

GLITTERING

IMAGES

A JOURNEY THROUGH ART FROM EGYPT TO STAR WARS

CAMILLE

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from Egypt to *Star Wars*

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PANTHEON BOOKS, NEW YORK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Paglia, Camille, [date]

Glittering Images: a journey through art from Egypt to Star Wars / Camille Paglia
pages cm

eISBN: 978-0-307-90780-6

1. Art—History. 2. Art and society—History—21st century. I. Title.
N5303.P29 2012 709—dc23 2012005220

www.pantheonbooks.com

Cover illustration and design by Peter Mendelsund

v3.1

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A Note About the Author

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Modern life is a sea of images. Our eyes are flooded by bright pictures and clusters of text flashing at us from every direction. The brain, overstimulated, must rapidly adapt to process this swirling barrage of disconnected data. Culture in the developed world is now largely defined by all-pervasive mass media and slavishly monitored personal electronic devices. The exhilarating expansion of instant global communication has liberated a host of individual voices but paradoxically threatened to overwhelm individuality itself.

How to survive in this age of vertigo? We must relearn how to see. Amid so much jittery visual clutter, it is crucial to find *focus*, the basis of stability, identity, and life direction. Children above all deserve rescue from the torrential stream of flickering images, which addict them to seductive distractions and make social reality, with its duties and ethical concerns, seem dull and futile. The only way to teach focus is to present the eye with opportunities for steady perception—best supplied by the contemplation of art. Looking at art requires stillness and receptivity, which realign our senses and produce a magical tranquillity.

Members of the art world and residents of metropolitan regions with major museums suffer from a tragic complacency about the current status and prestige of art. The fine arts are shrinking and receding everywhere in the world. Video games, digitally animated movies, and televised sports have far more energy and variety as well as manifest impact on younger generations. The arts are fighting a rearguard action, their very survival at stake. Museums have embraced publicity and marketing techniques invented by Hollywood to attract large crowds to blockbuster shows, but the big draws remain Old Master or Impressionist paintings, not contemporary art. No galvanizing new style has emerged since Pop Art, which killed the avant-garde by embracing commercial culture. Art makes news today only when a painting is stolen or auctioned at a record price. Furthermore, with the heady proliferation of mediums available to artists, the genre of painting has lost its primacy and authority. Yet for five hundred years after the dawn of the Renaissance, the most complex and personally expressive works of art ever produced in the world were executed in paint—from tempera and oil to acrylics. The decline of painting has cut aspiring artists off from their noblest lineage.

In most leading countries, art is regarded as central to national history and identity and routinely funded by ministries of culture. Art is omnipresent in Europe, which is littered with three millennia of monuments and ruins. European museums are treasure troves of cultural patrimony—works commissioned by church and state and later amassed by royal collectors whose estates became public property after the rise of democracy. In the still relatively young United States, a practical nation founded by Puritans, the arts have never taken deep root. Much of the general public has fitfully regarded the fine arts as elitist or alien and chronically begrudged them government funding, which remains minuscule and is recurrently threatened with extinction.

Because the American political experiment was launched in the late eighteenth century, the age of European neoclassicism, government and bank buildings, as well as private dwellings, often resemble Greek or Roman temples. Public art in the United States throughout the nineteenth century usually took neoclassic form in county courthouses, graveyards, and walls.

memorials, with which the United States overflows. Both neoclassic and Victorian-era art were strongly content-driven, full of uplifting messages about virtue, piety, patriotism, and duty—a moral view of art still maintained among many conservatives. Only a minority in the largely agrarian United States had any exposure to the arts, except at fairs and expositions. The central institution of America's small towns was the church, plain and unadorned in the Protestant style. Bible study and hymn singing were the central cultural activities, amplified by poetry, both read and recited.

After the Civil War, businessmen who had made huge fortunes in oil, steel, railroads, and high finance helped build museums, opera houses, libraries, and universities, partly to assert their own power against an old social establishment but also to vie with Europe, which still overshadowed American culture. Middle-class women were often arts boosters, giving an aura of high-toned gentility to arts appreciation, which sometimes repelled their husbands. In America, where masculinity was identified with the hardy frontier spirit, the arts have often suffered from a reputation for urban effete-ness.

While the crafts always flourished in America, from pewter and silver to furniture and glass, painting remained conventional, focusing on portraiture, history, or landscape. The three thousand miles of the North Atlantic crossing were no impediment to a brisk book trade, but traffic in radical new paintings was quite another matter. The United States was isolated from the turmoil and scandal accompanying rapid changes in artistic style that began in 1819 with the lurid Romanticism of Géricault's *Raft of the Medusa* and continued to the early twentieth century with the brash colors and spatial distortions of Fauvism and Cubism. Aspiring American artists needed independent wealth or outside support to travel to Europe to see the latest trends. Hence the general public was woefully unprepared for the shock of the International Exhibition of Modern Art, held in 1913 in a National Guard armory in New York, where over a thousand works by three hundred avant-garde artists triggered a storm of incredulity and ridicule from the press.

