The Art of Ancient Egypt  
First term 1958

Dr Adams last lecture covered the period of the Bronze and Iron Ages in Northern Europe and the Asian steppes from about 3000B.C. down to the beginning of the Christian era. In the next four lectures I shall be considering the art of Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Eastern Mediterranean, from ca. 3000B.C. to ca. 1000B.C. This is, broadly speaking, the period of the Bronze Age in those areas. The art in these regions is of course vastly different from the art of northern Europe, where the art of that time was based upon impermanent, barbarian village communities or of nomadic tribesmen; on the other, the art of the south is an art based upon large, civilized, urban communities, permanent and sedentary. The one thousand or so years prior to 3000B.C. witnesses what has been called the Neolithic revolution, based upon the development of agriculture through irrigation, of animal husbandry, the discovery of the wheel and of pottery and of the use first of copper and then bronze. The beginning of the third millennium saw the growth of towns, as distinct from villages, in the deltas of Mesopotamia and Egypt. The whole story of what occurred is continually being added to. Recent excavations at Jericho, for instance, reveal what appears to be continued occupation from late Neolithic through the intermediate chalcolithic to the Early Bronze Age, suggesting that Jericho might be the oldest continuously occupied city yet known to us. But although the picture must remain necessarily incomplete, you will find a sensible and rational reconstruction of what occurred, based on archaeology, in the late Professor Gordon Childe’s book What Happened in History (Pelican).

The Greek historian Herodotus, who visited Egypt in the 5th century B.C. call it ‘the daughter of the Nile’. The fertility of the Nile Valley stimulated population, but population constantly pressed upon the means of subsistence. If men were not to starve each flood must be induced to produce a good crop: the effect of drought must be reduced to a minimum. Hence irrigation. But effective irrigation is only possible with effective social controls. Hence the development of a centralized administration. Town bureaucracies in the end gave way to a national bureaucracy, in a country which a strong ruler could quickly subdue simply by sailing and marching with an army up and down the river The effect of geography upon the life, thought and art of Egypt is examined in a fine series of studies in a recent Pelican, Before Philosophy by H. Frankfort and others.

Egyptian history is conventionally divided into Kingdoms and Dynasties. The history of the country, as distinct from its prehistory, is conventionally traced from the time of the union of Upper and Lower Egypt, under the legendary King Menes (who is today usually identified with King Narmer).
Let us begin with some slides of the art of the Old Kingdom.* Our first slide shows us the step-pyramid of King Djoser of the III Dynasty (2950B.C.) I shall not discuss the evolution of the Pyramids from the large rectangular tombs known as mastabas. This can be found in any general art history such as Robb and Garrison. Excavations of the site of the pyramid at Saqqâra, 25 miles S-W of modern Cairo have revealed the pyramid to be part of a great tomb complex, which included the pyramid, which was of course the tomb of the king, a funerary temple and a spacious court. You will find a reconstructed plan of the temple complex in K. Lange and M. Hirmer book on Egypt, published by the Phaidon Press last year. Here is a wall partly reconstructed from the tomb.* It reveals already the use of buttresses to strengthen the wall and the use of square-hewn stone, or ashlar masonry construction. Our next slide reveals that the column, or more correctly the half-column with a papyrus capital, was already in use: evidence presumably that already the squared geometric buttress, purely functional form was being given a sense of vitality by reference to natural forms, in this case the papyrus reed of the delta. On the one hand geometric order; on the other hand organic vitality. One could say, with very little fear of contradiction, that the great architectural debate as to what is good building and what is not, has proceeded very largely within these two terms of reference: mathematical order and organic vitality, down to the present day. Within the Djoser tomb complex of the III Dynasty (2950B.C.) relief sculpture has also been found. In their introductory lectures Professor Burke and Mr Phillip pointed out that one of the most important aspects of the study of art is embraced by the term iconography. Let us briefly examine the iconography of this relief.* It is possible to interpret the meaning at three levels: we might call them (1) natural meaning (2) conventional meaning (3) intrinsic meaning. First, the natural meaning. We see a running or striding man holding a whip. He is bearded and wears a conical headdress. In front of him is a jackal on a long pole, above him is a bird of prey. That’s about as far as we can get with common knowledge. To appreciate its conventional meaning we must call in documentary evidence: this means, in this case, the help of an Egyptologist. He will inform us from the evidence of the written records that the beard, the headdress and the bird (which is a divine falcon) indicates that the man is a Divine King—the Pharoah. The hieroglyphs identify the man as King Djoser himself and he is depicted running in a ritual race which he ran in life at a periodic sacred festival. He is surrounded by friendly gods who watch over him: the jackal god, Anubis, and the falcon god, Horus. The intrinsic meaning lies deeper. It lies in the beliefs and the assumptions of the artist or artists who carved the relief. The relief is an implicit profession of faith in the Pharoah’s immortality, and also a kind of magical insurance of the immortality. Just what the precise function of the tomb reliefs and paintings were in relation to the dead man has been matter of considerable debate. Were they intended to be magical? That is to say if the king ran a ceremonial race in life; the relief would ensure that he ran a ceremonial race in death. This is the usual explanation. It may be the correct one. But some Egyptologists consider this to be an oversimplification. In her book entitled Arrest and Movement Mrs H.A. Groenewegen-Frankfort insists, on the evidence of
the texts, that Egyptians were well aware of the vital difference between life—here and now—and life after death. She stresses the point that in Old Kingdom reliefs and paintings the dead man is usually depicted in a passive condition, and the texts invariably describe him as *watching* the activities of life. He *sees*, but does not participate. Unfortunately there are too many exceptions to make the argument fully convincing. But it does seem clear that the Egyptians did not *naively* believe that all the typical scenes of hunting, fishing and harvesting one finds in Old Kingdom tombs were essential for the provision of food for the dead in the life after death. The question is a difficult one. How horrified we should be if the historians of some alien future society asserted that, in our society, biographies were written and portraits painted to ensure that men lived in the way they were depicted after dead. One can imagine Queen Victoria doing her best in the life hereafter to be as unconsciously funny as Lytton Strachey painted her. And yet, in one sense, it would be true: because the kind of life which the dead live in our memories is determined largely by what we might call the sympathetic magic of portraits and biographies.

