

On the status and purposes of ancient Egyptian art

INTRODUCTION

General

The definition and evaluation of works of art, and of art as a phenomenon, continue to vex archaeologists, among others. What is intuitively seen as art looms large in the material and textual record of recent millennia and responds ill to analyses that ignore either its elite character or its symbolic and aesthetic meanings. The oldest, Palaeolithic contexts in which such meanings are at issue have been discussed, for example, by Robert Bednarik (1992), P. G. Chase and H. L. Dibble (1992), and Iain Davidson (1992). Their discussion focuses on artefacts derived from what can only be non-complex societies; while their symbolism is crucial, their divisiveness and social status may not be. In addition to questions of symbolism, issues of definition and status are insistent for many complex societies, in part because art may be embedded in those societies in ways that many see as different from those of the contemporary world. These contrasts do not affect the prominence of artistic phenomena—however defined—in the record; so far as ancient and modern contexts can be compared, ancient artistic institutions often appear to be more prominent than analogous phenomena in today's societies.

In studying many societies, especially those approached through the material record, it is desirable to seek clarity—final agreement is beyond reach—in these matters of the definition, and still more of the status, of art. Ancient Egypt offers a paradigm example, both because artistic phenomena are so

Cambridge Archaeological Journal 4 (1994) 67–94. The argument of this chapter relates to, and in places intersects with, Norman Yoffee's and my comparative study, 'Order, legitimacy, and wealth in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia', which was composed around the same time: Baines and Yoffee (1998).

salient in its preserved record and because of the pattern of modern discussion (for the ancient Near East, compare studies in Gunter 1990). The background within Egyptology is well illustrated by the opening of the first paper, by Friedrich Junge, in *Studien zur altägyptischen Kunstgeschichte*, which derives from a colloquium on Egyptian art history in 1987 (the author encapsulates a view rather than subscribes to it):

Strictly speaking, there can be no 'art history'—that is, academic documentation and interpretation of 'works of art' and study of the development of their motifs, forms, and styles—in our field, because, according to the general view, there are no Egyptian works of art, in the common understanding of a category of things distinct from other artefacts ... (Junge 1990: 1; trans. John Baines)

Egyptologists, especially the linguists among them, have observed that there was no indigenous Egyptian category of 'art', the nearest approach to such a thing being the word *hmt*, which is normally rendered 'craft'. Thus, the argument runs, not only can works of art not be identified as a distinct group, but the Egyptians had no notion of 'art'. The statement just quoted can be contrasted with an article by Rosemarie Drenkhahn on 'Artists and artisans in pharaonic Egypt', which uses a different approach and mode of reasoning to assert that:

The majority of the artefacts preserved from ancient Egypt are the products of artisans and artists who mastered techniques of working with, and giving a pleasing form to, such materials as wood, stone, metal, ivory, glass, leather, faience, and clay. ... Most people today assume automatically that these pieces are 'art'. (Drenkhahn 1995: 331)

My initial aims in this chapter are to suggest ways of bridging the gap between these two statements and to consider how a definition of the status and character of art can profitably be related to its social context. The first quotation above is a deliberately extreme formulation of a view most favoured by linguists, in part because of its correlation with arguments about the word *hmt*; it is unlikely to command wide acceptance. The formulation remains valuable, because it exemplifies the problems of reconciling largely philological evidence both with the chiefly artefactual basis for the position summarized in the second quotation and with approaches that focus on art as a social institution.

Theoretical context and definition

This is not the place for a detailed discussion of how to define art. What is relevant here is the widespread perception that art is a virtual universal, not because everyone is an artist or a connoisseur, but because most—perhaps

all—societies exhibit phenomena of extremely diverse character that can be interpreted as art, despite problems of evaluation and disputes over what is and is not 'art'. Contrary to the first sentence of E. H. Gombrich's renowned *The story of art* (1972a: 4), I argue that there is 'such a thing as art'. Although some modern critical attitudes may suggest otherwise, art is a social more than an individual phenomenon, and works of art have their primary significance and interpretation in their originating society, as against the secondary aesthetic response of a modern viewer which Drenkhahn evokes in her acute formulation. The art historian and the iconologist need to seek an interpretive framework that is oriented toward the patrons, creators, and consumers of art in the producing society, as well as to the institution of art which they create and sustain. It seems hardly possible to arrive at a rigorous and generally acceptable definition of art; approaches such as that of Wollheim (1980) relate to different issues from those I address here. But this difficulty does not imply that art as a phenomenon does not exist, any more than the great difficulty linguists experience in defining the 'word' means that words do not exist. As in much humanistic study, there is an unavoidable circularity in identification and circumscription of the topic.

An initial weakness in the Egyptological view cited earlier relates to the linguistic argument derived from the word *hmt*. If a word for 'art' or 'craft' is identified and its meaning analysed, this may not help an investigation of the status of phenomena in the ancient society that should be called art. Instead, it may principally provide a foil for discussion of the modern term 'art', whose meaning itself changes. While familiar western meanings have parallels in classical antiquity, in themselves they hardly date further back than the Renaissance or even the 19th century. Such problems of fit between concepts and usages of different periods may be best met by adopting a middle ground.

To object to seeing Egyptian art as 'art' because the etymology or 'true' meaning of Egyptian *hmt* is 'craft' is in any case illogical. Etymology is not a good guide to usage and meaning; moreover, there are parallels, not least in western tradition, for an evolution from ideas of 'craft' to more value-laden ones of 'art'. In the reverse direction, the word *hmt* has usages parallel to those of western 'art', as when the skills of a doctor or lector priest are termed his *hmt* (e.g. Erman and Grapow 1929: 84), like the western 'physician's art'. However, since in such cases only the high prestige of the contexts leads one to render 'art' rather than 'craft', this alternative throws the burden of interpretation away from particular genres and back onto social factors. These analogies do not in themselves imply that the Egyptian word or concept had a spread of meaning comparable to those of 'art' in modern times, but rather leave the question open. Without wishing to pursue this issue further, I suggest that it is legitimate to use the extraneous category of 'art' to explore ancient

material, provided that the term's fragility in any context is kept in mind and an institutionally based understanding is sought. Models of actors' perspectives on the institution of art should include the positions of both patrons and executants; the ancient public or audience is a much more problematic category. It is possible to approach these perspectives through extant works and their social context, rather than through descriptive texts or the analysis of ancient terminology.

The second Egyptological objection to employing the concept of art, presented by Friedrich Junge in the first quotation above, is that works of art did not form a single category or have a single function (I return to this issue below). The same, however, applies in essence to many or most forms of artistic production, although classical and western societies offer distractingly paradigmatic exceptions where a premium is placed on the artist and on high-value mobile works of art (I also return to this matter below). At a lower level, phenomena such as the material acquired in the contemporary world for its local or touristic interest also form exceptions. For many traditions, the fact that works have definite and various functions and can be analysed in terms of those functions is not seen as detracting from their status as 'works of art' or as lessening the desirability of studying them in artistic as well as functional terms. In any case, rather few categories of artefact have only one function. Architecture is essentially functional, while also being the premier art form for many societies.

Although it is impossible to define art to general satisfaction, some indication of what is meant here is needed. I suggest that ancient Egyptian works of art are products, created for any purpose, that exhibit a surplus of order and aesthetic organization which goes beyond the narrowly functional. Such a definition is not intended to be evaluative of quality but rather to point to ordering and aesthetic intent, and it hardly addresses genre or the cultural significance of works of art. It can, however, incorporate rituals and performing arts. In essence it is close to the characterization of Rosemarie Drenkhahn cited earlier. It is also probably compatible with the usage of *hmt*, but it focuses on the product rather than the skills which went into its making. The definition is partial in taking this focus and in appearing to neglect the social institutions that made, utilized, and valued the products. An awareness of this social dimension is necessary for a full definition, but it cannot easily be incorporated into a brief formulation.

This definition should be contrasted with two offered by Egyptologists. Both of these focus on pictorial representation. Junge (1990: 15–19) proposes that one thing which makes Egyptian representational works into 'art' is that practitioners were not engaged in a craft pursuit but in rendering an almost Platonic 'idea'. Although pictorial works tend to derive from one another

more than to copy nature, and Junge's approach does not encompass this aspect, it does render some justice to the conceptual nature of representation. Yet such a nature characterizes many or most artistic traditions, while it is difficult to see in what way his position would bring ancient Egyptian and western art under a single rubric.¹ Roland Tefnin (1991b: 76–8), who concentrated on two-dimensional works, took a still more restrictive view, seeing as most strongly 'art' those works which exploit and make play with normal representational conventions to achieve unusual effects. In such a view, art would be most specifically materials that focus on metalevels of aesthetic discourse or engage in complex dialogue with tradition; this narrowing seems problematic to me.

These definitions respond to the elaborate and high-cultural character of artistic traditions in complex societies, but they hardly relate works to their use by patrons or to the commonality of purpose and style between architecture, representational art, and decorative arts. Furthermore, play with representational forms is also characteristic of strongly decorative traditions that are very different from that of Egypt; nor is it uniquely high-cultural. Thus, these definitions describe aspects of Egyptian art that can be paralleled in traditions and societies of many types. The centrality of a specific style to high-cultural traditions is nonetheless vital. A civilization and a style are nearly coextensive. A style is a crucial vehicle of discourse and of the maintenance of a society's identity. Development of and rupture with styles are matters of great importance. This role of style, which is easily perceived in Egypt, is less dominant in many later traditions.

SOCIAL CONTEXTS AND DIVISIONS

Art and exclusion

If the majority of the preserved Egyptian record has a deliberate aesthetic organization, and if definitions of art can accommodate that point, it is desirable to establish an interpretive framework that will incorporate this aesthetic character, and to set it within the ancient society and its values.

¹ Junge (1990, 19–25) proposes two further criteria, of 'reality' and 'beauty'. These may be specifically appropriate to Egyptian art, but although they address the function of works, again they are not very distinctive, and they do not address the commonality of character between Egyptian and other artistic traditions. The criterion of 'reality', however, can be related to the marked 'realism' of Egyptian representation (Ch. 9 §5), which it does not share, for example, with much Mesoamerican art or early Chinese traditions.

The record focuses on monumental tomb complexes and temples. The materials used in both were generally more durable than those used in structures designed for the living. Tombs were sited where possible in the desert and thus have a disproportionate chance of survival. Although this bias in the sources is not accidental and says something about what mattered to the elite, tombs and temples do not exhaust the contexts in which art might be located. Other important but largely lost loci include palaces (e.g. O'Connor 1993; Baines 1995b) and the houses and estates of the elite;² fortresses, too, are highly patterned and not narrowly functional (cf. Trigger 1993: 75–7). Wherever static art was set up, mobile art was probably present and, at least in relation to Egyptian influence abroad (e.g. Teissier 1996), was evidently most important; yet it is very largely lost. Mobile art was accompanied by aesthetic genres of performance, for which pictorial and textual evidence, as well as architectural spaces and the manipulated environment, supply indirect evidence (see also below; Baines 2006a).

