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Sésostris III et la fin du Moyen Empire

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Senwosret III and the Issue of Portraiture
in Ancient Egyptian Art[1]

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I. The Egyptological reception of Senwosret III's portraiture

The statuary of Senwosret III, along with that of his son and direct successor Amenemhat III, is certainly one of the most central issues in the long history of the egyptological debate about portraiture in Ancient Egyptian art. It perfectly illustrates the dangers and difficulties of interpretation engendered by what the late Roland Tefnin felicitously termed "le vertige du réalisme."[2] Since the modern discovery of those statues, in the late 19th century, the extraordinary individualization that characterizes them indeed impressed beholders and, with very few exceptions, induced the well-established and widespread conviction that Ancient Egyptian sculptors of the late 12th dynasty intended to portray their kings in a realistic, or even hyperrealistic manner. Thus, Gaston Maspero already wrote a little bit more than a century ago:

> "L'artiste que Sésostris III choisit copia ligne à ligne le visage long et maigre du prince, son front étriqué, sa pommette haute, sa mâchoire osseuse et presque bestiale. Il creusa les joues, il cerna le nez et la bouche entre deux sillons, il pressa et il projeta la lèvre dans une moue méprisante : il fixa ainsi l'image vraie de l'individu Sésostris."[3]

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2. Notably in a fundamental article for the subject of this paper: R. Tefnin, "Les yeux et les oreilles du Roi", in M. Broze, Ph. Talon (eds.), *L'atelier de l'orfèvre. Mélanges offerts à Ph. Derchain*, Leuven, 1992, p. 147-156. See also R. Tefnin, *Art et magie au temps des Pyramides. L'énigme des têtes dites de "remplacement"*, *MonAeg* 5, Brussels, 1991, p. 69-73.

3. G. Maspero, *Égypte*, Paris, 1911, p. 121. The rediscovery of those characteristic statuary portraits of Senwosret III goes back to the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, with, first, the granodiorite head CG 486, unearthed in Medamud in 1895, then the granite one BM EA 608, found by W.M.Fl. Petrie in Abydos in 1902 (W.M.Fl. Petrie, *Abydos* I, *MEEF* 22, London, 1902, p. 28,

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In his famous *Manuel d'archéologie égyptienne*, Jacques Vandier came to suppose that the "love of realism might justify that new official portraits were created every time the king physically changed, in a manner that could only be unpleasant for the ruler's self-esteem."[4] This prevalent kind of reading often leads to interpretative biases and

pitfalls, of which J. Vandier, again, provides us with a perfect example:

> "On sent que le roi, énergique et lointain, éprouve, après un long exercice du pouvoir devant l'ingra-titude des hommes, plus de mépris dédaigneux que de découragement, mais on devine aussi une certaine lassitude. (…)
>
> On se demande comment un sculpteur a pu, dans une pierre aussi dure que le granit, donner à la chair une souplesse aussi vivante et aussi vraie. Médamoud, sanctuaire créé par Sésostris III, nous a donc livré, de ce roi, une admirable série de portraits réalistes, et réalistes, non pas seulement parce qu'ils indiquent nettement l'évolution d'un visage, de la jeunesse à l'extrême vieillesse, mais aussi, et surtout, parce qu'ils expriment, avec une vérité extraordinaire, la vie intérieure du modèle."[5]

As keeper of the Egyptian Department of the Musée du Louvre, J. Vandier fundamentally based his interpretation on the monuments unearthed during the excavations of Fernand Bisson de la Roque on the site of the temple of Montu in Medamud, an archaeological yield partly shared between local storerooms of the then *Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*, the Cairo Museum and the Louvre. He was particularly amazed by the contrast he noted between two fragmentary statues of the monarch transferred to Paris: the so-called "young Senwosret III", Louvre E 12960, and its neighbor in the current display of the Museum, Louvre E 12961, known under the modern designation of "the old Senwosret III" (*Fig. 1*).[6] Ultimate proof of this reasoning, the same physiognomic opposition

pl. 55,6-7), the colossi in the same material CG 42011 et 42012, discovered by G. Legrain in the Cachette of Karnak (in 1900 and 1903), the series of statues of the king in adoration gesture from the site of Mentuhotep II's temple in Deir el-Bahari, during the excavations of Ed. Naville in 1905 (Ed. Naville, *The XIᵗʰ Dynasty Temple at Deir el-Bahari* III, *MEEF* 30, London, 1913, p. 11, 20, pl. 2; especially BM EA 684, 685, 686 and Cairo RT 18.4.22.4) and, more than a decade later, the famous gneiss sphinx MMA 17.9.2, acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1917 (in all probability initially from Karnak, as suggested by L. Habachi in "The Gneiss Sphinx of Sesostris III: Counterpart and Provenance", *MMAJ* 19/20, 1986, p. 11-16), before the major discoveries of F. Bisson de la Roque in Medamud (again), in 1925 (discussed here below), that allowed studies like the one of H.R. Hall: "A Portrait-Statue of Sesostris III", *JEA* 15, 1929, p. 154, pl. 30. Taking the chronology of those discoveries into account, it is interesting to notice the evolution of the discourse of an Egyptological authority such as G. Maspero regarding the historical figure of Senwosret III, initially considered only on the background of his later legend in demotic and Greek literatures, without any reference to the physiognomy of "the individual Senwosret" ("l'individu Sésostris"), nor any tenta-tive psychological reading of it (see, for instance G. Maspero, *Histoire ancienne des peuples de l'Orient classique. Les origines. Égypte & Chaldée*, Paris, 1895, p. 491). On the legend of Senwosret III, see the recent contributions of Gh. Widmer, "Pharaoh Maâ-Rê, Pharaoh Amenemhat and Sesostris: Three Figures from Egypt's Past as Seen in Sources of the Graeco-Roman Period", in K. Ryholt (ed.), *Acts of the Seventh International Conference of Demotic Studies. Copenhagen, 23-27 August 1999* (*CNIP* 27), Copenhagen, 2002, p. 377-393; and Ead., "Sésostris, figure de légende dans la littérature grecque et démotique", in Fl. Morfoisse, G. Andreu-Lanoë (eds.), *Sésostris III, Pharaon de légende* . Catalogue d'ex-position, Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts (9 octobre 2014-25 janvier 2015), Gand, 2014, p. 232-235.

