

ALBANY INSTITUTE OF HISTORY & ART

Ancient Egyptian Art and Culture

Glossary

Africa

Africa is the world's second-largest and second most-populous continent, after Asia. At about 12 million square miles it covers 20% of the Earth's total land area. Egypt is located on the Northeast corner of the African continent.

Amphora

A large pottery or stone vessel, usually with one or more handles and used as storage or transport container for liquids or solids.

Amulet

A small token, such as a hieroglyphic symbol or figurine of a god, believed to provide magical protection or other benefits to its wearer.

Ankh

The ankh is a hieroglyphic symbol meaning "life" and "to live." It was worn by many ancient Egyptians as an amulet, and is frequently depicted in art being extended by the gods.

Apis Bull

The Apis bull was a sacred oracle housed in the temple of Ptah at Memphis. The bulls were well treated throughout their lifetimes, given divine status as the embodiment of the god Ptah, and were mummified upon death. The Apis bulls, and later the mothers of the Apis bulls (sacred to Isis) were buried at Saqqara.

Artistic perspective

Egyptians used variations in size to indicate importance in their art. Viewpoints also changed within images to show the strongest characteristics of objects and people. Faces were always shown in profile, eyes were large, and legs were often shown in exaggerated poses.

Artifact

An artifact is something that was made by a person in the distant past. Clothing, pottery, furniture, tools, and art are all artifacts.

Atef

The atef is a crown with an ostrich plume on each side and horizontal ram's horns underneath. It is shown worn by Osiris, to symbolize his triumph over death, and by the king performing certain rituals.

Ba

The ba is the spiritual part of a deceased person that has the ability to act and move about. In ancient Egyptian art, the ba of a deceased person appears as a human-headed bird. The ba had the power to return to earth and observe the world.

Barley

Barley is a grain grown for making beer. It requires less fertile soil than emmer or wheat, and grows faster, but is harder to prepare as food.

Book of the Dead

Known in ancient Egypt as the book of "Coming Forth by Day," the Book of the Dead refers to a collection of prayers, magic formulas, and hymns to be used by the soul of the deceased for guidance and protection on its journey to the afterlife. From the New Kingdom to the Roman period they were usually written on papyrus and buried with the deceased.

Broad Collar

A piece of jewelry shaped like a bib necklace worn by ancient Egyptians and depicted on images of Gods and Goddesses. Broad Collars were made of natural materials material, faience, or gold and semi-precious stones. Sometimes very heavy, counterweights were needed to hang down the back of the wearer to keep them in place.

Bronze

Any of various alloys of copper and tin, sometimes with tin or other metals. In ancient Egypt, bronze was commonly been used in casting. A work cast in bronze is sometimes referred to as a bronze. It may also refer to the color of bronze, a moderate yellowish to olive brown. Bronze enabled Egyptians to improve tools and weapons such as razors, scissors, swords, and axes.

Canopic Jars

Containers holding the preserved internal organs of mummified persons, they frequently were shaped as the sons of Horus; Imsety (with human head), the liver; Hapi (baboon-headed), the lungs; Duamutef (Jackal-headed) the stomach; and Qebehsenuf (falcon-headed), the intestines. Later, when it became the custom to put the organs back in the mummy (as is the case in the Albany Institute's 21st Dynasty mummy) these four gods were represented on the mummy case.

Cartonnage

A material made of layers of gummed linen or papyrus and plaster; a medium for mummy masks and coffin decorations.

Cartouche

A cartouche is an oval frame, resembling a tied rope, on which the birth and throne names of the king are written in hieroglyphs.

Ceramics

Pottery or hollow clay sculpture fired at high temperatures in a kiln or oven to make them harder and stronger. Types include earthenware, porcelain, stoneware, and terracotta. Pottery made of fired clay was common in ancient Egypt and was sometimes beautifully painted.

Chisel

A sharp metal implement used to carve stone or wood.

Cippus of Horus

A type of protective amulet featuring the child god Horus standing on the back of a crocodile, holding lions, snakes, or other dangerous animals. Water was poured over the Cippus and then drunk, rendering the drinker invincible.

Coffin

A mummy case consisting of two separate parts, a lid (top) and a case (bottom) secured together using tenon and mortise joints and dowels.

Copper

A soft, reddish-brown metallic element capable of being shaped and formed, It is used either pure, or in alloys such as brass and bronze.

Cosmetics

In ancient Egypt, men and women used nail polish on both finger and toe nails; kohl was ground to create eye makeup that helped protect from the sun; lipstick was usual for, as were false eye lashes, wigs, and perfume.

Q-tip shaped metal or wood tools were used for applying cosmetics.

Crook and Flail

From the time of the early Old Kingdom onward throughout the history of ancient Egypt, the Crook and Flail were part of the king's paraphernalia. Osiris also holds them. Originally the crook probably derived from a shepherd's stick as a hieroglyph it signified the word "ruler." The flail resembles a flywhisk.

