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THE ART OF THE PREDYNASTIC PERIOD¹

By T. ERIC PEET, B.A.

Two of the most distinctive features of Egyptian art throughout its history are its effective use of line and its decorative value. By the first we mean that the Egyptian artist in his drawing made use of lines and curves which in themselves are capable of producing a pleasurable impression on the beholder, though it would be difficult or even impossible to explain why they do so. This feature of Egyptian art is evident to everyone who will examine a few typical specimens of good Egyptian drawing, painting or relief. In the famous reliefs of the north wall of the Seti temple at Abydos, for example, there is much stiffness and conventionality, much that is incorrect, in the rendering of the human form especially, yet the whole has a wonderfully pleasurable effect on the eye. This is due partly to the delicacy of the low relief but still more to this subtilty of line of which we are speaking. The curves of the body are not anatomically correct but they have a charm and grace which is even more important. They arrest the eye and in the same instant give it repose. This is a characteristic which Egyptian art possesses in common with that of Japan and that of China.

By the second feature, the decorative value of this art, we mean that an Egyptian artist, whether confronted with a temple wall or a mere knife handle for decoration, showed the greatest skill in adapting the means at his disposal to the end in view. It is possible to draw much better than the average Egyptian artist, but it would hardly be possible to cover a given space with drawing in a more effective manner than he did. The roof of the Sistine Chapel is doubtless unsurpassed as a piece of decoration, and the technique of the various scenes and figures is, in the eyes of some at least, beyond criticism. The Egyptian could not render life as perfectly as Michel Angelo did, nor could he approach his colour schemes and his chiaroscuro, but he was not far behind him in the conception of a decorative scheme to suit a given space. For evidence of this we need only go to the meanest of the painted private tombs of Thebes, Meir or Beni Hasan.

These two characteristics, long recognized in the well known art of the Middle Kingdom and the New Empire, can now be traced back through the Old Kingdom into the obscure depths of the predynastic period. Twenty years ago our knowledge of Egyptian art began with the IVth Dynasty. It was plain that even then work was being produced in Egypt which later ages would have difficulty in surpassing, and indeed there are many of us who can find little or nothing in later Egyptian art to

¹ This article is the substance of a lecture delivered on November 10, 1914, before the Fund.

compare with the Sheikh el Beled or the squatting scribe of the Louvre. This wonderful manifestation of art could not be the product of a decade or even of a century, and it was only to be expected that the progress of excavation would bring us face to face with some at least of the earlier steps in its evolution. And so indeed it was. The discovery of the statue of Khasekhem at Hierakonpolis showed us what the royal sculptor could accomplish in the IInd Dynasty, and the stela of the Serpent King took us back to the Ist, while a series of predynastic discoveries still continues to furnish us with works of art of an even earlier date.

It is with these predynastic examples of art that we are here concerned. We need hardly attempt to precise their age. The general consensus of opinion now favours an approximate date of 3400 B.C. for the beginning of the Ist Dynasty, and the works of which we speak are consequently earlier than this, though how much earlier the most ancient of them are is a point on which even conjecture is futile. Some would say two thousand years, others two hundred. However this may be, we are able by means of Petrie's Sequence Dating¹ to attribute relative dates to many of the predynastic works of art and so to watch the progress made during the period.

The artist in the narrower sense of the term produces his effects by two means, colour and form. For purposes of convenience in arrangement we shall here divide his products into two types, those which give pleasure by their own shape or colouring, and those which please by reason of some kind of ornament or decoration which is applied to them quite apart from their own colour, form or function. Naturally this is not a division based deep in the nature of things, and the two classes must frequently overlap and cross; it will however give us a useful classification of works of art for our present purpose. To the first class belong of course unornamented vases in pottery or stone and all objects sculptured or modelled in the round. The latter class includes vases of pottery with painted decoration, knife handles and combs covered with relief work, or tomb chambers ornamented with painted scenes.

Beginning with objects of the first class we may remark at once the excellent appreciation of colour as a decorative element displayed by the predynastic people from the moment of their appearance in the Nile valley. Careful excavation of their tombs frequently reveals around the neck of a child or woman a string of beads. Often these are of the beautiful light blue glaze of which these people already possessed the secret; occasionally these are made to alternate with beads of an equally beautiful transparent carnelian; occasionally, too, there is still greater variety, and beads made of various stones, all chosen for their beauty of colour, have been carefully strung in a manner which makes excellent use of their contrasts. This appreciation of colour is seen too in the earliest pottery, which is often covered with a slip of red haematite and then polished. This in itself gave a very pleasing body colour to the vase, and if variety were desired it could be obtained by so firing the vessel that the rim became subject to the reducing flame, whereupon it lost a portion of its oxygen and was reduced to the magnetic oxide of iron, which is black, the main portion

¹ Whatever doubt may be thrown on the accuracy of this method of dating by the excessive claims occasionally made for it, the fact remains that those who are in the habit of studying closely large quantities of predynastic material find it, if judiciously applied, a good rough criterion of relative date, every new class of object studied bearing out its accuracy and value.

of the vase remaining red¹. A similar regard to colour was shown in the choosing of stones for the making of stone vases, those being most frequently chosen which when cut and polished gave the most effective colour and surface. As regards form, the shapes of these early vases, made without the use of the potter's wheel, were rarely approached by the later Egyptians and have never been surpassed by any other people.

