

WOODEN STATUARY  
التمائيل الخشبية

*Julia Harvey*

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## WOODEN STATUARY

### التمائيل الخشبية

Julia Harvey

Holzstatuen  
Statuaire en bois

*Wood was a widely used material for sculpture in ancient Egypt from the earliest times. It was mostly native timber, but from the New Kingdom onwards, sculptors also used imported wood species. The majority of extant examples are from funerary contexts, found in both private and royal tombs, although the art of fine wood carving was also employed for furniture and other ritual objects.*

استخدمت الأخشاب لصناعة التماثيل بمصر القديمة منذ قديم الزمان وغالباً كانت أخشاب محلية ولكن إستوردت الأخشاب لصناعة التماثيل بدءاً من الدولة الحديثة. غالبية التماثيل الخشبية المتبقية من مصر القديمة هي من سياقات جنائزية حيث عثر عليها بمقابر العامة والمقابر الملكية. وقد استخدمت الأخشاب أيضاً في صناعة الأثاث والأدوات الطقسية.

**W**ooden sculpture has appeared alongside stone sculpture throughout Egyptian history, from prehistory down to Ptolemaic and Roman times. Although the vulnerability of wood to moisture and other threats, including termites—something the ancient Egyptians were clearly aware of—has often obscured this fact, fortunately enough survives to allow us to state for certain that wooden sculpture was always an important aspect of funerary and ritual practices. Wooden sculpture in this context has been taken to mean wooden statues of the king and queen and those of the tomb owner and his or her family. This means that certain categories with perhaps a claim to the designation sculpture have been excluded. These include cosmetic implements (e.g., mirror handles, unguent pots, cosmetic spoons, etc.), statues of prisoners, tomb models (with the exception of the extraordinarily elaborate female offering bearers from the early Middle Kingdom), harp finials, *shabti*s, statues of gods, and other ritual objects.

#### Construction

Wooden sculpture throughout Pharaonic history was mainly made of native timber—acacia, sycamore, and tamarisk, and sometimes a combination of these. For example, a statue of acacia may have a base made of tamarisk. The fibrous and knotty character of the native woods meant that statues larger than 300 - 400 mm had to be made from several separate pieces joined by dowels and mortise and tenon joints (fig. 1). The joints were subsequently concealed by a layer of paint or painted plaster on which the details of costume and jewelry were added. It is unfortunate that it is this painted layer that has often suffered the most damage (fig. 2). Imported woods like ebony and cedar were also occasionally used. In the New Kingdom, imported woods were favored for the production of royal statues in wood, and proportionally more private statuary was made of ebony. We should bear in mind, however, that as yet relatively few statues have had their



Figure 1. Statue of Ka-aper. 1.12 m. CG 34.

wood scientifically analyzed, so all conclusions are tentative.

### *Workshops*

Ancient Egyptian artisans were highly skilled at carving wood, and illustrations of workshop scenes often include statue-making (fig. 3). Although the inscriptions accompanying these scenes rarely refer to the statues depicted, the tools shown are a good indication of the material in question; an adze in the hand of a workman is an indication that the material is wood, whereas hammers and mallets tend to be limited to working stone. An adze, of course, would be quickly blunted if used on stone, and a mallet would be far too crude an instrument to work wood. The statues are usually shown in a completed state, regardless of the type of tool action. What is also revealed is that the artisans worked as a



Figure 2. Statue of Metjetji. 0.89 m. The Brooklyn Museum 50.77.

team rather than as individual artists; many individuals were involved in the production of a single statue.

Unfortunately, not enough wooden statues survive to establish whether there were local fashions centered around a particular town or necropolis. We can surmise a major Old Kingdom workshop in or around Memphis producing for the necropolis of Saqqara, and in the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom there were centers at Assiut, Meir, and Beni Hassan. Few conclusions can be drawn from this, however, beyond remarking that the wooden statues from Beni Hassan tend to have extremely large, painted eyes. During the New Kingdom and later, the main workshops were in Thebes and Memphis, and it will come as no surprise that most provenanced statues from these periods come from these two locations.

