

Art and life in ancient Egypt



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Week 1 The influence of Egyptian art

Introduction

It is hard to imagine anyone with an interest in human history and human culture who has not been fascinated by ancient Egypt. Books and films on Egypt abound, ranging from painstaking science to wild fantasy, and the legacy of Egypt can be felt in fields as diverse as jewellery, architecture (Figure 1) and film.



Figure 1 Carlton cinema, Islington, London 1930

Courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)

Yet there is a kind of instability to this fame. On the one hand there is a profound body of knowledge about Egyptian society, its religion, its art, even the conditions of daily life. But most popular culture revolves around clichés about mummies, pyramids, the tomb of Tutankhamun (Figure 2), and not much more.



Figure 2 Tutankhamun cereal packet and cut-price travel advertisement

Courtesy of Kellogg's

In the first week of this course about art and life in ancient Egypt, you will begin with a brief look at European exploration of Egypt and its history. You will then examine how Egyptian art has influenced the various phases of European art.

1 European exploration of Egypt

From a European viewpoint, knowledge of Egypt is strikingly recent. Educated Europeans have been steeped in a notion of the 'classical', of the cultures of ancient Rome and Greece, since the very idea of a modern culture emerged in the early Renaissance. But an understanding of Egypt, as opposed to a cluster of myths and fantasies, does not really begin to emerge until the early nineteenth century, when the long-dead script was finally deciphered, and Egypt was visited by increasing numbers of European travellers.

One of the most important developments was the appearance, following the Napoleonic invasion of 1798–9, of the massive French publication *Description de l'Égypte*, initially in ten volumes accompanied by 900 engraved illustrations, between 1809 and 1828. These brought a comprehensive and accurate visual survey of Egyptian temples, tombs and their sculpted and painted decorations before the European public for the first time.

A second key development was the Egyptian hieroglyphic script being deciphered by the French scholar and linguist Jean-Francois Champollion (Figure 3). This translation was, of course, a long process rather than a single event, but Champollion's first lecture about his breakthrough, which had happened on 14 September, was given to the French Academy on 27 September 1822.



Figure 3 Leon Gogniet, *Portrait of Jean-Francois Champollion*, 1831, oil on canvas, 74 x

60 cm. Louvre, Paris

Photo: Lauros/Giraudon/Bridgeman Art Library

2 The lens of 'Orientalism'

An important consequence of the relatively late 'discovery' of ancient Egypt by educated Europeans is that the very relation of Egypt to our own world remains problematic. This is as true of our own day, tensioned and fissured by the oil-driven conflicts of the wider 'middle East', as it was of the early nineteenth century: the reason Napoleon was there in the first place was to try and disrupt British supply lines to India. Egypt was opened up to Western eyes not merely because of the intrinsic interest of its culture and civilisation but because of its strategic promise for modern imperialists. Because of its geography, no less than its history, Egypt played and plays an ambiguous role in the European imagination.

The relationship of Egyptian art and culture to the 'Western' tradition continues to be a subject of debate. For a long time, the conventional view was that Egypt stood outside the Western canon, and the literature is studded with references that situate Egypt within the discourse of 'Orientalism'.

To help you understand some of the main components of 'Orientalism' sections 2.1–2.3 each contain an activity that consists of reading a number of short quotes by an author, followed by a question.

More recently, however, as the identity of the Western tradition itself has been scrutinised, the boundaries have come to seem less clear-cut. This is not to say that Egypt has been in any simple way incorporated into the Western canon. The point is more complex than that and has more profound consequences.

Due to a mixture of forces partly intellectual, partly political, adding up to the constellation inadequately labelled 'globalisation', the Western canon itself has, so to speak, been 'hybridised'. In what is surely one of the few unqualified positives of the contemporary situation, the canon has been opened up to acknowledge influences upon the European tradition, including its fountainhead Greece, from the ancient near East, Africa and elsewhere.

The early-twentieth-century critic Roger Fry once described the post-Renaissance European tradition before the advent of modernism as a 'right little, tight little, round little world'. No more. Fry was talking about the discovery of 'non-Western' art by the avant-garde of Gauguin, Picasso and others. That avant-garde has now itself been swallowed up and rendered historical by changes on a scale that would have given Fry pause. Rereading, recalibrating, sometimes rejecting, sometimes reframing, inherited canons of every stripe has come to seem not merely fascinating, but imperative. There is no paradox in the claim that thinking about ancient Egyptian art and culture is one element of an extensive, and resolutely contemporary, endeavour.

2.1 Gustave Flaubert – novelist

The French novelist Gustave Flaubert famously travelled with the writer Maxime du Camp through Egypt and the Holy Land in 1849. Modern critical scholars, notably Edward Said, have come to regard Flaubert's account of his travels as a *locus classicus* of Orientalism.

Activity 1 Gustave Flaubert – novelist

Read the quotations below and then answer this question:

What would you pick out as key features of the attitude indicated by these quotations?

When we were two hours out from the coast of Egypt I went into the bow with the chief quartermaster and saw the seraglio of Abbas Pasha like a black dome on the blue of the Mediterranean. The sun was beating down on it. I had my first sight of the Orient through, or rather in, a glowing light that was like melted silver on the sea.

(p. 28)

So here we are in Egypt, 'land of the Pharaohs, land of the Ptolemies, land of Cleopatra' (as sublime stylists put it). Here we are and here we are living ... What can I say about it all? ... each detail reaches out to grip you; it pinches you, and the more you concentrate on it the less you grasp the whole. Then gradually all this becomes harmonious and the pieces fall into place of themselves. But the first days, by God, it is such a bewildering chaos of colours that your poor imagination is dazzled ... There is much jostling and arguing and fighting and rolling on the ground ... Semitic syllables crack the air like whiplashes. You brush against all the costumes of the Orient.

(pp. 79–80)

As soon as I landed at Alexandria I saw before me, alive, the anatomy of the Egyptian sculptures: the high shoulders, long torsos, thin legs, etc. The dances that we have performed for us are of too hieratic a character not to have come from the dances of the old Orient, which is always young because nothing changes. Here the Bible is a picture of life today.

(p. 81)

We rise at dawn; drawn up on the beach are four slave-traders' boats. The slaves come ashore and walk in groups of fifteen to twenty, each led by two men. When I am on my camel, Hadji-Ismael runs up to give me a handshake. The man on the ground raising his arm to shake the hand of a man mounted on his camel, or to give him something, is one of the most beautiful gestures of the Orient; especially at the moment of departure there is something solemn and sad about it.

(pp. 180–1)

Source: Gustave Flaubert (1996 [1972]) *Flaubert in Egypt. A Sensibility on Tour* (trans. and ed. Francis Steegmuller), Penguin Classics, London.

Discussion

The first is a sense of strangeness and exoticism; the 'other' of what the writer has hitherto experienced in Europe. Flaubert is renowned for finding the heart of the matter in an apparently insignificant detail. Here it is the raised arm at a moment of departure, which somehow crystallises both the teeming medley of sensations on the one hand, and the stasis and melancholy on the other, which make up Flaubert's imaginative sense of the Orient. For him, ancient Egypt seems to be on a continuum with his contemporary present: in his Orient, nothing changes, except perhaps, to decline.

2.2 Amelia Edwards – traveller

Amelia Edwards was a late nineteenth-century English traveller to Egypt. She wrote a lively account of her journey up the Nile in 1874 (first published in 1877). As a result of her growing interest in the place, she went on to found the Egypt Exploration Society and to fund a Chair in Egyptology at London University.

Activity 2 Amelia Edwards – traveller

Read the quotations below and then answer this question:

What would you pick out as key features of Amelia Edwards' Orientalism?

We intended of course to go up the Nile; and had anyone ventured to inquire in so many words what brought us to Egypt, we should have replied: 'stress of weather'. For in simple truth we had drifted hither by accident, with no excuse of health or business or any serious object whatever; and had just taken refuge in Egypt as one might turn aside into the Burlington Arcade or the Passage des Panoramas – to get out of the rain ... Here then, without definite plans, outfit, or any kind of Oriental experience, behold us arrived in Cairo on the 29th of November 1873.

(pp. 2–3)

These half buried pylons, this solitary obelisk, those giant heads rising in ghastly resurrection before the gates of the Temple, were magnificent still. But it was the magnificence of a splendid prologue to a poem of which only garbled fragments remain. Beyond that entrance lay a smoky, filthy, intricate labyrinth of lanes and passages. Mud hovels, mud pigeon-towers, mud yards and a mud mosque ... [A]ll the sordid routine of Arab life was going on, amid winding alleys that masked the colonnades and defaced the inscriptions of the Pharaohs.

(p. 141)

I shall not soon forget an Abyssinian caravan which we met one day coming out from Mahatta. It consisted of seventy camels laden with elephant tusks ... Beside each shambling beast strode a bare-footed Nubian. Following these, on the back of a gigantic camel, came a hunting leopard in a wooden cage, and a wild cat in a basket. Last of all marched a coal-black Abyssinian nearly seven feet in height, magnificently shawled and turbaned, with a huge scimitar dangling by his side ... Anything more picturesque than this procession, with the dust driving before it in clouds, and children following it out of the village, it would be difficult to conceive. One longed for Gérôme to paint it on the spot.

(p. 205)

Source: Amelia B. Edwards (1891 [1877]) *A Thousand Miles Up The Nile*, 2nd edn, George Routledge and Sons, London..

Discussion

There is the same sense of exoticism we find in Flaubert (albeit divested of the overtly sexual dimension which runs through the French writer's account). In these extracts though, Edwards is more inclined to separate the grandeur of ancient Egypt from contemporary life than to assimilate the two. It is also interesting that she views Egypt very much in the terms provided by nineteenth-century Orientalist visual art. Her description of the temple of ancient Thebes at Luxor is couched in the mode of the paintings of David Roberts, while the camel caravan encountered on her journey to Abu Simbel instantly conjures up the work of the French Orientalist painter Jean-Léon Gérôme.

2.3 Howard Carter – archaeologist

The archaeologist Howard Carter was the discoverer of the tomb of Tutankhamun. In his account of the 1922 excavation, he frequently draws parallels between the tastes and habits of the ancient Egyptians and a more modern 'Orient'.

Activity 3 Howard Carter – archaeologist

Read the quotations below and then answer this question:

What do you pick out as significant features of Carter's Orient?

It was also essential to a mummy's well-being that it should be fully equipped against every need, and, in the case of a luxurious and display-loving Oriental monarch, this would naturally involve a lavish use of gold and other treasure ... [L]ove of ostentation was ingrained in every Egyptian monarch and in his tomb more than anywhere else he was accustomed to display it.

(pp. 21–2)

Had it not been for the evidence of plundering afforded by the tunnel and the re-sealed doorways, one might have imagined at first view that there never had been any plundering, and that the confusion was due to Oriental carelessness at the time of the funeral.

(p. 83)

That he [i.e. Tutankhamun] took the field of war in person, especially at his age, is improbable, but of such polite fiction, kings and conquerors in the Oriental world have always been singularly tolerant.

(p. 128)

Valuable woods and ivory, natural stones, faience, glass and metals were employed by the ancient Egyptians for the manufacture and decoration of their caskets. Throughout the East, through all ages, these highly ornamental boxes were used to hold the more valuable and personal belongings – trinkets and clothes – or as repositories for cosmetics in costly vessels. In fact to this day, the pride of the fellah is the gaudily bespangled

and more than often trumpery box, in which he keeps his most treasured articles.

(p. 247)

Source: Howard Carter, *The Tomb of Tutankhamun*, (London, 1923–33), Griffith Institute, Oxford/Little Books Ltd, London (2007 facsimile reprint edition).

Discussion

Once again, Carter assimilates ancient and modern, under the rubric of an unchanging Orient. In fact it is as if he is inclined to read the past in the light of the present. His sense of the gaudiness, even the immaturity, of contemporary non-European life, his motif of 'luxury' and 'carelessness' – not to mention the ingrained sense of superiority embedded in the descriptions of the 'fellah' – is mapped back onto the grave goods and burial practices of the Eighteenth Dynasty.

3 West versus East

The culture and art of ancient Egypt had an immediate and lasting impact in Europe. As already mentioned, the influence extended from clothing, furniture and jewellery all the way through to architecture. In the twentieth century this influence carried on in film.

In the area of the so-called 'fine arts', the influence of Egypt was felt in two broad ways. Artists working in the academic tradition in both England and France (indeed in continental Europe as a whole) tended to work within the discourse of 'Orientalism'.

According to the twentieth-century writer and critic, Edward Said, this was an image of 'the East', constructed by the West as its 'Other'. This image was composed of both positive and negative aspects (luxury, sensuality, indolence, unchangingness, for example), the sum of which was to confirm a Western sense of superiority and progress.

As critics and historians towards the end of the twentieth century became concerned to redescribe the relation of the Western canon of art to the art of other cultures, the early nineteenth-century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel came in for frequent criticism.

Many, including the historian of Chinese art Craig Clunas and the modern artist Rasheed Araeen, have identified him as the fountainhead of the assumption, in Clunas' words, of 'the absolute contrast between a dynamic forward-moving "West" and a static unchanging "East"'.

There is undoubtedly something to be said for this. But we would do equally well to realise how radically, and how quickly, Hegel was seeking to open up the classical canon that preceded him. Hegel gave his lectures in the 1820s, in effect at the very moment when Egyptian art and the Egyptian language were being brought within the purview of European scholarship. Hegel's innovation in spreading his net to include an aesthetics for Egypt, India and elsewhere, as well as Greece, deserves at least as much praise as the terms in which he constructed his account have laid him open to subsequent criticism.

Perhaps it would be fairer to acknowledge that Hegel was part of a Eurocentric discourse on the 'Orient' rather than its main progenitor. Hegel was in part responding to, and not merely formulating, a widespread cluster of conceptions about other cultures that were themselves symptomatic of the dawning age of Empire (with roots, of course, going back into the Renaissance, if not before: the 'Pharaoh' of the Bible itself is a sort of prototype of the 'oriental despot').

The next section contains an activity on some views of the nineteenth-century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel.

3.1 The views of G.W.F. Hegel

The early nineteenth-century German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel lectured on the philosophy of art during the 1820s. His arguments have been profoundly influential on the subsequent development of the history of art. In the late twentieth century they also increasingly became the butt of criticism aiming to redress the frequent bias of Western art history against the art of the rest of the world: a tendency on the part of Western historians and critics to use the Western canon of art as a yardstick with which to judge the value of all art worldwide.

It goes without saying that Hegel's thought is complex and nuanced. These four brief quotations are intended to offer only a glimpse of his philosophical position and a slightly more accessible fragment of his discussion, following on from that basic position, of the art of ancient Egypt.

Hegel divided the history of world art into three phases: Symbolic (by which he meant a range of non-Western or pre-Greek arts); Classical (the art of classical Greece and Rome); Romantic (the Christian art of the modern period, i.e the Renaissance and after). It has been above all this progressivist model of the development of artistic styles that has underpinned the traditional assumption, widespread in the West, of the superiority of Western art over the art of other cultures.

Activity 4 The views of G.W.F. Hegel

Read through the quotations and then put the substance of Hegel's reservations about Egyptian art into your own words.

The Idea of the Beauty of Art or the Ideal We must ... recall again that the Idea as the beauty of art is not the Idea as such ... but the Idea as shaped forward into reality ... There is here expressed the demand that the Idea and its configuration as a concrete reality shall be made completely adequate to one another. Taken thus, the Idea as reality, shaped in accordance with the Concept of the Idea, is the Ideal.

In this regard it may be remarked ... that the defectiveness of a work of art is not always to be regarded as due to the artist's lack of skill; on the contrary, defectiveness of form results from defectiveness of content. So for example, the Chinese, Indians and Egyptians, in their artistic shapes, images of gods, and idols, never get beyond formlessness or a bad and untrue definiteness of form. They could not master true beauty because their mythological ideas, the content and thought of their works of art, were still indeterminate, or determined badly, and so did not consist of the content which is absolute in itself ... Only in the highest art are Idea and presentation truly in conformity with one another, in the sense that the shape given to the Idea is in itself the absolutely true shape, because the content of the Idea which that shape expresses is itself the true and genuine content.

(pp. 73–5)

When we first enter the world of the old-Persian, Indian, Egyptian shapes and productions, our footing is not really secure; we feel that we are wandering amongst problems; in themselves alone these productions say nothing to us; they do not please us or satisfy us by their immediate appearance, but by themselves as they encourage us to advance beyond them to their meaning which is something wider and deeper than they are.

In such incongruity between meaning and the immediate artistic expression, how much is to be ascribed to the deficiency of art, the turbidity of imagination itself and its lack of ideas? Or how much of it has the character it has because the clearer and more accurate configuration was incapable by itself of expressing the deeper meaning, and because the fantastic and grotesque is just used instead on behalf of a more far-reaching idea?

(pp. 308–9)

In Egypt, on the whole, almost every shape is a symbol and hieroglyph not signifying itself but hinting at another thing with which it has affinity and therefore relationship ... Especially remarkable are those colossal statues of Memnon which, resting in themselves, motionless, the arms glued to the body, the feet firmly fixed together, numb, stiff and lifeless, are set up facing the sun in order to await its ray to touch them and give them soul and sound ... Taken as symbols, the meaning to be ascribed to these colossi is that they do not have the spiritual soul freely in themselves and therefore, instead of being able to draw animation from within, from what bears proportion and beauty in itself, they require for it light from without ... The inner life of the human form is still dumb in Egypt.

[In certain other Egyptian works, figures of Osiris] the human bodily form acquires a different formation and therefore already reveals the struggle to rise upward to the inner and spiritual life; but this effort here attains its proper aim, the freedom of spirit in itself, in only a defective way. The shapes remain colossal, serious, petrified; legs without freedom and serene distinctness, arms and head closely and firmly affixed to the rest of the body, without grace and living movement. The art of cutting the arms and feet free and giving movement to the body is ascribed to Daedalus first of all.

(pp. 357–60)

The works of Egyptian art in their mysterious symbolism are therefore riddles ... As a symbol for this proper meaning of the Egyptian spirit we may mention the Sphinx. It is, as it were, the symbol of the symbolic itself ... Out of the dull strength and power of the animal the human spirit tries to push itself forward, without coming to a perfect portrayal of its own freedom and animated shape, because it must still remain confused and associated with what is other than itself.

(pp. 360–1)

Source: G.W.F. Hegel (1975 [1835]) *Hegel's Aesthetics. Lectures on Fine Art* (trans. T. M. Knox in two volumes), Clarendon Press, Oxford.

Discussion

It is perhaps best to grasp what he is not saying. The features of Egyptian art which he does not like, its massiveness, its stasis, its general lack of animation, are not being ascribed to a lack of technical skill on the part of the artists.

Hegel relates the formal features of works of art to the underlying thought which they are striving to express. For Hegel, in common with virtually all educated Europeans of his day, the definitive emergence of human consciousness into a condition of freedom, occurred in classical Greece (and subsequently bonded with Christianity into a fully-fledged modern self-consciousness). This is something which ancient Egypt, with its political absolutism and animistic polytheism, lacked ('it always remains repugnant to us to see animals, dogs and cats, instead of what is truly spiritual, regarded as sacred' (p. 357)).

The criterion for a genuine, successful, work of art is the fusion of its form with the idea it expresses. For Hegel the achieved technical freedom of Greek sculpture (signified by Daedalus), expresses the freedom of the human spirit manifest for the first time in Greek society. By contrast, the lack of an organic relation between the form and the idea expressed, the merely external linking of artistic form to a general idea through a

relation of 'symbolisation', expresses the lack of freedom in oriental despotisms; expresses at bottom, that is, an earlier or lower phase of human development. For Hegel, this condition of the Symbolic remains the condition of 'almost the whole of Eastern art' (p. 308). Although Hegel describes developmental phases within Symbolic art (placing Egypt ahead of, for example, ancient India (p. 320)), and also implies development within Egyptian art itself (for example in the third quotation above), nonetheless for him the art of ancient Egypt remains locked within the first phase of the developmental triad Symbolic/Classical/Romantic.

Hegel was an innovator in even considering the art of non-Western cultures in his over-arching account of the development of art, but the fact remains that he assigns them an inferior position within that schema. Fundamentally, it is this legacy that makes Hegel relevant to a discussion of art in a period of globalisation, when perhaps for the first time, the prospect of a global art history that does not discriminate between the art of different societies, beckons.

4 Orientalism and European art

Be that as it may, such assumptions about the superiority and progress of the Western canon as defined by the Renaissance and Classical Antiquity, did indeed inform the academic practice of art throughout the nineteenth century. It remained more or less unchallenged until the emergence of the avant-garde in France later in the century.

In the case of Egypt, visual images tended to be of massively imposing ruins engulfed by sand with picturesque tribesmen arranged in the foreground to drive home the message of decline. No-one did this better than David Roberts, a Scottish painter who travelled in Egypt and the Holy Land in the late 1830s (Figure 4). The resulting studies fuelled his output for the rest of his career. A somewhat different inflection of Orientalism, involving a scarcely veiled sexuality, to be found in – or projected onto – the harem or the slave market, identifies the pictures of the French academician Gérôme (Figure 5).

