

WHEN THE
PYRAMIDS WERE
BUILT

EGYPTIAN ART OF THE OLD KINGDOM

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

WHEN THE
PYRAMIDS WERE BUILT

EGYPTIAN ART OF THE OLD KINGDOM

DOROTHEA ARNOLD

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRUCE WHITE

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
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Frontispiece: Detail of *King Menkaure and a Queen* (fig. 57)

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INTRODUCTION

HISTORY AND SOCIETY

When the Greek historian Herodotus saw the pyramids of Giza in the fifth century B.C.E., he was told that the three pharaohs Cheops (Khufu), Chephren (Khafre), and Mykerinos (Menkaure) had built these astonishing monuments. Today, 170 years after the hieroglyphs were deciphered and after historical and archaeological research has been conducted for five generations, we do not know very much more than Herodotus did about the history of the Pyramid Age. True, we can place this particular phase of the ancient Egyptian culture, usually called the Old Kingdom, in the third millennium B.C.E. Absolute dates for the period—from about 2650 to 2150 B.C.E., give or take fifty years—have been established with fair certainty through retrograde calculations based on the more securely fixed—because in part astronomically determined dates—of later Egyptian history. A list of rulers (see page 10) has been developed from various ancient sources, such as the Fifth Dynasty annals inscribed on a stone slab now in Palermo, a newly identified, very faded inscription from Saqqara, and the king list on a famous papyrus of Ramesside date (about 1295–1070 B.C.E.) in Turin. But even in this list uncertainties remain, and a number of rulers are still only names. Following the writings of Manetho, an Egyptian historian of the third century B.C.E., the Old Kingdom sovereigns are further assigned to four royal families—the Third, Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth of Manetho's thirty-one Egyptian dynasties. The number of years allotted to the reign of each Old Kingdom ruler is less certain, because the various later sources differ widely on this matter; in addition, when contemporary inscriptions specify a particular number of years, it is often not clear whether they are referring to regnal years or to occurrences of a biannual nationwide cattle count.

Knowledge about Egypt's relations with the outside world during the Old Kingdom is based on contemporary inscriptions and archaeological finds.

LEFT:

Relief Block with Funerary Stela of Huti and Ketisen (detail).
Egyptian Museum, Cairo (CG 1392)

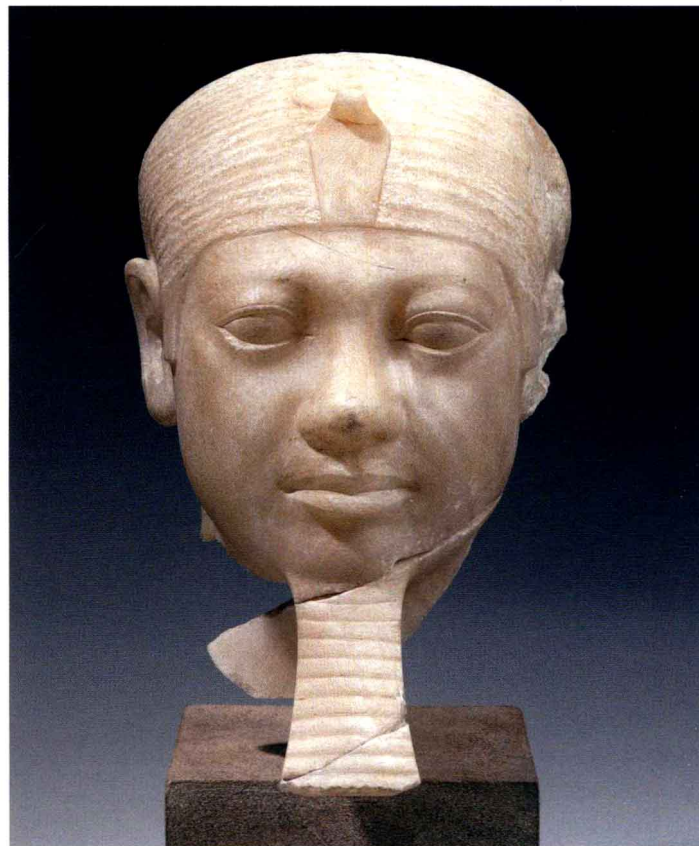
Pharaohs' names and images incised on rocks near hard-stone quarries in the mountains of the Egyptian Eastern Desert as well as near copper and turquoise mines on the Sinai Peninsula indicate that expeditions were sent out under a number of kings to obtain precious raw materials. Stamp seals bearing royal names and found at Old Kingdom sites in Nubia as well as shards of stone vessels with similar inscriptions discovered in the Lebanese port city of Byblos (near present-day Beirut) testify that Old Kingdom pharaohs looked outside their country, to the south, for supplies of African wood, panther skins, incense, and elephant tusks and, to the east, for cedar logs, wine, oils, and resins. Most of their activities outside of Egypt were probably confined to trading ventures of a predominantly peaceful character, albeit backed up by military force; some expeditions of this nature would actually be described in detail by Sixth Dynasty inscriptions in the tombs of officials. However, more seriously hostile raids against foreign countries must also have taken place, for they are implied by reliefs in the royal pyramid temples of the Fourth and Fifth Dynasties and by fragments depicting a siege and other battle scenes preserved from the Fourth (figs. 48–52) and Sixth Dynasties. Yet there is no evidence to indicate that Old Kingdom pharaohs annexed any foreign lands, even if some Sixth Dynasty inscriptions speak of “pacifying” outlying countries in the south in order to ensure the secure transfer of goods. All the Old Kingdom sources concerning foreign lands testify to a strong sense of identity in Egypt at that time. The home country was a secure and nurturing place outside of which it was precarious to venture. Life, in the proper sense, was possible only under the rule of the pharaoh.

