

EGYPTIAN ART
IN THE AGE OF
THE PYRAMIDS

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART

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THE PYRAMIDS

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ROYAL STATUARY

KRZYSZTOF GRZYMSKI

Statues of Egyptian rulers form a unique category, separate from that of the members of the royal family, nobles, and ordinary human beings. When admiring the superior workmanship and artistry of Old Kingdom royal statuary, we must keep in mind that Egyptian art was not made for purely aesthetic purposes but was in fact primarily functional. The royal statues had a specific role: to make manifest the position of the ruler in Egyptian society. The king was the key element of the society, not because of the political power of his office but because of his centrality to Egyptian ideology and religion. Without a king there would be no society to speak of, no state, no order; there would be only chaos. Any Old Kingdom pharaoh could state “l'État, c'est moi” with far more justification than Louis XIV.

The exact nature of the king and kingship in Egypt is an often-discussed issue. While some scholars stress the divine character of Egyptian kingship, others emphasize its human aspect.¹ There are few literary sources that give an Egyptian account of the character of kingship. Thus, scholars attempt to define Egyptian kingship through study of royal iconography, whether in sculpture, painting, or relief, with literary and religious texts providing some elucidation of symbolism and conventions. At the very least the king had a semidivine, superhuman status and acted as an intermediary between the gods and humankind. One is tempted to see the royal statue serving the same cultic function as did any other statue of a divinity. However, among the preserved Old Kingdom sculptures royal statues outnumber statues of gods by a wide margin. Moreover, most of the known royal statuary comes from mortuary temples and is therefore an expression of the cult of the deceased king and not of the living ruler. In this context it is often not clear whether a royal statue depicts a divine king, the embodiment of Osiris, ruler of the netherworld, or whether it simply represents the king's ka.²

Whatever the relationship between the divine and human aspects of the king, it is almost certain that the

office itself, rather than the individual, was considered divine.³ An Egyptian royal sculpture was not an exact representation of a particular human being but a depiction of the divine aspects of an individual who held the highest office. Such sculptures did, however, often display elements unique to a particular king, distinguishing him from his predecessors and successors. The ruling pharaoh was the image of a god on earth; the statue embodied this fact and therefore legitimized the ruler's exalted status. Certain conventions and symbols were used when depicting the king. The workmanship had to be of superior quality, and the pose, regalia, and choice of material and color all had symbolic meaning. Interestingly, the Egyptian royal sculptures seem to appeal to the modern viewer more than any other sort of Egyptian art. These three-dimensional figures, despite such peculiarities as the use of so-called negative space and back pillars, are highly realistic to our eyes. The inimitably Egyptian depiction of the body in two-dimensional relief, which strikes some modern viewers as awkward, is not a factor here.

Depictions of statues on First Dynasty seal impressions and stone vessels indicate that the Egyptians produced royal statuary from the beginning of their civilization.⁴ Early textual evidence confirms that royal statues, particularly of copper or gold, were manufactured in the Archaic and Old Kingdom Periods. Interestingly, almost all of the statues referred to in the texts were made for the temples of various gods and not for the mortuary complexes that are the source of most of the known examples. Royal funerary statues are, however, mentioned in at least one Old Kingdom text, from the famous Abusir papyri (cat. no. 117), which refers to a festival honoring royal statues of the deceased pharaoh.

None of the Old Kingdom royal statues bears the signature of a sculptor, except perhaps for one from the time of Djoser.⁵ It is generally, albeit incorrectly, assumed that Egyptian artists worked anonymously. In fact, the names of several artists, including sculptors, were preserved in

