The Purpose and Value of Ancient Egyptian Art

Author(s): Lina Eckenstein

Source: *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs*, Dec., 1905, Vol. 8, No. 33 (Dec., 1905), pp. 164-167+170-172

Published by: (PUB) Burlington Magazine Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/856551

THE PURPOSE AND VALUE OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

BY LINA ECKENSTEIN

THE discoveries that have been made in Egypt during the last few years deserve the attention of all who are interested in art. The wonders of Egypt were ever a byword with the European. Our oldest written literature dwells on them, and objects that came across the Mediterranean were treasured in the far-away past that witnessed the rise of power at Mykenae and the building of the great palaces of Knossos in Crete. But it is only during the last few years that we have come to realize the ancientness of art in Egypt itself and the developments that took place at home before their outcome was noised abroad.

The study of the art of any given country shows that the greatest successes are achieved where different layers of art development lie superimposed. The last important development of art on Egyptian soil followed the Mohammedan conquest of the seventh century. Previous to this the history of art of the country has been traced back through successive periods of rise and decay bearing witness to the continuity of art in Egypt for well nigh eight thousand years. A great development of art followed the uniting of Upper and Lower Egypt under King Mena, the first king of the first dynasty, whose reign is approximately dated to B.C. 5000; another climax in the art of the Old Kingdom is represented by the building of the Great Pyramid of about B.C. 3900. It is with some of the objects recently discovered which illustrate the taste and technique of this far-away past that the present article would acquaint the reader.

The purpose of art in Egypt was always to give a faithful representation of fact. It might be actual fact, such as the contest with an enemy, which is roughly rendered in colour already on the wall of a predynastic tomb; it might be ideal fact, such as the dangers that lurk behind death, a favourite matter for speculation, and the subject of some of the weirdest wall-decorations in the tombs of the kings at Thebes. But whether bent on recording actual or ideal fact, the Egyptian was always clear and direct in his utterances. At no time did he drift so far away from life as to practise art for art's sake.

This attitude was determined by the views he entertained on matters temporal and spiritual. From the earliest period and right across the recorded ages, the Egyptian's best belongings were buried with him. Of all the delightful, fanciful and inspiring objects that come out of Egypt, by far the larger proportion comes out of tombs. In our own middle ages men did not shrink from taxing the wealth of a city in order to build a cathedral, or from spending the better part of a life-time in illuminating a missal, since such work was reckoned to the glory of God. The conditions under which the Egyptian worked made his handiwork even more abiding. Individual death was to him an impossible conception. The stone jar which he ground out would be placed for continued use in the tomb, the pyramid which he built was a house for the ever-living king. In both cases he worked, so to speak, for eternity.

Cunning of hand combined with keenness of sight was ever the prerogative of man. From the point of view of art there is no improving on the drawing of the antediluvian stag and the chipping of many a flint arrowhead. The progress of art lies rather in the extending of ideas and the variety of material brought under control. In the period under consideration, gold and silver were known and prized, and an occasional bronze implement indicates a growing appreciation of metals, but weapons and tools were mostly of bone and stone,

chipped and ground into shape. Still water and fire had been pressed into his service by man, enabling him to bake pots and manufacture glaze, to grind stone into shape with the help of sand and water, and to split off slabs of rock by means of wooden wedges that were swelled with moisture. A wealth of objects worked with great dexterity and showing complete mastery over even the hardest kinds of stone have come out of pre-dynastic tombs. Towards the close of this period this acquired skill was turned to new purposes, and led to the production of large objects worked in stone which contain the most complete and perhaps the most important records of Egyptian history before the reign of King Mena.

The objects bearing these records were found, under the auspices of the Egyptian Research Account, on the temple site of Hierakonpolis, one of the most ancient temples belonging to the historic race, and probably the place of coronation of the kings before the subjugation of northern Egypt. The find included several stone mace-heads and a slate palette which are covered with scenes, worked in slight relief, taken from the life of predecessors of King Mena. The objects are of considerable size and were found together with a flint knife about 2½ ft. long. This suggests that they served a ceremonial purpose and originally formed part of the temple furniture.

Of these objects the slate palette of King Nar-mer is here represented.[1] It is about 20 in. high and is decorated on both sides, a circular place being left free on one side for grinding malachite into powder for face paint. Slate palettes serving this purpose had been in constant use some thousand years before the time of Nar-mer. Every good tomb contains one, and many still show patches of green. The application of face-paint in Egypt is at once remedial and decorative, since paint put around the eyes protects them from the glare of the sun, a fact familiar to the Egyptian woman of to-day, who paints lines of kohl under her own eyes and those of her children.