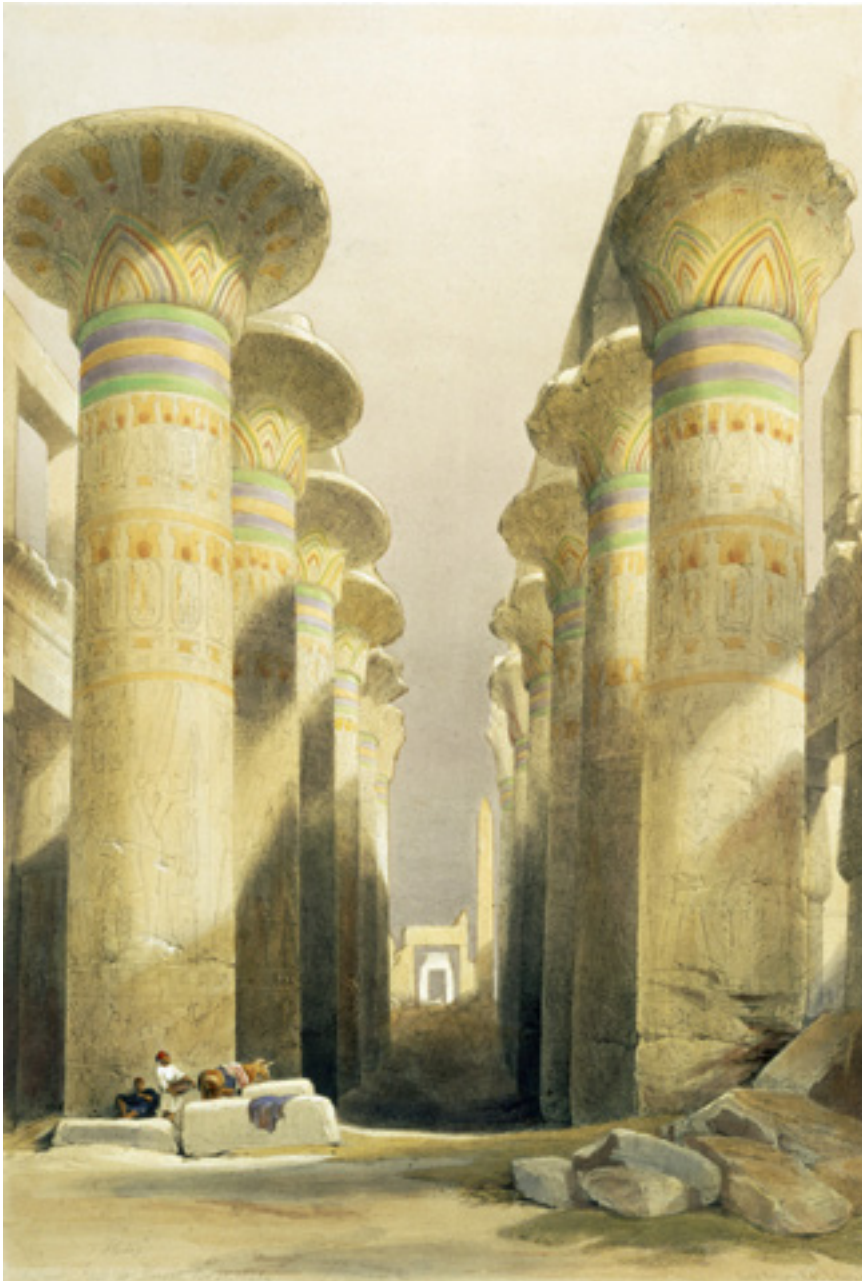


Figure 4 David Roberts, 'Central Avenue of the Great Hall of Columns, Karnak', colour lithograph, from Roberts, David (1846) *Egypt and Nubia: from drawings made on the spot by David Roberts ... with historical descriptions by William Brockedon*, London, Moon. Stapleton Collection

Photo: Stapleton Collection/Bridgeman Art Library



Figure 5 Jean-Léon Gérôme, *Moorish Bath*, 1870, oil on canvas, 51 x 41 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Gift of Robert Jordan from the collection of Eben D. Jordan
Photo: Museum of Fine Arts Boston/Bridgeman Art Library

4.1 Inspiring the Victorians

There was more to Orientalism than that of course, including a pervasive interest in the lands of the Bible. In England, using the invaluable resource of the British Museum, certain later Victorian artists were able to study Egyptian painting first-hand, and in some cases to incorporate it into their own work to enhance the effects they sought, ranging from a form of historical truthfulness to a sense of the exotic.

Activity 5 Drawing inspiration from the past

Look at these three paintings which drew inspiration from the Nebamun tomb wall paintings that were displayed in the British Museum (Figures 6, 7 and 8). Generally speaking, how do you think these artists have used the ancient paintings?



Figure 6 Lawrence Alma-Tadema, Joseph, Overseer of Pharaoh's Granaries 1874, oil on panel, 35 x 46 cm. Dahesh Museum of Art, New York, 2002.38

Photo: Dahesh Museum of Art/Bridgeman Art Library



Figure 7 Edwin Longsden Long, An Egyptian Feast, 1877, oil on canvas, 189 x 381 cm. Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford

Photo: © Bradford Art Galleries and Museums, West Yorkshire/Bridgeman Art Library



Figure 8 John Reinhard Weguelin, The Obsequies of an Egyptian Cat, 1886, oil on canvas, 84 x 128 cm. Auckland Art Gallery (Toi o Tamaki), New Zealand, Mackelvie Trust Collection, MU/147

Photo: Auckland Art Gallery.

Discussion

The artists have included elements of the tomb paintings to give a kind of 'authentic' flavour to their own artworks, which are an eclectic reconstruction of Egyptian life, combining an interest in the Bible with a fascination with the exotic (even, in Victorian terms, the somewhat risqué). Yet the way the ancient paintings have been shown is itself anything but authentic. You will become more familiar with the Nebamun paintings later, but if you look closely you will be able to see how the nineteenth-century artists have adapted the ancient works to their own compositions.

In the Alma-Tadema, the scene behind Joseph has been 'stretched out' to accommodate his chair back. In the original painting (see the close up in Figure 9), the standing scribe at the far left is much closer to the kneeling farmers and the geese to the right. To fill the space created in the upper row of figures above Joseph's head, an extra group of feet has been added. And of course, perhaps most telling of all, is the fact that paintings from a tomb have been transformed into decorations for a living-room.



Figure 9 Part of one fragment of 'Viewing the Produce of the Estates' (EA 37978)

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In the Weguelin, the artist has 'synthesised' two separate ancient fragments. As you can see, the scene showing the kneeling farmers, the geese, and the standing scribe (the same fragment used in the Alma-Tadema) ends with the table of offerings just upward and to the left of the foreground figure's head. The space further to the left of that is filled by an image taken from an entirely different scene, showing offering-bringers carrying wild desert hares (Figure 10). You will study these paintings in detail in Week 3.

As you will see later, Egyptian art involved a completely different set of representational conventions from the post-Renaissance European Academic tradition. Yet here these academic painters simply assimilate the Egyptian pictures into their own brand of 'realism', employing the flat paintings from ancient tombs as a decorative feature of their own artfully constructed spatial illusion.



Figure 10 Part of the fragment 'Offering Bringers' (EA 37980)

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5 The avant-garde and Paul Gauguin

In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, European art was split in two with the development of a self-consciously avant-garde tradition based in France. This was explicitly critical of the representational conventions associated with the Academic tradition. In its early manifestation this embodied a wide-ranging attempt to represent the conditions of modern life, particularly urban life as experienced in Paris. But before the end of the century, the urge on the part of avant-garde artists to distance themselves from the conventions of bourgeois society had led to the development of a discourse of 'primitivism'. The ultimate expression of this idea came in the early twentieth century when artists such as Picasso and others 'discovered' African carvings. But before that, the search for an alternative to academic conventions had led avant-garde artists to an interest in forms as diverse as Japanese prints, cheap popular prints, folk art, and in a few cases, the art of ancient Egypt.

In the avant-garde, artists did not use Egyptian art to add local colour to their own fictions, so much as to reinforce their own technical radicalism. In his well-known painting *Sunday Afternoon on the Island of the Grande Jatte*, the post-impressionist Georges Seurat was widely seen to have used the stasis and uniformity, as well as the flatness, of Egyptian painting to offer a telling reflection on the mores of contemporary Parisians. More pivotal however in the evolution of 'primitivism' was the work of Paul Gauguin.

5.1 Paul Gauguin

When Gauguin went to Tahiti in 1891 to escape from urban modernity he took with him an eclectic collection of source material including Japanese erotica as well as illustrations of European 'Old Master' art – and including photographs of ancient Egyptian paintings from the tomb of the scribe Nebamun that he had seen in the British Museum on a visit to London in 1885.

He seems to have intuitively grasped that the ancient Egyptian artists were following conventions different from those of the European academic tradition, and to have occasionally 'translated' ancient motifs into his own system.

Gauguin's paintings are complex, being on the one hand highly sophisticated and self-conscious examples of an avant-garde rejection of the conventions of bourgeois taste, and on the other seeking out 'authentic' effects according to the discourse of 'primitivism', which was beginning to be influential among artists tired of the superficial sophistication they saw around themselves in the cosmopolitan modern city.

Christmas Night, (Figure 11) is a strange painting of an imaginary snowbound winter scene in Brittany, yet painted in Tahiti. It draws on the image of the cattle being presented to Nebamun for the annual roll-call of the produce of the estates (Figure 12). So too does a woodcut he made of another Breton scene, also done in Tahiti.



Figure 11 Paul Gauguin, *Christmas Night (The Blessing of the Oxen)*, 1894/1903, oil on canvas, 71 x 83 cm. Indianapolis Museum of Art, Josefowitz Collection, 1998.169

Photo: © SuperStock, Inc./SuperStoc.



Figure 12 Part of 'Viewing the Produce of the Estates' (EA 37976)

© Trustees of the British Museum

Another example of his use of Egyptian art is *Ta Matete*, also known as 'We shall not go to the market today'. Here Gauguin drew on the banquet scene from Nebamun's tomb-chapel (Figure 13). He depicted a row of five women sitting side by side in a frieze-like arrangement, some turning and talking to each other, some with hands raised in gestures, all except one in profile. The image is clearly based on the banquet scene from the tomb of Nebamun.



Figure 13 Part of 'The Banquet' (EA 37986)

© Trustees of the British Museum

When asking ourselves what Gauguin was doing in these pictures, the first response might be to think along the lines of investing the scene with that element of 'primitive

authenticity' we know Gauguin was keen to get into his paintings. But the complication here is that by this date Tahiti was far from an authentic Pacific paradise, and the women in the market painting are Tahitian prostitutes in western clothes waiting for the boats to come into the harbour. So in a strange, transposed sense, the painting is a representation of the 'modernity' Gauguin has sought to escape, refracted through this register of an ancient, erotically charged, banquet scene – which might well have appealed to him in the first place for that very reason.

6 Twentieth-century popular culture

During the twentieth century, to a considerable extent, the legacy of ancient Egypt was felt in design and popular culture rather than the fine arts. The discovery of the jewellery and furniture in the tomb of Tutankhamun had a great influence on the development of Art Deco. There was a similar impact in the sphere of the popular arts both on the architecture of the new cinemas and on the films that were shown in them. Indeed, the very prevalence of clichés of mummies and treasure might have been one reason why avant-garde artists tended to steer clear of Egypt.

Only later in the twentieth century, with the emergence of postmodernism does one find artists again turning to Egyptian motifs to underpin their own art.

In a large installation of 1985, *Palazzo Regale*, in Dusseldorf, Joseph Beuys seemed to cast himself in the role of a pharaoh, surrounded by golden wall plaques, with coffin-sized glass vitrines filled with memorabilia suggestive of kingship and death. More recently, the American Bill Viola turned to Egypt for his high-tech brand of spirituality in the enormous, and enormously complex, video projection *Going Forth By Day* – wherein the spectator is surrounded by images projected simultaneously on all four walls of the room of people performing enigmatic tasks in ultra-slow motion, imbued with an air of ritual and based, it is claimed, on the ancient Egyptian text of the *Book of the Dead* called by the Egyptians *The Spells of Going Forth by Day*.

7 Beyond the myths

The legacy of Egyptian art, then, is complex. At one level it has become the stuff of cliché (Figure 14): the gamut of Myth & Magic, Chariots of the Gods, re-awakened mummies and the curse of the Tomb, all the way through to Indiana Jones-style ripping yarns. At another it has stimulated complex reflections on authenticity, modernity, and more recently on a range of pressing questions about the Western canon in relation to the art and culture of the rest of the world.



Figure 14 Shop display

Courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)

In this course we want to use some of the Egyptian paintings and objects in the collection of the British Museum to go beyond the myths and find out about the meanings of Egyptian art, why it took the form it did, what it can tell us about the conditions of life in ancient Egypt, and what we can deduce from it about our own cultural positioning.

Egyptian art can seem simultaneously too remote, or all too proximate: an off-putting combination of airhead New Age-ism on the one hand or daunting academic specialisation on the other. But for anyone prepared to push through those barriers it can offer a stimulating way into questions of identity and difference – of individuals and cultures – as well as debates about the social purpose or the relative autonomy of art in any culture, our own included.

The paintings discussed in the course are from the tomb of the official Nebamun, who worked in the temple of Karnak at Thebes during the reign of Amenhotep III (c.1390–c.1352 BC) or at the start of the immediately following reign of Amenhotep IV. This was a critical time in Egyptian history. Amenhotep III was one of the most important kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty, one of the high points of Egyptian power, but his reign preceded a period of dramatic upheaval in Egyptian society when his son changed his name to Akhenaten and convulsed the country with a religious revolution.

You can begin by selecting the links to these timelines to place the paintings in the context of Egyptian, British and world art history.

[Link to timeline of Egypt developed by the British Museum for schools](#)

[Link to timeline of British history developed by the BBC](#)

[Link to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History](#)

In the following weeks you will find out more about the paintings themselves and develop a more detailed understanding of Egyptian art and society.

Summary

For many years, Egyptian art was less well known in Europe than the art of classical Greece and Rome. You have seen in this section that from the early nineteenth century, Egyptian art had a significant impact on modern art, design and popular culture. Both Egyptian art and Egyptian society have had an ambiguous status relative to the Western canon of art. Egyptian art has often been viewed through the prism of 'Orientalism'.

You have also learnt how Egyptian art had an impact on the technical radicalism of avant-garde. Paintings from the tomb of Nebamun (c. 1350 BC) offer both a way into the study of Egyptian art and a challenge to prevailing stereotypes.

You can now go to Week 2

Week 2 History of the Nebamun paintings

Introduction

This week you will explore the answers to a number of questions:

- What are the key differences between painting in modern life and painting in ancient life?
- How should you read a piece of art, and in particular a piece of Egyptian art?
- What are the Nebamun paintings?
- What is their background? Where did they come from and how did the British Museum acquire them?
- What do they reveal about ancient life?

To do this, you will examine the Nebamun paintings in detail and begin to put them into context. Finally, you will learn about the 'period eye' of their nineteenth-century discoverers, and how they 'translated' the ancient paintings into a modern idiom.

1 Painting modern life

'The painting of modern life' was a phrase coined in the mid-nineteenth century by the French poet Charles Baudelaire to capture what was distinctive about the new art of his day. His was a dynamic culture characterised by new technology, new forms of urban life and leisure and a sense that the pace of life was quickening up.

This is an excellent opportunity to establish a rational and historical theory of beauty, in contrast to the academic theory of a unique and absolute beauty ... Beauty is made up of an eternal, invariable element ... and of a relative circumstantial element, which will be the age, its fashions, its morals, its emotions ... Today I want to discourse about a strange man, a man of powerful and decided originality ... He is looking for that quality which you must allow me to call 'modernity' ... By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and immutable.

Charles Baudelaire (1863), in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (eds) (1998) *Art in Theory 1815–1900*, Blackwell, Oxford, pp. 494–7.

Impressionism

The art that captured this life came to be known as Impressionism – an art of bright colours and rapidly applied dabs of colour that in its vivid, improvised quality somehow seemed to match the new informality and mobility of the life it depicted. Take a look at Figure 1, which is a painting by Edgar Degas.



Figure 1 Edgar Degas, *Café Concert* (also known as *Cabaret*), 1876–1877, pastel over monotype on paper and board, 22 cm x 41 cm. Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington D.C., William A. Clark Collection, 26.72

Photo: © Corcoran Gallery of Art.

- What is the subject of this picture?
- In the right-hand foreground of the picture you can see dark-clothed musicians and the heads of some members of the audience. Beyond them is a brightly-lit space in the centre of which is a standing female singer, leaning forwards slightly, towards the audience. Behind her is a colourful group of seated women. Beyond them, in the top-right of the picture, there are bright lights and what appears to be a dark exterior, the green colour perhaps indicating the light hitting some trees. This is an open-air café-concert in Paris, crowded with people, mostly men, listening to the songs, probably drinking and talking. It represents one of the quintessential sites of nineteenth-century 'modernity'.
- How is it made?
- The picture is made with pastel rather than paint, coloured in over a print called a 'monotype'. The main point here is that Degas has used sketchy, rapid effects involving blurring, lack of definition, even scratching and scraping at the surface, as well as quickly applied squiggles of the crayon, to capture the informality and mobility of the scene. The technique of the representation is closely 'tuned' to its content.

2 A modern view of ancient Egypt

At first sight, nothing could seem further from the art of ancient Egypt than the Degas painting.

One of the commonest ideas about ancient Egypt is that very little changed; that for an incredibly long time, literally thousands of years, Egyptian society remained set in its ways.

If asked to characterise what was distinctive about Egyptian art, most people would use words like 'static' or 'monumental'. We tend to think of:

- solid stone statues
- expressionless kings that never seem to change
- the pyramids – themselves almost symbols of eternity.

To begin the process of understanding an ancient perspective take a look at Figure 2 and then answer the questions below.



Figure 2 Sculpture of Rameses II (EA 19)

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- What is the subject of this sculpture?
 - It is a sculpture of a human head. The head is wearing what appears to be a fragment of a crown. Judging by its monumental size therefore, it is likely to be of a king. (As the caption reveals, it is the head of Rameses II, one of the greatest of the ancient Egyptian pharaohs.)
- How has it been made?
 - It has been carved out of a block of stone, a kind of granite, which is very hard. So a lot of effort has been expended on it – especially when you consider this is only part of what would have been a much larger piece.

- How would you characterise its effect?
- The intended effect seems to be one of power and authority. Given its size, the king would always appear to be looking down on a viewer – and such a piece was obviously meant to be viewed by the subjects of the semi-divine monarch. Whether this is seen as a beneficent or authoritarian representation of power is relative to the viewer. Presumably, to the ancient Egyptians themselves, it would have been the former; to the Romantic poet Shelley in his sonnet 'Ozymandias', it was very much the latter.

2.1 Egyptian painting

If we think of painting in the context of Egyptian art we tend to think of rows of figures, facing the same way in profile almost as if stamped from a pattern. Take a look at Figure 3 and then answer the questions below.



Figure 3 Papyrus of Hunefer, early Nineteenth Dynasty (EA 9901/3)

© Trustees of the British Museum

- How do you think the painting above has been made?
- It has been painted on a flat surface; in this case it is a sheet of papyrus. There are outlines, which may have been drawn with a pen or a fine reed brush, and the figures are coloured in with paints applied by brushes. There is also a lot of hieroglyphic writing accompanying the visual images.
- What is the subject of this painting?
- To the modern viewer the actual subject will not be clear without some relatively specialist knowledge. What you can see is a row of figures, some human, some animal, some hybrids, laid out in frieze-like fashion across the same ground plane, all looking from left to right at three more figures who are raised up slightly higher. Two of these are female, while the seated figure is male.

To go beyond these basic questions, you need knowledge of ancient Egyptian art and culture: which you will begin to gain from this course.

Here is a taster. The painting in Figure 3 is a scene from the Book of the Dead of the royal scribe Hunefer. It dates from the Nineteenth Dynasty of the New Kingdom, less than a century after the paintings from Nebamun's tomb-chapel, which form the principal subject of this course. At the left hand side, the dead Hunefer is being led to judgement by the jackal-headed god Anubis. In the centre, his heart is being weighed against the feather of truth (maat). The composite animal with the crocodile head is waiting to devour him if he is found wanting. In fact, he passes the test and is 'justified', which is recorded by the scribe to the gods, Thoth, with the ibis head. Further to the right, he is then led by the falcon-headed god Horus to be presented to the god of the underworld Osiris, who is sitting in a booth to receive him, flanked by the goddesses Isis and Nephthys.

3 Contrasting purposes

Neither this difficulty of interpretation, nor the difference from the type of pictures with which we are familiar in our own culture, nor again the massive, powerful effect of the sculpture, mean that Egyptian art is unpopular. Quite the reverse is true; it is widely admired, and frequently evoked in many modern designs. Figures 4 and 5 are photographs of an office building in London that was built in the 1930s.



