#### A Resource for Teachers

# EGYPTIAN ART AT THE MUSELIN OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON



Museum of Fine Arts, Boston | Department of Education and Public Programs

### **EGYPTIAN ART** AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON

**ANCIENT EGYPT** is often the first civilization that a student encounters when studying the ancient world. Powerful kings, intriguing gods and goddesses, and complex burial customs excite the student's imagination. Original works of art from ancient Egypt can bring this fascinating civilization to life and inspire young people to further exploration.

The renowned collection of ancient Egyptian art at the Museum of Fine Arts is a particularly rich resource because many of the objects were obtained from authorized archaeological excavations directed by American researchers. Between 1905 and 1942, Dr. George Reisner and others excavated in the area of the Giza pyramids and elsewhere in Egypt on behalf of the Museum and Harvard University, and many of the finds were allowed to come to Boston. Archaeological context (that is, where an object is found and what was found with it) is very important for determining the date, function, and meaning of a work of art. Because many of the objects selected for this guide have an archaeological context, they are able not only to illustrate principles of Egyptian art, but also to provide information about the social structure, economy, and religion of ancient Egypt.

#### **USING THIS GUIDE**

This resource guide and the accompanying guide for young people are designed to help you use works of art at the Museum of Fine Arts in your study of Egyptian life and culture. Eight objects have been chosen to illustrate the following four broad themes: images of the king, understanding Egyptian style, daily life, and religion. Each object, however, can be used to address a variety of topics. We hope that you will encourage your students to develop their observational skills and, through active looking, to express their own interpretations of what they see. There are still many unanswered questions about ancient Egypt, and new insights are always valuable. Suggestions for further discussion and exploration are offered in the "Digging Deeper" section at the end of each theme.

EXPLORING EGYPTIAN ART AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON WAS PREPARED BY PAMELA J. RUSSELL, IN CONSULTATION WITH MAUREEN ALBANO, MARGARET K. BURCHENAL, AND BARBARA MARTIN—ALL MEMBERS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION AND PUBLIC PROGRAMS—AND SUE D'AURIA AND YVONNE MARKOWITZ OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ANCIENT ART.

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In ancient Egypt, the king, or pharaoh, held absolute power. The king made the final decisions about the business of the state and the conduct of foreign affairs. Serving the king were numerous officials who oversaw the complex operations of the court. The king also played an important ceremonial role in religion, since he was believed to mediate between the human world and the realm of the gods. At his death, the king himself became divine. In Egyptian art the king is identified by special headdresses and a false beard and is portrayed as a regal and commanding figure.

#### UNDERSTANDING EGYPTIAN STYLE

Egyptian artists did not aim to express themselves personally through art. Instead, their work followed strict traditions so that they could create uniform, lasting monuments in the service of the king and the gods. The style of Egyptian art changed very little over thousands of years. Some have suggested that this conservatism reflected the seasonal regularity of the annual flooding of the Nile River. This flooding was vital to farmers, and therefore, predictability and stability were valued much more than change and innovation.

#### **DAILY LIFE**

We learn most about everyday life in ancient Egypt from objects and paintings found in tombs. The Egyptian belief in the afterlife required that the dead be provided with representations of life's necessities in their tombs. Food and drink were the most important provisions, so there are many images of bread, containers of beer and wine, cuts of meat, and fruits and vegetables. Activities of daily life such as farming, baking, and weaving are also depicted in detail.

#### RELIGION

Egyptian religion included a complex pantheon of numerous gods and goddesses, many possessing animal attributes. The special capabilities of certain animals were apparently linked to corresponding powers in their associated gods. Egyptians perceived divinity in the entire natural world. The seasonal cycle of the solar year—the annual flooding of the Nile being the most important event—was marked by a series of festivals. Colossal temples served as houses for the major gods. These temple compounds were tended by a hierarchy of priests, and they supported a lively economy of farming and industry.

