

Ancient Egypt

**Model boat**

11th- 12th Dynasty, Middle Kingdom (about 2133-1786 BCE)

Painted wood

27 x 37½ x 6 inches

The William Hood Dunwoody Fund 16.496

**Theme**

The model boat was a pleasure craft, designed for an Egyptian noble's recreation in the afterlife. It is the crew's labor, however, that is presented here—a reminder that for some to play, others must work.

**Background**

Ancient Egyptian civilization flourished for over 3000 years along 750 miles of the Nile River, from the Nile's first cataract to its delta on the Mediterranean. The history of ancient Egypt is organized in a progression of 30 dynasties. Dynasty 1 saw the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt in 3100 BCE under Menes, the first pharaoh. Dynasty 30 ended in 341 BCE when Persia conquered Egypt. The dynasties are grouped into kingdoms according to common political, social, and cultural trends. The model boat was made during the Middle Kingdom, Dynasties 11 and 12, 2133-1786 BCE, a period that saw the revival of strong centralized government and cultural splendor after many years of upheaval.

Life was good for nobles, landowners, and merchants in ancient Egypt. The desert protected the land from marauders, and the river provided plentiful fish, a fertile valley for growing grain, ready transportation for a far-flung papyrus trade, and travel throughout a vast empire. The Nile's predictable annual flooding encouraged the Egyptians to think in terms of order and continuity as they established their social, artistic, and religious conventions. In particular, ancient Egyptians came to trust that the life they lived on earth would not cease with death but would be renewed in a benevolent afterworld.

As with all events in daily life, access to the afterlife was controlled by the gods. The Egyptians worshipped a huge cosmology, from the most ancient and all-powerful nature deities like Ra, the sun god, to local deities who presided over districts or cities. Many of the most prominent gods in Egypt were those associated with the afterlife.

Careful preparations were made to assure a peaceful afterlife. The funerary arrangements for pharaohs and nobles were elaborate and time-consuming. The body of the deceased was preserved or mummified to provide the deceased's *ka*, the eternal spirit, with a permanent resting place. The mummy was housed in a tomb outfitted to facilitate the *ka*'s journey to the afterworld and provide for its needs and pleasures there. The tomb walls were carved and/or painted with scenes of entertainment, hunting and fishing, music making, banqueting, and family gatherings—and with prayers and ritual offerings to the gods. The *ka*'s practical needs were met with supplies of food, clothing, utensils, tools, and furniture, wooden models of chariots and boats, and statuettes of slaves weaving, baking, tilling, and herding through eternity in the service of the deceased. Prayers and magical incantations during the burial service sped the *ka* on its way and empowered the tomb sculpture and paintings to active duty. Even the poorest Egyptians made some provision for their afterlife, if only through the inclusion of a few simple tools and scraps of food in a sand-covered, communal grave.

During the Middle Kingdom, tomb construction was no longer the exclusive privilege of pharaohs and nobles. Prosperous merchants and landowners began to commission tombs for themselves and their families. The chapel tomb, consisting of a portico leading into a single large chamber, became popular as a modest alternative to the multi-roomed design of earlier monuments. Many such chapels were cut into a hillside at Meir, the provincial settlement where the museum's model boat was found. Cost-consciousness may also have influenced the Middle Kingdom preference for tomb wall paintings over the time-consuming and costly relief sculpture of earlier periods. Wooden burial models of laboring servants were also popular Middle Kingdom substitutes for the relief-carved servant scenes in earlier tombs.

### **Description**

The museum's model boat was provided for the deceased's cruising pleasure on the Nile in the afterworld. Carved from wood and painted a ruddy brown with white and black detailing, it is slightly more than a yard long and almost two feet high. The boat is modeled on a classic Egyptian design favored to this day for travel along the Nile. Its hull is deeply curved so that bow and stern rise high above the water line. The stern (back) arcs slightly higher, with the hint of an elegant curl at the top. Only one-third of such a boat's length would skim the water surface, making it easy to beach and eliminating the need for deep harbors.

The model boat includes several features that help date it to the Middle Kingdom, a period of significant boat-building innovations. Its solid central mast reflects a Middle Kingdom improvement over masts made of two slender laths roped together. Missing from the model boat's mast is a single cloth sail, rectangular and large enough to catch the prevailing winds from the north for sailing upstream as the Nile River flows from the south. On a real boat, rigging would have been made of papyrus fibers. The sturdy post at the model's stern would probably have supported a large rudder, the Middle Kingdom substitute for the clumsy steering oars used in earlier periods. Eighteen oarsmen are positioned facing the stern to hasten the boat downstream; they are seated on trestle benches, which were another Middle Kingdom innovation. Long oars tipped with narrow pointed blades, fastened to the boat by short ropes, would have completed the boat's equipment. Similar boat models from this period include oars like these stowed along the edge of the boat, as they would have been in life when not in use. Some tombs provided two boats for the ka, one with a mast for sailing upstream and a second with oars for rowing downstream.

