

1 Introduction

What was an image to the ancient Egyptians? This is the simple, yet many-faceted, central question posed by the present Element. In attempting to answer this question, it eschews a strong tradition in Egyptology of interpreting uses of images with reference to beliefs in magic and possession by souls. Such explanatory models tend in practice to shut down interpretation, as it is difficult to go any further than positing a particular belief on the part of the Egyptians. They also often end up resting on speculative foundations, as Egyptian texts, images, and practices were very rarely interested in expounding dogma of the kind such an approach aims to reconstruct.

In reaction to this tradition, part of the move in this work is rhetorical as an attempt to ‘take seriously’ (cf. Nyord 2018b) what the ancient Egyptians thought and did. In so doing, however, the approach espoused here opens up a number of new avenues that tend to be closed off by the traditional focus on beliefs. How does the image relate to that which it depicts, if it is not possessed by a soul? And what would be the more fundamental entailments of living in a world in which such connections exist? While far from answering all such questions definitively, the Element at least sketches how such questions might be formulated in practice, and how we can avoid familiar pitfalls in attempting to answer them.

Modern perspectives have tended to focus our attention on Egyptian images as something that needs to be decoded or deciphered, an approach partly justified by the close connections between image and writing in ancient Egypt (e.g. Tefnin 1984). However, recent thinking about images more generally has tended to stress that this approach is just one of two overall modes in which images can be experienced. In the influential formulation of medieval art historian Hans Belting (1994), images can be approached as either ‘likeness’ or ‘presence’. The former approach takes the image as something which, in mimicking the appearance of what it depicts, reminds the viewer of the depicted entity or – once decoded – makes a statement about it. As ‘presence’, the image becomes a manifestation or concretion of what it depicts, allowing it to be encountered in a particular time, place, and manner. In the words of Mitchell (2005), the former approach corresponds to an interest in what an image *means*, while the latter focuses instead on what the image *does* (cf. Sansi 2013: 18–20).

Egyptological approaches to Egyptian images have drawn on both approaches, albeit somewhat selectively. Because of the close entanglement between image and writing alluded to previously, the act of decoding by identifying iconographic elements has been, and still is, an important cornerstone of understanding ancient Egyptian images. On the other hand, the

question of what an image *does* has tended to be approached by more or less inventive ascriptions of particular beliefs to the ancient Egyptians concerning the images. Typically, such beliefs will concern the ‘magical’ properties of images – how (the Egyptians believed) they could come to life when not watched, how they could serve as habitat for one or more Egyptian souls, etc. In a more theorized form, such functions have been labelled as ‘performative’ (e.g. Sweeney 2004: 67), sometimes explicitly paralleling them with linguistic ‘speech acts’ which establish the reality of that which they express (e.g. Assmann 2015).

However, it is useful to turn this traditional formulation of the problem on its head. Rather than asking what the Egyptians must have believed to make them treat images very differently from our expectations, it is helpful to consider our own intuitions about images, especially because these intuitions turn out to be something of a special case in the broader perspective of global art history. Often labeled ‘representationalism’ (e.g. Bolt 2004; Barad 2007: 46–50), or simply a concept of ‘representation’ (e.g. Espirito Santo and Tassi 2013), these intuitions and expectations rest on a set of fundamental assumptions about the world widespread in modern Western culture, but much less prevalent elsewhere.

To put it briefly, representationalism posits a specific understanding of the relationship between an image and the entity or object which it depicts. Most notably, the only connection between image and entity is a mental one, in the mind of the maker of the image and/or the minds of the audience. This can be accomplished through mimicking visual aspects (mimesis), through an established set of signs or symbols (iconography), or through other conventions (typically an inscribed identification). However, none of this entails any real-world connection between image and entity, and the two lead completely separate lives despite any mental associations they may elicit. A change in the image will not affect the object in any way, nor will a change in the object have any influence on the image. A corollary of this relationship is that the depicted object enjoys a primacy not accorded to the image. The image is a mere copy, since its appearance is dependent on that of the object, while the inverse is not true.

