

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet



Wood funerary stela (Gallery 19, Case 15, No.23)
E.GA.4540.1943

The Ancient Egyptians Writing

The writing system of ancient Egypt was far more than a bureaucratic tool. It was intertwined with custom, religion and art, and the process of writing was invested with magical properties believed to be of divine origin. Therefore, writing was believed to be the gods' gift to humankind. Hieroglyphs themselves were called "god's words". It is these "god's words" that have passed to us the rich detail of life and belief in ancient Egypt.

Magic Words

Contemporary Western thinking tends to separate writing and image making as two distinct systems of communication. In ancient Egypt there was little distinction between the two systems, for written words were made of images. Words were also a form of creation. In one of the ancient Egyptian creation stories, the first god Ptah, by speaking words, brought them into being. In turn writing words could make things happen, and destroying an object on which words were written was a powerful piece of magic.

Ancient Egyptians believed that all images, those sculpted, painted, large or small, had the magical potential to become real; to become the subject depicted, or in the case of hieroglyphs, to become the meaning of the words. Writing could therefore, through this connection to the magic potential of images, materialise into either the meaning of the words or into the objects represented by individual signs.

In ancient Egypt the majority of people were illiterate and writing was a professional art. Scribes were held in high esteem because of the important social functions of writing and because of its links to belief and organised religion. The god Thoth was god of scribes and patron of the art of writing.

The Writing System

The ancient Egyptians carved or painted hieroglyphs onto a variety of objects and surfaces, such as stone, wood, as on some of the painted coffins on display, papyrus or ostraka (broken pottery).

Hieroglyphs were written both horizontally and vertically, their arrangement was often determined by aesthetics and the space available. There were usually no punctuation marks and no gaps between groups of signs. The signs usually read from left to right but not always. To discover in which direction a text should be read, look for the animal hieroglyphs, these creatures always face towards the start of a passage. Where hieroglyphs accompany a figure they face the same way as the figure is facing, which may be facing towards another figure. Each set of hieroglyphs act as a caption for their own figure, and so you may get juxtaposing hieroglyphs facing different directions. Hieroglyphs only recorded consonants; the system did not include vowels. Egyptologists usually sound an "e" as in egg, after each consonant or group of consonants for ease of pronunciation, e.g. the word for name is "rn" but is usually pronounced "ren"

Hieroglyphics were the most formal of the writing styles used in ancient Egypt, but their beauty was demanding both in terms of time and skill. For speed and ease of writing in everyday situations, it was essential that a less intricate form developed. The hieratic and demotic scripts, two cursive versions of hieroglyphs, are fluent and flowing and enabled the scribe to write at greater speed.

The Egyptian writing system was highly sophisticated; it enabled the communication and preservation of the full range of human emotion and transaction. It allowed for the same range of expression as our own.

The signs can be divided into three main groups:

1. Pictograms: stylised pictures that represent the drawn object. For example, an image of the sun represented the sun.

2. Phonograms: reused pictograms that represent the sound of the object originally depicted. An example in English is the verb "can" being represented by a picture of a tin can. Some phonograms represented the sound of one consonant, some two and others three.

3. Determinatives: Pictograms can convey meaning about an object, or something related to that object. For example, a pictogram of writing equipment can mean "scribe", "writing", or "to write". To clarify which of these is meant within the context of a certain passage, a determinative sign is added. In our example of writing equipment, when the word "scribe" is intended, the determinative of a man is placed after the original pictogram. When "writing" or "to write" is meant, a determinative of a papyrus scroll is added instead. Determinatives then, are the signs, which are placed after a pictogram or phonogram in order to clarify the meaning.

Examples of Tools for Writing

Scribe's Pen Box

Gallery I9, Case I5, Label 27, Museum No: E.GA4557.I943

Colour Palette

Gallery I9, Case I5, Label 27, Museum No: E.GA4557.I943

Reed Pens and Ink Holders

Gallery I9, Case I5, Label 26, Museum No: EI89a-b.I9I0/ EI89-b.I9I0

Scribe with Writing Equipment, on Model Granary

Gallery I9, Case 25