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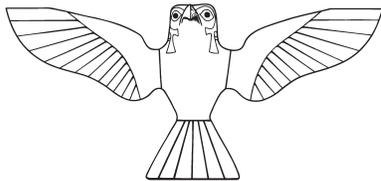


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PART I

Perceiving Ancient Art



Ancient Egyptian Art: Image and Response

Dorothea Arnold

My focus is not to try to arrive at a “meaning,” in the sense of semiotic, symbolic, religious or political significance for the various images, but rather to understand their visuality.

—Wells 2008, 16

As an Egyptologist and museum curator in charge of a collection of Egyptian art, one is frequently asked why this art is so popular in our time. Witnesses to the factual truth underlying this question are the vast numbers of visitors to exhibitions of Pharaonic objects, the sales of books and replicas of such objects, and the personal experience of this curator, who hears again and again people just entering the Great Hall of The Metropolitan Museum say: “First I want to go to the Egyptian galleries.” It is not easy to find an explanation of this phenomenon in the Egyptological literature, because even treatises such as the highly informative *Consuming Ancient Egypt* (MacDonald and Rice 2003) tend largely to just describe the situation as significant for our own time, and they do not link it to present day understandings of ancient Egypt on its own terms.

One aspect suggested by prevailing scholarly understandings of the purpose of Egyptian art that might be relevant in this context is the idea of exclusivity. John Baines, in his essay on the “Status and Purposes of Ancient Egyptian Art” (Baines 2007, 335–336), summarizes this in the concluding paragraphs. Egyptian art, he writes, “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 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.”

Baines draws from this general understanding a number of conclusions about the nature of Egyptian art, the important role played by tradition

during its history, and its seemingly all-pervasive exclusivity. He states (2007, 335–336):

The perpetual dialogue with the past and the use of different past models with diverse implications characterize an artistic discourse that is internally self-sustained 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 isolation of Egyptian civilization from its surroundings, is both a legitimization 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.

This understanding of the purpose of Egyptian art would suggest that the pleasant and invigorating experience of visitors in Egyptian art collections and exhibitions is based on the viewers' subconscious satisfaction that in seeing these artworks, they have become (posthumously, so to speak) members of the ancient Egyptian elite, or at least, of an Enlightenment elite that first "discovered," collected, and displayed Egyptian works in the western world. Such an explanation neatly would link present scholarly views on the place of Egyptian art in its own culture with the experiences of museumgoers today. But frankly, I do not believe that it explains sufficiently the worldwide appeal of Egyptian works. The attainment of quasi-elite status may be an ingredient in the joyful experience of museumgoers and tourists that flock to the monuments in Egypt and museums all over the world, but it is certainly not all of it.

John Boardman, the renowned scholar in your own field, Guenter, also understands exclusivity to be part of the attraction of Egyptian art and culture. But instead of Baines's social approach, Boardman links what he calls the "idiosyncrasy" of Egyptian art with its primary function: the prolongation of life beyond death. The "idiom" of Egyptian art, he writes, "is based on close knowledge and observation of the real but it [the real] was deliberately translated into something else, something more timeless than mere realism. . . . The result is an art which brilliantly expresses what lies beyond

realism, the divine, the immortal" (Boardman 2006, 156). It is this beyond-the-real quality of Egyptian art that, according to Boardman, makes it "easy to see how it continues today to be a focus for speculation about the exotic, magical, even extra-terrestrial in the arts" (Boardman 2006, 154). The latter aspect of its reception recaptures thoughts and experiences of viewers of Egyptian art from Renaissance and Enlightenment times through today and ultimately goes back to the reactions toward Egypt expressed by the ancient Greeks (Vasunia 2001). To be so long-lasting an ingredient of people's fascination with ancient Egypt, the idea of the culture's exotic, metaphysical nature can certainly not be disregarded as a factor in its allure to the present day. But again: Can that be all? Yes, among all the viewers that derive joy from visiting our galleries there are always a few who are seekers of the spiritual. The majority of viewers, however, simply derive visual pleasure and intellectual enrichment from the encounter with an extraordinary ancient culture. There must be something much more substantial about Egyptian art to generate that kind of reaction.

