**Power and Gender in Ancient Egypt: The Case of Hatshepsut**

**BY KRISTINA HILLIARD AND KATE WURTZEL**

*Recommended for Grades 7-9*

**Introduction**

Hatshepsut (1479-1458 B.C.E) ruled New Kingdom Egypt for roughly 20 years as one of the few female pharaohs in the history of ancient Egypt. Her rule began when her husband died and her stepson was too young to be pharaoh. Hatshepsut had to defy the typical feminine visual representations used by queens before her in order to establish herself as a king. To legitimize her role as pharaoh, Hatshepsut began a significant building campaign by constructing numerous images, temples, and obelisks, and by leading military expeditions. Visual representations of Hatshepsut range from depictions of her as a female king, physically female in form adorning pharaonic male accoutrements,1 to images of her as a physically male king with a man's chest and build. This Instructional Resource will address issues of how gender and power can be manipulated through works of art and architecture in relationship to Hatshepsut's reign as pharaoh.

**Objectives**

During this lesson, and in relationship to their study of Hatshepsut and her role in Egyptian history, students will:
- explore Egyptian sculpture and architecture to understand how they were used to glorify rulers;
- investigate image, structure, symbol, and composition to construct meanings associated with gender, authority, and position; and
- demonstrate how art and the design of environments are utilized to empower self and others.

**Historical Context**

Although motherhood was considered the pinnacle of a woman's achievement in ancient Egyptian society, women, typically upper-class and royal, were still allowed to be educated, to own property and businesses, to obtain a job, and to be involved in military leadership (Depla, 1994). More importantly, women could rule as pharaoh. This was a rare occurrence, yet it did happen. Hatshepsut's husband, Thutmose II, died early in his reign, leaving his young son, Thutmose III, the son of the king's second...
wife Isis, as the pharaoh of Egypt. Because Thutmose III was too young to rule, his stepmother Hatshepsut became his regent, his council to rule in his place until he was of age. Her father was the previous king and so she was Thutmose III's closest relative of royal birth (Robins, 1983). Soon after, Hatshepsut assumed the throne claiming herself king and began constructing sculptures and architectural environments depicting her divine birth and emphasizing her right to be king (Roehrig, Dreyfus, & Keller, 2005).

During her reign, representations of Hatshepsut changed. In the beginning of her role as regent, Hatshepsut portrayed herself as a queen, with physically female characteristics and traditional queenly insignia. Soon after, Hatshepsut began depicting herself in dual-gendered imagery, as a queen with kingly characteristics. Later, Hatshepsut began representing herself in a physically male form reminiscent of a canonical pharaoh (Roehrig, Dreyfus, & Keller, 2005). In effect, Hatshepsut was slowly addressing the intersections of gender and kingship, cultivating a new pharaonic identity.

**About the Art: The Power of An Image**

In ancient Egypt, literacy was rare, found mainly among the upper- and elite classes of society. Imagery thus functioned to educate and was used by the state as propaganda. Visual representations such as monuments, sculpture, and reliefs were used to persuade the public to follow the king and to understand that the king had the divine right to rule. These objects taught the public that they should revere the king and be dutiful.

The role of the pharaoh in ancient Egypt was father and god of the land of Egypt. A king's image accompanied by godly symbols was used to legitimize the king's power, transforming him into a god. Traditional kings displayed themselves as powerful males with symbols of both male and female nature, symbols connected to gods and goddesses (Troy, 2003). Hatshepsut's images depart from the canon of traditional kingly imagery. Hatshepsut's images shifted from one gender to another, but also displayed aspects of what may be considered androgyny, meaning that they evoked both gender identities together. For example, when she was represented as a female king, she wore male accoutrements such as the nemes headdress, a cloth folded over the head and tucked behind the ears. Furthermore, traditional pharaonic imagery also depicts the pharaoh with his principal wife, symbolizing the role of the royal couple as the mother and father of Egypt. However, Hatshepsut was predominantly depicted alone, since she did not have a partner to establish her power to the throne. Instead, she used aspects of androgyny to include both genders in her imagery, conveying the idea that she was both mother and father of Egypt by herself. Hatshepsut is the first female king to depict herself in this way, and in doing so, she began to gain the acceptance of the Egyptian people (Roehrig, Dreyfus, & Keller, 2005).

