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Menkaure and his queen statue

King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and Queen, 2490–2472 f.Kr., greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), photo: tutincommon (CC BY-NC 2.0) Serene ethereal beauty, raw royal power, and evidence of artistic virtuosity have rarely been simultaneously captured as in this breathtaking, almost life-size statue of Pharaoh Menkaure and a queen. The meticulously finished surface of the dark stone is smooth as silk, captures the physical ideals of the past and creates a sense of eternity and immortality even today. Without a doubt, the most iconic structures from ancient Egypt are the massive and enigmatic Great Pyramids that stand on a natural stone shelf, now known as the Giza Plateau, on the southwestern edge of modern Cairo. The three primary pyramids of Giza were constructed during the height of a period known as the Old Kingdom and served as burial sites, memorials and places of worship for a series of deceased rulers—the largest belonging to King Khufu, the center of his son Khafre, and the smallest of the three to his son Menkaure. Giza plateau, photo: kairinfo4u (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0) Head and trunk (detail), Khafre throned, from Giza, Egypt, c. 2520-2494 F.C.E., diorite. 5' 6 inches high (Egyptian Museum, Cairo) The pyramids are not detached structures. Those on Giza formed only part of a much larger complex that included a temple at the base of the pyramid itself, long walkways and corridors, small subsidiary pyramids and a second temple (known as a valley temple) some distance from the pyramid. These Valley Temples were used to perpetuate the cult of the late king and were active places of worship for hundreds of years (sometimes much longer) after the king's death. Images of the king were placed in these temples to serve as the focus of worship—several such images have been found in these contexts, including the magnificent sitting statue of Khafre, now in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. On January 10, 1910, excavators led by George Reisner, director of the joint Harvard University-Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Expedition to Egypt, revealed an astonishing collection of sorority in valley temple connected to the pyramid of Menkaure. Menkaure's pyramid had been explored in the 1830s (with dynamite, no less). His carved granite sarcophagus was removed (and then lost at sea), and while the Pyramid Temple at the base was only in mediocre condition; temple temple in dal, was—fortunately—basically ignored. George Reisner and Georg Steindorff at Harvard Camp, looking east towards the Khufu and Khafre Pyramids, in 1935, photo by Albert Morton Lythgoe (Giza archive) Reisner had been digging on the Giza plateau for years at this point; his team had already explored the elite cemetery west of the Great Pyramid of Khufu before turning their attention to the Menkaure complex, especially the barely touched Valley Temple. Four grey cacketrices, Menkaure valley temples, S-magazines, corridor III 4, 1908 (Gizaarkiven). View one of the triads in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Menkaure flanked by Hathor (left) and nome goddess (Egyptian Museum, Cairo) In the southwest corner of the structure, the team discovered a magnificent cache of statuary carved in a smooth-grained dark stone called greywacke or schist. There were a number of triad statues—each showing 3 figures—the king, the fundamentally important goddess Hathor, and the personification of a nome (a geographical indication, similar to the modern idea of a region, district, or county). Hathor was worshipped in the pyramid temple complex along with the tallest sun god Re and the god Horus, who was represented by the living king. The goddess's name is actually Hwt-hor, which means House of Horus, and she was connected to the wife of the living king and mother of the future king. Hathor was also a fierce protector who guarded his father Re; As an Eye of Re (the title assigned to a group of dangerous goddesses), she was able to embody the intense heat of the sun and use the blazing fire to destroy her enemies. There were 4 complete triads, one incomplete, and at least another in a fragmentary state. The exact meaning of these triad is uncertain. Reisner believed that there was one for each ancient Egyptian nome, meaning that there would originally have been more than thirty of them. Newer scholarship, however, suggests that there were originally 8 triads, each associated with a large site associated with the cult of Hathor. Hathor's prominence in the Triads (she actually takes the central position in one of the sculptures) and her outstanding importance to the royal family gives weight to this theory. In addition to the Triads, Reisner's team also revealed the extraordinary dyad statue of Menkaure and a queen who is breathtakingly singular. Head and torsos (detail), King Menkaure (Mycerinus) and Queen, 2490–2472 f.Kr., greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), photo: 1910 (The Giza Archives) The two figures stand side by side on a simple, square base and are supported by a split backpillar. They both face the front, although Menkaure's head is noticeably turned to its right—this image was likely originally placed within an architectural niche, making it appear that they were emerging from the structure. The broad-fired, youthful body of the king is covered only with a traditional short pleated kilt, known as a shendjet, and his head sports the primary pharaonic insignia of the iconic striped nemes headdress (so known from the mask of Tutankhamun) and an artificial royal beard. In his clenched fists, held straight down on his sides, Menkaure grasps ritual fabric rolls. His body is straight, strong and eternally youthful with no signs of age. His facial features are remarkably individualized with prominent eyes, a fleshy nose, rounded cheeks and full mouth with protruding lower lip. Heads (detail), King Menkaure (Mycerinus) Queen, 2490–2472 f.Kr., greywacke, 142.2 x 57.1 x 55.2 cm (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), photo: 1910 (The Giza Archives) Menkaure's Queen provides the perfect female equivalent of his youthful masculine virility. Sensuously modeled with a beautifully proportioned body accentuated by a clinging garment, she articulates the ideal mature feminine beauty. There is a sense of the individual in both faces. Neither Menkaure nor his queen are depicted in the purely idealized way that was the norm for royal images. Instead, through the overlay of royal formality, we see the depiction of a living person filling the role of pharaoh and personal traits of a particular individual in the representation of his queen. Menkaure and his queen step forward with their left feet—this is entirely expected for the king, as men in Egyptian sculpture almost always do so, but it is unusual for the female because they are generally depicted with feet together. They both look beyond the present and timeless eternity, their worldly visage showing no human emotion at all. The dyade was never finished—the area around the lower legs has not received any final polish, and there is no inscription. Despite this incomplete condition, however, the image was erected in the temple and was brightly painted – there are traces of red around the king's ears and mouth and yellow on the queen's face. The presence of paint on top of the smooth, dark gray wacke on a statue of the late king that was originally erected in his memorial temple courtyard makes an interesting suggestion—that the paint may have been intended to wear off through exposure and, over time, reveal immortal, black-meat Osiris Menkaure (for more information on the symbolic associations of Egyptian materials, see Introduction to Egyptian Art-Materials). Unusually for a pharaoh's image, the king has no protective cobra (known as a uraeus) perched on his forehead. This remarkable absence has led to the suggestion that both the king's nemes is and the Queen's wig were originally covered in precious metal and that the cobra would have been part of this addition. Based on comparison with other images, there is no doubt that this sculpture shows Menkaure, but the identity of the queen is another matter. She's clearly a royal woman. She stands at almost equal height with the king and of them two she is the one who is completely frontal. In fact, it may be that this dyad is geared towards the Queen as its central figure rather than Menkaure. The prominent position of the royal woman—on equal height and frontal—in addition to the protective gesture she extends has suggested that this, rather than one of Mekaure's wives, is actually his queen mother. The function of the sculpture was in any case to ensure the rebirth of the king in Afterlife. Additional Resources: This sculpture at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Educator resource from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Menkaure Pyramid Complex from Giza Archives Archives

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