

Week 1 The influence of Egyptian art



This item contains selected online content. It is for use alongside, not as a replacement for the module website, which is the primary study format and contains activities and resources that cannot be replicated in the printed versions.

About this free course

This content is taken from *Art and life in ancient Egypt*, which was originally published as an open educational resource on the OpenLearn website. This content may include video, images and interactive content that may not be optimised for your device. To view the original version of this content please go to OpenLearn – <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/>.

This version of the content may include video, images and interactive content that may not be optimised for your device.

You can experience this free course as it was originally designed on OpenLearn, the home of free learning from The Open University –

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/art-and-life-ancient-egypt/content-section-overview>

There you'll also be able to track your progress via your activity record, which you can use to demonstrate your learning.

Copyright © 2018 The Open University

Intellectual property

Unless otherwise stated, this resource is released under the terms of the Creative Commons Licence v4.0 http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/deed.en_GB. Within that The Open University interprets this licence in the following way:

www.open.edu/openlearn/about-openlearn/frequently-asked-questions-on-openlearn. Copyright and rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons Licence are retained or controlled by The Open University. Please read the full text before using any of the content.

We believe the primary barrier to accessing high-quality educational experiences is cost, which is why we aim to publish as much free content as possible under an open licence. If it proves difficult to release content under our preferred Creative Commons licence (e.g. because we can't afford or gain the clearances or find suitable alternatives), we will still release the materials for free under a personal end-user licence.

This is because the learning experience will always be the same high quality offering and that should always be seen as positive – even if at times the licensing is different to Creative Commons.

When using the content you must attribute us (The Open University) (the OU) and any identified author in accordance with the terms of the Creative Commons Licence.

The Acknowledgements section is used to list, amongst other things, third party (Proprietary), licensed content which is not subject to Creative Commons licensing. Proprietary content must be used (retained) intact and in context to the content at all times.

The Acknowledgements section is also used to bring to your attention any other Special Restrictions which may apply to the content. For example there may be times when the Creative Commons Non-Commercial Sharealike licence does not apply to any of the content even if owned by us (The Open University). In these instances, unless stated otherwise, the content may be used for personal and non-commercial use.

We have also identified as Proprietary other material included in the content which is not subject to Creative Commons Licence. These are OU logos, trading names and may extend to certain photographic and video images and sound recordings and any other material as may be brought to your attention.

Unauthorised use of any of the content may constitute a breach of the terms and conditions and/or intellectual property laws.

We reserve the right to alter, amend or bring to an end any terms and conditions provided here without notice.

All rights falling outside the terms of the Creative Commons licence are retained or controlled by The Open University.

Head of Intellectual Property, The Open University

Contents

Introduction	5
1 European exploration of Egypt	6
2 The lens of 'Orientalism'	8
2.1 Gustave Flaubert – novelist	8
2.2 Amelia Edwards – traveller	10
2.3 Howard Carter – archaeologist	11
3 West versus East	13
3.1 The views of G.W.F. Hegel	13
4 Orientalism and European art	17
4.1 Inspiring the Victorians	19
5 The avant-garde and Paul Gauguin	22
5.1 Paul Gauguin	22
6 Twentieth-century popular culture	25
7 Beyond the myths	26
Summary	27
References	27
Acknowledgements	27

Introduction

It is hard to imagine anyone with an interest in human history and human culture who has not been fascinated by ancient Egypt. Books and films on Egypt abound, ranging from painstaking science to wild fantasy, and the legacy of Egypt can be felt in fields as diverse as jewellery, architecture (Figure 1) and film.



Figure 1 Carlton cinema, Islington, London 1930

Courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)

Yet there is a kind of instability to this fame. On the one hand there is a profound body of knowledge about Egyptian society, its religion, its art, even the conditions of daily life. But most popular culture revolves around clichés about mummies, pyramids, the tomb of Tutankhamun (Figure 2), and not much more.



Figure 2 Tutankhamun cereal packet and cut-price travel advertisement

Courtesy of Kellogg's

In the first week of this course about art and life in ancient Egypt, you will begin with a brief look at European exploration of Egypt and its history. You will then examine how Egyptian art has influenced the various phases of European art.

1 European exploration of Egypt

From a European viewpoint, knowledge of Egypt is strikingly recent. Educated Europeans have been steeped in a notion of the 'classical', of the cultures of ancient Rome and Greece, since the very idea of a modern culture emerged in the early Renaissance. But an understanding of Egypt, as opposed to a cluster of myths and fantasies, does not really begin to emerge until the early nineteenth century, when the long-dead script was finally deciphered, and Egypt was visited by increasing numbers of European travellers.

One of the most important developments was the appearance, following the Napoleonic invasion of 1798–9, of the massive French publication *Description de l'Egypte*, initially in ten volumes accompanied by 900 engraved illustrations, between 1809 and 1828. These brought a comprehensive and accurate visual survey of Egyptian temples, tombs and their sculpted and painted decorations before the European public for the first time.

A second key development was the Egyptian hieroglyphic script being deciphered by the French scholar and linguist Jean-Francois Champollion (Figure 3). This translation was, of course, a long process rather than a single event, but Champollion's first lecture about his breakthrough, which had happened on 14 September, was given to the French Academy on 27 September 1822.



