to act as a building scaffold.

Fig. 11.1. Artisans finishing granite statues of the king and a limestone sphinx and offering table with rubbing stones, tomb of Rekhmire at Luxor (Dynasty 18). An artist, standing on a scaffold, inscribes the back pillar of the king. The upper register shows a pillared hallway with brick fill to act as a building scaffold.

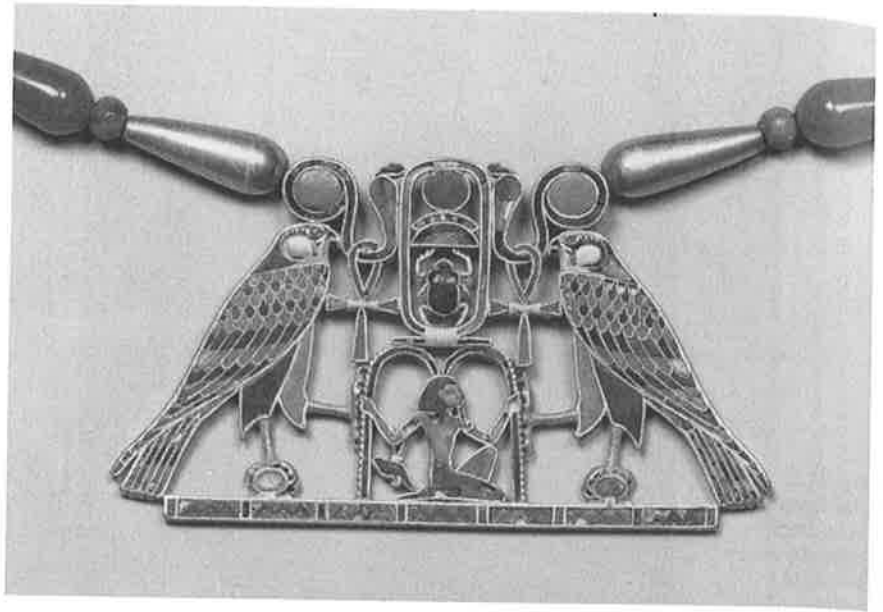
Fig. 11.2. Baked clay figurine of a king, Medinet Habu (Dynasties 21-24). In contrast to the stone statues of the elite, the bulk of the population made simple baked clay figures.



Although people are most familiar with stone statuary that was commissioned by the state and by members of the elite, the common people made and commissioned figurines and statuettes of baked clay or wood (fig. 11.2). Wood was also used for reliefs and architectural elements such as doors, and was worked chiefly with adzes, drills, and chisels. The native timbers of Egypt (sycamore, tamarisk, and acacia) did not produce large planks suitable for statuary and they were too fibrous for fine joinery, so high-quality wooden objects were usually made of pine and cedar imported from Lebanon or of ebony from Nubia.

Decorating or creating entire works with various metals dates to the Old Kingdom. Rough surfaces on some statues indicate that they were originally covered with gold leaf. Statues made of sheets of beaten copper appear in the late Old Kingdom, the most famous example being the life-size statue of Pepi I (Dynasty 6) that was probably beaten over a wooden core. The earliest examples of bronze statues date to Dynasty 18 (Thutmose III), but they do not become common until the Third Intermediate Period, at which time thousands of bronze statues of gods were made using the lost wax process. Metal was also used for ornamentation of architecture. Scenes from the New Kingdom tomb of Rekhmire show that large objects such as doors were

Fig. 11.3. Gold pectoral inlaid with stone and glass from the tomb of Sithathoryunet at Dashur. The pectoral combines hieroglyphs in a decorative motif that spells out the wish "May the Horus, Kha-kheper-Re (Senwosert II) have millions of years of life." Reign of Senwosert II (Dynasty 12).



sometimes cast in a single piece. Small holes in New Kingdom reliefs indicate that they were covered with gold or bronze sheets, and the tips of obelisks were likewise encased with sheets of gold.

Egyptian jewelers of the Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom, and Third Intermediate Period were able to produce highly refined and beautiful products for the luxury trade. Gold, electrum, and sometimes silver were employed to make elaborate jewelry, especially pectorals, some of which were suspended from finely braided chain. Gold pieces were often encrusted with tiny gold granules - a technique that would challenge even today's finest craftsmen. The lapidary arts were highly developed, and craftsmen worked carnelian, jasper, rock crystal, agate, lapis lazuli (from Asia), and turquoise (imported from Sinai), as well as glass (called "melted stone") or faience substitutes, into colorful inlays for elaborate jewelry (fig. 11.3).

