Principles of Style in Egyptian Art

Defining Style

Understanding Egyptian art lies in appreciating what it was created for. Ancient Egyptian art must be viewed from the standpoint of the ancient Egyptians not from our viewpoint.

The somewhat static, usually formal, strangely abstract, and often blocky nature of much of Egyptian imagery has, at times, led to unfavourable 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.

Another problem is 'What do we mean by **Style**?'

- Was the Egyptian 'style' different from today's view of 'style'?

Style is defined as *'how you do something.'* Style should be distinctive and recognisable it is derived from the Latin *stylus* meaning writing implement and was first concerned with the different writing of individuals. So in art there are two aspects to style and sometimes the art is dominated by one over the other. In Egyptian art that is the case.

The **first aspect** is the individual style of the artist. This can be difficult to determine with some cultures, and is generally indicated by the methods used to produce the art. This area of style can be divided into **assertive style** which is personal to the artist and carries information supporting individual identity then there is **emblemic style** which carries information about the group identity of the society the artist belongs to.

The **second aspect** of style is concerned with stylistic culture and is really a communication strategy that involves the transfer of information. For the Egyptian art it is dominated by the stylistic aspect.

The striking aspect of Egyptian art is that text accompanied almost all images. In statuary the identifying text will appear on a back pillar supporting the statue or on the base. Relief or paintings usually have captions or longer texts that elaborate and complete the story in the scenes. Paintings and panels are frequently accompanied by hieroglyphs that face to the highest placed person in the picture or generally to the right. Hieroglyphs are often works of art in themselves, even though many are instead phonetic sounds. Some stand for an object or concept which we call **logographic** which is a graphic that represents a word (Figure 1). Today the modern symbols used on road signs would be logograms.

Figure 1: Egyptian logograms. Peter Bull.

When looking at a piece of Egyptian art the text and image are not always clearly defined for example the **determinative** (a sign at the end of a word that indicates identification of motion is determined by a pair of legs and the name of a man is shown by the image of a man).

The exception to this Egyptian style is the art from the period of Akhenaten (1352 – 1336 BCE). He rejected the pantheon of gods in favour of one god and along with that radical move the art from this reign was different.

The proportions of the human form are seen in extreme with large heads and drooping features, narrow shoulders and waist, small torso, large buttocks, drooping belly and short arms and legs. We do not know why there was such a radical change and after his reign the art reverted to classical forms (Figure 2).

a)  b) 

Figure 2: a) Rameses II compared with b) Akhenaten, note the differences. a) © The Trustees of the British Museum, b) © The Art Archive / Alamy

Egyptian Style in Statues

While today we marvel at the glittering treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamen, the beautiful reliefs in the 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. So when we look at them for style we can know the person by interpreting the accompanying hieroglyphs, but the mode of decoration is also distinct and tells us something about the society.

- What was distinct about the style of the Egyptian art?
- Can we identify the conventions and if so what are they?

These images of status people, whether statues of gods or pharaohs or reliefs on tomb walls, were designed to benefit a divine or deceased recipient. The majority of Egyptian art exhibits **frontality**. This simply means they face straight ahead with just one eye visible and both shoulders front facing and this can make them look rigid (Figure 3).

- Were there other conventions of style in Egyptian art?

Figure 3: Egyptian Book of the Dead showing the stylistic features. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

The main conventions of Egyptian art can be seen in the above Figure 3. Stylistic conventions adopted by every artist in ancient Egypt included not only 'Frontality' but also 'Axiality'. The rules of axiality meant figures were placed on an axis.

Proportions of figures were related to the width of the palm of the hand so there were rules about proportions of head to body. The faces were devoid of emotional expression.

Hieratic scaling dictated that the sizes of figures were determined by their importance. The proportions of children did not change; they are just depicted smaller in scale. Servants and animals were usually shown in smaller scale. In order to clearly define the social hierarchy of a situation, figures were drawn to sizes based not on their distance from the painter's point of view but on relative importance. For instance, the Pharaoh would be drawn as the largest figure in a painting no matter where he was situated, and a greater God would be drawn larger than a lesser god.

