

Foreword is Forearmed

Consisting of Several Notes and a Dire
Warning

By Eric McLuhan
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I happened upon this discovery when I was teaching at the Ontario College of Art (as it was then called). The course concerned art and media and perception. We had decided to devote the semester to a close examination of visual ambiguity. We really got into it and began collecting every imaginable form of ambiguity, including puns and illusions, even Rorschach blots.

One night, early on, I was trolling through Janson's *History of Art* for examples to use in class the next day and was stopped by a photo of an Egyptian king's cosmetic palette. It was late, I was tired, the light poor, the image not of the best quality. At the first glance, I did a double-take. The main figure seemed to have his back to me. Odd. Blink; that's better. He's facing me now, just as you'd expect.

Then I looked closer. Sure enough, the figure could as easily be facing toward me as away from me. No detail in the image contradicted either stance, nothing but my own reflex assumption that the figure just had to be facing the viewer.

So it began.

The article that follows is not “about” ideas. It is pure experience. All the learning and intellectual understanding in the world will not get you one millimeter closer to seeing Egyptian canonical images in motion. It takes an average reader perhaps ten or fifteen minutes just to read through the piece, to “get the idea” loud and clear, and the result of that labour is—zero.

To learn to see—to experience—the moving images will take the average Westerner as little as an hour or two of practice; perhaps even a bit longer. In this matter, the gap between theory and practice is profound.

For now, gentle reader, ignore theory and go practice.

A piece of practical advice: leave your education at the door, if you can. The more training you have received in the history and aesthetics of Art, the principles of Fine Art criticism and interpretation, and so on, the less likely you are to succeed with these images. Frankly, you may know too much. On the other hand, children (and practicing artists) usually “get it” right away.

If you wish to succeed with these subtle images, you will need a supple and lively imagination, and a fair amount of patience. Consider: it is no accident that these *very* special effects have been hiding—in plain sight of us all—for thousands of years. We had lost the knack of seeing in the appropriate manner. Consequently, we simply tuned these things out, and then forgot about them.

Our culture’s highly sophisticated ways of seeing have trained us in the ways of perspective and single points of view. To activate the old modes of perception, we need to recapture something of the ancients’ delight in incompleteness and possibility.

We have learned to shun ambiguity; they delighted in it. To us, it is a vice; to them, making two images with one set of lines was a mode of compression, an artist’s economy of statement, much to be encouraged and much to be admired when managed well.

Festina Lente

As the Romans put it, *make haste slowly*.

Take your time with the exercises. There is no hurry.

Think of these exercises as contemplative, as a kind of meditation.

Reader, if you do not succeed right away, remember this: it has taken us thousands of years to rediscover how to bring these images back to life. So what's a few hours more? Patience, patience!

Take Yoda's advice: Don't try, do.
There is no try.

Relax, play.

Don't *try* or *strain* to see the effects.

If you can't simply play with the ambiguities in these ancient drawings (and enjoy it), this is not for you. You will not succeed with these animations. Ever.

Go home; do something else.

Reading further is a waste of your time.

Et sic friatur crustulum.

—E. M., *Ad gregem*.

How to Proceed

Follow the instructions in Steps One through Four to the letter. DO NOT proceed to Step Two *until* you have achieved *complete* success with Step One.

And the same advice applies to Steps Three and Two, and to Steps Four and Three.

This is crucial.¹ Pause at each stage, and practice until the motions are smooth and relatively effortless.

No matter if it takes an hour or even a day. DO NOT proceed until you are a virtuoso (more or less) with that Step. Anything less will lead to frustration and disillusionment. And we don't want that now, do we.

¹ Permit me an analogy: driving a car. Four steps must be followed. One: put the key in the ignition and start the engine. Two, use the shift lever to put the car in gear. Three, release the brake. Four, gently press the accelerator. Step One is crucial to success with the next three, and they are pointless unless One has been accomplished fully. I realize that this is a mere mechanical analogy to a perceptual matter, but it illustrates the point. Understanding the theory is a wonderful thing, but the car will not budge an inch until Step One is complete, in its entirety, etc.

What, not gone ahome?

Then,

Welcome

You are about to enjoy an experience crafted in Egypt some four thousand five hundred years ago. You are going to put on that ancient sensibility, to enter into it.

When you are done with the following article and have achieved some success with the Egyptian images in motion, then go dig out your old *History of Art*. If it reproduces any images of the canonical genre, look at them with your new eyes. Do they too now move for you?

More exciting still: visit the nearest art gallery or museum where you can find actual canonical images on display. As you stand there, rapt, watch them,

watch them dance

dance the ages

away ...

An Invitation to the Dance

By Eric McLuhan²

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² Note: This article forms part of the first chapter of a book-length study of Egyptian silhouette style and its further possibilities, including its remarkable form of three-dimensional representation and what it holds for our contemporary arts. If you are a publisher and are interested in producing this book (or this article), please contact the writer at mcluhane@sympatico.ca. Put EGYPT in the subject line.

Abstract

The Egyptians of the earliest Dynasties could produce prodigies of civil engineering and breathtaking feats of architectural accomplishment; they had no difficulty making sculptures that faithfully reproduced the originals. But one glance at their drawings and paintings and we conclude that, whatever else, they just couldn't draw very well. They couldn't seem to get it right. They had all the elements but somehow misconstrued them. They almost "got it," but stopped at an early stage and held there, for thousands of years.

Now, it appears that they did "get it right," in a manner that has some surprising consequences: the odd quirks that distinguish the classic Egyptian pictorial style serve as the vehicle for a completely novel, and unanticipated, effect. In the following pages, you can see how the ancient Egyptians managed their quirky style to produce lively moving images: by following the four Steps you can soon become adept at bringing the animations to life.

This is where it all began, about 3200 B.C., with the first king of the Old Kingdom. We know him by various names: Hor-Aha, Menes, Narmer.

