A IV Dynasty Portrait Head

By WILLIAM K. SIMPSON
Assistant, Department of Egyptian Art

At the turn of the century scholars of Egyptian art were startled by the appearance of life-size portrait heads in excavations at Gizeh, the site of a large necropolis of the Old Kingdom. Until their discovery it was considered an almost invariable rule that private sculpture of the period represented types, not individuals. The Sheikh el Beléd and several other representations of individuals were notable exceptions. Oswald Spengler summed up the contemporary view when he wrote: "In Egypt the face of the statue was equivalent to the pylon, the face of the temple plan." Certainly the Egyptian sculptor wished to represent the permanent aspect of a face and not a momentary expression, and so he often eliminated individual traits and approached architectural impersonality. But Spengler's extreme analogy could not now be made. The heads from Gizeh indicate that the interest of the Egyptian sculptor was not always the typical. In their individual character they are comparable with the portrait heads of classical and modern sculpture. During the comparatively short period in which they were made, Egypt attained an era of prosperity and stability under a strong central government, and the portrait heads reflect the finest artistic achievement of an age that saw the technical accomplishment of an age.

The Gizeh heads quickly found their way to the Cairo Museum and the museums that had carried on the excavations, taking their place as outstanding antiquities in the collections at Boston, Hildesheim, and Vienna; the three others that are known are in the Berlin Museum, the University College Museum in London, and the Museum at Berkeley, California. One of these heads, illustrated on the opposite page, has now been added to our collection; it was discovered by the joint expedition of Harvard University and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in 1936.

Most of these heads have been found in tombs of the royal family, the court, and officials of the IV Dynasty. The subject of our portrait head was a courtier who lived at the end of this Dynasty, probably in the reigns of Men-kū-Rē and Shepses-ku. We do not know his name or chief position, but a fragment of relief gives us part of several minor titles, and from these we learn that he held the offices of Master of the Largesses of the House of Life, Director of the Black Vase, and (Priest of) Wadjet. The significance of the second title is not known, but we may guess that it referred to the personal service of the king and was comparable to the title valet de chambre. Since it occurs in the titles of prominent officials of the earlier half of the V Dynasty and in the titulary of a family of powerful nomarchs in the VI Dynasty, it is likely that this courtier was of some importance.

His portrait, as well as his tomb, was made in accordance with the religious ideas and funerary customs of the age. During the early part of the IV Dynasty, at the time of the building of the pyramids of Khufu (Cheops) and Khafre-Rē (Chephren), the nobles were assigned their own tomb sites in orderly rows at the side of the pyramid of the ruler they served. These tombs consisted of a rectangular building with the outer walls sloping up to a flat roof made of solid masses of masonry. Inside the building were scenes in relief on the walls and a stela of the "false door" type through which the spirit came to receive offerings of bread, small cakes, beer, and wine. Later it became the custom to have a statue room which contained a likeness, usually ready-made, of the deceased. From the structure above ground a shaft descended to a short horizontal passage opening into the sarcophagus chamber, and after the funeral ceremonies the shaft was blocked up with rubble to keep any robbers out.

Our courtier managed to acquire a site in the eastern cemetery, near the main avenue to the pyramid of Khufu, where he built a tomb of the
type described above. The position of the tomb suggests a date later than the reign of Khufu, since it would have been difficult to build near the causeway during the pharaoh’s reign. From the marsh scenes on the wall of the chapel of the tomb some authorities would ascribe the tomb to the V Dynasty, but the IV Dynasty date is reasonably certain. In spite of much damage to the chapel these scenes still show a procession of peasants bringing in the produce of the fields to the owner. One of them is carrying a bird in one hand and holding its long beak in the other to prevent it from nipping him. These scenes are early examples of subjects which later gained widespread popularity.