Another recent deliberation about the reception of Egyptian art and objects today comes from Egyptologist-cum-anthropologist Lynn Meskell. In her 2004 book *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt*, in which she advocates a prioritization of the physical presence of Egyptian objects (their materiality) in our quest for understanding that ancient culture, she also deals seriously and at fair length with the present popularity of all things Egyptian (Meskell 2004, 177–219). In her final pages she sums up: "Thousands of years after the demise of Pharaonic Egypt as a coherent cultural sphere, so many lay people as well as scholars are fascinated with Egypt's tangible and spiritual achievements, although it is the overpowering physicality that serves as the bedrock for our fantasies and fascinations" (Meskell 2004, 218). This emphasis on the "thingness" of Egyptian art is very much part of any museum curator's (as well as any archaeologist's) life. But the physical presence of objects is not confined to ancient Egypt. It is true for any assemblage of objects from any human culture past and present. Therefore, the question remains: Why are the ancient Egyptian things so especially attractive to us today? I would like to suggest that this attractiveness is an outcome of the ancient

Egyptian world view transmitted through a singularly visual artistic language.

Let me start my explanation of what I mean by inviting you to look at a relief block found reused in the fill of the pyramid of Amenemhat I (ca. 1981–1978 B.C.E.) at Lisht, but derived from a monument of the much earlier pharaoh Khufu, builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza (ca. 2551–2528 B.C.E.). An

original Fourth Dynasty date for the relief, now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 1.1), is indicated by its style and the name of an estate that supplied offerings that include Khufu's cartouche (Goedicke 1971, 18–19; Arnold 1999). The relief shows three oxen, the first one missing its head, the last its tail. These oxen are part of a cortege of offering animals driven toward the



a



b

Figure 1.1. The cattle of Khufu, limestone relief block (a) and detail (b) excavated at Lisht North, Fourth Dynasty, reign of Khufu, ca. 2551–2528 B.C.E. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1922 [22.1.3]. Photo B. White; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

mortuary temple of the king. The bone structure, musculature, and skin texture of the cattle are depicted so accurately and with so much tactile sensitivity that the viewer experiences almost physically the smoothness of the creatures' skin, the softness of their flesh, and the typical bone structure of bovines (see, esp., Fig. 1.1:b). Even the depiction of the tails follows nature in its most essential details. The tail grows smoothly rounded out of the flesh and skin on the animal's back, passes along its hind parts, and then hangs down, weighted by the heavier end. This extraordinary detailing takes place on a sculptured surface raised less than a quarter of an inch above the background of the relief.

It should also be noted that a considerable amount of depth is suggested in the animal representations, not by any oblique views or foreshortening, but by the artist's skillful shaping of the grooves between various parts of the body. They are carved in such a way that the viewer has the impression that the legs and belly flesh are situated at different levels of depth, although in reality most of the grooves separating the near legs from the belly and the belly from the far legs are more or less just that—grooves—and the surfaces of body parts at seemingly greater depth are actually situated at an almost equal level (Schäfer 1986, 76–77, fig. 31:d).

The naturalistic details in the animal depiction and the illusion of depth in the relief are largely confined, however, to the interior of the figures. The outlines that determine the identity and posture of each figure are mainly composed according to a set of conventions that were put in place early in the history of Egyptian art and never totally abandoned. Heinrich Schäfer, in his *Von ägyptischer Kunst* of 1919, first identified and described these conventions as a “mental image which . . . is not faithful to a perceived visual impression but image-based (*vorstellig*)” (Schäfer 1986, 91; see also Baines 2007, 209), a term that comes close to what neuroscientists studying the visual perception of humans today call “object-centered perception” (as opposed to a viewer-centered perception that forms the basis for the eventual evolution of representational perspective; see Bruce, Green, and Georgeson 2004, 276). Following Schäfer, the object-centered conventions of two-dimensional Egyptian art have been described by others as a representational system in which each part of an object or figure is represented according to its most characteristic and

easily recognizable view (e.g., Smith 1978, 128, 273–350). The end result is an additive or, to use E. Brunner-Traut's term, “aspective” image (Brunner-Traut 1986) that combines various different views of a figure or object into a conceptual rather than realistic representation. Human figures, for example, commonly are depicted with the head, legs, and feet in profile, while torso, eyes, and hands usually are shown in frontal view. Animals are rendered in profile with only such parts as ears or horns seen in frontal view. In both human and animal figures the legs are best made visible by rendering them in a striding posture.

