

WORCESTER ART MUSEUM
ANNUAL ~ VOLUME I. 1935-1936

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS
PUBLISHED BY THE TRUSTEES

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The Worcester Art Museum publishes two periodicals. The *Annual* is devoted to the study of the collections and to articles on problems of research by members of the Staff and invited contributors. Announcement of exhibitions, acknowledgment of gifts, and information relating to the various activities of the institution are fully recorded in the *News Bulletin and Calendar* (published monthly from October to May inclusive) and in the *Annual Report of the Trustees*. Sustaining Members receive these publications free. Special subscription for Libraries for both the *Bulletin* and the *Annual*, \$1.00 per year. All inquiries may be addressed to the Secretary.

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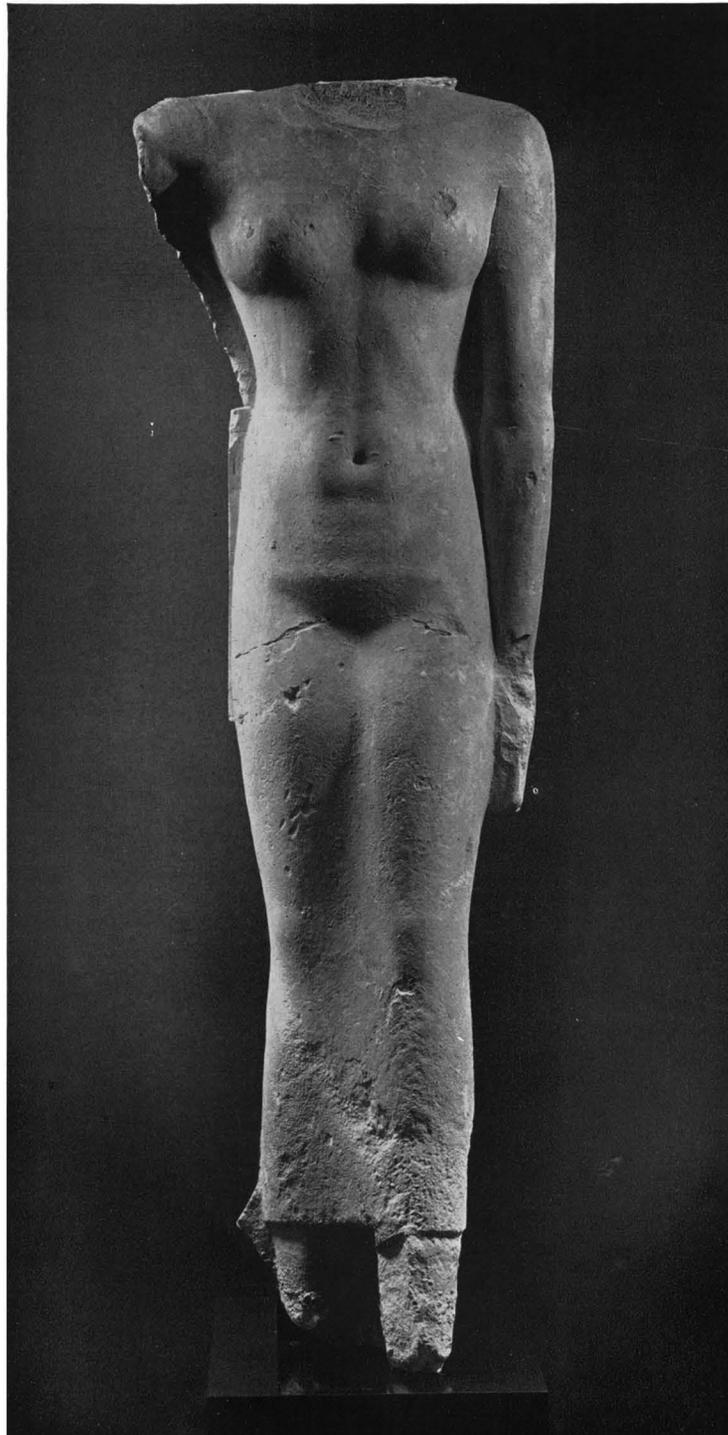


FIG. 1 EGYPTIAN SCULPTURE, FOURTH DYNASTY
Acquired in 1935

AN EGYPTIAN SCULPTURE OF THE FOURTH DYNASTY

BY PERRY B. COTT

Several years ago, in 1931, the Museum acquired the large relief of a nobleman hunting on the banks of the Nile. Until that time the Egyptian collections had been lacking in objects of monumental proportions. Now it is a pleasure to record the acquisition of another outstanding work of art in this field, the life-size torso of a woman carved of Turah limestone (Fig. 1).

