

# Art, Religion & Death in Old, Middle & Late Kingdom Egypt

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## Summery

The civilization of ancient Egypt lasted for over three thousand years. During this time there were many changes in terms of what the ancient Egyptians believed in, and how they lived their lives. However, many aspects of the basic culture, religion, and artistic style of ancient Egypt remained the same. The importance of religion and the respect for death ruled their art. They built mostly temples, graves and adopted strict canons controlled by the priests. Our knowledge of Egyptian civilization rests almost entirely on them and their contents since they were built to endure forever. Egyptian culture is even today a mystery but it still lives on, and with right we can say for Egypt- "land of eternity!"

**Key words:** art, religion, death, kingdom Egypt, mumification

## Rezime

Staroegipatska civilizacija je trajala više od tri hiljade godina. U toku tog vremenskog perioda bilo je mnogo promena u pogledu verovanja Egipćana i načina života. Kakogod, mnogi aspekti osnovne kulture, religije i stila umetnosti starog Egipta su ostali isti. Uticaj religije i postovanje mrtvih je bilo od velikog značaja za njihovu umetnost. Uglavnom su gradili hramove, grobnice i usvajali stroge crkvene kanone koje su kontrolisali sveštenici. Naše znanje o Egipatskoj civilizaciji skoro celo počiva na njima i njihovom sadržaju posto su i izgrađene kako bi izdržale večnost. Egipatska kultura je čak i danas misterija ali i dalje živi i sa pravom možemo reći za Egipat- "Zemlja večnosti"

**Ključne reči:** umetnost, religija, smrt, kraljevstvo, Egipat, mumifikacija

## Contents

Art,Religion & Death in Old,Middle & Late Kingdom Egypt .....	1
INTRODUCTION .....	3
RELIGION.....	4
Anubis.....	5
Bast or Bastet.....	5
Geb or Keb.....	5
Neith .....	6
Nephthys.....	6
Nut .....	6
Hapi .....	6
Hathor.....	6
Horus .....	6
Isis.....	7
Osiris.....	7
ART of EGYPT .....	7
Art in Old Kingdom .....	8
Middle Kingdom Egyptian Art.....	8
New Kingdom Egyptian Art.....	9
DEATH.....	10
Egyptian Way of Death .....	10
Funerary Customs.....	11
Mummification .....	11
Middle Kingdom - Death.....	12
Osiris, Death and Religion:.....	12
CONCLUSION .....	13
LITERATURE .....	13

# INTRODUCTION

The history of Ancient Egypt, long more than 3000 years, is divided into 8 or 9 periods, sometimes called Kingdoms. The Ancient Egyptians themselves rather seem to have developed the notion of dynasties throughout their history. It developed along the river Nile, in Eastern Africa.

The importance of religion and the respect for death ruled their art. They built mostly temples, graves and adopted strict canons controlled by the priests. Our knowledge of Egyptian civilization rests almost entirely on them and their contents since they were built to endure forever. Conventions of ancient Egyptian beliefs and culture strongly affected the art. The Pharaoh (King) considered divine. Representation of the figure presented the most reflexive view of each part of the body. Preparation for the afterlife was of extreme importance. The body must be preserved if the soul or ka is to live on in the beyond in a same body. They built great tombs for their Pharaohs (kings), who were not only the supreme rulers but gods.

## **Pre-Dynastic and Early Dynastic Period (3500-3000 B.C.)**

From about 5000 BC to 3000 BC, Egypt was not a unified nation and that time is known as the Pre-Dynastic period. Around 3000 BC, Upper and Lower Kingdom conjoined and lands along the Nile River were united under one ruler and the Dynastic period began.

## **The Old Kingdom (2700-2200 B.C.)**

The old kingdom is an important period in political and cultural development of Ancient Egypt. Centuries of uninterrupted rise, established one of the most powerful cultures of the ancient world. During this period Hieroglyphic writing reached its sophistication. The techniques of crafts developed to a high professionalism. King Djoser, builder of the step pyramid at Saqqara, is the first and most celebrated king of the third dynasty. The works of Cheops, Chephren, and Mycerinus, the creators of the three pyramids at Giza represents the peak of achievements in the architectural field. A strong centralized government, as well as a divine kingship characterizes this period. Towards the end of the period, central authority disintegrated and the country fell into a state of rapid decline.