The cattle of the Khufu relief is fully in accord with this scheme of two-dimensional representation. The animals' heads and bodies are depicted strictly in profile, whereas the eyes, ears, and, above all, the horns are represented as if seen from the front. Without any interior detailing, the result of such an outline drawing would be an easily recognizable image of a particular animal; and even with the naturalistic features of the finished relief in place, elements such as the horns of the cattle retain a largely decorative quality. The entirely abstract rendering of the join between the forehead and horns reveals unmistakably the basic conceptual character of the composition. Intriguingly, both the naturalistic and abstract elements could shift places somewhat from image to image. On another Old Kingdom block from Lisht (Fig. 1.2), for instance, the horns of a goat convey an astonishing impression of depth and verisimilitude through an ingenious twisting of the grooving and the stepped, slightly overlapping position of the horns. In general, however, conventions had the upper hand over the outlines of figures, determining much of the figures' postures and attitudes, while realism was played out in modifications of the conventional and in the detailed modulations of areas inside the outlines.

More than 60 years ago, Ernst H. Gombrich, in his 1950 work *The Story of Art* (in its 16th edition by the year 2006), based a good part of his assessment of Egyptian art on the relationship between its firmly regulated “idiom” or “convention” on the one side, and the artists' keen observation of nature and reality on the other. “The observation of nature,” Gombrich wrote (2006, 51), “and the regularity of the whole, are so evenly balanced [in Egyptian art works] that they [the art works]

impress us as being lifelike and yet remote and enduring.” Then he formulated the general statement: the “combination of geometric regularity and keen observation of nature is characteristic of all Egyptian art” (Gombrich 2006, 51). Nowadays we are reluctant to accept such general statements in view of the complexities of objects of art and artifacts. Let me, nevertheless, take what Gombrich has written about the Janus-faced character of Egyptian art (keen observation of nature coupled with “regularity”) as a starting point for a demonstration of how Egyptian artists/artisans expressed a general world view by visual means.

To a certain degree, an analysis of the reality-versus-formality qualities in Egyptian two-dimensional art is paralleled and further defined by the artistic process. The process of creating a relief like the one depicting the cattle of Khufu can be best observed in partly unfinished works. One

such instance, [Figure 1.3](#), from the burial chamber of King Haremhab (ca. 1323–1295 B.C.E.; Hornung 1971, 45, pl. 31) shows the sun god Re with the ram head of the creator god. He stands in a shrine on a boat and is protected by a huge snake. In this obviously unfinished detail, red guidelines were used to position the figures while black outlines were used to determine the main features of each figure and object. The sculptor then started his work, which was interrupted halfway through and never resumed. We can see, therefore, that the sculptor began by chiseling away the background around the god’s figure. This lowering of the background transformed the outlined figure into a “cookie-like” silhouette. After that, the sculpturing of the head created an unmistakable, albeit only sketchy, image of a living ram with its flapped ear, softly rounded muzzle, and deep furrow beside the nose. These latter naturalistic details again are located



Figure 1.2. Relief representation of a goat, limestone relief block excavated at Lisht North, Fourth Dynasty, reign of Khufu, ca. 2551–2528 B.C.E. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1922 (22.1.20). Photo B. White; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

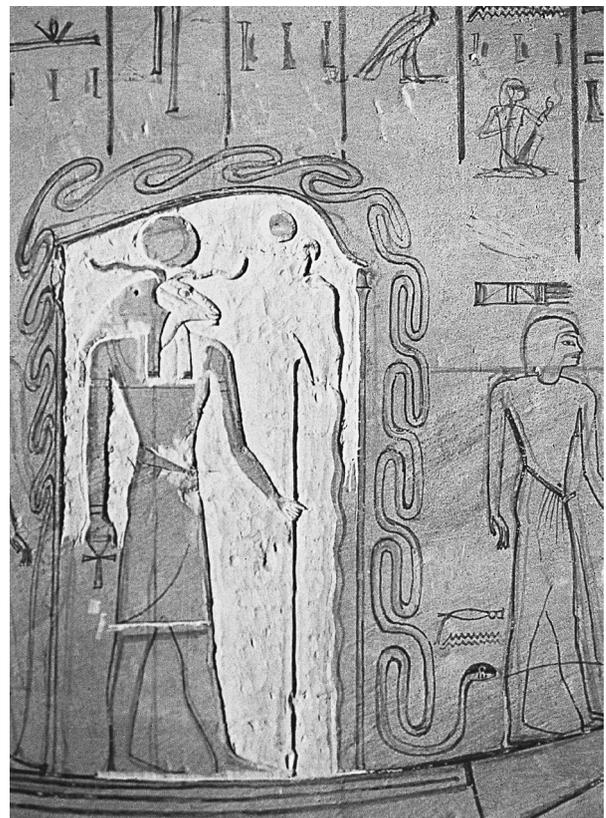


Figure 1.3. The sun god from the tomb of King Haremhab, Valley of the Kings, Egypt, Eighteenth Dynasty, reign of Haremhab, ca. 1323–1295 B.C.E. Photo A. Brack.

inside the outlines of the figure; and it is interesting to see that they were carved toward the end of the creative process, or at least at a point when the sculptor was ready to think of the final shape of the work. Because the relief work is unfinished, its surface is lacking a final smoothening.

