CHAPTER EIGHT

Apprenticeship and Figured Ostraca from the Ancient Egyptian Village of Deir el-Medina

KATHLYN M. COONEY

A figured ostracon is a limestone flake or potsherd that bears a drawing or design on its surface, rather than, or in addition to, a text. Flakes of limestone and pieces of pottery were plentiful in ancient Thebes and readily available for sketching. Ostraca, a disposable medium, can be considered as remnants of learning by draftsmen from ancient Egypt. This chapter examines this statement considering both the cognitive process involved in art creation (normative images, repetition, peripheral practice) and the context for this learning (the community of workmen with its shared and negotiated repertoire of skills, images, and style). Learning is seen here as both internal and external, and collections of figured ostraca are an excellent case study for skill acquisition in ancient Egypt. The learning that took place in a village like Medina during the later New Kingdom (1315–1081 BCE), and probably in other ancient Egyptian craftsmen’s workshops, was not abstract but contextualized because the activity of the group was inherently useful to them, given that members received salaries from the state if they gained access to the formal workshop structure. Figured ostraca are the remnants of a practice of enculturation: the following case study includes poor-quality beginning-student
hands, medium-level apprentice hands, and high-level master hands, indicating that learning through practice on a disposable medium was occurring at all skill levels in the community, not just among its peripheral members. Figured ostraca provide evidence for learning and apprenticeship as an informal and ongoing acquisition (Rogers 2003) within a “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991) in which people of all skill levels participated. Figured ostraca are remnants of cognitive skill building by an entire community, a result of constant input by participants with a variety of skill levels and goals.

A figured ostraca could be created by a skilled or novice hand and could have one or more colors of ink. The drawing could be carved in relief (Brunner-Traut 1956, no. 31, O. Berlin 21449), but more often the ink lines would be left untouched. Sometimes, the ostraca could represent a copy of formal art on a temple wall, as seen in the Lady of Pun example in Berlin (Brunner-Traut 1956, O. Berlin 21442). Much more rarely, the sketch was an original work, such as the evocative image of the stonemason holding a chisel in the Fitzwilliam Museum (Brunner-Traut 1979, EGA 4324-1943) or the expressive woman crouching to blow air into her fire (Brunner-Traut 1956, no. 62, O. Leipzig 1894). Humans were the most commonly depicted subjects in these sketches, but animals are by no means unusual. Artisans even created a fantastical series of figured ostraca representing animals in human dress and behavior (Brunner-Traut 1979, 11–18; Peck and Ross 1978, 49–50). For the most part, these objects were informal; that is, they were unfinished in the traditional ancient Egyptian sense. The drawn figures are usually incomplete in outline and color, and they generally lack textual captions. These ostraca were easily discarded, as many of them were found in refuse dumps.

Egyptological scholarship usually investigates these informal sketches as cultural objects that allow a glimpse into the daily life of the ancient Egyptians (Brunner-Traut 1956, 1979; Keimer 1941; Minault-Gout 2002; Page 1983; Peck and Ross 1978; Peterson 1974; Pomerantszeva 1992), or it focuses on functional issues of visual genre (Borchardt 1910; Davies 1917; Shäfer 1916) or trial sketching and formal teaching (Brunner-Traut 1956; Peck and Ross 1978; Peterson 1974), typically within the traditional scholarly specializations of Deir el-Medina or Valley of the Kings studies (Bierbrier 1982; Bruyère and Nagel 1922–1953; Cerný 1973; Valbelle 1985).

Most Egyptological catalogs compiling Egyptian figured ostraca focus on unusual, masterful, or especially detailed examples (Andreu 2002; Minault-Gout 2002; Peck and Ross 1978), but to understand figured ostraca from the perspective of cognitive formations, we have to look at characteristics shared by the entire oeuvre.
The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) owns a collection of figured ostraca that display characteristics shared by most figured ostraca in museum collections around the world: repetition of theme and serialization of genre with occasional bursts of creativity; they thus provide an excellent case study for normative practices. I argue that sketching on ostraca was part of an informal system of ongoing cultural and artistic practice by succeeding generations of artisans based on common images and styles that enabled increased proficiency in proportion, color use, and dexterity, as well as creating an avenue for creativity and innovation. The figured ostraca allowed a complex network of knowledge transference, not only linearly, perhaps within master–student apprenticeship systems, but also diffusely among intermediate and skilled members of the artisanal community.

