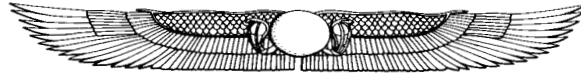


The Egyptian image of Horus, the sky god and a deity of kingship, is composed of properties of the peregrine and Lanner falcons and other falcon species.



III. Egyptian Art

THE FUNCTION OF ART IN ANCIENT EGYPT

What we call Egyptian art was originally created for religious and magical purposes. Its symbols and functions reveal the Egyptians' beliefs about the world and their attempts to understand and relate to it. In the Egyptian social and religious context, works of art played a practical role, whose straightforward physicality is not easy for the modern viewer to realize.

For example, the reliefs on temple walls depicting the king making offerings to the gods and smiting Egypt's enemies not only communicated the idea that the king was fulfilling his duty to maintain order in the universe. Egyptians also believed that these images, through their very existence, were instrumental in making this order a reality. Likewise, the statues Egyptians placed in their tombs and temples served as physical repositories for the spirit and material representatives of important and venerable persons. Through the ritual of "opening the mouth," each statue was made an actual living being able to receive offerings and prayers. The fundamental difference between an ordinary living being and a statue was that the "work of art" was destined to live eternally. To this end statues ideally were made of stone or other durable materials, such as hardwood or metal. Their features and poses were idealized, that is, they were represented according to the general standards Egyptians held for the beauty, dignity, and ethical attitude becoming to gods, kings, and human beings in high places. The identity of a statue's subject was established only in exceptional cases by the depiction of individual features. Identification was usually established by an inscription giving the individual's name. Writing, therefore, was an integral aspect of art; composed of pictorial signs, writing was, in fact, in itself a work of art. Aesthetic beauty, superb workmanship, and choice materials enhanced the potency of works of art for the ancient Egyptians as they do for us.

MAJOR THEMES

Cycles of Life

Egyptians believed that at the beginning of creation, a mound of earth arose out of an infinite watery darkness, just as the fields of Egypt reappear after the annual floods of the Nile. Upon this mound the Creative Force, the most visible aspect of which was the sun, generated the gods and, ultimately, all the living things on earth, in the waters, and in the sky. In plan and construction, Egyptian temples were metaphors in stone for these creation myths (slide 4).

For the Egyptians, creation was reenacted yearly as the inundation of the Nile receded and the land was renewed, bringing forth lush vegetation and a good harvest. They interpreted this annual event as a renewal of life and a triumph over death. They saw the same cosmic drama embodied in the daily cycle of the sun, which was born in the east and died in the west only to be reborn the next day. They also saw it in the human cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in the afterlife.

The Role of the Gods

The Egyptians believed the universe and all events that occurred within it were governed by the will of gods. If the annual inundation of the Nile was too great or too scant, it was because the river was angry or because the king had become lax in maintaining order, not because of weather patterns in central Africa. The gods embodied not only all natural phenomena but also abstract concepts such as justice, kingship, protection, and truth. Their actions dominated all aspects of life. Therefore, to ensure survival and prosperity, the Egyptians performed elaborate rituals and made rich offerings to gain the favor of gods and spirits.



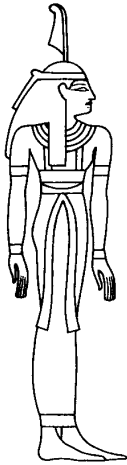
Thoth as a Baboon

To portray the multiple powers of their gods, the Egyptians imagined them in many different forms, often combining animal and human shapes (slides 17, 19, 25, 27–29, 38, 39, and poster). To make matters more confusing for us, some animals were shared by more than one god, and some gods had more than one animal attribute. For instance, Thoth, god of writing, was often symbolized by the baboon, known for its cleverness, especially with its hands (slide 38). The baboon was also associated with the sun god, because at sunrise baboons tend to sit facing the sun to warm themselves. Their poses suggested to the Egyptians that the baboons were worshiping the rebirth of the sun. Thoth also appeared as an ibis or ibis-headed human, for reasons the Egyptians understood but we do not (slide 39). This profusion of imagery was perfectly

natural to the Egyptians because they believed no single image could fully represent the powers of a god.