With the founding of New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1929, avant-garde art gained a major beachhead in the United States, helped along by an influx of refugee artists such as Mondrian and George Grosz, who were fleeing the advance of Nazism. Steadily, the tenets of modernist art became basic cultural assumptions for Americans oriented toward the humanities. But the general public has never completely accepted abstract art, especially in heartland towns lacking the oversized, abstract steel sculptures common in plazas of so many large cities, including Chicago. For two decades after World War II, American movies and TV shows portrayed the abstract artist as a weirdo, criminal, or psychotic. Like the Beats, the artist was perceived as a slacker, roué, and Communist sympathizer. A suspicion that the art world is anti-American lingers today, exacerbated by a series of bitter controversies over sacrilegious art in the late 1980s and 1990s that nearly led to termination of the National Endowment for the Arts by the U.S. Congress.

This book was inspired by my dismay at the open animosity toward art and artists that I have heard on American AM talk radio over the past two decades. As a lifelong radio fan, I listen with great enjoyment around the clock to political and sports shows, whose call-in format provides a lively forum for scathingly direct working-class and lower-middle-class voices heard nowhere else in American culture. The arts are sheltered on FM radio, home to National Public Radio and the BBC World Service, with their measured pace and plummy

tones, but even there, classical music stations are vanishing. On populist AM radio, particularly on conservative shows, the ruling view among both hosts and callers is that the art world is a sterile dead zone of elitist snobs and that artists are pretentious parasites and con men.

It is alarmingly obvious that American public schools have done a poor job of educating students about art. From preschool on, art is treated as therapeutic praxis—do-it-yourself projects with construction paper and finger paints to unleash children's hidden creativity. But what is far more needed is a historical framework of objective knowledge about art. The occasional class field trip to a museum, even if one is within reach, is inadequate. Art history courses should be built into the curriculum at the primary-, middle-, and high-school levels—a basic introduction to great art and its styles and symbols. The movement toward multiculturalism following the 1960s offered a tremendous opportunity to expand our knowledge of world art, but multicultural approaches have too often sacrificed scholarship and chronology for sentimental cheerleading and rote grievances.

Colleges awarding liberal arts degrees might be expected to stress arts education, but that is not the case. The current cafeteria-style curriculum makes art history courses available but not required. With rare exception, colleges have abandoned any notion of a core body of learning. Humanities departments offer a hodgepodge of courses tailored to professorial research interests. There has been a gradual phasing out in the United States of the art history survey course, which moved magisterially over two semesters from cave art to modernism. Despite their popularity with students, who remember them as crowning college experiences, survey courses are increasingly regarded as too cumbersome, superficial, or Eurocentric—and there is no institutional will to extend them to world art. Junior faculty teething on post-structuralism, with its mechanical suspicion of culture, regard themselves as specialists rather than generalists and have not been trained to think over such vast trajectories. The end result is that many humanities majors graduate with little sense of chronology or the gorgeous procession of styles that constitutes Western art.

The most important question about art is: what lasts, and why? Definitions of beauty and standards of taste are constantly changing, but persistent patterns obtain. I subscribe to a cyclic view of culture: styles grow, peak, and decay but flower again through periodic revival. The line of artistic influence can clearly be seen in Western culture, with various breaks and recoveries, from ancient Egypt to today—a five-thousand-year saga that is not (in academic jargon would have it) an arbitrary, imperialistic “narrative.” A host of stubborn concrete objects—not just waveringly subjective “texts”—survives from antiquity and from the societies that it shaped.

Civilization is defined by law and art. Laws govern our external behavior, while art expresses our soul. Sometimes art glorifies law, as in Egypt; sometimes art challenges law, as in Romanticism. The problem with the Marxist approaches that now permeate academe (via post-structuralism and the Frankfurt school) is that Marxism sees nothing beyond society. Marxism lacks a metaphysics—that is, an investigation of man's relationship to the universe, including nature. Marxism also lacks a psychology: it believes that human beings are motivated only by material needs and desires. Marxism cannot account for the infinite refractions of human consciousness, aspirations, and achievement. Because it does not perceive the spiritual dimension of life, Marxism reflexively reduces art to ideology, as if the

art object has no other purpose or meaning beyond the economic or political. Students are now taught to look skeptically at art for its flaws, biases, omissions, and covert power plays. To admire and honor art, except when it conveys politically correct messages, is regarded as naive and reactionary. Only one Marxist scholar, Arnold Hauser in his epic 1951 study, *The Social History of Art*, has succeeded in applying Marxist analysis without losing the magic and mystery of art. And Hauser (an early influence on my work) was building on the great tradition of German philology, animated by an ethic of massive erudition that is now lost.

Art is a marriage of the ideal and the real. Art making is a branch of artisanship. Artists are craftsmen, closer to carpenters and welders than they are to intellectuals and academics, with their inflated, self-referential rhetoric. Art uses and speaks to the senses. It is grounded in the tangible physical world. Post-structuralism, with its French linguistic origins, is obsessed with words and is thus incompetent to illuminate any art form outside of literature. Commentaries on art must approach and describe it in its own terms. A delicate balance must be struck between the visible and the invisible worlds. Those who subordinate art to a contemporary political agenda are as guilty of rigid literalism and propaganda as any Victorian preacher or Stalinist bureaucrat.

