The traveler on the Nile today passes through scenery very different from that surrounding the Egyptian of dynastic times. He will not see the panoramas of foliage and animal and bird life with which the ancient artist decorated the walls of palaces and tombs. Such paintings were veritable landscapes, undoubtedly reproducing familiar scenes along the Nile. On the higher banks grew acacia, sycamore, and palm trees, in which lived all kinds of gaily colored birds; at the water’s edge were thickets of green papyrus and marshes teeming with crocodiles, hippopotami, and water fowl; and in the water were blue and white lotus flowers and various kinds of fish. Nowadays one must journey up the river hundreds of miles to the southern Sudan to find comparable jungle-like, swampy shores, to see papyrus growing and crocodiles, hippopotami, and ibises and other wading birds living in their natural habitat.

Several factors have contributed to changing the banks of the river out of all semblance to their former appearance. During the thousands of years of its history the almost rainless climate has caused the gradual drying up of the higher ground, which is now desert. More and more land along the river’s edge has been reclaimed for agricultural purposes, to feed the ever-increasing population; and to make such land cultivable there has been developed a complicated system of irrigation for controlling the annual flood waters from the upper Nile.

We are grateful, therefore, not only to the ancient artists, who showed us the natural scenery they enjoyed, but to modern artists like Howard Carter and the N. de Garis Davieses, who reproduced in color many details of the fauna and flora as seen in the ancient wall paintings, and to ornithologists like M. J. Nicoll and Charles Whymper, who made a special study of Egyptian birds, ancient and modern.

Perhaps the bird most closely connected with Egypt in the minds of the majority of people is the white ibis, or sacred ibis, *Ibis religiosa s. aethiopica*. It appears in Egyptian art in many forms. In the earliest times it was the ensign of one of the nomes, or provinces; later it became one of the hieroglyphs, or picture-writing signs. It occurred as early as the Middle Kingdom in the form of a gold pendant-amulet for a necklace, later more frequently of faience; as a faience inlay it decorated a wooden shrine. And finally as a votive figure it was used in places where the god Thot, of whom the ibis was a symbol, was specially worshiped. The name Thot in Egyptian was *dhety*, written with the hieroglyph of the ibis on a perch. Since Thot was the god of learning, and of sciences and the arts in general, it is interesting to note the significance of the white ibis in ancient Egypt. Is it any wonder when one sees a life-size figure of an ibis made by a skilled craftsman that the Egyptians loved and revered this bird?

It was no mere chance or flight of the imagination, therefore, that an Egyptian sculptor in the time of King Harmhab, when given the task...
Votive figure of the white, or sacred, ibis, the symbol of Thot, the god of learning. The figure is made of cast bronze with a wooden body covered with linen and gesso and painted. Ptolemaic Period. Rogers Fund, 1953
of inscribing a statue of the king and his wife (recently published by Sir Alan Gardiner), included in his laudatory text the phrase "All his plans were as the gait of the Ibis, his conduct (in the) form of the Lord of Hasro." Hasro was one of the places of the cult of Thot, near El-Ashmunein, the city called Hermopolis by the Greeks. It is at Hermopolis indeed that we find our chief evidence of the worship of the ibis, for in subterranean corridors near the Ptolemaic temple there hundreds of mummified ibises were buried, and with them were placed votive figures like the one recently purchased for the Museum's collection. From that site in all likelihood came this figure—a composite of finely executed bronze head, with inlaid glass or crystal eyes, wooden body, and graceful bronze legs, cast in minutest detail. The wood was covered with linen and a thin layer of gesso and painted to imitate the bird's white plumage, with a mass of metallic black, almost hairlike feathers falling over the wings and tail. Time, unfortunately, has darkened much of this paint.

From Ashmunein too and of about the same date is a faience ibis, which was one of a group of inlays that decorated a wooden shrine. For-
merly in the Carnarvon collection and now in this Museum, these inlays have always attracted the attention of artists and craftsmen. The polychrome glaze was produced by inlaying pastes of different colors in hollows cut into the base material before firing, and the delicacy of modeling results from a final grinding and polishing of the vitreous surface. The shrine itself was of gilded wood, as bits adhering to the inlays testified.

Figures of the god Thot in human form with the head of an ibis, as he was almost invariably represented, occur in many Egyptian collections, but none of the smaller ones in faience is more beautifully modeled or better preserved than the one illustrated, also acquired from the Carnarvon collection. Seated figures like the bronze one on page 183, a recent purchase, come from temples dedicated to Thot and show him crowned with the lunar disk and crescent, signifying that he was also the personification of the moon as time-reckoner. The ibis was thought to bear some relation to the moon, and since in the Egyptian calendar the first month of the Season of the Inundation was called Thot and the first day of that month originally coincided with the rising of the Nile, a water bird like the white ibis may have been symbolic of that idea in the minds of the Egyptians. The head from another statuette of Thot, the body of which was of some other material, to judge from the dowels at the back of the head and the base of the neck, was also acquired recently, but the workmanship is less fine than that on the head of the complete ibis figure.

In late times the mummies of sacred ibises were buried in large numbers at Sakkara and Thebes as well as at Hermopolis, and often there was appliqué on the top of the wrapped bundle a charming figure, or figures, of the white ibis, the colors of the bird copied exactly in the bits of dyed linen which made it up. Such an example in the Museum’s collection is shown below. A second example, not shown here, has a single figure in black appliqué, showing that inside the bundle is a black appliqué, another of the three kinds originally native to Egypt, the third being the crested ibis. The latter two also appear as hieroglyphs, but they were apparently not looked upon with the same respect as the graceful white ibis. Just as the ancient Egyptians must have seen it in its native habitat, so we too can see it in the wall paintings at Beni Hasan and Thebes, and also in Whymper’s delightful color plate illustrating this favorite Egyptian bird in a papyrus swamp.

![Appliqué on the wrapping of a mummified white ibis. Ptolemaic Period. Gift of James Douglas, 1890](image-url)