

Arts and Crafts of Ancient Egypt

CHAPTER I

THE CHARACTER OF EGYPTIAN ART

THE art of a country, like the character of the inhabitants, belongs to the nature of the land. The climate, the scenery, the contrasts of each country, all clothe the artistic impulse as diversely as they clothe the people themselves. A burly, florid Teuton in his furs and jewellery, and a lithe brown Indian in his waist-cloth, would each look entirely absurd in the other's dress. There is no question of which dress is intrinsically the best in the world; each is relatively the best for its own conditions, and each is out of place in other conditions. So it is with art: it is the expression of thought and feeling in

ARTS & CRAFTS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

harmony with its own conditions. The only bad art is that which is mechanical, where the impulse to give expression has decayed, and it is reduced to mere copying of styles and motives which do not belong to its actual conditions. An age of copying is the only despicable age.

It is but a confusion of thought, therefore, to try to pit the art of one country against that of another. A Corinthian temple, a Norman church, or a Chinese pavilion are each perfect in their own conditions ; but if the temple is of Aberdeen granite, the church of Pacific island coral, and the pavilion amid the Brighton downs, they are each of them hopelessly wrong. To understand any art we must first begin by grasping its conditions, and feeling the contrasts, the necessities, the atmosphere, which underlie the whole terms of expression.

Now the essential conditions in Egypt are before all, an overwhelming sunshine ; next, the strongest of contrasts between a vast sterility of desert and the most prolific verdure of the narrow plain ; and thirdly, the illimitable level lines of the cultivation, of the desert plateau, and of the limestone strata, crossed by the vertical precipices on either hand rising hundreds of feet without a break. In such conditions the architecture of other lands would

CHARACTER OF EGYPTIAN ART

look weak or tawdry. But the style of Egypt never fails in all its varieties and changes.

The brilliancy of light led to adopting an architecture of blank walls without windows. The reflected light through open doorways was enough to show most interiors ; and for chambers far from the outer door, a square opening about six inches each way in the roof, or a slit along the wall a couple of inches high, let in sufficient light. The results of this system were, that as the walls were not divided by structural features, they were dominated by the scenes that were carved upon them. The wall surface ceased to be regarded as part of a building, and became an expansion of the papyrus or tablet. The Egyptian belief in the magical value of representations led to the figuring of the various parts of the worship on the walls of the temples or tombs, so that the divine service should be perpetually renewed in figure ; and thus what we see is not so much a building in the ordinary sense, as an illustrated service-book enclosing the centre of worship. Another result of the fierce indirect light was that which dominated sculpture. The reliefs, beautiful as they often were, would not be distinct in the diffuse facing light ; hence strong colouring was applied to render them clear and effective. So much

ARTS & CRAFTS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

did colouring take the lead that the finest sculptures were often smothered in a stucco facing, laid on to receive the colour. This almost spiteful ignoring of the delicate craft of the sculptor is seen in the XIIth dynasty, and was the ruling method in Ptolemaic work.

The extreme contrast between the desert and the cultivation gave its tone to the artistic sense of the people. On either hand, always in sight, there rose the margin of the boundless waste without life or verdure, the dreaded region of evil spirits and fierce beasts, the home of the nomads that were always ready to swoop on unprotected fields and cattle, if they did not sit down on the borders and eat up the country. Between these two expanses of wilderness lay the narrow strip of richest earth, black, wet, and fertile under the powerful sun; teeming with the force of life, bearing the greenest of crops, as often in the year as it could be watered. In parts may be seen three full crops of corn or beans raised each year beneath the palms that also give their annual burden of fruit; fourfold does the rich ground yield its ever-growing stream of life.

This exuberance amid absolute sterility is reflected in the proportion between the minuteness of detail and the vastness of the architecture. The

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SCENERY



1. The barren desert background
2. The luxuriance of the plain

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CHARACTER OF EGYPTIAN ART

most gigantic buildings may have their surfaces crowded with delicate sculpture and minute colouring. What would be disproportionate elsewhere, seems in harmony amid such natural contrasts.

