

REVIEW

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**The ear in the visual arts of ancient Egypt**

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Ear disease and function in ancient Egypt are known through paleopathology and the reading of medical papyri. The aim of this report is to present the different functions attributed to the ear as found in the visual art of ancient Egypt. Three main ear functions are recognized in the visual art of ancient Egypt: hearing, mediation while in prayer, and decoration. Hearing is sometimes portrayed in art by singers holding their hands behind their ears to demonstrate listening. Mediation while in prayer was also very popular, which explains the numerous stelae and painted reliefs in funeral inscriptions. Finally, piercing the earlobe was used not only for decoration but also to guard the human body against demon spirits. The study of the ear in visual arts of ancient Egypt enhances the knowledge of ear function provided by classical written and paleopathologic sources.

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No civilization had greater faith than the ancient Egyptians in the identity of the image and its object. The numerous representations of the smallest details of Egyptian life were intended to support the reality of objects who had to accompany the dead so as to allow them to lead the same life in the afterlife as they had in their living years. Death was an obsession. This is demonstrated through mummification and construction of immense graves, such as pyramids, grown out of the crystallization of aspirations towards the sky. These images of reality were the "copies" of objects or represented beings, in which the magic formulae conferred an equivalence on the model as in the ear. This faith in the reality of images pulled together an entire common system of creative conventions that took on a rational and sacred character. To achieve maximum power and efficiency, an image had to reproduce the model as completely as possible and not the partial aspect delivered by vision.<sup>[1]</sup> The most brilliant period of art in ancient Egypt was that of the New Kingdom (1520-1070 BC). Painting developed and became completely independent, substituting itself for statuettes and for half reliefs in funeral art. Alternating between magical texts and images, painting continued to be large scale not only on the walls of royal graves and those of nonroyal citizens but also in funeral papyri, such as *The Book of the Dead: Papyrus of Ani*.<sup>[2]</sup> By definition, symbols represent something other than what they actually depict, and in ancient Egypt that deeper meaning was invariably linked with the very nature of existence. Many Egyptian works of art were designed, in fact, to be "read" symbolically and to provide an underlying message, which was an essential part of their composition. Ideas that developed and became prevalent during the New Kingdom were to remain in force for the rest of Egyptian history, until superseded by those of Christianity.

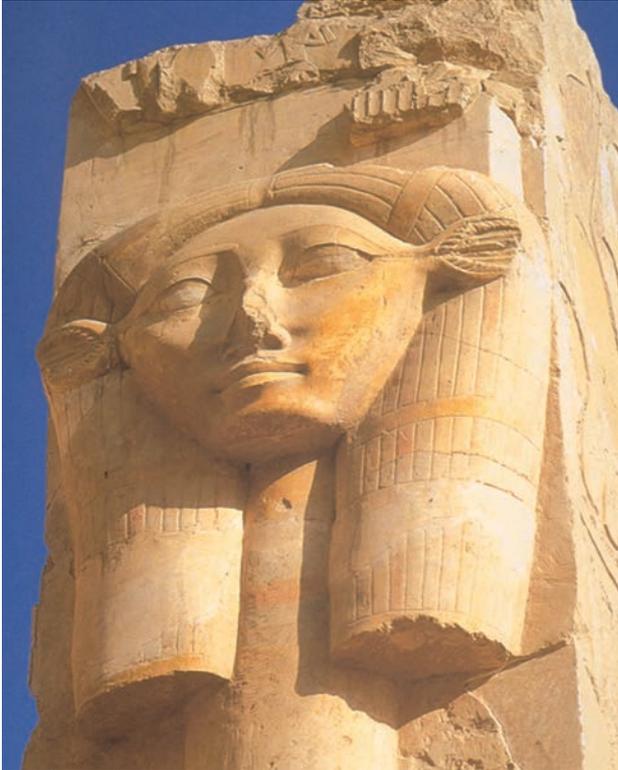
Egyptian hieroglyphs were a part of this symbolic language. The date and place of origin of Egyptian writing remain uncertain. Hieroglyphs were in use by the end of the First Dynasty. From the Old Kingdom (2675-2130 BC) onwards, hieroglyphs were reserved largely for monumental inscriptions. The Egyptian