Our knowledge of historical events within Egypt during the Old Kingdom is even more vague. Often the only fact known about a reign is that the king built certain monuments, such as a pyramid or a temple. About the reign of Khufu, for instance, nothing much is known. A crisis in the royal family when his reign came to an end appears to be hinted at in oft-quoted inscriptions in the tomb of Hetep-heres II, first the wife of his crown prince, Kawab, then—after Kawab died prematurely—queen to his successor, Djedefre

(fig. 42). That certain disruptive events took place at the time seems also to be indicated by Djedefre's building his pyramid not beside his father's at Giza but farther north at Abu Rawash. Djedefre was, moreover, the first of many Old Kingdom pharaohs to incorporate into his name the component "Re," the appellation of the supreme sun god, an indication that an important long-term development—the ascent of solar religion—was under way in Egypt. Other evidence of that same development is discernible in Djedefre's assumption of the title "Son of Re" and in the fact that his successor, Khafre (figs. 43–47), built a temple to Horemakhet, the god of the rising sun, directly in front of an imposing rock-cut image of the god in the form of a sphinx bearing the facial features of the king (fig. 45). The eventual construction, under Kings Userkaf, Niuserre (fig. 79), and others, of elaborate sanctuaries dedicated to Re indicates that the solar religion must have reached its peak during the Fifth Dynasty.

One reason for the scarcity of historical information from the Old Kingdom lies in the difference between the ancient Egyptians' attitude toward temporal events and present-day concepts of history. Ancient annals were apt to note for each king's regnal year the celebration of religious and state festivals, the founding of sanctuaries, the creation of statues of the gods, and the dedication of revenues to the gods rather than events that we would consider "historical." The fact most important to the economic life of the country—the height of the Nile's flood—was usually also set down, and, more rarely, a notation may be preserved concerning incoming cedar logs or a raid into Nubia. Among the few Old Kingdom sources that provide information of the kind contemporary Western historians would require to write a history of the period are the lists of titles cited at length in the tombs of high officials. Many of these lists, which indeed read like career résumés (figs. 36, 121), provide invaluable information about the overall structure of the Old Kingdom's administration and society.

At the peak of the Old Kingdom state stood the pharaoh, from whom all power derived (fig. 1). The divine nature of this omnipotent king afforded an



1. *Head of King Menkaure as a Young Man*. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harvard University–Museum of Fine Arts Expedition (09.203)

especially high social status to individuals who directly served his person, including the royal hairdressers and barbers as well as those in charge of the wardrobe and the "morning house" (levee) of the king. An inscription (Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE 66682) from the tomb of Ra-wer, a Fifth Dynasty official in charge of the king's wardrobe, offers a rare glimpse into real life among the entourage of an Old Kingdom pharaoh. As recently interpreted by James Allen, the text recounts that during the performance of a religious ritual, King Neferirkare inadvertently barred the way of Ra-wer with his staff. This may have caused the official, who was acting in his capacity as a *sem* priest, to stumble and perhaps even to drop some sacred accoutrements. Immediately the pharaoh exclaimed, "Be sound!" in order to protect his attendant from divine punishment for disrupting a holy ceremony.