Figure 3 Leon Gogniet, *Portrait of Jean-Francois Champollion*, 1831, oil on canvas, 74 x

60 cm. Louvre, Paris

Photo: Lauros/Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library

2 The lens of 'Orientalism'

An important consequence of the relatively late 'discovery' of ancient Egypt by educated Europeans is that the very relation of Egypt to our own world remains problematic. This is as true of our own day, tensioned and fissured by the oil-driven conflicts of the wider 'middle East', as it was of the early nineteenth century: the reason Napoleon was there in the first place was to try and disrupt British supply lines to India. Egypt was opened up to Western eyes not merely because of the intrinsic interest of its culture and civilisation but because of its strategic promise for modern imperialists. Because of its geography, no less than its history, Egypt played and plays an ambiguous role in the European imagination.

The relationship of Egyptian art and culture to the 'Western' tradition continues to be a subject of debate. For a long time, the conventional view was that Egypt stood outside the Western canon, and the literature is studded with references that situate Egypt within the discourse of 'Orientalism'.

To help you understand some of the main components of 'Orientalism' sections 2.1–2.3 each contain an activity that consists of reading a number of short quotes by an author, followed by a question.

More recently, however, as the identity of the Western tradition itself has been scrutinised, the boundaries have come to seem less clear-cut. This is not to say that Egypt has been in any simple way incorporated into the Western canon. The point is more complex than that and has more profound consequences.

Due to a mixture of forces partly intellectual, partly political, adding up to the constellation inadequately labelled 'globalisation', the Western canon itself has, so to speak, been 'hybridised'. In what is surely one of the few unqualified positives of the contemporary situation, the canon has been opened up to acknowledge influences upon the European tradition, including its fountainhead Greece, from the ancient near East, Africa and elsewhere.

The early-twentieth-century critic Roger Fry once described the post-Renaissance European tradition before the advent of modernism as a 'right little, tight little, round little world'. No more. Fry was talking about the discovery of 'non-Western' art by the avant-garde of Gauguin, Picasso and others. That avant-garde has now itself been swallowed up and rendered historical by changes on a scale that would have given Fry pause. Rereading, recalibrating, sometimes rejecting, sometimes reframing, inherited canons of every stripe has come to seem not merely fascinating, but imperative. There is no paradox in the claim that thinking about ancient Egyptian art and culture is one element of an extensive, and resolutely contemporary, endeavour.

2.1 Gustave Flaubert – novelist

The French novelist Gustave Flaubert famously travelled with the writer Maxime du Camp through Egypt and the Holy Land in 1849. Modern critical scholars, notably Edward Said, have come to regard Flaubert's account of his travels as a *locus classicus* of Orientalism.

Activity 1 Gustave Flaubert – novelist

Read the quotations below and then answer this question:

What would you pick out as key features of the attitude indicated by these quotations?

When we were two hours out from the coast of Egypt I went into the bow with the chief quartermaster and saw the seraglio of Abbas Pasha like a black dome on the blue of the Mediterranean. The sun was beating down on it. I had my first sight of the Orient through, or rather in, a glowing light that was like melted silver on the sea.

(p. 28)

So here we are in Egypt, 'land of the Pharaohs, land of the Ptolemies, land of Cleopatra' (as sublime stylists put it). Here we are and here we are living ... What can I say about it all? ... each detail reaches out to grip you; it pinches you, and the more you concentrate on it the less you grasp the whole. Then gradually all this becomes harmonious and the pieces fall into place of themselves. But the first days, by God, it is such a bewildering chaos of colours that your poor imagination is dazzled ... There is much jostling and arguing and fighting and rolling on the ground ... Semitic syllables crack the air like whiplashes. You brush against all the costumes of the Orient.

(pp. 79–80)

As soon as I landed at Alexandria I saw before me, alive, the anatomy of the Egyptian sculptures: the high shoulders, long torsos, thin legs, etc. The dances that we have performed for us are of too hieratic a character not to have come from the dances of the old Orient, which is always young because nothing changes. Here the Bible is a picture of life today.

(p. 81)

We rise at dawn; drawn up on the beach are four slave-traders' boats. The slaves come ashore and walk in groups of fifteen to twenty, each led by two men. When I am on my camel, Hadji-Ismael runs up to give me a handshake. The man on the ground raising his arm to shake the hand of a man mounted on his camel, or to give him something, is one of the most beautiful gestures of the Orient; especially at the moment of departure there is something solemn and sad about it.

(pp. 180–1)

Source: Gustave Flaubert (1996 [1972]) *Flaubert in Egypt. A Sensibility on Tour* (trans. and ed. Francis Steegmuller), Penguin Classics, London.

Discussion

The first is a sense of strangeness and exoticism; the 'other' of what the writer has hitherto experienced in Europe. Flaubert is renowned for finding the heart of the matter in an apparently insignificant detail. Here it is the raised arm at a moment of departure, which somehow crystallises both the teeming medley of sensations on the one hand, and the stasis and melancholy on the other, which make up Flaubert's imaginative sense of the Orient. For him, ancient Egypt seems to be on a continuum with his contemporary present: in his Orient, nothing changes, except perhaps, to decline.

2.2 Amelia Edwards – traveller

Amelia Edwards was a late nineteenth-century English traveller to Egypt. She wrote a lively account of her journey up the Nile in 1874 (first published in 1877). As a result of her growing interest in the place, she went on to found the Egypt Exploration Society and to fund a Chair in Egyptology at London University.

Activity 2 Amelia Edwards – traveller

Read the quotations below and then answer this question:

What would you pick out as key features of Amelia Edwards' Orientalism?