One reason for the marginalization of the fine arts today is that artists are too often addressing other artists and the in-group of hip cognoscenti. They have lost touch with the general public, whose taste and values they caricature and scorn. A majority of American artists, like a majority of American professors, are liberals who have little or no contact with those of opposing views. But the firebrand, antiestablishment, free-speech liberalism of the 1960s (with which I strongly identify) has evolved into a utopian dreamworld of the comfortable professional class, with its vague philanthropic impulses and strange passivity toward a bloated, authoritarian government. A monolithic orthodoxy has marooned artists in a ghetto of received opinion and cut them off from fresh ideas. Nothing is more hackneyed than the liberal dogma that shock value confers automatic importance on an artwork. The last time this was true was probably the late 1970s, exemplified by Robert Mapplethorpe's homoerotic, sadomasochistic photographs (which I admire and have defended). But culture has moved on. In the twenty-first century, we are looking for meaning, not subverting it. The art world, mesmerized by the heroic annals of the old avant-garde, is living in the past.

But conservatives are equally guilty of sins against culture. Despite their trumpet call for a return of education to the Western canon, they have behaved like provincial philistines when it comes to the visual arts. While there are several sophisticated art critics among urban conservatives, the momentum of the American conservative movement has been principally powered from outside the Northeast in agrarian regions where evangelical Christianity thrives. Protestantism has a history of iconoclasm: during the northern European Reformation, church statues and stained-glass windows were systematically destroyed as idolatrous. Compared with art-laden Roman Catholicism, mainstream American Protestantism is visually impoverished. Its images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd are often artistically so weak that they approach kitsch. Most conservatives operate in a climate that is either indifferent or hostile to art. The leading conservative writers and commentators seem blind to the intricate interconnection of art and politics in ancient Greece, which invented democracy. The nude, based on scientific study of anatomy, was the great symbol of Western individualism bequeathed to us by the Greeks, but Christian conservatives would never

permit the erotic nudes of Western art to be shown in public schools. American Puritanism lingers in conservative suspicions about the sorcery of beauty.

On the other hand, a tremendous amount of major Western art has been intensely religious and liberals, who have hounded Christmas crèches out of public squares, would similarly object to the doctrinal instruction necessary to present Christian iconography in the public classroom. Thus arts education is stymied in the United States—a victim of political cross fire. Although I am an atheist, I respect all religions and take them seriously as vast symbolic systems containing deep truth about human existence. While evil has sometimes been done in its name, religion has been an enormously civilizing force in world history. Sneering at religion is juvenile, symptomatic of a stunted imagination. Yet that cynical posture has become de rigueur in the art world—simply another reason for the shallow derivativeness of so much contemporary art, which has no big ideas left.

Given their ignorance and neglect of art, the series of public crises whipped up by right-wing politicians over offensive art in the late 1980s and 1990s was shot through with hypocrisy. But the instigators, including fundamentalist ministers, were absolutely correct that no genuinely avant-garde artist should be asking the government for support. There is no constitutional right to a government grant or to exhibition space in publicly funded institutions. Only one famous artist that I am aware of—the Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti—had the perspicacity and courage to exhort the arts community to renounce its infantilizing dependence on the government dole.

Amid the controversies over sacrilege, the art world made a terrible strategic error in elevating partisan loyalties over the welfare of American art. In automatically rushing to the defense of third-rate works like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) and Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* (1996), it allowed itself to be defined in the public eye as an arrogant, insular fraternity with frivolous tastes and debased standards. There have been great works of sacrilegious art: my favorite is Salvador Dalí's parody of the Annunciation, *Young Virgin Auto-Sodomized by the Horns of Her Own Chastity* (1954), where a bored Mary, clad only in seamed nylons and loafers, leans over a balcony while casually exposing her bare buttocks to a descending flock of fat, phallic tubers, surreally suggesting angels' horns, holy doves, jostling sperm, and missile nose cones.

The mediocre Serrano and Ofili works did not deserve their fame. *Piss Christ*, whose conceptual muddle was worsened by Serrano's shaky self-defense, was a large-format photograph of a plastic crucifix mistily submerged in a glass beaker of the artist's urine. The multimedia Ofili work, mounted by the Brooklyn Museum of Art in its 1999 show *Sensation*, Charles Saatchi enterprise imported from London, was equally confused. The British-Nigerian Ofili surrounded a cartoonish African Madonna with a collage of glued-on butterflies consisting of cutouts of female buttocks and genitalia from pornographic magazines; one breast, as well as the two stumpy pedestals, was sculpted of real elephant dung from the London Zoo. Whatever context might have been helpfully supplied by curatorial support (such as references to African fertility cults) was completely missing.

There was a predictable explosion over the Ofili Madonna from the tabloid press and from spokesmen for New York's immense population of ethnic Catholics. The Republican mayor of New York, Rudolph Giuliani, gratuitously inserted himself into the furor by his dictatorial grandstanding in threatening to cancel the city funding of the Brooklyn Museum and evict

from its lease. The arts community, exhilarated at this new opportunity to wave the tattered avant-garde banner, leaped into groupthink mode. As with the prior flap over Mapplethorpe photographs, there were demagogic attempts by supporters to blame the protests on racism, which had nothing to do with either controversy. Any acknowledgment of the pornographic cutouts was dishonestly suppressed in descriptions of the Ofili work by the liberal major media.