Principles of representation

In contrast to the "perceptual" art of the Graeco-Roman tradition, the art of ancient Egypt is "conceptual." In perceptual art, which is characterized by the conventions of single-point perspective and foreshortening to create the illusion of three dimensions, the subject is portrayed from the viewpoint of the artist. Conceptual art, on the other hand, attempts to portray the subject from its own perspective rather than the viewpoint of the artist, because the goal is to communicate essential information about the object itself,

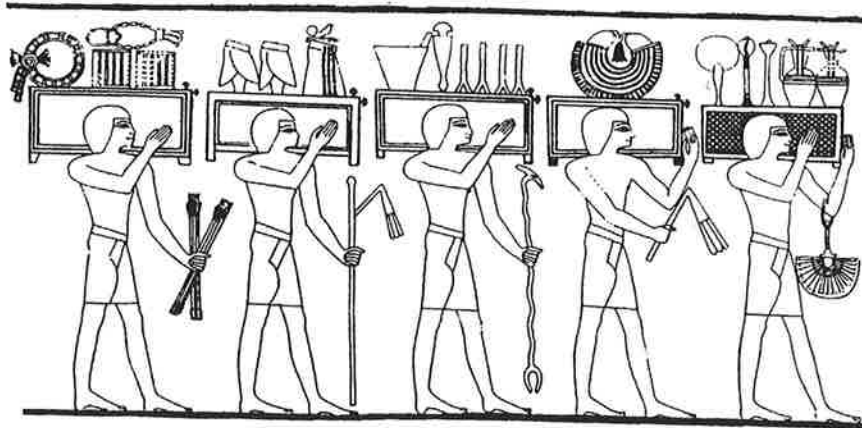


Fig. 11.4.
Procession of
offering bearers
from the tomb of
Rekhmire at
Luxor (Dynasty
18).

not how it appears to the viewer. Complex compositions reflect multiple viewpoints, for each object is shown as if isolated from surrounding objects. In the effort to relay the essential characteristics of the object, conceptual art tends to combine lateral and plan views to produce a composite diagram. In other words, if both the top and the side of an object are considered to be especially important for its identification, they are shown simultaneously.

The development of the complex conceptual conventions inherent in Egyptian art is tied to its religious function. Because representations were intended to substitute for the actual objects portrayed, each individual object was important in its own right; thus, the artist attempted to give the maximum amount of data about his subject without resorting to the "distortions" of overlapping, single-point perspective, or foreshortening.

The conceptual basis of ancient Egyptian art is best understood by looking at actual examples. That the ancient artist attempted to convey information about objects rather than portray them in three dimensions is seen in figure 11.4, which shows a procession of men carrying boxes of funerary offerings. Each box is shown as a simple rectangle because that was its distinctive form. There is no attempt to show the boxes in perspective by depicting them as trapezoids (fig. 11.5), for the Egyptians would have considered this a distortion of the boxes' true shape. Furthermore, in this scene (fig. 11.4) the contents of each box are shown above the container rather than inside, to avoid having to "tip" the boxes for the viewer. Each object within the box is shown in its most characteristic and recognizable form, even if this means combining various views. Hence the beaded collars, kilts, and hand mirror are depicted from above, while the jars are depicted from the side. Each object is shown as if in isolation – there is no overlapping that would mask characteristic features of individual objects – and each is in its correct

