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GUIDE TO

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

Smarthistory guide to Ancient Egyptian Art

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DR. AMY CALVERT, DR. ELIZABETH CUMMINS, DR. BETH HARRIS, AND DR. STEVEN ZUCKER

Smarthistory • Brooklyn

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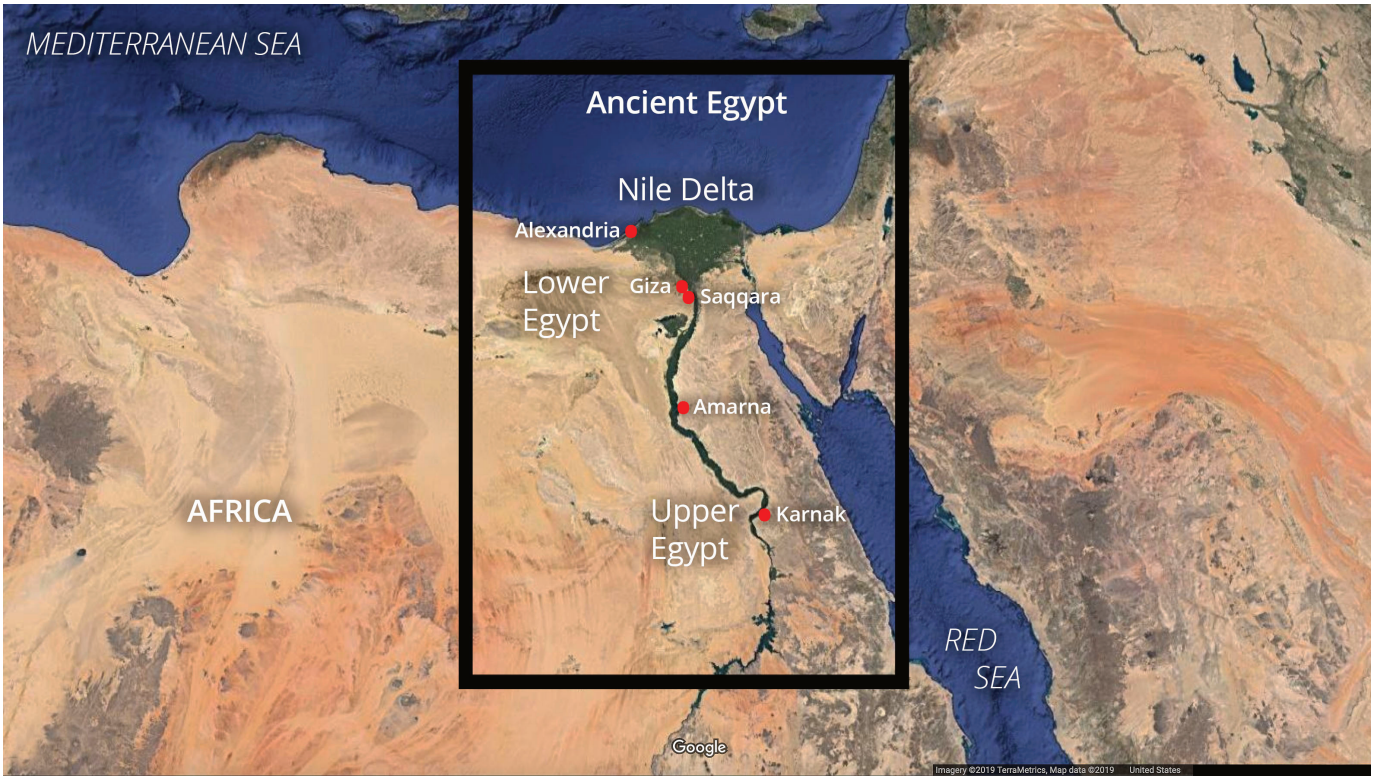
Map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PART I

A beginner's guide

1. Ancient Egypt, an introduction

Dr. Amy Calvert

Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara, Old Kingdom, c. 2675-2625 B.C.E. (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Egypt's impact on later cultures was immense. You could say that Egypt provided the building blocks for Greek and Roman culture, and, through them, influenced all of the Western tradition. Today, Egyptian imagery, concepts, and perspectives are found everywhere; you will find them in architectural forms, on money, and in our day to day lives. Many cosmetic surgeons, for example, use the silhouette of Queen Nefertiti (whose name means "the beautiful one has come") in their advertisements.

Longevity

Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for more than 3000 years and showed an incredible amount of continuity. That is more than 15 times the age of the United States, and consider how often our culture shifts; less than 10 years ago, there was no Facebook, Twitter, or Youtube.

While today we consider the Greco-Roman period to be in the distant past, it should be noted that Cleopatra VII's reign (which ended in 30 B.C.E.) is closer to our own time than it was to that of the construction of the pyramids of Giza. It took humans nearly 4000 years to build something–anything–taller than the Great Pyramids. Contrast that span to the modern era; we get excited when a record lasts longer than a decade.

Consistency and stability

Egypt's stability is in stark contrast to the Ancient Near East of the same period, which endured an overlapping series of cultures and upheavals with amazing regularity. The earliest royal monuments, such as the Narmer Palette carved around 3100 B.C.E., display identical royal costumes and poses as those seen on later rulers, even Ptolemaic kings on their temples 3000 years later.

A vast amount of Egyptian imagery, especially royal imagery that was governed by decorum (a sense of what was 'appropriate'), remained stupefyingly consistent throughout its history. This is why, especially to the untrained eye, their art appears extremely static—and in terms of symbols, gestures, and the way the body is rendered, it was. It was intentional. The Egyptians were aware of their consistency, which they viewed as stability, divine balance, and clear evidence of the correctness of their culture.

Palette of Narmer, c. 3000-2920 B.C.E. (left) and Ramses III smiting at Medinet Habu (1160 B.C.E.) (right)

This consistency was closely related to a fundamental belief that depictions had an impact beyond the image itself—tomb scenes of the deceased receiving food, or temple scenes of the king performing perfect rituals for the gods—were functionally causing those things to occur in the divine realm. If the image of the bread loaf was omitted from the deceased's table, they had no bread in the Afterlife; if the king was depicted with the incorrect ritual implement, the ritual was incorrect and this could have dire consequences. This belief led to an active resistance to change in codified depictions.

The earliest recorded tourist graffiti on the planet came from a visitor from the time of Ramses II who left their appreciative mark at the already 1300-year-old site of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara, the earliest of the massive royal stone monuments. They were understandably impressed by the works of their ancestors and endeavored to continue that ancient legacy.

Geography

Egypt is a land of duality and cycles, both in topography and culture. The geography is almost entirely rugged, barren desert, except for an explosion of green that straddles either side of the Nile as it flows the length of the country.

The river emerges from far to the south, deep in Africa, and empties into the Mediterranean sea in the north after spreading from a single channel into a fan-shaped system, known as a delta, at its northernmost section.

The influence of this river on Egyptian culture and development cannot be overstated—without its presence, the civilization would have been entirely different. The Nile provided not only a constant source of life-giving water, but created the fertile lands that fed the growth of this unique (and uniquely resilient) culture.

Each year, fed by melting snows in the far-off headlands, the river overflowed its banks in an annual flood that covered the ground with a rich, black silt and produced incredibly fertile fields. The Egyptians referred to this as Kemet, the "black lands," and contrasted this dense, dark soil against the Deshret, the "red lands" of the sterile desert; the line between these zones was (and in most cases still is) a literal line. The visual effect is stark, appearing almost artificial in its precision.

Time – cyclical and linear

The annual inundation of the Nile was also a reliable, and measurable, cycle that helped form their concept of the passage of time. In fact, the calendar we use today is derived from one developed by the ancient Egyptians. They divided the year into 3 seasons: akhet "inundation," peret "growing/emergence." and shemw "harvest." Each season was, in turn, divided into four 30-day months. Although this annual cycle, paired with the daily solar cycle that is so evident in the desert, led to a powerful drive to see the universe in cyclical time, this idea existed simultaneously with the reality of linear time.

These two concepts—the cyclical and the linear—came to be associated with two of their primary deities: Osiris, the eternal lord of the dead, and Re, the sun god who was reborn with each dawn.

Early development: The Predynastic period

The civilization of Egypt obviously did not spring fully formed from the Nile mud; although the massive pyramids at Giza may appear to the uninitiated to have appeared out of nowhere, they were founded on thousands of years of cultural and technological development and experimentation. "Dynastic" Egypt—sometimes referred to as "Pharaonic" (after "pharaoh," the Greek title of the Egyptian kings derived from the Egyptian title *per aA*, "Great House") which was the time when the country was largely unified under a single ruler, begins around 3100 B.C.E.

The period before this, lasting from about 5000 B.C.E. until unification, is referred to as Predynastic by modern scholars. Prior to this were thriving Paleolithic and Neolithic groups, stretching back hundreds of thousands of years, descended from northward migrating *homo erectus* who settled along the Nile Valley. During the Predynastic period, ceramics, figurines, mace heads, and other artifacts such as slate palettes used for grinding pigments, begin to

View from the high peak of the Theban hills showing the sharp delineation between the lush Valley and the barren desert. (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

appear, as does imagery that will become iconic during the Pharaonic era—we can see the first hints of what is to come.

Dynasties

It is important to recognize that the dynastic divisions modern scholars use were not used by the ancients themselves. These divisions were created in the first Western-style history of Egypt, written by an Egyptian priest named Manetho in the 3rd century B.C.E. Each of the 33 dynasties included a series of rulers usually related by kinship or the location of their seat of power. Egyptian history is also divided into larger chunks, known as "kingdoms" and "periods," to distinguish times of strength and unity from those of change, foreign rule, or disunity.

Period	Dates
Old Kingdom (the 'pyramid age')	c. 2649 – 2150 B.C.E.
First Intermediate Period	c. 2150 – 2030 B.C.E.
Middle Kingdom	c. 2030 – 1640 B.C.E.
Second Intermediate Period (Northern Delta region ruled by Asiatics)	c. 1640 – 1540 B.C.E.
New Kingdom	c. 1550 – 1070 B.C.E.
Third Intermediate Period	c. 1070 – 713 B.C.E.
Late Period (a series from foreign dynasties, including Nubian, Libyan and Persian rulers)	c. 712 – 332 B.C.E.
Ptolemaic Period (ruled by Greco-Romans)	c. 332-30 B.C.E.

The Egyptians themselves referred to their history in relation to the ruler of the time. Years were generally recorded as the regnal dates (from the Latin regnum, meaning kingdom or rule) of the ruling king, so that with each new reign, the numbers began anew. Later kings recorded the names of their predecessors in vast "king-lists" on the walls of their temples and depicted themselves offering to the rulers who came before them—one of the best known examples is in the temple of Seti I at Abydos.

These lists were often condensed, with some rulers (such as the contentious and disruptive Akhenaten) and even entire dynasties omitted from the record; they are not truly history, rather they are a form of ancestor worship, a celebration of the consistency of kingship of which the current ruler was a part.

The pharaoh—not just a king

Kings in Egypt were complex intermediaries that straddled the terrestrial and divine realms. They were, obviously, living humans, but upon accession to the throne, they also embodied the eternal office of kingship itself. The ka, or spirit, of kingship was often depicted as a separate entity standing behind the human ruler. This divine aspect of the office of kingship was what gave authority to the human ruler. The living king was associated with the god Horus, the powerful, virile falcon-headed god who was believed to bestow the throne to the first human king.

Horus's immensely important father, Osiris, was the lord of the underworld. One of the original divine rulers of Egypt, this deity embodied the promise of regeneration. Cruelly murdered by his brother Seth, the god of the chaotic desert, Osiris was revived through the potent magic of his wife Isis. Through her knowledge and skill, Osiris was able to sire the miraculous Horus, who avenged his father and threw his criminal uncle off the throne to take his rightful place.

Osiris became ruler of the realm of the dead, the eternal source of regeneration in the Afterlife. Deceased kings were identified with this god, creating a cycle where the dead king fused with the divine king of the dead and his successor "defeated" death to take his place on the throne as Horus.

Additional resources:

Egyptian art on the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/keywords/ ancient-egyptian-art/>

2. Ancient Egyptian art

Dr. Amy Calvert

Beautifully preserved life-size painted limestone funerary sculptures of Prince Rahotep and his wife Nofret. Note the lifelike eyes of inlaid rock crystal (Old Kingdom). (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Appreciating and understanding ancient Egyptian art

Ancient Egyptian art must be viewed from the standpoint of the ancient Egyptians to understand it. The somewhat static, usually formal, strangely abstract, and often blocky nature of much Egyptian imagery has, at times, led to unfavorable comparisons with later, and much more 'naturalistic,' Greek or Renaissance art. However, the art of the Egyptians served a vastly different purpose than that of these later cultures.

Art not meant to be seen

While today we marvel at the glittering treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamun, the sublime reliefs in New Kingdom tombs, and the serene beauty of Old Kingdom statuary, it is imperative to remember that the majority of these works were never intended to be seen—that was simply not their purpose.

Painted sunk relief of the king being embraced by a goddess. Tomb of Amenherkhepshef (QV 55) (New Kingdom) (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

The function of Egyptian art

These images, whether statues or relief, were designed to benefit a divine or deceased recipient. Statuary provided a place for the recipient to manifest and receive the benefit of ritual action. Most statues show a formal frontality, meaning they are arranged straight ahead, because they were designed to face the ritual being performed before them. Many statues were also originally placed in recessed niches or other architectural settings—contexts that would make frontality their expected and natural mode.

Statuary, whether divine, royal, or elite, provided a kind of conduit for the spirit (or ka) of that being to interact with the terrestrial realm. Divine cult statues (few of which survive) were the subject of daily rituals of clothing, anointing, and perfuming with incense and were carried in processions for special festivals so that the people could "see" them (they were almost all entirely shrouded from view, but their 'presence' was felt).

Royal and elite statuary served as intermediaries between the people and the gods. Family chapels with the statuary of a deceased forefather could serve as a sort of 'family temple.' There were festivals in honor of the dead, where the family would come and eat in the

chapel, offering food for the Afterlife, flowers (symbols of rebirth), and incense (the scent of which was considered divine). Preserved letters let us know that the deceased was actively petitioned for their assistance, both in this world and the next.

What we see in museums

Generally, the works we see on display in museums were products of royal or elite workshops; these pieces fit best with our modern aesthetic and ideas of beauty. Most museum basements, however, are packed with hundreds (even thousands!) of other objects made for people of lower status—small statuary, amulets, coffins, and stelae (similar to modern tombstones) that are completely recognizable, but rarely displayed. These pieces generally show less quality in the workmanship; being oddly proportioned or poorly executed; they are less often considered 'art' in the modern sense. However, these objects served the exact same function of providing benefit to their owners (and to the same degree of effectiveness), as those made for the elite.

