

# Ancient Age: Egyptian Civilization

*4500 BC TO 1090 BC*

## **Geographical Position**

If the art of a civilization exists without wearing out, even after thousands of years have elapsed; it is because of the geographic location that nation is blessed with. A notable example is the Egyptian civilization. In the north-east corner of Africa, lies Egypt. Due to it being geographically situated with large deserts and mountainous regions on its west and south, and oceans on the north-east, there was never any possibility of foreign invasion on Egypt. Thus, the art there has remained in the same condition for thousands of years. The division of Egypt's terrain is done in two parts, i.e. Upper and Lower Egypt. The tapering part of land in the East on both sides of the river is called 'Upper Egypt'. The Nile flows towards the North into the Mediterranean Sea. The northernmost region of Egypt, near the mouth of the Nile where it enters the sea is known as 'Lower Egypt'. The yearly flood that occurs in the Nile deposits rich alluvial soil and that has made the region fertile. Hence, since the Neolithic period, inhabitation has come to be witnessed here. Egypt's climate is hot and dry. Hence, the artefacts have not worn out and have remained intact even through thousands of years. The deposits on the banks of the river Nile are very useful in producing mud bricks. The papyrus plant that is grown there is quite helpful in the building of houses. There are gigantic accumulations of sandstones available in the mountainous terrains. Similarly, various kinds of stones, like diorite, granite, etc. are available in abundant proportions. Therefore, the production of huge buildings and grand idol-sculptures became possible in this land.

## **Historical Backdrop**

Since the Neolithic Age, there were human dwellings in Egypt. Around the year 3400 BC there was a king named 'Menes'. A most ancient rock inscription referring to this very king is found to be seen in Egypt.

Altogether, 31 dynasties ruled Egypt, beginning with 'Thinite' family, from which the political tenures began. 'This' or 'Thinis', was the capital city. The name of the dynasty 'Thinite' may have derived from this. There is not much information available on the ancient age royal dynasties. The regimes of the royal dynasties in Egypt are classified into four monarchies, namely the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, the New Kingdom and the Saite period. Around the period 2600 BC during the Old Kingdom reign, the huge pyramids were built; excellent artworks and sculpture were produced. In the period between 2000 to 1700 BC, during the Middle Kingdom regime, i.e. when the 11th and 12th royal dynasties ruled, the idols of the mighty and great icons of the dynasty were erected. At the same time, the construction of buildings too got an impetus. Around this time, ruled the famous king, Ramases II. This period is known as the golden age. The famous temples and tombs of Karnak and Luxor were built during the reign of Ramases.

### **Social and Religious Beliefs**

The art in any nation is seen to reflect the social and religious beliefs held in the nation. Egyptian art showcases this point vividly. During the beginning of the Egyptian historic period, the practices of black magic, sorcery are seen to have increasingly enhanced to form an organized religion. The Egyptians firmly believed in life after death, that it is like the known worldly life; and that if the body of the dead remained in a good condition, the soul could make use of the body till then. Ka is the name given to the soul by the Egyptians. The custom of preserving the human body after death was in vogue. To prevent the dead body from decaying to extinction, it was stuffed and preserved. This body is called a mummy. An exact replica of the image of the dead was carved in granite stone to immortalize his / her existence. The faith held behind this gesture was that if the body happens to perish, then 'Ka' entered this stone image of the person and lived a life after death. It was believed that the needs that prevail in the worldly life, those and their beliefs and values, are as necessary in the life after death. Therefore, enormous tombs like the pyramids began to be built. Simultaneously, the art of sculpture and paintings evolved too.

Egyptians believed in many Gods; the two major Gods among them being 'Osiris' and 'Ra'. Osiris was believed to be the God who bestowed

the yearly lush green vegetation, the fertile soil from which it emanated, and the river Nile which made all this possible.

Ra- The Sun, called Re too was the other famous God. Ra was shown as symbols of Pyramid, Sun Disk, or falcon.

The Egyptians considered animals as Gods too. The bodies being human, the heads are seen to be of animals. Besides these God of national stature, every village had a local God they prayed to.