As can be seen from this brief characterization, the representationalist understanding of images rests fundamentally on a distinction between the mental and the physical. Imagery is solely a matter of mental representation, while in physical terms an image is a distinct object subjected to laws of causality like any other. The analogy to the relationship between a linguistic message and the medium in which it is communicated is clear. This distinction between the mental and the physical is often referred to as ‘Cartesian

dualism' after its most prominent proponent in Western philosophy, René Descartes (1596–1650). Intuitive as it is to those who have been brought up with it, it is nonetheless fraught with problems. This is true in relation to its internal logic where it is difficult to explain, for example, how the physical and the mental can interact in sensory perception or will-based agency, if they are completely separate and incommensurable realms as Cartesianism posits. But a more practical problem arises if this relatively parochial (in the sense of being characteristic of a particular segment of Western cultural history) set of assumptions are raised to universal principles and used as the basis for understanding other cultures that did not share them (cf. Nyord 2009: 35–44, and the closely comparable case of ancient Near Eastern art in Bahrani 2003).

Thus, rather than granting representationalism logical primacy by asking what the Egyptians must have believed to make them disregard its tenets, this work suggests a different approach. While agreeing with representationalism that images are fundamentally about relationships between an object and that which it depicts, this relationship is not regarded by necessity as a representational one along the lines sketched previously. Rather, the exact nature of the relationship needs to be deduced from what the Egyptian did with and said about the image (cf. Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007). In particular, as will be seen in the following sections, the Egyptians tended to assume close, intrinsic connections between images and that which they depict, in Gadamer's words an 'ontological communion' (Gadamer 2004 [1960]: 137). In what follows, we will broaden this idea considerably and, expressed programmatically, this work will posit that we attain a better understanding of Egyptian images by following a simple fundamental principle: What appears to us intuitively as relations of representation (mimesis, symbolism, etc.), can more fruitfully be regarded as ontological connections. Importantly, this is not an ascription of a particular belief to the Egyptians (as we will see, this basic principle can lead in very different, sometimes opposite directions), but rather, it is a broadening of the interpretive field by sidestepping a specific 'belief' of our own.

On a smaller scale, such an approach also serves to remedy one of the key points of criticism against traditional Egyptological approaches to ancient Egyptian art, namely the tendency to decontextualize artworks to study them according to purely iconographic and stylistic criteria (e.g. Verbovsek 2005; Widmaier 2017). By making the words and actions of the Egyptians the main criterion for determining even the fundamental ontological status of the image, we can avoid bracketing the cultural context out of the act of interpretation.

1.1 Ontology of the Image

Central for the questions taken up in this Element is the ontology of the image: What is an image fundamentally, what is its relationship to what it depicts, and what can an image do? Ontology has become a popular topic in recent years under such headings as speculative realism and new materialism (e.g. Harman 2018; Bennett 2010; Barad 2007), which have, in some cases, provided entirely new conceptual frameworks for thinking about modes of being. It is worth stressing here that the aim of the present Element is relatively modest in comparison. Although any ontological analysis must necessarily make use of the concepts and vocabulary available to the scholar, I am interested here primarily in exploring what an image was *for the Egyptians*. To that end, I have resorted in several instances to ancient Egyptian terminology in order to complement established philosophical and art historical vocabulary. As aptly stated by anthropologists Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell, the kind of analysis undertaken here ‘has little to do with trying to determine how other people think about the world. It has to do with how *we* must think in order to conceive a world the way they do’ (Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007: 15). This method of adjusting our own concepts until the statements and practices of the people studied make sense lies behind the move suggested of abandoning representationalism from the outset. As such, it is broadly aligned with the method recently suggested by art historian James Elkins for ‘world art studies’ of ‘employing indigenous texts as interpretive languages’ (Elkins 2008: 113), although the ‘ontological turn’ in anthropology would purport to go significantly further than an art historical interpretation. On the other hand, such an approach goes in a different direction than more conventional ideas along the lines that the ‘special ontological status’ of religious images is ‘tied to the belief of their devotees’ (Belting 2016: 235), in which the image itself can be neatly separated from the irrational ideas its makers and users may have held about it (see Needham 1972 for an anthropological critique of the concept of ‘belief’).

