Chapter Title: Ancient Egyptian Art: Image and Response

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Book Title: Amilla

Book Subtitle: The Quest for Excellence. Studies Presented to Guenter Kopcke in Celebration of His 75th Birthday

Book Editor(s): Robert B. Koehl

Published by: INSTAP Academic Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5vj90s.8

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CHAPTER

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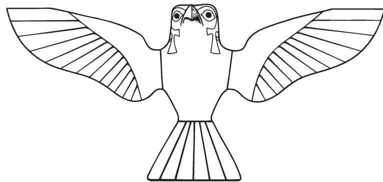

Ancient Egyptian Art: Image and Response

Dorothea Arnold

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

—Wells 2008, 16

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

One aspect suggested by prevailing scholarly understandings of the purpose of Egyptian art that might be relevant in this context is the idea of exclusivity. John Baines, in his essay on the "Status and Purposes of Ancient Egyptian Art" (Baines 2007, 335–336), summarizes this in the concluding paragraphs. Egyptian art, he writes, "served the ordered cosmos, which was celebrated on behalf of the gods and which humanity, as represented by the king and the gods, defended against the chaos. Art defined, encapsulated, and perpetuated that cosmos. At the same time it served the perpetual destinies of ruler and inner elite and circumscribed their lifestyles in relation to the rest of society."

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

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

> The perpetual dialogue with the past and the use of different past models with diverse implications characterize an artistic discourse that is internally self-sustained and exploits this characteristic to assert its significance both to itself and to the wider society. This internal discourse, which provides an analogy within the culture for the relative isolation of Egyptian civilization from its surroundings, is both a legitimization of art and a way in which artists create a context in which only their own concerns matter. As such it is a typically professional phenomenon. Professions, both ancient and modern, are exclusive and assume that only their members can judge the validity of what they do, avoiding recourse to a wider constituency. This characterization applies strongly to the Egyptian elite, and hence to the status of the art.

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

John Boardman, the renowned scholar in your own field, Guenter, also understands exclusivity to be part of the attraction of Egyptian art and culture. But instead of Baines's social approach, Boardman links what he calls the "idiosyncrasy" of Egyptian art with its primary function: the prolongation of life beyond death. The "idiom" of Egyptian art, he writes, "is based on close knowledge and observation of the real but it [the real] was deliberately translated into something else, something more timeless than mere realism. . . . The result is an art which brilliantly expresses what lies beyond realism, the divine, the immortal" (Boardman 2006, 156). It is this beyond-the-real quality of Egyptian art that, according to Boardman, makes it "easy to see how it continues today to be a focus for speculation about the exotic, magical, even extraterrestrial in the arts" (Boardman 2006, 154). The latter aspect of its reception recaptures thoughts and experiences of viewers of Egyptian art from Renaissance and Enlightenment times through today and ultimately goes back to the reactions toward Egypt expressed by the ancient Greeks (Vasunia 2001). To be so long-lasting an ingredient of people's fascination with ancient Egypt, the idea of the culture's exotic, metaphysical nature can certainly not be disregarded as a factor in its allure to the present day. But again: Can that be all? Yes, among all the viewers that derive joy from visiting our galleries there are always a few who are seekers of the spiritual. The majority of viewers, however, simply derive visual pleasure and intellectual enrichment from the encounter with an extraordinary ancient culture. There must be something much more substantial about Egyptian art to generate that kind of reaction.

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

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Egyptian world view transmitted through a singularly visual artistic language.

Let me start my explanation of what I mean by inviting you to look at a relief block found reused in the fill of the pyramid of Amenemhat I (ca. 1981–1978 B.C.E.) at Lisht, but derived from a monument of the much earlier pharaoh Khufu, builder of the Great Pyramid at Giza (ca. 2551–2528 B.C.E.). An original Fourth Dynasty date for the relief, now housed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Fig. 1.1), is indicated by its style and the name of an estate that supplied offerings that include Khufu's cartouche (Goedicke 1971, 18–19; Arnold 1999). The relief shows three oxen, the first one missing its head, the last its tail. These oxen are part of a cortege of offering animals driven toward the

