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Cover. *The Assumption of the Virgin*, 1650, Guercino, Italian (1591-1666); oil on canvas, 118-3/4 x 87 in. Josephine and Ernest Kanzler Founders Fund and Robert H. Tannahill Fund (71.1).

# AN OLD KINGDOM TOMB WALL

By William H. Peck

The Egyptian collection of the Detroit Institute of Arts has been enriched recently by the acquisition, through a generous contribution of the McGregor Fund, of a nearly complete tomb wall from a chapel dedicated to the memory of an official of the Fifth Dynasty (2494-2345 B.C.) named Mery-nesut (Figure 1). Found early in this century by the Harvard University–Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition in one of the Old Kingdom cemeteries at Giza, it comes to Detroit through a purchase agreement with the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston!

The tomb wall provides Detroit with its first example of ancient architecture of large scale. It is further distinctive in that it has been properly excavated, recorded, and preserved. All too often objects from antiquity which have found their way into museums have no such history and therefore cannot be totally studied and understood? The following article by Henry G. Fischer, Wallace Curator in Egyptology at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, treats the wall's text in detail. The intent of this article is to discuss the chapel wall's provenance, design, and decoration.

The great pyramids of the Old Kingdom have fascinated every subsequent age as visual symbols of the amazing power achieved by the pharaohs, for whom they were built as monuments and tombs. This tradition was fully developed by the Fourth Dynasty (2613-2494 B.C.) and culminated at Giza with the pyramids of Cheops, Chefren, and Mycerinus. They were not erected as isolated structures in the desert but were part of a vast funerary district, including temples and other ceremonial buildings, as well as a multitude of smaller tombs for members of the royal family and the aristocracy, creating a veritable "city of the dead." The visitor to Giza is overwhelmed by the size and scale of the pyramids and, arranged around them, the orderly streets of vast cemeteries necessary to accommodate all the members of the nobility who wished to be near their rulers in death as they had been in life.

The small chapel of Mery-nesut came from a tomb (number G 1301) less than half a mile

west of the pyramid of Cheops, at the northern edge of the Western Cemetery at Giza<sup>3</sup> It was built with a number of similar structures against the east wall of an earlier and larger *mastaba* tomb (G 1233). The name of the owner of tomb G 1233 is not known; no record of it was found. The Detroit wall was the west wall of the chapel of Mery-nesut (Figures 2 and 3). With the exception of some objects, which are discussed in the following article, it was the tomb's only decoration<sup>4</sup>

The word *mastaba*, used to designate the tomb type popular in the Old Kingdom, is an Arabic word meaning "bench." It was first applied to these mud brick or stone structures because of their supposed resemblance to the mud brick benches still found in front of modern Egyptian houses. The *mastaba* tomb evolved from the beginning of the dynastic period as a type of superstructure over the actual burial structure. It marked and protected the tomb shaft, and served as a place to contain the chapel, or chapels, necessary to the funerary cult. While tombs of the Fifth and Sixth Dynasties display a great amount of variety in the actual arrangement and number of rooms or chapels, Egyptian religious beliefs required that at least one location be selected for placement of offerings for the deceased. The west wall of the chapel from Mery-nesut's tomb is an example of the decoration of such an area.

Tombs of the Fifth Dynasty often included depictions of the deceased overseeing the various activities for which they had been responsible, as well as processional scenes of the bringing of offerings for the tombs. The figurative decorations on the Detroit chapel wall include two representations of the deceased before funeral meals, a "false door," and an elaborate "palace facade."

Most important is the sunken relief representing the deceased and his wife on the far left hand side of the wall (Figure 4). They both occupy the same backless chair, which has only one leg visible, the front leg presumably hidden by those of the deceased. The back leg has taken on the shape of a hoofed animal