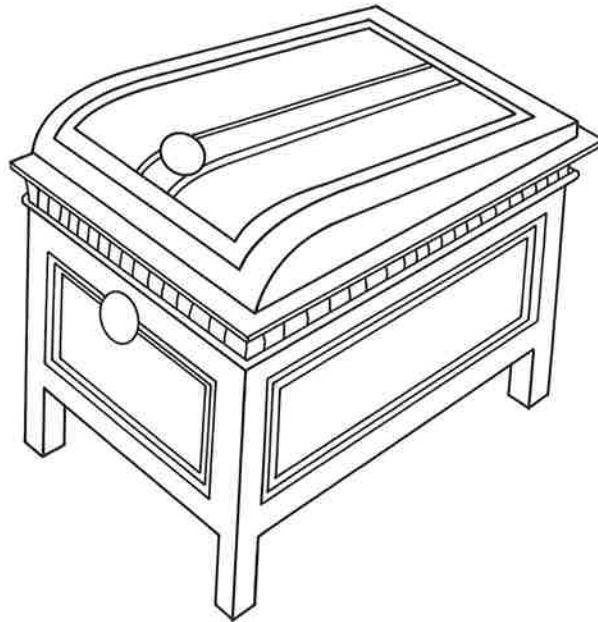
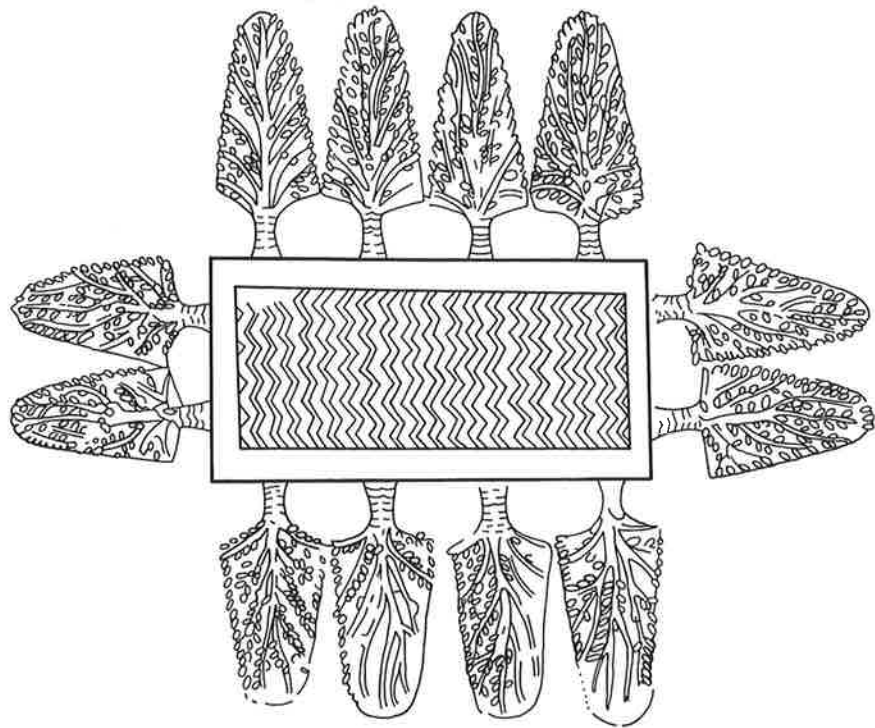


Fig. 11.5.
Drawing of a box
employing
Western
perspective. Note
how the rules of
perspective have
rendered the side
of the box as a
trapezoid.

relative size so that the artist could convey the maximum information about the object with the least amount of distortion. The tendency to combine plan and lateral views can also be observed in a typical pond and garden scene (fig. 11.6). The pond is rectangular as if viewed from above, while the trees are drawn in profile around the pond. The viewer's common sense plays a role in translating the message: trees, although portrayed lying flat so as not to mask the pond, are understood by the viewer to be standing around the edge of the pond. The entire scene, once interpreted, provides an accurate picture of a garden pond.

Although the ancient Egyptians did not attempt to create the illusion of three dimensions in the way artists in the Western tradition do, they did try to express the idea of depth within a scene. Depth within a composition was conveyed not by diminishing the size of the object (foreshortening), but occasionally by overlapping or, more commonly, by placing a more distant object above a closer object. Placing an object above another to indicate distance is best illustrated by a standard scene of boats on the Nile (fig. 11.7). Two ships appear, one above the other, yet each is positioned on its own separate aquatic baseline to indicate that each is on the Nile, one behind the other. This sort of convention allowed the ancient artist to convey the relative size of each ship and to give full details of the hull and rigging, for neither of the boats overlaps or masks the other.

Fig. 11.6. Scene of a garden and a pond, tomb of Rekhmire at Luxor (Dynasty 18). This image combines various viewpoints (frontal and aerial) to give the maximum information about the scene.



