

Four Wooden New Kingdom Female Statuettes in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo

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Abstract: The author analyzes four wooden female statuettes from the collection of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. All of them represent nude females and have many features in common. They were rendered in a way that emphasized their sexuality and fertility. Due to the lack of inscriptions their dating and function could be reconstructed only on the basis of analogies.

Keywords: New Kingdom Egypt, nude female, wooden statuettes, Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Eighteenth Dynasty

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The Egyptian Museum in Cairo has an extensive collection of female statues dating from different periods of Egyptian history. Some of them still need comprehensive study to determine their provenance, dating and function. The aim of this article is to examine a group of these female wooden statuettes, which belong to the New Kingdom and have many features in common: they represent nude figures, standing with their legs closed together, looking straight ahead, wearing plain, short, round wigs reaching down to the neck, framing the face and covering the ears. Their breasts, abdominal muscles and thighs are sculpted in an exaggerated way and their nipples are modeled in relief. There are no inscriptions on the statuettes, so the identity of the figures remains unknown.

STATUETTE NO. I, TR¹ 18.2.23.7 (Fig. 1a-d)

Its provenance is not known. The height of the statuette is 25cm. The wig has a longitudinal crack in the left side and there is some surface damage on the right arm. The feet are partially destroyed and the original base is lost. On the back of the statuette a deep crack extends from the left shoulder towards the neck down to the waist and there is another

¹ TR (i.e. Temporary Registration) is a numbering system in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo.



1a-d. Statuette of a nude woman holding a bird, inv. no. TR 18.2.23.7 (Phot. Sameh Abd el Mohsen © Egyptian Museum, Cairo).

longitudinal crack from her waist down to the buttocks. The tip of the nose is broken and the lips are partially eroded.

The female is represented with her right arm held at her side with the palm of the hand turned inward, while her left arm is bent at the elbow under her breasts and holding a bird in her hand. The species of the bird is difficult to determine. The arms are partially separated from the body. The woman has a heart-shaped face with broad cheeks narrowing towards a small chin, wide neck, large ovoid eyes, thin eyebrows and small mouth. In profile the belly protrudes visibly, the buttocks are not high, but sag somewhat.

Such a pose of carrying bird is first attested in the Eighteenth Dynasty, but it is documented also in later periods among representations of both elite and non-elite females.² The depiction of the bird in such a context could be interpreted in several ways: it might be a symbol of a beloved man that the girl tries to ensnare in her net or trap, as confirmed by passages from love poetry;³ and it could also refer to the young bird as a symbol of the young man whose love has been captured by the beautiful maiden, a distinct reference to the sexual potential of the deceased in the afterlife.⁴

ANALOGIES

The nearest analogies occur among mirror⁵ handles, such as:

1. A mirror handle in Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologna, inv. no. KS 1859 (**Fig. 2**), made of wood and inlaid with ivory.⁶ The height of the figure is 14.5cm. Its provenance is not known.⁷ However, E. Bresciani suggested that the figure may originate from the tomb of Horemheb at Thebes.⁸

The figurine depicts a nude⁹ girl standing with her left leg stepping forward and touching her tripartite wig with her right hand, while her left hand is against her chest, holding a small bird with raised wings. The girl wears an elaborate unguent-container on her head and ivory ear plugs.¹⁰

The object has been dated to the late Eighteenth Dynasty.

² Cf. Vandier 1941: 363–369; Aufrère 1996: 20–21; Derriks 2001: 68–69.

³ Peterson 1987: 25–26.

⁴ Bailleul-LeSuer 2013: 157; Derchain 1975: 64.

⁵ For the symbolism of mirrors, see: Kozloff 1984; Müller 1984.

⁶ Vandier 1958: Pl. CXLI, Figs 6–7; Silverman 2002: 446, no. 146; Aldred 1951: 95, Pls 164–165; Arte 1994: 78; Maspero 1897: 533; 1912a: 237, Fig. 77; 1912b: 209, Fig. 392; 1913: 186; Capart 1903–1904: 35–36, Fig. 12; Bissing 1914: Pl. 50, Fig. 4; Fechheimer 1922: 31, Pl. 65; Curto 1961: 117, Pl. 56; 1984: 452; Pernigotti (Ed.) 1994: 78; Morigi Govi, Vitali, (Eds) 1982: 141; Boeser 1907: 181; Bresciani 1975: 51–52, Pls 25–26; Cesaretti 1990: no. 91; Kminek-Szedlo 1895: 162; Picchi (Ed.) 2016: 548, no. VI 54; Bellasi, Sparagni (Eds) 2006: 47, 73, 191, no. B65.