A glance at the palette of Nar-mer makes manifest its meaning. Here is the king successfully smiting his enemy under the auspices of the cow-eared goddess. A closer study of the work reveals a wealth of interesting detail. The king wields a stone mace the wooden handle of which is ribbed, suggesting a stick wound round with a thong of leather; his tunic is fastened on one shoulder, which suggests a shape derived from an animal skin, his girdle is hung with images of the protecting goddess; while he wears the long flowing tail the significance of which is unknown. On his head is the high cap which is known as the cap of Upper Egypt. But on the reverse of the palette Nar-mer wears the square cap and feather which is known as the cap of Lower Egypt, a fact incompatible with the place assigned to him in history, unless the caps originally had another significance. Perhaps they were originally emblems of authority under its administrative and its judicial aspects.

The king's name is represented by a fish and a chisel; the servant who follows him with sandals and libation pot is also designated by signs. The servant is relatively small, a simple way of expressing inferiority of rank which always remained in use in Egypt. Again, the enemy is designated as 'ruler of the lake,' perhaps the Fayum district. He is long-haired and bearded, with a flat head and short thumbs, peculiarities repeated in the two figures below, who may represent cities brought into subjection. We also see the royal hawk grasping a head of the same type by a cord drawn through the lips, while the one human hand given to him to hold the rope shows the Egyptian's readiness to sacrifice truth of representation in order to secure directness of meaning. The sign with six plants

[1] Plate I, page 167.

below the hawk signifies six thousand, doubtless the number of subjected enemies.

The whole arrangement of the palette, taken with the realistic modelling of the muscles, especially of those about the king's neck, indicates great artistic skill. At the same time there are anomalies that are so patent that it seems curious they should have crept in and have remained unchallenged for many centuries to come. Thus the feet of the king and his servant are rendered in true Egyptian fashion with no attempt to indicate the difference between right foot and left by representing the smaller toes, which in the nearer foot are necessarily visible.

The reverse of the palette again represents the king and his servant, but here he is preceded by the standards of four nomes borne aloft, and two rows of corpses with their heads cut off lie before him. Below, two men hold back panthers whose unnaturally elongated necks encircle the place for grinding paint, while the royal bull underneath is seen destroying a city.

The importance of Nar-mer is further illustrated by the scene represented on a great mace-head found at Hierakonpolis also, on which the king is figured enthroned like Osiris, with the same standard-bearers and rows of men executing a dance. Other objects of stone and ivory found with these further prove the artist's power of representing man and beast to a purpose, with full control over his material and ungrudging devotion of labour.

Similar qualities belong to the objects which came out of a tomb at Abydos, probably that of Nar-mer, the great burial place of the kings of the first dynasty. One of these objects, a small strip of ivory representing a row of captives, is here figured,[2] since it exemplifies a point in Egyptian art worth noting. While the palette shows the artist's power of expressing himself in relief, and other objects found with it indicate as great a power of working in the round, in this strip it is a question of working by means of the line only. The drawing is forcible and direct, but the line, as such, has no interest. This indifference to the nature of the line is observable throughout the course of Egyptian art. We never come across a line graduated in thickness to indicate the roundness of an object, and there is no hatching to mark shadow or throw a thing into relief. We are left to infer that the successful handling of the line as the means of translating roundness and relief is peculiar to the art of Europe.