hieroglyph for ear is a cow's ear. In the beginning this sign was just an ideogram for an animal's ear and later was generally taken to apply to both the ear and hearing. This hieroglyph is built up by the cow's auricle and two small lines that attach the ear to the body (Figure 1). The first combination of a cow's ear with a human face was probably Hathor, the goddess associated with joy, fertility, music, and dancing. Hathor's cow ear can be observed in Egyptian art through many dynasties at different cult sites in many important ancient Egyptian cities. The first representation is found on Narmer's palet exhibited in the Cairo Museum, dating from the First Dynasty, but this motif was used mainly on temple columns as seen in the Hatshepsut temple of the 18th Dynasty in Deir el-Bahri (Figure 2). The hieroglyphic sign for ear is also found on half reliefs and tomb paintings, such as the Sennedjem tomb of the 19th Dynasty in Deir el-Medineh.<sup>[3]</sup> It is important to note that the accurate depiction of ear anatomy can be found as far back as the Fourth Dynasty.



**Figure-1:** An example of a cow's ear in a 20th Dynasty hieroglyph, found in a tomb in Deir el-Medineh.

Ear disease and function in ancient Egypt are known through paleopathology and the reading of medical papyri. The aim of this report is to present the different functions attributed to the ear as found in the visual art of ancient Egypt. The ear played a great role in



**Figure-2:** Hathor column in temple of Hatshepsut, Deir el-Bahri.

Egyptian life. It was thought that "the breath of life entered the left ear and the breath of death entered the right ear"<sup>[4]</sup>. The hieroglyphic sign for the ear, and later also for hearing, was a cow's ear, sometimes presented alone but more often depicted on the human head, particularly of the goddess Hathor. Three main ear functions are recognized in the visual art of ancient Egypt: hearing, mediation while in prayer, and decoration, but there also exist the possibility of deformation. These different functions will be detailed here.

### **Ear as a hearing organ**

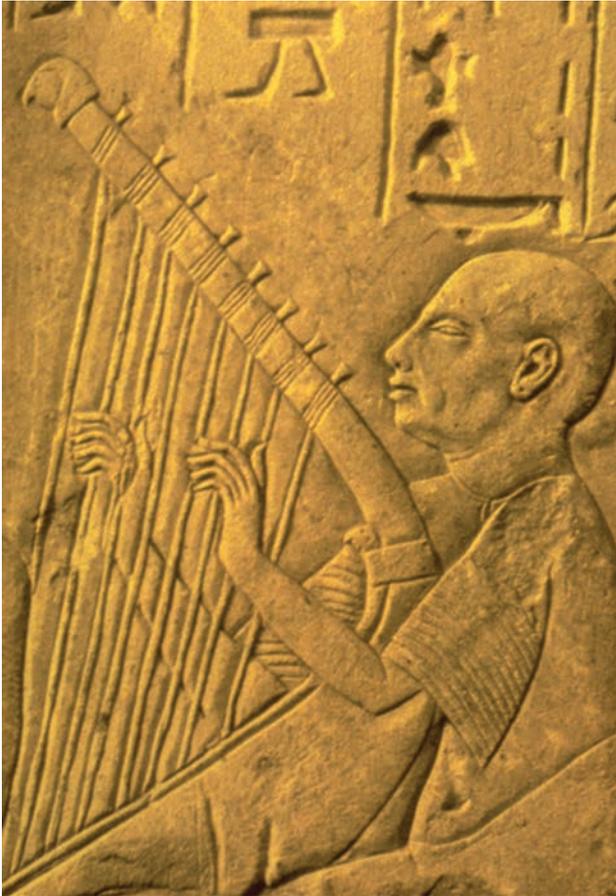
Describing the function of hearing is not simple because it is not visual. In visual art, there are only a few gestures showing that a person is listening: a turn of the head with one ear more directed to the approaching sound, often supported by simultaneously moving the eyes, or the enhancement of sound volume by cupping one or both hands behind the ears. Sometimes there is

