

The Gestures and Symbolism through the Collection of the Egyptian Museum

Ghada Khaled Mohamed¹ Hoda Kandil¹ Hesham Ezz El-Din Zaki¹

¹Faculty of Tourism and Hotels, University of Sadat City

Abstract

This paper presents the symbolic use of gestures through the collection of the Egyptian Museum and illustrates the different types of gestures and the meanings they refer to in the Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom and Late Period. The gestures of the remarkable statues, stelae and objects through the collection of the Egyptian Museum which is one of the greatest collections in the world, the Egyptian museum is a treasure house, it plays a key role as guardian of the secrets and legacies of ancient Egypt.

Keywords: Gestures, Symbolism, Egyptian Museum, Ancient Egypt.

Introduction

Egyptian art was originally created for religious and magical purposes. Its symbols and functions reveal the Egyptians' beliefs about the world and their attempts to understand and relate to it. In the Egyptian social and religious context, works of art played a practical role, whose straightforward physicality is not easy for the modern viewer to realize. Throughout the History of Art, the Symbolic use of gestures is among the most fascinating and important aspects of the Symbolism inherent in ancient Egyptian art. But it is also one of the most complex aspects and one which requires careful study. According to RICHARD H. WILKINSON we can define gestures as specifically prescribed individual movements, stances, or poses which may be used as part of a larger activity or which may function independently⁽¹⁾.

The purpose of this paper is to indicate the gestures of the remarkable statues, stelae and objects through the collection of the Egyptian Museum which is one of the greatest collections in the world, the Egyptian museum is a treasure house, and it plays a key role as guardian of the secrets and legacies of ancient Egypt⁽²⁾.

The non-verbal interaction of gestures represent a range of feelings, cultural ideas and beliefs that cannot always be as easily gleaned from textual sources. Therefore, this selection of objects is highly valuable for researchers to gain a sense of how the Egyptians communicated their human emotions and cultural ideologies. These would mainly concentrate on the **hands**, the **legs** and the **eyes**.

(1) R.H.Wilkinson, *Symbol & Magic in Egyptian Art*. London, 1994, p.192.

(2) Z. Hawas, *The Illustrated Guide to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo 2001, p. 7.

Gestures of the hands, eyes and legs have different aspects of from a statue to another. These are realized from different positions and gestures in the royal statues and the individual statues as well as various objects. The coming part shall display chosen objects from the Egyptian Museum for having remarkable gestures with different significances and meanings from the various periods.

Royal Objects

I. Hands

I.A. Gesture refers to Power

The gestures which symbolizes power represents in the right hand with clenched fist¹ on the knee (figs. 1 and 2) to express the power² and control of the Kings over their countries. The right hand with clenched fist is put on his chest (fig. 3) referring to idea of the king who possessed brave powerful heart in taking his decisions and commands.



Fig. 1, picture after the researcher



Fig. 2, picture after the researcher



Fig. 3, after <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/162833342756019243> 25/3/2018

¹ Malek, J., *Egyptian Art*, London, 1999, p.76.

² Saleh, M., *Official Catalogue The Egyptian Museum Cairo*, Organization of Egyptian Antiquities , 1987, p.49

I.B. Gesture refers to Mercy

This gesture is suggested from King *Senusert I*'s¹ left hand that was placed open on his knee (Fig.4) as well as the two hands of King *Amenhotep III*² (fig. 5). This is because the open hands symbolized mercy and peace.



Fig.4, picture after the researcher



Fig.5, picture after the researcher

I.C. Gestures refer to Protection

This is remarkably seen in the falcon god *Horus* while stretching wings behind their heads of kings *Khaefre*³ and *Neferefre* to emphasize supporting and protecting them (figs. 6 and 7).



Fig.6, picture after the researcher



Fig.7, picture after the researcher

In pillar of king *Senusert I*, but (Fig.8) god *Horus* with human body and falcon head is shown consolidating the king by putting his hand behind back of his head.



