

## CHAPTER 1

# What Is Art?

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*John Baines*

## Introduction: “Art” and the Aesthetic

Studies of ancient Egyptian art since the nineteenth century have generally used approaches and categories similar to those that have dominated research on western art. Earlier Egyptologists and art historians often assumed implicitly that ancient Egypt, being older than European traditions, produced works that were less evolved and at a lower level than those of later times. An opposed, but nonetheless related and continuing tendency has been to say that since no ancient Egyptian term exists that closely corresponds to the modern western concept of art, there was no “art” in ancient Egypt, and to use approaches based on a modern concept would be methodologically slipshod.

Both of these points of departure privilege post-Renaissance and post-eighteenth century western perspectives. They do not take into account the universality of aesthetic concerns in human society, at least since the emergence of modern *Homo sapiens* and probably earlier. If applied to other social phenomena, the terminologically based argument would yield the conclusion that the Egyptians had neither mathematics nor religion, because ancient terms for those domains are lacking. Furthermore, a good correspondence can be found between the Egyptian *hmt* and pre-nineteenth century western terms and usages for “art” (Baines 2007b [1994]).

One reason for the unreflecting use of a western-based approach has been the high degree of apparent congruence between core western artistic genres and those of ancient Egypt. It is seductively easy, and not necessarily wrong, to place architecture, statuary, and painting (here including painted and unpainted low relief) at the center of both traditions. Ancient Egypt, however, is an archaeologically recovered civilization for which a continuous tradition that might describe the living artistic environment and lead into modern discourse is lacking. Because of this disjuncture, one must be very cautious about accepting congruence between ancient and modern traditions and classifications. Although unusual numbers of works in organic and often ephemeral materials survive



from Egyptian antiquity, it remains difficult to gain a sense of the total range of ancient artistic production. For some periods, it is clear that genres other than those just named were at least as significant as the standard trio of architecture, statuary, and painting. The possible range and focus of aesthetic concerns in antiquity should be left open for testing against material and indirect evidence, as well as against reconstructions of the ancient context.

Another complication often encountered in nineteenth and twentieth-century western attitudes to art—whether or not what is discussed belongs in the western tradition—is the widespread assumption that only works that have no function beyond being aesthetic objects can be termed art. The art world of today—displaying new creations or those from the past—is then seen as a domain of action and experience that would be partly detached from its social context and from other areas of human experience. The programmatic title of Hans Belting’s work on medieval religious icons: *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image Before the Era of Art* (1994 [1990]) raises the implication that the icons might not have been “art” by more recent definitions because they had functions. Problems with taking lack of function to be a defining feature are evident. For example, because most works of architecture have a clear utility, they would be excluded from belonging to the category of art, as would a high proportion of what was produced in many aesthetic domains before the modern period of art galleries and museums—homes for functionless objects. The same would apply to a great deal of music and literature. Moreover, within their modern setting, objects in art galleries and museums do not lack a function: they are cultural artifacts that serve numerous purposes, including some that have been fulfilled by religion in other societal contexts. Be this as it may, one should assume that all aesthetic products have a function; the non-functional definition is an obstacle to understanding.

The rise of the art gallery and museum in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contributed to narrowing the conception of art. By contrast, developments in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, in which the range of activities of visual artists extends to include performances and various interventions in the environment, have been helpful in stimulating thought about the range of phenomena and traditions, whether surviving or lost, that might have belonged to ancient artistic environments. Here one might compare Richard Bradley’s concluding question in his *Image and Audience: Rethinking Prehistoric Art*: “Is it possible that, quite by chance, Installation Art and Conceptual Art have more in common with prehistoric archaeology than they do with the dominant trends in the Modern Movement?” (Bradley (2009), 233–234). Perhaps this parallel is not “quite by chance” but is in keeping with broader human proclivities.

This analogy between ancient practice and modern performance, neither of which fits familiar categories, suggests that, while some western ideas about art and the debates surrounding it can stand in the way of productive approaches to ancient Egyptian art, other western developments can point toward a broader understanding. Since study of ancient Egypt is necessarily undertaken from an outside perspective, it is legitimate to exploit such parallels. Is it possible to define art satisfactorily for ancient contexts, and how close will such a definition be to definitions used elsewhere? Rather than addressing this question directly, in this chapter I survey issues that I consider to be relevant to the context and significance of art in ancient society. I characterize art informally as the complete range of aesthetically ordered activity in a society, whether or not this results in the production of artifacts or leaves permanent



traces or other features that can be recovered from the material, pictorial, or textual record. My basic category is thus “the aesthetic” rather than “art.” This expansive approach is intended to avoid excluding anything that might be relevant, and it is tempered by taking into account that art and its products need to be seen in relative terms: things can be more or less artistic and can have more or less effort and value invested in them. In keeping with the aim of this volume, I focus on visual phenomena. Other sensory domains, such as music and verbal art, are embedded in Egyptian visual works and should be borne in mind as integral to the aesthetic environment.

## The Aesthetic Context

The majority of the material culture known from ancient Egypt is aesthetically formed. This preponderance is due, in large part, to the fact that royalty and the elite controlled most of the society’s wealth. They appropriated vast resources in order to create durable monuments and to place products that were as beautiful as possible in locations where they have survived to be found in modern times. Both the contexts for those products—temporary and permanent ordered spaces and structures—and the products themselves constitute works of art in the sense advocated here (the notion of beauty just evoked would repay analysis, but this cannot be offered here).