The LACMA Figured Ostraca

The LACMA owns nine New Kingdom figured ostraca, all but two previously unpublished. In 1980, LACMA received hundreds of ancient Egyptian artefacts and texts from the private collection of George Michaelides (Clackson 1994; Dawson et al. 1995), antiquities assembled in Cairo in the twentieth century.² None of the LACMA ostraca has a recorded findspot, a disappointing fact because even approximate provenance within the Western Theban context could have provided useful information.² Bengt Julius Peterson (1974) initiated groundbreaking work that examined published and provenanced Ramesside figured ostraca, comparing their subject matter to their findspot. He found more variety in the motifs and subject matter in the village of Deir el-Medina, where the community lived, compared to the Valley of the Kings, where the artisans worked and where ostraca subjects were generally connected to the visual motifs and iconography of the royal tombs—in other words, Valley of the Kings ostraca preserve countless representations of the king in various actions (Daressy 1901). Peterson (1974) also noted higher skill levels in the figured ostraca in the Valley of the Kings—as would be expected because the worksite employed draftsmen who were capable of working with quality precision and were thus either formally a part of the work team or apprenticed to it in an intermediate capacity (Janssen and Janssen 1990). Lower-quality draftsmanship is usually seen in the figured ostraca from the village, where individuals informally and peripherally connected to the workshop lived.

The first LACMA figured ostracon (figure 8.1, M. 80.199.47) shows one of the most popular sketch subjects from Western Thebes: the Egyptian
king, here standing and drawn in black ink. The king faces right, with his arm outstretched, probably meant to hold a weapon or some other ritual object now lost. He wears a blue crown, collar, and short kilt. The head is somewhat oversized in proportion to the body, and the facial profile is poorly formed, with a large nose, uneven eye, and nondescript mouth, suggesting a draftsman in training unable to form strong, even lines of various thicknesses.
The second ostracon (figure 8.2, M. 80.199.48) is inscribed with images of the king on both sides in both red and black ink. Both sketches exhibit high-quality, practiced and steady lines of varying thickness. It is unclear if the same hand was responsible for both sides. The recto depicts a king in black ink, facing right, wearing a solar double-plumed head-dress with a sun disk and ram's horns. The verso depicts another king's profile facing right, this one drawn in multiple colors. This sketch includes a detailed blue crown surmounted by double ma'at feathers, ram's horns, and a sun disk with uraei. The blue crown includes details of roundels in thin black ink lines throughout, accentuating the skill of the draftsmen, and the ma'at feathers are internally detailed with thin-lined striations. The sun disks in the headgear are painted a darker shade of red compared to the skin of the king, which is painted a lighter pink color. This

draftsman was adept in not only the formation of line but also the application of various color hues.

The third figured ostracon from LACMA (figure 8.3, M. 80.199.50) depicts a monkey climbing a palm tree, drawn in a fluid fashion in red and black ink. The subject of a monkey climbing a palm is quite popular in Ramesside Period Western Thebes (Andreu 2002, 102, no. 39; Minault-Gout 2002, 105–109; Peterson 1974, 33, 44). The monkey on this

![Figure 8.4](image-url)

ostracon faces left, with one hand outstretched to the fruit in the tree while the other hand holds the trunk. The image is drawn in a reasonably smooth and practiced hand, even though the sketch is abbreviated and schematic, probably indicating that it was done quickly, perhaps by an intermediate-level draftsman. Only the basic lines of the monkey's head and body have been included; this abridged and stylized sketch bears little detail. There is only some internal stippling in thick red and black dabs in the body of the monkey. The tail extends behind, filled with reddish brown ochre. The lines of the palm tree have been quickly drawn, with thick-lined and firm diagonal slashes in red and black along trunk.

The fourth LACMA figured ostracon (figure 8.4, M. 80.199.184) represents a scene of piety before a god: a man stands with arms upraised in worship of a tree. The ostracon is decorated on one side only, and much of the depiction is now worn away. The tree probably represents the tree goddess, a common image of veneration from the Theban area in Ramesside times. In addition to black and red paint, there are traces of yellow and expensive green pigments, suggesting that the ostracon may have served a votive purpose and thus deserved further color embellishment. The artisan seems of average skill level. The application of line is not very firm, and the body of the man is unmodeled and stiff. There is little detail; quickly sketched, thick lines were drawn on the man's kilt and within the trunk of the tree.

The fifth ostracon (figure 8.5, M. 80.202.28) depicts a popular subject: the king, in this case striding toward the right, holding a staff. The body is sketched in a black line and filled with reddish brown paint. There are traces of a white paint wash over the red ochre on the kilt. The pottery ostracon is broken just above king's forehead, but the remainder of the crown is filled with blue paint, a rare and expensive pigment on figured ostraca, again perhaps suggesting a votive purpose, perhaps even as the deified Amenhotep I (for this cult, see Cerný 1927). The draftsman has added a uraeus on the forehead and streamers extending from the back of crown in black ink. The draftsman's line application is firm but lacks some fluidity. There is no internal detail sketching in the crown or kilt.