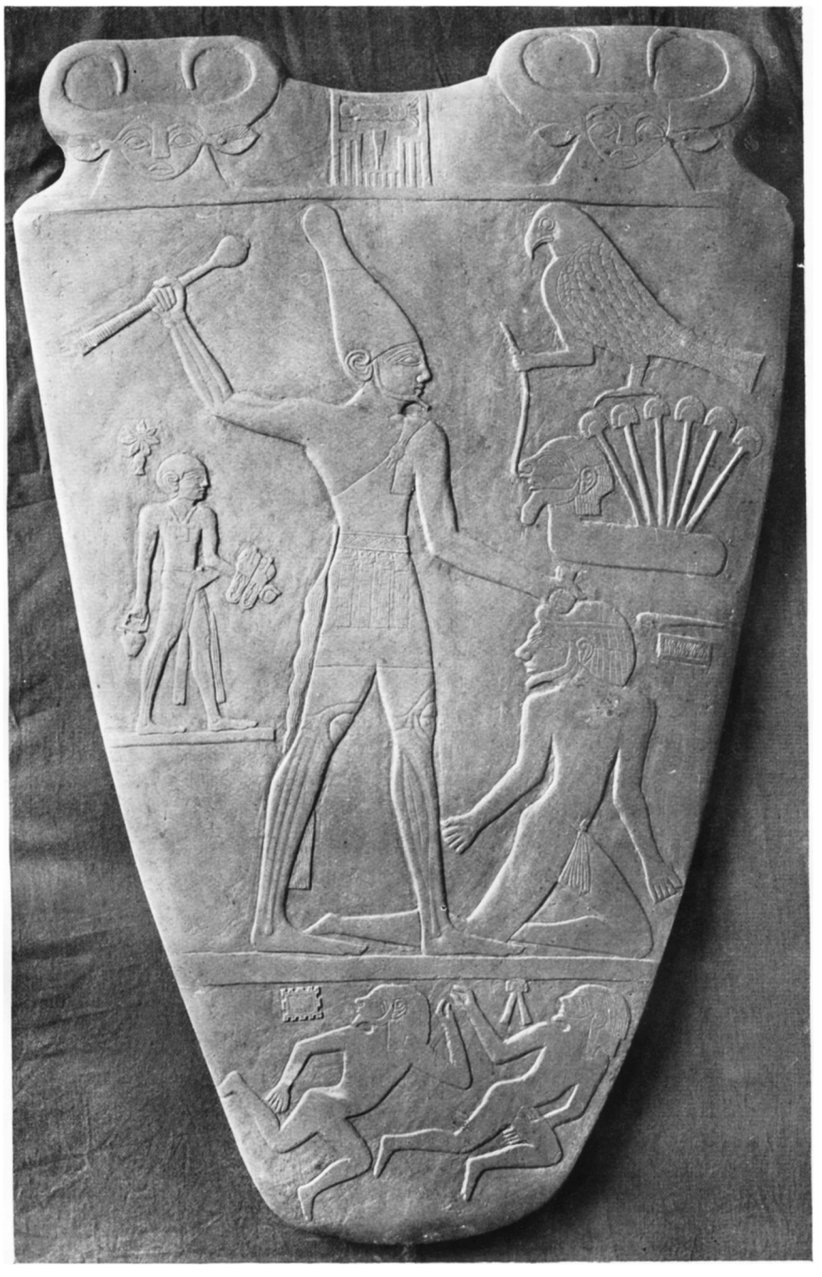
The Egyptian's power of working in the round is unsurpassed. Two ivory statuettes of kings are here reproduced,[3] each a few inches high, which are of marked individuality and compare favourably with the best art of any period. The one statuette is much broken away, and the name, if there was one, has gone. It was found in the temple of Abydos at a level which renders it probable that we have before us a king of the first dynasty. It is now in the British Museum. The king which it represents is old. Age has given him a stoop, but it has given him also great sweetness of expression. His kingship is expressed by his cap and the rich appearance of his mantle.

The other statuette, which came from a somewhat higher level in the same temple, represents Khufu, otherwise Cheops, the builder of the Great Pyramid. The name is inscribed on the side. This statuette represents the king in the full strength of manhood with a look of determination which agrees with the few historical facts recorded of him. This statuette, which in places preserves the original polish, is now in the Cairo Museum.

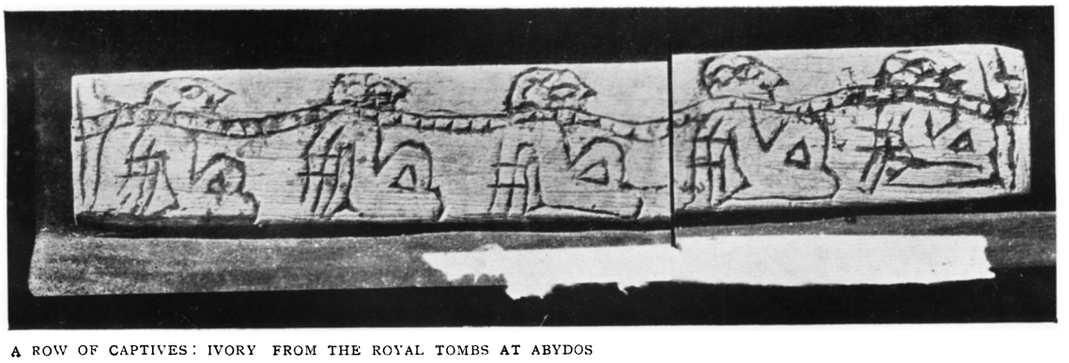
The Egyptian's power of rendering racial type, apparent already in the palette described above, is also exemplified in an

[2] Plate I, page 167.

[3] Plate II, page 170.



