Egyptian Art: Working with Stylized Images
Worksheet

Name______________________          Period________________

PAGES 2-3 (Eternal Images: Art History, Aesthetics)

1. Why did the ancient Egyptians build their civilization near the Nile River?
   Although the Egyptians were surrounded by desert, the fertile land along the Nile
   provided the basis for an agricultural society. A river also allows transportation by boat
   or barge and a civilization can establish trade routes.

2. What kinds of religious beliefs were held by the early Egyptians?
   The religious system of the ancient Egyptians was based on the worship of many gods, or
   polytheism. They believed that every natural event or aspect of life was ruled by these
   gods. Each god or goddess had a “specialty” such as the sun, wind, rain, river, death, or
   fertility.

3. What role did animals play in Egyptian religion?
   The Egyptians associated animal characteristics with various gods, often depicting these
   figures with an animal head on a human body.

4. Who was Ra? What animal represented Ra?
   Ra (sometimes spelled “Re”) was the Egyptian god of the sun and creation. Ancient
   Egyptians believed that the world began with Ra, who traveled across the sky by day and
   under the earth by night.

   Ra was portrayed with the head of a falcon, a large, powerful bird with keen vision.
   Falcons can soar to great heights and see great distances.

(Additional) What was significant of the Great Sphinx, shown on page 3? The face of the
sphinx is generally believed to be that of the Egyptian king Chephren who ruled during
the fourth dynasty. Its body is that of a lion, representing superhuman strength.

(Additional) For what purpose was the statue created? Like nearly all Egyptian art, the
Sphinx was created for ceremonial or religious purposes. Between its paws is a granite
stela, or slab, bearing an inscription that tells of a dream in which the sun god visits a
sleeping prince. A temple was built alongside the Sphinx so people could worship the
figure.
(Additional) How was the Great Sphinx constructed? It appears to have been carved out of a natural limestone formation that remained after blocks for building pyramids had been removed.

(Additional) What happened to the Sphinx over the centuries? The Sphinx’s nose and beard broke off and the original red and yellow paint wore away. Wind, sun, and moisture, along with salts used in the mortar, have caused erosion and deterioration. In recent years, a major project has been under way to restore and preserve the Sphinx.

(Additional) What kinds of figures decorate the ceremonial coffin, or mummy case, shown on page 3? The face is an idealized depiction of the person who was to be buried in the coffin. The hieroglyphics, or pictorial writing, consist of the stylized animal/human figures that represented gods and goddesses of death and rebirth. This text was believed necessary to insure that the deceased would live on into the afterlife. The doglike animal below the figures’ crossed arms is Anubis, the god of embalming. The larger figures toward the bottom of the coffin appear to be Osiris and Isis. Below them are four minor deities who guarded the entrails. From right to left: the human who guarded the liver; the falcon who guarded the intestines; the jackal who guarded the stomach; the monkey who guarded the lungs.

PAGE 4-5 (Life on Earth: Art History, Analysis)

5. What general characteristics did ancient Egyptian life have in common with life in the late 20th century? The Egyptians developed a highly advanced civilization with a central government, written language, and standardized weights and measures. Both men and women were concerned with fashion and grooming. People enjoyed elaborate social events, music, dancing, and games.

6. Was Egyptian art created solely for the self-expression of the artist? No; Egyptian art was not “art for art’s sake.” Images were created for communication, to decorate practical objects, or for religious purposes.

7. How did Egyptian artists and artisans depict their world? Human figures were always youthful and idealized; natural settings were lush and beautiful.

8. Who was Hathor and how was she depicted? Hathor was the goddess of daily life, associated with music, dance, and festivity. She is shown wearing a pair of cow’s horns with a solar orb in between.
9. What kind of perspective did Egyptians use in figures such as the one of Hathor? Her figure is composed of separate parts that are seen from different viewpoints. Although Hathor’s head and legs are shown in profile, her eye and shoulders are viewed from the front.

10. Are the figures in Egyptian art realistic and lifelike: How do they usually appear? Most of these figures are highly stylized and simplified, reduced to their basic shapes. So that each figure was immediately recognizable, the artist exaggerated its most prominent feature: wings, beak, long ears, sharp snout, horns, etc. These figures were more symbolic than literal. As part of a pictographic writing system, their function was that of a word or a letter of the alphabet.

(Additional) In the winged figure on page 4, how has the artist created the effect of feathers? The artist used angular, repeat patterns that suggest a falcon’s feathers.

(Additional) What kinds of contrasting shapes and patterns can you find in the monkey necklace on page 5? The monkeys and scarab are made up of organic, or curving, shapes that are bold and colorful. In contrast, the links of the chain are rectangular, geometric shapes. The patterns within the links are more subtle than those in the pendant.

PAGES 6-7, 8-9 (Into the Next World: Art History, Analysis)
11. What legend formed the basis of the Egyptians’ belief in an afterlife? Osiris, who was believed to have ruled over Egypt before the first dynastic kings, was brutally murdered and dismembered by his brother Seth. Osiris’s wife, Isis, reassembled her husband’s body and breathed life back into it. Their son, Horus, vanquished Seth and became ruler of Egypt. Osiris became the primary god of the dead. Anubis was in charge of embalming the dead while Horus led the deceased through the underworld. The story of Osiris was the model for every human death. Ancient Egyptians believed that through ritual embalming and religious ceremony, a person could “become an Osiris.”

