Aesthetics of anthropomorphous funerary wooden models

Case studies from Asyut

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I wish to dedicate this contribution to Ursula Verhoeven-van Elsbergen. She has not only been my academic teacher over the years, but also my supervisor, thesis advisor, and mentor. Since my first participation in an excavation at Asyut and my first involvement with small wooden fragments, which turned out to be funerary wooden models, she has always followed my research in this field with great interest. I would therefore like to present this short contribution to her and hope that it will sustain her kind interest.

Introduction

As often stated, funerary wooden models[1] are a diverse and complex category of grave goods.[2] Usually, they are well described as "small-scale representations of objects and people from everyday life"[3], although it should be noted that animals, architectural elements and rarely even plants are also present in this medium, and not all existing categories can be fittingly described as representations of "everyday life" activities.[4] Five categories have been extrapolated by Angela M. Tooley in her seminal study of wooden models, consisting of animal husbandry, food preparation, industrial processes, boats, and offering bearers/

1 In the designation as "funerary wooden models" I agree with Eschenbrenner-Diemer (2017, 134–135), who has pointed out that "wooden models" are a varied and widespread category, which calls for delimitation when it comes to models from within tomb contexts.

2 Cf. for example Breasted 1948; Tooley 1989; Tooley 1995; Zöller-Engelhardt 2016; Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017; Barker 2022; Zöller-Engelhardt 2022.

3 Tooley 2001, 424.

4 Thinking of offering bearers/estate figurines or funerary and procession barques, it is necessary to expand this categorial identification including representations of activities of a more ritual nature.

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estate figurines.[5] For the necropolis of Asyut in Middle Egypt, which will be the focal point of the analysis in this contribution, the most common assemblages in the descending order of their incidence include

- boats[6]
- granaries[7]
- offering bearers/estate figurines[8]
- food production and processing (especially beer and bread)
- weapons and tools[9] (and/or soldier models, respectively)
- agriculture (tending to animals, plowing)
- specialized crafts

All of these categories—apart from the models of individual objects like the weapons and tools—include anthropomorphous model figures. Most are integrated into scenic contexts like granaries or boats, while individual figures,[10] especially in the form of female estate figurines exist too. The anthropomorphous model figures do not represent individual personalities,[11] but depict prototypical human beings performing selected activities. The fact that the viewer's focus is clearly intended to be directed to the activity being performed results, on the one hand, from the integration of the human figures into scenic contexts, and, on the other hand, from their individual physical design. The representation of the activity carried out is put in the foreground in such a way that, for example, human proportions of the figures are modified to better highlight the activity.[12]

Regarding the aesthetics of these anthropomorphous wooden models, it has been noted before that some assemblages or even groups of figures within one model assemblage are

[5] Tooley 2001, 425. See also Tooley 1989; Tooley 1995. Barker (2022, 9) recently proposed four more general categories: food production and preparation, transport, animal husbandry, and craft production, not including offering bearers/estate figurines in her examination. Nevertheless, she also needs to postulate a fifth category "miscellaneous" for rare model categories such as "soldiers" or "foreigners."

[6] Usually at least two specimens (one equipped for rowing upstream and one for sailing downstream), but sometimes also including funerary barques, larger ships of transportation or voyage (see, e.g., a boat with canopy from the tomb of Mesehti/K11.3: Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 30970/CG 4918).

[7] Usually at least one with surrounding architectural structure.

[8] Usually at least one per tomb shaft/burial, sometimes more (see, e.g., five figurines in the tomb of Nakhti, cf. Zöller-Engelhardt 2022, 162–164 with further references). On the definition and distinction of offering bearer and estate figurines, see Zöller-Engelhardt 2022, 156–157, fn. 8.

[9] In contrast to the scenic model structures, especially in Asyut, a remarkable high number of model tools and weapons has been found, see Zöller-Engelhardt 2016, 19–26, 127–171.

[10] Cf. for example the model of a man with a hoe from Asyut, today in the British Museum, inv. no. EA45195, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA45195, accessed November 30, 2022.

[11] In contrast to "serving statues", which could bear inscriptions identifying them as relatives or household members of the deceased, Roth 2002.

[12] This is not in general linked with the skill of the producing craftsmen: numerous examples of likewise small-scale wooden statuettes attest to a more lifelike design of the figures, which testifies to great craftsmanship and the technical capabilities to produce such images.

of a different—that means "better"—elaboration than their accompanying or contemporaneous counterparts.[13] This contribution aims to offer some thoughts on the concept of "aesthetics" within funerary wooden model figures and to explore some aspects resulting in and also from these differences.