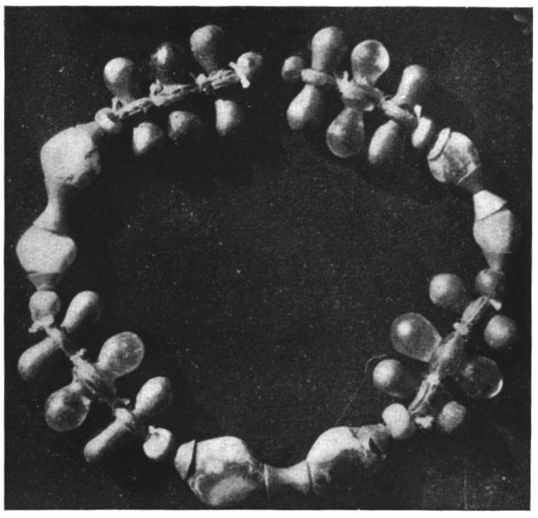
THE SLATE PALETTE OF KING NAR-MER, IN THE CAIRO MUSEUM



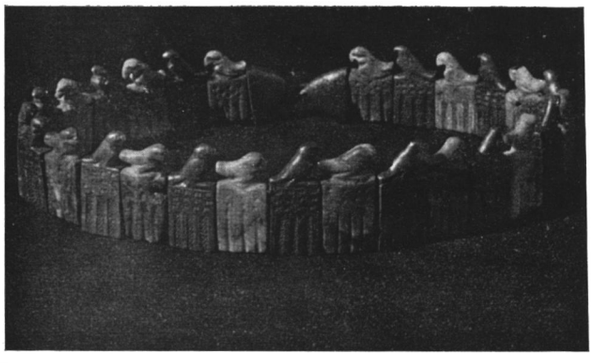
A ROW OF CAPTIVES: IVORY FROM THE ROYAL TOMBS AT ABYDOS

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART.
PLATE I

1



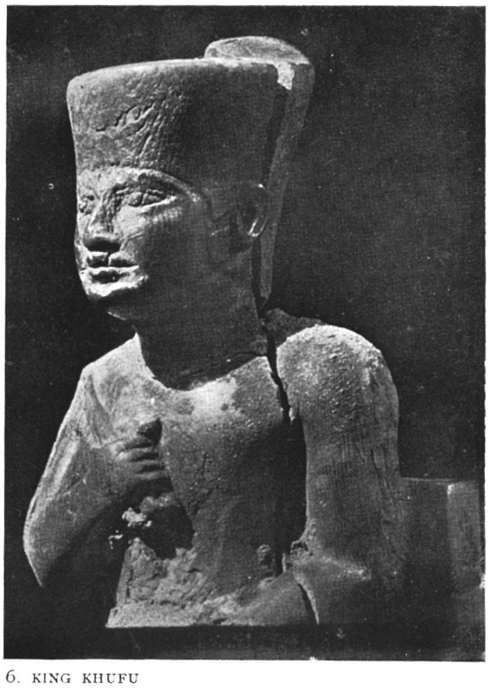
3



2

4

5. AGED KING



6. KING KHUFU

7. A CAPTIVE

ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART. PLATE II. BRACELETS (1–4) AND IVORY RELIEF (7) FROM THE ROYAL TOMBS AT ABYDOS; IVORY STATUETTES (5, 6) FROM THE TEMPLE AT ABYDOS

ivory slip here reproduced[4] which represents a captive and which came from the tomb of Qa, the last king of the first dynasty. The cast of countenance of the captive, his plaited locks and pointed beard, indicate a westerner or Libyan. The living strength and fierceness of the bound man are brought out in a masterly manner. The figure is on the inner side of a strip of ivory which is carved on the back with knots and bracts of a reed, in imitation of the real slips of reed that were used for casting lots or gaming. The Egyptian of to-day still throws such slips, half a dozen at a time, on the ground, counting how many fall with their outer side upward.

In conclusion, four bracelets found by Professor Petrie at Abydos are here represented.[4] They were on the forearm of a mummy in the tomb of King Zer, the successor of Mena. The history of the arm was inferred by Professor Petrie from its position. When the tomb was rifled and the body was broken up, the arm was hidden away in a hole and was forgotten. When it was first seen the gold was visible through the wrappings. The linen bandages were cut through, and the beads were rethreaded as they were uncovered.

The bracelets are composed of gold, turquoise, amethyst, and lapis lazuli. They are all different in design, and show great mastery of workmanship. The one with the rosette in its centre was worn nearest to the elbow; next to it was the row of hawks; then came the one with the hour-glass beads; and the one of three rows of beads held together at intervals was nearest the wrist.