We intended of course to go up the Nile; and had anyone ventured to inquire in so many words what brought us to Egypt, we should have replied: 'stress of weather'. For in simple truth we had drifted hither by accident, with no excuse of health or business or any serious object whatever; and had just taken refuge in Egypt as one might turn aside into the Burlington Arcade or the Passage des Panoramas – to get out of the rain ... Here then, without definite plans, outfit, or any kind of Oriental experience, behold us arrived in Cairo on the 29th of November 1873.

(pp. 2–3)

These half buried pylons, this solitary obelisk, those giant heads rising in ghastly resurrection before the gates of the Temple, were magnificent still. But it was the magnificence of a splendid prologue to a poem of which only garbled fragments remain. Beyond that entrance lay a smoky, filthy, intricate labyrinth of lanes and passages. Mud hovels, mud pigeon-towers, mud yards and a mud mosque ... [A]ll the sordid routine of Arab life was going on, amid winding alleys that masked the colonnades and defaced the inscriptions of the Pharaohs.

(p. 141)

I shall not soon forget an Abyssinian caravan which we met one day coming out from Mahatta. It consisted of seventy camels laden with elephant tusks ... Beside each shambling beast strode a bare-footed Nubian. Following these, on the back of a gigantic camel, came a hunting leopard in a wooden cage, and a wild cat in a basket. Last of all marched a coal-black Abyssinian nearly seven feet in height, magnificently shawled and turbaned, with a huge scimitar dangling by his side ... Anything more picturesque than this procession, with the dust driving before it in clouds, and children following it out of the village, it would be difficult to conceive. One longed for Gérôme to paint it on the spot.

(p. 205)

Source: Amelia B. Edwards (1891 [1877]) *A Thousand Miles Up The Nile*, 2nd edn, George Routledge and Sons, London..

Discussion

There is the same sense of exoticism we find in Flaubert (albeit divested of the overtly sexual dimension which runs through the French writer's account). In these extracts though, Edwards is more inclined to separate the grandeur of ancient Egypt from contemporary life than to assimilate the two. It is also interesting that she views Egypt very much in the terms provided by nineteenth-century Orientalist visual art. Her description of the temple of ancient Thebes at Luxor is couched in the mode of the paintings of David Roberts, while the camel caravan encountered on her journey to Abu Simbel instantly conjures up the work of the French Orientalist painter Jean-Leon Gérôme.

2.3 Howard Carter – archaeologist

The archaeologist Howard Carter was the discoverer of the tomb of Tutankhamun. In his account of the 1922 excavation, he frequently draws parallels between the tastes and habits of the ancient Egyptians and a more modern 'Orient'.

Activity 3 Howard Carter – archaeologist

Read the quotations below and then answer this question:

What do you pick out as significant features of Carter's Orient?

It was also essential to a mummy's well-being that it should be fully equipped against every need, and, in the case of a luxurious and display-loving Oriental monarch, this would naturally involve a lavish use of gold and other treasure ... [L]ove of ostentation was ingrained in every Egyptian monarch and in his tomb more than anywhere else he was accustomed to display it.

(pp. 21–2)

Had it not been for the evidence of plundering afforded by the tunnel and the re-sealed doorways, one might have imagined at first view that there never had been any plundering, and that the confusion was due to Oriental carelessness at the time of the funeral.

(p. 83)

That he [i.e. Tutankhamun] took the field of war in person, especially at his age, is improbable, but of such polite fiction, kings and conquerors in the Oriental world have always been singularly tolerant.

(p. 128)

Valuable woods and ivory, natural stones, faience, glass and metals were employed by the ancient Egyptians for the manufacture and decoration of their caskets. Throughout the East, through all ages, these highly ornamental boxes were used to hold the more valuable and personal belongings – trinkets and clothes – or as repositories for cosmetics in costly vessels. In fact to this day, the pride of the fellah is the gaudily bespangled

and more than often trumpery box, in which he keeps his most treasured articles.

(p. 247)

Source: Howard Carter, *The Tomb of Tutankhamun*, (London, 1923–33), Griffith Institute, Oxford/Little Books Ltd, London (2007 facsimile reprint edition).

Discussion

Once again, Carter assimilates ancient and modern, under the rubric of an unchanging Orient. In fact it is as if he is inclined to read the past in the light of the present. His sense of the gaudiness, even the immaturity, of contemporary non-European life, his motif of 'luxury' and 'carelessness' – not to mention the ingrained sense of superiority embedded in the descriptions of the 'fellah' – is mapped back onto the grave goods and burial practices of the Eighteenth Dynasty.

3 West versus East

The culture and art of ancient Egypt had an immediate and lasting impact in Europe. As already mentioned, the influence extended from clothing, furniture and jewellery all the way through to architecture. In the twentieth century this influence carried on in film.

In the area of the so-called 'fine arts', the influence of Egypt was felt in two broad ways. Artists working in the academic tradition in both England and France (indeed in continental Europe as a whole) tended to work within the discourse of 'Orientalism'.

According to the twentieth-century writer and critic, Edward Said, this was an image of 'the East', constructed by the West as its 'Other'. This image was composed of both positive and negative aspects (luxury, sensuality, indolence, unchangingness, for example), the sum of which was to confirm a Western sense of superiority and progress.

As critics and historians towards the end of the twentieth century became concerned to redescribe the relation of the Western canon of art to the art of other cultures, the early nineteenth-century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel came in for frequent criticism.