12. What steps did the Egyptians take to preserve the bodies of their dead? They used an elaborate ritual embalming process known as mummification, which took about 70 days to complete. Bodily fluids were drained. A special hook was put up the nose to remove the brain. The internal organs were carefully taken out and preserved in ceremonial canopic jars that had animal-headed stoppers. (Students might be interested to know that the heart was the only major organ that was not removed and preserved. As the center of wisdom and intelligence, it was essential that the heart be kept with the body of the deceased.) The corpse was then treated with salt, dried, and stuffed with linen or straw. It was coated with resin and wrapped in yards of linen while sacred spells were recited.
Jewelry and amulets were placed with the body. Finally, the body was placed in a decorated coffin and sealed in a tomb.

(Additional) Was this the way in which all ancient Egyptians were buried? Mummification and ritual primarily accompanied the deaths of royalty and the well-to-do. The richness of the mummy container and objects buried with the dead depended on the wealth of the deceased and his or her family. The poorest of the Egyptians were not mummified at all.

(Additional) What kinds of objects were placed in Egyptian tombs? The dead were buried with everything they would need for a comfortable afterlife: jewelry, perfumes and toiletries, tools, clothing, furniture, eating utensils, and even mummified food. Hundreds of special figurines, called ushabti, were often placed near the coffin to protect and serve the deceased in the afterlife.

13. Why did the Egyptian queen, whose coffins are shown on pages 8-9, have more than one burial container? The decoration of a person’s coffin was directly related to his or her prestige and standing in Egyptian society. Pharaohs and queens were usually buried within a nested series of richly decorated coffins.

(Additional) Mummy containers typically bore a likeness of the dead person’s face. How were these figures portrayed? In the afterlife, the person was always depicted as young, beautiful, and strong. The painted face was serene and idealized; it was usually crowned with an ornate wig or headdress.

(Additional) What is the significance of the decoration on this series of coffins? The lines of text and depictions of deities associated with death were believed to insure the deceased’s passage into the afterlife. The winged goddess in the center of each of the coffins embraces Tamoutnefret protectively. The Egyptians were correct in believing that the dead required protection from earthly avarice. Early in Egyptian civilization, it became common practice for grave robbers to plunder the tombs of the wealthy.

PAGE 10-11 (Art Spotlight: Mythical Creatures – Art History, Aesthetics)

(Additional) What does Alexander Calder’s *Yellow Whale* mobile have in common with some of the Egyptian animal figures you have seen in this issue? Like the Egyptian artists, Calder has emphasized the salient, identifying characteristics of the animal. The simplified organic shapes suggest the graceful curves of a swimming whale. The wires are like the streams of water blown from a whale’s airholes when it surfaces.
(Additional) How has the artist introduced the element of movement into this work? The mobile is intended to be hung from a ceiling, so that its separate components can be set into motion by air currents.

(Additional) What might the triangular red shapes represent? They could be small fish swimming around the whale.

(Additional) What gives Martin Puryear’s sculpture Old Mole an “ancient” quality? It is made of wood, which has a somewhat “rough-hewn” appearance. The simple, massive shape suggests something that might have been used in an ancient ritual.

(Additional) Does this work resemble any of the animals you have seen in Egyptian art? The curving form with its sharp “beak” suggests the head of an eagle, hawk, or falcon. In ancient Egyptian art, birds were symbols of freedom and godlike omnipotence. Ra and some other Egyptian deities were depicted as birds.

(Additional) What gives Old Mole such a mysterious quality? The mummylike interweaving and wrapping of the wood strips might spark viewers’ curiosity as to what lies underneath. Perhaps unwrapping the strips would release the power of some mysterious force within.

(Additional) Why might the artist have called this work Old Mole when it looks more like a bird? The title might be a reference to Shakespeare’s play Hamlet. When confronted with his father’s ghost, Hamlet calls the ghost an “old mole,” who was able to dig himself out of his grave. Maybe Puryear is referring to the dense, layered, hollow casketlike quality of his sculpture.

(Additional) Who was Horus, depicted in Niki de Saint Phalle’s sculpture on page 11? In ancient Egypt, Horus was the god who escorted the dead through the underworld.

(Additional) How has the artist depicted this god in her sculpture Horus? The artist has made him larger than life – the sculpture is nearly eight feet tall. She has further simplified and stylized the Egyptian version of the figure, making it highly abstract.

(Additional) What does the negative circular shape above the figure represent? This suggests a solar orb, such as the one above the figure of Ra on page 2. Egyptian artists placed this shape over the heads of many gods to indicate their superhuman status.
(Additional) how is the design of Kristen’s mummy case like that of ancient Egyptian mummy cases? Both are made of wood. Kristen has put a simplified, stylized figure on the front of her case. She has used lotus flowers, stylizing them as an ancient Egyptian artist would have. The arms of the mummy in the box are in the “Osiris pose.”

(Additional) what differences are there between Kristen’s mummy case and an early Egyptian one? Ancient Egyptian mummy cases were curved to conform to the shape of the human figure. Kristen’s is rectangular. Egyptian cases had lids, Kristen’s has a hinged door. Egyptians painted designs on their cases. Kristen has decorated hers with ceramic tiles and photomontages.

PAGE 16 (Critic’s Corner – Art History, Analysis, Assessment)

1. r, o, i
2. q, i, g
3. k, e, d
4. b, n, m
5. f, a, p
6. j, h, c