

The Conventions of Representation used in Egyptian Two-Dimensional Art (demonstrated with reference to the wall scenes in a *mastaba* tomb dating to the 5th Dynasty)

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I. THE TOMB

I have selected the *mastaba* tomb of TY (also sometimes written as Ti) at Saqqara dating to the middle of the 5th Dynasty (c. 2475 BCE). It is recognized as one with fine quality of execution, covering diverse topics and is well conserved (Osirisnet.net). Some scholars regard the tomb of TY as the high-water mark of the 5th Dynasty style (Aldred 88). I will use examples from 4 wall scenes in this tomb (painted limestone relief) to describe the conventions of representation used in Egyptian two-dimensional art. Each different convention will be described in a separate numbered paragraph.

II. THE SCENES



Figure 1 The Chapel North Wall: **TY Watching a Hippopotami Hunt** (Pinterest.com)



Figure 2 The Pillared Courtyard West Wall: **TY and his Family** with overlay outlining figures (Osirisnet.net)

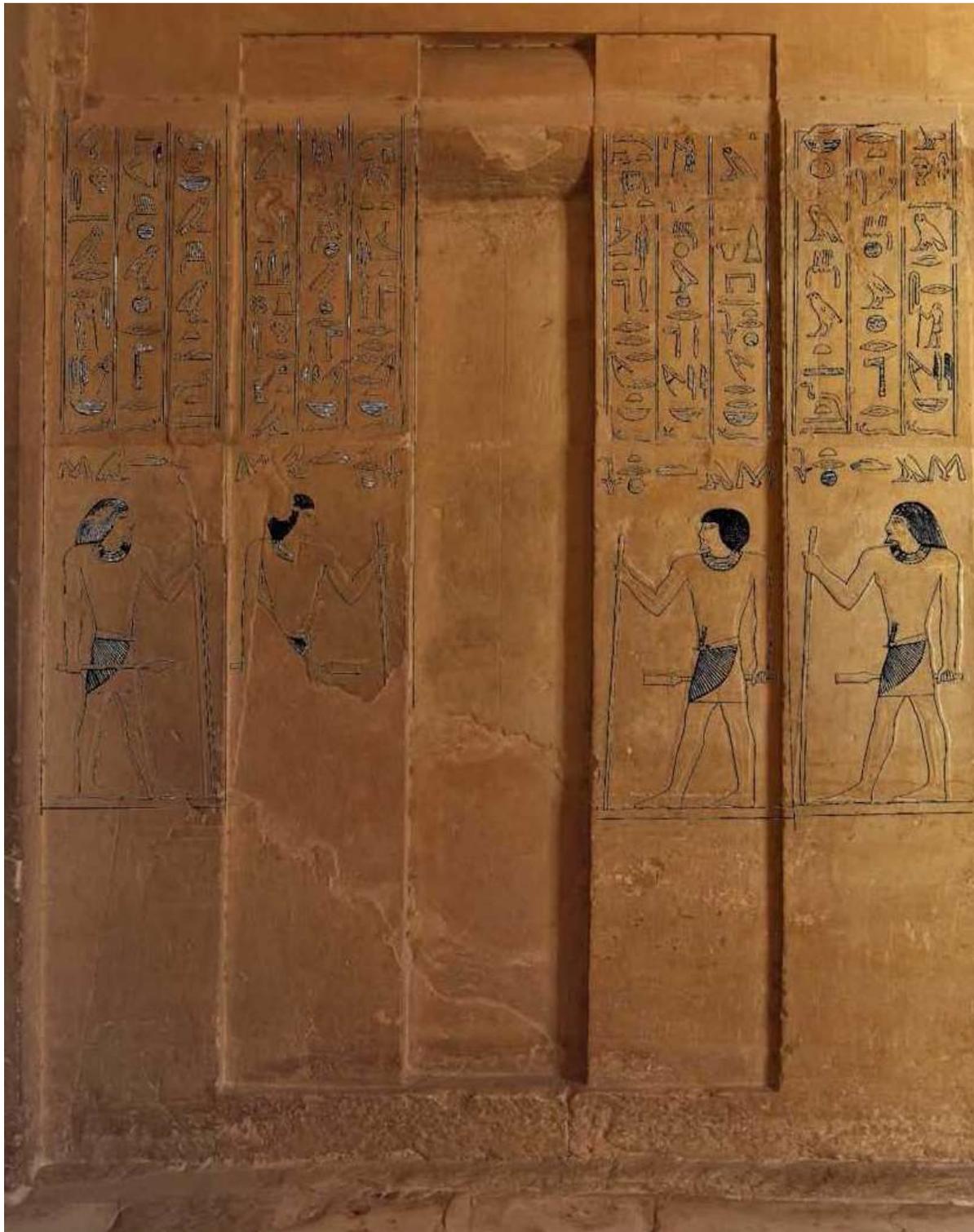


Figure 3 The Pillared Courtyard West Wall: **False Door of Demedj** (TY's eldest son) with overlay outlining figures and inscriptions (Osirisnet.net)



Figure 4 The Chapel North Wall: Registers 2 – 4 **Crossing the Ford and Preparing the Land for Sowing the Seeds** (Osirisnet.net)

III. THE CONVENTIONS

1. Scale and Hierarchical Order of Society

For human figures, relative size was used as a reflection of status in society (Robins 21). The king for example was always depicted as dwarfing all other human persons in a representation (e.g. the Narmer Palette). This is very clear in Figure 1 where the Tomb owner TY an official at the King's Court (his primary function was director of the hairdressers of the Great House but he did have other titles and responsibilities) is depicted as a much larger figure looming over his retainers. In Figure 2 TY also is much larger than the other members of his family. His wife standing behind him is smaller in scale, and their two sons shown in the bottom right hand corner are even smaller in scale.

2. Functionality/Emphasis on Meaning

Above all the use of two-dimensional representation was functional and *meaningful* in terms of *religious practice*, and the *link between life and the afterlife* (Robins 12). This functional emphasis dominated the work of the Egyptian artist. The *emphasis became on skill in execution as a priority* (Aldred 11). The Hippo hunt scene we see in Figure 1 is not only intended to reflect the activity of hunting that TY may have engaged in during his