Introduction

Ancient Egyptian objects were often imbued with several layers of meaning relating specifically to the piety and religious devotion of the Egyptian people. Certain cultural objects expressed themes of communication with the underworld, depicted manifestations of the gods, or represented the Egyptian people in a historical context. Despite a large variety of mediums and a massive scope, Egyptian art was unified as a whole by a basic set of beliefs and standardized aesthetic sensibilities. The three pieces examined below reflect this ideology and give us insight into the culture of ancient Egypt.

Canopic Jar, ca. 712–332 BCE

One of the most important and influential concepts in ancient Egyptian history was the notion of the afterlife. Burials, mortuary customs, and funerary rituals were heavily referenced in many art pieces and writings: the focus of death and the afterlife added another cultural layer to Egyptian lifestyles. Similar to the idea that the living needed housing, Egyptians believed that tombs were home for the *ka*, the spirit, and that these spirits required nourishment, ritual, and offerings in order to be preserved.

Canopic jars played an integral role in this emphasis on the afterlife. Beyond their intended purpose of storing human remains, these jars had religiously significant meanings that the Egyptian priests assigned them. After the body of the deceased dehydrated in shallow burial pits, a priest would remove the lungs, stomach, intestines, and liver. The organs would be placed in the jars, then packed into the tomb or a canopic chest to be stored with the body and travel with it to the afterlife. These canopic jars were conceptualized as bridging the gap between life and the afterlife in ways that would allow the body’s soul to retain its most important organs in each specific jar. The jars featured the heads of jackals, humans, baboons, and hawks. These images were valuable because they referenced the four sons of Horus, Imsety, Hapy, Duamutef, and Qebehsenuef. Anubis gave his sons mummification mortuary duties, which included the Opening of the
Mouth. Horus later made them protectors of the organs, otherwise known as the four cardinal points. Once the deceased being reached the afterlife, the canopic jars would ensure that these four cardinal points would still function for the new body.

Canopic jars are important today not because of their original function, but because of their universality. Canopic jars are one of the first subjects children discover while learning about Egyptian history, because of their clear purpose and easily graspable function. Furthermore, due to their inherent simplicity, and curious nature, canopic jars are a good stepping stone into learning about ancient Egypt. Because the tops are visually recognizable and almost humanlike, in a similar way to sarcophagi, they are intriguing yet familiar. Even though they may look simple, their purpose helps illustrate the prominence of religion, ritual, and death in the ancient Egyptian culture.

**Section of a Relief with Offering Scenes, 4th–3rd century BC**

This piece from the Late Period of ancient Egyptian civilization is a relief carved into red granite, depicting three separate offering scenes. The middle scene, which features a pharaoh offering incense to a hawk-headed god, is the only scene completely intact. The other two scenes are broken down the middle, but show just enough detail to imply that they also depict offerings. There is a repetition in the placement of the four visible figures; a pharaoh or other royal figure stands on the left, offering something to a deity sitting to their right.

The first major concept that this relief reflects is *ma'at*, or the universal balance of truth and order that could be achieved through devotion to the gods. In ancient Egyptian culture, the pharaoh served as an intermediary who presented the offerings of the common people to the gods. Ma’at was often personified (being referred to as a *she*), reinforcing the piety of the Egyptian people. Equilibrium was integral to ancient Egyptian art and culture; the standardized illustrative style and canonical proportions of human figures furthers this point. The four visible figures in this relief, while distinguished by headwear and clothing, are essentially identical in form.

Another significant symbol in this particular relief is the crown of the pharaoh on the right. This crown, known as *deshret*, is the crown of Lower Egypt. Also known as the Red Crown, it symbolized rule over Lower Egypt and was associated with deities such as Isis and Osiris. According to the plaque at the VMFA, the goddess seated to the very left could be Isis, reinforcing this idea of regional pride and authority.

The pharaoh to the right might be King Nectanebo II, the last native ruler of Egypt. His rule was a return to the decadence and independence of earlier periods in
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Egypt’s history, but was cut short by Persian invaders. This context would place this relief at the back end of ancient Egyptian history, a kind of final gesture to the gods before the collapse of their civilization.

This relief, like the majority of ancient Egyptian art in museums today, was taken from an Egyptian temple. The purpose of reliefs such as this was to immortalize scenes from everyday life. Although an interaction between a king and a god may not seem ordinary to us, to the ancient Egyptians it was a reaffirmation of their piety and constant devotion to the higher powers. Today, this piece serves as a valuable insight into our understanding of daily life in ancient Egypt, and an interesting (if somewhat chilling) look into a civilization at its end.

**Inner Coffin of the Charioteer Atef-amon, 1070–945 BC**

In ancient Egypt, art was believed to possess full magical powers, and was not meant to be viewed by the living. The ancient Egyptians believed in afterlife and immortality; they paid great attention to their funerary practices. Tombs were believed to ward off evils and also influence the process of reincarnation. Additionally, the sarcophagus art was regarded as the language between the dead and the gods. Unsurprisingly, this “intermediary” art became a key component in funerary practices. The coffin itself became an expressive space that united diverse Egyptian artistic practices.

The general meaning of the inner coffin surfaces was that the gods would protect the life of the dead in Hades, and the souls of those dead were able to see those images via the eyes depicted on the coffin. The hominid, or human-shaped inner sarcophagus, was intended to maintain its form before death. It was considered important to show the human shape and face to the god. In terms of artistic features, although these human faces on coffin surfaces were fairly realistic, realism was not the intended goal. They were just rendered well enough to portray to the gods that they had been human beings before so that they could be blessed with immortality.

Color was also a key method for communication between human beings and gods. Different colors have different specific meanings. For example, green and blue represented water and sky, having symbolic meanings of fertility and prosperity; golden brown was known as the color of the sun and the skin of the gods, which connoted immortality. This is why coffins were also painted in golden brown. Different gods, along with their stories, were painted on the coffins, allowing the coffin to express a narrative.

In addition to the images of the gods, there were often many hieroglyphics on the surface of the inner coffin as well, which were the most direct language between the dead and the gods. These hieroglyphics played a
significant role in ensuring the gods' acceptance of the sacrifices of the dead, and consequently, protection for them to gain rebirth\(^{16}\).

Ancient Egyptians believed that they gained immortality through their religious practices. Their piety and devotion provide us with valuable insight into the life of human beings who believed that their life on Earth was only the beginning. Their art has a monumental scope and breadth that reflects their belief in the metaphysical.

**Conclusion**

Ancient Egyptians used cultural objects as expressive tools to communicate complex notions of death, eternity, and religion. Their art was not limited to the canvas; they produced work on coffins, on the walls of temples, and on cultural objects such as canopic jars. Today, we look to these objects as manifestations of the beliefs of the ancient Egyptian people, and refer to them in our quest to unravel the many layers of meaning that guided their lifestyle.

**Sources Cited**