



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

June 2019 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

"Missed and Underrated Criteria for Authenticating Egyptian Artefacts" Marcel Marée

At the beginning of June Marcel Marée came to talk to us about the criteria he uses to authenticate Ancient Egyptian artefacts and detect modern forgeries. A lot of people bring artefacts to the British Museum to be authenticated, including art dealers, and so he's interested in improving and systematising the authentication process. Often experts rely on intuition, but that relies on such a breadth of knowledge that not many people can be sure they are right. Artistic merit is also often used as an indicator of authenticity, but that's a dangerous criterion to rely on as pieces that look like they are good quality are not necessarily old (nor vice versa). In this talk he laid out the criteria he looks at when he's examining an artefact - he said that he looks at several criteria because one is rarely sufficient to determine whether or not the object is a fake. He's keen to operate in a methodological way so that he avoids subjectivity.

The bulk of his talk was going through the criteria he uses. For each one he showed us several examples to illustrate what he meant, some of which were fakes and some of which were not. The first criterion he discussed was whether or not the maker of the object had followed ancient conventions of representation including the Ancient Egyptian canon of proportions. The Ancient Egyptians used proportion grids when constructing all of their art - both 2D representations and 3D sculptures. A modern maker is unlikely to have gridded the statue out before carving each section, and the trained eye can tell the difference. The grid doesn't just apply to the whole statue, they also gridded out faces separately. Over the course of 3000 plus years of history the templates used varied, but each period would have stuck to a particular set of conventions. So the first question he asks is does the artwork fit any of the known limited range of templates. To illustrate what he meant he showed us two heads of the Pharaoh Amasis (from the 26th Dynasty). The two did not look identical but do share several diagnostic features: they have big chins, there is very little forehead, the eyes are set high on the face. So there's room for variation but each artist is interpreting the same template. He also showed us a statue of Bes that clearly failed to meet this criterion. For starters the tail was all wrong, it was attached far too far down the back of the god, coming from the rectum rather than the tail bone! Much more importantly the feet were completely wrong. They were set sideways on the legs instead of facing forward as one would expect feet to be. It looks exactly like a 2D representation of Bes, so has clearly been made by somebody modern who didn't understand the differing artistic conventions of Ancient Egyptian art in 2D or in 3D. It's a mistake that would be inconceivable for an Ancient Egyptian. Marée also showed us another Bes artefact with the opposite mistake - a 2D presentation with the feet shown facing forwards: another clear fake.



Genuine Ramesside Era Prince on Luxor Temple Walls

Other examples are rather more subtle, like a relief of a Ramesside era Prince. At first glance it looks plausible, but then Marée went through the way in which both face and hair are wrong in many details as compared with an authentic example (from the temple walls at Luxor as shown on the previous page). The eyes are the wrong shape, as are the nose and chin. The hair style is also different, and the skull too big and bulbous at the back of the head. This is not an ancient artist working within the rules of the Ramesside canon, it's a modern forgery by someone who doesn't know the subtleties of what he or she is copying.

Marée's second criterion was whether or not the damage to the piece looked accidental. And if it wasn't accidental does it look like deliberate damage done by Ancient Egyptians - like removal of the nose of a statue or erasure of a name. Several of his examples for this criterion were heads of "statues" that had "broken off" yet had miraculously undamaged faces - it seems implausible that severe enough damage to smash the head from the body would leave the features so intact. The lines of the break in each case were too aesthetically pleasing (and looked like they had been cut with multiple blows rather than one catastrophic event).

One of these examples had also been part of a collection which had contained various dubious artefacts. As well as this head without a statue, Sydney Bernard Burney had also owned a torso of a tiny lapis lazuli statue. This object looked like it had been made by the same maker as the head, but they didn't reflect a single template so they must both be modern forgeries (as an ancient Egyptian would be constrained by the rules of his time). The torso also has nonsense hieroglyphs carved on it, and the quality of the piece is far too poor for such a precious and high status material. Along with these pieces Burney had also owned a couple of unusual lapis lazuli items (a bowl and a jackal head), some more heads from statues (now known to be fake, including a purported Middle Kingdom example that the British Museum now owns which Marée has taken off display). And a couple of the notorious crystal skulls that purport to be ancient South American artefacts but were actually made by machine tools in the 19th Century.

