Art and Religion in Ancient Egypt

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King Tutankhamen is one of Egypt's most famous pharaohs.

Here the pharaoh Horemheb is shown as the god Horus, who had the head of a hawk. Notice the symbols around the king. These are symbols from the Egyptian writing system, hieroglyphics.
In ancient Egypt, religion provided the answer to life’s mysteries. People believed that gods and goddesses controlled the Sun, the river, the crops, and the animals. Egyptians prayed to these beings to make sure that the gods fed and protected everyone. By 2500 B.C., Egypt’s pharaohs, or kings, became linked to religion, too. People believed that each king was the god Horus in human form.

The Egyptians used artwork to honor the gods. They thought this would help them in the afterlife. They also believed that after death they would experience scenes from the artwork. Such art tells much about the lives and religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians.
The ancient Egyptians had a series of creation myths, or stories about the world’s origin. According to one myth, at first there was just an ocean in darkness. Then the Sun God appeared on the surface of the water and made the Island of Creation. The Sun God was called Atum, Re-Atum, and Re at different times and in different regions. Re produced two children, both gods. His son Shu, the air, and daughter Tefnut, moisture, together formed the atmosphere. Shu and Tefnut’s son, Geb, and daughter, Nut, formed Earth and the sky. Geb and Nut were parents to Isis, Osiris, Seth, and Nephthys. Isis and Osiris gave birth to Horus, who became personified in each king.
In Memphis, a city in northern Egypt, the people believed that Ptah was the main creator and had given birth to Re.

Here Nut forms an arch, the sky, over Re in the center and Shu and Tefnut to his left and right. Geb, the figure lying down, represents the earth. This image is meant to stand for the creation of the world.
King Akhenaton, Queen Nefertiti, and their daughter Meritaten offer gifts to the Sun Disk Aton. King Akhenaton tried to make all Egyptians worship just one god, Aton.

Anubis is the god of embalming, or the process of making mummies.
The ancient Egyptians believed in many gods. Each of Egypt’s main centers, Heliopolis, Memphis, and Hermopolis, honored a different set of gods led by Re, Ptah, or Thoth. However, certain gods were known throughout Egypt or became associated with local gods. Re, the Sun God, became the most important god. He is shown in artwork as a falcon, a scarab, or a sun disk. Isis was the Mother Goddess. She brought Osiris back to life after his brother Seth killed him. Hathor, the goddess of love, protected women and travelers. She often appeared in the form of a cow. Thoth, the god of wisdom, invented hieroglyphics, a system of writing. He had the head of an ibis.
The ancient Egyptians believed in life after death. Tombs were filled with clothes, furniture, food, games, or any items that a person might need in the next world. The Egyptians often decorated their tombs more nicely than they did their houses. Family members brought food to a loved one’s tomb daily so that the person would not starve in the afterlife. The Egyptians thought that preserving a person’s dead body made that person immortal. In early times, bodies were buried in the hot, dry desert sand and were preserved naturally. Later, as temples and tombs were built, each body was embalmed, or dried and wrapped in layers of cloth. A preserved body is called a mummy.
Men work to prepare a tomb for Ipy, an Egyptian sculptor. In the top scene, they prepare the mummy. In the middle scene, they are painting the coffin. In the bottom scene, they are making furniture for the tomb.

King Tutankhamen rests in a coffin surrounded by paintings and hieroglyphs that will make sure he is powerful and wealthy in the afterlife.
The mortuary temple where Pharaoh Djoser rests is attached to the famous step pyramid, dating from about 2668–2649 B.C.

Five thousand years ago, the three pyramids at Giza were built to be the burial places for kings Khufu, Khafre, and Menkure.

Jewelry, such as this piece in the form of vulture goddess Nekhbet, was left in the tomb to bring protection to the person in the afterlife.
The ancient Egyptians built thousands of temples to honor their gods and to house the dead. There were two main kinds of temples. A cultus temple served as a place where a god’s statue could be housed and protected. Egyptians believed that the gods actually lived within these statues. A king or a priest could perform rituals in the cultus temple to please the gods and to ensure Egypt’s prosperity.

The mortuary temple was the place where funeral rites were performed for a dead king. Offerings were brought there to make sure that the king would be immortal and would remain powerful in the afterlife.
The pharaoh was the only one who could speak directly with the gods. However, the king could not perform daily rituals in every temple in Egypt. He needed help. Priests acted as the king’s representatives in the temples. They spent much time inside the temples taking care of the gods’ needs. The priests performed rituals for the gods at daybreak, at noon, and at night. At these times, they cleansed themselves with sacred water. Then they burned incense, put oil and clothing on the gods, and made offerings of food and drink. Ordinary people could not join in these rituals, but they could make their own offerings at home or outside the temples, in the courtyards.
Priests are performing rituals at a funeral in this tomb painting from around 2350 B.C.

