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Relief Blocks from the Tomb of the Vizier Nespeqashuty

Arnold Lehman: Look at the reliefs in front of you and to your right in this large case.

Edna Russmann: The carvings and drawings all come from the tomb of a man named Nespeqashuty. Around 650 B.C., Nespeqashuty was the most important royal official in the southern half of Egypt, and had a very elaborate tomb constructed in the cemetery at Thebes, modern-day Luxor.

I suspect that Nespeqashuty died suddenly and unexpectedly, because his tomb was found in a very unfinished state. In the front room were reliefs of the kind that you see here.

What is represented here, in the bottom row, center, and right-hand sides, is a long row of men and women bringing offerings, all of them faced toward the interior of the tomb so that they would magically provide food and sustenance to Nespeqashuty in the afterlife.

On the right-hand side were scenes of his funeral procession. And if you look at the top left you see some of the female mourners, and on the top right side some of the male mourners.

Since these reliefs were never finished, and in many cases carving hadn't even begun, we can see very clearly how these Egyptian artists, draftsmen, and relief carvers worked. If you look closely at some of the figures where only the preliminary paint has survived, you can see that there are actually two kinds of painting. There is an initial outline of the figure in light red paint, and that has been revised by a more important, more experienced draftsman in a darker red paint to establish the initial outline.

The carver would start by carving the outline and then the background to make it lower than the figure. And only when that was done did the artist come along and carve the details and modeling on the surface of the finished relief.

For more information about these objects, be sure to visit www.brooklynmuseum.org