

SAVING HISTORY

The Conservation of Painted Coffin Fragments from Abydos

BY MOLLY GLEESON

*a*rchaeologists from the Penn Museum are currently searching for tombs related to the Middle Kingdom community at South Abydos. In the Museum's collection are artifacts of this same time period but from North Abydos. One of these is a fragmentary coffin—beautifully decorated—that is a good example of an elite funerary object dating to the same era as the funerary complex of Senwosret III. Along with other conservation projects underway in the Museum's *In the Artifact Lab* Gallery, we are working on seven fragments of this Middle Kingdom painted wooden coffin.

John Garstang, supported by the Museum through the Egypt Exploration Fund, excavated these fragments in 1901 from the North Cemetery of Abydos, Cemetery E, Tomb E234. He mentioned these coffin fragments in his 1901 publication and included a hand-colored drawing. Garstang and others were struck by the remarkable quality of the painting, as illustrated in the finely rendered depiction of objects: collars, a mirror, and other elements that compose the object frieze.

There are no records indicating that these coffin fragments were ever exhibited, likely due to their fragile condition. Although the wood is severely insect-damaged by

termites, many of the delicate painted details are preserved. The paint is actively flaking, however, and has significant areas of loss revealing the *gesso* preparatory layer, which is powdery and missing in many areas as well. Compared to the hand-colored drawing in Garstang's publication, we can assume that much of the damage occurred prior to excavation. Certainly the insect damage occurred in the burial environment, and it appears that most of the damage to the painted surface pre-dates excavation. The red fill/adhesive material visible on the fragments is evidence of a previous treatment likely carried out soon after excavation and

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prior to acquisition by the Museum.

The conservation of these coffin fragments began with a careful study of their materials and current condition. By examining the boards closely under a microscope, and by using imaging techniques such as infrared reflectography and ultraviolet fluorescence photography, and analytical tools, including a portable x-ray fluorescence analyzer (pXRF), it is possible to better understand their manufacture and treatment history. For instance, the painted decoration on these boards appears to be in white and/or yellow, red, black, and green. However, upon closer inspection, it is evident that some of the details that appear to be black were originally green and/or blue, and the color has altered over time. It

TOP: Garstang's hand-colored drawing from 1901 appears on the left. On the right is a 2013 photograph of the coffin fragments. BOTTOM: The red fill material on this fragment is outlined in blue.

is also difficult to distinguish between white and yellow. Imaging and analytical techniques may help characterize these pigments.

After the boards have been studied, treatment will commence. Conservation will involve surface cleaning, removal of old restoration materials, consolidation of the paint and *gesso*, and stabilization of the wood substrate. Once treatment is complete, the coffin boards will be exhibited for the first time in the Museum's history. In the meantime, these boards will be on view as they undergo conservation treatment *In the Artifact Lab*. ●

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