A Timeless Culture: Egyptian Architecture & Decorative Arts

Charlotte Bell
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Cover photo: Hypostyle hall of the Temple of Horus at Edfu, 140-124 B.C.E. (Malek 333)
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The Foundations of Egyptian Culture

Unique geographic and climactic conditions, a religion centered on death and the afterlife, and a stable hierarchical society and system of government shaped the world’s longest lasting civilization—ancient Egypt. Egypt’s glory spanned more than four millennia, from around 5500 B.C.E. to its conquest by the Greeks in 332 B.C.E. During this period, Egypt created stunning architectural and artistic treasures that continue to amaze us today.

Geography & Climate

From the beginning, Egypt’s greatness came from the Nile (fig. 1). Even before the first people ventured into the northeast corner of Africa, the Nile was a paradise. Its waters were fresh and its banks fertile. The river’s annual floods washed impurities from the ground and deposited silt rich with minerals.

People came and settled along its borders, eventually developing strong agricultural communities. The mildness and predictability of the Nile’s seasons allowed these early Egyptians to prosper. Over time, they built canals, irrigation ditches, and terraced fields to control the water and increase their harvests. Farmers amassed surpluses, freeing much of the population from agricultural pursuits and allowing other professions to develop. The surplus food was also a commodity that could be traded, using the Nile itself to transport these goods.

Herodotus, a Greek who wrote of his travels in Egypt in the fifth century B.C.E., expressed the Nile’s importance beautifully when he wrote, “Egypt is the gift of the Nile.”

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1 All authors listed in Works Cited discuss the role of the geography and climate in Egyptian history. See, Brier and Hobbs, 1-2; Clayton 8; Hagen 7-23; Harwood, May and Sherman 51; Malek 5-6; Moffett, Fazio, and Wodehouse 22-23; Pemberton and Fletcher 16-17; Robins 14-18; Trachtenberg and Hyman 62.
Egypt was rich in minerals, with large deposits of building materials such as limestone, sandstone, granite, quartzite, basalt, travertine, siltstone, and soapstone. It had semi-precious stones, gold, copper, iron, galena, and clays, allowing it to make a wide array of goods for domestic use and trading.

Beyond the Nile to the west was the inhospitable Sahara desert and to the east, the barren Sinai Peninsula and the Red Sea. At the north lay the Mediterranean Sea and in the south giant boulders clogged the river, making it impassible. Egypt was an isolated civilization, delimited, protected, and nourished by its geography.

Religion

The Nile figured strongly in the development of religion in Egypt. The early Egyptians were unaware of the origin of the waters that annually inundated their fields. To them, the cycle of flooding that allowed them to flourish could only have been supernatural—a “gift of the gods” (Hagen 21). In fact, in the Egyptians’ eyes, the Nile was not just a river, but was itself a god, called Hapi (fig. 2). Other gods dwelled in the river or were associated with it—from the river gods Krophi and Mophi who sat under the rocks and made the water flow to the fertility god who blessed the waters.

Other natural phenomena, and indeed nearly every aspect of Egyptian life, also had associated gods. The sun was Aten or Ra, Hathor was the goddess of the sky and motherhood, Bes was the god of childbirth and war, and the king of the gods was Amun, the “Hidden One.” The Egyptians were free to worship them all. For the Egyptians, the real world was inseparable from the magical world of the gods.

The Egyptian gods had physical forms, as animals, humans, or a combination of both, each with special attributes. At times in Egyptian history, the Egyptians worshiped more than 1,000 different gods. The gods were depicted in paintings of official and daily life, wall carvings, statues, furniture, and jewelry.

2 The role of religion in the development of Egyptian architecture is discussed throughout all the references. See particularly, Brier and Hobbs 33-58; Clayton 6-7; Hagen 11-36; Harwood, May and Sherman 51; Malek 4, 8; Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 24; Pemberton and Fletcher 16; Robins 14-18; Trachtenberg and Hyman 62.
In the early days of ancient Egypt, the king (pharaoh) was thought to be a god himself and it was the king’s job to speak to the gods and to maintain the divine order. In later centuries, the pharaoh was no longer considered a god, but the son of a god. Nevertheless, the notion of the pharaoh having direct connection to the gods persisted throughout Egyptian history. Over time, kings delegated the task of speaking to the gods and maintaining divine order to a select group of stand-ins, a group that evolved into a powerful priesthood.

The stories the ancient people told about the gods give us another glimpse of the Egyptians’ religious beliefs and practices. The myth of Isis and Osiris (fig. 3), in which Osiris is killed by his evil brother Seth, but brought back to life by his wife Isis, represents the basic belief the Egyptians held about death—that the physical body would revive in the next world and gain immortality. Initially, only the pharaoh was assured eternal life, but eventually others of noble birth who were buried near the pharaoh could also hope for resurrection. As a result of this belief in an afterlife, the Egyptians developed elaborate burial rituals and funerary structures to ensure that the corpse would revive and flourish in the next life. Their tombs were highly decorated and contained all the accoutrements of daily life for the deceased to use in the next world.

Social System

Religion and the social system of ancient Egypt were inseparable. Because the pharaoh was considered to be divine, he was the protector of the people and the guardian of the country, and the people believed that prosperity and order depended on him. The Egyptians also believed that, as with the gods who had their assigned places and relationships, proper order required a strict hierarchy of social classes.

Lowest on the social hierarchy were farmers. Because, initially, only the pharaoh owned land, farmers were serfs and tied to the land. As soon as farmers were able to grow enough crops to feed many people, however, occupations other than farming were possible and some became free to move off the land. This new group was generally known as “free people” and in time consisted of tradesmen, priests, soldiers, and government officials.

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3 The social structure of Egypt is described in Brier and Hobbs 59-74; Hagen 56-65; Malek 6; Robins 18.
Some free people became bakers, brewers, butchers, clothiers, and cobblers, supplying basic goods to the populace. Others became miners and quarrymen, herders, or marsh hunters and fishers. As Egypt evolved, skilled craftsmen such as builders, carpenters and cabinet-makers, potters, sculptors, painters, jewelers, and metalworkers set up specialty workshops.

Craftsmen who worked directly for the king had prestige and their workshops set Egyptian trends. The work of these royal shops was broadly imitated, resulting in highly standardized artistic forms. The Egyptians did not comprehend the notion of free artistic expression and experimentation. Art to them was functional, an expression of the society’s religious beliefs and social order. As a result, Egyptian art remained essentially the same for the span of ancient Egyptian history, varying only slightly with the rise and fall of Egypt’s fortunes.