Cult Symbol

A sculpture, image, or amulet symbolizing a deity, the cult symbol was often itself an object of veneration.

Deir el-Bahri

Deir el-Bahri is the name of limestone bay in the cliffs in the north part of the Theban necropolis. Deir el-Bahri was used by Mentuhopte II as a backdrop for his mortuary complex during the 11th Dynasty. Later, Hatshepsut, the 18th dynasty Queen, built a temple just north of Mentuhopte's that was also terraced and carved into the cliffs.

Demotic

A cursive form of hieroglyphic writing developed in the seventh century B.C., written from right to left.

Djed Pillar Amulet

A symbol of stability, this amulet was shaped like a spinal column. It was used as an amulet in funerary ritual and placed on the mummy. It also was the sign of god of the underworld, Osiris.

Dynasty

A series of rulers descending within a family; ancient Egyptian history is divided into thirty dynasties.

Emmer

The Egyptians used this ancestor of modern wheat for the bread and beer that made up much of their diets.

Eye of Horus/Wedjat Eye-

The *wedjat* is associated with Horus, the god of the sky, who was depicted as a falcon or as a man with a falcon's head. In a battle with Seth, the god of chaos and confusion, Horus lost his left eye. The wound was healed by the goddess Hathor and the *wedjat* came to symbolize the process of 'making whole' and healing - the word *wedjat* literally meaning sound. The first use of a *wedjat* eye as an amulet was when Horus used one to bring Osiris back to life. *Wedjat* eye amulets were placed in mummy wrappings in great numbers because of their regenerative power.

Faience

A self-glazing ceramic material made from crushed quartz and used for large scale production of jewelry and amulets, shabtis, vessels and architectural decoration, often colored blue or green by the addition of copper.

False Door

A false door is a panel in the form of a niched doorway through which the deceased could receive offerings.

Flail

The tool used to separate the grain from the straw and the chafe in threshing grain (emmer/wheat and barley).

Funeral Cone

Cones made from clay set in rows above the entrance of a tomb. Sometimes inscribed with the name of the deceased their official titles and the names of their family members, these clay cones have been thought to represent the roofing poles of houses of the living.

Gesso

A mixture of whiting and glue often used to prepare a surface for painting.

Glass

A hard material made of silicates and an alkali fused with other substances. It is brittle, transparent or translucent, and considered to be a super cooled liquid, rather than a true solid. It solidifies from a molten state, in an amorphous rather than a crystalline structure. The earliest known manufactured glass used in Egypt, is from the beginning of the New Kingdom where it was highly prized and used mostly for jewelry and decorative objects.

Hieratic

The hand written counterpart to hieroglyphs, it was developed in the Old Kingdom mainly for writing on papyrus; written from right to left.

Hieroglyph

A Greek word meaning "sacred symbol." In ancient Egypt, one of some seven hundred signs used in writing. Some symbols indicated sounds, some whole ideas.

Inundation

The annual flooding of the Nile is called inundation. Inundation occurs three to four days after the appearance of the star Sirius on the horizon. In ancient times, this flood washed the land, and deposited a new layer of fertile soil carried from further upstream. It made ancient Egyptian agriculture successful.

Irrigation

A manmade method to water crops in areas of insufficient moisture. The ancient Egyptians used the waters of the Nile for irrigation.

Ka

The life force; a person's physical double. The mummy provided a home for the Ka. The Ka could move around in the tomb and doors were painted for it to use. The hieroglyph is a pair of extended arms.

Karnak

Called by the Egyptians "Throne of the Two Lands" and "The Finest of Seats" it is the site of the temple of Amun at Thebes. One of the largest religious complexes ever constructed, its 250

acres are the site of temples, chapels, obelisks, statues orchards, wells, lakes, houses and storage rooms built over the course of 2000 years.

Linen

Fabric made from the spun fibers of the flax plant, it is finer and lighter in weight than wool. Linen was used by the Egyptians for clothing, sheets and bedding, curtains and sails. The wrappings around mummies were also made from linen- either woven specifically for the funeral or recycled from old household clothing.

Lotus

The divine flowers of the gods; they represent death and re-birth by closing each night and re-opening each morning. The flowers provided the scent for the first perfume, as well as the perfumed cones that also contained the insect repellent citronella.

Luxor

The name Luxor comes from the Arabic – Al-Uqsor “the palaces,” for the many imposing temple ruins there including Karnak and Luxor Temple.

Maat

Concept of balance and rightness in life; a person had the duty to live in accordance with Maat; also the deity by that name charged with establishing and judging truth and honesty.

Mastaba

A type of Egyptian tomb having a rectangular superstructure with exterior walls slightly slanting inward as they rise, Mastabas contain chapels, chambers, and a shaft, leading to an underground burial chamber.

Menat

A type of amulet used to counterbalance the broad collars worn by the ancient Egyptians. Eventually, it became more decorative than the necklace it was attached to and would have been inscribed with spells and prayers.