Figure 4 London office building influenced by Egyptian style

Courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)



Figure 5 Detail of the building in Figure 4, showing papyrus-topped columns, and monumental cats flanking the entrance

Courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)

Very few people would ever associate Egyptian art with those conditions that Baudelaire picked out as defining his world and its art: the 'ephemeral, the fleeting and the contingent'.

Indeed it is quite true that while Impressionist paintings seek to give a vivid representation of contemporary reality, Egyptian paintings are doing something very different (Figure 6). Most surviving examples are from the walls of tomb-chapels. Some do contain striking details of daily life, fashionable clothes and jewellery, scenes of leisure, scenes of work. But the balance is different. A nineteenth-century painting of modern life sets out to tell us the truth of that form of life. For Baudelaire and those artists who answered his call, the truth of modernity was intended to replace the worn-out myths of classicism and religion. If what Baudelaire called 'the eternal and immutable' came into it at all, it had to come through the modern.



Figure 6 Chief baker of Amun, Padiamenet, making an offering to Osiris, early Twenty-

second Dynasty (EA 10063)

© Trustees of the British Museum

In Egyptian paintings in tomb-chapels it is almost exactly the other way round. Representing the experience of daily life, particularly the good things of that life as it was lived by the wealthy, was a way of helping ensure their continuation in the afterlife. The paintings' apparent concern with the here and now is not to be taken at face value.

Key point

Despite the sometimes naturalistic detail, what drives this art is an underlying concern with eternity, with humanity's relationship to the gods, with life on Earth not regarded on its own terms as we would understand it, nor indeed as simply followed by the afterlife, but informed by it at every turn.

The sense of this is conveyed by a harpist's song from a generation or so after Nebamun.

No one can linger in the land of Egypt ... The time of deeds on earth is only the occurrence of a dream.

4 Beginning to decode Egyptian art

We need, then, to look at Egyptian paintings in a 'dual' way. We need to see them as representations of physical things, but we also need to grasp their symbolic dimension. We need to be able to see through their surface, as it were to decode them, to resist simply regarding them with twenty-first-century eyes.

Yet this is not purely about learning to read the signs of the Egyptians' orientation to the afterlife; there are some Egyptian paintings which, if we learn how to look at them, and ask the right questions about what they are telling us, can reveal a world that is full of life and activity, of work and leisure, of the many small things that make up lived experience – thereby bringing the daily life of ancient Egypt closer to us. Among the most remarkable of these are paintings from the tomb-chapel of a Theban official Nebamun, painted over three thousand years ago, in about 1350 BC (Figure 7).



Figure 7 Hunting in the marshes fragment (EA 37977)

© Trustees of the British Museum

Revealing ancient life

Later we will look at the Nebamun paintings in detail. For now, see if you can begin to discover any insights into ancient life from this part of 'The banquet' fragment shown in Figure 8.



Figure 8 Part of the banquet fragments (EA 37986)

© Trustees of the British Museum

- What is this a picture of?
- It is a picture of musicians and dancers.
- How is it painted?
- It is quite 'painterly'. That is to say, it is painted relatively informally, preserving some of the qualities of a sketch. This helps the viewer get a sense of the 'activity' of the scene: the flute-player's hair swaying in time to the music, and the dancers' sinuous movements.

5 Decoding the Nebamun paintings

The full meaning of the Nebamun paintings is probably inaccessible to us today. One thing that is certain, however, is that they are every bit as much concerned with eternity and with the afterlife, with the projection of an ideal of harmony, plenty and order, as are the more usual, more 'static', types of ancient Egyptian tomb decoration. But when we look at some of their details (see Figure 9 for example), and particularly at the relatively informal way they have been painted we may be encouraged to think that here we also have a glimpse of 'the painting of ancient life'.



Figure 9 Details from the Nebamun paintings (EA 37984, EA 37978, EA 37982, EA 37976)

© Trustees of the British Museum

6 Easel painting

Because of the way they have come down to us in fragmentary form, and also partly because of the way the paintings are reproduced in books and on computer screens, it is easy for us to regard the Nebamun paintings in the way we most commonly encounter paintings in our own culture, that is, as 'easel paintings'.

'Easel paintings' are pictures painted on a canvas, or a piece of wood, usually rectangular, and supported on an easel in front of which the individual artist stands. In the post-Renaissance western painting tradition, most easel paintings have a dominant scene, usually a figure or a group of figures on which we focus our attention.

In the fifteenth century, in Renaissance Italy, this was one of the things that made a picture modern, which differentiated it from the medieval chronicle, or its visual equivalent, (or indeed, the Eastern 'tale') where one incident followed another, and another, and another without any special emphasis or focus. The idea of such a focus, a principal event on which to concentrate, that the picture was in some absolute sense 'about', rapidly became the normal sense of what a work of art was in the western tradition.

Now examine the painting by Archibald Archer (Figure 10) and then answer the questions below.



Figure 10 Archibald Archer, *The Temporary Elgin Room at the British Museum*, 1819. (PD 1935–3–9–3)

© Trustees of the British Museum

- Can you describe the main components of the picture? What kinds of things are represented?
- The picture shows an interior scene of a large room. A group of men are sitting and standing amongst a number of sculptures.
- Who are the people? What are they doing? What is it about?
- To a contemporary viewer the picture would show one of the most important 'moments' in the history of English art.

It shows a group of artists and scholars copying and discussing the recently acquired 'Elgin marbles' – sculptures from the Parthenon in Athens. The revelation of these ancient works from Greece, the fountain head of the Western canon, had an important effect on nineteenth-century British art.

The people who removed the paintings from the walls of Nebamun's tomb-chapel in the early nineteenth century seem perhaps to have regarded them in this way: as if they were 'easel' paintings. They cut out what they felt to be interesting or vivid pictures in their own right, or which they felt would be attractive to European taste, and the resulting fragments were subsequently mounted for display in frames.

7 Wall painting

To recover a sense of the paintings' original meaning, however, we need to re-think them imaginatively, not as independent easel paintings but as fragments of a complex, inter-related scheme covering the walls of the tomb-chapel.

In our own artistic tradition, paintings on walls are called 'mural' paintings to distinguish them from self-contained 'easel' paintings. Some of the main sites of mural painting have been churches. It helps if we can think of the Nebamun paintings as having more in common with a scheme such as that in Giotto's Arena Chapel (Figure 11) or in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, than with a single oil painting of, say, a family group or a garden.



Figure 11 Cappella Scrovegni (Arena Chapel), Padua, by Giotto

Courtesy of Web Gallery of Art

One of the things that wall paintings often do is to tell a story.

In the case of Renaissance schemes like Giotto's or Michelangelo's, or similarly in the case of medieval stained glass windows, these narratives are often Biblical. In the case of the Nebamun paintings, there is no single narrative key quite like this, but they do still add up to a story. The story they tell is of Nebamun's life, his achievements, his status, his virtue, and by extension how he will enjoy more good things in another life after his own death, in the eternity of the afterlife.

8 How the paintings were obtained

The British Museum display of paintings from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun consists of eleven fragments from the original scheme of paintings covering the walls of the rooms, of which there were probably two.

The paintings were discovered in a tomb-chapel on the west bank of the Nile near Luxor in 1820 by the Greek, Giovanni d'Athanasī, who was working as a collector of ancient Egyptian artefacts for the British diplomat Henry Salt (1780–1827) (Figure 12).



Figure 12 Henry Salt, an engraving from a portrait by John James Halls

© Trustees of the British Museum

No precise record of their location was made, though Egyptologists now believe it to have been in the area of Dra Abu el-Naga (Figure 13), close to the more famous Valley of the Kings, forming part of the large Theban necropolis. More than a thousand of these non-royal burials have been discovered (compared to 63 tombs in the Valley of the Kings itself), and that of Nebamun has never been found again. Salt died in 1827 and d'Athanasī

– who was turned down for employment by the museum – seems simply never to have been asked exactly where they came from.



Figure 13 The main area of the hill of Dra Abu el-Naga, showing the area excavated by the Egyptian–Spanish mission. The Theban peak, overlooking the valley of Deir el-Bahri, is visible on the left

© 'Proyecto Djehuty', Spanish Mission at Dra Abu el-Naga 2005

By 1821 the main/major surviving fragments were in London at the British Museum (Figure 14). In the next decade, due to their fragility, they were separately mounted in plaster and displayed in frames, much like the conventional western paintings of the time, and were placed against gallery walls among an array of other artefacts. They continued to be shown in that way throughout the twentieth century.



Figure 14 The paintings displayed in the upper Egyptian galleries in The British Museum in the late twentieth century

© Trustees of the British Museum

Initially the Victorian scholars seem not to have been able to permit themselves to regard the Egyptian paintings as (nor indeed, to pay Salt fully for) works of 'fine art'. However, Victorian artists used them as models for their own Orientalist paintings (Figure 15), and as the canon of 'art' has expanded beyond the confines of the Classical tradition *per se*, we have indeed come to regard them as 'art' in our terms.



Figure 15 Lawrence Alma-Tadema, *Joseph, Overseer of Pharaoh's Granaries*, 1874, oil on panel, 35 cm x 46 cm. Dahesh Museum of Art, New York, 2002.38

Photo: Dahesh Museum of Art/Bridgeman Art Library

Summary

Impressionist paintings give a vivid representation of contemporary reality. In comparison, Egyptian paintings represent everyday life but are also concerned with eternity. They are concerned with humanity's relationship to the gods, with the afterlife, as well as with life on Earth. Among the most remarkable are paintings from the tomb-chapel of a Theban official Nebamun, painted over 3000 years ago, in about 1350 BC. These paintings were discovered in a tomb-chapel on the west bank of the Nile near Luxor in 1820 by Giovanni d'Athanasia, who was working for the British diplomat Henry Salt.

You were introduced to two ways to examine a piece of art. To 'read' a piece of art, you need to consider the subject of the sculpture or painting, how is it made, and how you would characterise its effect. To decode Egyptian art, you should look at them in a 'dual' way: seeing them as representations of physical things, but also grasping their symbolic dimension.

You will have discovered that many Egyptian pieces tell a story about a life, a person's status and achievements, and their hopes for the afterlife. They should be viewed as part of a decorative scheme representing the person's life and works, rather than a single image.

You can now go to Week 3.

Week 3 The Nebamun paintings

Introduction

The Nebamun painting held by the British Museum are frequently described as 'fragments'. But the term 'fragment' is slightly misleading, for although none of the British Museum pieces show an entire scene as it would have existed in the original tomb-chapel, they do consist of relatively self-contained images, and are moreover quite substantial in size, around a meter wide.

Twelve smaller fragments also survive in other collections including Avignon, Lyons and Berlin, some of which can be located relative to the larger pieces.

It is possible to divide the paintings into a series of seven groups according to their subject matter and where they were probably placed in the original overall design of the rooms making up the tomb-chapel.

- Funerary offerings
- The banquet
- Viewing the produce of the estates
- Agricultural scenes
- Offering bringers
- Hunting in the marshes
- The Garden of the west

This week you will explore these fragments in detail. Following a brief introduction, you will have the chance to explore this fragment in detail. After analysing individual fragments, you will look at the clues that help to retrieve some meaning and point towards a possible reconstruction of the original design.

1 Funerary offerings

In this section you will be looking at the fragment showing a series of funerary offerings. This is the largest fragment to survive and would have been one of the most important images in the original decorative scheme (Figure 1).

Interactive media is not available in this format. Please visit the course:

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/art-and-life-ancient-egypt/content-section-overview>

This is a very detailed picture, but it is useful as a way into understanding what it is that you are seeing (as well as some things you cannot see that would have been important in the original tomb-chapel).

- What are the main features of this fragment?
- There are three groups of objects, arranged vertically, separated by greenish horizontal bars with yellow ends, about one-third and two-thirds of the way up the picture, respectively.

1.1 Exploration

Interactive media is not available in this format. Please visit the course:

<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/art-and-life-ancient-egypt/content-section-overview>

The vertical pile of wine amphorae, foodstuffs and perfumes is another representational convention. In reality objects would not be placed on top of each other, but laid out side by side on the woven mats represented by the greenish horizontal bars.

In all there are around thirty separate items: the four wine amphorae, the three perfume containers, about twenty pieces of bread, meat and fruit, plus several bunches of flowers and the garland of vine leaves.

What we have left out of this account, detailed though it is, are three further things which would, however, have been crucial to the meaning of the picture in the original scheme.

Figure 2 is an image from the extreme left of the fragment shows a hand, and below it, part of another large bunch of flowers whose blooms point to the right (as do those of the large bunch surmounting the pile of food).



© Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 3 Middle-left side of funerary offerings fragment (EA 37985)

© Trustees of the British Museum

Key point

In Egyptian painting the size of figures is not determined 'naturalistically' (in fact, despite the naturalism of their details, the pictures do not show 'realistic' scenes at all) but the figures' size indicates their importance in the scheme of meanings which the picture articulates. Being seated on a chair is another indicator of status.

There are also some hieroglyphic texts on the fragment that can give us clues to the meaning (Figure 4). One is at the left adjacent to the hand. The second descends from the top right edge. The third is further down to the right hand edge, adjacent to the pile of foodstuffs.



Figure 4 Funerary offerings fragment (EA 37985)

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Link to detail



Hieroglyphs adjacent to the hand (mid-left)



Hieroglyphs at top right



Hieroglyphs adjacent to foodstuff (mid-right)

1.2 Reconstruction

Now look at the conjectural reconstruction of the whole scene as it would originally have appeared in Nebamun's tomb-chapel (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Reconstruction drawing of the funerary offerings scene by C. Thorne and R. B. Parkinson

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On the basis of this detailed look at the surviving fragment, and the conjectural reconstruction, what do you think might be the overall meaning of this wall painting?

- What is happening in this fragment?
- The reconstruction allows us to see that the figure at the left, whose right hand can now just about be made out as protruding into the surviving fragment, and whose left hand would have held the bunch of lotus flowers, is Nebamun's son, Netjermes. The two larger seated figures at the right are Nebamun himself and his wife, Hatshepsut. It is Nebamun's foot that protrudes into the lower right of the surviving fragment.

In conclusion then, we can say that the original decorative scheme would have shown Nebamun's son, Netjermes, making offerings to his parents for their welfare in the after life; and they, according to the text, are 'true of voice' or 'vindicated', that is, their hearts have been weighed in the balance after death and found virtuous. Nebamun and his wife Hatshepsut are shown in a blessed state, seated in majesty in a booth, offerings laid before them, about to embark on a serene, happy and well-provided eternal life together.

1.3 Summary

The offering fragment shows a variety of everyday items while the hieroglyphs indicate that Nebamun's son, Netjermes, is making offerings to his parents for their welfare in the afterlife. Egyptian art employs various non-naturalistic representational conventions to indicate, for example, contents of receptacles which would otherwise be invisible (one above the other); the positioning of objects in spatial depth (one above another); and the importance of a depicted figure (by showing him on a larger scale than other figures or objects on the picture).

2 The banquet scene

In this section you will look at the banquet scene from the Nebamun wall paintings. These fragments are part of a single complex decorative scheme that probably filled most of an entire wall of the tomb-chapel (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Banquet fragments (EA 37984, EA 37981, EA 37986) and other small fragments (H. 1538-9)

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Once again, begin by looking closely at the surviving fragments, making notes of what you can see, and we will develop an understanding of what the fragments show in the context of the original scheme.

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- Take the first two fragments together (Figure 7). What is the most obvious thing you notice about the arrangement of the figures?
- The feature a modern viewer would pick out is that the figures are arranged in two horizontal bands, one above the other. These bands are 'registers': an important convention in Egyptian art, dating back to the very beginning of the dynastic period around 3000 BC.

It is not clear what the spatial arrangement of the figures on these two registers would have been, relative to each other: for example whether those figures on the top row would have been arrayed in front of those on the second, or seated in a circle around them, or in

some other way; the same goes for the spatial relations with the other two registers. While there is spatial integration within the registers, it is difficult to discern any across them.

2.1 Exploration

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Now that you have looked in detail at the fragments of the banquet, what can you recover about the possible meaning of the whole?

Key point

When looking at paintings of any kind, it is often useful to keep two aspects in mind simultaneously: the subject matter that is being depicted, and the way it is being represented. Another way of putting this would be to say that we need to attend to both the form and the content.

When you consider the depicted subject matter, the thing you will find most noticeable, 3500 years later is the mixture of familiarity and unfamiliarity. It is quite difficult to assimilate different aspects of the scene into a coherent whole.

Twenty-first-century sociality in the West tends to be very informal. Egyptian society in the Eighteenth Dynasty, indeed at any time throughout its long history, would have been highly courtly, formal and hierarchical. We have mentioned nineteenth-century paintings of modern life, and it might help once again to think of the tightly structured society gathering one might find described in Proust, with seated guests, strict protocols about introductions and conversation, and a hyper-sensitivity to rank and decorum (Figure 8).



Figure 8 A part of the banquet fragment (EA 37984)

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At the same time, of course, there is something quite different going on. In the Proustian *soirée*, the high society guests would have been sitting around on their chairs, being waited on, making polite conversation and sipping drinks. But the ladies and gentlemen would have been entertained by someone playing the piano or the violin, not by naked dancing girls hurling themselves around to rhythmic clapping and the rattle of a tambourine. It is hard to escape a stereotype of Orientalism here, if one gives the imagination rein to wander through perfumed air, drink in hand, to the sounds of ululating singers, a piercing flute and the strumming of the lutes. This certainly seems to have been part of the Victorian response – negatively attested to by the way the naked dancers and servants were obliterated from some photographs taken in the early 1870s (Figure 9).



Figure 9 A part of the banquet fragment (EA 37984)

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Nebamun's wake, if such this was, was far from Anglican. The mixture of music, conversation, eating and drinking, the smell of perfume and flowers adds up to something that is not what we would expect of a banquet devoted to the memory of someone who has just died. It all seems to have much more to do with life than with death. But that in its turn is probably more to do with our attitudes to life and death than with the way the ancient Egyptian ruling class conceived of that relationship.

When it comes to how the scene is represented, once again the question seems to require different responses.

In terms of the details, individual figures and groups of figures, the scenes are amazingly naturalistic, not least compared to the stasis we usually associate with Egyptian art. This effect is brought about partly by the relatively sketchy way the scenes are painted directly onto the plaster wall, sketchiness being something that, in the wake of Impressionism, we associate with values such as spontaneity (Figure 10).



Figure 10 A part of the banquet fragment (EA 37984)

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This has not always been the case. To a classically trained Academician, sketchiness in a painting would have been a sign that it was improperly finished, perhaps even the result of incompetence. We have no way of knowing whether Nebamun's tomb-paintings captured an intended effect or were dashed off quickly by workers eager to get the job done and get out. Or it may have been a technical constraint: the stone in the area was too poor to permit relief carving, so the paintings had to be made directly on the walls. The painterly skills are so vivid, however, that even if that was the case, perhaps the artists made a virtue out of necessity. Whatever the precise reason, it would be very hard for us not to see these paintings as miraculously accomplished, almost like snapshots that bring a remote culture powerfully back to life.

But for us this life likeness is then interrupted by the convention of the registers. What differentiates Egyptian painting, even these marvellously realised scenes of entertainment and leisure, is that the realistic detail of individual figures is not accompanied by an equally realistic spatial armature. There is no indication of where the musicians are placed, relative to the guests, whether the seats are in rows in front of or placed around the entertainment. We cannot even tell whether they are indoors or out.

The likelihood, given that this is not a royal palace, is that rooms would not have been big enough for so many guests, so the event is probably taking place in the central courtyard of a house, perhaps on a warm evening – though there is no representation of day or night for us to be able to tell. And yet, of course, this doesn't seem to get in the way: we read a sense of the atmosphere from the figures and their actions and don't feel the need to assess the plausibility of the setting.

2.2 Reconstruction

Look now at the speculative reconstruction of the entire wall (Figure 11). What is immediately noticeable?