Another, partly unrelated (cf. Latour 2009), recent use of the notion of ontology is worth mentioning here as well. In anthropologist Philippe Descola’s monumental *Beyond Nature and Culture* (Descola 2013 [2005]; cf. also Descola 2010), he proposes an overall quadripartite scheme of ontologies, which aims, in principle, to capture worldviews of all human cultures. The scheme is based on the interrelationship members of a given society experience between ‘interiority’ (the identity, agency, and experience of sentient beings) and ‘exteriority’ (types of bodies and bodily capacities). Ancient Egypt falls relatively clearly under Descola’s heading of ‘analogism’, an ontological

scheme characterized by the living creatures of the cosmos being interrelated through small incremental differences in terms of both interiority and exteriority (Descola 2013 [2005]: 201–31, cf. Quirke 2015: 39–40, and Brémont 2018 for examples of the employment of this idea in Egyptology; and a set of similar ‘analogistic’ features *avant la lettre* listed in Finnestad 1989: 30–3). This mode of experiencing the world with multiple hidden interconnections of homology and contrast often finds expression in widespread correlations between microcosm and macrocosm, found, for example, in practices of healing and divination, and indeed mythological concepts are often used in Egypt to establish connections of this kind (Nyord 2018a).

Of direct relevance to the topic of this Element, analogical ontologies also tend to imply certain specific conceptions and practices relating to images (Descola 2010: 163–213). One striking effect of the myriad analogical connections between different beings is the conception of chimeric creatures combining and interchanging clearly identifiable body parts from different species. Ancient Egypt is famous for its animal-headed gods, sphinxes, and other composite beings (cf. Wengrow 2014), a phenomenon that would indicate, in Descola’s scheme, the presence of underlying connections and analogies between the different kinds of living beings.

Another effect of the attention to sometimes-interchangeable parts and their role in a whole is a widespread use of collections and configurations of individual images. Not unlike the individual chimera, such assemblages are capable of functioning as a united whole despite being made up clearly heterogeneous elements, the configuration and interrelationships between which in turn elicit the function of the whole. In Egypt, such assemblages are constituted, for example, by heavily laden tables with different offerings (Robins 1998), the combined worship of a group of different gods housed in the same temple but each in their own shrine (e.g. David 2018: 125–82), or, perhaps most saliently, in collections of grave goods, many of which are clearly imagistic, deposited in tomb chambers around the body of the deceased (e.g. Grajetzki 2003).

As will be seen throughout this work, this expectation correctly predicts an overall concern with the capacity of images to establish connections and relationships, first and foremost between the image and that which it depicts, but often images form much more complex networks of connections, potentially incorporating multiple different images, materials, elements of iconography, etc. For reasons that will gradually become clear through the subsequent discussion, it is often a moot point whether such assemblages illustrate already-existing connections, or whether they establish and elicit new connections through their material configuration. Either way, the assemblage allows the

whole to become manifest in a given time, place, and manner through the presence and configuration of the images constituting its parts.

In what follows, the word ‘power’ will be used to designate this kind of dynamic, but hidden, connection which has the capacity to channel or guide observable processes, especially the ways in which beings like gods and ancestors become manifest. The Egyptians had several different concepts designating such capacities, though in many cases we have no way of knowing which particular category an Egyptian would have used. This is why a general etic term like ‘power’ is often preferable.

The expectations for ancient Egyptian imaging practices arising from Descola’s framework indicate the importance of concepts such as relationality and assemblages, and these ideas have been theorized independently of this framework in recent archaeology (e.g. Alberti 2016; Harris 2017a; Harrison-Buck and Hendon 2018). In particular, the notion of affect plays an important role in the understanding of images espoused here. The notion is used here primarily in its philosophical sense of ‘capacity to affect and be affected’ (cf. Pellini 2018: 46) rather than the everyday use to designate charged emotional states (although the two are sometimes combined with varying results in recent scholarship, e.g. Harris 2017b and the discussion in Pellini 2018: 45–7). The importance of the concept for interpreting ancient Egyptian images is that it allows us to conceptualize the Egyptians’ own practices where images are used to establish relations of mutual influence between the depiction, the depicted, and other places, entities, and powers.

A general Egyptian concept of particular relevance in this regard is what could be termed the ‘emergence principle’ (Fig. 1). Across a number of different myths, rituals, and other practices, a shared idea is that of creation and becoming as a process of differentiation. More specifically, that which is created, be it a baby, the sun, the sprouting grain, the landscape returning to normal when the Nile flood recedes, or the glazing of a ceramic vessel, is hidden in an unseen state of potential existence inside a ‘container’ from which it has not yet become distinguishable. The process of becoming is then experienced as an emergence from this undifferentiated material by turning into a distinct entity. This emergence principle is useful for understanding a wide range of concepts and practices in ancient Egypt, and especially for seeing the connection between instantiations of different order, such as mythological narratives and concrete images.

