Art and Society

Ancient and Modern Contexts of Egyptian Art

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Tracking Ancient Egyptian Artists, a Problem of Methodology. The Case of the Painters of Private Tombs in the Theban Necropolis during the Eighteenth Dynasty*

Dimitri Laboury

Introduction: Egyptology and the issue of artists

As with most of the notions we use on a daily basis, the concept of the artist has a long history that profoundly determines its currently accepted meaning in western – or westernized – contexts, as well as the many connotations we are accustomed to associating with it. Thus, making a hero out of the artist as a creative intellectual, distinct in this capacity from common people, is an attitude that actually finds its roots in a long lasting written discourse of important ancient western authors, as influential as Pliny the elder or – even more significantly – Giorgio Vasari, with his famous *Vite de' più eccellenti Pittori, Scultori e Architetti italiani* ('the lives of the most excellent Italian architects, painters and sculptors', Florence, 1550). This very specific conception of the artist, though far from being universal,[1] has nevertheless generated the prevalent conception of art History as a History (and even sometimes just a story) of – great – artists, with the main and seemingly natural aim of identifying individually those creative geniuses.

In this context, Egyptology and Ancient Egyptian art History appear particularly ill-suited to such an issue and incapable of addressing it. Indeed, on the one hand, despite a rare propensity for monumentality and durability, and, consequently, an extraordinary development of what we nowadays agree to call the arts, Ancient Egyptian society never really initiated a process of specific glorification of artists, as did, for example, the Ancient Greeks, in a rather different societal context. As Hermann Junker suggested, Ancient Egyptians merely seem to have recognized and valorised artists and makers of works of art as specialists, who are experienced and skillful (**Plate 42.1**), such as physicians, for instance.[2] On the other hand, from the point of view of Egyptologists and modern analysts, the paucity of Ancient Egyptian works of art signed by their actual maker (*infra*, **Plates 42.3, 43.1–2**) has often led to the conclusion that ancient Egyptian art was, fundamentally, a collective and anonymous art – and even, for some, the anonymous art par excellence. Furthermore, because of the total lack of any theoretical treatise on aesthetics in Ancient Egyptian literature, many authors have been inclined to deny the very concept of art in this culture, consequently preferring to consider the monumental output that still makes Ancient Egypt famous as the production of an army of workers under the authority of a literate administrative director and reducing the maker of the work of art from the status of artist to the one of artisan – at best.

Such preconceived ideas constitute the *communis opinio* about Ancient Egyptian art and are of course based on misunderstandings and ill-defined concepts. First of all, they are fundamentally shaped by our own western and modern conception of what art and artists should be. Thus, as Jan Assmann emphasized – not without a certain sense of irony – Ancient Egyptian art is by no means anonymous, but, on the contrary, deserves the qualifier of eponymous, in the sense that there is almost no Ancient Egyptian work of art which is not – in its original and completed state – accompanied and even designated by the name of an individual. But this name, omnipresent and always displayed or even shown off, is not the one art historians or art lovers configured by the western tradition would expect. It is the name of the commissioning patron who 'self-thematized' himself through the work of art, and not the one of the object maker, who deliberately withdraws his own identity from his creation to the exclusive benefit of his patron. Obviously, such a conception of the work of art and of its relation to its various actors is quite different from the one that prevails nowadays.

Besides, the total lack of any theoretical treatise on aesthetics in Ancient Egyptian literature should not be over-interpreted, nor considered so surprising, since it is probably due not so much to the accidence of preservation or discovery but to the fact that Ancient Egyptian literature was composed by a few very specific and well defined genres, among which there would have been no place for such treatises. Once again, western expectations do not match very well with what Ancient Egyptian civilization meant to yield. In regard to the notion of art, the uses of the word *ḥmw* clearly reveals that Ancient Egyptians conceptualized it as such, i.e. with the meaning we ascribe to it nowadays, since this term can equally refer to the technical ability and mastery of a practitioner of the plastic arts as much as to those of a writer, who knows how to handle 'the nice words' with his art.[3] Should we then imagine an art, i.e. a human production, without artist?

Finally, the collective dimension traditionally assigned to artistic production in ancient Egypt actually results from an excessive generalization of work organisation principles that were used for large-scale projects in a royal context. Of course, no one will be surprised that the workers' settlement on the site of the great pyramids at Giza was able to accommodate up to 18,000 people (according to the estimations that can be suggested from excavation of this settlement) or that the few iconographical and archaeological attestations of royal sculpture workshops that survived reveal a team work that already followed an almost semi-industrial production procedure (**Plate 42.2**).[4] It was evidently the size of the work that imposed such a fragmentation of the tasks to be performed. But, here again, it is necessary to avoid another error of reasoning, i.e. dissolving the notion of artist in this multiplication of the participants in the making of the monument. Indeed, who would nowadays think about denying the status of 'artist' to a sculptor such as Frédéric Auguste Bartholdi, because his monumental Lady Liberty required the participation of hundreds of workers of different specialities, or – to refer to an older western example – to Ph(e)idias, who conceived and supervised the entire sculpted decoration of the Parthenon, with the indispensible help of a large workshop?[5] Besides, if such a collective procedure seems to be well attested to for royal productions in Ancient Egypt, should – or even could – this model be transposed for private monuments, such as the private tombs in the Theban Necropolis?

In this confused and ill-defined theoretical context, Egyptology has often admitted that the figure of the Ancient Egyptian artist remains particularly evanescent and almost imperceptible – and even non-existent for some commentators. An interdisciplinary project recently launched at the University of Liège, under the auspices of the National Foundation for Scientific Research of Belgium (F.R.S.-FNRS), and dedicated to the study of painters responsible for the decoration of private tomb chapels in the Theban Necropolis during the Eighteenth Dynasty tends to demonstrate the contrary. The aim of the present contribution is to explain the main methodological and documentary bases of this new project.

The textual sources relating to artists in private tombs of the Theban Necropolis during the Eighteenth Dynasty

In a discipline like Egyptology, whose official founding act is a philological discovery, textual evidence is always of prime importance. One of the most interesting points about such evidence is that it offers the opportunity to identify precisely what ancient people themselves explicitly objectified. And from this point of view, the textual sources pertaining to artists and craftsmen who worked in Ancient Egyptian private tombs are much more informative than has been hastily claimed in the past.

