**Early Dynasties of Ancient Egypt**

Even before the first king ruled as *nesut bity*, dual king of upper and lower Egypt, a wellspring of great culture had already begun to bubble up. Fed by the fertile Nile, cultivation thrived and produced surplus. Civilization changed as individuals moved from entirely agrarian lifestyles to those centered on trade. The age of the artisan began. From this beginning, Egyptian scribes and artisans would go on to create a codified system of expression so complete that many of its ritual components would endure over the next three millennia. This system of images and symbols was sacred. Hieroglyphs transcended visual boundaries and took on the power of the object depicted. To alter or break a hieroglyph was to remove its power. Snakes were drawn cut in half. The ultimate death came with having your name chipped away. A properly made image of a deceased man could hold his *Ka* should his body fail. Through this embodiment within the image, the *Ka* could accept offerings of the cult, sustaining itself and thereby the *Ba,* in the afterlife. Thus the depiction of images became critically important to those seeking to live beyond death.

The stylized treatment of the body from composite viewpoints addressed the restriction of representing three dimensional form on a two dimensional surface. In order to fully articulate the figure, individual parts present their most complete structure independently of the whole. This simultaneous view became part of the Egyptian figural cannon. Realistic representation was not an important consideration. Ritual power given to the deceased by the proper arrangement of their image was paramount. Artisans’ strict adherence to the cannon produced figures that remained remarkably similar throughout Egypt's Dynastic period. With a more careful eye, however, the beauty of diversity emerges.

The panel from the tomb of Hesira is carved in low relief on wood. It is one of eleven similar panels originally located in an offering niche inside the corridor chapel of his funerary temple. Hesira was a scribe during the reign of Djoser. To achieve his position, a scribe must be literate. Scribes were essential as they provided services of governmental, religious and financial recordkeeping. A belief in the power of written language permeated society, helping to make the scribal class both wealthy and important. This wealth allowed them to build tombs and funerary temples as well as to endow a funerary cult. It is in the preparation of his funerary cult that Hesira must have commissioned the panels. With the assistance of the powerfully drawn image and sacred Hieroglyphs on the panel, offerings placed in the niche would sustain the "Ka" through the afterlife.

The carving shows an image of the tomb owner, Hesira. He is by far the largest object on the surface, taking up about two-thirds of the overall area. His feet are grounded by the bottom register. He stands with his left foot forward, his body turning in simultaneous viewpoint as in other traditional depictions. He is wearing a short kilt that does not reach his knees and a long wig that disappears down his back. In his forward hand he holds a long staff and the tools necessary for his work as a scribe. In his other hand he holds a scepter. These are symbols of authority and reinforce the importance of the deceased. Above his head is another reference to his important position as a scribe. The hieroglyph is a combination of the tools in the forward hand. The palette, water pot and penholder appear in a single symbol found in the top register, a few characters above the head of the figure.

Notable contrasts appear almost immediately when considering the images within the tomb of Sheshe Nefer. Most apparent is the effect produced through the difference of media. The delicate detail and fine line made possible by the wood of Hesira's panel is absent here due to the rough texture of the stone surface. There are multiple figures and though they all follow the eighteen square grid, they vary in position and appearance. They have isocephally within the register which indicates the workers are of similar social status. The tomb owner is clearly not included in this grouping as his status would require him to be depicted as much larger and therefore the most important figure in the scene.

The low relief carving is a harvest scene in two registers. On top the figures are engaged in the harvest of wheat. Four figures face the center of the composition. The two central figures face each other. They bend awkwardly at the waist. Leaning forward they grasp the sheaves with the left hand, bunch them together and slice them cleanly with scythes held in the right hand. This position is especially contrived for the reaper on the right as his left arm appears to sprout from the center of his chest. Such unconventional representation would not be used to depict the deceased. It is acceptable here only because this is an image of a cult-worker. This exception is similar to many that made the images of workers open to slightly more variation than those of the tomb owner. Workers were shown in the process of their work. The artisan frequently had to address the human form in positions not restricted to the standing, sitting and kneeling poses acceptable for the members of the upper classes.

The lower register contains three figures as well as two donkeys. Two adults are located on the right. They are facing each other as they move the harvested grain. There are hieroglyphs at eye level between the men. They have similar clothing, but different hairstyles. One man appears to be balding. The third figure is drawn on a smaller scale, possibly because he is a child. He is on the left of the balding man and is leading the donkeys who will carry the grain away in baskets placed on their backs. Through the industrious labor of his cult workers, Sheshe Nefer would be assured his *Ka* would receive sustenance. If the living cult failed, the images would continue to carry on the duty, sustaining the deceased through eternity.

The two tombs functioned similarly and with the same purpose. Both shared a devout adherence to systematic expression that began its development at the cusp of Egyptian civilization. Both images show knowledge and application of the eighteen square grid that regulated figural proportion. The figures follow the figural cannon. They are portrayed with a profile head, frontal eye and chest, and in profile from the torso to the toes. Figures in both carvings are pictured with accoutrements of their trade. Many of the figures wear similar short kilts and wigs. Both images also contain sacred hieroglyphs carved around the figures. They were both created with the purpose of sustaining the *ka* of the deceased. Despite the similarities, their divergence is also notable.

The dynamic nature of the figures engaged in their work gives the carving in the tomb of Sheshe Nefer a sense of energy and action that is very different from the restrained treatment of the figure of Hesira. Bending, twisting bodies are depicted as they move and shift, giving life to the narrative. Animals appear alongside the workers in the harvest scene. They lend their labor to the service of Sheshe Nefer.

As a member of the elite scribe class and the owner of the tomb, Hesira must be portrayed more prominently and with more formality than the multiple figures of the workers. He would not stoop to labor. He stands holding both the symbols of his class and the tools of his trade. His status as a scribe is reiterated in the hieroglyphs in the upper register. The choice of wood, a rare and presumably valuable media, may also be significant.

These visible differences are due to a fundamental difference in the intended function of the carvings. The palette in the corridor chapel of Hesira was placed in the niche to *accept* the offerings of the funerary cult. The stone relief carved in the tomb of Sheshe Nefer was intended to *provide* the offerings of the funerary cult. Both are significant in the quality of their execution and service to their purpose. They are a testament to the skill of the artisans that carved them. They are a marvel created by hammer, chisel and awl. In this way, it is the artisan, not the tomb owner, who lives forever.