Hard stone group statue of Ramses II with Osiris, Isis, and Horus in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (New Kingdom). (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Modes of representation for three-dimensional art

Three-dimensional representations, while being quite formal, also aimed to reproduce the real-world—statuary of gods, royalty, and the elite was designed to convey an idealized version of that individual. Some aspects of 'naturalism' were dictated by the material. Stone statuary, for example, was quite closed—with arms held close to the sides, limited positions, a strong back pillar that provided support, and with the fill spaces left between limbs.

Wood and metal statuary, in contrast, was more expressive—arms could be extended and hold separate objects, spaces between the limbs were opened to create a more realistic appearance, and more positions were possible. Stone, wood, and metal statuary of elite figures, however, all served the same functions and retained the same type of formalization and frontality. Only statuettes of lower status people displayed a wide range of possible actions, and these pieces were focused on the actions, which benefited the elite owner, not the people involved.

Modes of representation for two-dimensional art

Two-dimensional art represented the world quite differently. Egyptian artists embraced the two-dimensional surface and attempted to provide the most representative aspects of each element in the scenes rather than attempting to create vistas that replicated the real world.

Each object or element in a scene was rendered from its most recognizable angle and these were then grouped together to create the whole. This is why images of people show their face, waist, and limbs in profile, but eye and shoulders frontally. These scenes are complex composite images that provide complete information about the various elements, rather than ones designed from a single viewpoint, which would not be as comprehensive in the data they conveyed.

Registers

Scenes were ordered in parallel lines, known as registers. These registers separate the scene as well as provide ground lines for the figures. Scenes without registers are unusual and were generally only used to specifically evoke chaos; battle and hunting scenes will often show the prey or foreign armies without groundlines. Registers were also used to convey information about the scenes—the higher up in the scene, the higher the status; overlapping figures imply that the ones underneath are further away, as are those elements that are higher within the register.

Chaotic fighting scene on a painted box from the tomb of Tutankhamen in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (New Kingdom). Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert

Hierarchy of scale

Difference in scale was the most commonly used method for conveying hierarchy—the larger the scale of the figures, the more important they were. Kings were often shown at the same scale as deities, but both are shown larger than the elite and far larger than the average Egyptian.

Painted wooden model of the deceased overseeing the counting of cattle in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (Middle Kingdom). Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert

Text and image

Text accompanied almost all images. In statuary, identifying text will appear on the back pillar or base, and relief usually has captions or longer texts that complete and elaborate on the scenes. Hieroglyphs were often rendered as tiny works of art in themselves, even though these small pictures do not always stand for what they depict; many are instead phonetic sounds. Some, however, are logographic, meaning they stand for an object or concept.

The lines blur between text and image in many cases. For instance, the name of a figure in the text on a statue will regularly omit the determinative (an unspoken sign at the end of a word that aids identification–for example, verbs of motion are followed by a pair of walking legs, names of men end with the image of a man, names of gods with the image of a seated god, etc.) at the end of the name. In these instances, the representation itself serves this function.

Highly detailed raised relief hieroglyphs on the White Chapel of Senusret I at Karnak (Middle Kingdom). (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Additional resources:

Collection Tour of Egyptian Art: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston <https://www.mfa.org/collections/ancient-world>

The Giza Archives <http://www.gizapyramids.org/>

3. Materials and techniques in ancient Egyptian art

Dr. Amy Calvert

A wide variety

Egyptian artists used a wide array of materials, both local and imported, from very early in their history. For instance, already in the Predynastic period we find figurines carved from lapis lazuli—a lustrous blue stone that originates in what is now Afghanistan and indicates the early presence of robust trade routes.

Stone

There were numerous native stones used for statuary, including the ubiquitous soft limestone of the desert cliffs that line most of the Nile valley, as well as sandstone, calcite, and schist.

Group of stones collected in Egypt showing the range of colors and textures available to the ancient artists.

Menkaure (Mycerinus) and Khamerernebty(?), graywacke, c. 2490-2472 B.C.E. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

Harder stones include quartzite, diorite, granite, and basalt. Carving on softer stones was done using copper chisels and stone tools; hard stone required tools of yet harder stone, copper alloys, and the use of abrasive sand to shape them. Polishing was achieved with a smooth rubbing stone and abrasive sands with a fine grit.

Painted statuary

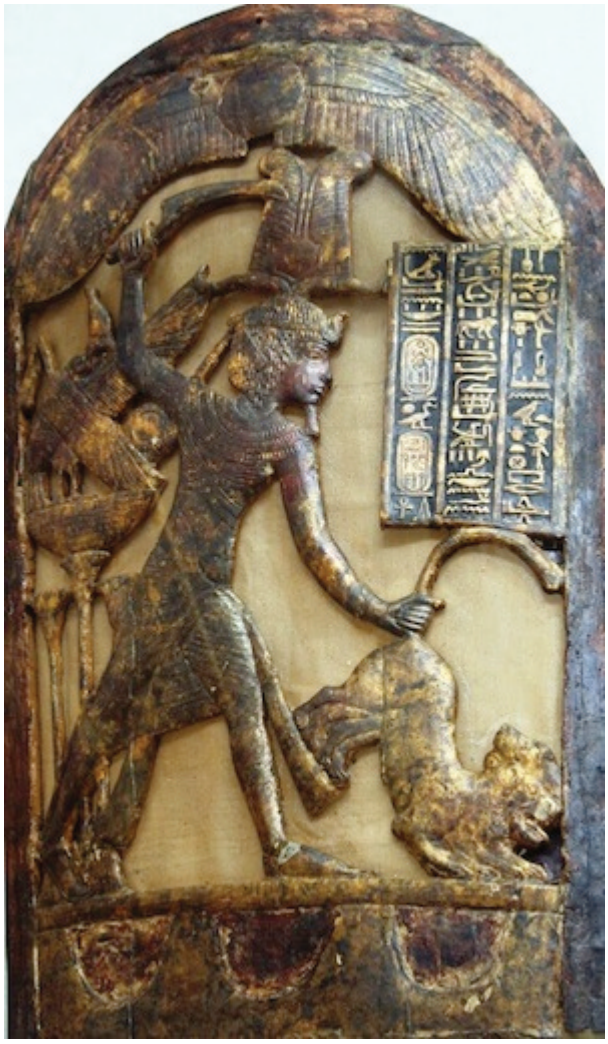
Most statuary was painted; even stones selected for the symbolism of their color were often painted. For instance, the exemplary statues of Menkaure (above and detail, below), builder of the smallest of the three major pyramids at Giza, were executed in dark schist (also called graywacke). This smooth black stone is connected with Osiris, resurrected god of the dead who was often shown with black or green skin referring to the fertile silt and lush vegetation of the Nile valley.

Menkaure (Mycerinus), detail, graywacke, c. 2490-2472 B.C.E. (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

These images preserve traces of red paint on the king's skin indicating that, when completed and placed in his memorial temple near his pyramid, they would have appeared lifelike in coloration. With time, the paint would have flaked away, revealing the black stone underneath and explicitly linking the deceased king with the Lord of the Underworld.

Wood

Egyptian artists also used a variety of woods in their work, including the native acacia, tamarisk, and sycamore fig as well as fir, cedar, and other conifers imported from Syria. Artisans excelled at puzzling together small, irregular pieces of wood and pegged them into place to create statuary, coffins, boxes, and furniture.



Ceremonial gilded wooden shield from the tomb of Tutakhamun. Egyptian Museum, Cairo (New Kingdom) (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Metals

They also executed pieces in various metals, including copper, copper alloys (such as bronze), gold, and silver. Cult statues of gods were made in gold and silver—materials identified by myth as their skin and bones—and were often quite small. Very few metal statues survive because they were often melted down and the material reused, although preserved examples from the Old and Middle Kingdoms demonstrate that they were skilled not only in sheet metal forming, but also practiced complex casting.

Jewelry work was quite sophisticated even in the Old Kingdom, as demonstrated by some highly creative pieces depicted in tomb scenes. A cache of royal jewelry from the tombs of Middle Kingdom princesses displays extremely high levels of skill in terms of design as well as precisely cut stone inlays, repoussé, and cloisonné.

Tutankhamun's lunar pectoral in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (New Kingdom) (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Many objects, especially small amulets and inlays, were made from a manufactured material known as Egyptian faience. This quartz-based medium could be easily shaped, molded, and mass produced. The glaze coating could be almost any color, depending on the minerals used in the composition, although turquoise blue is the most common.

Relief sculpture

Relief was usually carved before being painted. The two primary classes of relief are raised relief (where the figures stand up out from the surface) and sunk relief (where the figures are cut into and below the surface). The surface would be smoothed with a layer of plaster and then painted. If the surface was not carved before painting, several layers of mud plaster would be applied to create a flat plane.

The drawing surface would be delineated using gridded guidelines, snapped onto the wall using string coated in red pigment dust (very much like chalk lines used by modern carpenters). This grid helped the artists properly proportion the figures and lay out the scenes. Scene elements were drafted out using red paint, corrections noted in black paint, and then the painting was executed one color at a time. Even on carved relief, many elements in a scene would be executed only in paint and not cut into the surface.

Painted raised relief in the Temple of Seti I at Abydos (New Kingdom)

Pigments

Most pigments in Egypt were derived from local minerals. White was often made from gypsum, black from carbon, reds and yellows from iron oxides, blue and green from azurite and malachite, and bright yellow (representing gold) from orpiment. These minerals were ground and then mixed with a plant or animal based glue to make a medium able to attach to the walls. They could be applied as a single plane, but were also layered to create subtle effects and additional colors, such as pink or gray.

Iron oxide nodules, source of a range of red pigments, Thebes

PART II

Predynastic and Old Kingdom

4. Palette of King Narmer

Dr. Amy Calvert

Palette of King Narmer, from Hierakonpolis, Egypt, Predynastic, c. 3000-2920 B.C.E., slate, 2′ 1″ high (Egyptian Museum, Cairo)

Vitally important, but difficult to interpret

Some artifacts are of such vital importance to our understanding of ancient cultures that they are truly unique and utterly irreplaceable. The gold mask of Tutankhamun was allowed to leave Egypt for display overseas; the *Narmer Palette*, on the other hand, is so valuable that it has never been permitted to leave the country.

Discovered among a group of sacred implements ritually buried in a deposit within an early temple of the falcon god Horus at the site of Hierakonpolis (the capital of Egypt during the pre-dynastic period), this large ceremonial object is one of the most important artifacts from the dawn of Egyptian civilization. The beautifully carved palette, 63.5 cm (more than 2 feet) in height and made of smooth grayish-green siltstone, is decorated on both faces with detailed low relief. These scenes show a king, identified by name as Narmer, and a series of ambiguous scenes that have been difficult to interpret and have resulted in a number of theories regarding their meaning.

The high quality of the workmanship, its original function as a ritual object dedicated to a god, and the complexity of the imagery clearly indicate that this was a significant object, but a satisfactory interpretation of the scenes has been elusive.

What was the palette used for?

The object itself is a monumental version of a type of daily use item commonly found in the Predynastic period—palettes were generally flat, minimally decorated stone objects used for grinding and mixing minerals for cosmetics. Dark eyeliner was an essential aspect of life in the sun-drenched region; like the dark streaks placed under the eyes of modern athletes, black cosmetic around the eyes served to reduce glare. Basic cosmetic palettes were among the typical grave goods found during this early era.

In addition to these simple, purely functional, palettes however, there were also a number of larger, far more elaborate palettes created in this period. These objects still served the function of being a ground for grinding and mixing cosmetics, but they were also carefully carved with relief sculpture. Many of the earlier palettes display animals —some real, some fantastic—while later examples, like the Narmer palette, focus on human actions. Research suggests that these decorated palettes were used in temple ceremonies, perhaps to grind or mix makeup to be ritually applied to the image of the god. Later temple ritual included elaborate daily ceremonies involving the anointing and dressing of divine images; these palettes likely indicate an early incarnation of this process.

A ceremonial object, ritually buried

The *Palette of Narmer* was discovered in 1898 by James Quibell and Frederick Green. It was found with a collection of other objects that had been used for ceremonial purposes and then ritually buried within the temple at Hierakonpolis.

Temple caches of this type are not uncommon. There was a great deal of focus on ritual and votive objects (offerings to the God) in temples. Every ruler, elite individual, and anyone else who could afford it, donated items to the temple to show their piety and increase their connection to the deity. After a period of time, the temple would be full of these objects and space would need to be cleared for new votive donations. However, since they had been dedicated to a temple and sanctified, the old items that needed to be cleared out could not simply be thrown away or sold. Instead, the general practice was to bury them in a pit under the temple floor. Often, these caches include objects from a range of dates and a mix of types, from royal statuary to furniture.

The "Main Deposit" at Hierakonpolis, where the Narmer Palette was discovered, contained many hundreds of objects, including a number of large relief-covered ceremonial mace-heads, ivory statuettes, carved knife handles, figurines of scorpions and other animals, stone vessels, and a second elaborately decorated palette (now in the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford) known as the *Two Dogs Palette*.

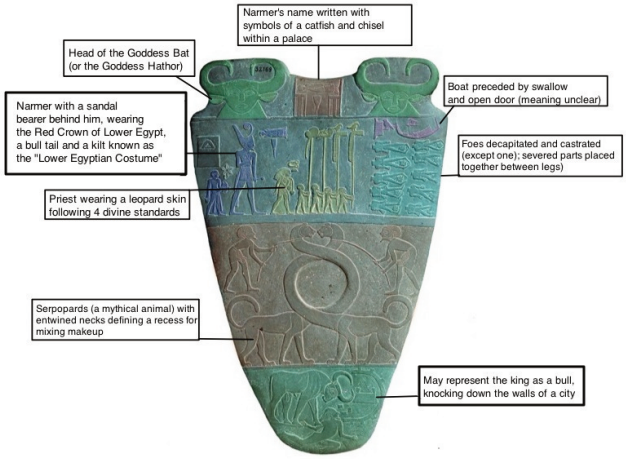
Conventions that remain the same for thousands of years

There are several reasons the *Narmer Palette* is considered to be of such importance. First, it is one of very few such palettes discovered in a controlled excavation. Second, there are a number of formal and iconographic characteristics appearing on the Narmer palette that remain conventional in Egyptian two-dimensional art for the following three millennia. These include the way the figures are represented, the scenes being organized in regular horizontal zones known as registers, and the use of hierarchical scale to indicate relative importance of the individuals. In addition, much of the regalia worn by the king, such as the crowns, kilts, royal beard, and bull tail, as well as other visual elements, such as the pose Narmer takes on one of the faces where he grasps an enemy by the hair and prepares to smash his skull with a mace, continue to be utilized from this time all the way through the Roman era.

