

Tomb Scene: EA37977 'Fowling in the Marshes' by Bethany Saunders

EA37977 is fragment of polychrome plaster belonging to the tomb-chapel of Nebamun, and currently resides in the British Museum. It measures 98cm (height), 115cm (width), by 22cm (thickness), and was purchased in 1821 from British collector, Henry Salt.¹

Nebamun ("My Lord is Amun") is an elite official, with the epithets in this scene proclaiming him as 'Scribe and Grain-accountant in the Granary of Amun'.² EA37977 dates to the 18th dynasty (c. 1350BC), during the reign of Thutmose IV to Amenhotep III according to stylistic features.³ The exact location of the tomb is unknown, but the British Museum and archaeological evidence determine Thebes as the preferred burial place for members of the elite throughout the first half of the 18th Dynasty (1550-1292 BC), when such agricultural scenes were common.⁴



Figure 1- Nebamun hunting in the marshes. EA37977. The British Museum. (2019).

¹ The British Museum. (2019).

² Parkinson, R. B. (2008) 127.

³ The British Museum. (2019).

⁴ Bryan, B. M. (2010) 1001-2.

The fragment portrays a hunting scene with Nebamun, who is fishing and fowling with his family on the Nile alongside eight vertical registers of hieroglyphs. Nebamun stands on the wooden deck of a small reed boat brandishing a snake-headed throw stick in one hand, and grasping three decoy herons in the other. His wife, Hatshepsut, stands behind him in the fertile marshland, crowned with a perfume cone and floral garland, whilst holding lotus flowers to her chest and a golden sistrum associated with Hathor (carrying erotic overtones emphasising rebirth and female sexuality). His naked daughter sits beneath him with a side braid as a sign of youth, holding his leg and a lotus, while wearing a lotus pendant. A variety of aquatic imagery is depicted with fish by the papyrus in front of the boat and the broad-leaved lotus flowers growing to the right. This idealised image of Nebamun intended to depict him in the prime of health whilst 'taking enjoyment, seeing good things' with his family for eternity.⁵



Figure 2- A close-up of the left hand corner of EA37977 to show remnants of a spear indicating how the missing left hand side would have joined the fragment.

EA37977 is an incomplete scene, with the missing elements, including Nebamun spearing fish with his son. The remnant of a spear on the bottom left hand corner peers across the papyrus thicket and impales a tilapia fish; a reconstruction drawing by the British Museum shows how this would have originally looked. The rooms containing the individualised paintings would have been accessible to friends and family, functioning as the link between the living and dead, for people to commemorate his life and admire his achievements with prayer and gifts.⁶

Tombs were created within the limestone hills of western Thebes by cutting rooms, passages and grave shafts into the rock; the majority of New Kingdom tombs

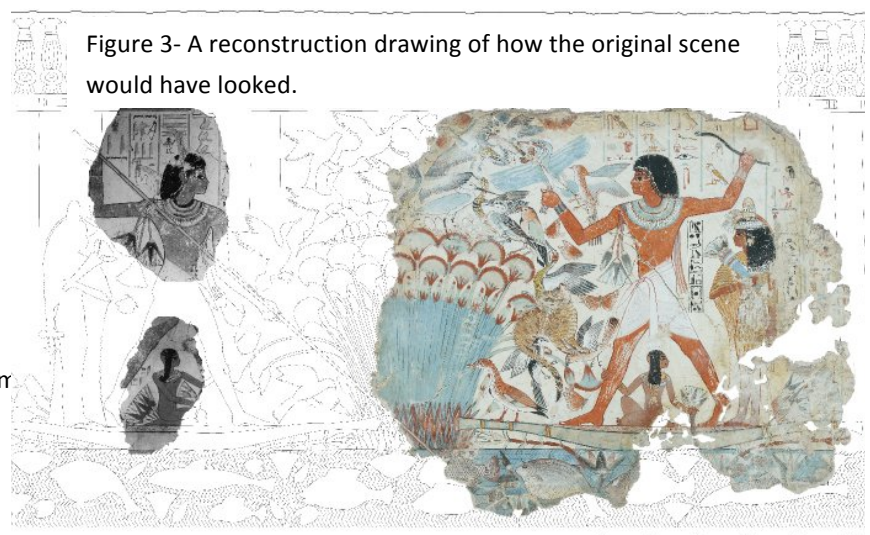


Figure 3- A reconstruction drawing of how the original scene would have looked.

⁵ Parkinson, R. B. (2008) 127. Translated from

⁶ Quirk, S. & Spencer, J. (1992). 151.

are therefore painted on heavily plastered walls due to the restriction of stone that could be carved and its poorer quality.⁷ EA37977 would have been made using Fresco Secco (with tempera for the painting medium), whereby pigments are mixed with an organic binder and applied onto dry plaster to make it adhere to the wall surface. This was the most common technique used to decorate New Kingdom Theban tombs during the 18th-20th Dynasties.

