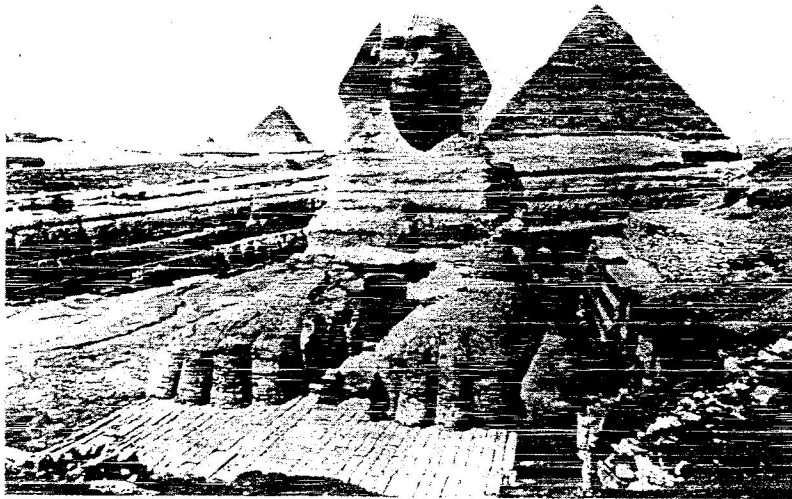


# Sphinx and Pyramids



Egypt, (3rd Millenium, B.C.)

Limestone

Bettmann Archive/New York, N.Y.

AE 193

*... built nearly five thousand years ago as tombs, mostly for the rulers of the Old Kingdom, 2780-2300 B.C., these sepulchres, set in the limitless space of the desert, are truly the first great works of abstract art. —Robin Fedden*

## INTRODUCTION

Rising majestically out of the desert sand, the Great Pyramids of Giza and their protecting Sphinx have awed all who have surveyed them for almost five thousand years. In the 2nd century B.C., the Roman philosopher Antipater of Sidon listed what he felt to be the Seven Wonders of the ancient world. Of these seven wondrous ancient architectural structures, the Pyramids were the oldest and are, today, the only surviving structures from that famous compilation. It was the stark beauty of these stone constructions which dazzled the ancient world, and that same beauty continues to impress the modern world.

Built during the IV Dynasty of the Old Kingdom around the year 2500 B.C., the three great pyramids of Giza are the most famous of all remaining Egyptian pyramids. The Pharaohs of the Old Kingdom for whom these magnificent tomb structures were built are most frequently known by their Greek names: Cheops (2575 B.C.); his successor Chephren (2550 B.C.); and then, Mykerinus (2525 B.C.). The Pyramids continue to present modern scholars with as many questions as answers.

Their geometric purity and mysterious presence continue to dominate the great desert behind them as well as modern Cairo, located within sight of Giza.

## HISTORY

Egypt's history is divided into periods called dynasties. These dynasties are generally grouped into three major periods. The Old Kingdom, during which the Great Pyramids and Sphinx were constructed, began around 3100 B.C. and continued until the Middle Kingdom (2133B.C.-1786 B.C.). The last great period of Egyptian dynastic history, the New Kingdom, ran from 1550 B.C.- 1085 B.C.

The Egyptian Pharaoh was considered to be not only a king but a god. His kingship was both absolute and divine. As an outgrowth of the Egyptian belief in the divinity of the Pharaoh, burial customs developed into an important aspect of Egyptian culture, in which each man was responsible for insuring his own happiness in the after life. This was accomplished by supplying his tomb with the things which were considered necessary for living well. Often actual objects such as furniture, gold, or food would be placed in the burial tombs. In other cases, pictures on the wall would supply those amenities which could not be placed in the tomb. By the Fourth Dynasty (2500 B.C.), Egyptians believed that at death, the human spirit (the *ka*) required a body in which to dwell in the after life. The practice of mummification evolved to preserve the body for the *ka*. Realistic statues of the deceased

were also placed in many tombs to insure a proper home for the *ka* should the mummy become destroyed.