4.   J. Vandier, *Manuel d'archéologie égyptienne* III : *Les grandes époques – La statuaire*, Paris, 1958, p. 194 ("L'amour du réalisme peut justifier que de nouveaux portraits officiels aient été ex-écutés chaque fois que le roi changeait physiquement, dans un sens qui ne pouvait qu'être désagréable à l'amour-propre du souverain"). From an Art Historical perspective, in which the relationship between the artist and his or her patron is essen-tial, one may nevertheless wonder whether there has ever been any king in the entire human history who allowed the official production of portraits of him that would be "unpleasant for" his "self-esteem", even for "the love of realism".

5.   J. Vandier, *Manuel* III, 1918, p. 185-186. Many other citations from famous Egyptologists could be added here, but a collection of them is definitely not needed for the purpose of this contribution.

6.   É. Delange, *Catalogue des statues égyptiennes du Moyen Empire*, Paris, 1987, p. 24-28 (with previous bibliography). This display was directly determined by J. Vandier's inter-pretation and, hence, still ensures that the latter has a very significant impact on visitors, lay-beholder as well as profes-sional Egyptologists.

Fig. 1 : Comparison of the face of the statues of Senwosret III Louvre E 12960 and E 12961, from the excavations of F. Bisson de la Roque at Medamud, after Fl. Morfoisse, G. Andreu-Lanoë (eds.), *Sésostris III, Pharaon de légende*. Catalogue d'exposition, Lille, Palais des Beaux-Arts (9 octobre 2014-25 janvier 2015), Gand, 2014, p. 37
(© Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN-GP/Christian Décamps).

may be recognized in the two-dimensional decoration of a no less famous limestone lintel from the same site, nowadays exhibited just next to the two aforementioned sculptures, on which two antithetical scenes depict Senwosret III offering a tall piece of bread to the god Montu, with a "juvenile face" on one side and "elderly" on the other (Louvre E 13983; details on *Fig. 4*).

Among the various published interpretations of the striking visage of Senwosret III's statues, Vandier's, with his age characterization and psychological (as well as historical) reading, certainly appears rather extreme –although no less deeply influential. But even if more subtle opinions have since been proposed, notably suggesting a will for expressivity through this particular style,[7] they almost all –more or

less explicitly– rely on and take for granted the –same– assumption that physiognomic individualization implies –or even means– realism and true portraiture. This equation (individualization = realism = true portraiture), largely induced by the sense of immediacy such a stylistic treatment conveys, especially for sculpture in the round –whose presence is always more intense– is as widespread and unchallenged as it is mainly unconscious. Besides, on a more rational level, it is grounded on poorly and ill-defined concepts, that actually engendered

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7. See, for instance, D. Wildung, *Sesostris und*

Amenemhat. Ägypten im Mittleren Reich, Freiburg, 1984; or J. Assmann, "Preservation and Presentation of Self in Ancient Egyptian Portraiture", in P. Der Manuelian, R. Freed (eds.), *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson* I, Boston, 1996, p. 55-81 (initially published in Id., *Stein und Zeit. Mensch und Gesellschaft im alten Ägypten*, Munich, 1991, with the concept of "expressiver Realismus").

much confusion throughout the history of the western discourse about Ancient Egyptian art.

II. The concept of portrait and its theoretical implications

The hypothesis of realism in the appraisal of Ancient Egyptian art is indeed very old and dates back –at least– to the end of Antiquity, as Johann Joachim Winckelmann recalled, when he stated, in his famous and seminal *Geschichte der Kunst des Altertums*, that "Egyptian artists, according to the testimony of a church father, imitated nature as they found it,"[8] concluding –on this argument from authority– that we may deduce the actual physical characteristics of Ancient Egyptians from their artistic rendering. And despite the recognition of the semiotic aspects and functioning of Ancient Egyptian art during the 20th century, this preconception is still extremely vivid and continues to pollute the debate about portraiture in the Egyptological discourse.[9]

A portrait is a depiction, in any kind of medium, of a specific individual, or, in other words, an individualized representation of a recognizable person. In the context of visual arts, it is usually opposed to "ideal (or type) image",[10] implying a pictorial individualization, and thus relates to the notion of realism as an accurate and faithful rendering of objective reality, which stands in contrast to idealization. Even if it is traditionally accepted and used as a fundamental concept in art history as a whole, this key opposition between realism and idealization (or idealism) is far from unproblematic from a theoretical point of view.

First, both notions are actually rooted in non-consensual philosophical concepts, since they refer to reality, which is a metaphysical matter, and a much debated one through human history. And in this respect, the Ancient Egyptian conception of reality was indubitably different from our modern western ones.