The sixth figured ostracon in this case study is a marl potsherd with many sketches on both the recto and verso, all drawn in an unpracticed hand (figure 8.6, M. 80.202.29). On the recto is a human profile wearing a short wig, facing left with drafting guidelines preserved at the top of the head and at the mouth level. The guidelines and the insecure, choppy quality of line indicate a beginning-level student draftsman. Next to this head are two more indistinct and roughly drawn sketches: a rectangle above and a trapezoidal shape to the bottom right. The verso (not shown) bears more sketches, which are practically illegible as they are not in
same orientation and overlap one another. This ostracon may be a remnant of skill acquisition in early stages.

The seventh ostracon (figure 8.7, M. 80.203.195) is inscribed with black ink on two sides. On one side are two rudimentary columns of hieroglyphs, presumably private names, written in what seems to be an unpracticed hand. On the other side is a sketch of a nonroyal facial profile. This example is drawn looking left, wearing a fillet and a shoulder-length wig. The line is strong and fluid, although there is no variation of line thickness and the eye is ill-formed. A poorly drawn sketch fills the area to the left of this profile—perhaps a fisted human hand—suggesting at least two draftsmen’s hands on one side of this ostracon.

The eighth LACMA ostracon (figure 8.8, M. 80.203.202) depicts two kings’ profiles in red and black ink. The left profile shows a king wearing a detailed Nubian wig and uraeus. The right profile depicts a king wearing the blue war crown and uraeus. Both royal profiles have a red under-sketch with a black ink line, and both were sketched with the same practiced, firm, fluid line with small-scale internal details in varying
thickness. On the other side of this ostracon is a letter written in hieratic Late Egyptian by a scribe named Ipuy to another scribe, concerning farmland. Deities of Khar (Syria-Palestine) are called upon. Also mentioned is an upcoming festival for the goddess Antit (Anath) of Gaza (Goedicke and Wente 1962, 24, no. 85, plate 93; Grdseloff 1942, 35–37, plates 7 and 8; Wente 1990, 127). It is likely that the letter was inscribed first and, when it arrived at its destination (probably Deir el-Medina), a sketch was added to the verso. The text and image have almost nothing to do with one another; the letter may have been received by a scribe, whose high-quality hand decorated the other side.
FIGURE 8.7. Ostracon M. 80.203.195. a. A human profile looking left and other sketch. b. Practice hieroglyphs. Date: probably New Kingdom, Nineteenth or Twentieth Dynasty (1315–1081 BCE). Material: limestone. Dimensions: 13 × 14.5 cm. Provenance: unknown but probably Western Thebes, Upper Egypt; gift of Carl W. Thomas. Photographs of the ostracon with probable provenance of Western Thebes were published before the purchase by Michaelides (Keimer 1941, plate 9, fig. 7). For some images of human profiles, see O. DeM 2505–2550 (Vandier d’Abbadie and Gasse 1936–1986, 104–112, plates 66–68). Many examples, including O. Cairo 25024, O. Cairo 25025 (Daressy 1901, 6, plate 5), and O. Cairo 25160 (Daressy 1901, 31, plate 30), show men wearing a similar wig and similar band around the forehead. Source: LACMA.

The last and ninth ostracon (figure 8.9, M. 80.203.209) in this case study is not a figured ostracon per se but has been included to show evidence of learning. One side depicts multiple hieratic bird signs in black ink as if the maker were practicing his penmanship. These bird hieroglyphs represent the ur or "great" bird (G 37 in the Gardiner sign list;

![Figure 8.9](image)

**Figure 8.9.** Ostracon M. 80.203.209 showing practice ur bird hieroglyphs. Date: New Kingdom, Eighteenth to Twentieth Dynasty (1504–1081 BCE). Material: limestone. Dimensions: this large ostracon is broken into three pieces, a, 19×28 cm; b, 10.8×18.5 cm; and c, 14×17 cm. Provenance: unknown but probably Western Thebes; gift of Carl W. Thomas, 1980. For an example in which a less accomplished draftsman practiced the nb basket hieroglyph, see O. Berlin 23972 (Brunner-Traut 1956, 130, plate 44). Source: LACMA.
Gardiner 1957), and the line quality is adequate. The repeated sketching of hieroglyphic signs and motifs was not uncommon (Peterson 1974, 24, 48). The recto of this large ostraca preserves a text of 10 lines from a piece of wisdom literature certainly written in a different hand. It is likely that a large ostraca was chosen for the inscription of the wisdom text, which was applied first. A second, less skilled individual then used the verso to practice handwriting.

All of these LACMA examples share characteristics with New Kingdom figured ostraca from Western Thebes. All the limestone chips or potsherds have an irregular, unfinished shape, and there was no attempt at formal layout or symmetry in the image inscribed on its surface. The drawings are incomplete, partly owing to the nature of the drawing medium and partly because they were meant as informal sketches. These objects are typically the end results of fast drawing with no erasures or plaster corrections. If mistakes were made, lines were simply redrawn over previous marks. Figured ostraca rarely have text accompanying the drawings. Unlike formal Egyptian artistic depictions on tomb and temple walls, these sketches often remain unlabeled and therefore according to the prescribed artistic standards of educated ancient Egyptians, unidentified, informal, and without any explicit purpose—apotropaic, votive, or otherwise.