In *Hatshepsut as a Female King*, Hatshepsut is portrayed as a female. She wears a wide collar and a sheer dress, where her breasts and feminine curves are shown to advantage. In addition, she shows off bracelets and anklets. These displays are typical of traditional queenly imagery of ancient Egypt (Robins, 1996). However, unlike traditional queens, she wears the pharaonic nemes headdress and uraeus adornment, a cobra on the front of the headdress. The *uraeus* is a phallic form associated with the sun god (Troy, 2003). The statue also includes two carved images of the goddess Taweret. This goddess was associated with the protection of women during childbirth, and links Hatshepsut to divine birth. According to Roehrig, Dreyfus, & Keller (2005), this life-sized statue is not idealized but an individual portrait of Hatshepsut, portraying her power and authority to those who view the sculpture. Although both female and male characteristics are part of the image, the work focuses on the feminine.

Hatshepsut further broke with tradition by representing herself as a man. In *Hatshepsut Offers Maat to Amun*, Hatshepsut is depicted as a male king, who wears the *nemes* headdress and adorns a traditional male wrap. Her torso is uncovered and reveals the chest of a man. She also wears the pharaonic beard. She is kneeling and offering two jars of *maat* to Amun, a kingly temple ritual. Maat is the fundamental order of the universe without which all of creation would perish. It was the primary duty of the pharaoh to uphold this order by maintaining the law and administering justice. Because Hatshepsut is depicted as offering maat to Amun, she is displayed as the rightful, dutiful king fulfilling her role as pharaoh. The large, open eyes and the small, thin nose are similar to that found in her female image.

She is, however, much more stylized in the fashion of canonical representations of ancient Egyptian kings. For all intents and purposes, she is a male king, her true identity only discernible by inscriptions on the statue, describing her as a "lady of the two lands" (Roehrig, Dreyfus, & Keller, 2005).

To further promote her power and political agenda, Hatshepsut built the *Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut* located at Deir El-Bahri in western Thebes, the capital city of ancient Egypt. Statues of Hatshepsut, including a colossal one as a traditional male king, relief images of Hatshepsut as a sphinx trampling her enemies, and narrative scenes of particular historical events were displayed throughout the temple. Moreover, shrines dedicated to various deities were also placed inside the temple in order to legitimize Hatshepsut's divine power and right to rule. Hatshepsut placed her temple next to that of Mentuhotep II's (2051–2000 B.C.E.), a powerful pharaoh during the Eleventh Dynasty who reunited Egypt and founded the second golden age of Egyptian history. This placement, as well as the use of colonnaded porticoes, ramps, and terraces, was purposeful and emphasized her reign as another golden age for Egypt (Roehrig, Dreyfus, & Keller, 2005).
Discussion of Artworks

After presenting a brief biographical sketch of Hatshepsut and ancient Egypt, ask students to discuss their understanding of Egyptian kings and queens, describing how they might envision them and what they would wear or build to convey power and identity. Present the two images of Hatshepsut and the image of the temple and have students compare the images, looking specifically at the different masculine or feminine qualities found in her portraits and the power conveyed by her temple. While comparing the works of art, explain the different accoutrements, address the function of the sculptures and temple monument, and inquire about their possible message.

Suggested discussion questions include the following:
- What are the similarities and differences between the sculptures?
- Would you know that these are images of a pharaoh? Why or why not?
- How is the pharaoh's power conveyed by the sculptures? The architecture?
- What do you think about her portrayal as a male pharaoh? Did it or did it not enhance her position in ancient Egyptian society?
- What do you think about her portrayal as a female? Did it or did it not enhance her position in ancient Egyptian society?

Relating the Art to Issues Today

Reveal to the students how the transition of Hatshepsut's images was tied to her identity and evolution as a king in ancient Egypt. Discuss how she was able to convince the public of her right to the kingship because of her images and building campaign. To relate the work to students' lives, ask your pupils to explore their own understanding of what it means to be male and female today. Have students consider how imagery and symbols in today's society construct ideas about femaleness and maleness. In addition, ask students to think about how they use objects and images to project a sense of identity and power. You may also want to compare Hatshepsut's temple with contemporary architectural structures, such as the White House, and how they convey power.

Suggested discussion questions include the following:
- What does it mean to be female or male in today's society?
- How do you know what it means to be a female or male today?
- Can you think of any visual signs, symbols, or architectural structures that might contribute to your understanding of what it means to have power in today's society?
- How do you contribute to ideas about gender or power through your everyday actions?

