

***Solving Problems and Pleasing Patrons: The Case Study of the  
Egyptian Artists who decorated the XVIIIth Dynasty Private Theban Tombs***

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**Abstract**

This study is focused on the artists involved in the decoration of the private Theban tombs of the nobles of the Egyptian XVIIIth Dynasty, officials who were part of the court and usually had a close relationship with the king or were linked to the temple administration. These private tombs, full of vivacious and original decorations, have been a focus of attention for Egyptologists, but few studies have tried to explore the role of the artists who painted these scenes and their background, which may be linked to palace or temple workshops.

Despite the absence of significant written sources regarding Egyptian artists' organization, we will try to explore their 'methodology' and the training process, their problems when performing the decoration, and their sources of inspiration when defining the tomb repertoire. Innovation and new pictorial resources will be also analyzed, as they must have played an important role in the tomb scenes, which should be attractive to visitors. The tomb was not only a resting place but also a memorial chapel visited by relatives and friends during religious festivals, and its decoration turned to be a way of showing social achievements and a way of perpetuating their memory.

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## Introduction

The so-called 'Valley of the Nobles' located in Thebes (Upper Egypt), the capital during the XVIIIth Dynasty, consists on a significant group of private tombs excavated into the mountain, which served both as burial place and as funerary chapel. These tomb chapels were built imitating the royal tombs in the 'Valley of the Kings', which was the New Kingdom royal necropolis from Thutmosis I onwards. The present study is focused on the artists involved in the decoration of these private tombs of the Theban nobles of the Egyptian XVIIIth Dynasty, and will try to explore the role of the artists, their background, methods and also their sources of inspiration.

The XVIIIth Dynasty is without doubt the most interesting period in the private Theban necropolis, as there was a significant increase in the number of private tombs. Today we have approximately 210 funerary chapels in the Theban necropolis dated to the XVIIIth Dynasty and we can assume that there were almost double in antiquity, which means a high number of tombs constructed and decorated in a short period of time (Kampp, 1996, 144-146). The XVIIIth Dynasty was a time of wealth and prosperity in Egypt linked to the expansion of Egyptian frontiers carried by kings like Thutmosis I or Thutmosis III, which made possible the incomes needed for such a 'boom' in tomb construction<sup>1</sup>. These tombs were built for high officials who were part of the court and usually had a close relationship with the king, or built for officials linked to the temples, so we could also label them as elite tombs. It is striking that most of these private Theban tombs are unfinished, with a varied degree of completion.

But more than the number of private tombs, we must stress the high quality of their decoration, which could be made in painting or painted relief, usually depending on the quality of the rock and also on the availability of artists. This type of private tomb was built as a hypogeum, with a limited outer space consisting on an open courtyard. It is necessary to remark the appearance of a new specific type of tomb in the early XVIIIth Dynasty, following the hypogeum model: the inverted T-shaped tomb. An ideal inverted T-shaped tomb should comprise the following elements: a forecourt or courtyard which leads to the upper-rock cut chambers, including a transverse hall, an elongated passage and an inner room with a niche for statues, and finally a shaft and subterranean burial chamber (Manniche, 1987, 30). The tomb of User (TT 21)<sup>2</sup> is one of the first tombs built according to this typology, constructed during the reign of Thutmosis I until the reigns of Hatshepsut/Thutmosis III (Kampp, 1996, 203-205). We can even mention the curious case of a high official, called Useramun, who early in his career had a traditional tomb built in the form of a long and narrow passage decorated mainly with funerary scenes (TT 61). But Useramun, who became vizier, ordered years after the construction of a second T-shaped tomb (TT 131). In this new type there is a new important element: the transverse hall. The T-shaped tomb became very popular during the XVIII Dynasty, and this change in the plan of the private tomb chapels may suggest the possibility that these monuments started to be used in a

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<sup>1</sup> The XVIIIth comprises the period from *circa* 1550 to 1307 B.C.. Dates based on the conventional Egyptian chronology (Baines, Malek, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> The short TT stands for Theban Tomb, followed by the number assigned to the tomb, according to the accepted the Egyptological terminology.