The burial chamber, like the rest of the tomb, had been plundered in ancient times, and fragments of a white limestone sarcophagus were
found scattered in the vicinity. The robbers also left several objects of funeral equipment that were not salable for everyday purposes, among them a ceremonial set with an implement for the “opening of the mouth” ceremony, various pieces of pottery, and a shattered portrait head of the wife of the owner of the tomb, found inside the chamber. Our special interest, however, lies in the portrait head of the owner himself, found at the base of the shaft, where a plunderer may have thrown it in his haste to obtain more precious objects or in fear of the outraged ghost. The several pieces into which it fractured on this or a like occasion were easily fitted together and the cracks filled in with plaster, as the photographs indicate.

The location of the heads in the tomb and their purpose have been something of a puzzle ever since they were found; for unlike the statues in the chamber above ground, they seem to have been placed in the burial chamber itself. Most of them were found at the base of the vertical shaft, and this position led the German excavators to believe that they were originally placed in the horizontal passageway and were later displaced by the robbers; the few heads found in the sarcophagus chamber were near the opening and appeared to have rolled in. Since the time of these excavations, however, a head has been found beside the sarcophagus in the chamber of an un plundered tomb. It seems most likely that a head of this type was made to serve as a magical substitute for the head of the mummy, an extra kept in reserve just in case something might happen to the real one. This generally accepted explanation is given added support by a chapter in the later Book of the Dead which is entitled “a spell for not letting the head of a man be severed from him in the necropolis.” Since the limestone heads appear to have been made for just such an emergency they are generally called *Ersatzköpfe*, or reserve heads.

These heads were among the first that were complete works of art in themselves, but an interest in the head can be observed in the careful, detailed treatment of it in contemporary statuary. The head of a statue was considered especially important since the “opening of the mouth” ceremony was performed before it and since the nostrils were considered by the Egyptians to be the seat of life. This belief is reflected in the deeply incised and carefully modeled nostrils of our reserve head and is the very same belief referred to in the Bible when Job says, “For my life (breath) is yet whole in me, and the spirit (ruah, breath) of God is in my nostrils” (Job 27:3).
That these heads were portraits is well established by their divergence from contemporary statuary and by certain resemblances noted between the heads of members of the same family. In a few cases a portrait in relief of the owner of the tomb has been found along with a head, and here there has been enough correspondence between the features to warrant our considering them the same man.

The earliest reserve heads are executed in a realistic style characterized by deliberate gradations in the plane surfaces. The eyebrows are frequently sculptured in relief, as in the head from Dahshur that perhaps dates from the end of the III Dynasty, or they may be indicated by a change in gradation, as in the head of Prince Seneferu-sonbe (illustrated above). Side by side with these are other heads that show a smoother treatment of the surface and remarkable suppression of detail, the outstanding example of this type being the head of one of the princesses, now in Boston. In the reign of the successor of Khufu, King Khafre-Ré, a compromise seems to have been effected with the impressionistic treatment dominant in the more successful heads.

The sculptors who followed the realistic tradition in the second part of the IV Dynasty lacked the skill and precision of their predecessors and consequently mismanaged details such as the eyebrows in relief. The heads that occur at the very end of the IV Dynasty show an even more pronounced decline in skill and artistic merit.

The reserve head of our anonymous official illustrates the compromise between the two early types, and although it belongs to the latter part of the IV Dynasty it does not show the usual falling off in quality. The neck is cut so that the head has a slightly exaggerated tilt, the eyes looking up, and the chin at an angle, the characteristic position of reserve heads. The eyebrows are indicated by a change of plane instead of being carved in relief. The eyes are not sharply cut, and the mouth is made slightly asymmetrical by the marked downward slant of
with plaster, a situation difficult to understand from our modern point of view since the quality of the surface detail of carved relief seems to us superior to the fairly haphazard surface of plaster-covered relief.

Masks were used later in the Old Kingdom to cover the face of the dead, and these have frequently been cited as close parallels to the reserve heads. It has even been plausibly suggested that the use of these masks, together with the development of mummification, eventually made the extra heads no longer necessary. These masks, of which an excellent example is illustrated on page 291, followed the lines of the face, since they were presumably modeled on the head itself. It seems likely, moreover, that the early masks, of which no complete examples survive, may have influenced the smoother gradations and impressionistic tendencies that distinguish reserve heads from contemporary sculpture. It is only a step from a likeness modeled on a face to a limestone portrait that preserves some of the effects obtained by direct im-

the upper lip on the left. In general, the right profile recalls the sharp lines of the early heads and is reminiscent of the head of Nofer in Boston. The front view and the left profile, however, clearly show the more impressionistic tendencies of the later heads.

