ROYAL PORTRAITS OF THE TWELFTH DYNASTY

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“A king,” said the prophet Nefer-rohu, “shall come from the south, called Amuny, the son of a woman of Nubia, and born in Upper Egypt.” This Amuny, better known to students of Egyptian history as King Amun-em-hêt I, founder of the Twelfth Dynasty, was a Theban, one of that hard-bitten breed of warlike provincials who time and time again saved their ancient land from ruin and injected new vigor into a civilization grown tired and an art grown smug and empty with the passing centuries. The new dynasty established its seat of government near Memphis, a center which still clung to the serene artistic traditions of the Old Kingdom, dead and gone for over two hundred years. Although the newcomers were impressed by the dignity and technical perfection of the works of the Memphite artists, they were not altogether satisfied with them. Thus we find in the Middle Kingdom, side by side with statues, reliefs, and paintings which might have been produced in the Fourth or Fifth Dynasty, others which depart from the dictates of ancient tradition and ancient taste and exhibit a new tenseness of spirit, a new preoccupation with lively minor incident, and a new and at times merciless realism.

Nowhere is this tendency more apparent than in the extraordinary series of royal portraits produced by the court sculptors of the Twelfth Dynasty. These record with searching accuracy not only the facial characteristics of each king, seen at a specific moment in his life’s span, but also something of his mood and of his underlying character. It is an eloquent testimonial to these ancient kings that, even when the mask of convention is removed and they are revealed to us as human beings, they lose nothing of the majesty and dignity inseparably associated with the pharaonic office.

During the last forty years the Museum has acquired, one by one, eleven such portraits, sculptured in the round or, in three instances, carved in relief. Some of these are well known to students of Egyptian art and have been published and illustrated many times. Others, anonymously labeled “Portrait of a King of the Twelfth Dynasty,” have received little attention, and one, acquired in 1945, has only recently been placed on exhibition (ill. p. 122).

Since the men portrayed were all members of one family—father and son in direct succession—we should expect and do, in fact, find considerable resemblance in the faces of the series. All betray the heritage of a Nubian ancestress and of intermarriage with women of mixed negro and bedawin blood from the upper reaches of the Nile. The most striking feature that they have in common is the strong bony structure of the faces, especially the high, prominent cheekbones and heavy brows. The ears are consistently huge—a marked family characteristic. The eyes tend to be heavy-lidded and pouchy, the mouths full, protruding, and sullen. The expression is nearly always grave, pensive, and at times melancholy. Strength, intelligence, cynicism, weariness, and disdain are written in the faces of these men whose lives were marked by struggles against marauding tribes on the boundaries of Egypt, powerful and ambitious local governors within the country, and treacherous inmates of the royal palace.

One of the earliest and most interesting of the series is a small royal head in limestone found near the pyramid of Amun-em-hêt I at Lisht and undoubtedly a portrait of the king himself (ill. p. 120). The face is distinctly “oriental” in appearance, flat and very broad across the cheekbones, but tapering to a small and rather shallow chin. The mouth, wide and full, is set low in the face and is characterized by a peculiar double curve of the lips. The eyes
King Amun-em-hêt I (1901-1962 B.C.). ABOVE: Head of a quartzite statue; gift of J. Pierpont Morgan, 1912. Head of a limestone statuette found near the pyramid of Amun-em-hêt I. BELOW: Painted limestone relief from the king's mortuary temple. The relief and the limestone head were discovered at Lisht by the Museum's Egyptian Expedition in 1906-1907 and 1907-1908.
King Se'n-Wosret I (1972-1928 B.C.). **Left:** Wooden statuette, one of a pair found near the pyramid of Se'n-Wosret I, showing the king wearing the crown of Lower Egypt. Its mate, with the crown of Upper Egypt, is in Cairo. **Right:** Limestone reliefs from the altar court of the king’s mortuary temple. All these portraits are from the Museum’s excavations at Lisht, 1913-1914.
King Se’n-Wosret III (1879-1841 B.C.). ABOVE: Upper part of a black granite statuette. Rogers Fund, 1945. The height of the face from chin to headdress is 2 3/4 inches. BELOW: Diorite sphinx, inscribed with the king’s name. OPPOSITE PAGE: Fragment of a quartzite head. The sphinx and the head were presented to the Museum by Edward S. Harkness in 1916-1917 and 1926.
are long, narrow, and slightly tilted. Except for a noticeable pouchiness of the lower lids, the flesh is taut and firm, and the portrait evidently represents the founder of the dynasty during the middle years of his life.