The Cosmetic Palette of King Narmer First Pharaoh of Old Kingdom Egypt



Fig 1

The World's First Moving Image

Invitation to the Dance

L'art ne reproduit pas le visible; il rend visible.
—Paul Klee, *Théorie de l'art moderne*

The history of Egyptian art is a history of the contour line.
—Whitney Davis³

Egypt of the earliest Dynasties lies shrouded in mystery and uncertainty. It is not as if early Egypt shrank from conspicuous works: it produced the massive pyramids and tamed the mighty Nile, invented monumental architecture in stone, which amazingly they developed to maturity in a single generation, accomplished prodigies of engineering and design—and yet they left no archive, no written history or other account of Egyptian thought, arts, sciences or skills. These first Dynasties left an immense trove of artifacts and architecture for us to explore. Now and then, someone poking about in the sand unearths a new

³ Davis, Whitney. *The Canonical Tradition in Ancient Egyptian Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989. Page 15.

marvel, occasionally a major one: an intact tomb, perhaps; a ruined temple, an unfinished pyramid, an abandoned city.

For as long as we have marvelled at the art of ancient Egypt, we have tended to see it almost solely in terms of our own art. It's a very human trait. We habitually regard the art of other countries in relation to our own. We tacitly assume that archaic or less mature cultures are all following the same track of development in their arts that we did in ours, though at a different pace. We assume, again tacitly, that should they persist they will attain the same degree of sophistication in their graphic arts that we have accomplished in ours. That is, we habitually look at others' arts as underdeveloped approximations of ours.

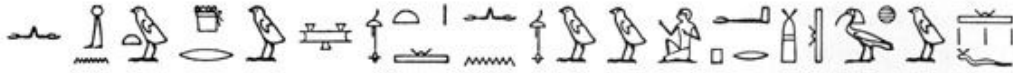
Even so, everyone who sees ancient Egyptian art agrees that it is unique. In all the history of art before or since, no other person or culture has used that style, or one even remotely like it. And isn't that, too, curious? For it is not an unpleasant style, though it does seem somewhat overly stiff and formal.

It appears that from the outset of the Old Kingdom Egyptian artists had invented a bold new graphic style, one attuned to their new sensibility and sense of adventure. They were embarking on a massive enterprise; the style helped cement their new identity, the establishment of a new land, a new people. The new artistic canon represented a confluence of various interests, social and political and artistic and religious. It and the emerging national state developed in parallel, along with a host of other social and

cultural innovations. The bold style epitomizes the new sensibility abroad in the new land; it proclaims stability, steadfastness and endurance. At the same time it is adventurous, daring, almost brash. Nothing like it had been seen before. It contributed powerfully to the new sense of group identity and group enterprise. It was—is—unique.

From the outset, they incorporated into the new style certain ambiguities which gave it the capacity for animation. They instituted a canon of aspects and proportions in their figure drawing that they kept invariable throughout their long and turbulent history. Though other styles and influences were imported with the occasional invaders, they departed with them too. Each time Egypt regained her feet she also returned to her primal canonical style. No other culture has shown such steadfastness or resolute adherence to a manner of drawing. One of the enduring questions about Egypt is this: what secret inducement or benefit could prompt them to adhere so tenaciously to this peculiar style for over two thousand years? Significantly, let an artist or image deviate from that canonical style in any regard or degree, and the animation ceases. I take this precariousness to indicate that movement was no accidental side effect but was fully deliberate and in no small measure accounts for much about the style that we find curious. No other artistic style before or since has been found to produce this effect. It is not preposterous, therefore, to suggest that this effect, which has been latent in the Egyptian style these thousands

of years, is what makes that famous style unique. All the world has recognized these ancient images as strong and powerful: they are decidedly not tentative or hesitant. That strength and power springs from the movement coiled within the “contorted” image.



No limit may be set to art, neither is there any craftsman that is fully master of his craft.

The Instruction of Ptahhotep⁴

The story of Narmer's palette is the story of early

Dynastic Egypt. From the outset of the First Dynasty, Egyptian artists established a systematic manner of drawing, one that they continued to use throughout their several-thousand-year history. The decisions they made about the architecture of style and technique set their art apart from that of all other cultures. "Once system as such had been achieved, it was maintained invariantly. During the early dynastic period, the system became increasingly popular, spreading from Upper Egypt in the Nagada III / early First Dynasty to the whole of Egypt by the beginning of the Third."⁵ It would serve to define their own self-image as surely as it defined them in the eyes of other cultures.

⁴ Old Kingdom; Saqqara, the tomb of Ptahhotep.

⁵ Davis, *Op Cit.*, page 159. Davis remarks, "Many elements of the Egyptian canon were rooted in prehistoric and predynastic artistic production. From the earliest prehistoric drawings in the Nile Valley to the final resolution of the canon at the beginning of the third millennium B. C., the possibilities for artistic action were gradually narrowing the subject to a set of distinct pressures." (Page 116.) "The crystallization of the canon by the end of the Second Dynasty

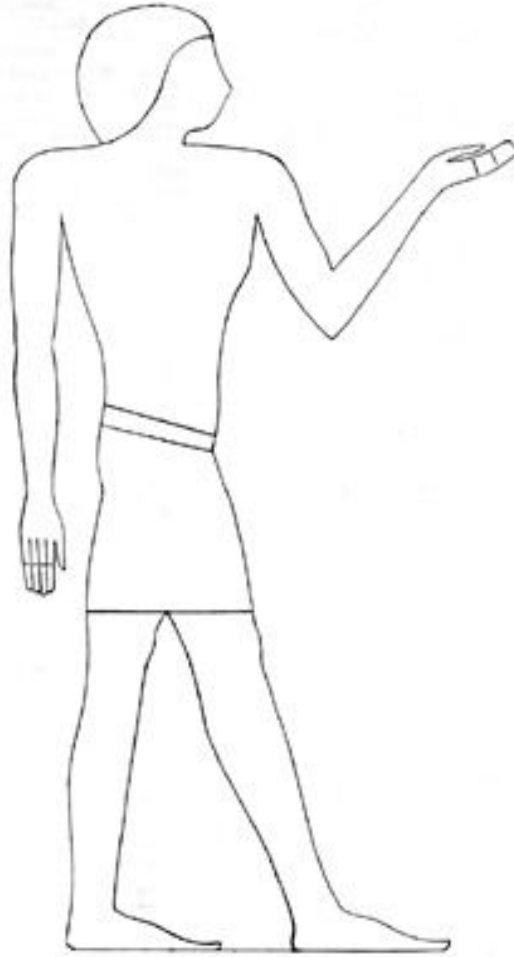


Fig 2
Fourth Dynasty, ca. 2500 BC.