Military might was an important aspect of Egypt’s success. Many men became soldiers (fig. 4), serving the king in the nearly constant military campaigns undertaken throughout Egypt’s history.

The priesthood formed yet another stratum of society. Although the king was the only one who could directly communicate with the gods, he appointed priests to act on his behalf. The king built temples for the priests, which were often dedicated to particular gods. Smaller chapels were constructed to honor the memory of wealthy citizens, and these were often staffed by priests as well.

As the society grew more organized, people moved into occupations relating to government. Those who could write became scribes—bureaucrats who handled correspondence and accounts for large estates, temples, and at the highest level, the royal palace. The scribes enjoyed higher status than the craftsmen and could move upward in the social hierarchy, eventually becoming local governors, departmental ministers, or diplomats conducting royal affairs for the pharaoh. At the top of the non-royal hierarchy were the pharaoh’s viziers, the highest officials in the land.
At the apex of the social hierarchy was the royal family. A blood relationship with the reigning pharaoh conferred royal status. In many cases marriage to a person of royal blood allowed a commoner to enter the royal realm.

The Beginning of Egyptian History:
The Unification of Egypt & The Rise of Dynasties

The Narmer Palette

The early Egyptians lived in two loose confederations, one in the north and the other in the south. Artifacts from this period show that the rulers of these groups wore distinctive royal hats—the Red Crown of the North (Lower Egypt) and the White Crown of the South (Upper Egypt). In about 3000 B.C.E., a ruler from Upper Egypt called Narmer (Menes) led an army into Lower Egypt and conquered the northern peoples, uniting the two areas under a single ruler.

Narmer’s conquest of Upper Egypt is depicted on a slate palette (fig. 5) discovered in the ancient town of Hierakonpolis near the southern end of Egypt. This palette is the earliest historical record from Egypt and the oldest document of a historic event.

One side of the palette shows Narmer wearing the White Crown, grasping an enemy by the hair with one hand while raising a mace above his head with the other. The reverse shows Narmer wearing the Red Crown and marching in a processional, having defeated the people of Lower Egypt and united the country.

Narmer, or perhaps his son, Hor-Aha, established the new Egyptian capital at Memphis, just south of the apex of the Nile Delta. Memphis remained the locus of government throughout most of Egyptian history.

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4 The Narmer Palette is discussed in Brier and Hobbs 2-3; Clayton 16-19; Malek 30-31.
The unification of Egypt marked the beginning of nearly 3000 years of artistic excellence and military dominance, resulting in unequalled achievements in architecture, art, literature, and mathematics. Egypt’s story had begun.

Dynasties

Historians divide Egypt’s history into segments called dynasties. The dynasties are grouped into nine periods (fig. 6). Bob Brier and Hoyt Hobbs provide a succinct summary of these periods in their book, Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians:

Egyptologists refer to the time just before Narmer’s unification as “Predynastic” (or Archaic) and the period from the unification of Egypt up to the raising of the first pyramid as “Early Dynastic.” The great age of pyramids that Zoser initiated is known as the “Old Kingdom,” after which came a period of anarchy and chaos, the “First Intermediate Period.” Egypt reassumed power in the “Middle Kingdom,” experienced another decline during the “Second Intermediate Period,” and resurrected itself again in a final great era of art and military success in the “New Kingdom” before undergoing a slow decline during the “Late Period,” ancient Egypt’s final era. (5)

Of the nine periods, the most significant for architecture and art are the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom, and the New Kingdom. During these periods, Egypt built massive structures that endure today, created detailed and finely crafted art, and left records of daily life that continue to fascinate students of Egyptian history.

**The Nine Periods of Egyptian History**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Dates (B.C.E.)</th>
<th>Dynasties</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Predynastic</td>
<td>To 3150</td>
<td>I-II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Dynastic</td>
<td>3150-2686</td>
<td>III-IV</td>
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<tr>
<td>Old Kingdom</td>
<td>2686-2181</td>
<td>VII-XI</td>
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<tr>
<td>First Intermediate Period</td>
<td>2181-2040</td>
<td>XI-XII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Kingdom</td>
<td>2040-1782</td>
<td>XIII-XVII</td>
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<tr>
<td>Second Intermediate Period</td>
<td>1782-1570</td>
<td>XVIII-XXI</td>
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<tr>
<td>New Kingdom</td>
<td>1570-1070</td>
<td>XXI-XXXI</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Period</td>
<td>1069-332</td>
<td>XXXII-XXXIII</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ptolemaic Period</td>
<td>332-30</td>
<td>XXXII-XXXIII</td>
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</tbody>
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Figure 6.
Architecture in the Old Kingdom: Pyramids & Temples

The Step Pyramid of Saqqara\(^5\)

The Old Kingdom begins with the 3\(^{rd}\) Dynasty and a king named Zoser (Djoser).

Before Zoser’s time, people were buried in chambers carved out of bedrock and covered with flat pieces of stone. Eventually, these tombs were elaborated by adding sun-baked mud-brick rectangular structures above, called mastabas (fig. 7). The burial chamber was cut into the bedrock below the mastaba. Inside the mastaba were storage rooms for clothing, food, furniture, weapons, and other items of daily life. Later mastabas included a chamber with a statue of the deceased.

Zoser, however, envisioned a grander memorial. His tomb, the Step Pyramid of Saqqara (fig. 8), built under the direction of his vizier and architect Imhotep,\(^6\) was remarkable in several ways. The tomb began as a mastaba, but Zoser was not satisfied, so he had the mastaba enlarged, adding other mastabas on top of previous ones until the structure had six layers and rose to a height of 204 feet. The pyramid was the first building erected entirely of stone (Moffitt, Fazio and Wodehouse 24).

Zoser surrounded his pyramid with a stone wall 33 feet high, modeling it after a palace façade. The entire Step Pyramid complex (fig. 9) was 1,800 feet by 900 feet. Shafts, tunnels, and chambers (fig. 10) within the pyramid contained stone vases, carved stone walls, paintings, and a statue of the king.

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\(^5\) Mastabas and the Step Pyramid at Saqqara are discussed in Brier and Hobbs 160-161; Clayton 32-37; Hagen 26-29; Malek 8; Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 25-26; Robins 40-45; Trachtenberg and Hyman 62-65.

\(^6\) Imhotep is the first recorded architect in history (Trachtenberg and Hyman 63).
Beyond the entrance was a long hall flanked by two rows of half-columns attached to piers that supported a massive stone ceiling. These half-columns are notable because they are among the first monumental columnar forms in the history of architecture (Trachtenberg and Hyman 63). The columns imitated papyrus plants and the bundles of reeds that had been used as building supports in earlier times. Imitating natural forms in columns and other building aspects is a motif that has remained central throughout the history of architecture (Trachtenberg and Hyman 63).