shown an obvious connection between a speaker and the ear of the listener and an indication of "inner listening" that is often shown in people meditating, writing, singing, or composing. Some examples of these different "gestures of hearing" have been identified, such as one in a tomb in Saqqara dated from the Fifth Dynasty (Figure 3). Another example is a half relief representing a singer and a musician also from the Fifth Dynasty, exhibited in the Cairo Museum. The singer clicks his right fingers and holds his left hand behind his ear to listen,<sup>[5]</sup> a gesture that is still found among the singers and storytellers of Egypt. Three other examples, also from the Fifth Dynasty, are a half relief carved in limestone found in the tomb of Nechefekta in Sacker that is displayed in the Cairo Museum and a painted limestone and a half relief in the mastaba chapel of Hetepher-akhi in Sacker.



**Figure-3:** Gesture of hearing on a half relief, Fifth Dynasty tomb in Sacker.

It is thought that blind people, to compensate for their disability, develop extraordinary skills in other areas, such as in playing music. In ancient Egypt, blind harpists are often depicted in tombs, particularly at Thebes. Two examples are a blind artist in a painting in the tomb of Nakht, the scribe of Amun of the 18th Dynasty at Shaykh Abd al-Qurna and another on a half relief exhibited in the Leiden Museum, The Netherlands (Figure 4). The sculptor emphasizes the blind person's special talent for hearing with his detailed representation of the harpist's ear as he concentrates on the sound of his instrument. This is a point of discussion among authors because art showing subjects with impaired eyesight is relatively rare, and, often, musicians may be shown in postures characteristic of the blind. Perhaps, however,



**Figure-4:** Blind harpist, Leiden Museum, The Netherlands.

the musician is simply closing his eyes to concentrate better on the music.<sup>[6]</sup> Nevertheless, hearing is essential for practicing music, and this is well represented in the visual art of ancient Egypt. Other examples include a limestone painting from the 20th Dynasty in the tomb of Inher-kha in Deir el-Medineh and a half relief on display in the Leiden Museum found in the tomb of Pa-Aten of the 18th Dynasty discovered in Sacker.

### **Ear in mediation or prayer**

To ensure that the name of the deceased would not be forgotten and would continue to be spoken through the long centuries after death, statues or stelae were erected in temples or places of pilgrimage so that the dead could take part in religious rituals and celebrations.<sup>[7]</sup> The dead were often depicted with the

gods and surrounded with objects, provisions, and offerings. In this fashion, the person was made immortal. These statues and stelae were normally accessible to the public and represented the center of the cult of the dying. Stelae containing representations of ears were rather common in the New Empire. Early Egyptological works proposed that these stelae were requests for the healing of deafness, but the existence of comparable stelae showing other body parts precludes such a possibility.<sup>[8]</sup> This theory, accepted by Pahor, asserted that the different forms and sizes of the 31 ears represented on a stela of Mer, the Sphinx Temple in Giza, were used to quantify deafness.<sup>[9]</sup> Another explanation is that they corresponded to a new way of communicating, introducing a larger dimension of the religion: the relationship between the individual and the god became narrower, and it was no longer absolutely necessary to communicate through the priest. Ears symbolized the divinity that listened to prayers, the divinity to which the favor-seeking believer turned. These ears have been interpreted either as an expression of the willingness of the god to listen or as a magical compulsion to ensure that the god hears.<sup>[10]</sup>

One of the most common examples of ear art, dating around 1200 BC, is displayed in the Cairo Museum. The limestone stela of Bay, which was discovered in the area of the temple of Hathor in Thebes, Deir el-Medina, contains 3 pairs of ears of various colors, probably referring to the 3 Amun-Re aspects: god connected to the air, sight, and humidity (blue), to the sun (yellow), and to the vegetation and water (green; Figure 5). The number of ears represented on a stela varied, from 1 to more than 100 that almost completely covered it.<sup>[11]</sup> Different models are displayed throughout the world, in nearly every serious collection of ancient Egyptian art. \* Depictions of ears can also be found on amulets and ex-votos (votive plates, votive statues). Ex-votos were gifts beseeching the gods for lasting health or disease cures or as a token of gratitude for recovery from illness. Many ex-votos were placed in temples or tombs. Objects in the shape of a human ear from the New Kingdom, almost invariably of molded, glazed composition, are usually identified as votive offerings