Fig 2 typifies canonical drawing from the earliest Dynasties. Everyone identifies this style exclusively with ancient Egypt. (See also **Fig 1**, **Fig 12** and **Fig 13**.) At first encounter the image looks a bit odd, as if there were something amiss with way it was drawn. On closer inspection, you begin to notice the many distortions. Impossible twists and juxtapositions. And yet, we have found, these twisted, contorted figures will move and dance

immediately precedes the final stabilization of the Egyptian state in the period of dynastic absolutism, the high Old Kingdom.” (Page 120.)

in the most marvelous manner. Take a closer look at a typical image.



Fig 3

Sixth Dynasty, 2200 BC.

Saqqara, tomb of Mereruka.

Hands and fingers support the sense that this presents a dorsal view. The hand on the right is evidently the figure's right hand, as

indicated by the way the fingers and thumb curl about the sceptre. It, in turn, crosses “behind” the body, which makes no sense unless we imagine we are seeing the figure’s body from the rear. At the same time, the hair falls over the shoulder in a manner that suggests we are seeing a frontal view: the suggestion is a mild one since, although the same hair-fall could occur with a dorsal view, it is somewhat unlikely.

The artist has assembled this image using the utmost economy. He gives us just enough to convey the idea, and no more. For example, he never gives enough detail to identify a *particular* person’s anatomy, an *individual’s* hand or foot. This image and all the others like it never depict scars, sunburns, pimples, wrinkles, varicose veins or other individualizing characteristics, even when they purport to portray particular persons (say, a pharaoh or an overseer). The drawing style emphasizes the outline, the bounding line, rather than features. The Egyptians conventionally called their draftsmen “scribes of outlines.”⁶

Ancient Egyptian art, as much as our own medieval iconography, had no use for perspective or vanishing points or chiaroscuro (light-and-shade modeling), all of which locate the observer *outside* the painting. The Egyptian observer, by contrast, was included in the painting; he completed it; he related to it as a participant rather than as a spectator. The “beholder’s share” was the lion’s share. The Egyptian artist had no use for detachment or vanishing points or perspective or chiaroscuro—all of which we expect as normal. These conventions retain so tight a hold on our perceptions that their absence automatically implies to us

artistic immaturity or naïveté. But the Old Kingdom artist drew *the* hand or *the* foot, not *a* hand or *a* foot. He was not striving for pictorial realism, or representation, or matching of image to external experience. He knew quite well how to manage that trick, and there are sufficient examples in Old Kingdom art of the use of point of view and so on to show that he was aware of these things. Too, Egyptian artists confronted no such problems with their sculpture (another exacting art form), so we may deduce that physical representation and verisimilitude was not a problem. The realism of the sculpture would also seem to confirm that the mannered pictures were that way intentionally. The Old Kingdom artist was concerned to bring to bear his viewer's natural tendency towards involvement. For his part, the Old Kingdom viewer regarded these images as deeply magical forms. The Egyptians didn't imagine their religious artifacts as aesthetic objects, but as a means or medium for *making* sense and for exerting power.

Old Kingdom sensibilities differ from our own in another, and crucial, manner. We might better appreciate this difference were we to look at a negative of the drawing. Imagine the image, Fig 2, rendered in solid ochre or black on white instead of as a white area bounded by a black line.

⁶ Mekhitarian, Arpag. *Egyptian Painting*. Trans., Stuart Gilbert. Geneva: Editions d'Art Albert Skira, 1954. Rpt., New York: Rizzoli, 1978. Page 21.

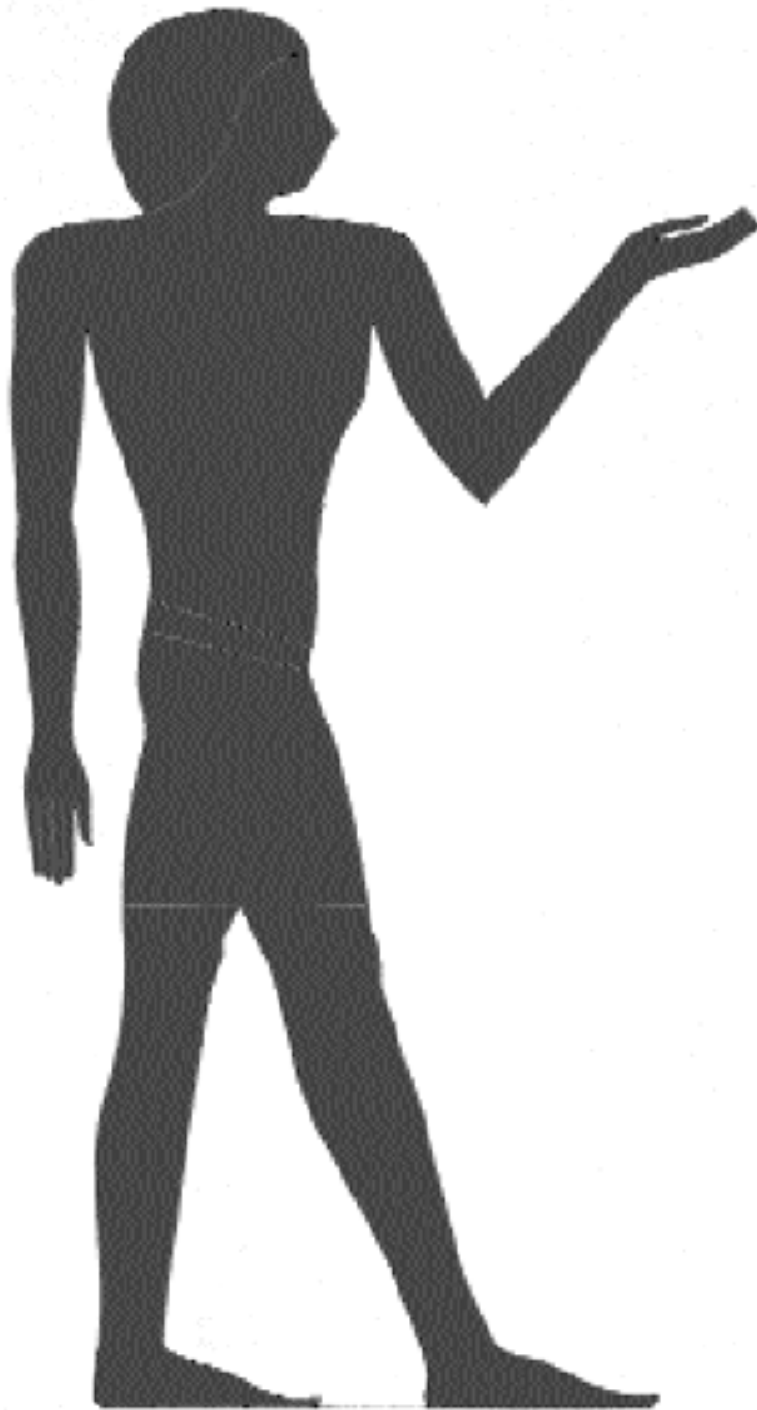
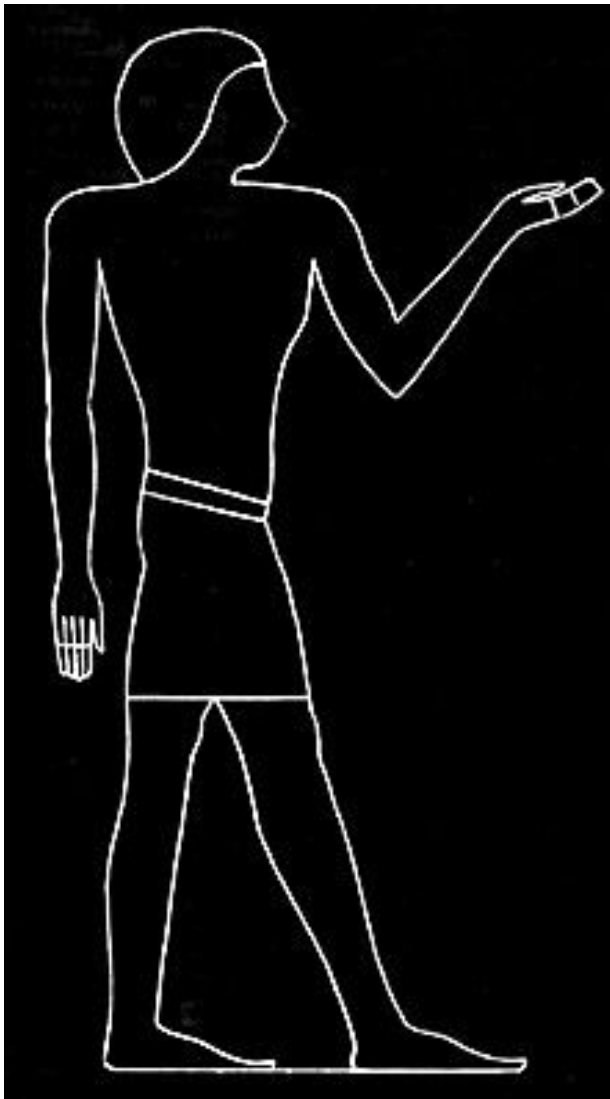


