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Art in Ancient Egypt

Architecture. Ancient Egypt's pyramids are the oldest and largest stone structures in the world. The ruins of about 90 pyramids still stand along the Nile. Three huge pyramids at Giza rank as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, a list of sights compiled by ancient travelers. The first Egyptian pyramids were built about 4,500 years ago. The largest one, the Great Pyramid at Giza, stands about 450 feet (140 meters) high. Its base covers about 13 acres (5 hectares). This pyramid was built with more than 2 million limestone blocks, each weighing an average of 2¹/₂ tons (2.3 metric tons). The ancient Egyptians also built temples of limestone. They designed parts of the temples to resemble plants. For example, some temples had columns carved to look like palm trees or papyrus reeds. The temples had three main sections—a small shrine, a large hall with many columns, and an open courtyard. Painting and sculpture. Many of ancient Egypt's finest paintings and other works of art were produced for tombs and temples. Artists covered the walls of tombs with bright, imaginative scenes of daily life and pictorial guides to the afterlife. The tomb paintings were not simply decorations. They reflected the Egyptians' belief that the scenes could come to life in the next world. The tomb owners therefore had themselves pictured not only as young and attractive but also in highly pleasant settings that they wished to enjoy in the afterlife. Ancient Egyptian sculptors decorated temples with carvings showing festivals, military victories, and other important events. Sculptors also carved large stone sphinxes. These statues were supposed to represent Egyptian kings or gods and were used to guard temples and tombs. The Great Sphinx, for example, is believed to represent either King Khafre or the god Re-Harakhte. This magnificent statue has a human head and the body of a lion. It is 240 feet (73 meters) long and about 66 feet (20 meters) high. The Great Sphinx, which is near the Great Pyramid at Giza, was carved about 4,500 years ago. Sculptors also created small figures from wood, ivory, alabaster, bronze, gold, and turquoise. Favorite subjects for small sculptures included cats, which the Egyptians considered sacred and valued for protecting their grain supplies from mice. Music and literature. The ancient Egyptians enjoyed music and singing. They used harps, lutes, and other string instruments to accompany their singing. Egyptian love songs were poetic and passionate.

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