

THE OXFORD ENCYCLOPEDIA OF

ANCIENT

EGYPT

DONALD B. REDFORD

EDITOR IN CHIEF

VOLUME 3



Julia HARVEY, "Wood Sculpture" (pp 246–250)

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

2001

Wood Sculpture

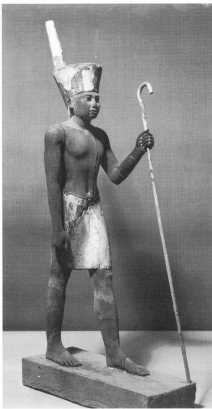
Throughout most of the history of ancient Egypt, sculpture in wood has appeared alongside that in stone. The vulnerability of the former material, however, has resulted

in a lack of understanding of the frequency of wood sculpture. Conditions that only superficially affect stone sculpture have a far more destructive effect on wood, and many instances are known of wood sculpture being found in a state impossible to preserve or even to record. This is the case, for example, for the Old Kingdom necropolis of Giza, where the majority was found to have been eaten by termites or reduced to pulp. This example underscores how remarkable it is that any wood sculpture has survived at all, let alone in a state that enables Egyptologists to assess stylistic development.

The fact that wood is more vulnerable than stone was known to the ancient Egyptians, too. Nevertheless, they decided that the material was appropriate for carving sculpture and became highly skilled at it. The inscriptions accompanying workshop scenes rarely referred to the statues depicted, but the tools shown are a good indication of the material in question—an adze in the hand of a workman is an indication that the material is wood, whereas hammers and mallets tend to be confined to working stone. The statues are usually shown in a completed state, regardless of the type of tool or action.

Throughout Egyptian history, the majority of wooden sculpture appears to have been made from native timber, that is, from acacia, sycamore, and tamarisk. Imported woods such as cedar and ebony were occasionally used, and in the New Kingdom they were the favored materials for royal sculpture in wood. Few statues have as yet had their material analyzed, so our knowledge of the woods used in ancient Egypt may yet change. As the indigenous woods did not yield sizable lengths of workable timber, statues larger than 30 to 40 centimeters (12 to 16 inches) were usually made from several separately carved pieces joined together by dowels, and mortise and tenon joints. The joints are almost invariably at the shoulders and the fronts of the feet. If the left arm is bent forward to hold a staff then the forearm is a separate piece. Life-size statues are made up of more pieces than smaller ones and patching is common on larger statues. The best-known example is the Sheikh el-Beled in the Cairo Museum. The patching and doweling visible on this statue would not have been evident on the finished product as statues were completely covered in a layer of paint or painted plaster on which many details of costume and jewelry were added. Sadly, this painted layer has usually deteriorated completely, along with much potential information on styles and fashions. The statues from the tomb of Metjetjy (sixth dynasty) are examples where the painted layer is still extant.

As so few statues have survived to our time, it is virtually impossible for scholars to identify individual workshops. In the Old Kingdom, Memphis and its necropolis clearly had its own workshop, with similar ones being set



SCULPTURE: WOOD SCULPTURE. *Statuette of King Senwosret I wearing the Crown of Lower Egypt, twelfth dynasty. Made of painted cedarwood, the statuette is from the tomb of Imhotep at Lishi. (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum Excavations 1913-1914; Rogers Fund supplemented by contribution of Edward S. Harkness [14.3.17])*

up in the provinces as the period progressed. Asyut, Meir, and Beni Hassan were prolific producers of wooden statues during the First Intermediate period and the Middle Kingdom, and it is possible to discern characteristics peculiar to one place or another: for example, the eyes painted on statues from Beni Hassan are generally much

larger than elsewhere. The lack of a complete sculptural record, however, invites caution when postulating the existence of stylistic schools. From the New Kingdom onward, series of wooden statues are carved for different locations. The Ahmose-Nefertari statues from Thebes and the kneeling figures holding Ptah shrines from Saqqara, for example, indicate that separate workshops were producing local "lines." The later periods are characterized by a virtual dearth of wooden sculpture, so very little is known about workshops during this time.

In the Old Kingdom, statues were placed in the tomb, first in a *serdab* and toward the end of the period in the burial chambers, to ensure that the *ka* of the deceased had somewhere to return if anything happened to the body. Groups of statues depicting the tomb owner in various guises were popular, particularly during the reigns of Unas (fifth dynasty) and Pepy II (sixth dynasty). These groups often consisted of several wooden statues and a stone one, despite stone being the more durable material. This distribution appears to have more to do with what the ancient Egyptian wanted to achieve in the afterlife than with the relative costs of the materials involved. Important court officials were as likely to have provided themselves with wooden statues as with stone ones; the comparative durability of stone, however, has biased our record of this phenomenon.

Depictions on the walls of Old Kingdom tombs show the tomb owner performing two basic sets of tasks: in one he is a passive participant, receiving offerings or overseeing his servants in the fields or elsewhere; in the other he takes a more active role by striding, hunting, or fishing. The task for artisans was how to convey these two aspects. Stone was ideal for impervious and inanimate form but wood was able to depict naturalistic, lifelike effects and thus convey an active role. In mixed Old Kingdom statue groups the stone statue is virtually always a seated figure, or else a standing figure with pendant arms. The legs are carved either together or with the left only slightly advanced. The wooden statues are striding, the left leg advanced with a staff held in the left hand. Even when the statues have pendant arms, the left leg is almost without exception advanced, thus conveying the idea of movement.

