FORM IN EGYPTIAN ART

Clarity, Balance, and Stability

Egyptian artists developed ideal forms that became the standard, or conventional, way of expressing desired meanings. The major figure of a composition, for instance, was usually larger than the more subsidiary ones, and its poses (standing, walking, sitting, or kneeling) were the most stylized. Even for subsidiary figures a limited number of arm and hand gestures were used to explain what the figure was doing.

The following are commonly used poses and gestures:

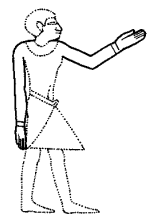|	
worshiping	both arms extended forward with hands upraised
presenting, offering	both arms extended forward with an object held in one or both palms
ready to receive offerings	seated with one or both arms resting on one's lap, palms down
summoning	one arm extended forward with the palm open
protecting	both arms extended out to the sides with the palms facing forward
rejoicing	both arms extended out to the sides with palms turned away from the body
praising	crouched on one knee, one arm raised and the other held against the chest with clenched fist
mourning	arms raised with palms turned toward the face

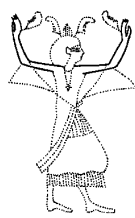worshiping   presenting, offering   ready to receive offerings   summoning

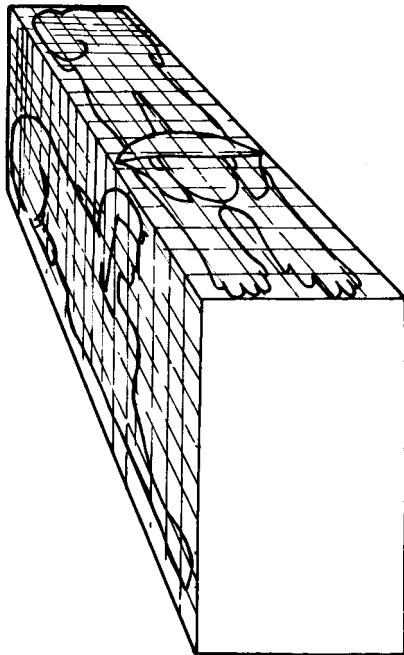protecting   rejoicing   praising   mourning

Balanced forms and compositions, clear outlines, simplified shapes, and flat areas of color were used to create order and clarity, and figures and scenes were arranged in horizontal rows (called registers). Momentary, fleeting images such as expressions of emotion or strenuous physical activity were not often treated because they were transitory, not permanent features. Nor were Egyptian artists much interested in the play of light and shadow or the illusion of space and atmosphere in outdoor scenes.

A Geometric Basis for Natural Forms

The structural elements of Egyptian art are the cube and horizontal and vertical axes. When preparing to carve a statue or decorate a wall, Egyptian artists first drew horizontal and vertical guidelines on the surface so the proportions of the figures would be consistent with the established canon. The result of such measured proportions and relationships was an art of remarkable order and uniformity that maintains the same balance whether in a colossal statue or a figure in hieroglyphic script. The guidelines also helped to arrange rows and groups of figures in a unified manner.

In creating three-dimensional sculpture in stone, artists started with a block upon which they drew guidelines on all sides. They then carved until the figure emerged, renewing the guidelines from stage to stage. Egyptian sculptors seldom completely freed figures from the stone block. With few exceptions, no space was carved out between the arms and torso or between the legs of standing figures. The lower part of seated figures is adapted to a large degree to the rectangular shape of the blocklike seat (slides 15, 19, 31, and 37). The backs of many standing figures remain attached to an upright slab or pillar, which Egyptologists call a "back pillar." Such elements contribute to the centered and poised character of Egyptian stone statues and reinforce their frontality and axiality.

Figures carved in wood often were made from several pieces pegged together, since large logs had to be imported and were therefore costly. Because wood is lighter, much less brittle, and easier to carve than stone, wooden figures were sculpted more completely in the round, with open spaces between the legs and between the arms and torso. However, wooden figures are represented in the same balanced and relatively motionless frontal poses as those in stone, giving an impression of stability appropriate for idealized and lasting images (slide 10).
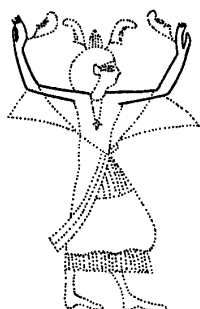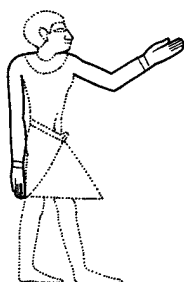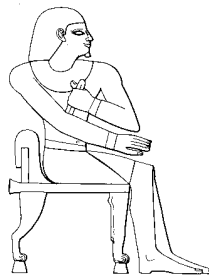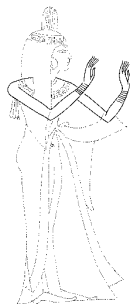

