

ART ANCIENT



EGYPTIAN RELIEF OF A MAN AND HIS WIFE

Thebes, First Half of Dynasty 18, circa 1525-1425 BC
Raised relief carved and painted limestone
H. 28 x W. 26.5

PROVENANCE

1960s French private collection [based on notarised statement, surface condition, restorations and extant wooden base].

Subsequently art market, Montpellier France.

Robert Shaw antiques, acquired from the above on 11th February 2020.

An exceptional example of ancient relief work, carved during the apogee of Egyptian artistic production. Its style and superior material identifies it as being from the private tombs of the Theban necropolis, whose reliefs are widely regarded as the finest of the 18th Dynasty. Preserving a particularly poignant scene from the tomb of a high-status owner that would have been the focal point of ancient Egyptian tomb decoration.

Depicting the tomb owner, represented wearing a plain bag wig and broad collar. The hand of the man's wife resting on his left shoulder in a gesture of affection, symbolising the bond between husband and wife and their connection and mutual support both in life and the afterlife.

Carved in mostly flat surfaces with areas of further modelling. A drill has been used to accentuate the corners of the mouth, the nostrils are deeply carved, and the line of the jaw is subtly defined. The elongated eyebrow and cosmetic lines, combined with the youthful smile and rounded nose and chin recall the royal portraiture in relief work of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III. Visible traces of the sculptor's chisel can be identified in the angular marks on both raised surfaces and on the background.





Egypt's Golden Age

The 18th Dynasty is widely regarded as the apogee of ancient Egyptian culture. Founded by Ahmose I (r.c.1539-1514 B.C.), he and his successors expanded Egypt's influence throughout the Near East and established control of Nubia through a series of successful military campaigns.¹ Similarly undefeated under Thutmose III (r.c. 1479-1425 B.C.) - who was regarded as the greatest warrior pharaoh, conqueror and strategist of all - Egypt emerged at the height of its political power.²

With the creation of an empire, life in Egypt was transformed. On a political level, this new task of managing a vast domain, spread across geographical and cultural divides, encouraged the emergence of a new type of official, for which Thebes assumed a preeminent position. On a cultural level, not only did it bring Egypt unimaginable wealth, but it also brought its people into contact with foreign ideas, both manifesting themselves in artistic production. With increasing trade and prosperity, the pharaohs and nobles of the New Kingdom lavished gold on their gods and religious rites. While the rulers of Egypt turned their attentions to cult centres, and especially that of Amun-Re of Thebes and his cult temple at Karnak, the nobility focused on establishing their own status, by outfitting their private tombs in the sought-after Theban necropolis in preparation for their death.³ It was in this context that Egyptian tomb decoration reached its height.

¹ Festival Hall of Thutmose III, Precinct of Amun-Re, Karnak Temple Complex, Luxor (Thebes).

The Theban Necropolis

Throughout the early New Kingdom, continued artistic development meant that the fine reliefs of private Theban tombs came to rival even the skillfully carved royal reliefs, such as those of Thutmose III and his queen, Hatshepsut. Displaying a mastery of form and colour, skilfully curated to convey the principal tenets of Egyptian funerary rites, scenes of daily life or from the Book of the Dead, as well as guidance for the tomb owner's journey to the underworld, Theban tomb decoration is considered to display some of the finest examples of tomb reliefs from the 18th Dynasty, and indeed from ancient Egypt itself.

While all showcasing the artistic achievements of the day, the vast majority of officials' tombs from this period have been carried out in painted plaster - a relatively quick and inexpensive technique for tomb decoration. By contrast, raised relief, typically in limestone, required even greater skill to carve and was a technique reserved for the privileged few. Moreover, of the 129 Theban tombs that can be dated prior to the reign of Thutmose IV, only 19 - the most impressive tombs of the necropolis - feature raised relief decoration either exclusively or partially painted, a technique that can be seen in the present piece.⁴

The present relief fragment can be dated to the first half of the 18th Dynasty as it displays stylistic affinities with the carvings typical of the joint reigns of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III. The relief is skillfully carved, and the figure depicted with a carefully shaped jawline, while a drill was used to accentuate the corners of the mouth and the nostrils. Visible marks left by the sculptor's chisel, perhaps once hidden by a coat of ancient lime plaster, would further have been embellished by the additional layer of paint, remnants of which can be seen on the wig and collar. In particular, however, it is the elongated eyebrow and cosmetic lines, combined with youthful smile and rounded nose, that recalls the royal portraiture from this period. On account of its superior style and material - carved in limestone, itself native to Thebes, and painted on top - the present fragment can be considered one of the most important 18th Dynasty relief fragments to have survived, having once adorned the walls of one of the most lavishly decorated private tombs of the early New Kingdom.



