

ARTnews MAY 2009

Tomb with a View

An exceptional Egyptian painted coffin features startling touches of naturalism

BY SYLVIA HOCHFIELD

Die we must. But it's safe to say that none of us will enter the Great Beyond as well provided for as the provincial governor and his wife who were buried in Tomb 10A at Deir el-Bersha, in Middle Egypt, 4,000 years ago. Djehuty-nakht died between about 2060 and 1990 B.C., in late Dynasty XI or early Dynasty XII. In death as in life, he could afford the best. His mummy was encased in two nested



coffins of expensive imported cedarwood and carried to a chamber cut into a limestone cliff on the east bank of the Nile. At some point his wife was also interred there. Like many Egyptian tombs, theirs was broken into by ancient thieves. After that violation, it remained undisturbed until 1915, when a Harvard University–Museum of Fine Arts expedition blasted through a boulder-blocked passage and found the largest Middle Kingdom burial assemblage ever discovered. The objects,

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most of which have never been displayed, will go on view at the museum on October 18 in the exhibition “The Secrets of Tomb 10A: Egypt 2000 BC” (through May 16, 2010).

Both of Djehuty-nakht's coffins were covered inside and out with images and inscriptions that would provide for him and protect him in the afterlife. The interior of the outer coffin is the tomb's artistic treasure: a painted offering scene in which the seated governor surveys the food and objects of daily

life he will need for his comfortable existence to continue.

The neatly stacked low tables in front of Djehuty-nakht support a profusion of meat and poultry, wine and beer. Below his feet are the parts of a black-and-white cow. Stacked up behind the incense-bearing servant are the makings of a feast: bread, figs, and long-stemmed onions, parts of an oryx, five

Sylvia Hochfield is editor-at-large of ARTnews.



LEFT A dove with opalescent feathers spreads its wings in the offering scene.



RIGHT A priest and three offering bearers were among Djehuty-nakht's carved wood retainers. The tallest figure, with her basket, is 17 inches high.

trussed fowl, and two feathered ducks with twisted necks. Elsewhere are a bed, clothing and jewelry, tools and weapons, flowers and writing implements. Kneeling offering bearers are lined up in rows, along with magical texts and spells.

Djehuty-nakht's spirit could pass in and out of the burial place through the ornamented false door behind the offering scene. His mummy was laid on its side so that he could see through the painted eyes, which were repeated on both sides of both coffins.

The anonymous artisan who created this composition was an experimenter: without breaching the strict boundaries of Egyptian representation, he tried new things. He made Djehuty-nakht's more distant leg a darker color than the nearer one to indicate that it was farther away, and in other passages he showed his awareness of three dimensions. Some images, like

the ducks with twisted necks, are unusually naturalistic, while others are impressionistic, like a brazier dotted with both glowing and dead coals or a dove with opalescent feathers.

The tomb contained not only this painted masterpiece but also an exceptional wood carving. Djehuty-nakht and his wife were supplied with a large quantity of servants and laborers in the form of miniature wooden figures. Most were crudely made, but one quartet of a priest and offering bearers was fashioned with unusual refinement.

It took curators a while to get the foursome—known as "The Bersha Procession"—right. The ancient plunderers made a mess of the tomb, and grave goods were strewn about in a jumble of bones, smashed pots, and shattered wood. The procession—it is only 26 inches long—was found upside down at the bottom of a heap of debris, the figures still at-

tached to their baseboard but separated from their accoutrements. They have been reconstructed twice, as more of their accessories were identified in museum storage and it became clearer how the pieces fit together.

A shaven-headed priest leads the group. The vase supported on his shoulder and the incense burner in his right hand are necessary for rituals enacted for the dead. Behind him, two women carry provisions to be offered to the gods. The third woman brings personal objects for the use of the deceased: a cosmetic chest and a handled mirror in an animal-hide case.

We can see how these figures stepped out of a wall painting and into the third dimension. They face the viewer's right, as painted figures generally do. They stride forward with the more distant leg and each figure holds offerings in the nearer hand,

at hip level so their bodies are obscured as little as possible.

If the poses are conventional, the naturalism of the bodies—visible in the subtle modulations of forms—is quite unusual. Like the coffin painter, the sculptor was a master who did something different within the strict boundaries of traditional representation.

It's almost a miracle that these creations of anonymous artisans survived. The ancient thieves who smashed up the tomb wrenched off one end of the outer coffin but left the offering scene intact. There was a fire on board the boat in which the tomb's contents were shipped to Boston, and many of the objects suffered water damage. Fortunately the coffin and the procession were unharmed. So, presumably, Djehuty-nakht's spirit—wherever it is—still enjoys the delicacies and the comforts prepared for it. ■