Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this unit, students should be able to:

1. Interpret historical narrative in Egyptian reliefs.
2. Identify the main sources of knowledge about the art of ancient Egypt and of the ancient Aegean, including archaeological finds, funerary art, and written sources.
3. Explain how the form of Egyptian architectural monuments reflects their purposes.
4. Identify architectural elements and types characteristically used during the periods of ancient Egyptian history and by the cultures of the ancient Aegean.
5. Examine the iconography and attributes used to identify the “god-king” pharaoh and his or her nature in Egyptian art.
6. Identify and define painting techniques used by the ancient Egyptians and by the cultures of the ancient Aegean.
7. Identify common features in human figure representations of the Armana Period in Egypt.
8. Define compositional types used by the ancient Egyptians and the cultures of the ancient Aegean.
9. Compare stylistic conventions and the representation of status in tomb reliefs and in murals of ancient Egypt.
10. Relate the Egyptians’ use of a canon for representing the human form to their value of permanence.
11. Describe the development of composition and narrative on Minoan pottery.

Written Lecture

Chapter 3: Egypt Under the Pharaohs

Much of what we know about ancient Egypt comes from the translation of documents. The Rosetta Stone, discovered by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799, became a translation “key” for deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphics. The stone has on it three different sections of the same text written in three different written languages: Greek, demotic (Late Egyptian), and formal hieroglyphs. Jean-Francois Champollion determined that the hieroglyphics represent in writing a once spoken language that can be traced to the language of Christian Egypt, Coptic. The fact that the Rosetta Stone has greatly served as a means of translating the written and spoken languages of ancient Egypt once believed lost is likely the reason that the creators of a well-known language software chose to name their product Rosetta Stone after the invaluable artifact.

Canon of figure representation

The dependability and continuity of the Nile River and its annual flood defined ancient Egyptian culture and the timelessness for which the Egyptians worked. The grandeur of Egyptian art attests to the skill of its creators and their
overwhelming need to create permanent monuments. The need for unchanging order drove the ancient Egyptians to create works that did not deviate from an established canon. In the *Palette of King Narmer (Fig. 3-3)*, the representation of Narmer himself is among the early works that defined the canon for representing human figures maintained by the ancient Egyptians for centuries.

The kneeling portrayal was also a popular representation, as can be seen in a representation of Hatshepsut (*Fig. 3-21*). Hatshepsut was one of the first female rulers who ruled an empire the size of ancient Egypt for a significant amount of time. During her approximately twenty-year reign, Egypt experienced great prosperity.

In the Old Kingdom Dynasty IV, the canon of figure representation had long been established and continued to be in use.

**Architectural tombs – eternal resting places for the divine pharaohs**

Change did occur in architecture. *Fig 3-4* diagrams the typical Egyptian mastaba tomb, and the origins of the pyramid complex can be seen in the Third Dynasty pyramid complex of King Djoser (*Figs. 3-5 and 3-6*). The Stepped Pyramid (*Fig. 3-5*) evolved into the Great Pyramids at Gizeh (*Fig. 3-8*). These developments revolved around the need to create a permanent site of eternal rest for the pharaohs' remains. The *Palette of King Narmer (Fig. 3-3)* illustrates a key underlying concept on which the building of these great tombs was based – a deified ruler. As found in the ancient Near East, the pharaoh is depicted as larger than life and invincible; conquest was achieved through his efforts alone. Kings and pharaohs were celebrated as equal to the gods. Symbols or attributes of the gods can be seen at both the front and back views of Narmer’s palette. Hathor, the cow with a woman's face, designates the divinity of Narmer. This sort of representation was used for all subsequent generations of pharaohs.

**Tomb paintings**

Paintings of ancient Egypt, particularly tomb paintings, offer insight into the lifestyles of the different classes of Egyptian society. The preparation of the tomb for its eventual occupant was always of paramount interest, and in the tombs excavated thus far, we see representations of events from daily lives: recreation, business, and entertainment. For example, hunting is portrayed in *Fig. 3-28*; trade business in *Fig. 3-16*; and entertainment in *Fig. 3-29*. Portraying the deceased performing activities that mirrored activities of daily life was another way to create continuity and permanence. The conception of Egyptian afterlife posited that the deceased continued to experience a life similar to that which he or she had lived. Paintings coupled with objects would aid the deceased in the activities of the afterlife.

**Iconography**

The royal portrait of Khafre (*Fig. 3-12*) presents the Pharaoh seated on his throne with symbols representing Upper and Lower Egypt carved on the sides. In the side view, Horus is shown as shielding and supporting Khafre. Horus and Khafre are brothers not only in spirit but also in reality – that is, the physical reality of the sculpture. The ancient Egyptian would have instantly recognized the relationship between Horus and Khafre as equals and as divinities. The symbols of the lotus and the papyrus are shorthand reference to the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. This format of presentation remained unchanged throughout ancient Egypt's long history. Durability and enduring sameness are hallmarks of ancient Egyptian work; therefore, the essential presentation of pharaoh as divine ruler did not deviate even if small details of royal regalia did.
The presentation of the gods as advocates and judges was not exclusive to ancient Egypt, as we have seen this depiction of gods and goddesses in other cultures. However, a significant difference can be seen in the depiction of deities in ancient Egypt. In other cultures, specifically Mesopotamia, the gods were represented in human form, but in ancient Egypt the gods and goddesses appear with animal attributes combined with human form. For example, Anubis is generally seen represented as a jackal, either in the form of the animal itself or as a jackal-headed human figure (Fig. 3-36).