Firstly, during the entire history of Ancient Egypt and beyond the limits of the sole Theban Necropolis, signatures of 'scribes of forms' (the Ancient Egyptian expression for painters) are much more numerous than it seems. Two kinds are to be distinguished: on the one hand, those that express a personal implication in the decorative process of a private monument (already partly collected by Edith W. Ware in 1927);[6] and on the other hand, the graffiti. The latter attest that many painters visited the monuments made by their colleagues, years, decades and sometimes centuries earlier, and that they beheld the formal qualities of these monuments.[7] They also reveal that the authors of those

inscriptions were literate and capable of leaving a written trace – and sometimes a literary one[8] – of their visit, even if such was not the case for all Ancient Egyptian painters, as we shall see.

Actual signatures claiming the making or a part of the making of a tomb's decoration are of course no less instructive. First of all, they highlight the pride of the creator, who often presents himself alone, or sometimes with a colleague or an assistant, like the two brothers Nebnefer and Hormin, both 'painters in the Place-of-Maat' (i.e. the institution of the Valley of the Kings), who signed the decoration of the double burial chamber in the tomb of their director, 'the chief of the gang in the Place-of-Maat' Inherkhauy, at Deir el-Medineh (TT 359).[9] The artist's claims usually refer to the actual decoration process, but it sometimes happens to encompass more, up to the supervision and management of the entire preparation of the tomb. This is the case, for example, at Elkab, with the famous tomb of Ahmose son of Ibana, which was made 'by the son of his daughter, the one who directed all the works in this tomb as the one who causes the name of the father of his mother to live, the scribe-of-forms of Amun, Pahery, the justified one' (**Plate 42.3**). This funerary chapel, decorated with wall reliefs (largely unfinished), demonstrates, among other evidence, that scribes-of-forms could produce images beyond the sole technical domain of paintings. They might also work in different private monuments, and sometimes on distinct sites: in Elkab, again, the tomb of the governor Sobeknakht was apparently decorated by the painter Sedjemnetjeru, who displayed his duly identified self-depiction in it and – as W. Vivian Davies was able to show[10] – also appears accompanied by 'his brother, the painter Ahmose' in the contemporaneous chapel of Horemkhauef – very similar in style as well as in iconographical conception – at Hierakonpolis, i.e. just on the other side of the Nile. Further to the North, in the late Old Kingdom cemetery of Akhmim at el-Hawawish, the painter Seni portrayed himself with his brother, 'the scribe of the divine books of the Great-House (i.e. the Palace) Izezi', behind the figure of the harpooning tomb-owner in two different funerary monuments, located close to each other. In the first tomb, made for Kheni, Izezi, is depicted with a palette in his hand and described as 'the one who decorated (*zš*) this tomb', whereas in the second funerary chapel, made for Tjeti-iqer (Kheni's father), this precision has vanished and the figures of the two brothers, this time both grasping their palette, are facing a small panel of three columns of texts that reads: 'the painter (*zš-ḳdw.t*) Seni, he says: "I am the one who decorated (*zš*) the tomb of the Count Kheni and moreover, I am the one who decorated this tomb, being alone!"[11] (**Plate 43.1**). Other examples from the Old Kingdom also display painters and sculptors of the Court sent by the central power to decorate tombs for the members of the elite, who were particularly proud to exhibit this remarkable favour.[12]

As members of Ancient Egyptian society, painters could, in some cases, also aspire to monuments entirely dedicated to their own commemoration. Many stelae testify to this, like, for example, those of 'the director of the scribes-of-forms of Amun, Dedia' (Louvre C 50 and Cairo CG 42122), born from a lineage of painters of Levantine origins, who, after the iconoclastic episode of Akhenaten's reign, was 'charged by his Majesty to restore' Theban temples 'as the chief of works and director of artistic functions' in these monuments.[13] There are also the funerary chapels of the inhabitants of the ancient village on the site of Deir el-Medineh or the so-called 'tomb of the artists', the tomb of the 'director of the scribes-of-forms in the Place-of-Maat, Thutmose', discovered in 1996 in the cliff of the Bubasteion at Saqqarah (T Bubasteion I.19) and to be published soon by Alain-Pierre Zivie.[14]

All those traces left by Ancient Egyptian painters themselves reveal a well hierarchized profession, both in terms of work organisation (chiefs, directors, etc.) as well as in terms of abilities. Indeed, the majority of painters' monuments belong to high officials in the artistic production of Ancient Egypt and, as such, to members of – at least a certain part of – the leading elite. This rather high social position often went together with competencies in religious and intellectual fields, i.e. some erudition, implied by different priestly titles. Even in visitors' graffiti, painters frequently presented themselves as '*wab*-priest and scribe-of-forms'. Nevertheless, a few traces of lower ranking and less well-educated painters have fortunately also survived. For example, the case of a certain Sennefer, responsible for the decoration of the tomb chapel of his father Amenemhat, both 'servants (*sḏm-ꜥš*) in the Place-of-Maat', at Deir el-Medineh (TT 340); the careful analysis of the inscriptions in this monument allowed the late Jean-Marie Kruchten to demonstrate that 'le décorateur de la tombe 340 devinait

plus qu'il ne comprenait le sens des signes plurilitères, répétant de mémoire, comme dans le cas de la formule *ḥtp-dj-nsw*, des passages entiers d'expressions stéréotypées, avec une fidélité très relative'.[15] Sennefer was, however, so proud of what he had been able to do for the funerary commemoration of his father that he complemented one of his self-depictions in the tomb with the following inscription, alas not without a few mistakes that betray his real level of literacy: '(a)s for (m)e, I am the son who writes correctly, as the one who (causes his) name (to) live', (*i*)*r* (*i*)*nk ink zꜣ* (for *zꜣ.f*?) *zši* (sic) *mty* (*s*)ˁ*nḫ rn*(*.f*), (**Plate 43.2**).

Finally, all these painters, whether directors or subordinates, almost systematically exhibit an administrative affiliation to a religious institution, i.e. to the state, which appears as their official and main employer; the decoration of a private tomb was thus a quite marginal activity for them.

