MEMY-SABU AND HIS WIFE

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When the Steward Memy-Sabu arranged to have statues of himself and his wife walled up in a secret niche in his mastabeh at Gizeh, he hoped that he had secured a pied-à-terre for his spirit “throughout eternity.” But, as one nearby tomb after another was entered and robbed, he must have had his misgivings. We are sure that he would be relieved to know that his statues remained in their original hiding place for well over four thousand years; and that, having been uncovered by urchins throwing stones at an apparently solid wall, they are now safe in New York.

The exact position of Sabu’s tomb cannot be guaranteed, but we have been told that it was at the extreme north edge of the West Cemetery at Gizeh. This great burial ground was originally planned by Khufu as a spirit city for his family and friends, the court which would attend him in the next world as it had done in this. To the east on a rocky spur was his own tomb, the Great Pyramid, dominating the valley below as it did the desert plateau behind. Here streets were laid out and mastabehs built along them for his favorites, each tomb containing statues of the deceased in which his soul could live during its visits to the earth. After Khufu’s death his burial ground continued to be used. Smaller tombs were built in the wide streets and closer to the edge of the plateau. There is no reason to doubt that Sabu’s was one of these.

So far as we know, only two statues were found. One, a seated figure of Sabu’s wife, has been acquired by Mr. Louis Stern. We shall return to it later. The second is now in the Met-

ABOVE: The West Cemetery at Gizeh, looking west from the top of the Great Pyramid. Photograph courtesy of Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
The Steward Memy-Sabu and his wife. Late V or early VI Dynasty, about 2420 B.C. White limestone, originally painted. H. 24 in. Rogers Fund, 1948
Two men and a boy. 'Amārneh period, about 1360 B.C. White limestone, painted. Height 8 in. Rogers Fund, 1911

It is surprising—if we believe the story of the discovery—that so little of the paint with which the statue was originally covered has been preserved. Probably one of the finders thought that it would be improved by a thorough cleaning. We can, however, reconstruct most of the color. The skin of Sabu was painted red-brown, as was usual. His wig and the details around his eyes were black. The eyeballs were probably white, like his wife's, with black centers. The brownish paint was carried over the lips and

ropolitan Museum (see ill.). It represents Sabu and his wife standing side by side, his arm around her shoulders while hers is around his waist. Sabu wears the short, curled wig and the simple skirt pleated in front and tied at the waist which gentlemen of the time affected. His wife's wig is short, parted in the middle and arranged in a multitude of tiny braids. Her own hair shows under it at the middle of the forehead. Her dress is the tight, figure-revealing garment so much admired by the Egyptians.
finger- and toenails. His skirt, or at least the pleated portion of it, appears to have been yellow. The cylindrical object in his right hand still has a trace of red paint.

The lady was given the usual yellow skin and yellow nails, with black hair and eye details. She, like her husband, seems to have chosen a colored garment or one decorated with color, for here and there a little red can still be found. There is no sculptured line to show the upper edge of the dress, but a trace of red marks the shoulder strap. Of the jewelry which she wore only the faintest hint remains. The once gay necklace contained blue-green beads and probably also, like the anklets, red ones picked out in black. No color remains on the left arm, but it is likely that there were once matching bracelets.

The pair stand against a support carved in one with them. This support, wide and firm at the base, narrows gradually as it rises. It is indented above Sabu’s elbow to lighten the amount of stone above the smaller figure.

Seen from the side, the support again tapers towards the top, but stone has been left behind the two figures to strengthen them. The support and base were red, except for the background between the figures and the top of the base, which were gray. (The space between Sabu’s legs was originally red, but was painted over with gray.)

Very little color is left in the inscription. The letter b, however (the second last sign, ꜜ), was yellow.

An interesting feature of this statue is the pose of Sabu and his wife. Only one other example is known of a similar date in which the husband embraces his wife, although the reverse is often the case. It is likely that the reason for this is simply aesthetic. A satisfactory convention had been worked out according to which the wife, slightly shorter than her husband, stood with her shoulder a little behind his. If she were on his left side, as in our statue, her right arm was just long enough to reach around his right shoulder, or perhaps his waist. The shoulders of the couple—the widest part of the statue—were thus brought as close together as possible, while his left arm, hanging at his side, filled the space left by the curve of their waists. The wife often held her husband’s arm affectionately with her own left hand.

The other exception is a statue in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. It was found during that Museum’s excavations at Gizeh in roughly the same part of the cemetery as that from which our statue is said to have come. The two pieces of sculpture are so strikingly similar in every way that it seems likely that they were made in the same workshop, if not by the same man. At any rate they must be contemporary, and we therefore must place ours at the end of the V or the beginning of the VI Dynasty.