Second, on a strictly formal level, the precise conditions of the opposition and the dividing line between the two concepts are difficult to define. For instance, if we confine ourselves to examples of Ancient Egyptian art,[11] subsidiary or grouped anonymous figures are often subject to reality effects,[12] a seeming individualization

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8. J.J. Winckelmann, *History of the Art of Antiquity*, translation by H.Fr. Mallgrave, Los Angeles, 2006, p. 128 (original quote: "die ägyptischen Künstler nach dem Zeugnisse eines Kirchenvaters die Natur nachgeahmt haben, wie sie dieselbe fanden"). The source of J.J. Winckelmann here is S. Theodoret, *De Providentia Sermones*, 3. Since Theodoret of Cyrrhus (*ca* 393 – 458 AD) does not seem to have ever travelled to Egypt and was active in the northern Levant, he must have relied himself for this comment on classical authors (such as those Winckelmann referred to, like Aristotle, Diodorus Sicilus or Herodotus). This would mean that, even in the context of the aesthetics of *mimesis* as Ancient Greeks and Romans defined and used it, Ancient Egyptian art could be interpreted as realistic. This philological assessment of Ancient Egyptian art, *i.e.* the latter's analysis primarily based on the commentaries of ancient authors rather than on the monuments themselves (in this case, those accessible in Rome in the 18th century CE, largely filtered by Ancient Roman egyptomania), is of course consistent with the general methodology of J.J. Winckelmann, leading, almost inevitably, to arguments from authority.

9. On the tension between the two approaches (*i.e.* focusing on the semiotic or mimetic aspects of Ancient Egyptian art) and the contradictions it often led to in this context, see D. Laboury, *Ktèma* 34, 2009, p. 176-177 and Id., *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 2010, p. 3.

10. Ideal and type images (or, in French, "image idéale" and "image idéelle") are to be distinguished, since the former relates to an ideal and the latter to an idea or concept; on this distinction, see the very interesting remarks of J. Assmann, in *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson* I, 1996, p. 65-71. Nevertheless, as opposed to the concept of portrait, both share their departure from perceptual reality in the sense of a generalization, a more generic or less individualized rendering.

11. Of course, countless instances of physiognomic individualization for fictitious characters in mimetic artistic traditions or the well-known conventionalized iconography of Christ in late medieval and early modern times could be adduced here.

12. On this notion, see R. Barthes, "L'effet de réel", in *Communications* 11, 1968 (special issue "Recherches sémiologiques : le vraisemblable"), p. 84-89. On the motivation of those reality effects, see the references in n. 14, here below.

that might be suggestive of a portrait but actually derives from a well-attested (graphic and/or chromatic) dissimilation principle, very well described by H.G. Fischer.[13] Can such cases be considered portraits of a social category or type portraits,[14] *i.e.,* notions that would blur the distinction between the two theoretical concepts of portrait and ideal image? Conversely, any Ancient Egyptian representation of a specified individual is characterized (and often identifiable or datable) by the style of its time and by the current generic or ideal conception of the human being.[15] In this sense, Ancient Egyptian art perfectly illustrates the facts that artistic imitation of reality is always inevitably selective and that every portrait is at least "contaminated" by an ideal image. So instead of a real dichotomy, the theoretical concepts of portrait and ideal image appear to form some sort of a vectorial combination (or the conjunction of two diverging vectors) in which both dimensions are always present, in varying proportions.

And, last but not least, if the conceptual opposition between portrait and ideal(ized) image, or realism and idealization, has become an established and (more or less) useful notion in modern western art History, one has to wonder about its relevance in the Ancient Egyptian

context, in a civilization that constantly and consistently aimed to bridge reality and ideality.[16]

The entire monumental culture of Ancient Egypt manifests a profound desire to preserve individual identity, especially from a funerary perspective, and thus exhibits a rather strong self-awareness. In this sense, as J. Assmann perfectly put it: "Portraiture is by far the most important and productive genre of Egyptian art, just as biography is the most ancient and productive genre of Egyptian literature."[17]

But, even with this fundamental principle of self-thematization (as Assmann proposed to characterize it) in order to validate the use of the notion of portrait, the two concepts that theoretically define it, *i.e.* individual identity, on the one hand, and recognizability, on the other, need to be assessed in the context of Ancient Egyptian art and thought.

As in many other civilizations, the (usual) word for image in Ancient Egyptian language, *twt*, implies the notion of likeness since it is related to a verbal root that means "resembling, being like or in accord (with)."[18] Hence, the image is clearly conceived as a representation – or a pictorial transposition– that resembles its model. But the numerous usurpations of statues performed merely by recarving of the name and without any facial reshaping, the variability in the portraitures of a specific person (either royal or private), and the genealogies of some portraits, in which an individual iconographically and physiognomically associated himself or herself

13.   H.G. FISCHER, *L'écriture et l'art de l'Égypte ancienne. Quatre leçons sur la paléographie et l'épigraphie pharaoniques* (*Essais et conférences du Collège de France*), Paris, 1986, p. 30-34.

14.   See the comments of P. VERNUS, "Stratégies d'épure et stratégie d'appogiature dans les productions dites „artistiques" à l'usage des dominants. Le papyrus dit „érotique"de Turin et la mise à distance des dominés", in K.A. Kothay (ed.), *Art and Society. Ancient and Modern Contexts of Egyptian Art*, Budapest, 2012, p. 109-121; and ID., "Comment l'élite se donne à voir dans le programme décoratif de ses chapelles funéraires. Stratégies d'épure, stratégie d'appogiature et le frémissement du littéraire", *CRIPEL* 28, 2009-2010, p. 67-115.

15.   See, for instance, Fr. JUNGE, "Hem-iunu, Anch-ha-ef und die sog. „Ersatzköpfe"", in *Kunst des Alten Reiches*, *SDAIK* 28, Mainz, 1995, p. 103; or J. ASSMANN, in *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson* I, 1996.