The next criterion is to consider if the item is a close copy of a known original - and does the copy reveal that the copyist has no idea what he is copying? Marée's first example was a copy of a seated scribe statue that is now in the Louvre - it is a pretty good copy but has no inscription on the scroll on the scribe's lap despite having the space for it. Another example was of an offering table, in this case the copyist had done a good job on the hieroglyphs including filling in a piece that was missing on the original. But the artefact as a whole is far too thin, offering tables are always big slabs not thin sheets of stone. Another example shows how fakes can sometimes be useful to Egyptologists. This was a stela in the collection of Lady Meux which was published by Wallis Budge - it matches an original in every detail. It was once assumed that there were two stelae but Marée assured us that when you look closely at Lady Meux's stela it's clearly a fake. The usefulness comes from the fact that the copy hasn't deteriorated like the original - so there are details on that copy which can no longer be seen on the original.

Another example was a statue of Tetisheri purporting to be from the 18th Dynasty - the base of it is an exact copy of an original, even down to some of the damage (which had removed part of an inscription). Of course on the copy you can see chisel marks rather than a fracture mark. Looking at the rest of the hieroglyphs you can see why the forger hasn't wanted to risk inventing the missing piece of inscription - there are mistakes that

an Ancient Egyptian would not have made, like writing a hetep sign without its loaf of bread. The original now has no torso or head, but the copy does so there is a debate about whether or not this upper part is an invention of the forger or a copy of a now lost piece of the statue. Part of the debate hinges around the hairstyle which is unusual, but Marée said it's not unique so can't be used to definitely say whether or not it's an invention.

Marée's next example was of an entire collection - the Mansoor collection. These pieces all purport to come from the Amarna era but are all copies. Generally not as good quality as the originals and often direct copies of known pieces. (When I was looking it up on wikipedia to check the spelling of Mansoor it was clear the article was written by someone who believes the pieces to be genuine.)

Marée finished the first half of his talk by telling us about a piece that came on the market in 2004 in Brussels at a problematic dealer. It is a small double statue that looks pretty ugly - the male figure of the two is leaning at an odd angle, the ears are big, and it just generally looks a bit rubbish. The inscriptions do make sense, but there are Old Kingdom names on these Middle Kingdom style figures. Perhaps they were named by parents inspired by the Old Kingdom? This would suggest a Memphite provenance, which fits with other details of the inscriptions - the man is named as a priest of Sokar, who is a deity known to be worshipped in the Memphite area. But there just aren't that many Middle Kingdom sculptures that have been found in the Memphite area, and this dealer had another one as well. By chance at a conference Marée saw a talk about the discovery of Middle Kingdom artefacts at Memphis. As part of the talk the speaker showed a photo of a statue in the process of excavation and it looked very like the statue up for sale in Brussels! So after the talk he asked the speaker where she'd last seen the statue she'd excavated. She explained that it had been found near the end of the dig season and had been packaged up in a crate and locked safely away in the Inspectorate. So they arranged for this to be checked and when this crate was opened 2 days later there was a fake in the place of the statue she had found! Marée showed us a picture of this fake, and it was really shockingly poor work - the original which we'd all thought looked a bit rubbish was much better quality than this replica. This demonstrated one of the points Marée had made at the beginning of his talk - just because it looks a bit rubbish, doesn't mean that a piece isn't genuine. In one sense the fake looked nothing like the original, but it did match the written description in the inventory at the Inspectorate - down to things like having black marks on the stone of the base because those were noted, but the black marks weren't in the same places nor the same shape.

Having discovered that this artefact for sale in Brussels was stolen Marée next went to the police to try and get it returned and the perpetrators apprehended. This was a long drawn out process - he had to contact his local police (the Met) and then in theory the report would move through the various levels of bureaucracy and international police forces and end up in the hands of the Brussels police force who could go and seize the statue. Sadly in practice the process was nothing like that simple, and Marée ended up having to ring the Brussels police himself several times and even then nothing happened for 7 weeks. By that stage the statue had "disappeared" from the Brussels dealership - although the second statue was still there to be confiscated and returned. It wasn't any surprise that the first statue had "disappeared", because it had been found dumped in a plastic bag outside a museum in Egypt having been smuggled back into the country. All this indicated that the criminal was someone who had inside

knowledge (so knew the first statue had been identified) and that they hoped that if they returned it then the investigation would stop. Unfortunately for him it didn't - he was caught and is now in jail. Unsurprisingly he turned out to be an employee of the Inspectorate the statue had been "securely" stored in.