Characteristically Egyptian artistic culture of the dynastic period (from c.3000) transformed its prehistoric precursors, and the new art and culture were available only to the elite (Ch. 13). Not only was the transformed elite art specialized in its techniques, style, and iconography, it was also a typical art of a professional group of designers and executants. Its mode of execution, its choice of materials, which required great expenditure of resources and technical specialization, and its complex and complete integration of writing removed it from the purview of all but the elite, who could commission works or receive them as largesse and could in principle read what was written on them. The works' potential for imparting status could naturally have been independent of whether patrons comprehended them aesthetically or iconographically.

What cannot be established, and indeed seems unlikely, is that the life and even the death of those outside the elite—that is, of most people—included much that was aesthetically formed.³ As in most complex societies, art was mainly of and for the elite, and it excluded the rest of society, who hardly had access to its products. So far as the non-elite subscribed to elite values, they were deprived of the potential to exploit artistic forms, partly by lack of

² El-Amarna, the capital of Akhenaten (c.1350–1340) and the principal site at which such houses have been recovered, is less informative than might be hoped because it was deserted deliberately rather than being abandoned in a hurry (for material, see e.g. Borchardt and Ricke 1980). The scarcity of evidence for wall paintings in elite houses, as against royal palaces, remains striking, and recent fieldwork has not altered the picture here.

³ Contrast here the rather different, more encompassing, approach to the aesthetic that I now propose in Chapter 1. The point made here, that those outside the elite were aesthetically deprived, still holds.

wealth and partly by not being able to exploit its principal genres. In respect of genre, enduring artefacts that might have been typical of the non-elite seem to have been largely eliminated from the acknowledged repertory or to have been devalued in importance. The daily activities of the non-elite are unlikely to have included much that was artistic, except among those who made artistic products or served the elite. Whether distinctive artistic activities and traditions existed outside the elite can hardly be known. While the non-elite could have possessed artistic forms in perishable materials that leave no record and have used them in settlements that cannot be exploited by archaeology because sites in the floodplain are not accessible, the prestige attaching to elite-controlled materials and contexts makes it improbable that the elite would have valued any such things highly. A comparable phenomenon, which does seem to have existed, is that a few activities relating to certain areas of human activity and concern, such as fertility, lay outside standard high-cultural forms. Fertility figurines in various media, which depict generally nude women often with babies, do not conform to general representational conventions, yet their use appears to have been common to all archaeologically accessible strata of society (Pinch 1993: 198–234).

This issue can be formulated in terms of how far one can speak of 'two cultures' or of a counter-culture. Jan Assmann (e.g. 1991: 16–31) has proposed that there were 'two cultures' in Egypt, on the one hand the monumental, religious, and on the other hand the everyday, and that these were characterized by the use of stone or of mud brick and perishable materials respectively. He further asserts that this distinction is part of the Egyptian orientation toward permanence and toward the next world, and is thus especially characteristic of Egyptian civilization. Yet such privileging of particular forms and materials occurs in many societies; nor is it confined to complex ones. A selective privileging of architectural genres also has parallels in a number of civilizations. I suggest rather that the institutions on which Assmann focuses were even more socially exclusive than he implies, since they prescribed the correct cultural forms and materials as constituting societal values, as well as surrounding central cultural practices with a barrier of costly materials and of expertise. The only chance those outside the elite had to participate in artistic culture was by imitating the forms of their betters in materials and styles that were not appreciated. This barrier separating high culture from the rest was paralleled in a system of decorum that circumscribed the content of representational art and focused ultimately on the world of the gods.⁴

⁴ Some aspects: Baines (1990b; see also Ch. 1 here). Gay Robins (e.g. 1993: 180–90) has extended the notion of decorum to gender, demonstrating the pervasiveness and subtlety of conventions that privileged men.

Thus, the elite appropriated resources, while restricting materially and symbolically what was available to others. Deprivation by poverty is typical of complex societies, but probably less characteristic of non-complex ones, where wealth, which tends to take the form of people as much as of things, often imposes on its possessor the obligation to exploit and disburse it for general consumption. In this sense, the phenomena considered by Assmann typify complex societies, which also exploit powerful means of creating value and social definition through style.

This specialization of artistic culture and aesthetic deprivation of the non-elite can be seen in various contexts. The basic living quarters in planned settlements attached to major constructions of the Old, Middle, and New Kingdoms (e.g. Hölscher 1934: pl. 2; 1951: 13–15) have an almost industrial uniformity in layout and style (for implications, see Kemp 1989: 111–80; 2006: 193–244; contrast Richards 1992: 37–46; 2005). Ceramics of most periods, which were used by everyone, had few aesthetic pretensions and were very seldom decorated. The elite could look to containers in metal, stone, and Egyptian faience (which may have been a rather more widely distributed luxury ware), whereas mass-produced pottery is virtually all that survives from other people. The strongly uniform ceramics suggest provision or organization by the centre or a strongly hegemonic non-high culture. This drab uniformity removed the aesthetic potential of a vital and universal material. The aesthetic devaluation of ceramics, as is found also, for example, in Mesopotamia, contrasts with their contemporaneous development in the rather less complex and centralized polities of Nubia and Sudan, where they remained aesthetically significant (see e.g. Bourriau 1981: 97–112; Nordström 2004).

This evidence addresses the non-elite only to a limited extent. Any aesthetic life the agricultural population outside national and regional centres may have enjoyed, perhaps largely in ephemeral media, is almost unknown. The evidence of pottery points toward their participation in universal forms, but hardly toward access to the more aesthetic manifestations of those forms (for a valuable range of material from religious contexts, see Pinch 1993). So far as they partook in central forms, they were culturally deprived by them.

Artistic genres and executants

The inevitable concentration of studies of art on central elite works has its full meaning only if the exclusivity of those works and their problematic relation with the remainder of society are borne in mind, especially where the legitimizing role of art is concerned. Drenkhahn continues the passage quoted above by noting the vast amount invested in 'artistic' production—including

decorative arts as well as what are now perceived as the core genres—from the beginning of Egyptian history on. The proportion of resources dedicated to this purpose seems to have increased for several centuries in the early third millennium. The majority of works fall into the widely familiar categories of architecture, statuary, relief, and painting, just alluded to as 'core genres'. The order in which I have given these is, I think, also an order of relative significance in the culture. The range of major genres can be varied and supplemented for different periods and contexts. Noteworthy supplements to that range include stone vase production, both figured and plain, in late pre-dynastic and early dynastic times (late fourth to early third millennium; el-Khouli 1978; Aston 1994), where it is significant that the hieroglyph for *hmt* 'art/craft' shows a drill used for producing stone vases: . At the time when the script was designed, this was a, or the, premier 'artistic' activity. Metal vessels then succeeded stone ones and became extremely important (e.g. Schäfer 1903; Radwan 1983; Insley Green 1987). Jewellery is another vital and slightly better attested genre (e.g. Aldred 1971; Wilkinson 1971). The latter two raise the problems, familiar from many ancient cultures, of how far the almost complete loss of metals and other precious materials distorts the archaeological and artistic record. The same applies still more to textiles, another salient genre that is poorly known from finds (although better than in many regions; see e.g. Vogelsang-Eastwood, 1993, whose presentation underplays the cultural significance of the material).

Decorative arts extend the role and functions of art to areas that cannot easily be assessed but were clearly significant. The use of much-recycled precious materials lessens the number of objects surviving, in comparison with such genres as statuary and stone vases. Decorative arts are pervasive in the funerary record (e.g. D'Auria, Lacovara, and Roehrig 1988; Brovarski, Doll, and Freed 1982), encompassing all but the most basic grave goods—of which relatively few seem to have been deposited; non-elite tombs are inevitably under-represented here, but also show a strong focus on amulets and jewellery. Furthermore, there was a general aestheticization of the life of the gods (for example in their cult images), of royalty, and of the elite (cf. Assmann 1991: 200–34), which extended through such categories as jewellery and furniture to clothing (whose value could be extremely high), cosmetics, perfumes, and performing arts. All these other artistic activities will have accentuated the division of the ruling group from other people, except insofar as some of those others made works of art, performed them, and in metaphorical and literal ways danced attendance on the more fortunate. An acknowledged characteristic of Egyptian artistic culture, which encourages those who study it to view it as a whole, is its consistency of style, from the largest work of architecture to the smallest piece of decorative art (e.g. Schäfer

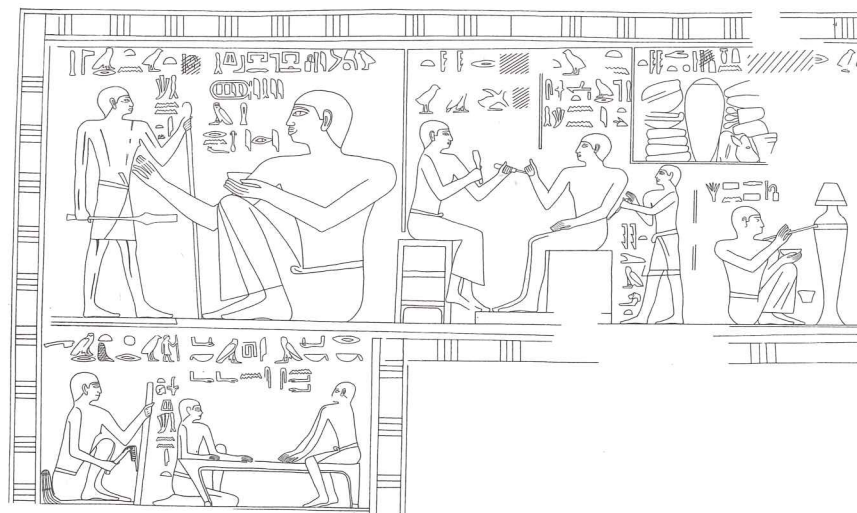


Fig. 34. Scenes of sculptors, painters, and carpenters making a bed and smoothing wood, in the tomb of Pepyankh Heny the Black at Meir, room A, north wall, west. 6th dynasty. After Blackman (1914–53: v, pl. 18).

1986 [1974]: 9–68). The consistency of art forms is part of the hegemony of elite culture and may not have furthered general social integration.