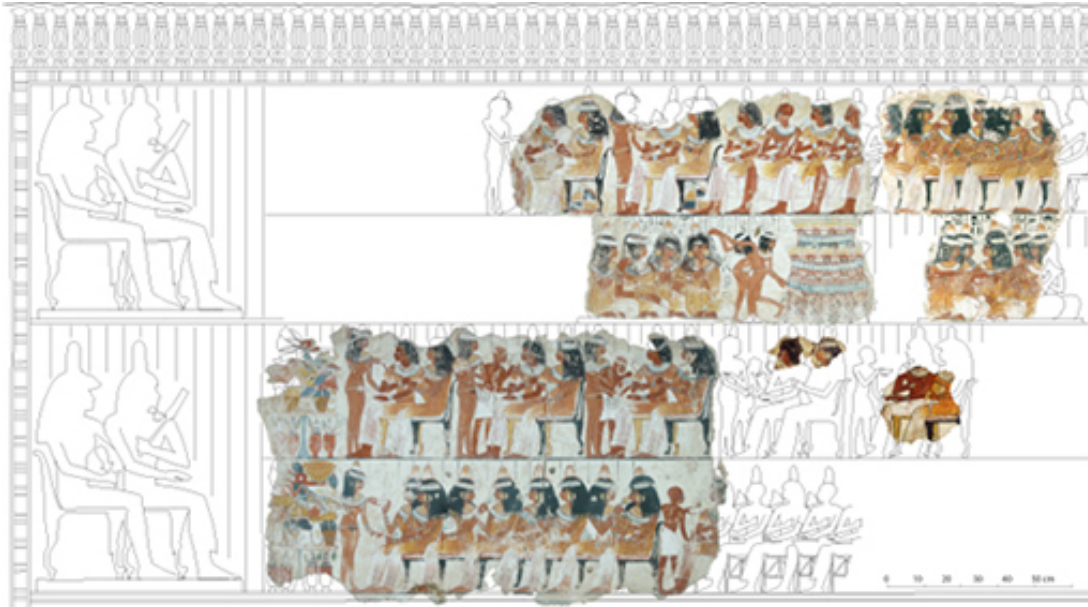


Figure 11 Reconstruction drawing of banquet scene by C. Thorne and R. B. Parkinson with other small fragments (H. 1538-9)

© Trustees of the British Museum. Other small fragments copyright Musée des Beaux-Arts de Lyon.

The scene is reconstructed on the basis of evidence from other tomb-chapels. It is likely that each of the two main groups, the top two registers and the bottom two, would have been directed towards two over-sized figures of Nebamun and his wife, to whom the guests are, as it were, paying their respects. It could be a representation of Nebamun's funeral/wake itself, or a banquet in his honour at one of the festivals for the dead held annually in the valley. The overall effect – of the registers, of the differences in scale across the composition as a whole – is to push the decorative scheme towards stylisation. Yet to the modern viewer, these kinds of non-realistic conventions of the *mise-en-scène* (composition of the scene) are counterbalanced by the dramatically realistic details that capture our attention.

It is as if one aspect of the technique and decorum of Egyptian art pulls us towards an acknowledgement of cultural difference, a life inaccessible in both its routines and its animating beliefs, while another simultaneously invites us to leap across the centuries and identify with people who are extraordinarily like ourselves, individuals who were alive three thousand years ago, and who were capable of the same sensory responses, and pleasures, as we are.

The point, perhaps, is that both are true; that this gap between familiarity and difference is one we cannot close. A measure of translation is permanently on the agenda of cultural exchange.

2.3 Summary

The banquet fragment shows a formal occasion with guests being served and entertained, and consists of a series of registers or bands. It is not clear what spatial arrangement these bands represent. The scene captures a sense of atmosphere and activity to a degree that is unusual in Egyptian art. This effect is due to the relatively informal technique used to paint it, and even the breaking of certain Egyptian representational conventions – such as the full faces of the musicians.

3 Produce and offerings

In this section you will look at several fragments. These include the three fragments of 'Viewing the produce of the estates', as well as 'Agricultural scenes' and the 'Offering bringers'.

Although the locations of their depicted activities cannot be decided absolutely, the fragments we have looked at, 'The offering table' and 'The banquet', would probably have been in one way or another, indoor scenes. For the next group of paintings, the scene moves outdoors (Figure 12).

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The banquet was a scene of leisure. The next group of pictures are about work. The figures represented in the banquet were wealthy men and women from the Egyptian elite, attended by domestic servants and entertainers. In the next group the figures are scribes and agricultural workers engaged in harvesting the crops and in animal husbandry (Figure 13). They represent the other side of Nebamun's life, the source of his wealth and status as Grain-accountant in the Temple of Amun at Thebes, without which he would not have been able to entertain important friends, and indeed would not have been able to afford a tomb-chapel to decorate in the first place.



Figure 13 Viewing the produce of the estates scene (EA 37979, EA 37978, EA 37976)

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3.1 Exploration

Now that you have had some practice in looking at Egyptian paintings, we can try and look more holistically at this decorative scheme.

Watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about the 'Viewing the produce of the estates' and 'The banquet' fragments.

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Now look at two more pieces also showing scenes of agricultural work.

One of these is a small fragment from what would have been a much larger scene depicting different parts of the centrally important activity of harvesting grain (Figure 14).



Figure 14 Agricultural scene fragment (EA 37982)

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The second piece is another 'agricultural' fragment, perhaps one of the most captivating of all. Egyptologists have not been able positively to identify a location for this scene, but it is not hard to see why D'Athanasi would have removed it, given its intrinsic charm (Figure 15).



Figure 15 Offering bringers fragment (EA 37980)

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3.2 Reconstructions

Viewing the produce of the estate

Look first at the speculative reconstruction incorporating the three surviving 'Viewing the produce of the estates' fragments (Figure 16).



Figure 16 Reconstruction drawing of produce fragment by C. Thorne and R. B. Parkinson

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- What can you say now about the overall construction of this scene and its meaning?
- It is made up of two registers of equal height, each taking up approximately half the height of the wall. This area is surrounded by a coloured block border that frames the whole picture space, only a tiny fragment of which survives at the left-hand edge. There is also an elaborate, rather abstract decorative frieze along the top. Each of these main registers is subdivided into narrower bands: two in the lower fragment, with a rather more confused situation in the top one – for there, the lower of the two sub-registers is itself further subdivided. The overall effect is of several layers, perhaps five in all, with nearly all of the actors facing to the left.

As we have learned from the offering and banquet scenes, the various activities taking place are dedicated to Nebamun – who is represented by two large-scale figures at the left-hand end of the picture. Only one of these Nebamun figures has survived.

The overall scene affords us a glimpse into the dynamic of ancient Egyptian productive life. The fruits of agricultural production are brought before the overseer for annual review. The agricultural workers show extreme respect for the overseer, reflecting the hierarchical nature of Egyptian society. A pivotal role is held by the scribes, demonstrating the power of literacy to the functioning of Egyptian society.

Agricultural scenes

Now consider the reconstruction of the 'Agricultural scenes' fragments (Figure 17).



Figure 17 A reconstruction of the wall with agricultural scenes, including fragments now in Berlin (ÄM 18529–31, 18539)

Photographs by Jurgen Liepe; copyright The Ägyptisches Museum, Berlin. Drawing by R. B. Parkinson and Claire Thorne

What is happening in this scene, somewhat in the manner of a strip cartoon, is that to the left in one 'frame' Nebamun and his team are out in the grain fields carrying out an inspection with the help of the farmer, while to the right their drivers have parked the chariots in the shade of a large sycamore tree at the edge of the field, and are waiting for the officials to complete their inspection – most likely before either heading off to another farm, or if it is late in the day, back to the 'office' (i.e. the administrative buildings in the temple complex) at Thebes.

Now watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about the 'Agricultural scene'.

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Offering bringers

Finally, consider this reconstruction of the 'Offering bringers' (Figure 18).



Figure 18 Reconstruction drawing of bringers fragment by C. Thorne and R. B. Parkinson

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These animals are part of another gift of offerings. The difference here is that whereas in the other scenes it is the produce of the farm that is being brought forth, here in addition to the products of harvest – the sheaves of grain – these animals are representatives of the wild, captured out in the desert, which is by implication now also brought within the purview of Nebamun, Grain-accountant in the Temple of Amun.

Now watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about 'Offering bringers' scene.

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In conclusion, Nebamun was an administrator – quite a well-off one. His memorial chapel showed both sides of his life, at leisure and at work: a banquet for friends and relatives, and these scenes of animal husbandry and the produce of the fields, not least the grain which was the staple of Egyptian life. One of the defining features of ancient Egyptian society, perhaps the single most important one that made the civilisation what it was, was its bureaucracy: the multiple layers of efficient administration that held the system together. This was a largely pre-industrial, agrarian society, a barter economy moreover. So these scenes give us, in effect, a glimpse of the sharp end of that system, out in the fields, recording the information about the produce of the estates that Nebamun and other officials like him in the great Temple of Amun at Thebes would then use to organise the community's spiritual and temporal life. If these encounters had not occurred, if those records had not been kept, if the farmers had not kissed the ground and if Nebamun had not sat on his folding chair as the animals squawked and bellowed and the dust rose, there would not have been any banquets and floral collars and exquisite costumes, nor indeed any temples to raise and tomb-chapels to decorate.

3.3 Summary

These fragments show scenes of outdoor working life, the role of Nebamun in society and the source of his wealth. There is a hierarchy of importance: Nebamun, the scribes and the farmers, that is shown by size and by the way they are painted. The more important characters are shown in formal poses and they wear more clothes. The outdoor scenes contrast with the lavish images of the banquet and show the ordinary side of daily life whilst continuing to reinforce the status of Nebamun, and by extension of the Egyptian elite as a whole.

4 Hunting in the marshes

In this section you will look at the fragment 'Hunting in the marshes' (Figure 19). This painting has achieved iconic status. It is likely to be illustrated in any survey of the history of Egyptian art, or indeed to illustrate ancient Egypt in any survey of 'world art'.

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Figure 19 Hunting in the marshes (EA 37977)

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- Why do you think it has achieved such prominence? What do you think it shows?
- This painting is very attractive to modern eyes. It is quite brightly coloured, the forms are clear, there is a lot of incident for the eye to fix on, and it now has an air of the exotic that will appeal to someone's sense of being adventurous and open-minded about art. It contains recognisable figures, yet manages to be wholly non-academic, provides a bit of a puzzle about what exactly is going on, yet doesn't suffer from the obscurity many people associate with contemporary 'conceptual art'.

This set of responses is closely bound up with what the work appears to be about because it seems, at first sight, as if it shows the good life; a handsome man with a beautiful wife and a child, engaged in sporting activity in a warm climate, almost as if they were on a family holiday. There is something very powerful about this conjunction of the

manifestly ancient with the apparently modern, as if time and space can be collapsed, and everyone, everywhere, has always been a bit like 'us'.

4.1 Exploration

Now look more closely at the painting (Figure 20). What do you notice about the figure of Nebamun himself?



Figure 20 The figure of Nebamun from the hunting fragment (EA 37977)

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He is in the prime of life. He has shining skin and a well-proportioned, muscular body. Yet we must remember both that this is elite art and that it is a memorial. This is, at the very least, an idealised image of what Nebamun might once have been, before he became rich and old.

More than that, however, the way the body is represented is not quite what it seems at first glance. As in all Egyptian representations of the human body, the apparent whole is the sum of several surprisingly independent parts.

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4.2 Reconstruction

Despite first appearances, then, what we have here is not at all a 'realistic' image. It becomes still less realistic once we move from the surviving fragment of the original painting as it was cut out by D'Athanasi, and attend to the full scene as reconstructed by Egyptologists.

A diagonal line at the bottom left gives the clue (Figure 21).



Figure 21 Hunting in the marshes (EA 37977)

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Look at the reconstruction of the entire wall, based on the evidence of that diagonal line, and the evidence of other decorated tombs, as well as two other surviving but at present lost fragments from the Nebamun tomb itself (Figure 22).



Figure 22 A reconstruction of the hunting scene, including the de Benzion fragments, based on parallels such as the scene in the tomb-chapel of Nakht (Theban Tomb 52)

Reconstruction drawing by C. Thorne and R. B. Parkinson. © Trustees of the British Museum.
Photographs of other fragments courtesy of the Association Egyptologique Reine Elizabeth, Brussels

The artificiality of the image is heightened once its symmetry is restored. There are now two Nebamuns, two Hatshepsuts, two boats, and two children, a male child on the left to balance the female child on the right.

The fishing and fowling scene is in short not a realistic snapshot of daily life at all, but a key motif from a repertoire that, Egyptologists have shown, extends back for well over a thousand years before the time of Nebamun, and was also, by the New Kingdom, a staple of Theban tomb-chapels.

A form of reed craft similar to our model is invariably depicted in fowling, fishing and harpooning scenes, found among the mural paintings of private tomb-chapels of the Old and Middle Kingdoms and of the New Empire, where it is called the *wsekhet-boat*. Such scenes, I believe, are as mythical as the pastimes of Horus.

Howard Carter, *The Tomb of Tutankhamun*, London, 1923–33, p. 244. (Carter is describing a model boat found in the tomb.)

Despite the powerful elements of naturalism, the ‘meaning’ of the composition is largely symbolic. It is an idealised evocation of harmony and prosperity, of a virtuous life. It is quite likely too that the accurately detailed wildlife in the marshes, the captured birds and the speared fish, represents forces of nature, potential chaos, being overcome by order. The cat, some of the accoutrements of Hatshepsut, and even the marshland landscape itself are associated with Hathor, goddess of fertility.

So the picture is ‘about’ both a life well-lived, and the forces of life and order overcoming chaos and death. The meaning of the scheme is produced by a combination of realism, that is, a naturalistic description of the way things are, and extreme conventionalism, wherein concrete images symbolise abstract ideas. The modern viewer can effortlessly recover and enjoy the realism, but the symbolism requires an intellectual effort we are seldom wont to extend, in modern culture, to the appreciation of ‘art’.

4.3 Summary

The fragment shows Nebamun in his youthful prime, before he is old and rich. He is apparently hunting with his family in attendance. The painting is a collage of images; a variety of animals and people. It is nonetheless symbolic rather than realistic, or rather, symbolic overall, as well as realistic in its detail. It represents a life well lived and the forces of life and order overcoming chaos and death.

5 Garden of the west

This section looks at the 'Garden of the west' fragment (Figure 23).

We conclude this survey of the surviving fragments of the tomb-chapel of Nebamun with what is arguably the most 'abstract' image of all, the one that makes least immediate sense to the modern eye.

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Once again there is a combination, unusual to the modern eye, of naturalism and non-naturalism.

- Can you describe what you see?
- The first impression is of something that almost looks like a carpet surrounded by a child's 'lollipop' trees.
Closer inspection shows that the rectangular motif in the centre is a pool with trees around it, perhaps an orchard. What is also important to notice is the way the trees, the pool, and the creatures in it are all represented in different ways.

5.1 Exploration

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The key to the meaning of the scene can be observed in the top right-hand corner (Figure 24).



Figure 24 Top right of the fragment 'Garden of the west' (EA 37983)

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There is the top half of a female figure, in a white dress, with baskets piled with fruit and a yellow jar containing something to drink. A closer look shows that the figure is emerging from a sycamore fig tree. This is a long-established Egyptian tradition relating trees to goddesses, such as Nut.

Egyptologists have concluded that in this case the goddess is Nut, associated with the sky and with rebirth. What she is doing is welcoming Nebamun into the 'garden of the west'. That is to say, the garden is not of this world. The west, where the sun sets, was regarded by Egyptians as the land of the dead (hence the location of a necropolis such as the Valley of the Kings, or that at Saqqara adjacent to the administrative capital of Memphis, on the west bank of the Nile). The scene represents the arrival of Nebamun into the afterlife. In so doing, it in effect concludes the surviving cycle of the tomb-chapel's decorations.

5.2 Summary

The scene shows a garden with a pool surrounded by shrubs and trees. There is a combination of profile and plan views – different representational codes within the same overall 'scene'. The goddess 'Nut' is shown in the top right corner. She is associated with the sky and with rebirth, and the west is the land of the dead. She is welcoming Nebamun into the afterlife.

6 Acquisition of the paintings

In this section you will learn how the fragments were selected and removed from the walls of the tomb-chapel.

When Nebamun's tomb was discovered in 1820 the paintings were literally wrenched from their setting with saws and crowbars. No attention was paid to the possible meanings of the scheme as a whole (which in many cases were inaccessible because the script had not yet been deciphered), and, incredible as it may seem to the twenty-first-century mind, no record was kept of the whereabouts of the site.

This was partly deliberate secrecy because of the rivalry between collectors, and what could be expected from the sale of good specimens to museums and private collections in Europe. Even at the time, the practice of stripping works of art from their sites was not uncontroversial. A letter of 1835 lamented d'Athanasī's habit of 'destroying Tombs under a false idea of preserving them', and referred to the cutting-out of paintings as 'a most destructive process'. [Hay, quoted in Parkinson p. 13]

It is important to recognise however that these transactions were legal at the time, and indeed involved the knowledge of the Egyptian government. Salt and d'Athanasī and others like them were trying to preserve relics of a lost civilisation, nor was it in any simple sense a matter of private gain, for the artefacts were for the most part due to be offered to the then-emerging major European museums. Having said that, it remains the case that the Enlightenment project of acquiring knowledge was often but a step away from a cruder form of acquisition, as well as being implicated in more overtly political Anglo-French rivalries following the Napoleonic wars.

Watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about how the fragments came to be in the British Museum

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Depending on where one stands at the present time, it is equally easy to regard this as a regrettable price to be paid for pioneering knowledge-work, or the symptom of a wider imperialist plunder of the rest of the world. This opens up a complex range of questions about the relationship of knowledge and power and the ethics of major museum collections which loom large in early twenty-first-century debate, but which would take us beyond the scope of the present course.

Whichever stance one assumes on this issue of the acquisition of the paintings, however, there remains something intriguing about the operation itself – that is, the operation of physically getting the pictures (Figure 25) – that raises it out of mere acquisitiveness and reveals it to have involved a considerable and complex cultural transaction.



Figure 25 The fragments were cut from the walls of tomb-chapel (EA 37985)

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6.1 Original locations

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- What do you notice about the difference between the two sequences, the surviving fragments and the complete original schemes?
- The most striking difference is what is missing.

7 Selecting the fragments

With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that in 1820 there was little comprehension of the original meaning of the scenes. This is not to say that there was none. In the wake of the Napoleonic expedition and the subsequent publication of the massive series of volumes *De l'Égypte*, Europeans, scholars and treasure-hunters alike would have had some knowledge of Egyptian painting, sculpture and architecture. But in the absence of an understanding of the language this would have been limited to a broad grasp of visual conventions rather than an ability to 'read' particular images. What it probably would have led to, in the case of figures such as d'Athanasi, Drovetti, Belzoni and others, was a sense of what was normal in Egyptian art, what was relatively run-of-the-mill, and what stood out in some way.

Hieroglyphs gave significant meaning to the scenes for their original viewers, but in the early nineteenth century they were meaningless (Figure 26).



Figure 26 A hieroglyphic caption from 'Hunting in the marshes' (EA 37977)

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- How did d'Athanasi make his 'selections'?
- The readiest answer is that d'Athanasi picked the most vivid scenes, details almost; and at one level that is probably enough.

If we go a little further, however, and ask what it was that made one scene rather than another appear vivid, the selection becomes more noteworthy. There is nothing natural or universal about what appears interesting in a picture. The concept of a 'period eye' has been used by art historians to recover the sense that different people at different times have made of visual representations. This concept was originally developed by the twentieth-century historian Michael Baxandall (1933–2008) to shed light on the Italian Renaissance, but it applies equally to other cultures, and is a useful tool with which to avoid universalising our own local cultural preferences. Thus, to the ancient Egyptians themselves, relationships that were ignored by or even invisible to d'Athanasi, would have been crucial to the paintings' significance. The meanings the paintings originally circulated, over 1300 years BC, would not have been the meanings d'Athanasi, and later Henry Salt or viewers at the British Museum saw in them. That is to say, the act of selection itself may be regarded as an act of production of a kind.

A lesson from the avant-garde

We have mentioned nineteenth-century art more than once in our approach to these paintings of 1350 BC, but here, unlikely as it may seem, there is a lesson to be learned from the twentieth century avant-garde. In the second decade of the century, Marcel Duchamp broke with a conventional practice of art making and developed the concept of the 'ready-made', which was of incalculable significance to the art of the later twentieth century.

The relevance of this to our present case is that Duchamp chose an existing object and nominated it as a work of art (thereby raising, almost at a stroke, various far-reaching questions about the nature of the work of art, the identity of the artist and the nature of the transaction involved when a spectator encounters a work of art that continue to resonate to this day) (Figure 27).



Figure 27 Marcel Duchamp, *Bottlerack*, 1914/1964, galvanized iron, 66 cm x 37 cm. The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. Vera and Arturo Schwarz Collection of Dada and

Surrealist Art.

Photo: The Israel Museum/Bridgeman Art Library. © Succession Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2008.

Duchamp's gesture had the effect of broadening the parameters of what could be regarded as constituting a cultural intervention. In effect, it demonstrates that to make a selection is to produce a new meaning. Duchamp was the first to recognise this, and grasp some of its implications for art. But similar kinds of selections, interpretations, misinterpretations, translations and so on have been the stuff of cultural encounters from time immemorial.

Key point

The act of making a selection also makes a new meaning.

When, in 1820, d'Athanasi and others like him took the decision to keep some parts of a painting and reject or destroy others, they were making decisions that involved a complex mixture of aesthetic and cultural criteria. Such an act is manifestly culturally relative, the work of a different 'period eye' from that which originally saw the pictures and derived meaning from them in the tomb-chapel in 1350 BC (Figure 28). (And by the same token, of course, different from our own, post-Duchampian, not to say post-Hollywood, 'period eyes'.)