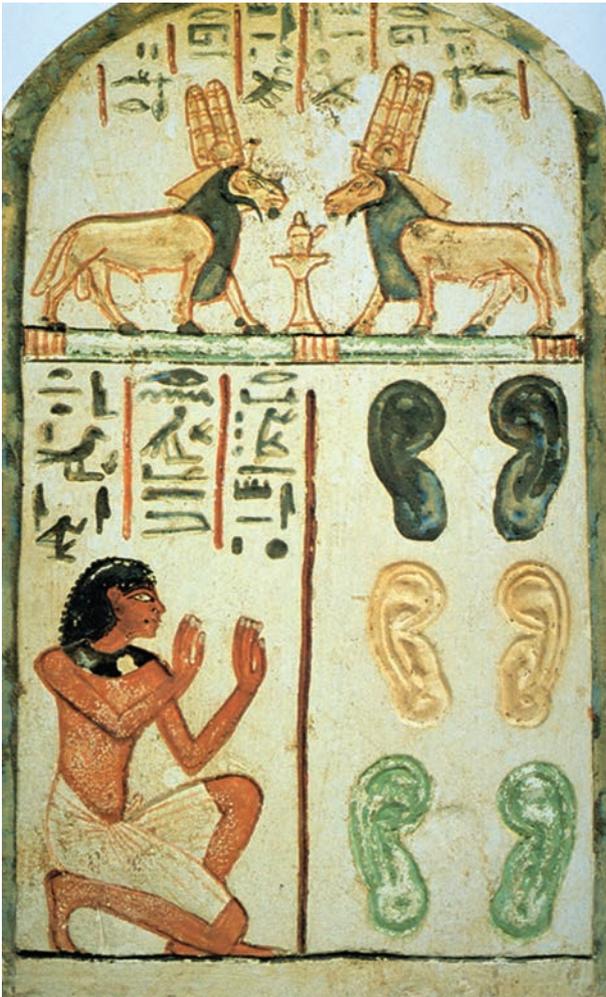


Figure-5: Ear stela of Bay, Cairo Museum.

rather than amulets (Figure 6). If they were indeed amuletic, their function would be to pray for hearing.<sup>[12]</sup> The function of amulets, however, is not always well understood, and different meanings have been proposed, for example:

- As a faith healer to promote recovery after an illness;
- As a reproduction, connected with the real organ in a mystic way;
- As a defender, supposedly to receive attacks from the malignant spirits to whom diseases are usually credited, and so to save the wearer;
- As a representative of a person and, thus, connected to that person.<sup>[13]</sup>



Figure-6: Ear amulets exhibited in the University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia.

These different suppositions are debated even today. Ear amulets are not exactly a mediator in prayer, but they can be, which is the reason why they are presented here. Amulets can also be found in many museums with displays of Egyptian artifacts.†

