

1. WHAT VALUE DOES EGYPTIAN ART HAVE FOR US?

I will not rest until there is nothing left
that is for me only word or tradition,
until everything is living idea.

Goethe, Rome 27 June 1787¹

An art is of course created and enriched by individual men in their own particular ways, but at the same time it has a wider aspect, it is a product of the mental activity of an entire people, and so has an existence in its own right, to some extent independent of the passing of single men, and separate from the works of other peoples.²

In every people the artistic impulse finds expression in a number of fields, which together compose a unity precisely because they are being exploited by *one* people. But only a few especially gifted peoples work uniformly, and with the same degree of success, in all these fields.³ Usually, creative power and vitality only find suitable ground in some of them, or reach high points at different times in different media (see p. 66). In addition, any man who attempts to portray the art of a bygone

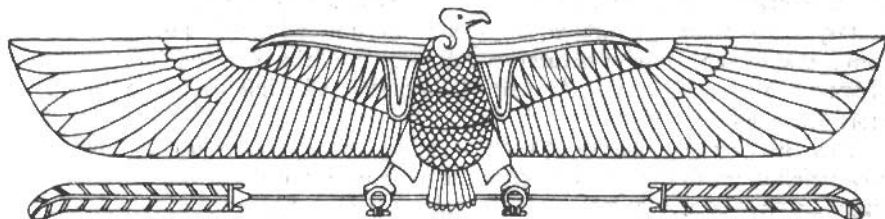


FIG. 3. Vulture on the ceiling of the royal processional way in a temple. NK

people is dependent on what has been preserved by chance. Moreover, his own disposition and circumstances will only very rarely allow him to comprehend all areas in equal measure.

For this reason this book does not study in equal depth the whole range of meaning of the word art, but restricts itself to the consideration of what we normally call representational art. Essentially, only two-dimensional and three-dimensional representation will be discussed, and these chiefly in so far as they depict human or animal bodies. Architecture will be considered only when this is unavoidable; purely decorative art, verbal art, music and dance will only be alluded to.

¹ [*Italienische Reise*, letter of 27 June 1787. Schäfer's text is inaccurate (J.R.B.).]

² How far the expressive capacities of a people in language and representational art may diverge over a long period can be seen in the case of the Jews. Excavations reveal that this people, which produced the literature of the Old Testament, possessed a really miserable artistic culture—indeed their material culture is poor as a whole.

³ Stapel 1928.18. [Wilhelm Stapel (1882–1954) German nationalist author and National Socialist (J.R.B.).]

A thorough acquaintance with Egyptian art is more than a fascinating and desirable extra, it is indispensable to anybody who wants not just to enjoy looking at, but really to understand the beginnings of Greek art, itself the progenitor of contemporary European art.

Strictly speaking, before the growth of great representational art in Greece only two parts of the Mediterranean world can be thought of as independently creative: Babylonia and Egypt. Both influenced art in Greece in various ways (Von Bissing 1912, 1925).

At all periods there was only one route from Babylonia to Greece—by way of Syria, Asia Minor, and the islands.

But in the case of Egypt there were two routes, the straight one across the sea, and the longer one round the coasts of Syria and Asia Minor. In the earlier period of the flourishing of Cretan—Mycenaean culture in the second millennium, the 'islands of the sea', as the Egyptians called these countries, probably traded directly with the Delta. But for a long time north Palestine and Syria also passed on to Greece Egyptian influence and Egyptian forms, often mixed with local and Babylonian ones and considerably altered. This longer route may even have become more important than the direct one for the effect Egyptian art had on early European art: it is almost as if Egypt's independent, self-assured art had to be dissolved and analyzed in order for the Greeks to be able to make use of it. The significance of the intermediaries can be easily seen in the case of ornament. Syria added an element of unrestrained fantasy to Egyptian style, which, although it transformed motifs into geometric forms, always kept close to natural models; only after this addition did it become productive for other peoples. Around 700 B.C. the direct link started to become more important.

There may be other echoes of these changing routes in Greek myths. There are obscure allusions to the direct route in the descriptions of the arrival of various legendary heroes, such as Kekrops and Danaos, the brother of Aiguptos. On the other hand, it is as if Egypt had been expunged from another group of myths. All the technical processes, like glass-making, which the Greeks derived from Egypt, are attributed to the active transmitters, the Phoenicians, or to native Greek inventors such as Daidalos.