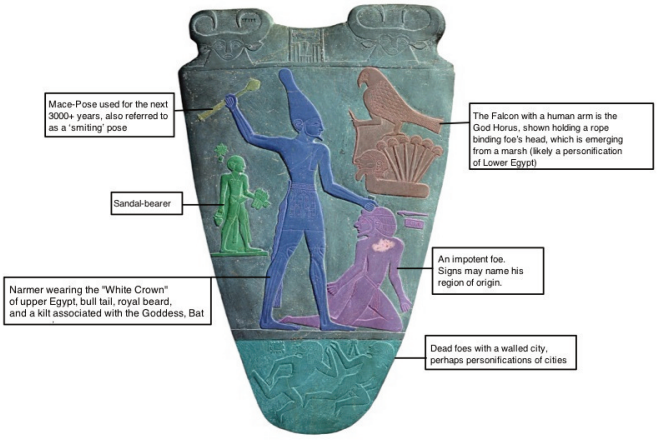
Two Dogs Palette, Hierakonpolis, Egypt c.3100 B.C.E. (Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford)

What we see on the palette

The king is represented twice in human form, once on each face, followed by his sandal-bearer. He may also be represented as a powerful bull, destroying a walled city with his massive horns, in a mode that again becomes conventional—pharaoh is regularly referred to as "Strong Bull."



In addition to the primary scenes, the palette includes a pair of fantastic creatures, known as serpopards—leopards with long, snaky necks—who are collared and controlled by a pair of attendants. Their necks entwine and define the recess where the makeup preparation took place. The lowest register on both sides include images of dead foes, while both uppermost registers display hybrid human-bull heads and the name of the king. The frontal bull heads are likely connected to a sky goddess known as Bat and are related to heaven and the horizon. The name of the king, written hieroglyphically as a catfish and a chisel, is contained within a squared element that represents a palace facade.



Possible interpretation: unification of Upper and Lower Egypt

As mentioned above, there have been a number of theories related to the scenes carved on this palette. Some have interpreted the battle scenes as a historical narrative record of the initial unification of Egypt under one ruler, supported by the general timing (as this is the period of the unification) and the fact that Narmer sports the crown connected to Upper Egypt on one face of the palette and the crown of Lower Egypt on the other—this is the first preserved example where both crowns are used by the same ruler. Other theories suggest that, rather than an actual historical representation, these scenes were purely ceremonial and related to the concept of unification in general.

Detail, Palette of King Narmer, from Hierakonpolis, Egypt, Predynastic, c. 3000-2920 B.C.E., slate, 2′ 1″ high (Egyptian Museum, Cairo)

Another interpretation: the sun and the king

More recent research on the decorative program has connected the imagery to the careful balance of order and chaos (known as ma'at and isfet) that was a fundamental element of the Egyptian idea of the cosmos. It may also be related to the daily journey of the sun god that becomes a central aspect in the Egyptian religion in the subsequent centuries.

Detail, Palette of King Narmer, from Hierakonpolis, Egypt, Predynastic, c. 3000-2920 B.C.E., slate, 2′ 1″ high (Egyptian Museum, Cairo)

The scene, showing Narmer wearing the Lower Egyptian Red Crown* (with its distinctive curl), depicts him processing towards the decapitated bodies of his foes. The two rows of prone bodies are placed below an image of a high-prowed boat preparing to pass through an open gate. This may be an early reference to the journey of the sun god in his boat. In later texts, the Red Crown is connected with bloody battles fought by the sun god just before the rosy-fingered dawn on his daily journey and this scene may well be related to this. It is interesting to note that the foes are shown as not only executed, but rendered completely impotent—their castrated penises have been placed atop their severed heads.

On the other face, Narmer wears the Upper Egyptian White Crown* (which looks rather like a bowling pin) as he grasps an inert foe by the hair and prepares to crush his skull. The White Crown is related to the dazzling brilliance of the full midday sun at its zenith as well as the luminous nocturnal light of the stars and moon. By wearing both crowns, Narmer may not only be ceremonially expressing his dominance over the unified Egypt, but also the early importance of the solar cycle and the king's role in this daily process.

This fascinating object is an incredible example of early Egyptian art. The imagery preserved on this palette provides a peek ahead to the richness of both the visual aspects and religious concepts that develop in the ensuing periods. It is a vitally important artifact of extreme significance for our understanding of the development of Egyptian culture on multiple levels.

*The Red Crown of Lower Egypt and the White Crown of Upper Egypt were the earliest crowns worn by the king and are closely connected with the unification of the country that sparks full-blown Egyptian civilization. The earliest representation of them worn by the same ruler is on the *Narmer Palette*, signifying that the king was ruling over both areas of the country. Soon after the unification, the fifth ruler of the First Dynasty is shown wearing the two crowns simultaneously, combined into one. This crown, often referred to as the Double Crown, remains a primary crown worn by pharaoh throughout Egyptian history. The separate Red and White crowns, however, continue to be worn as well and retain their geographic connections. There are a number of Egyptian words used for these crowns (nine for the White and 11 for the Red), but the most common—deshret and hedjet—refer to the colors red and white, respectively. It is from these identifying terms that we take their modern name. Early texts make it clear that these crowns were believed to be imbued with divine power and were personified as goddesses.

Additional resources:

Decorative Palettes of the 4th millenium <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/narmerspalette.htm>

Hierakonpolis website <http://www.reshafim.org.il/ad/egypt/narmerspalette.htm

Publication on the excavation <https://archive.org/details/hierakonpolis00greegoog>

5. An introduction to the Great Pyramids of Giza (Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure)

Dr. Amy Calvert

Pyramid of Khafre (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

One of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world

The last remaining of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world, the great pyramids of Giza are perhaps the most famous and discussed structures in history. These massive monuments were unsurpassed in height for thousands of years after their construction and continue to amaze and enthrall us with their overwhelming mass and seemingly impossible perfection. Their exacting orientation and mind-boggling construction has elicited many theories about their origins, including unsupported suggestions that they had extra-terrestrial impetus. However, by examining the several hundred years prior to their emergence on the Giza plateau, it becomes clear that these incredible structures were the result of many experiments, some more successful than others, and represent an apogee in the development of the royal mortuary complex.

Three pyramids, three rulers

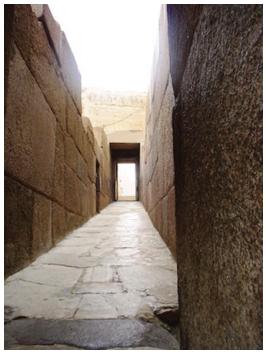
The three primary pyramids on the Giza plateau were built over the span of three generations by the rulers Khufu, Khafre, and Menkaure. Each pyramid was part of a royal mortuary complex that also included a temple at its base and a long stone causeway (some nearly 1 kilometer in length) leading east from the plateau to a valley temple on the edge of the floodplain.

Other (smaller) pyramids, and small tombs

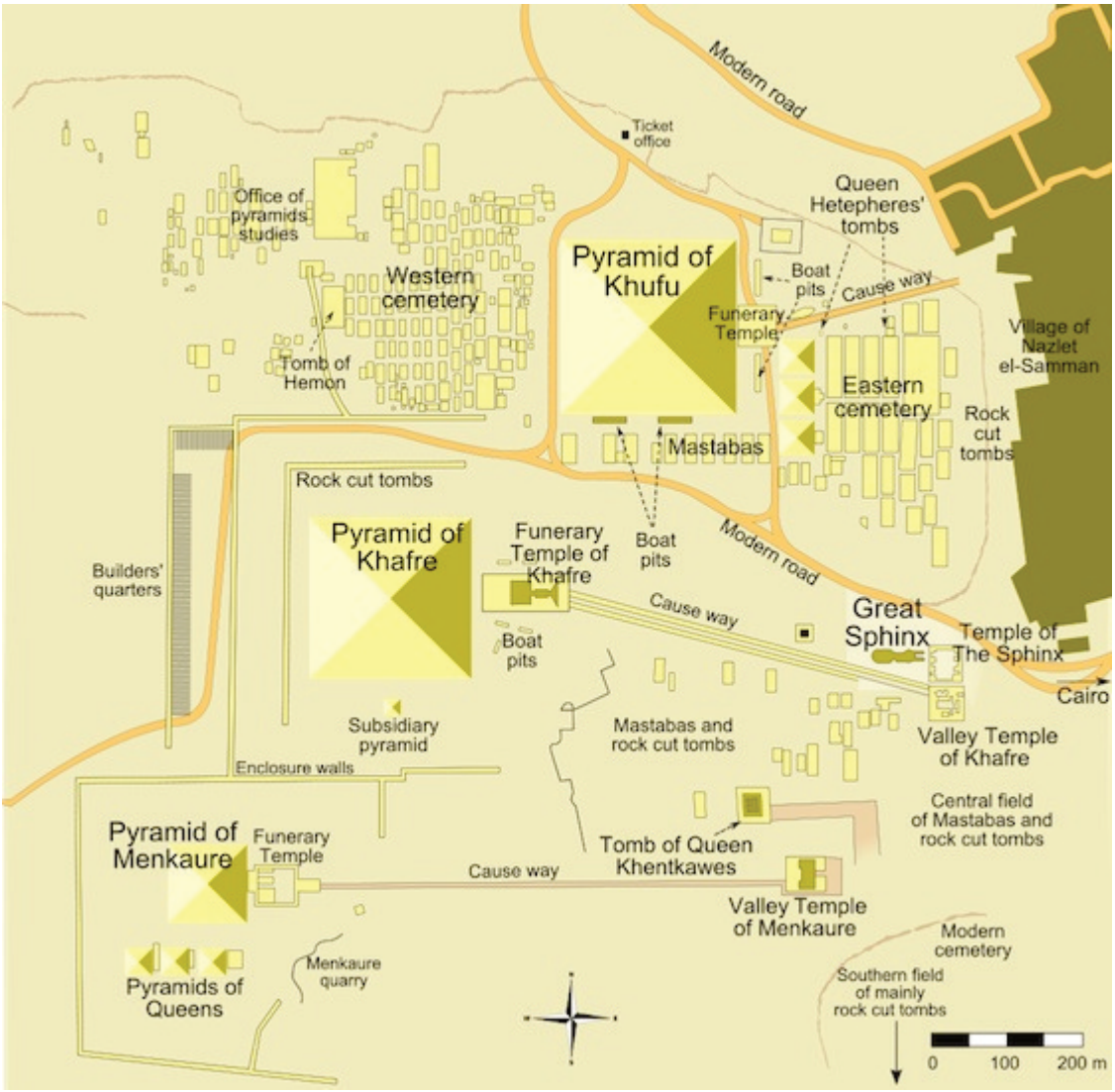
In addition to these major structures, several smaller pyramids belonging to queens are arranged as satellites. A major cemetery of smaller tombs, known as mastabas (Arabic for 'bench' in reference to their shape—flat-roofed, rectangular, with sloping sides), fills the area to the east and west of the pyramid of Khufu and were constructed in a grid-like pattern for prominent members of the court. Being buried near the pharaoh was a great honor and helped ensure a prized place in the afterlife.

A reference to the sun

The shape of the pyramid was a solar reference, perhaps intended as a solidified version of the rays of the sun. Texts talk about the sun's rays as a ramp the pharaoh mounts to climb to the sky—the earliest pyramids, such as the Step Pyramid of Djoser at Saqqara—were actually designed as a staircase. The pyramid was also clearly connected to the sacred ben-ben stone, an icon of the primeval mound that was considered the place of initial creation. The pyramid was considered a place of regeneration for the deceased ruler.



View up the causeway from Khafre's valley temple towards his pyramid (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)



Giza Pyramid Complex (graphic: MesserWoland, CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Giza_pyramid_complex_(map).svg>

Construction

Many questions remain about the construction of these massive monuments, and theories abound as to the actual methods used. The workforce needed to build these structures is also still much discussed. Discovery of a town for workers to the south of the plateau has offered some answers. It is likely that there was a permanent group of skilled craftsmen and builders who were supplemented by seasonal crews of approximately 2,000 conscripted peasants. These crews were divided into gangs of 200 men, with each group further divided into teams of 20. Experiments indicate that these groups of 20 men could haul the 2.5 ton blocks from quarry to pyramid in about 20 minutes, their path eased by a lubricated surface of wet silt. An estimated 340 stones could be moved daily from quarry to construction site, particularly when one considers that many of the blocks (such as those in the upper courses) were considerably smaller.

Additional resources

Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids, The Metropolitan Museum of Art <http://www.metmuseum.org/research/metpublications/Egyptian_Art_in_the_Age_of_the_Pyramids>

UNESCO webpage for Memphis and its Necropolis – the Pyramid Fields from Giza to Dahshur Giza 3D <http://giza3d.3ds. com/#discover>

Giza archives, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston <http://www.giza pyramids.org/>

Building the Great Pyramid, BBC <http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/great_pyramid_01.shtml>

Mark Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids*, Thames and Hudson, 2008.

Backstory

We are used to seeing the pyramids at Giza in alluring photographs, where they appear as massive and remote monuments rising up from an open, barren desert. Visitors might be surprised to find, then, that there is a golf course and resort only a few hundred feet from the Great Pyramid, and that the burgeoning suburbs of Giza (part of the greater metropolitan area of Cairo) have expanded right up to the foot of the Sphinx. This urban encroachment and the problems that come with it—such as pollution, waste, illegal activities, and auto traffic—are now the biggest threats to these invaluable examples of global cultural heritage.

The pyramids were inscribed into the UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979, and since 1990, the organization has sponsored over a dozen missions to evaluate their status. It has supported the restoration of the Sphinx, as well as measures to curb the impact of tourism and manage the growth of the neighboring village. Still, threats to the site continue: air pollution from waste incineration contributes to the degradation of the stones (http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/16610.aspx), and the massive illegal quarrying of sand on the neighboring plateau has created holes large enough to be seen on Google Earth. Egypt's 2011 uprisings and their chaotic political and economic aftermath also negatively impacted tourism, one of the country's most important industries, and the number of visitors is only now beginning to rise once more (https://www.reuters.com/article/us-egypt-tourism/egypt-has-high-hopes-for-tourism-despite-grim-statistics-setbacks-idUSKCN0X70BP).

UNESCO has continually monitored these issues, but its biggest task with regard to Giza has been to advocate for the rerouting of a highway (http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/1809) that was originally slated to cut through the desert between the pyramids and the necropolis of Saqqara to the south. The government eventually agreed to build the highway north of the pyramids. However, as the Cairo metropolitan area (the largest in Africa, with a population of over 20 million) continues to expand, planners are now proposing a multilane tunnel to be constructed underneath the Giza Plateau. UNESCO and ICOMOS are calling (http://whc.unesco.org/en/soc/3641) for in-depth studies of the project's potential impact, as well as an overall site management plan for the Giza pyramids that would include ways to halt the continued impact of illegal dumping and quarrying.

As massive as they are, the pyramids at Giza are not immutable. With the rapid growth of Cairo, they will need sufficient attention and protection if they are to remain intact as key touchstones of ancient history.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Aerial view from north of cultivated Nile valley with the pyramids in the background, 1938 (American Geographical Society Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Libraries) (photo: CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Giza_pyramid_complex#/media/File:Giza-pyramids-uwm.png>

View up the side of Khufu's pyramid showing scale of the core blocks (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

6. The Pyramid of Khufu

Dr. Amy Calvert

Pyramid of Khufu, c. 2551-2528 B.C.E. (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Size

The Great Pyramid, the largest of the three, was built by the pharaoh Khufu and rises to a height of 146 meters (481 feet) with a base length of more than 230 meters (750 feet) per side. The greatest difference in length among the four sides is a mere 4.4 cm (1 ¾ inches) and the base is level within 2.1 cm (less than an inch), an astonishing engineering accomplishment.