It is usually conceded that the finest Egyptian sculpture was produced during the Old Kingdom (3400–2475 B.C.) when artistic activity was directed to the construction of the pyramids and the adornment of tombs. In its early stages sculpture of this period betrays certain features of archaism but it was not long before artists attained to a complete mastery of their material and a mature style. It is to this epoch of consummate sculptural expression that the newly acquired Worcester torso belongs.

Our figure was originally part of a group, doubtless a pair, representing a man and wife. This is indicated by the fact that the sculpture is not free-standing, being bound to the stone slab at the back as if leaning against a wall. In the photograph it is possible to make out the broken edge of the slab, which formerly connected the woman and her husband, at the figure's right side. The man was shown in a standing or sitting position forming a composition comparable to that of King Mycerinus and his wife (IV Dynasty) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, or the Family Group (Fig. 2), of

the same dynasty, in the Cairo Museum (number 55). The fracture at the right armpit of our figure makes it impossible to know whether she held her arm resting upon the shoulder of her consort or around his waist.

The most striking features of our sculpture are the unusually fine quality of carving and the delicate, sensuous modelling of the torso. Such quality is comparatively rare in Egyptian sculpture and suggests that the sculptor was working under royal orders. The woman must certainly have been a member of the high nobility if not of the royal family itself.

The figure is clothed in a long, simple dress falling from the shoulders to a point above the ankles. The thinness of the material, probably a fine white linen, permitted the artist to render the anatomical structure with surprising faithfulness to nature. Surviving specimens of royal linens are of such exquisite fineness that it is difficult to distinguish them from silk and the limbs of the wearer could easily be discerned through the fabric. The extreme subtlety with which breasts, abdomen and legs are treated conveys a sense of pulsating vitality and, in spite of the sculptor's adherence to the Egyptian conventions—the medial axis which divides the figure symmetrically, the left arm held rigidly to the side and the left leg slightly advanced—the torso is full of potential movement. The woman must originally have worn the usual wig of the period since the lower portion of its curled strands of hair are to be seen above the shoulders, at the back.

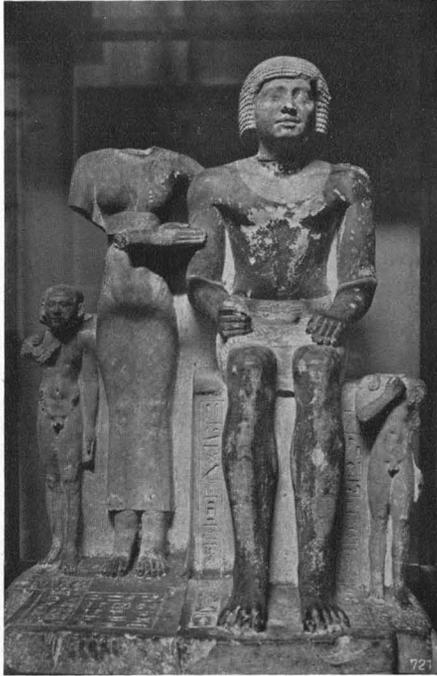


FIG. 2 FAMILY GROUP, CAIRO

Egyptian sculpture was practical in its aim in that figures of this type were not made for public exhibition but were intended for the tomb in order that they might be of direct advantage to the deceased in the life hereafter. The tomb or *mastaba* was a massive oblong of masonry containing three separate and essential elements: a vertical pit ending below in the funeral chamber where the mummy was kept, and a walled chamber, the *serdab*, where the images or statues of the deceased are preserved until they are visited by the Soul (*Ba*). Both of these rooms were walled up after burial and the only accessible compartment within the tomb was the chapel, the third element, which was open to kinsfolk, friends and the priests who paid worship and offerings. To enable the soul of the deceased to recognize and "enter" the image and thus prolong its future life it was imperative that the sculptor create as living a statue as possible of his subject, who is always represented in the bloom of youth. To heighten the effect of realism the sculpture was invari-

bly painted with appropriate tones for flesh, garments and jewelry. On our figure, however, no traces of painting have remained.

The immediate circle of the king, his family, friends and officials constituted a class of privileged persons. Usually each family had a tomb, generally in the vicinity of the pyramid of the pharaoh and often built at his expense. These tombs formed the royal cemeteries such as those excavated at Gizeh, Saqqara and Medum. Although positive evidence is lacking, our figure is reported to have been found in excavations in the vicinity of the Great Pyramid of Gizeh. Stylistic parallels to the Worcester torso are to be found in several other sculptures of the same period, notably in the female figure in the Family Group in Cairo, mentioned above, and a group statuette (Fig. 3) from Gizeh representing Queen Meresankh III with her mother, Hetep-heres II, respectively granddaughter and daughter of Cheops, in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. It may be fairly said, however, that neither of these is so fine in quality.



FIG. 3 GROUP STATUETTE, BOSTON