But the most informative textual sources – and, at the same time, the ones that seem to have been the least exploited until now – to facilitate an understanding of the modalities of private tombs' decoration in Ancient Egypt are probably the daily work texts. These are *ostraca*, of which different lots are known[16] – even if all of them are not yet published – and whose function was essentially administrative, as records of the evolution of the work in the preparation of a tomb in the necropolis.

Even if some of those *ostraca* refer to a daily counting (lists of absent and present workers, activities completed, quantities done, etc.), most of them provide clear evidence that the work was computed by the month, i.e. by a standard time frame and a rather short period compared to the time needed to complete the entire process of constructing a tomb, from its carving to the finalization of its decoration. An *ostracon* discovered near the funerary chapel of Senenmut (TT 71) at Thebes even records the action of 'taking over the work of the tomb by the scribe (or painter) Nebamun from the scribe (or painter) User until day 28'.[17] Furthermore, other documents of the same type, relating to the preparation of the tomb of the high priest of Amun Mery (TT 95) – and not yet published[18] – reveal that the same kinds of work were performed in the same parts of the tomb after several months and sometimes after several years, a fact that strongly suggests that the work was not continuous.

The daily work *ostraca* also attest to a recurring distribution of tasks and operations to be carried out by various kinds of workers, among which one can mainly distinguish: the quarrymen, etymologically 'those of the necropolis' (*ḫr.tyw-nṯr*), sometimes simply referred to as 'the men', a designation that seems to denote a rather low level of specialization; the plasterers, frequently associated with quarrymen; and those in charge of the decoration itself, essentially 'scribes of forms'. Although an *ostracon* of the Hermitage Museum does make exceptional mention – for an unknown period of time – of the work of 60 men and 7 'children' in 'the (funerary?) estate of the steward of the palace Sebty',[19] the teams involved in the preparation of private tombs during the Eighteenth Dynasty are usually quite small, ranging from 3 or 4 to around 10 people. Moreover, their number clearly decreases with the evolution of the work and the level of specialization of the workers involved. So, if the quarrymen and relatively unskilled labourers can be quite numerous, the teams of plasterers are generally smaller and, according to the documentation gathered so far, never more than two painters are attested to at the same time in a single tomb. Another distinction between the different types of workers is that the painters are always mentioned by name, whereas it is almost never the case for the many quarrymen and other labourers in charge of stone cutting or transportation and preparation of materials needed for making the tomb. Thus, painters seem to have enjoyed a more individualized recognition than their colleagues, quarrymen and plasterers. Finally, the most striking thing revealed by these *ostraca*, real snapshots in the process of preparing an Ancient Egyptian private tomb, is probably the fact that they establish without any ambiguity that stonecutters, plasterers and painters could happen to work within the same tomb at the same time, i.e. a situation that must have often caused some logistic and ergonomic problems in the management of the work.

On some occasions, these accounting documents furthermore allow us to specify the origin of the workers involved in the preparation of a tomb. Next to individuals who appear to be Theban, others come from more or less distant sites, such as Armant, about 20 kilometres south of the necropolis, but also from Neferusy, Qau el-Kebir or Hermopolis,[20] in the midst of Middle Egypt (380 kilometres from Thebes), to quote just a few examples. In many cases, it is not the

geographic origin but the administrative one that is mentioned, revealing that the crew often came from groups under the authority of the tomb owner or of one of his colleagues or familiars. Textual sources, moreover, converge to suggest that it was the patron and tomb owner himself who directly supplied the human and material means needed for the creation of his commemorative monument,[21] even if the latter was still quite often described as a special favour granted by the king – most probably as a question of prestige.

The material evidence: towards an archaeology of art and an experimental art History

In keeping with the continuity of the fascination that western culture seems to have always had for the hieroglyphic and symbolical dimension of Ancient Egyptian iconography, Egyptology has long developed a very peculiar vision of Ancient Egyptian art, a vision that tends to 'dematerialize' the image, to deprive the latter of its materiality and (re)present it as some sort of a hieroglyphic composition. Thus, among all the disciplines involved in the study of paintings, Egyptology is probably the only one that still continues to publish painted works in line drawings. The epistemological implications of such an epigraphic and documentary use of Ancient Egyptian paintings are far from being insignificant. They are particularly well illustrated by the comparison proposed by Daniel Polz in 1987 of his line-drawing recording of a scene in the entrance of the tomb of Huy (TT 54) with a drawing made of exactly the same scene a few decades earlier by Norman de Garis Davies (**Plate 43.3**): whereas 'the best archaeological draughtsman of his generation',[22] indeed one of the most famous and most productive epigraphists Egyptology has ever known, gave a very legible image, cleared from any element that could compromise its really hieroglyphic readability (**Plate 43.3 b**), the German archaeologist of the Theban Necropolis sought to record the material state of the archaeological object he had to document, just like any piece of ceramic or funerary furniture (**Plate 43.3 c**). Because of their respective trainings, those two Egyptologists do not see the same things in front of the same object and never present the same visual and mental image of it.[23] Thus, directing an archaeological observation of a painted work, while willingly omitting or minimising – at least as a first step – its properly aesthetic dimension and semantic component allows us to better see and consider the materiality of this object, i.e. the indispensable medium of its physical and artistic existence. And just like in a stratigraphy, there are, stored within this material medium, many marks that can be used to investigate and restore the genesis of the object and the circumstances of its creation. As we shall see, such an analysis of painting practices even allows us to track the work of individual painters.

The ambition to identify individual painters in the Theban Necropolis has already motivated a few studies, but it is necessary to underline here the limits of the most frequently used method in this field: iconographic homology or analogy. Usually called the Morellian method – in reference to the famous Italian physician and art connoisseur Giovanni Morelli (1816–1891), who succeeded in identifying artists' 'hands' by scrutinizing the morphology of some characteristic details in Renaissance and Early Modern paintings – this approach consists of comparing motifs of similar shape, considering them as clues for – or even symptoms of – a common creator. Such a method proved to be very productive in the study of western Early Modern paintings or Ancient Greek vase decoration,[24] but its application in the context of Ancient Egyptian art is quite problematic, mainly because of two fundamental and foundational characteristics of this art: on the one hand, an obvious will of stylistic homogenization, or, in other words, of neutralization of the personal style of the artist, who withdraws his stylistic identity from his work in order to merge the latter into the style of his time; and, on the other hand, the phenomenon of creative borrowing or creation by imitation. From a theoretical point of view, it is indeed possible to demonstrate that Ancient Egyptians conceptualized invention, and notably artistic invention, as an emulation of the models from the past, a process that implies – at least partially – an imitation of those forms inherited from the ancestors.[25] Private tomb chapels of the Eighteenth Dynasty in the Theban Necropolis literally abound with examples of motifs copied from one monument to another. One of the most famous cases is probably the now lost tomb of Wensu (TT A4), of which only a few fragments are preserved in the Louvre Museum. As Lise Man-