Just as the method of transmission changed with time, so did the Greek estimation of Egypt. Although they criticized the Egyptians, the Greeks esteemed highly the intellectual world of this peculiar foreign people: Herodotus, Plato, and Plutarch knew what they could hope to find there. Philip of Opus, a pupil of Plato,⁴ admitted that such hopes were not unjustified, even if, he added proudly, it was the Greeks who 'brought what they took over to a finer culmination'.

One should not overestimate the influence of Babylonia or, especially, Egypt on Greece; but it is obvious that the mere existence of those two great artistic and cultural areas must have acted as a stimulus. Many a chapter of the history of Greek and hence of all European art would appear different today if those teachers had not worked beforehand to smooth the way for the first steps of the pupil of genius, who was to outshine them in influence on the world, and to open up entirely new paths.

⁴ [It has not been possible to verify this passage. For Philip of Opus see *RE* 19.2351–66 (J.R.B.).]

But these links with Greek art do not by any means constitute all that knowledge of Babylonian and Egyptian art can offer us.

In order to solve the riddle posed by the blossoming of art in mankind, it is important to be able to carry out research among the peoples who created a great art independently. Since the Greeks arrived as new-comers among cultures that were then still far superior, one cannot expect their art to produce an answer to these questions; false impressions are often produced by its situation in time and space. Before reaching any judgement it is essential to establish what has developed spontaneously and where the preliminary work of another people has been exploited. The situation is quite different with Babylonia and Egypt.

Babylonian art can be traced as far back into prehistory as the art of the Nile valley, if not further, yet we are a long way from knowing the complete course of its development.

Egypt, on the other hand, is probably the only country in the world where we can observe the development of art more or less from its origins and in great detail: this development was furthermore given unity by the integrating physical shape of the river valley (see p. 32). The production of this people extends over more than four thousand years from its beginning to its high point, and on to its extinction a few centuries after the birth of Christ. There are of course still gaps, even if many that were once keenly felt have been bridged by new finds.

It is obvious how great a protection the length of this artistic life and the wealth of documentation provides against misinterpretation. It is scarcely the fault of the monuments that there is as yet no entirely satisfactory history of Egyptian art,⁵ since nowhere else are we offered such rich material for study, relatively free from sources of error, and chronologically well ordered. From the moment when Egyptian art reached maturity superimposed foreign influences, which might have diverted or in other ways disturbed the continuous process of development, are entirely absent; what was most essential to Egyptian art was not to be found in the art of any neighbours. Of course, Egypt was never entirely cut off: at certain periods it was astonishingly open to the outside world (p. 32). But in its progress its representational art took over apparently foreign material so authoritatively that it presents itself to us as a whole cast in an exceptionally unified mould. It would be an attractive and revealing exercise for historians of Egyptian art to study how it reacted on the one hand to Cretan-Mycenaean influence from the beginning of the second millennium to about 1300 B.C., that is, at a time of strength, and on the other to Greek influence from the fourth century B.C., in the weakness of old age. Many problems in the scientific study of representational art, especially in the rendering of nature, are most clearly stated and most surely answered from Egyptian art, thanks to the Egyptians' unremittingly consistent approach and to their insatiable delight in creation. There can scarcely be another great art about which it would be possible to write a book which sets out with the aims of this one.

The scientific study of art and the historical study of Greek art would in themselves provide sufficient reason to research into the art of the Egyptians. But there is a further incentive for us. Anyone whose interest in Egyptian art has been awakened will discover in it an irresistible fascination: he will find not only that his academic curiosity is satisfied, but also that he is dealing with a rich and mature art that still

⁵ [Among the books published since, two should be singled out: Wolf 1957, Smith 1958.]

has a vital message for him.

And yet there will almost always be a residue that is not understood. It is relatively unimportant that many people cannot completely understand the content of works of art. *Not* because the content is a subsidiary matter: in the end all Egyptian works were created to express it (see p. 154–5). But any guide-book can help with such questions, and we need similar aids for works in many other spheres.