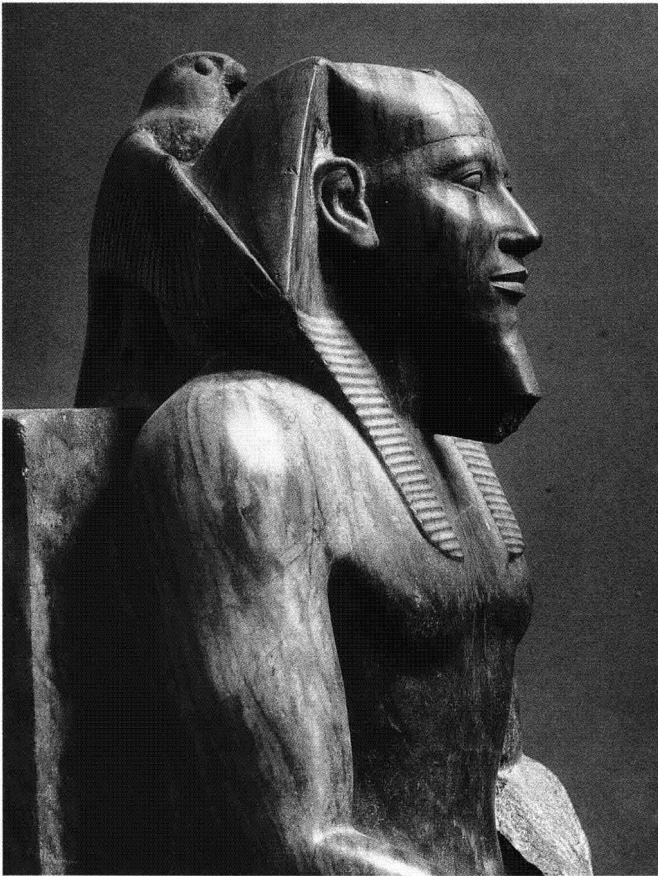


Fig. 28. Detail, Khafre Seated with the Horus Falcon behind His Head. Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 14

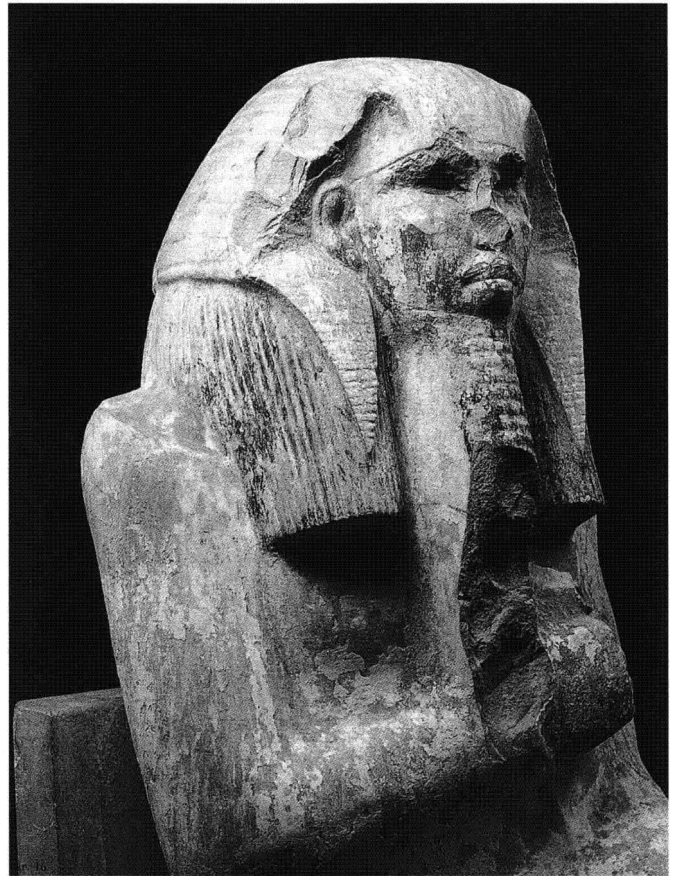


Fig. 29. Detail, Djoser Seated. Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE 6008

the paintings and reliefs that served as tomb decorations. Some of these scenes depict the actual making of sculptures, thus allowing art historians to reconstruct the production process and techniques used by the Egyptians.⁶ George Reisner's discovery of a group of unfinished stone statuettes of King Menkaure prompted him to posit eight stages of production, beginning with the pounding of the block with a stone to create the figure's general shape, followed by stages involving rubbing, sawing, and drilling, and ending with the final polishing. Although the canon of proportions certainly existed during the Old Kingdom, there is no evidence of the use of a square grid at that time.⁷ The chief artist simply indicated the guiding lines and points in red paint for his assistants and apprentices. These lines from the early stages of production are preserved on the Menkaure figures (cat. no. 73).

