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The Inner Coffin of Nesmutaatneru: Immortal Intersections of Art and Afterlife in Egyptian Funerary Practices

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Abstract: The Late Period in Ancient Egypt, between 760 and 660 B.C., was a time of great cultural and artistic change amidst turbulence that had set in after the Third Intermediate Period. The paper discusses the funerary art of the Inner Coffin of Nesmutaatneru, an artifact representative of this era, highlighting the interrelationship of religious belief, artistic innovation, and social status. It argues that the funerary objects, such as the coffin of Nesmutaatneru, were not merely ornamental but served as profound narrative tools that immortalized the identity and achievements of the deceased. The research investigates the craftsmanship and symbolism in Nesmutaatneru's coffin, emphasizing how it encapsulated religious iconography, mythological narratives, and creative techniques. From the vulture headdress to intricate hieroglyphic texts and divine depictions, in every respect, it reflects the importance of the culture to guarantee transit to the afterlife. Moreover, mummification processes, rich coffin designs, and burial goods underlined how material culture personified the belief of Egyptians in the afterlife. By contextualizing Nesmutaatneru's coffin within the broader context of Egyptian late-period funerary practices, this paper will demonstrate how artistic and religious traditions intertwined in the attempt to preserve legacies and affirm cultural values.

1. Introduction

The Late Period of Ancient Egypt (760–660 B.C.) was marked by political instability and disunity following the Third Intermediate Period. Amidst this turmoil, the 25th Dynasty emerged as Kushite kings from present-day Sudan sought to restore traditional Egyptian customs. Central to this cultural revival was coffin and funerary art, a prominent practice that not only provided the deceased with guidance, protection, and provisions for the afterlife but also served as a testament to their social status. [1] This paper examines the Inner Coffin of Nesmutaatneru. It reveals that funerary artifacts were not mere decorations but the art of preserving the story of the buried individual for posterity, thereby writing them into the collective history of Ancient Egypt. Funerary arts blended different artistic practices to guarantee entry into the afterlife, immortalize the person's story, and imbue the

ritual with greater creativity. [6] As such, funerary arts were a unique and integral part of late Egyptian artistic culture.

2. Artistic Expression and Religious Beliefs

Artistic expression was an integral component of ancient Egyptian culture. Art was even believed to be magical and closely intertwined with religious beliefs, making art objects a vehicle for appealing to the gods. For some, these artifacts could even secure immortality, ensuring the deceased's well-being in the afterlife and protection in the next life. Funerary artifacts, from decorations to possessions, also served as narrative devices, preserving the identity and legacy of the deceased for eternity. These artworks, whether vases or pendants, blended religious symbolism with personal details, offering a creative and lasting portrayal of the individual's life story. [5] Death ceremonies reflect society's artistic culture, showing a creative expression that intertwines life, death, and legacy. While ancient Egyptian art was deeply rooted in religious tradition, creating coffins also fostered creativity.

3. The Role of Temples, Palaces, and Creativity in Egyptian Art

In funerary practice, art was a way to show respect, status, and power through material possessions. The most notable locations in Ancient Egypt that contained art were temples and palaces. The former were decorated with detailed carvings and paintings of the pharaohs interacting with the gods, showcasing religious rituals that cemented the connection between rulers and their deities. Palaces, in turn, exhibited regal authority through artworks that showcased wealth, achievements, and power, like the Edfu Temple of Horus and the Palace of Malqata. [5] Egyptian artists utilize their creativity in blending art and structure to ensure people have a place in the afterlife, respecting and building their culture. Egyptian artisans used innovative techniques, such as plastered linen, pigment preparation, and carving, to honor the gods and highlight the unique attributes and stories of the honored individual.

4. Funerary Arts: A Pathway to the Afterlife

Figure 1: Ancient Egypt. Coffin of Amenemopet. 975–909 B.C. Wood, paste, and paint. 195 cm (76 3/4 in); w. 53 cm (20 7/8 in); h. 62 cm (24 7/16). The MET, New York City

Funerary arts such as coffin decoration, tomb paintings, and jewelry ensure the transition from

earthly existence to the realm of the gods through burial rituals and practices (see Fig. 1). Providing an eternal dwelling place, coffins in Ancient Egypt symbolized a protective passage into the afterlife and the higher in social status the person was, the more detailed their coffin would be. This would include complex decorations, multiple layers, and valuable materials. These adornments, in the form of offerings, symbolized the person's earthly success to secure their passage into the afterlife. It was believed that such elaborate preparations would help ensure the deceased's acceptance into the afterlife and guarantee their well-being in the realm of the gods. [18]