The slender half-columns in the courtyard (fig. 11) had bell-shaped depictions of papyrus flowers that formed the first capitals in architecture (Trachtenberg and Hyman 63).

Zoser’s Step Pyramid, and all the pyramids that were built in succeeding dynasties in the Old Kingdom, embodied Egyptian religious beliefs in monumental physical form. The pyramids symbolized the initial emergence of the earth from the primordial waters and the rising up of the king’s body after death—providing a stairway on which the king could walk to
join the gods in the sky. The structures were meant as fortresses to protect the pharaoh’s body and his possessions from robbers until such time as the king was resurrected. To ensure a successful transition from death to the new life, bodies were buried with all the accoutrements of daily life such as furniture, food, and water, written instructions to the afterlife, funerary statues, images of the gods, and even small servant statues who would do the deceased’s bidding in the afterlife.

True Pyramids & the Great Pyramid at Giza

By the Fourth Dynasty, pyramids were shaped as true pyramids, with smooth rather than stepped sides. The layout of the pyramid complexes changed as well. Instead of being enclosed in a stone wall, the later pyramid complexes were oriented linearly and included funerary temples and valley temples connected by long causeways. The pyramids served as tombs and the temples as places for the deceased king to be worshiped after his death.

The largest of the Old Kingdom pyramids was the Great Pyramid of Khufu (Cheops) at Giza (fig. 12), built in about 2570 B.C.E. The size of the Great Pyramid is staggering. At 481 feet tall, it was the largest structure in the world until the Eiffel tower was built 4,500 years later. Its base was 756 feet square and it contained 2,400,000 stones weighing two and a half tons each. The pyramid was a triumph of engineering. Its base was perfectly level and square, with only 1/8” error in the length of one side; its sides were perfect triangles facing the four cardinal points of the compass; and its faces were so perfectly angled that the apex was only one foot off the center of the base.

The pyramid was completed in about 20 years, a remarkable feat. Despite years of study, archaeologists still do not know how the Egyptians built the pyramid. Various theories abound, the most widely accepted being that the huge stones were moved up temporary earthen ramps.

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7 This discussion of the pyramids derives from Brier and Hobbs 6, 162-8; Clayton 47-49, 51-54, 57-58; Hagen 30-35; Moffit, Fazio and Wodehouse 27-29; Robins 45-51; Trachtenberg and Hyman 65-68.
Khufu’s burial chamber was located in the center of the pyramid rather than in the bedrock as with earlier pyramids. This chamber, known as the King’s Chamber, is 34 ½ feet long, 17 feet wide, and 19 feet high. The pyramid contains a Queen’s chamber, a Grand Gallery, and other smaller rooms as well.

To relieve the enormous pressure of the stones above these large interior chambers, the pharaoh’s engineers devised a complex multiple ceiling design topped by a triangular arch to deflect the load into the mass of the pyramid. The use of small carefully fitted ashlar blocks in this construction is believed to be the first instance of this technique (Trachtenberg and Hyman 66).

**Temples & Other Tombs**

Khufu’s son, Khafre (Chephren) built his funerary complex at Giza as well. More remarkable than his pyramid was his valley temple\(^8\) (fig. 13), the largest Old Kingdom structure other than the pyramids to survive. Built of limestone and veneered with giant slabs of granite, the temple was supported by huge pillars of stone joined by tenon-like joints. Khafre’s temple established the accepted components of temple architecture—large open courts, roofed passageways, pillared and colonnaded halls, axial alignment of spaces, and statue chambers—that would be followed for centuries. The temple also exemplified the Egyptian’s early mastery of building with dressed stone (Clayton 55).

In 1925, archaeologists discovered the tomb of Khufu’s mother, Queen Hetepheres. The tomb contained a number of pieces of the Queen’s furniture (fig. 14)—a canopy frame, a bed, and several chairs (Clayton 49). The furniture had carved armrests and legs with animal feet, details that were repeated throughout European furniture history.

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\(^8\) The valley temple of Khafre at Giza is discussed at Clayton 51-54; Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 27-29; Robins 49; Trachtenberg and Hyman 69-70.
Almost all the tombs of the Old Kingdom were robbed in antiquity, so little besides the structures or their ruins remains in existence. A few examples of fine jewelry and high-quality stone vessels are among the few goods that still exist (Malek 54).

The architectural and artistic traditions and conventions established in the Old Kingdom were maintained throughout the course of ancient Egyptian history, providing a unifying and stabilizing basis for later architectural endeavors in Egypt.

**The Middle Kingdom & The Two Intermediate Periods**

By the end of the Sixth Dynasty, Egypt was in decline. The annual Nile inundation had not occurred for several years, the central government had broken down, foreign invaders had entered the kingdom, and Egypt split into fragmented disorder (Malek 9; Robins 80). During this period, known as the First Intermediate Period, several pharaohs ruled simultaneously in different parts of Egypt, primarily in Herakleopolis in the north and in Thebes in the south, and no massive building projects were undertaken (Brier and Hobbs 12). Modest tombs were built and decorated, but the skilled artisans of the Old Kingdom had disappeared and craftsmanship was uneven (Robins 82-83).

Egypt was reunified in the 11th Dynasty by the pharaoh Montuhotep, a Theban king, and relative peace and prosperity ensued. This era, known as the Middle Kingdom, produced refined temples and pyramids, though of smaller scale than those of the Old Kingdom. The arts made a come-back in Thebes as the prosperity of the country increased (Brier and Hobbs 16).

Most of the tombs of this era were rock-cut with accompanying small temples comprised of three parts: a colonnaded portico, a chapel and effigy chamber, and a sepulchral recess. The interior piers of the temples at Beni Hasan (fig. 15), the location of the best examples of the tombs of this era, were in the form of lotus plants with reeded shafts and a small square capital. Some historians call this form “Proto-Doric.” Although there is no positive evidence that the Greeks were influenced by these forms in developing the Doric columns for which they are famous,
the form was used in later periods of Egyptian history when the Greeks were in Egypt and may well have been seen by them (Trachtenberg and Hyman 68).

The largest of the Middle Kingdom constructions was Montuhotep’s royal tomb complex (fig. 16), built into an enormous cliff across the Nile from Thebes at what is now called Deir el-Bahri. The temple was huge, constructed on a platform and surrounded by a portico of columns on three sides. With a tomb for the pharaoh, a large interior courtyard surrounded by pillars, a hypostyle hall, a niche for the pharaoh’s statue, tombs and chapels for the king’s wives, and a large garden in front, this elegant complex was expansive (Robins 87, 90-94). Only the pharaoh’s tomb and fragments of the smaller temples survive. This complex, however, may have been one of the first large scale uses of a raised platform, pillared porticos, and a hypostyle hall (Robins 94). This temple was also the first time the Egyptians had placed a monumental structure against a cliff (Trachtenberg and Hyman 70).