Aesthetics in ancient Egypt

Aesthetic appeal is a problematic concept not only in regard to ancient Egyptian material culture.[14] "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder" proves to be much more than a vague guideline for the analysis of objects from ancient Egypt in several respects: It has been stated in Egyptological research that there was no such thing as "art" in the modern (western[15]) sense of the term in ancient Egypt.[16] Every object is said to be made in order to fulfill a function, while aspects of aesthetic value are sometimes considered a byproduct of lesser importance. Friedrich Junge has argued against this idea:

> Und die Schönheit ägyptischer Kunstwerke, ihre ästhetische Wohlgefälligkeit, ist nicht ein angenehmes Nebenprodukt ihrer Herstellung, sondern die Essenz ihres Gelungen-Seins. Sie spiegelt in ihren materialen Elementen, nämlich ‚Richtigkeit' und Ordnung, Symmetrie und Proportion, Linearität, Klarheit und Abgegrenztheit, eine traditionsreiche Begrifflichkeit […].[17]

In contrast, it has been questioned whether aesthetic appeal is a prerequisite for addressing something as art at all,[18] while John Baines states: "Another complication […] is the widespread assumption that only works that have no function beyond being aesthetic objects can be termed art."[19] Kai Widmaier has recently analyzed the complex field in detail

[13] Cf. for example Tooley 1989, 380–381; Arnold 1991, 25–32; Freed and Doxey 2009, 152–154; Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 174–179.

[14] This short contribution is not suitable to present the complex discussion about Egyptian aesthetics and art. Rather, this section is intended to provide a minimal insight, aiming at highlighting the question of an ancient Egyptian appreciation of the aesthetic beauty of objects. For a recent discussion on the concept of aesthetics in Egyptology see Widmaier 2017, especially 58–62. On the term "aesthetics" he states: "Das Problem, Ästhetik konkreter zu fassen, hat sein Pendant im auch innerhalb der Kunstgeschichte bzw. der Philosophie noch nicht zu einem Ende gekommenen Diskurs zur Begriffsklärung." Widmaier 2017, 36.

[15] Cf. Junge 1990, 8; Müller 1990, 40–42; Verbovsek 2005, 150; Widmaier 2017.

[16] Baines 2015, 1–2. He exemplifies that, on the one hand, early research argued that since there is no lexeme for "art" in the ancient Egyptian language, there could not have been an overarching concept of art. On the other hand, analogies have been made, rather freely, between today's art genres and those found in ancient Egypt (architecture, statuary, painting) to justify the transfer of modern (western) concepts, methods, and terminology for the analysis of works from ancient Egypt.

[17] Junge 1990, 22.

[18] Widmaier 2017, 58–62.

[19] Baines 2015, 2.

and proposes a clear differentiation between "Egyptian images" and "Egyptological art,"[20] emphasizing the difference between the analysis of ancient Egyptian images in their historic context and their modern transformation or reception as "art."[21]

That aesthetics in the sense of appreciation of beauty through the perception of the viewer[22] was indeed valued in the ancient Egyptian society, however, has recently been exemplified from different perspectives by Rune Nyord. Combining the interpretation of the meaning(s) of Egyptian lexemes in the sphere of "beauty" or "perfection" with an ontological viewpoint in the analysis of the various functions of images, he draws several conclusions: in particular, he states that Egyptian conceptions of images involve multiple and diverse aspects, reaching far beyond a mere representational function and visual communication. Visual attractiveness is one of these factors, which is captured especially by the root *nfr*. *Nfr* does not only comprise concepts like "completeness and perfection relative to a pertinent category",[23] but can also encompass a material presence, for example of deities in the form of statues. This "perfect" presence can manifest itself in aesthetic or bodily beauty, especially in an aesthetic, predominantly visual sense of beauty.[24]

From the above mentioned modern point of view, very few anthropomorphous funerary wooden models are considered highlights of ancient Egyptian "art,"[25] as Gersande Eschenbrenner-Diemer has pointed out.[26] Among them are, for example, an individual figure carrying a backpack and a small box from the tomb of Niankh-pepi-kem from the 6th Dynasty, the two battalions of soldiers from the tomb of Mesehti from the 11th Dynasty, and the models from the tomb of Meketra from the early 12th Dynasty. We might add the so-called "Bersha procession," a series of four expertly proportioned figures carrying offerings. These models are not only addressed as "masterpieces" due to their appealing aesthetic appearance but likewise classified as "high-quality" examples of their kind.

Quality hereby entails very different characteristics. The Bersha procession, for example, is described in terms of exceptional "quality of carving, complexity of construction,

[20] Widmaier 2017, esp. 467–468.

[21] Widmaier 2017, 468.

