

Spirit of Enterprise

The 1990 Rolex Awards

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Cataloguing wooden statues from ancient Egypt

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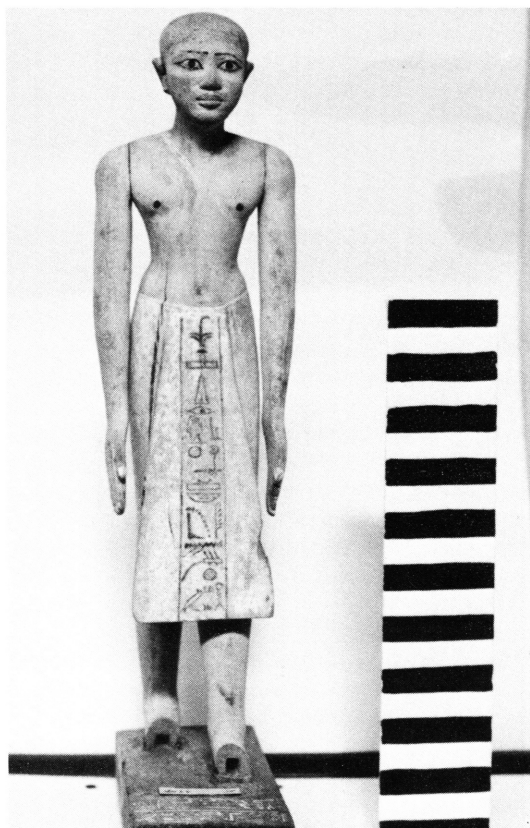
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I am preparing a catalogue of non-royal wooden tomb statues from the Old and the Middle Kingdoms of Ancient Egypt, from circa 2600 BC until circa 1700 BC. These are mainly statues of the owner of the tomb, either male or female, placed into it at burial to assist him or her in the afterlife. Often several different varieties were placed into the same tomb and ascertaining why this was so is just one aspect of my research. I am also examining a particular variety of offering-bearer figures placed into the same tombs. These statues became popular in the 4th Dynasty – the same period as the building of the Great Pyramid at Giza – and remained a standard part of the equipment of burial until the end of the 12th Dynasty. After the 12th Dynasty, Egypt was invaded and settled by outsiders for the first time and her subsequent history is full of the influences left behind by this people, known as the Hyksos.

During the later periods, wooden statues continued to appear, but not so frequently, and their original purpose seems to have been forgotten or superseded. In general, these statues measure 35–40 cm in height, although some as small as 10 cm and others of more than life size have been preserved. There is great variety in their style; this is not surprising if one considers the time period they encompass, but it is surprising when one knows how strictly the craftsmen adhered to the Canon Proportions. This is the set of regulations governing the production of any representation of the human figure, whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional, and is what makes Egyptian art appear to have remained static since its inception. This great variety in style, when properly recorded and analyzed, should reveal criteria vital for greater understanding of this early period.

The scattering of archaeological treasures

The passion of acquiring Egyptian antiquities during the 19th century resulted in collections being established all over the world. These consist of a wide variety of objects, especially those of a more portable size such as scarabs and amulets.



Wooden statue of an Egyptian male tomb owner, circa 2800–1800 BC.

Larger museums and wealthy private individuals stood sponsors to archaeological excavations and received a share of the newly discovered artifacts. As the passion for collecting intensified a black market grew apace, dealing not only in forged antiquities but also in stolen ones. Many early excavators were only interested in the more impressive antiquities, gold and stone statues, for example, and often turned a blind eye to the disappearance of vast quantities of more humble items from their sites. Not unnaturally, dealers were not anxious to publicize from where they had acquired their pieces, and the information we now consider to be the most valuable, for example, information on exact provenance, associated items, position in the tomb and so on, has been lost forever. In the case of wooden statues the situation may not be as hopeless as previously supposed. In many cases the statues bear inscriptions and the translation and correlation of these will reveal many clues to their origins.

The sort of information to be extracted from wooden statues covers an enormous range. The direct information concerns the tomb owners themselves and covers fashions on hairstyles, clothes, ornaments, stance, status – that is, their standing in the community and further afield – the positions they held locally and at court, inscriptions with the names of themselves and maybe their parents – especially helpful in determining genealogies. Female statues often have the “offering formula”, a plea to the god Osiris to look after the Ka (soul) of the

deceased in the afterlife in return for offerings of bread, beer and other commodities. Very few offering bearers are inscribed but the range of products they carry tell us a lot about the products of the period. The physical identification of the woods used is an area yet to be properly investigated.

A comprehensive database

In order to create an accurate and comprehensive database, access to the material is essential. My material is scattered across the globe, resting mainly in the major museums of the world, but also in many minor collections and even in private collections. It is impossible to locate the statues in the latter category except by word of mouth but those in the former two are readily accessible to scholars who are able to visit them. In general, museum curators have been extremely enthusiastic about my work. At present, it is the exception rather than the rule for collections in museums to be comprehensively published and the only way to determine what material is where is to visit each museum in person. This is both time-consuming and expensive but unavoidable if a reliable contribution to science is to be made. My experiences so far have led me to expect at least three extra statues for every one published – larger museums especially often have no idea of the extent of their collections, much of it lies in basement storage waiting to be catalogued.

• The fact that the statues are so widely dispersed has led to the generally prevailing notion that they are few in number and therefore of no statistical value. This is incorrect. I had originally forecast a database of some 300 statues, that number has increased three-fold and it may well be even higher. Thanks to two scholarships I was able to visit the Cairo Museum in 1986 and some 23 museums in the United States in 1988, and this has provided the information necessary for the completion of my thesis. However, the compilation of a catalogue goes far beyond the range of my thesis and the prospects of completion without external financial support are non-existent.



*Wooden statue of an
Egyptian female tomb owner,
circa 2800–2000 BC.*