Representation of the human form

Ancient Egyptian representations of the human form are recognizable because of their tremendous uniformity. This uniformity was ensured by the use of a grid system, which first appeared as simple guidelines during Dynasty 5 (c. 2500 BC) and provided standard proportions to fixed points of the human body so that figures were relatively standard. This system developed into a series of squared grid lines during the Middle Kingdom, with each square perhaps based on the width of a closed fist. Standing male figures were divided into eighteen equal squares from the hairline to the sole of the foot (fig. 11.8). (It is thought that the measurement stopped at the hairline rather than at the crown of the head to allow for the addition of various headdresses.) Distinctive parts of the body were measured in multiples of the grid square; for example, the knee was at the sixth square (the height of six fists) from the baseline, the bottom of the hip at the ninth, and the neck at the sixteenth. Standing figures of women (fig. 11.9) were also drawn on eighteen squares from soles to hairline, but they were usually depicted as more slender than their male counterparts and the small of the back was positioned higher. The grid system also accommodated figures in

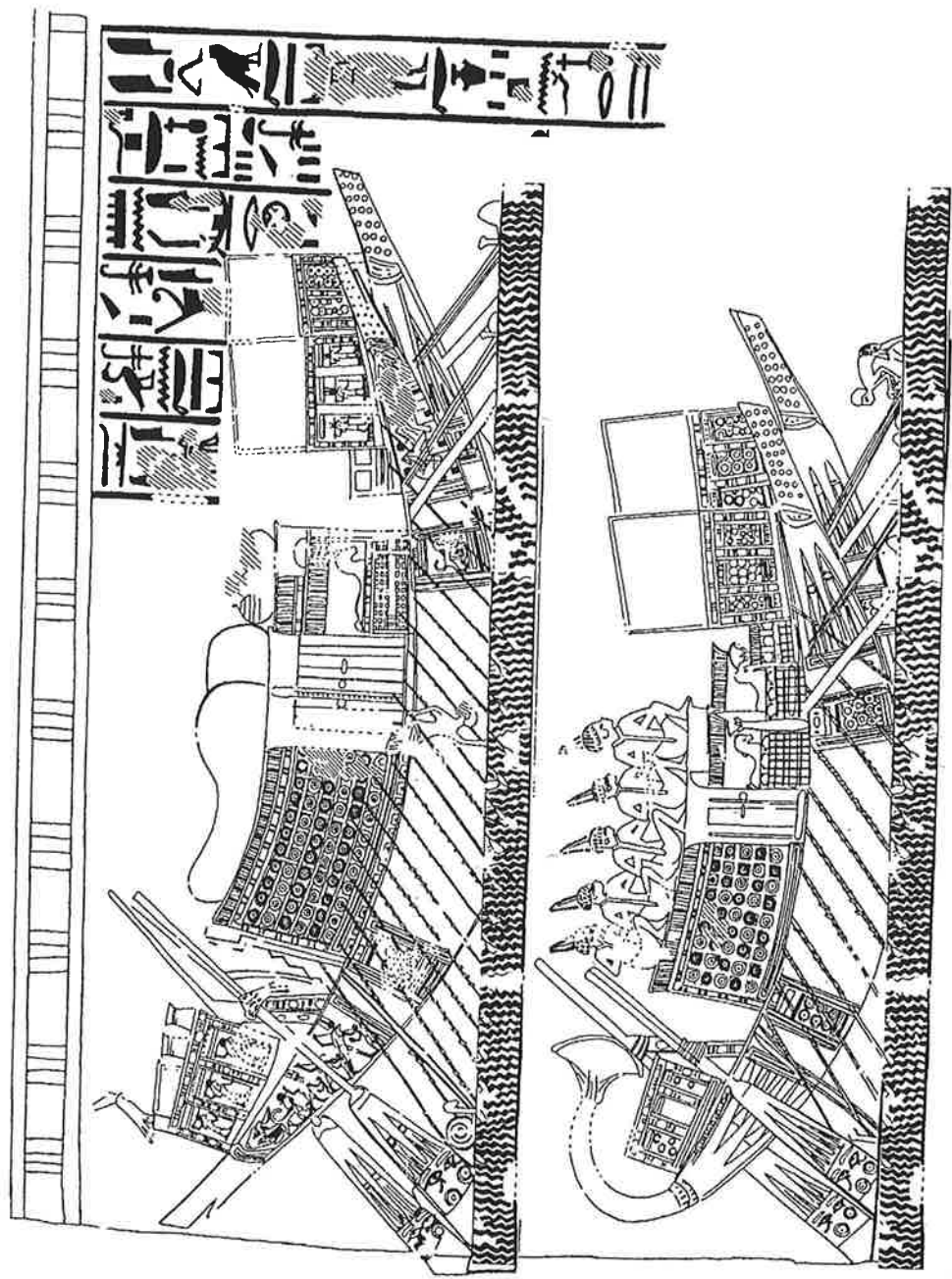


Fig. 11.7. Boats on the Nile as shown in the tomb of Huy at Luxor (Dynasty 18). Note how the upper boat, which is supposed to be behind the lower boat, sails on a duplicate ground, line hatched to indicate it represents the Nile.