2 Relief of Hatshepsut from The Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut, Deir el-Bahari.



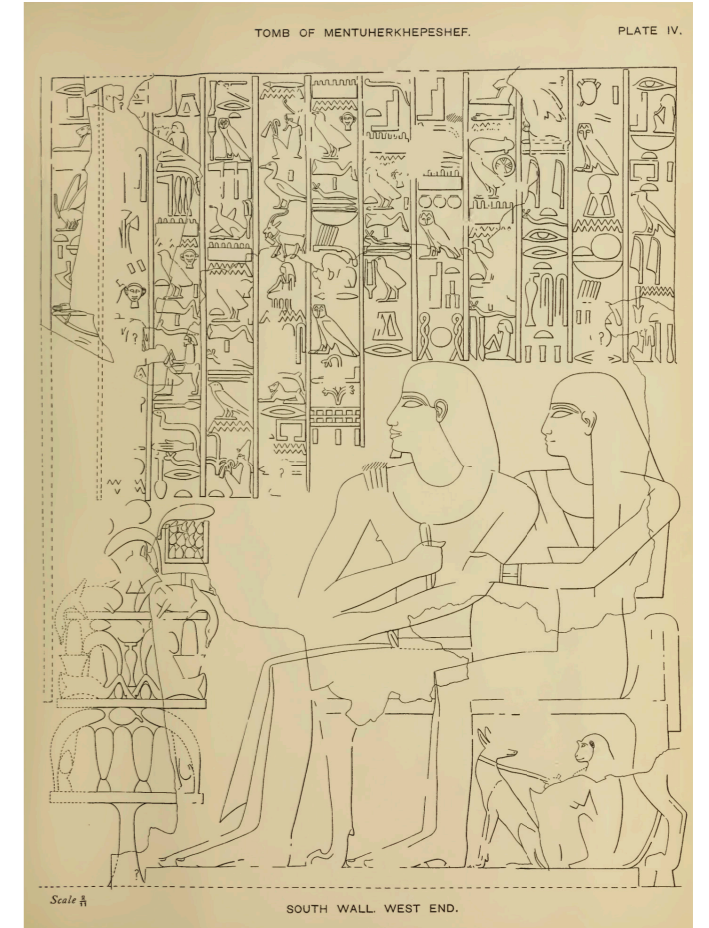
An Eternal Union

The present relief depicts a high-status tomb owner, likely a wealthy Egyptian official, affectionately supported by his wife, whose hand rests on his shoulder. In its 18th Dynasty tomb, this scene would have been the focal point of the carefully thought-out decorative agenda, which aimed at ensuring the patron's safe journey to the afterlife.

This scene is mirrored in one of the most impressive tombs of the period, the tomb of Mentuherkhepeshef, Mayor of Cusae (TT 20). The similar depiction seen here provides an insight into the wider decorative agenda of which the present fragment would have been a crucial part. The tomb-owner and his wife would likely have been sitting before a table, piled high with offerings, providing them with sustenance for their journey to the underworld. Hieroglyphs above - still partially preserved on the present piece - would likely have provided the name and titles of the individuals depicted, although they are too partial to allow an identification.

In addition to its deep significance in Egyptian religious and artistic canon, the present relief depicts a particularly poignant scene that resonates with us today. The preservation of the hand of the wife, affectionately resting on her husband's shoulder, displays their eternal union, and her support for him in both life and death. In ancient Egypt, the wife was central to the family unit, often seen as a partner, rather than a subordinate, to her husband. In death, the wife was regarded as crucial to her husband's successful transition to the afterlife, and she is often seen in tomb decoration performing rituals to assist his journey. Their depiction in the present relief is a touching and relatable scene, underscoring the eternal union between husband and wife that remains the foundation of marriage all over the world today.

3 A typical 18th Dynasty painted relief scene, from the tomb of Benia called Paheqamen (TT 343).



FOOTNOTES

- 1 C. Roehrig, 'Egypt in the New Kingdom, (ca. 1550-1070 B.C.); Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. URL: https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/nking/hd_nking.htm
- 2 R. Gabriel, Thutmose III: The Military Biography of Egypt's Greatest Warrior King, Potomac Books, 2009.
- 3 S. Hodel-Hoernes, Life and Death in Ancient Egypt: Scenes from Private Tombs in New Kingdom Thebes, Cornell University Press, 2000, p.3-4.
- 4 Report by Dr Steven Harvey, Egyptologist and Director of the Ahmose and Tetisheri Project at Abydos, Egypt, 3.09.2021.

4 A typical 18th Dynasty scene of the seated tomb owner and his wife before a table of offerings, from the Tomb of Mentuherkhepeshef (TT 20).