Indirect evidence shows that aesthetic expenditure in other domains was enormous. One arena, among a number for which pointers are available from many periods, is navigation on water, the most important and prestigious mode of travel and transport. From the beginning of the pictorial tradition in the Naqada I Period onward, images of boats often emphasize their display features (e.g., Landström 1970). These are particularly conspicuous in the decoration of Naqada II period pottery (“D-Ware”; e.g., Patch (2011) 67–77). The Gebel el-Araq knife (Naqada III) shows two types of boats belonging to opponents in a battle, with the victors’ craft having high, decorated prows (e.g., Malek (2003), 24; and see Figure 22.2 in Ataç, this volume). A flotilla of 14 large boats was entombed at Abydos as part of the funeral of a Dynasty 1 king (O’Connor (2009), 182–194). Several larger ships were dismantled and deposited next to the Great Pyramid. The boat that has been reassembled is elaborately designed, with both practical amenities and marked embellishments of form. An image of a river ship from the Dynasty 5 mortuary temple of Sahure is hoist with a huge sail that is shown as colored and embroidered with a flower pattern, a winged disk, and the royal titulary across the top fringe (Borchardt et al. (1913), pl. 9). A stela that narrates the architectural and spatial remodeling of Thebes by the Dynasty 18 king Amenhotep III has a section describing the newly commissioned river barque of Amun-Re, which is accorded almost equal status with major temples (O’Connor (1998), 162–165, figs 5.5, 5.6).

Two of the ships just mentioned survive, and they happen to be plain in appearance. Images of royal and divine barques are painted in bright colors and show cloth or leather coverings to cabins; the effect they gave through their reflection in the river is described in the stela text just mentioned. The finest barques would have been gilded. They were part of a culture of display on the river that gave indispensable élan to the movement of gods, kings, and elite. Funeral processions, sometimes conveyed on land and sometimes

by water, were comparably significant arenas of display; the salience of such processions is evident both from images of them and from the grave goods which survive in particularly large quantities from the New Kingdom (e.g., much material in Brovarski, Doll, and Freed 1982). Although such funerals would have been performed only for the wealthiest, high mortality and variable age at death made them more prominent in people's normal lives than comparable events are in the modern world. Moreover, the reality that the tomb would almost certainly be robbed, of which most people were surely aware, could only heighten the significance of the process of the funeral and the ceremony of burial, when the material was intact and being used for its intended purpose.

Thus, ceremonies of travel, festivals, and funerals were strongly aesthetic performances, and if possible, sited in aesthetically ordered locations (e.g., Plate 1). They presumably followed custom or defined rules, but they no doubt also departed at times from inherited forms in order to enhance their character, or to evoke modes hallowed by antiquity, as is stated in the tomb of Kheruef, where the performance of the *sed*-festival of Amenhotep III is depicted in the artistic style of its period but with archaizing details of costume and dance steps (Epigraphic Survey (1980), 43–45, pls. 24–28, 33–40). This was also a time when “curiosities” were collected and inscribed (Morenz 2010).

The aesthetic dimension celebrates and enhances single actions and rehearsed performances, impressing both participants and audiences while enjoining intense commitment on the part of the former and providing one among many bases for social distinctions, especially among the latter. Aesthetic qualities are inherent in finished material products as well as in performed works. For the central institutions of society, such as temples, king, and court, the premium placed on such qualities favored the creation of total environments in which as many domains as possible were ordered aesthetically. Those environments reached out, through the all-important mediating spaces of gardens, into the wider landscape. An example is provided here by institutions and practices relating to flowers, which are very widely depicted as accompaniments to rituals (Dittmar 1986), as well as being attested archaeologically (e.g., Hepper 2009; comparative study: Goody 1993, but weak on Egypt). Flowers must have been extensively tended and cultivated. A number of species were valued for symbolic and therapeutic qualities, but visual treatments show that they were appreciated aesthetically, while their perishable character was mitigated in elaborate, staff-like confections, as well as being converted into lasting form in many decorative motifs. Flowers were thus both displayed and performed, being turned into enduring objects and being integral to the general visual repertory.

Display can be in tension with utility. Human beings, being aesthetically attuned, very often give preference to display, or at least invest additional resources in order to create something that is not just useful but also beautiful. The prime arena of such tension is the human body. Much that is done to enhance the body through direct modification, dress, ornament, and comportment, conflicts with practicality, often requiring that the subject suffer in the name of beauty (which can never be easily separated from fashion). Aesthetic discourse about the human body, broadly focused on making it as beautiful as possible within constraints of decorum and fashion, can be observed on Egyptian monuments of many periods, whereas it is not strongly attested in texts. Such management of the body extends to human treatment of animals, both through breeding for at least partly aesthetic ends—conspicuous in dogs from no later than the Naqada III Period (Baines (1993), 64)—and through bodily alteration, as in the practice of deforming one horn



of choice oxen, which is quite widely depicted on monuments from the Old to the New Kingdom (e.g., tomb of Ptahhotep at Saqqara: Lange and Hirmer 1968, pl. 71).

In other cases, aesthetic aspects of things are in harmony with their utility. Aesthetically formed artifacts are very often better fitted to practical functions than those made without aesthetic regard. Well-balanced tools that are pleasing to hold and look at work better than poorly articulated ones. In many societies weapons are favored as objects for aesthetic display. Except in extreme forms, elegantly arranged and inscribed manuscripts are easier to navigate and read than badly written ones. It is difficult to point to an area of human activity where aesthetic concerns are completely absent. In Egypt, domains such as ceramics attracted less aesthetic involvement than in many cultures, but aesthetic concerns are present even there.