Fig 4

Where is the light source? Any figure seen in silhouette is illuminated from behind. The viewer stands in the figure's

shadow. Only backlighting will emphasize outline that way. All detail of the front or sides of the image is surrendered or downplayed and the stark edge becomes paramount. A backlit image means that light is shining at the viewer around and through the image. In effect, since it is not lit from outside, the image is the source of light: it shines at you. If the image is the source of light, the beholder is the screen. The subtle power of this style is that the viewer wears the image and participates in it.



The four Steps on the next pages show how silhouette drawing, rich in possibility because poor in detail, can animate a figure when it is viewed in the right manner.

If you would like to learn to see these ancient images in motion, follow the next four steps closely. The kind of motion is new to us. It is not motion from or towards something; the figure does not go somewhere. We have instead motion on the spot, motion without displacement—a new experience to us. The figure moves, yet is still in one spot: it comes to life, which is perhaps the point.

Step One

Does a silhouetted figure face towards you or away from you?

How can you tell?

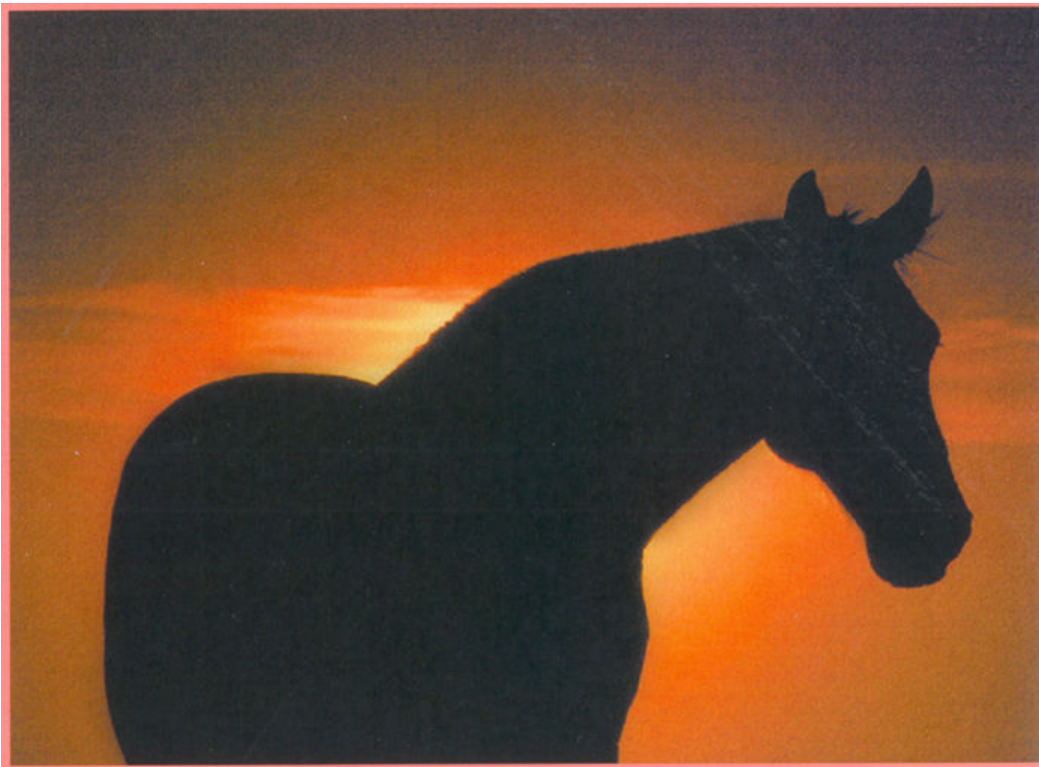


Fig 5

The horse shown here presents the fundamental ambiguity of all silhouette renderings. Is the figure turned slightly towards the viewer or slightly away from the viewer? Pause here for a few moments to capture each possibility. Our Old Kingdom images exploit the same ambiguity to great effect. When it shifts from one position to the other, the horse makes a slight turn; slight, but a turn nonetheless. She moves.