However, if the same craftsmen were indeed responsible, it must be admitted that ours was a “second try.” Although both couples are posed in the same way, a simple change has made the arrangement pleasing instead of rather awkward. The Boston lady is nearly as tall as her husband, so that he has had to raise his shoulder (which, as usual, is in front of hers) in order to put his arm around her; his forearm dangles down to her waist. Our sculptor has shortened Sabu’s wife so that the widest part of her body comes opposite the narrow part of her husband’s, thus taking care of the space left by the curve of the waists. More important, Sabu’s arm can pass behind his wife without his shoulder being raised, and only his hand comes over her shoulder. The result is extremely attractive, but was apparently too unconventional to meet with general approval.

Even when the pair represented are of the same sex, the embrace with more than the tips of the fingers showing in front is extremely rare. A second statue in the Museum of Fine Arts is the only other example of this pose known from the Old Kingdom. Here Queen Hetep-heres II, daughter of Khufu and wife of Djedef-reś, embraces her own daughter, Queen Meres-ankh III, her forearm dangling down to the latter’s waist. The little group in the Metropolitan Museum shown on page 97 was made a thousand years later, in the reign of Akhenaten. It is interesting to compare the position of Sabu and his wife with that of the man in the center and the boy. The affectionate, natural attitude was well suited to the new en-
The wife of Memy-Sabu. Late V or early VI Dynasty, about 2420 B.C. White limestone, originally painted. Height 19 in. In the collection of Louis E. Stern

deavor to express “truth.” But the man who carved Sabu and his wife, unconventional as he himself was, would have been shocked at the ideal of the sculptor of ‘Amārneh—the king’s own flabby body, misshapen head, and pouting lips. Neither would he have approved of the use of curved lines to give a feeling of movement. His own ideal has been exemplified in his rendering of Sabu and his wife: the pose, protective but impersonal; the bodies, youthful perfection; the whole impression one of permanence and tranquility.

We now return to the second statue found in the walled-up sirdāb of Sabu’s tomb, which Mr.
Stern has kindly given us permission to photograph and describe (see p. 99). As mentioned above, it represents Sabu’s wife. She is seated looking straight ahead, her hands flat on her knees. The two statues are carved to much the same scale. They are of the same very compact white limestone. Otherwise, were it not for their inscriptions, it would be hard to believe that they come from the same tomb. The interest of our statue lies in its originality, primarily of design and, to a lesser extent, of color. The man who carved Sabu’s wife was able to take a piece of stone, block it out four-square in a completely orthodox fashion, and achieve a work of art which, in its beauty of line, proportion, and modeling represents the best in Egyptian sculpture.

This statue has been even more drastically cleaned than the Museum’s. Originally it had a yellow skin, black hair and eye details, and a conservative white dress. A tiny flake of red at one shoulder points to a necklace. The seat and base were painted black and the hieroglyphs, cut on the upper side of the base, were also black.

The inscription is most unusual in that it mentions Sabu alone, and does not name his wife, whom, after all, the statue is supposed to represent. It is possible that when the moment came for the figures to be walled up in the tomb, no lady had yet been found who was considered worthy of passing eternity by Sabu’s side. At any rate, the inscription reads, “The King’s Grandson,” the Steward Sabu.” The Museum’s statue is labeled, “The King’s Grandson,” Memy-Sabu”—evidently his full name. Unfortunately, it has not been possible to discover anything about this gentleman except what the statues themselves tell us.

The words which we have translated “King’s Grandson” have been much discussed. It is likely that they mean literally, “The One Whom the King Knows.” This is one of the most ancient of Egyptian titles and was an extremely common one at the time Sabu lived. At first it was apparently reserved for actual grandchildren of the king; later it could be inherited, acquired by marriage, or even conferred by royal command. During the first part of the Old Kingdom the highest officials were proud to put “King’s Grandson” directly before their names. At the end of the period the “King’s Grandsons” never held important positions, that of “steward” being typical; so it would seem that the title no longer denoted a connection with the ruling dynasty but rather membership in the older aristocracy—the “new poor.”

As to Sabu’s personality, we can learn nothing from his face, for our statue was evidently complete, except for the inscription, when he chose it. The proportions of the base were decided without taking Sabu’s name and title into consideration, so that the engraver has had difficulty in crowding the last few signs into his space. But we can be sure that he was a man of taste and originality from the very fact that he chose these figures to represent himself and his wife. We like to think, moreover, that if their spirits do indeed visit their likenesses, they are pleased to find themselves in our Second Egyptian Room; and that the kas of the “Royal Grandsons,” Ny-kau-Hor, Re-em-kay, and Pery-nēb, and even of King Šahu-Rē himself, already assembled there, have been delighted to welcome their kinsman Memy-Sabu and his diminutive wife.

The statue of Sabu and his wife has been given the accession number 48.111. The similar statue in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (13.3164a-c) has been published by William Stevenson Smith, A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom, p. 57 and pl. 25f. For the statue of Ḥetep-heres II and Meres-ankh III (30.1456), see op. cit., p. 42 and pl. 16.

The accession number of the group representing two men and a boy is 11.150.21.