

Term 2

EGYPTIAN AND GREEK ART

LESSON 1: ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

Learning goals

Describe important features of ancient Egyptian society and its contributions.

Explain the religious purposes of Egyptian architecture, sculpture, painting, and relief.

Recognize symbolism, hierarchy of scale, frontality, and hieroglyphics in Egyptian art.

Explain how Egyptian art provides information about beliefs and daily life.

1. Ancient Egypt: People, beliefs, and contributions

Ancient Egyptian civilization developed along the Nile River, a vital waterway running through the country. Communities included farmers and herdsman, hunters and fishermen, soldiers, priests, scribes, artists and craftsmen, and enslaved people. Artists, craftsmen, and scribes were honored and admired.

A scribe was a person trained to read and write. Scribes wrote on papyrus, a writing material made from a reed that was processed into a paper-like sheet. Egyptians also used hieroglyphics, an early writing system made of picture-like signs. Hieroglyphics could appear beside figures and images on monuments and temple walls.

The ruler was called a pharaoh. Egyptians believed the pharaoh had a special relationship with the gods. Beliefs about the gods, death, and the afterlife strongly influenced Egyptian art.

The ancient Egyptians made bricks, used sails on water and wheels on land, harnessed animals for work, trained donkeys to carry people, combined copper and tin to make bronze, and forged tools from copper.

2. Predynastic and Dynastic Egypt

The Predynastic period lasted approximately 5000–3000 BCE. Egypt was not yet a unified nation; groups gradually became part of larger political units. Around 3000 BCE, the lands along the Nile were united under one ruler, marking the beginning of the Dynastic period. The presentation dates Dynastic Egypt to about 3000–30 BCE.

Early Egyptian artists worked with bones, clay, stone, and hippopotamus ivory. They made small figures of animals, birds, and people, and carved animals or birds on combs and pins. Stone palettes used for grinding minerals for eye paint could be shaped like birds, turtles, or fish.

Pottery was often decorated with geometric or animal designs painted in white on a red background. Images included birds, horned animals, human figures, plants, wavy lines, and boats. Some decorated pottery was found in cemeteries and may have been made for funerary use.

3. Architecture: temples, tombs, and pyramids

Important Egyptian buildings included temples, tombs, and palaces. Temples were places for rituals and worship. Tombs were burial places for kings and elite people. Palaces were residences where the king carried out governmental and religious duties.

Pyramids were built as tombs for pharaohs. Egyptians placed objects in tombs because they believed the deceased would need them in the afterlife. Many artworks survived because they were preserved in tombs and pyramids.

Royal tombs were often built on the west bank of the Nile. Because the sun sets in the west, Egyptians associated the western desert with the underworld, called the duat, where the dead dwelled and through which the sun passed at night.

Examples in the presentation include the Step Pyramid of King Djoser at Saqqara, designed by Imhotep; the Pyramid of Khafre; and the Bent Pyramid built during the reign of King Sneferu. The Step Pyramid is described as one of the oldest monumental stone structures and an early monumental royal tomb. Imhotep is identified in the presentation as the earliest artist whose name is recorded in history.



Step Pyramid of King Djoser



The Pyramid of Khafre



The Bent Pyramid

Egyptians also built large temples, including those at Abu Simbel, Luxor, and Karnak. The post-and-lintel system—vertical supports holding a horizontal beam—was used in temple construction. The Great Sphinx, carved from a rocky ledge, is another well-known Egyptian monument.