Female statues are invariably passive, standing figures in the Old Kingdom. The statues preserved are confined to the period until the reign of Unas and then from the reign of Merenre forward. The earlier statues are larger in format than later ones, which begin to show a wider variety in wig and dress styles. At the end of the Old Kingdom a female tomb owner was found with wooden statues for the first time. Pair statues also existed but very few have survived. At the beginning of the Old Kingdom, statues

are large (greater than 60 centimeters/23 inches), of high quality, and rare. After the reign of Merenre, quantity increases and the average size of 30 to 50 centimeters (12 to 20 inches) decreases. Statues in different costumes and wigs appear with inscriptions listing different titles, but not enough inscribed groups survive to enable scholars to associate particular costumes with specific titles. The costumes are nearly always a variation on the theme of the short gala kilt or the long, apron-fronted kilt. The former skirt is worn mostly with the staff and scepter pose, the latter with the arms pendant and with the right hand often holding a flap of the skirt. The echelon-curl wig in several variations was the most popular.

The inscriptions on wooden statue bases throughout the Old Kingdom are invariably lists of names and titles. It is not until the very end of the period that the well-known offering formula "for the *ka* of" the deceased appears. During the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom this becomes an almost invariable part of the inscriptions, and is the reason why wooden statues are often referred to as *ka* statues. The Old Kingdom statues, however, had not yet acquired this specific offering purpose.

At the end of the Old Kingdom, female offering bearers in wood appeared in the tombs for the first time. They are three-dimensional personifications of the funerary estates illustrated on the walls of the tombs. At first appearance, they are far superior to the small servant statues which form part of the scenes of daily life so popular in the First Intermediate period and the Middle Kingdom; the scenes from the tomb of Meketra are true masterpieces of their kind. As the period progresses, however, their special import decreases and their presence seems to become perfunctory. The quality also declines dramatically.

The wooden sculpture of the owners of the tombs and their wives remains of a relatively high quality during the Middle Kingdom, but their overall size decreases after the eleventh dynasty. The range of wigs and costumes for both males and females is much wider than in the Old Kingdom, but the accompanying texts on the bases are more stylized and thus still prevent us from linking the costumes and wigs to specific occupations, with the notable exception of the statue of Yuya in the Metropolitan Museum, who is wearing the vizier's costume. Female statues tend to have very pronounced waistlines and hips as the period progresses; statues from the earlier periods being more true to life in this respect. The techniques of manufacture remained the same as for the Old Kingdom. During this time local workshops in the provinces produced the majority of wooden sculpture, for example, at Asyut, Meir, Beni Hasan, and Dahshur. The earliest extant royal statues in wood date from the twelfth dynasty—two



SCULPTURE: WOOD
SCULPTURE. *Figure of Osiris*,
nineteenth-twentieth dynasty, from
a private collection. (Art Resource,
NY)

splendid statues are attributed to Senwosret I—and from this time on, statues of the king and his consorts became more common. The most magnificent statue in this genre is the *ka* statue of King Awibre Hor of the thirteenth dynasty, now in the Cairo Museum.

Up to this point in time, wooden sculpture follows an unbroken line of development. The quality of the works produced during the First Intermediate Period did not change, nor did the availability of materials. The general impression is one of realism and movement.

There is very little extant wooden material from the period between the Middle and New Kingdoms, making it impossible to trace the line of development between the two, or any effect that the Second Intermediate Period may have had on the production of sculpture. The relatively numerous statues from the first part of the eighteenth dynasty continued to be inspired by the Middle Kingdom and are full of force and character. Model scenes, however, had disappeared as had the female offering bearers. After the reign of Thutmose III statues became far less numerous, but they revived under Amenhotep III as the first statues to display Amarna traits. The figures are very elegant, but more stylized; their realism decreases. At this time the majority of the statues were female, many of them nude, and there is also a group that probably were originally the handles of mirrors. In the immediate post-Amarna period, statues became relatively numerous again, both males and females, and are generally of a high quality with complicated dress and coiffures. After the reign of Sety I female statues virtually disappear, but male statues continue to be popular through the twentieth dynasty. Two pair statues, both masterpieces, are known from the eighteenth dynasty, and show the tomb owner and his wife seated side by side. Wooden *shawabtis* are known from the Middle Kingdom on, but the best examples date to the New Kingdom.

During the later New Kingdom sculptors were less inclined to innovation and all types of statuary duplicated those made in stone (e.g., standard bearers and naophorous statues). The realism of the earlier periods declined into frozen conventions. Royal sculpture in wood is now relatively common. There are several known statues of Amenhotep III in ebony, accompanied by Queen Tiye. Royal tombs were supplied with large wooden statues (e.g., Thutmose III, Tutankhamun, Horemheb). Statues of queens are uncommon, especially in the later part of the period, an exception being the statues of the deified Ahmose Nefertari. Royal tombs and temples of the period were provided with resin-coated or gilded wooden statues, which were placed in wooden shrines. With the exception of those from the tomb of Tutankhamun, they are all poorly preserved.

During the later Egyptian periods, private wooden stat-

uary all but disappears. Like most art from that time, the few surviving examples are in an archaizing style imitating Middle Kingdom examples. Divine statuary appeared in the burial chambers of private tombs: kneeling figures of Isis and Nephthys were placed on either side of the sarcophagus; *ba*-birds, falcons and *akhom* figures as well as Anubis jackals were placed on top. Ptah-Sokar-Osiris figures, often with a cavity containing a papyrus roll, were also popular.

[See also Models.]

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