

The Motif of a ‘Blind Harper’ in an Unexpected Place

JOACHIM ŚLIWA

Abstract: In the village of Nawojowa Góra (25km west of Kraków, Poland) there is an Italian style villa built in the years 1923–1925 for Karol Gustaw Domański (1888–1936). For one of the rooms (a bedroom), the owner commissioned the manufacture of furniture decorated with Egyptian motifs. Among the latter, of particular interest are two relief panels carved in oak wood and featuring the figures of ‘blind harpers’ (respectively in left and right profile). There is no doubt that the woodcarver copied one of the harpers’ figures from the tomb of Ramesses III in the Valley of the Kings. The room decoration was probably designed by Julian Krupski (1871–1954), a painter and stained-glass artist who was a friend of the owner’s family. The furniture was made in 1929 and the discussed panels are an excellent example of the Egyptomania typical of the period, triggered by the discovery of Tutankhamun’s tomb (1922). In this case, however, the designer made use of another resource, which had been known to science for much longer. Nevertheless, the local community has long regarded the motif as associated directly with Howard Carter’s sensational discovery.

Keywords: Egyptomania, tomb of Ramesses III (KV 11), Julian Krupski (1871–1954), Karol Gustaw Domański (1888–1936)

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While looking for the influences of ancient Egyptian art in the works of contemporary artists, the present author has recently discovered a very interesting and completely forgotten trace. In Nawojowa Góra near Krzeszowice (25km west of Kraków, Poland) there is an Italian style villa (**Fig. 1**) erected in the years 1923–1925 for Karol Gustaw Domański (1865–1936),¹ who was a successful entrepreneur at that time, and who was soon to

¹ Kobylarczyk 2013: 88–95. I owe much of the information used here to Danuta Lubelska (Karol Gustaw Domański’s daughter) and Łukasz Skalny, the president of ‘Stowarzyszenie Miłośników Ziemi Krzeszowickiej’ (Krzeszowice Region Enthusiast Society). On the decision of the heiress, since 2003 the Society has been the owner of the part of the villa where the room with Egyptian décor is situated.



1. Nawojowa Góra near Krzeszowice. The Domański's family villa (1923–1925). Actual state (Phot. Jakub Śliwa).

acquire a large construction materials factory as well.² He resolved to erect a comfortable residence for his family, and ordered an appropriated project to be prepared by a local architect Leo Willmann.³

For one of the rooms (a bedroom), the owner commissioned the manufacture of furniture decorated with Egyptian motifs.⁴ Among the latter, two figures of ‘blind harpers’, respectively in the left and right profile (**Fig. 2**), represented on the headboard of a bed⁵ are particularly interesting. There is no doubt that the woodcarver copied one of the harpers very accurately from the tomb of Ramesses III in the Valley of the Kings (KV 11), commonly referred to as ‘Harper’s tomb’,⁶ most likely using a drawing from one of the publications

² Karol Gustaw Domański was an educated mining engineer, graduate of the famous *Bergakademie* in Leoben (Austria).

³ Working on the project he made use of the sketches made in Italy by Karol Domański Senior (Karol Gustaw’s father), who was an amateur painter. In later years Willmann became the mayor of a nearby town of Trzebinia, contributing greatly to the modernization of the town, especially to the improvement of sanitary conditions.

⁴ It should be added that the furniture designed for the dining room were executed in the Zakopane style, in accordance with the ideas of Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851–1915), the creator and promotor of this style. The Zakopane style drew upon forms and motifs typical of folk art and old wooden architecture of the Podhale region (Poland).

⁵ These are oak wood panels 64.0 x 21.2cm each, being a part of a headboard 204.0 x 85.0cm in size. Egyptian motifs also adorn two bedside cabinets (winged solar discs) and a large wardrobe (a stylized head of Hathor-Gorgo).

