

Ancient Egyptian Art

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM

Objects of the Egyptian Dead

Timeline of Ancient Egypt

before ca. 2920 BCE	Pre-Dynastic	—
ca. 2920 – 2649 BCE	Early Dynastic	Dynasties 1, 2
ca. 2649 – 2134 BCE	Old Kingdom	Dynasties 3-6
ca. 2040 – 1640 BCE	Middle Kingdom	Dynasties 11, 12
ca. 1550 – 1070 BCE	New Kingdom	Dynasties 18-20

Egyptian art was never meant to be displayed in museums. The ancient Egyptian people's main objective in creating many of the objects we now deem "art" was to make material goods which could accompany the dead to the afterlife. Additionally, Egyptian art reflects a sense of continuing traditions and *not* innovation. Egyptians were more inspired by objects of generations past and preferred not to create new forms.

Ancient Egypt, a society that had a great amount of respect for the deceased and for the afterlife, focused its energy on creating eternal tombs for the dead. Thus, much of what we know today about ancient Egypt is about death in that society, not life. After death, ancient Egyptians wanted to maintain a person's life force (called *ka*) into the afterlife, and so they made great attempts to preserve bodies through mummification. The image on the right is a child's mummy case from about the 3rd century A.D., found in the Worcester Art Museum's Egyptian gallery.



(1) In the **Pre-Dynastic** and **Early Dynastic** periods, only the elite commissioned memorial structures, sculptures, and paintings. Figures were portrayed in an *idealized* (exaggerated to appear more perfect) way to make them more impressive.

(2) In the **Old Kingdom**, artists tended to follow formulas in creating figures of people.

(3) The **Middle Kingdom** took inspiration from the Old Kingdom, but also moved away from idealism and into *naturalism*, or making figures look more like the people they were modeled after.

(4) Finally, in the **New Kingdom**, the arts finally prospered as Egypt expanded and grew richer. New funerary complexes were created in place of individual tombs.