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A NEW MASTERPIECE OF EGYPTIAN SCULPTURE

By ALAN H. GARDINER, D.LITT.

THE fragmentary painted limestone statue, which I am privileged here to publish out of the treasures of Lord Carnarvon's collection, is assuredly one of the greatest achievements of Egyptian sculpture. It is the portrait of a lady of rank, coming, no doubt, from the *serdab* or statue-chamber of a tomb in the vast Pyramid-field which extends southward from Gîzeh. Only the head and the shoulders remain; and the small size of the figure will be apparent when it is stated that the total measurement from the top of the head to the bottom of the break is only twenty-five centimetres. The breadth of the face inside the wig is seven centimetres, and the distance from the chin to the point where the parting of the natural hair disappears under the similarly parted wig is no more than 8·2 centimetres. Our Frontispiece gives, as indeed any reproduction would give, the impression of a life-size portrait; and this fact compels the reflexion how little the actual scale of a consummate work of art adds to, or takes from, its value for the spectator. The skin is painted a warm yellow, the conventional colour chosen by the Egyptians as characteristic of their womenfolk; the lips had previously been given a red colour, and this still shows faintly beneath the yellow. The heavy wig is black, as are also the natural hair, the eyes and the eye-brows. A tightly-fitting white tunic hangs from the shoulders, leaving the arms and a small portion of the chest bare; around the neck is fastened a bead-necklet represented by alternate painted bands of red and blue¹. As an eminent critic has pointed out to me, the colours here are an essential part of the artist's scheme, not a superfluous element as in Greek sculpture they often seem to be. The amazing vitality of the face is enhanced by the dense solidity of the black wig, and the multi-coloured pectoral lends brightness and gaiety to the whole. For the workmanship no praise can be too high; the moulding of the face, and still more of the breasts, is of surpassing delicacy.

The anonymous artist has been fortunate in his model: her features are of the heavy type (apparently characteristic of the Egyptian aristocracy in the early Dynasties) familiar from the Nofret of the Cairo Museum and from the wife of Mycerinus in the Boston group²; but she is free from the sullenness of the one, and from the somewhat commonplace half-smile of the other. The fleshy lips and the broad nose might

¹ The sequence of the bands from top to bottom is red, blue, red, blue, red; the lowest band is narrower than the rest. The colours now are much darkened.

² For this latter see G. MASPERO, *Essais sur l'Art Égyptien*, pp. 33, 35, 37.



STATUE IN THE POSSESSION OF THE EARL OF CARNARVON

Emery Walker Ph. sc.

have betrayed a lesser master into the suggestion of coarseness, but this danger has been successfully avoided. And indeed so entirely absent is over-emphasis in any direction, that it seems impossible to define the expression of the face otherwise than as significant of the most varied, yet obscure, potentialities. Is she grave or gay, frank or secretive, of material or of spiritual mind? The profile, at least, seems almost childish in its candour and innocence (Pl. II). Be her character what it may, the dominant note of the portrait is the vitality of its womanhood—a vitality, however, perhaps latent as yet and still seeking its outward expression.

The support at the back of the statue is modern, and the break was of a kind such as to leave but little clue as to the posture of the original. The position of the arms might suggest that they hung straight down the sides, but the impression gained is that of a sitting statue. The chances are that it did not form part of a group: when a married couple is depicted the wife seldom fails to grasp her husband's arm or shoulder in token of affection; children are represented, if at all, as of smaller size, and in some examples clasp their father's leg. Probably our statue stood alone and independent of any other figures; however, independent female statues are rare, and we must take it that this one portrayed a girl, or young woman, of very exalted rank. It is not unpleasing to think of her as a royal princess; nor, indeed, is this fancy in the least improbable.

The close analogy of the features with those of Nofret and the wife of Mycerinus indicates as the date the Fourth Dynasty (B.C. 2900—2750); the work of the Fifth Dynasty was more elegant, but less profound. A detail not to be overlooked is the appearance of the natural hair beneath the wig, as in both the statues already mentioned. Note further that, as in the case of Nofret, the wig concealed the ears.

For the benefit of such readers as are not students of Egyptology, I add a few words of explanation concerning the purpose of this and similar statues. They were specifically funerary in character, and had an important practical function to perform. The corpse was doomed to perish, in spite of whatever precautions might be taken by the embalmer to stave off decay and corruption. None the less, it was essential that the body should remain intact, and it was consequently hidden away in its sarcophagus at the bottom of a deep burial shaft, far from the reach of men. But immortality demanded assiduous tending and care; if the deceased was thus inaccessible, how was he to receive his daily meal of oxen and geese, beer and bread? For this purpose a substitute had to be provided, and it was provided in the form of a statue carved as true to life as the craftsman's art could make it—a realistic, and to the Egyptians even a real, embodiment of the dead man's personality. It has not been emphasized sufficiently that every Egyptian statue was deliberately brought to life by magical passes and spells, before it was walled up in the recesses of the *serdab*. The sculptor in Ancient Egypt was called 'the vivifier' ($\left(\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \right)$) and the word for 'to carve' was the same as that for 'to create,' 'to give birth' ($\left(\text{𓂏} \text{𓂏} \right)$ ¹); it is perhaps not fantastic to think that, in the beginning, these expressions were literally understood. At all events, such funerary statues were mimetically vivified by the ritual of 'Opening the

¹ See G. ELLIOT SMITH, *On the Significance of the Geographical Distribution of the Practice of Mummification*, p. 42, where this conjecture was first expressed by me.



STATUE IN THE POSSESSION OF THE EARL OF CARNARVON

Mouth,' performed first, perhaps, at the sculptor's workshop (the 'house-of-gold' ) and again at the final interment. It was probably on this last occasion, and possibly then alone, that the statue was displayed to the admiring gaze of relatives, friends, and servants, afterwards to be walled up in a tiny outbuilding of the tomb, absolutely closed but for a chink before which the priestly officiant stood to make the daily funeral offering¹. Thus the living could remain in touch with their dead.

To ourselves, accustomed to regard Art as a thing in and for itself, it may seem incredible that such skill, such manifest creative feeling, were expended for a mainly utilitarian purpose. But history points unmistakeably in that direction: Art is but the by-product of men's practical ends, nay more, of men's early superstitions.

¹ See (*e.g.*) Mr Blackman's article *J. E. A.*, vol. III, pp. 250-4.