5. Mummification: The Art of Preservation

Mummification was the most esteemed type of funerary art. Preserving physical bodies was implemented during the Old Kingdom Period (2649–2130 BC). Earlier burial practices often involved placing bodies in the desert, allowing the environment to mummify the remains naturally. Some bodies were wrapped only in goat hide and placed in small rectangular pits dug in the sand. Over centuries, body preservation evolved into a more complex and refined process, becoming more accessible to those of higher social status. [7] Mummification promoted a focus on preserving the deceased's lifelike likeness, depicting the individual in an idealized form and ensuring their spirit could be recognized in the afterlife. Seen in this light, mummification serves as an early example of portraiture.

The process itself was a form of art. It took a total of seventy days. The first step was to clean and purify the body before death as if priming the canvas. Next, the brain was removed and liquified, while a cut, usually made on the left side of the abdomen, was made to remove the organs to be placed in canopic jars. Then, the bodies were dehydrated by covering them with a salt mixture called natron and leaving them outside to dry for about 40 days. After that, each body was rubbed with oils and sprayed with perfumes before being wrapped in over one hundred yards of linen that covered every body part separately.

6. Nesmutaatneru's Coffin: Layers of Meaning

Each phase of the mummification was performed with precision and care, transforming the body into a sacred object. Technical skill was combined with symbolic meaning. The wrapping of linen represents spiritual protection, while perfumes allow the dead to retain dignity and symbolic purity. Each body part was touched with an instrument that prepared the body and the senses for the transition. The mummification process was a cultural expression of the Egyptians' deep belief that death was not an end but a new beginning. In a symbolic closure, priests would perform burial rites at the tomb's entrance and seal the entrance ("Opening of the Mouth" is one of the most famous ceremonies as it is associated with the god of the underworld, Osiris, which gives the ceremony deep religious significance). [7] The mummification funerary ritual suggests that creative expression permeated most practices and was one of the central cultural values of Ancient Egypt. Yet, it also signals that these practices imbued all creative processes with religious significance.

Figure 2: Ancient Egypt. Outer coffin of Nesmutaatneru. 760–660 B.C. Wood (sycamore). 72 x 204 cm (28 3/8 x 80 5/16 in.). Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Boston

Figure 3: Ancient Egypt. Middle coffin of Nesmutaatneru. 760–660 B.C. Wood. 186 cm (73 1/4 in.). Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Boston

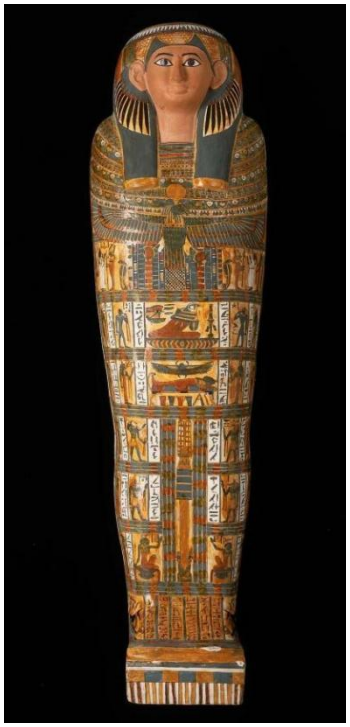

Figure 4: Ancient Egypt. Inner coffin of Nesmutaatneru. 760–660 B.C. Plastered linen over wood. 169 cm (66 9/16 in.). Museum of Fine Arts Boston. Boston