## **Hieroglyphics**

Egyptian hieroglyphics seems to be a crucial factor for the Egyptian people. This script was not formed with letter marks, but made from several pictorial symbols. Hence, they are called Hieroglyphics. Initially, this script was written by drawing quick sketches of birds, lions, spears, and several objects from the day-to-day life. Later it evolved and was made practical. In many reliefs and murals, matter written in hieroglyphics comes to be seen, and it is these scripts that helped explore the ancient history of Egypt.

## **Art of Architecture**

The greatest specimen of architectural art during the time of Egypt's ancient empire are its pyramids. The pyramids are famous for their uncomplicated design, their imposing and massive forms. In the period 3000 to 2500 BC, maximum number of pyramids were built. Thus, that period is addressed as the Pyramid Age.

During the very ancient age, very simple tombs were built. A corpse was buried in the pit and mud-stone was piled on it. Over a period, the pit grew larger and squarer and its walls began to be covered with wood. Later, in place of wood, bricks and stones began to be used. The mud-stone pile was replaced by building a pedestal of stone-bricks instead. The surface of this pedestal was flat and all four sides stood inclined. A tomb thus designed was called '*mastaba*'. It is an Arabic word, meaning 'small bench'. According to a widespread belief this is the original form of the pyramids.

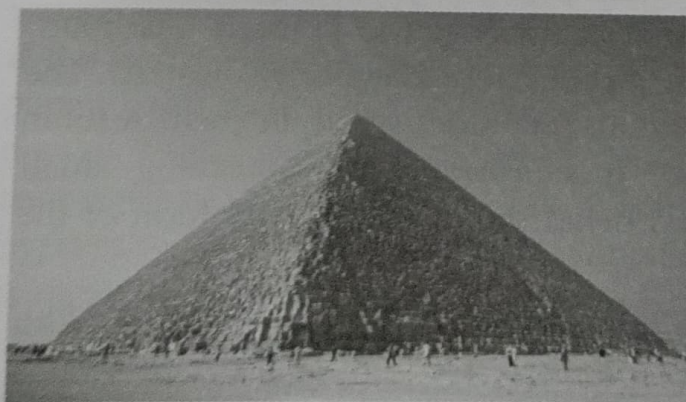
The lithic construction above the ground was first made in the 30th century BC by the state architect 'Imhotep'. He built at Saccara, a huge Step-pyramid as a tomb of 'Djoser', the '*Pharaoh*' (King) of the 3rd

dynasty. It is the most ancient, existing stone building in the world. A differently designed pyramid of the 4th dynasty Pharaoh '*Snefru*' is found at '*Meidum*' in Egypt. In it, atop the bottom pedestal there is a single towering phase, with a pedestal at the top. All these three pedestals have their walls inclined. Hence, this is called a pedestaled pyramid. This is a special specimen of the step pyramids. After many such transitions, at last the pyramid's complete form was realised. The three huge pyramids built side by side at Giza are uniquely famous. They are known as *Khufu*, *Khafre*, and *Menkaure*, after names of the three Pharaohs belonging to the 4th dynasty.

### The Great Khufu Pyramid of Giza

Probably to facilitate the transit of a dead man's soul into the other world, the triangular-shaped pyramids have been designed to appear like tapering at the top tusks, springing towards the sky. This largest pyramid of Khufu is solidly built from yellowish hued limestone. Otherwise the only hollow spaces are: the room having the mummified pharaoh's coffin, two rooms of the King and Queen, the descending path leading to it, tapering small windows for ventilation or some other religious purposes. There are polished tiles on the surface of all the four sides of the pyramid. In the main chamber is a vacant, granite coffin (Sarcophagus), existing presently in a damaged state. It may have been kept inside when the pyramid was being erected. The descending path is about 46 metres long, and along the skirting of its wall polished limestones are skilfully fit. An Arab historian while writing about that has said that 'in the joint between two stones, it is impossible to pass even a needle, or a feather through'.