#### Ear as a decorative organ

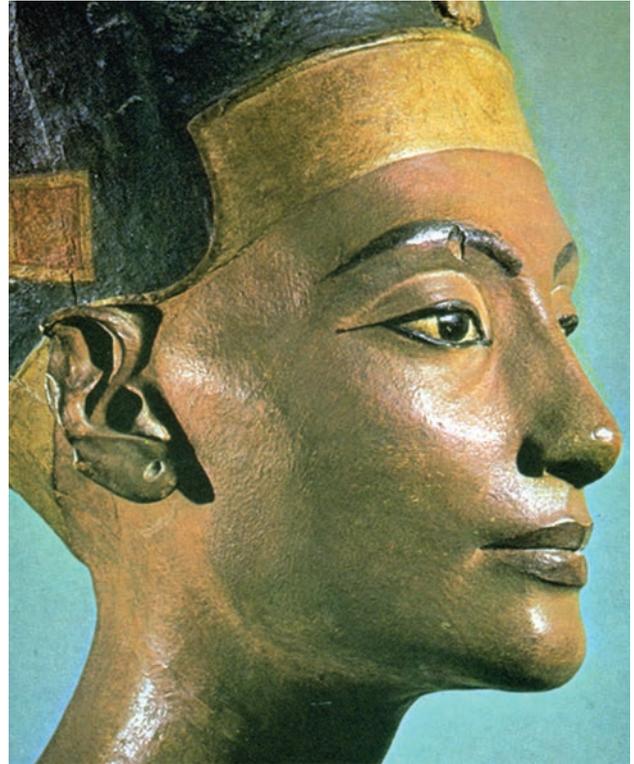
Piercing or stretching of the perforated earlobes to carry ornaments has been performed for thousands of years and remains the most widespread form of voluntary bodily mutilation today. There are many art objects that show this worldwide custom, including pottery, sculpture, and wall paintings.<sup>[14]</sup> In ancient Egypt, pierced earlobes were seen more frequently after the New Kingdom, but the first statues with earrings or earlobe perforation may be found in the predynastic period as demonstrated by a statue displayed in the Grimet Museum in Lyon, France, and another one displayed in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, The Netherlands (Figure 7). Consequently, round or slit-like perforations of the earlobes in Egyptian art are used as criteria for dating such art. Women in particular, but also men and children, decorated their ears with rings, discs, or pendants of various materials. At least in pharaonic usage, it would seem that the actual wearing of ear ornaments by males was mainly confined to young princes, and these ornaments may have been discarded in adulthood. Earrings were popular mostly because they were considered a protection against demons. Thutmose IV of the 18th Dynasty was the first pharaonic mummy discovered with pierced ears.<sup>[15]</sup> Numerous examples of mummies with pierced earlobes



**Figure-7:** Head of a statue with earrings, Rikjsmuseum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

exist, and the most representative ones are Nefertiti, Tutankhamun and Ramesses II. Nefertiti was the wife of Akhenaten, a pharaoh of the 18th Dynasty. Her most well-known bust, with evident pierced earlobes, is displayed in the Egyptian Museum of Berlin, Germany (Figure 8). The richest treasure of ancient Egypt was found in the tomb of Tutankhamun, another 18th Dynasty pharaoh, including statues, sarcophagi (especially the one with the famous gold mask, now exhibited in the Cairo Museum), paintings, all depicting the pharaoh with well-designed, pierced earlobes. Pierced earlobes were also apparent on Tut's mummified head. Finally, Ramesses II, a pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty, considered one of the greatest pharaohs of ancient Egypt with a reign of 67 years, also had pierced ears, seen on his statues in the Abu Simbel rock-cut temple.

In the second half of the New Kingdom, gods, mostly female, were also represented with pierced ears. In the Late Period (664-332 BC), even animals such as cats, which were domesticated during this period, were decorated with earrings, as in the cat that represents the



**Figure-8:** Head of Nefertiti, Egyptian Museum, Berlin, Germany

goddess Bastet in the British Museum in London, England. Other examples exist, notably in the Louvre in Paris, France (Figure 9), and in the National Museum in Copenhagen, Denmark. Other animals with earrings include monkeys and crocodiles.<sup>[16]</sup>

#### Ear diseases

From a pathologic point of view, few diseases are likely to be represented artistically with the exception of exophytic tumors, deformities (particularly protruding ears), and sequelae of trauma. In the visual art of ancient Egypt, these "artistic pathologies" are almost nonexistent because most known existing representations are of pharaohs and their families, strongly limiting the probability of discovering ear diseases, except for the aforementioned protruding ears. While headgear may be responsible for some ear protrusions, there are enough clear examples to show that protruding ears existed, especially when the anthelix is absent. This deformity of the ear is depicted



Figure-9: Cat with earring, Louvre, Paris, France.

in a statue dating back to the First Dynasty, discovered near the Nile and displayed in the Antikenmuseum in Basel, Switzerland. Another example is exhibited in the Aschmolean Museum in Oxford, England (Figure 10).

