

Not for the Art Trade

S. A. Goudsmit

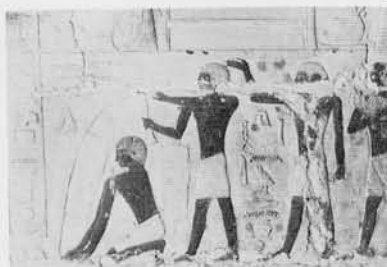
"What you dig up out of the ground is no good for the art trade." This was the doctrine of the famous Dutch-English family Duveen-Hangjas, which had been in the art business for generations. I learned that lesson in the early 1920's in Amsterdam, then a world center for dealers in art and antiques, when I first tried to buy an ancient Egyptian scarab. After months of searching I did find one dealer, D. Komter, who had a small, exquisite Egyptian collection. I had passed him by because I saw only some fine old paintings in his show window. I bought a scarab for ten dollars. It was in excellent condition.

He noticed my interest and he gave me his whole collection of about 120 scarabs to take home and study. I dated, photographed, and catalogued the scarabs and translated the inscriptions. Mr. Komter rewarded me with a few beautiful small figurines, which became the start of my minor collection. Not long after this, Mr. Komter retired and his valuable art was sold at auction. The scarab collection—with my catalog—sold for about \$120. No, I did not buy it, which I regret to this day. The reason was that my yearly income as a half-time assistant in one of the University of Amsterdam's physics laboratories was \$400. But this was the beginning of my life-long interest in the question of art versus archaeology.

It was not until the Second World War that the Duveen doctrine of art versus archaeology did an about-face. Ancient Egyptian curios became "Art," and art dealers and collectors began to look at the objects with much more respect. This has had various consequences. The prices have skyrocketed—which takes me out of the competition, although my income is now somewhat more than \$400 a year. Today most art collectors want to possess one or two Egyptian pieces. This has introduced still another side of the picture—that of authenticity.

Let me give you an example of how the art-versus-archaeology philosophies and the question of authenticity can overlap. I have a friend in

1
Details of the wall decorations in the Old Kingdom tomb of Per-Neb in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City. Height of figures, 36 cm.



California who owns a large limestone slab with a beautifully carved relief of a seated Egyptian goddess. He looks at it as if it were the Pharaonic version of "Whistler's mother." Such an attitude can seriously mislead a collector of Egyptian artifacts. Unlike art (or Art) from many other cultures and periods, the Egyptian artisan put his skill—but not his soul—into his work. He would seldom have carved a figure just for its own sake, because figures were always part of a large, conventional scene representing mythological rites, or daily happenings. In fact, not one artist but several groups of specialists worked on these reliefs. In spite of numerous sculptures and reliefs of exquisite beauty, we know of no individual artist, in the modern sense, whose personality dominated the style of his work. That did not arise until the era of the classic Greek sculptors and architects. From partly finished wall decorations it appears that the preliminary sketches, the actual sculpture, and the final coloring were done by different artisans. The result, of course, can still be exceedingly beautiful. It may reflect the soul of a civilization, rather than that of a single man or group of men.

Now, I would not be surprised if my friend's seated goddess turned out to be a forgery. The limestone slab on which the figure is carved has wide margins. Clearly, it is not part of a large scene as is normally the case. Of course, smaller slabs with single figures do exist; they are called "trial pieces" and are probably sculptor's exercises. They often show several unrelated figures, usually on both sides of a slab, in helter-skelter arrangement. It seems that the proper limestone was scarce, so no space on it was wasted. The lone seated goddess is, if genuine, an unusual example of Egyptian art.

Thus, to look at a fragment of an Egyptian wall relief as if it were a Picasso is about the same as seeing a major work by Andy Warhol in every can of Campbell's soup. It also follows that judging the authenticity of such ancient objects asks for reasoning different from that used in judging a Rembrandt.

When we contemplate the beautiful scenes carved on some of the temple walls so often shown in art books, it is fortunate that only a few of us can translate the hieroglyphs. The inscription reduces the artistic decoration to the level of a political campaign poster. It often describes in exaggerated language the greatness of the ruling king. The modern dictator who has his portrait displayed in offices and classrooms and on parade banners is only a minor operator compared with Ramses II. Almost all the giant statues inside and outside the Abu Simbel rock temple represent that king and one finds his likeness repeated in many other places, together with accounts of his alleged victories.

If one wished to buy a painting by a Vermeer or a Manet, he would be well advised to purchase it from a well-known dealer. The same holds true for ancient materials. It is a simple matter of self-protection. If the buyer decides that the object he has bought is a forgery, a good dealer will take it back at once and refund the purchase price, without trying to convince the buyer that the object is genuine. And, of course, such a dealer will not knowingly sell a forgery in the first place. As an example, many years ago I bought from Spink and Sons in London a piece the authenticity of which was once in doubt. One side shows a royal head, the other a particular hieroglyph, a bird. Mr. R. Forrer of Spink's told me that the relief had first been sold to a collector in Amsterdam, who doubted that it was genuine, perhaps because the royal head was obviously not carved by a first-rate craftsman. After the collector had returned it to Spink's the dealers washed the little slab thoroughly. When the grime was removed, a faint but clear colored pattern appeared on the royal necklace and the other side revealed a few symbols in hieratic writing. It was enough to dispel all suspicions about the slab being a forgery.