I want to turn now from the iconography of the relief to its **style**: and in so doing say something about Egyptian style in general. I shall discuss first the question of **proportion**, and second the question of **special rendering**. The problem of the system, of canon of proportion, used by Egyptian artists has occupied the attention of scholars for about 70 years. An excellent summary of the discussion will be found in Erik Iverson’s *Canon and Proportion in Egyptian Art*, 1955. In certain Old Kingdom tombs a number of drawings preserve sets of auxiliary lines and points. Squared grids of lines are also found on certain drawings. These lines and grids suggest that the Egyptians were using a canon of proportion to draw their figures. The discussion has centred on the actual nature of these proportions. What was its unit of measurement and so on? The first important point emerges is that the Egyptian unit of measurement of length, the basic unit of measurement for all general purposes, was the small cubit rod which as intended to represent the length of the forearm from the elbow to the tip of the thumb. The height of a man represented the four small cubits of one fathom measured from the base of the big toe to the parting of the hair from the forehead. The size of the foot represented a length of 2/3 of the small cubit, and equalled the size of the distance from the wrist to the elbow. From those three basic units the whole relations of the body were worked out. In this system these units were not regarded as fixed measurements of length but as ratios: so that a figure of any size might be drawn based on them. It will be seen that such an approach to the construction of the figure goes far towards explaining the strikingly rigid and uniform style of draughtsmanship which Egyptian artists sustained with singularly little variation for over a thousand years.

But there is also the question of **space**. The Egyptian artist was not concerned with depicting his figures to look as though they inhabited a world of three dimensional space. Spatially they conform to what has been called the laws of **frontality**, by which
the head is drawn in profile, the shoulders en face, or frontally, the torso twists from a fontal to a profile position and the legs are again rendered in profile. In Arrest and Movement Mrs Frankfort argues that this was much more than a conventional device for overcoming the problem of rendering a solid body on a flat surface. She argues that the Egyptian artist is never concerned with acting upon the imagination of a beholder. The figure is more like a hieroglyph, the scenes depict typical acts, not individual events in space and time, there is no narration, no dramatic situation. Egyptian art she says excludes the spectator, prevents him from sharing an illusionary world. Furthermore, the human figure was now thought of as something substantial, something whole.

… of the Egyptian civilization, and a convenient time for us to examine the way in which the arts had come to be used in the Egyptian society.