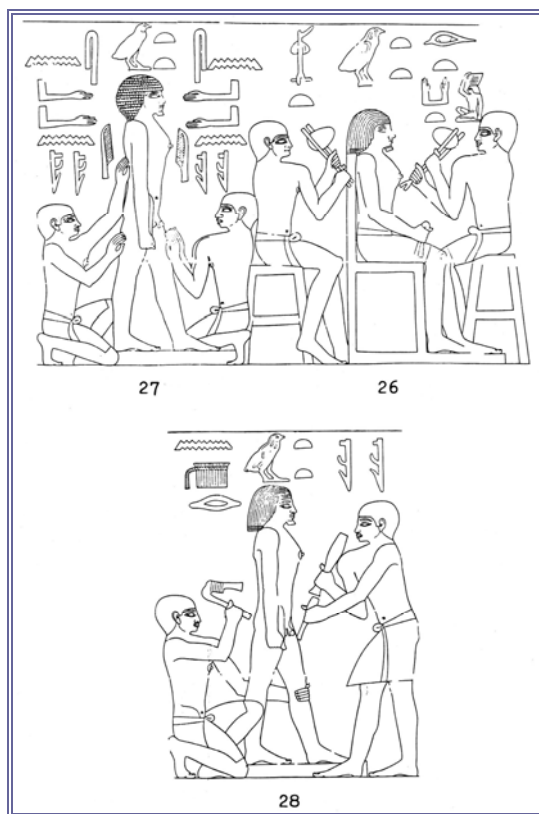


Figure 3. Workshop scene of statue-making in the Tomb of Ti.

### Old Kingdom

Wooden statues in the Old Kingdom may have been considered necessary to depict the tomb owner in his more active roles, accompanied by his wife. Stone statues in the tomb are usually static groups or seated statues, whereas those of wood usually show the tomb owner striding with staff and scepter in his left and right hand, respectively. These two aspects, active and passive, are matched by the depictions on Old Kingdom tomb walls. The statues, both wood and stone, first appear in the superstructure of the tombs, then in specially designed *serdabs*, and towards the end of the period in the burial chambers as well. As we move on in time, the quantity of wooden statues in each tomb increases while the size and quality decrease. In all, over 250 statues survive from this period.

No royal statues have survived from the Old Kingdom—in fact, only the front part of a

foot of a royal statue in wood has survived to prove that they existed at this time; certainly not enough to be able to draw any conclusions on type or prevalence.

### Costumes and Wigs

Male statues in the Old Kingdom show a wide variety of costume and wig types, but unfortunately no combination of these can be linked to a specific role or title (fig. 4). This is undoubtedly due to the fact that the plaster layer with the subtle details of decoration has usually not survived the test of time. Female statues are nearly always standing or with the left foot just slightly advanced. Inscriptions on the bases of statues of both sexes are invariably lists of titles and names. The well-known offering formula “for the *ka* of” does not appear until the very end of the period, but it becomes standard during the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom. This is why the usual name chosen by Egyptologists for tomb statues in both wood and stone is “*ka* statues”.

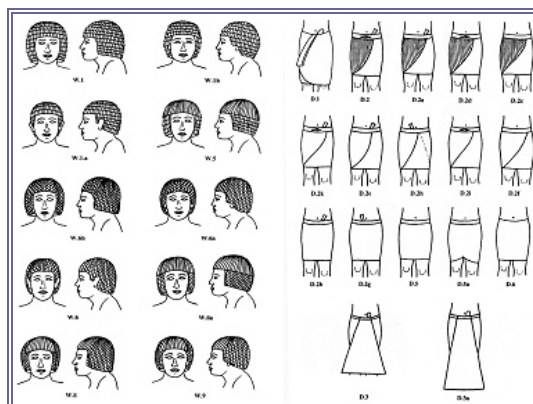


Figure 4. Examples of wigs and skirts.

### First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom

During the First Intermediate Period and Middle Kingdom, the emphasis shifts from the tomb owner and his wife alone to include models of daily life as well. Particularly fine examples of female offering bearers are known from the tomb of Meketra, for example (fig. 5). These female offering bearers are probably personifications of funerary

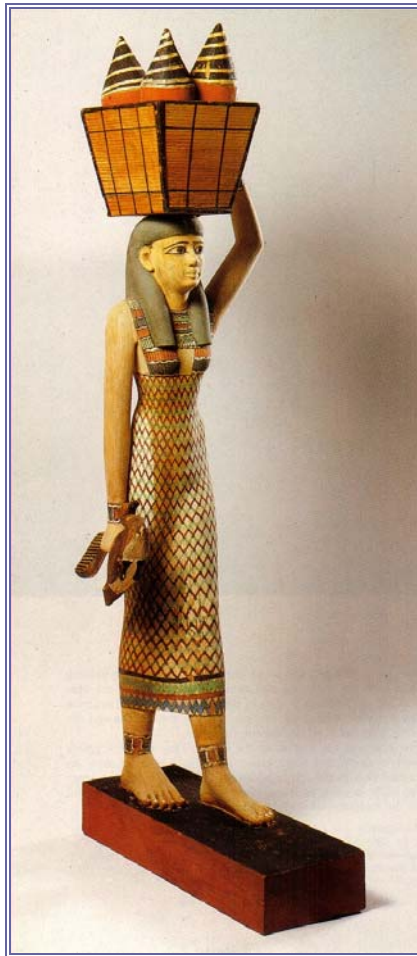


Figure 5. Female offering bearer from the tomb of Meketra. JE 46725.

