

The Human Figure in Ancient Egyptian Art

Background Notes

Delia Pemberton - 13 September 2017



Image 1, The Narmer Palette, c.3100 BC



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EGYPTIAN ART

Egyptian art reflected a strongly dualistic world view shaped by the country's unique natural environment. It was essentially a form of magic, concerned with the preservation of divine order, and this created an archaizing tendency that accounts for its remarkable consistency of style over five millennia.

Much of the art that survives was created expressly to provide for the dead and was not meant to be seen once the funeral rites were over. Thus how a person was represented had little to do with their actual physical appearance. Earthly time or individual characteristics had little relevance, which is why images are arranged non-sequentially, without a background.

In the case of the divine king, a ruler aimed to identify with his divine lineage, representing himself as the protector of Egypt and guarantor of divine order (Image 1). In the case of the deceased nobility, they were represented in the idealized form in which they wanted to spend eternity.

CONVENTIONS

Thus the human figure became subject to a complex set of conventions that would enable the dead to use their image as a substitute body after death. The head was shown in profile, but the eye and eyebrow in full view. Likewise, the shoulders were shown full on, but the chest, waist, hips, legs and feet all in profile.

The proportions of figures were strictly prescribed. Taking the height as the distance from the baseline to the hairline, the knee is a third of the height, the base of the buttocks half and the elbow two-thirds. The head is a ninth of the total height.

From c. 2000-c. 700 BC these proportions were standardized using a grid measuring 18 squares from the sole to the hairline (Image 2). This could accommodate various postures: seated figures were 14 squares high, kneeling figures 10. The same grid determined the length of the limbs - 3 squares for the foot, 5 from elbow to fingertips.

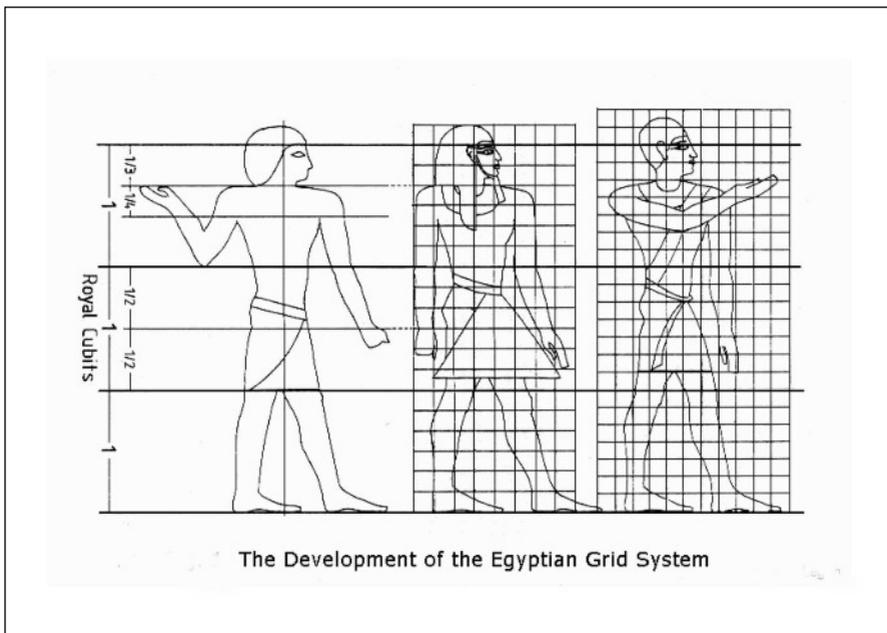


Image 2, The Egyptian canon of proportion

In terms of scale, the bigger the figure was, the more important its subject. In private tombs, the tomb owner (almost always a man) is usually the largest figure, with his wife, children and servants shown proportionately smaller (Image 3). Kings and gods are on a larger scale than commoners, but the same size as each other.

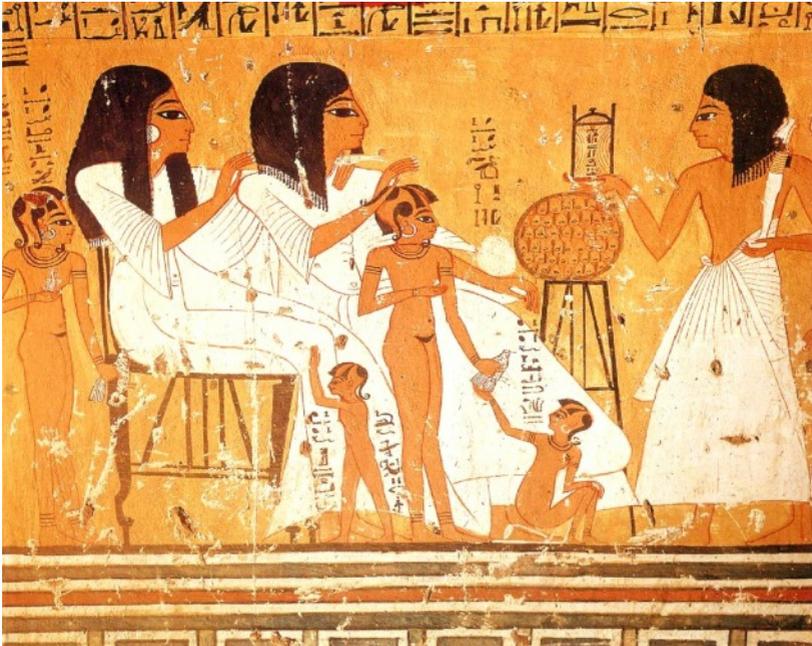


Image 3, Painting from the tomb of Inherkhou, Thebes, c.1100 BC

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Three-dimensional figures were created in a variety of materials including wood, pottery, ivory, cast bronze and stone. Stone sculptures began either as a roughed-out shape or a block. Using a grid, the basic shape was drawn out and cut by the masons. This process was repeated until the piece was finished by the head sculptor.