Fig.8, picture after the researcher

¹ Borchardt, L., *Statuen und Statuette von königen und privatleuten im museum von Kairo*, in: (CG) II, Berlin, 1911, pp.21-29, pl.67; *Centenaire del'Institut français d'Archéologie Orientale*, 1981, no.56

² Nicolas, G., *A History of Ancient Egypt*, 1992, p.224

³ Ziegler, C., *Egyptian Art in the Age of the Pyramids*, New york, 1999, p.99.

Goddess Hathor with full cow body is shown protecting king *Tuthmosis III*¹ whose statue is positioned under its chain (fig. 9). The same position is seen in statues of the cobra goddess Meretsegr² which is behind king Amenhotep II³ (fig.10) and king Ramesses II with god Horun⁴ (fig.11).



Fig. 9, picture after the researcher



Fig.10, picture after the researcher



Fig. 11 , after Tiraditti., Deluca, A
.,*The Treasures of the Egyptian
Museum* ,The American University
in Cairo Press,Cairo,1999, p.258.

¹ Lipinska, J., *The Temple of Thutmosis III, Dier el-Bahari II*, Warsaw, 1977, p.38.

² EL-Shahawy, A., *The Egyptian museum in cairo A walk through the Alleys of Ancient Egypt*,Cairo,2005, p.186

³ Hawas,Z., *The Illustrated Guide to the Egyptian Museum in cairo*,The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 2001, p.197.

⁴ Tiraditti., Deluca, A .,*The Treasures of the Egyptian Museum* ,The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 1999, p.258.

I.D. Gestures refer to Submission

The gesture of submission is represented in catching the hair of the kneeling enemy¹ who is begging for mercy (fig. 12,13 and 14) .



Fig. 12, After <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/378020962443292498/?lp=true>
27/3/2018



Fig.13, picture after the researcher



Fig.14, picture after the researcher

I.E. Gestures refer to Presenting Offerings

Offerings in ancient Egypt had a great important role to honor their gods, Gesture of offerings represents in the hands which carrying trays of fish to the Nile god Hapi² in order to provide the land with all nutrition necessary to life (fig. 15). King Akhenaten³ represents with his two hands holding an offering table (fig. 16). King Amen-Hetep II represents with his two hands holding an offering table but he is represented kneeling (fig. 17).

¹ Smith, W.S., *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt* , London, 1998, p.34.

² Stadelmann, R., *The Tombs of the pharaohs-Between Tradition and Innovation* , *Egypt the world of the pharaohs*,Cairo, 2009,p.114.

³ Aldred, C., *Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, London, 1973,fig.42.



Fig.15, picture after the researcher



Fig.16, picture after the researcher



Fig. 17¹ , After Aldred ,C., *New Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt*, London 1951 ,
Fig.50.

Other statues represented the kings while holding the nw jars as an offerings to god² (fig. 18, 19 and 20). The nw jars are supposed to contain libation or liquid offerings, mainly milk and wine³ .



Fig.18, picture after the researcher



Fig. 19, After Tiraditti.,

Deluca,A .,*The Treasures of the Egyptian Museum* ,The American University in Cairo Press,Cairo,1999, p.168.

¹ Aldred ,C., *New Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt*, London 1951 , Fig.50.

² Wilkinson, R.H., “ gesture “ in *Oxford Encyclopedia of ancient Egypt*, II , London , 2001,p.28.

³ El-Shahawy, A., *The Egyptian Museum in Cairo. A Walk through the Alleys of Ancient Egypt*, American University in Cairo Press, 2005, p. 168.



Fig. 20 , After El-Shahawy, A., *The Egyptian Museum in Cairo. A Walk through the Alleys of Ancient Egypt*, American University in Cairo Press, 2005, p. 168.

King Akhenaten and his family are shown standing with their two hands raised holding libation to god Aten¹. It should be mentioned that is an innovation cause all the royal family making offerings to the god (fig. 21).



Fig.21, picture After the researcher

I.F. Gestures refer to Family Relationship:

When examining ancient Egyptians statues and reliefs, it is easy to know that the ancient Egyptians family relationship was similar to today`s, Their love and affection is appeared in their monuments. In this theme will display that through their gestures which symbolize love towards their families.

The gesture represents in queen Tiye`s² hand that encircles king Amenhotep III which symbolizes her affection, care and tender she provides to her beloved husband (fig. 22).

