Sculpture and Painting

Painting and sculpture in the New Kingdom continued in the traditional style, until undergoing a drastic shift during the Amarna period.

Figure 1: Colossal statues of Ramses II outside of Abu Simbel

This famous work depicts four repeating statues of Ramses II, following the tradition of deifying pharaohs.

- Traditionally, all Egyptian reliefs were painted, with many less prestigious works in tombs, temples and palaces painted on a flat surface.
- Paintings in tombs were made with the intent of making a pleasant afterlife for the deceased.
- The Book of the Dead, consisting of spells painted onto papyrus, was intended to assist the deceased in reaching the afterlife.
- The Egyptians used the distinctive technique of sunk relief, which is well suited to very bright sunlight.
- Statues typically depicted Egyptian pharaohs, often representing them as gods.
- Amarna art is characterized by a sense of movement and activity in images, with figures being more realistically (less idealistically) depicted.

Note:

A relief is a type of artwork in which shapes or figures protrude from a flat background.

A sunk relief is a type of artwork in which an image is made by cutting the relief sculpture itself into a flat surface.
Figure 2: Agricultural scene from the tomb of Nakht, 18th Dynasty Thebes. Traditional tomb paintings often depicted scenes that were thought to help the deceased in the afterlife.

Figure 3: Artist’s sketch: Walk in the Garden; limestone; New Kingdom, 18th dynasty, c. 1335 BC A relief of a royal couple in the Armana style. The figures are thought to be Akhenaten and Nefertiti, Smenkhkare and Meritaten, or Tutankhamen and Ankhesenamun.
Painting and sculpture in the New Kingdom continued in the traditional Egyptian style, with many great works produced by pharaohs over the years. However, during the later Amarna period, it underwent a drastic shift in style.

**Painting**

Traditionally, all Egyptian reliefs were painted. Less prestigious works in tombs, temples and palaces were painted on a flat surface. Stone surfaces were prepared by whitewash, or if rough, a layer of coarse mud plaster, with a smoother gesso layer above; some finer limestones could take paint directly.

Pigments were mostly mineral, chosen to withstand strong sunlight without fading. The binding medium used in painting remains unclear, though egg tempera and various gums and resins have been suggested. It is clear that true fresco, painted into a thin layer of wet plaster, was not used. Instead, the paint was applied to dried plaster, in what is called "fresco a secco" in Italian. After painting, a varnish or resin was usually applied as a protective coating. Many paintings with some exposure to the elements have survived remarkably well, although those on fully-exposed walls rarely have. Small objects, including wooden statuettes, were often painted using similar techniques.

Egyptian paintings are created so as to show a profile view and a side view of the animal or person. Their main colors were red, blue, black, gold, and green. Many ancient Egyptian paintings have survived due to its extremely dry climate. The paintings were done with the intent of making a pleasant afterlife for the deceased. (Figure 1)

Themes of these paintings included the journey through the afterworld or protective deities introducing the deceased to the gods of the underworld (such as Osiris). Some tomb paintings depict activities that the deceased were involved in when they were alive and wished to carry on doing for eternity. The *Book of the Dead* is one of the most well-known works of the New Kingdom; consisting of hieroglyphic spells and illustrations painted on papyrus. It was buried with an entombed person to help them navigate to the afterlife.

**Sculpture**

The monumental sculpture of Ancient Egypt is world-famous, but refined and delicate small works exist in much greater numbers. The Egyptians used the distinctive technique of sunk relief, which is well suited to very bright sunlight. The main figures in reliefs adhere to the same figure convention as in painting, with parted legs (where not seated) and head shown from the side, but the torso from the front, and a standard set of proportions making up the figure, using 18 "fists" to go from the ground to the hairline on the forehead. Other conventions make statues of males darker than females ones, and the bodies of figures are typically idealized.
Statues typically depicted Egyptian pharaohs, often representing them as gods. In the famous sculptures outside the main temple at Abu Simbel, Ramses II is depicted in a row of 4 colossal statues. (Figure 0) Other deities are frequently shown in paintings and reliefs. Most of the larger sculpture survives from Egyptian temples or tombs, where massive statues were built to represent gods and pharaohs and their queens.

Amarna Art

The style of painting and sculpture shifted drastically during the Amarna Period in the late 18th dynasty, when Pharaoh Akhenaten moved the capital to the city of Amarna. This art is characterized by a sense of movement and activity in images, with figures having raised heads, many figures overlapping and many scenes full and crowded. Sunk relief was widely used. Figures are depicted less idealistically and more realistically, with an elongation and narrowing of the neck, sloping of the forehead and nose, prominent chin, large ears and lips, spindle-like arms and calves and large thighs, stomachs, and hips (Figure 2).

While the religious changes of the Amarna period were brief, the styles introduced to painting and sculpture had a lasting influence on Egyptian culture.