life, but also an activity that he would like to continue to engage in in his afterlife. A successful hunt was also a metaphor of triumph over evil (Kleiner 66). While the images are beautiful and expertly executed, they are created primarily for the function of extending this activity into TY's afterlife, and to confirm TY's victory over evil. TY himself is shown in a passive classical pose. He is not participating, he is observing. He, like his ka has become eternal (Kleiner 66).

In Figure 2 we see the 'presentation of the scroll' scene where TY holds a staff in the front hand and a handkerchief in the back hand. The document presented would contain a list of agricultural and other items produced from the funerary estates and offered to the deceased (Der Manuelian 563). In Figure 2 it is TY's eldest son who is presenting the scroll. Here once again we note the predominance of functionality and meaning in the creation of art.

In Figure 4 we see one of numerous scenes of agricultural activity. These scenes, fishing, agricultural and other related activities are meant to reflect the sources of TY's offerings that will sustain his Ka.

3. Showing Ideal Aspects of the Material World

The functionality of the tomb with the link to the afterworld required that activities and aspects of the deceased life that would be carried over into the eternal afterlife be ideal (Aldred 12). Objects and forms were depicted for the purpose of preservation in an ideal state and not to represent nature as it actually exists (Schafer 13). In general, the focus was on static non-changing qualities. The use of rectangular and other regular geometric forms also reflected this striving for simplicity and clarity (Schafer 19). The static non-dynamic over-all impression is quite clear in all the Figures that I have referred to in the tomb.

4. No Attempt at Visual Unity in Spatial Distribution

There was no attempt to connect various elements in a representation through visual unity (Schafer 160). Rather the focus was on the association of ideas (Schafer 161). There is no attempt to create a single view point, different views are all grouped together (Robins 21). In Figure 1 this is exhibited in the wonderful depiction of birds and stalking foxes at the top of the overall relief painting and the fishes and hippos at the bottom. This is not intended to represent an accurate

depiction of what an onlooker would see from one single vantage point. However, all the connected ideas are there. The marshes, the reeds, the startled birds, the stalking foxes, the people on the boats, the water, the fishes and the Hippos.

