A SCULPTOR’S SHAWABTY BOX

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Speculation concerning man’s relation to his gods and the problem of the good life and the reward for such a life after death has assumed as many forms as there are peoples and cultures in the heritage of our past. The ancient Egyptians’ approach to these problems as they developed over the four thousand years of their culture appears to us now as confused in detail but comparatively simple in broad outline. They believed quite literally in a life after death which would duplicate their life on the banks of the Nile. With the worship of their large hierarchy of gods and with the elaborate organization of priests to direct the religious ceremonies intended to propitiate these gods, together with a firm belief in the efficacy of magic, they evolved a religious system which changed little in essentials over the long history of dynastic Egypt.

Implicit in their belief that after death one would relive the life on earth is the definite possibility that the sorrows and burdens of life would be experienced as well as its honors and pleasures. This could hardly have been an agreeable prospect, especially for the wealthy and luxury-loving upper classes. By the time of the Middle Kingdom this problem had been felt, and in the New Kingdom certain solutions had been worked out. For instance, in the event that the gods should call upon the deceased in the afterworld to perform his share of the manual labor needed to cultivate the fields or repair the banks of the river—in case he were summoned for any such unpleasant task—he provided in his tomb equipment one or more (as many as 700 have been found in a single tomb) little mumiform figures called shawabtys. Their function was, through potent magic, to become efficiently alert and say “Here I am! I will do it!” when Osiris or one of the other gods of the Underworld called upon him.

The history of the development of the shawabty is a study in itself. From being a minia-

ture replica of the mummy of the dead person encased in a tiny duplicate of his large coffin, it passed through various forms until it became a standard figure, inscribed with the owner’s name, with variants of Chapter VI of the Book of the Dead (a spell transforming such a figure into a useful servant), or oftentimes bearing no inscription at all. Many of the figures carry a hoe in each hand and a basket slung over their shoulders, and when they appear in great numbers in a tomb, there is usually a foreman, wearing a longer garment and holding a whip, for each ten of the regular workers. They are fashioned in wood, stone, faience, or pottery, and many of them are carefully executed and quite beautiful in detail. The run of the mill, however, are usually carelessly made and of no artistic merit.

In the latter half of the XVIII Dynasty and on through the XIX and XX Dynasties shawabtys were often housed in shrine-shaped boxes, either singly or in sets of two to four. A man might provide several of these shawabty shrines for his tomb, as well as chests containing hundreds of the figures. They are usually found in the burial chamber itself along with the Canopic jars and the most important paraphernalia of his burial equipment. They are of wood, covered with a coating of gesso, and are painted in bright colors with figures of the deceased, sometimes accompanied by his wife, with representations of the shawabtys within, with a crouching figure of the jackal god Anubis, or more frequently with the symbolic false doors through which the spirit of the dead man was thought to come and go from his tomb.

The Egyptian Department has recently acquired such a box, which is not only a very interesting example of funerary art at the close of the XIX or the beginning of the XX Dynasty but has the added importance of having belonged to a prominent artist with whom we are fairly well acquainted.
He was Nakht-Amûn, Sculptor in "The Place of Truth" (the royal Theban necropolis) and a member of that small community of skilled artisans and artists who lived at Deir el Medîneh, close by the great cemeteries of the kings and queens on the left bank of the river at Thebes. He was the owner of one of the large and richly decorated tombs (no. 335) which surround the village at Deir el Medineh, and there is every indication that he was one of the leaders and important officials of that closely-knit organization of craftsmen. The French Archaeological Institute, which conducted excavations on this site, completely cleared his tomb, and as it had been already pretty thoroughly plundered both in ancient and modern times, they did not find much of his tomb equipment. In their publication of the tomb an uninscribed shawabty box is listed, as well as fragments of another bearing his name. Our box must have found its way into the hands of dealers before formal excavations were undertaken.

The box, which stands about a foot high, was made to hold two shawabtys, presumably one for Nakht-Amûn and one for his wife, for she sits beside him in the scene on the front panel, the inscription over her head reading, "The House-Mistress, Nub-sha'â'es."

There is nothing particularly unusual about this double portrait. The couple sit side by side, their chairs drawn closely together, her left arm encircling his left shoulder and her right hand clasping his right arm. She is dressed in the graceful, full gown with fringed selavage fash-

![The back of Nakht-Amûn's shawabty box, showing the painted "false doors"

ionable at that period and he in a long skirt knotted about his waist. Her wig is long and curly and is bound at the forehead by a fillet, the ends of which are tied in a bow at the back. Only faint traces remain of the lotus flower fastened in the band at her forehead. She wears the so-called "ceremonial cone" on her head, but strangely enough Nakht-Amûn is shown without it. His short wig frames his face with little curls, giving an impression of youth, which, together with the short and neatly cropped beard and the rather elegant gestures with which he holds the lotus to his face and grasps the handkerchief in his lap, gives a picture of a self-assured, fastidious young man, almost a dandy. It is odd that neither wears any of the jewels they affect in the formal scenes in their tomb. Nakht-Amûn lived to a fairly ripe old age. If the archaeologists have correctly identified his mummy, it is that of an elderly, clean-shaven man of about sixty who evidently had considerable trouble with his teeth, for they were badly worn and decayed! But the Nakht-Amûn and Nub-sha'â'es on the box are depicted in the prime of life and in the guise in which they hoped to live eternally. We can recognize in them a pleasant couple who undoubtedly assumed a position of importance in the social and artistic life of their community.