What is much more significant is that the strange form in which this content is presented does not allow someone unused to looking at pre-Greek art to arrive easily at a full appreciation. However, the exponents of some types of modern art have not found the rigidity of the statuary and the apparent distortion in two-dimensional works to be obstacles; rather they have considered that it is precisely in these matters that they have again come close to Egyptian art. Our studies will show that they have been mistaken in this (see p. 340). Those who sense that we are removed by thousands of years from these works, in which the method of rendering nature is fundamentally different, are nearer the truth. In fact, not only must we find our way in a world of alien forms of expression; we must also accustom ourselves to a quite different mode of apprehension of the world of the senses, before Egyptian representations reveal to us what the ancient craftsmen put into them. In this process three-dimensional works, that is statues, tend to be more accessible than two-dimensional reliefs and paintings. In statuary the observer may be disconcerted by a peculiar squareness in posture and form, but he can adapt to it with relative ease. For the posture, at all events, *could* be adopted by a living body. But in most figures in two-dimensional representations one finds postures and movements which to the untutored eye look positively dislocated.

To reach a correct appreciation of the rendering of nature in these works it is not enough to leaf through a few picture-books or to walk once or twice through a large collection; a considerable amount of work is necessary, entered into with the firmness of purpose and calm detachment which Goethe requires (see p. ix, motto B) for the appreciation of early Greek art.

Egyptian art long suffered from being regarded as at most the trainer of the 'future saviour', without being valued on its own merits—perhaps because it was seen as standing so close to Greek art. This situation has improved, partly as a result of ideas we owe to Herder.⁶ He introduced a way of thinking in which the history of representational and other art became the 'great fugue, in which the voices of individual peoples come to the fore one by one'.

Early indifference was followed by a reaction. Since the beginning of this century the general opinion of things Egyptian has risen to such an extent that it has often resulted in an underestimation of the art of other areas: I have indeed heard it said in as many words that the whole of Greek art from the fifth century on was just an aberration when measured against Egyptian. It is true that the vigorous rejection and acceptance of the two types of art expressed an awareness of the fundamental nature of the issue. Indeed, the opposition between the Egyptian rendering of nature and that initiated in Greek art and brought to a scientific conclusion in the modern era (see p. 274) is an opposition between two fundamentally different modes of artistic creation. I would like to offer an insight into this opposition by providing a better understanding of the basic principles of Egyptian art than has hitherto been

⁶ [On Herder and Egypt see Morenz 1968.154–8 (J.R.B.).]

possible. In doing this I wish to make clear what were *the forms of the images in which the Egyptian, i.e. the 'pre-Greek', mind assimilated the physical world in order to show it with objective accuracy*. In this way it will automatically become easier to understand how the basic elements of the other half of the pair, the 'Greek method', came into being. The general implications of these principles in global terms will also be considered. The better understanding achieved will finally allow us to examine the question (see pp. 340—42) of whether an artist of today can use again ancient Egyptian forms in the spirit in which they were originally created.

I hope, by discussion in the following pages of the basic problems of Egyptian two- and three-dimensional representation, to enable the reader to cast off his pre-conceptions and to make the necessary adjustment, a much harder task than most people imagine.

There are two types of approach to different forms of art. They normally occur in conjunction, but should be kept apart at least for theoretical purposes.⁷ For many it is almost an article of faith that all genuine art can immediately be recognized for what it is, and that its value can be appreciated at once by a person who is genuinely receptive to art; this should be possible at any time, and most especially now that we are at a peak of sensitivity. But the most superficial glance at history will reveal how opinions of contemporary and earlier masterpieces have varied—to such an extent that it is difficult to avoid asking Pilate's question, 'what is truth?' It is as if every man thought himself unique in being truly sensitive and correct in his judgement.

Unless, when one approaches an alien art, one makes a scholarly attempt to grasp its essence, one will grant recognition only to what one feels has a positive effect on one's own personality and acts as a new and enriching element in one's life. That is the natural way for a man to approach a strange work of art. In doing this he may calmly take appearance for reality, and fill the form, which would otherwise be dead for him, with new life; this is how many ideas become fruitful only when they are misunderstood. Any man, and that includes any artist, is entitled to do this, but not to make the arrogant assumption that he has found the key to a strange art in what he is thus able to perceive and appreciate of it. Classical Antiquity has assumed many forms in the minds of later generations, and will doubtless assume many more. How much, within the field of Egyptian art alone, the estimate of New Kingdom art in general, and Amarna art in particular, has fluctuated! So perhaps one is justified in being sceptical if today artists and enthusiastic laymen believe quite seriously that Egyptian works evoke in them the same feelings as they did in the Egyptians. Delighted at finding in Egyptian works of art elements that accord with what moves our own artists, people will leap over the vast abyss which separates us from those times and those men, and from the intellectual world of their works.