## The Aesthetic Community

While any normal Egyptian presumably possessed, to a greater or lesser degree, the aesthetic orientation which is characteristically human, the means to express it were very unequally distributed. The world of the peasant majority is almost entirely inaccessible, and we cannot know how and how far their everyday lives and celebrations were configured aesthetically. Most of the land's wealth was appropriated by royalty and elites who exploited the labor of others, including the peasants, fishermen, herders, and potters who produced necessities, in order to sustain their highly aestheticized way of life. The scale of the most grandiose Egyptian aesthetic products, such as pyramids and temples, shows that the exploiters could motivate vast numbers of people to participate in projects that entailed significant deprivation, even if there were compensatory advantages, such as the experience of different modes of living in the strikingly elaborate buildings and material provision at the town site south of the Giza pyramids (e.g., Baines (2009–2010), 127–136). One thing that made such exploitation possible was the workers' own susceptibility to the common goal and aesthetic impact of the enterprise.

The community that directed aesthetic matters, consisting primarily of royalty and elites, was not understood to be the prime beneficiary: in their and others' eyes, the beneficiaries were the gods. While the gods do not appear to have absorbed the bulk of the investment for lasting works in the third millennium, from the New Kingdom onward they clearly did so. By the Greco-Roman period temples were overwhelmingly dominant as environments and were works of art in their own right in the indigenous cultural context. To some extent, the same was true in the context of the largely Hellenistic milieu of the rulers (Arnold 1999).

Gods, the king, and elites generally directed the people who actually made works of art. Yet although the large numbers who were needed to make anything more than simple, small-scale artifacts were drawn from outside the elite, there was no neat division between these groups. Moreover, artistic activities such as architectural design, manufacturing and transporting colossal monuments and the creation of statuary, were so prestigious that they feature in the self-presentations of leading members of society. A unique example is the naming of an "overseer of sculptors" on a colossal statue base of Djoser from the Dynasty 3 Step Pyramid complex at Saqqara (unlikely to be Imhotep, contrary to widespread assumption: Gunn (1926), 187–196). Old Kingdom "Overseers of all the



king's works" were men of the highest status who probably directed the construction of pyramid complexes and may have been their architects or people responsible for the overall design (Strudwick (1985), 217–250). Some Old Kingdom tomb owners depicted sculptors and painters as favored members of their own entourages (Junker 1959). Prestigious specialist areas of production, such as jewelry-making, are mentioned in titularies, belonging in some cases to quite high-ranking people, who could have supervised jewelers or possibly been executants. The Old Kingdom leatherworker, Weta, possessed a fine stone sarcophagus (Donadoni Roveri (1969), 132–133, pl. xxxvi.1). From the Amarna period, when change in artistic forms was intense and rapid, names of several sculptors are known. An ivory horse blinker found in the house compound of the sculptor Thutmose, from which came the painted bust of Nefertiti, shows that he possessed a chariot, a status marker that had no direct utility for his occupation (Krauss and Newesely 1983).

Thus, members of the elite were not just aesthetic consumers or audiences, but also patrons, project directors, administrators, and to some extent designers or executants. They also had multiple connections outside their circles. Those who were of lower status emulated the elites and shared their aesthetic values, no doubt in part because other values were not easily available. How far such values penetrated the wider population cannot be known, and degrees of penetration may have varied in different periods: late prehistory and much of the third millennium appear to have been times of aesthetic plainness for many people, on occasion including the elite (Wengrow (2006), 151–175; Manuelian (2003), 167–169). A New Kingdom settlement area such as Kom Rabia in Memphis provides a different picture of large amounts of relatively ordinary aesthetic products used by people of lower elite status (Giddy 1999).

Making and performing art required many people. During periods when works were created in vast quantities and at a large scale, a significant proportion of the total population contributed directly to aesthetic production. In this network of patrons and executants, there were sub-elites whose activities and identities centered on the elite even though they may have resided among the wider population. Thus, in addition to being a consumer of art, the elite aesthetic community was an audience for art during its creation and probably supplied some participants or performers. The ideal audience extended further to all the groups that constituted Egyptian society—deities, the dead, the king, and humanity—even if most of the final group had little access to the products and performances. Furthermore, as in many traditions, much aesthetic creation was seldom or never seen after it was produced, because it was deposited in the ground or rendered inaccessible in other ways. In making things that would not be seen, executants followed their socially embedded aesthetic promptings and responded to their human patrons and peers, while having the suprahuman and deceased audience in mind as dedicatees and consumers. Texts, for example in the Ptolemaic period temple of Edfu, state that deities responded with delight to seeing the perfection of the work that the king and humanity created for them (e.g., Kurth (1994), 80–88).

## Pictorial Representation

Some artistic domains or genres are pictorial or representational, and others are not. This distinction is not intrinsically one of value, but representation can possess value for





what it is and does, as it clearly did in ancient Egypt. Individual pictorial images of the dynastic period—as opposed to whole scenes—were generally close to reality in outline and proportions; what they depicted could and can be easily identified. This focus on real things extended to composite forms, notably in decorative arts such as ceiling designs and textiles, most of which used abstract shapes less often than recognizable elements derived from prototypes in the natural or cultural world. The same is true of many architectural forms, with the notable exception of highly geometric structures such as pyramids.

Representation extended to entities of unknowable visual and spatial character, notably deities and the underworld (e.g., Hornung 1990), both of which were widely depicted in Egyptian art. In the case of deities, the use of human form to represent them did not imply that they “looked like” their pictures. Texts demonstrate that deities were believed not to have any single physical manifestation (e.g., Hornung (1982 [1971]), 100–142). Rather, they inhabited visible shapes, including statues, and those shapes displayed a domain of exchange between humanity and the gods. Cult statues also acted as a prime locus for human–divine contact. The ultimate form of deities could not be known.

