One of the many problems that ancient Egypt sets her students is to find out what has become of the statues of King Amenophis III. This pharaoh, who ruled from 1397 to 1360 B.C., at a time when imperial Egypt had reached the fullest extent of her wealth and power in the ancient world, was a more lavish patron of the arts than any earlier or subsequent king. Statistically speaking, there should be a better chance of unearthing a statue of Amenophis III than of any other pharaoh, yet the truth is that only some half dozen sizable specimens are known with unimpeachable inscriptions showing the owner to be indubitably Amenophis III—a poor legacy indeed from a reign in which the larger towns in every part of Egypt must have echoed to the sound of the mason’s pick and scraper.

The huge buildings which Amenophis erected at Thebes to the city god Amun alone are not unimpressive even in their disastrous ruin, and besides his own mortuary temple, a temple at Luxor, and another at Karnak, he probably completed a fourth in the precincts of his great palace on the west bank at Malkata, excavated by the Museum Expedition, 1910–1920. All these buildings were opulently decorated with gold, electrum, and silver. In addition, we read of “numerous royal statues in granite of Elephantine, in quartzite, and in every splendid and expensive stone, established as everlasting memorials and shining in the faces of men like the morning sun.” The temple of Mut, the consort of Amun, which he also built at Thebes, was furnished with nearly six hundred black diorite statues of the lion-headed goddess Sekhmet, who had become identified with Mut in his grandfather’s reign. The Museum collection contains several good examples of these Sekhmet statues, to which we shall refer again later.

It is hardly to be supposed that Amenophis would be any less prodigal in furnishing the statuary for his own mortuary temple, or for the temple at Luxor, which were much bigger structures. Nor was he so obsessed with quantity that he could not spare a thought for size as well. Sculpture on a really enormous scale first dates from his reign. The Colossi of Memnon, as they had come to be called by classical times, which stood in front of his now vanished mortuary temple, are perhaps the most famous of such statues; and when in later years the Ramessides of the XIX Dynasty wanted to impress the world with the extent of their own power and majesty by erecting colossi at every focal point, they found that their thunder had largely been stolen by their predecessor. They returned the compliment by stealing his statues.

When in the season of 1895 Flinders Petrie dug over the ruins of the mortuary temple of King Mer-ne-ptah of the XIX Dynasty (1223–
1211 B.C.) at Gurneh, near the Colossi of Memnon, he found that the earlier temple of Amenophis III had been ruthlessly pillaged to provide stone and even mud brick for the later edifice. The only monument that appeared as though it might have been fashioned originally for Mer-ne-putah was the upper part of a granite statue of the king, which is now in the Cairo Museum (see opposite page), and as it closely resembles the effigy on the sarcophagus lid of Mer-ne-putah, shown on this page, we may accept it as a reliable portrait of that king, but idealistic, of course, in the pharaonic tradition, showing him in his heyday and not as the corpulent, bald-headed old man he was at his death.

From time to time visiting scholars have commented upon the discrepancies between the Cairo portrait and that of the statues of Mer-ne-putah which the Museum obtained in 1922, in exchange for material excavated by its Egyptian Expedition in the previous two seasons (see pp. 116, 117). The Ramessides had the unpleasant habit of chiseling their ugly names on so many of their predecessors’ monuments that it has become almost an instinct among Egyptologists to attribute nearly every Ramesside statue to an earlier king. This inference has been indulged too freely, and so various have been the suggestions offered as to the proper identity of the kings represented in the two Museum statues, from Sobk-hotpe IV and other pharaohs of the late Middle Kingdom to Ramesses II, the father of Mer-ne-putah, that up to the present time it has been considered best to leave the entire question in abeyance.

Most investigators have been baffled by the fact that the inscriptions show no signs of being reworked. They are as crisp and bold as when they were first cut. There are no traces whatsoever of erased signs beneath them, and the polish is uniform on all surfaces of the stone. The belt buckles, moreover, which were such inviting spaces for usurpers to hack their names in, are conspicuously smooth and empty. Only one small incongruity exists to arouse suspicion, and that will be found on the sides of the throne of the larger statue, where the inscriptions are framed by a block border with an “eight-stripe” pattern and surround a panel filled with the symbolic plants of Upper and Lower Egypt twined in union (see p. 118). There is an almost painful contrast between the brutal cutting of the ill-proportioned glyphs and the clean but elegant intaglio of the Union motive, suggesting that the inscription was added by a hand less expert and sensitive. Conversely, the other statue shows no such conflict. The block border is wider and deeper, with a more normal “four-stripe” design, and conforms to the proportions of the hieroglyphs and reveals the same kind of cutting (see p. 117, right). In the face of all this, have we any reasons for doubting that the two statues are what they proclaim themselves to be—the likeness of “the Son of the Sun-god,
Lord of Crowns, Mer-ne-ptah, satisfied-with-Truth”?

