

THE OSTRACON

THE JOURNAL OF THE EGYPTIAN STUDY SOCIETY

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Publication of The Ostrakon is supported by a grant from
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Egyptian Study Society, Inc.
P.O. Box 40754
Denver, Colorado 80204-0754
UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
WWW.EGYPTSTUDY.ORG

THE PAINTED BOX OF TUTANKHAMUN
Lecture by TGH James, Summary by Jan Stremme

The Painted Box of Tutankhamun

A lecture by TGH James, Retired British Museum Keeper
of Egyptian Antiquities, 18 April 2003

Summarized by Jan Stremme

TG.H. “Harry” James shared some observations about Tutankhamun’s painted chest on April 18, 2003 at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science. This chest was first seen in modern times when Howard Carter’s team entered the antechamber of Tutankhamun’s tomb. The chest stood in front of the sealed burial chamber, at the foot of one of a pair of guardian statues. At the time, Carter described the chest as one of the “greatest artistic treasures of the tomb”. James was quick to point out that many more artistic treasures were found in the tomb later, but the chest remains a masterpiece. Carter, an artist himself, was taken by the details

in the painting on the sides and top of the chest, and commented on the detailing in the horses’ harness trappings and the stippling of the lions’ coats. He was also intrigued by some stylistic departures from the traditional formulaic art of the ancient Egyptians.

A quick overview of the chest shows fairly typical pharaonic themes, depicting the ruler’s prowess in battle and hunting scenes. These themes were seen as early as the 1st Dynasty scene of the pharaoh Den smiting foreigners, and through the Ptolemaic Period. Although Tutankhamun was a young king and probably not battle-seasoned, the scenes represent his power.

As James took us through the scenes on the chest, he used slides of Nina Davis's facsimiles which show the details as clearly as when they were first unearthed.

First we studied a scene of the pharaoh smiting Nubians. The pharaoh dominates the center of the scene in a beautiful chariot with his elaborately harnessed horses. Trampled enemies lie below the chariot in grotesque positions. To the left, the pharaoh's retinue is arranged in three registers. There are even some Nubian fan bearers shading the pharaoh in his chariot although James wryly observed, "I can't believe this actually happened" in battle. In front of the chariot, on the right side of the panel, is a chaotic tangle of bodies of Nubians. Even the Egyptian soldiers in this portion of the scene are unshaven. James pointed out two features rarely seen in traditional Egyptian art. Some of the soldiers are shown full face, and one chariot rider's cloak flies in the breeze. He pointed out that the artist left no blank spaces. The chaotic scene is skillfully laid out, free of repetition, with the contorted bodies and body parts. All remaining space is filled with flora.

The opposite side of the box features a similar scene of the pharaoh smiting Asiatics. The pharaoh is shown in a different chariot, protected by the vulture goddess Nekhbet. Again, some of the figures are portrayed full-face, and a retainer again wears a wind-blown cloak. James commented that the painter was enough of a master that he was not afraid to experiment, and even speculated that the artist "was obviously rather pleased" with the effect of the billowing cloak since he used this motif on several sections of the box.

Moving to the lid of the chest, we studied two hunting scenes. In the lion hunt, the pharaoh is again in the center and here his chariot horses' tails are braided. His three-tiered retinue follows on the right, complete with Nubian fan bearers, who carefully watch their fans lest they strike the king. James observed that the warriors are all clean-shaven in this scene, and pointed out another retainer in a wind-swept coat. Lions are in various contorted positions in the left front of the scene. Some lions are shown with full faces. No

two lions are the same and their coats have shading and stippling. These techniques, while not typical of contemporary art, are not unprecedented.

The second scene on the lid features a hunt of various desert animals. The familiar figure in a wind-swept cloak appears again among the retainers. The chaotic scene includes antelope, desert asses, a hyena and an ostrich. James pointed out that Carter's father was a noted animal artist, so Carter could not have helped but admire the careful portrayal of animals in this scene.

More typical, formal art decorates the two ends of the chest. The pharaoh is portrayed as a sphinx, wearing the Atef crown of Osiris and protected by Nekhbet. His name is painted in two cartouches and he is again trampling the enemy. James showed the audience the fine detailing where the pharaoh's name is spelled out on the palm fronds of the fan used to shade him. The figures are rigid and formal, with the exception of the trampled enemies.

The chest was made of wood, possibly sycamore. The interior is whitewashed and plain, and contained deteriorated clothing including sandals, gloves (some small enough for a child) and a headrest. We were left to speculate about the purpose of this beautiful box, and why it was included in the hasty burial of this short-lived pharaoh.

When Carter first removed the chest, he believed the only preservation measures required were a dusting and a protective coating. Unfortunately, within three to four weeks, it became apparent that the change in humidity was damaging the chest. The joint cracks widened as the wood began to buckle, cracking the paint. Melted paraffin wax was used to fix the gesso plaster to the wood. At the time, this tended to brighten the colors of the paint. But over the years, the colors and details in the painting have deteriorated significantly. There are modern conservation techniques that might be used successfully, but the task of conserving this artifact would be formidable and costly. Today, the painted box is prominently displayed in a glass case in the Tutankhamun exhibit at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.