Arms` gesture of King Tuthmosis IV and his mother Tia³ which are around the waist of each other (fig. 23) symbolize love, affection and satisfaction.

¹ Aldred, C., *Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, London, 1973, fig. 33.

² Kozloff, A., *Amenhotep III: Egypt's Radiant Pharaoh* , Cambridge University Press, 2012, p.193

³ Dodson, A ., Hilton, D., *The Complete Royal Families of Ancient Egypt*, The British library , London , 2004, p.140.



Fig.22, picture After the researcher researcher



Fig.23, picture After the researcher

King Akhenaten¹ kissing his princess is a touching gesture of affection and tender and she in turns gently touches his arm that symbolize love and tender (fig. 24).



Fig.24, picture After the researcher

King Akhenaten and his family represents in an intimacy and love scene², gesture of love and affection between the king and his daughter represented in the inclining head downwards towards his daughter trying to pass an earring to his eldest daughter. As for Nefertiti, she is touching Ankheseptaon that seated on her lap from the back of the head which is a gesture of love and affection (doc.25).This example is considered one of the best example in love and affection between members of the family.

¹ Aldred, C., *Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, London, 1973, fig.54.

² Saleh, M., *Official Catalogue The Egyptian Museum Cairo*, Organization of Egyptian Antiquities, 1987, p.167; *Le Règne Du Soleil Akhnaton et Néfertiti*, 1975, no.15.



Fig.25, picture After the researcher



Fig 26, picture After the researcher

The queen leans forward to adjust her husband`s collar¹ or to add a touch of perfume from the bowl which she carries in her other hand which symbolizes love, caring and affection towards her husband (fig. 26).

The gesture represents in the right arm of Isis on the right shoulder of Osiris² which symbolizes her weakness as if she takes strength from her husband , The other gesture represents in her left arm grasping his left upper arm which symbolizes love and affection (fig. 27).

Gesture represents goddess Isis³ is giving a breastfeed to her son Horus which symbolizes maternity and love (fig. 28).



Fig 27, picture after the researcher



Fig 28, picture after the researcher

I.G. Gestures refer to worshipping attitude:

King Senusert III is represented with his two hands lying upon his knee that symbolizes worshipping⁴ position (fig. 29) .

¹ James, T.G.H., *Tutankhamun The eternal splendor of the boy pharaoh*, The American university, Cairo, 2000, p.128.

² Records of the Egyptian Museum, TR.27/3/25/17 , SR/ 11751

³ Curto, S., &Alessandro, R., *Treasures of the pharaohs*, Milano,1984, Fig.55

⁴ Robins,G., *The Art of Ancient Egypt*, Cairo 1997, p.113.



Fig. 29¹, After M. Saleh, *Official Catalogue The Egyptian Museum Cairo*, Organization of Egyptian Antiquities, 1987, p.98.

The king represents with his two hands flat on his long straight skirt as a gesture of worshiping (fig. 30).



Fig 30, picture after the researcher

II. Legs:

One of legs of the enemy represents semi squatting and the other in opposite direction as they refer his desperate wish to escape from king *senefru*² (fig. 31)



Fig 31, picture after the researcher

¹ Saleh, M., *Official Catalogue The Egyptian Museum Cairo*, Organization of Egyptian Antiquities, 1987, p.98.

² Gardiner, A.H., Peet, T.E., Cerny, J., *The Inscriptions of Sinai II*, London, 1955, p.56.

III. Eye:

Eye gesture is form of body language in which the eye movements is helped us to understand the non-verbal communication. The example for eye, the enemy in Narmer palette¹ is looking forward and he doesn't look to the king because of his fear and inability to confront the king (fig. 32).



Fig. 32, After <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/378020962443292498/?lp=true>
27/3/2018

Individual Objects :

I. Hands

I.A. Gestures refer to Power: The gesture in (fig. 33) to express power and responsibility towards their families.

