The art of Ancient Egypt is a vast and highly complex subject, difficult to capture in a single work. In most cultures, both contemporary and ancient, the realm of art is not limited to any single medium or mode of transfer. Ancient Egypt is no exception, and artwork can be found on temple walls, portable stelae, papyri, ostraca, ceramic vessels, statues and many other artefactual and archaeological objects. Most notably however, and a fundamental trait of Ancient Egyptian culture, is the advent of art in funerary complexes—on the walls of causeways and mortuary temples, the exterior of temenos enclosure walls, and in the burial chambers of kings and commoners alike.

Ancient Egyptian art differed from that of other cultures in a fundamental way. Art served a functional purpose, which was inextricably tied to cosmology. For the Egyptians, the cosmos existed so long as chaos was expelled and the ‘Natural Order (Maat) of Things’ was maintained (see especially Jan Assmann, Ma’at: Gerechtigkeit und Unsterblichkeit im alten Ägypten, Munich, 1995). Initiated by the ‘Creator God’, such order was upheld in the mortal realm by his emissary, the Pharaoh. As holder of the divine office of the reincarnated Horus, his paramount responsibility was the preservation of Truth and Order for ‘eternity’. Thus, it was not simply good enough to promote such order in the here-and-now, it must be maintained for all time. Moreover, the conception of the ideal world was uncompromising and any attempt at temporal realism was illusionary and contemptible.

Each piece of art (sculpture, painting, reliefs), therefore, must reflect this idealistic not realistic view. An artist was not to portray the world as they saw it, but rather as it ideally should be and always would remain. In the words of Cyril Aldred (Egyptian Art in the Days of the Pharaohs 3100-320 BC, London, 1980, 15) this vision ‘was part of that immutable order of things that had been established as an institution of the Egyptian state at the First Time’. As a result of this inflexible cosmology, the canon of art itself was orderly and logical. Depictions were arranged in linear fashion, with registers and baselines delimiting the individual
elements (see especially Barry Kemp, *Ancient Egypt: Anatomy of a Civilization*, London, 1989, 83-9). Textual hieroglyphics could occupy the same space as pictorial representations, as both conveyed information about the world as it ideally existed, not realistically was. To this end, art was always conveyed in a two-dimensional fashion. To utilize three dimensions implied depth and time. It suggested that the scenes were being viewed in the current era. This in turn implied the possibility of change and was unacceptable as it undermined the dogma of the very representations the art attempted to display.

*Eternal Egypt* admirably acts as an overview of this massive subject. In addition to analyzing Egyptian art in a chronological fashion, useful insights are provided on individual aspects of art. The book results from reparations made to the British Museum and the subsequent loan collection that has been made available (until 2004) for tour in the United States. In all, 144 pieces have been loaned by the British Museum to the American Federation of Arts. The Curator of the Loan Collection and editor of this work, Edna Russmann, currently holds the post of Curator of Egyptian, Classical and Middle Eastern Art at the Boston Museum of Art.

The book is laid out in a bipartite fashion. The first half consists of three chapters, which provide an overview of ancient Egyptian art. The second half comprises the catalogue and discussion of all 144 pieces on loan to the American Federation of Arts. In addition to her own comments on Egyptian art, Russmann has enlisted the assistance of no less than a dozen contributors, whose own knowledge and expertise are well-known in the subject of Egyptology. Among the many prominent persons are Dorothea Arnold, Nigel Strudwick and Thomas G.H. James.

The first chapter provides an historical commentary on Egyptian art. It serves as a useful introduction to the subject and discusses the evolution of Egyptian art from its ‘fully-formed’ inception at the beginning of the Archaic Period down as far as Ptolemaic Egypt. Russmann comments on features such as negative space, the introduction of the back pillar in Dynasty 4, and the subsequent advent of the block statue during the Middle Kingdom. While her overview is both concise and yet informative, particularly in the areas of painting and sculpture, her discussions of architecture are in places lacking. Perhaps other works of a similar calibre would be a useful complement to this chapter. I suggest
Mark Lehner’s *The Complete Pyramids* (London, 1997) and Richard Wilkinson’s *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt* (London, 2000). Furthermore, Aldred’s *Egyptian Art* would make an excellent companion to Russmann’s volume. There is also a slight inconsistency in the description of Mentuhotep II as the founder of Dynasty 11 (18). It is commonly agreed amongst scholars that Mentuhotep II was the founder of the Middle Kingdom, but not the Eleventh Dynasty. Russmann concurs with this latter point in her ‘Chronological Appendix’ (260-261) at the rear of the work.

The second chapter is aspectual in nature and discusses three crucial elements of ancient Egyptian art: two-dimensional representation, portraiture, and archaism. Her considerations of two-dimensionality focus on its inherent flatness. She argues that this was a result of cultural constraints and is directly linked with the medium of writing hieroglyphics. As hieroglyphics are a constant form, unchanging in appearance, they offer an excellent medium for conveying information about the immutable cosmos. In this state, ‘texts and pictures combined harmoniously into a single channel of communication’ (Kemp, *Ancient Egypt*, 84). Russmann also discusses the pros and cons of painting versus carved relief and she raises some excellent points surrounding the interpretation of artistic scenes. Questions of function as against style, realism and ideology, historical reliability, and even symbolism are raised.

