

# The visit to the art museum in seattle

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Assignment: Select one of the works on view (Egyptian, Greek, or Roman) that deals specifically with death/funerary rites. While you are at the museum you should record the information provided for the work you select and make a sketch of the piece (you are required to include a sketch- Not A Photo-with your report). Write a 3-4 pages report explaining the work of art you selected and how it reflects the burial practices/ beliefs of the culture it represents. Be specific. My visit to the Art Museum in Seattle has been an illuminating experience. I felt privileged to be able to look at art objects of ancient civilizations and learn about the richness and sensibilities of cultures long lost. I was able to look and learn about a broad assortment of artifacts. For this report, I've chosen an Egyptian work that is related to death/funerary rites, namely, The Relief of Montuemhet and his wife Shepenmut, ca. 665 B. C. This pigment on limestone exhibit was originally excavated from tomb 34 and its dimension is 13 9/16 x 10 7/16 inches. The work is on display in the fourth floor of Seattle Art Museum, in the Ancient Mediterranean and Islamic Art galleries. There is a lot that could be read from the selected exhibit, especially pertaining to death and funerary rites of Ancient Egyptian civilization. The artwork in question belonged to the tomb of Montuemhet – referred to by Egyptologists as TT34. This tomb is located on the West Bank of the Nile facing the ancient Thebes (Luxor presently) near a place called Asasif. This artifact is of historical significance because Montuemhet was a very powerful administrator during his reign. Not only did he succeed Taharqa at the culmination of the Kushite twenty-fifth Dynasty, but he also oversaw the “ sack of Thebes by the Assyrians and the reign of Psammetichus I of the Saite Twenty-sixth Dynasty”. (SarahB, 2012) Some of

the statues of him were built during his own lifetime. Yet, it is the contents of his tomb, including the artwork in discussion, that represent the height of the legacy. In the tomb of Montuemhet (where the relief was found), excavators found the mummified body of the great administrator in a well-preserved state. The ancient Egyptians believed that to be reborn in the afterlife, one's body too needed to be preserved, which they mastered through the process of mummification. As is the procedure during mummification, the body of Montuemhet was found devoid of many internal organs (as these tend to decay quickly) and fully embalmed. The body was found wrapped in linen with beads and amulets woven into the layers for better binding. The face " was covered with a mummy portrait, and the body placed in a sarcophagus, or coffin, within the tomb. Only in this state, and surrounded by objects and food, was the deceased prepared for a successful journey to the afterlife". (Shaw, 2003) It is a well known fact that Ancient Egyptians believed in life after death. Indeed they believed that the afterlife is more rich and colorful than what the earthly existence could possibly offer. This is the reason why they made elaborate funerary preparations for the mortal body and made it ready to dwell comfortably in the eternal residence. All the necessities for daily living, including food, water, vessels, clothes, ornaments, pet animals, etc, were packed into the tombs alongside the mummified body. (Billard, 1978) The bodies were mummified so as to keep them fresh for life thereon, however unrealistic that possibility might look to the modern observer. The explanatory text accompanying The Relief of Montuemhet and his wife Shepenmut notes: " Most surviving Egyptian art was created to furnish tombs, and many of the symbols that were used over and over (the sun,

lotuses) represent regeneration.” In the artwork in discussion, we see the pictorial representation of both Montuemhet and his wife Shepenmut. Here we see a symbolic union of the couple in life beyond death. Egyptians paid such detailed attention to the ‘trappings’ of earthly life that even his wife was to accompany the deceased administrator in his glorious passage. The relief is a good example of sunk carving on a limestone block. Above the head of the royal couple, we see three columns of hieroglyphs. There are subtle marks made of original paint and chisel marks that run in vertical direction. Montuemhet’s shoulder-long wig has elaborate curls dropping down in the form of rows. He is also depicted wearing a “plain collar and a sash with a knotted fastener on his left shoulder. Traces of paint on his chest in the form of small rosettes indicate that he originally wore the priestly leopard skin. His near arm would have been held over his lap, his far arm held outwards towards an offering table (now lost). The wife wears a dress with knotted straps leaving her breast exposed, a small plain collar and a long striated wig.” (SarahB, 2012) During the time of Montuemhet’s demise, practices surrounding the building of individual tombs underwent a great revival. In the four centuries prior to his death, the building of complex schemes of decoration in royal tombs was nearly absent. In this sense, Montuemhet’s abode for afterlife is historically important. Paying particular attention to the relief artifact, we see some special stylistic elements. The Egyptian belief in the concept of eternity is not limited only to individual lives, but also to their artistic traditions. This is why one can see aspects of relief work from the Old Kingdom (going back two millennia) in the relief of Montuemhet and his wife Shepenmut. Coming as it does from the Saite

Period the deliberate imprint of antiquity in the art work is seen as desire to reassert Egyptian native styles after centuries of foreign rule. That the relief carries a unique style of its own makes it all the more impressive and valuable. References: SarahB (June 22, 2012), SOAP: Seattle Art Museum Blog, SAMart: Egyptian Art Friday, Billard, Jules B. (1978). Ancient Egypt: Discovering its Splendors. Washington D. C.: National Geographic Society. Shaw, Ian (2003). The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press. ISBN 0-500-05074-0.