In modern times the discovery of tombs containing the many necessities, and often luxuries, of daily ancient Egyptian life has allowed modern day social and cultural experts to learn enormous amounts about life in ancient Egypt. Little is known of the burial practices of the average non-aristocratic Egyptian, but because of the elaborate tomb decorations and rituals of the royal class, much can be deduced about the life of the elite and those who served them.

The royal tombs were constructed to last forever. There are many theories as to how the distinctive pyramidal shape came to be utilized for tombs such as the ones at Giza. There is clear progression from the early First Dynasty above-ground rectangular tombs (Mastabas) to the Third Dynasty's Stepped pyramid structures, and then to the Fourth Dynasty's smooth-sided geometrically pure pyramids. The motivating theories behind this progressive development are less clear.

One possible explanation put forth for the evolution of the pyramidal shape suggests that when the Third Dynasty kings moved their residence to the city of Memphis, they came increasingly under the influence of the cult of the Sun-god Re. A fetish (an object believed to have magical powers) associated with Re was a pyramid-shaped stone. The Pharaohs were believed to be the earthly incarnation of the sun god, and a pyramid would, therefore, be a logical association. Whatever the derivation, the beautifully calculated geometric shapes of the pyramids remain a source of wonderment for all who encounter them.

The blocks of limestone and granite used in constructing the pyramids of Giza are believed to have been transported by boat from quarries to the south of the Nile River. Transporting these large stones, which weighed up to two tons each, could be accomplished only during the annual three month flood period. Each stone was dragged from the Nile landing area up ramps which were built to facilitate the pulling of the stones to the final resting place in the Pyramid construction. Smoothing and shaping the stones (called dressing the stones), took place at the site. The close fit of the final cut blocks was accomplished with mortar which was used more for ease in sliding the stones themselves than as a cement to hold them together. Laborers for these massive projects are believed to have been paid workers (rather than slave), and to have lived in housing complexes at the site.

The pyramids were only part of the royal funerary complex. Many additional temples, walkways, and smaller burial structures com-

pleted the burial and ritual areas. Guarding this entire complex at Giza is one of the most compelling sculptures known to man, the Great Sphinx. The Sphinx, part lion, part human, combines the attributes of both the most noble of beasts and of the Royal Pharaoh. It is strong, powerful, stately, and seemingly eternal.

The lion had been represented in Egyptian art since the Pre-Dynastic times. Its fierce strength made it an appropriate image as a protective symbol. Lions were frequently carved into paired guardians of temples, or as decorative parts of a royal throne. In this case, the lion serves as a representation of the Pharaoh as Sun God protecting the Pyramids.

## CRITICISM

The enormous crouching lion body of the Sphinx was carved from a hill of rock left from the construction of the Great Pyramids. It extends two hundred and forty feet from paws to haunches. Subject to wind, weather, and natural erosion for almost five thousand years, the Sphinx has suffered considerable damage which is apparent in its deteriorating paws and chest areas. Compelling in its gaze, the head looks forward in a proud and noble manner.

The head of the Sphinx is carved wearing the striped royal headdress, the cobra on the brow, and was originally adorned with the plaited chin beard associated with the Pharaoh's. Despite considerable facial damage, the uniquely Egyptian mixture of timelessness, idealization and specific representation can be appreciated. This ability to combine the idealized and the realistic remained constant in Egyptian art throughout centuries of change and development. The focus on the eternal god-like qualities of the Pharaoh encouraged an art form which could depict a face both specific and eternal.

Between the lion's paws can be seen a small votive temple and a stela, or upright engraved marker. These small shrines were placed at the Sphinx during the New Kingdom by sun god worshippers. Directly in front of the Sphinx have been unearthed remains of a Fourth Dynasty temple with a large central courtyard which formed part of the large complex of ceremonial buildings associated with the Pyramids and their elaborate burial rites.

