
Exhibition Review

The Birth of the Individual As an Artistic Conception

by Muriel Mirak-Weissbach

“Egypt 2000 B.C.”

An exhibit of Egyptian art of the Middle Kingdom (2150-1650 B.C.), inaugurated in Würzburg, Germany in February 2000, and exhibited in Berlin and other museums of Germany up to the present. It is organized by the Munich and Berlin state museums.

One of the hallmarks of Western civilization, documented in its art, is the celebration of the individual human being, as the prime mover of history. It was the achievement of Classical Greek art, to have depicted the specific personality of the individual, whether cast as god or man. From Homer’s epic poems, the *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*, into the Greek tragic tradition of Aeschylus, Euripedes, and Sophocles, it is the discrete individual whose actions determine the fate of future history, the most eloquent example being Prometheus. In the Christian tradition, this idea is revolutionized, as the discrete human being is no longer portrayed as the plaything of often fickle gods, against whom he may rebel, but as the son of God himself. God manifests himself in the form of Jesus Christ, thus signifying, as Christ’s teaching makes explicit, that all men are born in the image and likeness of God the Creator. Furthermore, in the Christian tradition, just as Christ is uniquely the son of God, and is man, so is every human being a child of God, and as an individual, unique.

The conceptual breakthrough which occurred in Christian art in the 15th Century, known rightly as the Golden Renaissance, first of Italy, then of the northern countries, came in the form of a revolution in the pictorial depiction of the individual, and in the science of perspective. Whereas, in the Romanesque and later Byzantine art, the persons of Christ, the Virgin Mary, and others, were clearly identifiable by iconographic detail and position, the Renaissance, beginning with the 14th Century revolution in painting launched by Cimabue and Giotto, transformed them into unique historical persons—individuals, not icons. A glance at any painting of

the ensuing period of the 14th and 15th Centuries, from Leonardo da Vinci’s “Nativity” to his “Last Supper,” to Raphael’s “School of Athens,” or literally any other work of the great masters of the period, proves this beyond a shadow of a doubt.

‘Egypt 2000 B.C.’

Up until the present, it has been “politically incorrect” to suggest that the birth of the individual in Western art, might have occurred prior to Classical Greece.

Recently, a provocative exhibition in Germany posed the question, whether the concept of the individual had been developed even earlier, that is, by the forefathers of the Greeks, the Egyptians.

The exhibition, “Egypt 2000 B.C.,” inaugurated in Würzburg, Germany, presented the hypothesis, that it was in the period of the Middle Kingdom (2150-1650 B.C.), that the individual as a concept, embodied in art, was first formed. To this end, the exhibition presented an impressive array of sculptures, both of pharaohs and of the common man, which are undeniably portraits. The idea is, that the breakdown of the Old Kingdom (2686-2181 B.C.) and the ensuing period known to later historians as the First Intermediate Period (2181-2040 B.C.), were social upheavals, during which the individual developed a critical view of the otherwise all-encompassing state system, and asserted the value of his individuality.

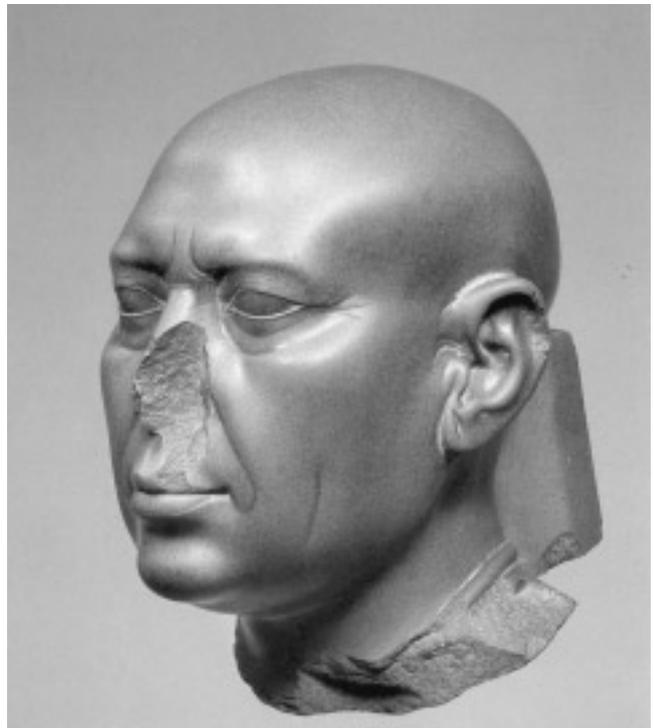
Thus, the art of the Middle Kingdom is seen as the birth of the individual. This period covers three dynasties, the 11th (2119-1976 B.C.), 12th (1976-1794/93 B.C.), and 13th (1794/93-1648/45 B.C.). The exhibition presented sculptures from this period, whose architectural remains are very limited, especially if compared to the rich monuments still standing from the Old Kingdom, the period of the pyramids, and the New Kingdom. Although the temples and other buildings from the Middle Kingdom have not survived, it is known from literary sources, that the period was considered by later generations in Egypt as a golden age. In the time of Ramses, the school texts spoke of authors from the Middle Kingdom by name; and, the plastic arts, especially sculpture, became the model



Amenemhats III, 12th Dynasty, 1853-1806. B.C.