While the decoration of the royal tomb of Haremhab is a highly sophisticated affair of state-like character, paintings in nonroyal tombs of the Eighteenth Dynasty are much livelier in the choice of themes and with the introduction of inventive modifications in positions and gestures based on observations of real life. There is, however, a noticeable distinction in these representations between the main figures in a composition, which are largely guided by conventions and thus much less free, and the often more realistic looking subsidiary figures. For instance, a wall painting in the tomb of Nakht at Western Thebes/Sheikh Abd el-Qurna (Fig. 1.4; ca. 1400–1390 B.C.E.; Shedid and Seidel 1996, 74; for the technical process, see also Shedid 1988; Bryan 2001; Tiradritti 2007, 62–84) shows the seated tomb owner and his wife. As was customary for conventional figural representations since the early Middle Kingdom, a rectangular grid of red lines was initially laid out over this section of the wall (Bryan 2001; Robins 2001). The figures were then drawn in outline directly onto the grid, following the canon of proportions prevalent at that time, which placed the hairline of a seated figure at 14 horizontal grid lines above the ground line (Robins 1994, 73–99). Remains of the initial grid are still visible in parts of the painting where no pigments were yet applied.

If the outline drawings of the seated or standing main figures again followed general conventions, the same is true for the drawing of main figures in action, although during the later Eighteenth Dynasty, such figures were frequently drawn free-hand, without an underlying grid. Indeed, the striking ability of Egyptian artists of all times to lay out even and intricately structured figures in one sweep is not only apparent in the images themselves, but it is also expressed in a rare ancient text relating to artistic work: the early Middle Kingdom stele of Irtisen now housed in the Louvre. In this text the master sculptor and painter Irtisen lists among other skills that he “know(s) the striding of a male figure and the walk of a female . . . the movement of the arm of a hippopotamus hunter, and the movement

of the legs of a runner” (Delange 2000, 61). Such attitudes were clearly part of a traditional repertoire.

After the first outline drawings were completed, painters applied solid areas of pigment over the various parts of the figures as indicated by the outlines (Fig. 1.4). Like the lowering of the background in relief work, this procedure transformed the drawn figures into silhouettes. It is important to realize that Egyptians evidently considered both outline drawings and silhouettes fully capable of serving the basic function of tomb decorations: to provide eternal life for the tomb owner. In the case of an emergency such as the premature death of a tomb owner, the work could obviously be left in this state without losing its life-preserving power.

One might, indeed, compare the silhouette-like quality of basic Egyptian figural representations to certain well-known images from our own history and daily life. Traffic signs, for instance, or the heraldic images that adorned the shields of medieval knights are of a similar character. In both cases, instant recognition is (or was) the main aim of such pictures, as both cases warn of life in peril. By analogy, one could argue that the art of the ancient Egyptians first goal was to establish, in quite an existential sense, the sheer presence of a person or situation by flashing instantly recognizable outlined images and silhouettes. Once the recognition was achieved, the detail work could begin in order to give credence to the reality of the image and link it to human observations and the human environment. A closer look at the silhouettes of the seated tomb owner and his wife in Figure 1.4 reveals, however, that some naturalistic features derived from observations of the real world could occasionally enter into the creation of figural silhouettes. The tomb owner in Figure 1.4, for instance, wears two pieces of clothing: an undergarment that covers the left shoulder and reaches down to the ankles, and on top of it a short kilt. The undergarment is painted with a light pink pigment (a mixture of red and white; see Lee and Quirke 2000, 113) to indicate that it was made of so fine and thin a linen fabric that the reddish-brown color of the man’s skin shines through.

