An Overview of

Egyptian Art

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Introduction

The many forms and interesting poses found in Egyptian art are intriguing not only because of the imposing figures they often represent, but also, in part, for their unfamiliarity. The images and figures depicted represent an ancient culture, long since faded. It is therefor interesting to take a short look at why the Egyptian art is so defined, so stylized. This exercise will show that the Egyptians developed a particular method to their artwork as a response to foreign influences and in an attempt to maintain their cultural integrity.

The Egyptian Artistic Canon

The Egyptian artistic canon consists of three governing elements, with one dominating everything: The Contour Line. This line defines the general shape of an object by tracing its outer surface. By relying exclusively on the contour line, the Egyptian artist ignores the inner details of the shape, except when they can not be dismissed. This results in a hint of muscular strength through the use of a slight bulge in the contour line. The face is a feature that generally is given more attention, but again, mainly through use of the contour line. The eyes and ears are represented through the shape they possess, as described by the contour line. Sculpture continues the idea of the contour line, with the line extended into three dimensions, becoming the contour plane. Eyelids can be represented as covering with the spherical shape of the eye discernible beneath (Davis, p15-20).

Another important feature of the canon is the pictorial presentation of the human figure. The head of a person is always seen in profile, that is, the side of the face is shown.

The shoulders are seen in their entire width, which requires a frontal presentation. The feet and legs are shown again in profile, with the torso in a transitional presentation, not quite frontal, not quite profile. The hands are always represented so that all five fingers are seen, unless grasping an object. Both ankles are visible with the legs spread slightly in an "at rest" pose. This pose, in other words, shows a figure that is, for the most part, stationary. In sculpture, the ankles are generally not in line with each other, although variations do occur as a result of the medium used. Arms tend not to be stiffly attached to the main body of the medium, but rather in natural poses (Davis, p13). The last portion of the canon deals with proportionality. This is a gray subject, and was mostly left to the eye of the artist. In general, the skill of the artist was quite accurate, allowing the following generalizations: The standing individual can be separated into eighteen equal units, with the head being roughly two units tall, the main body from the waist to the neck comprising twelve units, the legs nine units, the forearms four and a half units, and the upper arms three units. Various parts of the body can be further subdivided, but the general sizes are appropriate to the overall size of the figure (Davis, p22, Strouhal, p160).

Development of the Canon

Early pictorial forms of expression found in Egypt deal mainly with how to trap and classify certain animals (Davis, p133), mark the course of trails, and mark early boundary lines. While it may be difficult to classify such early utilitarian forms as works of art, they do express part of the mentality of the early, prehistoric, Egyptian. The canon for pictorial representations developed in the Predynastic Period and First Dynasty, being well formed by the Second Dynasty.

Early archeological finds suggest foreign influences possibly from Uruk and Elam, during the Predynastic period, that may have precipitated a move to a standardized, distinctly Egyptian style of art (Davis, p130). The development of hieroglyphic writing, with its standardization of form for each character may have helped to hasten the development of a canon for Egyptian artwork, making a unified code for all graphic arts (Davis, p134), especially since the Egyptian word for painter, *sesh*, is the same word for scribe (Strouhal, p160).

Early works of sculpture do not begin to completely display elements of the canon until the early part of the Third Dynasty. The move to the standard form took many decades, beginning in the Predynastic Period and continuing through the First and Second Dynasties. For sculpture, many of the leaps and bounds were accomplished in the Second Dynasty.

Figure 1 A Dynasty I monumental statue (Davis, p173)

The object in Figure 1, from the MacGregor Collection, is a prime example of a pre-canonical monumental statue from the First Dynasty. This fifteen inch green schist (or basalt) statue is considered to be "rigidly frontal and bilaterally symmetrical," meaning that its main features face forward, and each side is, for the most part, a replication of the other side (Davis, p172). All this suggests that the viewer observe the statue from only one direction, that being forward. The essence of the statue is its broad, smooth planes and cylindrical volumes (Davis, p173). While this piece shows great skill in cutting and polishing, it does not contain features of the canon (Davis, p179). The eyebrows are represented on the piece as raised strips of stone circling the raised eyes, rather than the contour of the eyes covered by the eyebrows. In addition, the legs are side-by-side, and the arms are stiffly attached stuck to the cylinder of stone (Davis, p173).

The canon as it applied to the ba-relief and painting was adapted to the statue by applying the form, with emphasis on the contour line, to each side of the stone (Davis, p179). In this way, then, the ancient Egyptians were able to unify all forms of art (Davis, p180). It is important to

Figure 2 Stone door step (Davis, p175)

remember that while the enormous length of Egyptian history makes such things appear fast, the canon was not a sudden development. It took several centuries for the final forms to be worked out. An example of this is the tendency of Second Dynasty sculpture to display many of the canonical forms, but deviate with an enlarged head in proportion to the rest of the body (Davis, p181). Another example of the time it took the ideas to develop fully is the First Dynasty limestone door step (Figure 2) in the form of a defeated enemy. This is a representation of the Egyptian's view of the superiority of their way of life. Every time someone passed through the door attached to this step, they were trampling over the foes of Egypt, perhaps reaffirming a recent victory. In this piece is illustrated the great care the early artisans took in finishing the selective details of a project.