[22] Cf. Müller 1990, 40 with n. 4, derived from A. G. Baumgarten's "Aesthetica" (1750–1758).

[23] Nyord 2020, 17.

[24] Nyord 2020, 16–21, 43 (here based on Müller 1990, 46–47). This corresponds to the conclusion Maya Müller reaches about the aesthetics of Egyptian works, stating that Egyptian objects are art even in a modern sense. She states that scientists would by now also perceive culture-specific peculiarities as "gut, schön, wahr." Müller 1990, 55. Cf. Junge 1990, 22 on the semantic sphere of *nfr* as good and beautiful in, among others, an aesthetic sense. Of interest in this context are also Widmaier's remarks on concepts of "processual aesthetics". Based on the research of Hartmut Böhme and Kris L. Hardin, he argues for adopting a more action-oriented emic perspective, which would allow to move beyond rigid categories such as "functionless" and "function-bound", and asks, how certain objects or practices are perceived as appropriate by individuals and societies, see Widmaier 2017, 58–62.

[25] Verbovsek (2005, 146) points out that, for example, serving figures, small statues of gods and goddesses as well as anthropomorphous or zoomorphous amulets are often subsumed under the term "Kleinkunst" instead of "Kunst".

[26] Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 174–175. Cf. Widmaier 2017, XXIII, who critizes that especially wooden statues have been analyzed very selectively according to their modern status as "masterpieces" ("Meisterstücke"). For a detailed analysis of wooden statues from Middle Egypt see now Beck forthcoming.

subtlety of detail, state of preservation, and overall sophistication"[27] as well as exhibiting "far more delicately carved and painted facial features and finely carved bodies made of a denser, finer grained, and accordingly more precious wood."[28] Other researchers, including the present author, chose terms like "precise workmanship, choice of material or accuracy of painting"[29] as well as quality "in terms of style and manufacturing technique"[30] or clearly distinguished between "quality and aestheticism"[31] in regard to model assemblages. Ultimately, high quality in the majority of cases means "'gut'—nicht im moralischen Sinn, sondern im Sinne von 'gekonnt'."[32] Noteworthy, too, is that the state of preservation influences the effect an object has on the modern viewer—some anthropomorphous figures of high quality and aesthetics are simply too poorly preserved to be perceived as masterpieces. This, in turn, can influence considerations of the distribution of particularly high-quality models.

Development and design characteristics of funerary wooden models

Funerary wooden models appear for the first time in the Old Kingdom, placed in the superstructure of funerary complexes, in close proximity to the statues of the deceased and his family or entourage in the serdab.[33] From the late Old Kingdom and especially the First Intermediate Period onwards, the model assemblages' positions can vary even within the same necropolis; frequently, however, they are now to be found in the subterranean parts of the tomb structure, primarily in the burial chamber or the burial shaft. This change of position seems to correlate with the strengthening of the cult of Osiris, whose chthonic aspect leads to a stronger emphasis on the subterranean aspects of the tomb architecture and signals a change of functions of funerary wooden models, as well.[34]

At the beginning of their evolution, wooden models are derived from the so-called "serving statues,"[35] which are individual figures and often show activities of everyday life (e.g., grinding grain, making mash). They are placed in the serdabs of Old Kingdom tomb structures. Following this line of development, early anthropomorphous wooden model figures are made as single figures or sometimes groups of two figures, mounted on a small flat

[27] Freed and Doxey 2009, 152.
[28] Freed and Doxey 2009, 152.
[29] Zöller-Engelhardt 2022, 186, n. 246.
[30] Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 174.
[31] Tooley 1989, 381.
[32] Müller 1990, 40.
[33] Cf. Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 172. 176, with further references.
[34] Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 172–176.
[35] See Roth 2002 for a definition and evolved concept of what has earlier been termed "servant statues." Cf. Eschenbrenner-Diemer (2017, 172), who emphasizes the different functional ranges of serving statues and wooden models.

board as base without surrounding architecture or model context. During the First Intermediate Period they gain more and more surrounding structures, until the late 11th and early 12th Dynasty mark the peak in terms of complex architectural and scenic model activities, involving multiple anthropomorphous figures in elaborate compositions.[36]

In general, individual early wooden model figures were more carefully crafted than the models of the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom, still showing a strong resemblance to serving statues and wooden statues in general.[37] This is attributed in part to the fact that more time, resources, and care could be spent on the earlier individual figures than invested into the manufacture of every single figure in the densely populated scenes from the later period. However, it has already been noted that there are models of the First Intermediate Period and Early Middle Kingdom that contradict this trend: for example, the model assemblage of the high official Meketra from the early 12th Dynasty is among the highest quality specimens that the wood craftsmanship of this period has produced. In a noteworthy contrast, the models of king Mentuhotep II, under whom Meketra spent a part of his career,[38] display a much less distinguished design.