Many, including the historian of Chinese art Craig Clunas and the modern artist Rasheed Araeen, have identified him as the fountainhead of the assumption, in Clunas' words, of 'the absolute contrast between a dynamic forward-moving "West" and a static unchanging "East"'.

There is undoubtedly something to be said for this. But we would do equally well to realise how radically, and how quickly, Hegel was seeking to open up the classical canon that preceded him. Hegel gave his lectures in the 1820s, in effect at the very moment when Egyptian art and the Egyptian language were being brought within the purview of European scholarship. Hegel's innovation in spreading his net to include an aesthetics for Egypt, India and elsewhere, as well as Greece, deserves at least as much praise as the terms in which he constructed his account have laid him open to subsequent criticism.

Perhaps it would be fairer to acknowledge that Hegel was part of a Eurocentric discourse on the 'Orient' rather than its main progenitor. Hegel was in part responding to, and not merely formulating, a widespread cluster of conceptions about other cultures that were themselves symptomatic of the dawning age of Empire (with roots, of course, going back into the Renaissance, if not before: the 'Pharaoh' of the Bible itself is a sort of prototype of the 'oriental despot').

The next section contains an activity on some views of the nineteenth-century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel.

3.1 The views of G.W.F. Hegel

The early nineteenth-century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel lectured on the philosophy of art during the 1820s. His arguments have been profoundly influential on the subsequent development of the history of art. In the late twentieth century they also increasingly became the butt of criticism aiming to redress the frequent bias of Western art history against the art of the rest of the world: a tendency on the part of Western historians and critics to use the Western canon of art as a yardstick with which to judge the value of all art worldwide.

It goes without saying that Hegel's thought is complex and nuanced. These four brief quotations are intended to offer only a glimpse of his philosophical position and a slightly more accessible fragment of his discussion, following on from that basic position, of the art of ancient Egypt.

Hegel divided the history of world art into three phases: Symbolic (by which he meant a range of non-Western or pre-Greek arts); Classical (the art of classical Greece and Rome); Romantic (the Christian art of the modern period, i.e the Renaissance and after). It has been above all this progressivist model of the development of artistic styles that has underpinned the traditional assumption, widespread in the West, of the superiority of Western art over the art of other cultures.

Activity 4 The views of G.W.F. Hegel

Read through the quotations and then put the substance of Hegel's reservations about Egyptian art into your own words.

The Idea of the Beauty of Art or the Ideal We must ... recall again that the Idea as the beauty of art is not the Idea as such ... but the Idea as shaped forward into reality ... There is here expressed the demand that the Idea and its configuration as a concrete reality shall be made completely adequate to one another. Taken thus, the Idea as reality, shaped in accordance with the Concept of the Idea, is the Ideal.

In this regard it may be remarked ... that the defectiveness of a work of art is not always to be regarded as due to the artist's lack of skill; on the contrary, defectiveness of form results from defectiveness of content. So for example, the Chinese, Indians and Egyptians, in their artistic shapes, images of gods, and idols, never get beyond formlessness or a bad and untrue definiteness of form. They could not master true beauty because their mythological ideas, the content and thought of their works of art, were still indeterminate, or determined badly, and so did not consist of the content which is absolute in itself ... Only in the highest art are Idea and presentation truly in conformity with one another, in the sense that the shape given to the Idea is in itself the absolutely true shape, because the content of the Idea which that shape expresses is itself the true and genuine content.

(pp. 73–5)

When we first enter the world of the old-Persian, Indian, Egyptian shapes and productions, our footing is not really secure; we feel that we are wandering amongst problems; in themselves alone these productions say nothing to us; they do not please us or satisfy us by their immediate appearance, but by themselves as they encourage us to advance beyond them to their meaning which is something wider and deeper than they are.

In such incongruity between meaning and the immediate artistic expression, how much is to be ascribed to the deficiency of art, the turbidity of imagination itself and its lack of ideas? Or how much of it has the character it has because the clearer and more accurate configuration was incapable by itself of expressing the deeper meaning, and because the fantastic and grotesque is just used instead on behalf of a more far-reaching idea?

(pp. 308–9)

In Egypt, on the whole, almost every shape is a symbol and hieroglyph not signifying itself but hinting at another thing with which it has affinity and therefore relationship ... Especially remarkable are those colossal statues of Memnon which, resting in themselves, motionless, the arms glued to the body, the feet firmly fixed together, numb, stiff and lifeless, are set up facing the sun in order to await its ray to touch them and give them soul and sound ... Taken as symbols, the meaning to be ascribed to these colossi is that they do not have the spiritual soul freely in themselves and therefore, instead of being able to draw animation from within, from what bears proportion and beauty in itself, they require for it light from without ... The inner life of the human form is still dumb in Egypt.

[In certain other Egyptian works, figures of Osiris] the human bodily form acquires a different formation and therefore already reveals the struggle to rise upward to the inner and spiritual life; but this effort here attains its proper aim, the freedom of spirit in itself, in only a defective way. The shapes remain colossal, serious, petrified; legs without freedom and serene distinctness, arms and head closely and firmly affixed to the rest of the body, without grace and living movement. The art of cutting the arms and feet free and giving movement to the body is ascribed to Daedalus first of all.

(pp. 357–60)

The works of Egyptian art in their mysterious symbolism are therefore riddles ... As a symbol for this proper meaning of the Egyptian spirit we may mention the Sphinx. It is, as it were, the symbol of the symbolic itself ... Out of the dull strength and power of the animal the human spirit tries to push itself forward, without coming to a perfect portrayal of its own freedom and animated shape, because it must still remain confused and associated with what is other than itself.