Conjectural reconstruction showing how guidelines may have been drawn on a block of stone for a sculpture, based on a papyrus of the Greco-Roman Period.
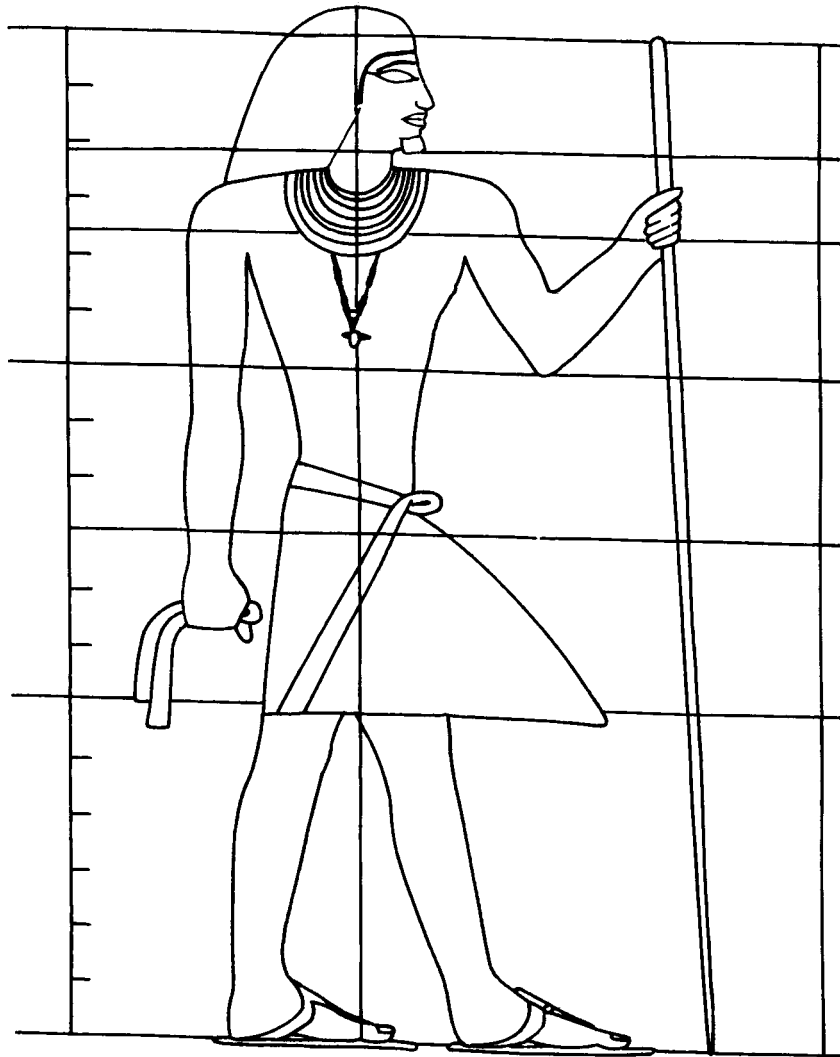
Poses and Gestures

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During most of Egyptian history the proportions of the human figure were related to the width of the palm of the hand. The entire figure from feet to hairline is eighteen palms high (the top of the head was not included because of the variety of headdresses and crowns); the face is two palms high. The shoulders are aligned at sixteen palms from the base of the figure, the elbows align at twelve from the base, and the knees at six.

Naturalistic Details

Egyptian art characteristically demonstrates a keen observation of nature. Although the proportions and poses of Egyptian sculptures were based upon strict conventions, subtle indications of musculature and bone structure suggest the artists were well aware of anatomy (slides 10, 27, and 31). Nowhere is this attention to natural detail more evident than in the way Egyptian artists depicted animals (slides 21, 30, 34, 35, and 36). In wall paintings and reliefs of hunting and fowling, species of animals are accurately portrayed in their environments, interacting in natural ways with other animals. In these detailed portrayals of the world, artists expressed the Egyptian love of life. One should, however, observe that the animals are predominantly shown in profile and their representations also follow the rules of frontality and axiality.

Man and dogs hunting gazelles. Line drawing after a stone relief in the Metropolitan Museum's collection (acc. no. 08.201.1).

Representational Conventions

When depicting the human body on a two-dimensional surface, artists used different points of view to show each part of the body in its most complete form. For instance, the shoulders are seen from the front. The torso and hips turn in three-quarter view so that the legs and arms can be seen in profile. The head is also shown in profile—to display simultaneously the back and the front, with protruding nose and lips—but the eye is drawn as if seen from the front, looking directly at the viewer.