The gestures and movements of lesser figures that are not the focus of the scene were not as strictly governed by convention, and all sorts of modifications and adaptations were employed in



Figure 1.4. Seated couple from the tomb of Nakht, Theban Tomb 52, ca. 1400–1390 B.C.E. Tempera on paper facsimile by Lancelot Crane, 1909–1910, detail. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1915 (15.5.19f). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

the outlining process to introduce a certain measure of realism into the picture. William Stevenson Smith has described in detail the multiple ways in which Old Kingdom artists modified, often ingeniously, the conventions of two-dimensional art in order to introduce real-world attitudes, movements, and gestures into the pictures on tomb and temple walls (Smith 1946, 304–332). He called the chapter in which he dealt with such modifications “The Attitudes of the Subsidiary Figures,” and in the introductory sentences he stated that “although in general they [the minor or subsidiary figures] follow the conventions laid down by the drawing of the chief figures, the multiplicity of the actions required for subsidiary figures, and their comparative unimportance in relation to the dominant figure, stimulated the artist to a more careful

approximation to some of the transitory aspects of the human body in movement and repose” (Smith 1946, 304). Thus, a kind of visual hierarchy was established where main figures were mostly governed by convention and subsidiary figures were often substantially modified according to observations of the real world. Of course, for us modern viewers—but who knows, perhaps for the ancient ones too—much of the charm of narrative two-dimensional Egyptian art is derived from such modifications of the conventional in the depictions of servants, agricultural laborers, herdsmen, craftsmen, and even festive guests and their entertainers and caterers (Figs. 1.5, 1.6).

Many modifications and adaptations in these subsidiary figures soon became, of course, part of a conventional repertoire and were thus repeated



Figure 1.5. Group of party guests and harpist from the tomb of Nakht, Western Thebes/Sheikh Abd el-Qurna. Photo A. Brack.

again and again, often with further modifications. But in many tomb scenes, especially those of the New Kingdom, there are also quite unprecedented, ad hoc inventions of a truly naturalistic nature. In [Figure 1.6](#), the tufted hairdo of one of the grape pickers, the man at the trough beside the vintners, and the cook who cleans out the fowl for the master's meal are each slightly varied according to the assumed age of the particular person, or just for variety's sake. Golden earrings like the one worn by Nakht's little daughter in the boat ([Fig. 1.6](#), upper right register) or like those peeking through the strands of hair of the party attendees ([Fig. 1.5](#)), and the way that the female guests interact with complicated gestures and turned heads ([Fig. 1.5](#)) are all unconventional and naturalistic representations. One can easily envisage the conversation taking place in [Figure 1.5](#) about the smell of the mandrake fruit that two of the ladies are holding: "Does yours smell differently than mine?" In the meantime, a third lady prefers the smell of a water lily.

Especially intriguing are the hands of the blind harpist in [Figure 1.5](#). The fingers of his upper hand

were so convincingly shaped with some bold brushstrokes (done at the silhouetting stage of the painter's process) that the painter who drew the final consolidating outlines around each figure did not add to this part of the work. The fingers of the lower hand—mostly with final outlines—are even seen in perspective, with the thumb touching the little finger, a way of showing hands that would become even more prominent during the Amarna period (ca. 1352–1336 B.C.E.). The movement of the fingers of both the harpist's hands are indeed so intriguingly suggestive of the musician's action on the strings of his harp that it takes the viewer a while to realize that the painter has attached the hands to the wrong arms, because the upper hand is really a right hand, here attached to the left arm, and the lower hand is a left hand attached to a right arm. Do we have to assume that in a previous painting the hands would have been rightly distributed and that the Nakht painter mixed up his prototype? It was again Smith who made detailed observations, albeit in a style that nowadays seems uncomfortably patronizing, on the various ways in which Egyptian artists of the

Old Kingdom dealt with the representation of hands in figures composed according to the conventions (Smith 1978, 275–289).

What evolves from such observations is the notion that Egyptian artists approached “reality” on a piece-by-piece basis. How then does this same complementary relationship between convention and naturalism play out in Egyptian three-dimensional art? H.G. Fischer demonstrated in his memorable 1965 article “Anatomy in Egyptian Art” (Fischer 1965) how much detailed knowledge of the bone structure and musculature of the human body and their organic functions is evident in ancient Egyptian sculpture. Fischer, interestingly enough, recorded in his article that he gained such insights during the fulfillment of some basic curatorial duties. As he told me himself, he spent many hours in

the Metropolitan Museum’s photo studio working with the photographers to obtain documentation of as many details of a piece as possible. Referring to the statue of Nikare (Fig. 1.7) as an example, he writes (Fischer 1965, 171–172):

to demonstrate the amount of anatomical observation in the statue illustrated, the source of illumination must be varied so as to pick up selective portions of the surface. If the light is passed across the shoulder from front to back, two faint vertical grooves become visible; these deltoid grooves, a recurrent feature in Egyptian sculpture, provide one of the rare examples of a detail that is observable only when the muscle is under great stress. The back of the same statue, as seen under harshly oblique lighting, brings out the same detail as well as the scapular ridges and the seventh vertebra, or vertebra prominens, at the base of the neck.