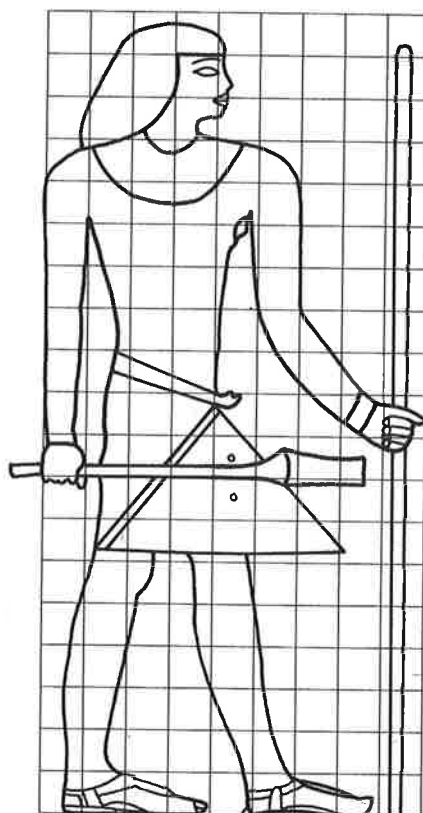


Fig. 11.8. Male figure superimposed over proportional eighteen-square grid.

postures other than standing, such as seated figures that were apportioned over a fourteen-square grid. This canon of proportions changed during the late Third Intermediate Period when the human figure was elongated with the use of a twenty-one square grid. This modification is very evident in Ptolemaic reliefs in which the figures appear to be very high-waisted (fig. 11.10).

Parts of the human body, like inanimate objects, were depicted in their most characteristic and identifiable form (fig. 11.11). Hence the face was shown in profile to express its contour, but the eye was shown in its unabstracted, frontal, almond-like shape rather than a profile wedge. Shoulders were portrayed frontally to express their width, while the rest of the torso was three-quarters turned, and the contour of the buttock, calf, and arch of the foot were in profile. Although the Egyptian artist almost always conformed to the traditional canon of human representation, he certainly had the skill to portray the human form in other ways. For example, the faces of certain genre figures, such as musicians and horses, as well as the common hieroglyphs of the human face (𓄎) and the forward-looking owl

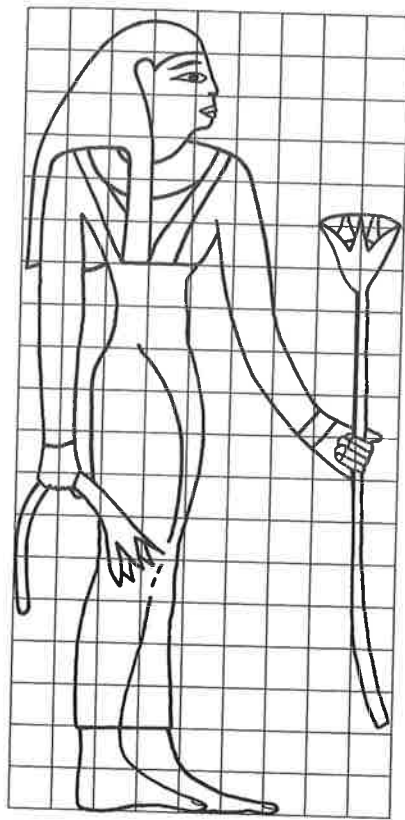



Fig. 11.9. Female figure superimposed over proportional eighteen-square grid.

() are shown frontally, belying the idea that the Egyptian artist was unable to draw such forms.

The desire of the artist to communicate the most essential features of the human form in two dimensions is especially apparent in the rendering of women, who were normally portrayed with the profile of a single high, rounded breast. Even though these female figures may be clothed in a dress with broad shoulder straps, the breast – as a characteristic part of the female – in two dimensions is shown exposed (fig. 11.12a), yet three-dimensional statues of women dressed in the same garb show that the straps cover the breasts (fig. 11.12b).