niche has demonstrated[26] many scenes from this funerary chapel are to be found, almost identical in form and grouped in very similar compositions (often register by register), images and inscriptions alike, in the apparently contemporaneous rock-cut tomb of the Governor of Elkab – and ex-painter of Amun – Pahery (T Elkab 3, **Plate 44.1**). Without any possible doubt, part of the decorative scheme of one tomb was copied from the other, or from a common source, even if some details appear to be unique in the entire iconographic repertoire of Ancient Egypt in its current state of preservation. In many other cases, the copy refers to much older models, sometimes separated by more than a century, a fact that of course implies the impossibility of a common author. Moreover, Shelley Wachsmann has proposed the concept of hybridism to describe the very common process by which Ancient Egyptian artists combined elements from different sources to invent and produce their own compositions.[27] Since copying is obviously integral to the phenomenon of iconographic creation in Ancient Egypt, it cannot be used as a proper – or at least principal – means to track individual creators.

Besides, the cases of morphological homology really relevant in this perspective do not pertain to iconography, but rather to the actual making of the motif, i.e. to technique. Close-up photographs gathered by the late Roland Tefnin provide us with a very good illustration of this: in the tomb of Tjanuny (TT 74) – as in the majority of Theban tombs and Ancient Egyptian monuments in general – the hieroglyphic inscriptions display variations in the rendering of some signs, like, in this example, the hieroglyph of the duckling *ữ* () (**Plate 44.2**). Even if the motif, i.e. the character itself, is in each case perfectly recognizable, it is equally obvious that the two signs on the left, though in opposite orientation and of slightly different colours, were made by the same hand while the third one is the work of another individual. It is not so much the shape of the motif but, rather, the sequence of the brush strokes that produced it that allows such an assertion. Just like in a real handwritten signature, it is not the final form – which is always susceptible to some variations – but the way it was done that makes the signature or sign(al)s the individuality of the author.

This concept of a technical signature, a signature made by the personal habits and practices of the painter or, in other words, his own painterly handwriting, fits perfectly with the material approach suggested above, an approach that considers the work of art in its technological dimension or as a process – and not just as the result of the latter. Such an archaeological look on paintings in Theban Tombs can be applied at different levels, revealing different complementary information.

The first level is of course the one of the monument itself. It has often been noted that there is hardly a single tomb for which the decoration has been completed in the entire Theban Necropolis, nor in any other necropolis of Ancient Egypt. Dealing with this issue for the elite cemetery of Amarna, Gwil Owen and Barry J. Kemp brought to light various kinds of works archaeologically attested to in the tombs that corresponded to various stages of preparation and to various categories of workers; and, moreover, they pointed out recurring patterns of incompletion that imply a quite unexpected coordination of the work and of the workers.[28] Thus, for example, it is not unusual that a plasterer extended his plastering over a zone where the stone had not yet been properly dressed or sometimes even cut. This means that the plastering work would inevitably be damaged – and subsequently need to be redone or repaired – when quarrymen later came to continue their task. G. Owen and B. J. Kemp explain the phenomenon by the scarcity of skilled workmen needed for creating a tomb and they suggest correlating this with the very intense activity of construction and decoration that characterizes the reign of Akhenaten. In fact, what they observed at Amarna can also be found in almost every tomb of the Theban Necropolis (and the same actually holds true for all the other cemeteries of Ancient Egypt). Thus, as early as 1921, Ernest Mackay noted: 'It would appear from the evidence to be found in several tombs, and especially in Nos. 78 (Haremhab) and 79 (Menkheper), that the plasterers often started work on the walls before the masons had finally finished cutting the chapel. In tomb 78 the outer faces of two columns were plastered with a preliminary coating of mud, though their backs are still rough and in places not trimmed, nor even properly cut.'[29] Some cases are really astonishing, such as the one of TT 229, in which the painter already drew the preliminary sketch of an entire scene just next to the entrance door while the cutting of the tomb had barely been started (**Plate 44.3**).

These kinds of ergonomic conflicts, as I propose to call them, correspond very well with the information provided by the daily work *ostraca* mentioned above. Indeed, both types of sources, archaeological as well as textual, converge to suggest a very peculiar work organisation, in which the different successive tasks took place discontinuously and sometimes all at the same time. Both also lead us to infer that it was difficult for private patrons to have at their disposal the skilled craftsmen required to prepare a proper tomb.

Applied to the level of the wall or to the surface to be decorated (face of a pillar, roof, lintel, etc.), the archaeological approach to Theban painting – if considered as a process – reveals the practical modalities of the painter's work. He clearly handles work zones of relatively small surface areas, generally corresponding to the range of action of an immobile person, and usually completes the entire painting procedure in one zone before moving to another. Once again, examples of this procedure can be found in almost every tomb chapel of the Theban Necropolis, but one of the most explicit is probably an unfinished scene from TT 145, in the name of a certain Nebamun, where the painter complemented his composition in different places by drawing a preliminary sketch over the white background of a scene he had previously – almost – finished (**Plate 44.4**).[30]

In addition, different clues allow us to determine the range of skills of the painter, which could vary significantly from one case to the next. For example, the ergonomic and spatial relations between the material traces of the successive stages in the making of the tombs' decoration – from the last plastering meant to receive the paintings up to the final outlines – provide clear evidence that the entire decoration procedure was normally handled by a single person, who was therefore capable of performing the complete technical sequence himself.[31] Moreover, mistakes in the hieroglyphic transposition of hieratic models for texts in the paintings sometimes betray the poor literacy skills of painters, whereas some of their colleagues obviously adapted those models to the actual layout of their composition, thus revealing, on the contrary, undisputable philological abilities.