Walls were plastered with a thick layer of a coarse, organic substance made from mud and straw to cover major irregularities of the stone and limit the possibility of cracking when dry to support the intonaco.⁸ This was a thin layer of fine gesso plaster (a white paint mixture consisting of a binder mixed with chalk, gypsum or pigment), that made the surface smooth so it could be painted.⁹

By the time of Thutmose II, grid stratigraphy was well established for decoration of elite tombs and allowed artists to adhere to the canon of proportions for the standard uniformity of figures.¹⁰ A preliminary sketch was made by outlining the figures in red pigment, which is exposed on the weed under the prow of the boat due to the loss of green colouring, and by Nebamun's front knee when it was refined.¹¹ The background was initially covered with a creamy white pigment mixed with binding agent, leaving the grid mostly hidden. The



Figure 4- A view of Nebamun's clothing. The British Museum. (2019).

figures were filled, often by layering colours to create realistic details, as seen by Nebamun's short kilt layered with a semi-transparent overkilt. The process of applying colours is clearly distinguished from the marshland representation in the tomb of Suemniwet (TT92); the unfinished decoration shows the order in which colours that were applied to such scenes, as well as the visible grid lines. The last layer encompassed the finishing details: contour of

⁷ Bryan, B. M. (2010) 1002.

⁸ Miller, E. (2008) 61.

⁹ Brewer, D. J. & Teeter, E. (2007) 190.

¹⁰ Brewer, D. J. & Teeter, E. (2007) 197; Bryan, B. M. (2010) 1001.

¹¹ Parkinson, R. B. (2008) 124.

faces and body, nose, lips, Nebamun's belly button and details indicative of his status like the small rolls of fat (suggesting prosperity).¹²

Colour became more diverse in the New Kingdom, with extended classifications of the basic palette allowing a greater degree of decorative attention in elite works, especially from 1400-1250 BC.¹³ Inorganic mineral pigments proved stable throughout time; however, Egyptian blue is ground more finely and becomes paler as more light is scattered, so lacks the intensity of mineral pigments with larger particles.¹⁴

Colours also held symbolic associations as well as pictorial and aesthetic functions:

Colour	How obtained	Symbolic significance according to funerary context
Red and yellow	Ochre (mineral of clay that ranged from light yellow, brown or red)	Red = life, victory Yellow/ gold = everlasting, indestructible (protective)
White	Gypsum (calcium sulphate), chalk (calcium carbonate) – naturally occurring mineral	Omnipotence, purity
Blue	Azurite (carbonate of copper present in Sinai), lapis Egyptian blue (calcium copper silicate)	Sky, water (Nile), primeval flood (creation), rebirth, fertility
Black	Soot (carbon)	Rebirth (fertile black soil that rejuvenated the land after the Nile overflowed)

¹² Parkinson, R. B. (2008) 124.

¹³ Baines, J. (2007) 256.

¹⁴ Bryan, B. M. (2010) 990; Miller, E. (2008) 64.

Table 1.¹⁵

Additionally, art functioned as a religious tool alluding to timeless order and stability, by striving to preserve the perfect state of the universe; marshland fishing and fowling scenes are allegorical representations that refer to this maintenance of order in the cosmos.¹⁶ Various birds emerging from the papyrus overlap to create an “elegantly crowded composition” to fill the space available.¹⁷ This deliberate distortion evokes Nebamun’s triumph over chaotic forces, assisted by the cat subduing the fowl within its grasp, as well as supplying eternal sustenance.¹⁸ The marshes growing out of the fertile mud of the Nile symbolised rejuvenation and eternal life; they held mythological reference as liminal zones inhabited by the enemies of Maat (wild creatures): subduing them ensured the maintenance of order and defeat of chaos.¹⁹



Figure 5- A close view of the cat’s gilded eye. Colour Plate 11.3. Miller, E. & Parkinson, R. B. (2001).

The cat’s unusual gilded eye evokes a mythological connection to the scene. As the only known example of gilding on wall paintings in Theban tomb decoration, it holds an iconographic role as the Sun-god hunting enemies of light and order to maintain the cosmos as the Solar Eye and Great Cat who slays Apophis. The gold leaf is clearly visible, but it has mostly fallen off due to shrinkage in the underlying adhesive layer.

Useful reading:

Baines, J. (2007). Colour Terminology and Colour Classification. In J. Baines (Ed.), *Visual & Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (pp. 240-262). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ Brewer, D. J. & Teeter, E. (2007) 190; Bryan, B. M. (2010)

¹⁶ Brewer, D. J. & Teeter, E. (2007) 189.

¹⁷ Miller, E. & Parkinson, R. B. (2001) 49.

¹⁸ Robins, G. (1997) 21.

¹⁹ The Metropolitan Museum of Art. (2000).

Brewer, D. J. & Teeter, E. (2007). *Egypt and the Egyptians* (2nd ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Bryan, B. M. (2001). Painting techniques and artisan organization in the Tomb of Suemniwet, Theban Tomb 92. In W. V. Davies (Ed.), *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt* (pp. 63-71). London: British Museum Press.

Bryan, B. M. (2010). Pharaonic Painting Through the New Kingdom. In A. B. Lloyd (Ed.), *A Companion to Ancient Egypt* (pp. 990-1007). Blackwell Companions to the Ancient World 2. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.

Miller, E. & Parkinson, R. B. (2001). Reflections on a gilded eye in 'Fowling in the Marshes' (British Museum, EA 37977). In W. V. Davies (Ed.), *Colour and Painting in Ancient Egypt* (pp. 49-51). London: British Museum Press.

Miller, E. (2008). Painterly Technique. In A. Middleton & K. Uprichard (Eds), *The Nebamun Wall Paintings: Conservation, Scientific Analysis and Display at the British Museum* (pp. 61-67). London: Archetype.

Parkinson, R. B. (2008). *The painted tomb-chapel of Nebamun*. London: British Museum Press.

Quirk, S. & Spencer, J. (Eds). (1992). *The British Museum Book of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Thames and Hudson.

Robins, G. (1997). *The Art of Ancient Egypt*. London: British Museum Press.