Figure 28 The Nebamun fragments as they were displayed in the twentieth century

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<http://www.open.edu/openlearn/history-the-arts/art-and-life-ancient-egypt/content-section-overview>

- What has been kept, and what has been lost?
- For the most part it is the large 'out of scale' figures that have gone, as well as other elements such as the decorative borders or compositional features such as symmetry (e.g. the left-hand figure in Hunting in the Marshes).

8 Selection based on subject

Undoubtedly, one main concern for d'Athanasi in selecting fragments would be basic and physical, i.e. the size of pieces that he could transport, as well as what would literally hold together. The fragments were fragile, their paint surfaces even more so, and transport conditions were primitive. This in itself would have constrained what he was able to remove.

There is, however, something more consistent about what was omitted. Mostly it seems to have been elements that would have diminished the naturalism of the scenes. Salt and d'Athanasi would have had considerable knowledge of ancient tomb-chapel art. To them, the large, static figures would have been the most formal, conventional and common; that is, they would have been the least interesting and appealing, despite the significance they would have originally had in producing the meaning of the compositions. To take the most obvious example, the servants, hares and gazelle, so attractive to d'Athanasi, would have been meaningless in the original scheme without the figure of Nebamun to accept them as a form of tribute.

By the early nineteenth century, the western, post-Renaissance, Academic tradition of art had been in place for over three hundred years. In a very powerful sense, it was what 'Art' was. Things that fell outside it were not really regarded as art at all (and certainly, things that we regard as art would not have been either). The cornerstone of that tradition was lifelikeness, especially in painting: the production of credible illusions of objects and actions in three dimensional space on a two dimensional surface; believable, that is, from the viewpoint of the picture's spectator.

That was not the end of the matter however. For the Academic system was itself internally articulated. Alongside the various technical requirements needed to produce credible and engaging illusions – such as modelling, composition and so forth – the subject matter that was to be depicted was itself arranged into various categories (Figure 29).

These categories were known as the hierarchy of genres. In ascending order of importance they were:

1. Still-life
2. Landscape
3. Genre (here meaning scenes of ordinary life)
4. Portrait
5. History (meaning complex multi-figure compositions combining attitudes of stasis,
6. Movement, clothed figures, nude figures etc, usually of Biblical or Classical subjects)



Figure 29 Various genres of paintings

One of the most arresting features of the surviving fragments of the Nebamun tomb paintings is the extent to which they conform to these categories (Figure 30).

- The offering table functions as a still-life.
- The garden of the west is a sort of landscape.
- We have two 'portraits' of Nebamun, overseeing the produce and hunting in the marshes, one at work and one with his family.
- The scenes of the farmers with their cattle and geese, the offering bearers with the hares and gazelle, and the images of harvest are all genre scenes.
- The banquet functions as a particular type of multi-figure composition combining clothed and nude figures in a way that would have been appealing to nineteenth-century gentleman connoisseurs.



Figure 30 Various genres within the Nebamun wall paintings (EA 37978, EA 37979, EA 37983, EA 37985, EA 37986)

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This is not, of course, to say that d'Athanasi went looking for a landscape or a portrait, let alone set out to recreate the whole hierarchy of genres. What it perhaps does say is that the 'period eye' of the early nineteenth century unconsciously thought of 'art' in more or less those terms. What was interesting to look at, what was arresting 'as art', was interesting or arresting according to such categories and criteria.

Fortunately we do have a fairly well-developed idea of what an early nineteenth century European would have found interesting or arresting in the field of visual imagery. It is also worth bearing in mind that 'interesting visual imagery' would have been inseparable from two dimensions whose very pervasiveness make them easy to overlook: time and space. Or more particularly, history and geography, in respect of both the interestingly, even challengingly exotic, and the reassuringly familiar.

The next three sections explore the 'discourses' of early nineteenth century art that are particularly relevant here.

8.1 The Bible

It is well-known that, at least up until the Napoleonic expedition, with its Enlightenment programme of scientific knowledge, the main driving force behind any European interest in Egypt was Biblical studies. In fact, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the two were not really to be separated. Science was regarded as shedding light on, even providing historical confirmation for, the Biblical story of the children of Israel: exiled in and ultimately escaping from the land of Pharaoh before arriving in their own Promised Land. In 1850, on his visit to Egypt, the French novelist Gustave Flaubert wrote of: 'the old Orient, which is always young because nothing changes. Here the Bible is a picture of life today'.

As we have seen, the Victorian painter Lawrence Alma-Tadema implicitly recognised that the Biblical Joseph was a kind of super 'Grain accountant', and some of the scenes from Nebamun's tomb could potentially be used to illustrate Joseph's story. (This is a considerable tradition: in twelfth-century mosaics in St. Mark's basilica in Venice, the pyramids are represented as Joseph's granaries: the stores he built to keep the surplus of the seven years of plenty before the onset of the seven lean years of famine.) It may be assumed that all sorts of scenes of ancient Egyptian daily life would have been grist to the mill for an audience willing to be enchanted by 'authentic' scenes of life as it was experienced by the actors in the Old Testament narrative.

Part of the appeal of genre-type scenes was the historical information they were assumed to offer about daily life in Biblical times (Figure 31). The pioneering Egyptologist Sir John Gardner Wilkinson (1797–1875) wrote a much-reprinted account of *The Manners and Customs of the ancient Egyptians* (1836) as well as *A Popular Account of the Ancient Egyptians* (1854) which he based on his familiarity with Luxor and the remains of ancient Thebes. His work drew on the influential fifth-century BC Greek account given in the *Histories* of Herodotus, but his main source was the paintings of daily life found in the Theban tomb-chapels. In particular, he illustrated the Nebamun paintings, which by then were in the British Museum.



Figure 31 Daily life depicted within the fragments (EA 37982, EA 37978, EA 37976)

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In his accompanying text, Wilkinson underlined the importance of the pictures for the purchase they could give modern people on the lived experience of Classical and Biblical times:

Though the literature of the Egyptians is unknown, their monuments, especially the paintings in their tombs, have afforded us an insight into their mode of life scarcely to be obtained from those of any other people. The influence that Egypt had in early times on Greece gives to every inquiry respecting it an additional interest; and the frequent mention of the Egyptians in the Bible connects them with the Hebrew records, of which many satisfactory illustrations occur in the sculptures of Pharaonic times. Their great antiquity also enables us

to understand the condition of the world long before the era of written history; all existing monuments left by other people are comparatively modern; and the paintings in Egypt are the earliest descriptive illustrations of the manners and customs of any nation.

8.2 Animals

A second significant discourse that had a particular inflection in English attitudes to art was animal painting. Stubbs is only the most prominent representative of a tradition going back into the seventeenth century, and would continue with redoubled force into the Victorian era, exemplified by a figure such as Landseer.

English art abounds with a veritable zoo of cattle, horses, sheep and birds, not to mention every variety of dog, ranging from the almost scientific studies of Stubbs to Victorian sentimentalism of puppies and kittens.

Many among the most memorable scenes from Nebamun's tomb-chapel represent animals: the geese, the cattle, the horses, the fish, the rabbits, the birds and butterflies, and of course, Nebamun's cat (Figure 32). To d'Athanasi one can imagine the tomb-chapel must have seemed like a treasure-trove of potentially very popular animal paintings.



Figure 32 Animals depicted within the fragments (EA 37976, EA 37977, EA 37978, EA 37982, EA 37983)

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8.3 Orientalism

A third powerful strand that we can unravel from the constellation of factors that would have made some scenes stand out, is the early stages of the discourse of Orientalism. In the eighteenth century, British and French involvement in India had begun to launch a

sense of different ways of life that was markedly different from medieval and Renaissance conceptions of the heathen and godless. In the early Renaissance, particularly in maritime cultures such as Venice, there was an openness to, indeed an embrace of, Eastern forms in art and architecture that subsequently froze over in the stand-off with Islam. But by the eighteenth century the balance of forces had changed, and Europeans were now encountering exotic cultures from a position of much increased power. These forms of life may have been non-Christian, decadent even, in the eyes of the church and its missionaries; but that did not mean they lacked allure. At this period the myth of the East was being consolidated, a heady mix of luxury, indolence and depravity that Europe constructed to set against, and to some extent to justify, its own perceived virtues of rationality and empiricism. The banquet scenes in Nebamun's tomb-chapel must have struck a chord as resonantly as the animals and the Old Testament. All those figures, the slender beautiful women in their rich flowing robes, the men with their idealised physiques, the gold, the wine, the lotus flowers, and of course the almost-naked dancing girls, would have set bells ringing in any viewer with a flicker of interest in the risky territory of Otherness (Figure 33).



Figure 33 Exotic scenes from 'The banquet' fragment (EA 37986)

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8.4 Conclusion

So then, perhaps we can say that out of a complex constellation of factors ranging all the way from what they could physically carry, through a set of deeply embedded ideas about art, to a vivid set of contemporary cultural interests, Salt and d'Athanasi between them effected a kind of translation.

They took the representational codes of ancient Egypt and rendered them into a comprehensible contemporary language of art – where 'art' as such was still a central medium of cultural reflection: that is, where key themes in a culture got worked through – tested, challenged, and enjoyed.

When their Victorian descendants put the fragments into frames and hung them on the wall in the manner of easel paintings, it was a silent tribute to their success (Figure 34). What is happening now, in the early twenty-first century, is that new display amounts to a restoration, as it were a 'retranslation' of the fragments back into the representational language in which they originally produced their meanings, three thousand years ago.



Figure 34 The Nebamun fragments as they were displayed in the twentieth century.

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Summary

This week you have looked in detail at the Nebamun fragments. You have also examined the way in which they were acquired, and considered the thinking behind the decision as to which fragments to take. In particular d'Athanasi and Salt would have made selections based on what their period eye constituted interesting art. They would have thought in terms of easel paintings and familiar genres such as biblical history, nature and animal images, and would also have been attracted to scenes that provided a glimpse of the oriental or exotic.

You can now go to [Week 4](#).

Week 4 Nebamun the man and his tomb

Introduction

In this section you will explore who Nebamun was and what we know about him, as well as how we know what we know.

When talking about ancient civilisations – inspired by the hundreds and thousands of books that have appeared on the subject, not to mention films and television programmes that confidently tell stories about Greeks and Romans, Chinese and Vikings, as well as ancient Egyptians – it is instructive to try and tell the story of an individual such as Nebamun.

The paintings from Nebamun's tomb-chapel are internationally renowned (Figure 1). They are among the most remarkable works of art to survive from the ancient world. They make that world seem vivid and immediate to us: the herd of cattle jostling their handlers, bellowing and stirring up the dust, the geese squawking in their boxes, Nebamun's cat flushing out birds among the reeds in the Nile marshes and sending up a cloud of coloured butterflies, his wife in her beautiful dress with immaculate hair and jewellery. We can imagine something of that life because of the apparent spontaneity of the images, very much as we can imagine the life going on in a scene of boating or dancing in nineteenth-century Paris in a painting by Renoir or Degas. But this is the power of pictures. The truth is that we know next to nothing about Nebamun. Or rather, all we know about him is contained in those paintings and their related texts.



Figure 1 Nebamun hunting in the marshes (EA 37977)

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1 Exploring the evidence

One of the principal motors of modernism was the drive to separate image from narrative; indeed abstract art can be seen as the culmination of a tendency to particularise the visual begun by Lessing in 1766. In ancient Egyptian art, the opposite is the case. The linguistic aspect is up there on the wall with the pictures, reinforcing them, interpreting them, even exhorting the spectator to respond.

Key point

The complementary relation of word and image in the ancient Egyptian tomb-chapel is a point worth emphasising. Recent postmodernist theory has frequently used the language of language to talk about images: treating the picture as a 'text' to be read. But for much of the modern period, beginning in the eighteenth century and with redoubled emphasis in the twentieth, the theory of art sought to distinguish pictures from words.

To the modern, non-specialist viewer, however, the picture is the thing: the wonderfully vivid cattle and geese, the dancing girls, the handsome couples. To all but a few highly-trained Egyptologists the hieroglyphs are no more than a general signifier of 'Egyptianness', along with the sideways feet and the wigs. Their specific message is lost on us (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Hieroglyphs from the scene of hunting in the marshes, 'Taking enjoyment, seeing good things in the place of eternity' (EA 37977)

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Yet to the literate ancient Egyptian viewer – a very small percentage of the society as a whole – the hieroglyphs would have been at least as important as the pictures, conferring the picture's particular meaning in its given context. The life stories of tomb-owners were usually given by the narrative texts. In fact the paintings tell us nothing particular about Nebamun, apart from the fact that he aspired to a conventional elite lifestyle. Even when he personally features in the paintings, the images are not likenesses. The agricultural scenes may have been chosen to link with his work, but agricultural scenes also occur in the tombs of people who were not grain-accountants. The only specific thing we know comes from the texts: his name and title.

If the tomb had remained intact, other texts would have told us the names of his parents and perhaps even a version of his life-story in the form of a 'tomb autobiography', as if

narrated by Nebamun himself from beyond the grave. But as it is, the damaged hieroglyphic captions tell us only that Nebamun was the Scribe and Grain-accountant in the Granary of Divine Offerings in the Temple of Amun at Thebes (Figure 3). This means he was an official in a very important institution. Not a 'minister' or 'secretary of state', in modern political terms, but something like a middle manager or a civil servant in an important ministry.



Figure 3 The Temple of Amun

Photograph courtesy of R. B. Parkinson

Before and during the Eighteenth Dynasty Amun was the most important of the gods worshipped in the temple complex at Thebes. Some ancient Egyptian names are very common, as in any culture, and many 'Nebamuns' have been identified by Egyptologists working on objects from the Theban necropolis (Figure 4), as well as in the necropolis itself. This is unsurprising, since the name translates as 'My Lord is Amun'.



Figure 4 Hieroglyphs of Nebamun's title and name, 'Scribe and Grain-accountant of Amun, Nebamun'

© Trustees of the British Museum, Drawing by R. B. Parkinson

1.1 A man of wealth

Another factor that provides a clue to Nebamun's status is the importance of grain at this time (Figure 5). Egypt was a barter economy. The idea of money in the form of coinage had not yet been invented. Grain was its nearest equivalent. Workers were paid in grain, which would then be exchanged for equivalent values of staples such as foodstuffs, including bread and beer, clothing and other necessities. So Nebamun's job situated him at an important junction in Egyptian institutional life, where the fundamental stuff of day-to-day existence touched the world of the gods.



Figure 5 Offering bringers with sheaves of grain (EA 37980)

© Trustees of the British Museum

Whatever the circumstances of his early life, which are completely unknown to us, by the time he had achieved the status described in his tomb decorations, Nebamun would have been wealthy – one of the top 5% of Egyptian society. A considerable portion of that wealth was probably invested in planning and making the tomb in the Theban necropolis that would be the gateway for his life in eternity. All that we have is ruins and fragments, but in 1350 BC this would have been a considerable enterprise: carving passageways and two rooms out of the solid rock, decorating them with paintings, texts and sculptures, and building an imposing entrance and courtyard.

Watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about Nebamun.

Video content is not available in this format.



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The tendency of modern popular myth is to summon up images of secrecy and tomb-robbers, searching for caches of gold by candlelight, and making off in the dark. But historically, Egyptian burials were highly public affairs. The tombs would have been planned for years and worked on for many months. After the funeral, the chapels remained open. They were there for family and other visitors to make their devotions during important festivals, and to keep alive the memory of the deceased – not least to ensure his continued prosperity in the afterlife.

It goes without saying that Nebamun could not have imagined the afterlife he actually got: a star attraction in the British Museum, the object of millions of gazes, his image as well as those of his wife, his children and his cat endlessly reproduced in the vast constellation of Egyptiana along with Tutankhamun and the pyramids: notepads, pencil cases, shoulder bags and mugs. Yet of Nebamun the man, beyond his name and the title of his job, we know nothing.

If you wish to get a sense of the fragmented nature of these tomb-chapels click the link below to explore the tomb-chapel of Senneferi at Thebes and view an excavation conducted by Nigel Strudwick.

[Explore the tomb-chapel of Senneferi](#)

2 Belief in an afterlife

Why, it might be asked, did the ancient Egyptians in general, and Nebamun in particular, go to such extraordinary lengths to construct and decorate their own private tombs?

One of the most persistent modern myths about ancient Egypt is that it was a culture obsessed with death. In fact Egyptian art is full of the details of life as it was lived by human beings on Earth many thousands of years ago, and the artefacts that have come down to us indicate a keen appreciation of the good things in life, at least for the elite. At the same time, however, it would be futile to claim that ancient Egyptians were not concerned with ensuring their rebirth into the much-desired afterlife.

Key point

The important point is two-fold:

- that the modern distinction between sacred and secular scarcely applies, the whole of life was imbued with a spiritual dimension involving gods who were ever-present
- that an Egyptian conception of the afterlife was closely modelled on the fears and hopes, needs and desires experienced in life on Earth (Figure 6).



Figure 6 A table piled with food at banquet (EA 37986)

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We have to be careful not to impose a Christian conception of life on Earth and life after death (not to mention a modern secular concept of life on Earth and nothing after death) upon Egyptian representations of their beliefs about humans, gods and what happens to the human body (as well as to the more intangible aspects of life) after the individual has died.

One thing in particular is of note. In a Christian conception the body tends to carry negative connotations and to be associated with sin, whereas notions of a reward for a good life in heaven tend to be couched in rather more ethereal terms. A case in point would be the contrast between Dante's *Inferno* (Figure 7), where most of the torments are resolutely and literally corporeal, and his *Paradiso*, where the experience of ascending into heaven is described in predominantly abstract terms of light and colour. The ancient Egyptians, however, (and once again one has to make the qualification that here we are speaking about the well-to-do) seem to have combined an abstract 'spiritualised' element with an altogether more worldly aspect.



Figure 7 Domenico di Michelino, *Dante and his Poem*, 1465, fresco, Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence

Courtesy of Wikipedia

At one level, the ancient Egyptians held ideas of posthumously joining the cosmic cycle and becoming one of the 'imperishable stars', while at another, they regarded their afterlife as being, at least in part, an idealised continuation of life on Earth: food, drink, sexual love, luxurious surroundings, even down to the matter of having adequate supplies of servants to do all the work (Figure 8).



Figure 8 Continuation of an idealised life (EA 37986)

© Trustees of the British Museum

3 Daily life

The life-world of most of the population of ancient Egypt would have differed quite considerably from the image conjured up by museum exhibits of the glittering wealth of royal and elite burials, and indeed from the image promoted by Hollywood films. This is the case at both ends of the social spectrum. Gold tiaras were doubtless always at a premium, but Egyptian workers were not slaves either, lashed up and down the slopes of a pyramid by cruel overseers.

Because so much that has survived from ancient Egypt has been from elite burials, our picture of Egyptian life has been inflected in a particular direction. The truth is that until recently comparatively little was known about how ordinary people lived their lives. A better picture is beginning to emerge, both with the development of improved archaeological techniques but even more so with a disposition to ask the right kinds of question.

Watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about daily life in ancient Egypt.

Video content is not available in this format.



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3.1 A hierarchical society

Egyptian society, like its most famous monuments (and like virtually all pre-modern societies after the paleolithic) was pyramidal. While there was some scope for social mobility, there was not much. And unlike contemporary globalised capitalism, driven by a relentless dynamic of transformation and innovation, Egypt was driven by an overwhelming imperative to keep things stable, to preserve order, and prevent a descent into chaos. In fact the very notion of an 'Egyptian' identity seems to have involved a reflection

of the environment they inhabited: being defined against the threat of surrounding chaos, both natural in the form of the desert, and social, in the form of hostile neighbours.

At the head of human society was the king, the 'Pharaoh'. The king occupied a unique position in that, although human, he was also divine. He was the single point of contact between the world of humankind and the world of the gods. To the virtue of the king alone fell the task of preserving what was termed 'maat', meaning balance, order and harmony in human affairs.

Watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about the hierarchy of ancient Egyptian society.

Video content is not available in this format.



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The king was assisted by an administrative elite, including such all-powerful figures as a vizier and a treasurer who oversaw the running of the main offices of the state: justice, religion, the economy, the army. These were duplicated at regional levels. Egypt was divided into 42 nomes (provinces), each of which had its own administration with figures responsible for the various walks of life in their own areas. Within these geographical areas a similar sort of hierarchy held sway: in the top levels, literate administrative figures such as Nebamun, keeping the day-to-day organisation going. Below that was a layer of tradesmen and skilled craftsmen, including those who would work on the decoration of a private tomb-chapel. Below that again there was the majority of the population: the mass of workers, including those who worked on the land, either with crops or animals, as well as fishermen, and many servants.

3.2 Death rituals

A poor person in ancient Egypt would have been buried, with at most a modest ceremony involving immediate family and friends, in a relatively shallow grave in the sandy soil. A member of the elite, however, such as Nebamun the Grain-accountant in the Temple of Amun would have undergone the most extraordinarily elaborate and long drawn out rituals all aimed at securing a happy and serene afterlife in eternity.