Mummification

The preservation of the human body by ritualized dehydration. Natron, naturally occurring salts, removed 7/8 of the weight of the body by dehydration.

Mummy Board

A cover for the mummy in the shape of the lid of the coffin and laced just beneath it and on the mummy. Mummy boards began to be made at the end of the New Kingdom and were popular only during the 21st Dynasty.

Myrrh & Frankincense

Two resins (gummy plant saps, dried to solid substances) used in preparing and preserving mummies. Reconstituted with wine to a syrupy consistency, myrrh sterilized and deodorized the body cavity after the removal of the organs. Frankincense was painted on to seal the body of the finished mummy. Age caused the dark tar-like, varnished appearance of most mummies.

Natron

Natron is a naturally occurring salt used in mummification process.

Nefer

The nefer symbol represents goodness or beauty.

Nemes

A royal headdress, of striped linen or leather, with lappets falling forward over each shoulder and the fabric gathered and tied in back.

Nile River

The world's longest river; it helped the ancient Egyptian was of life possible by providing food, irrigation, fertile soil and transportation.

Oasis

An area in a desert where water rises to the surface, providing moisture and allowing plants to grow in the absence of sufficient rain.

Obsidian Knife

A blade, made from glassy volcanic rock obsidian, called by the Egyptians "Ethiopian Stone." It was traditionally used to open the abdominal cavity of a body during the process of mummification.

Ostrakon

A limestone or pottery flake used to sketch, practice writing, or make notes.

Papyrus

A reed that grows along the banks of the Nile River, it was used by the ancient Egyptians to make paper. The stems of the plant were pressed together and smoothed to make a sheet, which could be used as a writing surface. In art, images of papyrus plants symbolized the world, which arose from the primeval waters at the time of creation. It was also a symbol of Lower Egypt.

Pilgrim Vase

A two-handled pot used to carry small amounts of liquid like a canteen.

Plumb Bob

A weight attached to a string used by craftsmen to determine a straight vertical line.

Sarcophagus

A coffin made of stone.

Scarab

An amulet used in ancient Egypt, Nubia, and Syria-Palestine taking the form of a stylized scarab beetle. The underside, when flat could be inscribed and used as a stamp seal. The scarab beetle lays its eggs in a round ball of dung and the Egyptians equated this both with the passage of the sun and with eternal life.

Shabti

These small funerary figurines, resembling a mummy and holding Osiris' crook and flail, were developed in the Middle Kingdom. They were usually inscribed with a spell from the Book of the Dead so that the shabti could be a servant for the deceased in the afterlife.

Shen

A hieroglyphic symbol of a coiled rope meaning, "repeat" or "encircle," the shen was used to represent the cyclical nature of existence and when enlarged to contain the name of a king or queen, it became a cartouche.

Situla

A ritual vessel for carrying water or other liquids for offerings, usually with a long handle at the top.

Stela

Greek for pillar, these slabs were decorated with relief and/or painted decoration and could serve as tombstones or historical markers. They could be carved from stone, made of wood, or of faience.

Tanis

Tanis was located in the eastern delta of the Nile. The city was sacred to the god Seth, as well as an important trade port. A large temple was constructed there in the 21st Dynasty decorated with stone blocks, statues and obelisks largely from other monuments in the area built by Ramesses II, as well as earlier kings of the 12th dynasty. Now largely destroyed, the temple was considered the northern version of Karnak.

Temple of Mut

Part of the Karnak temple complex, the Temple of Mut was probably begun by Hatshepsut, although there is evidence that Amunhotep I may have also built a temple on this site. Sacred to the goddess Mut, to whom Ankhfenmut was consecrated, the temple precinct was added to with some regularity throughout Egyptian History, growing dramatically under the 25th dynasty. It reached its present size in the 30th dynasty. It was even maintained under Roman rule by the Emperors Augustus and Tiberius.

Textiles

Linen, wool, and cotton were all used in ancient Egypt. Linen, made from fibers of the flax plant, was used for clothing as well as for wrapping preserved bodies. Wool was durable, but less comfortable to wear.

Thebes

The Greek name for ancient *Waset*, Thebes was a district capitol that rose to prominence when governors became kings of all Egypt at the end of the Eleventh Dynasty. It was greatly expanded during the New Kingdom when Theban pharaohs again ruled Egypt. Western Thebes was a vast cemetery for the residents of the town as well as for royalty buried in the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens.

Underworld

The ancient Egyptians thought of the underworld as a dangerous place through which a boat carrying the sun god and his companions, including the deceased, must travel every night.

Uraeus

A symbol worn on the front of a headdress, a uraeus represents the mythical fire-spitting cobra, a protector of kings and gods, rearing up with its hood outstretched.

Votive Cloth

A textile painted with scenes of offering to one of the gods, and usually inscribed with prayers, with the hope of gaining good fortune.

Wadi

A valley or streambed that is dry except perhaps in the rainy season.