Sculpture

Egyptian artisans during the Old Kingdom perfected the art of sculpting and carving intricate relief decoration out of stone.

Figure 1: The Great Sphinx of Giza
The Great Sphinx, located among the Pyramids of Giza, is the largest monolith statue in the world.

- Egyptian sculpture took the form of statues, which were often life-sized, and reliefs, which were carved into blocks of stone. Many were painted using natural minerals.
- Sculptures from the Old Kingdom are characteristically more natural in style than their predecessors.
- Sculptures, such as the ka statues, often served as funerary art, accompanying the deceased in burial tombs with the intention of preserving life after death.
- The Great Sphinx, located among the Pyramids of Giza, is the largest monolith statue in the world.

Note:

A monolith is a large single block of stone used in architecture and sculpture.

Funerary art is any work of art forming, or placed in, a repository for the remains of the dead (such as a tomb).

Ochre is an earth pigment containing silica, aluminum, and ferric oxide.
Figure 2:
Egyptian Sculpture of the Old Kingdom

This sculpture was created in the 4th Dynasty, and represents the goddess Hathor, King Menkaure, and the goddess Bat.

Figure 3:
Ka Statue of Horiwaba
Egyptian sculptors created the first life-sized statues and fine reliefs in stone, copper, and wood. They perfected the art of carving intricate relief decoration, and produced detailed images of animals, plants, and even landscapes, recording the essential elements of their world for eternity in scenes painted and carved on the walls of temples and tombs. Kings used reliefs to record victories in battle, royal decrees, religious scenes, and sculptures of kings, goddesses and gods were common as well. Figure 1 Sculptures from the Old Kingdom are characteristically more natural in style than their predecessors; toward the end of the Kingdom images of people shifted toward formalized nude figures with long bodies and large eyes.

The Great Sphinx, located among the Pyramids of Giza, is the largest monolith statue in the world, standing 241 ft long, 63 ft wide, and 66.34 ft high. Carved out of limestone, it represents a mythical creature known as a sphinx, with a lion’s body and a human head. It is commonly believed that the head is that of King Khafra, who ruled during the 4th dynasty when it was built (Figure 0).

While most sculptures were made of stone, wood was sometimes used as a cheap and easily carved substitute. Paints were obtained from minerals such as iron ores (red and yellow ochres), copper ores (blue and green), soot or charcoal (black), and limestone (white). Paints could be mixed with gum arabic as a binder and pressed into cakes, which could be moistened with water when needed.

By the 4th Dynasty, the idea of the Ka statue was firmly established. Typically made of wood or stone, these statues were placed in tombs as a resting place for the ka, or spirit, of the person after death (Figure 2). Other sculptural works served as funerary art, accompanying the deceased in burial tombs with the intention of preserving life after death. Early tombs contained small models of the slaves, animals, buildings, tools, and other objects necessary for the deceased to continue his lifestyle in the afterworld. Very strict conventions governed the crafting of deity figures, and these rules were followed so strictly that over three thousand years the appearance of statues changed very little.

In addition to funerary art, Egyptians surrounded themselves with objects to enhance their lives in this world, producing cosmetic vessels and finely carved and inlaid furniture. Over time, Egyptian artists adopted a limited repertoire of standard types and established a formal artistic canon that would define Egyptian art for more than 3,000 years, while remaining flexible enough to allow for subtle variation and innovation.