***Introduction***

Five thousand years ago, the Egyptians formed and sustained the world’s first large-scale, unified state along the Nile River. The Nile was a symbol of life and appeared in much of their artwork.

Egyptians believed in the afterlife and that their ka (spirit) would live on after they died; much of their life was spent preparing for the afterlife and immortality. They created art and architecture to assure a comfortable afterlife for their rulers, the pharaohs, who were also considered gods.

Much of what we know about ancient Egypt comes from their surviving tombs and temples. In the pursuit of permanence, the Egyptians built elaborate tombs and pyramids to house the pharaoh and everything he would need for the afterlife. They also built temples to worship their many gods. The interior decorations consisted of wall paintings or carved reliefs. The paintings and stone carvings followed rigid canons (fundamental rules) for representing the human figure. Egyptian artists shunned realism and perspective, and instead stylized their figures using contour lines and idealized features. Whether in relief or freestanding, statues were intended to last for eternity and were made of hard stone or granite. The poses were always compact, frontal and perfectly symmetrical. Hieroglyphics, the writing systems used by the Egyptians, were made up of symbols and pictures. These markings appear on much of Egyptian art, but remained a mystery to treasure hunters until the Rosetta Stone was decoded in the 1800’s.

The Egyptians’ monumental building styles survived for thousands of years. These massive structures still amaze generations of visitors who travel to Egypt to see them; they symbolize the strength and permanence of Egypt. Excavations of ancient tombs continue to this day, with new discoveries yielding more information about this ancient society.

We know now that all aspects of Egyptian culture were closely intertwined: hieroglyphic writing with art, art with religion, religion with poetry and poetry with political history. That is why there came into being a single science of Egyptology, dealing with Ancient Egypt as a whole.

***Vocabulary***

**Cartouche:** (pronounced “karTOOSH”) An oval or oblong shape enclosing a name in hieroglyphics, usually reserved for gods or kings.

**Egyptology:** The study of ancient Egyptian history, language, literature, religion, architecture and art from the 5th millennium BC until the end of its native religious practices in the 4th century AD

**Hieroglyphics:** Egyptian writing system that uses pictures to represent both phonetic sounds and words.

**Profile:** To show from a side view, particularly the human body or face.

**Stylize:** To simplify realistic details into their basic lines and shapes for decorative or artistic purposes.

**Ankh:** A cross with a loop at the top, used as a symbol of eternal life.

**Frontal:** Shoulder forward, hips forward.

**Canons:** Specific rules of proportion in which to represent the human figure.

**Relief:** To create a sculpture in relief is to give the impression that the sculpted material has been raised above the background plane

***Art Elements***

**Line:** A line is a mark made by the movement of a pointed tool and is often defined as a moving dot. Line often suggests movement in a drawing or painting. Contour lines outline the edges of forms and shapes and actually describe them in the simplest way.

**Shape:** Egyptian art employs both geometric and stylized organic shapes. Certain shapes, such as scarabs, ankhs, lotus flowers and birds, repeat throughout Egyptian art.

***Art Principles***

**Balance:** In Egyptian sculpture and architecture, symmetrical balance is most commonly seen.

**Repetition/Rhythm:** The repetition of elements in Egyptian art is based on artistic conventions that were in place for more than 3,000 years. In order to maintain these conventions, repetition had to be even and balanced, creating regular rhythms.

***Background***

The Egyptians believed that the world was organized according to the wishes of their gods. Starting from the earliest times, the rulers of Egypt, the pharaohs, sought to immortalize themselves through the art and architecture they commissioned for their final resting places, and the standard conventions used to create their art remained the same for nearly three thousand years.

***Geography***

Egypt is located in the northeast corner of the continent of Africa. This was a location well suited for building a great civilization since the country thrived in the lush strip of land along the Nile River. On either side of the river were desert and mountains that created an effective barrier to enemies.

The Nile, the world’s longest river, begins deep in Africa. It then descends to sea level in Egypt. Annual floods deposit rich soil onto the banks of the Nile from the hills thousands of miles away. The river flows through regions that may not have a single drop of rainfall in a decade, and crops grow luxuriantly in the fertile silt.