At the ideological core of the system of two-dimensional representation and associated iconography was temple relief. This shows deities and the king interacting to mutual benefit in a context that is at once abstract—mostly lacking specific markers of place—and cosmographic: each scene or group of scenes represents an idealized cosmos. The king is human, but his assumption of a divine role enables him, unlike other humans, to be depicted with the gods and to act as the protagonist of the human world in relation to the divine realm. However, this convention weakened from the late Middle Kingdom onward for all contexts except temple relief, so that people and gods were increasingly included within a single scene. Depictions of the king with gods had no close correlate in the living world, not even in temples, because the cult was performed by priests rather than the king. Priests are shown only in special contexts, notably in scenes where cult images of deities are taken out in procession while remaining shrouded inside shrines. Scenes in temples thus present an analogy for the cult, not a direct representation. Moreover, cult images themselves, which were only seldom depicted, seem to have been very diverse in form and did not necessarily conform to general norms of representation.

If temple relief, as the central and most prestigious context of representation, mostly shows activities that did not happen in the way in which they are depicted, one should be cautious about taking other pictorial subjects as realistic in any simple sense. There is a tension between the center, with its restricted range of forms that are constrained by decorum, and modes used in other contexts. From non-royal monuments to more ephemeral decoration and live performance and practice, the pleasure of visual forms was experienced by human beings more than by the gods. Those who commissioned the works had an evident desire to create beautiful environments, both for the gods and for themselves.

A central unifying feature across many visual contexts is the rendering of the human form with near-natural proportions, which gives a characteristic appearance to Egyptian pictorial art as a whole. The proportions and scale of human figures also form a basis for multi-register compositions. This treatment and focus set Egyptian art apart from the traditions of some early civilizations, such as that of Bronze Age China, which maintained an almost entirely non-representational character for over a millennium. Modern, particularly modernist, art critics such as Henriette Groenewegen-Frankfort (1951) tended



to favor traditions with more strongly abstract decorative tendencies or focused on traditions that more overtly dramatize their subject matter. Approaches like these led to negative evaluations of Egyptian decorative art in particular. Such evaluations are irrelevant to the ancient context, not least because they make no attempt to comprehend the roles of representation and decoration in that context. Egyptian art conveys many meanings through pictorial representation, from the relatively literal to the strongly symbolic, iconographic, and indirect. In most contexts pictorial forms carried a higher value than pattern-based ones, and pictures were more prestigious than writing (e.g. Baines (1999), 34–35), even though the two were designed to operate together through the pictorial character of hieroglyphic signs. In tomb and temple decoration, pictorial compositions occupy the main wall surfaces, while more strongly patterned designs that make less use of the human figure and more use of extensive texts, typically appear in peripheral areas.

As in many traditions, the mimetic side of Egyptian representation, which can be strongly virtuosic, for example in the rendering of skin and flesh in relief (Figure 1.1), could have a value in itself, and one that can be contrasted with others, such as delight in the evocation of shapes and textures in painting through just a few brushstrokes (many detailed examples in Mekhitarian 1954). Mimesis is intrinsically difficult, and mastery of it in two and three dimensions was prestigious. Displays of mastery include departures from standard types in the rendering of genre figures in the finest Old Kingdom tombs, such as that of Ti (Epron, Daumas, and Wild 1939–1966) and the differentiation of facial types in statuary, notably of late Dynasties 12 and 18 and the Late Period. A comparable phenomenon in a different context is the proliferation of detail and inventive composition in the depiction of offerings, a motif ubiquitous both in temples and on non-royal monuments (Robins 1998). In the deployment of detail, rich surface textures can complement and compete with mimetic aspects, constituting a stylistic tendency that is evident, for example, in the Theban late Dynasty 11 (e.g., Bisson de la Roque 1937), in reliefs in Theban tombs like that of Ramose (e.g., Lange and Hirmer (1968), pls. 172–178), and in temples of the Greco-Roman period (such as some areas at Kom Ombo, not published in photographs).

One subject of works of art is the making of art. Scenes or texts on monuments from many periods show the production and transport of works of statuary, architecture, jewelry, and tomb equipment, as well as the creation of relief and painting, though this was less easily depicted. First-millennium examples include additional motifs, such as the manufacture of perfumes (e.g., Aldred et al. (1980), 83, fig. 64), which formed part of the aesthetic and performance-oriented environment. Depictions of gardens and ordered settings for funerals and festivals are also renderings of art within art.

In texts and images, the engineering side of artistic production can hardly be separated from more obviously aesthetic concerns, but the former predominates in descriptive texts. Amenhotep III's namesake, Amenhotep Son of Hapu, oversaw the transport of the enormous quartzite Memnon Colossi to the king's mortuary temple and commemorated his achievement in the inscriptions on several of his own statues (Helck (1958), pp. 1822–1823, 1833). One should not, however, conclude that size was the principal criterion of achievement. Perhaps the engineering was more prominent than aesthetics because it was more exceptional (although only one text focuses explicitly on the statues' dimensions); works of more ordinary scale were made all the time. The colossal statues engaged more participants for their installation and were seen by more people. Aesthetic





**Figure 1.1** Standing figure of Kagemni in his tomb at Saqqara, room IV, west wall, Old Kingdom, early Dynasty 6. Photo Paolo Scremin. By kind permission of Paolo Scremin and Yvonne Harpur. © Oxford Expedition to Egypt.

aspects are more difficult to describe compellingly, and it would go without saying that the statues should be as beautiful as possible. The king's reward to Amenhotep was to give him statues of himself to set up in the temple of Amun. These statues, one of which bears a text narrating the statue transport, are noteworthy for their design and execution rather than for their size, being among the premier works of the period (e.g., Varille (1968), pls. iii–iv; Romano (1979), pl. viii, no. 117). Both these and another statue (which was restored in a later period: Lange and Hirmer (1968), pl. 159), revive Middle Kingdom types, displaying the depth of cultural knowledge that was at the disposal of king and elite.