The association of divine powers with animals was understandable for the ancient Egyptians, who lived closely with the many animal species that inhabited the Nile Valley and the surrounding desert. They must have been keenly aware of faculties animals have that humans lack, such as the ability to fly, to see in the dark, to hear and smell the approach of beings at great distances, and to move with extraordinary speed. To the Egyptians these animal characteristics seemed to be fueled by supernatural energy and to symbolize powers of certain deities. The Egyptians did not believe, however, that the gods were actual animals or human-animal combinations. An animal-headed image of a deity was an attempt to visualize the multiple aspects of that god. The human part of the image indicates that no ordinary animal is depicted and the animal head symbolizes the superhuman endowments of the god.

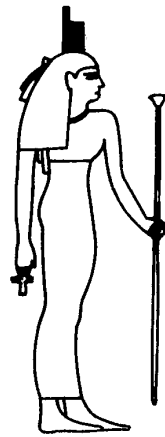
Drawings of Egyptian deities mentioned in these resource materials are given below and on the following page in some of their more recognizable guises.



Maat



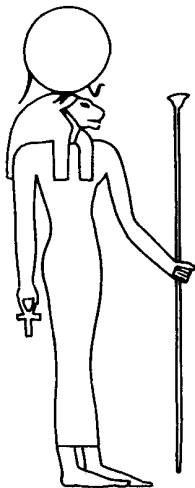
Nephthys



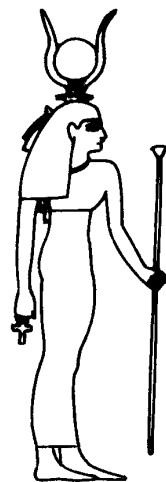
Isis



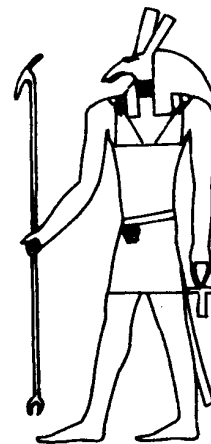
Osiris



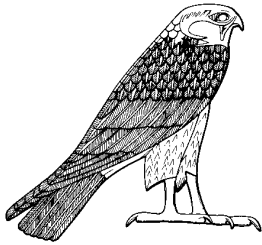
Sakhmet



Hathor



Seth



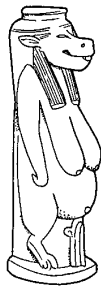
Horus as a Falcon



Jackal-Headed Anubis



Bes



Taweret



Falcon-Headed Horus



Heh (Eternity)



Ibis-Headed Thoth



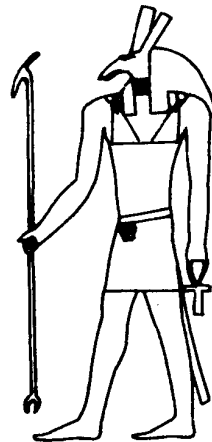
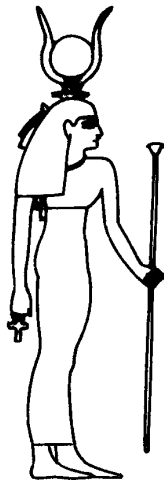
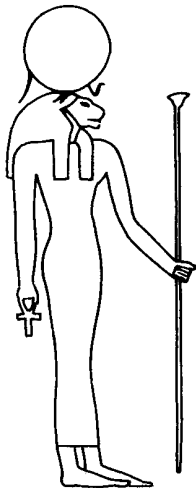
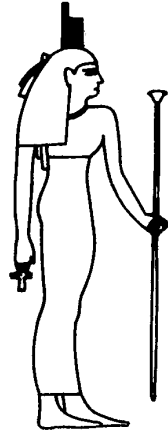
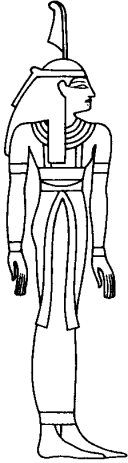
Thoth as a Baboon