16.   As notably emphasized by R. TEFNIN, *Art et magie*, 1991, p. 69-73.

17.   J. ASSMANN, in *Studies in Honor of William Kelly Simpson* I, 1996, p. 55.

18.   See, notably, M. EATON-KRAUSS, *The Representation of Statuary in Private Tombs of the Old Kingdom*, *ÄgAbh* 39, Wiesbaden, 1984, § 93 (nuanced opinion); J. ASSMANN, *Stein und Zeit*, 1991, p. 141; R. SCHULZ, *Die Entwicklung und Bedeutung des kuboiden Statuentypus. Eine Untersuchung zu den sogenannten "Würfelhockern"*, *HÄB* 34, Hildesheim, 1992, p. 701.

with a predecessor,[19] demonstrate that the Ancient Egyptian concept of resemblance was less constraining than in modern western cultures.[20] J. Assmann suggests to define this concept as a principle of non-confusability (*Unverwechselbarkeit*), *i.e.* a recognizability that could be fulfilled on multiple levels or just by the sole presence of the name of the depicted person.[21] Furthermore, one cannot underestimate the metaphysical dimension of the concept of resembling image: what is it supposed to resemble?[22] The physical and external –or phenomenological– appearance of its model or his or her actual reality, which could lie beyond appearances? Not to mention the close connection –and so most probably some sort of permeability– that Ancient Egyptian thought established between these two –very western– theoretical concepts of external appearance and inner reality, as is suggested by the customary complementarity between *ḳd* ("shape" or "external form") and *ẖnw* ("inside" or "interior") and the many expressions that define inner or moral qualities by an outer description of the face, such as *nfr-ḥr, spd-ḥr, wdi-ḥr,* etc.[23]

Just like "being Egyptian" was not primarily a question of ethnicity but of Egyptian-like or non-Egyptian-like behavior,[24] the Ancient Egyptian notion of individual identity appears to be fundamentally conceived as a personal behavioral or functional integration into the societal order. This is substantiated by the importance and persistence of comportment clichés in almost any kind of biographical texts. So, in other words, the individuality of a person with his or her own name, genealogy and specific fate (*šꜣy*) is always defined within the social framework of Ancient Egypt, *i.e.* according to social types or ideals, which shape and often overshadow or absorb the expression of uniqueness and singularity.

In such a cultural context, the traditional pseudo-opposition or dichotomy between portrait and ideal image needs –even more– to be viewed and used as a vectorial combination (as suggested above) or as a tension, which structured and generated different forms of self-thematization, in representational arts, as well as in literature. Moreover, this inextricable interconnection –or continuity– between the two theoretical concepts (or trends) and the very principle of reality effects imply, as we have seen, that physiognomic individualization cannot be automatically considered as a clear sign of true

19. For a set of various examples, see D. Laboury, *Ktèma* 34, 2009, p. 175-196; or Id., in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 2010.

20. Even if our conception of portraiture as a lifelike reproduction of the actual face of the model, with psychological or interior intimations, dates back to classical Greece, as is well recalled by V. Boura: "La pensée grecque et le portrait antique", in F. Flahutez, I. Goldberg, P. Volti (eds.), *Visages et portrait, visages ou portrait*, Nanterre, 2010, p. 23-34.

21. Note that, in our western tradition, such was also the case until late archaic Greece (V. Boura, in *Visages et portrait*, 2010, p. 25-27, fig. 1), and even beyond, especially for the depiction of imaginary or long gone characters.

22. Again, it is worth remembering that this question elicited a –philosophically based– debate within the *mimesis* art theory in Ancient Greece; again, see V. Boura, in *Visages et portrait*, 2010.

23. In this respect, see, notably, the recent contribution of Y. Volokhine: "Le visage du roi", *Égypte. Afrique et Orient* 74, 2014, p. 23-30. There must have been some sort of a physiognomonical reading of faces in Ancient Egypt, like, for instance, in Greek and Roman mentality (J. Wilgaux, "La

physiognomonie antique : bref état des lieux", in J. Wilgaux, V. Dasen (dir.), *Langages et métaphores du corps dans le monde antique*, Rennes, 2008, p. 185-195), but it seems nowadays impossible to reconstruct this culturally formatted knowledge: morphologically, what was a perfect or beautiful face (*nfr-ḥr*), a sharp one (*spd-ḥr*), a long one (*ꜣw-ḥr*), or a tense one (*wdi-ḥr*)… to Ancient Egyptians?

24. See A. Loprieno, *Topos und Mimesis. Zum Ausländer in der Ägyptischen Literatur*, ÄgAbh 48, Wiesbaden, 1988; B.J. Kemp, *Ancient Egypt. Anatomy of a Civilization*, 2nd ed., London-New York, 2006, p. 19-59; see also the recent contribution of G. Moers: "'Egyptian identity'? Unlikely, and never national", in H. Amstutz *et al.* (eds.), *Fuzzy Boundaries: Festschrift für Antonio Loprieno* II, Hamburg, 2015, p. 693-704; and, on ethnicity, the remarkable synthesis of Chr. Riggs and J. Baines: "Ethnicity", in W. Wendrich *et al.* (eds.), *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, Los Angeles, 2012.

portraiture (in our modern western sense of the word) nor of realism.[25]

This being clarified, how can one then interpret the so characteristically marked physiognomy of Senwosret III's depictions, and, furthermore, their variability?