The most striking objects of this first class and those which give us the best opportunity of judging the artistic capabilities of their makers are those which strive to reproduce in the round the forms of objects in nature itself. Here we have the beginnings of modelling and sculpture. In several graves of the early predynastic period models in clay of various animals, such as oxen (Pl. XII, fig. 1) and hippopotami, have been found. These are not as a whole productions of very great merit; among the best are the hippopotami which stand on the rim of a bowl (Pl. XII, fig. 2) found by Ayrton and Loat for the Fund at El Mahasna a few years ago². Models of boats also occur and at El Amrah MacIver found while working for the Fund a model of a house which renders very clearly the main features of the structure.

Of greater interest perhaps are the attempts to render the human figure. The most striking among these are the steatopygous female figures modelled in clay, of which the best known examples were found at Naqada. The abnormal thickening of the thighs in these statuettes is not to be attributed to the incapacity of the artist but is an intentional deformation found also in early statuettes from France, Malta, Thessaly and elsewhere. Side by side with this type of figure there seems to have existed in the early predynastic era another type of which the ivory figurine found by Ayrton for the Fund at El Mahasna (Pl. XII, fig. 3) is a good example³. The defects of this, partly perhaps due to the comparative toughness of the material (ivory), are evident. It is stiff, preternaturally elongated and rectangular. It compares closely with the famous Min statues found by Petrie at Coptos and the similar figure from Hierakonpolis, and suggests that these first efforts at sculpture in stone should be attributed to quite an early period⁴.

If we wish to see the enormous strides which sculpture made before the end of the predynastic period we need only confront the objects just discussed with the Hierakonpolis ivories⁵ and the earliest finds from the Royal Tombs at Abydos. The Mahasna figurine is positively barbaric by the side of those of Hierakonpolis (*e.g.* Pl. XIII, fig. 1), while the well-known figure (Pl. XII, fig. 4) of a dog⁶ now in the

¹ These vases with a painted surface, especially those in which the rim is blackened, might perhaps be classed under the second heading, that of applied decoration. I have however kept them here to distinguish them from vases with a definite design in paint of a colour different from the body colour.

² Now in the Manchester Museum. AYRTON and LOAT, *El Mahasna*, Pl. XI, 3.

³ *I.c.* Pl. XI, 1.

⁴ Poorness of work may of course be due to an inferior artist and is not necessarily a sign of early date. At the same time what we speak of here is a resemblance in style and not merely an equality of badness. Large statues of a god would hardly be given to a poor artist to execute and are probably a fair test of the sculptural ability of the period.

⁵ I cannot here treat the vexed question of the precise age of these ivories. There is of course no proof that they are actually earlier than the beginning of the 1st Dynasty.

⁶ CAPART, *Primitive Art in Egypt*, fig. 145.

Fig. 1.

Fig. 4.

Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.

Fig. 1. Ox, modelled in clay, from El Amrah.

Fig. 2. Bowl, decorated with hippopotami, from El Mahasna.

Fig. 3. Ivory figurine from El Mahasna.

Fig. 4. Part of Ivory figure of a dog, from Hierakonpolis. (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.)

Ashmolean Museum shows that by the time when these Hierakoupolis ivories were made Egyptian art had reached a perfection in the rendering of the animal form which it would be difficult to surpass.

We must turn now to the second class of objects, those in which the decoration may be said to be applied rather than to consist in the colour or form of the thing itself. And here, in order properly to estimate and understand this branch of predynastic art, it is necessary to pause for a moment and to consider the motives which led to the systematic decoration of many classes of objects and the elements of the decorative design of the ancient Egyptians.