A king or a priest performed the Ceremony of the Open Mouth to allow the dead to experience the scenes shown in the temple art. In this painting, King Ay performs the ceremony in the tomb of Tutankhamen.
One popular amulet was a beetle called the scarab, which was thought to bring the wearer long life.

Here a scene from the Book of the Dead shows the dead people being pulled to the afterlife on a boat.

This page from the Book of the Dead shows a scene from the afterlife. Notice the baboons. The Egyptians believed that baboons helped the Sun God to defeat the night. They called baboons the Watchers of the Dawn.
Magic

Magic played a large part in ancient Egyptian religion. People believed that spells and charms kept away danger and sickness or gave good luck. For this reason, they wore small amulets on necklaces and bracelets. Many amulets looked like animals and gods. The Egyptians buried their dead with amulets for protection on the trip to the next world. People often buried the Book of the Dead alongside the coffin. This book contained magic spells or prayers written on papyrus to help the dead in the afterlife. People also used spells and rituals to treat the sick. Egyptians believed that the gods decided whether the magic would work or not.
Music and dancing played a regular part in Egyptian life. Farmers sang in the fields. They danced to thank the gods for good harvests. Music could be heard at feasts, as well as during religious worship in the temples. Musicians played instruments such as harps, lyres, guitars, flutes, trumpets, drums, and tambourines, while people clapped along. After dinner people usually gathered to watch shows of singers and dancers. The king and the queen often had such groups perform at their palace. Mostly women held jobs as dancers and musicians. Decorations in the Egyptian tombs and temples include scenes of people bending, leaping, and dancing.
In this tomb painting, women musicians are playing the harp and other instruments, possibly during a banquet for the tomb's owner.

This lyre was used in Egypt between 1870 and 1320 B.C.

This trumpet was found in the tomb of King Tutankhamen.
Historians believe that the Great Sphinx of Giza was sculpted about 4,600 years ago. The sphinx has a human head and the body of a lion. It is carved from one piece of limestone and is 240 feet (73.2 m) long and 66 feet (20.1 m) tall!

In 1257 B.C., four 67-foot-tall (20.4-m-tall) statues of Ramses II were carved out of the cliff face at the temple of Ramses II at Abu Simbel.
The ancient Egyptians tried to gain favor with their king, their queen, and the gods by honoring them with works of art. They hoped that the gods would reward them on Earth and in the afterlife. The Egyptians created many statues and sculptures with this thought in mind. The tombs of the pharaohs and the nobles held sculptures as well as fine wooden furniture, magnificent paintings, and hand-crafted jewelry. At temple gates stood obelisks, or tall stone pillars that were covered with hieroglyphics. The Egyptians began writing with picture symbols called hieroglyphs as early as 3000 B.C. By 300 B.C., the Egyptian alphabet had more than 700 of these symbols.
The ancient Egyptians decorated their tomb walls with colorful paintings. They thought they would experience these scenes in the next life. They hired artists to paint them as the subjects in nice scenes and surroundings. Artists painted scenes of everyday life, which included details such as animals and plants. Much of what we know about Egyptian civilization comes from the treasures found in tombs. Art has lasted for thousands of years because of Egypt’s dry climate. In a sense, the preserved sculptures, paintings, and jewelry have indeed given their owners eternal life.
amulets (AM-yoo-lets) Small objects worn as good luck charms.
atmosphere (AT-muh-sfeer) The layer of gases around an object in space. On Earth, this layer is air.
coffin (KAH-fin) A box that holds a dead body.
ibis (EYE-bis) A bird that has a long curving beak and that wades in the water to hunt for fish.
immortal (ih-MOR-tul) Able to live forever.
papyrus (puh-PY-rus) A type of paper on which ancient peoples wrote, made from the leaves of the papyrus plant.
personified (per-SAHz-nih-fyd) To have taken on the features of a human.
pharaohs (FER-ohz) Ancient Egyptian rulers.
preserved (prih-ZURVD) Having kept something from being lost or going bad.
representatives (reh-prih-ZEN-tuh-tivz) People chosen to speak for others.
rites (RYTS) Ceremonial acts.
rituals (RIH-choo-ulz) Religious or social practices.
scarab (SKER-ub) A kind of beetle.
sphinx (SFINKS) A made-up ancient Egyptian animal with the body of a lion and the head of a man, a ram, or a hawk.
symbols (SIM-bulz) Objects or designs that stand for something else.
tombs (TOOMZ) Graves.