The focus of these rituals, needless to say, was the process of mummification. The complex, multidimensional Egyptian conception of individual identity – made up, in addition to one's body, of 'ka' and 'ba' (akin to, though not the same as, our notions of 'immortal soul' and 'individual personality') but also the name and the shadow – required a well-preserved body for the other aspects to attach themselves to in the afterlife to produce the 'akh', the state of transfigured being in a condition of permanent beatitude. So after death, the body and internal organs (though puzzlingly to us, not the brain, whose function was not appreciated) were all preserved through an elaborate embalming process taking several weeks. The mummy was then placed in a coffin, itself covered with many images and texts aimed at helping the person on their journey through the underworld towards rebirth and eternal life in the realm of Osiris where, in effect, time stopped. Ceremonies and spells known to us as the Book of the Dead accompanied this process, although their other name, the Spells of Going Forth by Day, better captures the sense of rebirth involved. In the generation after Nebamun, illustrations from these spells were often painted on the tomb-chapel walls as well (Figure 9).



Figure 9 The funeral procession and burial of the scribe Ani from his Book of the Dead (EA 10470.5)

© Trustees of the British Museum

It was this complex thing, part physical object, part sacred text, and accompanied by an equally complex complement of grave goods ranging from food to furniture, that was eventually placed in the tomb. Below the decorated tomb-chapel that had been painstakingly prepared during the owner's lifetime, the tomb-owner would live on in his 'house of eternity'.

4 Tomb-chapels

In this section you will look at the purpose, layout and decoration of Eighteenth Dynasty tomb-chapels.

Museums all over the world are full of objects from ancient Egypt (Figures 10–12). Some of the large sculptures are from public sites such as temple facades where they would have been seen by many people taking part in the festivals that marked the Egyptian calendar. But most of the smaller sculptures, the wall paintings and even the other kinds of objects from daily life such as jewellery, furniture, utensils and tools – not to mention, of course, coffins and mummies – have been taken from tombs: the burial sites of an elite wealthy enough to command the resources to construct memorials to themselves.



Figure 10 Oval fruit-basket of woven palm fibre with lid; contains figs and dates (EA 5396)

© Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 11 Wooden cosmetic-spoon (EA 5954)

© Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 12 Ivory scribal palette bearing rough Hieratic jottings in black ink (EA 5524)

© Trustees of the British Museum

The fact that so much of this material comes from tombs means it has a peculiar status. Those objects that have come from the burial chamber itself, such as goods to accompany the deceased on his journey through the underworld, were not meant to be seen again by human eyes. The most well-known of these caches came, of course, from the tomb of Tutankhamun.

A good part of the allure of ancient Egypt comes from this resurrected gold: jewels, funerary masks, coffins and so forth. Because of the power of this legend of the Egyptian

tomb, exemplified above all by Tutankhamun, there can be misunderstanding about Egyptian art. No less a figure than Gombrich, in his canonical *Story of Art*, writes, directly underneath an illustration of one of the paintings from Nebamun's tomb, that this was 'an art which was meant to be seen by no-one but the dead man's soul'. But the tombs themselves, concealed underground and never meant to be opened again, were only part of an enterprise that included a much more public dimension: than that of the tomb-chapel. Decorations such as those from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun were very much meant to be seen. They were in fact a focal point for gatherings of relatives and friends, a hinge almost, between life in this world and eternal life, carrying great responsibility for the success of the transition.

4.1 The west bank of the Nile

The area of the desert escarpment on the west bank of the Nile adjacent to Thebes is extraordinarily striking (Figure 13). Seen from the relatively lush green area by the river, the bare mountains glow pink in the morning sun and later in the day achieve a powerful visual effect as the sun sinks behind them. The area had been sacred since the Old Kingdom, not only because of these effects of the light on the rock but possibly also because of the curious natural formation of the peak that dominates the area, which resembles a natural pyramid (Figure 14).



Figure 13 The west bank escarpment looking towards the Valley of the Queens

Courtesy of R. B. Parkinson



Figure 14 A view of the Theban peak

Courtesy of R. B. Parkinson

By the Middle Kingdom the West Bank site had become a major cemetery, and a festival route led to it from the temple of Karnak on the east bank of the Nile. In the New Kingdom there evolved an extensive necropolis, the best-known part of which is known to us as the Valley of the Kings, behind which rises the Theban peak. The Valley of the Kings contained royal tombs, of which 63 have now been discovered. Other non-royal burial sites developed nearby in the area around the valley below the royal memorial temples. There were several festivals during the year, the two most important being the New Year festival and the summertime Festival of the Valley. During this latter festival, the sacred bark of Amun was brought out of its temple at Karnak on the east bank of the Nile, over to the west bank, and carried in a procession. The god was taken to the sanctuary of the goddess Hathor in the royal funerary temples in the 'Valley' of Deir el-Bahri (Figure 15).



Figure 15 A view of Deir el-Bahri

Courtesy of R. B. Parkinson

In the description of Melinda Hartwig, there 'Amun joined with the goddess to renew the fertility of the land. The bark spent the night floating on a lake of gold surrounded by four basins filled with milk, around which were placed burning torches. In the morning the torches were extinguished in the milk, signifying the return of the dead to Hathor, and the barks of Amun set out again, this time to return to their home at Karnak'.

The festival went on for two days during which time the private tomb-chapels became focal points for social gatherings. The chapels were lit up and feasts were held inside in the presence of the painted banquets depicted on the walls. The deceased's name was recited and prayers were said according to the instructions of the hieroglyphs that were part of the painted decoration. Many hundreds of these private tombs have now been discovered in this west bank necropolis. One of these contained the now lost tomb-chapel of Nebamun. The exact location is no longer known, but evidence suggests that it was in the area of Dra Abu el-Naga (Figure 16), in the northern half of the necropolis, to the north of the Valley.

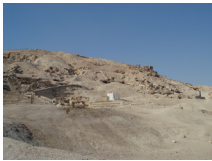


Figure 16 Part of Dra Abu el-Naga

Courtesy of R. B. Parkinson

5 Tomb layout

Typically one of these tombs would consist of three parts. First, as one approached, one would walk through a whole village of tombs before arriving at an entrance area cut into the hillside. This consisted of a high wall surrounding a doorway, with a sheltered courtyard in front of it. Tombs were ideally built on an east–west axis, the directions of the rising and setting sun respectively. The east represented the land of the living, the west the land of the dead. The entrance into the courtyard would be from the east (Figure 17). The door into the tomb-chapel itself would be wooden, with a decorated stone surround and above it was often a niche for a statue, facing the east. Usually a frieze of so-called funerary cones, set in the wall with the round end visible, ran around the top of the wall just below the cornice. The importance of these is that they were stamped with the name and titles of the tomb-owner and family members.



Figure 17 A reconstruction drawing of the outer parts of a Theban tomb-chapel, showing the courtyard and facade decorated with funerary cones

Drawing by Claire Thorne after Kampp, *Die Thebanische Nekropole* (Mainz 1996), fig. 67. © Trustees of the British Museum

Inside the door was a passage, rectangular in section, and either more or less steep depending on the terrain, but basically leading either into the hill or below the ground (Figure 18). This passage led to what was usually the first of two rooms. This first room was normally transverse to the entrance passageway and was decorated with paintings on all its walls. The ceiling was painted too, often in a pattern imitating decorative textiles. Beyond this room would be another passageway leading from the middle of the opposite wall into the second room. This led away longitudinally, giving an overall T-shape to the tomb-chapel. This design is the commonest, though there are variations – sometimes a single room, and sometimes even a larger room with columns holding up the roof. But the T-shape is the norm (Figure 19). At the far end of the second room, that is to say at the westernmost end of the chapel, there would be a niche containing a statue of the tomb-owner and his wife.

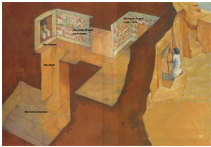


Figure 18 Impression of tomb-chapel layout

A reconstruction by R. B. Parkinson. From Meredith Hooper, *The Tomb of Nebamun: Explore an Ancient Egyptian Tomb* (London 2008), pp. 10–11.

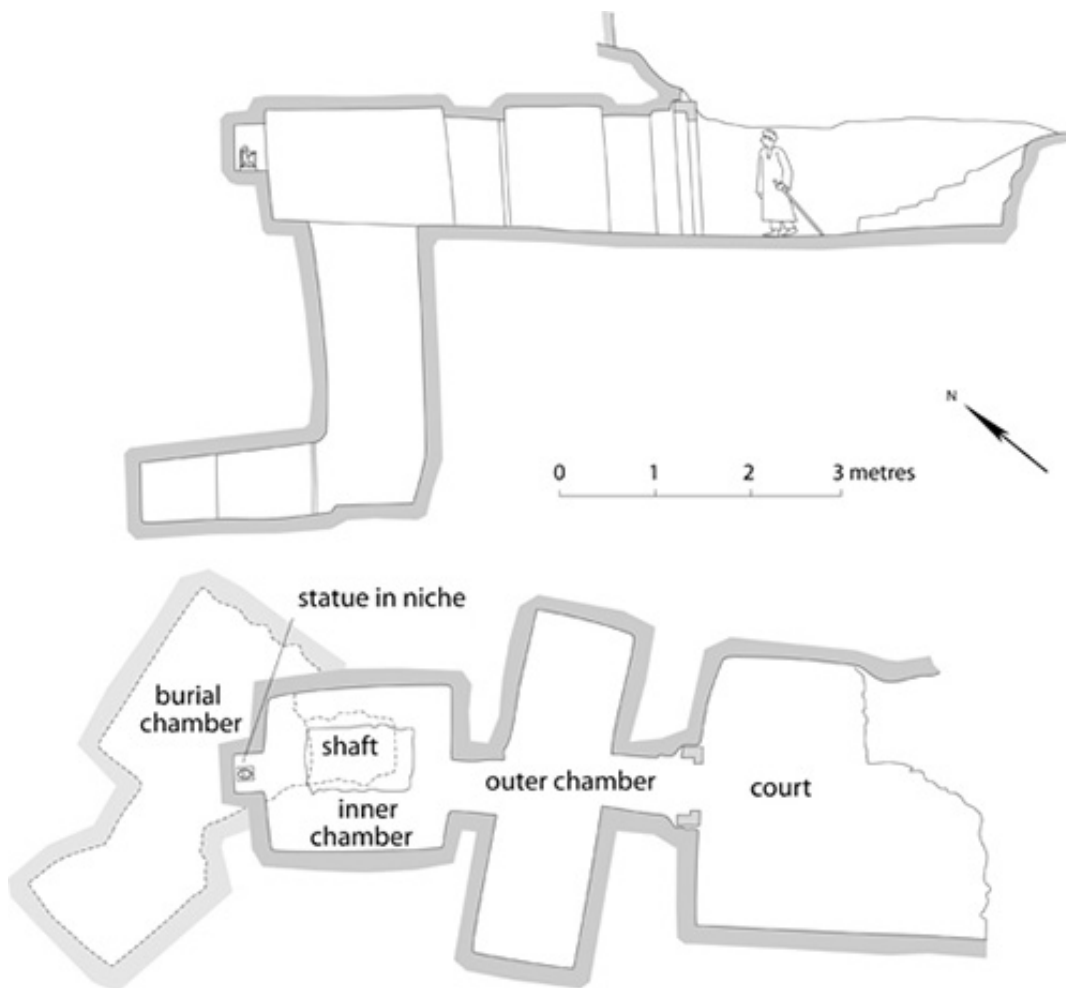


Figure 19 Plan and elevation of the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb-chapel of Nakht

Drawing by Claire Thorne after Norman Davies, *The Tomb of Nakht at Thebes* (New York 1917), 36. © Trustees of the British Museum

Somewhere below the floor of one of the rooms of the chapel, or even the courtyard, there would be a vertical shaft leading down to the actual burial chamber. This contained the coffin and the burial goods, but most often remained undecorated. The chamber was sealed with either a wooden door or stones, and the passage was backfilled after the burial to prevent access. Because the tombs were an important family site, however, they could be re-opened for the addition of further burials in subsequent years.

The tomb-complex, then, was on three levels: the upper level, the courtyard, with its entrance leading from the outside world into the interior. The next level slightly below ground containing the two decorated rooms of the chapel, and the third level, deeper underground containing the coffin and mummy itself. It is important to grasp that this

layout is not merely physical, not merely contingent. The layout of the tomb-chapel, and the tomb overall, in effect figures the journey of the deceased towards the afterlife. Each level had a different spiritual focus: the first, the courtyard, on life and the worship of the sun god; the second, the tomb-chapel, on the deceased tomb-owner his status and achievements; the third, the burial chamber itself, on Osiris and the underworld.

In one remarkable drawing, depicting a tomb during a funeral, the layout of such a tomb is preserved on an ostracon (Figure 20). The depicted scene shows, at the top, a priest and a group of weeping women. In the centre a figure is descending the shaft. At the bottom can be seen another figure with the coffin, as well as (to the left) a jackal-headed priest and (to the right) a chamber already containing two coffins.



Figure 20 Ostracon depicting a tomb (5886)

Courtesy of The Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester

6 Tomb decoration

The tomb-chapel was filled, practically from floor to ceiling, with painted decorations and accompanying hieroglyphic inscriptions (Figure 21). On the basis of a study of decorated Eighteenth Dynasty Theban tomb-chapels undertaken in the 1980s, Lise Manniche drew up a summary of the paintings they would typically contain:

- representation of the reigning king
- scenes relating to the office of the tomb-owner
- the tomb-owner making offerings
- the tomb-owner fishing and fowling
- hunting in the desert
- agricultural scenes
- wine making
- offering bringers
- banquets
- the funeral procession
- the deceased's voyage to Abydos
- rituals before the mummy, including the ceremony of Opening of the Mouth.

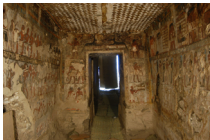


Figure 21 Long hall of Theban Tomb-chapel 147

Courtesy of Boyo Ockinga, Macquarie University, Australia

Watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about interpreting Nebamun paintings.

Video content is not available in this format.



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One of the effects of this information is to underline just how much is missing from Nebamun's tomb-chapel. The surviving fragments are, of course, parts of paintings; but more than that, many of the paintings have simply not survived at all. Neither has the sculpture of Nebamun and his wife, which would have been placed in a niche at the far western end of the rooms (Figure 22), nor the stela which would have contained a biographical text.



Figure 22 Statue of a couple from a Theban tomb-chapel (EA 2301)

© Trustees of the British Museum

Even if not all of these were present in any one tomb, it is easy to see how little of the decoration of Nebamun's tomb has survived. What has seems mostly to be from the outer room, which normally contained the scenes concerning the life of the deceased person. Very little has come down to us from the inner passageway and room containing the scenes of the funeral and entry into the afterlife; and it is likely these would have been there. Manniche writes that 'there is scarcely a single tomb of those with completely preserved decoration that omits it'.

6.1 Tomb graffiti

The decorated tomb-chapel, therefore, was a liminal space, a crucial threshold between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Its public rooms formed the chapel in

which family members and other visitors could continue to perform ceremonies and remembrances for the deceased, to assist him on his journey towards eternity.

That there was an important aesthetic dimension to this role is clear from surviving ancient evidence of viewers' responses, which have been preserved in the form of graffiti. The beauty and accomplishment of the decorations played a significant role in eliciting the desired responses.

You can read four of these now. They are Eighteenth Dynasty graffiti on the walls of a tomb-chapel that was already 400 years old at the time of the inscription (Figure 23). It belonged to a relative of the Vizier Intefiqer.

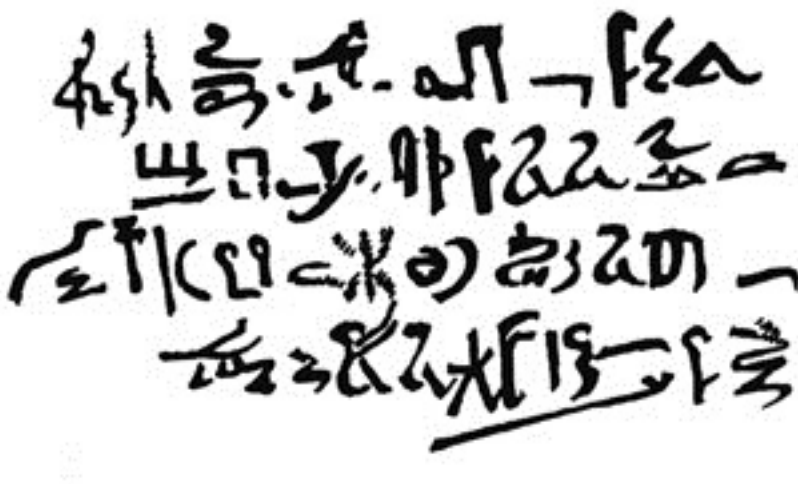


Figure 23 One of the graffiti

From R. B. Parkinson, *Voices From Ancient Egypt* (London 1991), p. 148.

The scribe Im[...son of ...] came to see this tomb [of Sobekneferu] With
<his> friend Hotep...

The scribe Bak <came> To see <this> tomb <of> the time of Sobekneferu.
He found it like heaven in its interior.[...with the sun shining in it; And he said
'May heaven rain fresh myrrh And sprinkle incense Upon this temple of that
Khufu, true of voice'.]

The scribe Djehuti, true of voice, came To see this tomb of the time of
Kheperkare – may he live for all Time.

The scribe Amenemhat, Son of the Elder of the Portal Djehutimes, Who was
born of Intef, came To see [this] tomb [of the Lord Vizier] Intefiqer. It was
pleasant to his heart...[...a monument(?)] which exists, Excellent for all time.
His name shall exist [for eternity...] [...with] offerings in it, Saying: 'An
offering which the king gives to Osiris [Foremost of the Westerners] [and

Amen-Ra], and the gods who are lords of the necropolis: Invocation offerings of bread and beer, Flesh and fowl, Alabaster and linen, Incense and unguent, All the goodly pure things, Which heaven gives, and earth creates, And the inundation brings, as his offering To the spirit of Intefiqer, true of voice!

7 Symbolism

Just as the paintings in the tomb were not simple depictions of flowers, food, animals, recreation and work activities, but also carriers of a superogatory symbolic range of meaning concerning progress into the afterlife, so too the tomb itself was not merely a physical space into which the mummies were placed. Like a Christian church in the shape of a cross, it too had a symbolic dimension. The organisation of the space, no less than its painted decoration, represented the transition from life to death, or more accurately, from life into the afterlife.

Watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about the purpose of tomb-chapels.

Video content is not available in this format.



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Melinda Hartwig, who has made a recent detailed study of Eighteenth Dynasty tomb-chapels, makes clear their great importance in ensuring the transition of the 'justified' individual into the afterlife. Their functioning had two distinct aspects, albeit connected: on the one hand to project the deceased through to the afterlife, on the other to commemorate his existence to those still living – the more to ensure that they keep up the various forms of commemoration that alone can ensure successful entry into the afterlife. 'Remembrance was vital for the time after death, because the dead who were venerated and commemorated were retained in the community of ordered being. Those who were not commemorated were cast off into the land of non-being and relegated to an existence as ghosts.'

In short, the whole success of his 'afterlife project', so to speak, for any one individual depended on the efficacy of his tomb-chapel: both the beauty of the paintings and the power of their accompanying texts to generate the necessary admiration, prayers and recitations of his name, and the stranger, magical sense in which the images could assume the reality of the things they depicted in order to assure the spirit's survival in the underworld. There was a tradition of visiting old tombs to admire their paintings, so that

the quality and beauty of the paintings – that is, their purely aesthetic aspect – was integral to their memorial aspect.

The tomb-chapel is in effect an absolutely critical life-support system (or more aptly, afterlife-support system) for the akh, the transfigured being, on its journey to eternal life (Figure 24). There could hardly be a more compelling reason for getting the decoration right.



Figure 24 The eternal life of a tomb-chapel (EA 37977, EA 37978, EA 37980, EA 37983, EA 37986)

© Trustees of the British Museum.

Summary

This week you learnt that we know very little about Nebamun himself, although the fragments of the wall paintings from his tomb are well known. He must, however, have been wealthy to have undertaken such a project as a tomb-chapel. You then explored the purpose and nature of tomb-chapels in general, before considering how the Egyptian conception of the afterlife was closely modelled on the desires and experiences of life. You can now go to Week 5.

Week 5 The creative process

Introduction

To fully appreciate the paintings in Nebamun's tomb-chapel, we need to do more than look at them closely. We need to look further into the questions of how they were actually made, and beyond that, to try to see what is at stake in the practice of Egyptian art. This includes a grasp of how different that practice was from what we understand by the idea of 'art' today.

This week begins with some thoughts on modern thinking about art and what defines 'art', and then examines the paradoxical question of whether an item is a work of art or a cultural product. Next you will explore some of the practical aspects of the creative process in relation to tomb-chapel art.