The scholar, who struggles to understand the essence of Egyptian art without hoping to find in it some immediate gain in his responsiveness to life, cannot be satisfied with the kind of observation just described. Many people have probably been drawn to this art because at some time it appealed to their emotions. But the scholar must test whether the forms are really created with the intentions suggested

⁷ I discussed the importance of the distinction between pleasurable and academic methods of viewing collections for their arrangement and use in Schäfer 1920.

to him by his emotions. He tries by his studies to remove what may be false impressions, and wants to be able, as far as possible, to hear what the works have to say from the point of view of the intellectual and emotional world in which they were created. In order to achieve this he will have to stand at a distance and abandon his instinctive sympathy for the works.

Representational art stands in the centre of the life of a people as one impulse among many that proceed from a single matrix. No scholar can afford to neglect this unity in the mental outlook of a people. In the case of Egyptian art we are not as fortunate as with Far Eastern art, where it is still possible to be guided by descendants who live in the same culture, or with Greek art, where there are many writings preserved from Antiquity. One cannot expect to find comparable statements by ancient Egyptians about their art. Yet we are not in such a hopeless situation as with the stone statues of Easter Island, where a few works stand isolated, and the meaning of the inscriptions is probably lost for ever.⁸ We are also much more fortunate than with Cretan art, where there is of course a profusion of surviving art works, but the religious, political, and intellectual environment into which the works were born is still almost entirely hidden from us by silence on the part of the written sources.⁹ The situation is different with Egypt. Here it is possible to become thoroughly absorbed in an overwhelming, ever-increasing mass of texts, from the most spiritual to the most worldly. Of course a knowledge of the language sufficient to let one penetrate to some extent into the writings is necessary for this. With Egyptian in particular, translations are quite inadequate, because the problem is not so much one of the literal meanings of texts as of absorbing as much as possible of the spirit of the language and of the script. A man who also knows the nature of the land can hope to throw a footbridge over that chasm, and to look at the ancient works in something approaching the total context from which they emerged. He¹⁰ might even achieve something which could be called thinking and feeling in Egyptian, which provides a protection against much false interpretation.

Many people tend to be shocked when it is suggested that they apply their intellects to works of art. Yet for anyone who is seriously engaged in the study of art it is essential. At least the basic principles underlying the rendering of nature in Egyptian art are quite simply comprehensible only through thought; they must necessarily remain closed to unaided sensibility. This is an area where Goethe's maxim that 'a work of art should just be enjoyed, not dissected by analysis' is invalid. And it is not satisfactory to ignore intellectual questions—they demand to be answered, precisely for the sake of the purity of one's aesthetic enjoyment. But there is no cause for concern; if the method of study allows both intellect and sensibility their rightful place, so that one is in no danger of coming to believe that what the intellect alone can grasp was created by the intellect, and if the whole idea can be made to live again, feeling will not be stifled. On the contrary, if the boundary is clearly drawn,

⁸ [But see now Barthel 1958.]

⁹ [But see now Ventris — Chadwick 1956 and Chadwick 1958.]

¹⁰ One will always be tempted to make the original surroundings of the works of art concrete for viewers. But this could probably only be done harmlessly by using temporary pictorial reconstructions. Attempts to do it physically, for example in a museum, must be extremely cautious and leave a lot of room for fantasy if they are not quickly to become intolerable. Apart from this—and it is often forgotten—the inner eye has to do most of the work even when visiting what is still standing in Egypt, and not just because of the state of preservation of the pieces.

thought and feeling can develop in close communication, each in its own field; then and only then is the way clear for a full appreciation of the whole.