The same concern with the essential characteristics of the human form can be seen in the rendering of the human hand. In the effort to depict all the fingers, the hand nearer the viewer was shown in the same form as the far hand – essentially upside down – otherwise the distinctive part of the hand – the thumb – would have been obscured (fig. 11.13). Likewise, for much of Egyptian history, the human foot was represented with the arch visible in both the near and the far foot, presumably because the arch was

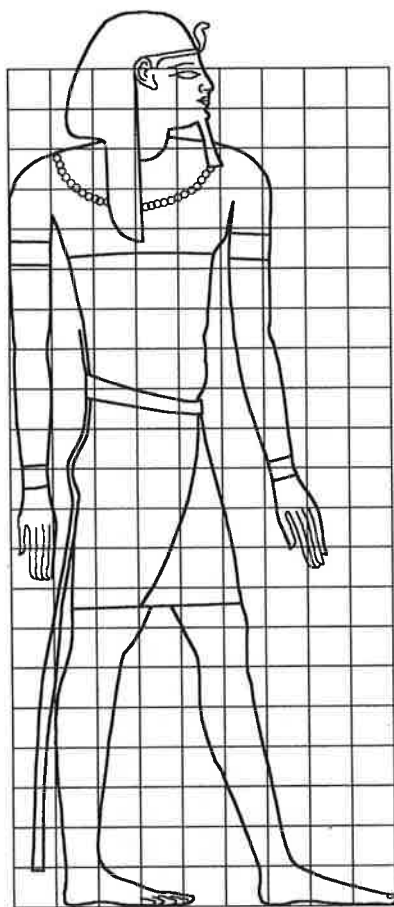


Fig. 11.10.
Figure from
Ptolemaic relief
(third century BC)
superimposed
over twenty-one-
square grid,
resulting in
elongated
proportions.

a characteristic feature of the foot. Accurate rendering of left and right feet showing all five toes on the near foot was experimented with during the reigns of Thutmose IV and Amunhotep III and became common during the Amarna Period. It continued to appear sporadically during the New Kingdom and finally became a common mode of representation during the Ptolemaic Period.

Status and role were also expressed through artistic conventions such as size, color, pose, and placement. In general, importance was expressed by relative size. Hence, in scenes of estate owners surveying workers or of the king inspecting his troops, the superior figure is much larger than the subordinates. But size was not always an absolute indication of importance. For example, a group of stelae from a single workshop at Naga ed Deir (First Intermediate Period) shows great variation in the size of a man in relation to his wife. On some stelae they are the same size, on others the woman