estates, three-dimensional examples of the friezes of personified estates decorating the lower parts of many temples. As the period progresses, the quality of the figures and models in general once again declines, although there are still a few exceptional pieces. The average size of wooden statues decreases after the 11<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, and although the range of costumes and wigs on male statues is much wider, there is still no prospect of identifying individual costumes and wigs with particular offices. One notable exception is the statue of Yuya in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, which depicts him wearing the vizier's costume (fig. 6). Tombs and even simple graves in the provincial cemeteries, for example, at Beni Hassan, now often contain



Figure 6. Statue of Yuya. Metropolitan Museum of Art 23.3.37.

wooden statues of the tomb owner, resulting in a corpus of about 500 statues in total. Female statues resemble those from the Old Kingdom, with the addition of new wig types. Perhaps the most notable difference is that the females now have very pronounced waists and hips.

The earliest extant royal statues in wood date to the 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (for example, the statues of Senusret I in Cairo and New York). Wooden *shabtis* are also known from the Middle Kingdom, but the best examples date to the New Kingdom.

#### *New Kingdom*

As yet, no systematic research has been conducted into wooden statuary after the end



Figure 7. Guardian figure from tomb of Tutankhamen. 1.92 m. JE 60708.

of the Middle Kingdom. A preliminary survey has revealed that the wooden statues from the first part of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty continued to be inspired by the Middle Kingdom and are full of force and character. Model scenes disappear as do the female offering bearers. The New Kingdom types appear to duplicate those from the same period in stone to a greater extent than in the earlier periods, and it is at last sometimes possible to link costumes to particular functions. The elaborate clothing of the later 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, for example, with its many pleats and folds was duplicated not only on the plaster coating but also in the wood itself, thus enabling us to identify military officers, priests, and priestesses with a much greater degree of certainty than before, even when the base of a statue is missing. When the base is extant, the names and titles of the deceased as well as an offering formula are now often accompanied by a dedicatory text. The dedicators are usually the son or daughter of the deceased, but often the parents, a brother, or sister

appear, perhaps indicating that the deceased had died young. The preliminary total for New Kingdom statues is about 80 male and 80 female, with over three quarters of that total dating to the period from Amenhotep III through the 19<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Two interesting subgroups of statues come from the Deir el-Medina necropolis. One subgroup comprises statues of the tomb owners holding a standard crowned by a sacred emblem, often a hawk's head or a ram's head; the other subgroup consists of statues of the deified Ahmose-Nefertari, the wife of Amenhotep I. An interesting extra detail concerning the subgroup of standard bearers is a carved relief of either the wife or son on the left-hand side. Pair statues are extremely uncommon in all periods; for example, only three are known from after the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty.

#### *Royal Sculpture*

Royal sculpture in wood is much more common in the New Kingdom, and many royal tombs and temples of the period were provided with resin-coated or gilded wooden statues. The larger, life-size ones are usually freestanding statues of the king (e.g., the statues from the tombs of Thutmose III, Tutankhamen, and Horemheb) (fig. 7), whereas the smaller ones are ritual statues usually placed in wooden shrines. The latter show the king striding while wearing the white or red crown, harpooning in a papyrus skiff, or standing on the back of a panther. Statues of queens are much less numerous and seem also to be on a much smaller scale. However, they are no less magnificent when they do survive, for example, the wooden head of Queen Tiy, which was recently reunited with its headdress (fig. 8). A pair of statues of Amenhotep III and Queen Tiy, found at Kom Medinet Ghurab in the Fayum and now in the Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim, also deserve mention—despite their tiny size (60 and 60.5 mm, respectively), the detail is exceptional. Votive statues of the deified Ahmose-Nefertari became popular during the Ramesside Period (see above).



Figure 8. Head of Queen Tiy. 95 mm. Berlin Museum. Inv.-No. 21834.