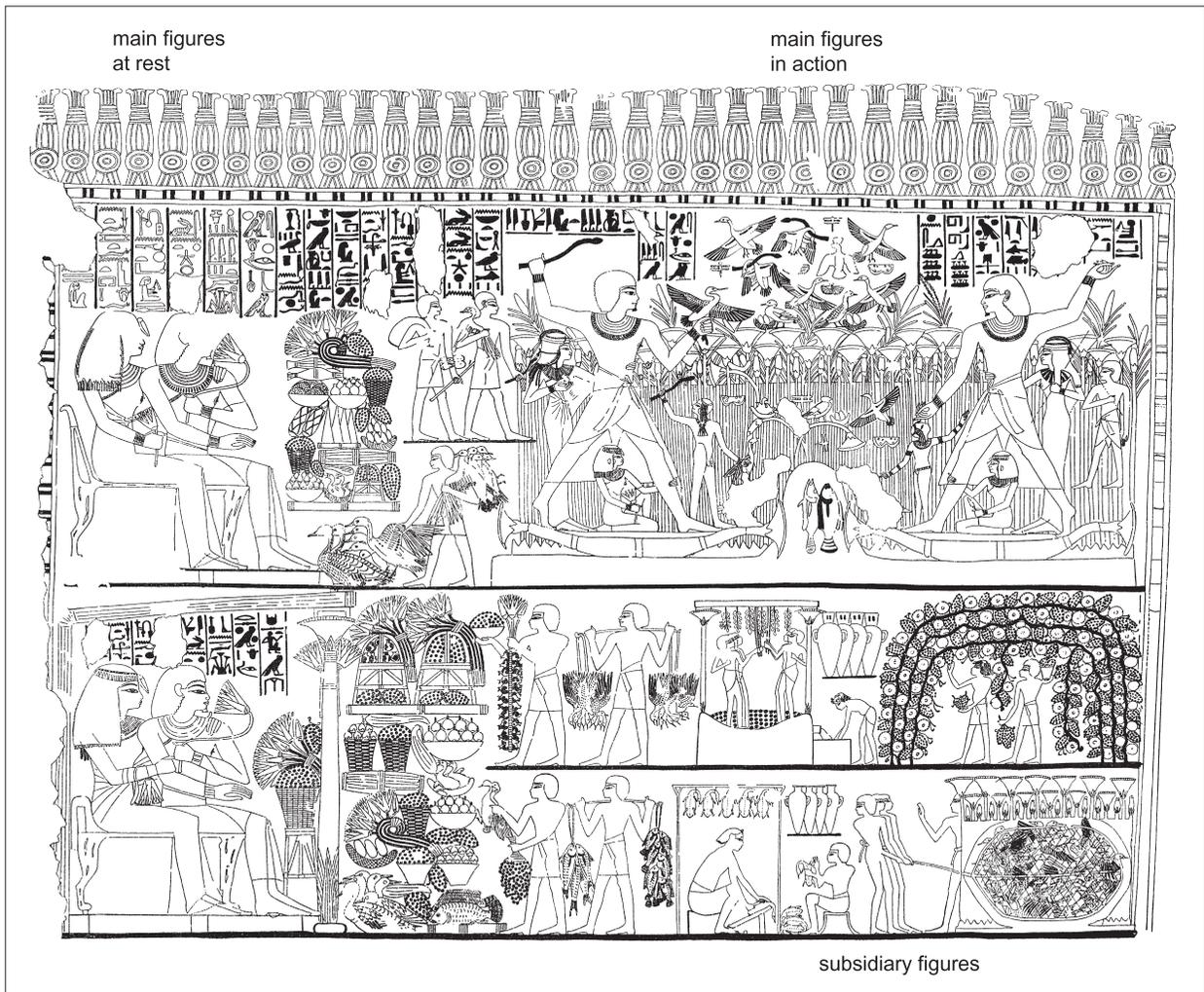


Figure 1.6. The northern part of the western wall in the tomb of Nakht. Drawing by S. Murphy, after Davies 1917, pl. 22.