different way before or during the funeral ceremonies, or in the years after (Kozloff, 2005, 304-305). According to written and visual sources, we know that private tombs were visited by relative and friends as part of the funerary cult and during important religious festivals. For instance, we have graffiti written in hieratic on the walls of these private Theban chapels which could be specifically dated to the XVIIIth Dynasty, being a proof of these visits made due to religious cult or maybe due to curiosity (Hartwig, 2004, 12-14). These funerary chapels were a symbol of social status, with a double function as they served as the space where the funerary and memorial cult was performed, and also as burial place

In these T-shaped tombs the transverse hall played an important role within the decorative program, including scenes specifically related to the life and career of the tomb owner which would immortalize his life. It seems that ancient Egyptian nobles wanted visitors to come to their tombs (Bryan, 2009, 22), and in the court or front rooms families gathered together during the local festivals. We know that during the Beautiful Feast of the Valley Festival, the most important religious Theban festival, after visiting the local temples the family and friends visited the tombs of their ancestors, made offerings and enjoyed banquets in the tombs. Even the wall paintings of many tombs represent the family and friends taking part in banquets during the Valley Festival, showing the deceased expected these visitors. We find this type of scene in the tomb of Nakht (TT 52), where the Valley Festival is represented in the transverse hall (Davies, 1917, plates XV-XVII). This is an important matter, as we should consider these tomb scenes as artworks that were admired and appreciated by the ancient Egyptians. Although it has been assumed that the concept of art did not exist in ancient Egypt and the artists themselves were mainly anonymous, we may consider the scenes of these private Theban tombs were produced by the artists for a specific 'audience', and although examples of funerary art the scenes were intended to be viewed.

### **The Background of the Theban Artists**

The XVIIIth Dynasty private Theban tombs have been a focus of attention but few studies have tried to explore the role of the artists who painted these scenes and their background. Painters and sculptors in ancient Egypt followed a fixed hierarchy, as it was the rule for craftsmen, and it was a male profession usually inherited from father to son (Laboury, 2013, 28-35).

First of all, it is necessary to explore the background of the artists. In Thebes during the XVIIIth Dynasty we do not have written evidence that suggests that artisans could work freelance. On one hand, there must have been several workshops of artists, probably linked to the royal service and to the temples, according to several sources, such as the titles of artists and supervisors. For instance, in the tomb of Nebamun and Ipuky (TT 181) we attest the representation of a "Painter of Amun", who worked in the tomb (Davies, 1924, pl. XI, XII. XIV). We have written evidence of artists with titles connected to the royal service, such as 'Chief of outline-draughtsmen of the Lord of the two lands' (Steinmann, 1982, 155). Archaeological remains found in the North Palace of Malqata and in the palace precinct of Birket Habu in Malqata indicate a significant number of resident artists. Apart from the artists linked to the temple and to the palace, we know that from the reign of Thutmosis I a group of artists was settled in Deir el Medina, commissioned to build and decorate the royal tombs. These

Deir el Medina artists could have occasionally decorated the private Theban tombs, a question that remains today problematic, but considering the high number of private tombs, this seems to have been more the exception rather than the rule (Hartwig, 2004, 23-24).

On the other hand, artists could sometimes have a diverse geographic origin coming from areas outside Thebes. For example the ostraca found in the tomb of Senenmut and near Deir el Bahari temple show that artists working there came from different cities in Upper Egypt and even one in Middle Egypt (Hayes, 1942, 23). This might also be the case of some artists who took part in the decoration of the private Theban tombs, but it is difficult to imagine how the tomb owners had the resources and possibilities to employ artists leaving aside the Egyptian institutions. We know that the king usually granted officials plots of land to build their tombs, and there is even textual evidence from XVIIIth Dynasty Thebes which mentions officials “interred in the land given by the king, into the tomb of the West” (Kanawati, 2001, 6-8). So we might also think that the institutions, temple or royal administration, had some role in the supply of skilled craftsmen to build and decorate the private Theban tombs, although probably the tomb owners should pay for their work.