"Head of a Man," 1850 B.C.



"Green Head," from the 30th Dynasty, around 400 B.C. In this later period, the Middle Kingdom was considered a golden age, to be emulated.

for the portraiture of the New Kingdom. This could be seen in the exhibition, in the comparison of the head of a male figure, from 1850 B.C., and the so-called "Green Head," from the 30th dynasty, around 400 B.C., sculptures which look as if they were contemporary.

There are two forms in which the new awareness of man, as an individual, became manifest in Egyptian art of this Middle Kingdom period: sculpture and literature.

The individual found expression in sculpture, even within the restraints of Egyptian statuary norms, which prescribe that the figure be presented frontally, in perfect symmetry. In sculptures of the pharaohs Sesostris I, II, and III, for example, it is immediately evident that, despite these formal constraints, each leader is depicted as a specific personality. Sesostris III is particularly easy to recognize, by virtue of the fact that the various sculptors portrayed him with characteristically prominent eyelids, and slightly downturned mouth. The exhibition happily included some fragments of sculptures of the head of Sesostris III, which, although mere fragments, still communicate the characteristics of the personality. The

same principle applies to the portraits of Amenemhats III, from the 12th dynasty, son of Sesostris III, who is recognizable not only because of the Upper Egypt crown he wears, but because of the facial features delineated.

Most striking are the statues of male figures, which are

not of pharaohs, but of ordinary people. These (numbers 71, 72, 73 in the catalogue), from 1850-1750 B.C., most convincingly document the fact, that it was the unique, personal identity of the individual in question which the sculptor strove to replicate.

A Revolution in Literature

But the most convincing documentation of this early discovery of individuality, is found in the literary texts. A number of texts on papyrus were displayed, in the hieratic script, and their content given in translation on tape. The texts are a delight. There can be no doubt, once one has heard the texts, that this Middle Kingdom literature ushered in a revolution. Markedly different from the tomb writings and biographies typical of the Old Kingdom, the Middle Kingdom texts are highly personalized—at times, intimate accounts of events which are light years away from the official chronologies. There were four texts shown in the exhibition, judiciously selected.

The first is the “Story of Sinuhe,” well known and available in modern translations in several languages. Sinuhe, apparently employed in the harem of Amenemhet I, narrates the events surrounding the death of the King. His son, Sesostris, learns of the death while on the battlefield, and rushes home. Sinuhe, for reasons not immediately obvious, flees the scene, out of fear, and emigrates to Palestine, where, under the reign of Sheikh Amunenschi, he lives a prosperous life. He marries the Sheikh’s eldest daughter, receives land, and even proves himself a valiant warrior in battle. When Sinuhe, already homesick for his native land, receives a letter from the new leader Sesostris, announcing that he has been absolved of all guilt, and inviting him to return, he leaves Palestine and goes home. There, after throwing himself at the feet of the new Pharaoh, he is granted a high position in the administration. The tale is told in moving, personal terms, with a high sense of drama.

The second text, called the “Teaching of Amenemhet I,” is in the form of an address of the deceased, now become a god, to his son and successor, Sesostris I. The dead King tells his son—as the ghost of Hamlet’s father will tell him, millennia later—that his death was due to a plot, hatched in the harem. He expresses confidence in his son’s ability to rule, and wishes him well. The piece was obviously intended to establish the legitimacy of the reign of Sesostris I, but its merits go beyond the political expedient.

The third text, the most fascinating of them all, is the famous “The Complaints of the Peasant,” or “The Eloquent Peasant,” from the 9th/10th dynasty, which relates the story of a peasant who wants to take produce to the market on the back of his donkey. On the way, he is robbed of both his donkey and its burden by a jealous tenant farmer. The peasant immediately goes to the man’s superior to lodge a complaint. Rensi, the overseer to whom he appeals for justice, is struck by his case, but especially by the extraordinary eloquence of his complaint. Rensi informs the King, who organizes for the

peasant’s wife and family to be provided for, in secret, but does not grant the peasant justice, until he has managed to have the latter’s eloquent complaint recorded in writing. Then, the peasant is granted justice, he receives his due reward, and the robber is appropriately punished.

This story is extraordinary for several reasons: first, because it documents the social process whereby a simple peasant could seek justice, and receive it. Second, and most important, the story highlights the special significance that Egyptian society bestowed on language, on the power of eloquence. As Gunter Burkhard notes in his essay, the “perfected discourse” was considered a high ideal in Egyptian culture, the means through which the uneducated could be educated.

The last text presented in the exhibition, is that of a man, in dialogue with his soul, over fundamental questions of life and death.

To whom do I speak today?
Brothers are evil,
Friend of today, they are not lovable.

To whom do I speak today?
Men are covetous,
Everyone seizeth his neighbor’s goods.