The Old Kingdom royal statues were made in a variety of materials: ivory, wood, limestone, quartzite, Egyptian alabaster, graywacke, anorthosite gneiss, gabbro gneiss, and granite. The choice of material may have had

symbolic and religious significance, although this remains an open question. The examples most often cited to establish such meaning were the royal statues of Djedefre. The magnificent head of this king (cat. no. 54) and almost all the other sculptures of him were made of red quartzite quarried at Gebel Ahmar, not far from Heliopolis, the principal sanctuary of the sun god Re. The growing importance of the cult of the sun god, evident in the name of the king himself, makes this association between the solar cult and the choice of material plausible. The same material was also frequently used to depict another Egyptian sun king, the New Kingdom pharaoh Amenhotep III.⁸ Red granite, popular with the Fifth Dynasty pharaoh Niuserre, may also be connected with the solar cult. Problems arise, however, in identifying the symbolic and religious significance of other stones whose use was not limited to royal or even private statuary but extended to stone vessels and palettes. Perhaps the ease of crafting the statues from limestone and graywacke was a primary consideration when selecting these materials.

The Cairo Khafre (fig. 28) is the best-known anorthosite gneiss sculpture, but many others were made for this pharaoh (cat. no. 61) and for Sahure (cat. no. 109). The choice of anorthosite gneiss, often incorrectly called “Chephren’s [that is, Khafre’s] diorite,” is puzzling. Found in a distant Nubian quarry, it is hard to work and only moderately attractive. However, it has a rare optical property—it glows in sunlight. Its deep blue glow, caused by the presence of the iridescent mineral bytownite, was noticed by geologists visiting the quarry. This quality is not evident in the artificial light of a museum and therefore went unremarked by scholars until recently. Now, however, it has been suggested that this blue glow, visible in the desert sunlight, attracted Egyptians to the material.⁹ Interestingly, art historians frequently mentioned the “radiant” facial expression of Khafre’s statues, a term that now seems to refer to the physical properties of the stone itself. One could speculate that this blue radiance signifies the celestial connection and association with the cult of Horus. It must be remembered, however, that many statues, and almost certainly all the limestone sculptures, were either partially or completely covered by paint, thus veiling the material’s possible symbolic and religious content.

Whatever the material, a number of attributes separated the image of a king from that of a mere mortal. Among these are formal headdresses such as the white crown of Upper Egypt (cat. no. 63), the red crown of Lower Egypt (cat. no. 62), and the *nemes*, the traditional royal head cover (cat. no. 170). These may be enhanced by the attachment of the uraeus, the royal cobra, to the front of the headdress (the earliest sculptural examples of the uraeus date to the reign of Djedefre). In the few instances in which the king wears a simple wig, the uraeus distinguishes him from private individuals. Often the king is depicted with cosmetic lines at the outer corners of his eyes, a feature also found on nonroyal sculptures. Sometimes a royal false beard is shown attached to the chin by a strap. The king may hold one or more of the symbols of his earthly power, among them a flail, a crook, and a mace. It was technically difficult to represent such long, thin objects, and the artists used short, round forms variously interpreted as either symbolic representations of a staff or simply as handkerchiefs. The dress of an Old Kingdom pharaoh was simple. Sculpted images show the king wearing either the knee-length robe associated with the Heb Sed or the characteristic tripartite kilt known as a *shendyt*. The king is shown naked in only two Sixth Dynasty representations, in which he appears as a child.