⁷ Possibly it comes from Memphis (PM VIII², 695).

⁸ Bresciani 1975: 51, Pls 25–26.

⁹ For the symbolical significance of the image of the nude girl decorating mirror handles, see: Robins 1996: 32–33.

¹⁰ Cf. Eaton-Krauss 1982: 227.



2. Mirror handle, inv. no. KS 1859 (© Museo Civico Archeologico, Bologne).

2. A bronze mirror handle in the Brooklyn Museum, New York, Charles Edwin Wilbour Fund, acc. no. 60.27.1 (**Fig. 3a**).¹¹ Its provenance is not known. The height of the figure, including the mirror, is 22.2cm. The disk is held in place by a rivet that passes through a stylized flattened headdress. The disk has a gilded reflective surface.

The handle has the shape of a female, with a typical Nubian appearance, standing on a rectangular base, with her left leg advanced, her right arm held at her side with the palm of the hand turned inward, while her left arm is bent at the elbow and is holding a bird. She is nude except for cross straps, a waist band, armlets and bracelets. These are indicated by incised lines, as are the creases at the neck, knees and belly, the pubic triangle with hair, stylized Bes tattoos on the thighs as well as tattoos and dimples above the buttocks. Tufts of hair protrude on the axial points of the head, these also being incised. The large pierced ears have the remains of one earring.¹²

C. Lilyquist pointed that the figure may be dated to the late Eighteenth Dynasty based on the type of the figure and the capital.¹³

¹¹ Fazzini 1975: no. 72; Cooney 1959–1960: 69; Eaton-Krauß 1976: no. 47.

¹² Derriks 2001: 29, 176, Fig. 33, no. 63.

¹³ Lilyquist 1982: 187–188.



3. Mirror handles: a. inv. no. 60.27.1; b. CG 44038; c. N. 2149a; d. N. 2165 = AF. 1677 (a. © Brooklyn Museum of Fine Art, New York; b. Phot. Sameh Abd el Mohsen © Egyptian Museum, Cairo; c-d. Phot. Ch. Décamps, Musée du Louvre).

3. A mirror handle in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo, inv. no. CG 44038 (**Fig. 3b**),¹⁴ found in Akhmim. The height of the figure is 21.5cm. The disk of the mirror was made of a bronze leaf and the handle – which is now missing¹⁵ – was melted. The two parts were joined by welding and the stem was consolidated by a copper tape. The mirror has a thin, almost regularly rounded, disk.

The handle is in the form of a female represented nude, standing on a small triangular base with her left leg advanced. Her right arm is held at her side, while her left arm is folded at the elbow against her breasts and holding a bird(?). She wears an enveloping wig that M.G. Bénédicté considered to be of Theban type. The face is eroded, so her facial features remain unclear.

The mirror has been dated to the New Kingdom.¹⁶

4. A bronze mirror handle in the Louvre Museum, Paris, inv. no. N. 2149a (**Fig. 3c**).¹⁷ It comes from the Clot bey collection. Its provenance is not known. The height of the figure is 24.5cm. The mirror has nearly round disk.

The handle is in the form of a nude female standing with her right arm hanging down by her side reaching to her knee, while her left arm is bent against her breasts and holding a bird in her hand. She has long, slender legs. The female wears an enveloping wig, collar, bracelet and waist band.

J. Vandier dated the mirror to the late New Kingdom.¹⁸

5. A bronze mirror handle in the Louvre Museum, Paris, inv. no. N. 2165 = AF. 1677 (**Fig. 3d**).¹⁹ Its provenance is not known. The height of the figure is 21cm. The mirror has a slightly oval disk.

The handle is in the form of a nude female standing with her right arm hanging down by her body, while her left arm is bent against her breasts and holds a bird in her left hand; two locks of hair reminiscent of the curls of the Hathor wig fall on her breasts and a third falls on her back. She wears a little modius in the form of a bunch of papyrus flowers on her head, aimed to secure the post of the disc.

J. Vandier dated the mirror to the late New Kingdom.²⁰

6. A bronze mirror handle in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. no. 41.263.²¹ Its provenance is not known. The height of the figure is 28cm. The mirror has a slightly oval disk connected to the handle by a lily flower. The figure forming the handle is cast separately from the mirror itself.

¹⁴ Bénédicté 1907: 20, Pl. X.

¹⁵ The present author investigated the figure and found that the disk is only preserved, while the handle is now missing.

