ECYPTIAN ART IN THE AGE OF THE PYRAMIDS

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

EGYPTIAN ART IN THE AGE OF THE PYRAMIDS

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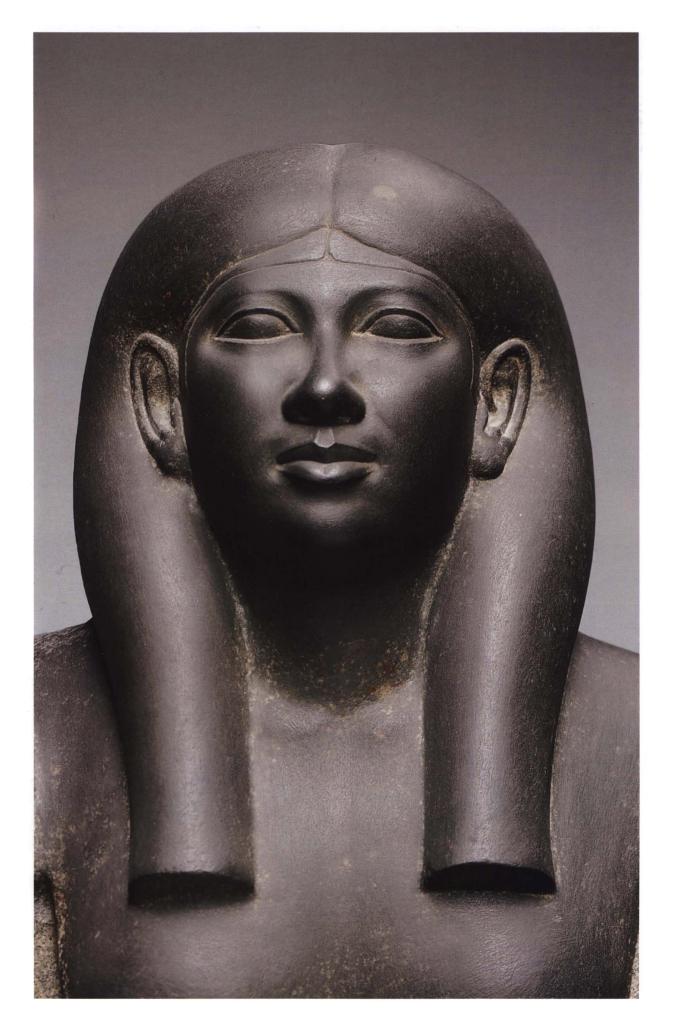
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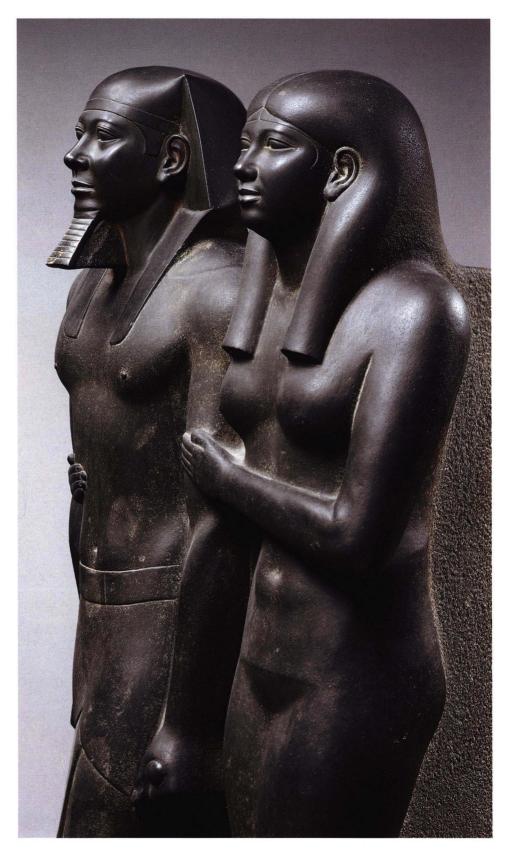
67. King Menkaure and a Queen

Fourth Dynasty, reign of Menkaure Graywacke with faint remains of paint H. 139 cm (54¾ in.); w. 57 cm (22½ in.); d. 54 cm (21¼ in.) Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harvard University– Museum of Fine Arts Expedition 11.1738

