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PREDYNASTIC ART

فن ما قبل الأسرات

David Wengrow

Vordynastische Kunst

L'Art prédynastique

"Predynastic art" describes a range of visual imagery and ornamental forms attested in Egypt and Lower Nubia from c.4000 - 3300 BCE. The known corpus comprises a rich variety of figural and non-figural designs, often applied to functional objects that were widely available, such as cosmetic palettes, ceramic vessels, and combs. Free-standing figurines are also known, as are occasional examples of large-scale painting and sculpture. Such images were a pervasive feature of Egyptian social life prior to the formation of the dynastic state, when elaborate personal display appears to have become a prerogative of elite groups.

فن ما قبل الأسرات مصطلح يصف مجموعة من الأشكال والصور التي عرفت بمصر والنوبة السفلى ما بين 4000 قبل الميلاد و 3300 قبل الميلاد. الكم المعروف من فن ما قبل الأسرات يتضمن مجموعة من الأشكال الأدمية والغير آدمية التي كانت تضاف إلى أشياء شائعة الاستخدام مثل الصلايات المستخدمة لطحن مواد التجميل، الأواني الفخارية وأمشاط الشعر. عُرف أيضاً النحت والتماثيل الصغيرة وأحياناً المناظر و التماثيل الكبيرة. هذه الصور كانت واسعة الانتشار بالمجتمع المصري قبل تكوين دولة ذات أسرة حاكمة حين أصبحت الصور الشخصية إمتياز عليّة القوم.

The term "Predynastic art" is conventionally used to describe a range of visual imagery and ornamental forms attested in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia, and subsequently throughout Egypt, during the early and middle part of the fourth millennium (c.4000 - 3300 BCE). The northward dissemination of these decorative forms constitutes part of a wider expansion of cultural influences and practices from the Nile Valley into the Delta, which begins around 3600 BCE and characterizes the transition from the Naqada I to Naqada II periods. During the final centuries of the fourth millennium the majority ceased to be produced, or their production was tightly restricted, as the display of images throughout Egypt appears to have become a prerogative of elite groups.

This attempt by the early dynastic state to co-opt, restrict, or eliminate pre-existing modes of visual expression implies that they had important social functions, reflected in the incorporation of art objects into Predynastic burials as ways of enhancing and extending a funerary image of the deceased that was committed to social memory.

Most of what is termed Predynastic art derives from cemeteries excavated throughout Egypt during the early twentieth century, such as the large burial grounds of Naqada and Ballas (Petrie and Quibell 1896), where the stylistic development of decorative forms provided an important component in Petrie's establishment of a relative dating sequence (Petrie and Mace 1901). Around that time many examples also entered public and

private collections from the antiquities market. Some are of doubtful authenticity, including a number of anthropomorphic figurines (Ucko and Hodges 1963) and a storage jar painted with an image of a sailing ship which is still widely, but unreliably, cited as the earliest evidence for sail-powered transport in the Eastern Mediterranean (Lacovara 1982).

In spite of its wide currency, the term “Predynastic art” has little meaning outside the context of the art market and the specialized disciplinary conventions of art history. There is no evidence to suggest that such a category had significance for prehistoric actors. It is a modern abstraction from a more encompassing system of communication and display that appears to have been strongly focused upon the ornamentation and modification of the human body, in life as well as death (Wengrow and Baines 2004). This is suggested by the highly mobile and portable character of many decorated objects, such as combs (figs. 1 - 3), spoons, and pins carved from bone or ivory, siltstone palettes (figs. 4, 5) and “tags” (fig. 6), miniature vessels, pendants (fig. 7), and flint knives; by their function in grooming and in the preparation of cosmetic, and perhaps also medicinal, substances; and by the provision of many of these objects with some means of suspension. Most of these artifact types, and the complex system of personal presentation to which they belonged, make their first appearance in the archaeological record of the Nile Valley (Egyptian and Sudanese) during the fifth millennium BCE, when domestic animals and plants were first widely adopted. However, it is only during the early fourth millennium, and within the more restricted area between the Second Cataract and Middle Egypt, that they were routinely used as surfaces for depiction or shaped into the forms of animals and other features of the landscape.