¹⁶ Bénédicté 1907: XXXIV; Derriks 2001: 33, Fig. 39, no. 83.

¹⁷ Boreux 1932: 629; Vandier 1972: 167, no. 748; Derriks 2001: 29, 179, no. 66.

¹⁸ Vandier 1972: 167, no. 748.

¹⁹ Vandier 1972: 167, no. 749; Champollion 1827: 74, nos 4–5.

²⁰ Vandier 1972: 167, no. 749; Derriks 2001: 29, 180, no. 67.

²¹ Smith 1960: 120–121; Terrace 1968: 49–56.

The handle is in the form of a nude girl, with a typical Nubian appearance, standing with her left leg advanced, her right arm held at her side with the hand clenched to hold an object now lost, while her left arm is bent at the elbow under her breasts and holding a bird. She wears a short, round, elaborate wig reaching down to the neck, framing the face and covering the ears.

The figure has been dated to the Eighteenth Dynasty.²²

STATUETTE NO. II, CG 775 (Fig. 4a-d)

The provenance of this statuette²³ is not known. It has the same height as statuette no. I. The nose is broken. The back of the wig and the left side of the buttock have cracks. The right arm and front part of the footplate are missing.

The female is represented standing with her left arm hanging down by her side and the hand opened, palm turned outward. The left arm is attached to the body with a wooden peg in an irregular way. It is definitely too short for this otherwise well-proportioned body. It seems possible therefore that the arm originally did not belong to this figure, but was mounted later. The facial features are characterized by incised eyebrows, large eyes, broad cheeks, full lips mouth and small chin. The figure has small feet with traces of red-brown color. The woman has very narrow shoulders, high waist, wide hips and a prominent pubic mound. The expense of the round belly, buttocks and thighs are reminiscent of the representations in relief and statuary of Amarna art, where the figures of Akhenaten and his family are represented with wide hips, round bellies, high waists, large breasts, narrow shoulders, and slender limbs.²⁴

ANALOGIES

The female's wig is reminiscent of the wig depicted on wooden head of queen Tiy, the chief wife of Amenhotep III, mother of Akhenaten, which comes from Medinet el-Ghurob, Faiyum, and is now in the Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin, inv. no. 21834 (Fig. 5a). The small head in its original version – without the double feathers crown – portrayed the queen wearing a short, round wig covered with tiny blue glass beads, hiding a silver *khat*-headdress, which can still be glimpsed above the forehead, at the neck and through a hole on the head.²⁵

²² Simpson 1977: 41, 68, Fig. 35; Wenig 1969: 52, Pl. 84; Derriks 2001: 31, 195, Fig. 37, no. 78.

²³ Borchardt 1930: 86; Vandier 1958: 657; PM VIII², 696.

²⁴ Robins 1993: 29.

²⁵ Borchardt 1911: Pls 1–4; Schäfer 1923: ii; 1931: Pl. 10; 1932: 81–86; Steindorff 1926: 47, Fig. 42; Kees 1933: Pl. 48; PM IV, 113; Kaiser 1967: 61, no. 676; Michalowski 1969: 389, 451, Pl. 383; Wenig 1969: 50, no. 59; Müller 1970: Pl. XXXVI, no. 117; Aldred 1973: 105, no. 19; Settgest 1976: no. 74; Bryan, Kozloff, Berman 1992: 209–210; Fay 1992: 72, no. 37; Hamann 1944: 237–238; Arnold 1997: 30; Wildung 1998: 22; 1999: 215, no. 39; Hawass 1998: 39–40; Malek 2003: 168; Tiradritti 2007: 72; Kessler 2009: 146; Seyfried 2012: 202, no. 4.



4a-d. Statuette of a nude woman, CG 775 (Phot. Sameh Abd el Mohsen © Egyptian Museum, Cairo).



5a. Head of Queen Tiye, inv. no. 21834; b. nude woman statuette, inv. no. UC 8829 (a. © Egyptian Museum, Berlin; b. © Petrie Museum, University College, London).

Another statuette that has been compared with our statuette no. II is in the Petrie Museum, University College, London, inv. no. UC 8829, of unknown provenance (**Fig. 5b**).²⁶ The statuette is dated to the New Kingdom. It is made of wood, and measures 22.7cm height. The left arm has been broken off and the front of the left foot, as well as the base, are lost. There is a large crack down the top of the right shoulder.