1.2 About This Element

This volume deliberately addresses a diverse readership. The general reader will find here an introduction, with numerous central examples, to what the



Fig. 1 A striking example of the emergence principle in Egyptian thought and experience: A ‘corn-mummy’ consisting of grain and earth wrapped in linen and coated with resin, and embodying the hidden creative power associated with the god Osiris. Michael C. Carlos Museum, 2018.10.1C. Photo courtesy of the Georges Ricard Foundation and the California Institute of World Archaeology.

Egyptians did with images. It is not intended as a general history of Egyptian art, but rather takes a case-study-based approach in which image practices are classified and interpreted, without comprehensively covering such traditional areas as iconography or stylistic development. In this sense, this Element is complementary to art historical overviews (with Robins 2008 as an excellent and readily available example), and the complete newcomer to Egyptian art history may fruitfully read it in tandem with such works.

The advanced student or professional practitioner of Egyptology will be familiar with much of the material discussed in the case studies, but will find new perspectives on this well-known material. A number of traditional ideas in Egyptological scholarship are taken up for discussion and re-evaluation, often in the light of concepts and approaches developed in neighbouring fields. In some cases, this leads to posing entirely different sets of questions from the concerns traditionally associated with particular bodies of material. For this readership, the Element is thus meant not merely as a convenient collection of phenomena not previously discussed as a whole, but also as an invitation to engage with old material in new ways, with many of the analyses presented here raising questions of relevance well beyond the case studies chosen to illustrate them.

Scholars from neighbouring, more general, fields (e.g. archaeology, art history, anthropology) will not only find the overview and classification of Egyptian image practices already mentioned, but will also see them approached through questions and concepts likely to be more relevant to them than many traditional treatments of Egyptian art and religion. The aim is to show that, far from being an exceptional area of archaeology or art history, Egyptian images are amenable to similar perspectives to those under development in other parts of those fields, and with a mostly unexplored capacity for bringing new concepts and materials to such theoretical discussions. The Element thus also constitutes an invitation to this group of readers to engage with the perspectives offered by Egyptian image practices in thinking about such current topics as affect, relationality, functions of images and visuality, and beyond.

The diverse readership and modest size of this volume mean that each of these aspects can only be explored relatively briefly, and many of the analyses presented here could be readily expanded upon along the lines suggested here. Rather than completeness, in most cases the discussion here aims instead at providing an introduction to each phenomenon along with a methodological (and in some cases theoretical) orientation arguing ways in which it can fruitfully be viewed, along with some central, recent references as a way further into the topic. The recurring use of the word ‘invitation’ in the preceding paragraphs is thus no accident: First and foremost this work is meant to provide inspiration for future thinking about Egyptian images by opening this material up to multiple, and in many cases Egyptologically speaking new, perspectives.

As a starting point for the exploration of uses of ancient Egyptian images, Section 2 takes up a number of central ancient terms and concepts for images. Several of the words used by the Egyptians to refer to images reveal aspects of their thought and experiences, especially concerning the pivotal question of the relationship between the image and that of which it is an image. At the end of the section, two influential Egyptological hypotheses about Egyptian images are examined, namely those explaining images as material substrates for the soul-like concepts of *ka* and *ba* respectively. Both of these are found to be problematical, and the section ends with a general discussion of how the ontology of ancient Egyptian images may be understood.

Section 3 broadens the perspective by moving from the concepts of images themselves to the material and social contexts in which images were created and received. Of relevance here is not just the social roles and positions of artists and patrons, but also questions of how the ontology of the image outlined in the previous section can be squared with traditional categories such as uses and choices of materials, the aesthetic dimension of images, and other ‘design choices’ such as posture and iconography.

Finally, Section 4 looks at the practical uses of ancient Egyptian images. Based on a rough typology of potential effects of the image, the section discusses not only the pervasive idea of the image as the material presence of the depicted entity, but also ways of modifying this basic scheme to put emphasis on relationality, causing change, and the ability of the image to function as substitute. The last part of this section discusses reasons for, and effects of, subsequent damaging or changing of images.