The repertoire of kingly postures was limited. Seven different poses can be identified:¹⁰

1. Standing with feet together (Djoser’s Osiris-like figure at Saqqara)
2. Striding with left foot advanced and usually with both arms hanging and fists clenched (cat. no. 67)
3. Sitting on a throne or a block and wearing either the kilt, with the left hand placed on the knee and the right hand in a fist vertically on the thigh (cat. no. 109), or the Heb Sed robe, with one or both arms crossed over the chest and usually holding the regalia
4. Appearing as a sphinx (cat. no. 171)
5. Appearing as part of a group sculpture, accompanied either by a deity or by the principal queen (cat. no. 67), or as a pseudogroup, that is, a double statue of the king (Staatliche Sammlung Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich, AS 6794)
6. Kneeling and presenting a pair of *nu* pots (cat. no. 170)
7. Squatting with one hand held to the mouth.

The first five attitudes date from the early phases of the Old Kingdom; the last two are known only from Sixth Dynasty examples.

Identification of materials, attributes, and attitudes deepens our understanding of iconography, stylistic changes, and dating. More than four decades have passed since the publication of the last great syntheses of Old Kingdom art.¹¹ During this period previously unknown royal statues have come to light either through museum acquisitions from private collections or through archaeological excavations. This new material revived interest in the art of the Pyramid Age, and recent years have seen the publication of several monographs discussing the royal sculpture of the First to the Third Dynasty, the Fourth Dynasty, and the Sixth Dynasty.¹² The discovery of Fifth Dynasty statues of King Neferefre in 1984¹³ and the 1997 publication of Old Kingdom sculpture at the Louvre¹⁴ added yet more works to the corpus of royal statuary. Since most of these royal representations are well provenanced and therefore attributable to individual rulers, their study has increased knowledge of the stylistic and iconographic elements typical of a given period or dynasty. The dating and attribution of unprovenanced objects have been facilitated to a degree, but differences of opinion about individual pieces will continue, given our reliance on personal experience and instinct in assessing works.

Only four royal statues are presently known from the Archaic Period, which includes the first two dynasties. One, a faience figurine of Djer, was found at Elephantine;¹⁵ three others, an ivory figurine of an unidentified king and two stone statues of the Second Dynasty king Khasekhemui, were excavated at Abydos. The feet from a pair of wood statues excavated at Saqqara, possibly of King Qaa, should perhaps be added to this list.¹⁶ Third Dynasty royal statuary, especially that of Djoser, is better represented in the corpus of pharaonic sculpture. The famous seated limestone statue from the serdab of the Step Pyramid at Saqqara (fig. 29) shows the king dressed in a Heb Sed robe; a large wig surmounted by a *nemes* frames his broad face, with its high cheekbones, large ears, wide mouth, and long beard. The sense of heavy, somber majesty is striking. The unfinished pillar-statue of the standing Djoser, still in the festival court at Saqqara, also has a broad face and a long beard, but because of the shape of its wig it is more reminiscent of the early divine images in Brooklyn (cat. no. 10) and Brussels¹⁷ than of the serdab statue. Fragments of other statues of Djoser are also known, some identified only recently in the site magazine. Two magnificent early royal portraits—the oldest surviving colossal head of a king from the Brooklyn Museum (cat. no. 21) and a small limestone head from Munich (cat. no. 34)—can be dated to the end of the Third Dynasty or to the early Fourth Dynasty. In both, the round full face, the undefined eyebrows, and broad nose are similar to features of the ivory figurine of Khufu from Abydos that is now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 36143), while the depth of the crown and the cupped ears are reminiscent of the Khasekhemui statues. Whether the Brooklyn and Munich heads depict Huni, Snefru, or even Khufu remains an open question. Together with the figurine of Khufu, they form a stylistic group that documents the transition from one dynasty to another.