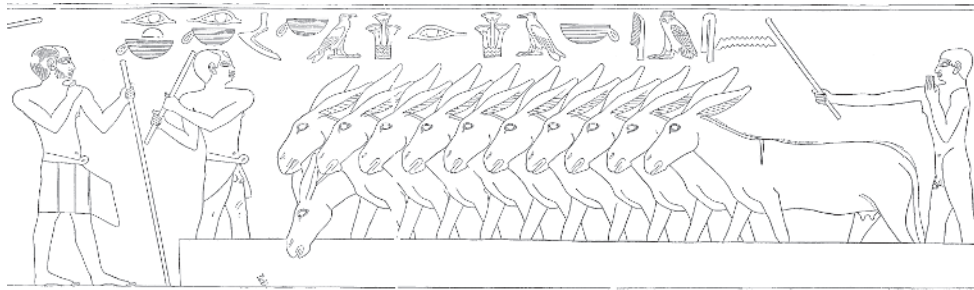
From late Dynasties 18 and 19 come a number of biographical inscriptions of artists, in various media and genres, that testify to their high social standing, and state that they executed commissions across the land (Frood (2007), 117–139). The creation of statues of deities went together with festivals and rituals within temples, integrating artistic skills, the use of rare materials, and religious participation. A different and revealing case is a relief in the tomb of the vizier Paser that shows him visiting the “house of gold,” where a group of sculptors present a statue of the king to the vizier. The statue is to be gilded. In the caption, Paser praises the sculptor and reports on the king’s satisfaction with the work, which is made according to an ancient model (Assmann 1992). The captions include strong religious elements and praise the statue’s quality. The goldsmiths shown in the lower register are said to be making vessels for offering stands, with representational works being made side by side with objects of other types. This is a broad, religiously charged, aesthetic environment in which works in various genres are produced, not a context of craftwork.

The integration of magical power, special knowledge, and skill is evident in the Dynasty 11 stela of the artist Irtisen, which uses florid, often obscure language to describe his accomplishments in pictorial representation, as well as some technical processes, stating that his whole expertise is a matter of initiation and will be passed on exclusively to his eldest son (Barta 1970; Delange 2000). Here, as in many cultures (e.g., Davis 1997), aesthetic concerns and making sacred things explicitly involve status and exclusivity. This may be one reason why few texts mention artistic methods and techniques; another reason may be that such matters are not well conveyed in language or easily coopted for prestige and display. The magical aspect of Irtisen’s knowledge can be associated with the widespread use of pictorial representation in magical and other rites, including the notion that a priest must imagine the form of a statue in order to revivify its owner (Fischer-Elfert 1998).

## Idealization

The interest in rendering real forms (evoked above) aimed not at a narrow realism, but at an idealization. Idealization is common to most artistic traditions: people and things should be shown at their best or their most typical. The latter aim can approach caricature, for example in genre subjects such as the emaciated herdsmen in some Middle Kingdom tombs (Maitland, in preparation). The same person can be represented in more than one ideal form. Men are youthfully perfect in physique in one statue or relief, while they are fatter through success and bureaucratic ease in another, a pairing that is common in Old Kingdom statuary and false-door reliefs (Fischer (1963), 17–22). Women, as in many societies, are rarely shown other than youthful and elegant; details of dress and accoutrements, rather than of physical allure, distinguish the generations of a mother and her adult daughter. Egyptian ideals of male and female form happen to be close to those of today’s west, a coincidence that can cause us to overlook that the manner of depiction is culturally specific. The idealization is made clear by cases where women are depicted in abject circumstances, notably in Old Kingdom tombs showing them nursing babies while attending to other demanding tasks (e.g., Harpur and Scremin (2010), 72–78, 579).

These patterns show that idealization normally correlates with status: the higher someone’s status, the more he or she is idealized. Figures that are not idealized often display



**Figure 1.2** Group of donkeys threshing; one opens its mouth and lowers its head to eat some of the grain. Saqqara, tomb of Ti, chapel, east wall, north section, second register from bottom, Old Kingdom, late Dynasty 5. After Epron, Dumas, and Wild (1939–1966, III pl. clv).

virtuosity in the depiction and differentiation of types or individuals. Late Dynasty 12 statues and some reliefs, in which the king is rendered as haggard with a clearly identifiable physiognomy, fuse virtuosity in rendering with a specific idealization that signifies the caring role of a particular ruler (e.g., Tefnin 1992).

Idealization does not rule out humor and particularity, notably in “scenes of daily life.” Humor is difficult to identify in works from a remote culture, but it is clear in scene captions, especially of the Old Kingdom, and highly probable in many genre details (e.g., Houlihan 2001), as well as in much imaginative literature. Details that enlivened common motifs were appreciated. An example is a donkey in a group threshing grain that bends down to take a mouthful, probably alluding to a general stereotype of donkeys as wayward and greedy (Figure 1.2). Patrons and viewers presumably took delight in such things in this life and wished to do so in the next world as well.

## Enactment

Much of the aesthetic environment was in lived contexts that are now inaccessible. A particularly intense aesthetic organization can be assumed for palaces. Indirect evidence for the functioning of palaces appears notably in Dynasty 5 decoration of the mortuary temple and approach causeway of Sahure (Borchardt et al. 1913; el-Awady 2009; Brinkmann 2010), in the remains of the palace complex of Amenhotep III and related structures at el-Malkata on the Theban West Bank (Koltsida 2007, with refs), and in the tomb of Tutankhamun. The last of these offers illuminating examples.