Distance in space from the viewer, if indicated at all, is represented either by one figure overlapping another or by more distant figures being placed above those in the foreground (slide 36). Important

Line drawing of a figure of Perneb from the false door and facade of his tomb, showing Egyptian conventions of representing a standing man.

figures usually do not overlap one another, because that would make them appear to be less than complete. However, groups of servants, attendants, and animals often are shown overlapping, sometimes in rhythmic repetitions and patterns (slide 18).

Running troops, showing overlapping and rhythmic repetition of figures. Line drawing after a stone relief in the Metropolitan Museum's collection (acc. no. 15.3.1163).

In depicting objects or landscapes, artists also used multiple points of view to convey the most complete information. For example, in offering scenes the recipient sits before a table of which the legs are in profile and the top is viewed as if one were looking directly down upon it. Yet the food piled on the tabletop is arranged vertically, each piece in its most recognizable form resting on top of the next (slide 33). In tomb paintings of gardens with pools—a favorite afterlife scene symbolizing rebirth—trees and flowers surrounding the pool are shown in profile, as are the patterns of the pool's ripples. The pool, however, is shown from above so the exact shape is clearly visible. Similarly the water in slide 36 is shown from above, but the birds and plants on the water and the fish in it are shown in profile.

The wife of the deceased (a lady-in-waiting named Roy) and her three daughters (all chantresses of Amun); the little man is a priestly servant. Their sizes indicate their relative importance. (Scene from tomb 75 at Western Thebes)

Scale

Size indicates relative importance. Images of the king are often much larger than life to symbolize the ruler's superhuman powers. In wall reliefs and paintings servants and entertainers, animals, trees, and architectural details are usually shown in smaller scale than the figures of the king, high official, or tomb owner (slides 31, 33, and 36).

Surface Contrasts and Relief Work

Egyptian stone sculpture, even when carved from the hardest materials, often possesses highly polished surfaces that contrast with finely incised details and patterns, whose surfaces are more rough. There are two types of relief carving: raised and sunk. In raised relief (also called bas relief) the whole space around figures is lowered, whereas in sunk relief only the outlines of the figures are recessed. In both types of relief the depth is usually less than an inch, and detailed modeling inside the figures is often achieved by carving at minute differences of depth. Since all inside modeling of figures—whether in sunk or raised relief—is always done in the raised technique, the two types of carving appear to have been combined in scenes where figures overlap. This is especially characteristic of reliefs of the Amarna period (slide 21).

Color

Sculpture, reliefs, and wooden coffins were enriched with warm and cool colors (slides 10, 18, 28, 32, 36, and poster). A similar sensitivity to color contrasts is evident in jewelry design (slide 17). Colors not only had aesthetic appeal but also had symbolic meaning. Blue and green were associated with water, the Nile, and vegetation. Yellow and gold stood for the sun and the sun god. Red and red-orange had complex meanings involving the desert, power, blood, and vitality. Gender was indicated by color as well as costume. It was a convention to portray men with reddish-brown skin and women with a yellow-tan color (slide 33). Nubians and tribute bearers from central Africa were often colored darker than Egyptians, and people from some other nations might be colored lighter. Lighter and darker skin tones were also used to differentiate overlapping figures.

The Amarna Period (1353–1336 B.C.): Change in the Forms of Art

The artists employed by King Akhenaten in his seventeen-year reign created a style of art as revolutionary as Akhenaten's elevation of the Aten (the sun disk, or light) to the position of sole god and his attempt to eradicate the worship of other gods, especially Amun of Thebes. Akhenaten took the throne as Amenhotep IV but changed his name to Akhenaten (meaning "effective for the Aten"). The traditional majestic and ideal forms of the king and gods were replaced with exaggerated, elongated images of the king and Nefertiti, his queen (slide 21). Intimate affection and tenderness were shown in scenes portraying the king with his wife and daughters. Controversy continues as to whether Akhenaten's peculiar features as depicted in art reflect actual physical deformities or are part of the expressionistic style of the period. In the later years of his

reign Amarna art developed a graceful, softly naturalistic style (slides 22 and 23) that deeply influenced the art of the late Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Dynasties ("Post-Amarna" art; slides 24, 25, 26, and 37).

Akhenaten's attempt to transform Egyptian religion did not last beyond his reign. Shortly after becoming king, Akhenaten's heir, Tutankhaten ("living image of Aten"), changed his name to Tutankhamun ("living image of Amun"; slide 23) and reestablished the cult of Amun and other gods.