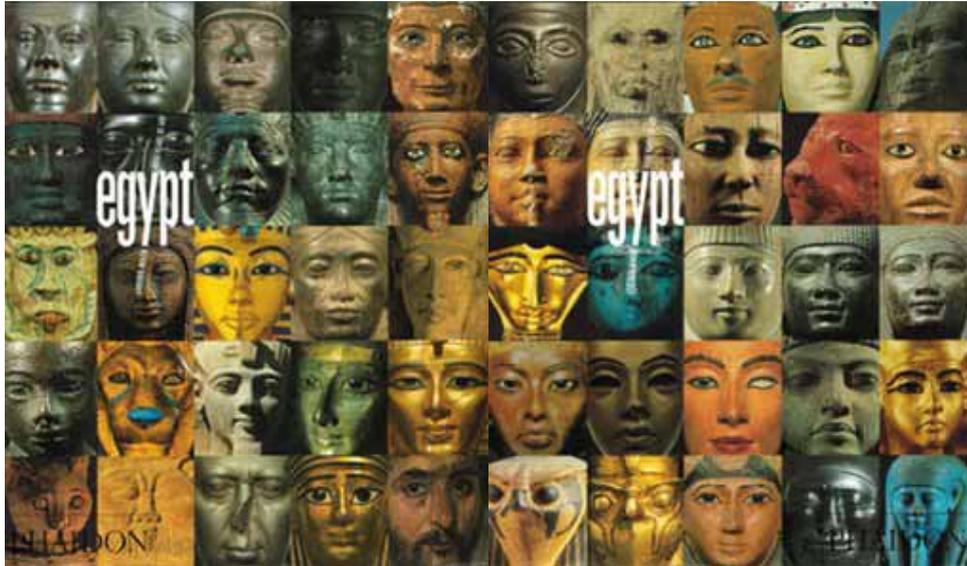


Malek, J. 2003. Egypt. 4000 years of art. – London/New York, Phaidon Press

Book review by S.M. van Roode



Egyptian art still appeals to our modern minds. It has been imitated since the times of the ancient Egyptians themselves: the societies of Napata and Meroe modelled their material culture largely on an Egyptian example, the Romans took home obelisks, parts of Egyptian religion and designed their villa's in a style they considered to be Egyptian. The well-known expedition of Napoleon to Egypt in 1798 was at least a success in the recording of the Egyptian monuments by the many scientists that trailed behind the army. In more recent times, elements of Egyptian art have been used in the Art Deco-period, resulting in both Egyptianizing jewellery and skyscrapers. Evidently, Egyptian art has lost nothing of its appeal. Exhibitions of Egyptian artwork always guarantee visitors flocking to museums, even if they do not know the slightest thing about Egyptian history.

In this beautiful book, Jaromir Malek tells the story of 4000 years of civilization from the angle of its art. Usually, the history of Egypt is illustrated with examples of art; this book places the objects in a central position and adds history when needed.



Left. Coffin of woman Tashaenkjeper, probably from Thebes. C. 600 BC. Painted wood, l. 175 cm, 68 in. Museo Civico, Bologna (Courtesy of Museo Civico Archeologico di Bologna).

Right. Return from Abydos, in the tomb of Sennufer at Sheikh Abd el-Qurna. C. 1410 BC. Wall painting on plaster (Courtesy of AKG London).

Each page of the sizable book contains a picture of an object, relief, tomb interior etc., accompanied by a small comprehensive text. Even if the reader is analphabetic, the book is a pleasure to page through. The illustrations are very carefully chosen and edited with equal care. For example, a white limestone reserve head from Giza is placed against a black background. This, combined with the subtle shadow over the face, makes the head stand out three dimensionally. The text explains the purpose of the head and in doing so provides insight in the ancient Egyptians' perspective towards depicting humans. Another head, that of king Thutmose III as a youth, is placed against a black background as well, but this time the head is made of dark siltstone. The glow of the highly polished sculpture, the dim light reflected by the cheekbones, and the upper part of the crown almost fading into the background make this picture a pleasure just to look at. A head of one of the daughters of Akhenaten, photographed from a straight frontal angle, can compete with any example of modern art. Some objects are treated with even more care: the death-mask of Tutankhamun and the gold and silver dish of Wendebaunded from Tanis are each placed on a page with the accompanying text on the opposite page. In this way the objects can be appreciated in their own right.



Left. Kai as a scribe, from his tomb at Saqqara. C. 2450 BC. Limestone and other materials, h. 53.7 cm, 21 in. Louvre, Paris (Courtesy of The Louvre Paris).

Right. Fish pendant, from a tomb at El-Haraga. C. 1880 BC. Gold, 1.4 cm, 1.5 in. Royal Museum of Scotland, Edingburgh (Courtesy of Werner Forman Archive).

Far from being an 'art-book' in the sense that its purpose is to present aesthetically pleasing objects, this book explains the principles of Egyptian art and the history of the civilization that it belongs to. The ancient Egyptians themselves would have approved of this angle: they did not know the principle of *l'art pour l'art*; art always had a function. In this book its function is to serve as a guide to ancient Egypt. The comprehensive texts, the exquisite photographs and the care with which the book has been edited turn it into a true asset for anyone interested in the history and material culture of Ancient Egypt.

Malek, J. 2003 (April). *Egypt. 4000 years of art.* – London/New York, Phaidon Press. 376 pp. ISBN 0 7148 4200 1. Price € 39.95/£ 24.95 (hardback). www.phaidon.com.