Amun

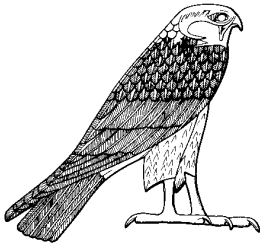


Common Forms of Major Deities





Common Forms of Major Deities

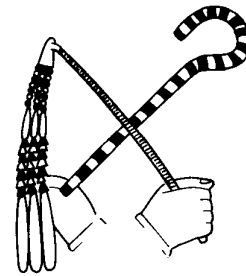


Representation of Deities in Art

Egyptian temples were the houses of gods, who resided in a literal sense in the cult statues inside the hidden sanctuary. It was the duty of the king to minister to the gods in their temples by daily rituals in which the cult statue was clothed, anointed, and fed by the placing of food offerings in front of it. In practice, priests mostly took the role of the king in these rituals, but in the reliefs that decorated the temple walls it is the king who communicates with the gods. Ordinary people never saw the cult statues; they entered only the temple courts, not the sanctuary, and saw the shrine of the god when it was carried outside in processions.

For their personal religious needs the Egyptians often addressed special deities, such as Taweret for matters pertaining to childbirth or Bes for concerns about childbirth and sexual life. Small figurines of these deities were kept in houses or were worn as personal adornment together with many charms. Magic played an important role in daily life, medicine, and all beliefs surrounding death.

In art, gods and goddesses were depicted as humans, animals, or as humans with animal heads. They were further identified by emblematic headdresses and they held in their hands a variety of scepters and the ankh, the hieroglyphic sign for life. The crook and flail, emblems of Egyptian kings, were held by Osiris because he was the king of the underworld.



Crook and Flail

Life after Death

Many surviving Egyptian works of art have been discovered in ancient tombs. No people has created a greater variety of art forms to ensure the protection and well-being of the deceased in the afterlife. Officials were pictured with their wives, families, and servants on the walls of tombs and in stone and wood sculpture. These images reflect the Egyptians' love of life and their consequent belief in the reality of a life after death.

The Egyptians did not look forward to an angelic afterlife in some distant paradise but to the continuation of their daily lives on Earth, among the living, enjoying all the pleasures of life with none of its pain or hardships. This vision of the afterlife is vividly depicted in the sculptures, reliefs, and wall paintings of Egyptian tombs, with the deceased portrayed in the way he or she wished to remain forever (slides 8–10, 15, 20, 22–25, 31, 33, 36, 37, and 40). To achieve this ideal existence, however, a proper burial was necessary.

The afterlife involved a daily interaction between the three major components of a human being: the body, the *ka*, and the *ba*. The body was the physical component. After death it was preserved through the process of mummification, in which it was dried out with salts and wrapped in linen strips and sheets soaked with resin, so that it would remain unchanging and whole forever.

The *ka* was the life force. At death it separated from the body and returned to the creator, from whom it had come; the deceased's goal was to rejoin the *ka* each day in order to live again. During life the *ka* had been sustained through food and drink, and this relationship needed to continue after death. That is why the Egyptians laid such emphasis on the presentation of food offerings at the tomb, and why the tombs themselves were equipped with scenes or models of food, food production, and dining (slides 9, 10, and 33). These provided the *ka* with a continual source of sustenance that could be consumed without affecting the physical offerings or depictions themselves. As the focus for offerings, the tomb was known as the "*ka* house"; statues of the deceased within the tomb are often called "*ka* statues" for the same reason.



