

6-13-2012

Model of a Funerary Boat


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Recommended Citation

RISD Museum; Dean, Peter; and Johnson, Peter, "Model of a Funerary Boat" (2012). *Channel*. 2.
https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/risdmuseum_channel/2

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My name is Peter Dean. I'm on the part-time faculty in the department of furniture design here at RISD. I've been interested in boats among other things for many years; not only their design, but their craft. We're here discussing the model boat, a funerary object from Egypt.

From a boat builder's point of view, it's quite obviously to me that this particular boat was never meant to actually float. This object is entirely symbolic. If it were put in water, I imagine it would tip over immediately, and then float down, everybody would float away, and that would be the end of it. Model boats have a great history over time of everything from a stick of wood with a leaf on stick attached that children play with on rivers, streams, or at the ocean front beachside. This one is clearly a funerary object. It's interesting to me that it has survived so well, being made entirely out of perishable material. In no place other than Egypt and in a tomb – Egypt being exceedingly dry – would you have this level of preservation of an object.

Here we have a group of Egyptians paddling a sailboat with the sail down.

I must say, rowing a boat is a lot more effort than sailing one, but usually you only row when you can't sail. In other words, there's no wind or the wind is coming from a direction that doesn't get you where you're going. So clearly, there's some determination among these personages on board this boat. They want to get there one way or the other. So the sail's ready for when the wind is appropriate, and there are lots of oars available for other to pick up and join the effort.

Perhaps they're just pushing off because this fellow on the bow holding the stick is the kind of tool you would use when you are just pushing off a beach, or getting out of shallow water into deeper water where oars would be useful. You can see that the rudder here isn't even in the water. I'm assuming that bottom of what you see of the hull would be the water line of the boat. So I would say this is just setting off, which from a funerary point of view makes perfect sense. It's that moment of departure.

My name is Peter Johnson. I'm a junior at Brown University concentrating in Egyptology. I've interned here at the RISD here in the Ancient Art department for almost a year now. We will be looking at the Model Boat from Meir from around 2,100 to 1,900 B.C.

This boat would've been in a tomb and representative of a way for the deceased to travel to the afterworld, or even to present any function they would need in the afterlife. Because boats were so important for commerce, trade, and travel, the fact that this would've been within an ancient tomb would've meant that after the tomb's owner dies, they would've been able to take this boat and use it as they would a life-size model in the real world.

This boat would've carried the deceased to the afterworld or sight of Abydos where Osiris the god of the dead would've resided. If you look closely, you can see one individual who is crouched with a white shroud and a long black wig. That would've been the tomb owner making his trip, either to procure some goods or to make a trip to the afterlife.

The model boat is made out of wood, and I think it's really interesting to think about the resources Egypt had in comparison to its foreign neighbors. Egypt was a pretty wood-scarce country having pretty small timber in comparison to its neighbors having large timber. This is really seen when looking at these model figures, which are pieced together by joints. They are not usually carved from one block of wood because a block of wood that size would not be easily attainable or moldable for its bad quality.

I think when you look at this object, you get a sense of how a different culture deemed things important. You see that the individuals are scaled a lot larger than the boat, because the individuals had agency, efficiency, and were performing a task. When looking at this object, one thing you can really take away is that everything was functional, and that you can learn about this different culture within the way they emphasize certain forms and de-emphasize other forms.