Having in mind the diverse evidence, it is difficult to reach a conclusion about the origin of the artists. The tombs paintings themselves could throw light to the question of their background. According to the existence of two clear different styles of paintings in private tombs dated in the reigns of Thutmosis IV and Amenophis III, Melinda Hartwig has proposed the existence of two Theban painters’ workshops. One workshop may have been linked to the royal palace and seems to have decorated the tombs of officials who held important positions in the court. The other workshop was linked to the temples, and probably in charge of the decoration of the tombs belonging to officials working in temple administration. The correlation between the style of the tomb paintings and the profession of the tomb owner suggests that they could have acquired artists from the institutions they were linked to. Hartwig has also argued convincingly that the so-called ‘Palace Style’ and the ‘Temple Style’ seen in private Theban tombs show connections with motifs attested in palace and temple artworks, which may indicate a common origin of the artists (Hartwig, 2004, 32-35). Probably, these artists were employed in the private tombs and then returned to their workshops. We believe that the high number of unfinished tombs in the private Theban necropolis may be related to the fact that artists were lent or hired for a certain period of time, and they had to return to their institutions usually leaving the tomb scenes incomplete.

As Betsy Bryan has pointed out, the increase of private Theban tombs dated to the XVIIIth Dynasty would imply an important demand for high-skilled artists (Bryan, 2001, 70). If there were not enough artists to cover the demand, the origin of the artists may have been diverse and with different levels of skill. In most tombs we can identify the hands of different artists, or maybe the hands of several master artists, as we can see in the tomb of Userhat (TT 56), where at least three artist’ hands have been attested (Beinlich-Seeber, Shedid, 1987, 141). The close analyses of the scenes of a tomb could even reveal the presence of several artists working with different techniques under the supervision of one or more master artists, as we will see.

## **Solving Problems and Pleasing Patrons: ‘Methodology’ of the Artists and Sources of Inspiration**

Despite the absence of significant written sources regarding Egyptian artists' process of decorating a tomb, we consider necessary to research the way these artists worked. Once the walls of the tomb chapel had been prepared to be embellished, the master artist had to select the number of scenes to be included according to the size of the tomb. But it was probably much more important to adapt the funerary decorative program to the likes of the tomb owner and to his profession, as many scenes in the tomb, and more specifically in the transverse hall, had to show the best actions of his life. Then the master artist had to organize the distribution of scenes and supervise the process of execution. The ‘methodology’ of these Theban artists is not so different from modern artist methodology, as they seem to have worked following a workshop method. The tomb of Suemniwet (TT 92), which has been exhaustively analyzed, shows the process which started with grids painted in the walls and the sketching of the scenes, and then continued with the decoration of a wall with varied colors and pigments. The tomb chapel of Suemniwet is largely unfinished, which helps us to examine different ways of work organization in the same tomb. For example, in the West part of the transverse hall we can identify one group of painters working under a single chief artisan, but in the East part a second and smaller group of painters worked under a different master artist. Besides, the decoration of the Front room in TT 92 shows great complexity and great detail, and suggests the presence of several master artists working together in the scenes of the Front room, and it seems that they completed each section before moving to the next one. These painters working in the Front room first laid colours, then applied layers and finally did the finishing lines, obtaining a complex scene with a high skilled technique and varied pigments (Bryan, 2001, 65-67). After studying the paintings in the tomb of Suemniwet, Bryan suggested that probably around 25 artists worked on the tomb, simultaneously or at different times and using different techniques and varied type of pigments. This tomb was planned and decorated by workshop-crews using a variety of organizational and painting methods, and probably each master artist had freedom to organize his crew as he wished (Bryan, 2001, 71). The conclusion then may be that several crews of artisans with a varied background and sometimes with different styles and techniques might have been employed in these private Theban tombs.

We have already mentioned the varied degree of skill of the artists working in a tomb. One of the problems that master artists should face was the supervision of the work done by regular artists or by apprentices, who will follow the decorative program established in the tomb by the master artists. In many of these private Theban tombs of the first half of the XVIIIth Dynasty we can observe the extensive use of square grids as a training method for unskilled artists. But grids were also used by regular and master artists to produce human figures with acceptable proportions. For example the use of the grid could be also very useful for master artists working in reduced spaces, such as the narrow corridors of small tombs, where a painter could not move backwards to have a wide perspective of the wall painting (Robins, 2001, 60). Therefore the grid in the XVIIIth Dynasty was not only used as a training method but also as a technical aid.