Our first slide shows us the step-pyramid of King Djoser, of the III Dynasty, built in the old northern capital of Egypt at Memphis, where the Nile broke into its delta, about twenty-five miles south-west of Cairo at Saqqâra. The first thing we note is that excavations have revealed the pyramid not to be an isolated monument in the sand, but only one part of a great architectural complex. The complex includes not only the pyramid, which was, of course, the tomb of the king, but a funerary temple, and a spacious court in which the king ran a ceremonial race, as well as many smaller temples and courts. You will find a reconstructed plan of the temple complex in Egypt by K. Lange and M. Hirmer, published by the Phaidon Press last year (1956). I would refer you to this book which is in the University library for your study of Egyptian art. The plates are excellent, and there is a good text at the back to accompany them.

The Djoser tomb complex is almost certainly the earliest great architectural work in stone yet recovered by archaeologists. There was nothing primitive about the building techniques, grounded upon finely cut and joined walls of ashlar masonry construction,* with some attached columns

In King Djoser’s step pyramid there was also found a life-sized seated statue in limestone, which we see in our next slide.* It is now in the Cairo Museum. The figure has been carved out of a large quadrangular block and the four faces of the block are still very much in evidence. Such statues create the feeling of timelessness—they do not suggest an organic and transient body, but a quite inorganic and timeless endurance. It is, in a sense, the process in reverse which we witnessed in stone buttress being translated into the organic form of a papyrus half-column. Such seated figures become a traditional type. Our next slide is of King Kephren of the 4th Dynasty.* The falcon behind his head reveals that the king is also Horus the falcon god. The divine viper standing erect in the centre of his forehead symbolizes the
kingly power and threatens the enemies of the king with destruction. The hieroglyph
on the side of the throne means “to join”, and symbolizes the union of Upper and
Lower Egypt which was achieved by the Pharaohs of the Old Kingdom. Her is a detail
of the head.* It has often been remarked that despite the quite abstract and cubical
nature rendering of the body, the head of such statues often possess the quality of an
individual presence—of portraiture. The expression of dignity and majesty and of
endurance upon the face of the Pharaoh provides us with one of the earliest
expressions in the history of art of the human form to represent the majesty of a god.

Lesser people were never endowed with quite the same dignity. The rendering of
Prince Ra-Hotep and his wife, for example,* although a great state dignitary, reveals a
more straightforwardly realistic interpretation. Note that the statues are coloured, the
man a dark brown and the woman light buff, a similar convention is met in Greek
painting.** Or consider the Dwarf Seneb and his family. In Egypt, as in Spain so
many years later, dwarfs often supplied the royal court with distinguished civil
servants. Seneb, we are told from a funeral tablet, married a cousin of the king and
was very rich. She holds with wifely devotion and note how artfully the two children
have been placed to make up for the deficiency of daddy’s legs; their own appear to
take after mother’s.

The statue of Seneb and his family is in fact full of vitality. One would not normally
associate it with the solemnity of a tomb. And in this respect the art of the Old
Kingdom presents us with a paradox. Although the art is concerned with the life after
death, few arts have been so much preoccupied with the daily round of life’s activities:
hunting, fishing, harvesting, tending cattle, all the typical scenes of the rural calendar
are treated in a way which suggests that the attitude towards life in Old Kingdom
Egypt was one full of self-confidence, optimism, and expressed a hedonistic
enjoyment of the material substance of life. Examine photos of reliefs in such Old
Kingdom private tombs as the Tomb of To, and the Tomb of Ptaheoptep. There is no
melancholy, no fear, no reflection, no spirituality in these reliefs. After all, why
should not the first burst of civilized life have an implicit self-confidence about it? We
must not allow our own mental image of Egypt to be coloured by such things as the
Masonic mysteries of Mozart’s Magic Flute.

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… severe time of troubles, and as is common in such times, the Egyptian scribes
began to question the traditional values of Egyptian society. Men saw temples and
pyramids falling into decay ad began to speculate—to speculate for the first time in
history so far as we know—upon the vanity of human pride, and to question whether
even the greatest monuments could possibly outlast time: One Egyptian scribe of the
time wrote:
Behold the places thereof;  
Their walls are dismantled,  
Their places are no more,  
As if they had never been…  
Lo, no man taketh his goods with him.  
Yea, none returneth again that is gone thither.