From this level on, and especially at the closer level of the brush strokes, the lines and the individual artistic process, the study of the material dimension of the work within the analytical perspective of an archaeology of art needs to be complemented by an experimental approach. Largely unused in Egyptology, an experimental approach to art indeed appears to be the best way to scrutinize the intimacy of the work of art and to try to comprehend its genesis. Performed in equivalent conditions, experimentation allows us to appraise – and therefore to validate or refute – hypotheses generated by the examination of ancient paintings, to precisely evaluate the ergonomic conditions of the work in the tomb chapels (lighting conditions, simultaneity of the different phases of the work, spatial and functional distribution of the latter, modalities of team work, speed and productiveness of the various tasks to be carried out, etc.), and to assess the specific properties and potentialities of the painting material archaeologically attested to, like pigments, brushes, bowls,[32] etc. This research, led by Hugues Tavier[33] within the project initiated at the University of Liège, highlights the impact of ergonomic and technical conditions (due, for example, to the nature of the pigments or of the binders used or to the technique of tempera) on the art of painting the Theban tomb chapels during the Eighteenth Dynasty, and, therefore, helps in identifying the part of the work that truly relates to the personal habits and practices of the painter. This is, in fact, the performance of an experimental art History. Even if the concept of an experimental Archaeology is nowadays accepted, its application to art History is still embryonic, despite the extraordinary research perspectives it opens.

A recent study Hugues Tavier and I have led on the paintings in the long hall of the tomb chapel of the Vizier Amenemope (TT 29) at Sheikh Abd el-Gurna[34] reveals the potential of this double method, i.e. the combination of an Archaeology of art and an experimental art History. Indeed, this dual approach allowed us to demonstrate, on the basis of strictly material observations – i.e. observations easy to objectivize and to verify – that this part of the monument was decorated by a single painter, who executed the complete technical sequence himself, from the clayey last layer of plastering to the final outlines of the paintings; that he generally coloured his composition by successive vertical bands approximately one meter wide, according to a progression that could also be reconstructed; that this painter was right-handed; and that he attempted to hurry his work by shortening his usual painting procedure but nonetheless did not succeed in finishing his task within the time

allotted. Furthermore, the addition of atypical and unnecessary – but nevertheless grammatically correct – complements to the inscription that describes one of the unfinished scenes shows that he tried to adjust this legend to the actual and final layout of his painting and, consequently, that he obviously had a rather good knowledge of the art of hieroglyphic writing.

As can be seen, the sources that allow us to study the artists of Ancient Egyptian painting – an artistic production that still generates widespread fascination and recognition among art lovers and connoisseurs even today – are far from being as poor or useless as has been assumed in the past. On the contrary, their often underestimated diversity is such that it requires a multiple and multidisciplinary approach, using all the resources of Egyptology – and even those this discipline is still currently inventing.

But such an investigation – as complex as it might reveal itself to be – is very rewarding, since it leads to a better definition and a clearer picture not so much of the individual identity of Ancient Egyptian artists but rather of their societal identity, i.e. the place they held within the society of Ancient Egypt, as essential actors in this culture, who were generally supposed to be definitely inaccessible. And finally, on a more theoretical level, the acknowledgement of the preconceived ideas generated by contemporary western culture(s) vis-à-vis the issue of the artist and the adoption of a less dogmatic perspective on the subject, a perspective that simply focuses on and sticks to the material evidence, also lead to a probably more appropriate definition of the artist as someone distinct from simple image-makers, copyists or craftsmen according to his personal investment in his work on a formal as well as on a semantic level, due to his technical as well as intellectual competences, which so many painters of the private tomb chapels in the Theban Necropolis during the Eighteenth Dynasty obviously displayed.

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* The present article is a slightly modified and translated version of a previous contribution, written in French and intended to be published by the SCAE in a volume dedicated to Abdel Ghaffar Shedid. I would like to express here my deepest gratitude to Todd Gillen for his many suggestions to improve the language of this article. Of course, any mistake remains entirely mine.

1 On this question, see E. Kris – O. Kurz, *Legend, Myth and Magic in the Image of the Artist*, New Haven – London 1930, who aimed to demonstrate the existence of common trends and topoi in the reported lives of artists almost all over the world (within specific societal contexts) and, at the same time, emphasized the strength of the western tradition on the subject, dating back to late classical Greece.

2 See H. Junker, *Die gesellschaftliche Stellung der ägyptischen Künstler im Alten Reich*, Vienna 1959. The issue is actually a little bit more complicated. I will return to this subject in a forthcoming contribution specifically dedicated to it.

3 See the expressions using the terms *ḥmw*, *ḥmw.w* and *ḥm(w).t* in *Wb* III, cols 82–85.

4 For archaeological remains of royal sculpture workshops, see J. Phillips, Sculpture Ateliers of Akhetaten. An examination of two studio-complexes in the City of the Sun-Disk, *Amarna Letters* 1 (1991), 31–40; D. Laboury, Dans l'atelier du sculpteur Thoutmose, in C. Cannuyer (ed.), *Acta Orientalia Belgica XVIII. La langue dans tous ses états. Michel Malaise in honorem*, Brussels – Liège – Louvain-La-Neuve – Leuven 2005, 289–300. For their ancient depictions, see R. Drenkhahn, *Die Handwerker und ihre Tätigkeiten im alten Ägypten*, ÄA 31, Wiesbaden 1976; M. Eaton-Krauss, *The representations of statuary in private tombs of the Old Kingdom*, ÄA 39, Wiesbaden 1984.

5 One has to note here that in Ancient Egyptian sources, the coordinators of large-scale works of art, like colossal statues or even temples, also usually claim originality, invention and authorship, as the very well known cases of Amenhotep son of Hapu or Senenmut exemplify among many others. Furthermore, for a recent reassessment of the question of creative cooperation in Egyptian tomb decoration, see A. Oppenheim, Identifying artists in the time of Senusret III. The mastaba of the vizier Nebit (North Mastaba 18) at Dashur, in M. Barta – F. Coppens – J. Krejci (eds), *Abusir and Saqqara in the year 2005*, Prague 2006, 116–132.

6 See E. Ware, Egyptian Artists' Signatures, *American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 43/3 (1927), 185–201.

7 On those graffiti, see the contribution of Alexis Den Doncker in this volume.

8 See, for example, the famous graffito in the name of Pawah in TT 139 (Pairy), signed by his brother, the *zš-ḳd* Batjay, and edited by A. H. Gardiner, The Graffito from the Tomb of Pere, *JEA* 14 (1928), 10–11, pls 5–6.

