

A Late Middle Kingdom Wooden Statue from Assiut in the Walters Art Gallery

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A wooden statue in the Walters Art Gallery, at present on display in the New Kingdom galleries, is reassessed and assigned to the Middle Kingdom on the basis of comparisons with similar statues in other collections.

The wooden statue that forms the subject of this paper is one of a number acquired by Henry Walters in 1914 and the years following from the antiquities dealer Dikran Kelekian. The figure (fig. 1) is that of a “stepping” female, i.e., one whose left foot is advanced, but not far enough for the weight to be transferred to it, as in a stride. She wears a heavy tripartite wig reaching to the top of her breasts and a sheath dress, indicated only by the hemline at mid-calf. Both arms are missing, but the dowels and holes left in her shoulders show that they were held parallel to her body. Her hands were probably held open with the fingers outstretched. Her left leg is advanced in a step, but the foot is broken off at the ankle. Her right leg is straight, and the heel of the foot is extant with a tenon underneath for insertion into a base. The front part of the foot was originally secured to the base, but both this and the base are now missing. The statue is at present mounted on a modern base. There are traces of color all over the statue, and these conform to what we know about the painted decoration of female statues. The entire statue shows evidence of having been covered in a layer of yellow paint or gypsum, on top of which other details were added. The wig, brows, outlines of the eyes, and pupils all show traces of black paint; we would expect traces of white in the eyes and on the dress, but this has not survived the passage of time. The general condition of the statue is very good, notwithstanding some cracks down the front and the back. What is extant is carved from a single block, perhaps acacia, although the wood has not been analyzed. The present height is 41 cm.

There are a number of fine details worthy of mention: the wig is striated with a center parting, and falls

straight down all around, covering the ears, but not the shoulders. The ends of the wig are bound, indicated by a series of diagonal carved lines on each striation. Under the wig, in the center of the forehead, a small triangle is visible (fig. 2). This indicates the presence of a headscarf or headcloth worn under the wig,¹ which is pulled back slightly from each temple. The woman has a fine, full figure and the quality of the carving conveys a sense of movement. There is no indication of a dress bodice, and we would consider her to be nude were it not for the hemline.² The statue was published by Steindorff who says that it is “probably early Eighteenth Dynasty, or possibly Middle Kingdom.”³ Vandier also attributes the piece to the New Kingdom.⁴

All the statues acquired from Kelekian were said to be “from Assiut.” Kelekian attributed them all to the Twelfth Dynasty. On stylistic grounds both Steindorff and Vandier consider that they came from Meir rather than from Assiut.⁵ They are most likely to have come from the excavations of Said Bey Khashaba, a merchant of Assiut who, in 1910, obtained a permit to excavate the district between Dairut, north of Meir, and Deir el-Ganadla, just south of El-Badari, on both sides of the river (fig. 3). This huge concession included Meir, Deir el-Gabrawi, and Assiut. In these localities are extensive Old and Middle Kingdom cemeteries. Khashaba did not actually excavate himself; he hired a large number of *fellahîn* to do the physical labor and enlisted the services of Ahmed Bey Kamal, an Egyptian archaeologist, to supervise the work and publish the results.

The major part of the excavation took place at Meir under the supervision of Kamal between 1910–1914. There is no doubt, however, that other teams employed by Khashaba were at work in other areas of the concession. Kamal published the material found under his supervision in the *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte*,⁶ but none of the statues in the

Fig. 1. *Stepping female*, wood, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery, no. 22.15.

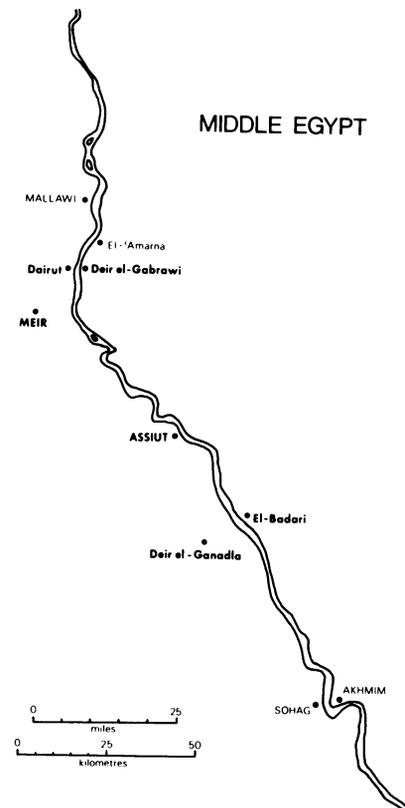


Fig. 2. Detail of Figure 1.