One of the most famous coffins, Nesmutaatneru's, was found in Thebes, Deir el-Bahari, Temple of Hatshepsut. She was from a wealthy family, and her coffin's multiple layers demonstrate her high social and religious status. She was the daughter of Tjaenwaset and Neskhonspakhered and the wife of a priest affiliated with the Theban falcon-headed god of war, Montu. Tellingly, in the coffin, Montu is depicted as a mighty warrior with a falcon head, wearing a sun disk and two plumes on his head. [15] The coffin's outer layer, used for rudimentary depictions, including adornments and jewelry, is shaped like a rectangular box with a vaulted lid and four corner posts (see Fig. 2). The coffin is made of sycamore and is undecorated. On top of the lid, a jackal represents Anubis, the god of the underworld. The only decorations worth mentioning are small bands of hieroglyphic inscriptions on the corner posts. Overall, the outer coffin is sparsely decorated compared to the inner coffin. The outer coffin provides physical protection for the inner coffins, representing wealth. [16] The middle layer shows the shape of the mummy and includes simple decorations (see Fig. 3). It shows the details of the facial features, which in ancient Egypt were believed to allow the mummies to "see, taste, and smell the living world." These facial features, however, are primarily symbolic rather than representative of the actual person. [14] The inner coffin is made of timber wood and carved to represent the shape of Nesmutaatneru (see Fig. 4). Then, a layer of plastered linen was applied to the wood before it was painted. [10] After creating the base, paints made of natural pigments were applied to create different colors from minerals such as red and yellow ochre, lapis lazuli, carbon black, calcite, and malachite. They were then mixed with a gum-like binder to create paint. They were finally applied using different sizes and textures, using brushes made from bundles of grass and reeds. [2] Nesmutaatneru's coffin shows how Egyptian funerary arts blend creative expression with religious practices, using art to guarantee her passage into the afterlife. Each layer of the coffin, from the symbolic facial features to the detailed inner designs, represents the cultural belief in the afterlife and highlights how craftsmanship combines spirituality and creativity. Furthermore, each layer of the coffin represented not just the deceased's social standing; it was also carefully decorated to narrate her life story. The hieroglyphs, deities, and jewels were chosen to reflect Nesmutaatneru's

achievements, family lineage, and spiritual journey, ensuring that the deceased's memory would remain immortal in the afterlife.

7. The Role of Female Priestesses and Grave Goods

During the Kushite dynasty, female priestesses significantly influenced religious and ceremonial practices. [11] Their status allowed them to be buried with great honor and in elaborate burial practices, including multiple layers of coffins, high-quality materials, and grave goods. The goods included food, jewelry, clothing, tools, and small figurines—all believed to assist in the afterlife. [18] The items buried alongside the deceased transform the tomb into a biographical archive. These goods were not just offerings for the afterlife but reminders of Nesmutaatneru's life on earth. Her grave ensured she would be remembered long after her body had perished.

8. Symbolism in Funeral Iconography

The coffin shows Nesmutaatneru wearing a vulture headdress over her long wig, representing divinity, maternal protection, and royalty (see Fig.5). It is made from gold and precious stones. This jewelry was used to show her high status and the craftsmanship of ancient Egyptian artisans. Gold symbolized the gods' flesh and was associated with eternity and divine power. The long wigs were worn to show high social status and protect their shaven heads from the sun, representing nobility. [9]

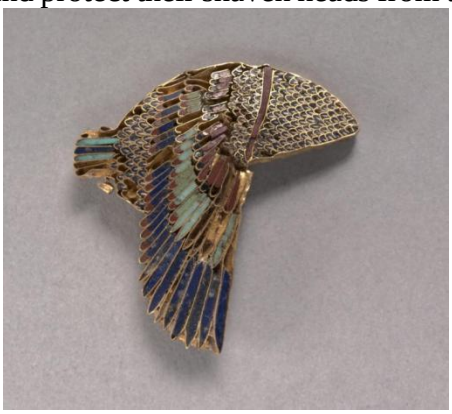

Figure 5: Ancient Egypt. Vulture Headress Inlay. 100-1 BC. Gold and Semi-precious stones.3 cm by 2.8 cm (1 3/16 in by 1 1/8 in). Cleveland Museum of Art. Cleveland

Below her head is a broad collar, a necklace Nesmutaatneru wears to represent rebirth, eternal life, and divine culture (see Fig. 6). Such necklaces were usually made from molded beads, metals, precious stones, plant materials, and a green ceramic material called Egyptian faience. Faience is made from silica; green is associated with regeneration, life, and fertility. The artists' creativity during this period allowed them to explore what nature provided to them and used them to fulfill their religions of honoring the gods and the afterlife. Artists find ways to utilize materials to create beauty that symbolizes their cultures. The flowers on the broad collar constitute a cycle of life, death, and rebirth. The Sun God Ra was thought to have been born next to flowers, making them significant. Flowers also evoke happiness as Egyptians saw death as a celebration of one entering the afterlife. [3] These representations suggest that they preserve the body and ensure the soul's successful transition into the afterlife.