Most of the LACMA figured ostraca depict generalized subject matter devoid of context, another pattern in keeping with the majority of New Kingdom figured ostraca in collections around the world (Peterson 1974). There are several dominant and constantly repeated motifs, such as king’s figures and profiles, isolated human images, and sketches of various animals. In fact, the LACMA corpus is characterized chiefly by its homogeneous and commonplace subject matter. Ostraca with repetitive and standardized subjects are often overlooked in the Egyptological literature, in favor of either those rare pieces that depict more narrative visual genres (providing context and thus perhaps more cultural information) or those that represent the hand of a true master. The LACMA ostraca reveal a variety of abilities among those engaged in the sketching. Some figures are practically unrecognizable (figure 8.6); others are masterfully rendered in evocative detail (figures 8.2 and 8.8). Most are adequate and of intermediate skill level (figures 8.1, 8.3–8.5, 8.7, and 8.9). Drawing on limestone flakes was not restricted to the very accomplished, nor was it considered appropriate only for the unskilled.

The vast majority of figured ostraca are commonplace images presented without context—isolated and incomplete depictions of an animal, a human profile, or a standing king, just as we see in the LACMA collection. Although such generalized images make up the bulk of figured ostraca collections, there is little discussion of this homogeneity in subject
matter in the Egyptological literature. The most popular subject in the LACMA collection, as with all figured ostraca, is the image of the king (figures 8.1, 8.2, 8.5, and 8.8). In two other LACMA ostraca, a nonroyal man's face is represented in profile (figures 8.6 and 8.7), another very common depiction in New Kingdom sketches. In another piece, a monkey is depicted climbing a palm tree (figure 8.3), again a popular subject in Deir el-Medina ostraca sketching. Most figured ostraca represent the same repertoire of abbreviated humans and animal figures without much, if any, text or context, and they remain without any specific function.

How should we explain the existence of sketches like these? Why did artisans take the time to produce this mass of sketched material, and why was there such a limited range of subject matter? Was it preparatory work? Do these images represent pattern books or collections of standard iconography? Are they the remnants of schooling in remedial and advanced draftsmanship? Are these figured ostraca copies of formal art in tombs and temples? Or are they simply sketches that were made out of boredom, functioning only for the moments that they were works in progress? If the LACMA ostraca, and the thousands of others like them, represent "practice" sketches whose usefulness expired once the sketch was complete, why would the artisans of Deir el-Medina have needed this "practice" when they were constantly active painting tomb walls? The LACMA provides an excellent collection through which the functionality of sketching can be reviewed and challenged.

Egyptologists have assigned a number of different functions to figured ostraca, as trial sketches, pattern books, practice media, or school exercises, but none of them can fully account for the key characteristics of these sketches—namely, the repetitive and homogenized subject matter in combination with a variety of skill levels.

**Trial Sketches**

Many Egyptologists have suggested that figured ostraca acted as preparatory sketches for the formal paintings drawn on the walls of royal and private tombs (Borchardt 1910; Maspero 1912, 168–169). According to this thinking, the ancient Egyptian artisan sketched a trial drawing on a potsherd or piece of limestone that he could then use as a guide when applying paint to a formal surface, such as a plastered tomb wall or stela. Emma Brunner-Traut (1956, 6) has noted one obvious example: a sketched image on an ostracon that corresponds with the formal scene in a tomb. This ostracon probably dates to the 18th Dynasty and may very well represent some kind of trial piece used to guide the team of tomb artisans responsible for layout and drawing. William C. Hayes (1942, 5) also notes
A number of possible instances of trial sketches, claiming that most ostraca acted as "preliminary studies of figures, scenes, or decorative elements which were, or were to have been, painted on the walls of the tomb—that is, drawings made with a definite purpose in view." However, these few examples for trial sketching come from the 18th Dynasty, a time to which few figured ostraca can be dated and just before the explosion of figured ostraca production in the Ramesside period.

Some Ramesside ostraca do provide the basic layout for the painting on a coffin, as seen in an unpublished ostracon in Turin, which depicts a Ramesside coffin, planned out in multidimensional form with text bands. There are also some 19th and 20th Dynasty ostraca with geometric designs that correspond to the ceiling decoration of private tombs (Peterson 1974, 52, 57–58, 64OK) or others representing false doors or columns (Vandier d'Abbadie and Gasse 1936–1986, O. IFAO 2701, 2702, plate 91). Some ostraca from the Valley of the Kings, found near the tomb of Ramses VII, represent scenes similar to what one would see in a royal tomb, although they are "not paralleled among the known netherworld books" (Demarée 2003: 25). Brunner-Traut (1956, 64–65) identifies a number of Ramesside examples depicting nude adolescent females and mothers with children, which she believes acted as trial sketches for domestic wall paintings, but this is a contested interpretation (Peterson 1974).

