The Art of Ancient Egypt
First term 1957

Last Thursday Mr Mulvaney lectured to us on the art of the Palaeolithic Period, today I shall deal with the arts of Ancient Egypt. There are four important distinctions we may draw between Palaeolithic art and Egyptian-Mesopotamian art.

First, the art of our times is connected by what we might call a chain of tradition to the art of Egypt-Mesopotamia. Beyond Egypt the chain is broken. The archaeological record which stretches back from Egypt to Lascaux and Altamira contains far more gaps than it does links. But from Egyptian times onwards, technical methods of working materials, style of drawing, and habitual ways of seeing, or modes of perception, and traditional graphic images which enable men to communicate their ideas and feelings to one another, have been passed down through Western Civilization from one artist to another. The art historian is concerned very largely with tracing the history of these technical methods, modes of perception, and accepted graphic images. He can only work where there is a continuous tradition of visual material and of written documents, for art history, like history itself is concerned very much with the study of written documents. We may say then that our study of the art history of Western Europe really begins with the art of Egypt and Mesopotamia. Prehistoric and primitive art are really the concern of the professional archaeologists and anthropologist.

Secondly, Palaeolithic art differs from Egyptian –Mesopotamian art because the former is a primitive art and the latter a civilized art. It is interesting to reflect that our own art is more closely connected by tradition to the arts of the ancient Egyptians and Mesopotamians, the first of the civilized, than, say, the arts of the Australian aborigines, the last of the primitives, though the arts of Egypt and Mesopotamia ceased to be practiced over two thousand years ago, and aboriginal art is still practiced today.

Thirdly, Palaeolithic art, is rarely if ever beyond the capacity of the individual artist. Palaeolithic art and Neolithic art is very small in size when compared with the great buildings, statues and paintings which emerge in Egypt-Mesopotamia after 3000 BC. With the appearance of civilization art becomes monumental in its character one work often involving the participation of many men. Thenceforward, too, we shall always be able to talk of the visual arts in the tripartite form which was for the first time firmly established in Egypt and Mesopotamia, namely, architecture, sculpture and painting.

And there is a fourth way in which Palaeolithic art differs from the arts of Egypt and Mesopotamia. We know that primitive man greatly feared the destructive powers of nature, and that he turned these destructive powers, by the artist, into his myths, into beings rather like himself. In this way he could keep an eye on them humour them and
propitiate them. But he was still very much afraid of his gods, and primitive art is usually filled with a sense of magic, mystery and fear. There is also, as we shall see magic, mystery and fear, in great measure in Egyptian and Mesopotamian art. But there is also something quite different; there is also a sense of pride. Civilized man very quickly became greatly proud of his material achievements. The Pyramids of Egypt express this new sense of pride, and it is preserved for us in the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel, one of the oldest stories concerned with the problem of man’s pride:

And they said, Go to, let us build us a city and a tower whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad.

With these preliminary remarks in mind we may now turn particularly to the study of Egyptian art.

You will recall that Mr Mulvaney pointed out that the cave art of France and northern Spain belongs to the Aurignacian and Magdelenian cycles of the Upper Palaeolithic, that is, the last phase of the Old Stone Age. Between 10 000 BC-8000 BC the hunting economy of the Old Stone Age gave way in the Eastern Mediterranean and Near East to the food-producing economy of the New Stone Age. But, remember, these dates refer only to that area. When Captain Cook landed in New Zealand he discovered a flourishing New Stone Age culture there, and when he arrived in Australia some months later he discovered a flourishing Old Stone Age culture. Neolithic art was not, like Palaeolithic art, a naturalistic art; it was an art of abstract designs and patterns based upon the techniques of weaving and potting which were invented in Neolithic times.

In the near-Eastern area many small Neolithic cultures began to use copper and bronze weapons about 3000 BC. The earliest civilizations date from about this time. They were formed by Neolithic societies coming together in larger urban groups in the fertile deltas of the Nile, the Tigras-Euphrates and the Indus.

In order to understand Egyptian art we must pay some attention to Egyptian geography and the organization of Egyptian society. Egypt has been described as ‘a green gash of teeming life cut across brown desert wastes’ and as an ‘hermetically sealed tube containing a concentration of life close to saturation point’. The Nile’s fertility stimulated population; population in turn pressed upon subsistence, if men were not to starve each flood must be induced to yield a good crop. Hence irrigation; and effective irrigation requires the control of waters and waterways, and the upkeep of canals. To accomplish this, a centralize administration is essential, at first a civic bureau, developing later into a national bureaucracy, at the apex of which, of course, stood the god-king, the Pharaoh. So much for the economics of the situation. How geographical factors influenced the thought and spiritual values of the Egyptians and
Mesopotamians has been brilliantly set forth in a series of essays in a book entitled
*Before Philosophy*, by four authors, Mr and Mrs Henri Frankfort, J.A. Wilson, and T.
Jacobsen. It is available in a Pelican edition. It is an excellent book to read as a
background to your study of Egyptian and Mesopotamian art.

Egyptian history is usually divided into the New, the Middle and the Old Kingdoms.
The Old Kingdom (dating from 2778 BC to 2263 BC) was preceded by the Thinite
Period, a period which covers the first two Egyptian Dynasties. The Old Kingdom
thus begins with III Dynasty. This was the time the first pyramids were built, the time
of the first flowering of the …

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Other parts of the body were divided proportionately, the whole figure being drawn
upon a square grid. We know that the Egyptians used square grids for their drawings
for many have been found. For a detailed discussion of this matter I would refer
anyone who is particularly interested to Erik Iversen’s book, *Canon and Proportions
in Egyptian Art*, 1955, in the university library. It is a highly specialized discussion,
but anyone also reading mathematics should find it of considerable interest.

