Ancient Egyptian Religion As Seen In Art And Architecture Essay, Research Paper

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As the hot Egyptian sun beats down upon his head, the archeologist realizes his time is drawing to a close. The local government had allotted a period of two weeks for the expedition to take place, and the thirteenth day is now in its peak. The search for the tomb of the great king Menes has, thus far, been a complete failure. The archeologist begins to feel a bit queasy, realizing his sudden failure; however, a cavalcade of shouts suddenly penetrates the intensely hot air. He strains his burning eyes to find the source of the commotion. Then he sees it: the corner of some ancient edifice is peeking sleepily from the sand and grit that buried it so long ago. |Could this be it,X the archeologist asks himself, still in awe over the pale stone that his eyes now gaze upon. It seems almost impossible that the tracks of a culture so great could be covered by such an inadequate foe as time. But even now as he gazes upon the tomb in success, the archeologist sees no culture behind these artifacts; he merely sees the makings of a fortune.

It will be nearly fifty years before the people represented by these pieces of time are honored for their diverse culture. Once vast and thriving, the Ancient Egyptian culture was a center of commerce, philosophy, and religion alike. The people had a culture like that of no other group in history; however, its complexity has led to many misconceptions about the Ancient Egyptian populace. The ever-popular archaic art style of a figure in profile surrounded by hieroglyphs has become the world+s favorite view of the Egyptian. As a result of this ignorance, the cultural aspects of this society are not fully appreciated. One of the greatest little-known truths about the people of this society is that they based almost everything they did around their spiritual beliefs.

In the life of Egyptian people, religion [played] a far more

important part than modern man can imagine. With the peoples

of antiquity, as in Europe in the Middle Ages, belief in gods or in

one god [formed] the focal point of man+s world-outlook. Religion

[provided] the stimulus to art and philosophy and a matrix for

the development of moral principles. (Woldering 28)

This similarity between everyday tasks and belief in the gods lead to advances in numerous aspects of this society. Ancient Egyptian religion has been fully demonstrated through Egyptian art, architecture, and funerary practices.

One of the most unique aspects of the Ancient Egyptian culture was the profusion of exceptional artwork. These compositions demonstrated not only

a style of art never before seen, but they also showed innovative techniques that have been duplicated for centuries. Although these works, which consisted mostly of pottery and wall murals, seem to be quite simple to the untrained eye, they were what most consider to be a stylized portrait of the times. J. R. Harris comments on this in his book, The Legacy of Egypt: |Purported lack of grace and charm, unnatural stylization–these were not shortcomings, but essential manifestations of [Ancient Egyptian art+s] specific natureX (194). In addition to the natural talents of the Ancient Egyptians, another explanation for their success in the arts is that there were few technological advances during their times. This allowed them to concentrate on aesthetic skills rather than on scientific ones. One of the most important contributions that the Ancient Egyptians made to the future of all art was a canon system that assigned particular proportions to parts of the human anatomy. This development created a more realistic view of the figures of people used in wall murals and pottery. These are merely a few of the aspects for which modern society gives the Ancient Egyptians credit.

Another unique aspect of the Ancient Egyptian culture was the construction of elaborate, and sometimes enormous, works of architecture. One of the main reasons for today+s knowledge about these edifices is the fact that many of them are still towering over Egypt. This is due to the great care that the Ancient Egyptian populace took in constructing the temples, tombs, and halls of their period. In addition, these people were most definitely skilled in building techniques, the arts, and mathematics. |In construction, the perfect knowledge of geometry of the architects is fully demonstratedX (Howell 41). Moreover, it is believed that not only the architects of Ancient Egypt worked on these masterpieces, but thousands of others also collaborated in the effort. Ancient Egypt+s buildings were, in their time, the most remarkable landmarks known to man. Also, the ability of the architects of Ancient Egypt to include decorations into the edifices they constructed was highly developed. Tombs and temples alike were greatly adorned with colorful paintings, hieroglyphs, and symbols that added to their beauty. These buildings possessed not only some of the most amazing works of architecture known to man, but also the blueprint of a culture long since past.

