

Egyptian Art

The arts in Egypt A wide range of arts—architecture, sculpture, music, painting, and literature—mark the ancient Egyptian achievement, which survived from the third millennium B.C.E. to the end of the classical period. While Egypt’s stupendous architectural achievements, and the sculptures representing their Pharaohs, continue to seize world attention, those master arts were only part of a vibrant social culture rivaling the brilliant bequests of Mesopotamian and Greek culture.

Architecture While we still have some remains of ordinary dwellings, and of commonplace urban environments, the great majority of ancient Egyptian structures remaining are either intact massive tombs or temples devoted to the gods. (Thus they are, like Roman public structures and temples, massive and conspicuous, and acquire outsized attention as trademark indicators of their cultures.) One should, in this category, before all mention the Great Pyramids of Gizeh, limestone and granite pyramidal tombs built square in the Central Desert, and intended to guarantee the immortality (and encoffined and mummified remains, of the Pharaohs Cheops, Chefren, and Mycerinus, the last of whom died in the mid third millennium B.C.E. Smaller royal or noble tombs co-existed with these grand Pharaonic warders off of death. The smallest of the monumental desert-tombs were called *mastabas*, and were rectangular flat-topped one storied burial places. The Pharaoh Zoser (2600 B.C.E.) was honored with a Stepped Pyramid in the desert at Saqqara, built by Imhotep, the first architect in history to be memorialized in writing. This Stepped Pyramid, much smaller than the Great Pyramids, was essentially a stack, but a large one, of *mastabas* super-imposed on one another.

Sculpture The Egyptian taste for massive structures and representations achieves immortal expression in the Great Sphinx of Gizeh, constructed around 2500 B.C. This 65 feet tall pyramid sculpture, its face the sculpted head of the Pharaoh Chefren, sports a lion’s lower half, to assert the blend of humanity with ferocity in the deceased Emperor, whose great pyramid is nearby. Free standing sculptured couples—say King Mycerinus and his Queen, from Gizeh—bear the distinctive stamp of Egyptian sculptural genius; the figures stiff and straight, one foot forward, the faces impassive and withdrawn. Massive seated sculptures of King Ramses II (1260 B.C.E.) proclaim the traditional moves of massive carving, which remained essentially static for more than a millennium.

Painting Paintings regularly decorated the interiors of tombs, providing an opportunity to memorialize the deceased in scenes which were characteristic of him, as was the case of a certain noble Ti (Saqqara, 2500 B.C.E.), on the walls of whose tomb there is a painted relief showing him watching his retainers attacking a river hippopotamus. Painted reliefs, common in and out of tombs, aimed for a startling synthesis of brilliant color with tactile presence. Worth adding that dance and musical instrumentation often joined genre scenes as the main narrative of such wall painting.

Readings

James, T.G.H., *Howard Carter, The Path to Tutankhamun*, London, 1992.

Smith, W. Stevenson, and Kelly, William, *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, New Haven, 1998.

Discussion questions

Do you think the desert is an important element in the expressiveness of Egyptian art? Where, in that art, does the desert become a formative ingredient?

What was the theology of the ancient Egyptians that led them to associate immortality with the great pyramids? What role did the coffins of the Pharaohs play in preserving the personality of the individual Pharaohs?

We have traditionally associated the ancient Greeks with a breakthrough Humanism, a rare innovative sense of the richness and significance of the human personality. The Egyptians have often been looked down on as stiff, ritualized, and formalized in their representations of human beings. What do you think of that contrast between the Greek and Egyptian civilizations?