As Gay Robins has remarked, beginning with the reign of Amenhotep II and continuing for the rest of the XVIIIth Dynasty there is an increasing tendency to

reserve the grid for major figures, while the rest were added freehand, which meant less time spent on the preparation of grids. This change took place together with a stylistic change, as we see a freer and more fluid way of rendering the human body, especially in secondary figures. It is possible that the stylistic change and the reduced use of grids are related, perhaps because those artists who were developing the freer style were becoming impatient with the process of drawing the grids before painting the wall. This tendency to reduce the use of grids continued during and after the Amarna period, and the employ of grids during the XIXth and XXth Dynasties in both private and royal tombs is very rare (Robins, 2001, 61). We may conclude the methodology followed by these artists was closely related to the style of the decoration, and it is therefore important to explore their working methods.

Besides the technical problems that these Theban artists should face, there were others related to the tomb scenes themselves. As we mentioned before, the tomb chapel decoration had to be planned according to the likes of the tomb owner and also had to show his achievements, as some kind of biographical narrative (Manniche, 1987, 32-33). The role of the patrons in Ancient Egypt and their interaction of patron and artist in the production of art is a complicated question, considering that we only have the result of such interaction in the form of finished works (Bács, 2001, 94).

The high number of tombs built and decorated in the XVIIth Dynasty, and especially during the time of Thutmose III / Hatshepsut, may have forced artists to look for new themes and new poses. During the XVIIIth Dynasty we see a wide range of themes within the tomb repertoire, so it may be convenient to explore the sources of inspiration of the artists when decorating a tomb chapel. We think Theban artists were aware that they should create a tomb following the established programme but also with original and appealing scenes, avoiding repetition. In this 'creative process' artists may have followed two practices: visiting and copying scenes from previous tombs, and using the so-called 'model books' or 'pattern books'. Both practices are complementary and they were probably part of the artists' work.

On one hand, we have written evidence of the visits to Theban tombs, which could be roughly contemporary or much older, such as the case of the tomb of Senet, who was probably the mother of the vizier Antefoker (TT 60), dated to the beginning of the XIIth Dynasty. This Middle Kingdom private tomb seems to have become a source of curiosity and pilgrimage at the beginning of the XVIIIth Dynasty, as the graffiti found on its walls prove. Davies documented 36 graffiti, many of them made by scribes who visited what they considered to be a source of inspiration for replication in later tombs. One of the most interesting graffiti in this tomb was made by scribe Amenemhat (graffiti no 33), who lived under Thutmose III, stating that he visited TT 60 and he was impressed by its decoration. The wall scenes in Amenemhat's tomb (TT 82), as many others XVIIIth Dynasty Theban chapels, are inspired by the scenes in Antefoker's tomb. We may suggest that Amenemhat could have visited TT 60 with the artists commissioned to build his tomb chapel (Davies, 1920, 29, no 33). Another graffiti made by a scribe called Sennefer was found on the desert hunt scene, which was admired and served as inspiration for many XVIIIth Dynasty hunt scenes (Davies, 1920, no 25).

We can assume that Theban artists visited tombs looking for inspiration and sometimes sketched details, maybe on ostraca. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has a

collection of ostraca found in an archaeological context near the tomb of Senmut and the Deir el Bahari temple and dated to Hatshepsut/ Thutmose III, which may be useful to show the process of copying and practising details or making sketches. For instance, we can mention an ostrakon depicting two portraits of Senmut, Hatshepsut vizier, which could show the process of copying a previous scene, or could even be a copy of a pupil corrected by the master artist (Roerig, 2005, 63). We even have evidence of grids made on a wall scene to be copied, such as the grid on the tomb of Kenamun (TT 63) drawn on the dog and ibex in the hunt scene (Wilkinson, Hill, 1983, 28, fig- 23).

On the other hand, we believe that ancient Egyptian artists worked with pattern books or model books, a compilation of drawings, sketches or single details, maybe made on papyrus or some kind of wooden surface. When they had to arrange and design the decoration of the new funerary chapel they would visit old tombs, but also relied on the pattern books with common scenes or details. The existence of model books has been suggested by several scholars such as Schäffer (1974, 62) or as Mekhitarian, who even proposed that the so-called ‘shapes scribes’ who planned the tomb decoration were trained through pattern books in the form of papyrus rolls, in which every page may give details of a certain type of scene (Mekhitarian, 1978, 20, 58). We think that ancient Egyptian artists used model books, where the repertoire of tomb scenes and details of the scenes were recorded. Having in mind that painters and sculptors inherited their profession, these model books may have passed from father to son.