A major innovation in heads of the later period is the extensive use of plaster by the ancient sculptor to finish and perhaps to alter the limestone surface. The technique is at its best in the colored bust of 'Ankh-haf, in Boston, which has subtle surface modeling as well as traces of a short chin beard made of plaster. In our recently acquired head the technique is used to widen the nose at the sides and to fill out portions of the right side of the face. In thickness the plaster varies from a thin coating near the left eye to the lumpy surface on the right side, but it is difficult to tell where the plaster is used for nuance and where it merely fills out sections that were left unfinished intentionally or that miscarried in the cutting. An interesting analogy occurs in Old Kingdom reliefs in which the carved surface was coated

**Portrait of Princess Iabetet of the IV Dynasty**
*Pelizaeus Museum, Hildesheim*

**A princess of the IV Dynasty. This portrait shows even surface gradations and subtle use of texture. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston**
pression, and the reserve heads may have originated in such a manner. Nevertheless, they soon developed certain traits which cannot be directly observed either in the masks or in sculpture contemporary with them, notably the marked downward slant of the lips in some of the heads, the detailed modeling of the nostrils, and the unusual treatment of the eyebrows. In these details they follow a course between the masks and the prevailing traditions of monumental royal sculpture.

The place of the reserve heads in Egyptian art presents several difficulties. The relatively short period in which they occur and their departures from contemporary sculpture might be taken to indicate that they were only a transitory development. Closer study indicates, however, that they are derived from the best traditions of the late III Dynasty and the IV Dynasty, modified by the more detailed working of the features suggested by the requirements for a strictly funerary portrait. These modifications in style and material distinguish the traits from the prevailing hard stone sculpture, a difference strikingly emphasized by two heads of Nile mud, which are better than some of the late limestone examples.

The heads did not disappear after the beginning of the following dynasty without leaving their mark in artistic tradition, for interest in variation in plane surfaces becomes prominent in a realistic school of sculpture, now dated in the V Dynasty, that includes the well-known scribe in the Louvre. The later sculptors undoubtedly benefited from the experiments of their predecessors in a material easier to work than the stone of monumental sculpture.

It is interesting to note that a number of heads in terracotta and bronze that have the characteristic tilt of the reserve heads have been found at Ile-Ife in Southern Nigeria. The origin and purpose of these more modern African heads is obscure, but it may be that they are a modification of the same primitive idea embodied in the reserve heads. Speaking of another African civilization of the present day, Toynbee has said, "This enclave of exception-

"A plaster mask used to cover the face of the deceased. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston"

"Three-quarters view of the newly acquired head, showing the ancient use of plaster for surface modeling"
ally high native culture cannot be accounted for by immigration. Is it a product of the Egyptian Civilization up the Nile? The radiation of a civilization, like the radiation of star-light, may go on travelling through Space for ages after the body which emitted it has ceased to exist.” These words phrase very nicely one of the many tentative ideas that scholars never quite bring themselves to say. The notion behind the reserve head may have survived almost to our own day.

The accession number of the head is 48.156 and the number of its maṣṭabeḥ at Gizeh 7560.

Dows Dunham and William S. Smith of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston have kindly supplied information from their notes. A useful list of the known reserve heads occurs in Dr. Smith’s History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom, pages 25-27. Illustrations on pages 289-291 are reproduced from the same book and from Dr. Smith’s Ancient Egypt, on page 290 (top) from Professor Junker’s Gīza I. The writer wishes to thank Edith Porada and Walter Federn for suggestions and William Bascom for permission to publish the illustration of the African head shown on this page.

Bronze head found at Ile-Ife in Africa