Walters Art Gallery can be identified with those listed there. No records exist of the finds made in the course of the excavations not directed by Kamal. Many probably found their way very quickly onto the lucrative antiquities market. In fact, Khashaba himself seems to have viewed his concession as a convenient source of additional income, and Kamal with difficulty persuaded him to establish a museum in Assiut to display some of his pieces, rather than dispose of them all for cash.⁷

Despite the stylistic considerations of Steindorff and Vandier, Kelekian's statement that the statues came "from Assiut" cannot be dismissed out of hand. He would have had no reason to try to disguise their true provenance if he had acquired them from Khashaba. Since a proper archaeological report from the time is lacking, it is not possible to establish beyond doubt that Assiut was the exact find-spot, but some weight must be given to Kamal's supervisory competence. Although his reports are sketchy by today's standards, he did his best to make a scientific record of everything which was unearthed during his period of excavation—it may be that only very small items "disappeared" while he was present. Meir, therefore, seems to be the least likely of the possible prove-



nances for these statues. At the excavation sites Kamal visited only irregularly, however, the tale is very different. No publication at all exists for these, and it is not surprising that a large number of objects found their way onto the antiquities market, either through Khashaba himself or the private enterprise of his men.

Vandier considers the Walters Art Gallery statues to be stylistically inferior to those from Assiut that he had examined.⁸ He seems, however, to have confined his comparisons to those statues excavated by Chassinat and Palanque in the period up to 1903 and now in the Louvre, Paris, and the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.⁹ These statues are of a remarkably high quality by any standards, and compared to them the Walters statues are indeed inferior. In 1907, D.G. Hogarth conducted a single season of work at Assiut. Rather than investigating the larger tombs already dealt with by Chassinat and Palanque, he directed his attention to those of the lesser inhabitants of the district. During these excavations, he turned over a great number of tombs and sent a large quantity of material to the United Kingdom. Much of it, including twenty-seven wooden statues, still awaits publication.¹⁰ A comparison of the quality of the workmanship, the style, and the range of these pieces

with the group in the Walters Art Gallery suggests that the latter also originated from Assiut.¹¹

A wooden statue of a woman in the National Museum, Copenhagen (fig. 4), bears a striking similarity to the Walters figure under discussion.¹² This statue was presented to the National Museum by the Ny Carlsbergfondet in 1958. Purchased from a Swiss art dealer, its previous history is unknown, but it was said to be from Assiut. It was published in 1960 by Buhl, who says that the statue originates from an unknown tomb at Assiut, and should be dated, along with two others in the British Museum, to the Twelfth Dynasty.¹³ Those in the British Museum come from Hogarth's excavations and have, therefore, a secure provenance and associated objects by which they can be dated. The Copenhagen statue is a stepping female wearing a heavy tripartite wig and a sheath dress.¹⁴ This dress has no upper bodice indications; it cannot be shown to exist by the hemline because the lower part of the statue (below mid-calf) is missing. However, the presence of cloth covering the legs is confirmed by the fact that the legs are not separately carved, even though the left leg is advanced. The arms are pegged into the shoulders by internal dowels and



Fig. 3. (left) Map of Middle Egypt showing the area from Dairut to Deir el-Ganadla.

Fig. 4. (right) *Stepping female*, wood, from Assiut, Copenhagen, National Museum, no. 13969.

Fig. 5. Detail of Figure 4.



Fig. 6. *Stepping female*, wood, from Assiut, London, the British Museum, no. 45193.

Fig. 7. Detail of Figure 6.



hang parallel to her body with the tips of the outstretched fingers reaching the level of the knees. The hands are very beautifully carved with much attention to the detail of the fingers and nails, although the white paint that would have covered the fingernails originally is now completely gone. Again, the quality of the carving of the statue gives the impression of movement, and, just as in the Walters Art Gallery statue, the torso is carved from a single piece of wood. The wig is parted in the middle, and the striated hair falls straight down onto the breasts and back, covering the ears, but not the shoulders. The ends are bound, as indicated by diagonally carved lines on each striation. The hair is pulled back slightly at the temples, and the figure wears a headcloth under the wig (fig. 5). The general condition of the statue is excellent, although there is some damage to the left-hand side of the wig in front, and a large filled crack down the back. The figure was originally covered in a thin layer of yellow paint or gypsum, of which many traces remain, and there are traces of black paint on the brows and eyes. In the corners of the eyes some white traces have survived. The extant height is 48.5 cm, slightly larger than the Walters statue.