Silhouette dissolves specific differences between one figure and another. It even omits all the normal clues that you use to tell whether you are looking at, say, a right hand or a right leg, or a left hand or leg. The silhouette mode overflows with ambiguity, which makes Westerners a bit uncomfortable. By contrast, Old Kingdom artists would likely have regarded what we call ambiguity as economy of statement: two images from one set of lines? Marvellous!! It is a trait of much primitive art, too, that the artist uses one set of curves or shapes to convey several related ideas simultaneously. Our literary critics domesticate ambiguity by calling it “texture,” “richness,” “semantic depth.” They are careful to praise the poet who applies it unobtrusively. And all of our best poetry is chock-full of it. For example, John Keats’s opens his celebrated “Ode on a Grecian Urn” with these lines:

Thou still unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time...

The interpreters strew some richness and texture in our path as early as the second word, “still.” One meaning comes immediately to mind, “as yet”: so we understand the sense to run,

Thou as-yet-unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time...

While we are thinking this way, the other meaning (“still” meaning “not moving”) lurks in the background. Obviously, the figures painted on the urn are forever frozen.

The “bride” may indeed flee her pursuers but all are fixed there in paint: they will never catch her. Keats manages to keep both meanings alive simply by leaving out some of the punctuation.



Fig 6

Similarly, our Egyptian artist manages to convey a double image by leaving out those details that would freeze his “meaning” to just one view. It is a delicate business. Leave

out too much and the result is cryptic or disjointed and degenerates into nonsense. Leave out too little and the possibilities seize up.

Had Keats inserted a hyphen,
Thou still-unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time...

he would have
eliminated all ambiguity on the spot; had he used a comma
instead,

Thou still, unravished bride of quietness,
Thou foster child of silence and slow time...

he would have resolved the matter the other way
and shed “unwanted” ambiguity. He chose to leave the
matter open, and unobtrusive.

Much of the poet’s and the painter’s art lies in knowing what to leave out. Keats was not unaware of the double meaning: of course he knew it was there. Equally, the problem isn’t that the Egyptian didn’t know how to draw: he knew his technique and proportions perfectly well. Our own difficulty with these images stems from our approaching *his* drawing with *our* assumptions and *our* eyes, and *our* knowledge. Sometimes ignorance can be an asset.

Look again at the legs and feet. Focus on one of the pair.

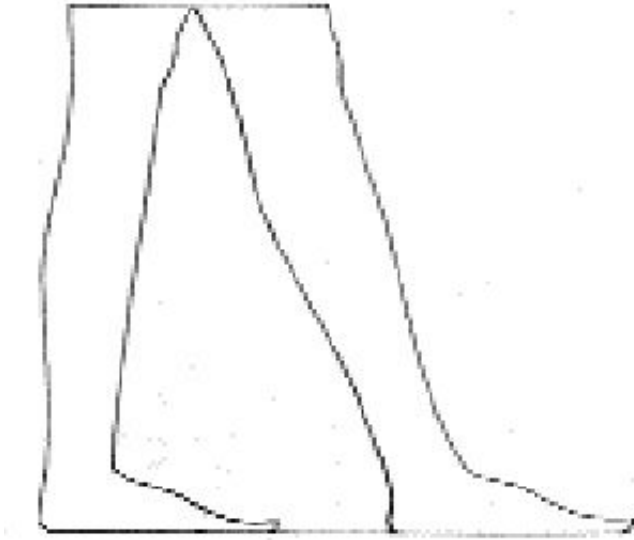


Fig 7

Are you looking at a left foot? Or a right foot?

How can you tell?

Suppose that you have decided that the rearmost foot is a left foot. Pause here for a moment and get comfortable with the notion. Imagine the details that the silhouette omits: the ankle of the left foot, the musculature, the arch, the row of toes hiding behind the big toe, and so on. Paint the picture. Then go further: extend your imagining to the foreleg and calf; again, supply the missing detail, the articulation of the muscles, and so on.

With that image held in mind, you “know” that the other foot and its foreleg must be the right-side one. So, shift your attention to it and use your imagination to supply it with the detail that the silhouettist has left out. This time the arch must be a bit different, toes are not hidden, there’s

perhaps more than a hint of knee and kneecap, striations of muscles under tension as the figure strides forward...

Pause here; become comfortable with the two feet and legs as you have imagined them. Hold that image a few moments longer.

THIS IS MOST IMPORTANT. DO NOT PROCEED TO STEP TWO until you have become completely comfortable with this image and can recapture it at will. Look away for a few moments; then look at it again and see the feet and legs right away in the detail you have imagined for them. Left to the rear; right to the fore.

Step Two

And now, reverse them ...



Fig 7a

Keep in mind that this is silhouette. In the absence of any detail of bone or muscle, the feet and legs that you have imagined as left and right could just as easily be imagined as right and left. So, now do just that.

Begin with the foot and leg that you had imagined as belonging to the left side, and see it now instead (in full detail) as a right-side foot and leg. It may take a minute or two to make the transition and get comfortable with the reversal.

Do the same with the other foot and leg: see them as belonging now to the left side of the body. Once again, pause, and become comfortable with the (new) assignment of right and left. You will discover that the new way of looking

at them is equally valid as the other way, and equally easy to imagine. The artist has deliberately left it up to your imagination. By leaving out just the right amount of detail, the artist increases the total information conveyed.

Now try the following: First, recapture the feet and legs as right and left, the way you imagined them a moment ago. Hold.

Then reverse: see them as left and right, as you first imagined them. Hold this for at least a minute.

And reverse again: Right / left; hold. Then left / right; hold. Then right / left; hold. Then left / right ... Hold each position for 20-30 seconds before switching to the complementary position. DO NOT PROCEED UNTIL YOU CAN PERFORM THIS PART OF THE EXERCISE SMOOTHLY AND EFFORTLESSLY.

Allow the two possibilities to oscillate gently back and forth for a minute or two ...