Though commercially successful for the Brooklyn Museum, *Sensation* was a public relations disaster for the reputation of art and artists in the United States. After several changes in leadership at the National Endowment for the Arts, the wounds had been slowly healing from the art battles of a decade earlier, and there was reason for cautious optimism about increases in federal arts funding. *Sensation* stopped that process cold. Conservative talk radio, now a nationally syndicated force, unsparingly informed its vast audience of the late outrage. My own warnings to the arts community in my [Salon.com](#) column fell on deaf ears. But my fears have been realized: as the economy worsened over the intervening years, school and civic arts programs, whose rationale is not understood by many among the general public, have been drastically curtailed or eliminated altogether by strapped municipalities nationwide. American schoolchildren are paying the price for the art world's delusional sense of entitlement.

This book is an attempt to reach a general audience for whom art is not a daily presence. I have tried to chart the history and styles of Western art as succinctly and accessibly as possible. The format of the book is based on Catholic breviaries of devotional images, like Mass cards of the saints. The reader is invited to contemplate the work, to see it as a whole and then to scrutinize its fine details. All parents who can afford it should have at least one art book lying around the house for children to encounter on their own. My young parents had E. H. Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1950), which they probably got from the Book-of-the-Month Club and which fascinated me despite its fuzzy black-and-white pictures. Even more influential was the curator René Huyghe's *Art Treasures of the Louvre*, a 1951 collection of a hundred large, lavish color plates that my father brought home from Paris, where he had studied Romance languages for a year at the Sorbonne (1952–53) on the GI Bill. Those two books formed my sensibility by the time I had gotten to grade school. Children, as well as general readers, need handy, manageable books. Too many art books are victims of the coffee-table syndrome—big, unwieldy, glossily packaged showpieces. H. W. Janson's nine-hundred-page *History of Art*, which became an academic staple after its publication in 1962, is a beautiful but intimidating object, weighing seven and a half pounds. Janson's text is superbly erudite but moves so numbingly fast that discussion of individual works is scanted.

Each chapter here begins with a specific period or style and then moves to a representative artist and work. For the sake of readability, there are no footnotes. Outside artworks are occasionally referred to (such as Sir Henry Raeburn's wonderful portrait of Eleanor Urquhart) and may be easily found on the Web. I have supplied an index but no bibliography, which would take another volume. The foundation for these chapters was more than two centuries of scholarship in art history. Although my doctorate from Yale University was in English literature, my work, starting with my dissertation, has been interdisciplinary. I have incorporated the visual arts in my classes throughout my teaching career, which has been spent almost entirely at art schools—in the 1970s at Bennington College, my first job out of

graduate school, and since 1984 at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Over the past two decades, I also developed my technique of image analysis through marathon slide lectures (up to eighty images) at public venues in the United States and abroad.

My thinking about art was impacted by an early attraction to archaeology, which conferred a historical perspective. The first art criticism I read (which I stumbled on in high school) was by Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde, apostles of aestheticism. They and their mentors Théophile Gautier and Charles Baudelaire remain my lodestars in approaching art in a reverential and even ecstatic way. Among art historians, my main influences have been two other products of German philology: Heinrich Wölfflin, with his critique of evolving phases of style; and Erwin Panofsky, whose theory of iconology requires layered attentiveness to idea, form, and social context. Lucidly written books by Rhys Carpenter, Sir Kenneth Clark, and Wylie Sypher broadened my understanding of art. In my upstate New York childhood, my immigrant family, with their meticulous virtuosity in the crafts of sewing, tailoring, barbering, carpentry, masonry, metalwork, basketry, and leather working, also conveyed the age-old Italian philosophy of admiration of beauty and veneration for art and artists.

The artworks in this book were chosen to avoid overlap with those in my first book, *Sexual Personae* (1990), which highlighted Stone Age, Egyptian, and Greek sculpture, as well as Renaissance, Romantic, Pre-Raphaelite, and Symbolist painting. (I call for insurrection against the fast-moving Marxist academic trend to drop “Renaissance” for the turgid term “Early Modern,” based on economics rather than art.) Scholarship has been copious on famous works like the Laocoön, the Book of Kells, and David’s *The Death of Marat*, but little has been said about Bronzino’s *Andrea Doria*, Friedrich’s *The Sea of Ice*, Manet’s *At the Café*, or Tamar de Lempicka’s *Doctor Boucard*. Grosz’s harrowing drawing *Life Makes You Happy!* seems virtually unknown, at least in the United States. Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*, the most important painting in any American museum, has drawn an enormous body of commentary, but I believe I have noticed and interpreted details that others have missed.

John Wesley Hardrick’s vivacious portrait of Xenia Goodloe has been reproduced only once before, in the catalog for a 1996 exhibition at the Indianapolis Museum of Art, *A Shared Heritage: Art by Four African Americans*. I first saw Eleanor Antin’s postcards for *100 Bodies* reprinted in *The Village Voice* while I was in graduate school, and I never forgot them. Renee Cox’s *Chillin’ with Liberty* was published in the catalog for a 2001 exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, *Committed to the Image: Contemporary Black Photographers*. The thesis of my final chapter—that film director and digital pioneer George Lucas is the world’s greatest living artist—emerged over the five-year process of writing this book. Nothing I saw in the visual arts of the past thirty years was as daring, beautiful, and emotionally compelling as the spectacular volcano-planet climax of Lucas’s *Revenge of the Sith* (2005).