Tutankhamun’s tomb and its contents present several features that are relevant here. Many pieces had been used, presumably in palace contexts during the king’s life. Significant numbers of furnishings had been altered, notably after the abandonment of the reforms of Akhenaten near the beginning of Tutankhamun’s reign. Among the more fragile objects, several thrones showed signs of previous damage, strongly suggesting that they had not been made for the tomb (Eaton-Krauss 2008). Other objects, such as the small golden shrine (e.g., Robins 2010), had no clear mortuary purpose and again are likely to have been used in life. This is true also of many boxes and garments. The evidence that the plethora of elaborately decorated pieces (many made from rare, costly,

and intractable materials) were used in life shows that the king's surroundings were saturated with artistically complex objects, no doubt organized by his ritualized everyday life and by the choreography of special occasions in which he was the protagonist.

After the king's unexpected death, a small tomb that had not been intended for him was filled with this material. Both images of elaborate elite funerals from the same period (e.g., Lange and Hirmer (1968), pls xxviii–xxix, 171) and a painting in Tutankhamun's burial chamber showing the funerary cortege of the highest officials (e.g., Reeves (1990), 72; Robins 2007) suggest that the transport of material to the tomb would have been a major event, unless such actions were performed in secret for kings.

Within the cramped tomb, those who performed the deposition made a virtue of necessity in the arrangement they created. The process of deposition would have constituted a significant experience for the small numbers of people involved, including the grief felt by some of them. A sense of order and enactment emerges from the placement of objects. Order is evident, for example, in the arrangement of a group of pieces around the small golden shrine, in a corner next to the entrance to the annex (Eaton-Krauss and Graefe 1985, pl. ii), and in the approach to the treasury, which was reached through the sarcophagus chamber and must have been filled before the actual burial. In the treasury itself, a statue of Anubis on a chest acted as a visual guardian, behind which—and thus deposited earlier—was the canopic shrine, toward which led a set of chests ranked by increasing size. Set up behind a gilded statue of a Hathor cow's head, immediately in front of the shrine, were three ceramic offering stands with lids that evoked a completed ritual action (e.g., Reeves (1990), 86–87). The treasury also contained numerous boat models that were placed as high as possible, on top of other objects, perhaps evoking the deceased's emergence from the tomb in the next world and his celestial and terrestrial navigation there.

This deposition, which was influenced by chance factors in the makeshift setting, was accompanied by elaborate procedures that included much wrapping in cloth, making the filling of the tomb a sequence of actions with aesthetic as well as ritual import. The process must have been largely improvised, because the tomb had to be filled by following general principles of design and order rather than an existing pattern. Similar principles presumably operated in lost contexts of ceremonial and elite living.

## The Unity of Aesthetic Forms

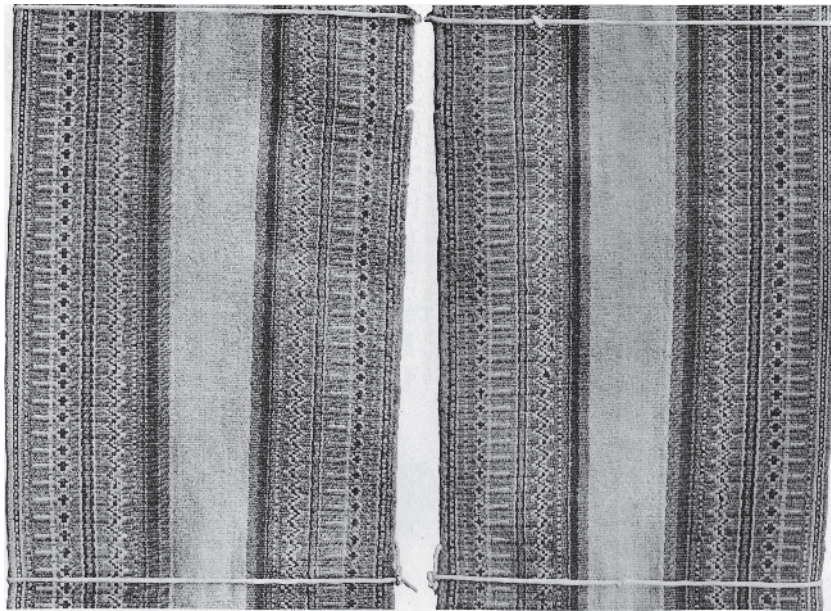
As already remarked, surviving aesthetically formed materials appear generally consistent in visual terms, a quality that is regularly noted, if not always admiringly, by modern observers. While there is no reason to question the impression of unity (but not uniformity or sameness) in the case of architectural and representational works, it may not have had quite the character that is perceived today, after the near-complete loss of perishable materials and of many pigments. Because the survival of color is at best patchy and much painting of relief was planned but never executed, Egyptian art can seem more focused on outlines and unadorned three-dimensional shapes than was the case in fact. Much complex, enriching detail has disappeared. Here, some western usages in statuary and misconceptions about ancient art, which have privileged plain and monochrome forms from the Renaissance onward, in addition to constraints of reproduction of images,



have tended to draw Egyptian art into the orbit of classical antiquity where, for example, polychromy and use of patterning on statuary have only recently been fully accepted and analyzed (e.g., Brinkmann and Wünsche 2007).