Color alone, however, is no criterion of antiquity in an Egyptian piece. Color has often been added only to enhance (or disguise) forgeries. However, restoration of colors is done today more often than in the past by a few perfectly reputable dealers in Egyptian art. This is, perhaps, a confirmation of what I stated earlier in somewhat different terms. Until relatively recently, the archaeological significance of an object was the dominant factor. Buyers were collectors with an interest in Egyptology. Today the customer is probably either an art collector with no knowledge of ancient Egypt, or just an affluent tourist desiring a genuine souvenir. To them, a good-looking colored object has special appeal.

I learned a lot about fraud in art and archaeology from art-dealer friends of my mother—much more than I had been able to learn at the museum of the State University of Leiden, where I studied hieroglyphics. From those dealers I found out that there were only a few great dealers in ancient art, such as Spink and Sons, whom I have mentioned, and Feuarent Frères in Paris. Although they specialized in objects for museums or for wealthy collectors, they usually had some minor odds and ends, not good enough for such clients, which they would gladly sell to young students and other amateurs. In fact, once Mr. Forrer presented me with a box full of scarabs that he did not consider worth sorting. There were thirty, mostly weather-beaten and damaged. About ten of them were obvious fakes, six were definitely ancient, though ugly, and with the rest I still amuse myself from time to time, periodically changing my mind about their authenticity.

But one word should be added about authenticity. Laymen often believe that there are such things as experts who can judge authenticity of an antique merely by looking at it.

The eye of the expert can indeed detect qualities that escape the layman. There is nothing supernatural about this. We recognize the handwriting of friends. We can often tell who wrote a letter without seeing the sender's name or address, even when it is typewritten. The margins, the arrangement of the address, or the size of paragraphs can be clues to its origin. We are not necessarily conscious of the characteristics we use for identification. Similarly, an art expert can recognize the style of a painter and be absolutely sure when a signature does not fit a painting. When a friend writes in haste, or when he is ill, his handwriting changes, but usually we still recognize it. Also, a true expert can with certainty



1, 2
Two sides of the same sculptor's trial piece. Width, 11 cm. Goudsmit collection.

3
Limestone "sketch pad." XXth Dynasty. Height, 44 cm. Goudsmit collection.

4
Old Kingdom offering bearer carrying urn with cedar oil. Height of figure, 24.5 cm. Goudsmit collection.

identify the work of a particular painter even when he deviated from his usual topics. He can also tell when in the painter's lifetime the work was executed.

If one wants to establish absolute authenticity, however, more detailed reasoning is needed. We must study consciously all the characteristics in a modern handwritten document that so far had only identified the writer intuitively. For example, the date on a written document might be ten years earlier than the time the letterhead was printed. Similarly, brush strokes and other mechanical details of a painting must be examined. A painting may contain a pigment which had not been manufactured until after the painter's death, proving, at the very least, a restoration.

During the twenties I took a course in scientific crime detection at the University of Amsterdam. It was a brand-new subject, and the techniques were still rather primitive. The teacher was C. J. Van Ledden-Hulsebos, a pioneer in that field, who had organized one of the world's first crime laboratories. He was a specialist in detecting document forgeries, and made clever use of specially modified microscopes and a simple spectrograph. He was also one of the first to use infrared photography and ultraviolet fluorescence. I examined a few items of the Komter collection with ultraviolet, and found an unexpected minor repair. But more important than the techniques was the kind of reasoning I learned in that course. It was a combination of scientific deduction and legal argumentation mixed with some psychology, about which more will be said later.

Today, techniques of physics and chemistry are used, and can often give conclusive evidence that an object has been forged, but not always that it is genuine. Unfortunately, laboratory techniques are expensive. They are useful for costly museum pieces, but an amateur does not want to spend \$300 to have a \$100 object examined. Fortunately, ordinary logic can often go a long way toward determining authenticity.

Because in Egyptian art there is no one artist, the whole concept of identification disappears. Egyptian style changed very slowly, so a beginner can learn rather easily how to tell whether a relief belongs to the early Old Kingdom or to the Ptolemaic period, 3000 years later. An expert can date the objects more precisely and sometimes also tell the region of origin. That is about all, and it is usually sufficient, at least for archaeological interests.

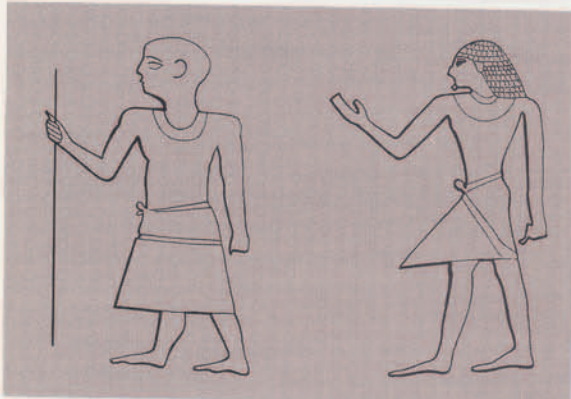




Now let me illustrate some of my points with a concrete example. I have in my collection a limestone slab on which is the bas relief of a man holding a jar. The style resembles that of the Old Kingdom, about 2500 B.C., the so-called Fifth or Sixth Dynasty period. In front of the man is a word written in hieroglyphs. The slab retains some color but the previous owner is known to have restored color on other objects; that in itself is enough to cast doubt on anything that passed through his hands.