Figure 1.7. Back view of the limestone statue of Nikare, second half of the Fifth Dynasty, ca. 2420–2323 B.C.E. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1952 (52.19). Image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The traits in Egyptian three-dimensional sculpture that express “regularity” and the “permanent” have often been described. With rare exception, Egyptian statues present their front to the viewer, and their position is composed around an axis. All of the statues are, moreover, placed on a block- or slab-shaped base that forms an unalienable part of the whole figure, while at the rear a vertical “back pillar” or “back slab” draws attention to the statue’s upright attitude (Fig. 1.8). It has often been remarked that together, the back pillar (or slab) and base preserve the cubic structure of the original block of stone from which the statue was carved, reminding the western viewer of Michelangelo’s statement that a statue is hidden in the stone—the sculptor has just to free it by carving away what hides it (Gombrich 2006, 238). Dietrich Wildung has proceeded from there to interpret the base and back pillar/slab as constituting the space occupied by the statue, and he understands the forward moving stride of the left leg as an element that links the figure with the defined space of the base and back pillar (Wildung 2006).

One basic fact should always be remembered: back pillars and back slabs are not remnants of a “primitive” state of Egyptian art when sculptors did not yet dare to free the figure entirely from the stone. The earliest Egyptian sculptural works do not have back pillars or back slabs (Eaton-Krauss 1998; only known exception: Ziegler 1999, 178–179, no. 10). These elements were intentionally developed from high seat backs during the Fourth Dynasty (Wildung 1972, 151–152). Once chosen, however, they became indispensable components of the Egyptian sculptural language and were adhered to until the very end of Egyptian art history. During that millennia-long history, the back elements changed their meaning repeatedly, of course, a fact that is well demonstrated by the changing repertoire of texts inscribed on them (Jansen-Winkel 2000).

The basic kinship of Egyptian stone sculpture with geometrically defined bodies is further emphasized by the various rectangular, triangular, trapezoidal, or otherwise multiangled supports that link—as so-called negative space—the legs with each other, the arms with the body, and the body with the back pillar, while also securing beards and other protruding parts of the figure. These noniconic components of Egyptian stone statues are fundamentally different in character from the tree trunk-shaped or otherwise imitative supports in classical sculpture. Although they function in some cases as static supports, most are not necessary to maintain the stability of a piece, and none of them is disguised as an object from the real world. In congruence with their noniconic shape, the elements comprising negative space are conceptual entities that underline the nonreal character of the framework of Egyptian sculpture.

It is important to stress that the base, back pillar/slab, and the various inner supports and “fill” areas turned many statues into high relief, and thus link them to the architecture that was in their sphere of existence. Egyptian statues were placed in chapels, statue chambers, or niches, and, when located under the open sky, they stood against walls or pylons or between the columns or pillars of a court. Even processional ways that were often flanked by rows of statues were mostly closed by long walls on both sides of the passageway. Carved from stone, the main construction material for temples and elite tombs, the sculptures were even more closely

linked with the architecture by the geometric elements that they incorporated. Since stone was almost exclusively the material of sacred buildings in ancient Egypt, the statues' close connection with architecture was also a link with the divine. Images of wood, ivory, metal, or clay were—in most cases—deposited in shrines, which were also often made of wood, or in boxes, or even just placed underground. Rarely fitted out with back pillars or support elements, they were less closely linked with architecture. For these works, linen wrappings often played the role of an accoutrement that lifted the statue (or statuette) from this world into the realm of the divine (Davies 2007, 179–180, fig. 77).

This then is what Egyptians evidently considered to be the right balance between regularity and realism in three-dimensional art. Each sculpture had to be endowed with a framework that ensured its existence in an environment of a superhuman character. Only inside that framework could the earthly and “real” come alive. It is clear that this understanding is essentially not different from the hierarchical relationship between the conventional and the realistic in two-dimensional art discussed above. In both cases the conventional and conceptual are linked to the superhuman while the transitory, narrative, and realistic, although of no lesser importance, takes second place.

After all these words, it is humbling to realize that ancient Egyptian scribes had already expressed similar ideas in one single image. Andrzej Niwinski and Erik Hornung were the first to recognize the significance of the hieroglyphic emblem in [Figure 1.9](#). As Hornung has written (1992, 51–52), “the urobos [a cosmic snake called ‘the one who bites its tail’] surrounds a rabbit, the Egyptian written sign for *wen* (being). The rabbit appears on a standard otherwise reserved for images of gods.” We do not need to go here into Hornung’s interpretation of the urobos aside from its reading as a symbol of an all-enveloping horizon of timeless nonexistence through which this world is again and again regenerated, like the sun rising from the underworld, but in which everything will dissolve at the end of time. For the present purpose it is enough to see that, according to this particular early first-millennium scribe, the Egyptians understood reality in its essential (divine) quality as existing inside a larger context of a nonreal/super-real character.