III. Interpreting Senwosret III's portraits

First of all, in the perspective of a realistic and hence historic (or even psychological) reading of those portraits, it seems impossible not to notice the striking discrepancy between the alleged royal weariness, "after a long practice of kingship" (see above, Vandier's quote), and what we actually know about the extended autocratic power, deeds and achievements of Senwosret III.[26] And the same holds true for his son and successor, Amenemhat III,[27] who

adopted the same stylistic formula. Besides, as R. Tefnin emphasized,[28] the unmistakable contrast between a supposedly old face and a perfectly firm, young and powerful body appears equally difficult to explain, especially for a (hyper)realistic representation. And, in her thorough analysis of the entire corpus of the statuary of Senwosret III and his son, Felicitas Polz[29] was able to demonstrate that the latest datable statues of Amenemhat III (namely those from his mortuary complex at Hawara and from the small temple of Medinet Madi (Cairo JE 66322 and Milan RAN 0.9.40001), which was completed by his successor) show the least aged physiognomy, as if the king were getting younger with the passing of time. Taking into account these Art historical facts, the realistic interpretation is obviously unsustainable, as well as the age characterization hypothesis and the historical and/or psychological reading, both based on the former. As R. Tefnin wrote: "Il faut nous rendre à l'évidence, nous ne nous trouvons plus ici dans le champ du réalisme, nous entrons dans l'espace des signes."[30]

Regarding the variability of the royal visage on the different portraits of the king –responsible for this misleading impression of an aging Pharaoh– it must be noted that, if not a single typological or physiognomic peculiarity can be exclusively linked to a specific site or even a region[31], every

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25. Even in *mimesis* artistic traditions, reality effects do not mean lifelike copy of actual faces; for a very good example, see V. Dasen, "Autour du portrait romain : marques identitaires et anomalies physiques", in A. Paravicini Bagliani, J.-M. Spieser, J. Wirth (eds.), *Le portrait : la représentation de l'individu*, *Micrologus Natura, Scienze e Società medievali* 17, Florence, 2007, p. 26-33.

26. For a recent and excellently nuanced synthesis on the reign of Senwosret III, see P. Tallet, *Sésostris III et la fin de la XIIᵉ dynastie*, Paris, 2005; Id., "Le règne de Sésostris III", in Fl. Morfoisse, G. Andreu-Lanoë (eds.), *Sésostris III, Pharaon de légende*, 2014, p. 22-29. One also has to consider the impact of his reign, especially through his military campaigns in Nubia, on the collective memory of Ancient Egypt, as it was transmitted through the legend of Sesostris in demotic as well as in Greek literature; on this see the references in n. 3. See also the contribution of Kh. El-Enany: "La divinisation posthume de Sésostris III en Nubie", in *Sésostris III. Pharaon de légende*, 2014, p. 228-231, for the New Kingdom.

27. The gigantism of the funerary complex of the king at Hawara and, more explicitly, the iconographic composition of the two dyads in a naos from this site displaying Pharaoh in gesture of adoration just next to another depiction of himself (with the *khat*-headdress and *uraeus*) holding the ʿnḫ-sign in one hand and presenting with his other arm the same hieroglyph to his royal interlocutor (or alter ego), like a divine figure (Cairo JE 43289 and Copenhagen Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek ÆIN 1482), or the structure around his colossi at Biahmu, strongly suggest that Amenemhat III initiated a process of self-deification during his lifetime. In

any case, this grand setting and its highly exceptional decoration program obviously inspired Amenhotep III, when he decided to launch his own self-deification, at the occasion of his *Heb Sed*; see W.R. Johnson, "Amenhotep III and Amarna: Some New Considerations", *JEA* 82, 1996, p. 68, n. 16.

28. R. Tefnin, in *L'atelier de l'orfèvre*, 1992, p. 151.

29. F. Polz, "Die Bildnisse Sesostris' III. und Amenemhets' III. : Bemerkungen zur königlichen Rundplastik der späten 12. Dynastie", *MDAIK* 51, 1995, p. 227-254.

30. R. Tefnin, in *L'atelier de l'orfèvre*, 1992, p. 152.

31. As F. Polz rightly stressed, this is not surprising, given the various textual sources of the time that refer to the mobility of works of art as well as of artists themselves; see F. Polz, *MDAIK* 51, 1995, p. 250-251, citing L. Habachi, *The Sanctuary of Heqaib*, *ArchVer* 33, Mainz, 1996, p. 60, pl. 80

Fig. 2 : Variations among statues of Senwosret III from the same series (from left to right): Cairo RT 18/4/22/4
(after M. Saleh, H. Sourouzian, *Musée égyptien du Caire, catalogue officiel*, Mainz, 1987, n°98), London BM EA 686, 685
(author's photographs; detail of the bust of London BM EA 686, after F. Polz, *MDAIK* 51, 1995, pl. 48a) and 684
(after E. Russmann, *Eternal Egypt: Masterworks of Ancient Art from the British Museum*, London, 2001, p. 103;
detail of the bust, after F. Polz, *MDAIK* 51, 1995, pl. 48b) from the temple of Montuhotep II at Deir el-Bahari.
Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.