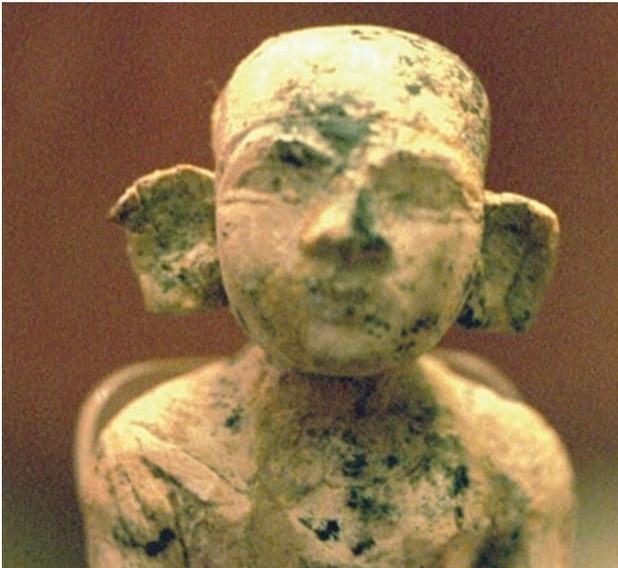


Figure-10: Head with protruding ears, Aschmolean Museum, Oxford, England.

### Varia

There is an enigmatic pair of ears painted on stuccoed linen and pasted on the wooden coffin of Teuris, made in first or second century AD Roman period (Figure 11). This painting shows a version of the "balance of judgment," an illustration from the 125th chapter of The Book of the Dead.<sup>[2]</sup> The scale pans are empty, and the space below the balance is occupied by one pair each of ears and eyes. These ears and eyes belong to Re (god of the sun and the supreme judge), which enable him to hear and see everything in the world. When Re performs the balance of judgment, the gods of vision and of hearing are present as his helpers in the quest for the truth. The painting can be interpreted in this way: there are 4 vessels, divided into 2 pairs, green (positive) and red (negative), sitting below the ears and eyes. The ears and eyes on top of these colored vessels recognize good and evil. Because the scales are balanced, one can conclude that Re has determined that the deceased Teuris was good during his life, had lived according to the rules of truth, and should therefore receive his reward in the afterlife<sup>[17]</sup>



Figure-11: Wooden coffin of Teuris.

The ear was also used as a "pen holder" by some scribes as depicted by Figure 12, which is on exhibit in the Louvre. This relief, discovered on a door of Meri in Saqqara and dated from the Fourth Dynasty, depicts the scribe Khenuka. Other examples have been found in the tombs of Niankh-khnum and Khnumhotep, both from the Fifth Dynasty, and princess Idut and a second half relief from the Fifth Dynasty discovered in the Akhetetep chapel, now displayed in the Louvre.



**Figure-12:** Half relief of the scribe Khenuka, Louvre, Paris, France.

## CONCLUSION

We have attempted to explore some of the ways in which the ear and ear symbolism were manifested in ancient Egyptian art. However, how can we be certain that such symbolic meanings as mentioned here held significance for the ancient Egyptians? The meanings of symbols can change over time, and it does not always follow that the symbolic significance of an ear in one composition will be identical in another from an earlier or later date. While we may select a specific interpretation that seems best to fit the context, other symbolic associations may also be involved. Art historians are well aware of some of the dangers of symbolic interpretation, and it is easy, for example, to superimpose our own ideas on those of the ancients or to draw conclusions about representational symbols from information gleaned from apparently related textual sources. What we can be sure of is that the ear had 3 recognizable functions in ancient Egypt: hearing, mediation in prayer, and decoration.

\*The British Museum in London, England; the Louvre in Paris, France; Museo Egizio in Turin, Italy; Musée du Cinquenaire in Brussels, Belgium; the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England; Antikenmuseum in Basel, Switzerland; Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Mass; the Oriental Institute of Chicago, Ill; Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum in Hildesheim, Germany; the Leipzig Museum in Germany; the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia; the Petrie Museum in London, England; the Egyptian Museum of Berlin, Germany; and the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto, Ontario.

†The Musée du Cinquenaire in Brussels, Belgium; the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England; the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia; and Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum in Hildesheim, Germany.

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