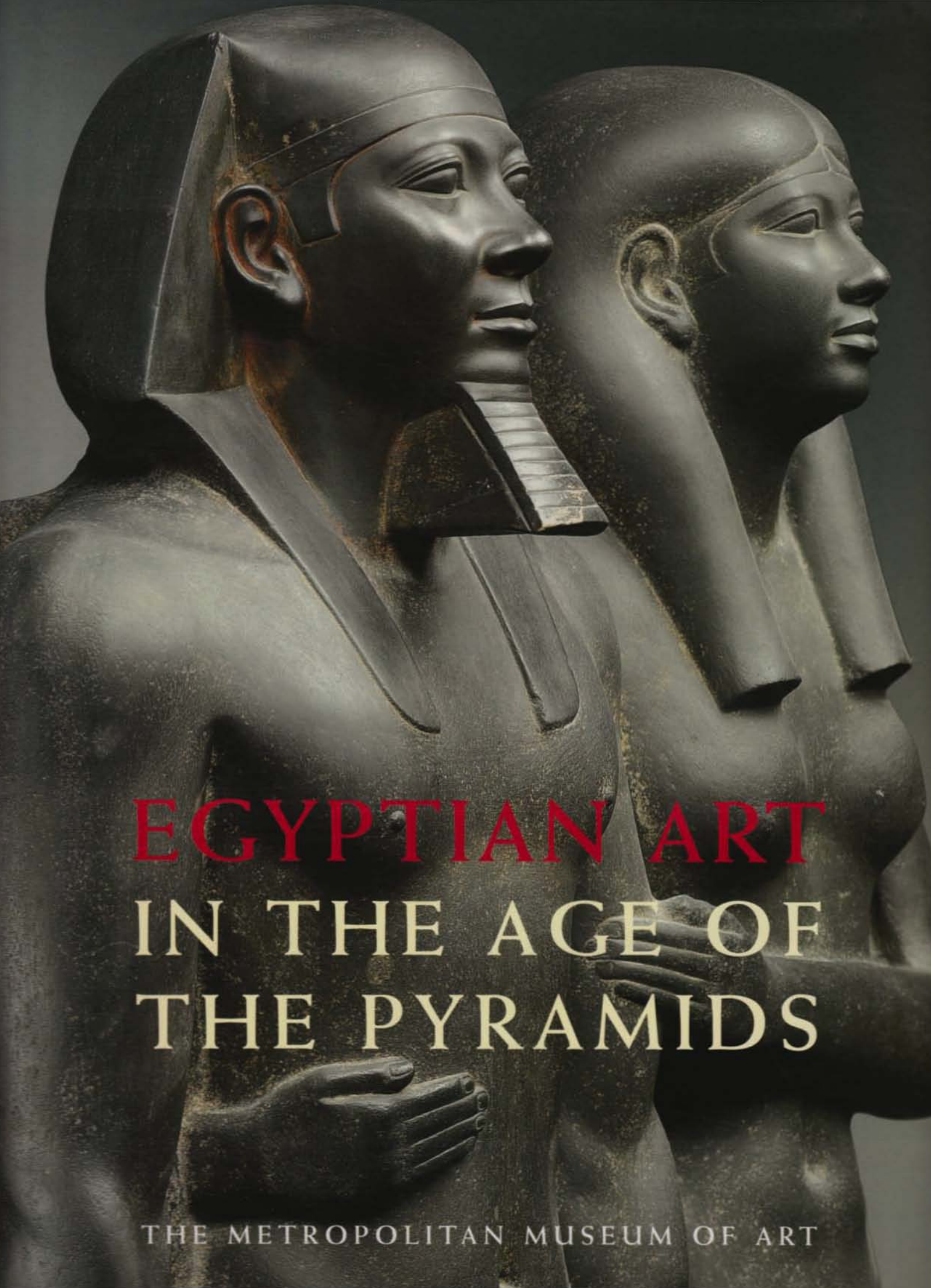

# EGYPTIAN ART IN THE AGE OF THE PYRAMIDS

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

# EGYPTIAN ART IN THE AGE OF THE PYRAMIDS

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mouth by a rather long, flat area, whereas only a soft indentation intervenes between the chin and the mouth in the relief. And beyond such differences in detail, the Hemiunu of the relief is younger and less forbidding than the man represented in the statue. Perhaps their expressive characters are at variance because the relief figure was depicted seated at a table with offerings and receiving eternal sustenance, while the statue was lodged in a serdab as a representative of the living man;[9] certainly the two works were made by different groups of artists. The vizier and Overseer of All Construction Projects evidently commanded the best talents in both relief sculpture and statuary.