There are thus occasional correlations between informal sketches on figured ostraca and formal, functional art, but we should question the frequent assumption that such drawings were preparatory sketches or copies of existing designs. The notion of trial sketching alone cannot account for the creation of so many figured ostraca. In fact, there are very few Ramesside figured ostraca that lay out scenes found on a tomb wall, coffin, or sarcophagus, even though we know that Deir el-Medina craftsmen decorated dozens of royal and private tombs and produced hundreds of private coffins during 19th and 20th (Cooney 2007). If artisans used figured ostraca primarily as preparatory sketches, one might expect to see more images of the Four Sons of Horus, the Tree goddess, the winged figure of Nut, or underworld genies from Book of the Dead scenes. Instead, it is clear that most figured ostraca do not have specific, identifiable sources but rather, as the LACMA examples show, are derived from a generalized set of iconographical images.

**Pattern Books**

Another suggested function is that sketches were akin to pattern books, which allowed artisans to collect imagery they wished to maintain in their collective consciousness. Heinrich Schäfer and Norman de Garis
Davies were the first to reject the notion that figured ostraca were used chiefly for preparatory layout, instead interpreting these sketches as a disposable medium for pure sketching. The very fact that West Theban ostraca were usually found in ancient refuse dumps suggested to them that their use was usually short-lived. Davies believes the drawings were a creative outlet for times of boredom and idleness and suggested the rather Marxian interpretation that these drawings gave a discontented population a narrow avenue for the venting of emotions of social disgust and professional dissatisfaction (1917, 236–237). Schäfer, on the other hand, saw very little overlap in specific content between the royal tomb walls, which these draftsmen painted, and ostraca images from the Valley of the Kings. To him, figured ostraca are the end result of artisans copying and collecting existing formal art, such as the image of the Punt queen from the funerary temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el Bahari found on an ostracon in the village of Deir el-Medina (1916, 46). Schäfer argued that figured ostraca are collections of artistic images and thus representative of years of “artistic breeding” among the Deir el-Medina draftsmen (“jahrtausendlange künstlerische Zucht eines ganzen Volkes,” 50–51).

In one sense, Schäfer’s understanding of figured ostraca might fit with the art historical notion of a “pattern book” or “model book” (Alexander 1992; Buchthal 1979; Evans 1969; Scheller 1963)—a collection of the most common images and iconography used by artisans as guides and inspiration in their daily work. However, only a tiny minority of figured ostraca can be proven to be copies of formal art. According to Peterson’s (1974) comprehensive survey, Western Theban figured ostraca subjects are usually not derived from traditional scenes and images from temples or tombs but rather are “details” or abstract likenesses that can be only loosely associated with such formal art. Peterson states that these objects are free from the usual iconographical traditions (“mehr oder weniger frei von den üblichen ikonographischen Traditionen,” 18).

This does not mean that there is no correspondence between formal and informal art—just that the functional link is difficult to identify. For example, there is a loose correlation in subject matter between ostraca from the Valley of the Kings and the images from the royal tombs themselves, evident in the countless figured ostraca depicting royal figures. Peterson consequently categorizes many figured ostraca as “zielbewusster Übungen” (1974, 23). His notion of “practice with a purpose” removes the necessity of dealing with figured ostraca as preparatory sketches, looking instead to a more abstract function. To Peterson, the commonality of images in figured ostraca represents a kind of canonical practice material. This would explain the recurrence of the same subjects—the same im-
ages of kings, human profiles, monkeys climbing trees, and deities that we see in the LACMA collection. Yet all of this raises another question that Peterson does not address: Why did these artisans need so much practice?

**Sketching for Practice**

Davies was the first to point out that the explosion of figured ostraca creation coincided with the disappearance of the grid as a means of creating art and the appearance of freehand drawings during the Ramesside Period, even in the most formal settings (Davies 1917, 237). Davies recognized a correlation between the increasing number of figured ostraca and the methodological changes in art production. However, he did not explain the increase in figured ostraca and sketching activity through the loss of the grid; rather, he argued that artisans increasingly turned to sketching because of changes in subject matter found in Ramesside private tombs, most especially owing to the loss of expressive scenes of daily life that were so common in the 18th Dynasty: “The draughtsman, therefore, suddenly withheld from professional use of much of his hardly-won capacities, naturally gave them exercise in idler moments and in satirical compositions” (237). Not only does this “creative outlet” explanation betray Davies’s lack of respect for Ramesside tomb scenes in comparison to 18th Dynasty examples, but also it misses a key point: without the grid, artisans may have needed a way to practice drawing a figure to scale and proportion without any guidelines. In the 18th Dynasty, the use of grid squares provided a means of equalizing skills among craftsmen of different capabilities and perhaps even stylistic sensibilities. When the use of grids declined, informal sketching may have become more important. The repeated sketching of humans, gods, and animals may have fulfilled a need for practicing freehand proportional and stylistic sensibilities—practice now needed by the entire artisanal population, skilled and unskilled alike.