After our break for coffee and cake Marée returned to his criteria for judging authenticity of artefacts. The next is that fakes generally show a lack of originality, those that do attempt something other than a direct copy show a lack of understanding of the subject matter. His first example illustrating this was a stela with a figure holding a was sceptre - not an unusual motif in general, but entirely inappropriate on this type of stela. The inscriptions also show a lack of understanding - it's an offering formula and starts out looking alright (although there are several mistakes) but once it gets past the initial part that many of us can recognise it descends into gobbledegook. This item was sold in the 1960s, in a sale where everything turned out to be a fake!

Another example he showed us was a seated male figure, purporting to be a statue of a Vizier (a title roughly equivalent to Prime Minister). All other statues of Viziers show them wearing a wrap around cloak, but in this one there is no cloak which left the forger with a problem to solve. Peeking out at the top of the cloak on a Vizier can be seen some strings and Egyptologists assume that these lead to some sort of pectoral or badge of office. But the forger wasn't aware of this so he guessed that the strings would just extend down the body to the kilt - making it look like the Vizier was wearing braces! It had once been in a private Belgian collection that has turned out to almost entirely consist of fakes. The art dealer selling this refused to believe Marée when he said it was a fake, so the artefact is now in the St Louis Museum. And he was not the only one, another item from that Belgian collection was put up for auction by Sothebys who also refused to believe their artefact to be a fake (so someone bought that one for £1.5million).

Marée's next example was a head of Tutankhamun - stylistically and technically impressive, but nonetheless a fake. The crown shows clearly where there are problems, it's based on an image of Tutankhamun and Ankhesenamun on a throne found in Tutankhamun's tomb but the sculptor hasn't been able to properly parse the elements of the crown. It is quite a complex composite crown, with several elements to it, and about halfway up there are a pair of rams horns which are quite hard to pick out on the throne image unless you really know what you're looking at. The forger has clearly been unable to figure out what these were, so added a rectangular block border like you would find on a tomb wall! And further up the crown it continues to go off the rails - the sun disks look more like donuts and the "ostrich feathers" look nothing like anything to do with ostriches or indeed feathers. So up to the crown the forger knew what he was doing and then his lack of deep knowledge was exposed when he tried to improvise. This item was intended to go up for auction at Christies, but after asking Marée to authenticate it they didn't sell it.

Marée's next two examples both have evidence for deliberate alteration in modern times. The first of these is a head of a statue that has been acquired by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts reasonably recently for a large sum of money. Marée believes this to be a fake for a variety of reasons (although the museum disagrees and has kept the piece on display). It purports to be a piece of private (i.e. non-royal) sculpture from the 12th Dynasty, and it has Senwosret III's features. But private sculpture of the period is normally smaller than this example, and generally isn't as good a copy of the King's features. Also the wig is all wrong - it has no undulations or striations like a 12th Dynasty

example of this type of wig would. Instead it is completely smooth, and looks like a 13th Dynasty wig rather than a 12th Dynasty one. But the face is equally clearly of the 12th Dynasty style. The damage is as with other fakes - not really consistent with this head ever having had a body - but there is a twist here. There is a photo of the piece in an archive in the Brooklyn Museum which was taken 60 years ago, and at that time the piece had more wig and more of the shoulders! The wig looked even less plausible at that point, and Marée thinks it is clear that the piece was recarved to remove this problematic area. And it must have been done by the original forger or someone in the know, because you wouldn't just hack away at a legitimate piece like that. The other example also purports to date to the reign of Senwosret III - it is a small seated statue of the king. It already raises doubts because it is too small for royal statuary of the period. Looking more closely it also has no inscriptions except for the cartouche on the belt which is unusual. But once there were inscriptions, and these were removed in modern times - so clearly they were problematic. And thus the piece must be a fake as otherwise it wouldn't be "edited" like this.