Construction: inner core stones, and outer casing stones

The pyramid contains an estimated 2,300,000 blocks, some of which are upwards of 50 tons. Like the pyramids built by his predecessor Snefru and those that followed on the Giza plateau, Khufu's pyramid is constructed of inner, roughly hewn, locally quarried core stones, which is all we see today, and angled, outer casing blocks laid in even horizontal courses with spaces filled with gypsum plaster.

The fine outer casing stones, which have long since been removed, were laid with great precision. These blocks of white Tura limestone would have given the pyramid a smooth surface and been quite bright and reflective. At the very top of the pyramid would have sat a capstone, known as a pyramidion, that may have been gilt. This dazzling point, shining in the intense sunlight, would have been visible for a great distance.

Detail of core blocks of Khufu's pyramid, c. 2551-2528 B.C.E. (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Interior

The interior chambers and passageways of Khufu's pyramid are unique and include a number of enigmatic features. There is an unfinished subterranean chamber whose function is mysterious as well as a number of so-called 'air shafts' that radiate out from the upper chambers.

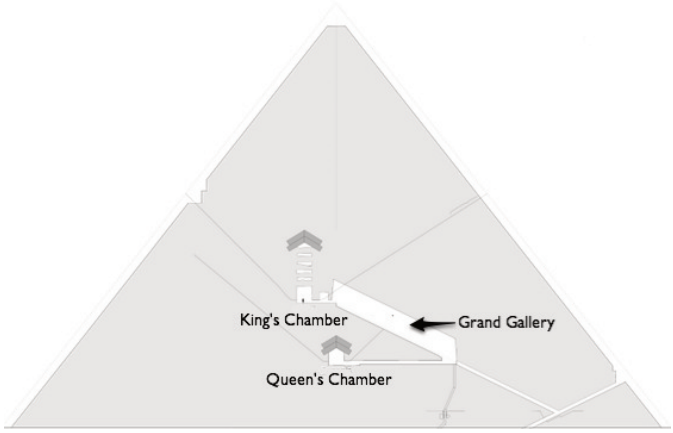


Diagram of the interior of the Pyramid of Khufu

These have recently been explored using small robots, but a series of blocking stones have obscured the passages. When entering the pyramid, one has to crawl up a cramped ascending chamber that opens suddenly into a stunning Grand Gallery. This corbelled passage soars to a height of 8.74 m (26 feet) and leads up to the King's Chamber, which is constructed entirely from red granite brought from the southern quarries at Aswan.

Above the King's Chamber are five stress-relieving chambers of massive granite blocks topped with immense cantilevered blocks forming a pent roof to distribute the weight of the mountain of masonry above it. The king's sarcophagus, also carved from red granite, sits empty at the exact central axis of the pyramid. This burial chamber was sealed with a series of massive granite blocks and the entrance to the shaft filled with limestone in an effort to obscure the opening.

Entrance, Pyramid of Khufu, c. 2551-2528 B.C.E. (photo: Olaf Tausch, CC BY 3.0)

Boats for the afterlife

Khufu's mortuary complex also included seven large boat pits. Five of these are located to the east of the pyramid and were a sort of model; these brick-lined boat shaped elements were probably intended for use in the afterlife to transport the king to stellar destinations. Boat burials and models of this type had a long history in royal mortuary contexts—a fleet of 14 such pits, containing actual boats averaging 18-19 meters (60 feet) in length encased inside, were discovered at a Dynasty 1 mortuary enclosure in Abydos, the cemetery of Egypt's earliest kings. Often, however, as with Khufu, the pits were simply boat shaped models rather than containing actual boats.

In addition to these model boat pits, however, on the south side of the pyramid Khufu had two massive, rectangular stone lined pits that contained completely disassembled boats. One of these has been removed and reconstructed in a special museum on the south side of the pyramid. This cedar boat measures 43.3 meters (142 feet) in length and was constructed of 1,224 separate pieces stitched together with ropes. These boats appear to have been used for the funerary procession and as ritual objects connected to the last earthly voyage of the king, and were then dismantled and interred.

Reconstructed funerary boat of Khufu (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Additional resources:

Mark Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids (*Thames and Hudson, 2008).

David O'Connor, Abydos: *Egypt's First Pharaohs and the Cult of Osiris* (Thames and Hudson, 2011).

7. The Pyramid of Khafre and the Great Sphinx

Dr. Amy Calvert

Pyramid of Khafre, c. 2520-2494 (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

Size and appearance

The second great pyramid of Giza, that was built by Khufu's second son Khafre, has a section of outer casing that still survives at the very top (and which would have entirely covered all three of the great pyramids at Giza). Although this monument appears larger than that of his father, it is actually slightly smaller but was constructed 10 m (33 feet) higher on the plateau.

Interior

The interior is much simpler than that of Khufu's pyramid, with a single burial chamber, one small subsidiary chamber, and two passageways. The mortuary temple at the pyramid base was more complex than that of Khufu and was filled with statuary of the king–over 52 life-size or larger images originally filled the structure.

Valley temple

Khafre's valley temple, located at the east end of the causeway leading from the pyramid base, is beautifully preserved. It was constructed of megalithic blocks sheathed with granite and floors of polished white calcite. Statue bases indicate that an additional 24 images of the pharaoh were originally located in this temple.

Pillars in Valley Temple of Khafre (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

The Great Sphinx

Right next to the causeway leading from Khafre's valley temple to the mortuary temple sits the first truly colossal sculpture in Egyptian history: the Great Sphinx. This close association indicates that this massive depiction of a recumbent lion with the head of a king was carved for Khafre.

The Great Sphinx (photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

The Sphinx is carved from the bedrock of the Giza plateau, and it appears that the core blocks used to construct the king's valley temple were quarried from the layers of stone that run along the upper sides of this massive image.

Khafre

The lion was a royal symbol as well as being connected with the sun as a symbol of the horizon; the fusion of this powerful animal with the head of the pharaoh was an icon that survived and was often used throughout Egyptian history. The king's head is on a smaller scale than the body. This appears to have been due to a defect in the stone; a weakness recognized by the sculptors who compensated by elongating the body.

Directly in front of the Sphinx is a separate temple dedicated to the worship of its cult, but very little is known about it since there are no Old Kingdom texts that refer to the Sphinx or its temple. The temple is similar to Khafre's mortuary temple and has granite pillars forming a colonnade around a central courtyard. However, it is unique in that it has two sanctuaries—one on the east and one on the west—likely connected to the rising and setting sun.

Additional resources:

Giza 3D <http://giza3d.3ds.com/#discover>

Google street view <https://goo.gl/maps/EfTCtoqQCmSZ4f5k7>

Khafre, Egyptian Museum, Cairo

8. The Pyramid of Menkaure

Dr. Amy Calvert

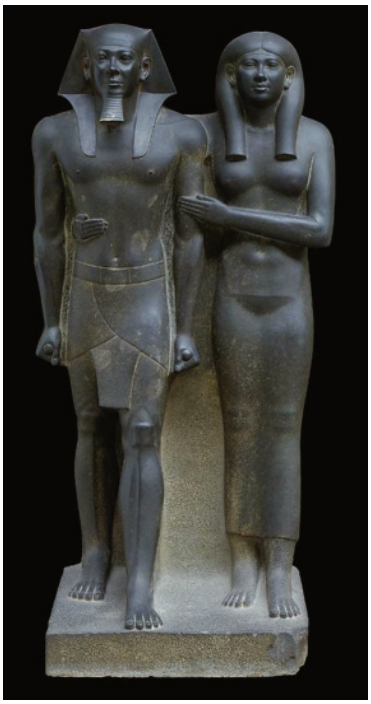
Pyramid of Menkaure (Photo: Dr. Amy Calvert)

The third of the major pyramids at Giza belongs to Mekaure. This is the smallest of the three, rising to a height of 65 meters (213 feet), but the complex preserved some of the most stunning examples of sculpture to survive from all of Egyptian history.

Pyramid of Menkaure, chamber with niches

Mekaure's pyramid chambers are more complex than those of Khafre and include a chamber carved with decorative panels and another chamber with six large niches. The burial chamber is lined with massive granite blocks.

His black stone sarcophagus, also carved with niched panels, was discovered inside, but was lost at sea as it was being transported to England.



King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 2490-2472 B.C.E., Greywacke, overall: 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm, 676.8 kg / 56 x 22 1/2 x 21 3/4 inches, 1492.1 pounds (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

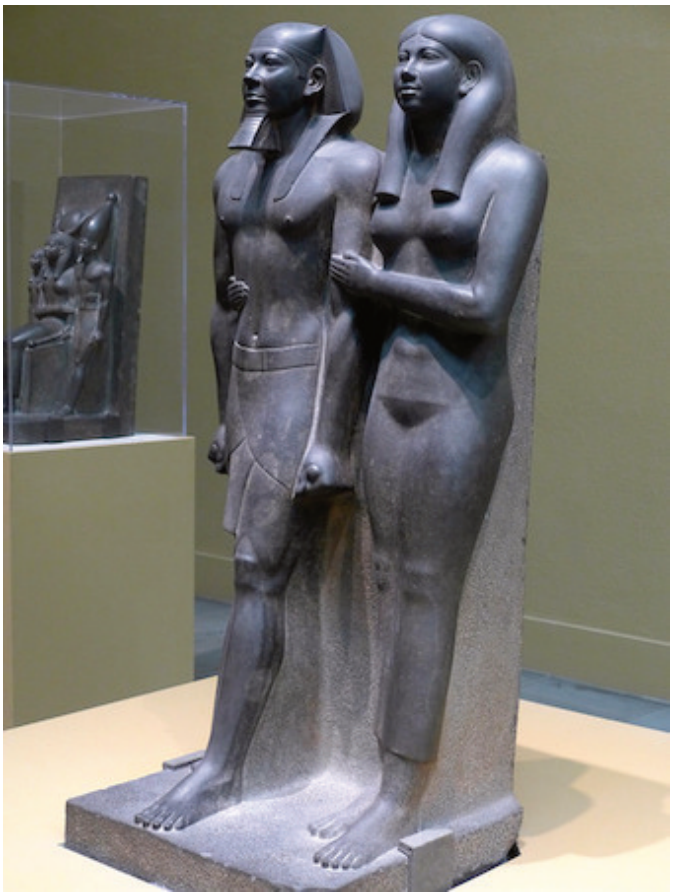
Within Menkaure's mortuary and valley temples, neither of which were completed before his death, excavation revealed a series of statues of the king.

The stunning diad of the king with his primary queen, Khamerernebty II (now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), as well as a number of triads showing the king being embraced by various deities, were discovered in the valley temple and were originally set up surrounding the open court.

This temple was still an active place of cult late in the Old Kingdom and was almost entirely rebuilt at the end of the 6th dynasty after it was heavily damaged by a flood.

9. King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen

Dr. Amy Calvert



King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 2490–2472 B.C.E., greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) (photo: tutincommon, CC BY-NC 2.0) <https://www.flickr.com/photos/10647023@N04/15105479211>

Serene ethereal beauty, raw royal power, and evidence of artistic virtuosity have rarely been simultaneously captured as well as in this breathtaking, nearly life-size statue of the pharaoh Menkaure and a queen. Smooth as silk, the meticulously finished surface of the dark stone captures the physical ideals of the time and creates a sense of eternity and immortality even today.

Undoubtedly, the most iconic structures from Ancient Egypt are the massive and enigmatic Great Pyramids that stand on a natural stone shelf, now known as the Giza plateau, on the south-western edge of modern Cairo. The three primary pyramids at Giza were constructed during the height of a period known as the Old Kingdom and served as burial places, memorials, and places of worship for a series of deceased rulers–the largest belonging to King Khufu, the middle to his son Khafre, and the smallest of the three to his son Menkaure.

Pyramids are not stand-alone structures. Those at Giza formed only a part of a much larger complex that included a temple at the base of the pyramid itself, long causeways and corridors, small subsidiary pyramids, and a second temple (known as a valley temple) some distance from the pyramid. These Valley Temples were used to perpetuate the cult of the deceased king and were active places of worship for hundreds of years (sometimes much longer) after the king's death. Images of the king were placed in these temples to serve as a focus for worship—several such images have been found in these contexts, including the magnificent seated statue of Khafre, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

On January 10, 1910, excavators under the direction of George Reisner, head of the joint Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Expedition to Egypt, uncovered an astonishing collection of statuary in the Valley Temple connected to the Pyramid of Menkaure. Menkaure's pyramid had been explored in the 1830s (using dynamite, no less). His carved granite sarcophagus was removed (and subsequently lost at sea), and while the Pyramid Temple at the base was in only mediocre condition; the Valley Temple, was—happily—basically ignored.

Giza plateau (photo: kairoinfo4u, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) <https://www.flickr.com/photos/manna4u/7164541911/in/photostream/>

Head and torso (detail), Khafre enthroned, from Giza, Egypt, c. 2520-2494 B.C.E., diorite. 5' 6 inches high (Egyptian Museum, Cairo)

Reisner had been excavating on the Giza plateau for several years at this point; his team had already explored the elite cemetery to the west of the Great Pyramid of Khufu before turning their attention to the Menkaure complex, most particularly the barely-touched Valley Temple.

George Reisner and Georg Steindorff at Harvard Camp, looking east toward Khufu and Khafre pyramids, 1935, photo by Albert Morton Lythgoe (Giza archives) <http://www.gizapyramids.org/media/view/People/1104/74359?t:state:flow=1e7a3d47-5dea-492d-8c27-9700aeedeca4>

In the southwest corner of the structure, the team discovered a magnificent cache of statuary carved in a smooth-grained dark stone called greywacke or schist. There were a number of triad statues—each showing 3 figures—the king, the fundamentally important goddess Hathor, and the personification of a nome (a geographic designation, similar to the modern idea of a region, district, or county). Hathor was worshiped in the pyramid temple complexes along with the supreme sun god Re and the god Horus, who was represented by the living king. The goddess's name is actually 'Hwt-hor', which means "The House of Horus," and she was connected to the wife of the living king and the mother of the future king. Hathor was also a fierce protector who guarded her father Re; as an "Eye of Re" (the title assigned to a group of dangerous goddesses), she could embody the intense heat of the sun and use that blazing fire to destroy his enemies.

Four greywacke triads, Menkaure valley temple, S magazines, corridor III 4, photo: 1908 (The Giza Archives). View of one of the triads in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/king-menkaura-the-goddess-hathor- and-the-deified-hare-nome-138424>

There were 4 complete triads, one incomplete, and at least one other in a fragmentary condition. The precise meaning of these triads is uncertain. Reisner believed that there was one for each ancient Egyptian nome, meaning there would have originally been more than thirty of them. More recent scholarship, however, suggests that there were originally 8 triads, each connected with a major site associated with the cult of Hathor. Hathor's prominence in the triads (she actually takes the central position in one of the sculptures) and her singular importance to kingship lends weight to this theory.