A relief head of Amun-em-ḥet I from his mortuary temple at Lisht (ill. p. 120) is too stylized to be classed as an accurate portrait but, nevertheless, exhibits several of the salient characteristics noted in the limestone head—the long, tilted eyes, the prominent cheekbones, and the thick, protruding mouth. Here also is preserved the profile of the king’s nose, a feature invariably broken on the statue heads.

The powerful quartzite head illustrated with the two portraits just described came as a gift to the Museum in 1912. Its provenience is unknown and its identity has remained an open question. Its resemblance, however, to the known portraits of Amun-em-ḥet I seems to the present writer to be so close as to make the identification worthy of serious consideration.

Attention is drawn particularly to the peculiarly oriental quality of the eyes, the enigmatic expression of the mouth, and the great breadth of the face in proportion to its height. The fullness of the mouth and the almost total absence of lines in the face suggest that this is a somewhat earlier portrait than the limestone head from Lisht. In view of the pronounced facial characteristics seen here it seems unnecessary to doubt the statement of Nefer-roḥu that the king’s mother was a Nubian.

Three portraits of King Se’n-Wosret I, Amun-em-ḥet’s son and heir (ill. p. 121), show us a handsome, well-proportioned face, mature and serious, but unmarked by the care and melancholy so apparent in the faces of his father and some of his successors. The full, healthy cheeks and the relatively cheerful mouth appear in the small and somewhat stylized head of a wooden statuette found near the king’s pyramid at Lisht. Se’n-Wosret’s strong, square-cut jaw and fine, well-shaped nose are shown to advantage in two heads, carved in relief, from the walls of his mortuary temple. There is a quality of youthful vigor in all the known portraits of this king which it would be unfair to attribute entirely to his choice of artists.

Skipping two generations, we come to one of Egypt’s greatest soldiers and administrators, King Se’n-Wosret III, conqueror of all Nubia, pioneer in the conquest of western Asia, and crusher of the long-powerful feudal barons of Upper and Middle Egypt. Power, ruthlessness, and disdain are clearly etched in the king’s tired and deeply lined face as portrayed on a black granite statuette recently acquired by the Museum, the head of a small diorite sphinx, and a fragmentary head of quartzite formerly in the Carnarvon collection (ill. opp. and above). The sphinx, long recognized as a classic example of Middle Kingdom portraiture, is inscribed with the Horus name and throne name of Se’n-Wosret III. The other two heads are so obviously portraits of the same man that no elaborate exposition of their identity is required. Particularly characteristic of the known portraits of Se’n-Wosret III are the deep-set, heavy-lidded eyes and the two little furrows in the brow above the bridge of the nose.

The face of King Amun-em-ḥet III, the last great pharaoh of the Middle Kingdom, is preserved in two portrait heads which differ widely from one another not only in the age of the man represented but also in the degree of real-
The death of Amun-em-het III, which must have occurred not long after the completion of this portrait, marked the virtual end of the Middle Kingdom, one of the rare periods in ancient history when the rulers of a land permitted themselves to be portrayed with such uncompromising adherence to reality. The ability of the Egyptian artist in the field of realistic portraiture is well known from statues of officials and private individuals of the Old Kingdom and later times, but it was not often that he had the opportunity to exercise this special talent on such exalted subjects as the semidivine persons of his kings.

King Amun-em-het III (1841-1792 B.C.) LEFT: Head of a statuette of gray marble. Bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 1929. BELOW: Head of a black granite statue. Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Thomas S. Foulds, 1924

ism attempted by the sculptors (see ills. above and below). Both, however, are paralleled by well-documented portraits of the king in the Cairo Museum and elsewhere, and in neither case is the attribution open to serious doubt.

The small royal head from the Havemeyer collection, exquisitely carved in mottled gray marble, is clearly a somewhat idealized portrait of the pharaoh as a young man. The mouth and eyes are treated in the old, conventional Memphite fashion, but the arched nose, the prominent bony structure of the face, and the faint suggestion of loose flesh around the mouth and chin mark the head as a portrait not only of a specific individual but of an individual closely related by blood to the other kings of the Twelfth Dynasty. The black granite head of Amun-em-het III wearing the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt was executed many years later. Deep, closely spaced lines descend along the sides of the nose from below the tired eyes to the corners of the thick mouth, with its characteristically long, heavy upper lip, to portray with pitiless realism the sagging, wrinkled face of the aged pharaoh.