DoA

1. Junker 1929, pp. 148–50. For the possibility that Hemiunu was the son of Nefer-maat, son of Snefru, see ibid., pp. 151–53; and cat. no. 24.
2. Junker 1929, pp. 132–45, figs. 18–21; Porter and Moss 1974, pp. 122–23, pls. 7, 15.
3. Junker 1929, pp. 145–48, fig. 23, pls. 15b, 16b, 17; Smith 1942, pp. 525–30; Martin 1978, nos. 2146, 2380.
4. For the offering formula in the Fourth Dynasty, see Junker 1955, pp. 82–86, with earlier references on p. 25a: "Totengebet"; Barta 1968, pp. 3–11.
5. The wood reliefs of Hesi-re (cat. no. 17 and Quibell 1913, pls. 29–32) are much earlier examples that display this differentiation between the outlines of the upper and lower parts of the face. The Hemiunu relief, however, has greater subtlety, as a comparison with these antecedents reveals.
6. The very rounded eyeball is seen in a number of mid-Fourth Dynasty reliefs of high quality. See, for instance Smith 1946, pls. 40e (Ankh-haf), 41 (Meret-ites), 42b, 43 (Khufu-khaf).
7. For comparable sculpture in the round, see especially a head of Khafre (cat. no. 61); for a parallel in relief, see the head of Mer-ib from mastaba G 2100 Annex in Berlin (ibid., pl. 46c).
8. Steindorff 1937, pp. 120–21; Smith 1946, pp. 303–4.
9. Schulz (1995, pp. 119–20) has remarked on the fact that Hemiunu's statue may depict an old man in the evening of his life.

PROVENANCE: Giza, near southeast corner of mastaba of Hemiunu (G 4000), Reisner excavation, 1925

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Steindorff 1937, pp. 120–21; Smith 1946, pp. 22–23, pl. 48c; Smith 1952, p. 33, fig. 16 on p. 37; Smith 1960, p. 37, fig. 20 on p. 45; Schmitz 1986, pp. 38, 39, ill.

# THE RESERVE HEADS OF THE OLD KINGDOM: A THEORY

Of all categories of ancient Egyptian sculpture that of the so-called reserve heads, one must say, has always constituted one of the most puzzling. These limestone heads, found almost without exception in the Western Cemetery at Giza, and all apparently dating to the early part of the Fourth Dynasty,[1] were so named by Hermann Junker when he first encountered them early in the century (*Ersatzköpfe*, in German, literally "substitution heads"). It was his theory, and it has been one followed by most scholars after him, that such stone heads were intended to take the place of the actual perishable head of the person represented if it should be damaged in any way.

The characteristics of this group of sculptures are easily described but have proved difficult to account for. In the first instance, they reproduce only the head and neck of a figure, making them quite unusual among Egyptian funerary statues, where the representation of a complete figure is for magico-religious reasons the norm; secondly, they are not shown with coiffures of any sort, there being usually only an engraved indication of the hairline; and thirdly, the gaze of the person represented is somewhat raised from the horizontal, which is also unusual, although sometimes encountered in Pharaonic statuary.[2] But added to these peculiarities, which are common to all of the group, are a number of other features that occur in many examples.