What the Canon Represents

Part of the reason the standard of art was developed by Egyptians was the safety and predictability of the land surrounding them. Each year, just after the star Sothis (Serius) rose with the Sun, the Nile would flood for six to twelve weeks, covering the land with its rich and fertile silt. The farmlands, exhausted from the previous year's crop, would be rejuvenated and yield a bountiful harvest as a result. The extent of the flood could be gauged at the First Cataract, and preparations could be made to reap the benefits of a particular year's flood. The fertile Nile valley was a narrow strip of land running through relatively harsh desert lands. This helped to keep foreigners out of Egypt, resulting in a relatively secure attitude in comparison with the invasion-prone Sumero-Akkaidians to the east. More than expressing an act or event, artforms complying with

the canon helped express the encompassing and constant qualities of the world the Egyptians knew (Davis, p205). For this reason, in a battle, the pharaoh is always depicted as victorious, and the enemy is abject.

Interpretations

An important thing to keep in mind when viewing any artform, especially Egyptian art, is that it is a symbolic representation of an event, open to interpretation. Commenting on artforms, Aristotle once said, "one may perhaps say not that they are better than the truth, but the fact was so at the time" (*Poetics*). Thus it becomes important to discuss what some of the images meant to the ancients, for while artistic expressions may be interpreted differently, not all interpretations are entirely correct. For instance, images depicting the pharaoh in the act of slaying a lion do not necessarily suggest that the particular pharaoh in the image had recently returned from a hunting party with the velvety hide of the king of beasts. Rather, the image represents the strength and domination the ruler has over the subjects and enemies.

The lion can be seen as a powerful figure in the desert, able to subdue the wild dog and vanquish the wild bull, just as the wild dog and hyena can capture and kill antelope (Davis, p76). Thus the hunt itself is of great importance, less for the procurement of food, but more in the display of the pharaoh's strength and abilities. In a similar manor, a young member of the royal family may wish to display his courage and control of his dog team by a demonstration followed by a depiction of the hunt (Davis, p73).
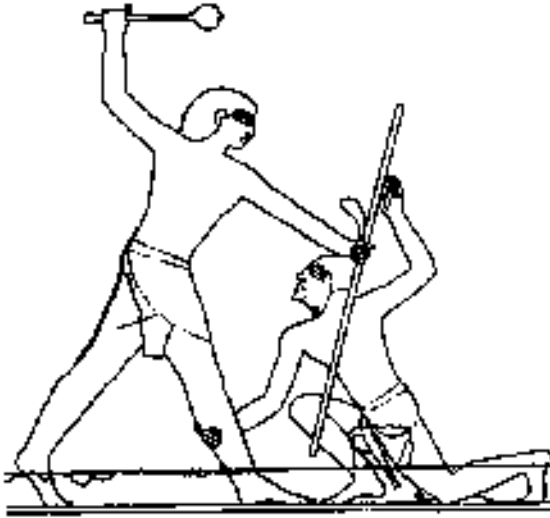
It is interesting to note that in a battle scene, the pharaoh need not be represented as a human smiting a foe, but may appear as a lion, bull or sphinx biting, chewing or otherwise killing an animal representative of an enemy (Davis, p78). This came about as various artists attempted to express themselves artistically within the

Figure 3 A drawing of the typical battle scene (Davis, p68)

confines of the canon. Thus there can be variations on a theme inside the accepted Egyptian canon. The standard battle scene itself departs from the canon by depicting a highly animated pharaoh, rather than the standard "restful" poses.   This departure, made during the Old Kingdom reigns of Narmer and Djet, itself became a standardized method of representing the victorious pharaoh. With this format, the pharaoh, with ankles widely separated grabs the kneeling opponent by the head with his left hand, his right preparing a blow from a club. On the pharaoh's head is his crown, on his belt is a dagger, and in the left hand that grasps the enemy is a staff. Typically the opponent is the chief of the enemy, signifying a victorious battle for the Egyptians.

The Amarna Period

Figure 4 A ba-relief of Akhenaton and family.
Note the circular pattern. (Davis, p132)

A major departure from the artistic canon occurred during a period that witnessed a number of major departures. The Amarna period introduced by Akhenaton saw the introduction of a new form of religion, worship of the sun-disk, Aton. With this new religion came a new capitol, at Amarna, and a new way of viewing the pharaoh. No longer was the pharaoh the fierce military leader, but a gentle father. Works of art produced during the reign of Akhenaton and his heir Tutankhamun reflect the new attitude of the pharaoh. Rather than depicting the Aton with a humanoid shape, the disk of the sun with rays extending outward and ending in hands holding symbols of life and dominion was shown. The pharaoh himself was also shown in gentle, fatherly roles, rather than the traditional war-like poses (Wente, p23). Circles were used prominently to help define the new style and show family unity (Davis, p32).

