

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN HISTORY

Some Background for its Art

Once the Greek historian, Herodotus, made an observation that "Egypt is the gift of the Nile, renovated every year by the inundation of the river." Egypt was divided into Upper Egypt along the Nile River, and Lower Egypt, the Nile Delta, which was a black fertile land. Egypt was surrounded by the Libyan and Sinai deserts, which were called the Red Lands. The deserts isolated Egypt for many centuries from Asian and African intruders.

The most important event in the study of Egyptian culture was the discovery of the Rosetta Stone by French scientists during the Napoleonic Wars (1799). The inscription on the stone was in three languages: Greek, Hieroglyphic, and Demotic (a simplified hieroglyphic.) English and French scientists deciphered the meaning on the inscription and provided an understanding into many writings found in Egyptian tombs. Egypt started coming out from the prehistoric period by adopting Mesopotamian writing (pictographic) around 3250 BCE.

Lower and Upper Egypt were united by legendary King Narmer from Upper Egypt around 3100 BCE. He combined the white crown of Upper Egypt with the red crown of Lower Egypt, establishing the capitol in Memphis. He took the title of Pharaoh, the king of Upper and Lower Egypt. The period of Egyptian history known as the Old Kingdom (2686-2181 BCE) had begun.

The kings of the third and fourth dynasties devoted very large resources to the design and building of funerary complexes on the west side of the Nile, called necropolis. During this time, Egypt built magnificent monuments. The Step Pyramid was designed and constructed by Inhotep, who was a royal architect and Pharaoh Djoser's Prime Minister. Funerary rituals were performed in an adjacent chapel (mummification and other rituals.) Then during the Fourth dynasty three great pyramids (Menkaura, Khafra and Khufu) were built at Giza.

Artistic achievements at this time were also outstanding; the canon describing proportions of Egyptian sculpture and paintings were formulated and not changed for 3000 years. When the old Kingdom was collapsing and the power of Pharaoh diminishing, an increase of the significance of priests and nobles occurred. This period lasted about 150 years and was the First Intermediate Period with political turmoil (2181-1981 BCE.) Then a swing of the pendulum in the opposite direction occurred, returning Egypt to old customs. But the power of the pharaohs during the Middle Kingdom (1981- 1800 BCE) never was the same as in the Old Kingdom. Some of the wall paintings, figurines of animals and workers, and models of houses survived in graves, giving a look into Egyptian life at that time. Frequently, tombs for the nobility and high-level officials were cut into rocks.

During the Second Intermediate period another great turbulence occurred, the invasion of an eastern Mediterranean people called the Hyksos. They invaded northern Egypt. Not much is known about the Hyksos. In Egyptian, the word means "foreign people." Northern Egypt (the Delta region) was occupied by the invaders and the rest of the country paid them tributes. The Hyksos introduced

into Egyptian culture many new elements such as the use of horses and chariots. Their conquest was covered with almost complete silence in Egyptian history and one explanation could be that this was a period of great humiliation for Egypt. In the beginning of the 18th dynasty, King Ahmose from Thebes started the expulsion of the Hyksos from Egypt and that process was continued by his successors through the period of the New Kingdom (1550-1069BCE.)

The empire-building period had begun. Egypt stretched from Anatolia to Nubia. There was a great influx of foreigners as mercenary soldiers, bureaucrats and courtiers to the royal courts. The Eighteenth, Nineteenth and Twentieth dynasties were the Third Golden Age of Egypt. The most unusual ruler during the 18th Dynasty was Amenhotep IV (1378-1362 BCE.) He radically transformed the country by abolishing the old religion and founding a new religion with one supreme God-sun, Aten, represented by the sun disk. He moved his capitol from Thebes to Tel-el-Amarna which was planned and constructed under his supervision. He changed his own name to Akhenaton (Horizon of Aten.) His changes were supported by his wife, Nefertiti, by his three daughters, and by his mother, Queen Tiy. There were also great changes in art, which became more naturalistic. His reign was short lived and his successor, the young King Tutankhamen, returned the country to the old religion. To secure his position he married Queen Nefertiti and moved the capitol back to Thebes.

One of the most important pharaohs from the 19th Dynasty was Ramses II who ruled for 67 years from 1279-1213 BCE.) He constructed many architecturally important monuments, enlarged the Luxor, and built Abu Simbel which he dedicated to himself. He also built smaller monuments to his wife. He was a great builder and warrior of the Egyptian empire. Abu Simbel was moved in 1968 to save it from submersion under the new Aswan Dam reservoir. The Third Intermediate Period (Dynasties XXI to XXIV) followed. Pharaohs were from Nubia and Libya. Finally in 525 BCE, Egypt was conquered by Persia. In 332 BCE Alexander the Great liberated Egypt. After his death the Ptolemaic Dynasty was established and showed influence from Hellenistic culture. This period was ended by the defeat of Anthony and Cleopatra, the Queen of Egypt, in a sea battle near Actium in 31 BCE by the Romans. At that time Egypt became the personal property of the Roman emperors.

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