The creative energy of our era is flowing away from the fine arts and into new technologies. Over the past century, industrial design, from streamlined automobiles and sleek home appliances to today’s intricately customized personal gadgets, has supplied aesthetic satisfactions once mainly derived from painting and sculpture. In my experience as a teacher, industrial design students have acute powers of social observation and futuristic intuition, as well as independent and speculative minds, rarely found among today’s overly ideological intellectuals. The industrial designer recognizes that commerce, for good or ill, has shaped modern culture, whose cardinal feature is not economic inequity but egalitarian market

communication. Indeed, American genius has always excelled in frankly commercial forms like advertising, modern architecture, Hollywood movies, jazz, and rock music.

But mass media are a bewitching wilderness in which it is easy to get lost. My postwar generation could play with pop because we had a solid primary-school education, geared to the fundamentals of history and humanities. The young now deftly negotiate a dense whirl of relativism and synchronicity: self-cannibalizing pop, with its signature sampling and retro fads, has become a stupendous superabundance, impossible to absorb and often distanced through a protective pose of nervous irony. The rise of social media has blurred the borderline between private and public and filled the air with telegraphic trivialities, crowding out sequential discourse that invites rereading.

Our visual environment is highly kinetic but unstable. In the digital age, images even on news sites can be so skillfully manipulated that everything has become slippery and evanescent. Famous faces are dropped into compromising scenarios, while women's bodies are fashionably slimmed, smoothed, and lightened. Photographs of celebrities at industry galas may be instantly scrubbed before online release to the once unimpeachable wire services. TV editing has ruthlessly sped up. The dazzling fast cuts invented by New Wave director Jean-Luc Godard and popularized for music videos by Richard Lester's Beatlemania movies have become a stilted cliché to gin up false excitement. Movies, TV, and the Web over-rely on a constant flashing or strobing that fatigues the eye and may impede small children's cognitive development. Few young people, including college students, have the patience now for the long, hypnotic takes and elegant pictorial composition of the European art films that Godard was merrily satirizing.

As digital photography has supplanted film over the past two decades (to the grief and indignation of many of my photography majors), the general public has gradually lost contact with the refinements of old-fashioned film developing. Striking, high-quality photographs of people and current events once filled the rotogravure sections of city newspapers and glossy large-format magazines such as *Life* and *Look*, whose fraying issues have become collector's items. Digital images are sharp and clean but lack the atmospheric shading that cues our sense of contour and depth. Digital color is supersaturated and garish, even cartoonlike, without the subtleties and fine gradations of blended color, used in oil painting since the Renaissance. Digital photographs can seem like unnerving glimpses into the pretty but frozen world of a dollhouse. Digital TVs, set at splashy wide-screen option, spread and stretch the image, imposing distortion on viewers as standard practice. Animated graphics in video games, electronic billboards, and sports telecasting create dizzily swooping compressions and tunnel-like warpings of space. The eye is assaulted, coerced, desensitized.

The only road to freedom is self-education in art. Art is not a luxury for any advanced civilization; it is a necessity, without which creative intelligence will wither and die. Even in economically troubled times, support for the arts should be a national imperative. Dance, for example, requires funding not only to secure safe, roomy rehearsal space but to preserve the indispensable continuity of the teacher-student link. American culture has become unbalanced by its obsession with the blood sport of politics, a voracious vortex consuming everything in its path. History shows that, for both individuals and nations, political power is transient. America's true legacy is its ideal of liberty, which has inspired insurgencies around the world. Politicians and partisans of both the Right and the Left must recognize that art too is a voice.

of liberty, requiring nurture without intrusion. Art unites the spiritual and material realms. In an age of alluring, magical machines, a society that forgets art risks losing its soul.

1

RESURRECTION

Queen Nefertari



Queen Nefertari and the Goddess Isis.

The tomb of Nefertari, ca. 1290–1224 b.c. Valley of the Queens, Luxor, Egypt. ([Illustration Credit 1.1](#))

Click [here](#) to view a larger version of this image.

~~Hosts carved out of time. Egyptian art is a vast ruin of messages from the dead. Clean and simple in form, Egyptian painted figures float in an abstract space that is neither here nor there. The background is coolly blank. Everything is flattened into the foreground, an eternal present where serenely smiling pharaohs offer incense and spools of flax to the gods or drive their chariot wheels over fallen foes. Hieroglyphics hang in midair, clusters of sharp pictograms of a rope, reed, bun, viper, owl, human leg, or mystic eye.~~

Resurrection was the master value of a civilization that dreamed of conquering the terror of death. At the heart of Egyptian religion was a corpse—the mummy of the great god Osiris swaddled in linen strips. Osiris was murdered and dismembered by his evil brother, Set, who scattered his fourteen body parts throughout Egypt. Isis, Osiris's sister and devoted wife, collected and reassembled them—except for the missing penis, which she fabricated in wood or clay. As Osiris's embalmer and enhancer, therefore, Isis acted as a resourceful proto-artist, assembling materials and molding a work of mummiform sculpture that would be reproduced in Egyptian art and cult for three thousand years.