Innovations in the Canonical Form

The Egyptians were clever at hiding necessary, but unsightly support structures within the statues. The colossal statue of Ramesses II features one of his daughters at his feet, adding support for the legs of the huge structure. Even though the statue's head is damaged, the figure resembles the great pharaoh, with his crown and other symbols of authority, including a dagger tucked inside the belt of his skirt. His daughter, Bentanta stands on his feet and reaches up past his knees. Her face is clearly defined and she holds symbols of the royal family. A very interesting thing to note is the fact that this Nineteenth Dynasty statue does not feature separated ankles, with one in front of the other, but the statuette of his

Figure 5 The colossal statue of Ramesses II
(Strouhal, p161)

daughter does, no doubt a compromise with the canon and the structural integrity of the medium. It was also common practice to show the dominant figure of the family (in this case the pharaoh) several times larger than other members in the scene (Strouhal, p163). This may explain the rather womanly features of the princess.
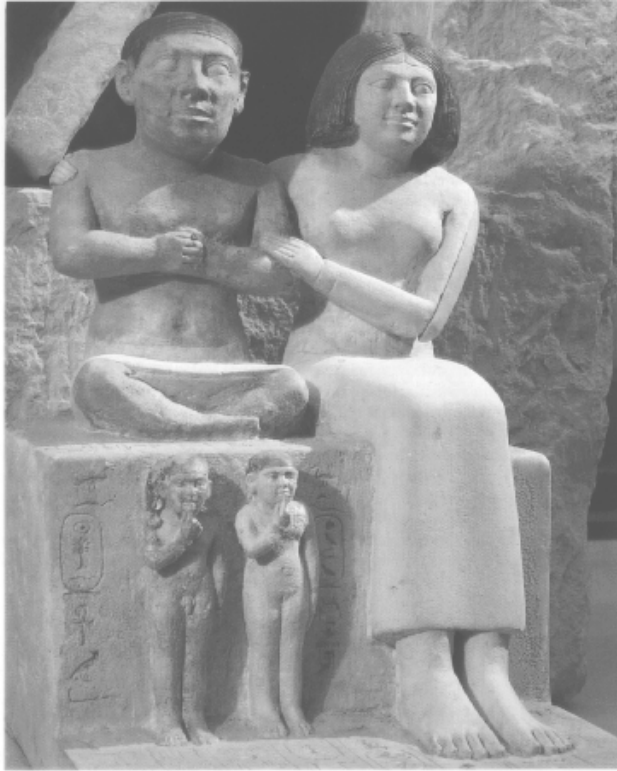
Because the Egyptian sculptor sought to represent merely the contour, features such as a gut stand out. In fact, the average Egyptian represented in sculpture was portrayed however they appeared, thus an obese person resulted in an obese portrait or statue. In most cases the pharaoh was represented with a perfect body, perhaps to reinforce the concept of pharaoh as Horus incarnate. The Egyptian sculptor was also adept at minimizing unusual features of the

Figure 6 A man and his family. Note the placement of the children. (Strouhal, p246)

subject. One man, sculpted with his family was born with abnormally short legs. The sculptor grouped the family so that a child was under the father, minimizing the effect of his shorter legs (Figure 6).

The act of sex being performed in art was reserved for the gods, as in the portrayal of the divine union of the sky goddess Nut and the earth god Geb (Strouhal, p239). However, many images and statues of an erotic nature

Figure 7 Acrobatic female dancer (Strouhal, p43)

exist, such as the concubine figurine from the harem of Amenhotep III (Strouhal, p55) and the acrobatic female dancer (Strouhal, p43).

An Interesting Aside

As the sun rose each morning, the colossal statues guarding the mortuary temple of Amenhotep III groaned as they cast off the chill of the night. The Greeks thought the statues represented Memnon from Troy whose ghost greeted the morning dawn, Eos. It is said that when the Emperor Hadrian toured Egypt, the statues emitted a tone that was more clear than that of a gong. Unfortunately, during an earthquake in 200 AD the fissured statues toppled over, and although repaired, ceased to make any further noises (Aldred, p11).

Conclusion

Even though the strict adherence to the canon by artists may seem almost a form of censorship, the artists were able to express themselves. Careful examination of details of the faces of figures or other focal points reveals this. The skill of the artisans in creating their images is plainly evident not only in the technical skill displayed, but also in adapting a story to fit within the confines of the canonical form. This form helped the Egyptians cope with and understand the changes taking place around them by providing a stable art form that represented things they understood while the world around them expanded into unfamiliar cultures. The St. Louis Art Museum has examples of this on display in the form of amulets conforming to the canonical form from the Twenty-sixth

Dynasty, while the Ptolemies were in power. While the canon may appear strict, but its

influences have left a glimpse inside culture of the ancient Egyptian.

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