

Tradition, Innovation and Archaism on 25th and 26th Dynasty Coffins: Objects from the Liverpool World Museum Collection

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Abstract

The ornate decoration schemes of the 25th and 26th dynasty coffins blended the elements of tradition, innovation and archaism. Images remained the core of decoration, highlighting and reproducing themes previously depicted on tomb walls, so continuing to surround the mummy with funerary rituals of the deceased. The Liverpool World Museum has a fairly substantial collection of Late Period coffins, which illustrate these artistic design programs. Tamutharibes (M14047), Ditamunpaseneb (24.11.81.5A+B), Pediamunnebesuttawy (M14049), Pedneferhotep (39.4042.10) and Ta-aa (M13992), all demonstrate how the three design programs were incorporated, often simultaneously depicted alongside each other, in a blending of image and text.

Tradition and Archaism

Tradition had always existed in ancient Egyptian funerary art, centering on all the fundamental rituals that surrounded life and death. Traditional iconography includes the vulture headdress, *wsh* collar, falcon terminals, winged Nut across the chest and the Abydos Fetish. Stolae, or rather “mummy braces” were important during the 21st and 22nd dynasties as a dating criterion, often linking the owner to a particular king or chronological marker. Their representations can be traced back to the early Middle Kingdom in the 12th dynasty on the mummiform gods Amun, Ptah, Min and Osiris.

The mobilization of archaism was a reminder of what had been, with which successful elite of the past had integrated into ancient Egyptian art. Archaising trends on inner coffins include a false door/doorway underneath winged Nut and a palace façade pattern on the base. The false door dates back to the Old Kingdom and was a prominent and core feature in the tombs from the early dynasties. It was the central part of the offering place of the tomb, and the first part of any tomb decoration. In this case, Nut replaces the offering panel scene that was typically the deceased seated in front of an offering table.



False door under Nut, inner coffin of Ta-aa, Liverpool World Museum M13992, © Liverpool World Museum



Red stola, inner coffin of Ditamunpaseneb, Liverpool World Museum 24.11.81.5A, photo by author



nbw under Nut, inner coffin of Pedneferhotep, Liverpool World Museum M39.4042.10, photo by author



Apis bull under feet, inner coffin of Tamutharibes, Liverpool World Museum M14047, photo by author

Innovation

Innovation allowed the 25th and 26th dynasty Theban priesthood to mark their presence in the historical record of iconographic design with new concepts for the art programs. Innovative features include a fringe along the wig, *nbw* under Nut, *wdjt* eyes on the feet, the Apis bull under the feet and structural changes: the pedestal base and back plinth. The depiction of Nut on the chest was a traditional feature on coffins up to this point. The depiction of a false door was archaising, and now the integration of the symbol *nbw* became an innovative feature, as it has not been attested before this point. The Apis bull is attested in the Coffin Texts, for instance CT III, 138a, 140a and even in the Book of the Dead, where the original coffin text corresponds to Book of the Dead spell 189. By the middle of the 18th dynasty, under the reign of Amenhotep III, he provided lavish burials for the deceased bulls at the Serapeum in Saqqara. The 22nd dynasty elites decorated their cartonnage coffins with the Apis bull icon, located at the footboard. It however, did not depict the deceased in mummy form on its back. This was a new feature the 25th and 26th dynasty elite incorporated.

Traditional elements from other media

Some traditional elements from other media (tomb decoration and papyri) are newly integrated into coffin iconography, including the procession of deities in Book of the Dead spell 125, the vignettes of Book of the Dead spells 89, 151 and 85, and the *nfr*, *wsh*, *nb* pattern on the base. Book of the Dead spell 89 ‘spell for letting a soul rejoin its corpse in the realm of the dead’, can be found on both tomb walls and on papyri. In New Kingdom tombs, spell 89 was found in the hall, and in the Late Period featured in the first pillared hall or copied into the decorative program of the courtyard. The placement of the vignettes and registers containing this spells or its alternative in spell 151, are iconic and help stylistically date the coffins of this period. Book of the Dead spell 125 ‘the Negative Confession’ in which it contains the judgment scene in front of Osiris and the negative confession, is a major focal point in the funerary iconography of ancient Egypt. Book of the Dead spell 125 was first depicted in tombs towards the end of the 18th dynasty. It became popular during the Ramesside Period, when significant changes in iconography occurred, a change from emphasis on scenes of daily life to a more religious focus surrounding depictions of deities. It continued to be used into the Late Period.



Vignette Book of the Dead spell 89, inner coffin of Ditamunpaseneb, Liverpool World Museum 24.11.81.5A, photo by author



Vignette Book of the Dead spell 125, inner coffin of Padiamunnebesuttawy, Liverpool World Museum M14049, photo by author

Conclusions

The relationship between the different fashions of design programs created a distinctive funerary object in a time of reunification. These three fundamental aspects of artistic representation marked a time where elite funerary objects conveyed continuity, a stamp of originality and a distant reminder of the artistic past. The combination of tradition, innovation and archaism varies across each individual coffin, some having combinations of two or even all three represented on an inner coffin lid. All these iconographic elements, consciously put together, formed what we now know as the elaborate coffin designs of the 25th and 26th dynasties. As a whole created a cohesive tomb microcosm with use of image and text.

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