In ancient Egypt, the great river that made life possible entered the consciousness of the Egyptians as a god and as a symbol of life. On either side, both east and west, a horizontal line of cliffs marked the boundaries of life. Beyond the river was the desert and death.

***History***

Ancient Egyptian civilization can be traced from 3500 BC and spanned nearly 3000 years. Egypt’s early rise is attributed to a number of important developments in a number of areas. Development of agriculture in the rich Nile River delta was of primary importance. The settlements around the rich growing areas grew into cities which were ruled by powerful leader-kings called pharaohs. Their power was loosely tied to a strong belief system oriented towards the afterlife and a hierarchy of gods who ruled over not only the dead but the living as well.

Much of what we know about the ancient Egyptians has been gleaned from the translation of their writings found on tomb and palace walls, stone tablets and papyrus scrolls. These “picture writings” are called hieroglyphics. Usually, a single image or “glyph,” will convey an entire word or idea. Often, the hieroglyphics are combined with narrative scenes of people, animals, gods and their symbols of power.

Changes in the style and content of Egyptian art, politics and religions are very subtle. The belief system was so much a part of all aspects of life that one did not dare deviate from the norm without offending the gods. Changes did occur, however, with the slow rise and fall of the powerful pharaohs. These influences were generally small but sometimes quite distinct in the areas of religion and politics. These changes also affected the arts and enable us to divide the historical and artistic periods into three sections called the Old Kingdom (3000- 2155 B.C.E.), Middle Kingdom (2040-1650 B.C.E.) and New Kingdom (1700-1070 B.C.E.).

***Religion***

The Egyptian concern for immortality amounted to near obsession. This life served to ensure safety and happiness in the next. This preoccupation is responsible in large part for the monuments the Egyptians constructed. For centuries they built their worldly dwellings of impermanent materials such as sundried brick. However, their tombs (which they believed would preserve their bodies forever), temples and statues were built of indestructible stone. Religion and permanence characterized their solemn and ageless art.

The Egyptians believed that the ka would live on after the death of the body within the corpse. Therefore, the dead body had to remain as nearly intact as possible. Insuring this, the Egyptians developed the technique of embalming to a high art. Their success is evident in numerous well-preserved mummies of kings, princes, nobles, commoners and animals. The mummy of a deceased was placed in a specially prepared tomb with food, drink, clothing, utensils and all apparatus of life, so that nothing that had been enjoyed on earth would be lacking. Sculptures of the deceased provided dwelling places for the spirit in case the mummy disintegrated. Wall paintings were for the enjoyment of the ka. They recorded, with great animation and detail, the recurring round of human activities and the cycle of “works and days” that changed with the calendar and the seasons. The tombs were placed to the west of the Nile River because that was where the sun set and where the Egyptians believed the journey of the afterlife began.

Egyptians hoped and expected that the images and inventory of life within the protective massive stone walls of the tomb would ensure immortality. However, thorough plundering of tombs became a profitable occupation almost from the beginning, and so far, we know of only one royal burial place that remained intact into the 20th century. This tomb, the tomb of King Tutankhamun (Tut), was discovered in 1922, to reveal the full splendor of a pharaoh’s funerary assemblage.

***Architecture***

Between 3500 and 3000 BC the Egyptian cemeteries contained oblong mounds built over graves. The body was mummified and surrounded with goods, wall paintings and pottery. Mastaba tombs (flat- topped, one-story buildings with slanted walls) were developed consisting of a burial chamber below ground and a light shaft from the grave to the roof. A small offertory chapel was attached to the mastaba. It also had a chamber for statues which served as a resting place for the ka, or soul.

The first pyramid dates from about 2750 BC. The tomb complex of King Djoser (pronounced “Zoser”) is Egypt’s oldest known architectural monument still in existence. It was designed by a man named Imhotep (who left his name inscribed on the pedestal of Djoser’s ka statue, thus making him the first architect in history to be known by name). What began as a mastaba was enlarged upon by placing mastaba-like elements of decreasing size on top of each other and creating a stepped pyramid. From its top, a 92-foot shaft descended to a granite-lined burial chamber.