But all this work would be wasted for a man who had nothing more than the acumen of a bright *homunculus*. Such a person can lead us into the strange land, but only a man with something of a Faust in him can become in a deeper sense at home there. It is possible for anyone to experience any art once in one of its masterpieces with 'bated breath' or 'beating heart', when a door between the work and the inner understanding, which may have been shut for a long time, finally opens. Thus many may be able to name works in other fields, whose significance dawned on them in a refreshing insight which then led to an appreciation of hitherto unattainable treasures. Verbal explication is of small assistance here; it must always be a deepening acquaintance with the works themselves which brings true understanding, and the acquaintance must be wherever possible with good originals, as even the best reproduction is only a makeshift. Nothing more than preparation can be achieved through words. As E.G. Kolbenheyer¹¹ said, they must 'perform their service and then at the the appropriate moment fall silent'.

It is essential to bear in mind the distinction between an artistic and an academic method of looking at ancient art, and to understand that, as in life, they do not remain at opposite poles, but are inextricably intertwined. For a man like H. von Helmholtz 'an artistic mode of reaction is undeniably part of the scientist's makeup'.¹²

We must always be aware that our understanding can never be complete. This is less because what is preserved, despite its profusion, remains, and always will remain, one-sided and full of gaps, or because we cannot waken a perfect human being from antiquity and incorporate him in our lives, as Faust did with Helena: it is far, far more because it is completely impossible for us to transport ourselves into the mind of a strange people. Such an awareness of the limitations of insight or perceptiveness should never stop us from pressing forward as far as we can. Research itself acquires from this barrier a particular, stimulating attraction. If no scholar can entirely free himself from himself and from the context in which he lives, this means that each individual will approach Egyptian art in his own way, which is racially, culturally, personally and temporally determined, and will by his agreement or disagreement conquer new areas or show known ones in a different light; all this will help scholars who test these contributions rigorously to draw an ever richer, more living, and more accurate picture of the whole. Here, as with all communication with other human beings and their activities, the best help is founded on a sympathy and devotion, which will of course recognize another approach as being different, but provided it is valid, will appreciate it and for this very reason not need to fear disappointment. We must keep ourselves as far from the excessive enthusiasm which foists our own personalities onto the creations of ancient artists, as from a prim coldness—which is in the final analysis just as lacking in objectivity.¹³

One may be confident that, as agreement and disagreement alternate, true values will repeatedly assert themselves. 'They can remain hidden from view for a long time, but in the end their invincible patience triumphs. They can wait. Even if at a particu-

¹¹ [Foremost poet of the National Socialist movement (1878–1962) (J.R.B.).]

¹² [Hermann L. F. von Helmholtz (1821–94): great physiologist and physicist, inventor of the ophthalmoscope (J.R.B.).]

¹³ Like that of Worringer (1927). See my discussion (Schäfer 1929b).

lar time the dominant movement banishes a perfect work of art into the outermost darkness or treats it with little discernment, provided it is physically preserved the work itself survives artistic movements and shines forth again, as soon as its time comes.¹⁴ Thus, despite temporary eclipses, there accumulates a permanent and ever-growing treasury of pieces ascertained to be great, giving us the confidence that behind changing opinions there is something firm, that there is some consistency.

In all attempts to penetrate into foreign realms of art, and therefore also with Egyptian art, one should bear in mind the warning Winckelmann gave to 'young beginners and travellers' as the best advice to take with them on the way to understanding Greek art:

Do not look for deficiencies and imperfections in works of art before you have recognized and learned how to discover what is beautiful. This reminder is based on daily experience—the beautiful has remained undiscovered by all too many, because they wanted to criticize before they had begun to learn; they behave like schoolboys, who are all sharp enough to discover the weaknesses of their teacher. ... But just as a negative sentence can be found more easily than a positive one, in the same way it is much easier to notice and to discover the imperfect than the perfect.

The aim of this book is to throw light on the position of Egyptian art in the art of the world, to show its living strength, and to prepare the way for an understanding of its achievements, as far as possible independently of the shifting 'values' (Schäfer 1929a) it may have for posterity. At the end the reader may himself decide whether the art thus contemplated seems lovable or worthwhile to him, and whether it is of a kind he finds personally enriching. No one who approaches Egyptian art today is likely to find, and he could hardly expect to find, an art which can satisfy him as it satisfied the ancient Egyptians. But even for us Egyptian art can provide at least many enjoyable hours of leisure, and surely nobody can occupy himself with the art of this gifted people, who more than any other created in joy for their own artistic instruction and hence for that of humanity, without bringing some personal profit away from the exercise.

¹⁴ Cohen 1925.4 [Very extensively modified by Schäfer (J.R.B.)].