The Second Intermediate Period marks a time when Lower Egypt was ruled by the Hyksos, most likely a Semitic people who entered Egypt from the east, again splitting the country into segments. Eventually, hostilities between the Egyptians and the Hyksos resulted in warfare and the defeat of the Hyksos, inaugurating the 18th Dynasty and a new era in Egyptian history (Clayton 69-97).

Although the time of the Hyksos’ rule was not a prosperous time for Egypt, the Hyksos introduced the Egyptians to the chariot and to the secret of producing bronze. These innovations enabled Egypt to increase its military power once it had again reunited (Brier and Hobbs 18).
The New Kingdom: Egypt’s grandeur

With the expulsion of the Hyksos, Egypt again rose to regional power and prosperity, producing immense architectural works. The period began with the 18th Dynasty pharaoh Ahmose I, who consolidated Egypt’s borders and stabilized the domestic government. Subsequent pharaohs in the early part of the 18th Dynasty concentrated on military and governmental affairs as well.

The Valley of the Kings

The early 18th dynasty kings made significant changes in the royal burial practices. Rather than erecting conspicuous pyramids to protect their bodies and goods—a strategy that had proven unsuccessful in the Old Kingdom—the pharaohs dug deep shafts into the solid rock in a remote valley on the west bank of the Nile, the Valley of the Kings. These tombs were constructed in strict secrecy and had concealed entrances and no associated temples. The pharaohs built their mortuary temples elsewhere.

The tombs, though hidden, were lavish. Great underground chambers were constructed with walls covered with elaborate hieroglyphs and paintings.

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9 The Valley of the Kings is discussed in Brier and Hobbs 19-20; Clayton 101, 107, 110, 113-114, 126-127, 131, 134, 136, 140-141, 144-145, 155, 157-158, 159, 165, 167-169; Pemberton and Fletcher 48; Robins 122, 146-147, 162, 168, 170, 195-196.
(fig. 17) and enormous stores of beautifully crafted items. Despite the secrecy, all but a very few of these tombs were plundered in antiquity.

The tomb of King Tutankhamen, one of the few intact tombs found in Egypt, was discovered in 1922. It contained several pieces of furniture (fig. 18), among them a painted furniture chest, an X-shaped chair, and an armchair. The forms of these exquisite pieces can be found in the furniture throughout western history. (Harwood, May and Sherman 60-63)

The tombs, however, tell the story of life in Egypt not only for the royal family, but also for the common people. Scenes of craftsmen, farmers, carpenters, brewers, and others are depicted in small statues and three-dimensional dioramas (fig. 19) and carved and painted (fig. 20) onto the hewn stone walls, primarily in non-royal tombs.

The Mortuary Temple of King Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri

The best preserved and most splendid of the funerary temples from the early 18th Dynasty is the temple of the female king Hatshepsut at Deir-el-Bahari (fig. 21). The complex stood on three levels. The first two levels consisted of large open

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10 The mortuary temple of King Hatshepsut is discussed at Clayton 101, 102, 104-107; Hagen, 122-125, 172; Moffit, Fazio and Wodehouse 31-33; Pemberton and Fletcher 13, 50-55; Robins 124-130, 132, 134, 138, 170, 178, 213; Trachtenberg and Hyman 71.
walled courts with central ramps to the level above. The top level had a colonnaded court with rooms on either side. The main sanctuary was cut into the cliff at the back. Each level began with a pillared colonnade. When viewed from the front, the three colonnades rise grandly above one another in strong vertical lines, echoing the strong vertical lines of the cliff behind (Robins 126).

The complex was laid out on a straight axis and was remarkable less for its stone mass than for the emptiness of its expansive terraces, ramps, and courtyard and for its juxtaposition with the massive cliff behind it. The temple exemplified a shift from the self-contained monumental pyramids to open temples that permitted participation of the worshipers (Trachtenberg and Hyman 71). Marvin Trachtenberg and Isabelle Hyman, in their book *Architecture: From Prehistory to Postmodernity*, state:

> In its clarity of detail, elegance of proportions, and openness, lightness, and interplay with the landscape, Hatshepsut’s monument was the closest that Egypt came to the architecture of the Classical world. (71)

Columns on the second terrace colonnade are faceted, a form that suggests the flutes of later Doric columns (Moffit, Fazio and Wodehouse 32). The temple was richly decorated with relief carvings and included niches for sculpture. Trachtenberg and Hyman praise the Proto-Doric columns as “permeated by a sureness of proportions and crispness of line” (71).

![Figure 21. Mortuary temple of Hatshepsut, c. 1473-1458 B.C.E. (Moffit, Fazio and Wodehouse 31)](image-url)
Eighteenth Dynasty State Temples

The funerary temples at Giza and Deir-el-Bahari contained the architectural elements that would define the great stone state temples built during the 18th Dynasty—long approaches, massive guardian gates, colonnaded courtyards, mysterious shrines, and a strong linear procession from the entrance to the inner sanctum (Trachtenberg and Hyman 71).

These sacred temples, built to honor a particular god or gods, were accessible only to the priests, who conducted mysterious rituals in the hidden sanctuaries deep inside the temples. The temples were surrounded by open courtyards enclosed by high walls. The entrance to the temples was guarded by huge pylons or statues. (Robins 131)

The temple architecture symbolized the creation story. Hypostyle halls in front of the sanctuary represented reeds in the primordial swamp, the higher floor level in the sanctuary became the emerging earth, and the statue of the god was the creator. Temple decoration represented the relationship between the gods and the pharaoh. (Robins 131)

Most of these temples have disappeared, but remains of two of the grandest complexes remain—Karnak and Luxor.

The Great Temple of Amun at Karnak

One of the most magnificent of the surviving state temples is the temple of Amun at Karnak. By the 18th dynasty, Amun, the “Hidden One,” had become the supreme deity in Egypt. The cult of Amun was centered at Thebes and the Karnak site was the focus of both religious and civic life in the city.

Trachtenberg and Hyman assert that the antecedents of the Amun temple can be found in the 12th dynasty Temple of Khons (fig. 22).