In her comprehensive article on "Amenemhat I and the Early Twelfth Dynasty at Thebes"[39] Dorothea Arnold has specified several characteristics distinguishing the anthropomorphous model figures of Meketra from those of king Mentuhotep II, which she then also uses as dating criteria differentiating First Intermediate Period models from the Middle Kingdom ones, here especially those from the reign of Amenemhat I.

The most salient feature are the different proportions of the anthropomorphous models from the two assemblages. While the standing model figures of Mentuhotep II exhibit flat, slender bodies, small heads, and practically no waist, the models from the tomb of Meketra have larger heads and more lifelike proportions at the center of the body (fig. 1). Additionally, while the human figures of Mentuhotep II have sticklike arms in a limited range of postures, the Meketra models show a variety of postures and indicate movement.

Arnold emphasizes that the features of the Mentuhotep II models are characteristic of anthropomorphous models of the First Intermediate Period, while the more lifelike—and thus probably more aesthetically appealing—proportions of the Meketra figures are typical for the Middle Kingdom specimens.[40]

For the necropolis of Asyut, this can be tested by a few standing figures, which were discovered only in recent years by the Asyut Project team.[41] Especially Tomb III (N12.1),

[36] Arnold 1991, 25.

[37] Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 139–147.

[38] Cf. Arnold 1991, 21–23.

[39] Arnold 1991. For a critical assessment of the methods and conclusions of Arnold's contribution, see Widmaier 2017, 297–322.

[40] She compares the quality of the Meketra models with two further assemblages of similar design usually dated to the early Middle Kingdom, both from tombs at Saqqara: Gemniemhat, and Wesermut with Inpuemhat. On the dating cf. also Eschenbrenner-Diemer and Russo 2015; Kruck 2022.

[41] M312–M314, see Zöller-Engelhardt 2012; Zöller-Engelhardt 2016, esp. 114–115. For an overview of the work of the Asyut Project in Tomb III (N12.1) see Kahl 2007; Kahl 2016.

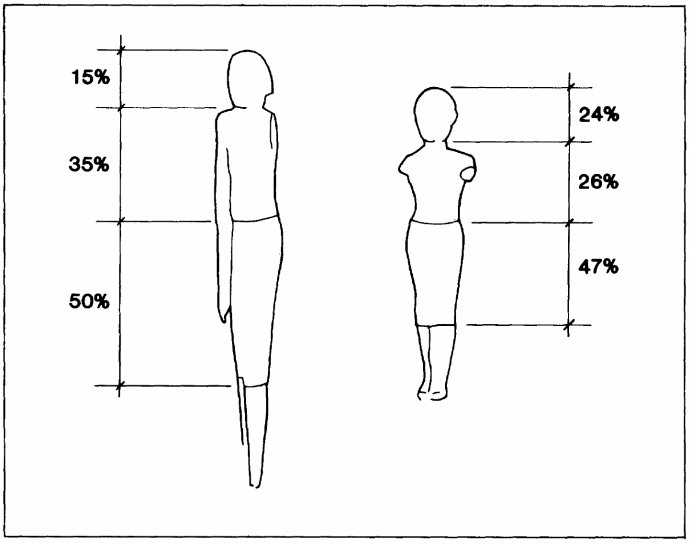
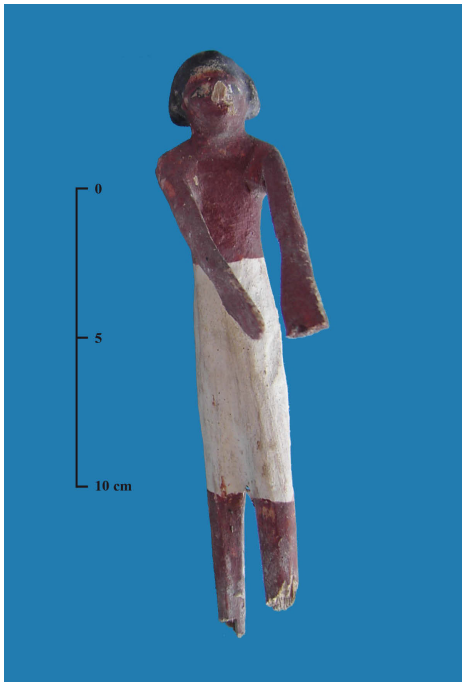


Fig. 1: Proportions of anthropomorphous wooden model figures from the tomb of Mentuhotep II (left) and the tomb of Meketra (right); from Arnold 1991, 25, fig. 25 (drawing by Barry Girsh).