9 See the study of the late C. A. Keller, A family affair: the decoration of Theban Tomb 359, in W. V. Davies (ed.), *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt*, London 2001, 73–93. A new publication of the tomb has recently been issued by N. Cherpion – J.-P. Corteggiani, *La tombe d'Inherkhâouy (TT 359) à Deir el-Medina*, MIFAO 128, Cairo 2010.

10 See W. V. Davies, The dynastic tombs at Hierakonpolis: the lower group and the artist Sedjemnetjeru, in W. V. Davies, *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt*, 113–125.

11 On this double scene, see N. Kanawati – A. Woods, *Artists in the Old Kingdom. Techniques and Achievements*, Cairo 2009, 8–10. One has to note here the apparent double meaning ascribed to the verb *zš*: according to the titles of the two brothers, in Izezi's inscription in the tomb of Kheni, *zš* probably refers to the act of conceiving the decoration of the monument (on the role of the scribe of divine books in such a task throughout Ancient Egyptian History, see P. Vernus, Les espaces de l'écrit dans l'Égypte pharaonique, *BSFE* 119 [1990], 39 and 49, n. 13), while in Seni's words, it obviously applies to the actual making of the tombs' decoration; in both cases, it's a question of creating the decoration and, in fact, describes the two complementary aspects of this process. This interpretation fits very well with the assertion of the scribe Merira in the Twentieth Dynasty tomb of Setau at Elkab, where he stressed in a double inscription that 'it is with his own fingers that he made those inscriptions, while the scribe of the divine books Merira, the justified one, he is not of the kind of the *zš-ḳdw.t* (*nn zš-ḳdw.t pw*; on this construction, see P. Vernus, Observations sur la predication de classe ('Nominal Predicate'), *Lingua Aegyptia* 4 [1994], 325–348). It is his own heart who leads him, without any superior to give him instructions.' This text was first studied by W. Spiegelberg, Eine Künstlerinschrift des Neuen Reiches, *RT* 24 (1902), 85–86, and the tomb of Setau has recently been published by J.-M. Kruchten – L. Delvaux, *Elkab 8. La tombe de Sétaou*, Brussels 2010.

12 Most of those examples were gathered and studied by Junker, *Die gesellschaftliche Stellung der ägyptischen Künstler*, and re-described more recently by Kanawati – Woods, *Artist in the Old Kingdom*.

13 See D. A. Lowle, A Remarkable Family of Draughtsmen-Painters from Early Nineteenth-Dynasty Thebes, *Oriens Antiquus* 15 (1976), 91–106.

14 For a preliminary overview on this tomb, see A.-P. Zivie, Un détour par Saqqara. Deir el-Médineh et la nécropole memphite, in G. Andreu (ed.), *Deir el-Médineh et la Vallée des Rois. La vie en Égypte au temps des pharaons du Nouvel Empire. Actes du colloque organise par le musée du Louvre les 3 et 4 mai 2002*, Paris 2003, 71–73, 78–79.

15 See Kruchten, Traduction et commentaire des inscriptions, in N. Cherpion, *Deux tombes de la XVIII^e dynastie à Deir el-Medina*, Cairo 1999, 49.

16 The most famous is definitely the one published by W. C. Hayes, *Ostraka and Name Stones from the Tomb of Sen-Mut (no. 71) at Thebes*, New York 1942. The author of the present article is currently preparing with Stéphane Polis and Todd Gillen (F.R.S.-FNRS – University of Liège) a systematic study of the entire corpus of this kind of texts.

17 See Hayes, *Ostraka*, no. 70 (p. 22 and pl. 15).

18 They were discovered during the excavation of the tomb chapel of the vizier Amenemope (TT 29), just below the tomb of Mery, by the Belgian Archaeological Mission in the Theban Necropolis, a joint project of the University of Brussels and the University of Liège.

19 See E. S. Bogolovsky, Die 'Auf-den-Ruf-Hörenden' in der Privatwirtschaft unter der 18. Dynastie, in E. Endesfelder – K.-H. Priese – W.-Fr. Reineke – S. Wenig (eds), *Ägypten und Kush*, Berlin 1977, 86–88.

20 See M. Megally, Un intéressant ostracon de la XVIII^e dynastie de Thèbes, *BIFAO* 81s (1981), 293–312.

21 In addition to the case of the two tombs of Senenmut, mentioned above (Hayes, *Ostraka*), see the document edited by P. Posener, Construire une tombe à l'ouest de Mn-nfr, *RdE* 33 (1981), 47–58.

22 N. Reeves, *Akhenaten, Egypt's false prophet*, London 2001, 22.

23 This inextricable link between training or experience and visual perception is of course very well known in cognitive psychology and cognitive science (at least since the middle of the previous century; see, for example, R. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, Berkeley – Los Angeles 1954; R. Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, Berkeley 1969; or Fr. Edeline – J.-M. Klinkenberg – Ph. Minguet, *Traité du signe visuel. Pour une rhétorique de l'image*, Paris 1992), but it seems to have been totally neglected within Egyptology and its own practices.

24 See the now classic analyses of J. D. Beazley, *Attic Red-figure Vase-painters*, Oxford 1942; J. D. Beazley, *Attic Black-figure Vase-painters*, Oxford 1956.

25 On this topic, see D. Laboury, Citations et usages de l'art du Moyen Empire à l'époque thoutmoside, in S. Bickel (ed.), *Vergangenheit und Zukunft. Die Konstruktion historischer Zeit in der 18. Dynastie*, Basel, to be published in

2011, 1–28, pls 1–10. Another good case of this phenomenon of creation by imitation and emulation of the past appears in the study of D. Arnold, Egyptian Art – A performing art?, in S. H. D'Auria (ed.), *Servant of Mut. Studies in Honor of Richard A. Fazzini*, Leiden – Boston, 2008, 1–18, where the author suggests considering Ancient Egyptian art as a performing art, i.e. like dramatic art or music, for example, where the artist – duly acknowledged as such – can perform a composition created by someone else.

26 See L. Manniche, *Lost Tombs. A Study of Certain Eighteenth Dynasty Monuments in the Theban Necropolis*, London – New York 1988, 62–87.