In addition to the triads, Reisner's team also revealed the extraordinary dyad statue of Menkaure and a queen that is breathtakingly singular. The two figures stand side-by-side on a simple, squared base and are supported by a shared back pillar. They both face to the front, although Menkaure's head is noticeably turned to his right—this image was likely originally positioned within an architectural niche, making it appear as though they were emerging from the structure. The broad-shouldered, youthful body of the king is covered only with a traditional short pleated kilt, known as a shendjet, and his head sports the primary pharaonic insignia of the iconic striped nemes headdress (so well known from the mask of Tutankhamun) and an artificial royal beard.

Menkaure flanked by Hathor (left) and nome goddess (Egyptian Museum, Cairo)

In his clenched fists, held straight down at his sides, Menkaure grasps ritual cloth rolls. His body is straight, strong, and eternally youthful with no signs of age. His facial features are remarkably individualized with prominent eyes, a fleshy nose, rounded cheeks, and full mouth with protruding lower lip.

Menkaure's queen provides the perfect female counterpart to his youthful masculine virility. Sensuously modeled with a beautifully proportioned body emphasized by a clinging garment, she articulates ideal mature feminine beauty. There is a sense of the individual in both faces. Neither Menkaure nor his queen are depicted in the purely idealized manner that was the norm for royal images. Instead, through the overlay of royal formality we see the depiction of a living person filling the role of pharaoh and the personal features of a particular individual in the representation of his queen.

Menkaure and his queen stride forward with their left feet—this is entirely expected for the king, as males in Egyptian sculpture almost always do so, but it is unusual for the female since they are generally depicted with feet together. They both look beyond the present and into timeless eternity, their otherworldly visage displaying no human emotion whatsoever.

Heads (detail), King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 2490–2472 B.C.E., greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), photo: 1910 (The Giza Archives)

The dyad was never finished—the area around the lower legs has not received a final polish, and there is no inscription. However, despite this incomplete state, the image was erected in the temple and was brightly painted—there are traces of red around the king's ears and mouth and yellow on the queen's face. The presence of paint atop the smooth, dark greywacke on a statue of the deceased king that was originally erected in his memorial temple courtyard brings an interesting suggestion—that the paint may have been intended to wear away through exposure and, over time, reveal the immortal, black-fleshed "Osiris" Menkaure.

Unusual for a pharaoh's image, the king has no protective cobra (known as a *uraeus*) perched on his brow. This notable absence has led to the suggestion that both the king's nemes and the queen's wig were originally covered in precious metal and that the cobra would have been part of that addition.

Heads and torsos (detail), King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 2490–2472 B.C.E., greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), photo: 1910 (The Giza Archives)

Based on comparison with other images, there is no doubt that this sculpture shows Menkaure, but the identity of the queen is a different matter. She is clearly a royal female. She stands at nearly equal height with the king and, of the two of them, she is the one who is entirely frontal. In fact, it may be that this dyad is focused on the queen as its central figure rather than Menkaure. The prominence of the royal female—at equal height and frontal—in addition to the protective gesture she extends has suggested that, rather than one of Mekaure's wives, this is actually his queen-mother. The function of the sculpture in any case was to ensure rebirth for the king in the Afterlife.

Additional resources:

This sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston <http://educators.mfa.org/ancient/king-menkaura-mycerinus- and-queen-275>

Educator resource from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston <http://educators.mfa.org/sites/educators.mfa.dev/files/related_file_362.pdf>

Menkaure Pyramid Complex from the Giza Archives <http://www.gizapyramids.org/>

King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and queen, 2490–2472 B.C.E., greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), photo: 1910 (The Giza Archives)

10. The Seated Scribe (Saqqara)

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is a transcript of a conversation conducted at the Louvre, Paris.

Seated Scribe, c. 2500 B.C.E., c. 4th Dynasty, Old Kingdom, painted limestone with rock crystal, magnesite, and copper/arsenic inlay for the eyes and wood for the nipples, found in Saqqara (Louvre, Paris) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're in the Egyptian Collection in the Louvre, in Paris, and we're looking at the Seated Scribe. This goes back to the Old Kingdom.

Beth: So this is more than 4,000, almost 5,000 years old. I think what draws people to this relatively small sculpture is how lifelike it is, given how old it is.

Steven: It's painted, which adds to its lifelike quality.

Beth: And that was not unusual for ancient Egyptian sculpture, although the amount of pigment and coloration that survives here is rather unique.

Steven: With a few exceptions, the sculpture is painted limestone. The exceptions are the nipples, which are wooden dowels, and the eyes.

Beth: The eyes are incredibly lifelike.

Seated Scribe (detail), c. 2500 B.C.E., c. 4th Dynasty, Old Kingdom, painted limestone with rock crystal, magnesite, and copper/arsenic inlay for the eyes and wood for the nipples, found in Saqqara (Louvre, Paris) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: And that's because they're made of two different types of stone: crystal, which is polished on the front, and then an organic material is added to the back that functions both as an adhesive but also to color the iris. And there's also an indentation carved to represent the pupil. All of this comes together to create a sense of alertness, a sense of awareness, a sense of intelligence, that is quite present. It collapses the 4,500 years between when the sculpture was made and today.

Beth: He's not idealized the way that we would see a figure of a pharaoh—the Egyptians considered pharaohs to be gods and would never have represented the pharaoh in this relaxed, cross-legged position, and with the rolls of fat that help make him more human.

Steven: He looks so relaxed, almost like he's just exhaled.

Seated Scribe (side view), c. 2500 B.C.E., c. 4th Dynasty, Old Kingdom, painted limestone with rock crystal, magnesite, and copper/arsenic inlay for the eyes and wood for the nipples, found in Saqqara (Louvre, Paris) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: That's true, but there is also a real formality here. He's very frontal. He's meant to be seen—pretty much exclusively—from the front and there's almost a complete symmetry to his body.

Steven: The exception being his hands. His right would have originally held a brush or a pen and his left holds a rolled piece of papyrus that he's writing on, which is interesting because it suggests the momentary even though the Egyptians are so concerned with the eternal. You said a moment ago that he's intended to be seen from the front, but that raises an interesting question: Was this sculpture meant to be seen at all?

Beth: Well, he was found in a necropolis (an ancient cemetery, or "city of the dead") southwest of Cairo in a place called Saqqara, an important Old Kingdom necropolis, and we don't know his exact findspot (the place where an object has been excavated), so we don't know as much about him as we would have if we did. But you're right, this is a funerary sculpture meant for a tomb.

Seated Scribe (detail), c. 2500 B.C.E., c. 4th Dynasty, Old Kingdom, painted limestone with rock crystal, magnesite, and copper/arsenic inlay for the eyes and wood for the nipples, found in Saqqara (Louvre, Paris) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We would know more about him if the base on which he sits was not cut. It probably would have originally included his name and his titles.

Beth: What's interesting is that the hieroglyph for "scribe" is quite pictographic and shows a writing instrument—a pen, a pot of water, and cakes of pigment. Scribes were very highly regarded in Egyptian culture. They were one of the very few people who could read and write. It's impossible to know how much of a portrait this is because we don't have this man in front of us, we don't know the degree to which this sculpture resembles him.

Seated Scribe (detail), c. 2500 B.C.E., c. 4th Dynasty, Old Kingdom, painted limestone with rock crystal, magnesite, and copper/arsenic inlay for the eyes and wood for the nipples, found in Saqqara (Louvre, Paris) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: The sculpture's been carved with real delicacy. The fingers are long and elegant, the fingernails are carefully inscribed.

Beth: And he has very pronounced high cheekbones.

Steven: The only clothing he wears is a kilt, which has been painted white. His skin is a pretty rich red-brown, and the hair and the rims of his eyes are accentuated with black.

Beth: It is wonderful to have this sculpture reaching out to us from more than 4,000 years ago.

Watch the video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKkcop-dlUY>

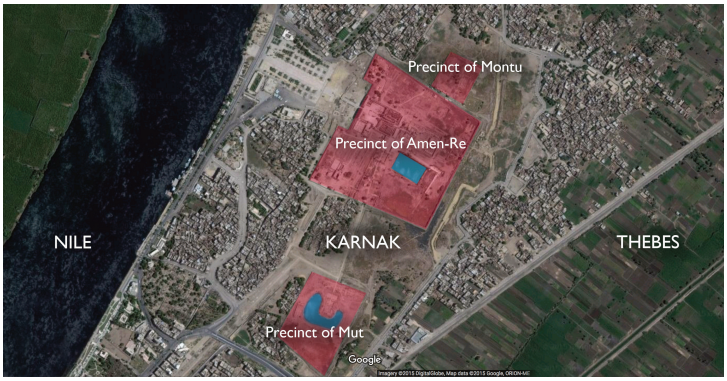
Seated Scribe (detail), c. 2500 B.C.E., c. 4th Dynasty, Old Kingdom, painted limestone with rock crystal, magnesite, and copper/arsenic inlay for the eyes and wood for the nipples, found in Saqqara (Louvre, Paris) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

PART III

Middle and New Kingdom

11. Temple of Amun-Re and the Hypostyle Hall, Karnak

Dr. Elizabeth Cummins



Google Earth view of Karnak (map data © Google)

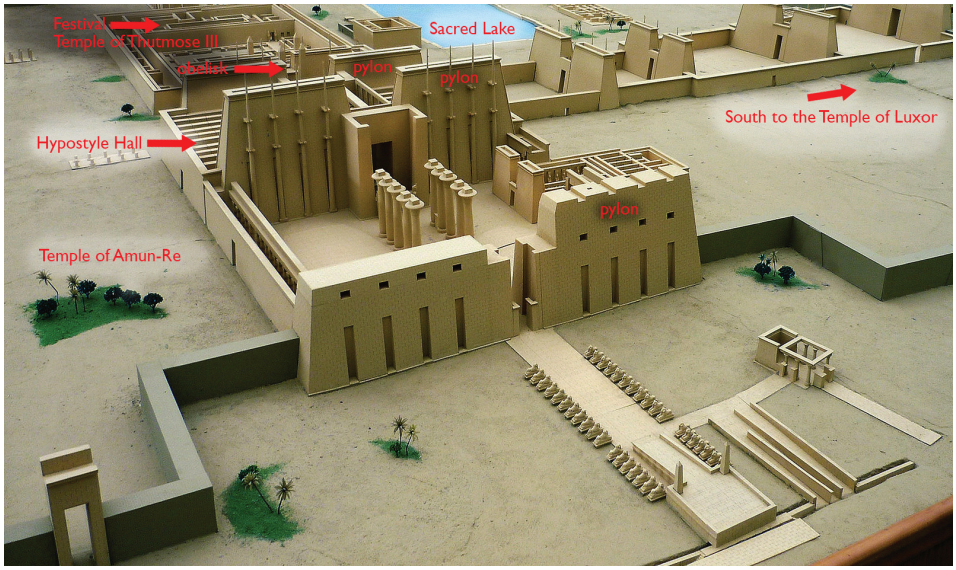
The massive temple complex of Karnak was the principal religious center of the god Amun-Re in Thebes during the New Kingdom (which lasted from 1550 until 1070 B.C.E.), the third and final period in Ancient Egyptian history. Amun-Re was one of the main gods of ancient Egypt; this deity was a composite of the god Amun, the patron of Thebes, and the Sun God, Re (or Ra).

View of sphinxes, the first pylon, and the central east-west aisle of Temple of Amon-Re, Karnak in Luxor, Egypt (photo: Mark Fox, CC: BY-NC 2.0) <https://www.flickr.com/photos/mjfox/8473752673/>

The complex itself remains one of the largest religious complexes in the world. However, Karnak was not just one temple dedicated to one god—it held not only the main precinct to the god Amun-Re—but also the precincts of the gods Mut and Montu. (Mut was a primordial goddess associated with motherhood, and was at times referred to as a mother of the earth and as mother of the gods; Monto was the ancient Egyptian god of war and is often depicted with the head of a falcon or a bull.) Compared to other temple compounds that survive from ancient Egypt, Karnak is in a poor state of preservation but it still gives scholars a wealth of information about Egyptian religion and art.

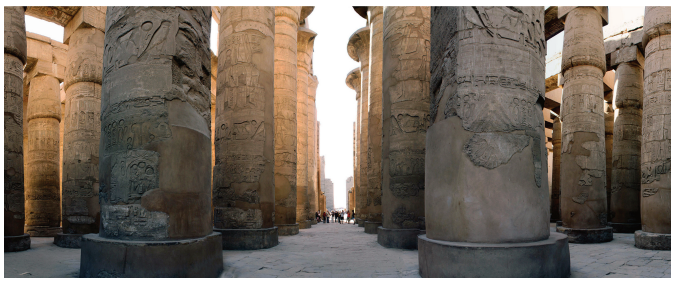
"The Most Select of Places"

The site was first developed during the Middle Kingdom (2055-1650 B.C.E.) and was initially modest in scale but as new importance was placed on the city of Thebes, subsequent pharaohs began to place their own mark on Karnak. The main precinct alone would eventually have as many as twenty temples and chapels. (R. Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt,* New York, Thames & Hudson, 2000, p. 154.) Karnak was known in ancient times as "The Most Select of Places" (*Ipet-isut*) and was not only the location of the cult image of Amun and a place for the god to dwell on earth but also a working estate for the priestly community who lived on site. Additional buildings included a sacred lake, kitchens, and workshops for the production of religious accoutrements.



Model of the Precinct of Amon-Re, Karnak (photo: Rémih, CC: BY-SA 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karnak_model.JPG>

The main temple of Amun-Re had two axes—one that went north/south and the other that extended east/west. The southern axis continued towards the temple of Luxor and was connected by an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes. While the sanctuary was plundered for stone in ancient times, there are still a number of unique architectural features within this vast complex. For example, the tallest obelisk (a very tall four-sided stone that tapers upward and is topped with a pyramid shape) in Egypt stood at Karnak and was dedicated by the female pharaoh Hatshepsut who ruled Egypt during the New Kingdom. Made of one piece of red granite, it originally had a matching obelisk that was removed by the Roman emperor Constantine and re-erected in Rome. Another unusual feature was the Festival Temple of Thutmose III, which had columns that represented tent poles, a feature this pharaoh was no doubt familiar with from his many war campaigns.



Hypostyle Hall, c. 1250 B.C.E. (hall), 18th and 19th Dynasties, New Kingdom, sandstone and mud brick, Karnak, at Luxor, Egypt (photo: Blalonde, public domain) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Karnakpanorama.jpg>

Hypostyle Hall

One of the greatest architectural marvels of Karnak is the hypostyle hall (a space with a roof supported by columns) built during the Ramesside period, or when Egypt was ruled by the 11 pharaohs named Ramses. The hall has 134 massive sandstone columns with the center twelve columns standing at 69 feet. Like most of the temple decoration, the hall would have been brightly painted and some of this paint still exists on the upper portions of the columns and ceiling today. With the center of the hall taller than the spaces on either side, the Egyptians allowed for clerestory lighting (a section of wall that allowed light and air into the otherwise dark space below). In fact, the earliest evidence for clerestory lighting comes from Egypt. Not many ancient Egyptians would have had access to this hall, since the further one went into the temple, the more restricted access became.