Ba Bird

The *ba* is the human being him- or herself—everything that makes a person an individual except for the body. The *ba* is also the link between life on earth and the afterlife. Each night the *ba* was expected to rejoin the mummy in the tomb and to receive from it the power of rebirth. In this union the *ba* was reunited with its life force, the *ka*, and became an *akh*—literally, an "effective being"—able to come to life again each day. This daily cycle of rebirth was patterned on that of the sun, which joined with the mummy of Osiris in the depths of the night and received from the mummy the ability to rise again at dawn. Because of its ability to move between the tomb and the world of the living, the *ba* was often depicted as a bird, but with a human head.



Scarab

To protect it from harm, and to aid in the daily transfer of new life to the *ba*, the mummy was surrounded by magic spells, amulets such as scarabs, and representations of protective deities (slides 13, 17, 25, 28, 32, 38, and poster). To help the *ba* in its hazardous journey through the night to rebirth at dawn, rituals and magic spells were inscribed on the walls of the burial chamber, sarcophagus, and coffins. Beginning in the New Kingdom such texts were also placed on papyrus scrolls buried with the deceased, known as the *Book of the Dead*.

Although the Egyptians viewed the afterlife as a daily cycle of rebirth, that new, ideal existence was available only to those who had lived properly before death. On its first nightly encounter with Osiris the *ba* had to undergo a judgment, in which its heart (the seat of thought and emotion) was balanced on a scale against a feather, the symbol of *Maat* (things as they ought to be). If the two did not balance, the *ba* was denied the chance to enter the cycle of daily rebirth; to the Egyptians this was known as "dying a second time." To help the *ba* pass this trial, the *Book of the Dead* was provided with a set of proper spells to recite and a scene of successful judgment; the mummy itself was also given a "heart scarab," inscribed with a spell requesting it not to testify against the *ba*. Once the trial had been passed, the deceased was declared "true of voice," and was able to begin the eternal cycle of daily rebirth.

This vision of the afterlife remained essentially unchanged throughout the three thousand years of pharaonic civilization. It provided the ancient Egyptians not only with the hope of life after death but with the comfort of knowing that their loved ones still lived in the world around them.

Order over Chaos: The Role of the King

The ancient Egyptians believed that the king was endowed with divine power so he could maintain universal order and justice against the forces of chaos and evil (slides 18, 19, 21, 23, and 34). The goddess Maat personified the equilibrium in the world; she was, therefore, especially associated with the king. On the strength of his divine nature the king was the mediator between the gods and humankind.

To describe the king's divine but by no means fully godlike nature, the Egyptians called the king the living embodiment of Horus and the son of Re (sometimes also spelled Ra—pronounced RAY), the sun god. Only in exceptional cases were kings worshiped fully as gods during their lifetimes. At death the king became one with Osiris, god of the underworld and symbol of the afterlife, and on earth his divine powers were passed on to the next ruler. In the ancient Egyptian language there are several words we translate as "king." These words refer exclusively to the king of Egypt; rulers of other lands were given lesser titles, such as prince or chieftain. *Nesut bity* means "king of Upper and Lower Egypt" and was used when the king issued proclamations or spoke officially to his people. Another word, *hem* (as in *hemek*, meaning "your person"), could be used as in "your majesty" by someone greeting the king face-to-face or writing to him. The name *pharaoh*, meaning "great house," originally referred to the royal palace and its inhabitants, but by the time of Ramesses II *pharaoh* had become a respectful term meaning the king himself.

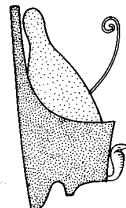
Below are some of the symbols for Upper and Lower Egypt.