Among primitive peoples there exist various motives for the decoration of objects¹. Firstly there is the purely artistic motive. In Egypt we have a good example of this in the early predynastic black pottery with incisions filled with a white paste in order to show them up effectively. The designs on these vases (Pl. XIII, fig. 2) are doubtless to a great extent derived from basket work, and as such have what may be called a natural origin, but their purpose is purely ornamental and they serve no useful end. In the second place an object may be ornamented for a useful purpose, as, for example, to distinguish it from others of the same kind and thus to mark its ownership. For instance certain savage tribes are accustomed to adorn their arrows with marks in order that the animal which is slain in a combined hunt may be given to him who actually shot it. In predynastic Egypt we have a good illustration of this motive for decoration in the numerous potmarks with which vases are incised. It is extremely probable that these originally denoted either the owner or the source or the contents of the vessel. A third motive for decoration is the magical or religious. Under this heading is to be placed the frequent use of red ochre for colouring objects or persons in neolithic Europe and elsewhere. It is of course not easy to trace decorative motives in Egypt to this source, for we know nothing of early Egyptian magic; it is, however, certain that a great deal of Egyptian decorative design had its origin in the various tribal totem signs such as the hawk, the bull, the tree and so on. It is hardly necessary to add that a piece of decoration which served in origin a useful or magical purpose may lose this and degenerate into something which is now retained from purely aesthetic considerations.

Such then were the motives which led to the application of ornament to various objects in early Egypt. This decoration was applied by the predynastic Egyptian to the object in various ways, by incising, by painting, by relief work, and occasionally by the application of figures cut almost entirely in the round². In these ways the idea of the artist was translated on to the object to be decorated. But what was the nature of the ideas which he endeavoured to translate? To understand this we must analyse briefly the nature of primitive design.

Deniker³ has laid it down as a principle of decorative art among primitive peoples that "all artistic designs are inspired by real objects; there is no feeling for what is purely and voluntarily ornamental, nor, for still more forcible reasons, are there any

¹ See HADDON, *Evolution in Art*.

² e.g. in the Mahasna hippopotamus vase and the various ivory spoons with animals on the shafts. This is precisely one of those points where our two classes of objects separated at the outset of this paper overlap.

³ *Les races et les peuples de la terre*, pp. 237 ff.

geometrical figures, as was believed till recently." It may be that Deniker is here making a generalization which cannot be proved and may even be incorrect. It is, however, certainly true that the vast majority of primitive designs are in origin an attempt to copy something in nature or manufacture. This was certainly the case in ancient Egypt. The mark made on the body of a large vase by the rope tied round it while it was still damp, to aid in moving it and to keep it from contact with its neighbours in the drying yard, is imitated even when the rope is no longer used or needed. Similarly the line drawn round the cylindrical vases of the Ist Dynasty, which appears in itself purely ornamental, is, when rightly viewed, only a degeneration of the wavy handle of the predynastic jar and can be traced through every stage of the decay. Further, the rows of triangles so common on the predynastic red on buff pottery are in origin mountain ranges, while the long wavy lines, usually in threes, on the same ware are derived from the representation of water. In other words, what may appear at first sight to be a purely geometrical design is shown on investigation to have a natural origin. Whether every element of early Egyptian design can be treated in this way or really had this origin is a question which, in spite of Deniker's dictum, I think is best left open. It is certainly true of the greater portion.

The motives of design having been selected, it remains to arrange them. Here two principles of primitive art come into play in Egypt, firstly the delight which the primitive mind, as well as the advanced, takes in the rhythmic repetition of sounds or sights¹, and secondly the less universal tendency of a primitive decorator to fill up the spaces in a scene with ornament quite meaningless in its present collocation if not in origin.

Fully to show how these principles of design and its application to the object are exemplified in predynastic art would require many pages of illustration, and we must confine ourselves to some of the more easily describable examples.

In early predynastic days we find the potter already producing complicated geometric designs on the white incised black ware, designs derived doubtless from basket work but which have advanced far beyond the prototype and formed a free geometric system based mainly on the principle of respecting a fixed element of design at regular intervals round the vase. Here the artist finds little difficulty. His work is accurate, and he succeeds in devising a scheme suitable to the surface to be covered—a feature of Egyptian art on which we laid stress at the outset—and in fitting it in with mathematical accuracy. At the same time he is producing another type of pottery with designs in white on a red background. Here he is not limited to geometrical patterns, but is experimenting with elements taken from nature, a plant, an animal, or even a human being. In this branch of pottery he is less successful, simply because he is attempting more. To a rather later date is to be assigned as a whole the pottery with designs in red on a usually unprepared buff surface. Here we notice a distinct advance both in arrangement and in drawing. The human figure is still crudely given, but the animals have improved a little and there is an attempt to give panoramic effects. To this class belong the vases with representations of boats bearing standards of the various nomes of Lower Egypt. And here we have our finest illustrations of the tendency to fill up all the available space with design of some kind (Pl. XIII, fig. 3)². The spaces above the boats are often filled with women dancing

¹ GROSSE, *Les débuts de l'art*, pp. 113 ff.