The strongly marked horizontal and vertical lines of the scenery condition the style of buildings that can be placed before such a background. As the temples were approached, the dominant line was the absolute level of the green plain of the Nile valley, without a rise or slope upon it. Behind the building the sky line was the level top of the desert plateau, only broken by an occasional valley, but with never a peak rising above it. And the face of the cliffs that form the stern setting is ruled across with level lines of strata, which rise in a step-like background or a wall lined across as with courses of masonry. The weathering of the cliffs breaks up the walls of rock into vertical pillars with deep shadows between them. In the face of such an overwhelming rectangular framing any architecture less massive and square than that of Egypt would be hopelessly defeated. The pediments of Greece, the circular arches of Rome, the pointed arches of England, would all seem crushed by so stern a setting. The harmony is shown most clearly in the temple of Deir el Bahri (fig. 1)

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ARTS & CRAFTS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

below its cliffs which overshadow it. Let any other kind of building be set there, and it would be an impertinent intrusion; the long level lines of the terraces and roofs, the vertical shadows of the colonnades, repose in perfect harmony with the mass of Nature around them. The Egyptian was quite familiar with the arch: he constantly used it in brickwork on a large scale, and he imitated its curve in stone; yet he always hid it in his building, and kept it away from the external forms, instinctively knowing that it could not serve any part of his decorative construction.

These principles, which were thus imposed on the architecture of Egypt, were doubly enforced upon its sculpture. Not only did Nature set the framing of plain and cliff, but her work was reflected and reiterated by the massive walls, square pillars, and flat architraves, amid which Egyptian sculpture had to take its place. In such shrines it would be disastrously incongruous to place a Victory poising on one foot, or a dancing faun. They belong to the peaks of Greece, divided by rushing streams, and clothed with woods,—to a transient world of fleeting beauty, not to a landscape and an architecture of eternity. Egyptian art, however luxurious, however playful it might be, was always framed

CHARACTER OF EGYPTIAN ART

on a tacit groundwork of its natural conditions. Within those conditions there was scope for most vivid portraiture, most beautiful harmony, most delicate expression, but the Egyptian was wise enough to know his conditions and to obey them. In that obedience lay his greatness.

The truest analysis of art—that of Tolstoy—results in defining it as a means of communicating emotion. It may be the emotion produced by beauty or by loathsomeness; each expression is equally art, though each is not equally desirable art. The emotion may be imparted by words, by forms, by sounds; all are equally vehicles of different kinds of art. But without imparting an emotional perception to the mind there is no art. The emotion may be the highest, that of apprehending character, and the innate meaning of mind and of Nature; or it may be the lower form of sharing in the transient interests and excitements of others; or the basest form of all, that of enjoying their evil. How does the Egyptian appear under this analysis? What emotions can we consider were intended by his art? How far did he succeed in imparting them to the spectators?

To understand the mind of the artist we must look to those qualities which in their literature

ARTS & CRAFTS OF ANCIENT EGYPT

were held up as the ideals of life. Stability and Strength were the qualities most admired, and the name for public monuments was “firm things.” Assuredly all mankind has looked on the works of Egypt as giving a sense of these qualities before all others. Closely connected is the sense of Endurance, which was enjoined in words, and carried into practice in the laborious work on the hardest rocks. It was for endurance that statues were made of diorite or granite, though they were painted with life-like hues, so that their material was scarcely seen. Upon these primary qualities was built a rich and varied character, reflected in the elaborate and beautiful sculpture which covered, but never interfered with, the grand mass of a monument. Truth and Justice were qualities much sought for in life, and were expressed by the artist in the reality of his immense blocks of stone, often more hidden than seen, and in the fair and even bearing of all material, without any tricks or paradoxes of structure. In all his earlier work his monolith columns and pillars were a protest that a structural unit must express unity, that what supports others must not be in itself divided. The Discipline and Harmony which were looked on as the bond of social life are shown by the subordination of the