

Bringing Ancient Egypt to Life – An Ancient Craftsman’s House Reconstructed

The new exhibit at the Newark Museum, “Stepping into Ancient Egypt: The House of the Artist Pashed,” combines a life-sized (and touchably interactive) recreation of a house from Deir El Medina, complete with furniture, grindstone and the like and a table-top cutaway model of the entire house and will be open to visitors (including classes of children) until June 1994. Visitors will also be able to see the new entrance to the museum, whose façade is reminiscent of an Egyptian temple.

Visitors to Egypt can easily see ancient tombs and temples, since they were made of stone, but the mud-brick of Egyptian houses has generally disintegrated into the ground. And likely sites are often under modern houses and thus cannot be excavated. But some ancient villages were planned, remote constructions for workmen on royal projects, such as one near the pyramids at Giza or Tel El Amarna, the hurriedly built new capital city of Akhenaton, abandoned after about thirty years.

But on the west bank of the Nile across from Thebes, with its temples at Luxor and Karnak, past the flood plain and cultivated area, beyond the first range of hills leading into the Valley of the Kings and so closer to the royal tombs on which they worked, was the workmen’s village of Deir El Medina (Arabic for “Hill of the Mosque,” though the original name was “Place of Truth”). The village, unlike agricultural villages because it had no market, was a community laid out on a regular plan, but it grew more random over its three hundred years of existence. Tuthmoses I founded the village around 1500BC and Amenophis I built its wall and was worshipped by the workers.

It used to be thought that these workers on the royal tombs were guarded and shut off from other people (potential tomb-robbers), but this now seems not so. How the secret of the location of the tombs was kept is not clear, but under strong Pharaohs guards were maintained at the tombs. Since there was no water, donkeys had to bring both water and food up to the village. Workers’ pay was in rations of grain, fish, oil, vegetables and changes of clothing. It was a hard life, but there were no taxes and men passed their jobs on to their sons (as Pashed did).

The tombs of the workers themselves are more charming (and much smaller) than the royal tombs, as in that of the lady Meret Ka, discovered by Italian archaeologists in 1920 and now in the Turin Museum. The French excavated in the same area in 1930, but they had little concern for the smaller everyday objects so valued by modern archaeologists.

Houses were oriented along one long street, with row house construction, one abutting on the other for cheaper construction. Low walls of stone set off the houses of mud-brick (covered with plaster), which hold up well in the absence of rain, if you keep the walls in good repair with new coats of stucco. Flat roofs gave extra living space.

The private tombs nearby were made by the same workmen, often cooperating with one another. You can see their figures and hieroglyphic inscriptions on the wall paintings. These workmen had to have a good degree of literacy to draw the hieroglyphs and to fit the figures to specific proportions; hence, there were lots of wills, jottings, letters on everyday life. The paintings represented how people wanted to look and be in the next life, so they show people rather above what they were in life. (See the fragment of a limestone stele in the Newark collection with

Amenomope in prayer with an incense burner. If you could afford, you also had larger limestone statues (as those in Turin).

An ancient timesheet on a small limestone slab shows the bureaucracy at work: two work gangs, one called "the gang of the right" and the other "the gang of the left", as many as forty people. Scribes recorded attendance and absence (with reasons for latter), including bite of a scorpion or brewing beer for the festival or working on own tomb) and periodic pay.

Workers used pattern books for the figures. Pashed was an outline draftsman, who drew working drafts of figures on boards or limestone chips, which were then transferred (using squares of specific magnification) to the walls, after which another workman would add the color.

At its largest, the village included seventy families within the walls (with some others outside), walls which were not defensive but merely a line of demarcation. Dorr lintels (red, a lucky color for doorways) were found, including that of Pashed and his wife Nofretari. Pashed's home dates to about 1300 BC, the reign of Seti I. In the Newark model you can see the religious room and living room, with its pillar and dias. A wind scoop on the roof catches moving air; there are very few windows because mud-brick is good insulation against the heat.

In the Newark reconstruction, the living room has a 3-legged table and an ancient game of senet, with its symbolic victory over death. The color combination for the reconstruction was taken from ancient frescoes; the wood furniture, reconstructed by a New Jersey woodworker, shows the great ability of the Egyptians. The niche with the religious stele reflects the close relationship of the Egyptians with their gods – especially the lesser gods (such as Meret-Seger) or Ptah (patron of craftsmen). The stele is reconstructed from a rubbing made in 1880 from the now-missing original. The bedroom contains a wig, rope bed and headrest. The bed would have been padded by folded linen sheets. Reconstructions of the fine linen clothing are based on gowns in the Petrie museum. Children try on kilts and tunics (simple and similar to Roman tunics) and use the wood-handled bronze mirror from the cosmetic box with its sliding lid and 2 knobs for sealing the box shut. Tomb paintings show more elaborate garments (e.g., pleated over-tunics) than any that survive.

The kitchen is reconstructed with grain storage (wheat for bread and barley for beer), a grindstone, brazier, coil basket, pots of various types (including a water jug in the living room for visitors). Evaporation through the unfired pots kept the water cool. A working model of a pottery rat-trap resembles the Have-a heart variety.

More is known about the workmen than about their wives or children. The men worked 8 days and then were off for 2 days. The women had more legal rights (owning property, making wills) than most ancient women had and, as Egyptian literature shows, were held in high regard by the society.