[*Giza*, January 18, 1910]... In the evening, just before work stopped a small boy from the gang at the thieves' hole in strip 1 appeared suddenly at my side and said "come." In the lower part of the hole the female head of a statue (¾ life size) of bluish slate had just come into view in the sand. It was too late to clear it. But immediately afterwards a block of dirt fell away and showed a male head on the right,—a pair statue of king and queen. A photograph was taken in failing light and an armed guard of 20 men put on for the night.¹

In those five sentences George Reisner related the discovery of one of the most important masterpieces of Egyptian sculpture. Found in the valley temple of Menkaure's pyramid, the statue was not in its original location and had probably been thrown there by tomb plunderers after the Arab conquest.²

In its size and majesty the statue is comparable to the great seated statue of Khafre in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (fig. 28). But this king is not depicted in divine isolation. Although the base never had an inscription, the sovereign is unquestionably Menkaure, whose face looks thinner than it does in other sculptures from Giza. Beside him is his principal wife,3 probably Khamerer-nebti II.⁴ The two figures stand with their backs against a wide slab that comes to their shoulders. Treated as two juxtaposed individuals, they are joined by the affectionate gesture of the queen, who embraces her royal spouse. The pharaoh is adorned with the insignia of power: nemes headcloth, here appearing without the uraeus cobra, revealing the natural sideburns; a false beard with horizontal striations; a plain shendyt kilt fastened by a wide belt. His left leg forward, the monarch has his arms at his sides and each hand closed around an enigmatic object. The queen, slightly smaller than her spouse, is at his left, her left foot slightly advanced. Like goddesses in triad statues



with Menkaure (cat. no. 68),⁵ she is wearing a long wig, but the artificial hair is smooth and reveals the natural hair, with its central part, on the temples and forehead. Wearing a sheer sheath, her left arm across her midriff in a pose seen in Third Dynasty statues (cat. no. 13), the queen has placed her left hand on Menkaure's arm and is encircling his waist with her right arm. That attitude, which gives a new humanity to the royal couple, served as a model for private statuary.⁶





Detail, cat. no. 67

The simplicity of the forms and composition is combined with an extraordinary delicacy in the modeling of the body and an unmatched precision in indications of musculature. Although the treatment of the features is identical-compare, for example, the precisely outlined eyes and their naturalism, the carefully realized inflections of the mouths, and the firmness of the fleshthe two faces are individualized in the manner of portraits. The square, mature face of the king, who is turning slightly to the right, has a noticeably firm mouth, whereas the queen's face is all youthful roundness. Remnants of red paint still highlight the king's face, ears, and neck; the queen's hair still retains traces of black. Oddly, the work is

unfinished, perhaps because of Menkaure's premature death (his funerary complex was hastily completed). Only the faces and upper bodies received a final polishing. Below, the torsos display an irregular surface, and tool marks are visible on both bodies. Citing the severe features of Menkaure, whom alabaster statues (cat. no. 70) and one of the triads show with full cheeks and a very round nose, Reisner attributed this masterpiece to the workshop of Sculptor A (see introduction to cat. nos. 56–63).⁷ cz

- 3. Nothing about the attributes suggests this is a representation of the goddess Hathor. See Fay 1998, p. 166.
- 4. For a cautious view, see Seipel 1980, pp. 165ff.
- 5. Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE 40678, JE 40679, JE 46499 (cat. no. 68), and Museum of Fine
- Arts, Boston, 09.220. All these statues have the same provenance.
- 6. For gestures of affection as a dating criterion, see Cherpion 1995, pp. 33-47.
- 7. Reisner 1931, pp. 128–29.

PROVENANCE: Giza, valley temple of Menkaure, Reisner excavation, 1910

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Reisner 1931, p. 110, no. 17, pls. 54–60; Smith 1946, p. 38, pl. 13; Vandier 1958, p. 24; Porter and Moss 1974, p. 29; Aldred 1978, pp. 188–89; Fay 1998, pp. 164–66, no. 7, figs. 11, 12

^{1.} Reisner, excavation journal, January 18, 1910,

p. 9; see Der Manuelian 1996, p. 64.

^{2.} Reisner 1931, p. 110.