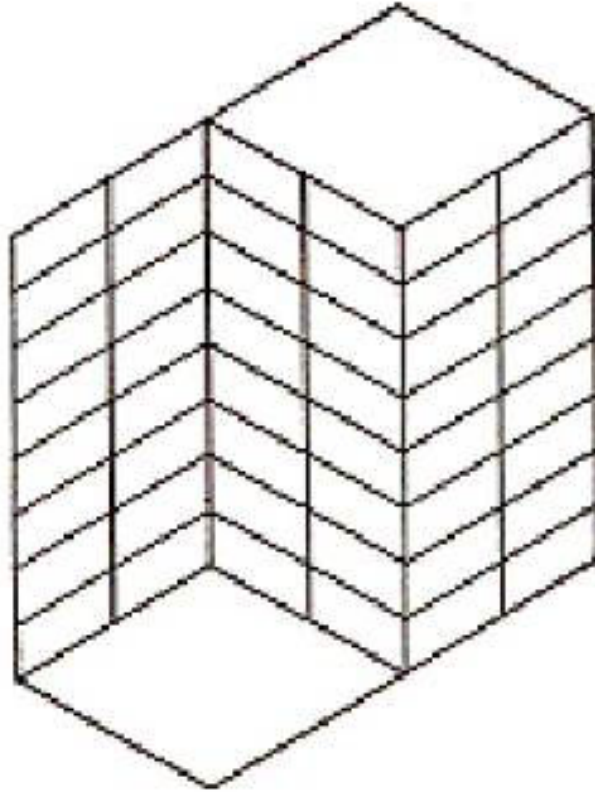
Keep alternating, left / right – right / left until it is easy and natural for you. For some, this will come quickly; for others, it may take a little more practice. Or a lot more practice. Be patient.

CAUTION

If you find this exercise unexpectedly challenging at first (that is, if you're experiencing difficulty getting the thing to work), **pause here and continue practicing** until you feel comfortable with the alternating / oscillating image as developed thus far. Do not be surprised or disconcerted if everything does not click into place immediately. It is *supposed* to take a while: it calls for an approach that is close to meditation.

Straining for the effect, *trying* to produce it, will generally result in defeat and disillusion. If you find yourself straining, take a break and come back to it later. After all, these effects are really rather subtle: they have lain concealed from us—right under our noses—for over four thousand years. What's a few hours more, or a day or two?

The manner of alternating, of oscillating, should not be abrupt, not a sort of snap from one posture to another as occurs, for example, with the optical “illusions” which we all find familiar (for example, **Fig 8**, below). It ought eventually to be a more graceful modulation back and forth, smooth, somewhat less than a flicker.



Figs 8, 8a



After a while, you will find a point midway between the two extremes and discover how to hover there, balanced like a tightrope walker, entertaining both resolutions simultaneously while actually selecting neither one. A Westerner's natural inclination (and training) is to latch on to one of the interpretations as the "correct" one and ignore the other as a mistake. With practice, however, you can learn to treat both of the interpretations the same way, as present but latent. Neither is allowed to take over and block equal awareness of the other. As with the two meanings of "still" in Keats's poem, balance is everything. The inexperienced reader will settle on one of the two meanings as the "right" one and subordinate the other; the experienced reader retains both simultaneously, gently oscillating between them as the poem unfolds.

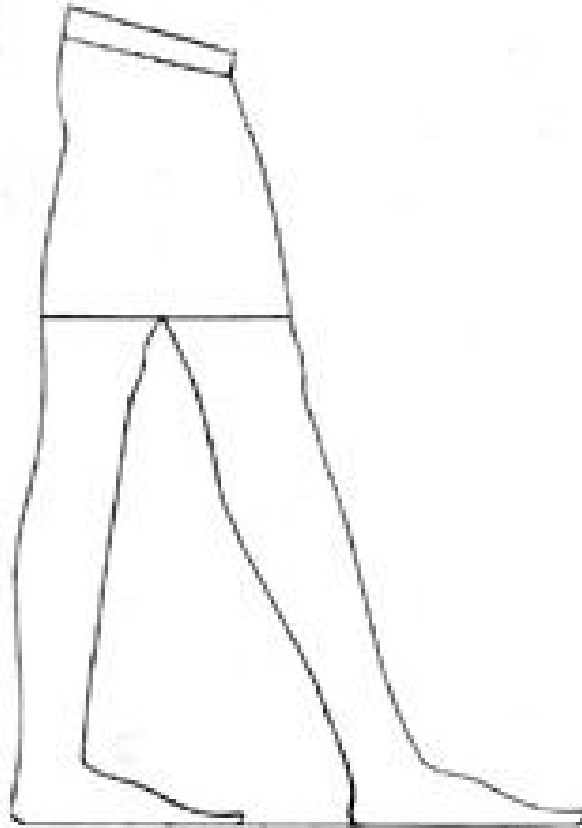


Fig 9

Egyptian artists of the period were quite consistent about preserving the ambiguity of legs and feet, as deliberate as they were with other features of their drawings: there is no chance that this effect is accidental.

As you can see in **Fig 9**, like the feet and legs, the skirt is given in side profile. The hem is just exactly long enough to obscure that part of the thighs where a leg-crossing would be visible. Were any leg-cross visible, the question of which leg is the right one and which the left could not even arise, and neither could motion. The moment a single point of view intrudes into the drawing, all movement ceases.

However, with feet and legs free to move, as the lower figure dances gently on the spot from one position to the

other in a slight shimmy, the movement extends to include the skirt and the hips and thighs beneath it.

PAUSE HERE AND PRACTISE WITH **Fig 9** UNTIL YOU FIND THE MOVEMENT OF THE ENTIRE LOWER BODY EFFORTLESS.

The lower body is given in approximately side-view: I say “approximately” because when the legs and hips turn they alternate slightly from or towards the viewer, as you have seen in the oscillations above, and in the image of the horse (**Fig 5**).

The upper part of the figure performs in much the same manner. Unlike the lower body, the torso is deliberately not presented in side profile.

Step Three

The Upper Body



Fig 10

The frontal image of a typical torso gives little away. The Egyptian artist gives the torso not from the side, as he did the lower body, but “facing” the viewer. Actually, since the artist provides us with almost no detail, we really cannot tell whether we are looking at the figure’s front or its back. While the very idea seems absurd—that the artist might turn a principal figure’s back to us—there is nothing, no set of details in the silhouette, to prevent our imagining the figure facing away from us. But if a single view has to be chosen,

anyone would naturally assume that the figure faces the viewer.

