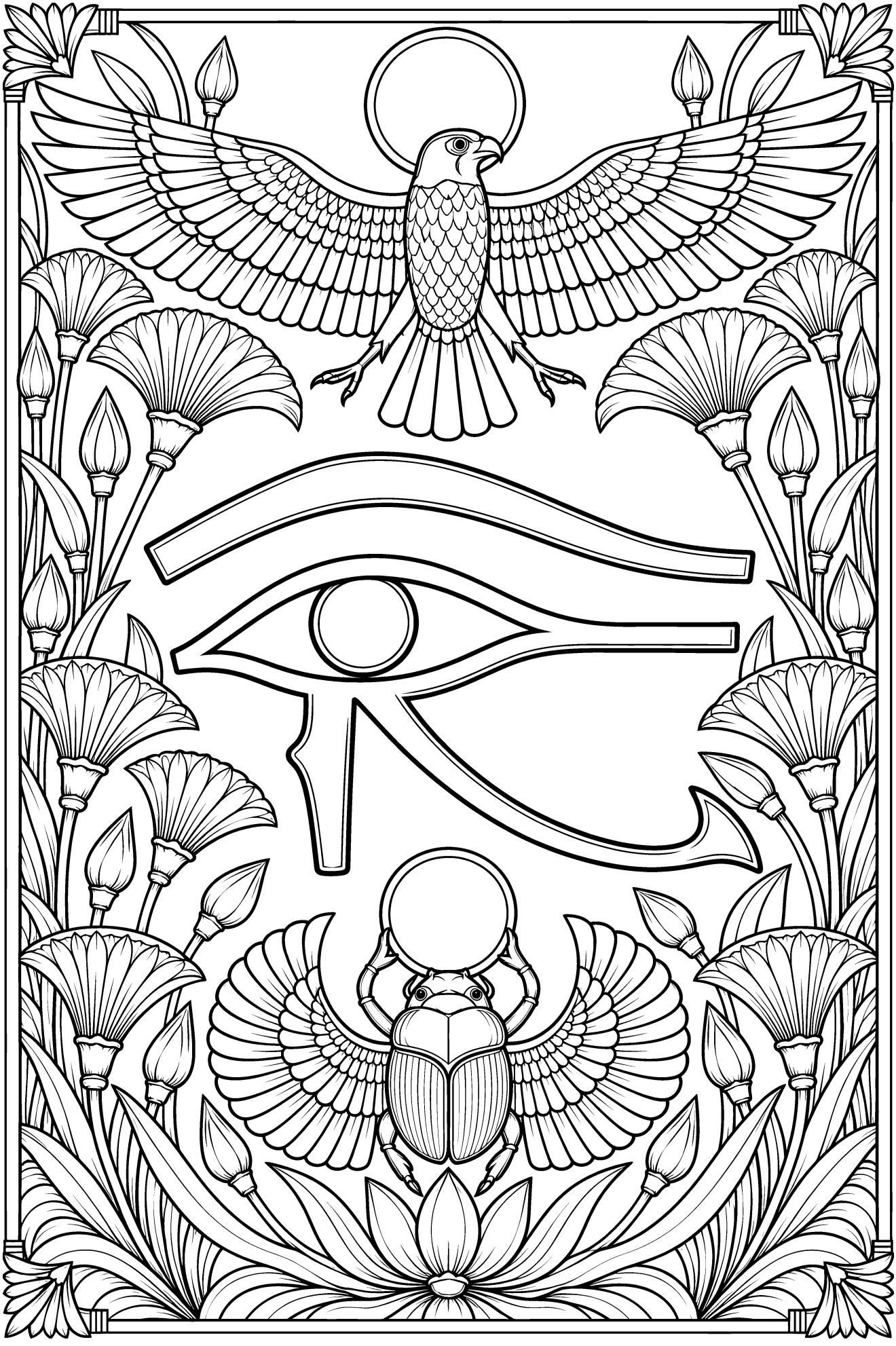


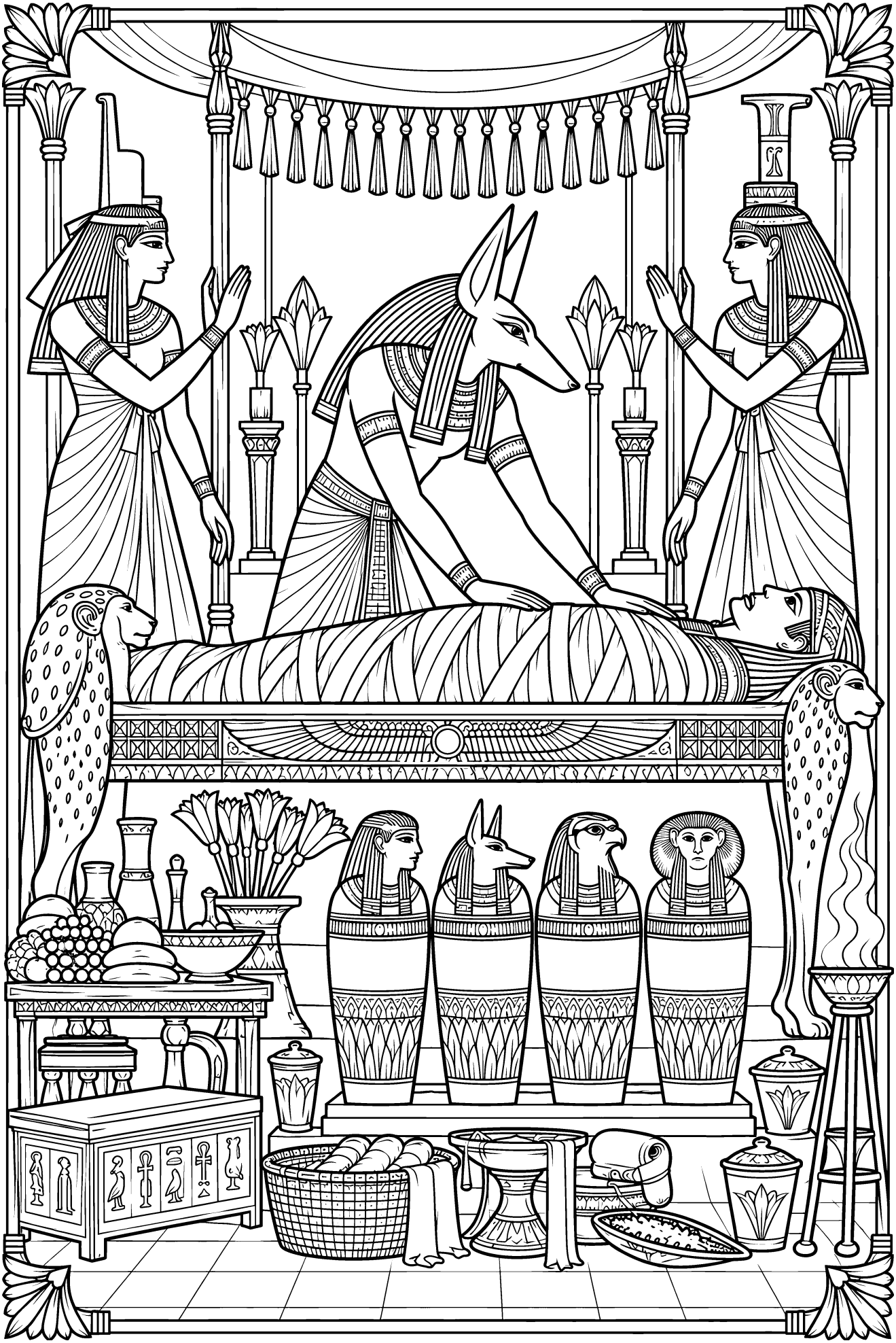
ISIS

Isis was the most powerful magician among the gods, and she was clever enough to trick even Ra, the sun god. She made a snake from his spit mixed with earth, and when it bit him she agreed to cure him only if he told her his secret name. He gave in, and from then on her magic was unequalled. Her name means ‘throne’, which is why she wears one on her head. Here she spreads the great wings with which she fanned the breath of life back into her murdered husband Osiris. Isis was loved for longer and more widely than almost any other Egyptian god. People worshipped her right across the Roman Empire, as far away as Pompeii and even Britain, and the very last known writing in Egyptian hieroglyphs was carved at her island temple of Philae, about 1,600 years ago. Her dress is usually white or red, and Egyptian painters often coloured such wings in bands of red, blue and green.