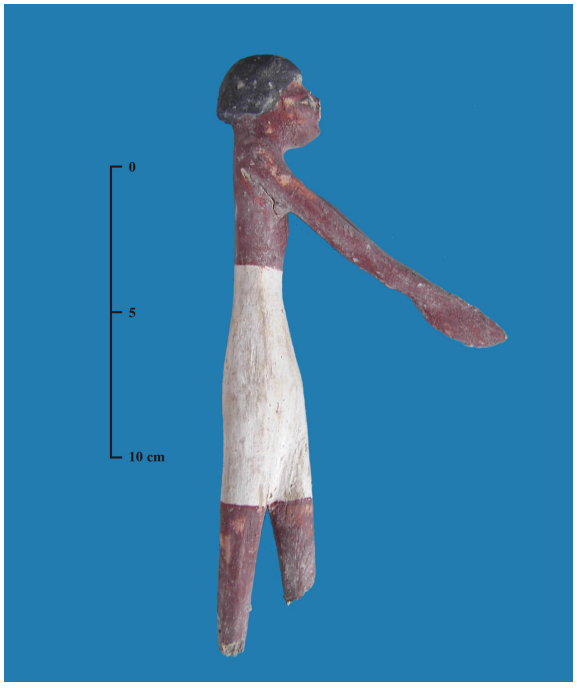


Fig. 2a: Anthropomorphous model figure M312 with arms outstretched, side view
Fig. 2b: Anthropomorphous model figure M312 with arms outstretched, front view
(photos: Monika Zöller-Engelhardt, © The Asyut Project)

Shaft 4—dating to the First Intermediate Period—was an unexpectedly rich source of anthropomorphous wooden models. The design of the figures exhibits the features of the Mentuhotep II models, discussed above (see one example[42] in fig. 2a–b): They all show flat, slender bodies with only a slightly indicated waist, proportionally too long legs, and small heads. The sticklike arms end in only crudely crafted hands, designed for their respective activity to be depicted. That is, they either end as flat elements to embrace a device or are designed as cuboid fists with a hole, through which a tool or oar could be inserted.

The proportions of the Asyuti figures from the above-mentioned assemblage (Tomb III, Shaft 4, side chamber) occupy an intermediate position between those in the assemblages of the Mentuhotep II and the Meketra calculation. Although the overall impression is more similar to the Mentuhotep II figures—with a slightly higher relative length of the head—the values do not deviate much from the Meketra examples:

Table 1: Proportions of standing anthropomorphous model figures from Tomb III (N12.1), Shaft 4, side chamber

catalogue no.	**top of head to end of apron**	**top of head to neck**	**neck to waist-band of apron**	**waistband to end of apron**
M312	15.0 cm	3.0 cm	4.3 cm	7.7 cm
		20 %	**28.66 %**	**51.33 %**
M313	16.8 cm	3.5 cm	4.0 cm	9.3 cm
		20.83 %	**23.81 %**	**55.35 %**
M314	14.5 cm	3.6 cm	3.4 cm	7.5 cm
		24.82 %	**23.44 %**	**51.72 %**

Comparing the values of the proportions of the Asyuti figures it is noteworthy that while the preserved overall height of the figures is slightly different, the proportions between parts of the human figures are close to each other. It follows that, although the not-quite-lifelike proportions detract from the overall aesthetic impression of the models, care was taken during the manufacturing process to ensure that the figures of a set correspond to each other as much as possible in order to achieve a mostly harmonious impression of the ensemble.

It is unfortunate that only one—seated—figure[43] from the plundered Tomb Siut III (N12.1), Shaft 3, side chamber in poor condition has been discovered (fig. 3a–b). This shaft has

[42] Zöller-Engelhardt 2016, 114, cat. no. M312 (S05/112).

[43] M156, Zöller-Engelhardt 2016, 71. Many additional fragments of human figures were discovered, but these were mainly arms; noteworthy are two heads of model figures, M157 and M158, stylistically closely resembling M156, see Zöller-Engelhardt 2016, 72.