The idea that the Egyptian aesthetic field was largely unified is surely correct, but in many periods its unity was probably much richer and gaudier than can now be appreciated, as glimpsed in the detailing and color of the linen “girdle” of Ramesses III (Figure 1.3), an object that can be compared with rich painted details in the king’s mortuary temple at Medinet Habu. Moreover, the widespread presence of whimsical pieces among smaller object types, such as decorated spoons (Wallert 1967)—whether or not they possessed strong symbolic aspects—or pictorial ostraca (e.g., Minault-Gout 2002), shows that the earnest and literal-minded character often ascribed to Egyptian art does not do justice to its range. These pieces exploit the same visual vocabulary as major works of architecture and representational art, for example by using architectural motifs like the cavetto cornice that scholars tend to see as carrying sacred meanings. Small and ephemeral forms were probably perceived as belonging ultimately in the same aesthetic domain as temple decoration (as discussed above), along with more “serious” works.

A couple of exceptions to this widespread unity are revealing. First, the corpus of amulets and related objects from late Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Period burials in the Nile valley includes many types that are not otherwise attested (Dubiel 2008). These pieces, which often show wear and were thus not exclusively funerary, suggest that the aesthetic and apotropaic practices of provincial populations differed, at least in part, from elite norms. Stephan Seidlmayer (2001) has drawn a related conclusion from the configuration of burials of the same general period at Elephantine, in which he observes a



**Figure 1.3** “Girdle” bearing the name of Ramesses III in a hieratic annotation; linen, length ca. 5.2 m. National Museums Liverpool (World Museum). After Van Gennep and Jéquier (1916), pl. 10.

change in the early Middle Kingdom to a mythologized style of interment that was closer to elite types. Second, several widespread types of ceramic figurines of women that seem to have been used in ritual fall outside general representational and stylistic conventions (Pinch (1993), 197–234; Waraksa 2009). These are found in contexts where those conventions otherwise apply, suggesting that they were believed to possess special properties that were inseparable from their form. However, New Kingdom types of these figurines include ones that conform to more standard conventions. This change may show that associated ritual practices declined or that they became more closely embedded in the normative, elite-focused aesthetic culture.

The non-standard amulets and female figurines might be compared with the “preformal” provincial culture, which Barry Kemp proposes characterized shrines and offerings deposited in them in the third millennium before being gradually superseded by more standardized forms in the Middle Kingdom (Kemp (1989), 65–83; (2006), 112–135; see also Bussmann 2010). These two sets of phenomena, however, belonged in different periods. Moreover, the figurines were situated, perhaps a little uncomfortably, within the dominant aesthetic as “folk” phenomena. Such phenomena, particularly ones relating to healing, are accorded a special position in many high cultures.

Artifacts or artifact types that fall outside general conventions are much rarer from the first millennium BCE than from the foregoing periods. Unlike the distinct but clearly Egyptian forms of the earlier figurines, Late Period objects that are neither Egyptian nor Greek in character emulate Egyptian style, as with an aberrant statuette of Osiris, perhaps of the fourth century BCE, found at Saqqara (Emery (1970), pl. viii, 1–2). It seems that indigenous visual culture became more uniform in later Egypt, surviving for many centuries in the face of the modes associated with Ptolemaic and Roman rulers and elites. This increased uniformity, during a time when the country was often politically fragmented, as well as being largely under foreign rule in the latter stages, is a measure of the power and significance of Egyptian forms. Those forms continued to develop and to relate in creative ways to their own past, as well as exerting enormous influence in the Near East and in the Greco-Roman world.

## Change and Tradition

Significant, aesthetically meaningful works result from choices made by patrons, designers, and executants. Although some categories of artifacts, such as block statues of the first millennium BCE, can seem rather stereotyped, little material with any aesthetic pretension that survives from Egyptian antiquity is mass-produced. Even when a manuscript of the Book of the Dead was created and the name of its recipient either left blank or filled in later, the choice of vignettes and layout was not strongly standardized (e.g., Taylor (2010), nos. 149, 155). Exercise of choice requires that the actors engage with existing tradition, in which the immediate past is the necessary context of training for future personnel (compare e.g., Bagley (2008), 118–119).

The principal arena of change is among elite social groups, and the elite’s desire to display difference in what they commissioned is evident in the patterning of the record. Emulation and competition should be posited as central to the processes of change. Difference is also essential to aesthetic response: it attracts attention because human



perception is focused by what is not uniform. The fact that pressures toward change and difference are seldom explicit in written sources does not mean that they were absent.

Complex responses to the past, as well as interest in recovering remote and damaged materials from it, are evident from many periods. Two early instances are revealing. The Hierakonpolis Main Deposit, a vast body of prestige objects in a range of materials that varied in age by some centuries, was buried at an unknown date perhaps during Dynasty 1 (McNamara 2008, with refs). Most of the object types found there have no close parallel from later periods perhaps, in part, through chances of preservation but also because ritual and aesthetic practices changed. Around two centuries later, tens of thousands of stone vessels of Dynasties 1 and 2 were interred in galleries under the early Dynasty 3 Step Pyramid of Djoser. At that point, such vessels, in many different stones, ceased to be a major aesthetic genre. Since many pieces were inscribed with royal and religious information (e.g., Roth (1991), 145–195), this deposition too probably signaled change in ritual practice. The superseded objects were buried in a sacred place rather than being discarded. Acts like these, perhaps more than coincidentally, sometimes laid the ground for later revivals as people returned over long periods to important sites, on occasion excavating ancient structures (e.g., Baines and Riggs 2001).