1 Modern thinking about art

Throughout this course, our subject is ancient Egyptian art. But even to say this is not unproblematic, and it is useful to consider some of the implications of what we are doing when we say we are studying the art of ancient Egypt.

In modern western societies 'art' tends to be regarded as an open concept. It has come to be seen as paradigmatic of a certain sort of freedom (which itself can be viewed in either extremely positive or extremely negative terms: one person's liberty can be another's licence; one person's innovation another's incomprehensibility or pretentiousness). It is hedged around with related ideologies of 'creativity', 'self-expression', 'originality', to name only some of the most obvious, and this despite its increasing domination by the marketplace. All of these self-images are focused on another adjacent idea: that of the 'artist', the type of person who makes art and to whom those notions of 'originality', 'creativity' and so forth are attributed.

This image, which is itself historical, is derived from Romanticism and Modernism.

But the picture is further complicated by the fact that much contemporary art, with antecedents in the art of the late twentieth century, involves a critique of those widely accepted modernist ideas. There is no single accepted term for this type of art. Some common labels, often negatively inflected, have included Conceptual art and Post-modernist art.

In contemporary society very many different types of thing can be included in the category of art, as well as things that are not really 'things' at all, such as performances, installations, even 'ideas'. Doris Salcedo's *Shibboleth* is one such example (Figure 1). This is quite a recent development, one that came to fruition only in the second half of the twentieth century. Not long ago the concept of art would have been restricted to a narrower class of objects: some two-dimensional and taking the form of drawings, prints and paintings, some three-dimensional objects usually of cast metal or of carved stone and wood.



Figure 1 Doris Salcedo, *Shibboleth*

© Tate, London 2008

This expansion in the idea of art brings problems in its train when we begin to refer to the 'art' of other cultures, especially remote or ancient cultures. On the one hand, it is the expansion and openness of the concept that permits its ever-wider application, but on the other it starts to be applied to practices that share little if anything at all with the practice of modern or contemporary 'art'.

1.1 Exercising artistic skill

One of the commonest traditional ideas about art is that it involves the exercise of some kind of skill. It is as if a craft skill, woodcarving for example, or goldsmithing, could be taken to such a pitch of perfection that the resulting object transcended its original category and ascended into the category of 'art'.

The post-Renaissance Academic tradition was largely about codifying the kinds of skills in the manipulation of a relatively restricted range of media that could result in producing a work of art. By way of distinction from 'mere' craft skill, however, the practice also involved the exercise of intellectual control: one thinks of 'learned' artists such as Poussin or Rubens. The concept of 'fine art' or 'high art' that was in place by the eighteenth century was quite exclusive – excluding many practices such as the 'lesser arts' or crafts that previously had counted as art, and by extension also excluding many practices of visual culture from around the world, past and present alike.

By contrast, the avant-garde tradition of 'modern art', and subsequently the contemporary development of so-called 'postmodernist' art have shown how the category of 'art' can survive and prosper even when divested of any craft-related concept of skill. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries learning and skill became the negative signifiers of academicism, increasingly trumped by individualistic notions of sincerity, spontaneity and feeling. In the later twentieth century, manual or craft skills became widely associated with more or less archaic 'artisanal' forms of production, and artists turned to contemporary modes such as industrial fabrication and mass production, or even the rejection of material production at all.

The expansion in the concept of art should have made us sensitive about offering exclusive definitions of what is and isn't, can and can't be 'art'. Nonetheless, it is worth emphasising two important features of our modern thinking about art in order to highlight the differences and difficulties we encounter with ancient Egyptian art: autonomy and artistic authors.

1.2 Autonomy

An important component of the modern concept of art – one that has been subject to considerable critical debate, positive and negative alike – is that of art's 'autonomy'.

At its most basic, this is the idea that art is an independent practice: that it does not, or should not, have to be validated by political, religious or moral criteria.

This is not to claim that art should not be 'about' anything, but that it does tend to set its own agenda, and has to be judged for how it stands up as art, rather than for its political or ethical probity. In one sense, of course, that is merely to push the problem back a stage: it begs the question of what to judge something 'as art' means. But the point here is merely to see some of what it does not mean in modern cultures: it does not mean that a work of art has to be morally upright, as it might have been for a Victorian; nor that it has to exhibit a 'correct' political tendency as it might for a Stalinist (Figure 2).



Figure 2 A relief from the Soviet military cemetery in Warsaw showing workers greeting victorious soldiers.

Courtesy of Wikipedia

This whole question is hedged around with difficulties, of course. The type of twentieth-century art known as ‘Socialist Realism’ was denied the status of legitimate art in the West during the Cold War, and instead was regarded as propaganda for the Communist states that promoted it. This at the same time as ‘autonomous’ art was promoted as symbolic of Western freedoms. Similarly there is no question that the cultural products we call ‘Renaissance art’ were variously in the service of the Church or the prince; or indeed that the ancient ‘art’ in Nebamun’s tomb-chapel was propaganda for the ideal world view of a social elite.

1.3 Artistic authors

A second key feature concerns the point that when we think of art, we immediately have to think about who makes it. That is, we have to consider the identity of the artist. By this, we do not just mean ‘male’ or ‘female’, ‘white’ or ‘black’, but what kind of artist this is: a ‘modernist’; a ‘postmodernist’; a ‘pre-modernist’, even. For each of these leads to a radically different relationship between the work of art and its spectator.

Watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about the artists who painted Nebamun’s tomb-chapel.

Video content is not available in this format.



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In our post-Romantic culture, we tend to conceive artistic authors in resolutely individual terms. One traditional idea associated with the concept of the artist (an idea very much contested today), is that of the 'genius'. A related series of factors, again now subject to academic challenge but together constituting something like a 'commonsense' of the notion of the artist, include ideas of 'creativity', 'sincerity', 'originality', 'authenticity'.

Clearly this idea does not fit very well with, say, a Renaissance workshop. Not that this prevents certain Renaissance 'masters' of workshops being considered as paradigms of the artist (Titian in Italy, Cranach in Northern Europe, are cases in point). But it gets more difficult when we go back to medieval times, and the names of workshop masters tend not to be known to us. And it gets very difficult indeed when we encounter cultures whose conception of the individual, of the individual's relation to society, let alone of ideas of creativity – not to mention self-expression – are radically dissimilar from ours.

There is no point bringing to bear the criteria one would employ to appreciate a seventeenth-century painting by Le Brun to a late nineteenth-century painting by Van Gogh. Likewise, there is no point applying the criteria one would bring to the Van Gogh to a contemporary installation by Louise Bourgeois. So in a world where Tracey Emin is an artist (a fully accredited member of the Royal Academy), in what sense are the makers of Nebamun's tomb-chapel 'artists'?

2 A paradox and its consequences

Modern day thinking means we have to be very careful when discussing concepts such as 'ancient Egyptian art'. On one side, as we have just seen, it is the very openness of our modern idea of art that permits us to regard as 'art' many things that were made for very different reasons. We regard an African mask as 'art' (Figure 3), but it is unlikely that a conventional middle-class Victorian would agree with us.



Figure 3 Songye mask, 19th century Democratic Republic of Congo (AF 1.2397)

© Trustees of the British Museum

The nineteenth-century curators at the British Museum did not include Egyptian sculpture or the paintings from Nebamun's tomb-chapel in their category of 'fine art', but we do.

The question of the artistic status of the sculptures and paintings of ancient Egypt much exercised connoisseurs in the early nineteenth century, and the reasons for their quandary say much about what the concept of 'art' has come to mean in modern Western societies, and what key values the notion of a 'Western canon' embraces.

In 1819 a leading Trustee of the British Museum Sir Joseph Banks wrote to Henry Salt, who had offered for sale his collection of Egyptian antiquities:

Though in truth we are here much satisfied with the Memnon [i.e. the colossal bust of Ramses II (Figure 4)], and consider it as a chef d'oeuvre of Egyptian sculpture; yet we have not placed that statue among the works of Fine Art. It stands in the Egyptian rooms. Whether any statue that has been found in Egypt

can be brought into competition with the grand works of the Townley Gallery remains to be proved.

The Townley Gallery housed a collection of ancient Roman sculptures assembled by Sir Charles Townley.



Figure 4 The colossal bust of Ramses II known as the 'Younger Memnon' (EA 19)

© Trustees of the British Museum

In similar vein, the *New Monthly Magazine* wrote in 1821 that:

Eastern style [including Egyptian] ... contrary to the Western, depended upon bulk rather than beauty; upon strength and uniformity, and upon massiveness of light and shade, rather than upon elegance of individual parts and the graceful proportions of a whole, for its magnificence. (p. 617)

Likewise, the *Annals of the Fine Arts* claimed:

They bear the character of the infancy of art, rude in their design, yet imposing in their massiveness and extraordinary size; they attest more to the vast power and perseverance of the bodily powers, than great exertions of a cultivated mind.

The same position was maintained by Peter Patmore in his *Guide to the Beauties of the British Museum* published in 1826. For him, the arts of Egypt 'exercise an almost painful and oppressive effect on the imagination' by the emphasis they suggest on 'physical power'. They exhibit a 'want of character', they are 'without any individual expression'.

It is not the craftsmanship that is disparaged, quite the reverse. For Patmore writing about the bust of Rameses II states 'nothing can be more beautifully executed, in point of mere workmanship, than this noble fragment'. What is lacking in Egyptian art is something more profound according to Patmore who writes 'There is no life in it – no character – no expression ... there is nothing individualised about it'. He clinches his assertion by claiming 'It is not a piece of sculpture, but a piece of stone'.

- Look again at the quotations above. What would you pick out as the key terms in this doubt about the ability of ancient Egyptian work to be regarded as 'art', and what is it contrasted with?
- One important point is that 'art' is seen as involving something over and above 'craftsmanship'. The manual skill involved in making the Egyptian pieces is acknowledged. But what it is seen as lacking is a range of qualities to do with individuality – life, character, expression.

Rather than the mind, Egyptian art is regarded as speaking to the body. It is 'rude', dating only from the 'infancy' of art. It suggests physical power rather than a cultivated mind, and by extension, the 'cultivated mind' can feel no human sympathy for it. All of these qualities are associated with 'the East'. And by contrast, all those values that are celebrated, such as individuality of expression and mind, are identified with the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome, the roots of the 'Western' tradition.

This is a very different situation from the one in which we find ourselves. In the early nineteenth century, the dual Christian/Classical tradition, rooted in Greece, defined the western canon of art and either completely excluded or at best marginalised everything else. Whereas for us, the concept of art has become, so to speak, omnivorous. We can apply it to miscellaneous collections of objects, videos, fleeting actions and disparate installations as well as paintings and sculptures, and these things can be from anywhere around the globe.

Furthermore, we have no difficulty in applying it retrospectively to a range of objects, that when they were made were not conceived under the rubric 'art' as we now employ it, and to a range of skills and activities the exercise of which constituted nothing like an independent practice of art on our model.

2.1 Art or cultural product?

But now that we have established that point, our thinking has to take a different turn. On the other side, we have to ask: Is it simply a mistake, then to call certain products of ancient Egypt 'art' or to refer to certain ancient Egyptian people as 'artists'?

- Is it a mistake to use the term 'art' to refer to the cultural products of any society separated from our own by either time or space?
- The answer surely has to be 'no'.

Now read on to discover arguments about why.

From the Renaissance onwards, European collectors had been displaying the products of non-Western cultures as 'cabinets of curiosities'. By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, in the wake of the Enlightenment, early museums proper were beginning to display material evidence from around the world as part of a general project of scientific understanding. These objects were displayed as anthropological artefacts – the material residue of forms of life that were very different from the normative cultures of the West. Little or no distinction was made between the decoration on an object and the object itself, nor between objects akin to paintings and sculptures and more directly utilitarian objects such as cooking utensils, musical instruments, weapons or even forms of transport such as boats.

Whatever they were, such objects were not the kinds of thing that would be found in museums containing the art of the Western tradition: that is, the art of the Renaissance, of the post-Renaissance Academic tradition, and – crucially – the ‘art’ of the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Fashion plate showing ladies and gentleman in the British Museum with classical Greek art, c.1832 (PPA 1539)

Trustees of the British Museum

2.2 Towards acceptance

It was above all the artists and critics of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century avant-garde (figures such as Gauguin, Kirchner, Brancusi, Matisse, and Picasso) who began to view the works of certain non-Western societies – principally Africa and Oceania – as ‘art’, on largely formal grounds. Thus was born the category ‘Primitive art’. In the vision of the avant-garde, ‘Primitive art’ was regarded as a receptacle of ‘authenticity’, of expressive power, deriving from a life lived close to nature, untrammelled by the distorting pressures and conventions of Western ‘civilisation’. The category tended to include, moreover, not just contemporary exotic cultures but the products of non-Classical, archaic societies.

By the second half of the twentieth century, the category of ‘Primitive art’ had widely come to be regarded as untenable – client to a variety of misconceptions of non-Western ways of life that were themselves symptomatic of an imperialist outlook, and in their extreme manifestations more or less racist. But the emergence of a post-colonial situation and an increasingly integrated global economy, albeit largely under continuing western hegemony, did not, of course, mean that objects such as, say, African masks, that had come to be regarded as examples (indeed, perhaps even as ‘masterpieces’) of ‘Primitive art’, could now return to the comparatively lowly status of the anthropological artefact. Quite the reverse. The widely accepted demand now was that such things be regarded as ‘works of art’ outright: that their formal and material differences from the accepted products of the Western canon be regarded as just that – differences within a global canon of ‘art’ rather than difference from the canon of art.

2.3 The nature of artistic practice

A related aspect of the problem concerns the nature of the characteristic range of practices in question, for all known human societies have evolved versions of these practices. The paradox is that it took the development of the western category of ‘art’ to the point that literally anything could be classifiable as a ‘work of art’ for the category to embrace the cultural products of the whole of humankind. While ‘art’ remained an exclusive category, subject to the exercise of certain restricted skills, on certain restricted materials, to express certain restricted themes, it could not perforce embrace practices

that operated in different ways upon different material to express different ideas. Only when art's exclusivity was transcended could it become a de facto universal category. Once it has become that, it would be completely perverse to deny the status of art to, say, a four thousand year old image of a man that does not conform to the classical canon of western representation, produced anonymously, for ends we imperfectly understand (let us call him Nebamun) (Figure 6).



Figure 6 Nebamun (EA 37977)

© Trustees of the British Museum

We live in a relativistic and commonly accepted liberal culture. In the second half of the twentieth century, partly as a reaction against the universalising claims of modernist theory that all art could be traced down to a common formal essence of 'significant form', recent art history and cultural theory has put great emphasis on concepts of 'difference'. In the name of diversity, and as a form of intellectual, even political, resistance to the Eurocentric bias that was often implicit in the notion of 'humanism', many art historians have sought to emphasise the difference between canons of representation. To give a crude example, historians have ceased to disparage Indian or Chinese art for its failure to conform to Western decorum, as their nineteenth-century predecessors so often did.

However, this openness to the relativity of cultural and aesthetic value can also result in a blindness to the peculiarity of what we are doing when we 'appreciate', or even feel 'interest' in the products of remote cultures. How do we do it? How do we recognise similarity-in-difference? Thierry de Duve once suggested a notion of 'transcendental materialism' to get at this point. Whether or not that concept holds water, there can be little doubt that an over-emphasis on relativity and difference often makes its gains at the expense of notions of a common or shared 'humanity'. Yet when we encounter phenomena such as ancient Egyptian art, one of the most important things that seems to bridge the gulf between ourselves and the makers of these ancient pieces is precisely such a common humanity. Were there only 'difference' between us, it would be hard to make any sense at all of things so remote in both time and space. The miracle is that these remote things are precisely not completely alien.

John Baines has convincingly established that the practices we refer to as 'ancient Egyptian art' were not completely client to other social demands – to do with religion, for example, or social stratification, or exercising power. There is enough going on that is specific to them to warrant the claim that there existed a relatively independent tradition of 'art' making, involving the exercise of aesthetic judgement at the levels of both production and consumption, and extending over centuries. 'Egyptian art' was, so to speak, a relatively autonomous practice within the constellation of Egyptian culture in the broadest sense, that is, including religion, politics, daily life, and so on.

However, it is probably mistaken to conceive of 'art' as a universal concept, if only because of the evolutionary vicissitudes and differences to which the various products and practices of art have been subject. It is patently clear that even as we talk about and admire 'ancient Egyptian art', it is not 'our' art. It is not, then, that there is an 'essence' of art centred upon exercising aesthetic judgement over and above making merely utilitarian

things, but that there is enough of an overlap – an ever-changing overlap, it must be said – between widely different practices to permit a category such as ‘art’ to be used sensibly to describe a performance by Joseph Beuys talking to a dead hare and a three thousand year-old fragment of painting from a tomb-chapel on the west bank of the Nile.

It may be useful here to think of Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘family resemblances’. To take a simple example, Wittgenstein pointed out that there was no essence of the concept of a ‘game’, but that the various things we conceive of as ‘games’ were united in a manner analogous to the way in which related people exhibit a ‘family resemblance’. So too with art. All human societies have evolved practices and products we can now regard as ‘art’, but this does not mean there is an ‘essence’ of art that manifests itself in different ways, that ‘art’ is some transcendent universal – only that there is a family of related practices which, in this culture (which, of course, has in important respects now become globalised), we have collected under the concept ‘art’.

2.4 Returning to Nebamun

The situation we are in, then, is this: we have to recognise that despite the fact that it is a painting of a sort, an ancient Egyptian tomb-painting is a categorically different kind of thing than a painting produced in the West during the last two or three hundred years when our concept of ‘art’ developed and painting became regarded as its paradigm. And by the same token, we have to accept that whoever made those ancient paintings, they were not ‘artists’ in our sense of the word.

Nonetheless, we unhesitatingly apply many of the same criteria to this ancient painting as we do to works of art in our own culture, both in terms of its manufacture and in terms of our emotional responses to it. We admire the skill of the ‘artists’ who made them. But more than that, in contrast to the gentlemen scholars of the early nineteenth century, we do feel able to extend a ‘human sympathy’ to some of these things – as if our conception of humankind has diversified along with our conception of its ‘art’. Even though the ancient painters would have had no framework to grasp the peculiarities of the modern conception of the ‘artist’, we increasingly feel that there is enough going on in terms of independent decision-making and insight on the part of individuals, of representational complexity and indeed a measure of knowledge and self-conscious modification of a relatively autonomous tradition of activity, to call them ‘artists’ making ‘art’.

Video content is not available in this format.



Watch this video in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about the wall paintings as art.

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At one level, the Nebamun tomb-chapel paintings are not the kind of things we understand by our term 'art' and the people who made them were not 'artists' in our sense. Yet in another sense, of course, they were: our category is flexible and open – as the vast range of books, films and even courses like this one testify. We simply have to be alert and try not to carry over aspects of the meanings of such words as 'art' and 'artist' that do not fit the case. Even though the Nebamun paintings are paintings of what was once modern life, and even though they seem to show that life in vivid naturalistic detail, they are not Impressionist paintings, and their authors were not Degas or Renoir, transplanted back three thousand years from the banks of the Seine to the banks of the Nile. But for us, despite all that, they are ancient Egyptian art, and their authors were ancient Egyptian artists. So long as we accept that art is a mobile category, no harm is done; the problems arise when we transport criteria from one historical or geographical situation to another where they do not apply.

There is nothing to be gained by withholding the concept from ancient funerary paintings because they were made for different purposes by craftsmen who did not even have a word for 'art' in our sense; just as there is no point in saying that they are 'real' art, evidence of an unquenchable human drive to aesthetic expression, shared for example by Rembrandt and Van Gogh, whereas a urinal or a pickled shark in an art gallery isn't.

3 Preparing the tomb

When a wealthy individual decided it was time to begin building a tomb for himself and members of his family, the first job would have been to engage a team of workers and to find a site – and to determine its approximate size. This process would have varied, depending on the circumstances of the individual, the scope of the task, and the physical conditions imposed by the prospective site. It is worth underlining that the workers were not slaves. They were appointed according to their skills, and they would have received payment, probably in grain.

First of all the chambers of the tombs had to be hollowed out of the living rock. Even though a relatively small private tomb was a minor enterprise compared to major state building and quarrying projects, this in itself was no mean feat. Remember that we are talking about bronze-age technology and tools made of relatively soft metal such as copper and bronze would soon lose their edge (Figure 7). Much of the work would have been done by using harder stones, such as flint. The labour-intensive and time-consuming nature of even this preparatory work should not be overlooked.



Figure 7 Bronze chisel (EA 15740)

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These factors have a consequence for the decorated tomb-chapels. On the west bank of the Nile at Thebes, much of the stone into which they were cut was not of very good quality in terms of hardness or fine grain. As such it was not very often suitable for carving even shallow reliefs. Furthermore, as restoration of the backs of the paintings has recently revealed, the hollowed-out rock surface as it was left was not smooth enough to paint on directly. The solution was to coat the relatively rough hewn walls with plaster (Figure 8).



