

Clipping nails and channelling aspirations

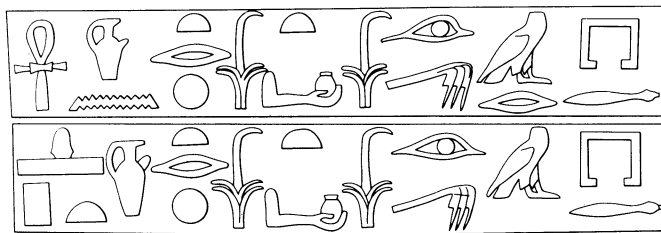
JOHN BAINES

DURING the twenty-fourth century BCE, two men named Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotpe who were perhaps twins constructed for themselves one of the finer tombs in the necropolis of Saqqara, near the capital city of Memphis. They belonged to Egypt's small, competitive, and highly talented governing elite, a theoretical meritocracy numbering perhaps a few hundred office-holders. Among many striking features of their funerary monument is the selection of official titles they displayed. They are the most prominent known 'Overseers of Palace Nail-Clippers'.

This title fitted a well-established pattern of supervisory positions. One would start as a 'Palace Nail-Clipper', moving up to become successively 'Under-Supervisor' (not attested so far) and 'Supervisor of Palace Nail-Clippers', before attaining the leading rank of 'Overseer'. Very grand people could be 'Overseers', such as the 'Overseer of All the King's Works' who was in charge of the pyramid of his day and much else. In the case of nail-clipping, however, a title of our two men that outranked all those just enumerated was 'Nail-Clipper of the King'. They were also 'King's Confidants for the Work of Nail-Clipping'.

Hartwig Altenmüller, who published the two men's tomb,¹ assumed that in this period the activity of nail-clipping, which was also sometimes depicted pictorially, briefly acquired a separate status. Yet there would surely have been too many clippers for the elite's toes to survive unutilated. A more likely explanation is that for a couple of decades quite a few people who rose to prominence were given titles relating to nail-clipping. Such an activity has a partial parallel in titles relating to royal dress and coiffure and could display close contact with the king's person—and guardianship of body products that might perhaps be used nefariously if acquired by enemies. The symbolism of nail-clipping spread more widely through the institution of the palace and, by imitation, in the households of prominent individuals, which also numbered nail-clippers among their staff.

As it happens, the tomb of a contemporary of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotpe named Ptahshepses at neighbouring Abu Sir, which is one of the largest ever constructed for a non-royal person, bears the name Niankhkhnum in ink on many of its blocks. These block-marks probably show that in 'real life' the latter oversaw



Inscription on the cylindrical lintel element of the entrance door of the tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotpe (c.2350 BCE): 'Overseer of Palace Nail-Clippers, Royal Favourite, Royal Dependand(?), Niankhkhnum/Khnumhotpe'.



Nail-clipping scene in the tomb of Khentika at Saqqara (c.2300 BCE). The captions read, right pair: 'Do my nails gently, my love'; 'I shall do it to your satisfaction'; on left: 'The Supervisor of Sealbearers, Heny'.

building work and the crushing rather than clipping of fingers and toes. His activity as quartermaster or architect would itself have had a high status.

Thus, elite titles are not reliable guides to occupations; other evidence is needed. We can say more about people's ascribed, and often achieved, status. Klaus Baer² made the fundamental discovery that during this period there were fixed ranking sequences of titles that generally changed at least once a reign. Kings or their closest advisers—holders of the title string normally translated 'Vizier'—were immune from these fluctuations—manipulated status-conscious officials by rearranging their symbolic perquisites. The titles which come at the head of sequences

do not relate to functions but are pure indicators of rank. A single title placed at the end of a sequence immediately before a man's name is normally his 'functional' title; as indicated, translating the title may not get us far toward understanding what he did. Many titles were worth accumulating because they were sinecures to which an income was attached.

The imposed changes in title sequences were anything but meaningless. A couple of 'autobiographies' make significant play with them. One Kaiemtjenet states that he achieved notable things 'when I was a humble Oarsman' and that these achievements led to his advancement, which the text records with a set of quite high-ranking titles. The inscription of Weni, the longest known from the period, repeatedly states that Weni was assigned tasks or given privileged information 'while my office was such-and-such', and that no one in that position had hitherto done, or been party to, such important things. Moreover, when Weni was appointed to one of his offices, four previous holders were dismissed. Weni's career lasted around fifty years and encompassed confidential legal functions, military leadership, and the transport of costly and heavy hardstone monuments (something that others must have done without proclaiming it). Like the true meritocrat he proclaimed himself to be, Weni progressed a very long way up the title ladder, probably—the inscription is broken—ending with the second highest of all ranking titles, a term conventionally rendered 'Count'. Although the activities he described seem real enough, he was as interested in whether they were innovative, and in the titles which accrued to him, as in their value as achievements.