#### PAGE 4

PAGE 6

#### PAGE 8

PAGE 10

# IMAGES OF THE KING

#### **1. STATUE OF KING MYCERINUS**

This imposing statue of a seated king depicts Mycerinus, a pharaoh of the Old Kingdom. Mycerinus built the smallest of the three pyramids at Giza as his tomb. This statue was found in 1907 near his pyramid, in a temple where the deceased king would have been worshiped as a god. The statue was a permanent embodiment of the pharaoh and his power. After the pharaoh's death, offerings of food and drink may have been placed in front of his statue by the priests.

Features that identify Mycerinus as a pharaoh include the long false beard and the headcloth of pleated linen called a *nemes* with the head of a cobra *(uraeus)* at the front (on this statue the top of the snake is broken off). This serpent was a symbol of royalty. The king wears a kilt, a garment worn by the male elite, and holds a folded cloth in his right hand, probably another symbol of authority.

Egyptologists are puzzled by the apparent small size of the head of this statue, which seems out of proportion to the big body. One explanation is that a different, larger type of headdress was planned originally, and that when the design was changed, the face and head had to be cut down to accommodate the preferred *nemes*.

The statue is made of alabaster, a creamy, translucent stone valued for its beauty. In later centuries, statues that no longer were actively worshiped might be broken into pieces so that the material could be reworked into stone vessels or ornaments. This statue, in fact, was found in fragments, presumably because the stone was being collected for other uses. Missing sections have been restored with plaster. Examples of Egyptian alabaster vessels can be viewed at the Museum in the corridor adjacent to the Old Kingdom gallery.

In ancient Egypt not everybody would have been able to view this mighty portrait. It is thought that only priests and nobles had access to the temple. The statue was meant to express the supreme power of the pharaoh and, as a stone monument, to last for eternity.

> **Statue of King Mycerinus** Giza, Pyramid Temple of Mycerinus Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4, 2548–2530 в.с. Alabaster (portions restored) Museum Expedition 09.204



#### 2. KING MYCERINUS AND HIS QUEEN

This elegant statue of a royal couple shows Mycerinus and his wife, probably Kha-merer-nebty II. The statue was discovered in a second temple to the deified king, one closer to the Nile River. It was found in 1910 by an Egyptian boy, a worker in the excavation crew, who then brought it to the attention of the American archaeologist George Reisner.

Art historians consider this one of the finest Egyptian statues because of its elegant proportions, serene composition, and superb craftsmanship. The king and his wife are shown standing, each with one foot somewhat advanced, the king slightly ahead of his wife. The king is again recognized by his *nemes* headdress and false beard. The queen, represented on the same scale as the king, wears a long, close-fitting dress. She lightly embraces him, with one arm around his waist and one reaching across her upper body to his arm. This gesture, seemingly one of tender support, is also made by goddesses beside pharaohs to show their validation of the king's power.

This statue was made to provide a lasting portrait of the king and queen and to enable them to enjoy the afterlife together. They are represented as young and beautiful, at their best for all eternity. The static and balanced composition evokes stability and order, qualities that the Egyptians valued as aspects of permanence and the desirable predictability of life.

Elsewhere in the Old Kingdom gallery, you will find a display case containing a series of unfinished statuettes that illustrate the stages of carving a statue.



**King Mycerinus and his queen** Giza, Valley Temple of Mycerinus Old Kingdom, Dynasty 4, 2548–2530 в.с. Graywacke (dark conglomerate) Museum Expedition 11.1738

### **DIGGING DEEPER**



Discuss the elements that indicate when a statue is a portrait of a king. Collect words to describe your students' impressions of these grand monuments. Explore what can be determined about the nature of Egyptian kingship just by looking at a royal image.



Our society is rich in images—in print, on television, and on billboards. In ancient Egypt, there were far fewer pictorial representations, and fewer people had access to them. Discuss how this would affect the visual impact of large stone sculptures.



Compare the two statues of Mycerinus with official portraits of today's political leaders. How are power and control conveyed in images today?

# UNDERSTANDING EGYPTIAN STYLE

In the ancient Egyptian social hierarchy, beneath the pharaohs and their family members were the noblemen, who held important official positions in court and in the government. During the Old Kingdom, many members of the nobility were buried in a cemetery at Giza, adjacent to the royal pyramids.