A second point about the stylistic convention of Egyptian art must be mentioned. This
is the so-called law of *frontality*. Simply explained it means that the main parts of the
figure are represented from their most characteristic angle. Thus the face is drawn in
profile, but the eye is *en face*, or drawn full-face. The arms and legs are in profile but
the trunk full-face. I suppose it is these right-angular twists in the joints, which endow
these Egyptian figures to our eyes with such a sense of movement and vitality—as
though we were looking at a nation of acrobats.*

In King Djoser’s Step Pyramid a life-sized seated statue in limestone was found with
painting still clinging to it. It is now in the Cairo Museum. The eyes were formerly
inlaid to make it appear more life-like. The statue has been carved out of a solid block
and the four faces of the block are still much in evidence. The figure has been carved
in large cubical masses; the intention has not been to create a realistic figure, but to
create an effect of great dignity and majesty, ‘the divinity that doth hedge a king’. It is
the oldest life-sized royal statue known.

Such seated figures became a traditional type.* Our next slide shows a statute in
diorite, a very hard stone, of King Kephren, a Pharaoh of the 4th Dynasty. The falcon
Horus behind the King’s head at once symbolizes the king and serves as his protector.
A divine viper stands erect in the centre of the forehead, symbolising royal power, and
threatening the enemies of the king with destruction. The hieroglyph on the side of the
throne means “to join”—and this symbolizes the uniting of upper and lower Egypt
which was achieved under the Old Kingdom. Lions are represented on the sides of the
chair, and the king himself, wears a leonine expression. Magnificently proportioned in
its large cubic masses, serene and aloof in its expression this statue of Kephron is, one
of the masterpieces of Egyptian art—a magnificent sculptural embodiment of the idea
of divine kingship. We may see this more clearly if we look at the head, alone.

Only the Pharoah was presented with such dignity and majesty. How much more
realistic and matter-of-fact is the sculpting of Prince Ra-hotep and his wife.* The
Prince was a son of the King, and a great state dignitary—but we cannot help feeling
that the sculptor as been here more interested in catching a likeness than of
realising…

topped the forms of which are based upon the papyrus reeds of the delta. Our next
slide is a careful reconstruction of the Djoser tomb area.* The original height was 65
feet-noe the large bastions and smaller buttresses which help to strengthen the wall.

Within the Djoser tombs relief sculptures have also been found. We see one in our
next slide.* Now Professor Burke has pointed out that in order to understand an
artist’s intentions we must pay attention to the meanings which an art work seeks to
convey, and the associations which it seeks to suggest. The study of meanings and
their associations in the visual arts is called iconography. Let us examine briefly the
iconography of this relief. It is possible to interpret it at three distinct levels: (1) a
natural meaning (2) a conventional meaning (3) an intrinsic meaning. Well, what is its
natural meaning? We see a running or striding man [holding?] a staff or whip. He is
bearded and wears a conical headdress. In front of him there is a jackal on a long pole,
above him a bird or prey. But to appreciate its secondary meaning we must call in the
help the Egyptologist. He will inform us that the beard and the headdress, and the bird
above, which is a divine falcon, indicates that the man is a Divine king, and that the
hieroglyphs identify the king as King Djoser himself running in the ritual race, at a
special periodical sacred festival, which I mentioned earlier. He is surrounded
by friendly gods who are keeping a kindly watch over him, such as the jackal god,
Anubis, and Falcon god, Horus. And what of the third level of meaning, the intrinsic
meaning? This intrinsic meaning lies in the beliefs and the assumptions of the artists
who carved these reliefs. In common with Egyptian society they assumed, believed
implicitly, though they may never have given the matter a conscious thought, that
these images helped to ensure the eternal perpetuation of the king’s daily activities
after death. The relief is, in other words a kind of insurance and at the same time a
profession of faith in the Pharaoh’s immortality. I have spent some time on the three
levels f meaning whereby this relief may be interpreted, because we can, if we wish,
seek these thee levels, natural, conventional and intrinsic in most works of art. For a
more detailed discussion of these levels of meaning I would refer you to E.
Panofsky’s *Studies in Iconology*, a basic text for anyone seriously interested in art history.

Let us turn from the meaning to the style of the relief. It is well-known that Egyptian artists worked according to fixed principles in the depiction of figures. There has been a good deal of discussion as to just what these rules were. It has been argued that the proportions of the figures is based upon the primary Egyptian measure of length: this was the small cubit and represented the distance from the elbow to the tip of the thumb. The height of a man was taken to be four small cubits from the base of the big toe, to the point where the hair meets the top of the forehead. [pages missing]

As we descended the social ladder a greater degree of realism is to be realized.** here in our next slide we have what must be surely one of the most touching of Egyptian sculptures, the painted limestone group of the Dwarf Seneb and his Family. In Egypt as in Spain in much later years, dwarfs supplied the court with distinguished servants. Seneb was, according to a funeral tablet, very rich, and married a cousin of the king. Here we see her holding him with wifely devotion. She seems very pleased to possess a husband who is at least dark and handsome, and judging by the calf-like expression on her face, and the thickness of her ankles she has good reason to be. The children have been delightfully placed to make up for the deficiency of daddy’s legs, but their own, unfortunately, seem to take after mothers’.