

18th dynasty egyptian jewelry essay sample



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Abstract

Jewelry has an essential part in the daily and after-life of the peoples of ancient Egypt. Aside from man's inherent fascination to beautiful objects, Egyptians esteemed it for their idea of its spiritual and supernatural attributes. More than just pieces of ornamentation, jewelries were worn especially by the nobilities and men of key positions, more for their supposed supernatural powers rather than their economic value. Because of its influence and affluence, Egypt easily forged a large amount of collection, of exquisite quality, almost unequaled by any past civilizations. This paper primary delves into the identification of the materials used, their subsequent symbols and meanings surrounding each object held sacred by the early Egyptians, as well as their religious beliefs that provides better understanding of Egyptian use of jewelries.

18TH DYNASTY EGYPTIAN JEWELRY

I. Introduction

Early men adorned themselves with pebbles, shells, berries, and feathers. Through the years, this has developed into more elaborate and expensive items — of what is now referred to as jewelry. Jewelry is made in a great variety of types and from many different kinds of materials. Precious jewelry is made of the rarest and most beautiful metals and gemstones. It is valued both for materials employed as well as its craftsmanship. nEgypt is considered as one of the richest storehouse of the ancient world's finest pieces of jewelry, preserved in tombs by Egypt's nobility. It has attracted both scholars and marauders alike. Despite surviving centuries of robberies,

the pieces of treasures left reveal the sophistication and splendor of an ancient past.

II. Egyptian Jewelry

Traditionally jewelry has been a sign of social rank and a symbol, often of luck or good fortune. During pagan times, jewelry was often buried with the dead — the Egyptian tomb of King Tutankhamen (18th Dynasty 1567-1320) yielded a rich treasure of jewelry when it was opened (“ Jewelry”). The sensational discovery of this tomb, revealed the fabulous treasures that accompanied an Egyptian sovereign, both during his life and after death, as well as the high degree of mastery attained by Egyptian goldsmiths. This treasure, now in the Egyptian Museum, represents the biggest collection of gold and jewelry in the world. The Pharaoh’s sarcophagus was made of entirely of gold and the mummy was covered with large quantity of jewels. More jewels were found in cases and boxes in the other rooms of the tomb. The diadems, necklaces, pectorals, amulets, pendants, bracelets, earring, and rings are of superb quality and of a high degree of refinement rarely surpassed or even equaled in the history of jewelry.

The ornaments in Tutankhamen’s tomb are typical of all Egyptian jewelry. The perpetuation of iconographic and chromatic principles gave the jewelry of ancient Egypt — which long remained uncontaminated in spite of contact with other civilizations — a magnificent, solid homogeneity, infused and enriched by magical religious beliefs. Ornamentation is composed largely of symbols that have a precise name and meaning, with a form of expression that is closely linked to the symbology of hieroglyphic writing. The scarab,

lotus flower, Isis knot, Horus eye, falcon, serpent, vulture, and sphinx are all motif symbols tied up with such religious cults as the cult of the pharaohs and the god and the cult of the dead. In Egyptian jewelry the use of gold is predominant, and it is generally complimented by the use of the three colors of cornelian, turquoise, and lapis lazuli or of vitreous pasts imitating them.

Although there was a set, fairly limited repertoire of decorative motifs in all Egyptian jewelry, the artist-craftsmen created a wide variety of compositions, based mainly on strict symmetry or, in the jewelry made of beads, on the rhythmic repetition of shapes and colors. Necklace beads — generally made of gold, stones, or glazed ceramic — are cylindrical, spherical, or in the shape of spindles or disks and are nearly always used in alternating colors and forms in many rows. The necklaces have two distinct main forms. One, called menat, was the exclusive attribute of divinity and was therefore worn only by the pharaohs. Tutankhamen's menat is a long necklace composed of many rows of beads in different shapes and colors, with a pendant and with a decorated fastening that hung down behind the shoulders. The other, much more widely used throughout the whole period, was the usekh, which, like the vulture-shaped necklace from the tomb of Tutankhamen, also has many rows and a semicircular form.

Among the treasure discovered in the tomb of Queen Ashhotep (18th dynasty) is a typical Egyptian bracelet. It is rigid and can be opened by means of hinge. The front part is decorated with a vulture, whose outspread wings cover the front half of the bracelet. The whole figure of the bird is inlaid with lapis lazuli, cornelian, and vitreous paste.