Just as Ancient Egyptian art and architecture have become important to today+s knowledge of the society, the history of the two is a relic that brings to life some astounding aspects of Egypt. The earliest known art of the Ancient Egyptians was believed to have been very undefined and unskilled, according to Elizabeth Payne in her book, The Pharaohs of Ancient Egypt. |Crudely at first, they began drawing the duck and the fish on the sides of their pottery bowls. Then, little by little, over the long years, their skill as artists increased and their everyday objects became as beautiful as they were usefulX (27). After this eventual increase in the artistic talent of the people, new practices came in to use by which Ancient Egyptians expressed themselves. For example, tombs went from being mere pits and hollows in the sand to being quite complex. These structures have become what the world knows today as the Pyramids of Giza. A great sense of aesthetic realization came over the populace during this period; however, in later times the creativity of the artisans and architects of Egypt declined. It became a regular practice for more recent kings merely to duplicate the pyramids+ grandeur and beauty on a smaller scale. Eventually, the decline of ancient art and architecture approached, and only a few satirical papyri and scarce metalworking were left to define an entire culture+s history. The only basis that modern man has for his understanding of the Ancient Egyptian lifestyle are the few artifacts that came from the flourish of art and architecture.

Although aesthetic skills of the Ancient Egyptians were vital to the people, the most important factor of life was their religious beliefs. It is believed that all aspects of everyday life were centered around their belief and faith in the gods. In addition, the Ancient Egyptians were very superstitious; they watched for signs of good and bad luck as well as signs of events to come. Another main characteristic of their religion was the fact that they believed in numerous gods which each had a special power or purpose. |[The gods] personified everything the Egyptians wondered about or feared or hoped for. Reigning supreme over this multitude was Ra, the great god of the sunX (51). Each entity was constructed his or her own temple so that the people could worship there and beseech the gods for certain needs or wants. Also, the priests made sacrifices to the entities and bathed and anointed golden figures of them. These statues and dolls were not necessarily human figures: the gods were often represented by animals and specialized symbols. Such artistic sculptures were one of the many applications of art and architecture in religion.

The religion, art, and architecture of the Ancient Egyptians were so closely tied to one another that it is sometimes hard to distinguish between them. In fact, the Ancient Egyptians+ religion was the most common subject matter of their sculptures, paintings, and structures. For example, the prominent area of construction was that for temples and tombs. Such edifices were skillfully painted with murals to depict the purpose of the room or section; a temple would have pictures of the gods, and a tomb would have art showing a burial or death. In addition, ancient mythological texts were beautifully carved and painted on these walls. Although these were all applications of art and architecture in religion, the most prominent is most likely the funerary art of the Ancient Egyptians.

According to Irmgard Woldering, |Most of what is known about the life of the Ancient Egyptians – about their actions as well as their ideas – is derived from representations in their tombs, funerary gifts, and inscriptionsX (29). In addition, most rare art uncovered by today+s archeologists is found adjoining or in tombs and cemeteries. For this reason, today+s archeologists have searched the tombs of Ancient Egypt in order to uncover the truth behind this society. Many incredible discoveries have been made pertaining to the use of art and architecture within tombs. For example, it was customary for the Egyptians to bury funerary gifts along with the deceased. Such items included pottery, weapons, furniture, and wooden replicas of the body. These gifts were given so that the deceased would have all the comforts of earthly life in the hereafter. Another amazing aspect of the Ancient Egyptian+s funerary art and architecture was their grandeur. |The walls were once painted and overlayed with gold, silver, alabaster, and marble, the gates plated with gold and adorned with pillars, courtyards, and gardensX (Showker 156). Such architecture was often built in the form of great pyramids, towering high above the horizon. These tombs were made not only to encase the body of a powerful ruler but also to glorify the gods to the fullest degree. It was believed that the body, or the |ba,X was merely a transport for the earthly life, and in death the spirit, or the |ka,X would be resurrected to pursue a life in the hereafter. This is why such emphasis was place upon the grandeur of funerary art and architecture.

Although the Ancient Egyptians+ religion has been fully demonstrated through Egyptian art, architecture, and funerary practices, the influence of their beliefs has extended far beyond what is imaginable. According to Noel Q. King, author of Religions of Africa, Egyptian religion of old has had one of the greatest effects upon Africa+s modern religions (47-48). For example, the multiple gods that the Ancient Egyptians adopted into their theism so long ago are still today present in many African tribes. In addition, the methods used in ancient mummification are the root of corpse preservation in modern society. Such contributions of the Ancient Egyptians have been adapted into methods used by today+s populace in many instances. This is because the culture of Ancient Egypt has provided a stimulus which creates the desire to live, to succeed, and to be remembered in history.

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