Decorative arts also affect modern perceptions of ancient artists. Drenkhahn (1976; 1995) argues, against Hermann Junker's study of the social position of Old Kingdom artists (1959), that the pattern of scenes showing artists and/or artisans (between whom it may not be advisable to distinguish), especially in non-royal tombs of the third millennium, shows that they were of similar status whether they were making beds and boxes or statues, and hence that neither the western-style 'artist' nor his aesthetically concerned patron existed. While some scenes may favour such a conclusion, caution is necessary. The argument could as well also be reversed, so that the cabinet maker would be an 'artist' almost as much as the sculptor in wood near whom he was shown in a tomb scene (e.g. Fig. 34). While this interpretation addresses a frequent commonality of technique and personnel among those who worked in the same media, it does not take into account questions of the design of major projects, of iconography, or of the general significance of artistic production and the amount of resources it absorbed.

A distinction can also be observed between sculptors and other craftsmen shown in these scenes: only the sculptors are frequently captioned with titles and personal names, and these identifications raise their status in relation to the others (Eaton-Krauss 1984: §§ 43, 44, 53–4, cat. 43–4). On a minimal

reading, the sculptor who created the simulacrum through which the tomb owner was to exist in the next world had a more personal relationship with him and hence a higher status than the cabinet maker enjoyed. This point probably extends further, with the former's activity being seen as more broadly significant than the latter's. But this does not imply that the cabinet maker or jeweller was undervalued, because their professions were part of the same elite high-cultural complex as the sculptor's and shared his underlying aesthetic. Their products too could exhibit the highest levels of technical and artistic skill and should be accorded a commensurate value.⁵

What Drenkhahn's approach valuably highlights is that artists were not the free agents driven by ideas of originality and progress familiar from modern stereotypes. Those typically western conceptions are far from universal, and their absence in Egypt does not mean that there were no 'artists', or that there exists a single type of 'the artist', still less that there was no originality or change.⁶ Clear evidence exists for a positive role for innovation (see e.g. Baines 1997: 215–16; Schneider 2003a), even though textual support deriving from those who created or supervised works of art is sparse (but see Dziobek 1992: 52–4). Apart from these difficulties of comparison, the evidence from non-royal tombs covers only a limited number of genres of artistic activity. The creation of major and large-scale stone statuary is seldom represented, and the design and decoration of temples and other major monuments not at all. For a variety of reasons, the preserved scenes are not suitable contexts for showing the most prestigious artistic activities, and so cannot provide evidence for the status of those activities and their executants. Nor can the role of the ultimate patron, the king, be seen in this material, which derives principally from the elite; few suitable royal contexts are preserved, and in any case restrictions of decorum make it unlikely that these things would have been widely depicted.

In its admirable aim to avoid imposing occidental categories on the ancient materials, an approach such as Drenkhahn's risks becoming reductive. If interpretation sticks closely to the preserved record, insufficient allowance

⁵ One indication of the prestige of representations of jewellers is that they are shown a number of times as dwarfs, maintaining whom was a luxury of inner elite life. The notion that an individual might have his own jewellers' workshop is itself testimony to the importance of aesthetic matters and of this genre of 'decorative arts'. See Dasen (1993: esp. 118–22, discounting any imputed special 'magical' status of dwarfs in this context).

⁶ The priest in charge of creating a statue is accorded a special, 'mystical' role during the ritual of opening the mouth, in a process that can be related to ideas of the artist (Fischer-Elfert 1998). 'Artistic temperament' is not confined to the west and may correlate with more general ideas of human creativity; see, for example, the study of Warren D'Azevedo (1973; see further D'Azevedo 1958), who also considered the balance between patron and executant in the production of aesthetic works.

may be made for the context and for the improbability that evidence for other relevant contexts would survive. The character of discourse in the ancient society may be underestimated. It is difficult to identify discourse directly comparable to that of western artists and commentators on art, and it can too readily be assumed that such things did not exist, as against the more likely possibility that they were not written down or that they took different forms from those of some other cultures. Here, the occurrence of comments about artists in the 14th century BCE cuneiform correspondence between the king of Egypt and Near Eastern rulers provides evidence from an international context that surely had counterparts within the individual cultures (Moran 1992: 19, no. 10, lines 29–42).

There is also the problem that writing about art is never easy; few of the greatest writings of most cultures are treatises on art. Visual art is best comprehended by viewing it and by doing it. Societies with a restricted range of written genres and subject matter may not develop a tradition of discursive writing about art; for Egypt it is hard to see where any such texts might belong. The character of Egyptian discourse about art was probably different from that of the modern West, but such discourse could still have had a comparable role or function, both among the elite and among the executants who created the works which sustained the traditions, and whose workshop continuity and regroupings will have affected development profoundly. In addition to citing specific evidence for such discourse (see below), I would allow more generally for its presence.

THE ROLE OF ART IN HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENTS

Discussion in society and social uses of art

Thus, one difficulty for scholars who approach Egyptian art from a theoretical and actor-oriented perspective has been the rarity of texts that provide evidence for attitudes to art or pointers to its intrinsic significance, coupled with clear evidence for non-artistic functions of works of art. This lack of explicit statements is part of a general difference between ancient Near Eastern and western styles of discourse: the former do not feature substantial amounts of mid-range theoretical discussion. Neither the lack of texts nor the presence of a function provides grounds for arguing that narrowly artistic concerns did not affect the production of the ancient works. Buildings, statuary, reliefs, and paintings had specific non-artistic functions, such as to act as temples or tombs, to be objects of veneration or means of persuasion, or

to be vehicles through which a deceased person's identity would receive offerings. Such a line of reasoning would also be reductive. Words—and for some purposes especially the written word—are a problematic medium, yet scholars have tended to argue that since in surviving records people seldom formulated a topic in words, that topic did not exist or must have had a culturally idiosyncratic meaning or realization. In any case, the large gaps in the written record make it unwise to argue from silence. Furthermore, insistence on a single function for works ignores uses of them that may be neither directly aesthetic nor instrumental but are nevertheless significant, such as being the locus of display or competition within a group and a mark of division between groups. Multifunctionality is to be expected.

It is in any case possible to point to significant Egyptian discourse about works of art that focuses on their general positive and symbolic qualities, as against their narrow functionality. Maya Müller (1990) has collected passages describing works of architecture, including the graffiti of later visitors, which show an aesthetic appreciation that also assimilates them to ideal and quasi-cosmological canons that are closely paralleled in integral features of their buildings' decoration and inscription. These statements do not form a sophisticated critical vocabulary, but there is no reason why they should do so, any more than that would be expected of eulogies accompanying the opening of modern buildings or of the captions to picture postcards of them. Moreover, a few texts point toward more profound meanings (e.g. Assmann 1970), and the well-attested complex artistic uses of the past (e.g. Ch. 7 here; L. M. Leahy 1988: ch. 6; A. Leahy 1992) must have involved much discussion (see also below). Some of the most important works and contexts were subject to restrictions of knowledge and access that would have made them unsuitable for public discussion. The only text that presents an artist's skills is so obscure that it appears deliberately to allude to things without revealing them (Barta 1970a; see Baines 1990b: 8–9; Fischer-Elfert 2002).

The methodological scruples of theoreticians which I have discussed here have been generally ignored by Egyptologists who work with traditional methods and by many museum curators. These scholars categorize, analyse, and evaluate works in the central genres according to methods, generally similar to those used for numerous cultures, that are often grouped under the term 'connoisseurship'. While artistic traditions should not simply be lumped together and there is no reason for assuming that connoisseurship is a universal method, this intuitive approach points to an issue that is essentially the same as the one raised by Drenkhahn. Egyptian works of statuary and relief, as well as architecture, respond to traditional modes of art-historical analysis—more 'radical' ones have hardly been tried on them—whether or not their status and functions were different from those of superficially

comparable works in other departments of the same museums. This argument from the cross-cultural comparability of genres again highlights the reductiveness of denying the status of 'art' on grounds of function. Function may differ in different cultures, but aspects of form and execution are nonetheless comparable.

The issue of function can be exemplified by reversing the argument about function and asking why the Egyptians used major works of art for 'utilitarian' purposes. Such a formulation emphasizes that those purposes are symbolic, not narrowly instrumental. It is hardly meaningful to ask whether the rituals performed upon a cult statue were directly causative, but the food placed before it was taken away and ultimately consumed by the priests, who must have known that the material nutrition it contained was available to them and was not consumed in the same way by the statues. The same point can be made about the supposed 'magical' and recreative function of statues (e.g. Russmann 1989: 3), or in another sense of buildings. These works underwent an 'opening of the mouth' ceremony in order to render them functionally effective (e.g. Blackman and Fairman 1946). In whatever way the actors may have comprehended this ritual, it need not have been completely different in kind from the consecration of a church, which makes it fit for its ceremonies but does not affect its status as a multifunctional and polysemous work of art that is comparable in this respect with the Egyptian one.

Thus, it seems justifiable to see Egyptian art as a phenomenon analogous in many ways with the art of other traditions. The centrality of the production of aesthetic objects to many periods of Egyptian history, notably some materially rich times that exhibit major cultural or political tensions, makes it worth reviewing the role of works of art in the discourse of the ancient elite. The importance of statuary and rare materials as early as the beginning of the fourth millennium can be illustrated by such objects as a statuette of lapis lazuli from Afghanistan found at Hierakonpolis (Porada 1980; this could have been made in the Near East or in Egypt). Three colossal statues of the god Min from Koptos (Fig. 35 shows one of them), which date to the late fourth millennium and were originally about four metres high, were probably set up outside a temple and thus suggest indirectly the presence of an imposing artistic and architectural context (e.g. Williams 1988; Dreyer 1995; contrasting interpretation: Kemp et al. 2000).

Among periods within Egyptian dynastic civilization that exemplify these issues are the formative time of dynasties 0–1 (c.3150–2800), which can be contrasted with the 3rd–4th dynasties and their development of pyramids and associated works of art and architecture (c.2650–2450); the 12th dynasty with its highly distinctive statuary (c.1940–1760); and the century or so from the time of Amenhotep III to that of Sety I (late 18th–early 19th dynasty,



Fig. 35. Colossal statue of the god Min from Koptos. Limestone. Late fourth millennium, perhaps Naqada IIIa. Height of fragment 1.77 m. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum 1894.105e. Courtesy Ashmolean Museum.

c.1400–1275). Late period artistic modes (715–332), although generally less extravagant than earlier ones, display complex and significant relations with earlier traditions. The great temples of the Graeco-Roman period (320 BCE – c.200 CE) surviving in southern Upper Egypt document a vast expenditure of resources by culturally alien rulers on monuments of the traditional culture deep in the provinces. These periods, which I pass quickly in review in the following sections, can illustrate various aspects of the role of art.