"Tent pole" columns, Festival Temple of Thutmose III, c. 1479-25 B.C.E., sandstone, mud brick, paint, Karnak, at Luxor, Egypt (photo: Dennis Jarvis, CC: BY-SA 2.0) <https://www.flickr.com/photos/archer10/2217355182/>

Temple as cosmos

Conceptually, temples in Egypt were connected to the idea of *zep tepi*, or "the first time," the beginnings of the creation of the world. The temple was a reflection of this time, when the mound of creation

emerged from the primeval waters. The pylons, or gateways in the temple represent the horizon, and as one moves further into the temple, the floor rises until it reaches the sanctuary of the god, giving the impression of a rising mound, like that during creation. The temple roof represented the sky and was often decorated with stars and birds. The columns were designed with lotus, papyrus, and palm plants in order to reflect the marsh-like environment of creation. The outer areas of Karnak, which was located near the Nile River, would flood during the annual inundation—an intentional effect by the ancient designers no doubt, in order to enhance the temple's symbolism.

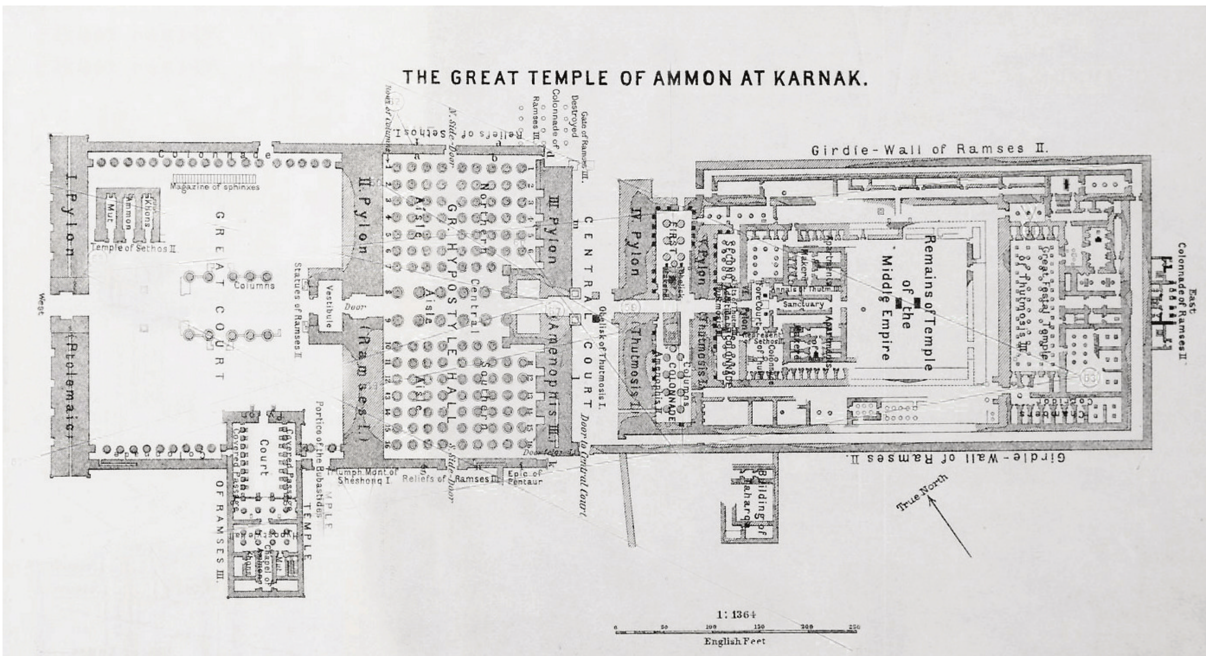
Additional resources:

A digital resource from UCLA that provides an overview of the types of buildings and building phases of Karnak <http://dlib.etc.ucla.edu/projects/Karnak/>

The Karnak Great Hypostyle Project <http://www.memphis.edu/hypostyle/>

Slide show detailing the excavation of the Mut Precinct at Karnak <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/features/mut/>

R. Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt* (New York, Thames & Hudson, 2000).



Plan of the Temple of Amon-Re, Karnak

12. Mortuary Temple and Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is a transcript of a conversation conducted in the Ancient Egyptian Art Galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut, c. 1479–1458 B.C.E., Dynasty 18, New Kingdom (Deir el-Bahri, Upper Egypt), granite, 261.5 x 80 x 137 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City in the section devoted to the art of Ancient Egypt. And we're looking at an enormous, granite sculpture.

Beth: This is a sculpture of the female pharaoh Hatshepsut.

Steven: We think of pharaohs, that is, ancient Egyptian kings, as male. And of course the vast majority were. There had been a long tradition in ancient Egypt of women assuming enormous authority in the position of regent, that is as a mother or a member of the royal family who would reign until a male ruler reached the age where they could actually assume power.

Beth: Those women were very powerful but Hatshepsut is unusual. She assumes the authority of king, of pharaoh. She created a whole mythology around her kingship that described her divine birth, the way that an oracle had predicted that she would become king. She ruled Egypt for more than two decades. She commissioned a remarkable number of temples, of sculptures. She was interested in the power of art to convey royal authority.

Steven: And no building speaks to the authority of the king more than the mortuary temple.

Beth: The sculpture that we're looking at was actually made for this mortuary temple. There anywhere from six or eight or ten of these kneeling figures. There were also representations of Hatshepsut as a sphinx which lined the center of the lower courtyard of her mortuary temple.

Steven: And that temple is an extraordinary place. It is built directly against this vast cliff face.

Beth: I can't think of a more dramatic environment for architecture. Those cliffs are towering and their organic qualities are in such contrast to the regular order and structure of the built environment.

Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut, c. 1479–1458 B.C.E., Dynasty 18, New Kingdom (Deir el-Bahri, Upper Egypt), granite, 261.5 x 80 x 137 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: This is hewn right from the living rock.

Beth: And that sense of permanence, that sense of stability that is expressed by that wall of living rock is a perfect expression of the very sense of stability that we think Hatshepsut and her dynasty were trying to reassert after a period of instability. This was the beginning of the new kingdom.

Steven: In ancient Egyptian history, we talk about three major periods: the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom, and these periods are separated by periods we call Intermediate Periods.

Beth: These were periods of relative chaos, often when Egypt was divided in its rule or was ruled by external rulers.

Steven: The representations of kingship in ancient Egyptian art are almost two millennia old by the time we get to Hatshepsut and so what she can do is adopt those forms to show herself as king. These forms were easily recognizable. That is symmetry, its embeddedness in the stone, we see that there is no space between her arms and her torso or between her legs. There is a real sense of timelessness but there are also more specific symbols.

Beth: The head cloth that she wears is a symbol of the king that would have originally been a cobra.

Steven: We have the beard that we associate with kingship.

Beth: We're talking about a visual language here. And this visual language of kingship was male. In fact, there is no word for queen in the Egyptian language. The term is king's wife, or king's mother.

Steven: Her body is represented in a relatively masculine way. Her breasts are deemphasized, for example. She has got broad shoulders.

Beth: The inscriptions that were on many of these sculptures use a feminine form and so the representation itself is masculine but the identifying words, the hieroglyphs identify her as female. About 20 years after Hatshepsut died, the pharaoh she had been co-ruler with systematically destroyed all images of Hatshepsut.

Steven: That would not have been an easy matter. You wouldn't have simply toppled the sculpture. It would have shattered into so many pieces. This made of granite, incredibly hard stone. It would have been very difficult to produce and it would have been very difficult to destroy.

Beth: Well, and not only that, but Hatshepsut had commissioned hundreds of images of herself. So it would have taken a long time to destroy these sculptures. This was an intentional act, but we're not really sure why this happened.

Steven: We do know that the fragments were discovered in the early twentieth century thanks to an excavation undertaken by the Metropolitan Museum of Art which is why they are here. And what we're seeing are a series of monumental sculptures that have been put back together but some of this is guesswork. We don't know if one particular fragment goes with one sculpture versus another.

Beth: So when we look at those sculptures, we see her in a range of positions. In some she is kneeling. In some she is standing. In some she is seated. In some she is represented as a sphinx. A king only would kneel of course to a god. And that really helps us place this sculpture along the processional path.

Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut, c. 1479–1458 B.C.E., Dynasty 18, New Kingdom (Deir el-Bahri, Upper Egypt), granite, 261.5 x 80 x 137 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: So once a year, there was a ritual involving a sculpture of a god. Now we have to remember that for Egyptians, the sculpture of the god was the embodiment of the god and temples were houses for a god. So once a year the sculpture of the primary god, Amun-Re, was taken from the temple in Thebes on the eastern side of the Nile.

Beth: And carried across the river on a ceremonial barque, on a shrine that was shaped like a boat.

Steven: As though he were traveling literally across the Nile from the eastern side, the land of the living, toward the land of the dead, and he would be carried up this causeway toward the temple and his primary shrine in the mortuary temple at the very top center.

Beth: And that sculpture would have been spent one night in that shrine before it would have been returned across the river.

Steven: And so it makes sense then that you would have this representation of Hatshepsut on her knees making an offering, these two bowls or jars that she holds are an offering to the god because the god passed in front of these sculptures who are not just sculptures but embodiments of Hatshepsut.

Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut, c. 1479–1458 B.C.E., Dynasty 18, New Kingdom (Deir el-Bahri, Upper Egypt), granite, 261.5 x 80 x 137 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: It's interesting how the scholarship that surrounds this ruler has changed. Early in the twentieth century, for example, the destruction of the images of this ruler were associated with the idea that she was out of place, that she was an usurper, and she was seen very much in a negative light. She is seen much more sympathetically now in the early 21st century.

Steven: And there were women before Hatshepsut who asserted themselves as kings, and there were a few women after her, but Hatshepsut had enormous power, enormous influence, the sculptures, the architecture that she commissioned set an important standard and inspiration for all the later work of the New Kingdom. Imagine walking past these enormous sculptures of Hatshepsut.

Beth: This is all about procession. This is all about pageantry. This is all about expressing the power of the king.

Steven: Kneeling like this is not something you can do for more than a minute or two. It's hard on the toes. It's hard on the knees. So this is a position that someone would only take very temporarily and yet there is something very eternal about the sculpture, something very permanent. This is not a figure who engages us, who is in the world, but who lives in the eternal. This is an image of a king who is also a god.

Watch the video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pZOUV_rTyj0>

Large Kneeling Statue of Hatshepsut (detail), c. 1479–1458 B.C.E., Dynasty 18, New Kingdom (Deir el-Bahri, Upper Egypt), granite, 261.5 x 80 x 137 cm (The Metropolitan Museum of Art) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

13. House Altar depicting Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Three of their Daughters

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the Egyptian collection of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

House Altar depicting Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Three of their Daughters, limestone, New Kingdom, Amarna period, 18th dynasty, c.1350 BCE (Ägyptisches Museum/Neues Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: So around 1350 B.C.E., everything changed in Egyptian art.

Beth: When we think about Egyptian art, we don't think of change.

Steven: That's true. The Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, the New Kingdom, and the transitional periods between– art is consistent for almost 3,000 years. But there is this radical break right around 1350. And it's because the ruler, Akhenaten, changes the state religion.

Beth: He changes it from the worship of the god Amun to a new god, a sun god, called Aten. So he actually changes his own name to Akhenaten, which means Aten is pleased. The key is he makes him and his wife the only representatives of Aten on earth. And so he upsets the entire priesthood of Egypt by making him and his wife the only ones with access to this new god, Aten.

Steven: And in fact, after Akhenaten dies, Egypt will return to its traditional religion. So this period is a very brief episode in Egyptian history, but it also marks a real shift in style. And this small stone plaque that we're looking at, this sunken relief carving—which would have been placed in a private domestic environment– is a perfect example of those stylistic changes.

Beth: Right. It would have been an altar in someone's home, where they would have seen Akhenaten and his wife Nefertiti and their relationship to the god Aten. This has always been one of my favorite sculptures. It's so informal, compared to most Egyptian art. We really have a sense of a couple and their relationship with one another and their relationship with their children. And love and domesticity.

Steven: So let's take a close look. On the left, you have Akhenaten himself. This is the pharaoh of Egypt, the supreme ruler. You can see that he's holding his eldest daughter, and he's actually getting ready to kiss her. He seems to be holding her very tenderly, supporting her head, holding her under the thighs. She seems to be, perhaps, pointing back to her mother at the same moment.

House Altar (detail of Akhenaten), limestone, New Kingdom, Amarna period, 18th dynasty, c.1350 BCE (Ägyptisches Museum/Neues Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: We see Nefertiti holding another daughter on her lap, pointing back to Akhenaten, and yet a third daughter, the youngest one, on her shoulder, playing with her earring. And I think it's immediately apparent that there's something wrong with their anatomy. If we look at the children, or we look at Nefertiti or Akhenaten, we see swollen bellies, very thin arms, and elongated skulls, forms that have made historians wonder whether there was something medically wrong with Akhenaten.

Steven: In fact, we don't think that there was. We think that this is a purely stylistic break. It was meant to distinguish this new age, this new religion, from Egypt's past.

Beth: Egyptian art had been dominated by rectilinear forms. Here, Akhenaten seems to be demanding this new style dominated by curvilinear forms.

House Altar (detail), limestone, New Kingdom, Amarna period, 18th dynasty, c.1350 BCE (Ägyptisches Museum/Neues Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Look at the careful attention to the drapery. There is a softness throughout that is an absolute contrast to the traditions of Egyptian art. But in some ways, there are elements of traditional Egyptian sculpture.

Beth: Right. We still see a composite view of the body. A profile view of the face, but a frontal view of the eye.

Steven: Right. Or one hip is facing us. But the shoulders are squared with us. So as much of the body is exposed to us as possible, while the figures are still in profile. So let's take a look at some of the iconography here. This little panel really tells us a lot. God is present. Aten is present, here rendered as the sun disk. And from that sun—which has a small cobra in it, which signifies that this is the supreme deity, the only deity. Akhenaten was a monotheist. And this was in such contrast to the pantheon of gods that traditional Egyptian religion counted on. Here Akhenaten says, no, there is only one true god. So we can see the cobra. We can see the sun disk. And then we can see rays of light that pour down. And if you look closely, you can see hands at the ends of those rays, except for the rays that terminate right at the faces of the king and queen. And there, you see not only hands, but also ankhs, the Egyptian sign of life. And so it's as if Aten is giving life to these two people, and these two people alone.