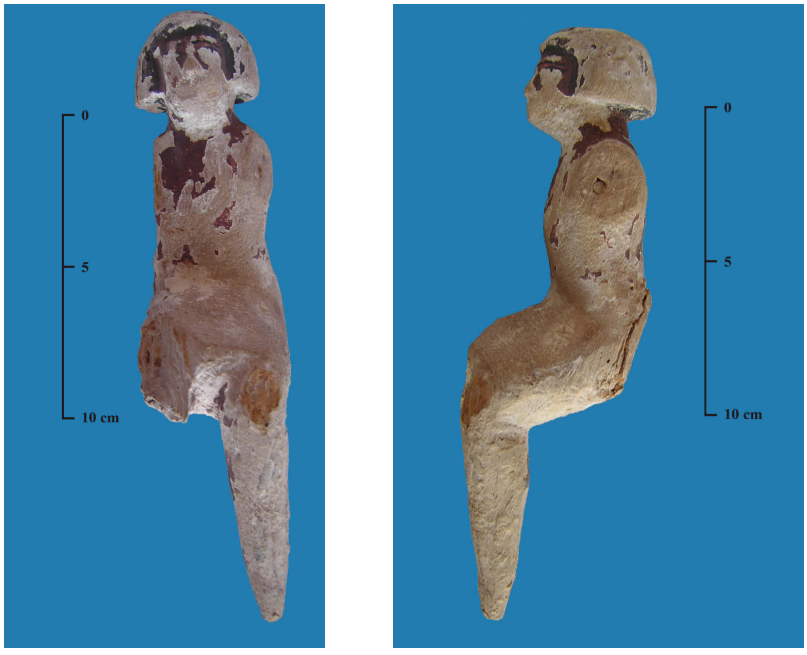


Fig. 3a: Anthropomorphous seated model figure M156, front view
Fig. 3b: Anthropomorphous seated model figure M156, side view
(photos: Monika Zöller-Engelhardt, © The Asyut Project)

been attributed to the tomb's owner, the First Intermediate Period nomarch Iti-ibi.[44] The seated figure indicates that this model assemblage could have been manufactured with more lifelike proportions, which in this case measure 3.9 cm (head to neck) to 4.6 cm (neck to waistband). The facial features are more balanced, as well.[45] Hence, also models from the First Intermediate Period can exhibit more lifelike proportions, and the mutual relation of lengths of the head, the upper body, and the lower body with knee/end of the apron is not reliable as a dating criterion,[46] but helpful in assessing the aesthetic appeal of the different anthropomorphous wooden models.

It is worth drawing a comparison to the model assemblages of exceptional design, mentioned above. The model equipment of Meketra shows a consistently high execution and balanced proportions in most details, while interestingly the other "masterpieces" stem

[44] Kahl, el-Khadragy and Verhoeven 2006, 243–244; Kahl 2016, xii; Zöller-Engelhardt 2016, 31–32.
[45] Compare the model heads M157 and M158, mentioned above, Zöller-Engelhardt 2016, 72.
[46] In general, there is a lack of criteria to distinguish and clearly date model material from the First Intermediate Period and the Early Middle Kingdom, which is why especially for anthropomorphic wooden model figures a dating "First Intermediate Period or Early Middle Kingdom" is often found in the research literature and must be narrowed down in comparison with the further tomb equipment. Cf. for example Grajetzki 2003, 39–42; Eschenbrenner-Diemer and Russo 2015, 174. As Widmaier (2017, 306–322) has shown in his critical review of Arnold's article, it is generally problematic to draw conclusions about historical developments based on stylistic criteria.

from contexts mostly featuring less elaborately executed model material. This is exemplified by the two battalions of soldiers from the tomb of Mesehti, whose figures are well carved and proportioned, and elaborately painted with an eye for detail and individual design of each figure. Noteworthy is their size, too, which surpasses the more typical 20–30 cm of standing model figures.[47] The anthropomorphous figures on the model boat from the same assemblage of Mesehti,[48] while still set apart from sets like the Mentuhotep II models or the assemblage from Tomb Siut III (N12.1), Shaft 4, side chamber, described above, do not reach the same level of aesthetic balance as the soldiers. The same holds true for the "Bersha procession," a piece standing apart from the further model equipment of Djehutynakht.[49]

In contrast to the aesthetics of these anthropomorphous figures stand ensembles like those from the necropolis of Sedment,[50] which show a remarkably different design and construction. For example, the model figures from the assemblage of Tomb 1525, dating to the First Intermediate Period, exhibit flat, board-like bodies with elongated heads and unshaped arms.[51] It has been noted that their design resembles some figures of the model ensemble of king Mentuhotep II, favoring the possibility that Theban craftsmen were sent to the region of Sedment for the manufacture of these figures.[52] The designs of the individual assemblages in Sedment, however, differ from each other just as the compilations in other necropoleis like Asyut.[53] Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that Tomb N13.1 of the nomarch Iti-ibi(-iqer) in Asyut contained a few model figures comparable to some of the anthropomorphous models of Mentuhotep II, as well.[54] Since Tomb N13.1 is dated roughly to the reign of the Theban king,[55] a contemporary distribution pattern of these design features might be identified.