Like the boat, the oarsmen are carved from wood. Their faces are individual, some round and stolid, some smoothly youthful, some gaunt and tired. The faces are framed with full smooth caps of black hair. These may well have been wigs. Ancient Egyptians wore wigs over hair cut very short for hygienic purposes. One of the favored Middle Kingdom wig styles, especially among the lower classes, was a cap of short tight curls, cut low across the forehead and across the back of the neck. Facial hair also was discouraged except during ritual periods of mourning when men, like several of the oarsmen, allowed their beards to grow. All eyes face forward, rimmed in traditional black liner, and all expressions are sober. The arms have been carved separately and pinned at the shoulders, from which they extend rigidly to the figures' laps, ending in curled fists that may have cupped oars. Around the waists are narrow knee-length skirts painted white; in real life these skirts would have been made of linen.

The oarsmen would have been slaves to an aristocratic master. Along with the peasant class of tenant farmers, slaves (many the spoils of foreign wars) formed the broad base of ancient Egypt's pyramidal social order. It was the labors of this class that made it possible for the model boat's intended passenger to relax and enjoy a river cruise.

## **Style**

The distinctive style of Egyptian art reflects the culture's interest in order, clarity, and permanence. Strict conventions governed the "right way" to depict any subject in any medium. The artist was charged with conveying the characteristic essentials of his subject. There was little interest in flattery, or in capturing a fleeting action or emotion. Figures tend to be restrained and stiff. For example, the model boat's oarsmen, though apparently poised to row, convey little sense of action or effort. Rather, the mood is one of eternal patience. The guiding canons of Egyptian art changed very little over time. Egyptian art does not look all the same by any means, but the differences are subtle shifts within an enduring view of reality.

Egyptian painters worked in a limited palette. The model boat and its oarsmen are painted a red-brown, with black details for hair, eyes, and the boat's decorative trim, and white for the oarsmen's skirts. All of these were earth pigments made from metal ores and other natural materials. Powdered pigments were mixed with a water-soluble gum to make a sort of glue tempera. The brown paint was probably made from iron ore, the white from lime (made by heating shells or chalky limestone), and the black from soot.

## **Artist**

The artist who carved the model boat is anonymous, like most Egyptian artists, but he would have been highly respected as working in the service of the gods. Whether the artist's work was a painted hunting scene, a carved stone "false door" for a tomb, an inlaid gold amulet, or a model boat carved from wood, it was closely tied to the religious beliefs at the core of all aspects of Egyptian life. The artist's inspiration was credited to Ptah, the creator god, traditionally depicted as a ram-headed sculptor molding the first person on his potter's wheel. So closely was art linked to religion that artists were often priests as well. The artist's profession was proudly maintained in a family, passed down from one generation to the next. In the rigid strata of Egyptian society, artists were members of the upper class of wealthy landowners, merchants, provincial officials, and scribes.

The artistic community was organized in a strict hierarchy, reflecting again the essential Egyptian faith in regular, predictable order. The High Priest of Ptah at Memphis was called the "Greatest of Craftsmen" and "Chief Leader of the Artists." During the Old Kingdom, the latter title was literal, for the High Priest of Ptah oversaw the design and execution of all works of art in Egypt. While Memphis remained an influential artistic center, the High Priest's leadership was merely symbolic by the time the model boat was made.

By the Middle Kingdom, highly structured workshops had been established throughout Egypt. Wall paintings and relief carvings of artists at work tell much about the structure of these studios. Workshops employed a variety of specialized craftsmen—sculptors, painters, stoneworkers, woodworkers, goldsmiths, and lapidaries—who collaborated under the guidance of workshop supervisors. The mark of a master craftsman was the ability to deftly execute artistic conventions. Supervisors were master craftsmen in their own right, whose special grasp of Egyptian aesthetic principles enabled them to envision and coordinate complex projects. Artists often identified themselves not by name but by workshop or project. Archaeologists have found hieroglyphic references to artists who proudly called themselves "painter in the royal house," "chief of the sculptors," "superintendent of all the artists of the king," and "superintendent of the works in the place of eternity."