But, if figured ostraca filled this important function, then why do we not also have masses of figured ostraca from other sites beyond Western Thebes? The limestone chip may be part of the answer; it was a plentiful waste product of the work in the Valley of the Kings in particular, and it seems to have become the medium for sketching in Western Thebes in the Ramesside period. Other time periods and other places would have used other media connected to their own work and contexts, including potsherds and reusable writing boards (Peck and Ross 1978). The 18th Dynasty site of Tell el Amarna in particular has preserved a number of figured ostraca mostly on potsherds, although nowhere near the numbers
of Ramesside Western Theban examples, depicting the expected royal subject matter (Frankfort and Pendlebury 1933, 16-31, 58, 91, plate 35; Peet and Woolley 1923, 14-15, 27-28, 66, 72, 74, plates 10.6, 14.3, 23.2; Pendlebury 1951, 64-74, 88, plates 70.5, 74.2). The disappearance of the grid may explain a need for more "practice" by draftsmen, but given the fact that it was already in decline in the reign of Amenhotep II in Dynasty 18, it does not neatly explain the need for artisanal sketching overall.

**Sketches as School Exercises**

Many scholars believe that the large number of ostraca represents the product of school exercises (Brunner-Traut 1956, 8; Brunner-Traut 1979, 7; Keller 1991; Peck and Ross 1978, 31; Peterson 1974, 53), arguing that the limited repertoire of representations may owe its origins to some kind of formal training system in which groups of boys were given similar subjects on which to work.

Many of the LACMA ostraca could indeed have been school exercises. The subject matter in all examples is generalized and part of the same popular series of motifs. More important, the skill level of many of the LACMA examples represents medium- to low-quality draftsmanship (figures 8.1, 8.3-8.7, and 8.9). However, we are treading on a slippery slope when we equate inferior quality with evidence for training. When is skill level poor enough for the modern scholar to categorize an ostraca as a formal school exercise? And why did the skilled draftsmen (e.g., those responsible for figures 8.2 and 8.8) create figured ostraca with the same bland subject matter, despite their more practiced hands? It might be possible to conclude that higher-quality ostraca represent the model examples that the students were meant to copy (Peck and Ross 1978, 27), as some Egyptologists assume is the case in the famous Berlin ostraca pair (figure 8.10) that depicts, in one ostraca, a high-quality seated king and, in the other, a different copy read by some as lesser quality and thus supposedly drawn by a student (Brunner-Traut 1956, 44-47, cat. nos. 28, 29, plate 12; Janssen and Janssen 1990, 88). However, the difference between these two pieces may not be as much qualitative as it is reflective of different stylistic sensibilities. These pieces are not necessarily the products of formal artistic training, at least not in a linear student–master relationship.

There are many theoretical problems with the evocation of schools, or linear master–pupil relationships, in this sketched material. Equating the quality of these informal sketches with a formal function is fraught with inconsistencies and assumptions. There are insufficient examples of matching depictions of varying quality to sustain the conclusion that so many figured ostraca find their origins in formal school activities based
on mimesis. In fact, a quality assessment of figured ostraca in collections around the world, and in the LACMA case study, shows a very wide continuum of skill levels. Given the lack of evidence for formal artistic education in Deir el-Medina based on mimetic activity between teacher and pupil, it is more likely that most craft instruction did not happen in a formal setting but, rather, informally, continuously (Rogers 2003), and even unconsciously at the work site and in the craftsmen’s village, among small groups of artisans and apprentices who networked diffusely, not linearly. When we see sketching as an informal and organic product of the entire artisanal community, we are approaching a fuller understanding of mechanisms of learning, capturing, and transferring visual imagery.

**Practice, Proportion, and Play as Skill Equalization**

In the Valley of the Kings, the Deir el-Medina craftsmen probably spent long stretches of time waiting for the roster to be taken, for the supplies and rations to arrive, or for the heavy labor crews to finish certain tasks. Much of this time must have been spent creating the multitude of figured ostraca now found in museum collections around the world today. Most such sketches are not copies of older art, nor are they trial pieces or formal school exercises. The selection of motifs do not represent clear common denominators that appear in most forms of formal art; actually,
some of the most commonly sketched elements are not seen in formal images at all. For example, there are very few representations of monkeys and other animals in naturalistic behavior in formal funerary or temple art, but ostraca from Western Thebes preserve hundreds of such examples. These artisans used a differentiated and homogenized set of iconography for informal sketching. The LACMA figured ostraca are examples of just such visual material, and it is the limited generality that makes such images the perfect subject matter for Deir el-Medina artisans and their apprentices, who are learning the craft of their fathers, uncles, and cousins. As for the specific details within the homogenized set of representations, we must assume some choice at least within the details for the artisan, and we might also conclude the lack of a copied model in most cases.