Relief carvings were made in a similar way. Sunk reliefs, carved into the stone, were quicker to execute and were used for the vast expanses of carvings that covered temple exteriors. Raised reliefs, in which the background was removed to leave the design standing proud, were much more time-consuming and expensive and are more often found in the interior of temples and tombs.

Where the quality of stone was poor, paintings normally replaced reliefs in royal and private tombs. Before painting, walls were well prepared and coated with gypsum plaster. The artists worked in teams, drafting the designs that were then coloured with mineral pigments. The final details were added by the chief painter.

THE ROYAL IMAGE

As the intermediary between humanity and the gods and the guarantor of divine order, the king was the focal point of state art. Regardless of appearance or ethnicity, Egypt's kings adhered to the archetypal image of kingship depicted on the Narmer Palette. This powerful statement is invariably found on the massive pylons of the many temples that dominated Egypt's landscape. The exterior walls were covered with reliefs showing the king among other deities, or defeating foreign enemies in battle. These, and the royal colossi placed at temple entrances, were the only parts of the temple visible to the populace (Image 4).

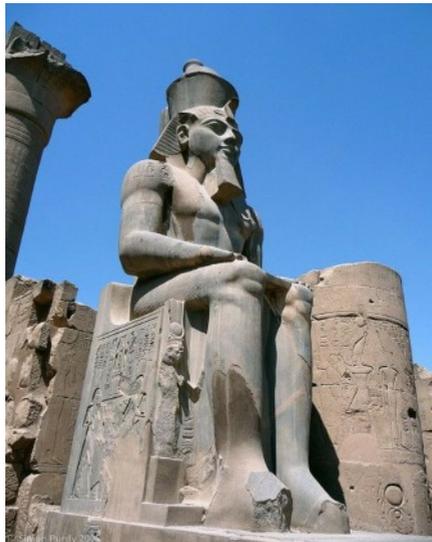


Image 4, Colossal statue of Ramesses II, Luxor Temple, c.1250 BC

The temple interior was the preserve of the royal family and the priests, drawn from the ranks of the nobility. Here the king emphasized his divine authority as the dutiful servant of the gods, a more subtle form of propaganda for the benefit of the rich and powerful. This did not mean that it could not be manipulated. Rulers deemed unfit, including women, were removed from the official record and their images destroyed. In Egyptian eyes, they no longer existed. Conversely, powerful priests were able to aggrandize themselves, gradually enhancing their status until they were able to seize kingship for themselves.

ART AS EVIDENCE

The conventions of representation make it very difficult to take Egyptian art at face value. Someone who died in old age would wish to be youthful in the next life, and would be depicted accordingly. Children of the deceased are often shown as very young, when they may well have been adults. Conventional proportions dictate a slender body shape, but mummified bodies often tell a different story. Representations of emaciation are very rare, while corpulence in men indicated their prosperity rather than their looks. However, some care was taken to portray various disabilities. Although minor figures in compositions are often just a form of hieroglyphs, they may offer our best glimpses of how ancient Egyptians really looked.

INFLUENCES

Egypt's wealth was built on trade, and from the earliest times there was close contact with the neighbouring regions of Nubia, Syria-Palestine, Arabia and Mesopotamia, as well as Greece and the Mediterranean islands. Many of the cultures adopted Egyptian imagery into their religious and decorative art, and Egyptian figures are believed to have been a major influence on the development of Greek sculpture (Image 5).



Image 5, Comparison between an Egyptian ka-statue, c.2500 BC and a Greek kouros, c.600 BC

Invariably Egypt's foreign rulers found it expedient to adopt the established conventions of art, but from the 4th century BC the growing population of Greeks and Romans began to have its own influence. This is especially evident in funerary art, particularly the highly individualized funerary portraits of the 1st and 2nd centuries AD (Image 6).

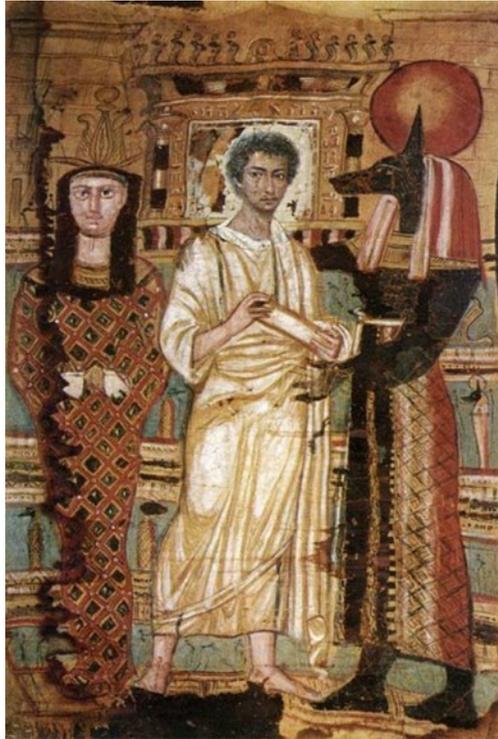


Image 6, Roman period funeral shroud, Fayum,
c.1st-2nd century AD

FURTHER READING

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