



**1** Geese from the tomb of Itet at Meidum. This early masterpiece of Egyptian painting, executed on fine plaster covering a brick wall, dates from about 2600 B.C. The original is now in the Cairo Museum. 31.6.8

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CHARLES K. WILKINSON  
**EGYPTIAN  
WALL  
PAINTINGS:**

The Metropolitan Museum's  
Collection of Facsimiles

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**T**he Metropolitan Museum of Art has on display in its new Egyptian galleries approximately 350 colored facsimiles of ancient wall paintings copied mostly from tombs during the first third of this century by the Graphic Section of its Egyptian Expedition. As the last surviving member of the Expedition and as one who made many of those copies, I have been invited to write about them from the standpoint of my personal knowledge and experience. It is my intention to recount here why and how we copied the original paintings, what we discovered in the process about the Egyptian artist's methods and materials, and what his pictures tell us so vividly and in such detail about everyday life in the civilization that flourished along the Nile 4,000 years ago. I therefore leave to others such matters as the analyzing of stylistic differences in Egyptian art by dynastic periods.

I joined the Egyptian Expedition of The Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1920, working in and among the desert foothills and tomb-riddled cliffs of the Theban necropolis on the west bank of the Nile opposite Luxor (see maps, pages 58–59).

The Museum's Curator of Egyptian art in those days was Albert M. Lythgoe, who, in 1906, had created the department and inaugurated the expedition to Egypt (Figure



2). Arthur C. Mace, a distinguished English archaeologist, was his senior assistant. After beginning at Lisht and in the Kharga Oasis, Lythgoe sought a third exploration site. In 1910 the Museum was granted a concession at Thebes, and Herbert E. Winlock, once a student of Lythgoe's at Harvard, became the field director. Heading the Graphic Section there was Norman de Garis Davies, the man responsible for my joining the Expedition. It was the task of the Graphic Section to record and copy Egyptian wall paintings, the great majority of which are in tombs of the Theban necropolis.

In 1920, when Davies needed a new assistant skilled in the fine arts, he inquired at the Slade School, University College, London, whence he had previously obtained assistants and where his wife, Nina, had studied. I had just finished my training there, and Henry Tonks, the renowned director of the school at that time, recommended me to Davies. Tonks thought he could help both parties. He knew I needed a job, that active service in World War I had left me none too strong physically, and he felt that the climate of Egypt during the winter seasons, when expeditions are in the field, would benefit my health. Davies, in turn, would be getting a fully qualified assistant experienced in painting in tem-



**2** Albert M. Lythgoe and his wife, Lucy, photographed at the Kharga Oasis in 1908. Two years earlier, Lythgoe became the Museum's first Curator of Egyptian art, and organized its Egyptian Expedition



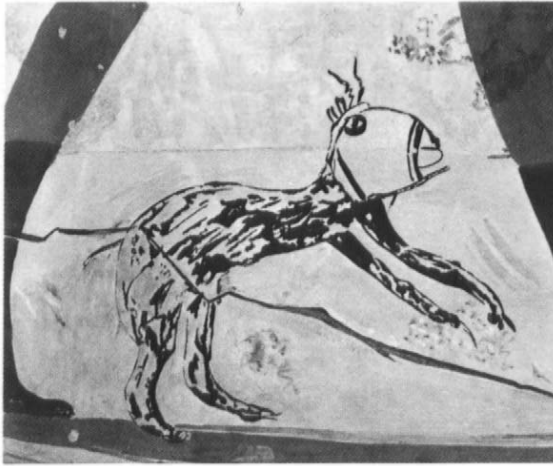
**3, 4** Userhat, a royal scribe, hunts gazelles, hares, and other desert animals from a chariot drawn by two horses, one red, one white. Chariots and horses were not used in Egypt until about 1700 B.C., when they were probably introduced by invaders known as the Hyksos. This scene dates from about 1450 B.C. At the right is a Coptic monk's version of the red horse, painted some two millennia later on the same wall. Tomb of Userhat (T 56), Sheikh abd el Qurna. 30.4.42, 222

pera, an accomplishment that was essential to the job. It was the beginning of my professional association of twelve years with Davies in Egypt and of a friendship brought to a close only by his death in 1941. The Metropolitan Museum's collection of copies of Egyptian wall paintings by Davies and his associates is unexcelled in size and quality because of his unflagging enthusiasm and high standards, and should be considered in large part his achievement.