In the description of the bracelets we cannot too closely follow the account of Professor Petrie.

The gold rosette which forms the centre of the first bracelet imitates the shape of a flower. The back is made hollow, and pierced with twice three holes for threading. A middle plate was then soldered halfway down the cup, and the edges turned inwards over it so as to form the petals. The beads adjoining the rosette are blue turquoise, with small gold balls between them, which are hammered out and soldered together. Small golden space-beads separate the second turquoises from the large amethyst beads in which the rows of beads unite. A similar arrangement is observed at the back of the bracelet. The intervening space and the fastening is by means of a plait of coarse hair or beaten gold wire, the wire being wrought to the thickness of the hair, that is ·013 inch. The plait at the end is turned back to form a loop to catch on to a golden ball-button which is held by a shank of gold that is fastened to it.

The second bracelet consists of hawks on grooved plaques, which may be understood as panelling. They are alternately of gold and turquoise. The gold hawks have been cast in a mould with two faces, the junction line being carefully removed and burnished. The birds are of one size, while the plaques on which they stand differ, a difference which has been produced by filling the mould at the base to a varying height. 'The horizontal threading holes in each plaque were probably cast, as there is no tapering and no burr to them, but they are not all on the same level.' Again, the end pieces are made as a beaten cone, flattened to an oval and closed at the end by a plate soldered in. The gold, according to Professor Petrie, was worked by chisel and burnishing, no grinding or file marks being visible. The chisel used for surface work was ·035 inch wide; the punch was ·026 by ·016.

The turquoise plaques were cut with a saw and worked over with a drill and a graving point. The drill holes for threading are conical, up to ·024 inch wide. The form of the turquoise hawk is older than that of the golden hawk, which agrees

[4] Plate II, page 170.

with the fact that the turquoise plaques bear the signs of wear at a little distance from the threading holes, leaving a rim of stone around the holes, which can only have been caused by a large bead with a wide conical hole wearing on the turquoise. Again, the plaques have a system of numbering on the bases by means of upright and of sloping strokes, from which we gather that several of the gold, and more still of the turquoise, plaques are missing. This corroborates the belief that the bracelet was put together of plaques that date from different periods.

The third bracelet consists of groups of lozenge-shaped turquoise and hour-glass beads, the latter consisting of a gold bead on either side of an amethyst one; in one case the hour-glass bead is of dark brown limestone. The hour-glass shape of bead is otherwise unknown. Each one has a double ridge around the middle of it, with a deep groove between. Two hairs were passed through the lozenge-shaped beads and their gold protective caps, and then parted one on either side of the hour-glass beads and lodged in the groove. The hairs were kept in place by binding them close on each side of the bead by a lashing of very fine gold wire.

The fourth bracelet consists of three similar groups of beads, one larger, and the others smaller, on either side. The middle beads are of dark purple lazuli, carved in a spiral imitating the gold beads of the same shape. These beads are made by coiling a gold wire, which is wrought thicker at the end than at the middle, to harmonize with the barrel form of the whole bead. The smaller beads are of turquoise. The gold ball beads in this case also are wrought hollow, and the groups of three are soldered together with a technical perfection of soldering which, in the estimation of Professor Petrie, has never been excelled.

'Such,' to quote the comment of Professor Petrie, 'is this extraordinary group of the oldest jewellery known, some two thousand years before that from Dahshur. Here, at the crystallizing point of Egyptian art, we see the unlimited variety and fertility of design. Excepting the plain gold balls there is not a single bead in any one bracelet which would be interchangeable with those in another bracelet. Each is of independent design, fresh and free from all convention or copying. And yet not any one of these would be in place among the jewellery of the twelfth dynasty; they all belong to the taste of their age—the purest hand-work, the most ready designing, and not a suspicion of merely mechanical polish and glitter.'

Various thoughts are roused by looking closely into these and other objects of Egyptian art which the researches of the last few years have restored to us. Not the least curious is it to think how directly these productions appeal to our taste. The desire to place achievement on record, to perpetuate individuality, and to fabricate beautiful objects out of the rare products of nature, are still among the high purposes which art sets before itself, and the manner in which the Egyptian gave utterance to these purposes closely corresponds to our own. The reason of this kinship lies in the historical facts which the researches in Egypt of the last few years have recovered also. We now know that Egypt and the lands north of the Mediterranean influenced each other from the earliest recorded times. Thus in being brought into contact with the productions of ancient Egypt we are confronted by that which has helped to mould our own taste. We are introduced to what may long have remained unknown, but which is not therefore unfamiliar, since it contains elements which appeal to us, regardless of considerations of space and time.