The manner in which this box is decorated is typical of the late New Kingdom. There is a carelessness of workmanship that is characteristic, as well as a quick sketchiness that adds vivacity to an otherwise decadent style. The fig-
Shawabty box with portrait of Nakht-Amün and his wife, Nub-sha'es. From Nakht-Amün's tomb at Deir el Medineh. Late XIX or early XX Dynasty.
ures and the details of the clothing are outlined in a dark red. The flesh tones are red, Nubsha'ėes being only slightly lighter in shade than her husband. The red splashes on the clothing, which by a modern eye would be explained as an effort to indicate shading in the deep folds of the garments, have been interpreted by some Egyptologists as evidence of the stain of unguents from well-anointed bodies—the ancient Egyptians used oils profusely as would be necessary in a hot, dry climate. The inscription, the wigs, eyes and eyebrows, the chairs, and the band at the bottom of the box are black, all against a background of white, while the framework of the box itself is a dull, muddy yellow. The only details on the front of the box which vary from this general color scheme are the green mat under the chairs and the scarcely visible blue strokes of the lotus petals.

The bands of color making up the false door on the back of the box are painted in the usual alternate stripes of blue, red, blue, green, red, and at the sides and top, in blue, green, blue, against the yellow tone of the framework.

The covers of these shawabty shrines are usually vaulted, following the design of the traditional sanctuary at Buto in the Delta. Here, however, a plain, flat lid is used, although the vault is indicated on the end boards. The usual knobs for fastening with a cord are absent, two holes to receive wooden pins being used instead.

It is interesting to compare the shawabty boxes belonging to Sen-ūdjem and members of his family with this one of Nakht-Amūn. A close contemporary and perhaps even a colleague of Nakht-Amūn, he also owned one of the large tombs at Deir el Medineh. This tomb was cleared in the latter part of the last century, and the coffins and funerary equipment sold to the Metropolitan Museum by the Egyptian Government in 1886 were among the first items accessioned in the Egyptian collection. Two boxes from this group are illustrated here and a shawabty of Sen-ūdjem himself from a similar shrine on page 212. In these boxes we have the typical vaulted lid and the knobs around which the closing cord was tied and sealed. But it is obvious to the most casual observer that, except for slight variations, these boxes all follow a similar pattern.
Of the two men, Nakht-Amün seems to have held the more exalted position. Whereas Senenmut's principal title was "Servitor in the Place of Truth," Nakht-Amün lists, besides this, an imposing series of titles in his tomb—"Draughtsman of Amün," "Sculptor of the Lord of the Two Lands (the reigning pharaoh)," "Sculptor in the Place of Truth," "We'bt-priest of the Lord of the Two Lands, Amun-hotpe I (the patron saint of the Theban Necropolis and of this community of artists at Deir el Medineh)," and elaborations on all of these. Of all the titles, that of "Sculptor in the Place of Truth" is evidently the most important in his eyes and the only one he chose to inscribe on the shawabty shrine in our collection. It is, indeed, his professional title and the measure of his success in a long career.

Perhaps a brief explanation of the unique situation of this specialized group of artists and artisans who were employed in the construction and decoration of the royal tombs in the Theban Necropolis and a sketch of the history of their town at Deir el Medineh will give a clearer picture of what being a "Sculptor in the Place of Truth" really meant.

After many years of excavation at Deir el Medineh, both in the village and in the complex of tombs surrounding it, the French Archaeological Institute has been able to give us a pretty clear story of the site. Thout-mosé I, early in the XVIII Dynasty, was responsible for the foundation of the village, he being the first to use the Valley of the Kings for his tomb. The little, closed valley of Deir el Medineh was ideal for the purpose of housing the workers needed for the construction of his secret project as it is hardly a twenty minutes' walk from his tomb and a location easily policed and invisible from the right bank of the Nile.

It is thought that these first artisans were little more than slaves, many of them of foreign extraction, to judge from their names, and that they were virtual prisoners in their walled
town, under close surveillance as they came and went from their work back in the cliffs. However, as the Valley of the Kings to the north and the Valley of the Queens to the south became the fashionable royal burial grounds, many more skilled workers were needed to construct the large and lavishly decorated tombs. So the village grew, fostered by succeeding pharaohs, and except for the brief respite when most of the workers seem to have followed Akh-en-Aten to el ‘Amârneh, it flourished until the end of the XX Dynasty. With its growth and the increased scope of its function, came a high degree of organization among the workers, precedent and rank forming the basis of a social pattern not dissimilar, though on a much simpler scale, to that of the luxurious courtly life across the river. There were masons and stonecutters, designers and engravers, painters, sculptors, and architects (important more or less in this order), and each category of workers seems to have been organized into its own little brotherhood with its religious cults and chapels and lay priests. Professional skills were passed from father to son to grandchildren, until it seems to one studying the large tombs of the prominent families of the XIX and XX Dynasties that everyone is related to everyone else and that all are in the same “line” of the profession, so to speak. For instance, Nakht-Amûn’s great-grandfather, grandfather, and father were all either “Draughtsmen” or “Sculptors in the Place of Truth,” and pictured in Nakht-Amûn’s tomb is an array of brothers, nephews, and cousins, to say nothing of the relations-in-law, all of whom seem to have achieved high recognition in their profession. One of Nakht-Amûn’s older brothers, Nefer-ḥotep, rose to great prominence—he was actually “Chief of all the Workers in the Place of Truth,” the highest honor possible in this closed corporation of workers.

We can hardly begrudge Nakht-Amûn his justifiable pride in his career, and we can be pleased for him as well as for ourselves that his shawabty shrine has survived the ages to form a part of our collection.

The shawabty box of Nakht-Amûn is accessioned under the number 47.139; those from the tomb of Sen-nûdjem, under 86.1.14 and .16; Sen-nûdjem’s shawabty, 86.1.22.

On the tomb of Nakht-Amûn at Deir el Medineh, see B. Bruyère in Fouilles de l’Institut français d’archéologie oriental du Caire, vol. iii (1926); on the village, ibid., vol. xvi (1939).