The major characteristic of this pyramid is its imposing form. It



Kheops-Pyramid

pervades over 13 acres of land. Its height originally was 144 metres, of which 135 metres prevail to exist. Each side of its quadrangular base is 225 metres long. In the inner spaces of the pyramid, at certain places there are exquisite sculptures, at others colourful pictures. The pillars

there too have been painted. The main chamber *specially reserved for the soul of the dead is decorated with idols and pictures. These are depictions of the events in the worldly life that the soul has led. Even scripts of prayers to God are found adorning the walls and pillars.*

According to the opinion of the architect Sir W.M. Flinders Petrie, the pyramid may have been built using 25 lakh stone blocks *weighing 2540 kg each. The Greek historian Herodotus wrote about it after having visited this pyramid in 450 BC. He says in his writings, it took ten years to build a road to carry immensely huge stones from the banks of the Nile to the place of construction, and one lakh labourers toiled for twenty years to build the pyramid. The Pharaoh Khufu ruled for 23 years. It seems he may have taken up the construction of this tomb as soon as he ascended the throne. To have piled up such huge and heavy stones one above the other without any advanced resources like today, is a mind-boggling and wonderful fact.* (*Kheops-Pyramid.jpg, Wikimedia Commons, CC 2.5*)

### **The Middle Kingdom Caves-Tombs**

Pyramids were built to secure the corpse and valuable belongings of the Pharaohs. But this objective failed because of the robberies that ensued, by busting the pyramids. Therefore, the practice of building pyramids during this era was brought to a halt.

The Pharaohs of this age moved their capital from Memphis to the city of Thebes in the South. In the uninhabited region near Thebes, to the west of the river Nile, a new trend of carving rocks to build caves-tombs came into practice. This region is recognized as 'Valley of the tombs of the kings'. The idea behind building these in a remote uninhabited region was to keep the tombs a secret. The rocks were dug deep to create tombs inside and the caves' entrances closed off with stones and mud. Temples were built in front of these gates for memorial customs and prayers. Among these cave temples the ones built by, Queen Hatshepsut at Deir-el-Bahari and Ramesses II at Abu Simbel are extraordinarily famous.

### **Deir-El-Bahari Temple**

This temple, related to the 18th royal dynasty was built in the year 1500 BC by the Pharaoh Tuthmosis II's Queen Hatshepsut This architecture is a complex structure of temples and tombs. The entrance is largely and

clearly seen despite it being having excavated in the mountains. The important thing about this temple, located at the foothills, which is the frontal part of the tomb, is that it's a pathway leading from the assembly hall to the tomb rather than to the sanctum. In the area in front of the temple there are the common-row of Sphinx and idols.

A Sphinx which is an idol with a man's head and a lion's body used to be a symbol of the Pharaoh's affluence and power. Its headgear has the royal emblem of a snake. Through the rows of these Sphinx, the chariots and other ensemble in a procession could move till the entrance gate. The entrance gate is on a high pedestal; ascending the steps leads to another pedestal. On this, cypress trees were deliberately brought and planted from Arabastan. The pedestal is supported by pillars. On the inner side walls of the pedestals, the exploits of Queen Hatshepsut have been depicted in the form of reliefs. Wonderful construction, solid design, and environmentally compatible architecture are the characteristics of the temple.

### Abu Simbel's Temple

This temple built by Ramasses II is of a different type. The base of the temple's entrance door is oblong and has pylons tapering at the top on two sides. This pylon has the temple's gateway. On this pylon, both sides together there are four carved huge idols of the sitting Pharaoh Ramasses, each measuring more than 18 metres in height. One of these is partly collapsed. The huge imposing forms of these four idols is the distinctive feature of this temple. There are two large galleries inside, and on the walls, sculptures of *Osiris*, the Egyptian God have been carved. The form



of the idols is like quadrangular blocks, but the heads are carved quite carefully along with minutest details. On the frieze (sculptured horizontal band at the top) of the pylon, monkeys found in the eastern countries are seen to have been carved. It's a surmise

that these may have been carved to welcome the rising sun.

