

THE (DYS)FUNCTION OF ART IN ANCIENT AND CONTEMPORARY EGYPT: RELIGION, IDENTITY AND MIND

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ABSTRACT:

This paper will examine the functions and dysfunctions of art in ancient times and modern societies from an artistic perspective. It will focus on the New Kingdom of Ancient Egypt as well as on contemporary Egypt (post revolution). It will give historical context to specific examples of identity expression in art and use modern language to explore both ancient and modern artistic expressions in Egypt. The paper will make correlations between narratives in the ancient and modern worlds through specific examples of visual art and how it was used as a channel for both mourning and liberation. Using Ancient and modern Egyptian mortuary artwork, this paper explores these correlations in the ancient and contemporary societies based on the examination of visual and textual contexts from both periods. This examination of mortuary art analyzes the purposes of these different types of mortuary works to determine their functionality or dysfunctionality, demonstrating the vulnerabilities of self-expression through art as a result of religion and politics. These findings show the effects of religion and politics on identity in Egypt and how it has been used beneficially to society and individuals as well as detrimentally throughout Egypt's history.

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Introduction

Art has functioned in a variety of ways throughout history. It has helped governments propagate beliefs in their policies and in regimes to build confidence, it has helped explorers document the flora and fauna of the world and religions develop and expand despite time and location. It has been the catalyst for understanding our world from the past to the present, and everything in between. Visual art has proven to be a tool for contradiction and confusion as this paper will examine. Art has disseminated untruths and dangerous accusations. It has caused misrepresentation and exposure to defile peaceful people and places. While it has helped us

understand the world around us, it has also perpetuated harmful stereotypes and gender roles, perpetuating a stagnant frame of mind, solidified with 'evidence' in the image. At the same time it has been a tool for revolutions as well.

Art is powerful. 'Art' today is often thought of in a traditional sense, being paintings, drawings, sculptures, or the like. However, 'art' encompasses much more territory, and affects a much greater audience than presumed. We consume art daily, often without reflecting on what it both does for and to us. We will look at how visual art has been used in Ancient and modern (Revolutionary) Egypt in their various functions and dysfunctions.

1. (Dys)Function of visual art in Ancient Egypt

1.1 Religious works and rituals

Religious art has served many purposes throughout history, including missionary work, storytelling, event archive, and, naturally, diffusion of information though the artist was often looked at as a perpetrator of misuse of images (Taylor, 1998). This was an effective way for people to learn about the religion in question and gain support and followers, which often meant revenue, but also reached a wider audience of common people, among them the illiterate (Carter, 1976). This can be understood from a different perspective as both functional and dysfunctional, as imagery, without context leads to misinterpretation or misrepresentation when trying to express a very specific idea.

In Ancient Egypt (New Kingdom, c.1550 BCE), temples and cults of different gods and goddesses were likened to governing bodies as high priests were both considered a religious and political authority (Mark, 2021). This conflict of interest led to inequity and inequality in the religious and governing bodies, which allowed the temple cults to control both the land, and subsequently the people who worked it, as well as to exert great influence over the pharaoh (Mark, 2021).

These temples were intricate and detailed in providing stories of creation as well as in showing events throughout Egyptian history that displayed pharaohs' greatness and reinforced their connection to the gods. This was both a means of worship (for the gods' roles in these achievements), but also a way to educate the public and 'promote' certain agendas (Temple Architecture, n.d.). These stories were etched into the walls as friezes, circulating pillars, and covering ceilings of temples, painted with vibrant colors, unlike the faded hues and sandy stones left today (Stünkel, n.d.). They used great artisans to garnish these temples. The pictures acted as words, creating meaning, and, further, a sense of understanding and purpose, but were often vulnerable to misinterpretation (Shehab, 2017).

The images flooding temples' interiors and exteriors proved to be an outlet to the common people. This encouraged people to find community and belonging.

Temple priests performed other duties necessary to run the temple and care for the gods, but they did not perform any duties such as proselytism, or serving or educating the public (Mark, 2021). The artwork throughout the temple was at storyteller, providing examples of authority embedded in the images. They relayed “truths” of life as they were believed to recreate life within them (Stünkel, n.d.).

