

AN EGYPTIAN PAINTING ON LINEN

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Judging from the title above, it might be assumed that the ancient Egyptians followed the present-day practice of painting on canvas, but that is by no means the case. The Egyptian paintings with which we are all familiar are wall paintings done either on stone sculptured in low relief, on the plaster of mud-brick walls, or on the plastered rock walls of tombs. Other paintings also exist—for instance, those on the panels of boxes or the surfaces, both exterior and interior, of coffins, the occasional decorative paintings on pottery, and the “vignettes,” often in color, on the papyrus of such religious writings as the *Book of the Dead*—but as a rule textiles were never used as a base for painted pictures.

There are, to be sure, the fully decorated anthropoid coffins of the later Egyptian periods. These are often made not of wood but of what has somewhat misleadingly been called “cartonnage”—a material built up of alternating layers of linen and gesso. The linen, however, serves only as a binding material, and the prepared surface is always a smooth coating of fine gesso, much like that on the wooden panels of renaissance paintings.

Gessoed wooden panels were commonly used, like our slates, by Egyptian scribes for practicing writing and for preliminary drafts of accounts and letters later to be transcribed on papyrus. A scribe might use such a panel for a sketch for a wall decoration, but he seems usually to have preferred a potsherd or a flake of limestone.

We have the record of what seems to be a formal painting on a panel in the tomb of a VI Dynasty vizier at Saqqāreh (see ill. p. 203). The artist is shown seated before an elaborate easel at work on a picture which represents personifications of the three seasons. This subject is, I believe, unique in the his-

tory of Egyptian art. It is, however, more than likely that the artist, possibly the vizier himself, is at work not on a painting but on the preliminary design for a wall decoration in a temple, like the well-known one in the Sun Temple at Abu Sir of the previous dynasty. Only one actual example of a painting made at an easel has survived. This dates from the VI Dynasty and its subject matter is distinctly funerary in character. It may therefore be assumed that, except in the late Old Kingdom, easel painting as we now know it was to all intents and purposes not practiced. This is quite in keeping with the character of Egyptian painting, which was primarily functional (serving religious or funerary purposes) in the “decoration” of temple or tomb walls and purely decorative in the case of domestic interiors or useful household articles. To be sure, some objects have survived whose sole purpose was to satisfy the eye of the beholder or the pride of the possessor, but easel paintings are not among them. If a wealthy man wished to brighten his living room with a picture, he had it painted directly on the wall, not on a wooden or canvas rectangle which would then be hung there.

The subject matter of an Egyptian painting on linen recently acquired by the Museum excludes it from the category of domestic decoration (see ill. p. 202). It is distinctly funerary in character: in fact, it epitomizes Egyptian funerary art, for it represents the reception of food offerings by a deceased man; and this is made perfectly clear by the title: “An offering of all things good and pure for the spirit of the Osiris Ḥori, justified.”

The style of the painting and Ḥori's costume place it at the end of the XVIII Dynasty. The illustration makes a description unnecessary except for mention of the colors. The



The funerary meal. A late XVIII Dynasty painting on linen

inscription, the chair, the wig, and the clay stoppers of the two wine jars are dead black. The body color of Hori is brownish red outlined with darker red, and the fruits, vegetables, and cakes on the offering stand are in bright, naturalistic colors. The pigments are the ones commonly used in wall paintings, and the brilliant effect is enhanced by a ground coat consisting of a thin, white gesso wash.

The white sizing has preserved the part of the linen covered by the painting, for the areas beyond it are in poor condition. How large the piece was originally is uncertain, but it must have been part of one of the many

sheets stored in the linen chests of every well-appointed Egyptian household for daily use as bed linen and clothing or as mummy wrappings and shrouds when a member of the family died.

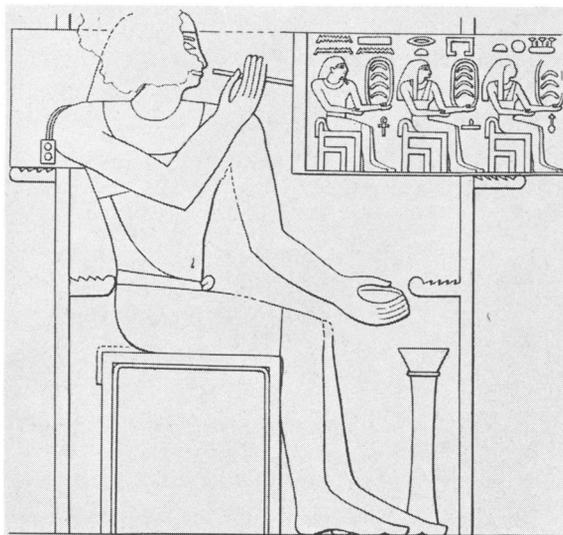
The manner in which this particular piece of linen was used is by no means clear. The possibility that it was a shroud covering a mummy in its coffin might be considered but for the fact that the rare examples of decorated shrouds now extant bear either excerpts from the *Book of the Dead* or else a full-size drawing of the god Osiris, with whom the deceased was identified. In any case the use of the linen as a shroud would not satisfactorily

explain the trapezoidal shape of the painting.

It is in this odd shape that we must seek the explanation and purpose of this unusual painting. Another less evident clue is the fact that the threads of the fabric are not at right angles to each other. The strands which should be horizontal are curved, the center being lower than the outer ends. Such distortion would result if a sheet of loosely woven linen were stretched over an object and tied at the opposite side. The effect would be exaggerated if the object were conical, like the two jars under the stand in the picture, or a box with sloping sides. Now jars, whether of stone or pottery, often had pieces of cloth tied over their mouths, the knot being sealed with clay marked with the impression of a scarab or other sealstone. A similar method of securing the contents might easily have been applied to a box. If we assume that the piece

of cloth was large enough to come down over the sides of such a container and that the funerary artist saw the opportunity to exercise his craft on this stretched linen, we have a possible explanation of the unusual features of this painting: the odd shape of the enclosing lines, the irregular stretch of the fabric, and the fact that the scene is painted on linen. If this is the true answer to the problem, the inscription is a label not only for the picture but also for the contents of the jar or box.

Accession number 44.2.3. Fletcher Fund, 1944. The trapezoid enclosing the painting is 10 in. high and 11 in. wide. The evidence for easel painting in ancient Egypt is to be found in an article by Prentice Duell in Technical Studies in the Field of the Fine Arts, vol. VIII, pp. 174-191 (April, 1940). The drawing of a painter working at an easel is by Lindsley F. Hall.



A VI Dynasty artist working at his easel