The temple was in danger of getting wholly submerged in the water let out by the very famous and huge Aswan dam built in Egypt. This caused the global organization UNESCO getting into action, mobilizing support from several nations, and overseeing that the whole entrance part of the temple and idols of Ramasses was detached from the rocks, and re-installed above the water level. If it were not for this timely intervention, such a huge work of art would have been destroyed.

### **Caves-Tombs**

The recently excavated Tutankhamun's tomb is very well-known. Much of it has been robbed, yet the tomb practically has been found intact, in its original state. This tomb was discovered and excavated in 1922. Tutankhamun was an Egyptian Pharaoh of the 18th dynasty during the last phase, or the period of New Kingdom. Therefore, we can gather knowledge about the art and handicraft of that period. These are seen to comprise the gold coated coffin and the gold cast idol. His headgear has golden and azure blue stripes done using inlay. It appears that the use of gold has been done in abundance, and colour applied over it.

### **Egyptian Temples**

The practice of building pyramids was brought to a halt during the Middle Kingdom and instead, the custom of building caves-tombs in a remote uninhabited region began. Since things began to get robbed at these sites, the temples that were built for offerings-rites, instead of around the caves-tombs, began to be built far way on the riverbank or in the cities. Having done so, these temples – even if they were connected to the tombs from religious perspective – yet due to them being shifted to distant locations, the constituents in the tombs remained safe. Thus, a lot of importance was attached to the existence of temples during this time. Due to the momentum the temples-building acquired, there came about in their appearance, a look of stateliness and elegance. The Karnak and Luxor temples are very famous.

### **Temple Design**

The design of the temple generally was based on a 'simple straight

axis'. In the open space in front, through the row of the 'ram idols', each postured sitting like the Sphinx, there was the straight path to go the temple. At the end of these rows there were two huge and high stone columns. Being square blocks, they tapered towards the top, and had a small symbol of the Sun in the end. These columns had descriptions of the Pharaoh's valour and excellent work written over their surface. These columns are called 'obelisks'. They are also known as 'Cleopatra's Needles'. Specimens of these are kept at several museums in Europe. Behind these columns, there were idols of the dead Pharaohs on either side. After these idols, between and right behind them there was the gateway of the temple. On either side of it there were massive pylons with oblong base and tapering top. As you enter the gateway there was a spacious courtyard and on the three sides remaining, leaving the pylons', there were cloisters. The public were allowed entry till this courtyard. This was followed by the assembly area called the 'High Peristyle Hall'. Its roof rested on tall lithic columns. Between the rows of columns, the pillars of the two middle rows were taller than the rest. Which is how the roof over these also was at a greater height than the roof over the rest. In the wall that stood between these two roofs there were windows which provided a ventilation; where light would pass through inside. Behind this main assembly hall, in a small, not very high, dark room there was a deity's idol. Entry to this sanctum was permitted only to kings, members of the royal family and the priests. A wall surrounded the courtyard, assembly hall and sanctum on three sides and the fourth side on the front was confined due to the pylons. No arches have been used in the Egyptian architecture. A horizontal stone beam was placed above two pillars as a frame for the roofs. Therefore, the bigger hall was crammed with pillars, leading to the lack of large free spaces available inside.

The pylons at Karnak are very large and huge, whereas in the pillars at the Luxor temple idols of Ramasses II have been fitted in. There are several types of columns seen in Egyptian temples. There is a variety found chiefly in the column capitals. Various shapes that are found are those of Bell, Lotus, Palm tree leaves, The Hathor deity's head, etc.

Owing to the Egyptians' complete attention focussed on life after death, they never paid much heed to earthly forms of edifice building like palaces, houses, etc. or they may have not endured the test of time and got destroyed.

## Egyptian Sculpture

Akin to its architecture, Egyptian sculpture too was relevant to post humous life. It is therefore, to ascertain life after death, that the idols of the dead were kept in *mastaba*, pyramid and mortuary temples. Besides, kept along with the dead Pharaoh's or the chieftain's idol, were also idols of their attendants and slaves to serve the former in their after-lives too. This is a major reason for the Egyptian stone sculpture to have flourished. The rocks found off the river Nile basin had an abundance of limestone and sandstone. In the waterfall areas, black granite and in the desert regions diorite was available prodigiously. At times, wood, mud and brass too were used to create sculpture.