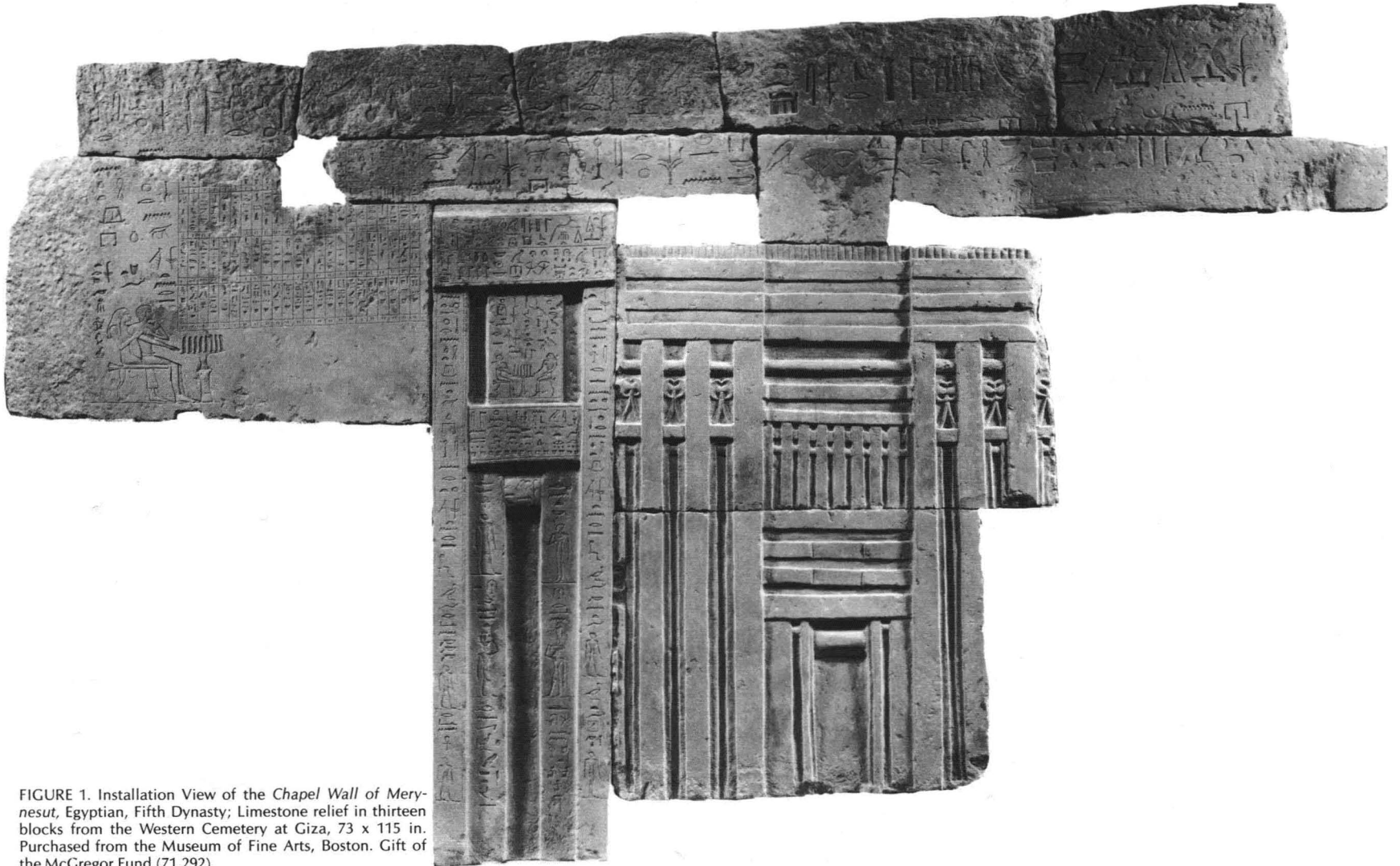


FIGURE 1. Installation View of the *Chapel Wall of Merynesut*, Egyptian, Fifth Dynasty; Limestone relief in thirteen blocks from the Western Cemetery at Giza, 73 x 115 in. Purchased from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of the McGregor Fund (71.292).



limb, a frequent feature in Old Kingdom furniture design<sup>5</sup> More curious is the “palm capital” motif at the top of the leg, which suggests handles known from carrying chairs or litters.<sup>6</sup> Mery-nesut assumes a formal posture with his left hand clasped on his breast and his right arm extended toward the table. His wife sits behind him, embracing him with one hand on his left shoulder and the other on his right arm. One could interpret this gesture as either urging him to partake of the repast or cautioning him to be moderate?

