

Angela Lau
Advanced Painting

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Prof. Emily Mason

Egyptian Exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

It's been awhile since I went to the Met, but I noticed that they had added more artwork in the Egyptian Exhibit. There must've been over 150 artworks featured at the exhibition, but among the highlights of the exhibition were some ritual bowls and chalices of blue and green, a finely carved wood statuette, and a Roman mummy portrait. The exhibition also included several examples of sculpture in wood. One of these, that I found of interest was a statuette of a man preserved from the waist up, is considered a Middle Kingdom masterpiece.

Another work on display that caught my eye the most was a small human doll of bound flax with blue beaded hair, which probably served as a symbol of regeneration. This enigmatic Middle Kingdom figure is one of two dolls excavated from the tomb, the other one being larger with no beads.

As far as I know, from the very beginning of Egyptian history, writing and art were inseparable. Most Egyptian works of art are actually larger forms of the figures in hieroglyphics. For example, the figure of a seated man,

which appears frequently in sculpture and painting, is also the hieroglyphic ideogram for "man." As much care was taken in drawing the hieroglyphs as in creating the images in art. In the ancient Egyptian language the same word (*sekh*) is used for writing, drawing, and painting.

The Egyptians used pure colors, both warm and cool, in creating jewelry and in paintings, wooden figures and coffins, and details on stone sculpture. Colors had not only artistic appeal but also had a great meaning behind it. Blue and green were often linked 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.

They demonstrate a keen observation of nature. The images of animal life and the plants of the Nile marshes, the agricultural land, and the desert express the Egyptian's love of life. On another level, these images usually have a symbolic meaning. A lot of Egyptian art have animal images, especially in sculpture and hieroglyphics. Animals were usually symbols associated with life and death, the characteristics of the gods, or the power of the King. For example, a Hippopotamus were greatly feared by the Egyptians, who often saw them as symbols of chaos. Yet because hippos lived in the Nile waters that revived the

land each year during droughts, Egyptians also saw them as symbols of rebirth and rejuvenation in the afterlife. The most common animal is the Cat. With their sleek muscles and graceful legs, combined with the cat's erect pose and alert expression, shows a sense of power. However, this is not an ordinary cat. It wears a necklace and its pierced ears once held gold rings. This is the goddess Bastet in the form of her sacred animal, the cat.

Many people wonder what the ancient Egyptians actually looked like. This is difficult to answer because of the time that has elapsed and the fact that all surviving images are works of art, not documentary representations. It is safe to say that among the large family of African nations, the Egyptians' physical appearance evolved in the particular conditions of the Nile Valley. Skin tones were most probably darker in the south than in the north, and overall darker than in the rest of the Mediterranean basin. The males were conventionally portrayed with a reddish brown skin color and women, with a yellow-tan color shown in most paintings and reliefs. Egypt women were above all wives, mothers, and "mistresses of the house." As such, they played a subordinate role to men in art. The women would sit and stand behind the men, and when a monument, such as a tomb, is dedicated exclusively to a woman, her

husband usually does not appear, perhaps to spare him the indignity of a secondary place.

What I love about Egyptian art is the fact that there's so much history behind it, and how an ancient civilization so long ago can come up with such magnificent art without any of today's materials really intrigues me. They made things such as gaming pieces, scarabs, amulets, and votive figures, which were also on display at the museum.

Bibliography

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