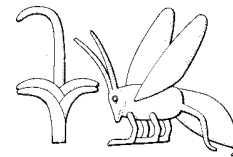
Crown of Lower Egypt
(Red Crown)



Crown of Upper
Egypt (White
Crown)



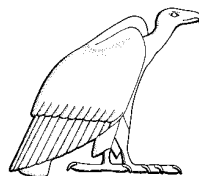
Double Crown
(Crown of Upper
and Lower Egypt)



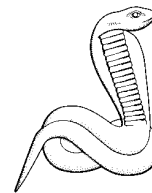
Sedge (Upper Egypt) and
Bee (Lower Egypt)



Papyrus (Lower Egypt)
and Lotus (Upper Egypt)



Vulture
(Upper Egypt)

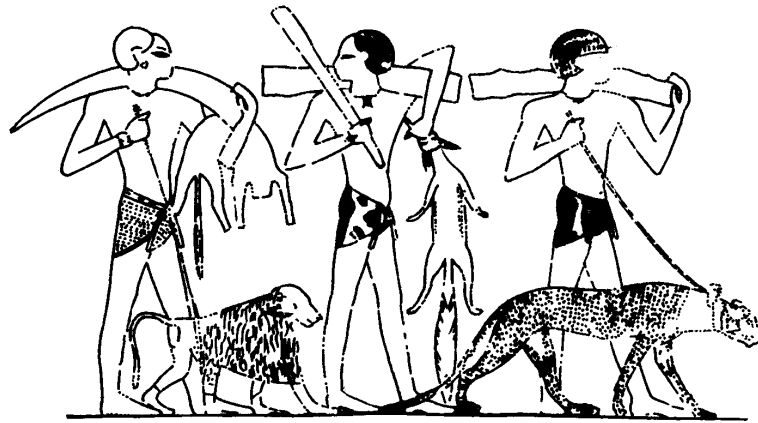


Cobra
(Lower Egypt)

The King in Art

Art played a vital role in asserting and activating the divine powers of kingship and in defining in visual terms the king's awesome responsibilities. The building of temples and maintenance of the gods' cults were, moreover, primary duties of every king. Although in actuality most cult practices were performed by priests, this always happened in the name of the ruling king. The reliefs in the inner chambers of the temples, therefore, showed only the king communicating with the gods. These reliefs were believed to perpetuate the religious rites, even if nobody actually performed them. Statues of kings in temples either showed pharaoh in the performance of cult activities or were *ka* statues that received their own rites and offerings, thus strengthening the bond between the king and the gods (slides 4, 15, 21, and 25).

Egypt's contact with its neighbors was to a large extent through peaceful trade, and peoples of these lands were often shown in Egyptian art bringing "gifts" (in reality, trade goods) to the king. However, images of foreigners could also symbolize the forces of chaos. Thus, reliefs of the king in his chariot trampling Egypt's enemies—often found on the outside walls and pylon gates of temples—signified not only military triumph but also the triumph of order over chaos and thus protected the temples from evil (slide 18). The bows of Egypt's nine traditional enemies are often depicted beneath the feet of figures of enthroned kings, emphasizing the protective role of pharaoh.



Nubians carrying tribute to the Egyptian king.

Kings were conventionally represented as idealized, perfect human beings, but in some periods the king's face was represented as careworn, even old (Middle Kingdom; slide 16). At other times individual traits were indicated, such as the drawn features and visionary face of King Akhenaten (slide 21). Even when idealized, a king's face was usually characterized in such a way that his people would recognize him (or her) even if they could not read the name. This enables art historians to ascribe heads of kings without inscriptions to specific rulers, often with fair certainty.

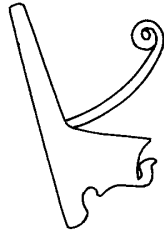
Kings were identified as royalty by specific inscriptions and by their regalia: the royal kilt, with an ornamental bull's tail, symbolizing superhuman power; a group of traditional crowns with the sacred uraeus, or cobra, at the forehead (slides 23 and 26); the rectangular false beard; the crook and flail held by the king across his chest; and the cartouches encircling the king's two most important royal names—his throne name, *nesut bity* (ruler of Upper and Lower Egypt), and his birth name, which identified him as son of Re, the sun god. In a similar way the status of officials, scribes, and lesser ranks of citizens was indicated by what they wore and held (slides 24 and 37).