The similarities between the two statues may be more than coincidental, although the Copenhagen

statue is of slightly better quality. It is possible that both were produced within a very short time of each other, possibly in the same workshop, and that they both came from the Middle Kingdom necropolis at Assiut. To support the attribution to Assiut, I would draw attention to the similarity of these figures to BM 45193, *Idy-Keky* (fig. 6), which was excavated by Hogarth at Assiut.¹⁵ This statue wears a heavy tripartite wig with bound ends, and a headcloth is visible in the center of the forehead (fig. 7). In contrast to the other statues, *Idy-Keky's* wig is plaited, and she wears a fillet drawing it back from her face. She wears a sheath dress, indicated only by the hemline. The arms are held parallel to the body, and the outstretched fingers reach the level of the knees. The left leg is advanced. On the basis of its known provenance, the piece can be dated to the Twelfth Dynasty.

Consideration of a statue, now in the Brooklyn Museum (fig. 8), may help in determining a more precise date.¹⁶ The woman wears a similar wig to that of BM 45193. Here it is difficult to be sure whether the statue wears a headcloth under her wig, as a large blob of plaster obscures the relevant spot. This could be accidental overflow from the wig, or the effects of the passage of years on the original decoration. Her wig is held back from her temples by a fillet. In this

case, the wig has been carved as a separate piece and is dowelled into the head of the statue. Her left leg is advanced and she stands on an inscribed base. Her dress is again a simple sheath, but this time enough of the original painting of the bodice remains for us to be able to discern its shape (fig. 9). Straps form a trapezoidal pattern with the top of the dress, a feature which appears from the Eleventh Dynasty on, replacing the V-form of the Old Kingdom. The gap between the straps increased and the straps themselves often became wider as the Middle Kingdom progressed.¹⁷ Although the straps on the Brooklyn statue are fairly narrow, the trapezoid they form is wide enough for the piece to be dated to the second part of the Twelfth Dynasty.¹⁸

The evidence that points to a late Middle Kingdom date for both the Walters statue and that from the National Museum, Copenhagen can be summarized as follows:

— The wearing of a headcloth under a full tripartite wig appears to be confined to the Middle Kingdom. All datable examples so far collected confirm this.

— The style of the tripartite wig, striated or plaited with bound ends drawn back from the forehead or tied back from the temples with a fillet appears to be of the Middle Kingdom. This is again confirmed by the dateable statues so far collected.

— The straps of the dresses on those statues on which enough painted bodice decoration remains form a trapezoid on the chest. The size of this increases towards the end of the Middle Kingdom. The example closest to the two statues under discussion is the statue from Brooklyn which has been dated to the late Middle Kingdom.

— Their most likely provenance is Assiut, given the date at which they first appeared on the market and the information supplied at the time, coupled with the excavation circumstances. The arguments of Steindorff and Vandier that the statues are not of high enough quality to come from Assiut are negated by the finds made by Hogarth.

— The dating of the statues to the New Kingdom must be dismissed and the statues assigned to the Middle Kingdom, probably the second half of the Twelfth Dynasty.

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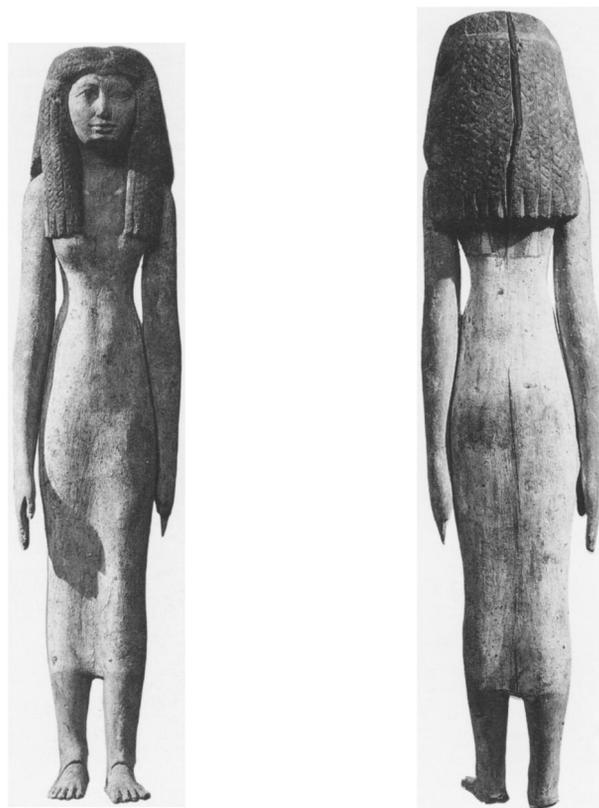


Fig. 8. *Stepping female*, wood, unknown provenance, Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Museum, no. 86.226.11, gift of the Ernest Erickson Foundation.