Dynasties 0–1 and the 3rd–4th dynasties

(a) *Defining styles and artists*

The Egyptian state coalesced during the earliest of these periods. Around the time of political unification, there was a great transformation in artistic styles and content, leading to an iconographic definition of the Egyptian

cosmos that set the pattern for later periods. During the 1st dynasty, large numbers of votive offerings were deposited in temples. Many were in precious materials also used for royal funerary equipment (materials such as gold are naturally seldom preserved). This production of elite objects must be very imperfectly represented by what is preserved; many others will have been deposited in lost locations. The architectural context, which would have conveyed vital meaning to people beyond the small numbers with access to temple sanctuaries, can hardly be reconstructed for this period (Friedman 1996: late predynastic case) and is much better known for mortuary complexes (e.g. O'Connor 1989b; Dreyer et al. 1990) than for temples (but see O'Connor 1992).⁷

What is most significant for art here is the chiefly iconographic formulation of ideology and cosmology (cf. Ch. 13). Although the hieroglyphic script was integral to pictorial compositions, it did not record continuous syntax until a century or two later, so that crucial meanings were conveyed through representational and architectural modes. While we cannot identify specific artists who created the works which embodied the new conventions, it seems inconceivable that an enterprise of such cultural importance as the definition of a style for the civilization and the encoding of its values was not under central direction and did not involve leading members of the society. At the core of the new system was the politically dominant figure of the king.

More can be said about artists and their position in the first pyramid age of the 3rd–4th dynasties, but some issues are disputed. The royal pyramid complexes exhibit comprehensive planning as works of art and, even on a minimal evaluation based on levels of craftsmanship, display standards of execution going far beyond the 'functional'. Techniques and styles evolved quite rapidly over a century or so, while most complexes exhibit major alterations in design, showing that there was ongoing engagement with their conception during construction. In the case of the 3rd dynasty Step Pyramid complex of Djoser (c.2650), we have the name of the likely designer or chief architect in the inscription on the front of a royal statue plinth found in the entrance, which names the 'master of sculptors' Imhotep (Fig. 36; Wildung 1977: 5–9; see also e.g. Junker 1959: 76–9). It is irrelevant here whether Imhotep carved the statue or rather supervised its production. What is relevant is that he had a quite exceptional status, as is shown by the fact that non-royal individuals are never otherwise named on royal statues. In exercising this privilege, he placed next to his name the title of chief sculptor

⁷ The precise character of the Hierakonpolis Main Deposit, the principal group of this material, has since been questioned, and an alternative function for the location proposed, by Liam McNamara (in press). This change in the understanding of the context does not strongly affect the picture given here.

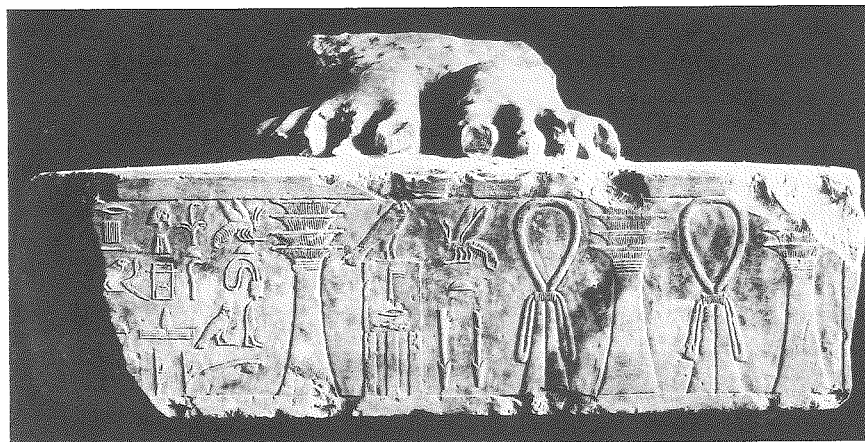


Fig. 36. Base from statue of Djoser, from the entrance colonnade of the Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara; the inscription on the left names the 'master of sculptors Imhotep'. 3rd dynasty. Painted limestone. Height 14.2 cm, width, 48.7 cm, depth 66.3 cm. Cairo Museum JdE 49889. After Firth, Quibell, and Lauer (1935: pl. 58).

and not that of an administrative office. Imhotep later became a culture hero, and may have been held, among other things, to have overseen a reform of Egyptian writing—and thus of artistic conventions—in the time of Djoser (Ch. 2 §1; opposite view: Wildung 1977: 88–9).

Although evidence for those who directed work on 4th dynasty pyramids is not so direct as with Imhotep, it can hardly be doubted that those undertakings, which will have involved much of the country's population indirectly or directly, were controlled by leading members of the elite. Some of these, who were the sons of kings, are known by name; their tombs at Giza were among the principal non-royal monuments of the necropolis, arranged to the east and west of the Great Pyramid.⁸

The projects for the pyramids display other artistic characteristics, of which I cite one. Between the Step Pyramid (e.g. Smith 1998: 26–34) and the mid-4th dynasty pyramid of Khephren at Giza, architectural vocabulary and style moved from adaptations in stone of earlier plant-based forms—themselves probably executed earlier in mixed media including mud brick—to a near-complete geometrical abstraction that a modern critic might see as exploiting the 'natural' properties of the stones. The new style lasted only two or three generations, being replaced in the 5th dynasty by a more representational one

⁸ Strudwick (1985: 218 nos. 34, 96) cites evidence for 'overseers of all the king's works' from the 4th dynasty. Other Old Kingdom holders of that title were of the highest status, often viziers. For the statue of Hemunu, who held that title, see Arnold and Ziegler (1999: 229–31 no. 44).

(e.g. Smith 1998: 49–52, 66–9). This double stylistic transformation cannot well be interpreted as a simple consequence of changes in religion and symbolism. Even if such changes played an important part, the transformation must have included an aesthetic component.⁹ Such a development toward and away from austerity and abstraction has parallels, not least in the Modern movement with its epigone the Postmodern; it seems to be a natural way in which a tradition can develop and then move on again by returning to and developing older forms.

(b) Access to works of art

The 4th dynasty poses strongly the issue of access, and hence of audience. This applies even to vast pyramid complexes, but I review it in relation to statuary and relief. It too is relevant to many cultures.

One of the principal objections to seeing Egyptian creations as art has been the fact that many works were invisible in their final positions. Since they were not viewed and lacked an audience, it is implied, they could not be intended to be art. The 'reserve heads' of this period (Fig. 37), separate near-lifesized sculptures apparently lacking a context of installation and coming from the bottoms of tomb shafts, were subject to some ritual mutilation before they were deposited (Tefnin 1991a), while some of the 'slab stelae' forming the cult focus of elite tombs were walled up and made invisible—and hence are remarkably well preserved (e.g. Reisner 1942: 64–5; Smith 1998: 45 figs. 78–9; Arnold and Ziegler 1999: nos. 51–3; comprehensive study: Manuelian 2003). This walling-up is only the most striking of many invisible contexts in which sculpture and reliefs were placed.

To deny the status of art to these works is to rely too much on a single criterion. The context of patron and executant exists for such objects whether they are seen or not, and even whether they are to be conserved or destroyed. Moreover, while the uses to which these works were put often differed from those of modern times, such uses do not seem to have affected their appearance greatly. Apart from the mutilation of the reserve heads, two- and three-dimensional forms of objects destined to be seen are similar or identical to those which were to be invisible. This situation can be compared, almost at random, with the vast amount of sculptural and pictorial decoration in large medieval churches and cathedrals, much of it virtually invisible when completed and incorporating inscriptions that only the keenest-sighted among

⁹ The variation in style does not seem to be technically motivated, although there was enormous technical change in the 3rd and 4th dynasties. Some much later buildings, notably the 'cenotaph' of Sety I at Abydos (c.1290; Frankfort 1930), seem to take up a 4th dynasty style, apparently without technical motivation.

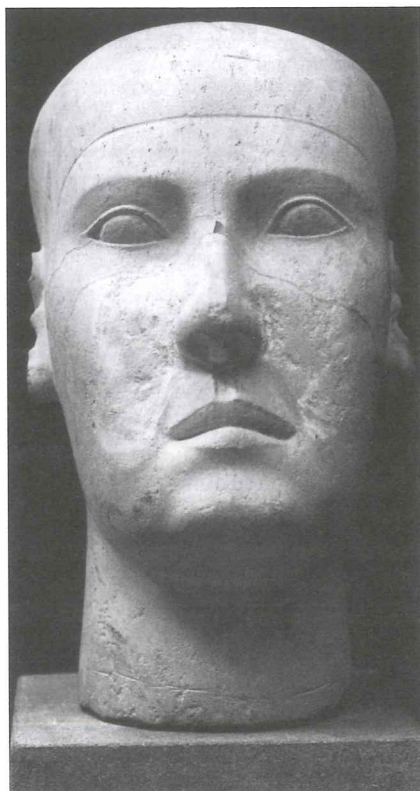


Fig. 37. Reserve head from Giza. Limestone. 4th dynasty. Height 30 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 14.718 (MFA negative C4362). Courtesy Museum of Fine Arts.

the literate few could have read.¹⁰ In Egypt, invisibility also had little effect on the formation of traditions or on interactions of later periods with earlier works.

The issue of access also concerns the palettes (Figs. 30, 38) and maceheads (Figs. 7, 32) that embody the evolving state's ideology and cosmology and were dedicated in temples immediately before the 1st dynasty. These include works of the highest quality and technical mastery, whose relative merits are suggested by a comparison—across media—with the rather earlier and far cruder wall painting in Tomb 100 at Hierakonpolis, which probably itself belonged to a ruler (Quibell and Green 1902: pls. 75–9; see e.g. Williams and Logan 1987). The style and the technique of the palettes and maceheads were devised for their dimensions, context, and materials, and could not easily have had larger and more public counterparts, so that the pieces must be evaluated as the votive objects they appear to have been and not in relation to putative monumental propaganda works.

¹⁰ Thus, for example, Norman Bryson's interpretation of these images as narrowly didactic (1981: 1–5) neglects the context in which they were located and the excess of means employed in relation to any such end.



Fig. 38. The Two Dog Palette from the Hierakonpolis Main Deposit. Naqada III period. (left) Side with grinding depression ('recto'); (right) side with animal composition and flute player. Siltstone. Height 42.5 cm, width 22 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum E.3924. Courtesy Ashmolean Museum.