27 See S. Wachsmann, *Aegeans in the Theban Tomb*s, OLA 20, Leuven 1987.

28 See G. Owen – B. J. Kemp, Craftsmen's Work Patterns in Unfinished Tombs at Amarna, *Cambridge Archaeological Journal* 4/1 (1994), 121–129.

29 E. Mackay, The cutting and preparation of tomb-chapels in the Theban Necropolis, *JEA* 7 (1921), 154–168.

30 Another obvious example was published by B. M. Bryan, Painting techniques and artisan organization in the Tomb of Suemniwet, Theban Tomb 92, in W. V. Davies (ed.), *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt*, pl. 21.1.

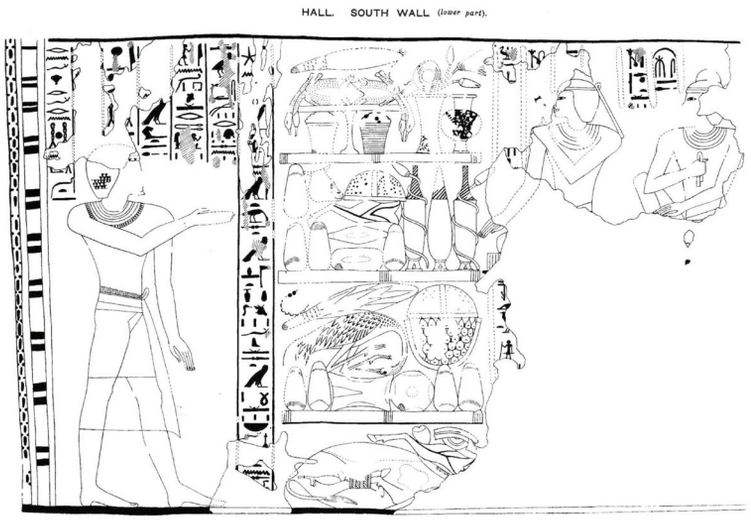
31 See D. Laboury – H. Tavier, À la recherche des peintres de la nécropole thébaine sous la 18e dynastie. Prolégomènes à une analyse des pratiques picturales dans la tombe d'Amenemopé (TT 29), in E. Warmenbol – V. Angenot (eds), *Thèbes aux 101 portes. Mélanges à la mémoire de Roland Tefnin*, Monumenta Aegyptiaca 12, Brussels 2010, 91–106, pls 8–22.

32 On this matter, see the pioneering investigations of A. G. Shedid, notably in C. Beinlich-Seeber – A. G. Shedid, *Das Grab des Userhat (TT 56)*, AV 50, Mainz, 1987; and A. G. Shedid, S*til der Grabmalerein in der Zeit Amenophis' II*, AV 66, Mainz 1988.

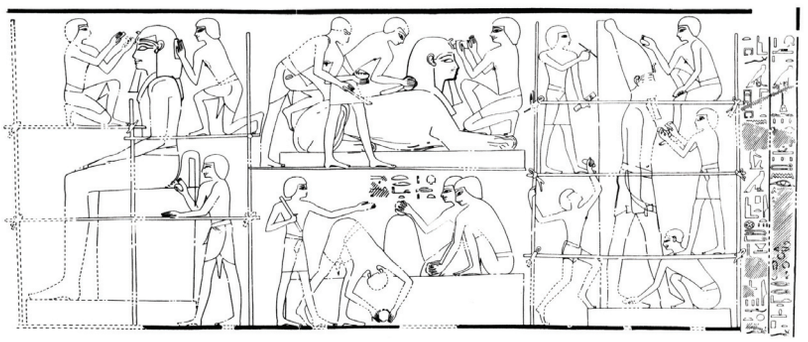
33 See his contribution in these proceedings, H. Tavier, Pour une approche expérimentale de la peinture thébaine.

34 See Laboury – Tavier, À la recherche des peintres de la nécropole thébaine sous la 18e dynastie.

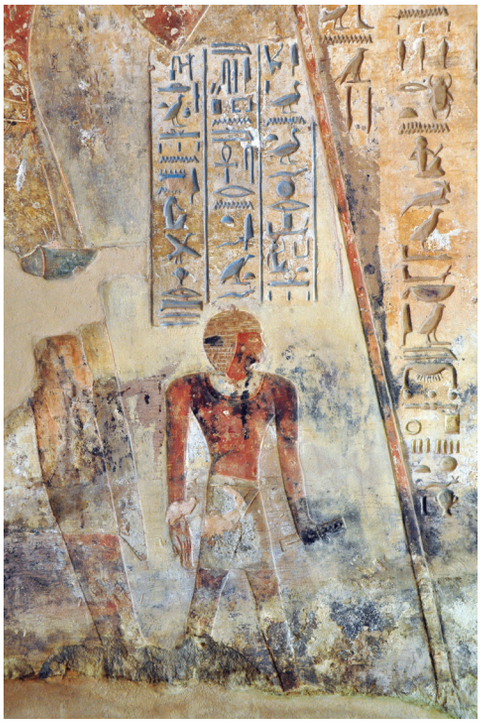
Plate 42



1 Depiction of Amenemhat paying homage to the artists responsible for the making and decoration of his Theban tomb (TT 82), according to an iconographic use inherited from the Old Kingdom. After N. de G. Davies, *The Tomb of Amenemhet (No. 82)*, London 1915, pl. 8.

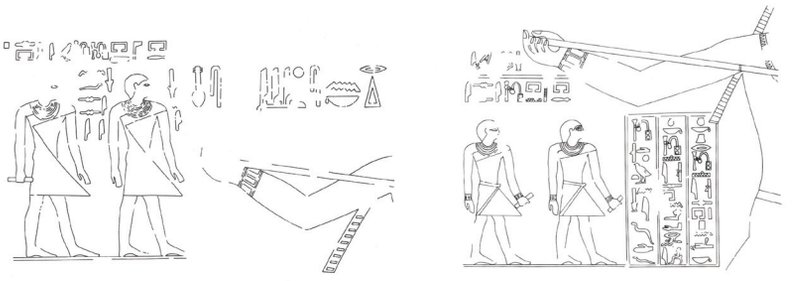


2 Scene of a sculptors' workshop in the temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak depicted in the tomb of Rekhmira (TT 100). N. de G. Davies, *The Tomb of Rekh-mi-Re' at Thebes*, New York 1943, pl. 60.



