
Depiction Of Human Body In Egyptian And Greek Art

ESSAY #3: Compare and contrast the way the human body/"the figure" is treated in both ancient Egyptian and Greek art.

The human body is treated both similarly and differently in ancient Egypt and Greece. The Greeks style of sculpting is influenced heavily by the Egyptians, but throughout time, the style start to vary immensely. These similarities and differences are both shown through how much movement and emotion is given to the artworks, how deities are portrayed, as well as the exploitation of using the human body for propaganda and/or storytelling.

In ancient Egypt, figures were always portrayed idealistically and without much emotion. Greece creates their own sculptures in this same fashion until the Archaic and Classical periods where they begin to add some sense of life and realism from both emotion and body movement. This sense of realism is emphasized even more in the Early and High Classical periods when more contrapposto is introduced to the sculptures. Before the Orientalizing period and during the Geometric period, the Greeks made their figures solely with geometric shapes – hence the naming of the time period. This style of painting – and even sculpting – served its purpose in getting a point across that the figure was in fact a human, but there was no sense of life to the art. When looking at a piece from this time, the viewer would not be fooled that this could be an actual person rather than just a few lines. As time goes on to the Orientalizing period, Greek art has transformed to look more like that of the Egyptians; as shown through the Lady of Auxerre (Crete, Greece ca. 650-625 BCE), there is an attempt at portraying at least some sense of volume and mass through the sculpture. Continuing onto the Archaic period, there is a much more noticeable difference between the work of the Egyptians and that of the Greeks. During this time of 6th century BCE, the Greeks introduce something new into their sculptures that the Egyptians lacked: emotion. This little addition makes a world of difference when looking for realism in a figure. The Archaic smile is the most notable emotion of this time, and it is shown throughout many pieces, including the Kroisos (Anavysos, Greece ca. 530 BCE). This figure still relates to the Egyptian style by having one foot slightly more forward than the other, but unlike the Egyptians' statues, this figure is freed from the blocks of stone and it has a noticeable smile on its face – both differences indicate that the sculpture is alive.

Where Greece starts to perfect the way of sculpting a figure to make it seem as if it is alive, Egypt forgoes this in favor of keeping their statues stiff; in doing so, these Egyptian figures appear more godlike and ethereal, as shown in the Facade of the temple of Ramses II (Abu Simbel, Egypt ca. 1290-1224 BCE). These monumental statues outside of this temple are seated and mounted into the wall, seeming to loom over everything else in their wake. Their larger than life quality makes the four statues of Ramses II appear as if they are immortal; something other than human forever carved into the stone. The Greeks once followed in the Egyptians footsteps with this sort of design for their sculptures, but after time, all Greek sculptures could be viewed in the round, and all of them were full of life. Even though these Greek sculptures may be full of movement and life, some still retain their godliness for the simple fact that they are statues of deities. The Marble Statuette of Aphrodite (Benghazi, Libya ca. 150-100 BCE) in the Penn Museum is a beautiful example of the Greek showing off their usage of contrapposto and retaining a fairly natural human body, all while maintaining the utter

beauty that a goddess would have.

When dealing with their respective deities, Egypt and Greece portray them in different lights. Where the Greeks sculpt their gods and goddesses to be superhuman both in beauty and strength, the Egyptians carve their deities in anamorphic forms. To the Egyptians, having their gods and goddesses be part human and part animal showed a sign of power: it was a symbol of becoming the beast master. The Goddess Sekhmet (Thebes (Ramesseum) ca. 1405-1367 BCE) at Penn Museum shows Sekhmet, goddess of war and pestilence, in the form of a lioness and seated in a block of stone, just the same as the Facade of the temple of Ramses II. The greatest and most well known example of Egyptian art is also created in this way: the Great Sphinx (Gizeh, Egypt ca. 2520-2494 BCE). This monumental sculpture has the body of a cat – a very important animal in Egyptian culture – and the head of a man (most likely King Khafre). The sheer size of the artifact as well as the anamorphic qualities shows just how important this statue once was to the ancient Egyptians, and it continues to remain one of the most important relics in history today.

In both Egypt and Greece, artists find a way to exploit the human body and use it as a form of propaganda, whether it be depicting the victory of a successful battle or the telling of a mythological tale through the piece. An example of Egyptian propaganda would be the Section of a Temple Relief (Tell El-Retaba ca. 1292-1190 BCE) featured in Penn Museum. This fragment of a wall features a scene of Ramesses II slaying an enemy and the god Atum offering the King the sword of victory. This piece is doing its job in showing the people that Ramesses II was a righteous King who was only ever victorious; under his reign, there would be no defeating Egypt. An example of Greek propaganda would be best shown in the Attic Red Figure Stamnos (ca. 490 BCE, Penn Museum). On this large vase, there is a painting of the famous scene of Heracles fighting and killing the Nemean Lion. This story from mythology is widely known, even beyond Greece, and this painting was a way for the Greeks to spread the story and keep it alive.?