Egyptian jewelry had brought great influence to other jewelry art-forms outside its borders. For instance, Egyptian influence on Arabian Bedouin jewelry was made evident particularly when Tutankhamen's tomb was opened and the jewelry discovered therein was subsequently displayed. The evidence confirmed that Egyptians favored multiple pendant ornaments and plain or engraved metal surfaces richly decorated with applied filigree and granulation. They made abundant use of turquoise, cornelian, faience and glass, colorful beads, string or pendant, and multicolored combinations of stones set on thin sheets of beaten gold — all these features are also characteristics of Bedouin jewelry.

III. Religious Symbolism

To speak of Egyptian jewelry out from the context of its religious belief system is most difficult, even close to impossibility. Religion played a decisive part in social and economic life. Political decisions and personal affairs as well as judicial investigation were brought before the god in the form of alternative questions and were apparently decided by movements of the image. A large part of the population was integrated into the official hierarchy of priests and temple personnel. Ancient Egyptians believe that through the aid of temple priests, knowledge of the name, possession of the image, application of the “right” word, and the use of amulets — was a weapon in man's fight against supernatural powers. The boundaries between magic and ritual were fluid. The results desired from ritual actions (fertility, order in nature, etc) can be ascribed to both magical power and divine activity (“Jewelry”).

In accordance with the faculty for abstraction and the limited sense of individuality typical of Egyptian culture as a whole, the representation of religious conceptions was characterized by a series of religious symbols and emblems. For this reason, that most ancient Egyptian jewelry had magical significance — so much so that it is almost impossible for scholars to distinguish the amuletic from the purely ornamental. It is especially difficult because the Egyptians took their everyday jewelry with them to the grave.

Materials Used

Metals and gemstones were worn in jewelries not just for their aesthetic value but valued more for their particular spiritual or magical powers, and their subsequent benefits to the one who possess it.

A. Metals and Gemstones Used in Egyptian Jewelries

☞ Gold. For many centuries, gold has been regarded as the most valuable and widely used for jewelry due to the metal's malleability, attractiveness and rarity. However, the Egyptians had a rich deposit of such metal and benefited much from its abundant supply of gold within its own land. Egypt virtually enjoyed trading monopoly of this precious metal. The Egyptians employed it in jewelries, not only for its physical qualities but because of their belief that gold is representational of the gods (R. Russel. " Gold History") and rulers, a popular belief held by many other early civilizations. Pharaohs were held in Egyptian community as the sons of Ra (the Egyptian's sun-god), the source of life; gold was associated or believed to represent the sun, and in such manner that this precious metal began to be related to immortality.

It is not therefore surprising that their Pharaohs wore large numbers of it, both in their lifetime and even to their grave. Gold was held as having power to secure their immortality, as well as demonstrate their position and prosperity. It is however strange, that gold was not used in their monetary system but used barley instead. In mostly pitiful conditions, slaves were enforced to find gold through shallow diggings or from its rivers. One historian noted that those convicted of crimes and captured by wars were the ones mostly delegated for working in gold mines. The Egyptian rulers were hard taskmasters, driving their slaves to work day and night without respite, and all the while bound by chains and heavily guarded (“ History of Gold: A Brief History of Gold”).

☞ Silver. This metal were considered by Egyptians as valuable as gold. In contrast to gold, silver deposits were taken far from the borders of Egypt or its territories. Consequently, due to the difficulty by which it is brought to Egypt, its value rose and became highly prized by Egyptians. Countries seeking alliance and favorable relations with the rulers of Egypt brought silver as one of the treasure-gifts with which to please them (H. T. Parcker. “ Silver).

☞ Copper. This is identified with the goddess, Hathor. Powdered copper mixed with silica, achieve a bluish-green color after being heated in a kiln. Because of the achieved bluish color, the Egyptians valued objects containing it.

☞ Malachite. This too, is identified by the Egyptians with Hathor, the “ Mistress of Heaven”. As the “ Celestial Nurse”, she is depicted as having

disguised herself as a cow, to nurse the Pharaoh. The Egyptians therefore look to her for solving problems concerning childbearing, health, or matters pertaining of the heart. Along with turquoise, gold and copper, malachite is also associated with Hathor, who is also referred to as the “ Lady of Malachite”. Egyptians wear ground malachite as part of their eye make-up, believing it to cure or ward off eye infections (“ Hathor”).