Two implications of these finds are doubtless paralleled elsewhere. First, the divine audience as well as, to whom were dedicated votive offerings temple construction and decoration, was as integral to the objects' meaning as a human audience. Second, the artists were close to the ruling and commissioning elite, and the forms were developed between patrons and artists. Production for the gods paid due respect to them, as well as enhancing the status of the donor, principally the king. For the executant, the aim to produce works of high quality could apply equally to large or small pieces, whether destined to be visible or invisible, and might be exacted by the patron or donor in either case. Motivation toward excellence must, however, ultimately be internal to the executant, with whom it can also originate.¹¹

¹¹ There are naturally cases where concealed work was less carefully done than what was more visible. This can be observed in many places in the temple of Sety I at Abydos.

The patron's and artist's search for quality does not explicate sufficiently the meaning of the works. The Narmer Palette (Fig. 30) crowns a development in which royal dominance, relations between the king and the gods, and the structure of cosmos and society were incorporated iconographically with the utmost sophistication (see also Ch. 13; Baines 2003a). The palette may stand on the margin of ideologically more central developments of temple relief and painting, in which the king was shown interacting with deities, both sides being depicted—as later—in human form at the same scale; but any such works that there may have been are lost.¹² The self-contained nature of the palette and its votive function may have required it to bridge symbolic domains and to condense a great deal of meaning. They do not alter its status as a work of art, but they do throw into relief the great weight of symbolism which it bears.

A striking aspect of the palettes and maceheads is that, despite their quite rapid evolution and centripetal role in the emergent state, they come at the end of a development, not at its beginning. With the 1st dynasty their production ceased, and preserved royal reliefs are confined to tomb stelae (e.g. Fig. 17; Lange and Hirmer 1968: pl. 6; Baines 1995a: fig. 3.12) and ivories, notably from the Hierakonpolis Main Deposit (e.g. Adams 1974; Whitehouse 1992). Reasons for this change probably include: developments in the use of materials, so that precious substances that are lost from the record began to carry meanings and implications of status previously associated with other media; the location of some artistic activities in lost contexts, principally temples and palaces within the floodplain; and, most importantly, a general restriction of the public contexts of art. The legitimizing functions of representational art could be complemented by other forms of display, including the increasingly monumental scale of architecture. Rituals, such as the sacrifice of retainers at 1st dynasty royal funerals,¹³ demonstrated the power of king and state in the most peremptory fashion. Art appears to have become progressively restricted within the elite and to have acquired an introspective character that related it less to the wider society than was the case in some later periods. Few surviving pieces from the first two dynasties could clearly have functioned in social competition or have belonged to genres distributed throughout the elite. Competition and ranking can, however, be seen in architecture. The highest levels of society appear to have been strongly

¹² The earliest preserved temple reliefs date to the late 2nd and early 3rd dynasties. They appear to be fully within 'classical' Egyptian conventions. A provincial relief or stela tentatively dated to the 1st dynasty already exhibits many relevant features: Morenz (1994).

¹³ See e.g. Dreyer (1990: 67). A number of further examples have since been found, notably around the 1st dynasty enclosures at Abydos. For a set of partly cross-cultural studies, see the themed issue of the journal *Archéo-Nil* 10 (2000), *Le sacrifice humain en contexte funéraire*, resumed and expanded as an edited book: Albert and Midant-Reynes (2005).



Fig. 39. Three stone vases, provenance unknown. Siltstone. 1st dynasty. Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum 13213, 12778, 12779. Courtesy Ägyptisches Museum Berlin.

stratified, with not more than one or two people at a time constructing the most elaborate tombs, notably in the Saqqara necropolis, next to the capital of Memphis.¹⁴ There are more modest cemeteries with architecturally constructed tombs at a number of sites in the country, showing that wealth was not centralized to an extreme degree.

Thus, the 1st dynasty, rather like the 4th, appears to have restricted the range and use of significant works of representational art, and in a different way of architecture, to very few people. The stone vases characteristic of the period (e.g. Fig. 39; see el-Khouli 1978) do not affect this pattern significantly, because vast numbers were deposited in the tombs of the kings and of rather few others. What is striking in terms of categories of material is that the vases are much superior in execution to the rare preserved fragments of statuary, except for ivories (Fig. 40; see e.g. Quibell 1900: pls. 5–17); major stone sculpture seems not to have developed significantly until the later 2nd dynasty, notably with two statues of King Khasekhem (Fig. 41; parallel siltstone piece: Quibell 1900: pls. 40–1).¹⁵ The skills which went into creating the palettes and maceheads may have been closely related to those used on vases, and the vases attained still

¹⁴ One such tomb, belonging to an official named Merika who held the highest titles, also had wooden statues in a chapel, as well as a stela (Emery 1949–58: III, 10, pls. 27, 39; Kemp 1967: 26–30; see also Ch. 13 here). The attribution of this tomb is now questioned on a variety of grounds by Ellen Morris, David O'Connor (2005), and David Wengrow (2006: esp. 223–8); the very high status of Merika and the significance of his stela remain clear.

¹⁵ Wood could have been important: see Emery (1949–58: III, 10, pl. 27). A life-size limestone half-kneeling statue of a man (king?) with a heavy wig from Hierakonpolis, of uncertain date but perhaps 1st dynasty, is unlike most later works in iconography, although parallels can be found: Quibell (1900: pl. ii, Cairo Museum JdE 32159); see also Fay (1999: 115–16, 146 figs. 57–8), who compares it with a statue of Amenemhat III. I am grateful to Marianne Eaton-Krauss for pointing this piece out to me and suggesting that it may show a king.



Fig. 40. Ivory statuette of a female dwarf from the Hierakonpolis Main Deposit. 1st dynasty (?). Height 13.3 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum E.298. See Dasen (1993: 274 no. 106). Courtesy Ashmolean Museum.

higher levels after the palettes and maceheads ceased to be made, becoming the most significant mobile art preserved from the period and perhaps taking over traditions as well as executant personnel from other media. However, some inscriptions on stone vases from the Step Pyramid relate to their earlier use among the living, probably in temple rituals (e.g. Roth 1991: 145–95), reminding us that the range of preserved contexts is very incomplete. It seems thus that the vases must have been major symbolic resources for the cult, as well as being deposited as grave goods (in any case, objects like large granite vases can hardly have had a practical everyday use). Vast amounts of high-value goods were deposited in major early 1st dynasty tombs, in a practice that appropriated aesthetic value to the inner elite (see Ch. 4). Nothing points to a wide availability of aesthetic artefacts or practices outside the elite.

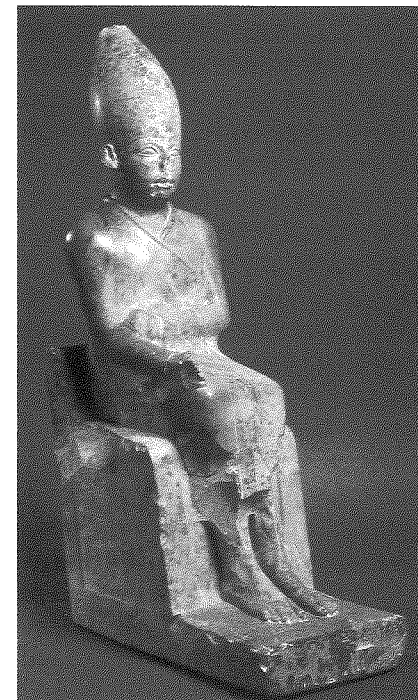


Fig. 41. Limestone statue of Khasekhem from the Hierakonpolis Main Deposit. 2nd dynasty. Height 63 cm, width of plinth 17 cm, depth 33 cm. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum E.517. Courtesy Ashmolean Museum.

12th dynasty royal statuary

Some of the most striking Egyptian images are the haggard figures of the late 12th century kings Senwosret III (Fig. 42) and Amenemhat III (Fig. 43). A fairly consistent stylistic development can be seen, from the statuary of Amenemhat I and Senwosret I at the beginning of the 12th dynasty to the time of Amenemhat III, after which evidence for royal works is sparse (Evers 1929; Aldred 1970; Tefnin 1992; Fay 1996). Some works of the first half of the dynasty, notably large hardstone statues but including at least one smaller one (Evers 1929: II, pl. xiii fig. 64), have more individual physiognomies than those of earlier times, and pieces from the entire dynasty have ears of exaggerated size. The highly individual features of Senwosret III and his successor nonetheless exhibit a marked change. Statues of the two can mostly be told apart on the basis of facial type. Both share the worn look, which is especially typical of Senwosret III; distinctions between them suggest that the kings' personal physiognomies contributed to the sculptural norm, but they do not demonstrate that an ideal of 'true' portraiture suddenly appeared (see further Ch. 9 §4, with refs.). As is shown by the marked contrast between the



Fig. 42. (left) Over-lifesize head of Senwosret III, provenance unknown. Pink granite. 12th dynasty. Height 32.3 cm. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum E.37.1930. Courtesy Fitzwilliam Museum.

Fig. 43. (right) Head of Amenemhat III, perhaps from the Aswan area. Dark shelly limestone. 12th dynasty. Height 11.6 cm. Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum E.2.1946. Courtesy Fitzwilliam Museum.

king's head and his body, which remains trim and muscular, the new type did not run counter to the principle that most people, and particularly kings, were shown in an idealizing and 'perfect' guise. This point applies strikingly to cases where the same facial type occurs on a sphinx. To modern eyes these create a strong contrast between the specificity of the face and the generality of the body. This apparent difference may illuminate by analogy the relation between body and face on anthropomorphic statuary: in some sense the worn facial type conveys an ideal.

This iconography, as one can appropriately term the facial treatment, should signify a quality of the king. The form has an evident analogy in the instruction texts of the period that are placed in the mouths of kings, notably the Instruction for Merikare and the Instruction of Amenemhat (e.g. Parkinson 1998: 212–34, 203–11), which emphasize the burdens of the king's office and the responsibility he must bear. Statues with the highly characterized faces come from temples (e.g. Naville 1907: pl. 19—four from a single temple), where this aspect of the king's role would be displayed to the gods, whereas only priests among humanity had access to inner areas; many examples are also quite small. But this 'intimate' interpretation

should not be overstressed, because some of the same features occur in softened form on a perhaps more public colossal head (Romano 1979: no. 40), where such a treatment might perhaps seem surprising. The temple context can, however, be contrasted with a mortuary one, because a statue of Amenemhat III from his pyramid complex lacks the new features (e.g. Evers 1929: pls. 102–4; Lange and Hirmer 1968: pls. 114–15). The focus of this iconography appears therefore to be this-worldly.