While working in temples as one of the many varieties of priests was lucrative, it was part-time, and a sense of identity was crucial then, as so much depended on it (Mark, 2021). What does that mean? At the time and for centuries, jobs, especially artisan jobs, were passed down, or inherited, from one family member to the next, often father to son, etc. (Artisans of Ancient Egypt, 2018). This meant that there was not much room for exploration of life, rather a very deep sense of belong and advancing the work your father (or relative) provided you. It was an honor to have such esteem, again, especially as an artisan. The best of them worked directly for pharaohs in the artisan village creating jewelry along with preparing all tomb and funerary necessities – linens, vessels, sarcophagi, furniture, etc. (Artisans of Ancient Egypt, 2018). This profound connection with one’s heritage made separation of one’s personal identity inseparable from that of their family and career.

The failures or dysfunctions of the aforementioned aspects of religious “text” in the form of imagery (and religion) are numerous and perhaps more detrimental than beneficial. While religion seemed to provide all of these wonderful aspects in a time in history, especially Egyptian history, of great wealth, the people were misguided by religion due to power within the cult(s). While cults seemingly provided a lot for their followers, it was at a great cost to them in reality. The cult followers often sought assistance from the temple, be it medical, financial, or protective, however they were expected to make regular offerings, as a sign of gratitude. Though it is obviously burdensome when living on low wages or even in poverty, it was nevertheless expected nevertheless (Mark, 2021). Pharaohs would build temples and require the followers and priests to maintain them. Priests were often highly paid, and followers could have belonged to any class (Mark, 2021). Mark (2021) examines evidence of priests profiting from the land belonging to the temple and priesthood, gaining riches comparable to those of a Pharaoh. And much like religious entities in the United States of America today, they were tax-exempt, furthering their wealth (Mark, 2021).

Art in these temples projected what pharaohs deemed necessary – the pharaoh interacting with deities, depictions of plentiful offerings to the pharaoh, and images of the pharaoh at important festivals showing his power – manipulating cult followers through the depictions (Oppenheim, 2004). The images that adorned the temples acted as propaganda to encourage belief and following of the cult, exploiting people for their need to believe and be ‘good’ people, as well as those in need. All of these tactics further perpetuate a sense of false identity because of the

constant visual barrage they are confronted with, acting as religious propaganda. The depictions only served to represent and idealized version of the individual (Baines & Lacovara 2002).

1.2 Communication between worlds

Aware of the tangled and complex Ancient Egyptian identity and its deep association with heritage, it is not hard to understand the link to continued communication of the living to the deceased through imagery. This connection, as a part of their cultural traditions, acts in one way as a necessary custom, to remain in contact and communion with the deceased. It also acts as a way to continue an abundant afterlife.

This sense of obligation to and respect for the deceased is noble, as long as it can be maintained. But like our modern traditions, some can be lost from one generation to the next as our acquaintance with older generations, or even later ancestors, weakens, the sense of obligation can be lost and less effort is made in maintaining those direct connections. And while it was not uncommon for families to have group burial sites, the real offerings were required to be replenished and could have been quite demanding for so many (Baines & Lacovara, 2002). Many tombs were painted or engraved with offering rituals and foods. This ensured that the deceased would seemingly always have food as needed, in the case that their descendants did not or could not provide them, though the chants were needed to enact the delivery (Baines & Lacovara, 2002). Artistic expressions of sustenance proved to be a necessary aspect of funerary processes and rituals allowing for continued communion with the deceased. Visitations of the tombs by family and cult members were a necessary aspect of a continued, prosperous eternal life.

1.3 Elimination

There is another association between the living and the dead through imagery. It was used as a means to both honor and dishonor. While many understand the concept of honoring others with their likeness in death – often using realistic depictions of the deceased as a way of remembering them, these same images were used adversely. The image, and name, of the deceased was of high importance as it was spoken by the descendants when visiting, which gave new life to the deceased (Ikram, 2015). This allowed them to continue ‘living’ in the afterlife. But the destruction of one’s image or name (cartouche) in the living world meant an end to one’s eternal life. This eternal life, however, was what most Egyptians worked all their living lives for. They spent their lives planning their afterlife and preparing for it. So, the destruction, and consequent death, in the afterlife meant one had to protect one’s image even in death. Today, we can see examples of destruction of likenesses and names, graffiti, etc. as a way to eliminate one’s enemy or wrongdoer

(Baines & Lacovara, 2002).