5. No Foreshortening or Depth Perspective

There was no attempt at depicting a third dimension or depth, and no attempt to portray distance/depth through the use of perspective (Robins 21). The reason for this is that the functionality of the art required truth that will be eternal. The artist did not want to mirror optical illusions, but rather wanted to portray an objective rendering of reality. There was a need to preserve the original item being depicted and not deprive it of any of its characteristics or components (Schafer 89). The purpose was to achieve eternal truth rather than temporary illusion (Aldred 15). In Figure 1 we see the birds and foxes in the background in their proper relative size. Perspective is not used to give any depth to the image. Depth could be shown through overlapping figures (Robins 21). In Figure 1 overlapping is used to show one boat behind the other. In Figure 4 we see this in respect of the various animals.

6. Vertical Layering and use of Registers

In view of the spatial conventions discussed in 4 and 5 above, the ancient Egyptian artist used vertical layering, rather than perspective/size to denote distance, the higher layers being further away. Figures in higher registers are behind those in lower registers and so on (Schafer 190). While we do not have in Figure 1 clearly demarked registers, we do have vertical layering. In Figure 4 we see a clear example of several registers used to depict in each scene different but related activities.

7. The Human Form

Given the functionality of the images in the tomb, the striving for an eternal ideal existence for the deceased, the elite tomb owners were depicted in their ideal human form, regardless of what their bodies actually looked like in reality. The concept was to capture the essential perfect essence of the deceased and not his/her accidental appearance (Kleiner 66). A number of conventions developed over time, and remained largely fixed for thousands of years. Many of these are exhibited in the standing images of TY in Figures 1 and 2:

7.1 The Canon of Body Proportions

By the 5th Dynasty there had developed a canon that ruled the size, location and proportions for representing the human body for the elite.

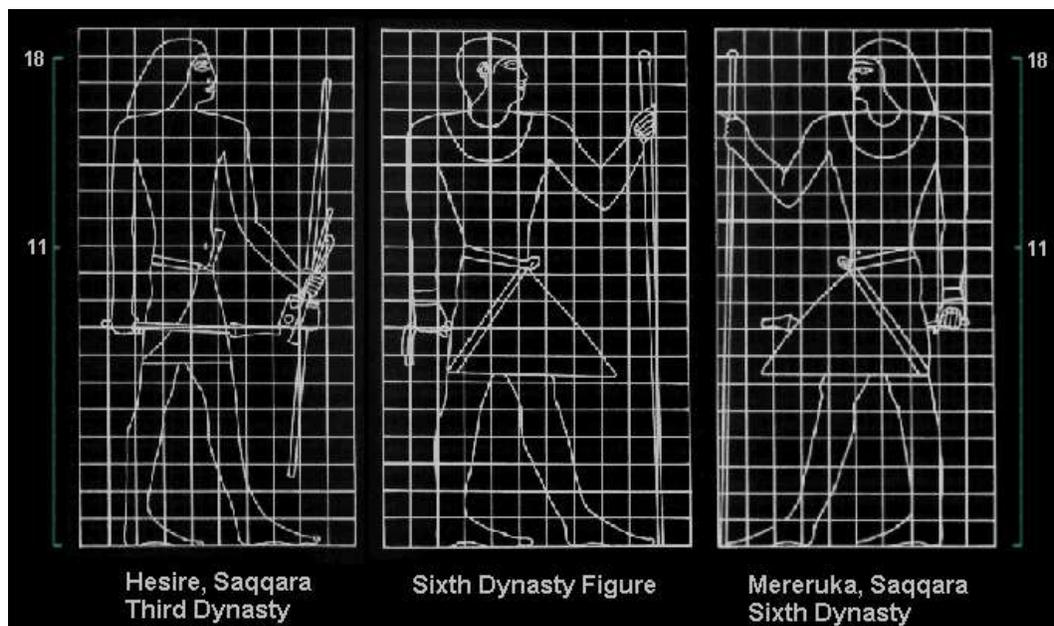


Figure 5 Examples of Grids Defining the Canon of Proportions (Brown)

In Figure 5 above we see an illustration of the grid and square system developed and used ensure a uniform and proper representation of the human body (for the elite). 18 units to the hairline and 19 units to the top of the head. A vertical axial line divided the torso in half. Up to seven horizontal lines were then used these marked the top of the knees, the lower border of the buttocks, the elbow, the armpits, the junction of neck and shoulders, the hairline and the top of the head (Robins 76-77). The standing figures of TY in Figures 1 and 2 conform to this system.

