

E. H. Gombrich, Review of William H. Peck, *Drawings from Ancient Egypt*, *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, Vol. 69, 1983, pp.192-193 [Trapp no.1983Q.1]

Drawings from Ancient Egypt. By WILLIAM H. PECK. Photographs by John G. Ross. Foreword by Cyril Aldred. 270 X 250 mm. Pp. 207, illustrations 169, colour 16. London, Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1978. Price £10.50.

The attractive book under review with its sixteen colour plates and 132 monochrome illustrations of drawings on ostraka, papyri, walls, and ceramics is likely to appeal to art-lovers who find it hard to come to terms with the impersonality of monumental Egyptian art. A brief introduction by Cyril Aldred explains the context of these scattered works, and William Peck provides a survey and informative commentaries of the illustrations. Here one's only regret might be that the indications of measurements—so relevant in many cases—are relegated to the list of plates at the end of the book.

The arrangement is according to subject matter, man, woman, the royal image, etc. down to animal life and architecture. There are advantages in this grouping, though the reader has to turn to the text for discussion of the meaning here assigned to the term drawing (that is designing in a liquid medium with a section of rush chewed or beaten to separate the fibres into brush form), and of the extremely varied purposes this technique was made to serve. The proximity to the techniques of the scribe is stressed by Cyril Aldred and is indeed obvious in the case of illustrations on papyrus. There is ample evidence that the technique was also used as a preparatory stage for sculpture, the traces of the brush being more flexible and easier to correct than the marks of the chisel. Even so it is remarkable how rare and how slight are these second thoughts or 'pentimenti', compared, for instance with the sinopie found under the painting surface of Italian murals. If to err is human, the Egyptian craftsmen were almost superhuman. Almost, but not quite. For more revealing glimpses are offered by their drawings on slabs or ostraka which the author calls 'trial pieces'. Some appear to be the work of apprentices trying out a formula such as that for the King's head, with the master amending the outline or adding the drawing of a fist or a hand as a guide to the correct proportion. In the majority of trial pieces, however, the author sees the work of a master craftsman struggling with a somewhat unusual subject for which no easy formula was available. Hence, as we read, more trial pieces exist for subjects like wrestlers and dancers, or complicated combinations of animals for hunting scenes, than for the usual compositions which any master could draw without hesitation.

A particularly interesting category is copies, such as the astounding sketch of the Queen of Punt from the temple of Deir el-Bahri. The uniqueness of the model makes the copy easily recognizable, but the author (instancing a version after a relief from Medinet Habu) thinks that many other drawings must have been similarly based on existing monuments. Commenting on the representation of a woman nursing a child which exists in two very similar drawings the author writes: 'It is often the case, that a single drawing of a scene seems to be the product of imagination and invention, until the discovery of others of the same type proves the subject was sanctioned by common usage and needed practice.' Students of European medieval art have found it impossible to arrive at a hard and fast distinction between sketchbooks and pattern-books. Evidently the same difficulties arise in the study of these Egyptian monuments.

Even the renderings of animals in human roles may be more dependent on patterns or pattern-books than their carefree manner suggests. We read that the cats in these drawings were perhaps derived from a common model. The author has no doubt about the interpretation of this genre as humorous and perhaps even irreverently parodistic. There is no mention in his bibliography of the book by

Hedwig Kenner, *Das Phänomen der verkehrten Welt in der griechisch-römischen Antike* (Klagenfurt, 1970) which very tentatively links this type of imagery with utopian dreams of reversal and renewal. Whatever one may think of this interpretation, it is clear that there is always a subjective element in any reading of comic intention. Discussing the memorable drawing of an unshaven stonemason the author wants us to pity the poor man, believing that the 'skilled artist who worked with pen and brush must have looked down on the labourer who toiled with chisel and mallet'. But need the drawing be intended as a portrait? Could it not also belong to the type of generic mockery which has so often prompted rival guilds to deride each other? Or, alternatively, could it not even be a self-caricature by a stonemason, meditating on his lot?

Generally there is less evidence of spontaneity and freedom in these tantalizing drawings than a casual look may convey. Even the few erotic doodles and other scribbles are firmly embedded in the system and procedures of the Egyptian style. They are invariably filtered through the system of Egyptian methods which have been so thoroughly analysed by H. Schafer and which the author, following Emma Brunner Traut, refers to as 'aspective'. Without wishing to challenge this interpretation (to which this reviewer has also adhered) it may be opportune to draw the attention of readers of this journal to the alternative view on perspective and non-perspective in art which has been put forward by a leading student of visual perception, the late James J. Gibson, in his latest and last book *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston, 1979). Gibson's reasoning is too subtle and too complex to be summarized in a few words; suffice it to say that he does not fall into the trap of dismissing perspective as a mere convention. What he argues instead is that the arrested monocular vision of the world is an artificial abstraction which can never do justice to the workings of our visual system, which relies not on 'snapshot vision' but on the flow of information obtained by the observer who moves around in the world. The system is geared, in his view, to extracting what he calls the invariants of our environment, its layout and structure, independent of any particular viewing point. This interpretation comes fairly close to the author's formulation that in Egyptian art 'the elements are arranged in a way that conveys not the visual momentary impression but a description of reality at no fixed time'. The reason why Gibson dissociates his view from the traditional interpretation according to which such conceptual images are based on 'knowledge' rather than on 'seeing' cannot here be further set out. What matters is that any aspective system must resemble a map rather than a mirror image and a map demands adherence to the code if it is to function at all. What the author writes about the drawings of constellations on the ceiling of the tomb of Senenmut probably applies to many other subjects: 'The skill of the artist was exhibited only in the degree to which he could be faithful to the original.' It is this approach which was subverted by what may be called the 'eyewitness principle', with its development of perspective. As soon as the representation was conceived as a record of what the artist had actually seen from a particular viewing point at a given moment subjectivity entered the process. In the making of such a record of a real or imaginary experience drawing will also assume a different function. Its role in the formation of the unique and unrepeatable image will be much more creative than it could ever be in the context of a conventional style. In describing the drawings in a papyrus of the *Book of the Dead* the author writes: 'The figures are based on carefully worked out and standardized models, but nevertheless have great vitality and grace.' We need not disagree, to recognize that there is an unresolved problem in his 'nevertheless'. It stems from that great reorientation of image-making that led Vasari in the sixteenth century to collect drawings and an eighteenth-century poet (A.-M. Lemierre) to formulate accepted opinion in the lines:

Le moment du génie est celui de l'esquisse;
C'est là qu'on voit la verve et la chaleur du plan.

Without this conviction this book would not have been compiled and marketed. We have a right to be subjective in our response to the images of the past, and can be grateful to the author for selecting as his first illustration a much simplified (and much enlarged) drawing of a profile which, with good reason, reminds him of Picasso's `classic' faces. But could we have explained to its master why many would one day prefer this first preparatory exercise to the disciplined perfection of the finished image?