The typical tomb form was the *mastaba*, a rectangular mound faced with stone or brick, within which lay the burial chamber and a chapel for offerings to the spirit, or *ka*, of the deceased. The ka was believed to pass through the false door of the chapel to receive offerings of food and drink, given either as real supplies or in symbolic form, through paintings or carvings on the walls or as three-dimensional models. Bread, beer, fruit, and meat were popular gifts.

#### 3. FALSE DOOR OF KHUFU-ANKH

This is the false door from the *mastaba* of Khufu-ankh, chief of the singers and flutists in the royal court. Khufu-ankh and his family members are shown on either side of the recessed false door. A stone offering table for food was found in front of this false door.

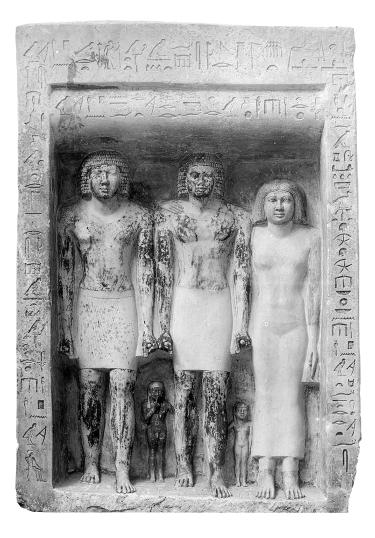
The figures are rendered in sunk relief, a technique in which figures and text are cut into the background. The artistic conventions for relief are somewhat different from those for sculpture in the round, though the same basic principles of symmetry and clarity apply. Artists rendered each part of the human body as clearly as possible: the head in profile, although the eye is shown frontally; the shoulders frontally, but the legs and feet in profile. It is almost as if the artist were creating a diagram of the human body. Although not very naturalistic, this representation of the human form created an enduring image that was intended to be understandable for all time.

The door is adorned with formulas written in the hieroglyphic system of writing. To have the words carved in stone ensured their effectiveness through time.

Knowledge of writing was restricted to the royal and noble classes, an estimated 1 percent of ancient Egyptians. The scribes, a particular group of highly respected officials, were charged with the creation and supervision of court records. In the museum's New Kingdom gallery there is a case displaying instruments used by scribes.



**False door of Khufu-ankh** Giza, tomb G 4520 Old Kingdom, Dynasty 5, 2524–2400 в.с. Limestone Museum Expedition 21.3081



**Group statue of Pen-meru** Giza, tomb G 2197 Old Kingdom, Dynasty 5, 2524–2400 в.с. Limestone Museum Expedition 12.1484

#### 4. GROUP STATUE OF PEN-MERU

This group statue comes from the *mastaba* tomb of a court official named Pen-meru. He is depicted twice, in his two main roles in life. On the left he is shown as a court official, and in the middle, with his wife and two children, he appears as a family man. The hieroglyphic inscriptions indicate that he lived to an old age and served as director of the dining pavilion. Like the false door of Khufu-ankh, this group is made of limestone, a material readily available along the Nile.

As was traditional in Egyptian art, males are painted a reddish brown, whereas the skin of females is painted yellow. This difference is explained by a man's outdoor activities and his longer exposure to the sun. Noblewomen presumably led a more sheltered existence indoors. In real life, the skin color of ancient Egyptians probably varied greatly.

Pen-meru's children—his son, Seshem-nofer, and his daughter, Nefer-seshem—are depicted on a very small scale. They were considered less important than the adults, and their small size emphasizes their immaturity. The pigtail on the side of the head and the son's gesture of holding a finger to his lips are other hallmarks used by artists for the representation of children.

## **DIGGING DEEPER**



Outline and discuss the basic techniques for portraying the human body in Egyptian art. What makes a work recognizable as Egyptian?





Both of these works of art were created for court officials. Discuss what might be meant by "chief of the singers and flutists" and "director of the dining pavilion." Think about what some of their duties might have been.