The earliest undisputed examples of Fourth Dynasty royal sculpture are the two broken statues of Snefru discovered at Dahshur, one of which is now on display in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.¹⁸ They mark the birth of a new style in Egyptian sculpture, known by the German term *Strenger Stil* (severe style), which emphasizes sharpness, strength, and simplicity of form rather than expressiveness of subject. Except for the two images of Snefru, all other examples of this style fall into the class of non-royal statuary.

The royal portraits of Snefru's successors vary in number. Ironically, the visage of Snefru's son Khufu, who built the Great Pyramid at Giza, is known from only one

small statuette, while that of his little-known successor, Djedefre, whose pyramid at Abu Rawash lies in ruins, is represented by numerous statues. The portraits of Djedefre in red quartzite show a characteristically bony and angular face with prominent cheekbones and a strong jaw evincing strength and determination. In the Louvre head (cat. no. 54), among the greatest masterpieces of Egyptian art, this force is tempered by a certain resigned wisdom expressed in the pouches under the eyes and tensed muscles at the corners of the mouth.

Most surviving royal images of the Fourth Dynasty date to Djedefre's successors Khafre and Menkaure and were found during excavations of their temples at Giza. A statue of Khafre protected by Horus in the shape of a falcon and group statues of Menkaure (fig. 28; cat. nos. 67, 68) are among the greatest art objects ever created. The sculptors who made these royal images remain anonymous to us. However, differences in treatment of the physiognomies of the two pharaohs are easily recognizable, as are differences among images of the same ruler, suggesting that there were at least two and probably more sculpture schools or ateliers. Sorting out these styles is problematic; opinions differ and ultimately the decision rests with the viewer. The choice of material may have an important bearing on this matter. The limestone image of Khafre (cat. no. 62) is quite different from Khafre's graywacke head in Leipzig (1946). The latter has some resemblance, however superficial, to the head of Djedefre in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo (JE 35138-Suez S 10), but it also has the wide face, soft cheeks, and serene expression of the gneiss statues of Khafre (fig. 28; cat. no. 61). Likewise, the fleshy round nose, full cheeks, and faint smile appear in all depictions of Menkaure,¹⁹ but the alabaster portraits of this king have such distinctively prominent eyeballs (cat. no. 70) that at least one has been thought to portray another pharaoh, Menkaure's successor, Shepseskaf.

The attribution of most Fourth Dynasty sculpture was based on inscriptions or archaeological context. This information is rarely available for Fifth Dynasty royal statuary, perhaps the least homogenous group of all the Old Kingdom assemblages. Userkaf, the first king of the Fifth Dynasty, is known from a colossal head found at his temple at Saqqara (cat. no. 100). The attribution to this ruler of other portraits, including an example in the Cleveland Museum of Art and one found at Abusir, is often based on their similarities to heads of Menkaure. Using this criterion, one could also assign two other statues (Louvre, Paris, AF 2573, and Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE 39103) to Userkaf or another early Fifth

Dynasty ruler. The group statue of Sahure (cat. no. 109), whose identity is assured by its inscription, also continues the traditions of Fourth Dynasty artists, and it has even been redated, albeit unconvincingly, to the reign of Khafre.²⁰

Statues of the later Fifth Dynasty pharaohs Neferefre and Niuserre form the bulk of the corpus of Fifth Dynasty royal portraits. A statuette of Neferefre showing the king wearing a wig and protected, like the Khafre mentioned above, by the falcon-headed Horus,²¹ has a rare feature: the limbs were carved in the round. The six known statuettes of Neferefre were made in a variety of materials and show different attitudes and attributes but have common traits, such as the roundness of the face, the shape of the eyes, and the modeling of the nasolabial furrows. In three statuettes the king holds a mace, a royal symbol that rarely appears in sculpture. The head of a statuette in Brussels²² may also be identified as that of Neferefre. Niuserre is known from five remarkably similar statues: all show the king wearing the *nemes*, and all but one are made of red granite, the exception being the calcite pseudogroup in Munich, the only Old Kingdom double statue of a king. Three other royal portraits of unidentified kings (Athens, L120; Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Berlin, 14396; Egyptian Museum, Cairo, JE 39103) may be attributed to the Fifth Dynasty, although different dates have also been proposed. The only attributable image of the later kings of this dynasty is a small and possibly unfinished statuette of Menkauhor (Egyptian Museum, Cairo, CG 40).