The king did this, states the text, “because [Ra-wer] was more precious to His Majesty than any man.”

From the beginning of the Fourth Dynasty, the strictly centralized administration of Old Kingdom Egypt was headed by an official (at first a prince of the royal house) whose title is usually translated as “vizier.” These officials not only controlled the country’s administration in the name of the king but were also, during certain reigns, in charge of the country’s workforce, which meant that all the functions entailed in building the pyramids were their responsibility. In the Fifth Dynasty, as the administration of the Egyptian state passed from the royal family to professional, predominantly nonroyal officials, viziers assumed the more definitely structured offices of supreme legal functionaries, heads of the scribal oversight of state offices, and heads of the state granaries and treasuries. To lighten the heavy burden of all these duties, several viziers were appointed contemporaneously. Many of the astonishing achievements of the Old Kingdom are due to viziers, and the names of men like Hemunu (fig. 33), who was probably responsible for the building of Khufu’s pyramid at Giza, and Ptah-shepses, vizier and Overseer of All Construction Projects under King Niuserre (see fig. 79), stand proudly beside those of their pharaohs.

Officials under the viziers’ overall authority headed all the other branches of the government; in addition, they led expeditions into neighboring lands, commanded fleets of ships, and supervised building activities throughout the country. In most cases these officials also filled honorary but prominent priestly offices in pyramid temples and in various religious institutions and sanctuaries, both in Memphis, the capital, and in the provinces. Besides probable living quarters in Memphis, these men typically owned large country houses with vineyards and lakes on the agricultural estates, from which they derived the bulk of their income. Officials of this status, as well as the members of their families, are the subjects of most Old Kingdom statues, such as figures 85, 88, and 91.

For the most part, the acting priesthood consisted of scribes and officials recruited to serve in the temples for certain parts of the year. Such service was both an

honor and a source of additional income. Priestesses were devoted primarily to the cults of the female deities, such as the goddess Hathor, but could in rare cases serve male gods. While their main ritual offices were those of musicians and singers (fig. 40), funerary priestesses are also known. Women in the Old Kingdom, unlike those in later periods of Egyptian history, might hold responsible offices, for instance, in the administration of the house of a high-status woman. Wives and daughters of officials, like their male relatives, often had the title “Royal Acquaintance.”

Finds of statues, reliefs, and texts from provincial sites are scarce for the earlier phases of the Old Kingdom, but a small number of provincial statues from the Third and the early Fourth Dynasty (fig. 14) display high standards of craftsmanship and art. After the end of the Fifth Dynasty, as the provincial administrations became increasingly more independent and powerful, many provincial officials had elaborate tombs decorated with reliefs and wall paintings and furnished with statues (figs. 124, 126). Some scholars have argued that the increase in provincial power ultimately led to the downfall of the Old Kingdom. However, there were doubtlessly various causes for the decay of the administrative structure, not the least among them serious climatic changes in the Middle East and North Africa, which probably caused droughts and consequent food shortages in the Nile Valley. The presence of able local administrators, who provided food and security when the central administrative structure collapsed, was possibly more advantageous than destructive. Eventually, it was from this provincial base that a unified Egypt could again rise and flourish, as the so-called Middle Kingdom (about 2040–1650 B.C.E.).