Rising behind the Sphinx are the three towering Pyramids of Giza. The largest all stone buildings the world has ever known, the height of the largest of the Pyramids is topped only by the late nineteenth century spires of Cologne Cathedral in Germany. The Pyramids were built with square bases and smooth sides which form an isosceles triangle. All sides meet

at an apex. Each of the three Giza Pyramids is oriented to the four points of the compass. Each of the structures was once covered with an outer casing of finely smoothed white limestone. These coverings had subsequently been taken for other building projects. The largest of the three, the Pyramid of Cheops, was originally four hundred and eighty two feet high, but now with its outer coating gone, it reaches a height of four hundred and fifty one feet. Each of the four sides is seven hundred and fifty five feet long. The whole area occupied by the Pyramid of Cheops covers about 13 acres.

The paws of the Sphinx show repair work which has been undertaken in recent years. There continues to be much scientific discussion as to the most appropriate manner in which to treat and preserve this most ancient world monument. Twentieth century problems of tourism and air pollution have added to the on-going problems of wind and erosion. Located just miles from the metropolis of Cairo, tour buses are no longer allowed to park in the immediate vicinity of the monuments in an attempt to protect the sensitive limestone from additional pollution damage.

Compare the monumental Sphinx and Pyramids with an example of smaller Egyptian artwork, such as would have been found in tomb paintings and relief sculptures. *The Stela of the Lector Priest of Amun, and His Mother, The Chantress Amun-Hotpe* (AE 107) was carved in limestone during the Eighteenth Dynasty, ca. 1420 B.C. Executed nearly one thousand years after the Great Pyramids of Giza, the stela maintains the earlier interest in portraying qualities of the eternal and unchanging. The three central figures are shown, not as observed in nature, but as each part is most easily understood. Shoulders and eyes are depicted frontally; faces and legs in profile. The scented oil jars on the heads are depicted to clearly show their shapes and thereby be recognizable. This was a convention used throughout Egyptian art to ease communication in "reading" a painting or bas relief sculpture. The hieroglyphics, or symbol writing, used by the ancient Egyptians, can be seen framing the figures. Although from a later period in Egyptian history, this stela is similar to the one which can be seen between the paws of the Sphinx.

## AESTHETICS

For twentieth century admirers, there is an abstract beauty to the Great Pyramids that relates to much of modern art. The precise, clean lines of the Pyramids silhouetted against the desert skyline present a breathtaking spectacle. The lack of ornamentation highlights the beauty of the proportions and mammoth scale of these purely geometric shapes. Even today

the eternal stability sought by the architects of ancient Egypt continues to affect the viewers of these awe-inspiring monuments.

The Egyptians built the Pyramids to reflect upon their ideas about the pharaohs, about the after-life, and about their gods. Discuss the ways in which societies express their ideas. How do the arts help present an idea visually. Can beauty be appreciated for many reasons? Would the Pyramids be less impressive if they were not burial sites? Consider the impression one receives from seeing the St. Louis Arch rising against the skyline. How do these two monuments differ? How are they alike? These questions can help direct a class discussion about the many ways in which beauty is perceived by different societies.

## STUDIO ACTIVITIES

Building on the experiences of studying the Pyramids and Sphinx, use plastilene or clay for a three dimensional activity. A lesson focusing on geometric shapes is well suited to work in plastilene. Building a pyramid of clay helps to reinforce the concepts of geometric design in the Pyramids. Starting with square bases, students should build equal sided triangles on each of the four sides. Continue manipulating the clay into the triangular sides which meet at an apex. Plastilene will easily allow cutting the finished shapes with wires to indicate how interior chambers would have been allowed for in the building of the stone structures.

Once the structure of the pyramids has been understood, re-use the plastilene clay for an exercise in modeling an animal / human combination form. Pictures from magazines can provide models for the creative invention of fantasy animals, such as the Sphinx. A fun drawing exercise at the completion of the modeling exercise is to have students display finished products, and to draw additional combinations using each other's examples as models.

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