In addition to objects attached to the body, the known repertoire of Predynastic art also comprises many free-standing forms. Among the most widely discussed are clay figurines of



Figure 1. Fragment of ivory comb with anthropomorphic ornament. Naqada, Tomb 1411 (UC4308).



Figure 2. Ivory comb with bird ornament. Naqada, Tomb 1419 (UC5367).

humans (fig. 8) and animals, as well as examples that appear to deliberately combine elements from different species. Free-standing figurines in ivory and bone appear not to have been produced in any quantity until the very end of the Predynastic Period, which saw a proliferation of such figures that continued into the Naqada III Period and beyond. The interpretation of Predynastic figurines is an area of ongoing controversy and no



Figure 3. Fragment of ivory comb with animal ornament. Badari, Tomb 1670 (UC9581).

consensus exists as to their purpose or even their basic subject matter (Ucko 1968). Some are closely comparable in form and surface detail to figures rendered in other media, such as those modeled or painted on ceramic vessels. This fluidity of decorative forms between mobile media is strongly characteristic of Predynastic art as a whole, but frequent attempts to extend such comparisons to the extensive record of Nilotic rock art remain inconclusive and do not in themselves provide a reliable method for dating the latter (Wengrow 2006: 99 - 123).

Another important class of free-standing object is pottery, use of which as a surface for painting underwent a number of changes during the Predynastic Period. Most striking is the shift between two monochrome traditions, from a light-on-dark to a dark-on-light format, which marks the onset of Naqada II (c.3600 BCE). The former White Cross-Lined Ware (abbreviated as “C-Ware”) is known primarily from cemeteries in Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia, dating to the early fourth millennium BCE. It features loosely symmetrical arrangements of living beings, particularly wild river-animals such as hippopotami and reptiles, occasionally



Figure 4. Fish-shaped cosmetic palette. Siltstone. Naqada, Tomb 117 (UC4374).



Figure 5. Cosmetic palette. Siltstone. Naqada/Ballas (UC6025).

depicted alongside figures of human hunters. Painting is executed in white on a polished red background and typically appears on open forms such as bowls (fig. 9) and beakers. By contrast, the later Decorated Ware (abbreviated as “D-Ware”) was made in a marl fabric that created a pale surface for decoration, executed with a dull red pigment. Its characteristic vessel form is a closed globular jar, probably inspired by contemporaneous stone vessels, the patterned texture of which is sometimes imitated in paint. On vessels with figural decoration, activities relating to water remain a dominant theme, notably through the inclusion of paddled boats with emblematic standards (fig. 10); but the repertory of riverside creatures has changed with the inclusion of flamingos and horned ungulates. As on earlier painted



Figure 6. Cosmetic palette (“tag”) with double-bird ornament. Siltstone. Naqada, Tomb 8 (UC4414).

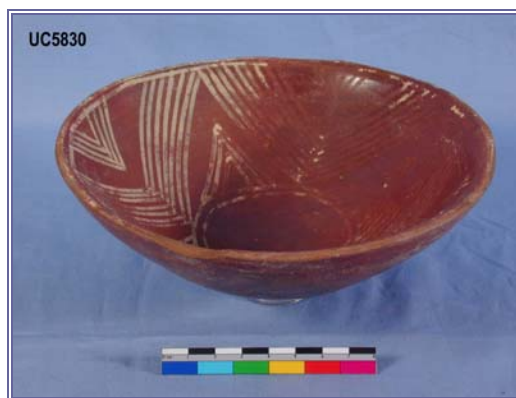


Figure 9. White Cross-Lined bowl. Naqada (UC5830).



Figure 7. Limestone amulet. Badari (UC10328).



