

Hieroglyphs and Egyptian Art

From the very beginning of Egyptian history, writing and art were inseparable. Before 3000 B.C., in the same time that scribes were finalizing the standards and signs of hieroglyphic writing, artists were creating conventions for representation of figures and objects in sculpture, painting, and relief. Consequently, most Egyptian works of art are actually larger forms of the figures in hieroglyphs. 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. It is not surprising, therefore, to find that in the ancient Egyptian language the same word (*sekḥ*) is used for writing, drawing, and painting.

In Egyptian hieroglyphs some of the pictures (called ideograms or sense signs) represent the actual object, such as the words for "land," "offering," and "scepter," which appear on the following pages. However, many words—such as "life," "power," "justice," "understand," and "protect"—cannot be expressed by pictures. To write such words the Egyptians employed the rebus method, which uses the pictures of things not to denote these things themselves but to stand for other words, or parts of words, that sound the same (such signs are called phonograms or sound signs). For example, the hieroglyph that looks like a duck is the sound for the word that means "son," the picture of a basket is the sound that means "lord," and a scarab beetle represents the sound that means "to come into existence." When these glyphs are meant to represent an actual duck, basket, or scarab instead of sounds, usually they are followed by a single stroke.

Twenty-four hieroglyphs represent single sounds and were used by the Egyptians the way the letters of our alphabet are used. They are all consonants (see below, in the explanation of the signs meaning "eternally"). Other glyphs represent the combination of two or three consonants. Single sound signs are often used as complements to the two- or three-sound signs, repeating either the first or the last letter of a multiple sound sign. The Egyptians did not write the vowel sounds. To pronounce Egyptian words, we usually use *e* (eh) or *a* (ah) sounds between the consonant sounds. Because the actual vowel sounds are not known, there are often several different English spellings of Egyptian names. For example, although in these materials you will find the spelling Meketre, in other materials you may see an alternate spelling, Mekutra.

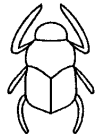
At the end of most words the Egyptians put a so-called determinative. This is an ideogram that explains the meaning of a word. For instance, after *hemet* (wife) there is the figure of a seated woman. Since hieroglyphs represent only the consonant sounds, determinatives served to differentiate between words that have the same consonants but different vowels. Determinatives are not pronounced.

In order to write well, Egyptian scribes needed to know some seven hundred hieroglyphs and to be able to draw them clearly. In documents on papyrus, which are usually written in a cursive script, the scribe wrote from right to left. Hieroglyphs, however, can be written from right to left or from left to right and often appear written in both directions on carvings and wall paintings. To know which way to start, note the way the animal and human figures are facing and read *from* that direction *into* their faces. For example, if an animal faces right, start reading from the right. Lines of hieroglyphs in both directions can be arranged horizontally or vertically. All these variations enabled artists to combine inscriptions and figures in a great number of ways.

The word *hieroglyph* is Greek. The Greeks saw this form of writing mainly on the walls of Egyptian temples, so they gave the symbols this name, which means sacred signs. The handwritten version of hieroglyphs was, in Greek times, used primarily by priests, so it was given the Greek name *hieratic* (priestly), although it was the everyday manner of writing during most of Egyptian history.

Some Frequently Used Hieroglyphs

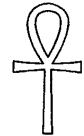
Note that in the descriptions that follow, the hieroglyphs on the left should be read *from the right*, and vice versa.



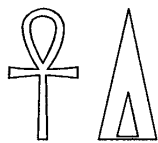
Kheper, the scarab beetle, means "to become" or "to evolve." It is an amulet in life and in death, symbolizing rebirth.



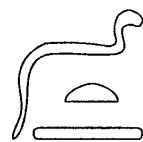
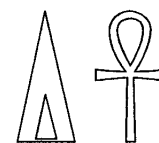
The *shen* sign, a ring of rope, symbolizes all that the sun encircles. As amulets, knots and ropes provide protection.



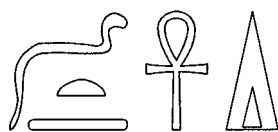
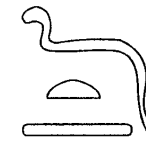
The ankh, possibly a sandal strap or an elaborate bow, means "life" and "to live." It is held by deities who frequently offer it to the king's face.



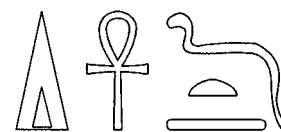
"Given life" is represented by a conical loaf of bread, which means "to give" or "given," and by the ankh.



"Eternally" or "forever" (*djet*) is represented by three glyphs: a cobra (for the sound *dj*), a round loaf of bread (the sign for *t*), and a flat tract of land (the determinative).



This combination of symbols means "given life forever." Note how hieroglyphic signs are always arranged to fill a square or rectangle in a balanced way.





The *djed* sign, meaning "stability," may represent a stylized tree with the branches cut back or a bundle of reeds. The sign was closely associated with Osiris.



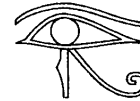
The *sa* sign, meaning "protection," represents a rolled-up herdsman's shelter.



The *was* scepter, meaning "power," is a forked staff with an animal's head.



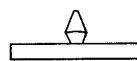
The *wedjat* eye, "the sound or restored one," used for protection against evil, is a human eye with the plumage marking of a Horus falcon's cheek.



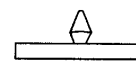
The *ka*, the life force of an individual, is represented by two extended arms seen from above.

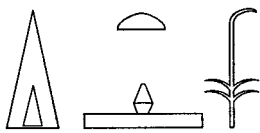


Tyet, the knot of the goddess Isis, resembling the knot in a sash of a robe, is a symbol of protection.

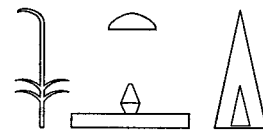


Hetep, meaning "offering" or, as a verb, "to be content": a conical loaf of bread on a reed mat.

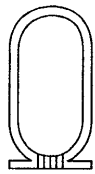




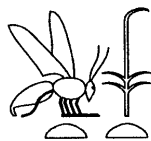
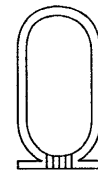
These glyphs mean "an offering that the king gives." The king is represented by the sedge plant. The word for king is always put at the beginning.



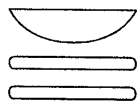
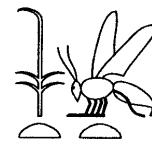
Hieroglyphs Frequently Used for Royal Identification:



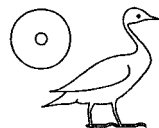
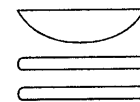
This sign (called a cartouche since the late eighteenth century) is an elongated version of the *shen* rope within which two of the king's names (his birth name and his throne name) were written.



"He of the Sedge and the Bee" is a royal title meaning the king of Upper (the sedge plant) and Lower (the bee) Egypt.



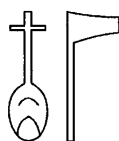
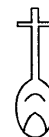
"Lord of the Two Lands," another royal title, is represented by the *neb* glyph, meaning "lord," and by two lines, representing the "Two Lands" (Egypt).



"Son [the duck] of Re [the solar disk]" is another title of the king.



"Perfect, good, beautiful," pronounced *nefer*, a stylized image of the heart and windpipe, can also mean good fortune and happiness.



"The perfect god" is the *nefer* glyph with the word "god," which is the emblem of divinity, a cloth wound on a pole.