Interplay between the recent past and more remote times imparts patterns to aesthetic choices, in addition to increasing aesthetic options. It is meaningful to choose a past period as a stylistic or iconographic source, and for a cultured audience the choice between models from different periods in the past is also significant. Scholars often interpret such choices in political or ideological terms, and that must be at least partly valid. The early Dynasty 12 emulation of late Old Kingdom monuments and styles made valuable rhetorical points at a crucial historical juncture, displaying specific artistic and ideological values (Silverman, Simpson, and Wegner 2009). By contrast, the eighth-century BCE introduction of a plain, archaizing style in statuary and relief cannot be linked as neatly to historical events, because it began a generation or two before wider political changes (Leahy 1992). In such a case, the development of taste is probably a crucial factor. Taste, or the predilection for particular styles and techniques within a social group (perhaps led by a small number of individuals), should always be accorded a significant role in aesthetic developments. Taste can be influenced, positively or negatively, by anything that patrons or artists have seen. From the New Kingdom, some types of luxury materials have a similar character across the whole Near East (see Feldman 2005, who slightly overstates their similarity). Indigenous Egyptian architecture, relief, and painting of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods show a complex interplay of styles (Arnold 1999; Riggs 2005), some of it so subtle that Hellenistic influence was long overlooked (McKenzie (2007), 119–146).

## What Is Distinctively Egyptian?

Egyptian artistic forms constitute a coherent whole. From the late fourth millennium onward, those forms were normative within Egyptian civilization and highly influential beyond. The earliest surviving art that displays a clear influence of developed Egyptian forms may be the relief-decorated incense burners from Cemetery L at Qustul in Lower Nubia, dating to Naqada IIIA (Williams (1986), pls 33–38). The same influence

is pervasive on Syrian and Palestinian seals of the early second millennium (Teissier 1996), a common and durable genre that attests to styles and motifs that were no doubt present in perishable media. Even today, several millennia later, Egyptian influence and Egyptianizing art are familiar in many genres (e.g., Humbert and Price 2003). People see Egyptian art as both distinctive and attractive.

What is it about the art that is so distinctive and appealing? The large Egyptian investment in aesthetic matters can be paralleled in many cultures and so cannot be the answer. It is the clarity and consistency of Egyptian forms, as well as the sense of order that they impart, that communicate so effectively and appeal to so many people. Fundamental among these forms are the treatment of the human body, the use of registers, and the norms of proportion that contribute to lucid pictorial compositions (Robins 1994). Dense and complex scenes adhere to the same principles as open and simple ones: they are read and convey their meaning against the same background of clarity and order. Exceptions, such as cases where (often with symbolic or humorous intent) tall elements break out of registers or borderlines are crossed (e.g., Figure 1.1), show that the principles of art were consciously understood and could be adroitly manipulated.

Whatever may have been the stimuli that originally drew Egyptian art to develop in the direction it did, its role at the core of the aesthetic system in temple relief and its cosmological mission gave deep significance to its distinctive character. Aesthetic matters were central to the Egyptian definition of order. That order was anything but static: the art of the Late Period was fundamentally different in appearance from that of Early Dynastic times. Rulers and elites who inaugurated new periods of history evoked earlier times in the artistic changes that they commissioned, creating something like a cycle of stylistic and thematic configurations that drew upon older forms, while developing them further and incorporating new developments. These configurations remained valid into the Roman period, when traditional Egyptian temple construction and elite burial practices were actively maintained for centuries after the country had ceased to be a self-standing political and cultural entity (e.g., Riggs 2005).

Aesthetic concerns are of paramount importance both for human beings and for their societies. For Egypt as for any other archaeologically recovered culture, in order to grasp the significance that such concerns had it is necessary to take into account all of society, including the gods and the dead, and to imagine features of the aesthetic environment that cannot be recovered from the material record. The greater the range of contexts and aesthetic forms that is taken into account, even on the basis of very limited survival or indirect hints, the better we can situate and understand those genres for which evidence is abundant.

## GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

In this chapter I develop approaches presented in Baines (2007b [1994]), which focuses on “major” genres, and, in the brief contextualization in Baines (2007a), extends the argument to general aesthetic practice, including ephemeral forms (Baines in preparation) and arts of performance (Baines 2006). My treatment is in dialogue with the tentative, text-focused argument of Junge (1990). Questions relevant to my approach are implicit in some studies of Egyptian art, but I know of little Egyptological discussion. A classic survey of related issues, encompassing many genres, is Schäfer (1986 [1974], 9–68, first published 1930). A broad presentation with much useful

analysis is Kemp (2006) 111–160, who treats mainly earlier periods and architecture. Here are cited a few examples: many are illustrated elsewhere in the present volume.

Domains of material evidence that are particularly relevant include textiles (e.g., Van Gennepe and Jéquier 1916; Vogelsang-Eastwood 1993; Donadoni Roveri 2001), faience (Friedman 1998), and metalwork, of which two premier examples from the Old Kingdom and one of mixed date are treated in Eckmann and Shafik (2005). For a type of metal vessel known primarily from pictorial sources, see Schäfer (1903); for surviving vessels with different forms, see Radwan (1983). Implications of luxury media for the ancient Near East including Egypt, are discussed by Feldman (2005). Smith (1965) presents relevant material and arguments for thinking about aesthetic environments and the context of the East Mediterranean region as a whole.

A valuable set of essays on classical antiquity, focused primarily on art history and standard genres of sculpture and pictorial representation, is Platt and Squire (2010). Works that explore wider artistic environments for Renaissance Europe and offer suggestive analogies for the Egyptian case include Nash (2008) and, for luxury arts, Belozerskaya (2005). Aspects relating to performance and the creation and curation of works are covered by Howarth (1997). These examples can doubtless be paralleled in many cultures and periods; Coote and Shelton (1992) present a range of studies from ethnographic contexts. Riggs (2010) discusses the presentation of ancient Egypt in museums, a powerful locus of reception that intersects with definitions of art.

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