Marée's next criterion was to think about whether we can determine where a piece was made and what it was made for. His first example was a sculpture head purporting to date to the Old Kingdom. It's said to be "provincial work" - i.e. not made in the court workshops but out in the provinces, which would explain why it is of poorer quality. The problem is that the only known sculpture workshops in the Old Kingdom are in Memphis and are court based, there were no provincial workshops in this period. It also fails on other criteria - the head looks like it was cleanly chiselled off the "body" (which likely never existed) and the head is not the right shape. It is still on display, despite his passing on his opinion to the museum in question.

His next example was a small obsidian Anubis/jackal figure. The primary problem with this piece is that there is no obvious Egyptian context it could be made for. There are no known temples of Anubis where this could have been a cult statue, and anyway it's too small and the wrong material for a cult statue (which would be gold or silver). Jackal figures are often found in tombs on coffins, like the ones on Tutankhamun's coffin, but this figure is far too small for that context. And once again the wrong material - all known tomb sculptures are made of wood. So there's no obvious purpose for this unique item, which means it could well be a fake.

Marée's last criterion was whether there was any suspicious lack of inscriptions. His examples for this point were all stela fragments. The common theme was that they were "broken" conveniently along lines which meant the inscriptions would have broken off (if they'd ever existed in the first place). One of these stela fragments is now in the British Museum (where it is no longer displayed), it looks like it is from the reign of Senwosret I in style but has no space at all left for the inscriptions one would expect. This along with other features has made him sure it's a fake.

To round out his talk Marée returned to a point he'd made at the beginning - just because something is unusual or of poor quality doesn't necessarily mean it's a fake. To illustrate this he showed us some less than fantastic quality items from well documented excavations. Some of these examples have been discovered at Edfu, dating to the 2nd Intermediate Period or early 18th Dynasty. The photos he showed us were of a stela, block statue and double statue which looked ugly and of poor quality. But nonetheless they had a secure provenance so are legitimate. There are also inscriptions on them which have hieroglyphs that fit the style of the period and the texts make sense. They are poor, but legitimate. Another example is also from Edfu,

from the reign of Amenhotep I - a seated scribe statue, which is of poor quality but securely provenanced and matches the known Amenhotep I era canon of art. He finished up with a handful of examples of items wrongly labelled fakes. One of these was 4 small pieces hacked from a statue base of a statue of Amenhotep III depicting Asiatic prisoners beneath the king's feet. He had identified them as real, and even identified the site they came from, and so they were repatriated to Egypt from the dealer who had intended to sell them. However on arrival in Egypt the authorities there judged them to be fakes and put them in storage. It took him a lot of work to persuade them that these pieces were real and should be returned to the place they had been stolen from rather than remain in Cairo in storage.

Another example was a stela from the reign of Amenemhat II. It had once been exhibited as a forgery, but when he had the chance to examine it he was able to identify it as work done by a particular ancient artist. And his last example was of a statue of Amenemhat III, which is real but has been re-worked at some point in modern times. It has been sanded down to make the nose and face less damaged, which obviously alters the features. Marée contrasted this with the sorts of modern alteration he'd talked about earlier - the first type is more a wholesale removal of parts of a piece, so the sort of thing you'd only do to a fake. But this second type is more subtle and more akin to restoration (though rather more invasive than real restoration should be!).

In the question and answer session at the end Marée was asked if he destroys fake objects. He said he doesn't, but he's aware some Egyptian authorities do smash them. He thinks fakes should be kept for educational purposes. And also because experts can be wrong, as he had been pointing out in the last part of his talk - further examination might overturn a verdict of forgery. But he does strongly feel that they should be taken off display.

One of the things that kept coming up throughout the talk was that forged items often get sold on the art market. Marée told us that he's involved in setting up a body that will identify authentic and forged items and certify them so that buyers can be more sure that they aren't being ripped off. He was talking about working with the dealers as well as with potential buyers, holding out the carrot to dealers that if they get items certified they'll get more interest from buyers.

This was an absolutely fascinating talk and an insight into the way that an expert examines an artefact for signs of forgery. It's certainly made me look at things more closely as I see photos of objects. And I have great appreciation for the skill and breadth of knowledge necessary for Marcel Marée to authenticate the objects he examines!