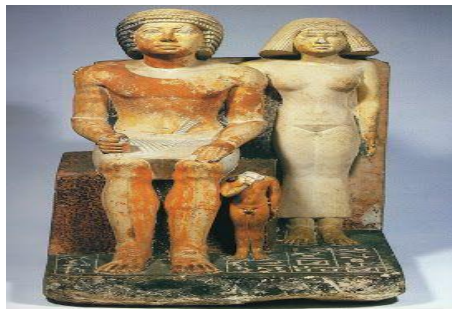


Fig. 33 ², after Robins, G., *The Art of Ancient Egypt*, Cairo, 1997, p.73.

I.B. Gestures refer to Protection:

Dedusobek³ holds his daughter's waist to protect her from falling down (fig.34). Senenmut, famous architect from reign of queen Hatshepsut is shown in the same attitude with her daughter princess Neferure⁴ (doc.35). But here Senenmut as a private tutor encircles the body of the child by his large hands to protect her from falling down.

¹ Bunson, M.R., *Encyclopedia of Ancient Egypt*, New York, 2002, p.43.

² Robins, G., *The Art of Ancient Egypt*, Cairo, 1997, p.73.

³ Dodson, A., Hilton, D., *The Complete Royal Families of Ancient Egypt*, The British library, London, 2004, p.113.

⁴ Smith, W.S., *The Art and Architecture of Ancient Egypt*, London, 1998, p.227.



Fig 34, picture after the researcher Fig 35, picture after the researcher

I.C. Gestures refer to family relationship:

The gesture here represented in the wife`s hand that encircles her husband (fig. 36) which symbolizes her affection, care and tender she provides to her beloved husband.



Fig. 36 ¹, After, Saleh, M., *Official Catalogue The Egyptian Museum Cairo*, Organization of Egyptian Antiquities , 1987, p.79.

In (fig.37), the gesture here represents in the wife`s right arm on husband`s right shoulder which symbolizes her weakness as if she takes strength from her husband , The other gesture represents in her left arm grasping his left upper arm which symbolizes love and affection.



Fig 37, picture after the researcher ¹

¹ Shaw, I., *British Museum Dictionary of Ancient Egypt* , London, 1995,p.88.

II. Legs :

The gesture here represents in the position of the right leg, which symbolizes that he was ready to seat at crossed position and give us a scene full of vital² (fig. 38 and 39)



Fig 38, After <https://www.pinterest.com.au/pin/197032552427234567> 4/3/2018

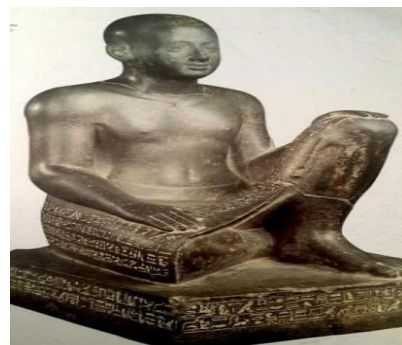


Fig. 39, After Tiraditti.,Deluca, A., *The Treasures of the Egyptian Museum*,The American University in Cairo Press,Cairo,1999,p.349.

This position might recall us the image of simple people, especially in the Egyptian countryside when they want to take comfortable position through exchanging legs when they feel tired or stress in their position . This exchange of their legs gives them more comfort.

III.Head:

III.A. Gesture refers to receiving instructions :

The gesture represents in her raised head and looking forward as if she were in conversation with her master to receive instructions and her attitude symbolizes serious work (fig. 40).

¹ *Records of the Egyptian Museum*, CG 101, SR/ 2 15603

² Aldred, C., *Old Kingdom Art in Ancient Egypt*, London, 1949 , p.37.



Fig. 40¹, After Tiraditti, F., Deluca, A., *The Treasures of the Egyptian Museum*, The American University in Cairo Press, 1999, p.89.

III.B. Gesture refers to preparation to work (fig. 41):

The gesture here represents in his head which is gently inclines toward the unrolled papyrus on his lap which symbolize his preparation to read the text or to write down the words.



Fig.41, picture after the researcher

II.C. Gesture refers to Giving Wisdom

Baboon is positioned behind the head of Ramessunakht² (fig. 42) as if to provide him with knowledge and wisdom. For it is known that baboon was a clever animal and was the sacred image of Thoth god of wisdom and writing³.