series of sculptures reveals stylistic nuances from one piece to the other. This is perfectly exemplified by the well-known set of praying statues of Senwosret III erected in the funerary complex of Montuhotep II at Deir el-Bahari,[32] on which the rendering of the given type varies in the reproduction of the king's facial model, but also in the size of the different sculptures, although they were definitely conceived as a series, made to be displayed one next to the other (*Fig. 2*). The dimensions of the raw blocks delivered to the workshop undoubtedly affected the duplication of the model; but so did, of course, the sculptors' particular sensibilities and skills. Within Ancient Egyptian art, the best demonstration of this widespread –and, actually, perfectly normal and even to be expected– phenomenon is certainly provided by the famous set of triads of Menkaura: whereas each figure of those group statues, whether the king, the goddess Hathor or the personification of a nome, plainly shows the very same physiognomy, *i.e.* the easily recognizable official portrait of Menkaura, every preserved triad, as their discoverer, G.A. Reisner, pointed out,[33] is characterized by slight stylistic –or rendering– variations, which allow them to be differentiated, but are also absolutely consistent on the three faces of the same sculpture, clearly denoting a single individual hand (or sculptor) behind –at least the finishing– of each piece (*Fig. 3*). The nature

and distribution of these stylistic differences and, at the same time, the strong consistency of the royal physiognomy indicate a very well-controlled facial model of the king, dispatched among the sculptors' workshops in order to be faithfully copied, despite a few inevitable faint alterations caused by the technical and human circumstances of such artistic productions.[34] Obviously, the same applies to Senwosret III's statues from Deir el-Bahari –as, in fact, to every sculpture series in Ancient Egyptian Art:[35] the characteristic official visage of the ruler was reproduced on every piece of the series but rendered or interpreted in slightly variable ways (through smooth inflections of the surface or, on the contrary, with sharper edges and clearer incisions,[36] varyingly marked, on a rather squarish or a more elongated face…), due –at least mainly– to personal artistic inclinations, habits or expertise, as the treatment of the rest of the

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(biography of Sarenput I); one can also mention here the stela of Shen-Setji in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 50.33.31 (R.O. FAULKNER, "The Stela of the Master-Sculptor Shen", *JEA* 38, 1952, p. 3-5; G. ROSATI, "Stela of the 'Master-Sculptor' Shen-Setji: A Review", in A. Bausi, A. Gori, G. Lusini (eds.), *Linguistic, Oriental and Ethiopian Studies in Memory of Paolo Marrassini*, Wiesbaden, 2014, p. 629-645). This, of course, weakens the long-lived theory of local workshops' traditions and styles in the production of royal statuary.

32.   See above, n. 3, for their *editio princeps* by E. Naville.

33.   G.A. REISNER, *Mycerinus. The Temples of the Third Pyramid at Giza*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1931, p. 108-129, pl. 36-45.

34.   On this, see D. LABOURY, *Ktèma* 34, 2009, p. 175-196; and ID., in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 2010.

35.   For a few examples, see K. DOHRMANN, *Arbeitsorganisation, Produktionsverfahren und Werktechnik – eine Analyse der Sitzstatuen Sesostris'I. aus Lischt*, PhD dissertation presented at the Georg-August-Universität Göttingen, 2004; R. TEFNIN, *La statuaire d'Hatchepsout. Portrait royal et politique sous la 18ᵉ dynastie*, *MonAeg* 4, Brussels, 1979; D. LABOURY, *La statuaire de Thoutmosis III. Essai d'interprétation d'un portrait royal dans son contexte historique*, *AegLeod* 5, Liège, 1998; L. MANNICHE, *The Akhenaten Colossi of Karnak*, Cairo, 2010. Regarding the technical circumstances bearing on the faithfulness of the duplication of the royal physiognomic model and its consistency in the statuary of Senwosret III, it is not surprising that the latter's least marked faces are often to be found on his smallest sculptures, as, for instance, in what S. Connor suggested to designate as the "Brooklyn group" (*i.e.* a series of almost identical granodiorite statuettes gathered around their best-preserved example, Brooklyn Museum 52.1, with a face of less than 6 cm high) in his PhD thesis, *Images du pouvoir en Égypte, de la fin du Moyen Empire à la Deuxième Période Intermédiaire*, dissertation presented at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2014, referring to an observation made by B. FAY, *The Louvre Sphinx and Royal Sculpture from the Reign of Amenemhat II*, Mainz, 1996, p. 34, n. 160.

36.   On the reinvention of the relation between shape, material and light in Middle Kingdom statuary, see the very sensitive comments of R. Tefnin, in *L'atelier de l'orfèvre*, 1992, p. 149-150.

Fig. 3 : Comparison of the three faces on Menkaura's triads Cairo JE 46499 (top) and 40678 (bottom)
(author's photographs).

anatomy and other iconographic details reveal.[37] And exactly the same kind of fluctuation in the

rendering and the markedness of Senwosret III's physiognomic formula can be detected in the set of statues of the king unearthed in Medamud.[38] Acknowledging this phenomenon of –unavoidable– variability in the transposition

37. It should be noted here that Ed. Naville, in 1913 (so only two years after the authoritative statement of G. Maspero quoted at the beginning of this article), already wrote about those statues that he found in Deir el-Bahari: "The four heads are not quite similar in type, as if the king had been sculptured at different ages, or what seems more likely, because they are not all by the same hand" (Ed. Naville, *Deir el-Bahari* III, 1913, p. 20).

38. Compare Louvre E 12960-2 (É. Delange, *Statues du Moyen Empire*, 1987, p. 24-28; and fig. 1 of the present article) and Cairo CG 486 and RT 18/6/26/2-JE66569 (F. Polz, *MDAIK* 51, 1995, pl. 48c-d), almost certainly from the same series, considering their size, iconography and material.

SENWOSRET III AND THE ISSUE OF PORTRAITURE IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ART

of the royal facial model, with its factors and actual effects, brings to light the strong impact of the choice of descriptive vocabulary on interpretation: while characterizing the degree of marked-ness and the stylistic treatment of the transcribed model remains quite neutral and allows the integration of technical and material arguments as well as the issue of quality in the reasoning, the use of terms like "old" and "young" forces the interpretation into a very narrow semantic register and is, as a matter of fact, already an interpretation in itself –or, better, a projection based on the undemonstrated hypothesis of realism.