During the period of the ancient empire the sculptural relics are found to be of two types, Round statues and Reliefs. Figurines in any position: standing, sitting or kneeling, were created by the Egyptian sculptures adhering to always certain geometric rules. Having the body and parts shown symmetrically on both sides of an imaginary central vertical line or an axis was the indication. Practically when a body moves, it bends at various joints; but in the Egyptian idols the depiction of human figures was straight, frontal, stiff and static. Such kind of inflexible, symmetrical representation is known as 'Law of Frontality' in Egyptian art. Its famous statues are as follows:

### King Khafre's Idol



This idol is currently in the Cairo Museum and is in a seated posture. It was discovered in the mortuary temple near the pyramid. Made from Diorite stone, this belongs to the period of the 4th royal dynasty (2680 BC – 2665 BC). The throne on which Khafre sits is decorated with motifs of papyrus and lotus.

On both sides of the throne are heads of the Sphinx. Both hands resting on his laps, Khafre sits stiffly, with his shoulders glued to the throne's back rest. His knees and legs too are joined together. A garment tied

around the waist is his only attire. His headgear of soft jute is suspended over both his shoulders. A long but false beard is shown; it was a practice of the Pharaohs to sport false beard during celebrations. Khafre's natural beard is also seen to a slight extent. On his shoulder is perched an 'Eurasian Sparrowhawk'. The bird has spread its wings over the king's head, suggesting that it is protecting the Pharaoh. In spite of it being an inflexible and static looking sculpture, it is rated as one of the excellent examples of portrait sculpture.

### Ranofer's Idol

This idol too, like Khafre's, is held in the Cairo Museum, and made from limestone. It belongs to the 5th royal dynasty (2565 BC to 2420 BC). The Pharaoh Ranofer is depicted in a rigid, frontal, standing pose.

An imaginary vertical line passing through the centre divides its body into two parts. His forehead and neck are very stiff, and his gaze is direct ahead. His hands are carved sticking to his body. Both his feet are flatly placed on the ground. The left leg has moved a little forward. There is a hair wig on his head. A piece of cloth rolled around from his waist to the knees is the only attire. Although the idol is rigid, one experiences a liveliness and vitality. An upright neck and the solidity of the sculpture denotes royal glory and prestige. This idol was painted. The Egyptians had the custom of mostly painting all idols.

### Rahotep and Queen Nofret

These statues are in the Cairo Museum now. These too are seated, in a stiff and frontal posture. The garment too, around Rahotep's waist is worn like the other idols. Queen Nofret's attire though is transparent and close-fitting type of full-length robe. She is wearing a fat necklace. She is seen to be wearing a wig, as her parted natural hair is also visible on her forehead. Eyes of natural crystal are fitted on both the idols. Both having been painted completely, Rahotep is blackish red and Nofret yellowish in complexion.



## **The Seated Writer**

In the character-idol of common individuals, a seated writer's statue is famous. Kept in the Louvre, Paris, this limestone idol is painted. The eyes that have been affixed are natural rock crystals with inlay work. He was found in a tomb at Saccara. It belongs to the period of the 5th royal dynasty (2665 BC to 2440 BC). He is in a seated position with folded thighs. This statue is of an alert, prompt, attendant; ever ready to take down quickly whatever the master dictates. Having a papyrus roll in his hand, his right hand seems to be holding a writing tool. His keen gaze, square face and pursed thin lips suggest him to be an ideal scribe. Though it has been moulded as per the law of frontality, yet the construct of his chest, shoulders and eyes is quite realistic.

Egyptian sculptors have produced several colossal and enormous sculptures. Among them the huge statue of the Sphinx near Khafre's mortuary temple needs special mention. This statue bearing a human head and a lion's body is made by carving out of a huge rock. This sculpture was a symbol of the wealth and power of the royal dynasty. The head is said to be none other's but of the Pharaoh Khafre. The serpent on his headgear is the royal emblem. Between two paws of the lion there is a temple.