Protecting one's tomb and name was of key importance as not only tomb robbery and vandalism occurred, but erasure of a deceased person and full occupation of a tomb could occur as well. Protection spells were often depicted both on the sarcophagi and in tombs to aid in the protection of the deceased. The erasure of the pictorial evidence of a tomb owner meant the tomb could be recycled and reused (Baines & Lacovara, 2002). While there are some instances of this, it was greatly discouraged as it was a criminal act. It was, as one would imagine, ill-advised to anger or disturb the dead, so robbing and vandalizing happened, but were thought to have cursed the individual perpetrator (Baines & Lacovara, 2002).

Imagery served a beautiful purpose of honoring and memorializing individuals allowing their descendants a sense of communication by way of visitation and communion at the mortuary site. Families would retell the stories and spells depicted on the walls, speaking to and with their loved ones (Ikram, 2015). But these same images left the deceased vulnerable, proving that with mere bad intentions or desperation one could be destroyed.

2. (Dys)Function of visual art in Post-Revolutionary Egypt

The 2011 Egyptian Revolution was for many a harrowing time where many lives were lost fighting for change for Egyptians against a corrupt government regime. It was a series of violent attacks from the police and military in an attempt for Hosni Mubarak to remain unchanged in power (Egypt Uprising of 2011, 2011). While many onlookers saw it as period of protest, Egyptians saw it as the climax of frustrations which lead to the Revolution through rejection of government reform and constant oppression by the regime (Egypt Uprising of 2011, 2011). The revolution began in 2010, but continues today through artists and social justice fighters. They continue to create and fight, some silently and/or anonymously as the current government continues to ignore the will of the people and use the military as intimidation against any new or continued revolt. This section focuses on the Post-Revolutionary Egypt as a way to specify time.

2.1 Memorialization and Remembrance

Art created during and directly following the 2011 Revolution has resonated with people around the world, especially those that watched the revolution happening on their TVs, and, of course, for those that lived and fought in it. This section will look at specific examples of Revolutionary art.

Both in ancient and modern societies we create artwork in the likeness of others as a way of honoring and remembering them, but in times of war or unrest, like in the case of 2011 Egypt, it is used as a way to speak to those who are indifferent or even defending the actions of the government (Awad, 2017a). The memorialization

of lives lost during the Revolution was a way to bring light to a dark time and to people in struggle (Awad et al., 2017b). Martyrs and the abused become symbols adopted by the society to “embody dynamic meanings and representations that communicate different narratives,” according to Awad (2017a).

One may ask, “What purpose does it serve to memorialize innocent lives lost in a revolution, other than to remember them?” The answer is simple and yet profound. The people fighting against injustice during the 2011 Egyptian Revolution knew the risks of their actions of protest. While it can be assumed no one was hoping to die as a martyr, many had probably come to the conclusion that it was a very real possibility, especially considering the government’s violent reaction. They were adults who had decided to risk their lives for their people to have justice and improve their lives. They had a cause to fight for. These deaths, regardless of the innocuous actions of civilians, were unjust and undeserved. So why memorialize if society accepts death as collateral damage in a civil uprising? First, we must respect the deceased as an individual and also as a sudden absence of an individual, reflecting on the fact that there will be no more memories with them, rather only memories of them that remain. Johnson and Nyhof explain that using systems of transcendental beliefs will eventually regulate themselves, which they explain prior as being “powerfully relevant and pragmatically regulatory, precisely because they reflect higher-order organization” (2006). They explain further, “These organizational processes commonly give rise to ideas regarding the existence of a higher, deeper order, beyond the perceptible given” (Johnson and Nyhof, 2006) which can be understood that these beliefs of creating lasting memory and change through memorial works are not only beliefs, but can be achieved through action.