The great pyramids of Giza are the biggest of all Egyptian pyramids. They are true pyramids, evolving from the stepped pyramid construction, and each has a square base and four triangular sides coming to a point at the top. In these true pyramids, the actual burial site may be within the pyramid—not below ground—with false chambers, false doors and confusing passageways to foil potential tomb robbers. It is a popular misconception that the pyramids were built by slave labor. In fact, modern Egyptologists believe that the workers on these great monuments were, in fact, paid laborers. These mammoth creations were vast public works projects. The supply of laborers came from farmers who were working for the pharaohs during the non-farming season.

Between 2000 and 1500 BC rock-cut tombs and mortuary tombs were introduced, probably because pyramid tombs proved to be too expensive and attracted grave robbers. Rock-cut tombs were carved out of the “living rock” of mountain sides. Many of these tombs can be found in the Valley of Kings, where along with a number of unfinished tombs, sixty-two identified tombs have been excavated by Egyptologists.

Through thousands of years of gradual transition and development in architecture, the religious themes remained constant. Architecture provided a vast framework for Egyptian art—walls for paintings and chambers filled with sculpture and incredibly ornate burial treasures. Very little remains of the normal “day-to-day” living quarters with the exception of what is found in some ruins and temples. However, much can be determined by looking at some of the tomb-temples built with the post and lintel system. This architectural system is made up of closely crowded pillars holding up massive beams. No arches were used; this construction technique was unknown at the time. Art historians believe that the average homes were constructed in a similar way with wood and lighter materials such as grasses and reeds. Once again, this reminds us of the Egyptian concept of life and death: the afterlife was the primary focus of attention.

***Sculpture***

The Egyptians are credited with creating two forms of sculpture: the free-standing and the relief sculpture. Free-standing sculpture was usually funerary statues of royalty or of deities. The figures were very compact and solid with few projecting parts. Frontal and rigid, the sculpture was worked from the four flat surfaces of the stone and never lost the block-like form of the stone from which it was carved. The proportions were a strictly developed formula which reflected the ideal proportions for royalty and deities.

Relief sculptures generally contained hieroglyphics and were painted. The figures were carved by scraping away the areas surrounding them so they stood out from the surface. Again these were very frontal and closely followed the strict formula of presentation; when the artist changed his view, he did it in 90 degree increments. Therefore, he acknowledged only three possible views: full face, strict profile, and vertically from above. In order to depict each figure with the greatest possible completeness, the artist combined the frontal and profile views. His method of doing this—and the method used, unchanged, by all Egyptian artists over a period of 2500 years—was to have the eyes and shoulders in a frontal view and the head and legs in profile. This created a particularly static image of the person. This frozen view suited the artist’s rendition of pharaohs since they were considered gods and above mortal efforts such as physical activity. In some relief sculpture and drawings, common workers, who by their nature show more physical activity, were shown in profile. In most cases, Egyptian artists stylized their figures without regard to reality; figures often have two left hands and two left feet.

***Painting***

Egyptian paintings are very similar to the relief sculptures and are often combined with hieroglyphics. The Egyptians loved color and painted everything imaginable. They created paintings on walls, papyrus scrolls, furnishings, ornamental objects, mummy cases, etc.

Most of what we know about Egyptian life and history is from their paintings. Important political events, day-to-day life and complex religious ceremonies were portrayed in paintings spanning hundreds of years. The paintings were most often very stylized and followed a formula that was decorative and symbolic. Figures were shown in profile, and the most important figure, the pharaoh, was always shown larger than other figures to show his importance and dominance. Pigments were usually formed from various minerals available in the area. A later development was the technique of mixing color into melted wax. Called “encaustic,” this pigment/wax mixture was used to paint many mummy portraits.

