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Egyptian, New Kingdom, 18th Dynasty,
1550 – 1295 B.C.,
Relief with Figures in Profile

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RELEIF WITH FIGURES IN PROFILE

Limestone
10 x 16.5 cm; 3 3/4 x 6 1/2 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, England, acquired 1956 – 1959;
Thence by decent to Tonkin Hopkins;
Private Collection, England.



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This finely carved limestone fragment preserves part of a larger figural composition in raised relief, showing the heads and upper bodies of two male figures advancing in procession towards the right. Although separated from its original architectural and narrative context, the fragment retains sufficient evidence of costume, gesture, colour and physiognomy to place it securely within the sophisticated artistic traditions of Egypt's Eighteenth Dynasty. More specifically, the delicacy of its carving invites comparison with relief sculpture produced during the early Thutmosid period, particularly under the reign of Queen Hatshepsut and her co-ruler Thutmose III in the mid-fifteenth century B.C.

Both figures wear short, carefully arranged wigs composed of echeloned locks, their repeated strands creating an ordered pattern around the head and neck. The rear figure is distinguished further by a short beard, while his left hand is clenched and raised towards the opposite shoulder. Such gestures formed part of the highly codified vocabulary of Egyptian representation and would originally have been understood within the action of the complete scene - perhaps a procession, ceremony or act of attendance. The figures are not conceived as portraits in the modern sense; rather, variations in hairstyle, beard, costume and gesture could communicate distinctions of role and status while remaining within established conventions of Egyptian figural art.

Of particular quality are the faces. The profiles are defined by gently sloping foreheads, delicately modelled eyes, straight noses and subtly upturned lips. These restrained, almost elegant features are characteristic of some of the finest relief carving of the Thutmosid period. During Hatshepsut's reign, Egyptian royal and monumental art underwent a period of remarkable refinement and artistic experimentation. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has described her reign as one of exceptional artistic creativity, manifested particularly in sculpture, relief and monumental architecture. The softly articulated mouth and elongated, slightly slanting eye visible here correspond particularly closely to the visual language associated with Hatshepsut's great mortuary temple at Deir el-Bahri.

Important comparisons can be made with a group of painted limestone reliefs from the east wall of the temple's upper terrace, now in the Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, Staatliche Museen in Berlin. Published as catalogue nos. 82a–c in Catharine H. Roehrig's, *Hatshepsut: From Queen to Pharaoh*, these fragments formed part of an extensive representation of the Opet Festival, in which groups of soldiers participate in the celebrations accompanying the sacred procession of Amun. The Berlin reliefs are securely dated to the joint reign of Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, circa 1479–1458 B.C. Nos. 82a and 82c offer particularly useful comparisons for the present fragment in their profile heads, short hairstyles, carefully controlled contours and combination of linear precision with understated modelling.

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Equally significant are the surviving traces of red pigment visible on the skin. Egyptian relief sculpture was originally conceived as a polychrome art, its carved surfaces enlivened by extensive painted decoration. Within Egyptian artistic convention, male Egyptian figures were commonly represented with reddish-brown skin, while women were generally rendered in lighter tones. The Berlin soldiers from Hatshepsut's temple preserve precisely this convention: their bodies were painted red to identify them as Egyptian men. The minute remnants of pigment on the present fragment therefore preserve an important indication of its original appearance, when the relief would have been considerably more vivid than its present limestone surface suggests.

Despite its fragmentary condition - including surface losses and a vertical break passing through the left-hand figure - the relief retains an impressive degree of sculptural finesse. The assured contouring, elegant physiognomies and surviving colour together evoke the exceptionally accomplished workshops active during the Thutmosid age. Detached from the larger monument for which it was created, the fragment nevertheless preserves something of the ordered ceremonial world of New Kingdom Egypt and the remarkable technical refinement that distinguishes the relief sculpture of the Eighteenth Dynasty.

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