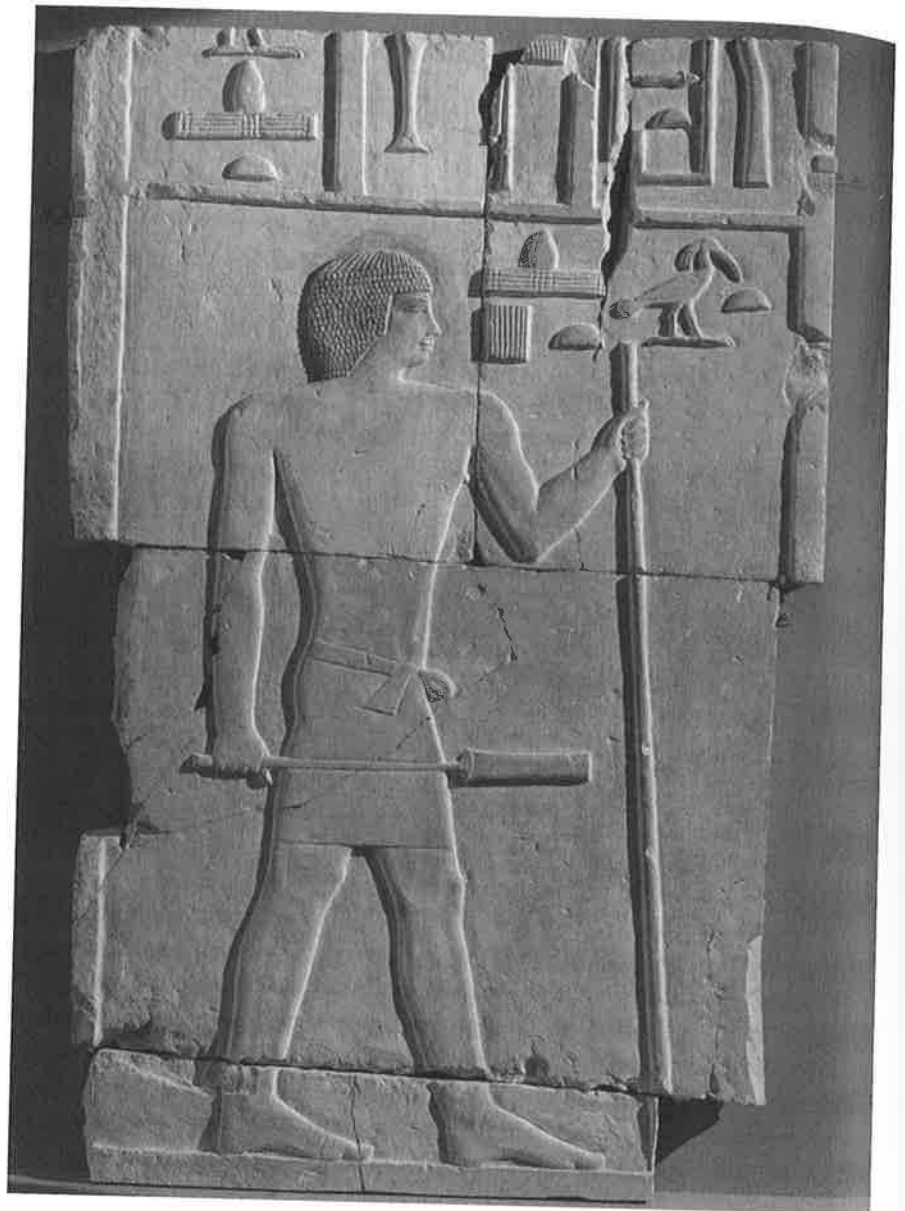


Fig. 11.11. Standard representation of the human figure. Note how the man, named Akhetotep, is portrayed in a combination of views: his face in profile, his eye frontally, and his body in a combination of profile, frontal, and oblique views (Dynasties 3-4).

barely reaches her husband's hip, her relative height being predicated by the overall composition and space constraints. Statues and two-dimensional representations of men were painted reddish-brown while women were colored yellow, a difference that some scholars see as supporting differences in gender roles – men became tanned because they had to work in fields, but women, at least ideally, did not. Placement of figures is especially important

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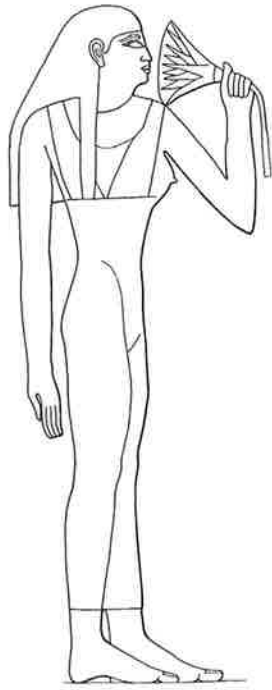


Fig. 11.12a.
Woman with
V-neck dress
shown in relief,
mastaba of
Mereruka at
Saqqara (Dynasty
6). The
identification of
the figure as
female is
emphasized by
showing the
breast bared.



Fig. 11.12b.
Statue of a
woman wearing
a V-neck dress
similar to that
depicted in fig.
11.12a, showing
how the straps
actually cover
her breasts
(Dynasty 5).

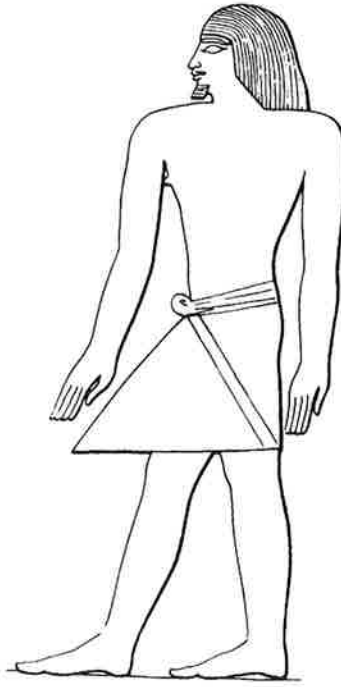


Fig. 11.13.
Classic
representation of
the human figure
showing an arch
in both feet and
identical hands.
Mastaba of
Mereruka at
Saqqara (Dynasty
6).

in portrayals of husband and wife. In both seated and standing pairs, the woman is usually to the male's left (the viewer's right), but there are many exceptions (see fig. 11.12b). In standing compositions, the woman almost always has her arm around her husband's shoulder or waist, but it is very rare for the man to be represented embracing his wife.

