

CLEVER MINDS AND EXPERT HANDS

Clever Minds and Expert Hands

Egyptian Art and Artists in the New Kingdom

Edited by

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and Benedict G. Davies**



ABERCROMBY PRESS

ISBN: 978 1 912246 35 9

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A CIP catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

First published in the United Kingdom in 2025

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Front Cover:

Artists at work, Theban Tomb 217 of the sculptor Ipuw, Deir el-Medina
(photograph by Gema Menéndez, 2025)

Typeset in Myriad Pro & Minion Pro
Designed and typeset by Benedict G. Davies

Published by:

Abercromby Press
12 Elm Park Road
Wallasey
CH45 5JH

PRINTED IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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Alisée Devillers

1. Introduction

Prior to recent Egyptological efforts to reassess the agency of artists within ancient Egyptian (elite) artistic production and their potential for reaching prestigious social positions, two rather contrary ancient sources were often quoted to demonstrate their lack of proper social standing. On the one hand, the unique nature of the sculptor Irtyesen's stela (Louvre, c 14) overshadowed other artisans' monuments and means of self-expression and was used to stress their limited access to funerary commemoration; on the other, the dreadful literary depiction of craftsmen¹ in the *Satire of the Trades* was thought to illustrate their overall lower societal status.

* I wish to thank Prof. Dr Inmaculada Vivas and Prof. Dr Gema Menendez for having accepted this paper for their conference “‘Distinguished above others’: The role of the artists in New Kingdom Art”. I also express my gratitude towards the UR “Mondes anciens” (University of Liège, Belgium) that made my participation to this symposium possible by funding my stay in Madrid. This paper was written during my postdoctoral stay at UCLA. This research stay was funded by the Belgian–American Educational Foundation (B.A.E.F.) and I wish to thank them here for their financial support.

¹ I will use ‘artists’, ‘artisans’, and ‘craftsmen’ alternatively to designate producers of artefacts that were, from the ancient Egyptians’ perspective, embedded with an ‘aesthetic added value’ (for a definition of ‘art’ ‘from a broader and more anthropological vantage point’, see D. Laboury and A. Devillers, ‘The ancient Egyptian artist: a non-existing category?’, in D. Candelora, N. Ben-Marzouk, and K. M. Cooney (eds), *Ancient Egyptian Society: challenging assumptions, exploring approaches*, New York and London, 2022, p. 166). I am well aware of the debate surrounding the definition of ‘art’ and its creators, but by using different terms alternatively to designate these experts, I wish — at least — to not replicate our modern biases and offer a more flexible vision on the question. On a broader art historical perspective, from the very beginning of any kind of artistic production, art producers always benefited from a variety of statuses — from the advisers of kings who shaped their visual propaganda to the illiterate individuals whose expertise was limited to a specific field of manufacture. Moreover, it has been demonstrated that our need to distinguish between ‘artists’ and ‘craftsmen’ is certainly the result of modern issues, grounded in the progressive empowerment of Renaissance artists, and later on the deep questioning of the nature of art in the 19th–21st centuries, which deeply shaped our contemporary understanding of this kind of human creation (see, e.g., D. Laboury, ‘L’artiste égyptien, ce grand méconnu de l’égyptologie’, in G. Andreu (ed.), *L’art du contour. Le dessin dans l’Égypte ancienne*, Paris, 2013, pp. 28–35). Adding to the common sense decision to analyze each artistic production within its own context, one should certainly have in mind the variety and diversity human society entails when dealing with its visual production, opting for a socio-economic version of art history.