⁶ PM I.2, 518–527, esp. 520–521 (side-room I). See also: Reeves, Wilkinson 1996: 159–161 and 53, 64. The ruler’s mummy was removed from the tomb yet in the times of Twenty-first Dynasty, and moved to safety



2. Nawojowa Góra near Krzeszowice. The Domański's family villa. Two panels with the representation of 'blind harpers' (1929). Oak wood, dimensions 64.0 x 21.2cm (Phot. Jakub Śliwa).

accessible at that time (**Fig. 3a-b**).⁷ The same source was most likely drawn upon when making a *guéridon* (flower-stand), being an accurate imitation of Egyptian column with closed papyrus capital (**Fig. 4**).⁸

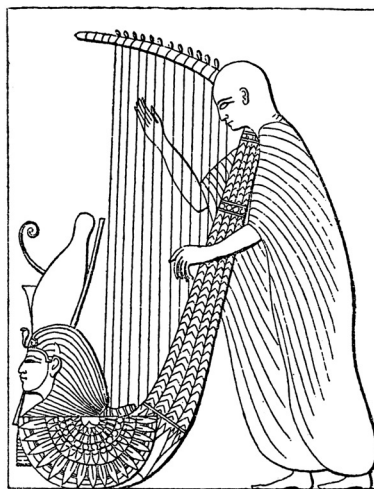
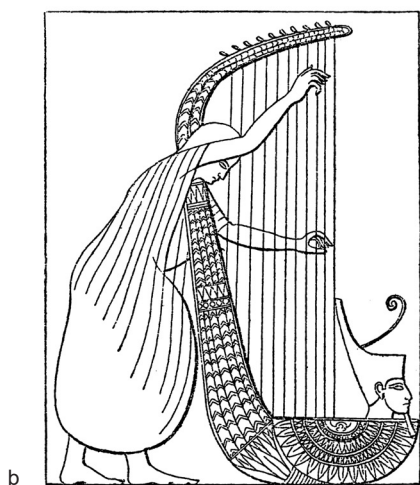
cachette DB 320 (discovered in 1895, currently in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo). The sarcophagus is kept in the Louvre, and its cover in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge.

⁷ This could be John Gardner Wilkinson's book (Wilkinson 1878: 436, Pl. XI bis), or a study by Adolf Erman, popular in that period, either the original version (Erman 1885) or one of more actual editions, where a drawing with the 'blind harpers' very suitable for copying can be found (Erman, Ranke 1923: 284, Fig. 125). The appropriate volume of the *Description* (II: Pl. 91), less accessible, or a drawing from Ippolito Rosellini's work (Rosellini 1834: Pl. XC VII), are less likely sources.

⁸ At that time, an appropriate drawing was available for example in Truchim 1926: 18. The column which was imitated belongs to a variant in which the shaft has the form of a bundle of eight papyrus stalks, with pointed



3. 'Blind harpers' from the Ramesses' III tomb (a. Rosellini 1834: Pl. XCVII; b. Erman, Ranke 1923: 284).



No written information has survived, but it can be assumed that the models, in the form of appropriate drawings, were provided to a cabinet-maker/woodcarver by Julian Krupski (1871–1954), a painter and stained-glass artist,⁹ and long-standing friend of Karol Gustaw

leaves marked in the lower part of the shaft. The oldest example of such column is known from the temple of Sahure (Fifth Dynasty). Cf. Arnold, Janoši 1984: 345–348 and Fig. 8; Arnold 1994: 222 (e).

⁹ Szczawińska, Chrzanowska 1986. Krupski graduated from the School of Artistic Industry in Lvov and 'Kunstgewerbeschule' in Vienna; in his time he was a popular interior decorator, author of polychromic decorations in many churches in the Małopolska and Podkarpacie regions (Poland), and a stained-glass designer (e.g. for St. Martin's church in Krzeszowice). Poland's Independence Monument founded by Domański in Nawojowa Góra in 1934 was also built according to his project.



4. Nawojowa Góra near Krzeszowice. The Domański's family villa. Flower-stand in the shape of a papyrus column with closed capital. Oak wood, height 127.5cm (Phot. Jakub Śliwa).