This development can be viewed in two principal ways. As an approach to depicting the king's face, it could have originated near the beginning of the dynasty and have strengthened later. Alternatively, it could have been introduced under Senwosret III as a specific statement about the king's role and responsibility, and thus made an assertion about Senwosret III in particular. Roland Tefnin (1992) suggested that the iconography of royal eyes and ears signifies the king's responsible role in relation to humanity, and he integrated the facial presentation with the notion of royal 'propaganda', ascribing to it the same kind of meaning as I do (Tefnin 1991c; on the notion of propaganda, see further Baines 1996b). While this interpretation is tempting, the limitations on public access to the works restricts its focus so far that the term itself becomes problematic. It seems better to view the iconography as part of a dialogue between the king and gods on the one hand, and between the king and the elite group responsible for producing and giving meaning to statuary on the other. The latter could have consisted, in addition to the king himself, of officials in charge of furnishing temples and mortuary complexes and of the leaders of workshops. These people were presumably steeped in values, of which we can see another expression in literature, that formed part of the same overall high-cultural complex. It seems that they wished to incorporate those values into the king's sculptural image.

In this context of production within a small elite group of exacting royal and divine patrons, the works will have had a specifically artistic focus—a concern with visual form and its realization of meaning—while retaining a broad ideological significance. This focus can be seen in the influence exerted by the royal statuary. Many non-royal statues of the late 12th and 13th dynasties have similar casts of face to royal pieces. The royal style was disseminated to contexts where its iconographic implications could hardly have been the same, although its sober and serious qualities probably had their own value (see e.g. Vandier 1958: pls. 77–92; large group: Habachi 1985: pls. 50–109; see also Sourouzian 1991: pls. 48–52). Some owners may also have seen their position in their local communities as having elements in common with that of the king, but they could hardly have entertained his aspirations to a cosmic role. The tendency of the non-royal to follow the royal is widespread within and outside Egypt and is unsurprising. This case is

nonetheless revealing, because a specific iconography changed in the course of dissemination into something that was mainly a prestigious association, rather than having all its royal meaning. Royal statuary was influential despite its general inaccessibility in its destined positions. Here, the large numbers of royal statues should be borne in mind: they must have been produced for many temples in a variety of sizes and types, and the most important temples contained numerous examples of them. Some of their influence may have passed directly through workshops, being stimulated either by members of the elite who were involved with them or by the sculptors themselves, who will have applied and spread their training and stylistic predilections broadly.

This dissemination and elaboration within a restricted context can be observed in many periods. The most striking example may be the development of temple relief and iconography in Ptolemaic and early Roman times (e.g. Sauneron and Stierlin 1978), when the ubiquitous hieroglyphic writing in the wall scenes was in a form very few could read, while the overall design and details of the interiors were largely invisible once they had been completed (as had always been the case).¹⁶ Much of the motivation for these developments was religious, but aesthetic factors were also crucial (Baines 1997). In comparison with 12th dynasty royal statuary, the Graeco-Roman temple forms had relatively little impact in the world outside, in part because they were so highly specialized and in part because of a gradual withering of the indigenous elite.¹⁷

Both for the 12th dynasty and for Graeco-Roman temples, the institutional position of art should be borne in mind. Whereas the creation of enormous monuments such as the great pyramids self-evidently required huge resources and many people, the more regular pattern of production of statuary and relief involved high degrees of skill and of artistic decision and design on the part of smaller but still significant numbers of people. As might be expected, artistic and iconographic concerns were significant to the development of these genres at least as much as were concerns relating more closely to contexts of use. A straightforward notion of propaganda may not be appropriate for the interpretation of statuary and relief.

¹⁶ Thus, the interpretation of Christian Leitz (2001: 341–2), who sees priestly personnel as absorbing the culture of the hieroglyphic inscriptions and scenes from being present in the temple, could only well apply to the lowest register of decoration (he suggests the first two, but this seems doubtful to me), and then only for good lighting conditions and people with excellent vision. It is another question whether a human audience was expected to read the inscriptions; I doubt whether that was their main purpose.

¹⁷ Egyptian architectural forms were, however, widely influential in the Graeco-Roman world, but in free interpretations rather than close copies; see McKenzie (2007); briefly Baines (2004b: 39–40).

The late 18th dynasty

The third period I review briefly runs from the later 18th dynasty to the early 19th (c.1400–1275). This begins with the reign of Amenhotep III, during which more works of architecture and representational art were created than in almost any other (for the following, see Kozloff et al. 1992; O'Connor and Cline 1998). Unlike most kings, Amenhotep seems to have worked on projects at an undiminished or increased pace up to his death. Surviving works from his reign include royal and non-royal, as well as major and decorative forms; the great quantity preserved can be only a small fraction of what was created. Among the king's major undertakings was his stupendous mortuary temple, which was decorated with many hundreds of hardstone statues of himself (Fig. 44) and of deities (Fig. 45) and sacred animals (Bryan 1997). The temple may have been the largest single one built to date, and in front of it stood perhaps the largest transported statues in Egypt, the quartzite Memnon Colossi, which were carved in an extremely hard stone and brought hundreds of miles upstream to be set in position. These feats were recorded in inscriptions set up in the temple which presented them as being integrated into the design of the whole city of Thebes (Helck 1961: 195–9, 272–3). While these texts hardly

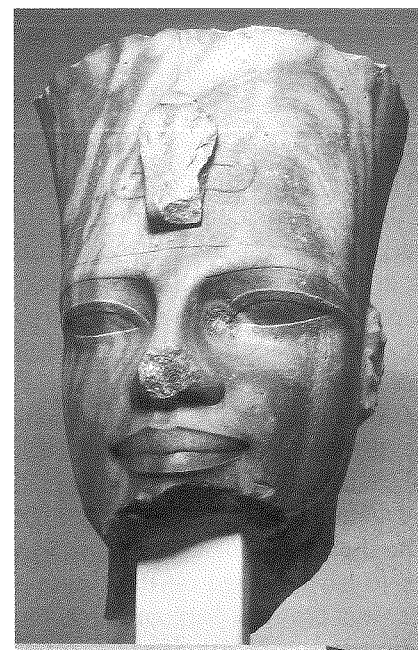


Fig. 44. Head from colossal statue of Amenhotep III, from his mortuary temple on the West Bank at Thebes. 18th dynasty. Quartzite. Height 1.31 m, width 1.02 m across top of crown. British Museum EA7. Courtesy British Museum.



Fig. 45. Colossal statue of the goddess Sakhmet from the Mut temple complex at Karnak, probably first set up in the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III on the West Bank at Thebes. Granodiorite. 18th dynasty, reign of Amenhotep III. preserved height 1.98 m, width 48.7 cm. British Museum EA45. Courtesy British Museum.

address narrowly artistic concerns beyond general expressions of the temples' beauty and of the rich materials used in their construction and decoration, they do form an iconological commentary on their significance and thus supply some discourse—probably simple in comparison with its oral background—surrounding the king's whole project to remodel the country's religious capital and hence to extend a substantially aesthetic design beyond the core of temples and palaces (O'Connor in preparation).

The entire operation was organized by Amenhotep son of Hapu, a non-royal official who inscribed a version of the events on one of his statues (Helck 1961: 272–3). He had the highest non-royal status in the land and was granted the unprecedented privilege of a mortuary temple of his own (Wildung 1977: 286, with refs.). On the East Bank, opposite the king's mortuary temple, was the Luxor Temple, whose meaning seems to have focused on the kingship itself (Bell 1985). A hardstone stela of the twin brothers Suty and Hor, the 'architects' of that temple, is preserved (Edwards 1939: pl. 21). Several features

of the stela, notably the innovative solar hymn, show that they were among the leading people of the age (Fecht 1967; Baines 1985b). Apart from this biographical flesh which can be added to the bones of the monuments and their builders, there was a high level of innovation in architecture, in the style of some statuary, and in the elaborate reliefs of non-royal tombs. Variety and quite rapid development in art parallel a great diversity in religious texts and support the assumption that the artistic changes form part of a wider ferment (Baines 1998b). Certain features looked to the past, for example in the performance of ancient rituals (Epigraphic Survey 1980: 43, pl. 28) and in the Middle Kingdom model for a major statue of Amenhotep son of Hapu (Fig. 46; Sourouzian 1991).

Art should be seen both as an essential medium through which these changes were formulated and as a goal: it was constitutive and not accessory. The ultimate purpose of Amenhotep III's projects may have been religious and political, being connected with solar religion and with raising the king's status in relation to people and to the gods. Such goals were realized through art and architecture, and ultimately in the king's grand remodelling of capital and

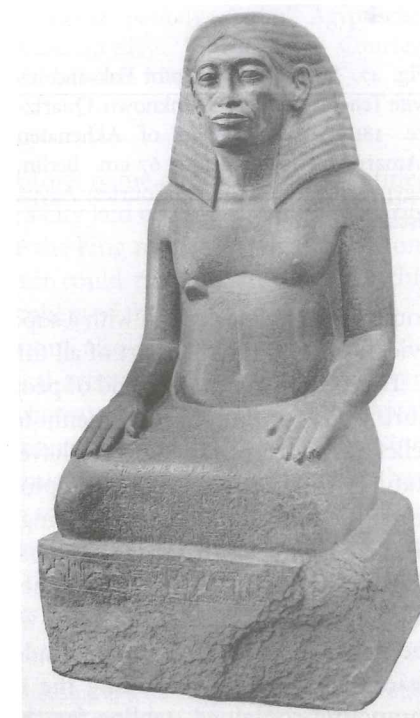


Fig. 46. Seated statue of Amenhotep Son of Hapu, pose and iconography inspired by Middle Kingdom models (nose area recarved in antiquity), from Karnak. Granodiorite. 18th dynasty, reign of Amenhotep III. Height 1.42 m. Cairo Museum CG 42127. After Legrain (1906: pl. 76).



Fig. 47. Stela of the sculptor Bak and his wife Tahere, provenance unknown. Quartzite. 18th dynasty, reign of Akhenaten (Amarna period). Height 67 cm. Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum 1/63. Courtesy Ägyptisches Museum Berlin.

country as a divine cosmos with a superhuman royal protagonist (there is some evidence for the counterpart of all this in living ceremonial: Baines 2006a).