Temple at Abu Simbel



The Great Sphinx



post-and-lintel system

4. Main characteristics of Egyptian art

a. Symbolism

Symbolism means that an image, color, or object communicates an idea beyond its physical appearance. For example, the ankh—a cross-like sign with a loop at the top—represented life. The hippopotamus could symbolize rebirth.

b. Hierarchy of scale

Hierarchy of scale means that the size of a figure communicates its importance. A ruler or deity may be shown larger than attendants or ordinary people. The difference in size is not necessarily an attempt to show realistic distance; it can indicate social or religious status.

c. Frontality and ordered arrangement

Egyptian figures often follow formal conventions. A person may have a head and legs shown from the side, while the eye, shoulders, and chest are shown more frontally. This combination presents the most recognizable view of different body parts. Figures may look stiff, formal, and carefully arranged.

d. Hieroglyphic writing

Picture-like signs were used as part of the Egyptian writing system and often appeared with images. Together, writing and pictures could communicate names, beliefs, and information on monuments, temple walls, and tombs.

5. Sculpture

Statues of gods and kings were commonly placed in temples. Small bronze images of gods and sacred animals could be presented as offerings. Painted wooden statues of funerary gods were placed in tombs to help the deceased pass safely into the afterlife.

Many Egyptian sculptures are formal and stylized. Figures often face forward, with the left foot slightly ahead of the right. The figure may remain closely connected to the stone block, with few open spaces between the limbs and body. Some sculptures idealized rulers rather than showing every individual feature realistically.

Artists used materials and decorative substances such as gold, turquoise, lapis lazuli, red coral, and glass. The presentation includes the stone figure of King Khafre, a life-sized statue of King Pepi I, a gold mask associated with Tutankhamun, and a sculpture of Queen Nefertiti described as more relaxed and graceful than many Egyptian statues.

6. Painting and relief

Egyptians painted scenes on the walls of temples and tombs. A relief is an image carved so that figures and background occupy different levels of a surface. In raised relief, the background is cut away so the figures stand out. In sunk relief, the figures are cut into the surface so they sit lower than the surrounding background.

Tomb paintings and reliefs were intended to help the deceased continue in a comfortable and familiar environment. Scenes might show food offerings, daily activities, gods, or religious beliefs. For example, the Geese of Meidum is a well-known painted work from the Old Kingdom.

Egyptian artists did not usually try to create the illusion of depth in the way later artists might. They often showed each object from the view that made its features clearest. Figure size could communicate importance, and bodies followed established conventions.

7. Mummification and the afterlife

The Egyptians believed that the body had a role in the afterlife. The presentation explains that the ka, a spiritual aspect of the person, would need the body; therefore, bodies were carefully preserved. After embalming, a body was wrapped in linen bandages. Egyptians also mummified some animals. Tombs contained objects believed useful to the deceased in the afterlife.

8. Crafts and everyday life

Egyptian craftsmen made furniture, jewelry, pottery, and other useful objects. These objects show that art was not limited to monuments. Artworks and crafts help us learn about Egyptian daily life, beliefs, materials, skills, and social organization.

Key terms

Pharaoh — ruler of ancient Egypt.

Scribe — a trained reader and writer.

Papyrus — a writing material made from processed reeds.

Hieroglyphics — a writing system using picture-like signs.

Predynastic — the period before Egypt was unified under one ruler.

Duat — the Egyptian underworld, as described in the presentation.

Symbolism — the use of images or objects to communicate meanings.

Hierarchy of scale — using size to indicate importance.

Relief — a carved image in which figures and background occupy different levels.

Stele — an upright carved stone slab used as a monument.

Ka — a spiritual aspect believed to need the body in the afterlife.

LESSON 2: GREEK IDEAS OF BEAUTY

Learning goals

Explain harmony, proportion, balance, order, and ideal beauty.

Recognize how Greek artists expressed ideas of beauty in sculpture, architecture, and pottery.

Compare the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods.

Analyze an artwork using visible evidence rather than relying only on personal opinion.

1. What did beauty mean to the ancient Greeks?

For many ancient Greek artists and thinkers, beauty was connected with order: the parts of something were arranged in relationships that made the whole feel organized and complete. Beauty was not only a matter of looking attractive. It could also be connected with reason, character, discipline, and excellence.