Nevertheless, I suggest you “keep your options open” for a while... For now, take a moment and fill in a little detail with your imagination. Absurd as it may seem, try seeing this as a drawing of *the back* of the torso ...

Notice that the artist has again studiously left out a great amount of detail. Were this figure actually being shown from the back, we would expect some clues: a hint at least of the spine and some ribs, and certainly a suggestion of shoulder blades. Conversely, if we *are* seeing the figure from the front, where are the expected features: clavicle, pectorals, breasts, nipples, rib cage, abdominal muscles, sternum, bones and musculature of neck and shoulders, and so on?

If we set aside our reflex assumption that we view the figure from the front, we see right away that it *could* as easily be a frontal or a dorsal view. True, it is “illogical” to assume that our ancient artists drew their sitters’ backs rather than their fronts, yet they consistently choose ambiguity over literal statement; that is, they consistently—deliberately—leave the door open to alternative readings of their images. Two specifically frontal details are given: the navel, and one of the nipples. But the artists always position these items off to one side, where they will not limit the front/rear ambiguity of the torso.

Go look at the (**Fig 10**) torso again; recapture your sense of it as a view of the back. Stay with that image a few moments, at least until you are comfortable with seeing it.

Now revive your first impression, that of seeing the front of a torso. Once again, fill in a few missing details; *see* them definitely (not vaguely). Details like the definition of the rib cage, chest musculature, shoulders, trapezius, etc. And as before, hold that image for a few moments ...

DO NOT PROCEED UNTIL YOU ARE ABLE TO ENVISION BOTH ASPECTS OF THE TORSO SMOOTHLY AND EFFORTLESSLY. This may take some practice, perhaps more than a few minutes'; if so, persist until you have accomplished it, even if it takes the rest of the day. Resist the temptation to read on and jump to the conclusion. *Your* skills and *your* imagination are the key to this entire system of drawing. *Festina lente*, as the Roman adage has it: make haste slowly.

Step Four

And now, add arms and head to the trunk ...

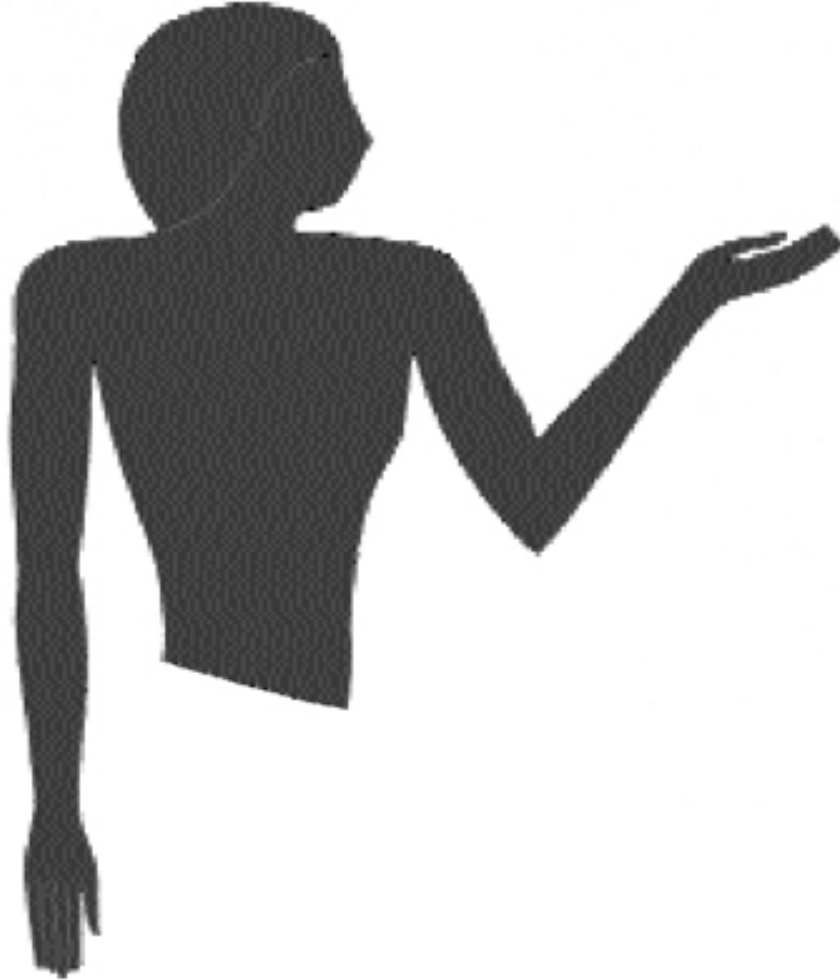


Fig 11

In this style, the head is always presented in silhouette, never in three-quarter view, which Western art tends to prefer.

Continue with your practice with the torso: now you have the arms and head as well, you will find that the movement is if anything more easily managed.

See **Fig 11** first as facing you and fill in as much detail as comes naturally. Hold for a minute or so.

Then let the figure turn its back to you; begin filling in appropriate detail. Again, hold for a minute or so.

Notice the hands: silhouette provides you no detail to suggest which is which. When—and wherever—this occurs, viewers are expected to supply the deficit, a process called “the beholder’s share.”

In the following case (**Fig 12**), the artist simplified matters by making one hand twice. Evidently, this wee anomaly does not interfere with the figure’s movement:



Fig 12
Old Kingdom. ca. 2200BC;

Aswan.

This trope, one hand doing double duty, is quite common in Egyptian canonical art. See also **Fig. 15**, *infra*.



Fig 13

Eighteenth Dynasty (Thutmose IV), ca. 1450-1400 BC;
Western Thebes, Tomb of Nakht.

This composition puts a witty twist on doublehandedness: seen in either position, the figure has not a right hand and a left hand but rather a right hand and a wrong hand. Facing one way, one of his

hands is the right hand and the other is simply wrong. Facing the other way, the hands reverse, and what was the wrong hand is now the right hand. And each time you spot the wrong hand you instinctively want to flip the figure to right it. So you do, and the hands flip on you. *Mise en abîme*. As they say, sweet.

On the Head

In this canonical style, the head is always shown in profile, as here.