To whom do I speak today?
Gentleness hath perished,
Insolence hath come to all men.

To whom do I speak today?
He that hath a contented countenance is bad,
Good is disregarded in every place. . . .

Death is before me today,
As when a sick man becometh whole,
As when one walketh abroad after sickness.

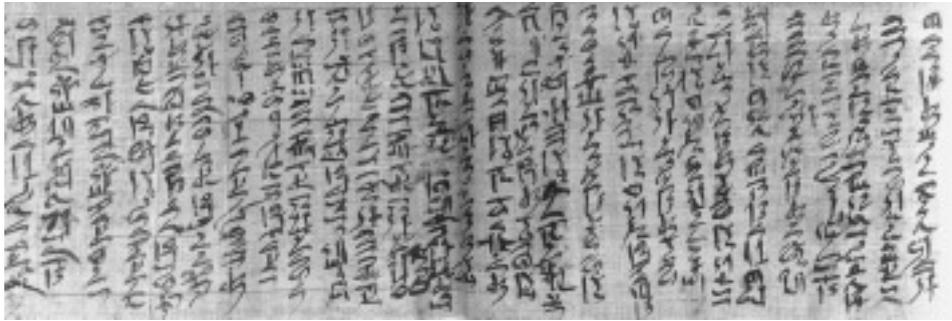
Death is before me today
As the odor of myrrh,
As when one sitteth under the sail on a windy day.

Death is before me today
As the odor of lotus flowers,
As when one sitteth on the shore of drunkenness. . . .

Death is before me today
As when a man longeth to see his house again,
After he hath spent many years in captivity

A Break With Frontal Symmetry

Such richness in literature, of which the selected texts give only a taste, is testimony to the undeniable fact that the culture which produced it, the Middle Kingdom, placed special value on the mind, ideas, and actions of single individuals. And yet, there remains a distinct difference between the



“Report About the Dispute of a Man With His Ba,” 12th Dynasty, ca. 1850 B.C. The text is the lament of a desperate man, facing death.

Egyptian achievement of the Middle Kingdom, and the later breakthrough in Classical Greece. The difference has to do with the revolution in artistic representation effected by the Classical sculptors, which broke with the frontal symmetry associated with the archaic periods in Egypt and Greece, and showed the human being caught as if in mid-motion. In pictorial art, it was accomplished through the revolution in the science of perspective. This not only altered the physical representation of the human figure, but also introduced an utterly revolutionary concept of the work of art, as eternal.

It was the great English poet John Keats, who grasped this concept better than any other, in his “Ode on a Grecian Urn.” The work of art, in the case of Keats’ ode, fixes action, suspending it in time, for all time. Only art is capable of doing this, at once portraying the specific historical moment of an event—whether historically significant, like a great battle scene, or utterly banal or commonplace, like the gathering of village folk for a wedding—and at the same time, fixing it forever, uncompleted. The ironies which Keats elaborates in his ode, are rich and unending: Although in real historical time, as referenced in the art work, the event was completed, effecting consequences on future developments, in the Classical work of art, it is suspended. Thus, Keats’ lover will never complete the kiss he wishes to bestow on his beloved; yet, she will remain forever fair, will never fade. Mortality in the historical reality, is superceded by immortality, through art.

Capturing the human figure in mid-motion, was the precondition for communicating this idea of eternity, as a metaphor.

The great French historian, philologist, and founder of Egyptology, Jean-François Champollion, identified this fundamental progress effected in Classical Greece, over its Egyptian predecessors, in terms of a freeing of the art form, as art, from the literal representation. In his *Précis*, Champollion wrote: “The genius of these peoples [the Egyptians and the Greeks] shows itself to be essentially different. Writing and the imitative arts separate early and forever with the Greeks; but in Egypt, writing, design [drawing], painting, and sculpture, march on constantly [*de front*] toward one goal. . . . Each of these arts, and above all, the destination of their products . . . come to be confused in one sole art, the art *par excellence*, the art of writing” (*Précis du Système Hiéroglyphique des*

Ancients Égyptiens. . . 1828, pp. 430-431).

Champollion’s insight helps to appreciate the achievements of the Egyptian sculptures, in particular, of the Middle Kingdom. At the same time, it helps to identify the extent to which the leap forward in conception, undeniably manifest in the portraiture of the sculptures and the literature, still does not constitute “art” in the sense in which we understand the Classical Greek achievement. As Champollion emphasizes, the art of writing and the written word were the fundamental principle of all Egyptian “art,” and civilization; although this writing, in hieroglyphics, is an inextricable combination of the literal, the symbolic, and the metaphorical, it is and remains, language. In Classical Greek art, it is the metaphorical which, freed from the literal meaning, reigns supreme.

Kepler’s Revolutionary Discoveries

The most crippling error in mathematics, economics, and physical science today, is the hysterical refusal to acknowledge the work of Johannes Kepler, Pierre Fermat, and Gottfried Leibniz—not Newton!—in developing the calculus. This video, accessible to the layman, uses animated graphics to teach Kepler’s principles of planetary motion, without resorting to mathematical formalism.



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