A brief change in the canon – Akhenaton and the Amarna period

Changes in the uncompromising conventions of Egyptian art occurred in the New Kingdom during the 18th Dynasty reign of Amenhotep IV, or Akhenaton as he renamed himself (Fig. 3-30 and 3-33). This period was short-lived, lasting approximately twenty years. During this time the canon changed from representing the pharaoh as a heroic godlike figure with an ideal body to an aging figure identified as a pharaoh only by royal regalia. After Akhenaton's death, the old order returned and was never deviated from thereafter.

Chapter 4: The Prehistoric Aegean

NOTE: Though the title of Chapter 4 is “The Prehistoric Aegean,” the cultures of the Aegean at this time did have written languages – now called Linear A and B – and documentation does exist. Therefore, “prehistoric” is not technically accurate. The author of the textbook likely used the term because many of the written documents and examples we have of Linear A and B have not yet been deciphered or translated.

Chapter 4 introduces the ancient Aegean and its rich cultural traditions. Historians' initial introduction to the lands and peoples of the ancient Aegean was Homer's Iliad. Archaeology has proven an essential tool for deciphering what is myth and what is truth in the Iliad and other ancient literary works, which underscores the need for interdisciplinary collaboration to amplify knowledge about ancient worlds and cultures.

The ancient peoples and cultures that once inhabited what is now modern-day Europe and surrounding lands continually crossed paths via trade, travel, and warfare, exchanging ideas, artistic trends and motifs, and mythologies. Whether the exchanges were intentional or not, whatever was adopted was modified to fit individual cultures. The art of the ancient Aegean reflects new immigrant populations that enhanced the influence of cultural exchange with the ancient Near East and Egypt.

Cycladic Art

Representations of human figures in Cycladic sculpture are generally abstract and schematic. To describe a representation as “abstract” means that it appears as something more conceptual rather than natural – Cycladic figure sculptures generally appear almost as a geometric diagram of the human form rather than how the human form appears in nature.

The purpose of the figures is unknown. More female figures have been unearthed than males. The female figures may have been part of the burial process, while the males, depicted as musicians, may be playing for the deceased in the afterlife.
Minoan Art

The aerial view of the Palace of Knossos at Crete (Fig. 4-4) shows the complexity and massive scale of Minoan architecture. It is believed that the idea of the labyrinth (or maze) and the myth of the Minotaur came from Crete and the complexity of this palace. Palace complexes such as the one at Crete housed royal private residences, non-royal residences, administrative and bureaucratic offices, and storage areas. The plans of palace complexes were carefully planned according to the functions of specific rooms. The palace complex of Knossos reveals that the Minoans adapted the engaged column (used by the Egyptians) to be used as freestanding and supporting columns that maintain structural elevations (Fig. 4-6). These elevations along with open stairwells allowed air to flow through the complex and allowed light into otherwise dark areas and rooms for comfort.

The Minoans used the *buon fresco* (true fresco) technique. Artist’s working in this manner mixed pigment with water and painted onto wet plaster; the pigment bonded with the plaster as it dried. The technique is more permanent than the *fresco secco* (dry fresco) technique that the Egyptians used. To compare the bull-leading fresco at Knossos to an Egyptian tomb painting reveals a greater sense of movement in the Minoan painting created by an implied curving line; this sense of movement is characteristic of most Minoan paintings. In addition to cultural activities such as bull-leaping, the Minoans also painted landscapes as wall decoration, in which no narrative appears, such as the “Spring Fresco” from present-day Thera (Fig. 4-9). The representation of pure landscape was an uniquely Minoan innovation.

Mycenaean Art

Historians are uncertain of the origins of the Mycenaean peoples, as with many ancient cultures. They flourished on the Greek mainland and made many architectural achievements, including vaulted tholos (round) tombs such as the “Treasury of Atreus” (Fig. 4-21). They were also influenced by the Minoans. In the Lion Gate (Fig. 4-19), a Minoan column is represented between the lions. As we saw with the Lamassu (Fig. 2-21) in Chapter 2, the lions seem to act as guardians. The careful plan and layout of the gate allows it to be effectively guarded so that any invading force could be neutralized.

The Mycenaeans buried their dead with precious objects – jewelry for women and swords or daggers for men – suggesting that they believed in an afterlife, like other ancient cultures we have studied. A dagger from Grave Circle A (Fig. 4-23) is an example of such an object. The lion-hunting scene on this particular dagger is an example of the use of hunting scenes to suggest the virility and power of the man to whom the dagger belonged. We have seen this sort of subject matter used for the same purpose by other ancient cultures (Fig. 2-23), proving wide cross-cultural influence. The dagger is also proof of the Mycenaeans’ fine metalworking skills; it is only nine inches long, yet the artist was able to represent detail with inlaid gold, silver, and niello on the bronze form.