(pp. 360–1)

Source: G.W.F. Hegel (1975 [1835]) *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art* (trans. T. M. Knox in two volumes), Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Discussion

It is perhaps best to grasp what he is not saying. The features of Egyptian art which he does not like, its massiveness, its stasis, its general lack of animation, are not being ascribed to a lack of technical skill on the part of the artists.

Hegel relates the formal features of works of art to the underlying thought which they are striving to express. For Hegel, in common with virtually all educated Europeans of his day, the definitive emergence of human consciousness into a condition of freedom, occurred in classical Greece (and subsequently bonded with Christianity into a fully-fledged modern self-consciousness). This is something which ancient Egypt, with its political absolutism and animistic polytheism, lacked ('it always remains repugnant to us to see animals, dogs and cats, instead of what is truly spiritual, regarded as sacred' (p. 357)).

The criterion for a genuine, successful, work of art is the fusion of its form with the idea it expresses. For Hegel the achieved technical freedom of Greek sculpture (signified by Daedalus), expresses the freedom of the human spirit manifest for the first time in Greek society. By contrast, the lack of an organic relation between the form and the idea expressed, the merely external linking of artistic form to a general idea through a

relation of 'symbolisation', expresses the lack of freedom in oriental despotisms; expresses at bottom, that is, an earlier or lower phase of human development. For Hegel, this condition of the Symbolic remains the condition of 'almost the whole of Eastern art' (p. 308). Although Hegel describes developmental phases within Symbolic art (placing Egypt ahead of, for example, ancient India (p. 320)), and also implies development within Egyptian art itself (for example in the third quotation above), nonetheless for him the art of ancient Egypt remains locked within the first phase of the developmental triad Symbolic/Classical/Romantic.

Hegel was an innovator in even considering the art of non-Western cultures in his over-arching account of the development of art, but the fact remains that he assigns them an inferior position within that schema. Fundamentally, it is this legacy that makes Hegel relevant to a discussion of art in a period of globalisation, when perhaps for the first time, the prospect of a global art history that does not discriminate between the art of different societies, beckons.

4 Orientalism and European art

Be that as it may, such assumptions about the superiority and progress of the Western canon as defined by the Renaissance and Classical Antiquity, did indeed inform the academic practice of art throughout the nineteenth century. It remained more or less unchallenged until the emergence of the avant-garde in France later in the century.

In the case of Egypt, visual images tended to be of massively imposing ruins engulfed by sand with picturesque tribesmen arranged in the foreground to drive home the message of decline. No-one did this better than David Roberts, a Scottish painter who travelled in Egypt and the Holy Land in the late 1830s (Figure 4). The resulting studies fuelled his output for the rest of his career. A somewhat different inflection of Orientalism, involving a scarcely veiled sexuality, to be found in – or projected onto – the harem or the slave market, identifies the pictures of the French academician Gérôme (Figure 5).