Passage to the afterlife meant a descent to the underworld. Souls hoping for rebirth invoked Osiris and literally became him. Despite its preoccupation with death, Egyptian art is rarely claustrophobic. The beyond was no spectral twilight but a lively zone of physical needs and pleasures. Warehousing stools, chairs, tables, chests, clothing, perfumes, ointments, jewelry, games, daggers, boomerangs, chariots, and jars of extracted viscera, the tomb was a distillation of real life. The urbane aristocrats promenading across the walls are wide-eyed and cheerful as they face the great unknown. Their majestically enthroned guardian gods often seem faintly comic, with the large heads of birds, beetles, or hippopotamuses, vestiges of primitive animism.

Resurrection also symbolizes our modern recovery of Egypt. For a millennium after the fall of Rome, Egypt was wrapped in a haze of occult legend. After Islam's arrival, it became a closed world whose pagan remains were ignored and neglected. Napoleon's 1798 invasion helped start Egyptology: a French officer's discovery of the Rosetta Stone led to the decipherment of hieroglyphics, while the immense, multivolumed report by Napoleon's team of surveyors and scientists set off a craze for Egyptian style that swept European architecture and decor and would even produce America's Washington Monument. Over the next century, thanks to photography, knowledge of Egypt was gradually spread throughout the world. The ancient Egyptians have finally achieved their immortality.

From earliest times through the Middle Kingdom, the rulers of Egypt were buried in sprawling necropolises at the desert's edge near the Delta, as the Nile fans out toward the sea. The principal sacred districts were at Saqqara and Giza, where the Great Sphinx, hacked out of bedrock, still guards Chephren's mammoth pyramid. After a devastating Syrian invasion, the capital of Egypt was moved four hundred miles south to Thebes. There the upstart warrior pharaohs of the New Kingdom created their own cemetery facing toward the setting sun across the Nile—the Valley of the Kings, scarcely more than a dry gulch behind the high, horned escarpment of the Libyan Plateau. Pyramids or telltale markers of any kind were prudently avoided. The coffins were buried deep in the rock and the entryways heaped with rubble. Nevertheless, most tombs in the Valley of the Kings were looted within two centuries. One that escaped detection belonged to a minor king, Tutankhamen, who died young. When his tomb was found and opened in 1922, the staggering treasures, such as his solid-gold

mummy case, gave tantalizing hints of what the grave goods of a star pharaoh must have been.

Royal wives and children were buried in the nearby Valley of the Queens, where eight tombs (called “Houses of Eternity”) have been found. The most lavish one belonged to Nefertari, first and favorite wife of the imperialistic Rameses II, who sired at least forty-five sons from eight wives and who ruled for more than sixty years during the thirteenth century b.c. Nefertari’s unusual status was signaled by her figure being made the same size as the king’s at her shrine at Abu Simbel, where four seated colossi of Rameses were cut from a Nubian cliff on the Nile. Nefertari (her name means “the Most Beautiful of Them All”) was of noble but not royal blood. She may have been a cousin or even a younger sister of Nefertiti, the charismatic queen of the rebel monotheist ruler Akhenaten. Nefertari bore Rameses II’s firstborn son, who died tragically young, perhaps inspiring the story in Exodus of God’s curse upon Pharaoh. (In Cecil B. DeMille’s epic movie *The Ten Commandments*, Anne Baxter plays the seductive Nefertiti to Yul Brynner’s arrogant Rameses.) Nefertari had at least five more children, but the robust Rameses (whose well-preserved mummy survives in the Cairo Museum) outlived them all. Hence his successor, Merneptah, was the son of a lesser, rival queen.

Nefertari’s tomb was discovered in 1904 by Ernesto Schiaparelli, an Italian scholar and museum director. Sunk forty feet into the bedrock, it has a twofold axis aligned to the compass points and consists of two large ceremonial chambers, annexed by side chapels and niches and connected by a staircase. All that remains of the queen’s pink granite sarcophagus is a smashed lid. The tomb’s ceilings were painted midnight blue and spangled with gold stars to represent the heavens, while the walls and square columns were adorned with religious scenes and symbols. The raw limestone surfaces were first coated with a rough plaster of Nile mud, which was sculpted in low relief. A thin layer of fine plaster was then applied, upon which the designs were painted in tempera—always mineral pigments mixed with an unknown binder, perhaps a gum from the acacia trees of Thebes. A sparkling egg glaze was used as a sealant. Nefertari’s tomb would suffer damage from an earthquake and serious deterioration from rock-salt crystals slowly deposited behind the plaster by seeping rainwater. Thanks to a major rescue project by the Getty Conservation Institute in collaboration with the Egyptian Antiquities Organization (1986–92), the tomb has been repaired, stabilized, and reopened to the public. The conservators’ meticulous cleaning and consolidation (with no new paint whatever) have revealed the murals’ still brilliant color.



VALLEY OF THE KINGS, LUXOR, EGYPT Pyramid-shaped mountain across the Nile from Thebes. Now called al-Qurn (the Horn). Ancient name: *ta dehent* (the peak). Sacred home of Meretseger (She Who Loves Silence), cobra goddess and vengeful guardian of the Theban necropolis. (Illustration Credit 1.2)

The paintings are a narrative of Nefertari's journey toward the afterlife. She is presented as a pilgrim soul seeking justification and resurrection. There are oddly few references in the tomb to her husband and none to her children or life story. Everything is focused on Nefertari's spiritual quest. Respectful yet confident of her worthiness, she is a plucky, solitary wayfarer confronting the awesome powers and mysteries of the cosmos. Demons wait to pounce at each of five gates (out of a traditional twelve) leading to Duat, the netherworld. But Nefertari knows the sacred formulas, passes her test, and wins resurrection, proved by her being repeatedly called "the Osiris."