2 Image Terminology

An important step towards an understanding of Egyptian conceptions and experiences of images can be taken by examining the ways in which the Egyptians categorized and discussed images (Ockinga 1984; Schulz 1992: 700–20; Eschweiler 1994; Hoffmann 2001; Eaton 2007). Ancient Egyptian language had a number of different terms for what we would term images, some of which could also be used to designate phenomena to which we would not apply this label. By examining the etymology and usage of some of the most important Egyptian terms, we can get a number of pointers regarding the main question that was identified in the Introduction, namely that of the nature of the relationship between an image and that which it depicts.

It is worth noting from the outset that these terms show a great deal of overlap in their actual usage (i.e. regarding what kind of images they can be used to refer to). Thus, most of them can be used of images in both two and three dimensions, and with very few exceptions noted in the following, they are not generally restricted to specific categories such as individual genres of sculpture. Thus, rather than being a catalogue of different kinds of Egyptian images, the examination of terminology demonstrates the different designations used by the Egyptians to characterize the roles of images, especially concerning their relationship to what they depict. For this reason, the following discussion is focused on a smaller subset of ancient Egyptian image designations, where the etymology and usage of the terms offer insights into the underlying conceptions of images.

2.1 Mimesis and Idealization: The Concept of *twt*

One of the oldest and most frequent ancient Egyptian designations of images in two and three dimensions is the word *twt*, derived from a root usually translated as meaning ‘to be like, to resemble’ (Fig. 2). The notion that an image is supposed to resemble that which it represents, and that the image can correspondingly be designated as a ‘likeness’, is very familiar to modern observers. Perhaps this is the reason why the semantics of this image concept has rarely

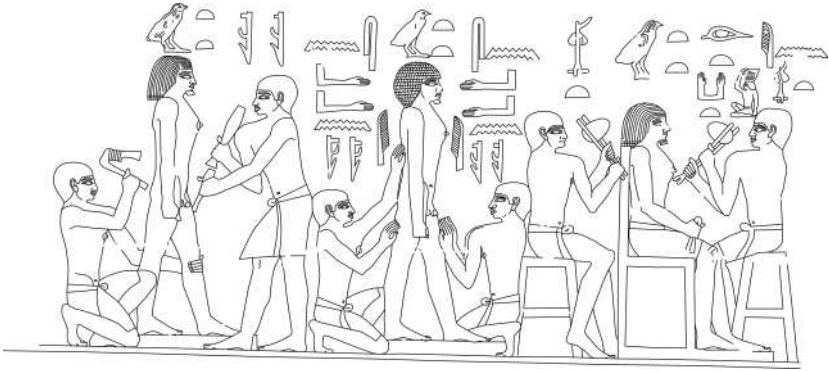


Fig. 2 Tomb relief of *twt*-statues in the making. The tomb of Ti (Saqqara). Drawn by Henriette Vex Nyord after Wild 1966: Pl. CLXXIII.

attracted further attention. However, it is clear to even the casual observer of ancient Egyptian art that simple mimesis – an attempt to capture as faithfully as possible the visual details of what is represented – is rarely the predominant aim in itself. Rather, this aim is significantly tempered by tendencies towards idealization and of depiction according to preexisting archetypes (Laboury 2010). For example, human bodies tend to be proportioned according to set canons, rather than representing specific body types or bodily features (Robins 1994), and depictions of private people often assimilate their facial features to those of the reigning king (Jørgensen 2015). This raises the question in what sense Egyptian images were regarded as ‘likenesses’ as implied by the use of the term *twt*.

A pivotal example of what the Egyptians meant by the root *twt* comes from the inscription on an obelisk still standing in the Karnak temple where it was erected by the female pharaoh Hatshepsut (r. 1473–1458 BCE) (Fig. 3). The obelisk was part of a pair dedicated to the god Amun and Hatshepsut’s father, King Thutmose I. The inscription details the impressive feat of manufacturing the enormous (almost 30 metres high) monolithic obelisks, which were originally covered with large quantities of gold foil, and in particular it stresses the special relationship between Hatshepsut and Amun which motivated the creation of the monuments. Towards the end of the inscription on the base of the obelisk, Hatshepsut presents some considerations of how the obelisks would be viewed by posterity, stating ‘*He who hears this shall not say that what I have related is boasting; but rather say “How it resembles (twt) her!”*’ (Urk. IV, 368, 3–5).

The opposition between boasting and correspondence with reality is immediately understandable, but there is one detail in the passage that is surprising.