House Altar (detail of Nefertiti), limestone, New Kingdom, Amarna period, 18th dynasty, c.1350 BCE (Ägyptisches Museum/Neues Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Those rays of light are holding those ankhs right at the noses, the breath of life for Akhenaten and Nefertiti. We can see in the throne of Nefertiti symbols of both Upper and Lower Egypt, indicating that Nefertiti is queen of both.

Steven: Akhenaten himself is sitting on a simpler throne. It does give a sense of her importance and the fact that they would rule Egypt together.

House Altar (detail of rays), limestone, New Kingdom, Amarna period, 18th dynasty, c.1350 BCE (Ägyptisches Museum/Neues Museum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Watch the video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ryycDVWXDvc>

14. Portrait Head of Queen Tiye

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection at the Neues Museum, Berlin.

Portrait Head of Queen Tiye with a Crown of Two Feathers, c. 1355 B.C.E., Amarna Period, Dynasty 18, New Kingdom, Egypt, yew wood, lapis lazuli, silver, gold, faience, 22.5 cm high (Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection at the Neues Museum, Berlin) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: One of the most interesting women in all of Egyptian history began her life as the daughter of a bureaucrat but would marry the pharaoh of Egypt. She would then be demoted upon his death and would simply be the queen mother. But her son would then elevate her status substantially, making her divine, making her a goddess.

Beth: So much of that history can be seen in this tiny sculpture of Queen Tiye.

Steven: There's a clear sense of her nobility. Even though she began in a relatively modest way as a commoner, although with fairly high status, she looks out and past us here, and there's no doubt she's a queen. She's completely unapproachable.

Beth: And we may also be getting a sense here of what she looked like. There seem to be some individual characteristics. She seems to be a little bit older, we can see lines extending below her nose on either side of her cheeks. And there are some distinctive facial characteristics. So perhaps we have a little bit of a window into what she really looked like.

Steven: The face and neck are made out of yew wood, this beautiful dark wood. The eyes are made out of ebony and alabaster. And then there's some other materials as well, gold and some of the semi-precious stone, lapis lazuli, is visible just under that headdress that seems to have been chipped away.

Beth: That's right. What we're seeing are in fact evidence of these changes in Tiye's life. Underneath the headdress that we see her in now would have been a gold headdress that signified her status as the queen, as the wife of the pharaoh. And we can also see that in the two gold clips that we see on the forehead, that are evidence of where that crown would have been worn.

Portrait Head of Queen Tiye with a Crown of Two Feathers, profile view, c. 1355 B.C.E., Amarna Period, Dynasty 18, New Kingdom, Egypt, yew wood, lapis lazuli, silver, gold, faience, 22.5 cm high (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: There would have been a cobra placed there, the insignia of royalty. That was presumably removed when her husband died, and she actually fell in status to that of queen mother.

Beth: But she was so important and so smart, and her son depended on her so much that in order to have her be able to actively participate in politics, in the affairs of the royal court, he elevated her status to one of a goddess.

Steven: And that's when this headdress would've been added. This would have been spectacular when it was first made. Now it simply looks a little bulbous, but if you look a little bit to the back right of the skull, you can just make out some brilliant blue faience beads that catch the light and really shimmer. That would've covered the entire headdress. And so she would have looked regal and almost celestial, appropriate to a goddess.

Beth: Her headdress extends upward where we see horns, a solar disk, and two feathers. Now that solar disk may refer to the religion founded by her son, Akhenaten. Akhenaten got rid of Egypt's traditional polytheistic religion and established a monotheistic religion centered around Aten, who is symbolized by the sun.

Steven: This sculpture really does give us a sense of her importance, her power, her son's respect for her, and gives us just a little glimpse into the complexity of Egyptian life at this high station.

Watch the video. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j55j1NZoAKk

Portrait Head of Queen Tiye, showing Crown of Two Feathers, c. 1355 B.C.E., Amarna Period, Dynasty 18, New Kingdom, Egypt, yew wood, lapis lazuli, silver, gold, faience, 22.5 cm high (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

15. Thutmose, Model Bust of Queen Nefertiti

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted at the Egyptian Museum of the Neues Museum, Berlin.

Thutmose, Model Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1340 BCE, limestone and plaster, New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, Amarna Period (Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection/Neues Museum, Berlin) (photo: Philip Pikart, CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nofretete_Neues_Museum.jpg>

Steven: We're in the Neues Museum in Berlin. And we're looking at the famous bust of Nefertiti. It is a life-size, full-color image, and it's really impressive.

Beth: It's the treasure of this museum. And it's been placed in a rotunda with a large dome. She's been placed slightly higher than eye level, so we look up at her. She's fabulously beautiful.

Steven: She's virtually the sole work of art in this very large space. Clearly, she is the focal point.

Beth: Yeah, it's quite theatrical. And unlike so many other Egyptian sculptures, she wasn't intended for a tomb. She was found in the studio of the artist who made her, Thutmose.

Steven: We think that this sculpture was actually a model that he'd created in order to work on other sculptures of her. That is, this sculpture would function really as a three-dimensional sketch.

Beth: As a prototype.

Steven: That's right. And there are a few reasons why that's thought. Not only was it found in his studio, but it is incomplete in a way that suggests that it was never meant to be completed. If you look, for instance, at the sockets of the eyes, that would generally be inlaid with semi-precious stones. But only one eye has any inlay in it. And in that case, it's a temporary material, even wax, and so not the kind of quality one would expect in a full-fledged sculpture for the queen.

Beth: Art historians have discovered through scientific analysis that she's made not just of painted limestone but limestone that's been covered with a very, very thin layer of plaster. And that enabled the sculptor to achieve really subtle effects modeling her face.

Steven: But then the neck and the headdress plaster gets much thicker, and it would have been much easier to work and create that very fine detail on the plaster rather than the coarser material of the limestone core.

Beth: And that's so important where we see the lines, very subtle movement around her cheeks. What's so remarkable about the sculpture is how sensitively carved she is, how we really get a sense of skin and bone and these lovely movements around her face.

Thutmose, Model Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1340 BCE, limestone and plaster, New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, Amarna Period (Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection/Neues Museum, Berlin) (photo: Giovanni, CC BY-SA 2.0) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File: Nefertiti_(Nofretete_in_Berlin).jpg>

Steven: She's tremendously elegant, but even beyond the simple elegance of the contours of her face, her high cheekbones, the shallow of her cheeks.

Beth: Her long neck.

Steven: Beautiful symmetry. A way in which line is unified throughout the entire portrait bust. For instance, follow the lines downward that are constructed by the contours of her headdress that tapers as it moves towards her chin. So her face and headdress create a perfect triangle. But that's actually continued by the lines of her neck below her chin. And it's accentuated by the lighting in this museum. But it really does create this sense of continuity from the top of the sculpture to its base.

Beth: What we're describing is a new ideal of beauty that's really different from the tradition of ancient Egyptian sculpture. And that's because Nefertiti was the wife of the pharaoh Akhenaten, who established a new religion in ancient Egypt which was monotheistic instead of the traditional polytheistic religion. And with that, he created a new ideal of beauty that we see in the sculptures that were created during his reign.

Steven: That's right. I think we see this sculpture really as a perfect exemplar. Nefertiti is especially interesting because we believe she did not simply function as the wife of the pharaoh. She is shown in so many portraits with the accoutrements of the ruler that we think that she actually shared power.

Beth: It's interesting, this period that we call the Amarna period of Akhenaten's reign, where we have two powerful women—his mother, Tiye, and his wife, Nefertiti.

Steven: Both represented as beautiful women, as powerful women, and giving us a kind of insight into late Egyptian culture.

Watch the video. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cZuYdIRAIAs>

Thutmose, Model Bust of Queen Nefertiti, c. 1340 BCE, limestone and plaster, New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, Amarna Period (Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection/Neues Museum, Berlin) (photo: Magnus Manske, CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nefertiti_Bust#/media/File:Nefertiti_bust_(right).jpg>

Backstory

In 2009, the refurbished Neues Museum in Berlin celebrated its reopening, with the bust of Nefertiti prominently displayed as one of its main attractions. The celebration coincided with one of the Egyptian government's repeated pleas for the official return of the bust to Egypt. The museum has staunchly refused to give up the sculpture, asserting that the bust was acquired legally by the German archaeologist Ludwig Borchardt in 1912. Borchardt had excavated it along with several other objects from the studio of the ancient Egyptian sculptor Thutmose, and had brought his finds to Germany as part of an agreement with the Egyptian Antiquities Service. While there is no proof that Borchardt's dealings were explicitly illegal, as early as 1925, the Egyptian government began to take issue with Germany's possession of valuable antiquities. They began imposing sanctions, and the bust has been the source of tension between the two nations ever since.

This controversy relates to a general growing public awareness about the provenance—and politics—of antiquities held in European and American museums. In 2016, Nora al-Badri and Jan Nikolai Nelles, two artists from Germany, made a bold statement about these issues by staging an event they called "NefertitiHack." They secretly mapped the sculpture using a consumer-grade 3-D scanning device, and then released the data openly under a Creative Commons license. The artists' intention was "to inspire a critical reassessment of today's conditions and to overcome the colonial notion of possession in Germany," according to their website <http://nefertitihack.alloversky.com/>.

Many groups have advocated for using digitally-produced replicas either as stand-ins for objects that are returned to their places of origin, or vice versa—as ways of offering highly accurate replicas in place of the originals. The sharing of data between institutions and groups who lay claim to objects has also been suggested as a way to ease tensions over restitution. Nelles and al-Badri's project is a critical statement about the growing questions around repatriation and public access to objects via 3-D models and other data, as the Neues Museum does not allow photography or publicly share its own 3-D model of the bust.

Nora al-Badri, one of the artists behind NefertitiHack, stated:

> "The head of Nefertiti represents all the other millions of stolen and looted artifacts all over the world currently happening, for example, in Syria, Iraq, and in Egypt…Archaeological artifacts as a cultural memory originate for the most part from the Global South; however, a vast number of important objects can be found in Western museums and private collections. We should face the fact that the colonial structures continue to exist today and still produce their inherent symbolic struggles." <https://hyperallergic.com/274635/artists-covertly-scan-bust-of-nefertiti-and-release-the-data-for-free-online/>

Over a century after it was excavated, the bust of Nefertiti remains a flashpoint for institutions and the public, driving us to consider the ways in which objects and their data are acquired, displayed, and shared.

Backstory by Dr. Naraelle Hohensee

Additional resources:

Image of Nefertiti, photo: Philip Pikart (CC BY-SA 3.0) <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nefertiti#/media/File:Nofretete_Neues_Museum.jpg>

NefertitiHack website <http://nefertitihack.alloversky.com/>

Artists' video of the scanning process in the Neues Museum <https://vimeo.com/148156899>

"Swiping a Priceless Antiquity … With a Scanner and a 3-D Printer," *The New York Times,* March 1, 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/arts/design/other-nefertiti-3d-printer.html?_r=0>

"Artists Covertly Scan Bust of Nefertiti and Release the Data for Free Online," *Hyperallergic,* February 19, 2016 <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/02/arts/design/other-nefertiti-3d-printer.html?_r=0>

"Re-Examining Nefertiti's Likeness and Life," *ABC News,* December 8, 2012 <http://abcnews.go.com/International/examining-nefertitis-likeness-life/story?id=17905667>

"German foundation refuses to return Nefertiti bust," *Reuters,* January 24, 2011 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-germany-egypt-nefertiti/german-foundation-refuses-to-return-nefertiti-bust-idUSTRE70N6N220110124>

"A 3,500-Year-Old Queen Causes a Rift Between Germany and Egypt," *The New York Times,* October 18, 2009 <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/19/world/europe/19iht-germany.html>

16. Tutankhamun's tomb (innermost coffin and death mask)

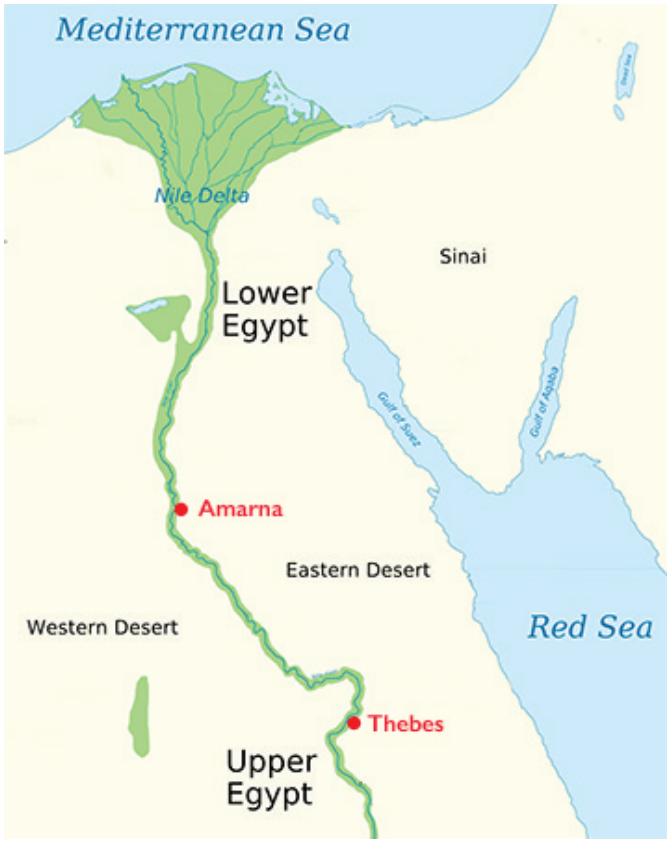
Dr. Elizabeth Cummins

Harry Burton, Howard Carter with Innermost Coffin of Tutankhamun, 1922 (Tutankhamun Archive, Griffith Institute, University of Oxford)

Nearly lost to history

Tutankhamun was only the age of nine when he became king of Egypt during the 18th dynasty of the New Kingdom (c. 1332–1323 B.C.E.). His story would have been lost to history if it were not for the discovery of his tomb in 1922 by the archaeologist Howard Carter in the Valley of the Kings. His nearly intact tomb held a wealth of objects that give us unique insights into this period of ancient Egyptian history.

Tutankhamun ruled after the Amarna age, when the pharaoh Akhenaten, Tutankhamun's probable father, turned the religious attention of the kingdom to the worship of the god Aten, the sun disc. Akhenaten moved his capital city to the site of Akhetaten (also known as Amarna), in Middle Egypt—far from the previous pharaoh's capital. After Akhenaton's death and the rule of a short-lived pharaoh, Smenkhkare, Tutankhamen shifted the focus of the country's worship back to the god Amun and returned the religious center back to Thebes.



Map of Ancient Egypt (modified) (original image: Jeff Dahl)

Tutankhamun married his half-sister, Ankhesenamun, but they did not produce an heir. This left the line of succession unclear. Tutankhamun died at the young age of eighteen, leading many scholars to speculate on the manner of his death—chariot accident, murder by blow to the head, and even a hippopotamus attack! The answer is still unclear. Tutankhamun's much-older advisor (and possible step-grandfather), Ay, married the widowed Ankhesenamun and became pharaoh.

