

## Ancient Egyptian Art

From the earliest times Egyptian art was developed in the service of the Pharaoh. Ancient Egyptian art was first created to show that the Pharaoh was a god. The art forms were worked out by the master craftsmen in the Pharaoh's court and were then followed carefully by lesser craftsmen who worked for ordinary Egyptians.



**Pictures:** The earliest work of art that we can give a date to is the Palette of Narmer, who was the first king of the first dynasty, about 3000 B.C. (5000 years ago). This palette shows Narmer's victories. It is carved with 'reliefs,' which means that the artist has carved away the slate background to make the pictures stand out. This

early picture does not show any 'perspective'. That is, it does not show any depth or space (think of a modern painting of a country lane, showing the lane stretching away into the distance – that is perspective). For the next 3000 years, Egyptian pictures showed little change from this early example. Pictures were either carved in relief on stone or slate, or they were painted on walls. In both cases, the pictures are 'two dimensional' showing no depth. The craftsmen from the 4th dynasty onwards produced wonderful wall paintings, of people's daily life and the birds and plants that were around them. These paintings are found on the walls of the tombs where the dead were buried. It was hoped that in the life after death, the pleasant life shown in the paintings would continue for the dead person.



The picture to the left shows people trapping birds and people plowing. Below is a brightly colored picture of Geese. Both these paintings were painted on the walls of Egyptian tombs of the Old Kingdom more than 4500 years ago.



In Egypt's Middle Kingdom, the same art forms continued: we can see from the picture below a number of features that are common in Egyptian



pictures throughout the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms.

- The bodies of the figures are facing us, but their heads are in profile (turned sideways).
  - The body of the Pharaoh, if shown, is larger than the other figures and is always very stiff and formal, as in the Narmer palette, but the bodies of ordinary people are more relaxed and life-like, as in the picture of people plowing
- All the pictures are two-dimensional, without any depth.



**Sculpture:** From the 3rd Dynasty onwards, Egyptian art began to produce sculpture as well as carvings and paintings. The most exciting time for this art was the 4th Dynasty when the Pyramids were built. The picture below shows King Mycerinus between two goddesses. The statue was made around 2600 B.C. (4600 years ago). Later Egyptian sculpture followed this style for 2000 years. The statues are life-like, always facing forwards (unlike the paintings), and are made from hard stone, which has lasted well.

### **Egyptian sculpture**

- Shows human faces as they really were.
- Has the figures facing directly forwards.
- The figures are standing or sitting upright and are very stiff and formal.

### **Applied Art**

During Egypt's New Kingdom, wealth flowed into Egypt and the master craftsmen used precious metals such as gold and precious stones to produce jewelry and to decorate the mummy-cases in which the mummified bodies of pharaohs and rich officials were placed.

The best example of a highly decorated sarcophagus (mummy-case) that has survived is that of the Pharaoh Tutankhamen. The sarcophagus is made of solid gold and beautifully decorated by the master craftsmen.