Titles mattered through this life into the next. Perhaps two hundred years after the time of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotpe, one Djau son of Djau constructed a double tomb at Dayr al-Gabrawi, hundreds of kilometres upstream from Memphis, so that he could share it with his greatly respected father. The final passage of Djau's inscription states that he begged of the king that his father receive the title 'Count'. The king granted this request 'as a funerary offering'. The elder Djau was elevated in status posthumously for his family's benefit and for his own other-worldly well-being, a procedure that has parallels in other societies. Quite different texts show that the

Egyptians, like most of humanity, were nonetheless aware that 'no one has returned from there' to say whether it is worth taking it with you, whether 'it' be wealth or a title.

¹ Ahmed M. Moussa and Hartwig Altenmüller, *Das Grab des Nianchchnum und Chnumhotep* (Mainz 1977).

² *Rank and title in the Old Kingdom* (Chicago 1960).

Sources for figures: Moussa and Altenmüller, Nianchchnum (see n. 1) fig. 7; courtesy of the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo. T. G. H. James and M. R. Apton, *The mastaba of Khentika called Ikhekhi* (London 1953) pl. xi; courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.

David Elliott at MOMA

JANE JAKEMAN

THE present exhibition, 'Absolut Vision, New British Painting in the 1990s', sponsored by the producers of Absolut Vodka, is David Elliott's last gift to Oxford as Director of the Museum of Modern Art. After twenty years at MOMA he is leaving to become head of the Moderna Museet in Stockholm, where the collection will be rehoused in a specially designed new building. However splendid its architecture and collections, the Moderna Museet will be following where MOMA has led, as a museum that comprehends and serves all sections of the society in which its art exists. This is a vision which Oxford owes to David Elliott, whose personal modesty makes his achievement all the greater. (Some acknowledgement has recently come his way in being short-listed for the notable Goodman Garrett award for encouraging business sponsorship of the arts.)

As far as the University section of Oxford society is concerned, he has not only performed the formal functions that bridge the space between contemporary art and traditional scholarship, such as his Visitorship of the Ashmolean, his supervision of theses on modern art, and the ever-open door that MOMA provides for student experimentation, but he has performed a far wider service in opening up Oxford's somewhat circumscribed academic vision to the wider world, with his examinations of cultures outside the accepted modern canon. Oxford was thus privileged between 1977 and 1984 to be the host for some internationally renowned key exhibitions such as those on Lissitsky, Rodchenko, and Mayakovsky, a plotting of Soviet modernism which steadily continued with shows of art from the GDR and of Stalinist painting to build our knowledge and response to Eastern-bloc culture; shows relating to South Africa and Latin America have explored an extraordinary range of art.

Elliott has always looked to wider horizons, but, as befits a Museum with a rigorous scholarly element amongst its public, has consistently given us a vision of art as an intellectual and social phenomenon. Yet the pleasures of direct response have also always been valued at MOMA. Such successful ventures as the half-term workshops and weekend trails for children, the courses for sixth-formers and the utterly unpatronising work the Museum has quietly carried out for students with learning disabilities testify to the ways in which MOMA has extended the meaning of that po-faced term, 'art appreciation'.

What of this current show, 'Absolut Vision'? Elliott has selected works by nineteen British artists under the age of forty, asking the question of how they differ from the traditional mainstream. This new generation cannot help but see the prime visual reality as that of the fast-moving and electronic world that surrounds them continually and which may have taken over from painting as the most real expression of feeling. 'Sincerity itself can be a form of blindness' is one of a number of propositions advanced here, though some traditionally beautiful elements advance alongside electronic dazzle: the luscious dewy curves of Alan Miller's 'Blue Painting,' with its reminiscence of the vision through the microscope, or the glittering beaded patterns of Chris Ofili's African-derived imagery. Richard Patterson's 'Motorcrossover II' shows shiny colour undulating in the strange mutations produced when glistening synthetics are seen through a heat-haze by an electronic eye, a particular sensuality for our modern vision.

But sometimes certain limiting and irritatingly immutable qualities of painting itself become apparent: Damien Hirst's spectacular 'spin painting', 'Beautiful Mad Crazy Spinning Psycho', seems merely dull precisely because it does not spin as electronic or mechanical imagery can be bidden to do. It *does* nothing: it merely *is*, and the exhibition, in spite of some occasional kicking silliness involving lumps of elephant dung, asks such serious questions as whether simply 'being' is any longer enough for art.

'Absolut Vision' owes more to Elliott than the cerebral pleasures of its questioning. The hang in the Piper gallery reveals a brilliant eye that has created, by its arrangement of great plain canvases, an intelligent vibrating space in which it is an extraordinary delight merely to walk up and down, and this experience we do not owe to any individual work of art but to an overall ability to see how the paintings relate to one another and to empty space, to a directorial vision in which the Moderna Museet will rejoice.

David Elliott has softened academic Oxford up for that alarming concept, 'modern art', and we are the more capable of welcoming his successor. The support of a community which, almost in spite of itself, has got excited about contemporary culture will undoubtedly be forthcoming.