

Egyptian Culture

Historical isolation of Egyptian culture Religion, art, and science converged, in ancient Egypt from the third through the first millennium B.C.E., to create a coherent culture capable of leaving its distinctive mark on future civilizations. While that mark is distinctive and forceful, the Egyptian contribution to the West was only indirectly transmitted to our contemporary world; unlike the Greco-Roman tradition. That tradition undergirds our systems of law, political organization, artistic and philosophy, while the Egyptian tradition had no direct channel (like the western Middle Ages and Renaissance) through which to pass to the major cultures of the Europeanized, and now Americanized, West.

Art Distinctive in appearance, spiritual in intent, and overwhelming as masterpieces of ancient technology, the major works of Egyptian Art are the culture's eternal demand on our attention. The Great Pyramids of Gizeh, constructed around 2500 B.C.E. in the middle of the desert, were homes for three great Pharaohs, places from which their souls could begin their journeys to the Other World. Around the coffins of those pharaohs the Egyptian architect constructed imperishable monuments, on which the world could gaze while contemplating its own preparations for passage upwards. Pyramids became, in fact, living museums in which interior and exterior relief carvings, often brilliantly painted, elaborate sculptures (often of the deceased monarch), and depictions of dancers and musicians all conspired to create a kind of showplace for the greatness of the Egyptian aesthetic sense.

Religion As the above on pyramids would suggest, religion and art were intimately intertwined in the Egyptian experience. The art museum of the Great Pyramid was at the same time the treasured home of the body of the deceased Emperor, in whose honor the pyramid was constructed—though only after lengthy planning, which involved not only architectural genius but the immense labor of preparing and transporting/dragging the gigantic limestone and marble building blocks for the temple. Nothing short of deep religious faith can have provided the primal spark for this blaze of effort—or rather nothing short of the whip, for slave labor was the essential ingredient in the greatest of the pyramids.

Science The Pyramids, *mastabas*, step-pyramids—all these works of architectural genius, that dot the sands of Upper Egypt til today—are evidence of prodigious scientific understanding—precise, massive, dramatic. Students of ancient Egypt are to this day unsure of the skills employed to transfer heavy materials, to relief-carve in limestone, to master arches and lintels which bear immense weight, and above all to raise and place the slabs, staircases, and interior chambers of the pyramids. The required knowledges of math, physics, and even astronomy—for the cardinal points positioning of the temples—were stupendously refined. Why hesitate, in view of this diversity of skills—to include the Egyptians' advanced achievements in dentistry, paper manufacture, and the ability to brew a good strong beer?

Readings

Bierbrier, Morris, *The Tomb Builders of the Pharaohs*, New York, 1984.

Nicholson, Paul T., et. al., *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, Cambridge, 2000.

Discussion questions

What does it say about the technological skills of the ancient Egyptians, that they both mastered the construction of the pyramid, and invented the first effective toothpaste and toothbrush?

Would it be correct to say that Egyptian culture influenced the modern West chiefly through its effect on Judaism, and the Judaeo-Christian tradition? How would that influence have taken place? Along what channels?

Who brought the stone materials into the desert, to serve as construction materials for the great pyramids of Gizeh? Were these hired manual laborers? Where did they come from? Were they paid, or were some of them unpaid slaves?