² CAPART, *op. cit.*, fig. 94.

Fig. 1.

Fig. 2.

Fig. 3.

Fig. 4.

- Fig. 1. Ivory statuette, a crouching captive. From Hierakonpolis.
 Fig. 2. Black incised pottery with decoration in imitation of basket-work.
 Fig. 3. Vase decoration. From de Morgan.
 Fig. 4. Gold-leaf with incised designs, sewn on to one end of a large flint knife to form the handle. (Cairo Museum) 131.111.164.128 on Mon, 14 Dec 2015 23:22:21 UTC
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or with flamingoes, while, as if this were not enough, the spaces which still remain are crowded with little zigzags. Another excellent example of this trait is to be seen in the famous painted tomb at Hierakonpolis¹, where boats, men and animals are mixed up in the wildest confusion. Nevertheless, in the best examples of this type of pottery, the adaptation of the design to the space to be filled is excellent. This notable feature of later Egyptian art is already present and needs nothing more than the purging away of the barbarism of filling-ornament.

From works such as these we pass on to a number of wonderful artistic products which, as far as can be ascertained, date from the end of the predynastic period. The artist has progressed and is now able to deal with much more untractable materials, such as ivory, stone, bone and gold. One of the finest pieces of work of the period is a knife handle of gold-leaf in the Cairo Museum (Pl. XIII, fig. 4)². On one of its flat surfaces is engraved a series of peculiar animals, including a lion and a gazelle, excellently arranged, but showing still a remnant of primitive tradition in the rosettes of leaves used to fill up the spaces. On the other surface is a pair of serpents entwined so as to form three circular spaces, each of which is occupied by a rosette of leaves. These, unlike those on the other face, do not offend, for they are not a filling-ornament but an integral part of a conventional design. An equally praiseworthy product is the ivory comb of the Davis collection, on which are cut in relief on both sides rows of birds and animals. The design, depending as it does for its effect on repetitions of similar elements, is primitive, but the work is exquisitely delicate, and the characteristics of the various beasts are clearly rendered.

Still more remarkable, however, is the wonderful series of ornamented slate palettes, the best known of which represents King Narmer (Menes³) smiting the people of the Harpoon nome. In this we may see the progress made in the rendering of the human form. The figure of Narmer has a certain heaviness which may also be remarked in the slightly later relief of Semerkhet at Sinai and in the statue of Khasekhem from Hierakonpolis. It is not equal to the best work of the IVth Dynasty, but on the other hand a broad chasm separates it from the early predynastic representations of the human form in whatever material. Equally admirable is the ornamented mace-head of the Scorpion King now in the Ashmolean Museum; and here we may single out for special praise the excellent arrangement of a complicated design on a rounded surface of varying curvature.

From the aesthetic point of view however both these objects must give way before the slate palette of which the British Museum and the Ashmolean possess fragments (Pl. XIV)⁴. On the one face is a scene representing prisoners being led into captivity, and dead warriors being devoured by beasts and birds of prey. This, despite occasional crudity in the drawing, especially of the human forms, produces an excellent decorative effect, while some of the attitudes and movements of the figures are really well rendered. On the other face, the artist has been even more happy in his conception. On either side of a palm tree stands a giraffe feeding off the leaves (Pl. XV). The delicate

¹ CAPART, *op. cit.*, figs. 162-3.

² CAPART, *op. cit.*, fig. 33.

³ The identification is based on the new fragment or fragments of the Palermo Stone, for whose contents the bulk of Egyptologists are still entirely dependent on the scanty and mysterious breathings of the initiated few.

⁴ CAPART, *op. cit.*, figs. 179-180; LEGGE, *P.S.B.A.*, xxxi (1909), Pl. XLII, XLII a.

rendering of the detail of the palm tree has compelled the admiration of a French writer, but perhaps even more astonishing are the graceful curves of the giraffes' legs. Egyptian art can show no finer example than this of the completeness with which it realized these two characteristics, the effective use of line and the perfect adaptation of the design to the space to be filled.

We have now rapidly reviewed the art of the predynastic period in its course from the earliest arrival of the predynastic people in the Nile valley to the accession of the Ist Dynasty. We have examined its methods and its achievements, and have seen that it contained in the germ most of what we admire so much in the best Egyptian art, that of the IIIrd to VIth Dynasties. We venture to think that if those who are unable to step back behind the era of classical Greece and admire any of Egypt's artistic products, would take the trouble to make themselves acquainted with these early works and their origins instead of judging the Egyptian artist, as they too often do, by the commonplaces of the New Kingdom and the conscious archaisms of the XXVIth Dynasty, they would occasionally be glad to let their eyes wander from the marvels of Greece to their no less wonderful predecessors in early Egypt.