Limiting sketching to certain subjects could be compared to the cognitive socialization of Western children when they practice drawing (not to suggest that Egyptian art is childlike in quality or sophistication). Children are encouraged to stay within an understood repertoire of subjects—to draw boxlike houses, puffy clouds, stick figures, and angular cars. They are also encouraged to practice a style of representation that is recognizable—one that avoids perspective and excessive, unreadable creativity—by constantly repeating and practicing a generalized set of known images (Piaget 1962).

Explanations for repetitive practice are as dependent on basic human psychology as they are on ancient Egyptian social and aesthetic structures. If one looks at the work of cognitive scientists, neurologists, biologists, and anthropologists (Callois 2001; Csikszentmihalyi and Bennet 1971; Dissanayake 1988; Gardner 1973; Grimes 1995, 43–44; Harth 1999; Stokes 1972) as it pertains to sketching and art production, it is documented that the repetition of common and known imagery helps the brain to process form and style. Cognitive scientist Erich Harth (1999) argues that neural patterns of serialization and grouping reinforce images into a kind of internal neural sketchpad. He also notes that “every act of invention or creation involves trial patterns in the head that are being judged for their adequacy and modified until they appear satisfactory” (104). Thus, the creation of figured ostraca with serialized and common subject matter was an external communitywide method of processing images, allowing common denominators of iconography to be chosen among an entire community of Egyptian artisans and those learning their craft.

Psychological and biological imperatives for informal artistic production and sketching can be accounted for in anthropological theories of adult “play behavior”—spontaneous practice within the entire community that is nonetheless controlled by cultural norms and expectations of
style and form. Informal art production is a materially unproductive, but cognitively productive, play activity, supporting learned behaviors and lessening tension during times of boredom or stress (Dissanayake 1988, 65–66; Stokes 1972). Informal artistic production, such as sketching, has been called “a kind of adult play behavior” (Dissanayake 1988, 75) because “repetition, recurrence, and restoration of order” are part of a spontaneous and informal cultural activity that all humans participate in to process and serialize the world around them and the activities that take place in it (77). Some neurologists have concluded that sketching can be called a “goal directed form of play” (Gardner 1973, 166), mirroring Egyptologist Peterson's notion of “practice with purpose.” Ancient Egyptian artisanal communities were constantly practicing and playing with images, form, and repetition in order to process the world around them. Playing with form and line is a participatory, informal, nonstructured learning process that allows practitioners to create memory structures and determine how images are perceived, processed, stored, retrieved, changed, and discarded.

Play among humans develops boundaries and norms (Gosso et al. 2005); it is practiced through repetition of acts punctuated by spells of free experimentation (Dissanayake 1988, 74–91). Among the draftsmen of Deir el-Medina, much of the sketching on ostraca allowed an informal and spontaneous conversation involving subjects belonging to visual standards, removing images that were irregular, exaggerated, or in any way out of bounds, thereby establishing what was accepted as a visual norm. The majority of sketching at Deir el-Medina followed visual standards in style, subject matter, and methodology. However, figured ostraca are nonetheless punctuated with unexpected, new, and fresh examples that do not follow the accepted standards of proportion, form, dimension, perspective, or subject matter. Informal sketching allowed the craftsmen of Deir el-Medina not only the opportunity to learn and practice their accepted norms but also the chance to risk and test new artistic forms and combinations. It was one of the main methods by which style was maintained, but it was also the avenue through which styles were updated and modified—a psychological and neurological mechanism for taste change.

Skill Acquisition and the Community of Practice

Play and practice with the repetition of images helps us to understand cognitive internalization. But we also have to see learning as externalization, and here we recognize the figured ostraca as the bridge between play, practice, and work within a larger community. For the ancient
Egyptian draftsman, artistic knowledge was attained through practice, and this knowledge was created within a particular cultural context of accepted standards and norms (Bourdieu 1977). The serialization of a differentiated set of images indicates an ongoing communal agreement of subject matter, and thus that sketching activity happened within a communal structure, one that we could call a “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998). Not everyone living in Deir el-Medina, or within any other artisanal workshop setting in ancient Egypt, was a part of the community of practice; only those actively involved played a part: craftsmen with a formal role in workshop activity and their offspring whose goal was formal admittance to that workshop.

The community of practice in ancient Egypt was a flexible and adaptable teaching system that did not rely on linear master–pupil relationships. All those who belonged shared an interest in visual memory acquisition, equalization, style, socialization, standardization, and creativity. The members of this community of practice held different areas of influence—some were masters and thus full participants, some were capable draftsmen and thus active participants, and others were just learning and thus on the periphery of the system. Those who were part of the official work gang could use figured ostraca to teach, to explain a plan of action, to show their skill, and even to compete with other artisans, and thus maintain their position in the community; those on the periphery used sketching to develop and display specialized skill sets and knowledge, which were key to entrance into the workshop.

