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Masterpiece of ancient Egyptian art could be a modern forgery

The “Meidum Geese” in Cairo’s Egyptian Museum may have been painted by a 19th- century curator

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The "Meidum Geese" at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Photo by Francesco Tiradritti

New research by an Italian scholar has shown that a painting in Cairo’s Egyptian Museum known as the "Meidum Geese" may be a fake. Writing for our sister newspaper, *Il Giornale dell’Arte*, the Egyptologist Francesco Tiradritti called the five-foot-long fragment of wall decoration “what the Mona Lisa is to Western art”. A facsimile is on view in the Egyptian galleries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

According to the historical records of Egypt’s Antiquities Service, the work was discovered in 1871 at the tomb of prince Nefermaat and his wife Itet (also Atet) at Meidum, and dates to around 2575-2551 BC in the early fourth dynasty. It went on display almost immediately at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and has since been widely considered an early masterpiece for its extraordinary level of detail.

Tiradritti's studies have now uncovered "anomalies [that] put the authenticity of the 'Meidum Geese' in serious doubt and make it very likely that the painting is a modern forgery," // *Giornale dell'Arte* reports. Tiradritti identified two of the three pairs of birds depicted in the painting as bean geese (at the outer edges) and red-breasted geese (facing to the right), species which only breed and migrate in Europe and central Asia. Neither appear elsewhere in ancient Egyptian art. The colour palette, particularly the beige and dark red pigments, is also "anomalous" when compared with a second fragment of decoration excavated from the tomb of Nefermaat and Itet, Tiradritti says.

Rather than "an anonymous and all too talented artist who lived 4,500 years ago", Tiradritti says, the "Meidum Geese" was probably created by one of the Egyptian Museum's own curators. Luigi Vassalli, who was supposedly responsible for the removal of the work from the prince's tomb, had previously trained as a painter at Milan's Accademia di Brera. Tiradritti recommends scientific analysis to determine whether Vassalli "repainted or completed a pre-existing subject, as was common in the 19th century and as he himself had done for other works in Cairo, or if he created an entirely new work."