In balanced compositions of a man and woman seated at either side of a table of offerings, the man is normally on the viewer's left facing right, which was apparently the dominant position. Ironically, in a tomb belonging to a married woman, the husband usually is not shown, perhaps because if he were, the rules of decorum would force the woman into the secondary position in monuments that were supposed to commemorate her.

Portraiture and idealization

Images of people were intended to substitute for them for eternity, so representations rarely show an individual in any state other than the prime of health and life. This symbolic aspect of Egyptian art precludes the existence of real portraiture, for the goal of the artist was to show individuals as they wished to be, not as they actually were. Men are shown with broad muscular chests and narrow hips while women are shown impossibly thin



Fig. 11.14.
Differing
representations
of Nefertiti
(Dynasty 18)
emphasizing the
symbolic nature
of Egyptian art:
(a) the idealized
form; (b) the
radical style.

and long-legged. Age, physical infirmity, or deviations from the cosmetic ideal are rarely portrayed in the main figures, generally being restricted to field-hands, laborers, and subservient figures. Age is so seldom indicated in art that in most cases the captions that accompany group scenes are the only way to distinguish between a tomb-owner's wife and his mother. That there was little attempt to portray people as they actually appeared is also confirmed by the fact that many statues were made without a particular purchaser in mind, and the statue was matched to its owner merely by the addition of a hieroglyphic label. Likewise, the identity of a statue could be changed by effacing the label and substituting another name without altering the features.

The only substantial – and, indeed, tremendous – variation from the traditional forms of human representation appeared during the reign of Amunhotep IV/Akhenaten (Dynasty 18) (see chapters 3 and 6). The most prominent change was in the representation of the king and his family. Over the course of Akhenaten's seventeen-year reign, the depictions, which appeared in both temple and domestic contexts, ranged from naturalistic to highly abstracted and grotesque (fig. 11.14a, b). The most extreme variation from the standard canon, which appeared early in the reign, shows the king with an elongated neck, drooping jaw, and fleshy feminine body.



Fig. 11.14. (cont.)

The emphasis upon scenes of nature, with animals frolicking, and informal scenes of the royal family and courtiers has led some to suggest that the representations were an effort to portray the king and his family as they actually appeared. However, the inconsistency of the portrayals suggests that the change in style was purely artistic, motivated by the changing religious program of the king. Furthermore, religious texts that refer to the king as the agent of creation suggest that the representations of the king are a reference to him in his role of androgynous creator god, hence the feminine features of the king. Another indication that the art style of the Amarna era was linked to Akhenaten's theological program is that, shortly after the restoration of the old polytheism, the artistic style generally reverted to the earlier, traditional forms.

In contrast to the idealization of the human form, Egyptian artists depicted animals with great attention to detail. Scenes of fishing and fowling incorporate images of the fauna which can be precisely identified by modern scholars.

Summary

Egyptian art served a religious function rather than a purely aesthetic one. Representations were thought to substitute eternally for what was portrayed,

so objects were shown in a manner which was thought to give the fullest and least abstracted information, combining multiple viewpoints, plan, and profile views into a composite, highly symbolic diagram. Foreshortening and other elements of single-point perspective were generally avoided because they were considered to be distortions.

The fundamental characteristics of Egyptian art were established during the early Old Kingdom and survived with minor variations throughout the Pharaonic Period. The relatively static style was associated with the idea that the state of the world was perfect at its creation, and therefore innovation was not necessarily valued because it moved the cosmos away from the earlier state of perfection. The use of standard proportions for the human form maintained by a system of grid and guide lines, as well as the organization of artists into teams working together on a single work, ensured that the art was standardized and did not reflect the inspiration of a single craftsman.

Human figures were portrayed in an idealized form because the representations were intended to depict individuals as they wished to remain, and how they wished to be remembered, for eternity. Thus, idiosyncratic features such as age, obesity, or infirmity were usually avoided by the ancient artists.

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EGYPT AND THE EGYPTIANS

Second Edition

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CAMBRIDGE