One of the finest documents in Egyptian literature records the dispute of a would-be suicide with his own *ka* or soul. In it we read:

They that built in granite and fashioned a hall in the pyramid, that achieved what is goodly in this goodly work—when the builders are become gods, then their offering tables are empty (and they are) even as the weary ones which die upon the canal without a survivor; the flood has taken its end and likewise the heat of the sun, and the fish of the river bank hold converse with them.

These, as I say, are the earliest reflections upon ruins known to us, and indicate a growing maturity of Egyptian thought. But they were uttered much too early to have influenced similar proclamations by the Hebrew prophets, which have coloured our thinking about the vanity of earthly treasures down to the present day.

Under the Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom (2133B.C.-1786B.C.) Egypt was again reunited and centralized. The art of the Middle Kingdom is regarded by many as the high water mark of Egyptian art—especially the art of the XII Dynasty. Here is the seated statue of Ahememhet III, in limestone in the Cairo museum. Let us compare it with the seated statue of Khephren, of the Old Kingdom. There is surely a greater feeling of rotundity about Ahememhet. In the Kephren statue the transition from one plane to another is somewhat sharp and angular, in the Ahememhet statue the transitions are more subtly managed. The figure has become somewhat taller and leaner in its proportions, and although great dignity and majesty is expressed in both statues, there has been a movement toward a more lifelike, a more naturalistic treatment. This point is emphasized when we compare the heads of the statues. The geometric, cubic effect of Kephren gives way to subtle transitions of plane around the mouth and nostrils. They are both masterpieces, but one possesses the virtues of an abstract art, the other the virtues of a more naturalistic, stylistic change. Not too the difference in expression. There is an optimistic air about Kephren, a note of youthful self-confidence, despite all its sense of power. The face of Amenhemet wears a more thoughtful and serious cast. And this is true in general of Middle Kingdom portraiture as compared with Old Kingdom portraiture. Professor Wilson writes: ‘a theme of the Middle Kingdom was social responsibility: the king was a herdsman who cherished his herds; the official had a positive duty toward the widow and the orphan; in short everyman had rights which imposed responsibilities upon other men. Even the sculptors of the time sought to bring out this emphasis on conscientious character and
moved from a delineation of majesty and force to a portrayal of concern for obligations. Such careworn portraits of the pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom are well known.

Expressions become more serious and men become more devout. There is an air of deep religious resignation in this wooden statue of the Ka of King Hor in the Cairo Museum, a king of the XII Dynasty.* We know that it is a ka or soul statue by the upraised arms. It represents the immortal essence of the ruler incorporated in his body. The inlaid eyes of quartz and alabaster would give the statue glint. In our next slide we have a detail of the statue.* There is an air of quietude, passivity and piety here which differs essentially from the robust earthliness of the Old Kingdom statues. Although the comparison is not quite fair, we can emphasise the point by comparing the ka statue with the wooden statue of Ka-Aper of the Old Kingdom I showed you earlier. Both are wooden, both in a similar pose: but how utterly different the proportions, and how utterly different the expressions. Here is a detail of the ka statues.*

The Middle Kingdom Pharoahs built pyramids but they have been destroyed; indeed there are few remaining examples of Middle Kingdom architecture remaining. The centre of gravity of Egyptian society had moved considerably south up the river, and the Middle Kingdom is famous for the tombs cut into the mountains which border the eastern side of the Nile in Upper Egypt.* Here is a tomb of a prince near Assuan. On the right we see the prince with his staff, his three sons behind him. On the other side he comes with his servants. He is much larger than his servants because he is more important than they are. This is sometimes called hieratic proportion. Our next slide brings us into the interior of the tomb.* The roof is upheld by strong, cleanly cut piers, and on either side there are three niches hewn out of the solid rock. In these niches is placed a figure of the deceased prince in the form of an Osiris mummy. Osiris was perhaps the most popular of the Egyptian gods: he was an agricultural god, a god who died and was reborn each year at the time of the flooding of the Nile. He became Lord of the Underworld to judge the dead. The story of the myth of Osiris has been nowhere better treated than in the Golden Bough by Sir James Fraser. Its anthropology is somewhat out of date today, but it is one of those great books which anyone who comes to a university to do more than prepare for a career should read before they leave it. As we move into the tomb we come to a small room upon which you will see a painting. In the slide we see the painting.*