Axiality, proportion and hieratic scaling indicate that Egyptian artists would have had to use mathematics to construct their composition. Ancient Egyptian artists used vertical and horizontal reference lines in order to maintain the correct proportions in their work. In many

tombs the walls still carry these grids used to ensure the conventions were kept to by the lower and apprentice artists working for the master artist. Political and religious, as well as artistic order was maintained in Egyptian art.

Important figures were not usually depicted overlapping, but figures of servants were. Each object or element in a scene was designed and drawn from its most recognizable angle. The objects in a scene were then grouped together to create the whole. This is why images of people show their face, waist, and limbs in profile, but the eye and shoulders are shown facing frontally. These scenes are composite images designed to provide complete information about the relationship of the objects to each other, rather than from a single viewpoint.

Rules were also applied to the poses and gestures of the figures to reflect the meaning of what the person was doing. An ancient Egyptian artist would depict a figure in an act of worship with both arms extended forward with hands upraised.

They did not attempt to replicate the real world but did achieve a realistic dialogue between the three dimension world and their paintings by the use of position and grouping to represent depth so the background is shown above the figure the foreground below or to one side.

Most formal statues show a prescribed frontality, meaning they are arranged to look straight ahead, because they were designed to face the ritual being performed before them.

Frequently this is in a temple or tomb such as the row of four colossal statues of Rameses II outside the main temple at Abu Simbel (Figure 4). They were designed to face the rising sun so important in Egyptian religion.

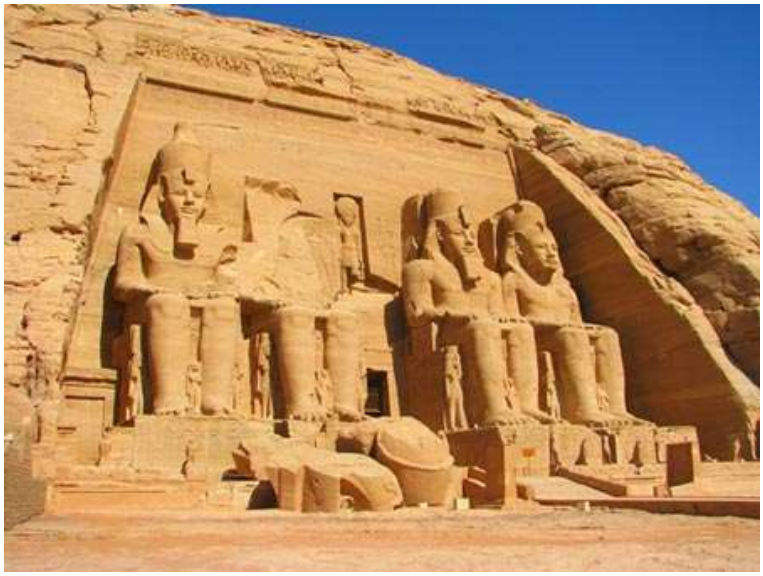

Figure 4: Statues of Rameses II at Abel Simbel. © Shutterstock.

Statues were set up to take part in the rituals relating to the gods and the pharaoh. Many statues were also originally placed in recessed niches or other architectural settings; contexts that would make frontality their expected and natural mode. Others were placed against pylons or along an avenue to the temple as in Figure 5.

Figure 5: Avenue of Sphinxes and first pylon at western entrance to Precinct of Amun Re Karnak Temple. © Shutterstock

Statuary, whether divine, royal, or elite, provided a conduit for the spirit (or *ka*) of the represented being to interact with the earthly realm. Divine cult statues (few of which survive) were the subject of daily rituals. Those rituals would include those of clothing, anointing, and perfuming with incense the statue. Sometimes they came out of the temple and were carried in processions for special festivals, so that the people could "see" them even though they were almost all entirely shrouded from view in wooden arks, but their 'presence' was felt.

The reason for this frontality is they were designed not as an art form but as part of a religious ritual. The Egyptians did not have a word for art but they had words for statue, stelae or tomb. They had a sense of the **aesthetic** but within a function. Art is then functional within the religion.