Figs. 42¹, After Tiraditti., Deluca, A., *The Treasures of the Egyptian Museum*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo, 1999, p.268.

¹ Hassan.S., *Excavations at Giza 1929-1930*, Oxford 1932, p.115.



² Records of the Egyptian Museum, CG/42162.

³ R.H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of Ancient Egypt*, 2003, p. 166

IV.Eye:

Eye gesture represents in the scribe`s eye as he is looking forward in a serious way to receive what to write down (fig. 43).

Another example represents in Ramessunakht`s eye which is directed downwards as if he is concentrating on his work (doc.44).

	
<p>Fig.43 ², After the researcher</p>	<p>Fig 44, After Tiraditti.,Deluca,A.,<i>The Treasures of the Egyptian Museum</i>,The American University in Cairo Press,Cairo,1999,p.268</p>

Conclusion

This paper illustrated different gestures through the collection of the Egyptian Museum from the old Kingdom up to late period, these gestures vary between royal statues, Individual statues, Royal stelae, individual stelae.

The non-verbal interaction of gestures represent a range of feelings, cultural ideas and beliefs that cannot always be as easily gleaned from textual sources. Therefore, this selection of objects is highly valuable for researchers to gain a sense of how the Egyptians communicated their human emotions and cultural ideologies.

The gestures are one of the most difficult to understand so it is important to know more about gestures to helped anyone to understand this non-verbal communication and show the meanings which behind theses gestures.It is clear that gestures can be substituted for words and just as ‘words may express anything’ however subtle or intense, gestures can do the same. Therefore, in terms of communication, feelings, beliefs and ideas can be conveyed in a gesture.

¹ Tiraditti.,Deluca,A.,*The Treasures of the Egyptian Museum*,The American University in Cairo Press,Cairo,1999,p.268.

² Borchardt, L., *Statuen und Statuette von königen und privatleuten im museum von Kairo*, in: CG, Berlin 1911, p.34.

These objects are useful for students and researchers to study and interpret as it encourages them not to rely on textual or evidential detail, but to delve deeper to 'think like an Egyptian' and understand what these gestures conveyed in antiquity.

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الإشارات والرمزية من خلال مقتنيات المتحف المصري

غادة خالد محمد¹ هدي قنديل¹ هشام عزالدين زكي¹

¹ كلية السياحة والفنادق، جامعة مدينة السادات

الملخص العربي

يهدف البحث إلى رصد التعبير بالحركة الجسدية والإشارة سواء إشارة يد أو ذراع أو إصبع والتي لها دوراً هاماً في الإتصال الغير لفظي وعبر بها المصري القديم في كثير من القطع الأثرية والمناظر والآثار الخاصة بالتاريخ المصري القديم. والهدف من هذه الدراسة هو عرض وتوضيح الإشارات والمعاني من خلال التماثيل واللوحات. إن الرمزية والإشارات في مصر القديمة هو موضوع معقد جداً ويمكن أن يكون لها دلالات مختلفة من أحد علماء المصريات إلى أخرى، بالتأكيد، لدينا بعض الأمثلة واضحة من الإشارات، والتحقيق في هذا الموضوع هو رحلة إستكشافية إلى العقل المصري القديم، ودراسة الإيماءات يضيف الكثير إلى فهمنا من مصر القديمة. ومن الواضح أن مجموعة كبيرة من المشاعر والمعتقدات والأفكار التي يمكن نقلها في إشارة والتي توضح الجانب التواصل من الإيماءات وتبين الطرق التي يقوم المصريون القدماء من خلالها بنقل المشاعر والأفكار عبر هذا النوع من التفاعل غير اللفظي. هذا البحث هو استطلاعات موثوقة للعلاقة بين التماثيل والكلام من خلال المشاعر والتعبير البشرية ومن خلال الإيماءات التي تم توفيرها من قبل التصوير في الفن، ومشاهد اللوحات، التي تشمل بعض من الإشارات بمثابة الكلمة والصورة في نفس الوقت للتعبير عن معان كثيرة والمشاعر الإنسانية.

الكلمات الدالة: الإشارات، الرمزية، مقتنيات، المتحف المصري.