

Kushite Archaism in the 25th Dynasty: An Examination of Gender and Agency in Nubian Art

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During the 25th Dynasty, Nubian kings ruled Egypt. At this time, they seem to incorporate specific elements of Egyptian art and religion into their own, selecting from the whole of Egyptian history, especially from periods when the kingdom of Egypt was at its peak of power. This practice is called archaism and was the predominant feature of Nubian art during the 25th Dynasty. In this paper, I examine the practice and explore questions regarding agency and power, especially that of the king, and the representation of gender in Nubian art. My discussion focuses on two artifacts: two mirrors retrieved from the tombs of King Shabaka and King Amaninatakilebte. These two mirrors are similar in form. However, they are exact opposites in terms of the gender of deities selected. Whereas the Shabaka mirror features three Egyptian goddesses and an image of the God's Wife of Amun, an important female position in society, the Amaninatakilebte mirror features three Egyptian gods and an image of the king himself. What are the differences between the figures in the Egyptian context versus the Nubian context? Why were powerful female figures chosen for an object meant for Shabaka's tomb, when its counterpart in Amaninatakilebte's tomb featured the expected male symbols, and what can this tell us about agency in Nubian archaism, as well as the representation of gender in Nubian art of the era? And finally, what are the general implications regarding Nubian and Egyptian interactions at this period?