This prominence of art, and of people who can be termed artists, continued during the 'revolution' of Amenhotep III's successor Akhenaten. In a rock relief at Aswan, where they may have supervised the extraction of granite for statuary, the father-and-son sculptors Men and Bak commemorated their work for both kings, differentiating between the artistic styles of the two (Habachi 1965: 86 fig. 11; Krauss 1986: 18 fig. 8). Bak's own mortuary stela (Fig. 47; Krauss 1986) exemplifies the new style in a strong form. Later in the reign, the chief sculptor Thutmose, who occupied a large house compound at the new capital of el-Amarna, headed the studio which created numerous heads (e.g. Fig. 48), including the renowned Berlin bust of Nefertiti. The compound contained stabling for chariot horses—hardly a requirement for

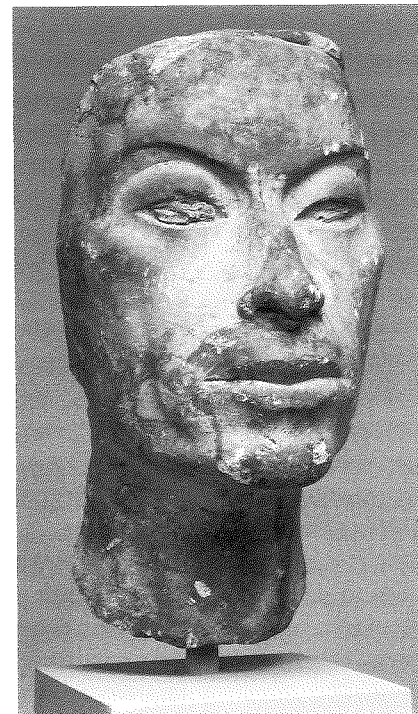


Fig. 48. Plaster head, possibly of the later King Aya, from the house compound of the sculptor Thutmose at el-Amarna. 18th dynasty, reign of Akhenaten (Amarna period). Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum 21350. Height 27 cm. Courtesy Ägyptisches Museum Berlin.

sculpting—and the object with the sculptor's name and titles that identified the tenant was an ivory horse blinker. In a city laid out for ceremonial chariot journeys to and from the suburbs where the king resided overnight (O'Connor in preparation), a chief royal sculptor could ride the streets on a richly caparisoned chariot alongside other members of the elite.¹⁸

Men, Bak, and Thutmose are important also because they came at the beginning and end of Akhenaten's radical artistic style. Men and Bak were active through its formative period, whereas the works from Thutmose's studio show a softening and a partial return to a traditional manner. Since Akhenaten was not himself an artist, he must have relied on people like these to make a reality of his ideas, and they in turn probably had a decisive impact on the particular direction of artistic development. The graffito of Men and Bak states that the king had instructed them personally, and this has sometimes been taken literally, but Rolf Krauss has demonstrated (1986: 40–2) that

¹⁸ For the horse blinker, see Krauss (1983). On housing and status at el-Amarna, see Crocker (1985); Tietze (1985; 1986); Shaw (1992).

such statements are conventional in inscriptions of builders and architects—the earliest related text dates to the Old Kingdom (Roccati 1982: 181–6) and an instance is known from el-Amarna itself—and so need not show anything distinctive about Akhenaten. What is said is likely to contain some truth, if only by coincidence, since Akhenaten must have indicated that he wanted radically new artistic forms and may have influenced their direction, as well as quite probably selecting the artists who oversaw their production.

Where Amenhotep III and Akhenaten agreed, or more probably took things for granted, was in using artistic production to formulate and propagate their differing ideas. The scale of Amenhotep III's works hardly diminished under Akhenaten; nor did standards, at least in statuary. But, just as small-scale works of dynasty 19 like the palettes do not seem to have addressed a wider audience, even the colossal and relatively public—or at least highly visible—structures of Amenhotep III were ultimately aimed only at those who could visit the temples, or in their greatest dissemination at those who would partake in the life and ceremonies of the capital (see also Baines 2006a). They may not have had much message for the people of the country as a whole. There is no strong sense in which they were propagandistic to the widest public, although such propaganda would be hard to identify and might not be expressed in art. (There may be a case for seeing the comparably grandiose projects of Ramesses II in the following century as being more oriented toward a public.) What they do show is that radical change necessarily involved the artistic forms which were part of the civilization's definition.

Art remained significant for religious and other change when Akhenaten's reforms were rejected after his death, but not in a straightforward way. The almost immediate return to traditional forms has an obvious symbolism, but for at least a generation styles continued to be influenced by Akhenaten. Some developments in style and in the rendering of nature before and during the time of Akhenaten (e.g. Russmann 1980) were not lightly abandoned, and artists—like most modern interpreters—may not have seen them as specific to the ideas which were being repudiated. But under Sety I (c.1292–1279), when the rejection of Akhenaten and the return to enriched traditional forms culminated (Fig. 49), there was a generally stronger contrast with the styles of Akhenaten than at the end of the 18th dynasty (e.g. Calverley and Broome 1933–59; Hornung 1991). In his relatively short reign, Sety constructed and decorated many major works, notably temples and his tomb, continuing the artistic focus of Amenhotep III in particular (not addressed specifically by Peter Brand, 2000). The principal difference, and one that is in keeping with the aims of Sety I, is that his art was not strongly innovative. His military reliefs constitute an important exception here (Epigraphic Survey 1986). Sety's artistic achievements are noteworthy also in the context of the numerous

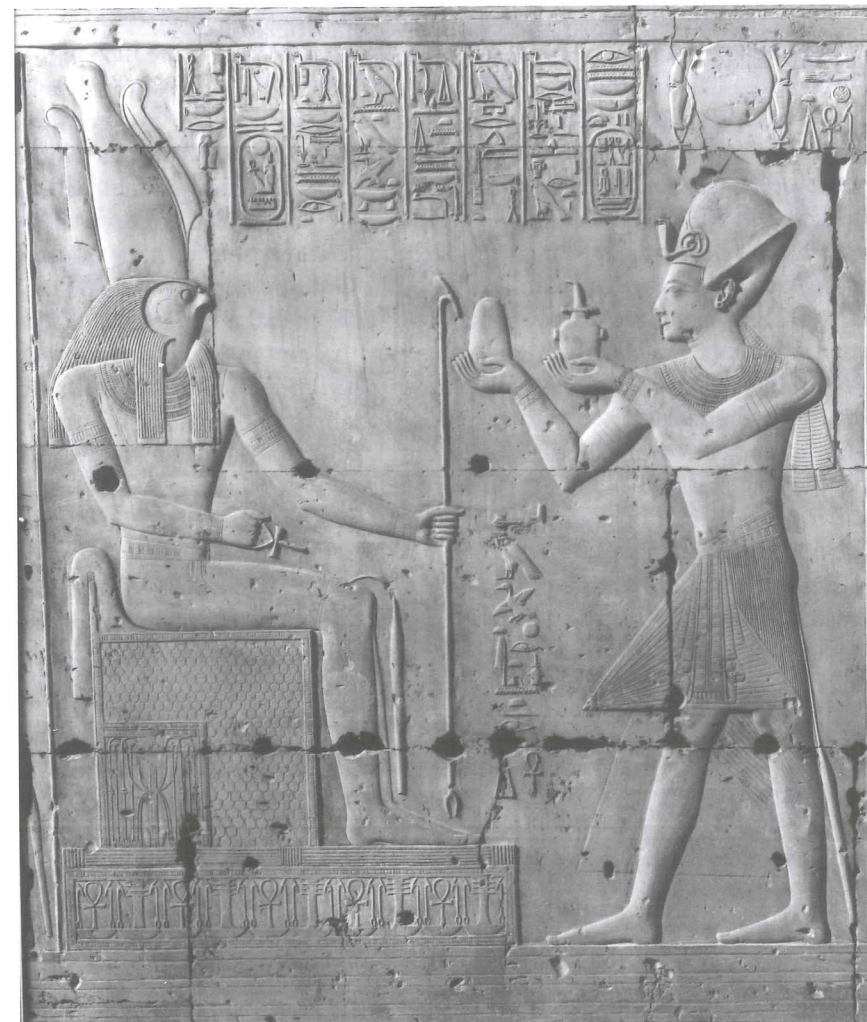


Fig. 49. Relief of Sety I offering to Ptah-Sokar, north wall of the Hall of Sokar and Nefertem in his temple at Abydos. 19th dynasty. Photograph by Amice M. Calverley. Courtesy Egypt Exploration Society.

military campaigns that he conducted (see e.g. Murnane 1990), which might have meant that he had fewer resources to devote to art than rulers in periods of peace. This expenditure is a measure of the continuing centrality of art, which was not an adjunct of other activities and purposes but a partly autonomous institution with its own patterns of development.

The Late and Graeco-Roman periods

The times of stability and prosperity between 700 and 300 were fewer than in earlier epochs. Only small numbers of major monuments survive from the period, in large part because they were concentrated in the Nile Delta, where preservation is poor. The relevance of this period to the argument here is especially in its uses of tradition (see also Loprieno 2003b). A 'revivalist' artistic style began to appear in the late 8th century, before there was any lasting political change or reunification of the country's fragmented territories (A. Leahy 1992; see also Russmann 1974). The extent of revival in the later 25th and 26th dynasties and focus on the past was, however, much greater than earlier, and it encompassed many spheres (see e.g. Brunner 1970; Neureiter 1994, both with problematic interpretations), including the reuse of ancient royal titulatures, texts, and language (Manuelian 1993), and more generally a return to a rather more austere style characteristic of much earlier periods and not of the preceding late New Kingdom (c.1200–1070) and Third Intermediate Period (c.1070–730).

In art, the striking feature of this revival is the use, principally in its initial phase, of models from a wide range of periods. There are examples of the copying of standing monuments both in temple relief (e.g. Baines 1973) and in non-royal monuments, of the combination of different styles in single pieces (e.g. Manuelian 1985: 110–12), and of the commissioning by the rich of statues of themselves in a variety of styles (e.g. Leclant 1961: pls. 1–33; Bothmer 1969 [1960]: nos. 13–14). Copies on Roman period papyri of Middle Kingdom tomb inscriptions that were known in situ in the 19th century CE show such material interchanging with the stream of literary tradition (Baines 1992a: 254 with n. 41; Osing and Rosati 1998: 55–100; Kahl 1999: 268–70). Some of these features have more limited parallels from earlier periods, as with the statue of Amenhotep son of Hapu cited earlier, but their extent is new, as is their rather more public and self-conscious character. These are exemplified in an inscription in the tomb of Ibi at Thebes which invites the reader not just to read it out but also to copy it (Kuhlmann and Schenkel 1983: 71–3). This tomb is also striking for its decoration, sections of which were closely based on the 6th dynasty tomb (more than 1500 years older) of a namesake at Deir el-Gabrawi, about 300 kilometres to the north.¹⁹ It would not have been very taxing to make suitable recordings of the old reliefs; what is remarkable is that the

¹⁹ Kuhlmann and Schenkel (1983). The scepticism of Friedrich von Bissing (1926) about the connection was, I think, incorrect, being based on the notion of exact copying rather than reuse and adaptation of motifs and compositions. Parallels between the two tombs are strong enough to make coincidence very unlikely. See also Kemp (2006: 372–3).

later Ibi knew about the older tomb. Unless this was a matter of chance, it implies that someone had a detailed knowledge of not very prominent ancient provincial monuments. Even if it was chance, the fact would remain that such tombs were being explored. Although there is no evidence for art exhibitions or museums—analogue phenomena may occur elsewhere in the ancient Near East (Roaf 1992; Cooper 1990; Beaulieu 1989: 138–41)—these practices come close to them in their deliberate seeking out of ancient works.