Fig. 9. View of the back of Figure 8.

Notes

A letter stating that the statue Nationalmuseet 13969 was excavated at Assiut or Meir by Said Bey Khashaba between 1910 and 1914, and was on display in his museum until 1957, has recently been found in the archives of the National Museum Copenhagen (personal communication from Dr. Elin Rand Nielsen). Since Meir is excluded for the reasons discussed above, we can now be sure that this statue does indeed come from Assiut.

I would like to express my thanks to those museum curators whose help and encouragement have made this article possible, especially Dr. Ellen Reeder of the Walters Art Gallery, Mr. W.V. Davis and Dr. A.J. Spencer of the British Museum, Mr. Søren Dietz of the National Museum, Copenhagen, and Mr. Richard Fazzini of the Brooklyn Museum. I am also most grateful to Dr. D.M. Dixon of University College, London, for his invaluable criticism of the manuscript.

1. This is not an unknown phenomenon, cf. Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE 49633 (an unpublished female offering bearer from El Moalla); London, British Museum, no. 45193 (fig. 7); Copenhagen, National Museum, no. 13969 (fig. 5); etc.

2. Again, this is a very common method of portraying the dress, cf. London, British Museum, no. 45193 (fig. 6); Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, no. 4318–1943; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, no. 72.4128; Copenhagen, National Museum, no. 13969 (fig. 4); Brooklyn, Brooklyn Museum, no. 86.226.11 (fig. 8); etc.

3. G. Steindorff, *A Catalogue of the Egyptian Sculpture in the Walters Art Gallery* (Baltimore, 1946), 45, no. 125, pl. XVII.
4. J. Vandier, *Manuel d'Archéologie Egyptienne III: Les Grandes Epoques: La Statuaire* (Paris, 1958), 438.
5. Vandier, *Manuel III*, 158: "On peut être assuré, en tout cas, que les statuette de Baltimore n'ont pas été exécutées à Siout. Le style est très différent, et la comparaison avantage, sans aucun doute, Siout. On peut donc, mais sous réserves, attribuer à Meir le groupe de statues. . ."
6. This he did in a series of articles published from 1911 onwards.
7. *Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*, 15 (1915), 177.
8. See note 6 above.
9. E. Chassinat and Ch. Palanque, *Une campagne de fouilles dans la nécropole d'Assiout*, Mémoires publiés par les Membres de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale du Caire, 24 (Cairo, 1911); cf. J. Harvey, "Some Notes on the Wooden Statues from the Tomb of Nakht at Assiut," *Göttinger Miszellen*, 116 (1990), 45–50.
10. Of the material in the British Museum, BM 45193 has been published by M.-L. Buhl, "En fornem aegypterinde," *Fra Nationalmuseets Arbejdsmerk* 1960, 38–44; the remaining artifacts from the excavations are still unpublished.
11. See the forthcoming publication of my thesis "A Typological study of Wooden Statues from the Old and Middle Kingdoms," for further discussion of this point.
12. Copenhagen, National Museum, no. 13969.
13. M.-L. Buhl, "En fornem aegypterinde," 38–44. Buhl illustrates one British Museum piece (BM 45193, fig. 3, p. 41). I believe the second to be BM 45057, but this is a guess on my part as nowhere does Buhl give the inventory numbers of either statue.
14. Further publications of this piece include: M.-L. Buhl, *100 Masterpieces from the Ancient Near East* (Copenhagen, 1974), 53–54, no. 44; W. Seipel, *Ägypten: Götter, Gräber und die Kunst—4000 Jahre Jenseitsglaube I*, (Linz, 1989), no. 85b.
15. Hogarth's Tomb XXXV at Assiut.
16. Originally published in *Handbook of the Minneapolis Institute of Art* (Minneapolis, 1917), 26; and further by R.S. Bianchi in *The Collector's Eye. The Ernest Erickson Collections at the Brooklyn Museum* (Brooklyn, 1987), 103.
17. Vandier, *Manuel III*, 258. The feature is already present on the Eleventh-Dynasty female offering bearers from the tomb of Meketre. See Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE 46725, and New York, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, no. 20.3.7, although the angle formed by the straps is very slight.
18. Vandier, *Manuel III*, 258. Bianchi, *The Collector's Eye*, 103.

PHOTOGRAPHS: figs. 1, 2, Baltimore, Walters Art Gallery; figs. 4, 5, Copenhagen, the National Museum, Dept. of Near Eastern and Classical Antiquities; figs. 6, 7, London, the British Museum; figs. 8, 9, Brooklyn, the Brooklyn Museum.