The sculptors' treatment of certain of the facial features is not only odd, but odd in such ways that the variations from the norm must be explained away. The peculiarities were listed by Smith in his chapter on the heads in his work of 1946.[3] They consist of (1) the appearance in some of the examples of deep cutting around the eyeballs, separating them from the lids to a degree unusual in Egyptian sculpture, (2) the occasional presence of a fine carved line around the roots of the alae of the nose, where the lateral portions, or wings, of the nostrils join the cheeks, emphasizing the join in an unnatural way, and (3) the quite peculiar and equally unrealistic treatment of the philtrum, the groove down the center of the upper lip, which, instead of being a mere shallow depression, is rendered as a shallow trench with vertical walls. This is so utterly strange both in terms of the marked naturalism of the portraits themselves and of the Egyptian sculptor's own tradition—both before and after the period with which we are dealing—that some explanation must be sought.

Even stranger and more puzzling are the odd mutilations that many heads have suffered. Most noticeably, some examples have had a rough groove hacked in the back along the median line from the crown of the head to the lower end of the neck. Another mutilation visible on many heads is damage to, or complete removal of, the ears; oddly enough, in one or two of the examples where the ears are missing, considerable care has been taken to dress down and smooth the areas where they once were.

Much ink has been spilled over the question of the purpose of these heads, which seem to make nonsense of many of the principles we see, or believe we see, in Egyptian art of this or any other period. But any hypothesis that seeks to explain the purpose of a discrete and clearly definable group of artifacts must surely take into account all extraordinary characteristics found within the group, whether or not these characteristics are all present in all members of the group.

A theory was suggested by the present writer several years ago in which the reserve heads were seen as artists' prototypes of the type exemplified by the famous head, now in the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin, of Nefertiti, and the other stone and plaster heads found in the reknowned sculptor's workshop at Amarna.[3] In other words, they were models for the use of sculptors engaged in producing several representations of the same person, whether in sculpture in the round or in two-dimensional art.[4] The peculiar treatment of the heads' features was there explained as intended to facilitate the use of a successful molding medium—the one suggested was fine linen soaked in water with some sort of glue or size, the kind of medium later used for cartonnage masks and coffins—to enable the sculptors of the royal workshops to produce copies in clay or gypsum plaster. Indeed, one such head in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (21.329), still has its left cheek partly covered with a thick wad of plaster, suggesting that a direct mold in gypsum plaster had been attempted and had proved a failure.

This theory assumes, of course, that several copies would be needed, that statues would be worked on at various venues, and that the chapel relief carvers might make use of them as well; the highly individualistic relief portraits of Nefer and Hemiunu from their Giza chapels suggest the artists responsible had prototypes of some sort to work from.[5]

A related sculpture was also referred to in the aforementioned article by the present author; this is the famous bust of Ankh-haf (fig. 32). This superbly realistic work, executed in limestone with a plaster coat of varying thickness, is that of a man of middle years, with the suggestion of a rather fuller figure than the usual Egyptian ideal; the ears, which had apparently been added in plaster, are missing. Unlike the reserve heads, it has been given a coat of red-brown paint; the eyes were picked out in black and white, but only traces remain. Unlike the heads, it was found not in a tomb shaft but in the inner room of the chapel of mastaba G 7510 in the Eastern Cemetery at Giza, where it had apparently been set up on a low mud-brick stand. When it fell from its position, it crushed several pottery offering vessels, showing that, unlike the heads, it had been actively used as a focus for the funerary cult.

Not the least of the problems surrounding the heads is that of their original location in the tombs in which they were found. This question has been lately much addressed;[6] apart from the fact that the objects were mostly deposited somewhere at the foot of the vertical shaft leading to the actual burial chamber, nothing very certain can be said on this point.

Although attempts have been made to explain the creation of reserve heads as artifacts intended solely for magical purposes—representations of the deceased that could be ritually killed, as by the previously described incision down the back of the head—these founder on the fact that the killing of funerary gifts to enable them to accompany the deceased has never been reliably inferable from the Egyptian archaeological record and would almost certainly have been alien to the Egyptian way of thought; this would of course have particularly been true with regard to representations of the honored dead. Such fanciful theories, one must conclude, deserve only to be dismissed out of hand. NBM

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1. Smith 1946, pp. 23–30.
2. Bothmer 1970, pp. 37ff.
3. Smith 1946, pp. 28–29.
4. Millet 1981, pp. 129ff.
5. Smith 1946, pp. 23, 29, 303–4.
6. See Kelley 1974 and Lacovara 1997.