Show the head from in front or behind, lose the side profile, and the result is less interesting; a blank oval with protruding ears. Symmetry. But the silhouetted profile, exactly side-on, could equally easily be looking over the right shoulder of a torso facing the viewer, or the left shoulder of a torso with its back to the viewer. The profiled head may not move much or may not move at all, yet it preserves the ambiguity of the rest of the drawing and does not interfere with its motions.

Remarkably, the eye is always shown as if from the front: it is not given in a side view. Consequently, the head too is a mosaic, like the rest of the body. Each constituent element is presented from its own “best” point of view and the overall composition is a compound of these views. Like a figure in one of our own Cubist paintings, the Egyptian canonical figure is “known” from all sides at once. Hands and arms are given with the same careful attention to detail and doubleness. Often, the hands are put on “backwards” to make the rear-view easier to provide—and never because of some oversight or ineptitude of the draftsman.

Each element of the complete figure is given and seen from its own point of view and there is no single “right” point of view for the figure as a whole. Every component of the canonical drawing is seen at the viewer’s eye level: this feature results from not using perspective and foreshortening.

The head is drawn as being at the viewer’s eye level; the skirt too is at eye level. The shoulders and the arms and the hands and the feet—all are poised at eye level simultaneously. This has a curious consequence. As the gaze roams back and forth across the figure, in effect, *the viewer* is transported first this way and then that in sync with the various points of view built into the figure. *The viewer moves*. While you tour the image you enter into it; it encloses you in a kaleidoscopic New World—yours to explore. It moves; you move —

Not just all sides and points of view, seriatim, but simultaneously: all times and aspects at once. And so the archetype is born of the cliché.

Egyptian artists often used the liberties granted them by silhouette to help the beholder see the figure from all sides: now and then, they would deliberately put the hands on “backwards.” This “error” is found across all the ages of Egyptian formal art. It first occurs in the first—the prime—example, king Narmer’s palette (*q.v.*).



Fig 14

Thebes, King Mentuhotep
Eleventh Dynasty, ca. 2100-2000 BC
Cairo Museum

At first glance, one is struck by the many similarities **Fig 14** bears to the arrangement of figures on Narmer's palette. By the time this image was made, ten full dynasties after Narmer, the tableau was conventional; it was likely more symbolic than literal.

Take another look at the Narmer palette from the First Dynasty (**Fig 1**). Narmer and Mentuhotep: each appears to have his hands "on backwards," but only if you imagine the standing king to be facing you. Is there any additional clue to orientation? Ignore the hands, look again. The king simply cannot be facing you: the posture is impossible. To verify

this, try it yourself: stand in the king's position, feet aligned, legs astride, baton raised. You-as-silhouette stand in one plane; your captive is posed in a different plane, a bit behind yours. You (in the position of the dominant king) now stand between the viewer (who imagines you are facing him) and the captive to your hind side (whom you grasp and threaten). Well, try it: face the viewer, stand astride, reach behind you and grasp your captive. Your posture is quite inappropriate for the job at hand. You can't convincingly threaten your captive, who could easily topple you. If from this stance you try to smite him you will not be able to rally enough force to cause harm, and you may damage your spine. And so on. However, all these and other difficulties evaporate if you allow yourself to see a *dorsal* view of the king here: immediately the hands are right, and the posture is strong and natural. Try it yourself.

Many hints and suggestions were placed in these images to assist the beholder to provide his "share." Another such appears in the figure of Mentuhotep, though not in that of Narmer. The king is holding a baton or mace upraised, obviously intending to strike his captive. If Mentuhotep is facing you, as soon as he moves his arm he will knock off his headgear. But if he does face away from the beholder, then the posture is understandable and the figure—once again—makes sense.

To understand these images, think silhouette.

Without question, the style was carefully crafted to permit the animations and what flows from them. This contention is easily supported. Violate the canon in the slightest manner or degree and the animations cease forthwith. Let an arm cross in front of a torso, for example, or let one leg or one foot obscure the other—let one of these or of a number of other violations occur and the figure freezes on the spot.

A host of questions remains to be resolved. Why, for example, are male and female figures allowed different degrees of movement? (Females always have one foot partly obscuring another, so that left and right are firmly established and the figure is frozen—from the waist down.)



Fig 15
Early Twelfth Dynasty, ca. 1800 BC;
Bersheh, Tomb of Djehutyhotep

What rules of decorum govern the many anomalies, which have remained utterly consistent across thousands of years? Why are some figures in a painting allowed movement and others denied it?

There are additional dimensions to this surprising style, literally. In the book-length study, we explore how the style provides certain figures with three-dimensionality as palpable as the kind to which we are accustomed. These marvellous Egyptians have contrived three-dimensionality, while working in silhouette mode! More remarkably, they did it without resorting to the trappings of our version of the 3D illusion: perspective, vanishing points, chiaroscuro, foreshortening, and the rest. Flat space, the space of silhouette, is multidimensional.

You have now, by an ancient magic, entered the ancient world for a moment. You have enjoyed a very brief moment of communion with the Egypt of 4500 years ago. You have shared, briefly, an experience that they contrived for themselves and guarded as a close secret.

There is not even a hint that any of the outsiders that conquered and ruled Egypt during the “interregnums” ever learned this secret: certainly, none of them ever exhibited the slightest awareness of it or ever used it. And now you are one of the privileged few who have participated in this secret dance.

Many aspects of this mysterious phenomenon remain to be explored. For one, how did the Egyptians discover it in

the first place?⁷ And what meaning did it hold for them? What meaning, what implications, might these techniques hold for our time? Then there is this little enigma: why haven't we spotted these animations before now? And the corollary: why have they surfaced in *our* time? More practically, what use, if any, might this technique be to the arts and artists of the Second Millennium?

One thing is clear: now we can date the first animations as occurring nearly 5000 years ago, at the beginning of the First Dynasty in Old Kingdom Egypt.

Toronto, 2007

And that's the He
And the She
Of It

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⁷ The problem is that it's an all-or-nothing matter. Depart from the style in any manner or degree, and the animations cease. I think it fair to say that the canonical style is rigorous precisely to preserve the animations. It might even be argued that the style results from the animations, more than vice-versa. The style is both subtle and complex, with the sort of complexity that develops over generations of artistic effort; yet there is no evidence of the Egyptian artists' developing it by stages. It appeared abruptly, like our Athena mature at birth, as was much else in the mysterious Old Kingdom.

⁸ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*.