Unfortunately no example of an ancient Egyptian model book has survived, but we can mention two New Kingdom wooden boards which may reflect the process of copying a scene or practising a detail, and may recall the existence of model books. The first is a well-known wooden board in the British Museum collection (EA 5601), whose provenance is unknown, but said to have been found in a Theban tomb. The recto shows on the left area the seated figure of a king laid out on a grid, Thutmose III, and several hieroglyph symbols on the right area (Iversen 1960, 71-79, plate XVI).

The second is a fragmentary wooden board, most probably dated to Hatshepsut/ Thutmose III period, recently found in the courtyards of the tombs of Djehuty (TT 11) and Hery (TT 12)<sup>3</sup>. This board found in the private Theban necropolis was used on both sides for drawing and for writing, and the surface of each side was divided into two halves by a vertical imaginary line. On the recto the left half was used to draw two figures of pharaoh on a grid resembling a standing statue of a king, and the right part of the board was used for the text (Galán, 2007, 95, 100). When comparing the two drawings we can notice the image on the right has been done with greater skill than the one on the left (**Figure 1**). Therefore, it is possible that the images correspond to the work of a master artist copied by his apprentice, reflecting the practice of learning by copying a model on a single object, master and apprentice side by side. The striking frontal view of the image may also suggest that it is a

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<sup>3</sup> I thank Dr. J.M. Galán for generously providing me the images of the Apprentice’s board found in Dra Abu el-Naga (© Proyecto Djehuty).

preparatory study of a statue, or perhaps it is just an exercise in draughtsman's skills and knowledge (Galán, 2007, 105).

