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Relief of Akhty-hotep

Edna Russmann: About 2800 B.C. a man named Akhty-hotep had a tomb built and decorated with relief carvings. Most of the carvings represented Akhty-hotep himself, as does this figure here. He is standing, holding a long walking staff in his left arm, and a kind of a paddle-shaped short staff in his right hand. For most Egyptian officials these were the signs of official status—of authority and responsibility.

When Akhty-hotep lived, men wore kilts—rectangular pieces of cloth that they wrapped around their middles. Akhty-hotep is shown here as an active young man wearing a short kilt. Older men were often shown with kilts that reached down almost to their ankles. So here is Akhty-hotep as a vigorous young man, but one who is already in official status, wearing a hairdo that is either his own short, natural curly hair, or possibly a short curly wig. We're not really sure.

Egyptian figures in two dimensions take a bit of getting used to, because they show the head in profile, but the eye is shown from front view. The shoulders are shown in front view, but the rest of the body is in profile. And the two feet are absolutely identical. On both of them you see only the big toe.

The Egyptians not only started out designing their two-dimensional human figures this way, but they kept it up for more than three thousand years. They wanted to do it this way because they considered it the clearest, most legible way to make a figure. And I can say, after several decades of working with Egyptian painted and relief two-dimensional figures, it's come to seem really quite natural to me.

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