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11 The entire temple complex at Karnak was built over several dynasties and is discussed in the cited references throughout. See in particular, Clayton 106-107, 109, 110, 122, 138, 142, 149, 156-157, 176, 185-186, 191, 193, 207; Hagen 17, 40, 116, 124, 193, 196, 200; Malek 9, 135, 138, 142-143, 151, 170, 277, 282, 286, 290, 291; Moffit, Fazio and Wodehouse 8, 32-33, 36, 122; Pemberton and Fletcher 13, 47-48, 50, 53, 56-57, 62-68, 74, 95-96, 120, 124, 137, 144, 146, 148, 169, 177-178, 199; Robins 101, 119, 131-135, 152, 177-178, 198-199, 214, 237; Trachtenberg and Hyman 71.
located within the Amun temple precinct at Karnak. The Temple of Khons greeted worshipers with an imposing pylon—the “prototype of all the facades of Western architecture” (71). The pylon was symmetrical and immense. Its walls were edged with torus moldings, topped with a cavetto cornice, and decorated with relief carvings and statues. Behind the pylon was a peristyle court with colonnades on the sides, then a hypostyle hall, and finally, the inner sanctum. (71)

The Great Temple of Amun, however, was the most stupendous of the late Egyptian temples. The vast temple complex (fig. 23) extended over about 1 square mile and was comprised of three precincts. The largest was the central precinct, dedicated to Amun, which included the Temple of Khons, the Temple of Ptah, and a sacred lake. To the north was the precinct of Montu, the Theban war god. To the south was the precinct of the goddess Mut.

The temple’s history is long. Begun in the Middle Kingdom, the complex was extended and embellished over the course of the next two millennia. The kings of the 18th dynasty invested enormous resources in this temple, gradually replacing the Middle Kingdom structures with new ones and refashioning the work of previous dynasties.

Originally the temple’s main axis was oriented east-west, facing the Nile and aligned with the sun’s path. In the New Kingdom, a new processional route on a north-south axis was created, linking the Amun temple with the precinct of Mut and the Temple of Luxor to the south.

The complex eventually had ten massive pylons interspersed with courtyards and an impressive hypostyle hall.

The hypostyle hall (figs. 24 and 25), built by the pharaoh Seti I and his son Ramesses II, is the largest hypostyle hall ever built, measuring

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Figure 23. Temple of Amun at Karnak (Pemberton and Fletcher 65).
340 feet by 170 feet. Its stone slab roof was supported by 134 columns in 16 rows. The columns in the outer seven rows were nine feet thick and 42 feet high; the central rows of columns were 12 feet in diameter and 69 feet high. The columns were carved with extensive hieroglyphs and topped by opened papyrus flowers on the two center rows and closed papyrus buds on the sides. The roof above was closed, but the roof of the central portion was higher than that of the sides, leaving a clerestory which allowed light to fall on the columns in such a way as to cause the closed-bud columns to appear to lift toward the light in the center.

The Luxor Temple

Five kilometers south of the Temple of Amun at Karnak lies the Amun temple at Luxor (fig. 26), built in the 18th and 19th dynasties. Luxor was the location of the annual Opet festival, where the divine nature of the king was annually renewed. Amenhotep III erected a grand sandstone temple on the site to accommodate the rituals associated by this occasion. The temple featured an open solar court for worship, a contrast to the hidden sanctuaries of previous temples. Imposing columns

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12 The temple at Luxor is discussed in Clayton 115, 117, 130, 206; Hagen 17, 50, 188, 191, 192; Pemberton and Fletcher 66-67, 79-80, 98, 144, 148, 209, 214, Robins 132, 135, 158, 178, 181.
with closed papyrus capitals surrounded the open court.

**The Tomb of Ramose at Sheikh Abd el-Qurna**

During the reign of Amenhotep III, his vizier, Ramose, built an tomb in western Thebes. The tomb includes a hall of columns with lovely shape and form (fig. 27) and exquisite paintings and low reliefs (fig. 28). The relief carvings show Ramose’s family members sitting in chairs with animal feet and raised legs, providing a glimpse of the furniture used by the nobles.

![Figure 27. Tomb of Ramose, c. 1350 B.C.E.](image)

![Figure 28. Relief, Tomb of Ramose](image)

**The Funerary Temples of Ramesses II & Ramesses III**

The 19th Dynasty continued in the tradition of grand mortuary temples, following the general temple model set down by the preceding dynasty. The funerary temples of Ramesses II (Ramesses the Great), now known as the Ramesseum (fig. 29), and Ramesses III (fig. 30) are of this type. Laid out on a single axis were pylons, colonnaded courtyards, porticos, hypostyle halls, and inner sanctuaries surrounded by small chapels and storerooms. The

![Figure 29. Ramesseum, c. 1225 B.C.E.](image)

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13 Ramesses II and Ramesses III are discussed in Hagen 41, 50, 51, 68, 74, 81, 84, 85, 95, 116, 120, 121, 144, 145, 152, 192, 201, 214, 228; Malek 10, 118, 188, 225, 226, 231, 232, 235-241, 245-247, 250-254, 341; Moffitt, Fazio and Wodehouse 36-37; Pemberton and Fletcher 144-155, 174-185; Robins 166, 170, 172, 177-178, 181, 183, 195, 196, 198, 213.
walls and columns were richly decorated with accounts of the kings’ exploits, particularly military campaigns, and scenes relating to the religious function of the temples.

Figure 30. Mortuary temple of Ramesses III at Medinet Habu, c. 1250 B.C.E. (Pemberton and Fletcher 178)

Abu-Simbel

Ramesses II also had two temples carved into the cliffs near the southern border of Egypt as a memorial to himself and his queen, Nefertari. The larger of the two, the Great Temple, is fronted by four seated statues of the pharaoh 60 feet high. The temple is oriented to catch the rays of the rising sun at the spring and autumn equinoxes, which pierce directly into the inner sanctuary over 200 feet inside the mountain. Inside the temple, in the first of two pillared halls, stand the temple’s huge cult statues (fig. 31).

The temple dedicated to Nefertari (fig. 32) is smaller, but also contains colossal royal statues in front of the temple pylons. The battered surface on the front of this temple was an uniquely Egyptian element.

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14 Abu-Simbel is discussed in Clayton 153-154, 196; Hagen 17, 50, 51, 227, 228, 229; Malek 10, 236-241; Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 36-37; Robins 178, 181.
Secular Architecture & Furnishings

The daily life of the people is more difficult to discern than that of the royal families. Although ordinary activities are depicted on tomb walls, only the royals and the highest officials could afford to build the monuments that created lasting evidence of their lives. Nevertheless, some evidence exists to indicate how ancient Egyptian houses and other secular buildings were constructed.