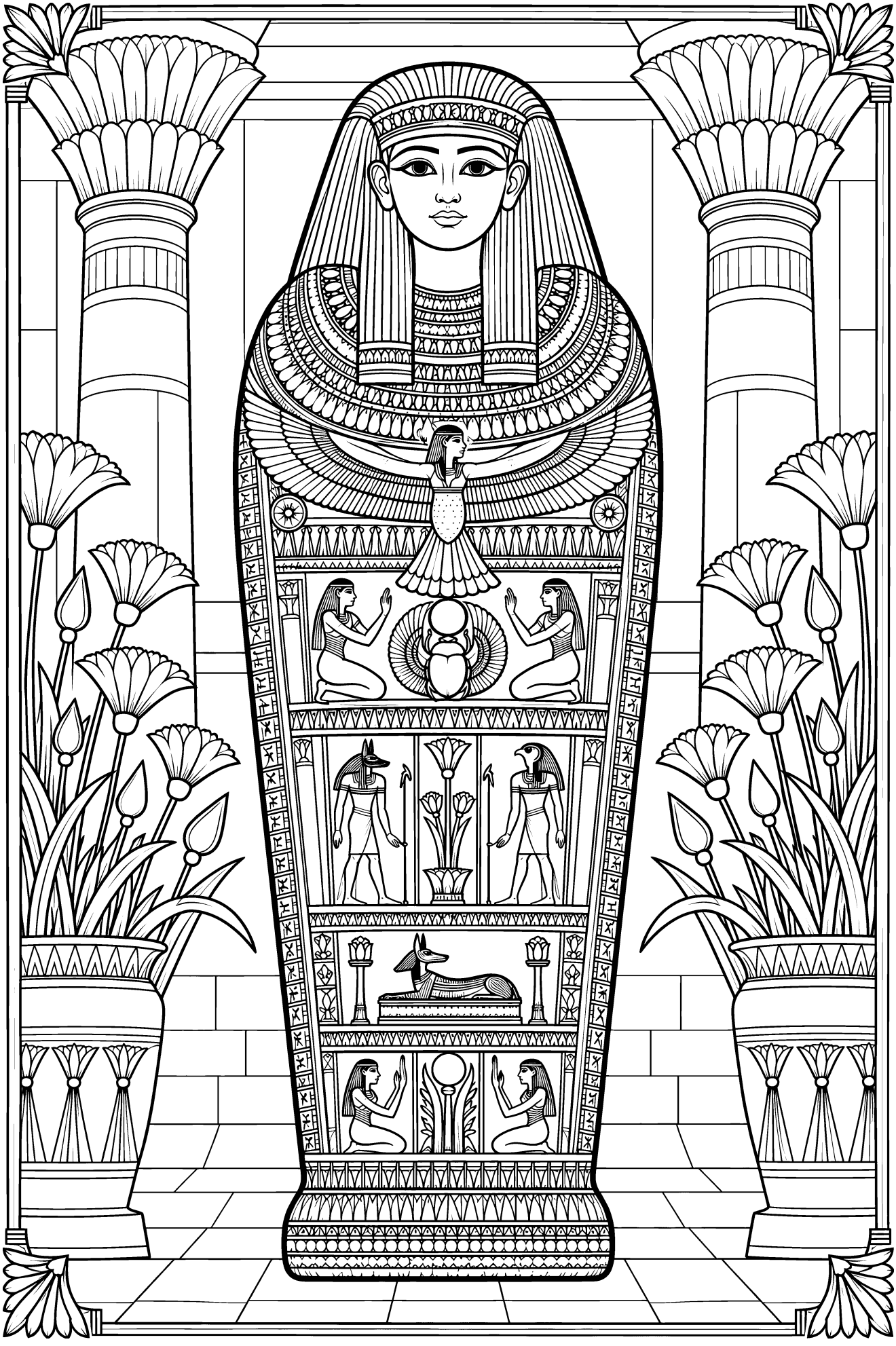
THE EYE OF HORUS

During their long fight for Egypt's throne, Set tore out one of Horus's eyes. Thoth, the god of wisdom, healed it, and the restored eye became a symbol of protection and of being made whole again. It was one of the most popular lucky charms in ancient Egypt, worn by the living and tucked into the wrappings of mummies. Horus was a falcon god, and the line and curl beneath the eye are copied from the dark markings on a falcon's face – compare it with the falcon above. Below, a winged beetle pushes the sun into the sky, another sign of renewal. You may read that each part of the eye stood for a fraction used in measuring; it is a charming idea, but most experts now doubt it. Eye of Horus charms were often made of a glazed blue-green ceramic called faience, so turquoise, deep blue and green are the most authentic colours.