But, then, going back to J. Vandier's –very influential– statement, what about the physiognomic discrepancy in the decoration of the famous lintel of Senwosret III from Medamud, supposedly the ultimate proof for the realistic reading of the king's iconography (*Fig. 4*)? Firstly, in a realist perspective assuming that "new official portraits were created every time the king physically changed" (Vandier's words), it seems difficult to explain that Pharaoh would have been depicted side by side old and young, unless one half of the lintel were completed many years after the other, which, of course, makes –close to– no sense (or at least calls for strong supporting evidence). Secondly, a larger view of the lintel (*Fig. 4*), not exclusively focused on the face of the ruler, reveals that the left-hand side of this sculpted block was decorated in a more schematic way, with less (well) detailed features, than the other half: the specific official physiognomy of the king is indeed simplified (with a less subtle bone and cheek structure, a more ordinary straight mouth and a longer and more classically hieroglyphic eye), but so are, for instance, the outline and shape of the less well-proportioned hands of the sovereign, lacking the elegance lent by the slightly outward-raised fingertips of his alter ego on the right. What is even more interesting and conclusive is the fact that this

holds true for the depiction of the god Montu, as can easily be seen by the formal treatment of the eye itself or of the feather motif around it (hieroglyphic sign H16: 𓆓), finely detailed on the right-hand side of the lintel and totally absent on the mirroring figure, on the left. Such a divergence of quality is actually well attested in the decoration of symmetric architectural elements, like lintels or doorframes, and might derive from work organization or training methods, with a master artist working alongside his apprentice or a younger colleague.[39] And, in any case, it definitely cannot be interpreted in a realistic manner, as an intentional indication of the king's age.

A similar phenomenon of variation in artistic treatment in the reproduction of the official model seems to account for the stylistic differences J. Vandier highlighted, in direct connection with this lintel, between the two Louvre statues of Senwosret III from Medamud (*Fig. 1*): despite various damages (and even if the inscriptions were not preserved), the official visage peculiar to the king is easy to recognize on both sculptures; but while its rendering is soft and smooth on E 12961 (the so-called "young Senwosret III"), in the entire corpus of the monarch's statuary that came down to us, it has never been as heavily marked, with clear-cut incisions and geometric volumes, as on E 12961.

As we have seen, this notion of marked-ness is particularly interesting for comparing the different portraits of Senwosret III, but also for assessing and interpreting the specificity of

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39.   See, for another almost contemporaneous example, R. Krauss, C.E. Loeben, "Die Berliner „Zierinschrift" Amenemhets III als Beispiel für gebrochene Symmetrie", *Jahrbuch Preußischer Kulturbesitz* 33, 1996, p. 159-172 (esp. fig. 3, p. 163); and, for a broader study of the phenomenon, with previous references to it, see V. Davies, "Complications in the stylistic analysis of Egyptian art. A look at the Small Temple of Medinet Habu", in T. Gillen (ed.), *(Re)productive Traditions in Ancient Egypt*, AegLeod 10, Liège, 2017, p. 203-228.

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Fig. 4 : Close-up views of the royal and divine figures in the antithetical scenes of the limestone lintel Louvre E 13983, from the excavations of F. Bisson de la Roque at Medamud (© Musée du Louvre, dist. RMN-GP/Christian Décamps).

his –actually– very coherent facial model. Just like in linguistic terminology, one may indeed distinguish in the analysis of figurative arts –and more particularly of human representations– marked forms from neutral or unmarked ones.[40] And from this vantage point, it is obvious that the portraiture of Senwosret III is willingly marked in comparison to the much more neutral royal

visage in use in the earlier part of the Middle Kingdom (or even in the entire history of Ancient Egyptian art), with a clear emphasis on the ears, eyes and mouth of the monarch.[41] But, once again, this marking intention, which –almost inevitably– engendered a more individualized representation,[42] does not at all imply that the

40. The classic example in the study of Ancient Egyptian language is the $sdm.n.f$ form, marked by the morpheme -n-, in contrast to the unmarked form $sdm.f$.

41. As perfectly underlined by R. Tefnin, in *L'atelier de l'orfèvre*, 1992.
42. As R. Tefnin, in *L'atelier de l'orfèvre*, 1992, rightly stressed (notably p. 150-155), the emphatic means in texts

resulting image is or even can be considered realistic. Reality effects are used here to emphasize certain aspects of the king's face and, of course, qualities connected to them. Although it seems very difficult to reconstruct the precise physiognomonical interpretation such a stylistic treatment likely elicited from Ancient Egyptian beholders,[43] R. Tefnin convincingly argued that this marked visage conveyed a message about the nature of kingship as it was conceived at that time, in keeping with a very significant contemporary textual production on the same subject (hymns in honor of the king on both royal and private monuments and the corpus of literature brilliantly studied by G. Posener in his famous book *Littérature et politique*)[44] alluding to special qualities relating to mouth, eyes and ears, such as the eloquence, vigilance and solicitude of the monarch praised in those texts.[45] Within the exceptional textual self-thematization of the king at the time of Senwosret III, the famous stela

from his fortress at Semna brought to Berlin by K.R. Lepsius (SMB ÄMP 1157) offers a unique direct commentary on a statue of the ruler in the latter's own words:

> "I am a king who speaks and acts, (…) one who takes care of the humble ones, steadily kind but without mercy for the enemies who attack him, one who attacks when he is attacked but is still when one is still (…) Now, if My Majesty has caused to make the statue of My Majesty at this border that My Majesty has made, it is for the sake of your being firm (*wdi.tn*) on it and for the sake of your fighting for it."