Lower down on the social ladder, in what might be called the middle class, came the scribes, who would either be assigned to assist high officials or function on their own in various record-keeping duties or in supervisory positions. Certain leading craftsmen also belonged to the middle class, although many others are more aptly designated as dependent workmen of the lower classes. As in many premodern cultures, the concept of a craftsman’s being an “artist” did not exist; nevertheless, the skilled creators of the sculptures,

OLD KINGDOM RULERS

THIRD DYNASTY		FIFTH DYNASTY	
ca. 2649–2630 B.C.E.*	Zanakht	ca. 2465–2458	Userkaf
2630–2611	Djoser	2458–2446	Sahure
2611–2605	Sekhemkhet	2446–2438	Neferirkare
2605–2599	Khaba	2438–2431	Shepseskare
2599–2575	Huni	2431–2420	Neferefre (or Raneferef)
		2420–2389	Niuserre
		2389–2381	Menkauhor
		2381–2353	Djedkare Isesi
		2353–2323	Unis
FOURTH DYNASTY		SIXTH DYNASTY	
ca. 2575–2551	Snefru		
2551–2528	Khufu (=Cheops)		
2528–2520	Djedefre (or Radjedef)		
2520–2494	Khafre (=Chephren)		
2494–2490	Nebka II	ca. 2323–2291	Teti
2490–2472	Menkaure (=Mykerinos, Latinized: Mycerinus)	2291–2289	Userkare
2472–2467	Shepseskaf	2289–2255	Pepi I
2467–2465	Djedefptah? (=Thamphthis)	2255–2246	Merenre I
		2246–2152	Pepi II
		2152–2152	Merenre II
		2152–2150	Netjerkare Siptah (=Nitocris)

*Approximate dates adopted by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

reliefs, and paintings in Old Kingdom temples and tombs were highly regarded. Such men even occasionally left their images and names on tomb walls, and many of those who commissioned tombs were eager to stress that their particular artists had been well paid. Like all craftsmen in ancient Egypt, Old Kingdom sculptors and painters functioned within firmly structured institutions, whether under royal or temple administration or in the household of a great man. Largely performing in teams and supervised by master craftsmen and scribal administrators, the craftsmen were paid according to their rank in the institution. A cemetery for middle-class officials, craftsmen, and builders, recently discovered near the pyramids of Giza, has yielded statues of a fresh and naive directness that amply compensates for a certain lack of artistic refinement (fig. 64).

People of the lowest class in Old Kingdom society were called *mrj.w* (dependents; literally, those of the irrigation canals). It was from among these predominantly agricultural laborers that the large workforces for the royal building projects, as well as the soldiers for military campaigns into foreign countries, were recruited by draft. At the building sites, the workers were divided into gangs of perhaps two hundred men, and each gang was given a particular designation that usually included the name of the king for whom they worked—"Khufu is friendly," "Khufu is powerful," or the like. Besides these dependents, prisoners of war, especially from Nubia, also performed manual labor. But up to the very end of the Old Kingdom, there is no evidence that people were owned, inherited, or disposed of as slaves.

Both middle-class people and dependents are integral participants in the activities depicted in temple and tomb reliefs. These images of life in the Nile Valley not only show the nobleman and his family but devote as much, if not more, space to farm laborers, sailors and marine troops, craftsmen, herdsmen, bird catchers, hunters, fishermen, and traders (figs. 80, 107, 119). All these individuals are rendered in their appropriate places, and although the whole certainly paraded a great man's worldly possessions, it also honored each person's contribution toward the common achievement. The hierarchically structured Old Kingdom society, as depicted in art, was not exclusive but encompassed all aspects of human existence under the gods and the pharaoh.

THE ARCHITECTURAL AND FUNCTIONAL CONTEXT OF OLD KINGDOM ART

The essence of Old Kingdom art is joy in life. Men and women are predominantly rendered as young, vigorous, and beautiful (figs. 14, 25, 26, 125). If an elderly (fig. 54), obese (fig. 33), or emaciated person (figs. 82, 96) or a dwarf (figs. 40, 41) is depicted, it is with deep respect, even awe, for the diversity of life. Animals (figs. 30, 31, 68), plants (figs. 32, 80), and elements of the inundated land (fig. 80) fully share in human existence, which is, above all, productive and pleasurable. People of all stations perform their tasks with confidence in their own abilities and in the ultimate value of their achievements. The deserts teem with wildlife, fish abound in the canals and the river, migratory birds visit the marshlands in great numbers, and the annual Nile flood comes, on the whole, with dependable regularity to water the fertile earth. No wonder that the pharaoh is depicted striding forward hand in hand with a deity (fig. 55)!