ANUBIS AND THE EMBALMING RITUAL

Making a mummy took about seventy days. The embalmers drew the brain out through the nose with a hook and threw it away, because they thought it was unimportant. The main organs were taken out and dried separately, and only the heart was left in place. The body was then covered in natron, a natural salt that dried it out, for around forty days, before being wrapped in hundreds of metres of linen bandages with lucky charms tucked between the layers. The chief embalmer may even have worn a jackal mask to play the part of Anubis, the god of embalming – a pottery mask with eye-holes still survives. Here Anubis lays his hands on the wrapped body as it rests on a lion-shaped couch. On either side stand the goddesses Isis and Nephthys, sisters who in myth mourned their murdered brother Osiris; at real funerals, two women played their parts and wept over the coffin. You can tell them apart by their headdresses, which spell their names: Isis wears a throne, and Nephthys a house with a basket on top. Below wait the four canopic jars for the organs, a basket of bandages, offerings of food and a burner of sweet-smelling incense. Anubis was painted black, the colour of rich soil and rebirth, not the brown of a real jackal; the linen can stay cream, and the two goddesses can wear white or red with bright collars.

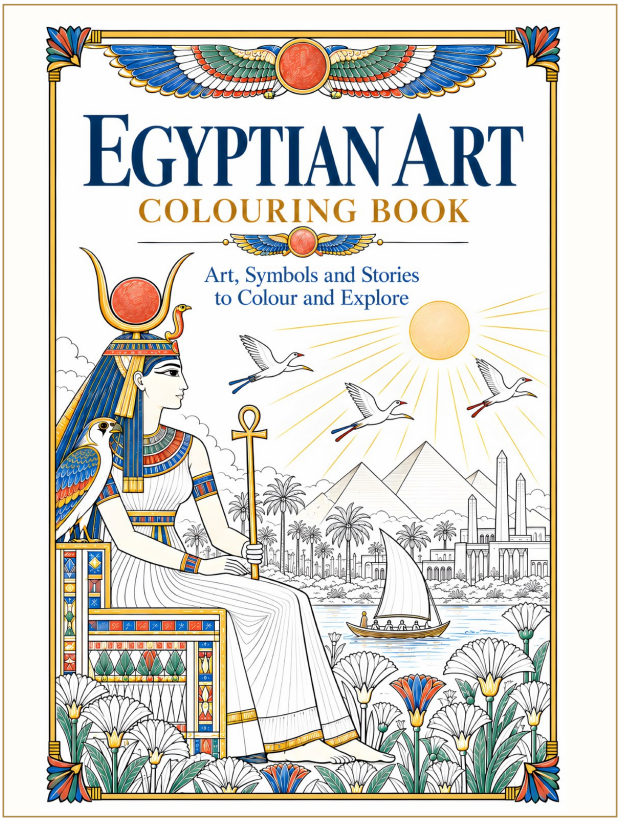


THE PAINTED COFFIN

Around 3,000 years ago, Egypt was poorer than it had been, and many royal tombs had already been robbed. Instead of covering coffins in gold, craftsmen painted them, filling every surface with gods and protective spells so that the coffin itself became a shrine around the body. They recycled, too, scraping old coffins clean and repainting them with a new owner's name. In 1891, a single hidden tomb near Luxor was found to contain more than 150 burials of priests and their families, in coffins just like this one. Across the chest a goddess spreads her wings to protect the dead; beneath her, a winged beetle lifts the sun between two kneeling goddesses; and lower down, the jackal Anubis lies on top of a shrine. These coffins usually had a yellow background, varnished to make it glow like gold, with strong red, blue and green details.

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