# DAILY LIFE

Djehuty-nakht was the governor of a province situated midway between Giza and Thebes. His tomb was discovered at the site of Deir el-Bersha, not far from Amarna. He was buried in a rock-cut chamber on the eastern banks of the Nile. His mummy was placed in a coffin that was in turn placed in a slightly larger outer coffin. Both coffins were set on a sled for transport. The coffins were painted with texts relating to the rituals of the afterlife as well as with images of objects used in daily life.

The coffins are made of cedar, a wood probably imported from the area of present-day Lebanon. By the Middle Kingdom, Egypt had a far-flung trading network that reached south into Africa (for gold, timber, and spices), as far east as India (for grain), and north to Anatolia (for minerals). Cedar, like ebony, was highly valued and imported for special purposes.

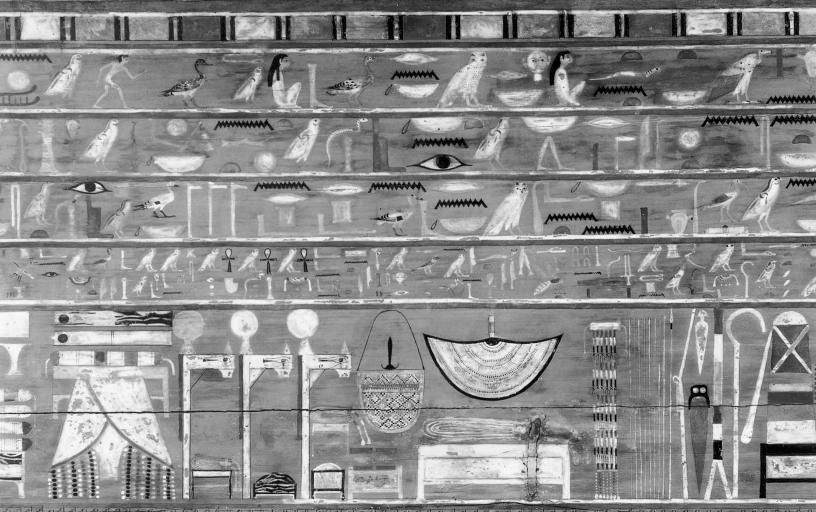
Interior face of the outer coffin of Djehuty-nakht Deir el-Bersha Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 11, 2061–1991 в.с. Painted cedar Museum Expedition 20.1823

#### 5. COFFIN OF DJEHUTY-NAKHT

At the top of the inner face of the outer coffin are bands, or registers, of hieroglyphic text enumerating the titles of the governor. Below the writing are depictions of objects that were of use to the deceased in the afterlife. In the photograph below you can see a kilt, a mirror in a checkerboard case, and a fan. Also visible on the coffin are carpentry tools, a large oxhide tube holding spears, an oxhide shield, and a bed with animal legs.

Another side of the outer coffin is displayed nearby in the same gallery. It depicts the governor receiving offerings of meat, cakes, fruits, and vegetables.

In the New Kingdom gallery are other objects illustrating daily life, including mirrors like those depicted on the coffin, a board game called *senet*, and sandals made of fiber.



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#### 6. MODELS OF WORKERS

The tomb of Djehuty-nakht provides excellent examples of models that depict bakers, brick makers, and carpenters. A model of farmers with two cattle reminds us of the importance of agriculture in ancient Egypt. With so little fertile land along the Nile, farmers had to be very industrious. Cows were important as sources of both milk and meat, just as they are today, and oxen were used to plow the fertile banks along the Nile Valley.

Another model illustrates the process of textile production. The most common textile was linen, prepared from flax. The spun fiber was woven by women into cloths of varying textures, ranging from coarse to very sheer and fine. The making of cloth was one of the primary occupations of women in all ancient cultures.





Models from the tomb of Djehuty-nakht Deir el-Bersha Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 11, 2061–1991 B.C. Wood Museum Expedition 21.408, 21.891

### **DIGGING DEEPER**

Examine the models to see which activities are carried out by men and which by women. Notice how the workers are dressed.



Discuss which activities are still carried out today in much the same way as they are represented in the models. Determine which activities have changed significantly. Ask your students to think of the tasks that they would illustrate if they were to create models of today's essential activities. Explore how those tasks might be depicted.