In general, the houses of the common people were built from perishable materials—primarily adobe and date palm logs—and so no longer exist today. Evidence from Egyptian art, however, reveals that Egyptian towns were crowded, with narrow streets of two- to four-story houses sharing common walls and laid out on a grid pattern. Larger houses had family suites, servants’ quarters, workshops for weaving, bread and beer making, a granary, and staircases (fig. 33). (Brier and Hobbs 143-146; Trachtenberg and Hyman 74)
To contend with the daily extremes of temperature in the dry desert climate, Egyptian houses had high walls, a single narrow entry door oriented toward the prevailing breeze, and few if any windows. Beyond the entry lay an enclosed garden courtyard with a pool and trees and shrubs for shade. A columned portico and apartments for the family lay beyond the courtyard. Columns were constructed of date palm logs or bundles of smaller trunks bound together, usually with a carved top depicting palm fronds or lotus buds. Doors were pivoted rather than hinged. (Brier and Hobbs 143-146)

In some houses, stairs led to the rooftop where poles might support an awning, vents allowed breezes into the house, and open slatted windows placed high in the walls created currents to exhaust hot air during the day. Bedrooms had raised alcoves for sleeping, adobe benches for sitting, niches in the wall for lamps, and latrines (fig. 34) with a channel running outside. Most houses also had stables for animals, silos to store grain, and often slaughterhouses, cellars, or workshops for weaving and baking. (Brier and Hobbs 143-146)

Egyptians had little furniture. Furniture was generally limited to chairs, low stools, simple wooden frame beds with lashed-twine mattresses and curved headrests, small round tables, boxes or baskets for clothing and jewelry, and small lamps (Brier and Hobbs 146).

The Tombworkers Ghetto

Because the tombs of the New Kingdom were built in utter secrecy in an attempt to conceal their locations from tomb robbers, the masons and other construction workers were housed in secluded and secured villages remote from other elements of Egyptian society. Villages were constructed especially for the tomb workers and their families. The remains of these ghettos gives us a picture of the conditions for this working class. One village, Deir el-Medinah (fig. 35), was built in a narrow, remote valley separated from the Valley of the Kings by a steep mountain path and guarded by police to keep the workers from leaving and revealing the secrets of the tombs. (Hagen 78-80). The village held about 70 one-story houses built on either side of narrow paths. This particular ghetto existed for about five centuries until about 1050 B.C.E. (Hagen 78).
The tombworkers often carved out small tombs for themselves in the cliffs near the village and beautifully decorated these tombs with pictures of their own families and lives (fig. 36).

The Planned City of Tell el-Amarna

Archeologists have found the site of one city that reveals not the norm, but a departure from the usual secular building conventions. The site is the planned city of Akhenaten, now called Tell el-Amarna, built about 1370 B.C.E. by King Akhenaten, a pharaoh of the 18th dynasty. Akhenaten rejected the polytheism that had guided Egypt since its beginnings, worshiping instead a single deity, the Aten, the sun disc. In about 1370 B.C.E., Akhenaten moved his royal entourage and capital to an uninhabited location midway between Memphis and Thebes. Akhenaten had a new city built on this site entirely to his vision. This city, Amarna, may be the first instance of urban planning (Trachtenberg and Hyman 74).

\[\text{15} \text{ The reign of Akhenaten and the city of Amarna are discussed in Brier and Hobbs 23-24, 56-57; Clayton 120-126; Malek 6, 7, 10, 138, 168, 174-95, 198, 225; Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 33-36; Pemberton and Fletcher 95-97; Robins 149-165; Trachtenberg and Hyman 74-75.}\]
The unwalled city was built linearly along the Nile, with a broad thoroughfare connecting its two ends, bordered by official buildings and administrative offices. The houses of the upper classes, which lay beyond the core, were built of mud-brick and arranged in open plan around courtyards and gardens, not crowded together as was commonly found in other parts of Egypt. One reconstruction of a block of buildings in the merchant district reveals houses strikingly modern in appearance (fig. 37). Housing for workers was laid out in a grid, with walls to control access to the camp and rooms arranged in series.

The art produced during the reign of Akhenaten is strikingly different from other Egyptian art. Akhenaten may have been disfigured, since all representations of him show a large protruding head, a long neck, narrow shoulders and waist, swollen buttocks, and short thin legs (fig. 38). It is also possible that these changes in human proportion were purposely designed to make a distinctive religious statement. The forms of other human figures in the art of this time reflect the same proportions.

Akhenaten allowed, or perhaps even encouraged, his artisans a freedom of creativity and expressiveness that broke with tradition. Art from this period is more naturalistic and less bound by convention.

Whether this artistic freedom produced any changes in furniture is unclear, but seating depicted in relief carvings from the period (fig. 38) appear to have straight legs that lack the curvature, animal feet, and cylindrical drum bases of earlier chairs and a triangular bracing system rather than the straight and X-shaped bracing seen in chairs in other dynasties (See fig. 18).

Akhnaten’s palace layout shows the same general
arrangement as was found in the houses of the common people—a narrow entrance leading into courtyards and a pool, surrounded by rooms for family members, workshops, and animals stalls (fig. 39).

The Third Intermediary Period & The Late Period

Following the reign of Ramesses III, Egypt went into another decline, accompanied by an increase in the power of the priests, a weakening of the central royal authority, and an eventual breakdown of social order (Clayton 175). This period, from 1069 B.C.E. to 525 B.C.E., is called the Third Intermediary Period and later, from 525 to 332 B.C.E., the Late Period. By this time, much of the land was in private rather than royal ownership and the royal coffers were essentially empty.

A succession of kings—Dynasties 21-31—ruled Egypt, but none was able to restore stability to the country. Very little royal building occurred during the Third Intermediate Period. (Clayton 173; Pemberton and Fletcher 196-201)

By this time, other civilizations in the Mediterranean had formed and gained considerable power. The Libyans, the Nubians, the Assyrians, and the Persians all occupied and ruled Egypt at various times during this period (Clayton 189; Pemberton and Fletcher 202-206). The Libyans, Nubians, and Assyrians occupied Egypt with relative benevolence for short periods, but the Persians, under the leadership of Cambyses, robbed the Egyptian treasuries, killed sacred animals, and enslaved the people with taxes, greatly weakening the country (Clayton 193, 199, 205). Nevertheless, Egyptian kings still sat on the throne during most of this period.

The kings of the Late Period were the last Egyptian pharaohs, however. After the arrival of the Greeks in 332 B.C.E, no Egyptian pharaoh would ever rule Egypt again (Pemberton and Fletcher 231).