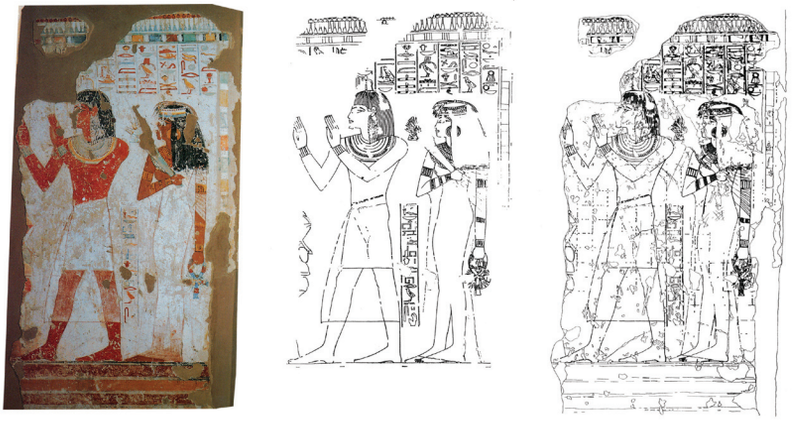
3 Signature of the scribe-of-forms Pahery in the tomb of the father of his mother Ahmose son of Ibana at Elkab (T Elkab 5). Photo: D. Laboury.

Plate 43



1 Signatures and self-depictions of the scribe-of-forms Seni and his brother, the scribe of the divine books of the Great-House Izezi in the tombs of Kheni and Tjeti-iqer at el-Hawawish (TH 24 and TH 26). After N. Kanawati, *The Rock Tombs of El-Hawawish. The Cemetery of Akhmim* II, Sydney 1981, fig. 18; and N. Kanawati, op. cit., I, fig. 8.

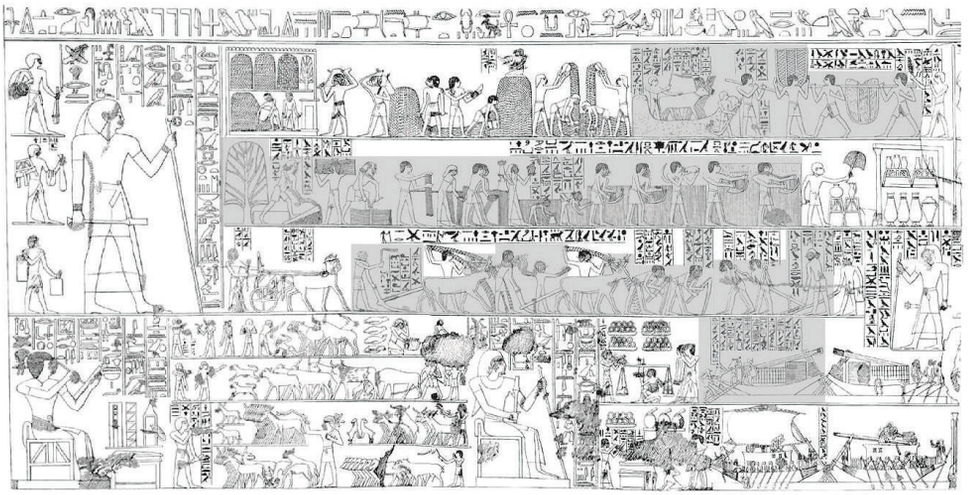
2 Self-depiction of the servant in the Place-of-Maat Sennefer in the tomb of his father Amenemhat at Deir el-Medineh (TT 340) After N. Cherpion, *Deux tombes de la XVIIIe dynastie à Deir el-Medina*, MIFAO 114, Cairo 1999, pl. 8.



a b c

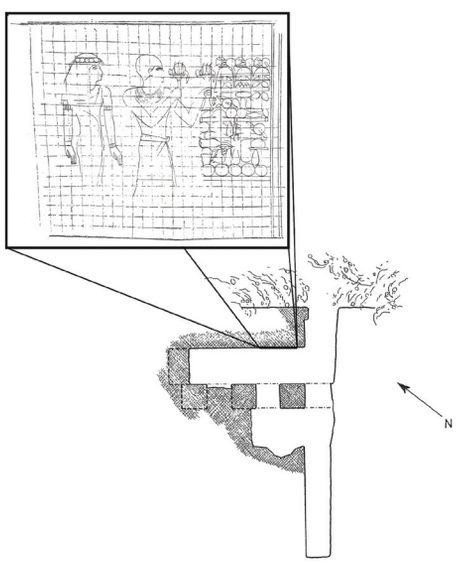
3 a-c Comparison of a photograph of the scene painted in the entrance way (left door-jamb) of the tomb of Huy (TT 54) and the line drawings of the same respectively made by Norman de Garis Davies and Daniel Polz. After D. Polz, *Das Grab des Hui und des Kel, Theben Nr. 54*, Mainz 1996, pl. 1; and D. Polz, in J. Assmann – G. Burkard – W. V. Davies (eds), *Problems and Priorities in Egyptian Archaeology*, London 1987, 136–137.

Plate 44



1 Parts of the decoration of the western wall of the tomb chapel of Pahery (T Elkab 3), which appear almost identical on the fragments from the Theban tomb of Wensu (TT A4) preserved in the Louvre Museum (N 1430-1 and 3318) After L. Manniche, *Lost Tombs. A Study of Certain Eighteenth Dynasty Monuments in the Theban Necropolis*, London – New York 1988, pl. 10.

2 Three depictions of the hieroglyphic sign *t3* in the tomb of Tjanuny (TT 74). After pictures © MANT – archives R. Tefnin.



3 Plan and location of the remains of the decoration initiated in the TT 229. After F. Kampp, *Die thebanische Nekropole*, Mayence 1996, 506, fig. 398 ; and M. Baud, *Les dessins ébauchés de la Nécropole Thébaine (au temps du Nouvel Empire)*, MIFAO 63, Cairo 1935, 199, fig. 94.

4 Part of the decoration of the tomb of Nebamun (TT 145) where a preliminary sketch has been painted on the white background of an adjacent scene already drawn and almost finished. After A. Fakhry, in *ASAE* 43 (1943), pl. 13.