Paradoxically, this overwhelmingly positive view of life was expressed in artworks destined for the dead. With very few exceptions (fig. 14), Old Kingdom statues, reliefs, and paintings were originally created for tombs and for temples attached to royal pyramids. The paradox is resolved to some degree by the recognition that the primary function of such art was, in fact, to replicate and eternalize life, in a sense to

build a duplicate world of stone that was able to last forever.

The pyramids of the Old Kingdom were never meant to stand in isolation. King Djoser's "Step Pyramid" at Saqqara (fig. 6) was surrounded by a great many buildings, clustered in groups around several open courtyards. Attached to the early pyramids of King Snefru at Meidum and Dahshur were chapels, causeways, a statue temple (at the Bent Pyramid; fig. 21), and the ritual landing stages called valley temples, all generally aligned along an east-west axis. The chapels themselves grew into temples during the remainder of the Fourth Dynasty, were enlarged during the early Fifth Dynasty, and became standardized in form with King Sahure's multifaceted monument at Abusir (figs. 72, 73). Each royal compound was in turn surrounded by numerous rectangular superstructures marking the burial places of members of the royal family, courtiers, and officials. In the Fourth Dynasty, at Meidum, Dahshur, and especially Giza, these mastabas (after the Arabic word for "bench") were arranged in neatly aligned rows with open streets between them, thus forming veritable "cities of the dead" around the pyramids. Within both the royal temples and the mastabas, statues of the kings or officials with their wives and children formed the population of the "city of the dead," stone vessels (figs. 9, 110) were deposited to ensure that supplies for the afterlife would not perish, and wall reliefs and paintings depicted the activities and pleasures of life: all in the hope that, in stone, it would last eternally.

Of the number of ways to place statues within the pyramid temple or mastaba, one of the most conspicuous was in a niche. Protected on three sides by walls, and possibly by a door in front, the statue in its niche served as the focus of rituals and the recipient of offerings. Statues of a deceased king, for instance, were placed in niches in the center of the pyramid temples, and a daily offering ritual was performed by the priests in front of the statues. In the tombs of officials, the statue in its niche marked the place where the soul of the dead could materialize and where the living could communicate with the dead.

Statues within royal temples or mastabas could also be aligned along a wall or placed between the pillars of a hall or portico. Many royal statues were placed in this way (fig. 44), and numerous mastabas contained rows of statues, partly or wholly carved out of their rock walls. Such aligned statues are usually understood by scholars to have served as participants in rituals rather than as recipients of offerings. Even less directly involved in rites were the rare statues flanking tomb or temple entrances: their main function was doubtlessly to act as guards, as the sphinxes did at the valley temple of Khafre.

The most striking way of placing Old Kingdom statues—and the most unusual in relation to practices in other periods of Egyptian history—was to position them in a *serdab*, a closed chamber named after the Arabic word for “cellar.” The *serdab* provided the ultimate protection to the statue by hiding it away from view entirely, even from descendants entering the offering chambers of the tomb. The holes or slots often placed high up in the front walls of the *serdab* (fig. 86) were not meant for viewing the statue but rather for allowing the fragrance of burning incense, and possibly the spells spoken in rituals, to reach the statue.

In the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties *serdabs* often contained a great number of statues (figs. 90–93). Most of them represented the tomb owner, but there were also images of the owner’s spouse and their children, either as separate figures or as parts of groups in which the main figure was the tomb owner. The statues showing the tomb owner alone are usually quite varied, representing him or her in different hairstyles, wigs, garments, and poses. The male tomb owner may stand, left leg forward, holding a staff or scepter (figs. 12, 126), sit on a high seat (figs. 53, 83), or squat on the ground (fig. 127); men are often shown as scribes, sitting cross-legged, holding a papyrus roll, and reading or writing with a brush in the right hand (fig. 102). In some cases, when the facial features of the same subject were rendered differently in a series of statues, scholars have suggested that the intent was to show the tomb owner at different stages of life (fig. 64). In other cases, the statues were clearly commissioned from different artists (figs. 124, 126).

Behind all this variety, there was more than just a wish to avoid monotony. Evidently, the Old Kingdom Egyptians believed that the personality of a human being could best be described by showing the individual under various aspects. And it is significant that these aspects are expressed first and foremost by the different ways in which a person presents himself or herself: “Look, this is me wearing my short wig; this, when I sit on my high seat; this, when I write,” and so on. In fact, “self-presentation” has been identified as one of the overall aims of Egyptian art. The statue groups in the Old Kingdom *serdabs* unequivocally testify to a belief that the “real” self of a person is not identical with any single representation but resides somewhere hidden behind all of them together.

