

ART OF THE ANCIENT EGYPTIANS

The religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians affected all aspects of their life and art. The Egyptians did not believe in one true God; they believed in several main gods and goddesses and hundreds of lesser gods, many of which were represented by animals. They built impressive temples as the homes of gods, funeral chapels of pharaohs (rulers who were thought to be the sky god Horus in human form), and small models of the universe. They also believed in an afterlife in a world much like Egypt. One would be allowed to enter that world if his heart (bearing a record of all his past deeds) proved pure enough when weighed on a scale against the "feather of truth." They believed that the soul (or *ka*) left the body at death but eventually returned to rejoin it (or, if necessary, an image of it) for the journey to the afterlife. If the body was destroyed and there was no substitute image, the *ka* would wander hopelessly forever.

In order to protect their dead bodies, all Egyptians who could afford to do so built tombs of solid stone in dry places near the edge of the desert. In addition, the bodies were preserved by embalming and wrapping. The wrapped bodies, called mummies, were put in special decorated cases. Frequently, statues or paintings of the person were also placed in the tomb for the *ka* to enter if anything happened to the body. The walls of tombs and temples were covered with pictures and hieroglyphics showing the daily activities, relatives, friends, and servants of the dead person. The Egyptians believed that prayers by the priests could cause the god Osiris to bring these people back to life. The tomb also held food, jewelry, and personal objects for the dead person.

For thousands of years Egyptian art followed strict rules. Although the art looks strange to us today, the rules' purpose was that parts of a body or object would be shown in their most familiar and complete point of view. In pictures of people, the head, hips, legs, and feet were always shown in profile view, while the eye and shoulders were in front view. Distinguishing features, such as thumbs, foot arches, and big toes were included on both hands or feet regardless of whether they could actually be seen. If the scene or person came to life again, nothing important would be incomplete.

Other Egyptian rules for art controlled size, arrangement, and color. Size of a person indicated importance rather than actual size. Artists arranged parts of a picture neatly in horizontal rows with things that were actually behind being placed above to be clearly visible. Sometimes different parts of a story were arranged along horizontal bands. Artists used few colors and made them bright and flat (not shaded). Egyptian men were painted reddish brown, women golden brown, and most slaves darker brown.

Another important aspect of Egyptian art was hieroglyphic writing. Some symbols represented words, some sounds, and some clues to the meaning of words. People writing in hieroglyphics today have to think in sounds, not letters, since the symbols do not always represent exactly the same sounds as modern letters. Also, Egyptian scribes sometimes left out vowel sounds, so spelling can be confusing. Hieroglyphics could be written left to right, right to left, or top to bottom, and the symbols could be arranged in many different ways to make the writing fit and look attractive in its space.