## **The Middle Kingdom (2050-1800 B.C.)**

The middle kingdom started with the re-foundation of the Kingdom under single administration by Mentuhotep II. It was an epoch of restoration of the Egyptian culture. The kings of the following dynasties enlarged their control over the land, promoted the economic and political development. Egyptian trade flourished, and a developed irrigation system was re-established. Pyramid building was also revived, but much humbler than in the old kingdom.

This rise was followed by the ultimate downfall and the country fell into the hands of foreign rulers.

## **The New Kingdom (1550-1080 B.C.)**

During this period Egypt reached the zenith of its power. Egypt extended further south in Africa and into the Middle East under these rulers. Tutmosis III was among the pioneers in the military field. The degree of refinement of this age is clearly manifested in the architectural heritage. Under the rule of queen Hatshepsut, the artistic revival began. The reigning monarchs of this period showed a genuine interest in art and architecture. Akhenaten, the heretic pharaoh, reached the peak of artistic innovations with his unique art style that accompanied his religious reformation.

## **Late Period (after 1080 B.C.)**

The late period was a period of deterioration. Kingship suffered a decline in prestige, and the political and social systems were unstable. Egypt was now ruled from two separate capitals, one in the north and one in the south. Large foreign colonies developed and Egypt for the first time opened its borders to the foreigners who settled in the delta.

## **RELIGION**

The Ancient Egyptians believed that whatever happened in the natural world was a result of the god's attitude. The religion of Ancient Egypt was a polytheistic (many gods) religion with one short period of monotheism (one god). Their religion hosted about 700 different gods and goddesses.

The ancient Egyptians interpreted every occurrence in terms of the relationship between natural and supernatural forces. The ancient Egyptians imagined the world to be a far different place from what we now know it to be. In this fundamental description of the world, the forces of nature were identified as divine descendants of the creator god. As the religion of Egypt evolved, various gods gained importance.

## **The Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt**

Some gods and goddesses took part in creation, some brought the flood every year, some offered protection, and some took care of people after they died. Others were either local gods who represented towns, or minor gods who represented plants or animals.

The ancient Egyptians believed that it was important to recognise and worship these gods and goddesses so that life continued smoothly. Each god had their own specialised function.

The Egyptian gods and goddesses were mostly, at least partly anthropomorphic - human shaped - deities who behaved like humans and walked among mortals. Gods were not worshiped in the same way throughout Egypt or throughout time. Particular locations and pharaohs favored one set of gods over another. Here is a summary list of some of the major gods and goddesses of ancient Egypt and their primary functions.

### **Anubis**

Anubis was a funerary god. His task came to be holding the scales on which the heart was weighed. If the heart was lighter than a feather, the dead would be led by Anubis to Osiris. If heavier, the soul would be destroyed.

### **Bast or Bastet**

Bast is usually shown with a feline head or ears on a woman's body or as a (usually, non-domestic) cat. The cat was her sacred animal. She was a daughter of Ra and was a protective goddess. She was originally a sun goddess, but after contact with the Greeks, she changed to a moon goddess, probably due to the Greeks associating her with Artemis.

### **Bes or Bisu**

Bes may have been an imported Egyptian god, possibly of Nubian origin. Bes is depicted as a dwarf sticking out his tongue, in full frontal view instead of the profile view of most of the other Egyptian gods. Bes was a protector god who helped in childbirth and promoted fertility. He was a guardian against snakes and misfortune.

### **Geb or Keb**

Geb, god of the earth, was an Egyptian fertility god who laid the egg from which the sun was hatched. The goose was Geb's sacred animal. His laughter was thought to cause earthquakes. Geb married his sister Nut, the sky goddess. Set(h) and Nephthys were children of Geb and Nut. Geb is often shown witnessing the weighing of the heart during the judgment of the dead in the afterlife. Geb was associated with the Greek god Kronos.

## **Neith**

Neith is a predynastic Egyptian goddess who is compared with the Greek goddess Athena. Neith is depicted as a weaver, like Athena, and also like Athena as a weapon-bearing war goddess. She is also shown wearing a red crown for Lower Egypt. Neith is another mortuary god connected with the woven bandages of the mummy.