Figure 1.8. Sandstone statue of an official from El Kab, Fourth Dynasty, ca. 2575–2465 B.C.E. New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1962 (62.200). Photo B. White; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

I want to close these remarks with a look at an example of a well-known Egyptian statue type: the beautiful Sakhmet ([Fig. 1.10](#); Metropolitan Museum of Art, acquisition no. 15.8.3). This statue is one of literally hundreds of such dark granodiorite sculptures that were dedicated to Sakhmet, the mighty goddess of war and pestilence, by King Amenhotep III in his mortuary temple at western Thebes (Hayes 1959, 238, fig. 143). All of these statues have a common form: the goddess’s body is that of a mature, rather broad-hipped female who sits on a throne holding a sign of life in one of her hands while wearing the tripartite wig, the usual



Figure 1.9. Emblem showing the cosmic snake urobois surrounding "reality." The rabbit reads *wen*, "to be." Drawing after Hornung 1992, 52.



Figure 1.10. Head of a granodiorite statue of the goddess Sakhmet, Eighteenth Dynasty, reign of King Amenhotep III, ca. 1390–1352 B.C.E. Photo B. Schwarz; image © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

head covering of female deities, over her head and shoulders. As the daughter of the sun god Re, she is crowned by a solar disk to which a uraeus cobra is attached in front. The head is that of a lioness, shaped with all the features characteristic of the animal in nature. Strongly emphasized cheekbones define the greatest width of the face at the height of the eyes. Below them, the cheeks are strikingly hollow, hinting at the presence of long and powerful jaws that enable lions and lionesses to open their mouths especially wide for the decisive bite into the back or flank of their prey. The large nose broadens expressively at the tip, and the chin sags under the thin-lipped, double-bow-shaped mouth. The eyes, hooded by fleshy lids, look slightly downward with an uncompromising watchfulness that is well known to anybody who has observed the animal in a zoo or in the wild. In short: the sculptors of these hundreds of statues took the greatest care to endow each deity's head with the typical features of the real animal while transferring properties of fur and flesh into sculptural elements.

That is not to say, of course, that each sculptor, or even each supervisor of a sculptors' workshop, went into the wild to sketch lions from nature. The basic features of the animal had been observed and depicted for thousands of years by the time Amenhotep III commissioned the Sakhmet statues. What is important is that the essential components of the image, however much due at this point to a tradition taught to young sculptors through the generations, were still understood as congruent with the real and reinforced, most probably again and again, by renewed observation. Evidence for this understanding is provided by the astonishing degree to which the features of the Sakhmet statues are still recognizable as the ones of real lions and lionesses; the opportunity to check the long-held artistic tradition was amply provided at the time the Sakhmets were created by the king's extensive hunting feats (Hayes 1959, 232).

It is all the more striking that the superbly rendered animal features in Sakhmet's head are surrounded by and combined with other forms of (at least partly) conceptual character. Female lions, for instance, have furry ruffs around their faces that are somewhat reminiscent of the mane around the face of the male lion, but differ from it by not covering the gap between the ears. The ruff around the face of Sakhmet, however, has been transformed

into a star-shaped collar. Similarly, the animal's whiskers are shaped in the sculptures as a palmette-like decorative feature, and the tufts of hair inside the ears, although following beautifully the undulations of the flesh, are rendered as decoratively distributed thin lines.

Also intriguing are the claw-shaped, raised areas below the eyes of the Sakhmet statue (Fig. 1.10). The eyes of living lions and lionesses are visually elongated at both the inner and outer corner by dark-colored markings that make the eyes look larger than they are and add to their menacing character. Based on the markings that run from the inner corner of the living animal's eye toward the nose, the sculptors have created sculpturally circumscribed areas shaped like a half crescent. Since the eyes of the statues are more horizontally

positioned than the slanted feline eyes of the living animal, possibly to make them look more human, the half crescent-shaped features in the sculptures have become attached to the lower eyelids, and their direction is almost vertical. The sharply pointed ends of these features, however, contribute markedly to the piercing quality of the deity's glance.

In short, the impressively sculpted head of the goddess Sakhmet (Fig. 1.10) is another example of the Egyptian artists' close familiarity with nature and their ability to integrate the knowledge derived from that familiarity into a more than just realistic whole. Do you still wonder why people love Egyptian art? Don't we all look for the fullness of life under an umbrella of something that is not "just real"?

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