Mery-nesut and his wife are shown in standard fashion, shoulders and torso seen from the front, head and lower part of the body in profile. He wears a wig composed of overlapping locks and a short beard denoting nobility.<sup>8</sup> His only garment is an undecorated kilt. His wife’s long wig falls before and behind her near shoulder, and she is dressed in a sheath-like garment, which almost reaches her ankles. The neckline of this garment is not indicated, but the emphatic hem at the lady’s ankles suggests that she is properly clothed.

The tableau of the deceased before the funerary table must have been one of the most important elements in Old Kingdom tomb decoration, since no tomb seems complete without it, and in many instances it is repeated a number of times in a single tomb. Here, the same scene can be found again as a part of the “false door” but with a slightly different format (Figure 5). In this smaller composition the couple face each other across the table, which also varies slightly from the table in the larger scene. In the larger composition the table seems to consist of two parts, a small unit which could have been used while sitting on the floor, and a stand to raise it to the height required for those seated on a chair.<sup>9</sup> In the smaller relief the table is not so carefully designed. While it is not uncommon to see varying forms in a chapel, it is a bit unusual to find two different treatments of the same subject in such close proximity.

The Egyptians believed that the inclusion of a “false door,” a carved niche before which the actual offerings were placed, made it possible for the deceased to make use of the ritual offerings left for him. It is usually carved in imitation of an actual entrance, with recessed jambs, and decorated with depictions of the deceased, his wife, and family. Most “false doors” were decorated with the important portrayal of the owner enjoying a funeral meal, and with texts asking for the protection of the

gods and the continuation of offerings necessary for the next life. The inscriptions also mention the institution of an endowment to insure future tomb rituals. Simple statements about the tomb owner and his family often provide enough information for a partial reconstruction of his genealogy.

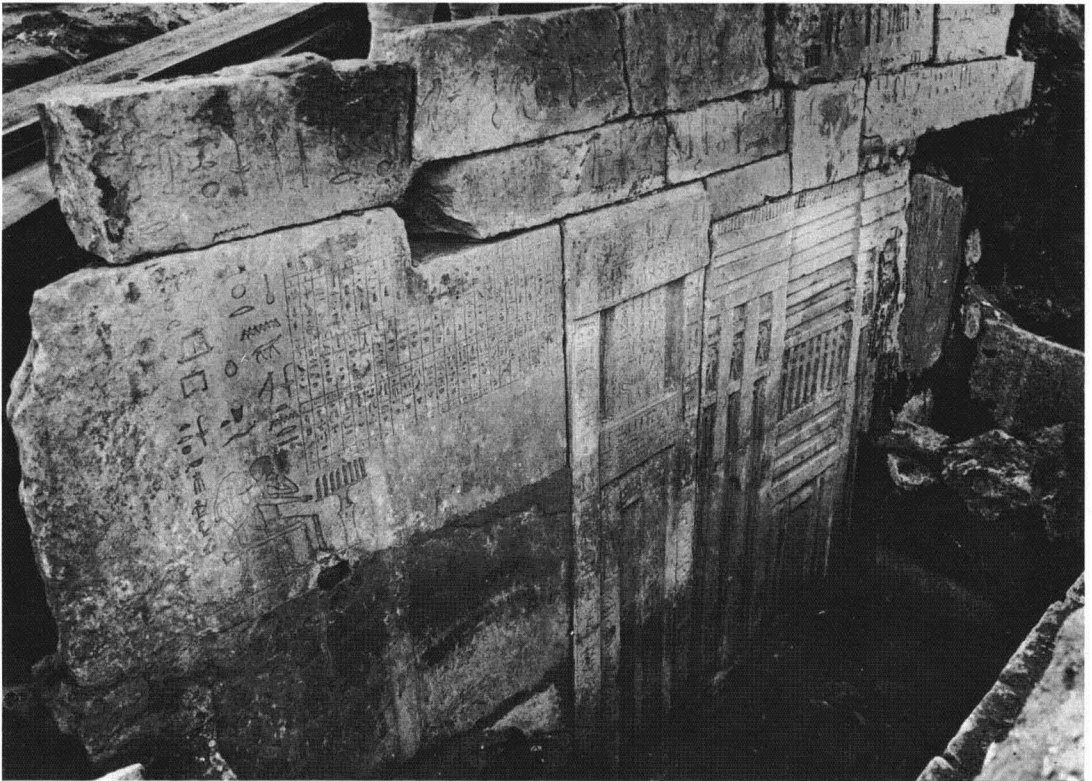
The “palace façade,” or elaborate architectural decoration in relief on the right of the wall (Figure 6), is a motif often found on tomb walls or on the exterior of stone sarcophagi. Its prototype might have been the recessed paneling of the exteriors of early dynastic tombs built of mud brick, but laced wood paneling has also been suggested.<sup>10</sup> The “palace façade” includes a door topped by a cylinder or drum, which simulates the rolled-up reed matting used to close doors. Above this is a barred clerestory window, which would have lit the dark interior of the structure. The entire image suggests the façade of a palace or fortress with towers flanking a small doorway.