☞ Carnelian. Also called cornelian, possess a red color or a variant of reddish-brown. It is associated with having power to give life.

☞ Turquoise. It is one of ancient Egypt’s popular gemstone, thought to heal depression and ward off evil attacks. It is believed to bring delight. The Egyptian’s word for turquoise is even synonymous with delight. This material was also found in Tutankhamen’s Inlaid Pectoral since turquoise was related with rebirth. (“ A Golden Age That Never Ends”).

☞ Lapis Lazuli. The Egyptian word for lapis lazuli is identical with joy. Its bluish color is associated with the color of the heavens, of royalty and deity, of friendship and truthfulness. Egyptians regard lapis lazuli as symbolic of Isis. Ancient Egypt saw this stone as a means to obtain sacred information (“ Lapis Lazuli: Stone of Friendship and Truth”), and thus worn as an amulet by Egypt’s Chief Justice (“ Lapis Lazuli Jewelry”).

☞ Amethyst. A precious stone with colors ranging from light blue-violet to purple worn by Egypt’s royalty. Associated with things pertaining to the faculties of the mind, it is held to possess supernatural powers to dispel evil thoughts and quicken the mind (“ A Brilliant Life”).

B. Other Considerations

☞ Other Material Used in Jewelry: Faience. This was found in large quantities among the Pharaoh's grave sites, in jewelries or amulets. Although often thought of as the predecessor of glass, faience is actually a predecessor of glazed ceramic. It is also highly prized by Egyptians for making amulets since it has been associated with fertility. Its high value (as valuable as precious metals and gems) was evident in Tutankhamen's necklace. Every piece, including faience was laid out carefully and artistically. While the presence of faience in jewelries have lowered its production cost, it does not however decrease the value of the piece itself since Egyptians base value upon the supernatural power it is believed to possess and give (" Glass Beads, Fabulous Fakes and the Birth of Costume Jewelry").

☞ Shapes and Colors. Aside from associating supernatural powers to certain objects, Egyptians attribute the same characteristics to colors and shapes. Egyptians believe that the green of feldspar and turquoise was the color of new life, the red of carnelian the color of life-blood and the blue of lapis lazuli the color of the heavens, and for such reasons these had been found among the graves of Pharaohs. The cowrie's shell and fish shapes gave protection and the scarab shape was the most potent amulet of all. Egyptian turquoise in the shape of a scarab (the dung beetle revered as the symbol of regeneration) was also found in the tombs of Pharaohs (H. C. Ross. " Related Civilizations and Their Influences").

It would appear strange though, that in Egyptian society, which believes that artists possessed the power to perform miracles (such as providing the

object by which a spell can be pronounced over it — everyone was sure that a servant's image had been brought back to life in the tomb, to obey his master's command in the after life), and in which art was not just a pleasant pastime but a primary and vital necessity, their actual social status is so low. In fact, it is far below the status of prehistoric witch-doctors.

The fact was that craftsmen-artists were only material executants, bound by rules which they had to apply but which they had not drafted, as well as ritual formulas, the real significance of which they were unaware. The true creators were always the priests, or rather the magician-priests. Without their intervention, the image produced by craftsmen-artists, even though in accordance with the canons of art or magic, would have possessed no magical power at all (Egyptian Art).

IV. Foreign Influence

A first sign of outside influence however, have occurred in the 18th dynasty. It consisted of earrings, which are imported jewels, unknown in classical Egyptian production. Another evidence of the influence of foreign styles in some of the jewelry of the 18th dynasty is a headdress that covered nearly all of the hair, made of a network of rosette-shaped gold disks forming a real fabric. Foreign influence increased to an ever greater extent during the last dynasties and with the arrival of the Greeks. Like all other forms of artistic expression, in spite of three centuries of Ptolemaic dynasty (up through 30 BC), the great artistic tradition of Egyptian jewelry slowly died out, and the introduction first of Hellenism and then of the Romans led to the definitive

decline of the most monumental cultural and artistic structure known throughout all history.

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