## **Nephthys**

Nephthys is the head of the household of the gods. Nephthys is sometimes depicted as a falcon or as a woman with falcon wings. Nephthys was a death goddess as well as being a goddess of women and the house and a companion of Isis.

## **Nut**

Nut (Nuit, Newet, and Neuth) is the Egyptian sky goddess depicted supporting the sky with her back, her body blue and covered with stars. Nut is the daughter of Shu and Tefnut, the wife of Geb, and mother of Osiris, Isis, Set, and Nephthys

## **Shu**

Shu was an Egyptian air and sky god who mated with his sister Tefnut to sire Nut and Geb. Shu is shown with an ostrich feather. He is responsible for holding the sky separate from the earth.

## **Hapi**

Hapi was the personification of the River Nile, depicted as a corpulent man (fat signifying abundance) with a crown of lilies (Upper Nile) or papyrus plants (Lower Nile).

## **Hathor**

Hathor was an Egyptian cow-goddess and personification of the Milky Way. She was the wife or daughter of Ra and mother of Horus in some traditions. She was a sky goddess. She was also the patron of love, dance, alcohol, and foreign lands.

## **Horus**

Horus was normally considered the son of Osiris and Isis. He was the pharaoh's protector and also patron of young men. Horus' different names are associated with specific aspects of Horus so that Horus Behudety is associated with the noon sun. Horus was the falcon god, although the sun god Re, with whom Horus is sometimes associated, also appeared in a falcon form. He became the divine prototype of the Pharaoh.

## Isis

Perhaps the most important goddess of all Egyptian mythology. Her most important functions, however, were those of motherhood, marital devotion, healing the sick, and the working of magical spells and charms. She was believed to be the most powerful magician in the universe, owing to the fact that she had learned the Secret Name of Re from the god himself. She was the sister and wife of Osiris, sister of Set, and twin sister of Nephthys.

## Osiris

The god of the dead, and the god of the resurrection into eternal life; ruler, protector, and judge of the deceased. Osiris was the first child of Nut and Geb, thus the brother of Set, Nephthys, and Isis, who was also his wife. Osiris is an underworld god who, after being murdered by his brother, was brought back to life by his wife. Since he was killed, Osiris thereafter lives in the underworld where he judges the dead.

## Re-Ra

Ra was the god of the sun; the name is thought to have meant "creative power", and as a proper name "Creator", Re or Ra, the Egyptian sun god, ruler of everything, was especially associated with the city of the sun or Heliopolis. He came to be associated with Horus. Re may be depicted as a man with a sun disk on his head or with the head of a falcon

## Set (Seth)

Set or Seti is the Egyptian god of chaos, evil, war, storms, deserts, and foreign lands, who killed and cut up his older brother Osiris. He is depicted as composite animals.

• Anubis



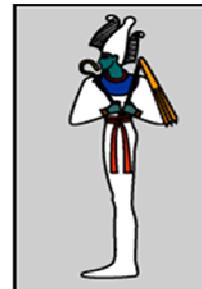
• Horus



• Isis



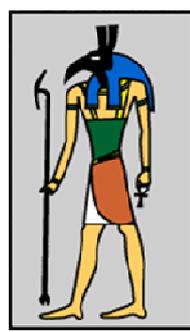
• Osiris



• Re-Ra



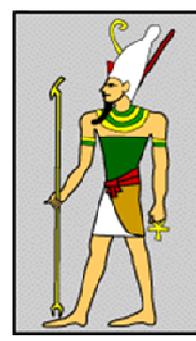
• Set (Seth)



• Bast or Bastet



• Atum



# ART of EGYPT

Ancient Egyptian art is five thousand years old. It emerged and took shape in the ancient Egypt, the civilization of the Nile Valley. Expressed in paintings and sculptures, it was highly symbolic and fascinating - this art form revolves round the past and was intended to keep history alive.

## Art in Old Kingdom

Most of the art we have from the Old Kingdom comes from tombs. Some of it comes from the walls of the tombs and **pyramids**. Royal and private statuary, as well as wall paintings and reliefs, reflected the concepts of art that served the cult of the gods, the kings, and the dead. In royal statuary, traditional poses are combined with idealistic features. The statuary was designed to depict royalty as physically strong with softened features, sometimes with touches of realism. The private statuary followed the same concepts, but had more freedom in movement and more varieties of poses.