The large missing area on the right which interrupts the “palace façade” design seems to have been cut away in antiquity. Since the smaller *mastabas* were built in clusters around the larger and earlier structures, it was sometimes necessary to make changes in order to provide passageways from one chamber to the next. This might explain the reason for the missing areas of this wall. The present museum installation does not attempt to simulate the lost portions of the palace façade design, since we have no way of knowing exactly what is missing. George A. Reisner, the archeologist who excavated the portion of the necropolis at Giza in which our tomb wall was located, believed that there had been a second “false door” at the far right.<sup>11</sup> The missing areas at the left are due in part to the excavator’s decision not to take up shipping space with blocks that were completely uninscribed.

While the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the wall are made up of the same characters, the treatment of details varies according to relative size (Figure 7). The largest inscription naturally has the most detail, and the smallest, the offering list at the left, has the least, indicating the engraver’s concern that the text fit a set space and yet remain readable. In the “false door,” particularly, the carving of individual characters, especially the animals and birds, reveals a great concern for descriptive detail. It is doubtful that the wall was ever painted. Neither the relief carvings nor the inscriptions reveal any indica-



FIGURE 2. View of the *Chapel Wall of Mery-nesut* during the excavation. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.



66 FIGURE 3. Oblique view of the *Chapel Wall* during the excavation. Photograph courtesy of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

tions of color. The amount of detail in the carvings also makes the use of color unlikely. The only variation from the natural limestone's tone is in areas where stucco was used to make repairs.<sup>12</sup>

The general layout of the thirteen blocks which comprise the wall suggests that some areas, such as the "false door," were carved before they were put into place. Other parts, such as the offering lists which takes up part of three blocks, probably were done after the wall was erected. In the large horizontal inscription, the joins were originally hidden with mortar and the characters carved on what seemed to be a continuous surface. The apparent lack of concern for straight courses of stone may come as a surprise to those believing ancient Egyptian

construction to be geometrically perfect in all respects. In fact, the more normal stone construction throughout most of Egyptian history utilized uneven heights of blocks rather than standardized units. Perhaps this can be explained by the technical difficulty of quarrying standard sizes and a reluctance to waste material by trimming to a predetermined measurement.<sup>13</sup>

The tomb wall from the chapel of Mery-nesut serves as an essential reference for anyone interested in the funerary beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, and provides a wealth of study material for the scholar and student. We are grateful to Dr. Fischer for the following article on the inscriptions and his analysis of their content.



FIGURE 4. Chapel Wall of Mery-nesut. Detail of Figure 1, left side showing the offering scene with the offering list.



FIGURE 5. Chapel Wall of Mery-nesut. Detail of Figure 1, showing the offering scene above the "false door."

#### NOTES

1. When the Institute began to expand its Egyptian holdings, Boston's curator of Egyptian art, the late William Stevenson Smith, suggested the possibility of our acquiring the tomb wall, which was stored in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts awaiting eventual installation there. The purchase was made with the approval of the trustees of both institutions.
2. Notable exceptions in our collection include the relief of the Assyrian King Tiglath-Pileser (50.32), excavated by Layard, and pottery and other study materials received from the Egyptian Exploration Fund (Society).
3. The exact location of the tomb can be seen in G. A. Reisner, *A History of the Giza Necropolis*, Cambridge, Mass., 1942, Map of the Western Cemetery.
4. The two essential references to this tomb are Reisner, *ibid.*: 382 ("G 1301; Mery-nesut and his wife Kaemsuw: corridor chapel with west wall lined with white limestone; palace door between two niches"), and W. S. Smith, *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom*, 2nd ed., Oxford,