The Ptolemaic & Roman Periods

The Macedonian born Alexander the Great entered Egypt in 332 B.C.E., driving out the occupying Persians. Alexander treated Egypt well and ordered repairs to be made to the temples, and the Egyptians regarded him as their savior (Clayton 206). He built a new Greek city at Alexandria in the Nile Delta and established Greek rule in Egypt. Although the arrival of the Greeks marked the end of
Egyptian rule in Egypt, the Greeks, and later the Romans, continued to build temples to the gods in the Egyptian tradition, some of which remain today.

After Alexander’s death nine years later, the government of Egypt passed to Ptolemy I, Alexander’s friend and general. Ptolemy I ruled as a pharaoh, upholding the traditions of Egypt, encouraging the study of Egyptian history and religion, and cultivating the support of temple priests (Clayton 209). Ptolemy I and his Greek successors undertook improvements to the temples of the New Kingdom. Greek became the official language of Egypt (Clayton 210-211).

**The Temples of the Ptolemaic Period**

In 237 B.C.E., Ptolemy III, the third of the Greek rulers of Egypt, began building a great temple at Edfu dedicated to the god Horus (fig. 40). The structure was completed in 231 B.C.E. by his son Ptolemy IV and opened in 142 B.C.E. by Ptolemy VIII. This temple is the best preserved of Egyptian temples (Clayton 215) and follows traditional Egyptian temple layout (Robins 235). It has a massive pylon en-scripted with images of the pharaoh making offerings to gods. Behind the pylon lies an open courtyard surrounded by columns decorated with scenes of the deities. The inner shrine (fig. 41) is situated at the end of a long path through the temple (Hagen 197).

On the island of Philae near the first Nile cataract, Ptolemy II started the construction of a temple dedicated to Isis (fig. 42). The temple complex was completed in Roman times. After Karnak, this complex was the most densely populated, with shrines, small temples, and chapels. The island was a center for pilgrims and continued to be used into the sixth century A.D. (Malek 320)

The Greeks built the Temple of Hathor at Dendera (fig. 43). This sandstone temple is one of the few temples not oriented on an actual east-west path. Because it is situated in an area where the Nile makes a wide bend, the temple is oriented “river east” but astronomically north (Malek 340). The columns at
Dendera display three registers of decoration and are topped by heads of the goddess and square capitals (Pemberton and Fletcher 231).

**The Romans**

Although the Greeks tried to restore Egypt’s greatness, they were unable to do so in the face of the rising power of a new Mediterranean civilization, the Romans. The Greeks formed alliances with the Romans Julius Caesar and Mark Anthony, but Rome eventually defeated the Ptolemaic forces and captured Alexandria in 30 B.C.E., making Egypt a Roman province. (Clayton 217)

The Roman Emperors of Egypt build a temple to the creator god Khnum at Esna (fig. 44) using standard Egyptian forms. This temple may be the last substantial temple structure still existing in Egypt. Its façade has six columns with beautiful capitals connected by intercolumnal walls about half the height of the columns. The hypostyle hall contains 18 columns. (Malek 250)

Roman Egypt was prosperous and new cities were founded, with most buildings erected of classic Roman architecture. The Romans imposed Christianity on Egypt and closed most of the Egyptian temples (Hagen 235), converted them to Christian churches, or destroyed them (Pemberton and Fletcher 214). With the loss of their religion and the upset of the social order by continuous foreign rule, two of the three pillars of Egypt’s civilization—religion and the social hierarchy—were gone and Egypt’s
ancient traditions no longer endured. Egypt became a tourist center, but never again a strong power (Clayton 217; Pemberton and Fletcher 212).

However, the Romans took many of Egypt’s monuments and works of art back to Rome and Roman artists imitated them, passing down many of Egypt’s architectural, engineering, and artistic achievements. During various times in the history of the western world, including the European Renaissance, the age of Napoleon, the decodifying of the hieroglyphic script in 1822, and the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1922, interest in Egypt again flourished, demonstrating that the greatness of ancient Egypt has not been forgotten and is likely to continue. (Malek 13)

**Pattern & Motif**

Egyptian tomb paintings, pottery, jewelry, tools, and temple decoration contain an amazing display of pattern and motif. Natural elements such as water, the sun, and plants deeply influenced Egyptian art and figured heavily in the development of Egyptian writing, hieroglyphs and art (Harwood, May and
Sherman 52-53).

As early as 2450 B.C.E., sophisticated animal and plant patterns appeared on temple walls (fig. 45). Columns in temples were modeled after lotus or papyrus plants (see figs. 11, 15, 25, and 26). Wine jars contained floral patterns that appear similar to architectural dart forms (fig. 46).

Geometric patterns also played an important part in Egyptian decorative arts. A detail from the painted ceiling in the tomb of the scribe of the treasury of the temple of Amun, Neferonpet Kenro, at Khokha on the west bank at Thebes, shows repeated circular lotus patterns, segmented stripes, and smaller dentil-like details (fig. 47). The wall and ceiling of the tomb of Nefertari, the wife of Ramses II, reveal elegant star patterns, a course reminiscent of a triglyph and metope frieze, vertical stripes, and a lovely zigzag/flower pattern (fig. 48).

One of the most splendid painted burial chambers is that of Sennefer, mayor of Thebes under Amenhotep II. The wall and ceiling paintings in this tomb are magnificent, displaying intricate geometric zigzags, checkerboards, barred borders, linear elements, and plant forms (fig. 49). Hieroglyphs and paintings depict everyday life of the noble class.

The motifs found in these tombs and other structures built in ancient Egypt, both those based on the natural elements of the Egyptian environment and those derived from geometry, appear again and again in architecture and interiors, particularly during the several Egyptian Revival periods. (Harwood, May and Sherman 59).
Egyptian Revival

Egyptian design became popular during the period 1820-1850 after Napoleon’s travels to Egypt, again in the 1920s after the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamen, and briefly in the 1990s, at the time the Tutankhamen exhibit was touring the United States.