The dominant reaction of the writer on seeing the two Museum statues for the first time was that they were undoubtedly of Amenophis III, whose portraits have highly personal features, and he was strongly reminded of two statues of that king in the British Museum in London, which Belzoni found in 1819 on the site of the king’s mortuary temple at Thebes (see pp. 120, 121). As, however, there are those who deny that individual portraiture existed in ancient Egypt, even in royal statuary, some stylistic analyses will be required to supplement this purely subjective appraisal.

In the first place it is necessary to emphasize that these Museum statues are impressive works of art and are to be counted among the chef's d'oeuvre of a department rich in masterpieces of all periods from ancient Egypt. They are hewn out of a warm, flecked gray porphyritic diorite, which has been finished with a restrained surface polish. It is a hard stone, but all the details—the stripes of the nemes wig cover, the drop beads of the necklace, the pattern of the belt, the folds of the kilt—are rendered with a firm, confident precision which is almost the work of a gem-cutter. In the making of the smaller statue, the ancient stone mason has most skillfully excised some flaws and replaced them by mortised inserts of matching stone still in position on the left arm, though the prosthetic portions of the throne are now missing (see opposite page). The contrast between such technical mastery of the material and the perfunctory, often crude workmanship of Mer-ne-ptah’s monuments will be evident, even in the illustrations.

A comparison between the feelings expressed in the different sculptures is even more revealing. The Museum statues are still naturalistic in conception, but the volumetric forms of the limbs and torso have been refined to a more summary statement, in keeping with the idealistic treatment of the portraiture. The total result is a coherent expression of monumental dignity and majesty (see p. 119). In the Cairo statue, on the other hand, the abstract nature of the underlying cylindrical forms of the torso and arms has been more harshly expressed; and the face, despite the common Ramesside attempt to copy the style of Amenophis III, whose only legitimate successors they claimed to be, lacks an inner life, and is but little more than a mask, like the effigy on the sarcophagus lid. The emphasis, in fact, is completely different. While the Museum statues by their artistic and technical excellence belong to an age of high achievement and deep conviction, the Mer-ne-ptah sculptures show quite clearly the decline in standards that occurred during the reign of Ramesses II and
Two views of a smaller statue of Amenophis. The decoration and inscriptions on the side panel of the throne were added by Mer-ne-tpah. The Double Crown originally above the wig cover is now missing. Rogers Fund, 1922

persisted for some generations after him. That the Museum statues were produced in the reign of Mer-ne-tpah is scarcely possible, despite the names they bear. Indeed, the very names have tongues like Caesar’s wounds to tell us that crime has been committed, for it will perhaps be seen how cruelly the large cartouches bite into the shoulders and torso of the Museum statues. The early Ramessides had developed the habit of so branding any statue that took their fancy. Such marks were even imposed upon their own original sculptures, where indeed they seem less discordant.

There are, happily, many stylistic details that often distinguish the sculptures of one pharaoh from those of another. In this case there are several that help to identify the king represented. The large ears of the Cairo statue of Mer-ne-tpah are shown with pierced lobes. Such a fashion occurred sporadically during the reign of Amenophis III but was de rigueur for some generations after him. The wig covers of the Museum statues reveal a gently rounded upper contour without peaks at the corners, with broad equal stripes on the head cloth and narrow striations on the lappets, which have a thin inner border.
Relief on the side of the throne of the statue shown on page 116. The plant motive and borders are contemporary with the statue, while the deeper inscriptions with Mer-ne-p'tah’s name and titles were added later.

This pattern originated under Amenophis III and persisted up to the reign of Sethos I with minor modifications; but under the succeeding king, Ramesses II, the borders of the lappets and the striations both became wider, the latter often being as broadly spaced as the stripes of the head cloth. The Cairo statue has two deep lines beneath the chin representing creases in the neck. The Museum pair lack this feature, which again came gradually into prominence during the reign of Amenophis III and was typical of the Amarna period and later of the Ramessides. But perhaps the most distinguishing detail is the form of the uraeus, which in the Museum examples has the main coils of the cobra lying in an S-shaped pattern behind the hood, fairly high on the head cloth. Under Ramesses II this fashion changed to show the coils lying in an oval arrangement nearer the brow line.