Figure 8. Fragment of anthropomorphic figurine. Fired Nile silt. Qau (UC9601).

pottery, male figures are sometimes distinguished by the penis sheaths they wear. The maximum distribution of Decorated Ware extends from Lower Nubia as far north as the southern Levant.

The surviving corpus of Predynastic art represents only a fraction of what was produced. Little can be said, for instance, about the decorative designs that were undoubtedly applied to the bodies of people and animals. Life-size sculpture was present by no later than the Naqada II Period, as attested by limestone fragments of a human statue found at Hierakonpolis (Jaeschke 2004). Much decorative work in metal, probably hammered rather than cast, has no doubt also been lost through recycling. The existence of other, perishable, media is indicated by the polychrome painting on fragments of linen from Gebelein and by the extensive pictorial decoration found on the plastered walls of a mud-brick tomb at Hierakonpolis, dating to the mid-fourth millennium BCE (Quibell and Green 1902). This unique composition comprises vignettes of boats, animals, and humans in combat that vary in scale and orientation, and may have been created by numerous painters during the course of an extended funerary ritual. Elements of these scenes bear comparison with images on Decorated Ware, while others—such as the so-called “master of animals”—reflect the growing influence of representational forms and techniques

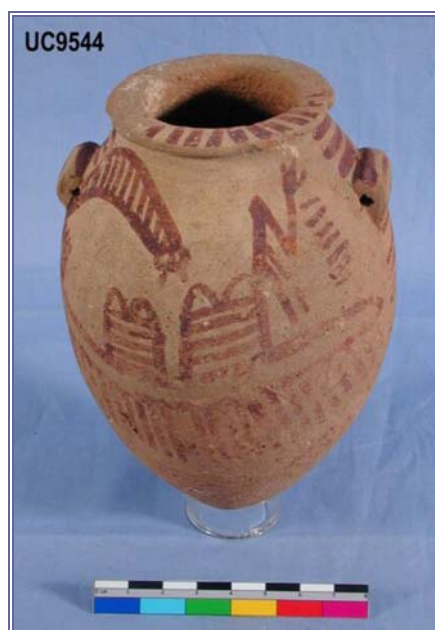


Figure 10. Decorated Ware jar. Badari (UC9544).

imported from Southwest Asia (Moorey 1987). These forms are likely to have been conveyed on small and durable objects such as cylinder seals, and may have stimulated the adoption of relief carving (e.g., on ivory knife-handles) towards the end of the Predynastic Period (c.3400 – 3300 BCE). The latter technique was subsequently taken to new heights on ceremonial cosmetic palettes and maceheads of the late fourth millennium BCE.

Bibliographic Notes

Interpretation of Predynastic art has often been confined to issues of typology and chronological development, with minimal attention to function, context, or meaning. An early exception was Jean Capart's *Les débuts de l'art en Égypte* (1904; English translation 1905), which emphasized the importance of bodily display in Predynastic society and was strongly influenced by comparative ethnography and contemporary theories of cultural evolution; aspects of this approach are developed in David Wengrow's *The Archaeology of Early Egypt* (2006), with particular reference to the role of decorated objects in funerary rites. The most extensive art-historical treatment of this material is Whitney Davis' *Masking the Blow* (1992), which also introduces theoretical perspectives from literary theory and cognitive psychology. Peter Ucko's *Anthropomorphic Figurines of Predynastic Egypt* (1968) remains important for its comparative approach, incorporating evidence from other prehistoric cultures as well as the ethnographic record, and for its critique of the notion that Predynastic symbols can be simplistically equated with particular divinities or religious beliefs—an approach that nevertheless remains popular. Illustrated overviews of Predynastic art are provided by Baumgartel (1955, 1960), Vandier (1952), and Asselberghs (1961). Petrie (1921) and Ciałowicz (1991) review particular classes of material. Important collections—respectively in Berlin, Brooklyn, and Oxford—are published, with commentary, by Scharff (1931), Needler (1984), and Payne (1993). Extensive holdings at University College London can be viewed at <http://www.petrie.ucl.ac.uk/>.

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