One might wonder why the Museum, in its golden age of discovering and acquiring ancient Egyptian objects, was also committed to making copies of wall paintings. The individual responsible for that policy was Lythgoe, a man whose modest concealed rare administrative ability and a passion for thoroughness. Lythgoe was a staunch advocate of the scientific approach to field archaeology as initiated by Sir Flinders Petrie: a systematic, accurate recording of all finds in excavations, for what might seem at first to be of no intrinsic value could yield information of enormous significance after further examination and study. Lythgoe was also deeply influenced by a perceptive statement by the philologist F. Llewellyn Griffith that, for a fraction of the cost of an excavation, a great deal about Egypt's past could be learned by accurately copying wall inscriptions in

tombs that were already accessible. Lythgoe expanded upon Griffith's idea to include all mural paintings, inscribed or not, and by the winter of 1907/08, during the second season of the Expedition's field work, he had created the Graphic Section under the leadership of Davies to make facsimile copies. Photography was also used to record the tomb interiors, but it is to be remembered that this was still the age of black-and-white prints made from fragile glass plates. Furthermore, even if color film had existed, its transparent, transient qualities would not have met Lythgoe's standards. What Lythgoe wanted were permanent, accurate copies of the originals, exact in line, color, and, when possible, in full scale, for study and exhibition at the Museum and for publication.

Both Lythgoe and Davies were only too well aware that since ancient times wall paintings had been subject to vandalism, some of it perpetrated by the Egyptians themselves. During the reign of Amenhotpe IV, who took the name of Akhenaton and attempted to establish the supremacy of the god Aten, his followers entered the tombs and systematically deleted parts of inscriptions and sometimes even whole figures, such as those of the *setem* priests (see Figure 30). Again, when his successor Tutankhamun ascended the throne, and the god



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Amun was restored to his primary place among Egyptian deities, more deletions were made. Still other disfigurements and effacements were the result of political rivalries, whether royal or not.

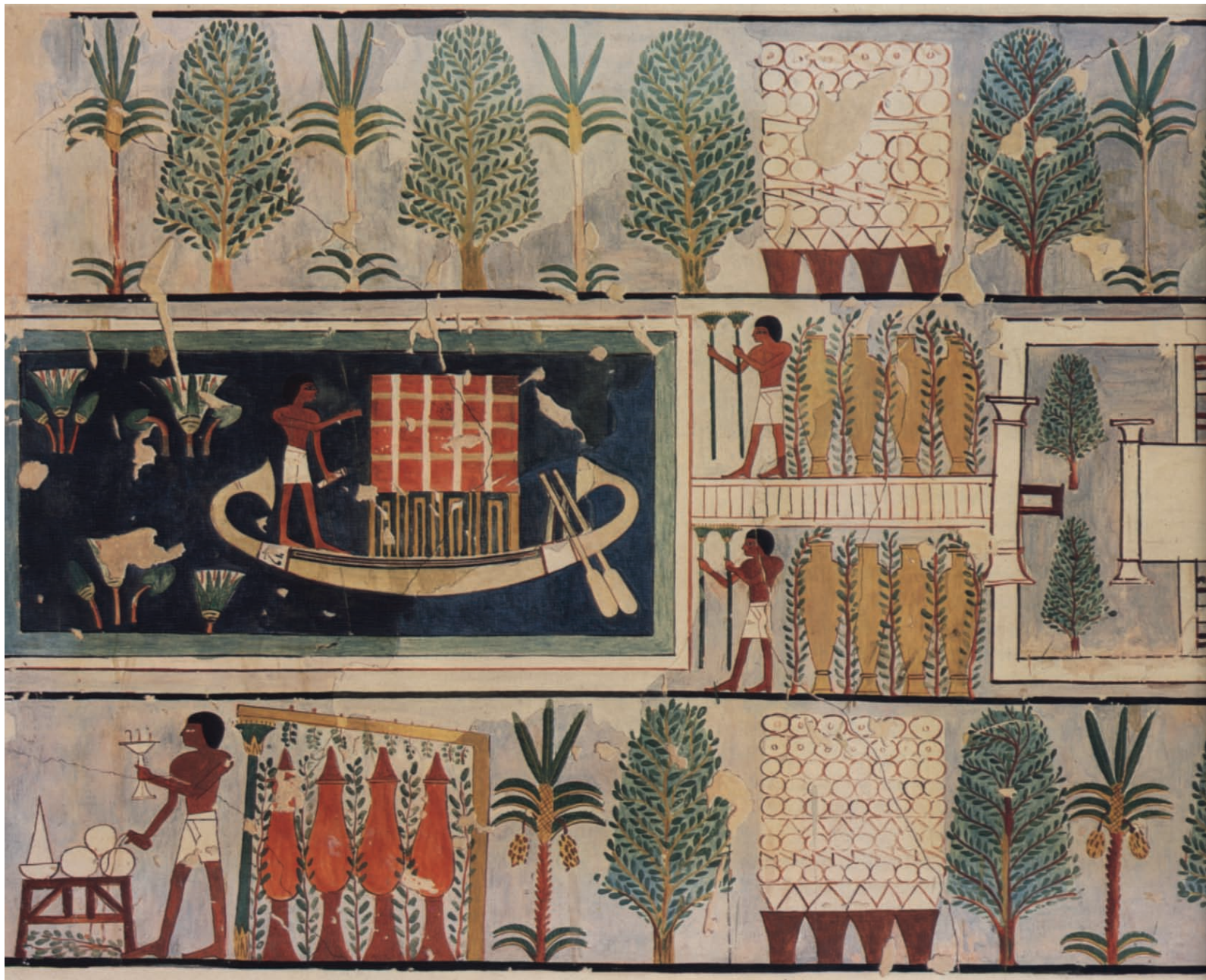
With the advent of Christian monasticism in the third century of our era, further damage ensued when the monks took over funerary temples and tombs for monasteries. Deir el Bahri, for example, meaning “the northern monastery,” is the Arabic name for Queen Hatshepsut’s temple, built against and into the cliffs at the end of the Asasif valley, where in the nineteenth century the ruins of a Coptic structure stood in its uppermost courtyard. The monks used the tombs in the surrounding area for living quarters and for meditation, and when they found things in the wall paintings they considered evil or tempting, such as female figures, they often scratched them out. Sometimes they defaced the walls with little sketches, as happened in the tomb of Userhat. Among the ancient Egyptian paintings in this tomb is one in which a pair of fine horses is depicted with great verve and spirit (Figure 3). Some two millennia later a monk tried his hand at copying the principal horse on the same wall in the chamber (Figure 4), an effort that Davies aptly described as a very triumph of failure.