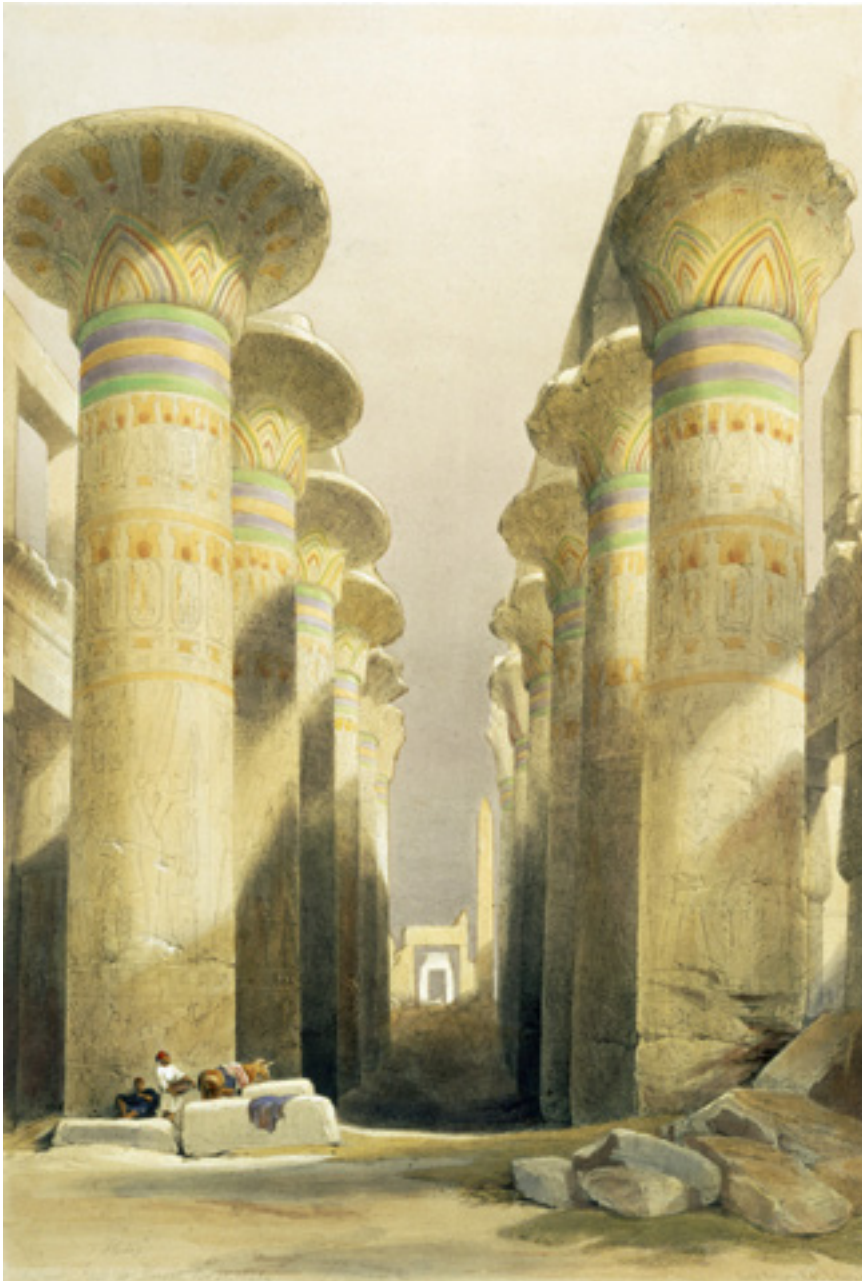


Figure 4 David Roberts, 'Central Avenue of the Great Hall of Columns, Karnak', colour lithograph, from Roberts, David (1846) *Egypt and Nubia: from drawings made on the spot by David Roberts ... with historical descriptions by William Brockedon*, London, Moon. Stapleton Collection

Photo: Stapleton Collection/Bridgeman Art Library



Figure 5 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath*, 1870, oil on canvas, 51 x 41 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Robert Jordan from the collection of Eben D. Jordan

Photo: Museum of Fine Arts Boston/Bridgeman Art Library

4.1 Inspiring the Victorians

There was more to Orientalism than that of course, including a pervasive interest in the lands of the Bible. In England, using the invaluable resource of the British Museum, certain later Victorian artists were able to study Egyptian painting first-hand, and in some cases to incorporate it into their own work to enhance the effects they sought, ranging from a form of historical truthfulness to a sense of the exotic.

Activity 5 Drawing inspiration from the past

Look at these three paintings which drew inspiration from the Nebamun tomb wall paintings that were displayed in the British Museum (Figures 6, 7 and 8). Generally speaking, how do you think these artists have used the ancient paintings?



Figure 6 Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Joseph, Overseer of Pharaoh's Granaries 1874, oil on panel, 35 x 46 cm. Dahesh Museum of Art, New York, 2002.38

Photo: Dahesh Museum of Art/Bridgeman Art Library



Figure 7 Edwin Longsden Long, An Egyptian Feast, 1877, oil on canvas, 189 x 381 cm. Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford

Photo: © Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, West Yorkshire/Bridgeman Art Library

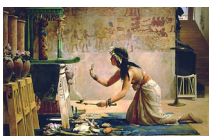


Figure 8 John Reinhard Weguelin, The Obsequies of an Egyptian Cat, 1886, oil on canvas, 84 x 128 cm. Auckland Art Gallery (Toi o Tamaki), New Zealand, Mackelvie Trust Collection, MU/147

Photo: Auckland Art Gallery.

Discussion

The artists have included elements of the tomb paintings to give a kind of 'authentic' flavour to their own artworks, which are an eclectic reconstruction of Egyptian life, combining an interest in the Bible with a fascination with the exotic (even, in Victorian terms, the somewhat risqué). Yet the way the ancient paintings have been shown is itself anything but authentic. You will become more familiar with the Nebamun paintings later, but if you look closely you will be able to see how the nineteenth-century artists have adapted the ancient works to their own compositions.

In the Alma-Tadema, the scene behind Joseph has been 'stretched out' to accommodate his chair back. In the original painting (see the close up in Figure 9), the standing scribe at the far left is much closer to the kneeling farmers and the geese to the right. To fill the space created in the upper row of figures above Joseph's head, an extra group of feet has been added. And of course, perhaps most telling of all, is the fact that paintings from a tomb have been transformed into decorations for a living-room.



Figure 9 Part of one fragment of 'Viewing the Produce of the Estates' (EA 37978)

© Trustees of the British Museum

In the Weguelin, the artist has 'synthesised' two separate ancient fragments. As you can see, the scene showing the kneeling farmers, the geese, and the standing scribe (the same fragment used in the Alma-Tadema) ends with the table of offerings just upward and to the left of the foreground figure's head. The space further to the left of that is filled by an image taken from an entirely different scene, showing offering-bringers carrying wild desert hares (Figure 10). You will study these paintings in detail in Week 3.

As you will see later, Egyptian art involved a completely different set of representational conventions from the post-Renaissance European Academic tradition. Yet here these academic painters simply assimilate the Egyptian pictures into their own brand of 'realism', employing the flat paintings from ancient tombs as a decorative feature of their own artfully constructed spatial illusion.



Figure 10 Part of the fragment 'Offering Bringers' (EA 37980)

© Trustees of the British Museum

5 The avant-garde and Paul Gauguin

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, European art was split in two with the development of a self-consciously avant-garde tradition based in France. This was explicitly critical of the representational conventions associated with the Academic tradition. In its early manifestation this embodied a wide-ranging attempt to represent the conditions of modern life, particularly urban life as experienced in Paris. But before the end of the century, the urge on the part of avant-garde artists to distance themselves from the conventions of bourgeois society had led to the development of a discourse of 'primitivism'. The ultimate expression of this idea came in the early twentieth century when artists such as Picasso and others 'discovered' African carvings. But before that, the search for an alternative to academic conventions had led avant-garde artists to an interest in forms as diverse as Japanese prints, cheap popular prints, folk art, and in a few cases, the art of ancient Egypt.