- Proportion: the parts relate to one another in measured or pleasing ways.
- Balance: visual weight is controlled so that one part does not overwhelm the whole.
- Harmony: the parts work together and create a unified whole.
- Order: the arrangement feels organized rather than chaotic.
- Idealism: an artist may improve or perfect a subject to express an ideal rather than copy every detail of reality.

2. Beauty, goodness, and the mind

Kalos kagathos is a Greek cultural ideal linking the beautiful (kalos) with the good (agathos). Physical excellence could be associated with character, education, courage, and responsibility to the community.

Plato argued that beauty could mean more than an attractive appearance. Beautiful things could lead the mind toward higher and lasting truths rather than temporary pleasure. Aristotle discussed beauty through ideas such as order, symmetry or proportion, and definiteness: a beautiful whole has parts arranged in a fitting way. These are simplified explanations of complex philosophical ideas.

3. Idealism and naturalism

Idealism presents a figure as an ideal or perfected form. The artist may emphasize youth, controlled proportions, calm expression, and an organized body. Naturalism studies life and movement more directly. It may show muscles, weight, believable posture, aging, or emotion. Greek art used both approaches, and a single artwork may combine them.

4. Three periods of Greek sculpture

a. Archaic period

The Archaic period is associated in the presentation with approximately 700–480 BCE. Sculptures often look frontal, formal, rigid, and patterned. Kouros refers to a statue of a young man; kore (plural korai) refers to a statue of a young woman. The figures can appear still and symmetrical, and some features show Egyptian influence.

b. Classical period

The Classical period is dated approximately 480–323 BCE in the presentation. Artists explored balance, proportion, idealized anatomy, and calm but believable movement. The body could look more natural while still representing an ideal of beauty.

c. Hellenistic period

The Hellenistic period is dated approximately 323–31 BCE. Artists often explored drama, strong emotion, movement, suffering, old age, and a wider variety of body types. This period shows that

Greek art did not always aim to represent young, perfect, calm bodies.

In broad terms, the presentation describes a movement from the stillness and formality of Archaic sculpture, to the balanced idealism of Classical sculpture, and then to the more expressive and dynamic works of the Hellenistic period.

5. Contrapposto: a body that looks alive

Contrapposto is a standing pose in which most of the body's weight rests on one leg while the other leg relaxes. The hips and shoulders tilt in response. This creates a natural-looking balance and suggests that the figure could move at any moment.

6. Proportion and the Canon

Polykleitos was famous for a lost treatise called the Kanon, meaning “rule.” It described a system for organizing the human figure. The Greek idea of symmetria referred to relationships among the parts of the body and the body as a whole.

Some modern textbooks simplify the proportions associated with Polykleitos as about one head to seven body units. However, the original Kanon is lost, so the exact formula is not known. The important idea is that Greek artists treated proportion as something that could be studied, not merely guessed.

7. Case study: Doryphoros, or the Spear Bearer

The Doryphoros is associated with Polykleitos. The original Greek bronze is lost, and the sculpture is known through ancient copies. When studying it, observe four features:

- ✓ Weight: most of the weight rests on one leg.
- ✓ Opposition: the hips and shoulders tilt in opposite directions.
- ✓ Proportion: body parts are carefully related to one another.
- ✓ Expression: the face is controlled rather than highly emotional.

The sculpture communicates more than physical strength. Its balanced pose and carefully organized body express an ideal of order and proportion.

8. Beauty in Greek architecture: the three orders

Greek architecture used different column styles, commonly called orders. Each order has recognizable features.

- ❖ **Doric**: simple and sturdy; the column has no base in the form described in the presentation.
- ❖ **Ionic**: more slender, with scroll-shaped forms called volutes at the capital (the top of the column).
- ❖ **Corinthian**: ornate, with a capital decorated with acanthus leaves.

These orders show how beauty could be expressed through the design and arrangement of architectural parts. Look at the top of a column, its proportions, and its overall appearance to identify the order.