Here we see the Prince receiving gifts of food to sustain him on his voyage to the land of the Dead: some bread-rolls, pancakes and sandwiches, asparagus tips, and a splendid duck. But what unfriendly person has brought those apples which seem to be touched with the moth, and that rabbit suffering from myxomatosis. But his son has brought some flowers, what a sweet thought.
The Middle Kingdom collapsed under the impact of a foreign invasion. The Hyksos, Semite warriors out of Asia invaded Egypt and established themselves in armed camps among the Egyptians. The 14th-17th Dynasty were Hyksos rulers. They were eventually thrown out by the Pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty who established the New Kingdom or New Empire. The Hyksos invasion developed something like a security psychosis among the Egyptians, an abiding fear that what had happened might happen again. A national army pushed the Egyptian frontier north up into Syria. Trade developed with Asia Minor, Cyprus and the Levant. The 18th Dynasty witnessed the final flowering of Egyptian art. The Rock Temples grew larger and more grandiose, as for instance in our next slide, the magnificent rock temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Dēr-el-Bahri, with its magnificent setting and its great ramps which recall to mind the spacious splendour of baroque city planning. The proportions of the figure, however, as we see in our next slide, become more slender as in this finely modelled figure of Queen Hapshepsut herself. Over one thousand years separate the seated figure of Hatshepsut from the seated figure of Kephren. And yet the traditional conventions of the Egyptian sculpture have been retained. Indeed the sculptors of the New Kingdom paid increasing attention to the work of the Old Kingdom, until in the Saïtic period at the very end of the Ancient Egyptian civilization sculpture became archaistic, that is, sculptors began to imitate closely the archaic models of the Old Kingdom. Egyptian art was in short a highly traditional art, but within the tradition there is a considerable degree of flexibility, apparent when we compare Kephren with Haspshetsut.

The highly conservative art of the New Kingdom was broken for a short period during the reign of Amenophis IV of the 8th Dynasty. Amenophis was something of an heretic who broke with the traditional worship of Amon-Rē. And began to worship the sun god in his own way. He has been championed as a pioneer of monotheistic religion by Sigmund Freud and others—and there is a considerable literature about him. A word of warning however. The naturalistic art which flourished during the short reign of Iknatoan, interesting as it is, is not characteristic of Egyptian art in general, and I think, cannot compare in quality with the finest art of the Middle Kingdom.

Our next slide shows a sandstone statue of Iknatoan in the Cairo Museum. It is modelled in a highly angular and mannered style.* Here is a detail.* Note the pointed eyes, the exaggerated nostrils and mouth, the large ears, the deep cutting of the figure, the rounded hips and the emphasis upon the belly. This style combines emphatic formal mannerisms with a rather sensuous appeal, and recalls certain types of Indian art rather than traditional Egyptian art. Here is a head of Queen Nōfretētē, Iknatoan’s wife. This piece is more frankly naturalistic in treatment, and there is a rather stilted and affected grace about the carriage of the head which recall vividly, to my mind at least, those strange creatures which inhabit the pages of Vogue. And here she is when painted.*
The naturalism of the art of Iknatoan’s time is continued in this granite statue of his son-in-law Tutankamon.* But already there is a tendency to return to the traditional principles of Egyptian art.*

Some of the relief sculptures of the 18th Dynasty are extremely beautiful.* Our next slide shows a detail from the relief on the tomb of Ramose at Thebes. It shows guests at a feast. Here that element of naturalism always present in Egyptian art has been wonderfully related to the formal conventions of the art. Note the full-face eye, the stylized hands and the precise gem-like cutting of the details of necklaces and hair. And yet the sculptor has been able to endow his image with a superb sense of vitality. And it is this sense of abundant vitality held in restraint by powerful and yet thoroughly intelligible formal conventions that constitutes the beauty and the genius of Egyptian art.

But however highly civilized and refined the art of Egypt may appear to be we will do well to remind ourselves that very deep currents of fear and magic and primitive religion run in it as well. This may be realized in the images of many popular Egyptian gods, such as that of the repulsive figure of the god Bēs, a god of music and the dance, and the horrible hippopotamus goddess Thoueris, another popular deity who watched over pregnancies and presided over confinements. Indeed Egyptian art contains masterpieces of the grotesque as well as masterpieces of beauty; it is at once an art of formal conventions and of robust imagination.
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