2.2 Activism and Protest

Art as activism is often seen in memorial art as it serves two main functions: to remember and to remind, or speak out. Activist art can be memorialization of an individual, but also act as protest in the same extent (Main, 2015). Yilmaz describes memorials as not only a “promise of enduring remembering, but also the symbols of ephemeral memory” (2010).

Those who lost their lives in protest deserve remembrance and honor, though the Egyptian government was quick to cover or strip any graffiti, or memorial art, that appeared. This did not discourage activist artists from reshaping those works, or creating new works in their place. The activist artists’ works were quick to go viral and become staples of the Revolution, like that of ‘girl in the blue bra’ (Amaria, 2011). Images that were shown on television and in other media outlets of abused or murdered protesters enacted new artwork as protest and the ‘blue bra girl’ was embodied by men and women alike (Amaria, 2011).

This reuse of the image is both beautiful, but also distressing. Those heinous

moments of blatant abuse of power and violence are immortalized and plastered on walls, carried on signs, and act as a reminder of the ongoing oppression and violence. The dysfunction of this type of memorial art can cause lasting wounds for the families and victims that see the images over and over again. It does not allow for time or space from the incident for them to mourn and recover, which already is a arduous and daunting experience, and Awad explains this process of memory reconstruction as a creative process because it entails reconstruction “based on the demands of the present time and influenced by the current social context” (2017a) that essentially requires personal cognizance of one’s current state but that also accounts for the social context around them that may or may not hinder recover, growth, or acceptance. Memorial art can be appealing as an art form in commemorating the loss of many, but acts as the constant alarm that things will never be the same.

2.3 Liberation and Repression

Visual art has acted as publicity and propaganda as we have seen in many military regimes, including Egypt (Awad et al., 2017b). It has served as memorials and messages of protest from the people, and yet left wounds unhealed and caused oppressors to be more violent, which is evident in individual and journalistic accounts (Amira, 2011). These functions of art have all proven successful and failures in different contexts, but why? Art serves two major purposes, especially in developing countries like Revolutionary Egypt. Visual art gives hope to the oppressed, articulating sentiments that are repressed or silenced in tyrannical situations, saying the words that are dangerous vocalize, and expressing emotions there are not yet words for (Awad et al., 2017b). While heavy-handed regimes would believe their actions are just and often paper over destruction with a fresh coat of paint or even national pride works, using visual art as an instrument for healing with the public, they have used it effectively as a repressive mechanism (Main, 2015).

Though memorial art can ‘feel’ liberating and act as a real sense of expression it can receive mixed emotions from the general public when the memorial art is graffiti activist art. It is meant to “give light to a person who is devastated by what’s happening, maybe this can help people continue their fight or it could help show them the path,” as stated by one of Awad’s interviewed graffiti artists, named ‘EZ’ for anonymity (2017b). However, as art has this effect on people, it has the adverse effect when too generalized, as expressed by a pedestrian interviewed by Awad who stated, “[H]ow do I know whether this person is in prison or a martyr or just a painting of a beautiful lady, only they (the artist) know this person, they are not reaching the wider audience” as she made reference to a portrait of a prisoner (2017b). Awad cites Marková (2003) stating that the work must be comprehensible, or seemingly with some context, otherwise when there is too much distance

from the artist, or perhaps also the context, then the viewer will reject [the work] (2017b). This is a consistent struggle for artists as they may not want to put themselves out there or make too obvious their connection with the work, however, as discussed, it is necessary for the artist to include more context to reach the wider audience, as the pedestrian mentioned above. The lack of consideration of the viewer risks a loss of message, especially in activist art.