The Queen

There is no word for "queen" in the ancient Egyptian language. The queen was called *hemet nesut* (wife of the king). The king usually had several wives; however, at least in the New Kingdom, one was identified as main queen by the title "great wife of the king." A queen's status was highest when her son became king. There are a number of cases where a queen mother ruled for her son who was still a child. Several queens also ruled in their own right, often at the end of a dynasty. Queen Hatshepsut, the most famous female pharaoh, was first co-ruler with her young nephew Thutmose III, then took over "kingship" on her own (slide 15).

As consorts queens shared the divine nature of the king and were occasionally identified with goddesses such as Hathor, Isis, or Tefnut (the female part of the first gendered pair of gods). The crown worn most frequently by queens consisted of the head, wings, and tail of a vulture, but queens also wore the horns and sun disk of Hathor.

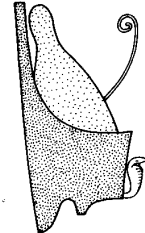
Here are some of the regalia that identified royalty:



Crown of Lower Egypt (Red Crown)



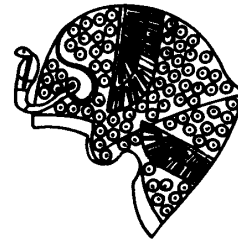
Crown of Upper Egypt (White Crown)



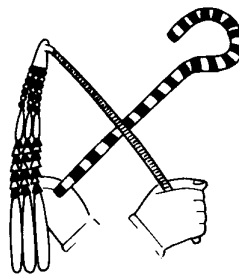
Double Crown (Crown of Upper and Lower Egypt)



Nemes (Pleated Cloth) Headdress to Which the False Royal Beard Is Attached by Straps



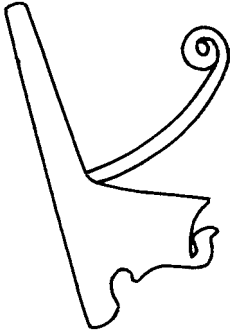
"Blue" Crown



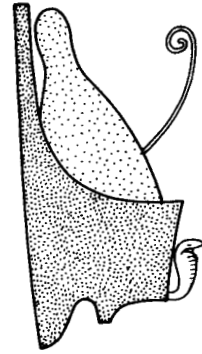
Crook and Flail

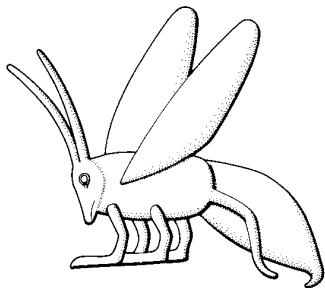


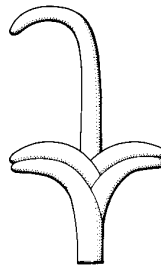
Symbols of Upper and Lower Egypt

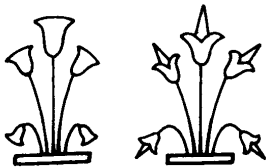


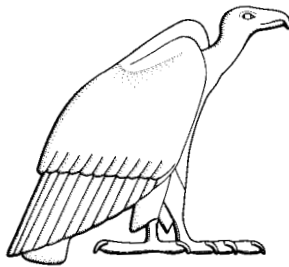


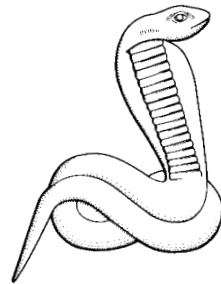


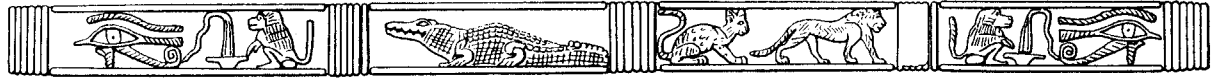












Royal Regalia of Ancient Egypt