It was one of the ancient Egyptian’s most fervent wishes, expressed frequently in texts on Middle Kingdom coffins, not to be separated in the afterlife from wife or husband and children. Clearly a person’s closest family members—what we today call the nuclear family, not any wider, “tribal” connections—were an indispensable part of his or her personality. Although Old Kingdom relief representations attest to the importance of the nuclear family, the group statues in the *serdabs* are especially significant in this respect. There, we see husband and wife standing side by side, the wife usually embracing the husband (figs. 2, 61, 87), while the husband rarely embraces the wife (fig. 62); we see the couple seated equally, side by side (fig. 63), or the man seated, the woman standing (fig. 88), or the man seated, the woman squatting beside him and embracing his leg (fig. 91). And then the children come in, and again all sorts of variations occur in the poses and combinations (figs. 53, 91, 92). Viewing these multiform works in juxtaposition allows us to participate in their makers’ insightful efforts to capture the endlessly varied subtleties of human relationships.

The strong narrative element in the three-dimensional family groups becomes even more pronounced in the action statues found in *serdabs* (figs. 3, 95–101). In the past these figures were usually called “servant statues” because of the nature of the actions most of them perform. Women grind grain or press half-baked bread through sieves to make beer; men stir stews in



2. *Pair Statue of Ka-pu-ptah and Ipep*. Kunsthistorisches Museum, Ägyptisch-Orientalische Sammlung, Vienna (ÄS 7444). See also fig. 87.

cooking pots or butcher calves (fig. 95); a potter works at the wheel (figs. 96–99), and a woman nurses two infants (figs. 100, 101)—all these activities were certainly performed in real life by servants and dependents. Yet, some action statues bear inscriptions that give the name of either a peer of the tomb owner or a member of his family. These have led to the current theory that these statues represented an entourage of family and friends engaged in tasks that would ensure the deceased's eternal sustenance and rebirth. And such offices could indeed be considered as basic acts of piety toward a dead parent or relative. Although tombs from the late Fourth Dynasty on depict the family of the owner sharing with the deceased only the elevated activities of a noble's life, the early Fourth Dynasty tomb of Itet, wife of the vizier Nefer-maat, at Meidum, shows the couple's sons (identified by name in the

inscriptions) catching birds in a clapnet, sowing grain (figs. 23, 24), building boats, and caring for the house pets. It is as if, in this one woman's afterlife, the whole world were inhabited only by her family, whose members work together to ensure eternal life for her.

The creation of action statues certainly offered a daunting challenge to sculptors: to transfer poses and groupings otherwise represented in two-dimensional reliefs into three-dimensional works. That their best efforts met this challenge magnificently can be seen in each of the figures illustrated here (figs. 3, 95–101). In a few works of the Fifth Dynasty and in more of the Sixth, the action-statue mode was applied to larger-size sculpture and even to royal images, as in the half-lifesize kneeling captives found in pyramid temples (fig. 116), the statues of figures kneeling and squatting in astonishingly free poses (fig. 127), and a statuette of the kneeling King Pepi I (fig. 115). It is interesting to note that the action of such figures usually appears to be addressed toward an invisible counterpart: the captives kneeling presumably before the king, the king before a god. Action statues of the “servant statue” type, on the other hand, were usually part of a whole group of such figures, united by their common deposition in a serdab.

FORM AND CREATIVITY IN OLD KINGDOM ART

Art historians have always been impressed by the ancient Egyptians' adherence to certain preconceived artistic forms and rules—so much so that the term “Egyptian” has been used to characterize any highly stylized, iconic art. Old Kingdom sculptors and painters did indeed observe a firm set of standards and rules, many aspects of which were inherited from the preceding Archaic Period and some even from late Predynastic times. But it was during the Old Kingdom that these artistic standards received their final shape and became the guidelines that would be followed during all subsequent periods of ancient Egyptian history. Old Kingdom artists can therefore certainly be said to have formalized, if not invented, the basics of Egyptian art.

In the Old Kingdom, as in subsequent periods of Egyptian history, two-dimensional art forms showed