

African Pillar – Symbolism and Significance



Standing at the entrance of the Africana Institute is “The Pillar,” a contemporary African work of art depicting ancient African culture. The pillar was envisioned by the Institute’s director, Dr. Akil Kokayi Khalfani, and the painting and installation was completed by artist [Carol Black-Lemon](#).

Starting at the base of the pillar we see an illustration of San Rock Art. The San’s southern African culture represents one of the oldest civilizations in the world, with a legacy dating over 20,000 years into our past. The San people established one of the earliest egalitarian societies and some of the oldest legacies of art, philosophy and culture known to humanity.

Above the base are images of Seti and Het Heru from ancient Kemet/KMT (Egypt). Seti represents the Ntchru or spiritual principle of Setsh, which symbolizes the desert, darkness and chaos. Het Heru is the Ntchru of love, motherhood and joy. The interplay between these two spiritual forces represents balance and unity in the African community. As the Heru em Akhet (the Sphinx) sits above Seti and Het Heru guarding the Mer Khutu or Pyramids at Giza, it also protects the open space for relevant dialogue and scholarship at the Institute.

Yanga stands adjacent to Seti in the form of a statue. He was leader of a successful African slave rebellion in the area of Veracruz, Mexico in 1609. The community he and other African rebels founded, first as San Lorenzo and currently known by his very namesake, still exists today. The spirits of sovereignty and endurance are characteristics the Institute aims to embody in its everyday practice of facilitating dialogue and community.

A tekken or obelisk stands to the side of Seti with Olmec heads carved into its façade. The Olmec culture is considered the mother civilization of Mesoamerica, ranging from the region currently situated in central Mexico to Honduras and El Salvador. They thrived during the period from roughly 8000 BCE to 400 BCE. Having conceived the concept of zero, a hieroglyphic writing system and a calendar, they made their presence indelibly known to contemporary peoples through production of their colossal head structures, possibly depicting eminent soldiers or athletes of their times. The features of the faces carved into stone millennia ago were stereotypically African or “negroid” in appearance, suggesting possible African origin and/ or interaction regarding Olmec culture. This idea is controversial, but its

inclusion on the pillar reflects the openness to critical thinking and world exploration of African presence across time and place.






Above and to the right of Het Heru are the Giza Mer Khutu. The Mer Khutu are among the oldest wonders of world civilization, for millennia were the tallest man-made structures on the planet, and are built to such astronomical precision that each of the four faces of the pyramidal structures match the four true cardinal directions – north, south, east and west with respect to the poles and the equator – with next to no measurable mathematical or geometric deviation. It is speculated that the arrangement of each Mer Khut (singular form of Mer Khutu) and the Heru em Akhet corresponds with the arrangement of the three middle stars of the Orion star constellation as seen from Earth.






The Giza Mer Khutu complex consists of three limestone pyramids, the largest of which houses the remains the Nswt Bety (supreme ruler of upper and lower Egypt) Khufu, as well as articles to accompany his journey to the next incarnation. This structure dates back to at least 2560 BCE, rendering it at least four and a half millennia old. The next largest Mer Khut houses the remains of Khufu's son the Nswt Bety known as Khafra, while the smallest one houses the remains of Khafra's son, the Nswt Bety known as Men-Kua-Ra. This dynasty left an indelible legacy of civilization and an incomparably prestigious material culture for all humanity to take inspiration from for eons, its practices and sciences still studied and embraced by Africans and people all over the world to this day. The Africana Institute, in its modest capacity at Essex County College, takes inspiration from such greatness to maintain a consistent and lasting practice of scholarship and excellence with which to inspire today's students and tomorrow's leaders.

Immediately to the right of Het Heru stands the Nswt Bety Seti I next to his son, the subsequent Nswt Bety Ramessu II. Seti I holds an incense holder in his hand while explaining to young Ramessu II the significance of his ancestors. Ramessu I (whose name means "Ra bore him") reigned briefly around the period of 1292-1290 BCE, while Seti I (who takes his name from the aforementioned Ntchru) reigned from his father's death in 1290 BCE to around 1279 or 1274 BCE. Remussu II reigned for the following sixty-six years (until 1213 BCE). All three men were progenitors of what some scholars deem the "19th dynasty" which lasted 110 years. Just as Seti I understood the significance of the ancestors and of continuing their legacy, the Africana Institute takes very seriously the contributions of African workers, families, scholars, creators and leaders past so that we can animate their impulse and influences within the innovations of the present. And because the multidisciplinary Africana Institute includes politics in its studies, investigating political manifestations both amenable and antithetical to democracy in Africa as well as the Americas, we look back across millennia to see what sorts of regimes and personalities arose to assert or organize power in Africa.

To the left of the Giza Mer Khutu is the Temple of Hatshepsut Amen (circa 1479-1458 BCE). Hatshepsut Amen was the greatest and longest-reigning female Nswt Bety in the history of Kemet. When she was throned, she took the title Maatkare, meaning “truth in the soul of the Sun.” The temple became a shrine of truth-seeking and enlightenment, which reflects the goals of the Institute.

Below and to the right of the Giza Mer Khutu are several symbols from two African cultures – the Kemetite and the Akan – whose direct lineage and connection with one another are current prompts for ground-breaking research. The Akan Adinkra symbols developed among the Gyaaman clans of the Brong region of Ghana and were once the exclusive right of royalty and spiritual leaders to bear. From the nineteenth century onwards, following a military conflict in which one of the Gyaaman kings was killed and his adinkra-stamped robe taken by the Asantehene (king of the Asantes) Nana Osei Bansu-Panyin, adinkra symbols were further developed and their usage democratized and spread further across Ghana, West Africa, and eventually the African diaspora. Adinkra means “goodbye” in several of the Akan languages.

From the top,  is the symbol “Gye Nyame,” meaning “except for God” and signifying the supremacy of the element in the universe that can create and maintain reality.  is the symbol “Sankofa,” also depicted with . It means “return and get it,” signifying our imperative to gain knowledge of the past to have hindsight and insight with which to encounter and create the future.  is the symbol “Okodee Mmowere” which means “the talons of the eagle.” It signifies strength, bravery and power.  is the symbol “Mmusuyidee” which means “that which removes bad luck.” It signifies good fortune and sanctity.

Among the symbols from Kemet, , a scarab beetle, is the symbol for Khepera, the Ntchru of the Sun, manifestation and creativity.  is the Ankh, a symbol of balance and unity between male and female, between the Ntchru Ausar and Auset, and between all opposing forces which together in harmony allow the universe to exist and recreate itself amidst perpetual change.  is the Eye of Heru or the “Wedjet,” symbolizing the Ntchru Heru, container of the sky, master of warfare and bringer of protection.  is the symbol Ba, sometimes depicted as a perched eagle or falcon, which signifies the living essence of a human being, his or her personality, consciousness, or “soul.” Finally,  is the symbol “Iaret” which portrays a cobra and signifies sovereignty – of community, nation or self. All of these symbols inform the Institute’s aspirations with regard to practice, execution and inclusion in seeking to study reality through African eyes and move bravely, purposefully and with harmony into a more prosperous future for African peoples.

“The Pillar” is just one expression of the Africana Institute’s objectives of revitalization, reconnecting and strengthening African scholarship and African communities. We invite you to learn more about this beautiful work of art and to participate in the activities of your Africana Institute.

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