In the avant-garde, artists did not use Egyptian art to add local colour to their own fictions, so much as to reinforce their own technical radicalism. In his well-known painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte*, the post-impressionist Georges Seurat was widely seen to have used the stasis and uniformity, as well as the flatness, of Egyptian painting to offer a telling reflection on the mores of contemporary Parisians. More pivotal however in the evolution of 'primitivism' was the work of Paul Gauguin.

5.1 Paul Gauguin

When Gauguin went to Tahiti in 1891 to escape from urban modernity he took with him an eclectic collection of source material including Japanese erotica as well as illustrations of European 'Old Master' art – and including photographs of ancient Egyptian paintings from the tomb of the scribe Nebamun that he had seen in the British Museum on a visit to London in 1885.

He seems to have intuitively grasped that the ancient Egyptian artists were following conventions different from those of the European academic tradition, and to have occasionally 'translated' ancient motifs into his own system.

Gauguin's paintings are complex, being on the one hand highly sophisticated and self-conscious examples of an avant-garde rejection of the conventions of bourgeois taste, and on the other seeking out 'authentic' effects according to the discourse of 'primitivism', which was beginning to be influential among artists tired of the superficial sophistication they saw around themselves in the cosmopolitan modern city.

Christmas Night, (Figure 11) is a strange painting of an imaginary snowbound winter scene in Brittany, yet painted in Tahiti. It draws on the image of the cattle being presented to Nebamun for the annual roll-call of the produce of the estates (Figure 12). So too does a woodcut he made of another Breton scene, also done in Tahiti.



Figure 11 Paul Gauguin, *Christmas Night (The Blessing of the Oxen)*, 1894/1903, oil on canvas, 71 x 83 cm. Indianapolis Museum of Art, Josefowitz Collection, 1998.169

Photo: © SuperStock, Inc./SuperStoc.



Figure 12 Part of 'Viewing the Produce of the Estates' (EA 37976)

© Trustees of the British Museum

Another example of his use of Egyptian art is *Ta Matete*, also known as 'We shall not go to the market today'. Here Gauguin drew on the banquet scene from Nebamun's tomb-chapel (Figure 13). He depicted a row of five women sitting side by side in a frieze-like arrangement, some turning and talking to each other, some with hands raised in gestures, all except one in profile. The image is clearly based on the banquet scene from the tomb of Nebamun.



Figure 13 Part of 'The Banquet' (EA 37986)

© Trustees of the British Museum

When asking ourselves what Gauguin was doing in these pictures, the first response might be to think along the lines of investing the scene with that element of 'primitive

authenticity' we know Gauguin was keen to get into his paintings. But the complication here is that by this date Tahiti was far from an authentic Pacific paradise, and the women in the market painting are Tahitian prostitutes in western clothes waiting for the boats to come into the harbour. So in a strange, transposed sense, the painting is a representation of the 'modernity' Gauguin has sought to escape, refracted through this register of an ancient, erotically charged, banquet scene – which might well have appealed to him in the first place for that very reason.

6 Twentieth-century popular culture

During the twentieth century, to a considerable extent, the legacy of ancient Egypt was felt in design and popular culture rather than the fine arts. The discovery of the jewellery and furniture in the tomb of Tutankhamun had a great influence on the development of Art Deco. There was a similar impact in the sphere of the popular arts both on the architecture of the new cinemas and on the films that were shown in them. Indeed, the very prevalence of clichés of mummies and treasure might have been one reason why avant-garde artists tended to steer clear of Egypt.

Only later in the twentieth century, with the emergence of postmodernism does one find artists again turning to Egyptian motifs to underpin their own art.

In a large installation of 1985, *Palazzo Regale*, in Dusseldorf, Joseph Beuys seemed to cast himself in the role of a pharaoh, surrounded by golden wall plaques, with coffin-sized glass vitrines filled with memorabilia suggestive of kingship and death. More recently, the American Bill Viola turned to Egypt for his high-tech brand of spirituality in the enormous, and enormously complex, video projection *Going Forth By Day* – wherein the spectator is surrounded by images projected simultaneously on all four walls of the room of people performing enigmatic tasks in ultra-slow motion, imbued with an air of ritual and based, it is claimed, on the ancient Egyptian text of the *Book of the Dead* called by the Egyptians *The Spells of Going Forth by Day*.

7 Beyond the myths

The legacy of Egyptian art, then, is complex. At one level it has become the stuff of cliché (Figure 14): the gamut of Myth & Magic, Chariots of the Gods, re-awakened mummies and the curse of the Tomb, all the way through to Indiana Jones-style ripping yarns. At another it has stimulated complex reflections on authenticity, modernity, and more recently on a range of pressing questions about the Western canon in relation to the art and culture of the rest of the world.



Figure 14 Shop display

Courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)

In this course we want to use some of the Egyptian paintings and objects in the collection of the British Museum to go beyond the myths and find out about the meanings of Egyptian art, why it took the form it did, what it can tell us about the conditions of life in ancient Egypt, and what we can deduce from it about our own cultural positioning.

Egyptian art can seem simultaneously too remote, or all too proximate: an off-putting combination of airhead New Age-ism on the one hand or daunting academic specialisation on the other. But for anyone prepared to push through those barriers it can offer a stimulating way into questions of identity and difference – of individuals and cultures – as well as debates about the social purpose or the relative autonomy of art in any culture, our own included.