Valley of the Kings, Egypt (photo: Troels Myrup, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0 <https://www.flickr.com/photos/troels/523273403>

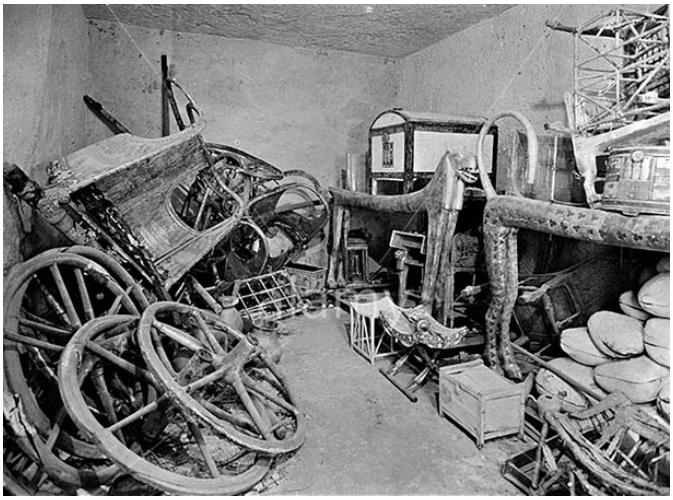
The tomb

During the early twentieth century, Howard Carter, a British Egyptologist, excalvated for many years in the Valley of the Kings—a royal burial ground located on the west bank of the ancient city of Thebes. He was running out of money to support his archaeological digs when he asked for funding for one more season from his financial backer, the fifth Earl of Carnarvon. Lord Carnarvon granted him one more year—and what a year it was!

Lord Carnarvon with Carter during his initial visit to the tomb, 1922 (photo: Keystone Press Agency Ltd., 1922)

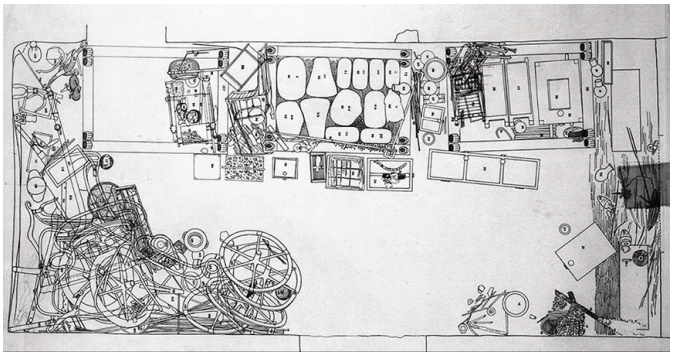
At the beginning of November 1922, Carter came upon the first of twelve steps of the entrance that led to the tomb of Tutankhamun. He quickly recovered the steps and sent a telegram to Carnarvon in England so they could open the tomb together. Carnarvon departed for Egypt immediately and on November 26, 1922, they made a hole in the entrance of the antechamber in order to look in. Carter states:

> At first I could see nothing, the hot air escaping from the chamber causing the candle flame to flicker, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the lights, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold –everywhere the glint of gold. [Howard Carter and A. C. Mace, The Tomb of Tut-ankh-amen (New York City: Cooper Square Publishers. 1933), (vol. 1) pp.95-96]



Harry Burton, View of tomb interior, 1922 (Tutankhamun Archive, Griffith Institute, University of Oxford)

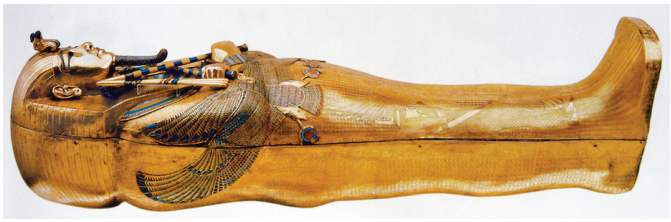
The task of cataloging the finds was an immense undertaking for the team. Carter spent a decade systematically recording the finds and having them photographed.



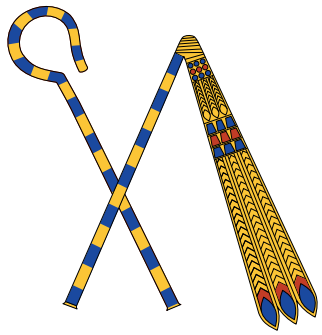
Howard Carter, Drawing of Tutankhamun's tomb (Tutankhamun Archive, Griffith Institute, University of Oxford)

The innermost coffin

Tutankhamun's sarcophagus (a box-like stone container) held not one but three coffins in which to hold the body of the king. The outer two coffins were crafted in wood and covered in gold along with many semiprecious stones, such as lapis lazuli and turquoise. The inner coffin, however, was made of solid gold. When Howard Carter first came upon this coffin, it was not the shiny golden image we see in the Egyptian museum today (below). In his excavation notes, Carter states, it was "covered with a thick black pitch-like layer which extended from the hands down to the ankles (top image). This was obviously an anointing liquid which had been poured over the coffin during the burial ceremony and in great quantity (some two buckets full)." [N. Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), pp. 108-109.]



Tutankhamun's tomb, innermost coffin, New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty, c. 1323 B.C.E., gold with inlay of enamel and semiprecious stones (Egyptian Museum, Cairo)



Egyptian crook and flail (image: Jeff Dahl) <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Crook_and_flail#/media/File:Crook_and_flail.svg>

The image of the pharaoh is that of a god. The gods were thought to have skin of gold, bones of silver, and hair of lapis lazuli—so the king is shown here in his divine form in the afterlife. He holds the crook and flail, symbols of the king's right to rule. The goddesses Nekhbet (vulture) and Wadjet (cobra), inlaid with semiprecious stones, stretch their wings across his torso. Beneath these goddesses are two more—Isis and Nephthys—etched into the gold lid.

The death mask of Tutankhamun

The death mask (right) is considered one of the masterpieces of Egyptian art. It originally rested directly on the shoulders of the mummy inside the innermost gold coffin. It is constructed of two sheets of gold that were hammered together and weighs 22.5 pounds (10.23 kg). Tutankhamen is depicted wearing the striped nemes headdress (the striped head-cloth typically worn by pharaohs in ancient Egypt) with the goddesses Nekhbet and Wadjet depicted again protecting his brow. He also wears a false beard that further connects him to the image of a god as with the inner coffin. He wears a broad collar, which ends in terminals shaped as falcon heads. The back of the mask is covered with Spell 151b from the Book of the Dead, which the Egyptians used as a road map for the afterlife. This particular spell protects the various limbs of Tutankhamun as he moves into the underworld.

Death Mask from innermost coffin, Tutankhamun's tomb, New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty, c. 1323 B.C.E., gold with inlay of enamel and semiprecious stones (Egyptian Museum, Cairo) (photo: Bjørn Christian Tørrissen, CC BY-SA 3.0)

Additional resources:

The Griffin Institute's digital archive of the excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb—includes all of Carter's handwritten notes, plans, and photographs <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/discoveringTut/>

Theban Mapping Project <http://www.thebanmappingproject.com/>

Tutankhamun's Funeral on The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/tuta/hd_tuta.htm>

Howard Carter and Arthur C. Mace, *The Tomb of Tut.ankh.Amen, I-III* (London: Cassell and Company) 1923-1933.

Carl Nicholas Reeves, *The Complete Tutankhamun: The King, The Tomb, The Royal Treasure* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990).

17. Last judgment of Hu-Nefer, from his tomb

A CONVERSATION

Dr. Beth Harris and Dr. Steven Zucker

This is the transcript of a conversation conducted in the British Museum.

Hu-Nefer's Judgment in the presence of Osiris, Book of the Dead (detail of Thoth left of Hu-nefer), 19th Dynasty, New Kingdom, c. 1275 B.C.E., papyrus, Thebes, Egypt (British Museum), (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: We're in the British Museum in London, in a room that is filled with ancient Egyptian mummies, and as a result, it's also filled with modern children.

Beth: And tourists. It's a great room—there's great stuff here.

Steven: We're looking at a fragment of a scroll that is largely ignored.

Beth: It's a papyrus scroll.

Steven: A papyrus is a reed that grows in the Nile Delta, that was made into a kind of paper-like substance, and actually was probably the single most important surface for writing right up into the Middle Ages.

Beth: We're looking at a written text of something that we call the "Book of the Dead," which the ancient Egyptians had other names for, but which was an ancient text that had spells, and prayers, and incantations—things that the dead needed in the afterlife.

Steven: This is a tradition that goes all the way back to the Old Kingdom (c.2649-2150 B.C.E), writing that we call pyramid texts. These were a sense of instructions for the afterlife, and then later, in the Middle Kingdom (c.2030-1640 B.C.E.), we have coffin texts—writing on coffins—and then even later, in the New Kingdom (c.1550-1070 B.C.E.), we have scrolls like this that we call the "Books of the Dead."

Beth: Sometimes the texts were written on papyrus, like the one we are looking at, sometimes they were written on shrouds that the dead were buried in… These were really important texts that were originally just for kings in the Old Kingdom, but came to be used by people who were not just part of the royal family, but still people of high rank, and that's what we're looking at here. This text was found in the tomb of someone named Hu-Nefer, a scribe.

Steven: A scribe had a priestly status, so we are dealing here with somebody who was literate, who occupied a very high station in Egyptian culture. And we actually see representations of a man who had died, who was buried with this text. If you look on the left edge of the scroll at the top, you can see a crouching figure in white, Hu-Nefer, who is speaking to a line of crouching deities (gods) professing the good life that he lived—that he's earned a place in the afterlife.

Hu-Nefer's Judgment in the presence of Osiris, Book of the Dead (scale detail with Anubis right and Ammit left), 19th Dynasty, New Kingdom, c. 1275 B.C.E., papyrus, Thebes, Egypt (British Museum) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: Well, what we have below is a scene of judgment: whether Hu-Nefer has lived a good life and deserves to live into the afterlife. And we see Hu-Nefer again, this time standing on the far left…

Steven: …and we can recognize him because he's wearing the same white robe.

Beth: He's being led by the hand, by a god with a jackal head, Anubis, a god that is associated with the dead, with mummification, with cemeteries. And he's carrying an ankh in his left hand.

Steven: …a symbol of eternal life, and that's exactly what Hu-Nefer is after.

Beth: If we continue to move toward the right, we see that jackal-headed god again, Anubis, this time crouching and adjusting a scale…

Steven: …making sure that it is exactly balanced. On the left side, we see the heart of the dead…

Beth: …so the heart is on one side of the scale, on the other side there's a feather. The feather belongs to Ma'at, who we also see at the very top of the scale. We can see a feather coming out of her head. Now, Ma'at is a deity associated with divine order—with living an ethical, ordered life.

Steven: And in this case, the feather is lower, the feather is *heavier*. Hu-Nefer has lived an ethical life, and therefore is brought into the afterlife.

Hu-Nefer's Judgment in the presence of Osiris, Book of the Dead, 19th Dynasty, New Kingdom, c. 1275 B.C.E., papyrus, Thebes, Egypt (British Museum) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Beth: So he won't be devoured by that evil-looking beast next to Anubis. That's Ammit, who has the head of a crocodile, the body of a lion, and the hind-quarters of a hippopotamus. He's waiting to devour Hu-Nefer's heart, should he be found to have *not*lived an ethical life, *not*lived according to Ma'at.

Steven: The Egyptians believed that only if you lived the ethical life, only if you pass this test, would you be able to have access to the afterlife. It's not like the Christian conception, where you have an afterlife for everybody, no matter if they were blessed or sinful—that is, you either go to Heaven or you go to Hell. Here, you only go to the afterlife if you have been found to be ethical.

Beth: The next figure that we see is another deity, this time with the head of an ibis, of a bird. This is Thoth, who is reporting the proceedings of what happens to Hu-Nefer, and in this case, reporting that he has succeeded and will move on to the afterlife.

Steven: I love the representation of Thoth. He is so upright, and his arm is stretched out, rendered in such a way that we trust him that he's going to get this right.

Beth: Next, we see Hu-Nefer yet again, this time being introduced to one of the supreme gods in the Egyptian pantheon, Osiris. And he's being introduced to Osiris by Osiris' son, Horus.

Hu-Nefer's Judgment in the presence of Osiris, Book of the Dead, 19th Dynasty, New Kingdom, c. 1275 B.C.E., papyrus, Thebes, Egypt (British Museum) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Steven: Horus is easy to remember, Horus is associated with a falcon, and here has a falcon's head. Horus is the son of Osiris and holds in his left hand an ankh, which we saw earlier, and again, that's a symbol of eternal life. He is introducing him to Osiris as you said, who is in this fabulous enclosure, speaking to the importance of this deity.

Beth: He's enthroned, he carries symbols of Egypt, and he sits behind a lotus blossom, a symbol eternal life. On top of that lotus blossom are Horus' four children, who represent the four cardinal points: North, South, East, and West.

Steven: The children of Horus are responsible for caring for the internal organs that would be placed in canopic jars, so they have a critical responsibility for keeping the dead preserved.

Beth: We see Horus again, but symbolized as an eye. Now remember, Horus is represented as a falcon—as a bird—and so here, even though he's the symbol of the eye, he has talons instead of hands, and those carry an ostrich feather, also a symbol of eternal life.

Steven: The representation of the eye of Horus has to do with another ancient Egyptian myth, the battle between Horus and Seth, but that's another story.

Beth: Now, behind Osiris, we see two smaller standing female figures, one of whom is Isis, Osiris's wife, the other is her sister, Nephthys, who's a guardian of the afterlife and mother of Anubis, the figure who we saw at the very beginning leading Hu-Nefer into judgment.

Steven: Notice the white platform that those figures are standing on. That represents natron (sodium carbonate decahydrate, sodium bicarbonate, sodium chloride and sodium sulfate), the natural salts that were deposited in the Nile. They were used by the ancient

Egyptians to dry out all of the mummies that are in this room, so that they could be preserved.

Beth: Actually, the word "preservation" is really key to thinking about Egyptian culture generally, because this is a culture whose forms, whose representations and art, remain remarkably the same for thousands of years. Even though there are periods of instability—or even just before this, we had the Amarna Period, where we saw a very different way of representing the human figure—what we see here, these forms look very familiar to us, because this is the typical way that the ancient Egyptians represented the human figure.

Steven: Even though this is a painting from the New Kingdom (c.1550-1070 B.C.E.), these forms would have been recognizable to Egyptians thousands of years earlier in the Old Kingdom (c.2649-2150 B.C.E.).

Beth: And we see that mixture that we see very often in ancient Egyptian art: of words—of hieroglyphs—of writing and images.

Steven: I love the mix, in our modern culture we really make a distinction between written language and the visual arts, and here in ancient Egypt, there really is this closer relationship, this greater sense of integration.

Watch the video. <https://youtu.be/WceVwMdN0eE>

Hu-Nefer's Book of the Dead in case (British Museum) (photo: Steven Zucker, CC BY-NC-SA 2.0)

Acknowledgments

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