



# Historically Speaking

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## Art of Ancient Egypt



### Mass versus Articulation

The ancient Greeks became increasingly dedicated to realistic representations of the human figure, in both perfection (often representing deities) and imperfection (such as scarred and broken athletes).

The Egyptians were generally less concerned with realism than with impressive size. The pyramids, temples and statues were generally massive.

Egyptian artisans did pursue perfection in smaller items such as jewelry, figurines, vials and religious paraphernalia. They had the benefit of massive amounts of gold at their disposal as well as a rainbow of precious and semi-precious stones. Much of this has been recovered from tombs, however, it is probably true that what has been recovered in modern times is only a fraction of what was originally there.

Ancient Egyptian art must be viewed from the standpoint of the ancient Egyptians to understand it. The somewhat static and often blocky nature of much Egyptian imagery has led to unfavorable 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.

While today we marvel at the glittering treasures from ancient Egypt, it is imperative to remember that the majority of these works were never intended to be seen, that was not their purpose.

These images, whether statues or reliefs, were designed to benefit a divine or deceased recipient. Most statues show a formal frontality, meaning they are arranged straight ahead, because they were designed to face the ritual being performed before them. Many statues were also originally placed in recessed niches or other architectural settings, contexts that would make frontality their expected and natural mode.

Divine cult statues (few of which survive) were the subject of daily rituals of clothing, anointing, and perfuming with incense and were carried in processions for special festivals so that the people could “see” them though they were almost all entirely shrouded from view, but their presence would have been felt.

Royal and elite statuary served as intermediaries between the people and the gods. Family chapels with the statuary of a deceased forefather could serve as a sort of “family temple.” There were festivals in honor of the dead, where the family would come and eat in the chapel, offering food for the Afterlife, flowers (symbols of rebirth), and incense (the scent of which was considered divine). Generally, the works we see on display in museums were products of royal or elite workshops; these pieces fit best with our modern aesthetic and ideas of beauty. Most museum basements, however, are packed with hundreds (even thousands!) of other objects made for people of lower status—small statuary, amulets, coffins, and stelae (similar

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to modern tombstones) that are completely recognizable, but rarely displayed. These pieces generally show less quality in the workmanship; sometimes being oddly proportioned or poorly executed, they are less often considered “art” in the modern sense. However, these objects served the exact same function of providing benefit to their owners, and to the same degree of effectiveness, as those made for the elite.



Above: Three colossal statues. Left: Khafre Enthroned from the Old Kingdom, Center: Statue of Amenemhat II from the Middle Kingdom, Right: Statue of Ramesses II from the New Kingdom.



Left: "Book of the Dead" was a guidebook with illustrations on how to get to the next world. They were written on long rolls of papyrus paper.



Left: Massive Egyptian statues, such as these pictured at the Abu Simbel temple in Egypt, were made to last for eternity.



Right: The mask of Tutankhamun is a gold funerary mask of the 18th-dynasty ancient Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamun. After being buried for over 3,000 years, it was excavated by Howard Carter in 1925 from a tomb in the Valley of the Kings and is now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.