Activity I: Personal Power

For this activity, students will begin to develop an understanding about Hatshepsut's public use of gendered imagery to reinforce her position of power. The students will determine how gender issues affect their lives today and their sense of personal power. Investigating individual concepts of gender and identity, the students will reflect on when they feel powerful as a man or woman and how this is reinforced, or not reinforced through society and social imagery.

The first step is asking students to think about when they feel most powerful. The second step is investigating how these powerful moments are related to gender concepts and visual imagery. Next, have students write four paragraphs during the class period. The following prompts can be used to begin the writing exercise.

- What do you think about her portrayal as a female? Did it or did it not enhance her position in ancient Egyptian society?
- What are the similarities and differences between the sculptures?
- Would you know that these are images of a pharaoh? Why or why not?
- How is the pharaoh's power conveyed by the sculptures? The architecture?
- What do you think about her portrayal as a male pharaoh? Did it or did it not enhance her position in ancient Egyptian society?

Studio Activity: My Public Display

Students will create a two-dimensional mixed-media collage, reflecting their identity, power, and individual understandings of gender. Encourage students to consider the project as a work of public art, which they will display in an architectural environment. Ask students to think about any messages they wish to project about themselves, any ideas they wish to reinforce about gender, and a visual aesthetic they hope to create for their architectural structure.

To begin, have students strike a pose that expresses a moment when they feel most powerful. Take pictures of each pose using a digital camera and upload the images onto the computer. Next, allow students to experiment with color combinations and value scales on the computer. After experimenting, print off the best five manipulated images for each student. Have students transfer their favorite manipulated image onto canvas, cardboard, or paper, adding paint to construct a mixed-media collage.

The last step is to incorporate aspects of prior classroom discussion into the work of art. Ask students to think back to their discussions and writing exercise and recall symbols, images, or structures they investigated during the earlier exercises. Students will then search through various media sources to locate similar images and integrate these into their portraits. Ideally these collaged symbols, objects, and structures will be a reflection of how students understand their place in society as it relates to identity, gender, and power.

Studio Activity: My Temple, My Place

Students will now construct a model for a temple or architectural structure, where their images could possibly hang if the building was constructed. This temple or architectural diorama should reflect the students' identities, their understandings of gender, and what power means to them. Students may bring in any size cardboard box and use multimedia or found objects to decorate their temple. Before they

begin to decorate their interiors, students should paint their boxes and allow
time for them to dry. Once the boxes are dry, students may add various
objects or images onto the walls and in the interior space of their building.
After students have completed their temple, ask them to display their works
alongside the earlier two-dimensional images and answer the following
questions:
- How does this building reflect who I am today or who I hope to be in
the future?
- What message does my building send to others?
- How is my building a reflection of my identity?
- How is my building a reflection of my world or my environment?
- Would a visitor in my space understand my perspectives on gender and
power?

Assessment
At the conclusion of this unit, have students write a reflection on their
activities. Entries should address the following questions:
- Did your perception of ancient Egyptian works of art change because of
this project, and if so how?
- How did this project help you to understand how you define femaleness,
maleness, and power?
- How does your understanding of gender and power reinforce or
challenge beliefs in your environment?
- How does Hatshepsut's use of gendered temple sculptures relate to you
today?

Conclusion
Hatshepsut's use of dual-gendered imagery helped to construct her identity
as pharaoh, and reminded those who walked through her temples of who
she was. These sculptures, along with the overall reign of Hatshepsut, offer
opportunities for students to examine ancient Egyptian artwork through the
lens of gender and power. In addition, Hatshepsut's use of both the female
and male identity to reinforce her position enables students to investigate
their conceptions of femaleness, maleness, identity, and power as they are
constructed and projected in today's society.

Kristina Hilliard is a McDermott Intern at the Dallas Museum of Art and
Kate Wurtzel is the Director of Education at the Trammell and Margaret
Crow Collection of Asian Art. Ms. Hilliard can be reached at khilliard@
dallasmuseumofart.org and Ms. Wurtzel can be reached at kwurtzel@
crowcollection.org.

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Figure 3. Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut, 18th Dynasty, Deir El Bahri, Egypt.

ENDNOTES

1 An accoutrement is an accessory item of clothing or equipment.
2 It was quite common that the pharaoh had numerous wives, yet one wife was considered the principal wife, the woman who was represented publicly. Other wives typically were used to bear children.
3 A vessel used in images to imply an offering to the gods.
4 Egyptian term for truth, justice, and order.
5 The god of Thebes and creator of the world, who later becomes associated with Re, the sustainer of the world.