*Third Intermediate Period, Late Period, and Ptolemaic and Roman Periods*

During the later Egyptian periods, private wooden statuary becomes much less common, although this could be an accident of preservation. A total of only four statues in wood of male and female tomb owners are currently known from the Third Intermediate Period, 25 from the Late Period, and only three from the Ptolemaic and Roman Periods. Those from the Late Period, like most art of

that time, imitate Middle Kingdom styles. Also during this period, kneeling figures of Isis and Nephthys begin to be placed on either side of the sarcophagus in the burial chambers of private tombs (fig. 9); *ba*-birds, falcons, and *akhom* figures (archaic figure of a perched falcon), as well as Anubis jackals were placed on top. Ptah-Sokar-Osiris figures, often with a cavity containing a papyrus roll, were also popular.

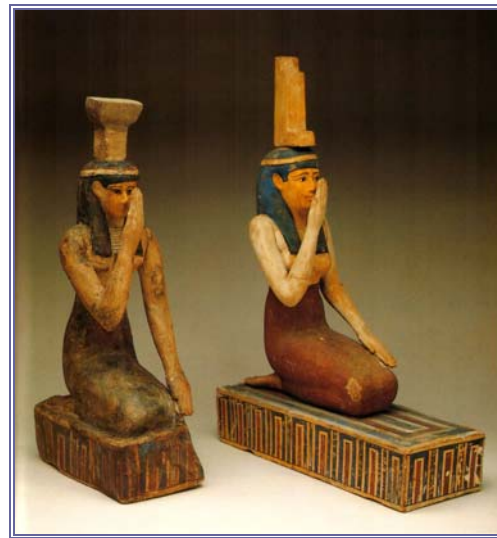


Figure 9. Two statues of Isis and Nephthys. Late Period. Roemer-Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim. Inv.-No. 1583/4.

*Bibliographic Notes*

Wooden statuary has rarely been studied as a separate category. The main exception so far is the monograph by Julia Harvey, *Wooden Statues of the Old Kingdom* (2001a), which offers dating criteria based on stylistic changes. Harvey's further work includes a comparative study of some female wooden statues from the Middle Kingdom (1991-), an analysis of wood statues and female offering bearers (2006), as well as an overview of wood sculpture (2001b). Studies such as that by Jacques Vandier, *Manuel d'Archéologie Égyptienne* (1958), and Bodil Hornemann, *Types of Ancient Egyptian Statuary* (1951-), are indispensable for locating extant statues in both wood and stone. Vandier's work is still the most comprehensive discussion of Egyptian statuary to date—a mine of information and illustrations from the Old Kingdom to the end of the New Kingdom. Gay Robins' *Proportion and Style in Ancient Egyptian Art* (1994) opened up a whole new way of studying statuary by setting out the rules of proportion followed by Egyptian craftsmen. *The Representations of Statuary in Private Tombs of the Old Kingdom* (1984) by Marianne Eaton-Krauss is a thorough discussion of two-dimensional representations of wood and stone tomb statues depicted in wall scenes in Old Kingdom mastabas. Nicholas Reeves' *The Complete Tutankhamun: The King, the Tomb,*

*the Royal Treasure* (1990: in particular 130 - 139) presents an overview of ritual figures and magical objects. References to similar statues from other royal tombs can be found in the relevant sections in Reeves and Wilkinson (1996). For a comprehensive list of statues see Porter and Moss (1960-). Helmut Satzinger (1982) gives a detailed study of the standard-bearing statues from the New Kingdom. William S. Smith's *A History of Egyptian Sculpture and Painting in the Old Kingdom* (1949) is a fundamental study of Old Kingdom art, including wood sculpture. Angela Tooley (1995) presents an introduction for the general reader to models and scenes, including offering bearers in wood and in stone.

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Figure 1. Statue of Ka-aper. 1.12 m. CG 34 (Saleh and Sourouzian 1987: pl. 40).

Figure 2. Statue of Metjetji. 0.89 m. The Brooklyn Museum 50.77. Courtesy of The Brooklyn Museum.

Figure 3. Workshop scene of statue-making in the Tomb of Ti, after Eaton-Krauss (1984: pl. IV).

Figure 4. Examples of wigs and skirts, based on Harvey (2001a: figs. 1 a and 3).

Figure 5. Female offering bearer from the tomb of Meketra. JE 46725 (Saleh and Sourouzian 1987: pl. 74).

Figure 6. Statue of Yuya. Metropolitan Museum of Art 23.3.37 (Hayes 1959: fig. 27).

Figure 7. Guardian figure from tomb of Tutankhamen. 1.92 m. JE 60708 (Saleh and Sourouzian 1987: pl. 180).

Figure 8. Head of Queen Tiy. 95 mm. Berlin Museum. Inv.-No. 21834 (Málek 2003: 169).

Figure 9. Two statues of Isis and Nephthys. Late Period. Roemer-Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim. Inv.-No. 1583/4 (Eggebrecht 1990: pl. 30).