The example of Ibi is one of many. The Late period use of the artistic past involved a more explicit and varied recourse than in earlier times, but not necessarily a fundamental difference in approach. It implies the presence of attitudes and treatments that can be paralleled in artists' methods in many cultures; the classical tradition, both in ancient Rome and thereafter, is the obvious European example. Artistic use of the past in Egypt is a visible analogy for the verbal practices of criticism whose absence from the record many scholars have taken to suggest that a sense of 'art' was lacking—while continuing tacitly to analyse the works themselves as art. As will be clear, I believe that their action is correct and that they are wrong to have such scruples. Such uses of the past leave space for a considerable measure of innovation, as is visible notably in 4th century tomb reliefs (e.g. Fig. 50; see L. M. Leahy 1988). A crucial point here is that, whether or not such developments were prompted by, or intended to incorporate, other ideological

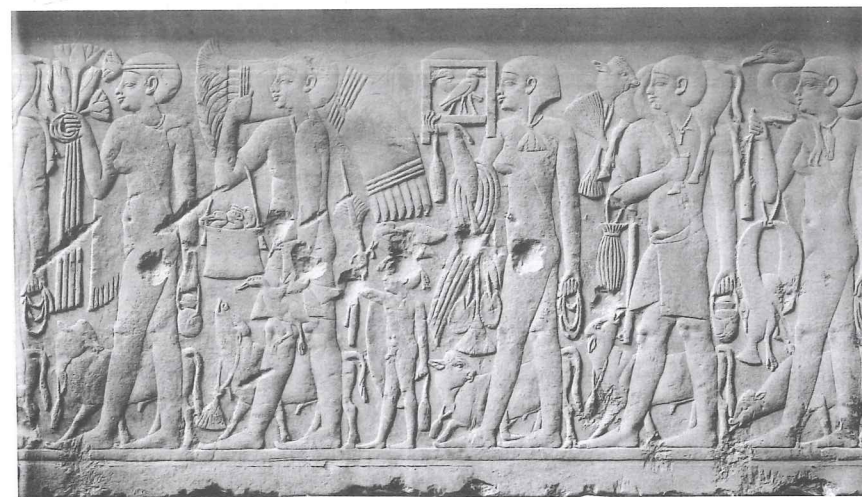


Fig. 50. Group of offering bearers on the lintel relief of Tjanefer from Heliopolis. Limestone, raised relief. 30th dynasty. Height 30.5 cm, total width 1.14 m. Cairo Museum JdE 29211. After Maspero (1907: pl. 34); see also L. M. Leahy (1988: no. 77).

matters, their formulation was artistic. The culture and tradition of art created an aesthetic domain that referred to itself in the first instance for its meaning, and was able to articulate its discourse in terms of differential recourse to past models, to more or less contemporaneous ones, or to a conscious mixture of the two.

Thus, while recourse to the past was a broad phenomenon, it is likely to have contributed to the insulation of the institution of art from other cultural activities. This separation has clear social implications. Those who can comprehend the use of old styles are a small, learned minority, in this case probably a smaller group than in the New Kingdom. Only they count as truly competent to judge; in their own eyes, only they count at all. Despite the use of divergent models, the social divisiveness of art becomes more evident than the cohesiveness it offers by sustaining a single cultural definition. These tendencies probably reached their high point in temples of the Graeco-Roman period (Fig. 51), some of whose inscriptions are almost literally indecipherable. These esoteric creations received massive patronage and were deeply serious in intent. They were very complex works of art, and in considerable measure their *raison d'être* was in their artistic character. In the long term, a situation emerged in which traditional artists were answerable only to a small indigenous priestly elite, and through them to the rulers. In one way, this is everything artists can ask for. In the end, however, it may be the death of art because too many people may come to see a specific form of it as dispensable or abhorrent. In Egypt this happened during the late

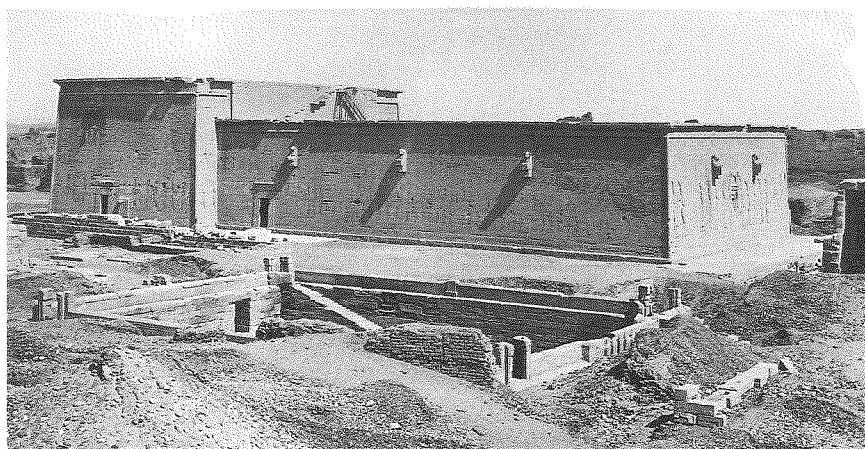


Fig. 51. View of the temple complex of Hathor and Isis at Dendara, from west. 1st century BCE – 2nd century CE. After Chassinat (1934: pl. xxv).

Roman period. When Christianity came, it too worked through art, necessarily rejecting traditional Egyptian style and subject matter along with the religion and civilization of which they had been an essential component.

CONCLUSION: THE INSTITUTION OF ART

The significance of art can be seen in many facets of Egyptian civilization, and is commensurate with the preponderance of aesthetically formed material in the record. Art served the ordered cosmos, which was celebrated on behalf of the gods and which humanity, as represented by the king, and the gods defended against the forces of chaos. Art defined, encapsulated, and perpetuated that cosmos. At the same time it served the perpetual destinies of ruler and inner elite and circumscribed their lifestyles in relation to the rest of society. The focus of artistic production on these central activities, many of them secret and exclusive, reinforced and legitimized the position of art, which in turn legitimized religious dedications together with much of the underlying division in society, in a mutually sustaining cycle. In this context, the role of hieroglyphic writing in art is important (Fischer 1986; Ch. 13 here). Writing brought representational forms together with verbal high culture, while also limiting access to that culture by incorporating it in a style of writing available only to a minority even of the literate, most of whom used the cursive form of hieratic. The reinforcing cycle of official religion and art also favoured the internal, self-regarding focus of both. What mattered in maintaining the order of things was to sustain the activity of the small group who commissioned, designed, and perhaps executed the works of art within the context of elite high culture. Only those involved comprehended the activities and their significance fully. A wider legitimation for their position is one that is general to elites: on behalf of society they assume responsibility for portentous matters and appropriate the necessary resources. This role for the elite in maintaining traditions is indeed formulated explicitly in religious and literary texts of the Graeco-Roman period (Derchain 1990: 25–8).

Within continuing artistic culture, the uses of tradition reinforce this focus on the elite and their artistic interests. There is ample evidence from Egypt for artistic change, variation, and innovation, so that interpretations of the fundamental aim of artistic conventions as being to maintain 'invariance' do not take an actor's perspective.²⁰ The perpetual dialogue with the past and

²⁰ Davis (1989); Assmann (1992: 169–74); see further Baines (1997: 217–18).

the use of different past models with diverse implications characterize an artistic discourse that is internally self-sustaining and exploits this characteristic to assert its significance both to itself and to the wider society. This internal discourse, which provides an analogy within the culture for the relative insulation of Egyptian civilization from its surroundings, is both a legitimation of art and a way in which artists create a context in which only their own concerns matter. As such, it is a typically professional phenomenon.

Professions, both ancient and modern, are exclusive and assume that only their members can judge the validity of what they do, avoiding recourse to a wider constituency. This characterization applies strongly to the Egyptian elite, and hence to the status of the art whose production they organized and which they or their masters, the king and the gods, consumed. The elite was a professional class, a group of administrators rather than a nobility, and in principle if not in practice lacking an independent source of wealth. Artists might be designers and supervisors, or possibly executants, who were part of that central group, or they could be subordinate artisans who worked for them. Either way, they depended principally on the king and the elite, and far less on the rest of society. Their livelihood came from state or elite incomes that were appropriated from producers to the centre by way of taxes, rents, or levies of labour (see e.g. Janssen 1975b). The artists had little constituency in the wider society. As people who did not wield supreme power in the state, they have left little individual trace in the record. Similarly, evidence bearing upon the grandees of many other periods and cultures hardly includes material about artists (contrast here Takeshi Inomata's archaeological findings of elite artistic activity at the Maya site of Aguateca, 2001).

The split between the groups involved in artistic production and consumption on the one hand, and the rest of society on the other, is complemented by the scarcity of artistically formed evidence from outside the elite. The scale of many artistic undertakings was so great that a large proportion of the population must have been affected by them. Such people often have little control over what is imposed on them, but they must have participated more or less willingly in these activities, and to a considerable degree they must have accepted the importance of what was done, that is in effect, its official legitimations. To that extent, the works and the institution of art will have exerted persuasive power over everyone. The archaeological record of the First Intermediate period (c.2150–2000), in which there was a proliferation of crude but characteristically artistic forms among a larger group than in centralized periods (e.g. Seidlmayer 1990; Dunham 1937), supports the assumption that artistic forms had such power. The tomb stelae and statuary of this period served a traditional elite function, and inherited artistic forms were in principle adopted with the function. Similarly, votive bronzes, the numbers of

which proliferated in the Late period, and which were probably dedicated by a relatively broad social group, remained within established artistic conventions, although with widely varying levels of artistic execution (e.g. Roeder 1956).

The forms created in the first few dynasties continued to constitute much of the architectural and visual definition of the Egyptian cosmos and society; no alternative was available. This indissociable identification of art and civilization, which is a measure of the significance of art in Egypt, says something important about the role of art, rather than showing that so multifunctional and multifarious a phenomenon cannot be termed 'art'.

Visual and written culture in ancient Egypt

JOHN BAINES

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