The paintings discussed in the course are from the tomb of the official Nebamun, who worked in the temple of Karnak at Thebes during the reign of Amenhotep III (c.1390–c.1352 BC) or at the start of the immediately following reign of Amenhotep IV. This was a critical time in Egyptian history. Amenhotep III was one of the most important kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty, one of the high points of Egyptian power, but his reign preceded a period of dramatic upheaval in Egyptian society when his son changed his name to Akhenaten and convulsed the country with a religious revolution.

You can begin by selecting the links to these timelines to place the paintings in the context of Egyptian, British and world art history.

[Link to timeline of Egypt developed by the British Museum for schools](#)

[Link to timeline of British history developed by the BBC](#)

[Link to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#)

In the following weeks you will find out more about the paintings themselves and develop a more detailed understanding of Egyptian art and society.

Summary

For many years, Egyptian art was less well known in Europe than the art of classical Greece and Rome. You have seen in this section that from the early nineteenth century, Egyptian art had a significant impact on modern art, design and popular culture. Both Egyptian art and Egyptian society have had an ambiguous status relative to the Western canon of art. Egyptian art has often been viewed through the prism of 'Orientalism'.

You have also learnt how Egyptian art had an impact on the technical radicalism of avant-garde. Paintings from the tomb of Nebamun (c. 1350 BC) offer both a way into the study of Egyptian art and a challenge to prevailing stereotypes.

You can now go to [Week 2](#)

References

Carter, H. (1922–33) *The Tomb of Tutankhamun*, Griffith Institute, Oxford/Little Books Ltd, London (2007 facsimile reprint edition).

Edwards, A. B. (1891) *A Thousand Miles Up The Nile*, 2nd edn, George Routledge and Sons, London.

Flaubert, G. (1996) *Flaubert in Egypt. A Sensibility on Tour* (trans. and ed. F. Steegmuller), Penguin Classics, London.

Hegel, G. W. F. (1975) *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art* (trans. T. M. Knox in two volumes), Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Acknowledgements

Except for third party materials and otherwise stated (see [terms and conditions](#)), this content is made available under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 Licence](#).

The material acknowledged below is Proprietary and used under licence (not subject to Creative Commons Licence). Grateful acknowledgement is made to the following sources for permission to reproduce material in this course:

In line with the British Museum's wishes and aims to encourage the dissemination and use of information about their collections, The Open University is delighted to confirm that all content credited to © The Trustees of the British Museum is also made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Figures

Figure 1 Carlton Cinema Islington, London 1930: Courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)

Figure 2 Tutankhamun cereal packet and cut-price travel advertisement: Courtesy of Kellogg's www.kelloggs.co.uk

Figure 3 Leon Gogniet, Portrait of Jean-Francois Champollion, 1831, oil on canvas, 74 x 60 cm. Louvre, Paris Photo: Lauros/Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library

Figure 4 David Roberts, 'Central Avenue of the Great Hall of Columns, Karnak', colour lithograph, from Roberts, David (1846) Egypt and Nubia: from drawings made on the spot by David Roberts ... with historical descriptions by William Brockedon, London, Moon. Stapleton Collection Photo: Stapleton Collection/Bridgeman Art Library

Figure 5 Jean-Léon Gérôme, Moorish Bath, 1870, oil on canvas, 51 x 41 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Robert Jordan from the collection of Eben D. Jordan Photo: Museum of Fine Arts Boston/Bridgeman Art Library

Figure 6 Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Joseph, Overseer of Pharaoh's Granaries 1874, oil on panel, 35 x 46 cm. Dahesh Museum of Art, New York, 2002.38 Photo: Dahesh Museum of Art/Bridgeman Art Library

Figure 7 Photo: © Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, West Yorkshire/Bridgeman Art Library Edwin Longsdon Long, An Egyptian Feast, 1877, oil on canvas, 189 x 381 cm. Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford

Figure 8 Photo: Auckland Art Gallery. John Reinhard Weguelin, The Obsequies of an Egyptian Cat, 1886, oil on canvas, 84 x 128 cm. Auckland Art Gallery (Toi o Tamaki), New Zealand, Mackelvie Trust Collection, MU/147

Figure 9 © Trustees of the British Museum Part of one fragment of 'Viewing the Produce of the Estates' (EA 37978): © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 10 Part of the fragment 'Offering Bringers' (EA 37980) © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 11 Paul Gauguin, Christmas Night (The Blessing of the Oxen), 1894/1903, oil on canvas, 71 x 83 cm. Indianapolis Museum of Art, Josefowitz Collection, 1998.169 Photo: © SuperStock, Inc./SuperStoc

Figure 12 Part of 'Viewing the Produce of the Estates' (EA 37976) © Trustees of the British Museum

Figure 13 Part of 'The Banquet' (EA 37986) © Trustees of the British Museum Figure 14: shop display Photo: courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)

Every effort has been made to contact copyright owners. If any have been inadvertently overlooked, the publishers will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

Don't miss out:

1. Join over 200,000 students, currently studying with The Open University -

<http://www.open.ac.uk/choose/ou/open-content>

2. Enjoyed this? Find out more about this topic or browse all our free course materials on OpenLearn - <http://www.open.edu/openlearn/>

3. Outside the UK? We have students in over a hundred countries studying online qualifications - <http://www.openuniversity.edu/> - including an MBA at our triple accredited Business School.

[Week 2](#)