Egyptians are also noted for their invention of the illuminated manuscript. These illustrated books were written and painted on rolls of papyrus, a surface made from the thin-shaved pith of the papyrus plant and glued together to form a continuous sheet. The most important of these are the so-called “Books of the Dead,” which are collections of prayers for the protection of the deceased during their perilous adventures in the other world.

***Archeology***

Howard Carter was an English artist who was hired by the British Museum at the age of seventeen to work in Egypt as an illustrator with the archaeologist, Percy E. Newberry. Carter worked in Egypt for more than 20 years, learning all he could about archaeology, before he undertook an expedition of his own following World War I. Sponsored by the wealthy British amateur Egyptologist, Lord Carnarvon, Carter discovered the entrance to the tomb of King Tutankhamun in November of 1922, in the Valley of the Kings. Before 1922, a total of thirty- three royal tombs had been found in the bedrock of the Valley of Kings. Every tomb had been pillaged long before Carter’s time and only a few important discoveries had been made. Most experts believed that the burial ground had yielded all of its secrets, but Carter disagreed. He had spent years studying in Egypt and he believed that one tomb was still hidden somewhere in the royal necropolis (“city of the dead”)—that of a boy king, Tutankhamun. Lord Carnarvon was just about to discontinue his financial aid when Carter pleaded for just one more year. Although nearly every inch of the valley had been explored, there was one unlikely small spot that had not been searched, and it was there that the unbroken seal on the door to King Tut’s tomb was found. Unfortunately, Lord Carnarvon died a few months later and never got to see the final resting place of the ancient boy king. Carter spent six years carefully excavating and documenting the contents of the tomb.

Very little is known about King Tut. He was probably crowned king in 1334 BC at the age of nine, and most experts agree he died about nine years later at the age of eighteen. Why he died is still a mystery, but his death evidently took his subjects by surprise and they were unprepared for a proper burial; a commoner’s tomb was hastily converted into his sepulcher. In spite of this, the treasures that have been removed from the tomb are magnificent.

**The Rosetta Stone**

Ancient Egypt developed three types of writing, all of which are known today by the names the Greeks gave them. The earliest system of writing employed a number of symbols called hieroglyphs (from the Greek hieros, “sacred,” and glyphein, “to carve”). Some of these symbols were simple shapes of creatures or objects, and others were signs representing spoken sounds. In time, this system evolved into a shorthand version, called hieratic, that would be written more quickly in lines of script. In the 8th century BC, writing was no longer restricted exclusively to the priests and scribes, and a third type of writing came into use that was less formal, easier to master and accessible to all. The Greeks referred to this new type of writing as demotic (from demos, “the people”). From this time on, all three systems were in use, each for its own specific purpose: religious documents were written in hieratic, inscriptions on monuments were written in hieroglyphics, and other texts were written in demotic.

The Egyptian language eventually died out as the result of centuries of foreign rule, starting with the Greeks in 332 BC. By the 14th century the great majority of Egyptians spoke Arabic. As 19th century scholars became interested in the treasures of this ancient world, they were faced with the daunting task of trying to decipher these various types of writing that covered the ancient artifacts in a long- ago forgotten language. The key to solving this problem appeared in the form of a slab of carved stone, discovered by Napoleon’s soldiers in 1799 near the Nile delta town of Rosetta. It has come to be known as the Rosetta Stone. Inscribed on the stone was a decree dating from about 196 BC, commemorating the coronation of Ptolemy V (one of the Greek kings of Egypt) written in three languages—hieroglyphics, demotic and Greek. Even with the Greek translation, it was almost 20 years before it was determined that all three texts said the same thing. An English physician named Thomas Young linked some of the hieroglyphs to specific names in the Greek version. Later, a Frenchman named Jean-François Champollion located the names Ptolemy and Cleopatra in both of the hieroglyphic and demotic texts. Building from the phonetic symbols for P, O, L and T in demotic, Champollion was finally able to decipher the two Egyptian texts. Thanks to the work of these 19th century scholars, modern Egyptologists are better able to understand the ancient Egyptians through the written inscriptions they left behind.

Bibliography

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