The statuette represents a standing nude female with her feet together on a small base. She wears a short wig, which curves above her brow and behind the ears, and is cut straight at the back of the head. She has a round face, but the facial features are strongly effaced, and the ears appear only as indentation in the wig. The figure has narrow sloping shoulders, a small high waist, large rounded breasts and wide hips. Her right arm hangs at her side with the hand open against her thigh. The left arm is bent across her breasts with the hand clenched. In the opinion of the present author, the statuette should rather be compared to our statuette no. I, notwithstanding the bird.

²⁶ Page 1976: 77, no. 82.



6a-d. Statuette of a nude woman, CG 774 (Phot. Sameh Abd el Mohsen © Egyptian Museum, Cairo).

STATUETTE NO. III, CG 774 (**Fig. 6a-d**)

The third wooden statuette²⁷ was found – according to L. Borchardt – in an Eighteenth Dynasty tomb at Deir el-Bahari.²⁸ It measures 20cm in height and is almost completely preserved, while only the tip of nose is broken.

Despite its small size, the statuette is definitely one of the most beautiful sculptures of this group. The female is represented with arms held down by her sides, the palm of the hands turned inward and her legs are attached to the base. She wears nothing except for a simple painted necklace adorning her neck, the traces of which are still preserved on the chest. Her facial features are precisely modeled: she has a full face with large ovoid eyes, incised eyebrows, convex cheeks, small mouth with the upper full and pointed lip, while the lower one being less prominent, and a tiny chin. The arms and legs of the woman are partly separated from the body and the toes are not specified. The pubic area is indicated by dots. There are traces of black color on the wig. The emphasis on the sexual characteristics and the fullness of the hips might have meant that such a figure appeared as a fertility symbol.²⁹

ANALOGIES

This representation can be compared with the wooden female statuette displayed in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, inv. no. AH 196. The statuette is dated to the New Kingdom and measures 33.5cm in height. Its provenance is not known. The figure depicts a standing unclad female with her feet together on a small base. She is represented with arms held by her sides, the palm of the hands turned inward. Her left arm is adorned with a bangle.³⁰

STATUETTE NO. IV, CG 776 (**Fig. 7a-d**)

This statuette³¹ of unknown provenance measures 20.5cm in height. The arms are missing and the round face is partially eroded, so the facial features remain unclear and the foot-plate is partially damaged.

The statuette represents a standing nude female. She has narrow shoulders, a high waist, a prominent pubic mound, long, slender legs and small feet; the toes are not specified.

²⁷ Vandier 1958: 657; Borchardt 1930: 85.

²⁸ Borchardt 1930: 85.

²⁹ Wildung, Schoske (Eds) 1984: 138, no. 64.

³⁰ Fasson 2016: 550, cat. no. VI.63; Boeser 1907: 155; 1925: 8, no. 41; PM VIII², 698.

³¹ Borchardt 1930: 86; Vandier 1958: 657; PM VIII², 696.



7a-d. Statuette of a nude woman, CG 776 (Phot. Sameh Abd el Mohsen © Egyptian Museum, Cairo).

ANALOGIES

The wig of this statuette strongly resembles the wig of a wooden head of a female kept in the Petrie Museum, University College, London, inv. no. UC 8830. The height of the head is 6.2cm. The provenance is not known. It is dated to the New Kingdom.³²

COMMENTARY

Two iconographic features of the four figures deserve particular attention with respect to their dating and function.

The first is their nudity. In their art and literature, the Egyptians used nudity to convey more than social status. The nude or partially nude human figure could express several emotions and serve cultic functions. It is not surprising that the depictions of unclothed females should be overwhelmingly connected with sex and fertility. During the second half of the Eighteenth Dynasty nude or dressed women were usually rendered in a way that emphasized their sexuality and fertility: a pretty, youthful face, full breasts set off by a small waist and wide hips, callipygian buttocks, the pubic triangle usually distinct, even prominent. Unless they are shown working or embracing a family member, freestanding representations of women in the round, whether these females are dressed or not, usually appear with arms held tightly at their sides,³³ holding a pet, fruit, sistrum, flower or a bird in one hand.

The second detail of particular interest is the wig. The representations of women wearing short, round wigs reaching down to the neck, framing the face and covering the ears, are attested in the iconography of both elite and non-elite women in the Old and Middle Kingdoms, and again in the Late period. However, during the New Kingdom, this type seems to be confined to servants, although its significance is unclear, as observed by G. Robins.³⁴

Considering the nudity of the figures, the type of the wig worn, the tender, smooth surface treatment, especially the facial features, and the carving style, we can conclude that the statuettes under study belonged most probably to the late Eighteenth Dynasty, represented servants and their forms have been accentuated to show their sex-appeal or fertility.