At a key point in her travels, Nefertari is welcomed by Isis, who takes her affectionately by the hand and leads her eastward toward the next chamber. The goddess speaks, promising salvation: "Come, King's great wife, Nefertari, beloved of Mut. I give to thee a place in the Sacred Land." The queen's name hovers in two golden cartouches (heraldic rings or medallions). Now she must meet the scrutiny and challenges of the other leading gods, including the sun god Re, the scorpion goddess Serquet, and ibis-headed Thoth. She will make offerings, appeal for aid, and play a chess-like table game (*senet*) with an invisible opponent, Fate.

The figures of Isis and Nefertari illustrate the strict conventions of Egyptian art, which remained virtually unchanged (except for Akhenaten's brief experiment in naturalism) for three millennia. Postures are formal and frozen and contours firmly outlined. In Egyptian painting or relief sculpture, the head, nose, hips, and feet are shown in profile, while the eyes, shoulders, and chest are seen from the front—an arresting but anatomically impossible hybrid. While wigs or fabrics may be finely patterned, draftsmanship is usually broad and cartoonlike. The palette is limited: pigment was applied in even swatches of five primary colors without shading. Egyptian paintings were made like jewelry in glittering, juxtaposed parts.

Everywhere in the tomb, Nefertari is presented as a paragon of grace and beauty, epitomizing the lofty standards of the Egyptian elite. A woman of high rank was near

always depicted as slim, lithe, and small breasted—even if the mature reality was far from that. Nefertari wears a stylish ensemble of translucent linen: a crisply pleated cape-shawl knotted over a tight, high-waisted, ankle-length dress (*kalasiris*), smartly double-wrapped with a dangling, textured belt. Isis, in contrast, along with all of the tomb's other goddesses, wears a svelte, opaque, breast-baring sheath with shoulder straps—a design that had first appeared in Egyptian art a thousand years before and that never changed, symbolizing the goddess's timeless power.

Over Nefertari's long black wig rests a magnificent golden vulture cap representing Mut, the hermaphroditic vulture goddess who was patron of Thebes. Its beak juts fiercely from the queen's brow, while its wings protectively embrace her head. A double vulture plume nestling a solar disk rises from the crown. The queen's jewelry consists of banded bracelets; a flaunting broad gold collar (*wesekh*); and a rearing cobra (the royal uraeus of Lower Egypt) coiled through her earlobe. Isis's wig is wrapped by a ribbon and topped by the sky goddess Hathor's solar disk and cow horns, from which protrudes another cobra. Isis's green staff, the *was* scepter of authority; draped around her neck over her rainbow collar is a beaded necklace with two tubers (*menat*), Hathor's emblem of fertility. Its heavy gold counterpoise hangs behind Isis's right shoulder. The women's eyes (like men's eyes too in Egypt) are rimmed and extended by kohl, a sooty mascara that reflected and cooled the sunlight.

The queen's skin is red, close to burnt umber—a striking departure from the yellow tones normally given Egyptian women aristocrats. Her skin surprisingly matches that of the goddesses and not the goddesses in her tomb. Skin color in Egyptian art was generally a signifier of class rather than race: noblewomen neither worked in the hot sun like peasants nor exercised arms or waged war in the open like men. Nefertari's dark skin may refer to her unspecified activity in the public realm, also suggested by her state title, "Mistress of Upper and Lower Egypt." As a masculine motif, her skin color would therefore parallel the pharaoh's kilt, head cloth, and ceremonial beard appropriated by the formidable Queen Hatshepsut in the prior dynasty. It is also at least theoretically possible that Nefertari, as a daughter of the south, was using mahogany skin tones to claim and promote a Nubian ancestry.

Egypt was a conservative society whose authoritarianism was bred by the harsh desert environment. Complex organization over huge distances was required for construction, irrigation, trade, and governance. Order, inextricable from truth and justice (*ma'at*), was seen as both beautiful and necessary. Hence the suave sophistication projected by gods and royalty in Egyptian art had a larger ideal meaning. Artists were merely anonymous craftsmen in Egypt, but they were faithful messengers of the cultural code, generating for era after era these elegant apparitions who still haunt us.

MYSTIC VISION

Idols of the Cyclades



Cycladic figurine.

Early Cycladic II, ca. 2800–2300 b.c. Marble. 1 ft. 3½ in. Dokathismata type. The Museum of Cycladic Art, Athens, Greece. ([Illustration Credit 2.1](#))

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~~What if an entire civilization disappeared and left only hidden hoards of stone dolls? The~~
in effect is the story to date of the Cycladic idols, which have been dug out of cemeteries and ritual pits in the Cyclades, a chain of 220 arid, rocky islands in the Aegean Sea between southern Greece and Turkey. The purpose of these mysterious objects, carved from fine white marble during the early Bronze Age (3500–2300 b.c.), remains unknown. But the discovery in the late nineteenth century deeply influenced modern abstract art.