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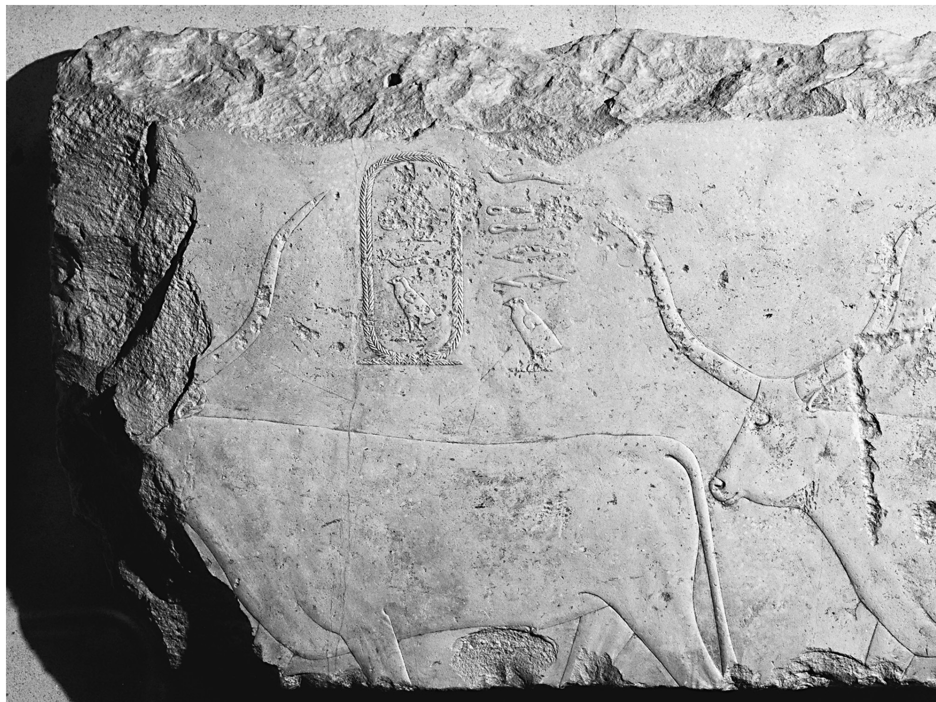

b

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

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

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

The naturalistic details in the animal depiction and the illusion of depth in the relief are largely confined, however, to the interior of the figures. The outlines that determine the identity and posture of each figure are mainly composed according to a set of conventions that were put in place early in the history of Egyptian art and never totally abandoned. Heinrich Schäfer, in his *Von ägyptischer Kunst* of 1919, first identified and described these conventions as a "mental image which . . . is not faithful to a perceived visual impression but image-based (*vorstellig*)" (Schäfer 1986, 91; see also Baines 2007, 209), a term that comes close to what neuroscientists studying the visual perception of humans today call "object-centered perception" (as opposed to a viewer-centered perception that forms the basis for the eventual evolution of representational perspective; see Bruce, Green, and Georgeson 2004, 276). Following Schäfer, the object-centered conventions of two-dimensional Egyptian art have been described by others as a representational system in which each part of an object or figure is represented according to its most characteristic and easily recognizable view (e.g., Smith 1978, 128, 273–350). The end result is an additive or, to use E. Brunner-Traut's term, "aspective" image (Brunner-Traut 1986) that combines various different views of a figure or object into a conceptual rather than realistic representation. Human figures, for example, commonly are depicted with the head, legs, and feet in profile, while torso, eyes, and hands usually are shown in frontal view. Animals are rendered in profile with only such parts as ears or horns seen in frontal view. In both human and animal figures the legs are best made visible by rendering them in a striding posture.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Also intriguing are the claw-shaped, raised areas below the eyes of the Sakhmet statue (Fig. 1.10). The eyes of living lions and lionesses are visually elongated at both the inner and outer corner by dark-colored markings that make the eyes look larger than they are and add to their menacing character. Based on the markings that run from the inner corner of the living animal's eye toward the nose, the sculptors have created sculpturally circumscribed areas shaped like a half crescent. Since the eyes of the statues are more horizontally positioned than the slanted feline eyes of the living animal, possibly to make them look more human, the half crescent-shaped features in the sculptures have become attached to the lower eyelids, and their direction is almost vertical. The sharply pointed ends of these features, however, contribute markedly to the piercing quality of the deity's glance.

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

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