Sketching was peripheral to the real practice of funerary art production and provided a system of guidance and skill acquisition with less risk and intensity than painting a formal art object. The practice of sketching utilized the cognitive skills of the entire community—as a source of normative styles and themes and as a source of innovation. The homogeneity of subject matter indicates that the learning process of a craftsman was a social process and that knowledge was embedded in the practice of artistic creation, whether formal or informal. Figured ostraca are remnants of an informal dialogue of learning and accountability between practitioners, a dynamic negotiation of form and meaning that has been frozen in time because it was recorded on a limestone flake.

Acknowledgments

I thank a number of people at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art who made this work possible, especially Nancy Thomas, who kindly permitted me to publish these pieces; Renée Montgomery and Delfin Mappantay, who facilitated my work at the museum; and Peter Brenner, who kindly allowed me use of many of his photographs. I thank Nancy Thomas,
Violaine Chauvet, and Regina Schulz for reading and commenting on the first draft, and Neil Crawford for his input throughout the project. A shorter version of this research was presented at the American Research Center in Egypt’s annual meeting, April 17, 2004, in Tucson, Arizona, titled “Drawings Unseen and Rediscovered: New Kingdom Figured Ostraca in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.” Finally, I thank Kathleen Keller, who made helpful comments about the research in its initial stages. She will be missed.

Notes

1. Michaelides died in 1973, after which most of his collection was purchased by antiquities dealers, who then sold lots to individuals, other dealers, and various institutions, including the British Museum, Cambridge University Library, and the British Library. Because so many dealers were involved in the transactions after Michaelides’ death, it is unclear which individuals and institutions purchased ostraca and when they acquired them. LACMA was given approximately 30% of the Michaelides textual hieratic ostraca. All of the original hieratic Late Egyptian textual ostraca in the Michaelides collection have been published (Goedicke and Wente 1962), but the figured ostraca were not included in the volume. Two of the figured ostraca (LACMA M. 80.203.195 and LACMA M. 80.199.48) were published before they were purchased by Michaelides (Keimer 1941). Seven of the nine LACMA figured ostraca are published here for the first time. LACMA was also given a number of texts, including mummy tags and a selection of the Michaelides textual ostraca, made of both limestone and terracotta, written in hieratic Late Egyptian, Demotic, Greek, Coptic, and Arabic. In this lot are only nine figured ostraca. I have not been able to locate any other figured ostraca from the former Michaelides collection, although it is almost certain that examples exist that were sold between 1973 and 1980 to museums or to private collectors.

2. Despite the fact that these LACMA ostraca are unprovenanced, the type and cut of the limestone and the style of representation strongly suggest an origin in the Western Theban area of Upper Egypt and a date during the New Kingdom, most of them more specifically attributable to the Ramesside period (19th and 20th Dynasties, 1315–1081 BCE). The Ramesside period is the most prolific time for figured ostraca preservation, if not also production (Bruyère and Nagel 1922–1953). Thousands of Ramesside ostraca from Western Thebes found their way onto the art market around the turn of the 20th century, and it is likely that those purchased from Michaelides come from this time period and area as well. Many of the LACMA ostraca can probably be linked even more precisely to Deir el-Medina artisans and to their village or work sites in the Valley of the Kings or Valley of the Queens, given the diagnostic rock type, the subject matter associated with royal tomb production, and style of the images,
such as long, narrow, often unmodeled Ramesside body shapes and post-Amarna neck lines and eye shapes (Werbrouck 1932). The work of these Western Theban craftsmen—cutting and decorating the tombs in the Valley of the Kings—produced a tremendous amount of limestone chips of this size and density, which were then used to keep records, write letters, and sketch. Even if the LACMA figured ostraca do not find their origins in Ramesside period sites in Western Thebes, which is unlikely, they are still relevant to a larger discussion on skill acquisition. Regardless of their origins, they provide a great deal of information about sketching and practice of individuals engaged in image creation, particularly by showing a variety of quality levels—from the basic beginner to the capable apprentice to the master hand.

References


Keimer, L. 1941. Sur un Certain nombre d'ostraca figurés, de plaquettes sculptées, etc. provenant de la Nécropole Thébaine et encore inédits. Études d'Égyptologie 3:1–24.


Archaeology and Apprenticeship

Body Knowledge, Identity, and Communities of Practice

EDITED BY WILLEKE WENDRICH

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA PRESS

Tucson
Archaeology and apprenticeship: body knowledge, identity, and communities of practice / edited by Willeke Wendrich.

Includes bibliographical references and index.
CC79.E85A7484 2012
930.1—dc23 2012014653

Manufactured in the United States of America on acid-free, archival-quality paper containing a minimum of 30% postconsumer waste and processed chlorine free.