Although a few Cycladic figurines are male (in occupations such as lyre player, warrior, or hunter), the overwhelming majority are female and thus probably played some role in regional fertility cult. Are they goddesses whose blessing is being invoked or human women praying for safe pregnancies? Artistically, they are remote descendants of the Stone Age statuettes of earth mothers that have been found throughout Europe. The most famous example, plucked from a riverbank in Austria, is the tiny Venus of Willendorf, with her pendulous breasts and bulging belly. Over a period of twenty thousand years, that corpulent design was refined and stylized, eventually producing the streamlined Venus of Lespugue (from the French Pyrenees), whose head has become a small, polished knob and whose torso is a smooth stalk rising from her bubbling hips.

The trim Cycladic idols represent a final stage in this long development. They have completely shed the ballooning silhouette of Stone Age mothers, who embodied the teeming, untidy organic principle. Classic Cycladic style is linear and coolly geometric, with smooth planes and sharp angles. It seems to be a unique fusion of the islands' earliest extant images—enthroned obese mother goddesses and flat, enigmatic violin-shaped totems. The figurines sport pert, maidenly breasts (rather than droopy udders) as well as surprisingly long legs. Another novelty is that they have feet, unlike Stone Age statuettes, whose feet may have been ritually broken off to capture and detain the earth mother with her magical fertility. As with the latter figures, the pubis is emphatically marked by an inverted delta, an archaic symbol around the world for procreative female power. On the flat Cycladic surface, the delta has become more abstract and may be notched (extending the leg line) to suggest the vulval groove. But this is no map for male penetration: the female triangle, protected by stiffly locked legs, is stubbornly sealed.

In our figurine, Cycladic linearity is illustrated in the strangely elongated neck, a sturdy pylon supporting the ovoid head like a triangular plate or shield. It's as if a woman were becoming a praying mantis, an insect linked with prophecy in ancient Greece. She has a spiky, rudder-like nose but no eyes or mouth. Were they once painted on? Traces of color cling to some idols. But that the face was not incised or sculpted (as Cycladic ears often were) may indicate it was thought to be of secondary importance. The Venuses of Willendorf and Lespugue are also both faceless: that absence of identity, in modern terms, is accentuated by their lowered heads, which convey an indifference to the outside world as they monitor their all-important womb. This Cycladic figurine, in contrast, has an alert aplomb, perhaps reflecting a less uncertain and more advanced society. Although lacking hands, her bowed, folded arms (always left above right) certainly seem more willed and potent than the feeble stumps resting on inflated breasts in Stone Age figures. She is barricaded, embracing only herself.

But the poise of the Cycladic idols may be a mirage arising from their shift in context. Photographed and displayed in museums, the figurines are positioned vertically, as if standing

up. Like the Venus of Willendorf, however, they may have been originally intended to recline like sleepers or the dead laid out for immolation or burial. Ritual objects were often held in the hand like talismans. Indeed, one source of Cycladic streamlining may have been the surface detail was worn off through frequent handling over time—analogous to the weathering of white beach pebbles that may have partly inspired the statuettes in the marble-rich region. Now erect with upturned face, the idol seems attuned to higher realities like a modern antenna picking up radio signals from the atmosphere. Her blank head appears almost helmetlike, while her body, with its wide, square, rather masculine shoulders (a feature of the Dokathismata type of idol from Amorgos), seems gloved in a filmy casing, like a wet suit. Her springy legs and toes give her the look of a high diver or soaring space traveler.

Like the weathered colossi of Easter Island in the South Pacific, the sleek Cycladic idols are patient watchers and mystic seekers, tapping into elemental forces. The prominent head may suggest that a sense of consciousness was emerging in Aegean culture. Mind had not yet been dualistically severed from body, nor had the concept of an eternal soul been born. But progress is detectable out of humanity's early state of fearful passivity toward nature and matter. These cryptic figurines are daring explorations of form and structure, with the body represented as a skeletal frame and not simply as a heaving mass of fluid flesh.

The history of the Cycladic idols demonstrates how works of art change in meaning over time. We may never know what the figurines meant to their fabricators. But to many important modern artists—Pablo Picasso, Constantin Brancusi, André Derain, Jacob Epstein, Amedeo Modigliani, Jean Arp, Jacques Lipchitz, Alexander Archipenko, Henry Moore, Barbara Hepworth, and Alberto Giacometti—these sculptures were paradigms of a radical new simplification, breaking with the ponderousness and clutter of the Victorian period and Belle Époque. Like African and Polynesian tribal masks, the Cycladic figures became totems of exotic “primitivism” before and after World War I. Amid a revival of world mythology that was revolutionizing psychology and anthropology, they seemed to embody universal archetypes rather than the neurotic individualism of decadent Europe.

Although modernism as a movement may be nearly exhausted, the clarity and grace of these objects remain. Perhaps their spirituality can be even better appreciated now. Propped upright, the Cycladic idols are those who stand and wait—human beings battered by time and fate but still hoping for a revelation from beyond. Messages are no longer sought in the labyrinthine bowels of mother earth. The crisply carved Cycladic idols, appealing to the eye, carry an invigorating sense of the future. Even in their rightful positions on their backs, they are gazing skyward toward some other order—not necessarily a supreme deity but the shifting pattern of bright stars.

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