7.2 Body Orientation

The face was shown in profile, whereas the shoulders were in front view. Only a partial view of the chest was shown (one nipple only). The navel is also in a lateral view. Heads, arms, thighs, legs and feet are shown also from the side. One eye is shown in full (face on) within the profiled face (Schafer 281 -283). This is shown in the two images of TY in Figures 1 and 2.

7.3 Age and Physicality

Elite men were generally depicted in their idealized state (youth and athletic build), but were also sometimes shown in their mature state. Women on the other hand were always shown as youthful and slender (Robins 76). Both images of TY in Figures 1 and 2 depict him as youthful and athletic. TY's wife is shown in Figure 2 as youthful and slender. Non-elite men were depicted in more natural poses of activity and without the application of the rigid system used for elite men. The sailors in Figure 1 and peasants in Figure 4 provide examples of the more naturalistic depiction of non-elite men.

7.4 Skin Colour

Men were depicted as having a reddish skin colour while women were given a much lighter yellowish colour (Schafer 71, Robins 55). The skin colour for men is clearly reddish in Figures 1 and 4.

7.5 Nudity

Generally elite men were not shown in the nude. Children were shown nude with a finger pointing to their mouth. Non-elite adult men were sometimes shown nude. We see some of the sailors in Figure 1 in the nude, also some of the men in Figure 4. In Figure 2 we see TY's younger son shown in the nude in the classical pose for children with a finger pointing to his mouth. Women were usually shown in tight clinging dresses that show the outlines of their attractive figures to reflect sexuality and fertility (Robins 76). In Figure 2 we see TY's wife in a tight dress with two straps which reveal her breast.

7.6 Jewels and Personal Ornaments

As one of the functions of the tomb and accordingly the art within the tomb was to assist the deceased in his/he journey to an eternal afterlife, just as they were depicted in their ideal image, they were also depicted wearing some of their jewels and personal ornaments (which they would take with them into the afterlife). In Figure 2 we see both TY and his wife wearing necklaces. In one of the scenes in the tomb we see TY wearing a necklace as well as a chain from which hangs a representation of the Goddess Bat (Osirisnet.net).

8. Colour

While there were paintings without relief, there were never reliefs without painting (Schafer 74). Colours were meant to portray actual colours of the depicted subject as seen close up and not as may be distorted by distance or other phenomena (Schafer 71). That is another element emphasizing the aim of reflecting unaltered reality (see Section 5 above). Where there are groups of subjects of the same colour, the artist would not hesitate in giving them somewhat different darker and lighter colours (Schafer 71). For example in Figure 4 we see in the crossing of the ford, the person in front is of a darker red than the two other persons.

9. Non-Human Forms

Similar to human forms birds were shown in a side view with some broadening at the tail. Animals were also shown in side view but with a front view at the eyes (Schafer 98). We can see in Figure 1 the side view of the different birds hovering over the papyrus, and the stalking foxes also in side view but with front facing eyes. Flowers and plants were also depicted in a standard way (Schafer 20 – 22)). The papyrus plant, the heraldic plant of lower Egypt is shown in its standard image in Figure 1. In Figure 4 we see various animals also from a side view.

10. Duality, Order and Balance

Egyptians believed in duality and balance in nature, exhibited for example in order and chaos (Kemet and Desheret) the black land and the red land; also, the two lands, upper and lower Egypt. This was reflected in their art (Robins 21, Aldred 13). We can see this in Figure 3 where the figures

on both sides of the false door face each other and the hieroglyphic inscriptions are written in opposite direction so as to also face each other achieving balance.

11. The use of Hieroglyphs and Inscriptions as Part of the Overall Composition

Hieroglyphs were integral to the functionality of the two-dimensional representations. The use of names would identify persons and objects (Robins 21 - 24). Sometimes writing would be used to show conversations between persons (Malek 130). We see an example of this in Figure 4 crossing the ford, where on the left side a naked and bearded drover is speaking to his assistant admonishing him for the slow movement of the oxen (Osirisnet.net). Hieroglyphs in that they were in themselves small pictures also adhered to the conventions of two-dimensional representation and they were integrated in the composition as a whole. We can see this in Figures 2 and 3 where the hieroglyphs are carefully placed within the scene maintaining the elements of order and balance discussed in 10 above.

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