So according to Senwosret III himself, his statues were meant to inspire strength, braveness, power and authority –rather than lassitude or old age.[46]

Interestingly enough, the emancipation from the traditional hieroglyphic abstraction and the very marked physiognomy that characterize Senwosret III's portraiture actually appeared one generation earlier, in private statuary, which, at least this time, influenced royal art.[47] Without the mummy of the king, it is impossible to evaluate the plausible resemblance between pharaoh's real face and his sculptured portraits. However, some sort of a physiognomic convergence seems rather likely, simply because the same stylistic formula was actualized differently for Senwosret III and for his son and successor, Amenemhat III.[48]

and in statuary are different and specific to each mode of expression or genre. In the context of the more conceptual than perceptual and hieroglyphically oriented art of Ancient Egypt, such an amplification was naturally achieved through a more distinct or individual(ized) depiction of the features to be focused on. It is nonetheless very interesting to note that an intriguingly similar stylistic formula was also used in the *mimesis* artistic tradition of late Republican Rome; on this, see V. Dasen, in *Le portrait*, 2007, p. 26-33.

43. See above, n. 23.
44. G. Posener, *Littérature et politique dans l'Égypte de la XIIᵉ dynastie*, Paris, 1956. See also the excellent synthesis of B. Mathieu, "La littérature à la fin du Moyen Empire", in Fl. Morfoisse, G. Andreu-Lanoë (eds.), *Sésostris III, Pharaon de légende*, 2014, p. 86-91.
45. Once again, see R. Tefnin, in *L'atelier de l'orfèvre*, 1992. On the concept of the hearing ear in Ancient Egypt, one may add now the study of N. Toye-Dubs, *De l'oreille à l'écoute. Étude des documents votifs de l'écoute : Nouvel éclairage sur le développement de la piété personnelle en Égypte ancienne*, *BAR-IS* 2811, Oxford, 2016. It might be tempting to imagine that the marked visage of Senwosret III could correspond to what Ancient Egyptian language and thought designated as someone *wdi-ḥr*, literally "tense of face", meaning "brave", "eager" or "bold" (the verbal root *wdi* being prominently used in the text of the Semna stela), but this hypothesis is nevertheless impossible to demonstrate.

46. Again, the parallel with late Republican portraiture, characterized by a no less marked physiognomic style and combined with a textual self-thematization emphasizing virtues such as *gravitas, constantia, severitas* or *auctoritas* is more than interesting; once more, see V. Dasen, in *Le portrait*, 2007, p. 26-33.
47. See Fr. Junge, "Die Provinzialkunst des Mittleren Reiches in Elephantine", in L. Habachi, *The Sanctuary of Heqaib, Elephantine* IV, *ArchVer* 33, Mainz, 1985, p. 117-139; and, on the contemporary royal portraiture, see B. Fay, *The Louvre Sphinx and Royal Sculpture form the Reign of Amenemhat II*, Mainz, 1996, p. 60 and pl. 80.
48. It must be reminded here that the comparative analysis of Thutmosis III's mummy and statue portraits reveals that, despite a rather significant ideologically driven evolution through different chronological types, the iconography of

Conclusion

From an Art Historical point of view, taking into account, on the one hand, the conceptual and theoretical implications of the descriptive vocabulary referred to and, on the other hand, the technical and human circumstances of

the king is characterized by a few absolutely constant physiognomic features that precisely distinguish the royal mummified head, denoting an undeniable inspiration from the actual appearance of the ruler, although his visage was as unmistakably modified according to his political orientations and references, in order to make it meaningful in his official version; see D. Laboury, *La statuaire de Thoutmosis III*, 1998, p. 647-655. On the consistency of this combination of an analogical reference to visual perception of outer or phenomenological reality and a consciously managed departure from this perceptual reality in order to create meaning or extra-meaning, beyond the simple reproduction of visual appearances (and if necessary, despite them), with the fundamentals of ancient Egyptian Art, see D. Laboury, *Ktèma* 34, 2009, p. 175-196; and Id., *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, 2010.

statuary production in Ancient Egypt, the analysis of the statue portraits of Senwosret III leads to the unavoidable conclusion that they can no longer be considered as (hyper) realistic representations, as a manifestation of a "love of realism" allegedly characteristic of that period. Set in its historical context, the compellingly individualized and strongly marked physiognomic model they were meant to reproduce and display seems to form a coherent discourse on the nature of kingship, consistent with a significant textual self-thematization of the monarch. So in fact, more than showing the actual face of the king or providing a window to his soul, these portraits promote the official and ideal image of the royal power of the time, which is, from an Egyptological perspective, undoubtedly much more interesting to have access to.

Résumé :

Depuis leur redécouverte égyptologique, à la fin du 19ᵉ siècle, les portraits statuaires de Sésostris III ont fortement influencé leurs commentateurs et engendré la conviction très largement répandue qu'ils représentent le sommet du réalisme dans l'histoire de l'art égyptien. Le présent article se propose de remettre en question cette conception dominante en analysant la confusion terminologique et conceptuelle qui sous-tend une telle interprétation et en recontextualisant cette production sculpturale dans une perspective d'histoire de l'art, en prenant notamment en considération les aspects matériels et proprement artistiques de la question.

Abstract:

Since their Egyptological discovery, at the end of the 19ᵗʰ century, the statue portraits of Senwosret III deeply impressed their commentators and induced the pervasive idea that they represent the most lifelike or the epitome of realism in the history of Ancient Egyptian art. The present article aims to challenge this widespread assumption by analyzing terminological and conceptual confusion underlying this interpretation and recontextualizing this statuary production in an art historical perspective, taking notably into account material and artistic aspects of the issue.