Buildings & Monuments

This Egyptian Revival style was incorporated into a number of buildings, particularly those whose purpose lent itself to monumentality (Moffett, Fazio and Wodehouse 419). The style was characterized by the use of sloping or battered walls, rope-like moldings, bundled shafts, lotus flower capitals, smooth ashlar finishes, deep cavetto cornices, and flat rooftops. Motifs included the ankh, scarab, lotus, papyrus, sphinx, winged-eye falcon, sun disc, cobra heads, and palm leaf. Egyptian forms were used in churches (fig. 50), fraternal organizations (fig. 51), movie theatres (figs. 52 and 53), hospitals (fig. 54), prisons (fig. 55), tombs (figs. 56 and 57), municipal structures (fig. 58), museums (figs. 59 and 60), hotels (fig. 61), and exhibitions (fig. 62). (See Harwood, May and Sherman 59)

Figure 50. First Presbyterian Church, Nashville, TN, 1848-1851, William Strickland
Columns with lotiform capitals, bright earth-tone colors, winged falcon and other motifs
Figure 51. Masonic Temple, Charlotte, NC, 1914, Willard G. Rogers and Charles C. Hook
Battered walls, dressed stone, closed-bud capitals, pylons

Figure 52. Ada Theatre, 700 Main Street, Boise, ID, 1927, Tourtellotte & Hummel
Inscriptions on walls and open lotiform columns, pharonic statues

Figure 53. Egyptian Theater, 157 Bala Avenue, Bala Cynwyd, PA, 1927, Hoffman & Henon
Closed lotiform capitals, falcon, painted cornice, dressed stone
Figure 54. Egyptian Building, 1301 E. Marshall Street, Virginia Commonwealth University (originally the Medical College of Virginia), Richmond, VA, 1845, Thomas S. Stewart
Battered walls, pylon, reeded columns with open lotiform capitals.

Figure 55. New York Halls of Justice ("The Tombs") Prison, New York, NY, 1838, John Poppel
Lotiform columns, battered walls, massive stone architecture

Figure 56. Good Mausoleum, Forest Lawn Cemetery, Buffalo, NY, 1922
Sun disc, lotiform capitals, carved columns
Figure 57. Mt. Auburn Cemetery, Cambridge, MA, 1831/1842, J. Bigelow
Reeded columns with closed-bud capitals, battered walls, pyramid shape roof

Figure 58. Electric Railway System service building, San Diego, CA, 1923
Lotiform capitals, pilasters, deep cavetto cornice

Figure 59. Layton Art Gallery, Milwaukee, WI, 1888, W.J. & G.A. Audsley
Egyptian motifs, column forms
Figure 60. Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE, 1931, John and Alan McDonald
Battered walls, massive stone construction

Figure 61. Luxor Hotel, Las Vegas, NV, 1993, Veldon Simpson Architect, Inc.
Sphinx, pyramid shaped hotel building

Figure 62. Crawston Ostrich Farm, Panama-California Exposition. Balboa Park, CA, 1915
Pyramid shaped structure, sphinxes, columns painted with Egyptian figures, lotiform capitals
Furniture

During each Egyptian revival period, furniture makers produced chairs, settees, and tables inspired by the Egyptian X-chairs and the pharaohs’ throne chairs (figs. 63-68). Chairs made in Rome during the Roman Empire and the 15th and 16th century Italian renaissance made use of the Egyptian X shape, as did the Bauhaus Barcelona chair in the early 20th century. English Regency armchairs produced in the early 19th century resembled the royal chairs of Egypt (Harwood, May and Sherman 62-63). Some furniture manufacturers incorporate Egyptian motifs such as sphinx heads into their designs without much other reference to actual Egyptian furniture structure, yet call their pieces “Egyptian Revival” (fig. 69). Nevertheless, the shapes and motifs of Egyptian furniture have endured beyond Egyptian civilization.

Figure 63. French folding stools, 1736, Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené
X-shape construction

Figure 64. Curule settee, New York City, 1810-15, Mable Brady Garvan collection
X-shape construction, animal feet, straight leg bases
Figure 65. Savonarola chair, c.1880
X-shaped base, carved back animal motifs

Figure 66. Barcelona chair, 1927, Mies van der Rohe
X-shape construction

Figure 67. Couch in the form of an Egyptian boat with crocodile feet, 1806
Figure 70. Regency settee
Motifs

Figure 68. Egyptian Revival chair, 1870, Brooklyn Museum, rosewood, burl walnut, gilt and patinated metal mounts, original upholstery
Animal feet, pharonic heads on armrests, Egyptian motifs

Figure 69. Modern Egyptian-style chair, Design Toscano
Sphinx heads on armrests
Conclusion

Egyptian civilization was a civilization of firsts and of lasts.

It was the first civilization to free itself from the constraints of stone age tools and rudimentary post-and-lintel construction. Viewed from the perspective of the ancient world, its leap from Neolithic dwellings to the Step Pyramid of Saqqara in a few generations is astonishing.

It was the first civilization to build massive structures in dressed stone, with a precision of stone cutting and elegance unseen anywhere else in the ancient world and, arguably, unmatched in modern times.

It was the first civilization to devise complex engineering solutions to the problems presented by its megalithic projects. That a civilization so recently emerged from primitive life could create the Great Pyramid’s nearly perfect geometry is astounding.

It was the first civilization to use shaped columns as roof supports, developing a form that some have termed “proto-Doric.” It was the first to create clerestory windows to introduce light into and release heat from its structures and the first to use corbeled roof construction.

It introduced motifs and patterns of nature and geometry that have been adopted and repeated throughout western culture.

It was the first civilization with a recorded history. Egyptian hieroglyphic writing was one of the earliest written languages and the tradition of recording exploits and daily life on the walls of tombs and temples and on stela, freestanding stones used to record announcements, has ensured that much of this ancient culture remains available for study today.

The ancient Egyptian culture was in many ways a civilization of lasts as well. No other civilization has produced such monumental works of such imposing size and volume of stone. No other culture has endured so long. No other civilization has the power to create such a sense of awe and wonder as does ancient Egypt.

Egypt’s accomplishments rise above mere firsts and lasts, however, for Egyptian structures and artistic expressions exist not only in height, width, and depth, but also in the fourth dimension of time. The rhythms of daily life, religion, and culture were timeless to the ancient Egyptians. Modern perception of Egypt’s
heritage is timeless as well, not only for the durability of its ancient structures, but for the eternalness of its historic influence.

In many ways, the history of Egypt, from its beginnings through the grand achievements of its dynasties to its ultimate demise with the rise of other Mediterranean civilizations, ultimately leads back to where it began—to the timeless Nile and its endlessly repeating cycles of life and death, inundation and growth. As with the Nile, the essence of ancient Egyptian civilization and its architecture is this timelessness, this continuity of infinite beginnings. Just as the Nile’s unfailing rhythms endure, ancient Egyptian civilization endured for four millennia with little variation, and the monumental structures that so eloquently expressed the Egyptians’ hopes for immortality were built to last for all time.

Two thousand years after the decline of the ancient Egyptian civilization, despite our own technological achievements, we are still amazed by the power and grandeur of ancient Egypt’s tombs and temples and intrigued by ancient Egypt’s remarkably consistent and durable society. Only the ruins of this incredible civilization remain, but the Nile, the mother of the ancient Egyptian world, continues to flow.
Works Cited