## **Relief Sculptures**

In Egyptian Sculpture, besides the Round Statues, innumerable reliefs are found to have been carved. On the reliefs carved on the walls of the tombs and mortuary temples, the daily lives of common Egyptian folks are represented. To supply the necessities and comforts to the dead, idols of common people were kept there. The scenes bear depictions of: grain production, cattle grazing and rearing, jewel designing, wine filtering, processing food, processions of royal attendants, banquets and many other such activities. These scenes are mostly carved on horizontal sculpture strips. The drawing of the human figures in reliefs, adheres to the law of frontality as in the case of round statues. A specific inclination to draw human figures is seen in the relief sculptures. The representation in these reliefs is composed in a way that the head and legs (part below the waist) are made to look as they would if seen laterally, and the torso and eyes as they would if seen frontally. Besides, an emperor, deities, or any other person of eminence is shown to be a larger figure in comparison to the

other figures. This distinct type of rendition is found on reliefs of several pylons and is known by the name of 'Sunk Relief'. Such types of reliefs are carved on the outer walls of pylons. First an outline of the form was etched on the surface and then roundness achieved through chiselling on it, and the form was completely created with all the finer details. But there was no digging on the background part left out of the form. Since the highest point of such 'sunk relief' remains at the same level of the background, the breakage in such carvings is minimum, in comparison to the other type of reliefs.

In Egyptian sculpture, the Pharaoh Amenophis IV is seen to have attempted to bring about a change in the New Kingdom era. Instead of believing in a pantheon, he believed in only one God; which is the revolutionary change he tried to affect. Realistic representation in art started. Instead of stiffness and lack of dynamism, ease and naturality began to be seen in sculpture. But this proved to be a short-lived change, because after that Tutankhamun once again began to make definite advances following the old traditional path.

## Visual Art

These murals have been created on the inner wall of the pyramid.

The mural tradition began during the Middle Kingdom with low-relief murals. The wall was wet plastered and figures were drawn on it. A sticky agent was mixed in the colours and flat paint applied. Low-relief and sunk-relief sculptures were painted too. Murals on themes of hunting, feast, fishing, daily life incidents, have been drawn. All of them have been made applying the law of frontality. Though the depiction of human figures is symbolic, the drawings of animals are realistic in comparison. The swan murals drawn in a temple at Meidum are life-like and beautiful. In certain tombs, many drawings have been painted in a band of about 30-35 cm height. In all these murals and reliefs, there is script written in hieroglyphs. This script is designed as a part of the mural.

The female figures look more dynamic and lively in the human forms depicted. In all the visuals, the male hues are deep red and the female complexions are shown yellow. The outline of the forms was drawn using dark colour. Limited colours like red, turmeric yellow, a little green or blue

are seen to have been used. All these rules of drawing had been carried forward since the period of the Old Kingdom.

## **Other Arts**

Due to the arid climatic conditions in Egypt, the myriad artefacts buried underground have remained intact. Thanks to the discovery of an utterly non-devastated Tutankhamen's tomb, a very excellent specimen of Egyptian artistry became available. Owing to their penchant for artefacts, Egyptian males adorned their bodies more than their female counterparts. The Egyptian artisans have studded hard precious stones in the gold-silver jewellery through inlaying. Hence, they haven't been able to display their creativity in producing any variety of decorative forms in the outer form or structure of jewellery. They are seen to have used animal, human and architectural forms for designing jewels. The neck-medals are pylon-shaped and the ear studs are of the lotus pillar capital shape. The considerable influence of architecture over other arts could be the reason behind these shapes. Similarly, since the artisans expressed their artistry only within the confines of the commands of head-clerics, the scope of individual creativity of the former was constricted.

Many civilizations rise, prosper and get ruined through the passage of eras. Though it is a fact that the period of prosperity of the Egyptian civilization has ended for all temporal purposes, yet it even today shines proudly, in the forms of the Pyramids, Sphinx, Temples, Sculpture, Painting and other artefacts.