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MICHAEL C.  
CARLOS  
MUSEUM

carlos.emory.edu



# classroom TUTORIALS

## *Shabtis* at Your Service



Funerary figure (*shabti*) from  
King Tutankhamun's tomb.

The ancient Egyptians believed that after they died their spirit would have to work in the fields of the god Osiris, even kings and queens. Not wanting to labor in the next life, they created small figurines called *shabtis*. The Egyptians believed that these mummiform figures would come to life and work in their place, allowing them to enjoy the afterlife.

While all *shabtis* shared a common purpose, they do not all look the same.

These personal attendant figures could be made of wood, stone, pottery, glass, bronze, copper or (most abundantly) faience, an ancient Egyptian material that shares many characteristics with glass. In addition to being made from a variety of materials, *shabtis* are also inscribed with hieroglyphs that give the owner's name and title, and magical spells that were thought to bring the figurine to life.

Here is one such ancient Egyptian *shabti* inscription:

“O *shabti*, allotted to me, if I am summoned or if I am ordered to do any work that has to be done in the realm of the dead; or if any unpleasant tasks are imposed for me there as a duty, you shall present yourself for me on every occasion, to cultivate the fields, to irrigate the riverbanks, to ferry sand from the east to the west. “Here I am,” you shall say.”

Sometimes *shabtis* were made in groups of 365, one for each day of the year. In these large groups there were often overseer *shabtis*, represented holding flails. Other *shabtis* were shown with seed bags or hoes, the tools that they would need in the afterlife to work in the fields. The *shabtis* found in King Tutankhamun's tomb come in a wide range of styles and materials. Of the 413 *shabtis* from the tomb, 365 are workmen, 36 are overseers, and 12 are directors (one for each month of the year). Several of the *shabtis* from the tomb are included in the exhibition.

Perhaps the most beautiful of these is a large, gilded, wood *shabti* found in the Annex of the tomb. Measuring 51.6 cm, it is one of the largest and most finely detailed and executed of the boy king's *shabtis*. This image of the king wears the royal *nemes* headdress adorned with a bronze uraeus and vulture representing the protective goddesses Nekhbet and Wadjet. The *nemes* headdress was made of cloth and tied in the back like a kerchief. With his hands crossed in front of his chest, this *shabti* holds a flail in his right hand and would have held a crook in his left—symbols of divine kingship. The funerary figurine is also represented with a large golden broad collar and two golden cuffs, jewelry that is fit for a king. These gilded attributes were made from sheets of hammered gold applied to the wooden form.

Wood was relatively scarce in ancient Egypt, as it is today. Only certain types of trees, like acacia and sycamore, are able to grow in the dry climate. Most high-quality wood was imported, such as fine cedars from Lebanon. The ancient Egyptians became very skilled carvers because they did not want any wood to go to waste.