These female figures have been found in different contexts and most likely served various purposes. In the world of the living, some figures may have been magical guarantors of fertility to both mothers and children who had reached the age of puberty. As burial equipment, the figures probably represented the potential for rebirth and procreation, thus assuring continuity and immortality in the afterlife for both genders.

³² Page 1976: 78, no. 83.

³³ Goelet 1993: 20, 25, 26; Behrens 1982: 291–294; Robins 1996: 30, 39.

³⁴ Robins 1999: 64.

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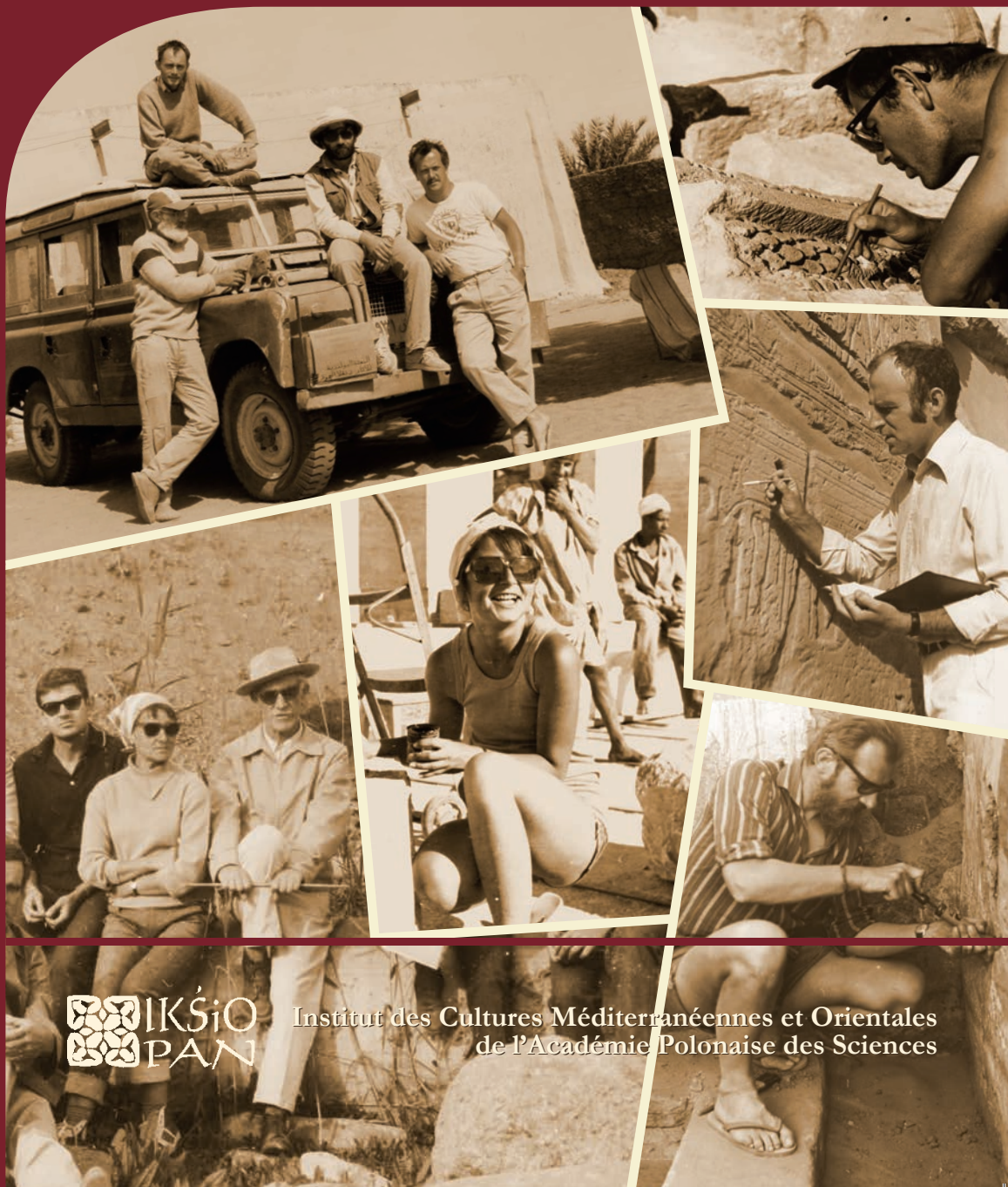
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