The examples discussed above have demonstrated some features that create a more aesthetic outline of anthropomorphous figures, which were the result of the manufacturing process of the ancient Egyptian wood craftsmen. Against this background, the last section will consider the significance that the aesthetic design of anthropomorphous model figures might have had in the complex conglomerate of their functionality.

47 Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 30969 and JE 30986, cf. Saleh and Sourouzian 1986, nos. 72–73.
48 Cairo, Egyptian Museum JE 30970/CG 4918, cf. Landström 1970, 70–71 with fig. 207.
49 Cf. Freed and Doxey 2009, 151–177.
50 Petrie and Brunton 1924, 5–8, pls. XI, XVII, XX. Cf. Grajetzki 2005.
51 Petrie and Brunton 1924, pl. XVII; Grajetzki 2005, 23.
52 Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2018, 105.
53 Compare, for example, the quite different design features of the female estate figures 2111, 2115 and 2107 on plate XXVI in Petrie and Brunton 1924.
54 Zöller-Engelhardt 2022, 160–161, pl. 39a–d. It must be noted, however, that the model fragments were found scattered in the surface debris around the mouth of Shaft 1 and the north-east corner as well as in the filling of Shaft 2, and can thus not be connected to the original burial equipment with certainty.
55 Verhoeven 2020, 4–5; El-Khadragy 2022, 11–13.

Implications of the aesthetic design of anthropomorphous funerary wooden models

As outlined above, the design of anthropomorphous funerary wooden models differs greatly. This depends on various factors, among others the chronological development, the geographical distribution, and partly the social strata of their owners. However, these factors are obviously more complex, leading to different outcomes of aesthetic appeal in figures within contemporaneous burials of the same necropolis or even within the assemblage of one and the same burial.

It has been argued that "the functionality" of ancient Egyptian artifacts, especially funerary equipment, is not limited by any diminished aesthetics.[56] As previously indicated, aesthetics in this specific viewpoint goes hand in hand with quality, meaning careful and elaborate manufacture, including painting, even proportions as well as a homogeneous harmony in the scenic representation, and—not least—the choice of the wood. A most lifelike reproduction of the represented entity seems to elicit an aesthetic appeal, at least in a modern view, in which models have often been regarded as quite accurate miniature images of their reference entity in the real world. However, mere mimesis[57] is apparently not the only idea behind the creation of the small-scale representations,[58] although the varying degree of aspired lifelikeness of wooden model figures proves that also the ancient Egyptian viewer was, indeed, concerned with the appearance of the model assemblages. A homogeneous result was aimed for, even if the individual anthropomorphous figures were less well proportioned. Thus, even if less well-made models served their purpose, at least an aesthetic appearance was desirable, with this contributing to the broader range of functions of these miniatures.

These observations correlate with analyses made on ancient Egyptian statuary:

> This brief survey shows that whereas extant Egyptian artworks display a clear concern with aesthetics in our terms, we would err if we understand this as an isolated goal in the Egyptians' own understanding […]. Instead, the terminology discussed here indicates that aesthetics was an aspect of the broader functions of images that have been indicated by the discussion of image terminology in the previous sections. Thus, at least as far as the ideology was concerned, beautifying images was not a concern for its own sake, but rather was an intrinsic aspect of ensuring the broader

[56] For funerary wooden models cf. Tooley 1989, 381; Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 174; in general, Nyord 2020, 45.

[57] On the idea of "portraiture" and "ideal image" in Ancient Egyptian sculpture cf. Laboury 2010; Widmaier 2017, 322–374; on proportions and style in general Robins 1994; on the terminology of mimesis e.g. Nyord 2020, 10.

[58] Eschenbrenner-Diemer states: "Therefore, the manufacture of objects does not appear to have been driven by mimicry, except the need to make it recognizable in order to invest it with its entire magical efficacy. What appears as minimalism actually permits the object to be identifiable." Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 175.

> purpose(s) that images were meant to serve—notwithstanding the undeniable fact that many ancient Egyptian objects apparently regarded as fully functional did not succeed entirely in meeting these aesthetic ideals.[59]

This means that a deeper understanding of the intention of aesthetics in anthropomorphous funerary wooden models can only be gained by reevaluating the functional facets of these figures in context. Some observations are especially worth mentioning when reassessing the concept of "funerary wooden model" in general, and its aesthetic aspects in particular.

Previous research offers several explanations for the varying outcome of funerary models: As stated above, aesthetics or quality is said to be a secondary factor for the "functionality" of models,[60] if functionality is considered as recognizability of the activity displayed and the magico-religious intention of provisioning the deceased with nourishment and mobility in the afterlife. Yet, model assemblages offer a broader range of functionality. As Elisabeth Kruck has pointed out, model equipment reflects the social status of the tomb owner.[61] This especially holds true for the variety of scenes within an assemblage and often—but not consistently[62]—the aesthetics of the funerary model assemblage. In this respect, quantity seems to be given higher priority than quality,[63] compare, for example, the above-mentioned assemblages of the high official Meketra and the Theban king Mentuhotep II.