I showed the man with the jar to several persons. They were doubtful or noncommittal. One art expert was inclined to doubt its authenticity because he could not understand why the Egyptian artist had placed a vertical ridge in front of the figure. (Whistler would not have put his mother behind a pillar when he painted her.) Another art connoisseur thought that the hair was "too mechanical." Other objections were that the urn carried by the man is not symmetrical; the hieroglyphs are badly aligned and one of them is somewhat misshapen.

The answer to these last comments is rather simple. Books and art museums acquaint us with only the very best workmanship. However, in the Cairo Museum and in the tombs it is easy to find numerous examples of lower grade workmanship, of which my slab is by no means the worst example.

To get back to my man with the jar, my own doubts were aroused by two observations. There is a misspelling in the hieroglyphic word and the position of the arms is unusual. I shall show how these two peculiarities can, in fact, be used as support for the authenticity of the relief.



Remember that artisans were merely copyists and could not read hieroglyphics. One group sketched the symbols in outline; another group chiseled them out. Misreadings sometimes occurred and examples are found in Per-Neb's tomb in the Metropolitan Museum. The inscription on my slab reads "first grade cedar oil," but the bottom symbol, the face, is wrong. Now, the work was done in dark tombs under primitive lighting conditions. On my slab the correct outline  must have been mistakenly interpreted as the much more common , which the artisan had probably carved many times. Would a modern forger have made such an easily detectable error?

The right arm is partially hidden behind the body, and it appears that we are looking at the man's back. An examination of all the Egyptian relief figures as shown in books and museums reveals that the highly conventionalized human figures are always depicted showing the front of the body. Thus, I ask, why should a skillful forger, with thousands of examples easily available to him, produce such an unusual pose? It seems more likely that he would make his work resemble the common practice as much as possible.

I used the word "always" in the last paragraph. That is not quite true. By a thorough search I found a few cases with arms in a position similar to those of my man. Two examples appear on a wall of the Old Kingdom tomb of Per-Neb. It struck me that each was the front figure in a row of offering bearers. This explains the meaning of the vertical ridge. Our man must also have been the first of his row; the vertical ridge is simply the usual boundary line between two scenes. On the left of the ridge there might perhaps have been a large image of the deceased facing to the right and seated in front of an offering table—a common pose in such tombs.

These considerations lead me to a hypothesis, or perhaps a mere guess, about the man's unusual pose. Looking at a parade of people, we see the front of those coming toward us and the back of those who have passed us. Could it be

that the ancient Egyptian designer tried to convey this observation by showing the first man's back? Another pose, with both arms on the same side, showing half of the figure's back, is more common and also occurs primarily for the first man in a row.

I am now certain that this relief is genuine. Otherwise, I must assume a forger who first deliberately placed the arms in a most unusual pose, then put up a vertical ridge to simulate the lead position of the figure, and who made a sophisticated spelling error, revealing a knowledge of hieroglyphs. Highly unlikely.

Note that all this conjecture tells nothing about the slab as a work of art. I don't consider it an example of good craftsmanship. I have seen forgeries with more appeal for the art connoisseur. But the collector of Egyptian objects is primarily interested in a genuine link with that distant civilization. If an ancient object happens to be beautiful, its intrinsic value will, of course, be greater.

Unfortunately, the monetary value may depend on authenticity, illogical as this may seem. The collector interested in archaeology, on the other hand, wants to be sure that the object belongs to the period ascribed to it. He is interested in its historical, mythological, or sociological significance, and an inscription is often more meaningful to him than is the object's beauty. The quality of workmanship displayed in an ancient object is, of course, a factor in its appeal. Today, with the emphasis on art rather than on archaeology, quality plays an inflated role in the eyes of the general art collector who often does not care about the historical background of the objects he owns.

What you dig up out of the ground is now very good for the art trade. But it is perhaps forgivable for a longtime Egyptology buff to view this reversal of values with a doubtful eye and a twinge of regret. •

1 Sketch of two figures from an Old Kingdom tomb in the Cairo Museum. Both represent the chief magistrate Kara-Pepi-Nefer and show great difference in craftsmanship.



Dr. S. A. Goudsmit is a physicist who became interested in Egyptology during his student days at Leiden in the Netherlands. He kept up this interest during his teaching career which started at the University of Michigan in 1927. He is at present Editor-in-Chief of the American Physical Society. His office is located at Brookhaven National Laboratory, Upton, Long Island, New York. This article is based on a lecture presented by Dr. Goudsmit at Rockefeller University, New York City.