



EMORY

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classroom TUTORIALS

Symbols and Colors



SYMBOLS

The ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic system was extremely complex, incorporating more than 700 symbols, which were combined to create written language.

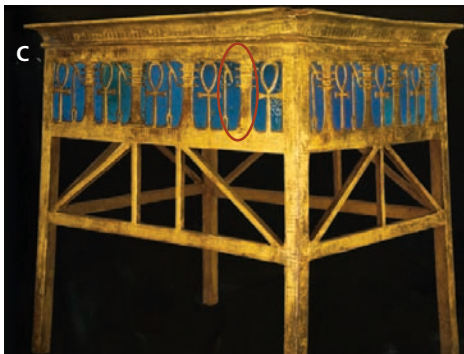
A few of these hieroglyphs appear on works of art, alone, or in combinations of two or three, and symbolically represent concepts of great importance to ancient Egyptians. Look for the following symbols in *Tutankhamun: The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs*.

Djed pillar (A)

Symbolizing the backbone of Osiris, the *djed* represents stability and strength.

Ankh (B)

The *ankh* is a symbol of everlasting life. The arms on this piece once held a torch.



Was scepter (C)

Representing dominion and power, this symbol was often connected with the king and the gods. It is seen on a jewelry chest in the exhibition in combination with a *djed* pillar and the *ankh*.

Lotus (sesen) (D)

The lotus is a symbol of Upper (Southern) Egypt. The flower closes at night and opens again at dawn, associating it with the setting and rising sun.



Scarab (E)

In ancient Egypt, the dung or scarab beetle was called *kheper*, the same word the Egyptians used for “creation.” Scarab beetles lay their eggs in a ball of dung. Then they push the dung ball along the ground to make sure it is evenly heated as it incubates the baby scarabs. In this action the Egyptians saw an image of the sun on its daily course across the sky—rolled by a giant beetle. The emergence of the baby scarabs from the dung ball after they hatched also made it an important symbol of re-birth. For a video of a dung beetle in action visit: http://video.nationalgeographic.com/video/player/animals/bugs-animals/beetles/beetle_dung.html?fs=animals-panther.nationalgeographic.com

Shen (F)

Representing a loop of rope that signifies eternity, the *shen* in its elongated form is called a cartouche.





Papyrus (G)

This plant was extremely useful to ancient Egyptians. They used it to make sheets for writing, boats or skiffs for hunting, and rope. In art it often complements the lotus and is used as a symbol to represent Lower (Northern) Egypt.

Wedjat Eye (H)

The eye of Horus represented protection and healing.

Sema tawy (I)

This symbol, a stylized representation of the windpipe flanked by lungs, represented the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt. Sometimes the *sema tawy* was tied with the plants of Upper and Lower Egypt, the lotus and papyrus.


Nbw (J)

The *nbw* was the Egyptian symbol for gold, which was associated with the sun and was thought to be the flesh of the gods.




COLORS


In ancient Egypt color was almost synonymous with the idea of substance. The Egyptian word for color, *iven*, could also be translated as “nature,” “being,” “disposition,” or “character.” For the Egyptians, colors possessed meaning and symbolism.




Red (*deshet*) Red was linked with regeneration as well as with dangerous forces that threatened order (*maat*). For example the life-threatening desert was called the “red lands.” Danger, destruction, and death were ideas connected with the color red as was the “eye of Re,” the fiery side of the sun god. Scribes even switched from black ink to red when they wanted to write the word “evil!”




Blue (*irtiu* and *khesdedj*) This color represented sky and water. Important concepts such as the heavens and the primeval waters (the place from which all life emerged in Egyptian mythology) are connected with the color blue. Because of the Nile, blue is also associated with birth and rebirth because the annual flood of the river brought fertility to the land.




Yellow (*khenet* and *kenit*) The color of the sun, yellow was linked with the concept of eternity and imperishability.



Green (*wadj*) Ancient Egyptians thought that green was the color of freshness and life. In speech, green was associated with positive, life-producing behavior. For instance, if someone does “green things” their actions are considered positive. The color was also associated with the deities Hathor, Wadjet and Osiris.



White (*hedj* and *shesep*) Associated with cleanliness, purity, and sacredness, the color white was used in religious rituals. The color white could also symbolize southern (Upper) Egypt. The word *hedj* was also used for silver and was associated with the moon.



Black (*kem*) In ancient Egypt, death and night were symbolized by the color black. Unsurprisingly, black also symbolized the Underworld. Because of these associations, black could also conversely represent regeneration—and thus life itself. These connotations were likely a result of the fertile black soil that rejuvenated the land after the Nile overflowed each year. As a result, Egypt itself was called “the black land.” Because of its association with life, the colors black and green were sometimes used interchangeably.