Artists created seated scribe statues or figures standing, kneeling, or praying and others busy in domestic works. Examples are the statues of Prince Ra-hotep and his wife Nofret, which look like real humans because of the colors and the inlays of the eyes. The wooden statue of Ka-aper, with a realistic modeling of the features and the body, his other bust, and that of his wife, are additional examples of private statuary. Wall spaces in the tombs and temples began to use reliefs and paintings to depict daily activities in homes, estates, and workshops. There were also scenes of entertainment as well as offerings. Such reliefs and paintings were sometimes executed to depict the activities of working groups, animals, and birds.

## Middle Kingdom Egyptian Art



These scenes are from the tomb of Ti, who was an important official in the Middle Kingdom.

With the collapse of the Old Kingdom about 2160BC, there was also a big change in art styles. The carved reliefs of the Old Kingdom continue, still with the background all carved away. But the subject matter is different: in the Middle Kingdom instead of Pharaohs crushing their enemies, you get quiet scenes from daily life.

### **Amenemhet III**

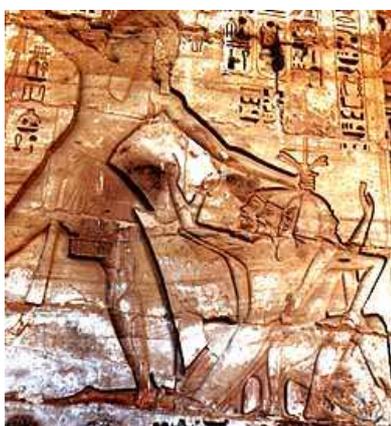
The style of three-dimensional sculpture also changed in the Middle Kingdom. Pharaohs no longer look so serious and strong; now they look more boyish and eager, less like gods and more like people.

## **New Kingdom Egyptian Art**

Near the beginning of the New Kingdom, the Amarna style developed.



**Ramses III and prisoners**



**Ramses III killing a Libyan**



**Ramses III**

After Amarna, around 1200BC, Ramses and his successors brought in new interests to art, where the main idea was to be very big and impressive, even if the details were not so fine. Reliefs are cut into the stone, instead of the background being cut away as they were in Old Kingdom art. New Kingdom artists, and their audiences, liked a loose, enthusiastic style, more than the old tightness and precision. And, because the Egyptians were doing a lot of conquering at this time, the reliefs often show wars or prisoners.

## **Literature**

Ancient Egyptian literature also contains elements of Ancient Egyptian art, as the texts and connected pictures were recorded on papyrus or on wall paintings and so on. They date from the Old Kingdom to the Greco-Roman period.

The subject matter of such literature related art forms include hymns to the gods, mythological and magical texts, mortuary texts. Other subject matters were biographical and historical texts, scientific premises, including mathematical and medical texts, wisdom texts dealing with instructive literature, and stories. A number of such stories from the ancient Egypt have survived thousand of years, the most famous being Cinderella, where her names is Rhodopis in the oldest version of the story.

## DEATH



- Ankh-Egyptian symbol of eternal life

### Egyptian Way of Death

If you lived in Ancient Egypt, you probably believed you would use your body in the afterlife. When you died your soul or *ba* would fly out of your body and spark your double (*ka*), which would then travel to the otherworld. However, it would need to return to your body, since without the physical body, the *ka* would die. Since your body had to be preserved for the re-entry, the Egyptians developed embalming. If you were a pharaoh, destined to join the other gods -- not only would you need your body, but all the other accoutrements of status, from gold to slaves. Pyramids served to house this paraphernalia of eternity.

All Egyptians expected to need heka to preserve their bodies and souls in the afterlife, and curses threatening to send dangerous animals to hunt down tomb-robbers were sometimes inscribed on tomb walls. The mummified body itself was protected by amulets, hidden beneath its wrappings. Collections of funerary spells - such as the Coffin Texts and the Book of the Dead - were included in elite burials, to provide esoteric magical knowledge.

The dead person's soul, usually shown as a bird with a human head and arms, made a dangerous journey through the underworld. The soul had to overcome the demons it would encounter by using magic words and gestures. There were even spells to help the deceased when their past life was being assessed by the Forty-Two Judges of the Underworld. Once a dead person was declared innocent they became an *akh*, a 'transfigured' spirit. This gave them *akhw* power, a superior kind of magic, which could be used on behalf of their living relatives.