This mixed sense or understanding of the situation can cause dysphoria, often brought on by high stress and grief (Lexico Dictionaries, n.d.). Since grief presents itself in different ways, much like depression, dysphoria can cause long bouts of these feelings that make one feel as if there is no future or end to the darkness, expressing symptoms such as sadness, apathy, fatigue, worry, uneasiness, and general dissatisfaction with one's life, but is a mood rather than a condition often associated with other mental illnesses or conditions ("Dysphoria", n.d.). Living in unrest, grieving the loss of lives and stability, with high stress related to the uncertainty of the future of the country could ostensibly create a psychological dysphoria about one's situation. When there are few resources and outlets to grief, stress and anxiety one can correlate the blasé attitudes of many after years of unrest as situational dysphoria, perhaps in combination with diagnosed or undiagnosed depression, anxiety, or other mental illnesses such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). When even the street art has no context, it can seem like a hopeless situation or give a sense of such due to the lack of motive for the cause.

Conclusion

Through the use of visual art, clarity can be brought to tough topics, including abuse and misinformation as Johnson and Nyhof (2006) conclude in *Transcendental Self-Organization* that cognitive functions direct one "...to what is vitally important, not what is strictly, objectively real". Visual art has been manipulated and exploited, and has functioned as both throughout the history of Egypt to unite people and kingdoms through death and politics/religion (Main, 2015). However, art as a conduit for good, for outward, visual expression of inexpressible emotions, for protest, allyship, and storytelling, among so many other positive uses, is liberation from the oppressor as Saad (2017) explains artist in a variety of genres have "...camouflaged their oppression behind symbolic works". Art functions through society's dysfunctions, though it can be abused and used as equally unjustly as honorably, as Awad (2017a) explains that "...narratives of the past always change and get reconstructed".

Visual art helps us gain understanding of ourselves and through the act of making or consumption of art itself, as seen in Egypt with the rise of the modern Egyptian identity shaped by the "return" of pharaonic art in contemporary society and media (Saad, 2017). It creates empathy and sharing through shared experiences.

While everyone interprets and consumes art differently, as Awad (2017a) explains, it is clear in its necessity for both function and dysfunction because "...symbols in public space [are] intentionally produced and modified to communicate a certain narrative and regulate a community's collective memory". This dichotomy of visual art will continue to shape cultures around the world, but should be used with caution as this paper demonstrates the misuse and dysfunction of art when used for personal or political gain can cause lasting (mis)understanding or perpetuation of false narratives.

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(DIS)FUNKCIJA UMJETNOSTI U DREVNOM I SAVREMENOM EGIPTU: RELIGIJA, IDENTITET I UM

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APSTRAKT:

Vizuelna umjetnost igra jednu od ključnih uloga u našem svakodnevnom životu, što je postalo posebno vidljivo tokom pandemije izazvane virusom COVID-19. No, s istorijske tačke gledišta, postoji i dublji smisao vizuelne umjetnosti za čovječanstvo. Vizuelna umjetnost služi u propagandne svrhe za mnoge religije te promoviše izraze identiteta u svim oblicima, a ujedno za mnoge pojedince ima i terapijsku moć. I dok su to sve primjeri u kojima umjetnost donosi mnogobrojne blagodati, ona takođe širi dezinformacije, (re)produkuje rodnu diskriminaciju i izaziva psihološku uznemirenost. U istorijskom smislu, umjetnost mijenja političke odnose i rodne norme u različitim kulturama, te utiče na pojedince i čitave zajednice širom svijeta. Sa druge strane, ovaj pozitivan i nadahnjujući uticaj ima i svoje naličje - patnju, pobunu, pa čak i smrt. U ovom radu ispituju se funkcije i disfunkcije umjetnosti u antičkom vremenu i savremenim društvima iz umjetničkog ugla. Središte je pažnje na Novom kraljevstvu tokom perioda starog Egipta kao i na savremenom Egiptu nakon revolucije iz 2011. godine. Rad pruža uvid u istorijski kontekst specifičnih izraza identiteta u umjetnosti i upotrebe savremenog jezika da bi se istražili umjetnički izrazi kako u oba pomenuta perioda. Naposljetku, u radu se porede narativi u antičkom i savremenom svijetu kroz specifične primjere vizuelne umjetnosti u pogledu njene upotrebe kao kanala za izražavanje i žalosti i slobodarskih ideja.

Ključne riječi:

Novo Kraljevstvo, post-revolucionarni Egipat, disfunkcije umjetnosti, identitet, psihološka uznemirenost