Portraiture, the second element expounded, is an area of Egyptian art extensively debated. Consequently a sizable portion of this section is dedicated to defining portraiture. Ultimately Russmann differentiates between recognizable depictions that offer a physical likeness of the individual and the modern definition of portraiture which demands that the artwork illustrate the personality or character of the individual. She concludes that an acceptable, albeit minimal, definition of portraiture in ancient Egyptian art is one with a ‘recognizable depiction of the actual features of a real individual’ (32). However, the *caveat* of such a definition is that individualistic features cannot be verified. Nevertheless, she does not believe that the lack of a control group or item precludes an artwork from being defined as a portrait. The only point that Russmann fails to make explicit is that the lack of a control (used to verify the physical likeness of portraiture in individual sculptures) makes the classification of such pieces highly subjective.
The remainder of the section is dedicated to an overview of portraiture throughout Dynastic Egypt. The introduction of late non-portrait forms at the end of the Old Kingdom, which exaggerate facial and anatomical features, is delineated. Aspects of imitation are also discussed, and occur as early as Dynasty 3. Lastly Russmann details the employment of non-royal portraiture in contrast with its royal counterpart. Interestingly it is evident almost as early as imitative sculpture, considering that the non-royal portraits are the polar-opposite of the imitative genre.

The subsection also poses several intriguing questions. For example, how do modern scholars interpret the apparent lack of expression on most sculptures? Again, given the apparent function of portraits as the attempted preservation of an individual’s features for eternity (i.e. their recognizability is immortalized), was portraiture an attempt to make up for poor methods of mummification? Perhaps the only question not raised in this excellent section is that of realism versus idealism. If, as argued above, art and its canons were utilized to portray the ideal world as it exists for eternity, then the realism inherent in portraiture would contradict the fundamental premise of Ancient Egyptian art. For portraiture is a ‘snap-shot’ of the features of the reigning monarch, not an ideal depiction of an everlasting, immutable king. The only rationale for portraiture would be to argue that the office-holder is human, and thus mutable, while the office of kingship is divine and immutable. Thus, the face of the office-holder could change, as long as the office of kingship itself never altered.

The final element in ch.2 is that of archaism. Russmann (40-1) quickly defines archaism as the imitation or emulation of older works. She then continues to discuss archaism during the different epochs of Egyptian history, but adds the disclaimer that only sculpture and reliefs will be dealt with. While the information provided for the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms is intriguing, it is the debate that ensues for the Third Intermediate and Late Periods, which is most engaging. Russmann’s forté is clear as she discusses the pseudo-movement of archaism during this latter stage of Egyptian history. In particular she draws attention to the fact that archaism during the Third Intermediate and Late Periods drew upon spatially proximal material. Thus, northern headquarters utilized
sculpture and reliefs from the Memphite region (and thus replicated Old Kingdom material), while southern counterparts used Theban material (and thus emulated works from the Middle and New Kingdoms).

The section concludes with a number of pertinent statements about archaism. In addition to its obvious usage as a ‘tool’ for resisting change, archaism clearly illustrates that the ancient Egyptians had a conscious awareness of their past. Furthermore, as Russmann correctly elucidates, the increased usage of archaism during periods of civil unrest and political turmoil is not mere coincidence. Rather, contemporary rulers, be they ethnically native or foreign, realized the need to assert their right to hold the divine office of Pharaoh. Thus, in an attempt to promote their legitimacy (and probably to instill a sense of nationalism), they utilized archaism to hearken back to the classical Egypt of their ancestors.

The third chapter details the foundation and evolution of the British Museum, from its inception in 1753 up until the formation of a separate Department of Egyptian Antiquities in 1955 and on until the modern day. It is a passionately written account, achievable only by someone intimately associated with the British Museum. As a former Keeper of the Department of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum, T.G.H. James, provides a well-researched and easy-to-read chapter with unique insights such as only a former Keeper could offer. The content is highly informative, and at times his dry, subtle humour is clearly evident (such is the case when he comments on the monies paid to Henry Salt). Perhaps the single most enjoyable aspect of the chapter is his description of the life and career of Samuel Birch, the ‘first Egyptologist’. The enthusiasm and emotion, which empower the words one reads, unmistakably convey the sympathy that the author obviously felt when researching the life and times of the late Samuel Birch.

The Loan Collection Catalogue, which comprises the remainder of the work, is presented in a chronological fashion—most certainly the easiest way to deal with this sizable collection. Each entry consists of a description of the item and a discussion of its importance or relevance. Most noteworthy are the inclusion of referential footnotes and a select bibliography for each item! Such an excellent and comprehensive format is worthy of much praise indeed. For while the first section provides a useful overview for beginners and intermediate-level students on the
subject of Egyptian art, advanced users can utilize the referential catalogue to their hearts' content. Coupled with the usual appendices consisting of a map of ancient Egypt, a timeline of Dynastic Egypt, a glossary of art-historical terms and a bibliography, this book is an excellent reference guide and a holistic work on the subject of ancient Egyptian art.

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