A recent study by Romano of the fourteen securely identified and eleven undated statues of the Sixth Dynasty found that many (for example, cat. no. 170) show an “exaggeration of details including wide, piercing eyes and thick everted lips, bodies with unnaturalistically attenuated torsos, and long thin arms with little trace of musculature.”²³ These characteristics are typical of the so-called Second Style, first identified in private sculpture.²⁴ Romano has also noted that while many individual details appeared in earlier periods, the combination of them is new. An example of this innovative use of iconographic details is the placement of the Horus falcon on the back pillar of an alabaster statue of Pepi I, where it serves both as a sculpted hieroglyph of the royal name and as the protector of the pharaoh (Brooklyn Museum of Art, 39.120).

The representation of queens is beyond the scope of this essay, but it may be worthwhile to note the gradual elevation of the queen from a small and subservient

figure on one of Djedefre’s statues, to an equal partner of Menkaure, and finally to the embodiment of Isis protecting her son, Horus, in the statue of Ankh-nes-meryre II with her son Pepi II (cat. no. 172).²⁵

Generally speaking, the royal statuary of the Old Kingdom shows the same characteristic elements known from the private statuary, such as cubic form emphasized by placing the subject on a base and using a back pillar to support the figure. Art historians have noted that the best Old Kingdom sculptures are slightly asymmetrical in such details as the placement of the ears and the execution of eyes or lips. In fact, one could posit that all the statues are asymmetrical because of the forward stride of the left foot and the different positions of hands or other body parts or attributes. Indeed, axiality and frontality rather than symmetry characterize Egyptian sculpture. This exhibition presents a unique opportunity to study these and other aspects of the historical and stylistic development of Egyptian royal sculpture, which was one of Egypt’s most important contributions to our civilization.

1. Frankfort 1948; Posener 1960; Wildung 1980b; Baines 1995.
2. Helck 1966, p. 40.
3. Goedicke 1960, pp. 3–6.
4. Eaton-Krauss 1984, pp. 89–94.
5. Lauer 1996.
6. Smith 1946, pp. 350–60.
7. Robins 1994, p. 64.
8. Kozloff and Bryan 1992, p. 133.
9. Harrell and Brown 1994, pp. 54–55.
10. Reisner 1931, pp. 123–25; Romano 1998. I would like to express my gratitude to Dr. Romano for placing at my disposal the galley proofs of his article prior to its publication.
11. Smith 1946; Vandier 1958; see also Altenmüller 1980b, cols. 557–63.
12. Sourouzian 1995; Stadelmann 1995b; Romano 1998.
13. Verner 1994a; Verner 1995.
14. Ziegler 1997a.
15. Dreyer 1986, pp. 101–2.
16. Sourouzian 1995, pp. 133–40.
17. Wildung 1972.
18. Fakhry 1961b, pls. 33–37; Stadelmann 1995b, pp. 164–66.
19. In this respect the facial expression on the so-called Mycerinus (Menkaure) head at Brussels (cat. no. 69), with its upwardly turned mouth, differs from other graywacke portraits of that king; see Gilbert 1961; and Tefnin 1988, pp. 18–19.
20. Seidel 1996, pp. 51–53.
21. Verner 1985a; Verner 1994a, pp. 143–48.
22. No. E.7117; Tefnin 1988, pp. 20–21.
23. Romano 1998, p. 269.
24. Russmann 1995a.
25. A discussion of nine statues of Old Kingdom royal women was recently published by Fay (1998).