For centuries, too—even into my time—many tombs were occupied by the local people, who lived in them very cozily with their animals (Figure 5). Their fires, usually made close to the walls, affected the colors of the paintings seriously, the smoke imparting a yellowish cast to cool bluish gray backgrounds, and the heat turning blues and greens to a slaty gray. Only in a few tombs—for example, that of Minnakhte—do the colors appear to have survived undiminished (Figure 6). The people also did some deliberate damage to the paintings, including knocking out eyes to avert evil, but on the whole the abuse they inflicted stemmed from an attitude of indifference.

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**5** Forecourt of the Theban tomb of Noferhotep (T 49) as it looked in 1920, when the tomb was inhabited by a family with a cow, eight sheep, four goats, a dog, a cat, and poultry. Over the years many of the painted tombs have been protected from intruders by gates installed by the Egyptian Antiquities Service





**6** Funeral ceremony in a temple garden for Minnakhte, overseer of granaries. His catafalque is being transported across a pool to steps leading up to the temple. The pylons and walls of the temple are seen from above, while the entrances are at right angles to them, as if lying down. Cakes and breads are piled between the trees, and jars of beer and wine are shaded by greenery. The original painting, although damaged when copied and virtually destroyed today, is among the few with exceptionally well preserved colors. About 1475 b.c. Tomb of Minnakhte (T 87), Sheikh abd el Qurna. 30.4.56 (restored)

The most serious damage to the paintings was effected in an entirely different way. After Napoleon's campaign in Egypt in 1798/99, the attention of the Western world was focused on this ancient land, attracting to it throughout most of the nineteenth century both the best and the worst of visitors. In Egypt one could satisfy either an intellectual thirst for knowledge of an older civilization or a lust for material riches.



The abundance of antiquities aroused predatory instincts to a very high degree, and a surge of interest in Egyptian paintings gave rise to an unscrupulous traffic in pieces hacked from the walls. Great chunks were carried away, and many paintings were irretrievably ruined in the process. By the beginning of this century thefts had become so numerous and damage so severe that the director general of the Egyptian

Antiquities Service, Sir Gaston Maspero, authorized Howard Carter, then his chief inspector in Upper Egypt, to install gates with iron bars at Theban tomb entrances and to employ guards. (In addition, wire netting was stretched over the gates to keep bats from living in the tombs.) The project was pursued vigorously by Carter's successor as chief inspector, Arthur Weigall, who sought the assistance of the gifted Egyptologist Alan Gardiner. This security system was a major step in curbing the nefarious trade in pieces of wall paintings, although such trade has never entirely ceased.

Among the commendable travelers attracted to Egypt in the early nineteenth century, two who recorded Egyptian wall paintings before so many were vandalized and whose careful drawings and notes were of value to our endeavors were Sir John Gardner Wilkinson and Robert Hay—and while I am no relation to Sir John, I am honored to have helped in a minor way to further his pioneering efforts. From 1821 to 1833, almost a century before our Expedition arrived, Wilkinson lived in the Theban hillsides, clearing and examining accessible tombs. He was the first to undertake the methodical and accurate copying of tomb paintings with a view to understanding Egyptian life. Hundreds of his line drawings and a few plates in color illustrate his crowning achievement, *The Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1837–1841). Wilkinson's meticulous copies, together with his notebooks, were exhibited in 1978 by the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford University, and although they are too small to be considered facsimiles, their significance as reliable, irreplaceable source material has finally been given due public recognition.

Hay traveled in Egypt and Nubia, sometimes with other artists, between 1828 and