## Funerary Customs

**Over more than three thousand years of ancient Egypt's history, traditional beliefs about the transition to eternal life persisted, with new ideas being incorporated from time to time.** Most important for full participation in the afterlife was the need for an individual's identity to be preserved. Consequently, the body had to remain intact and receive regular offerings of food and drink.

The afterlife was assured by:

1. Preserving the body through mummification.
2. Protecting the body in a tomb in which the name of the deceased was inscribed.
3. Providing the deceased with food and drink or illustrations of it in case no one was available to make the offerings.

**To protect the spirit of the deceased, scenes and inscriptions were written on coffins and the walls of tombs.** These texts included such writings as adaptations of the myth about the death of Osiris and spells to protect the deceased on his or her dangerous journey to the underworld. Figures known as shabtis functioned as servants for the deceased.

**The final step in the transition to the afterlife was the judgment by Osiris, god of the underworld, in a ritual known as the Weighing of the Heart.** If a person had led a decent life, he or she would be judged worthy of eternal life. Many spells and rituals were designed to ensure a favorable judgment and were written in the papyrus or linen "Book of the Dead."

All ancient Egyptians believed in the afterlife and spent their lives preparing for it. Pharaohs built the finest tombs, collected the most elaborate funerary equipment, and were mummified in the most expensive way. Others were able to provide for their afterlives according to their earthly means. Regardless of their wealth, however, they all expected the afterlife to be an idealized version of their earthly existence.

## Mummification

The process of mummification, the form of embalming practiced by the ancient Egyptians, changed over time from the Old Kingdom (ca. 2750-2250 B.C.), when it was available only to kings, to the New Kingdom (ca. 1539-1070 B.C.), when it was available to everyone. The level of mummification depended on what one could afford. The most fully developed form involved four basic steps:

1. All of the internal organs, except the heart, were removed. Since the organs were the first parts of the body to decompose but were necessary in the afterlife, they were mummified and put in canopic jars that were placed in the tomb at the time of burial. The heart was believed to be the seat of intelligence and emotion and was, therefore, left in the body. The brain, on the other hand, was regarded as having no significant value and, beginning in the New Kingdom, was removed through the nose and discarded.
2. The body was packed and covered with natron, a salty drying agent, and left to dry out for forty to fifty days. By this time all the body's liquid had been absorbed and only the hair, skin, and bones were left.
3. The body cavity was stuffed with resin, sawdust, or linen and shaped to restore the deceased's form and features.
4. The body was then tightly wrapped in many layers of linen with numerous good luck charms, or amulets, wrapped between the layers. The most important amulet was the scarab beetle, which was placed over the heart. Jewelry was also placed among the bandages. At each stage of wrapping, a priest recited spells and prayers. This whole procedure could take as long as fifteen days. After the wrapping was complete, the body was put into a shroud. The entire mummification process took about seventy days.

### **Middle Kingdom - Death**

During the Middle Kingdom, there were three types of burials:

1. surface graves, with or without coffin
2. shaft graves, usually with coffin
3. tombs with coffin and sarcophagus.

### **Osiris, Death and Religion:**

In the Middle Kingdom, Osiris became the god of the necropolises. Pharaohs had participated in mystery rites for Osiris, but now private individuals also took part in these rites. During this period, all people were thought to have the spiritual force or ba. Like the rites of Osiris, this had formerly been the province of kings.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the ancient Egyptians were a socially advanced culture, their buildings and culture live on, though they do not. The ancient Egyptians are considered among many to be the civilization upon which much of the western world's views and attitudes are based. Everything from religion, to architecture, to art has been handed down, generation by generation, to us in the present day. Although many of the ancient Egyptians' traditions have been modified or altered, the majority of their core principles remains constant. Yet, despite the ancient Egyptians' conservative nature, there were some changes within the infrastructure of their society. Throughout the ages known as the Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, and New Kingdom, there were alterations to their religion, art, and architecture. Internal forces, as well as outside influences, have molded ancient Egyptian civilization. This paper attempted to determine the forces which changed the Egyptians. Modifications of Egyptian life were subtle, but noticeable and significant nonetheless.



Pyramides in Giza

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