Social status is also brought forward as a factor for the access to resources, meaning the possibility to commission higher skilled craftsmen and the use of higher quality material like imported wood. Georgia Barker additionally assumes that the three-dimensional medium of the wooden models presented certain limitations in their design, foremost the attention to detail.[64]

Particularly interesting are the not-so-rare cases in which models from the same tomb have markedly different aesthetics, for example the so-called "Bersha procession" in the rich model assemblage of the governor Dejuhtynakht. It has been proposed that in these cases the tomb owner oversaw the manufacture of the high-quality item(s) by himself, while the rest of the model assemblage was provided by the surviving dependants.[65] It seems unlikely, however, that an influential nomarch only supervised the production of a small part of his funerary equipment, while his relatives provided an enormous model assemblage, yet of diminished quality. More likely seems the scenario that such outstanding individual pieces were favors gifted by the king from the royal workshop.[66]

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59 Nyord 2020, 45.
60 Tooley 1989, 181; Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 175.
61 Next to a connection to ritual and a correlation with the representation of everyday life ("Alltagsbezug"), Kruck 2022, 863–1000.
62 Zöller-Engelhardt 2022, 190; cf. Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 175.
63 Zöller-Engelhardt 2022, 189; cf. Barker 2022, 188–189.
64 As well as the lack of inscriptions in contrast to wall scenes, Barker 2022, 183–186; Barker 2016, 69.
65 Tooley 1989, 380–381; Barker 2022, 188–189.
66 Cf. Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 163.

Still, the attempts to achieve well-proportioned figures and harmonious compositions of anthropomorphous models suggest that the aesthetic appeal of these figures was indeed recognized and valued as well as aimed for. Following Nyord in his assessment that ancient Egyptian images offered more than visual attractiveness and conceptual referentiality, we must thus conclude that aesthetics was "an intrinsic aspect of ensuring the broader purpose(s) that images were meant to serve."[67] These purpose(s) in the case of wooden models, among others, included permanent magico-religious provisioning for the afterlife in support of wall decorations —where present—, a role/roles in funerary ritual, possibly the preservation of the everyday life environment of the owner and a representation of the status of the deceased. The latter was ideally achieved on different levels within the model assemblage: by quantity, by quality, and by variety. Although models were mostly placed in the burial shaft or chamber and not meant to be seen by the living after the interment, their inherent aesthetic properties served these purposes without the need to actually visually communicate. This resonates with recent approaches in material culture studies, which ask what an object *does* instead of what an object *means*.[68]

Against this background, the concept of "funerary wooden model" is yet to be established. As far as we can say, there is no ancient Egyptian expression for the category of funerary models,[69] which opens the possibility that they were regarded within other categories of grave goods. A suitable Egyptian category seems to be statues and statuettes, for which there are multiple linguistic expressions[70]—as for many other parts of the funerary equipment[71]—and which may have been manufactured by the same woodworking craftspeople.[72]

Even in the archaeological material, it can be difficult to distinguish elements of model figures from small wooden statues, especially when fragmented. Thus, the modern categories differentiating models, estate figurines, statuettes, and statues are not entirely useful in analyzing the functional scope of these artifacts of ancient Egyptian material culture.[73] Nyord has additionally highlighted that Egyptological research tends to "decontextualize artworks to study them according to purely iconographic and stylistic criteria."[74] Accordingly, since model assemblages are an integral part of the funerary assemblages from the late Old Kingdom to the late Middle Kingdom, their functions, meaning what such models *do*, can only be determined in a wider context. Future research within a broader theoretical framework has to reevaluate the conceptual sphere of not only anthropomorphous funerary wooden models, but also their surrounding compositions within their functional spheres.

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67 Nyord 2020, 45.

68 Cf. Harris 2021, 10.

69 And they are not represented as such in tomb scenes or object friezes, see Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 175; however, there are wall scenes depicting the broader range of topics present in the model material; thus, wall scenes and model assemblages can be seen as complementing each other, cf. Barker 2016; Barker 2022; Zöller-Engelhardt 2022, esp. 187.

70 Cf. Nyord 2020, 9–28.

71 Cf. for example Kruck 2022.

72 Indicated by Eschenbrenner-Diemer 2017, 164 with footnote 133.

73 Beck forthcoming.

74 Nyord 2020, 3. Cf. also Widmaier 2017, 473–479.

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