Figure 6: Ancient Egypt. Broad Collar of Wah. 1981–1975 BC. Faience, linen thread. 34.5 cm (13 9/16 in.); W. 39 cm (15 3/8 in.). Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York City

The ram-headed pictogram below the collar is associated with Amun-Ra, revered as the supreme god of the ancient Egyptians. The ram's head symbolizes Amun-Ra's power in the sun and the air. He is depicted with blue skin to represent his connection to air and all primeval creation. The pictogram also features Amun-Ra wearing a headdress with two feathers and a prominent sun disk flanked by large falcon wings. They were often created in the form of brooches or amulets. These pieces were made of gold and silver and frequently adorned with precious stones. [17]

Bands of hieroglyphic text divide the body of the coffin into different compartments. The prayers in the text come from the Book of the Dead, a collection of spells believed to help the soul navigate the afterlife. [13] These compartments depict deities related to the afterlife. In the middle, Nesmutaatneru is shown lying on a bier, surrounded by the gods Isis and Nephthys. Biers were used to carry royal coffins and to showcase embalming practices. They were made of wood and were often fashioned to resemble the goddess Sekhmet, a lioness who protected kings. [10]

The compartment on the left of the compartment containing the individual lying on a bier shows Isis, one of the most important goddesses in ancient Egypt due to her role as a powerful healer, protector of women and children, and resurrecting her slain husband Osiris to show devotion to family. Similar to how Nesmutaneru supports her husband's belief in the Montu. She was also known as Aset, the goddess of healing and magic. She was the wife of Osiris, the god of the afterlife, and the mother of Horus, the god of the sun. Isis' sister, Nephthys, is in the right compartment. She is often represented with a headdress that includes hieroglyphs, which compose her name (see Fig. 7). Nephthys is associated with mourning and funerals and is known as the protectress of the dead. She seduced Osiris and had a child named Anubis. However, Nephthys then abandoned him to hide from her husband, Set, who killed Osiris—leading to Osiris becoming known as the god of the afterlife. Isis took over the role of mother for Anubis. These mythological events shape the role of deities and how they are perceived and guide the deceased through their journey from life to the afterlife. Mixing mythology with art reinforces Egyptian burial practices' spiritual and religious aspects, adding more narrative and creativity to the art. [12]

Figure 7: Ancient Egypt. Isis and Nephthys with ankh and djed pillar. 1250 BC. papyrus. 42 cm by 61.2 cm. British Museum. London

Figure 8: Ancient Egypt. Winged Scarab, 664–332 B.C.E. Faience. 1/2 x 1 1/16 x 1 5/16 in. (1.2 x 2.7 x 3.3 cm). Brooklyn Museum. New York City

Above the figure of Nesmutaatneru in the middle compartment lying on a bier is a winged scarab representing the deity Khepri (see Fig 8). Winged scarabs, which guaranteed rebirth and symbolized the sun god Re, were famous at ancient Egyptian funerals. Scarabs were made of various materials, including faience, stone, glass, and pottery. [4] The concept of the afterlife was available to all Egyptians. Elaborate funerary practices that integrated lavish decorations and arts were seen as stronger guarantors of the afterlife. Gods were used to explain natural phenomena, human experiences, and life and death, offering the Egyptians a framework for understanding the world and the afterlife. Each deity represents a specific force or element, allowing ancient Egyptians to attempt to control these forces through worship and rituals. The wealthy purchased their way into the afterlife using material possessions portrayed through funerary art. Another way for the wealthy to guarantee their access to the afterlife is to include bird-headed creatures symbolizing fertility, life, and regeneration, likely inspired by the massive flocks of birds that migrated over ancient Egypt twice a year. [8]

9. Conclusion

The coffin of Nesmutaatneru is a remarkable example of ancient Egyptian artistry due to the merging of artistic craftsmanship with religious and cultural significance. It showcases how deeply art was intertwined with religious beliefs in the afterlife. Through intricate carvings, vivid colors, and symbolic imagery, the coffin reflects the Egyptians' reverence for the afterlife, illustrating their desire for protection and eternal life. Funerary art perpetuated the individual's legacy, blending creative artistry with religious devotion. These artistic traditions conveyed their spiritual values and left a profound legacy that influenced future cultures. The craftsmanship seen in this artifact provides

invaluable insight into how funerary arts served as a vehicle for spiritual and cultural expression in late-period ancient Egypt.

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