Wood and metal statuary to represent generic figures and these in contrast to the ritual statues were more expressive. The arms could be extended and hold separate objects, spaces between the limbs were opened to create a realistic appearance, and more positions were possible. Even then the art conventions were kept to (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Relief of craftmen. Pat O'Brien

Stone, wood, and metal statuary of elite figures 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 benefitted the elite owner, not the people involved.

Hence these generic figures were frequently put in tombs to serve the tomb owners in the afterlife as bakers, scribes and other occupations. They were there as **shabti** probably developed from the servant figures common in tombs of the Middle Kingdom. They were shown as mummified like the deceased, with their own coffin, and inscribed with a spell to provide food for their master or mistress in the afterlife. Alternatively there can be models of the servants both sorts can be seen in Figure 7, below.

a)  b) 

Figure 7: a) Shabti figures; b) model of a sailing ship. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Small figures of deities, or their animal personifications, are very common, and found in popular materials such as pottery. There were also large numbers of small carved objects,

from figures of the gods to toys and carved utensils. Alabaster was often used for expensive versions of these; painted wood was the most common material, and normal for the small models of animals, slaves and possessions placed in tombs to provide for the afterlife.

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

Egypt Style in Paintings and Relief

Paintings demonstrated two-dimensional art and as a result it represented the world quite differently. Egyptian artists used the two-dimensional surface to provide the most representative aspects of each object in the scene.

Does the painted art also show the same conventions?

Egyptian artists worked in two dimensions only and so the best characterisation of the object was the view the artist used. Again they used the ideas of frontality, axiality and proportionality. So when creating the human form the artist showed the head in profile with full view eye line parallel with the shoulder line while the chest, waist, buttocks and limbs are in profile. However, if there is neck jewellery to be shown it is shown in full (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Musicians, Tomb of Nakht. © The Art Gallery Collection / Alamy.

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 ground lines. 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.

Keen observation, exact representation of actual life and nature, and a strict conformity to a set of rules regarding representation of three dimensional forms dominated the character and style of the art of ancient Egypt. Completeness and exactness were preferred to prettiness and cosmetic representation. The use of mathematics to create the art is also very evident in many of the incomplete art forms indicating that Egyptian artists used some mathematical formulas to create **order** in their art.

Because of the highly religious nature of Ancient Egyptian civilization, many of the great works of Ancient Egypt depict gods, goddesses, and Pharaohs, who were also considered divine. Ancient Egyptian art is characterized by the idea of order. Clear and simple lines combined with simple shapes and flat areas of colour helped to create a sense of order and balance in the art of ancient Egypt.

Symbolism played an important role in establishing a sense of order this ranged from the pharaoh's regalia (symbolizing power to maintain order) to the individual symbols of Egyptian gods and goddesses. Animals were also highly symbolic figures in Egyptian art.

Colours of the subjects were more expressive rather than natural. So a red skin implied hard working tanned youth, whereas yellow skin was used for women or middle-aged men who worked indoors. The presence of blue or gold indicated divinity. The use of black for royal figures expressed the fertility of the Nile. Stereotypes of people were employed to indicate geographical origins.

Difference in scale was commonly used for conveying hierarchy. The larger the scale of the figures, the more important they were. Kings were often shown at the same scale as the deities, and both are shown larger than the elite and far larger than the general populace and in smallest scale are shown servants, entertainers, animals, trees, and architectural details. So the size indicates relative importance in the social order.

Ancient Egyptian art forms are characterized by regularity and detailed depiction of gods, human beings, heroic battles, and nature. A high proportion of the surviving works were designed and made to provide peace and assistance to the deceased in the afterlife. The artists' desire was to preserve everything from the present as clearly and permanently as possible. Ancient Egyptian art was designed to represent socioeconomic status and belief systems.

The Egyptians used the distinctive technique of sunken relief, well suited to very bright sunlight. The main figures in reliefs adhere to the same figure convention as in painting,

Papyrus was used by ancient Egyptians and it was exported to many states in the ancient world for writing and painting. Papyrus is a relatively fragile medium generally lasting around a century or two in a library, and though used all over the classical world has only survived when buried in very dry conditions, and then, when found, is often in poor condition.