The form of the uraeus and the absence of neck lines and ear perforations, therefore, put our statues squarely into the reign of Amenophis III. Fortunately, too, the portraiture is unmistakable: the long narrow eyes enhanced by prominent cosmetic lines and the double curve along the division of the lips with a slight lift to each corner are peculiar to the statues of this king, as a comparison with the examples in the British Museum will show. The proportions of our statues, with their somewhat top-heavy appearance, are not uncharacteristic of the sculpture of Amenophis III, possibly because they were meant to be viewed from below, and allowance was made for foreshortening.

The London pair, which are also in porphyritic diorite and of comparable dimensions, have the same peculiarities; one is entirely uninscribed, but the other bears the untouched names and titles of Amenophis III and there is happily no doubt about the identity of the sitter. The close parallels between these two statues and our own pair are striking; they even have the same elegant Union motive and unusual eight-stripe block borders carefully incised on the sides of the thrones. The thrones and pedestals of all four statues follow very closely the design of those of the Sekhmet statues in the Museum referred to above. Five of these Sekhmet statues also have the eight-stripe block border and the same type of Union motive; the rest are undecorated. They thus provide valuable information about the condition of other statuary in the temples of Amenophis III towards the end of his reign, since, although evidently placed in position in the Mut temple, they are in different states of completion. One, for instance, still shows signs of the pecking that blocked it out and lacks the final cutting of the details and the rubbing to a smooth finish. Only one is fully complete, being decorated, polished, and inscribed. An examination of these statues incidentally shows that there is no uniformity in the position of the toes in relation to the rounded front edge of the pedestal, some examples having a very narrow margin, as in the case of the larger of our statues of Amenophis III and the London pair, while
Detail of the statue of Amenophis on page 116, showing Mer-ne-ptah's cartouches on the shoulders
Statue of Amenophis III, found on the site of his mortuary temple at Thebes. The front of the throne is inscribed with his name and titles. In the British Museum others have the same wide border that is evident on the smaller Museum statue.

The Sekhmet statues from the Mut temple, like the London pair from the king's mortuary temple, reveal that when the death of Amenophis III presumably stopped all work on his various grandiose schemes, most of the temple sculptures were in position, some were complete in every particular, others wanted their inscriptions, a few lacked both inscriptions and decoration, and one or two were still merely roughed out. Akhenaten, the successor of Amenophis III, was too preoccupied with his own egotistical ventures elsewhere to finish his father's works at Thebes, even if he had had any sympathy for them, and although Tut-ankh-amun later completed for the temple of Amenophis III at Soleb two granite lions that were still lying in the quarry, it seems clear that as late as the reign of Mer-ne-ptah there must have been many statues abandoned on the various sites that offered alluring prizes for any pharaoh unscrupulous or indifferent or impoverished enough to want to commandeer them.

At Luxor the temptation proved irresistible, and Mer-ne-ptah had some of the sculptures removed, presumably from the forecourt of his predecessor's temple at Luxor, and set up at the eastern portal of the court of Ramesses II in the same temple complex. Two of them showed Amenophis III seated. One, on a smaller scale than the other though probably of the same height, represented the king wearing the Double Crown on top of his nemes wig cover and was entirely uninscribed. The larger was also without inscriptions, but the throne already had its Union motive and eight-stripe block border incised on the side panels. The masons of Mer-ne-ptah cut the names and titles of their king unfeelingly in all the usual vacant spaces. Their task was the easier since they had nothing to erase; and they left the belt buckles blank as affording too meager a space in which their clumsy chisels could operate with a full flourish. The facial features of the earlier king were not altered, and his old-fashioned uraeus and unpierced ear lobes were left untouched. Such details did not matter to the ancient Egyptians, very few of whom ever saw their pharaoh in the
flesh anyhow. If a new statue of a ruling king had to be carved then it would be made as near as possible to the official master portrait produced by the court sculptor; but if an earlier statue had to be usurped all that was necessary was to hammer out the old names and chisel in the new and perform certain magic ceremonies upon it in the name of its fresh owner.

Thus while we should not censure Mer-ne-ptah too severely for having put his mark upon another's uninscribed statues, which according to Egyptian ideas were therefore anonymous and impersonal, we need also feel no compunction in restoring their rightful identity to them. The attribution to Mer-ne-ptah, whose troubled reign is distinguished more for military than artistic triumphs, has tended to prejudice the recognition of these two Museum statues for what they really are. Since we should now be free from that particular inhibition, perhaps we can see them as the supreme masterpieces of temple sculpture that they surely are, made at the climax of artistic achievement in the XVIII Dynasty, before the excesses of the Amarna period brought conflict and a certain vulgarity into the pharaonic tradition.

The writer is particularly indebted to his colleague Nora Scott, who some years ago independently reached the conclusion that the Museum statues were possibly made for Amenophis III. From her own photographs, which she generously passed over to him, the illustrations on these two pages have been made.