Domański and his family. In the years 1913–1932 Krupski was connected with Lvov, where he taught artistic wall painting at the Industrial School, so he surely had adequate knowledge and access to library resources.¹⁰

The discussed panels are an excellent example of the Egyptomania typical of the period when the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb made such an immense impact worldwide. In this case, however, the designer made use of another resource, known to science for a much longer time.¹¹ As mentioned above, the original that he imitated comes from the tomb of Ramesses III in the Valley of the Kings (KV 11). The tomb was discovered in 1768 by the Scottish explorer James Bruce and the Italian Luigi Balugani during their dramatic journey

¹⁰ One cannot also rule out a role for Karol Domański Senior (Karol Gustaw's father), who lived in Lvov, and showed a noticeable interest in art. The direct maker of the furniture (along with such elaborate panels) was a certain 'Trzcionka', who put his name and the date of 1929 on one of the pieces. No more detailed information about him is available. It is worth mentioning that figures of 'blind harpers' in a similar antithetical arrangement had been used much earlier (1902) in the decoration of Gustaw Kamiński's tomb in the Powązki cemetery in Warsaw. This pylon-tomb and its decoration was designed by Bolesław Łęgiewicz. Three harper figures, carved in bas relief, were placed on both left and right side of the doorjamb. However, they differ in terms of their costume: each harper has a typical *shendyt*-apron around the waist and wears a *khepresh*-crown, an attribute reserved for the rulers; additionally the lower part of the harp is adorned with a falcon head. Cf. Piątek, Ćwiek, 1992: 531 and Phot. 14–17.

¹¹ Nevertheless, the local community regarded the motif as associated directly with Howard Carter's sensational discovery (26th November 1922).

in search of the source of the Nile.¹² Later on, the tomb was repeatedly visited, described, and the attempts were undertaken to prepare its full documentation.¹³

Despite the fact that the decoration in Ramesses' III tomb features two harpers (**Fig. 3b**), the bed designer made use of only one of them (**Fig. 2**; the person on the left side), closing the composition with its mirror image. In the original, the figures differ clearly in the position of the hands, and the lower parts of the harps are decorated with royal heads adorned respectively with the red crown of Lower Egypt and the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt (**Fig. 3b**).¹⁴

Each of the panels from Nawojowa Góra is framed with a frieze of lotus flowers from above, while the side borders are formed by vertically arranged *sa*-signs, symbols of protection (not fully understood by the carver), separated by chevrons (**Fig. 2**). The rectangular field between the two harpers is filled with carefully executed ornamentation composed of alternating vertical and horizontal rectangular pieces topped with spirals, giving the impression of an elaborate plaiting.¹⁵

It does not seem likely that this particular motif of 'blind harpers' was chosen consciously, i.e. with the full understanding of its ancient meaning; the designer most likely fell under the charm of what may appear a scene of a peaceful (or maybe even 'drowsy') music performance.¹⁶ One could not be more wrong, though, as the true meaning of the scene is very solemn, or even existential, sometimes interpreted as a kind of Egyptian *memento mori*.¹⁷

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¹² Bruce 1790: 125–134. Which is why it was called 'Bruce's tomb'. It was partially known already in the Greco-Roman era, as proved by numerous Greek graffiti inscribed on the walls of the rooms accessible at that period.

¹³ Despite previous attempts, the tomb of Ramesses III has not been fully published as yet. The task was entrusted to Tadeusz Andrzejewski in 1958, but the works were interrupted by his untimely death (1961). The task, along with the partially prepared documentation passed to Alexandre Piankoff (1897–1966), but he too was unable to complete it. The next scholar to undertake the burden was Marek Marciniak, who started the work in 1977 but managed only to produce a preliminary report (Marciniak 1983). As an interesting detail one can mention that among the nineteenth-century tourists who visited the place there was a Pole; he left his name to perpetuity on one of the walls as 'Leon Chałaczkiwicz Polak' (he could not be identified in more detail).

¹⁴ The details of the music instruments could not fit within the much narrower projected panels. The number of harp strings was also reduced to eight (instead of eleven at the original scene). Actually the images of two harpers are in very bad condition, especially their lower parts (cf. Hickmann 1961: 45).

¹⁵ Such ornamentation can be seen on the ceilings of a number of private tombs in Thebes dating from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Dynasties. Cf. Fořtová-Šámalová, Vilímková 1963: Pl. 55, no. 169.

¹⁶ A certain role in the choice of the motif might have also been played by the scene's composition, with two identical arrangements, framing the area of the planned headboard.

¹⁷ A thorough analysis of the 'blind harper' motif has recently been published by Alexandra Verbovsek (Verbovsek 2014).

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