Figure 8 Preparing and painting the wall. Illustration by Chris Molan from *The Tomb of Nebamun*, The British Museum Press

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The Nebamun tomb makes use of two different kinds of plaster. First there is a coarse, thick kind of render, made from Nile mud incorporating various bits of vegetation, most notably short lengths of straw. This would be applied to the rough, somewhat 'bobbly' surface of the hollowed-out rock chamber. When that was dry, it had a layer of finer, thinner lime-plaster put on top, like a modern 'skim' coating, to provide a suitable surface for painting (Figure 9).



Figure 9 Cross-section of a fragment of Nebamun wall painting, showing the two layers of ancient plaster and the modern Plaster of Paris mount below

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At this preparatory stage, the decoration of the tomb must be born in mind. Paleolithic cave paintings, for example, were painted directly onto the rock, often taking advantage of the shape and contour of the rock itself to help animate the depicted scenes. Some ancient Egyptian tomb decoration also took advantage of this, for example the tomb-chapel of Senneferi (Theban Tomb 96B), where the rough surface of the rock-cut ceiling is decorated with painted vines.

However, the majority of Egyptian paintings were flat, and as David Summers has convincingly argued, the conception of – and the technical ability to realise – a plane surface on which to situate representations was itself a major advance in the realm of 'art'.

4 Designing the decoration

Before the plastered surface could be decorated, however, various decisions had to be taken about the overall design.

It is quite likely some of these decisions would be taken either by, or with the involvement of, the tomb-owner himself. What these decisions might have been, no one now knows. But since the tomb would have been very expensive, accounting for a large proportion of Nebamun's wealth, it is likely he would have taken some kind of role in deciding the scheme.

Once again it is worth bearing in mind the difficulties of the process. Large sheets of draughtsman's paper, for example, were not available, let alone the facilities of a modern drawing office. Papyrus sheets may have been used to draw out plans, but these would not have been very large (Figure 10). Small drawings also exist on flakes of stone and ceramic with plane surfaces, known as 'ostraca' (Figure 11).



Figure 10 Drawing board with an apprentice's sketches (EA 5601)

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Figure 11 Ostraca with a sketch of a duck (EA 56706)

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It is unclear how such small designs might have been 'blown up' to full size. It is possible there may have been pattern books in use, for some features of the designs were conventionalised. These included the borders as well as motifs. There are also surviving examples of plane surfaces rather like 'drawing boards', perhaps the same sort of thing as a table top, onto which a design could have been laid out, and then whitewashed over and re-used for the next one. One such example from the New Kingdom is in the British Museum, though the drawing it retains is an apprentice exercise.

4.1 From plan to wall

Once the scheme for a particular wall was agreed it then had to be sketched out on the wall surface itself.

The first stage was to lay down the registers. These were the horizontal baselines on which figures in Egyptian art were placed (see Figure 12), and that had been a convention from the beginning of the Dynastic period when the canon of Egyptian representation was

being formulated in the early third millennium BC. This would be done with a string dipped in paint and 'twanged' down on the surface. One such length of string, wrapped round some artist's brushes has actually survived from the tomb of Mentuhirkhopsef at Thebes



Figure 12 The unfinished stela of the sculptor Userwer, Twelfth Dynasty (EA 579)

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Once the registers were in place, the main figures were then sketched out in red. The draughtsmen who would do this would have been apprentices in the craft hierarchy, and their work would be checked by the master in overall charge of the work. He would make corrections or sometimes redraw the figure.

This figure-drawing process was complex and subject to considerable variation.

Throughout Egyptian history, a template was followed, though despite the apparently Procrustean nature of the description, this was not as rigidly applied as it sounds. During the Old Kingdom there was a system of proportional guides that by the time of the late Eleventh to early Twelfth Dynasties of the Middle Kingdom had evolved into a grid (Figure 13).



Figure 13 Part of a proportion grid (EA 5601)

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This consisted of 18 squares, stretching from the soles of the feet up to the hairline of a standing figure. (For seated figures it was 14 squares.)

Despite the daunting description, however, the proportional grid is not responsible for the famous 'stasis' of Egyptian art. Its application varied not only over time but even within a single tomb. It was in essence a guide for the production of human figures with 'correct' proportions, rather than an absolute template.

In the Nebamun tomb-chapel, only the offering scene employed a grid, although overall, according to Robins, they had been very common in earlier Eighteenth Dynasty painted tomb-chapels. It was variable as to whether one grid would cover a whole wall or whether variably sized grids were used for different sized figures, and both methods could be employed in one tomb-chapel. By the later Eighteenth Dynasty, only large, formal figures were usually designed according to the grid, with smaller figures either being drawn in with just a few guidelines or even completely freehand.

Although this process would have prompted a certain rigidity in the figures, it does seem to have been used as an aid, rather than an absolutely inflexible requirement. It was scarcely more constraining than the ideal proportions associated with the European academic system many centuries later, or, come to that, the practice of 'squaring up' from a drawing to a larger design that is a commonplace of Western art. Indeed, the evidence

from ostraca and papyri is that ancient Egyptian artists were perfectly capable of improvised freehand drawing, even a form of witty caricature exaggeration (Figure 14).



Figure 14 Papyrus showing satirical caricature of animals (EA 10016.1)

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As Robins has established, tomb-painting was not a form of painting-by-numbers; the use of the grid was far from slavish and there was considerable scope for judgement and the exercise of choice on the part of the ancient artist-draughtsmen. And the tomb-chapel, we must remember, was a considerably formalised environment, as indeed is any religious space in any culture.

4.2 The use of reliefs

Depending on factors including the time and money available, but more particularly on the geology of the place, tomb decoration could be of two distinct types: straightforward painting onto the plaster, following the design; or shallow relief, which involved cutting away the design before paint was applied.

In the case of Nebamun's tomb, the rock at Dra Abu el-Naga was too poor to permit relief carving, so it was always going to be a flat painting on the plaster surface.

The vizier, or 'prime minister' Ramose, also of the Eighteenth Dynasty, had a much grander tomb on the west bank at Thebes in an area where the rock was better quality. Despite Ramose's radically different social level from Nebamun, the relief decoration of his tomb-chapel affords a comparison with the Nebamun paintings.

In either case, painting or relief, the underdrawing would be obliterated, either by the chisel or the paint. However in some cases the design was not finished and so the drawing survives. Thus in the Ramose tomb these pictures of foreigners bringing tributes have been preserved (Figure 15).



Figure 15 Drawing on the walls of the tomb-chapel of Ramose

Courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)

If the design were, however, carried through, the finished effect would be different. The liveliness of the drawing disappears. Incising the designs in shallow relief is a slower process and tends to produce a certain stasis or quietness in the designs.

Thus, a relief from the tomb-chapel of Ramose shows a banquet scene comparable to and contemporary with that in Nebamun's (Figure 16). The overall aesthetic of the period is the same, but the effect is different from both the preliminary sketch in Ramose's own tomb-chapel and the finished painting in Nebamun's because of the different technique used to make the image.



Figure 16 Relief

Courtesy of Paul Wood (The Open University)

We tend to read these images rather in the way we read neo-classical reliefs. For modern eyes they can produce a kind of distance, even a certain coolness; more positively, they can convey an impression of stateliness or of the ideal.

When comparing reliefs with paintings it is true that both can appear static (Figures 17 and 18). Indeed, most Egyptian tomb-paintings do convey a certain motionlessness. However, in some cases the more rapid working procedure of painting can produce a livelier effect, as in the case of Nebamun's tomb-chapel (Figure 19). It is not the fact of painting alone that confers the vivid effects of the paintings in Nebamun's tomb; it is the quality of the work by the artists. But that quality depends on the relative freedom with which the surface could be worked, a freedom that could not have been as great with incised relief. This expansiveness contributes to the effects that make the Nebamun paintings particularly attractive to modern eyes, valuing as we do the kinds of effects produced by artists such as Constable, Turner and the Impressionists – effects that we read as evidence of spontaneity, and hence of a certain kind of truth.

We must remember, however, that these Eighteenth Dynasty tomb-chapel paintings emerge from a very different practical context than do the kinds of informal images we value today.



Figure 17 John Flaxman, detail of the frieze on the façade above the entrance of the

Royal Opera House, London, stones, stucco

Photo: Conway Library, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London.



Figure 18 Painted relief from the tomb of an Old Kingdom official, Khnumhotep, c. 2400 BC (EA 1166)

© Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 19 Nebamun fragment 'Viewing the Produce' (EA 37978)

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5 Applying the paint

The range of colours used in Eighteenth Dynasty tomb-chapels was relatively small. It goes without saying that it was nothing like the huge range of synthetic colours available today, or even the range available to artists over the last five hundred years in the medium of oil paint.

The principal colours available were black, white, red, yellow, green and blue (Figure 20).



Figure 20 Samples of pigments, including ancient samples (EA 5563, EA 5568, EA 5569)

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Black was derived from carbon, obtained from sources such as lampblack, or soot on the bottom of cooking utensils, or ground charcoal. White came from chalk or gypsum, resulting in two distinct types: a kind of creamy white often used for backgrounds, and a brighter, shinier white used for items such as clothes and jewellery. Red and yellow were derived from naturally occurring ochres (these continued to be used in the European tradition, as well as in other traditions including contemporary Australian Aboriginal bark painting). Figure 21 shows a range of colour samples.



Figure 21 Colour samples, Meredith Hooper, *The Tomb of Nebamun: Explore Ancient Egyptian Tomb* (London, 2008), p. 9

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In addition to black, white, red and yellow, Egyptian artists also had blue and green available. These were not so 'natural' being made from 'frit', an artificial glass-like substance that contained traces of copper. An important factor here is that the colour gets less vivid the smaller the grains are ground, so more binder has to be used to stick the grains together. The result of this is that with the passage of time and the decay of the binding medium, the blue and green colours have tended to fall off. So the colour balance of the surviving compositions, now many thousands of years old, can be different from the original (Figure 22).



Figure 22 A detail of one of the guests showing the loss of pigment to the blue jewellery (EA 37986)

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The pigments were ground into powder and mixed with a binding medium of plant-based gum, which resulted in a small cake. This could then be worked with the addition of more medium into a liquid paste which could be applied to the walls. Various kinds of receptacles could have been used to hold the paint, such as shallow clay dishes and shells

The paint was applied to the prepared surface by means of various different types and sizes of brush (Figure 23). These were derived from date palms or reeds, sometimes tied together to form a stem or handle, with the ends crushed or chewed to form a carrier for the paint approximating to the bristles of a modern brush. The relative crudeness of some of these 'brushes' only goes further to emphasise the skill of the ancient artists in achieving the vivid illusions they did of subjects such as fur, feathers and clothing. In this

connection however, it should be noted that despite the example of these quite expressive brushstrokes that were used in these paintings to produce an impression of, say, a cat's fur, when areas were to be covered, the colours were applied 'flat'. There was relatively little mixing of colours, and the effects of transitions from light to dark that we refer to as 'shading' are absent.



Figure 23 Ancient brushes with the remains of paint still on them, probably from burials at Thebes (EA 36892-3, 36889)

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6 The skills of the painters

Apart from the sheer technical difficulty of getting the colours and applying them to the wall, another important aspect of these procedures that differentiates Egyptian art from modern easel painting is that the artists worked in teams. Once again there was considerable variation in what happened, but the process was not that of an individual artist, in the modern manner, standing before his easel, taking all the manifold decisions necessary to complete the picture. The numbers involved could vary.

According to Professor Betsy Bryan, who has studied an unfinished tomb-chapel, there could have been gangs of 20–30 people, including apprentices and assistants of various kinds, under the direction of one or more masters. There was also variation in how the work was done: sometimes walls were done one scene at a time, others were worked on in bands. One of the surprising features is that despite the general anonymity of the Egyptian artist, in some cases collateral evidence such as accompanying hieroglyphic texts has allowed Egyptologists to deduce the identity of individual masters, and even families of artists.

Watch these three short video clips in which Richard Parkinson and Paul Wood talk about some of the artist errors in the Nebamun paintings

Video content is not available in this format.



Video content is not available in this format.



Video content is not available in this format.



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In the case of the Nebamun paintings, a great deal of their effect comes down to the painterly skills of individual artists. Look at the bird's feathers and the cat's fur in Figure 24.



Figure 24 Nebamun fragment 'Hunting in the Marshes' (EA 37977)

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- What features of these images would you pick out as contributing to their lifelikeness?

- The painting is very informal and 'improvised'.

You can see how very long single brushstrokes, almost calligraphic in nature, are used to 'draw' the bird's feathers. But then much shorter strokes, laid over a background grey 'wash' are used to indicate the bars of plumage.

The texture of the cat's fur is conveyed by many closely packed short strokes, which are then spaced out to indicate a lighter-coloured chest.

The 'lifelike' effect is produced by a mixture of marvellously close observation – really looking at how a cat arches its back, or grips with its paws, or at how a bird flaps its wings – allied to a repertoire of sophisticated painterly techniques for translating those characteristics into a credible two-dimensional image.

On the one hand, then, producing the wall-decoration of a Theban tomb-chapel was a collective process. It has certain points of resemblance to the way a Renaissance mural painting would have been produced by a master's workshop, but the tasks were perhaps more stratified. If anything, the process was more like an assembly line, with the complex process broken down into an ensemble of simpler tasks.

But on the other hand, within these constraints there was considerable latitude as to how a commission was carried out, and a considerable amount was up to the skill of individuals and the discretion of the master in overall charge of the project. In some of their 'painterly' features, often of humble subjects such as the fur of a cat, the wing of a goose, or the hair of a girl, the Nebamun pictures seem to stand at the furthest limit of the expressive powers of ancient art.

7 Conventions of representation

In this section you look at the question of different conventions of representation. In particular we note what have been the dominant representational conventions in Western art perspective

In E.H. Gombrich's celebrated textbook *The Story of Art*, first published in 1950, as well as in numerous other books before and since, the Western tradition is traced back to Athens in the fifth century BC. Gombrich does not begin his book in Greece, but when he does get there, Chapter 4 is called 'The great awakening'. For Gombrich and others, what the Western tradition of art 'woke up' to was lifelikeness.

Although the comparative verisimilitude of Classical art was subsequently lost in the centuries of Christian influence, its rediscovery and amplification in the emerging humanistic climate of fifteenth-century Florence is held to exemplify the 'Renaissance'. This cornerstone of the Western tradition represents a synthesis of Christian belief and Classical knowledge that continued to define Western culture up to the twentieth century. Its distant origin in the Greek achievement of lifelike imitation (Figure 25) was a symptom of what Gombrich called 'altogether the most amazing period of human history', a time of the emergence of democracy in politics and of rational enquiry in philosophy and science.



Figure 25 Ancient Greek drinking cup (GR 1836.2.24.25)

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It is with a nicely studied bathos that Gombrich isolates the equivalent advance in art, a 'tremendous moment in the history of art' when, around 500 BC, 'artists dared for the first time in all history to paint a foot as seen from the front' [53]. In a word, artists discovered the device of 'foreshortening'.

7.1 The skill of 'foreshortening'

Few would now subscribe to this 'Story of art' without reservation. But in this classic account, the technical ability to foreshorten limbs, to represent bodies as we actually perceive them in three-dimensional space, was seen to constitute an epochal advance that set Western art on a different level from that of the rest of the world. Whichever word you want to use – mimesis, verisimilitude, the property of being 'realistic' – this achievement of lifelikeness in two dimensions became regarded as the defining value of Western art.

For our purposes here, in the present study of ancient Egyptian paintings from the tomb of Nebamun, the point is not so much to celebrate this powerful account nor indeed to dispute it, but to note one of its important corollaries.

From within the conventions of our own culture, in what light are we to conceive so different a kind of art? For it is a short step from regarding verisimilitude as the goal to which art aspired, an awakening into full consciousness from a more twilight realm of sleep and dreams, to regarding the absence of verisimilitude as a kind of failure, the mark of relative cultural backwardness: the belief that other cultures didn't paint realistically because they couldn't (Figure 26).



Figure 26 James Stephanoff. A watercolour showing a nineteenth-century view of the evolution of art with items mostly from The British Museum, 1845 (PD 1994-12-10-6)

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The activity below explores an example of such thinking. It comes from debates in the French Academie Royale in the seventeenth century. Charles Perrault is discussing the relative merits of ancients and moderns, and at one point touches on the relationship between then-contemporary Academic art, and a type of non-Western art

Activity 1 An artistic debate

Read the following quote and then answer the questions.

Some years before Raphael and Titian, there were paintings made – they still survive – the principal beauty of which lies in the fineness of line; you can count every hair in the beard and on the head of each figure. Though Chinese art is very ancient, they have remained at this stage. They will, perhaps, soon learn to draw properly, to place their figures in noble attitudes, and attain exact expressions of all the passions. But it will be a long time before they attain a perfect understanding of chiaroscuro, the degradation of light, the secrets of perspective, and the judicious organisation of a large composition.

Charles Perrault, 'A Digression on the Ancients and Moderns' (1688), from *Art in Theory*, 1648–1815, p. 57.

1. What kind of art do you think Perrault is talking about in the first sentence?
2. In the next short sentence, Perrault does two things. How would you characterise them?
3. What would you pick out as the key ideas in his next two sentences, ideas that define what it is that is 'advanced' about his own art?

Answer

1. By 'the years before Raphael and Titian' he means 'before the sixteenth century', i.e. before the High Renaissance. He may be thinking of Trecento and Quattrocento art in Italy, or equally of well-known figures of the Northern

Renaissance. The description of 'fineness of line' and 'being able to count individual hairs' would certainly apply to a painter like Van Eyck.

2. First he equates Chinese art with the type of art we have just discussed. But more importantly, he inserts a notion of progress. The idea of 'remaining at a certain level' carries with it the negative sense of failing to advance to another one. Perrault regards the art of the High Renaissance, and by extension of the subsequent Academic tradition of which he himself was a leading representative, as being more developed than both earlier European art and the art of other cultures, exemplified here by Chinese art.
3. The first key idea is the notion of 'drawing properly'. The second concerns the cluster of ideas in the final sentence, in particular, 'perspective' and 'shading' as the keys to organising a composition. The strong implication here is that not to employ shading and perspective is not to draw properly. It is the mark of artistic backwardness.

7.2 Dissimilarity within conventions

Yet even within the Western tradition, where some form of lifelikeness was a shared goal, two-dimensional images can be radically dissimilar. Obviously there is a difference between a figure by Giotto and a figure by a Victorian artist, such as Alma Tadema, but the difference can be just as great between different groupings within the same culture. A 'neo-classical' figure in an Ingres painting will be constructed very differently from a figure in a picture by the 'romantic' artist Delacroix, despite being painted in more or less the same time and place.

The point is that it is the effect that is being sought that determines how figures are represented and disposed, not the relatively trivial achievement of 'accuracy' as such. It thus becomes possible to see that lifelikeness, or naturalism, is not so much an absolute technical achievement as a relative value.

The question that follows then, in the light of what we have seen of the seventeenth-century Academy's views on art, and of Gombrich's subsequent twentieth-century account of the hallmark of the Western canon, is: where then does this leave us with the art of ancient Egypt? Does the art of ancient Egypt look like it does because the Egyptian artists could not 'draw properly'? Is the absence of foreshortening in Egyptian art evidence of a failure to 'awaken' into the morning light of Greece, and, by ultimate extension, into the Western canon – perspective, democracy and all? (The unstated corollary of which, as with Perrault, being: what do we do with the 'non-Western' tout court?)

The questions, it seems, have suddenly spilled over from a more or less abstruse debate about the nature of something three thousand years ago, to matters rather more pressing in the here and now. Yet though we must think about such questions, we do not have to resolve them here. Whether one views the achievement of 'scientific' perspective in the Florentine Renaissance as an unquestionable example of progress, or whether one regards it as a kind of testament to a culture of materialism and acquisitiveness, is not the point at issue here. What we have to strive to do is, first, grasp the fundamental point that there have been different representational conventions in play at different places and times in human history, and then to go on to develop at least a basic understanding of what the principal Egyptian conventions were.

8 Conventions of Egyptian art

In this section you will look at key conventions of Egyptian art, and why Egyptian artists followed those conventions. Here is a simple activity to begin your exploration.

Activity 2 What does Egyptian art look like?

Study Figure 27, and then make a list of some (say, half a dozen) instances of what you think are key features of the Egyptian 'style'.



Figure 27 Characteristic Egyptian art: Rameses III before the gods of Memphis, from the Great Harris Papyrus (EA 9999.43)

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Answer

Here are some things you may have observed:

- mixing of human bodies with animal heads or, less frequently, animal bodies with human heads
- mixing of frontal and side views, for example, side views of legs and feet with frontal views of the body, side views of the head with frontal eyes
- a lack of modelling, resulting in a flattened, cut-out effect
- an overall effect of stasis in the individual image, and when several are taken together, an effect of unchangingness.

8.1 Beyond the stereotype

Most of these characteristic features of Egyptian two-dimensional art can be found in the Nebamun wall-paintings (Figure 28). However, the Nebamun paintings also include several other features that do not conform so readily to our stereotypes of Egyptian art.