1949: 65 ("G 1301: Seated male; conventional except for the right hand which is clenched palm down on the knee; short wig, short skirt; fair workmanship corresponding to the well-cut palace-facade panelling and the moderately good sunk reliefs and inscriptions of the chapel; inscribed on the right side of seat: *w'b nswt Mr-nwst*; on left side: *rh nswt Mr-nswt*, 58.5 cm. Cairo No. 37713"). Smith refers here to the statue found in the tomb, which is discussed by Dr. Fischer in the following article.

5. The best known representation of a chair without its front leg is found on one of the wood panels of *Hesi-Re* in Cairo, *Cairo Catalogue Générale*, 1426.
6. As in the Hetep-heres "carrying chair," but see also J. Vandier, *Manuel d'Archéologie Égyptienne*, vol. IV, chap. II, sec. 1, "Attitudes du Maître et de son Épouse," figs. 18, 19.
7. Her legs are behind the chair, which is unusual but not unknown. See the relief of *Djadjaemankh* in the Louvre, illustrated in H. Baker, *Furniture in the Ancient World*, 1966, fig. 41.

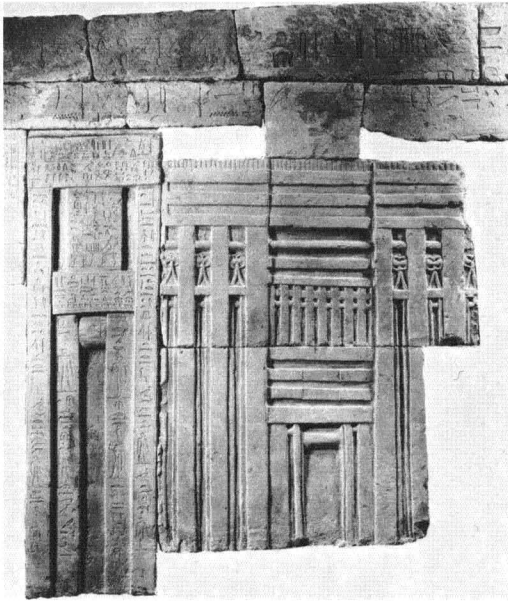


FIGURE 6. Chapel Wall of Mery-nesut. Detail of Figure 1, central portion showing the “false door” on the left and the “palace facade” on the right.

8. In discussing another relief in the Detroit collection, the *Offering Relief of Ka-aper* (57.58), Henry G. Fischer postulates in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, XVIII, no. 4 (1959): 238, 239, a development of the handling in relief of this type of wig during the Old Kingdom. Based on the amount of space allowed for the topmost row of locks, he concludes that those wigs having the least amount of differentiation for the top row belong to the end of the Fifth Dynasty and the beginning of the Sixth Dynasty. Using this criterion, along with the evidence of the inscriptions discussed in the next article, the tomb wall of Mery-nesut would have to be dated to no earlier than the end of the Fifth Dynasty.

9. Vandier (note 6): fig. 26.

10. See S. Clarke and R. Engelbach, *Ancient Egyptian Masonry*, Oxford, 1930: 213-214.

11. Reisner (note 4).

12. While coarse enough to be called “stucco,” it is more properly a gypsum plaster. “Defects in walls intended for relief decoration were also repaired with gypsum, which was then carved like the stone, and any faults in the reliefs themselves were made good in the same way” (A. Lucas, *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Industries*, 4th ed., rev., London, 1962: 77). In several instances on the wall, a pink material was used to repair broken edges between the blocks or to fill depressions in rough places on the stone surface. In some cases the hieroglyphs were worked over these repairs. The upper blocks also seem to have weathered more than the lower ones, suggesting that the top of the tomb wall may have been exposed at some time.

13. For a full discussion of the problem, see Clarke and Engelbach (note 10): chap. IX, “Dressing and Laying the Blocks.”



68 FIGURE 7. Chapel Wall of Mery-nesut. Detail of Figure 1, left side showing both offering scenes and inscriptions.