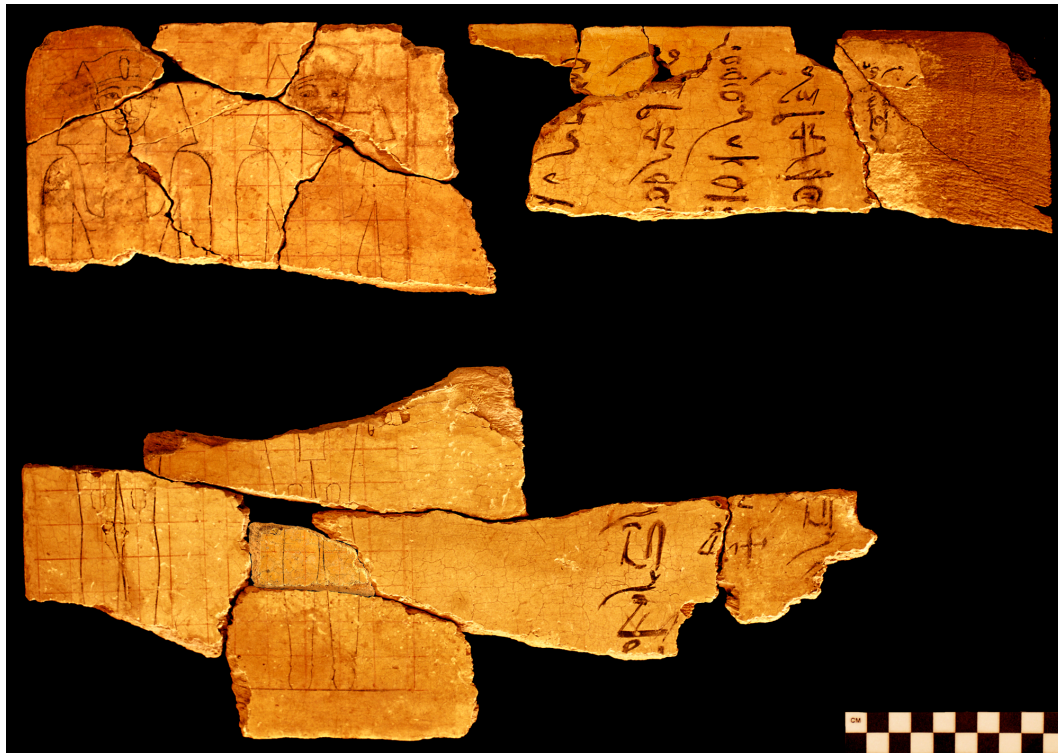


Figure 1. Recto of the apprentice's board

The verso of the wooden board shows the motif of a king shown in the posture of fowling, with his right arm raised and holding a duck in his left hand (**Figure 2**). The drawing is part of a fowling in the marshes scene, but there is no representation of the papyrus thickets or the wild ducks, so it seems it is not a preparatory sketch for painting or carving this type of scene, but rather a draughtsman's exercise to practise his skills and knowledge of the proportions of the human body (Galán, 2007, 107-108). Considering this drawing shows only a part of the typical fowling scene, we might think that the artist was copying a detail of a previous scene who called his attention, or maybe he was adapting the usual image of Egyptian officials fowling in the marshes, so common in New Kingdom Theban tombs, to the iconography of a pharaoh. This apprentice board is an interesting and useful find because it was found in an archaeological context linked to the tomb of Djehuty, who may be the owner of this object which could have been placed in his tomb as part of the funerary equipment. He was a high official who held the title of overseer of the craftsmen under Hatshepsut, so we might assume his professional interest in that kind of pictorial compositions (Galán, 2007, 115). But for our study this find is particularly useful because we can see the process of training, copying and practising details, which was part of the daily lives of the Egyptian artists.





Figure 2. Verso of the apprentice's board

### **Innovation and Pictorial Resources in the Private Theban Tomb Chapels**

Finally, we will analyze briefly the question of innovation and new pictorial resources in the XVIIIth Dynasty private Theban tombs. The royal tombs of the XVIIIth Dynasty usually show a decoration more or less restricted to funerary and religious contents. But the private tombs were probably a more convenient context for artist's innovations, where they explored new possibilities. The decorative program in private tomb chapels is really varied: scenes related to the career of the owner, funerary scenes or the so-called daily life scenes (Manniche, 2003, 42-45). But probably due to the high number of tombs built and decorated during the XVIIth Dynasty, and especially during the time of Thutmosis III / Hatshepsut, artists had to look for new themes and new artistic resources. Although we can trace motifs copied from one tomb to another, there are no two identical tombs. The innovations attested in the New Kingdom private Theban tombs could be related to new themes, to unusual details of an icon, or to the new treatment of a traditional theme (El-Shahawy, 2010, 3-5). From our point of view, one of the most striking innovations is the transgression of some Egyptian representation rules, which have been followed over centuries by artists. It has been usually assumed that in the New Kingdom wall decoration the concept of depth was generally avoided (Hodel-Hoernes, 2000, 22), but in some Theban tombs we see attempts to create depth and perspective. For instance in the agriculture scene in the transverse hall of the tomb of Nakht (TT 52) the artist has converted the register line into an undulating line, giving some perspective to the fields depicted (Davies, 1917, 60-62, plates 18-21). In the hunt scene in the tomb of Rekhmire (TT 100) the register lines are completely absent and the artist creates perspective and a sensation of movement and chaos (Davies, 1943, 41-43, plate XLIII).

Another interesting example of the emancipation from Egyptian representation rules is the frontality of human figures and animals. We could mention the musicians in a frontal view from some Theban tombs, such as the tomb of Nebamun (TT 90) or the tomb of Horemheb (TT 78), creating a sense of movement and reflecting the artistic freedom of these Theban painters (Volokhine, 2000, 36-37). In our research of the innovations we have paid special attention to the frontal poses of the dogs shown in desert hunt scenes, which reflect a break of the movement of animals and have been attested in several private Theban tombs, such as TT 21, the tomb of User (Davies, Gardiner, 1913, plate XXII), or in TT 100, the tomb of Rekhmire (Davies, 1943, plate XLIII). We believe this type of animal frontal poses could have worked as a 'visual hooks', calling the attention of the viewer to particular details. It is difficult to say if these frontal pose is a self-developed artistic innovation within the Theban workshops, or if it is the result of artistic foreign influence. Frontal poses are attested in Near Eastern and Aegean art, and we must bear in mind this was a period of intense contact with the world abroad, when foreign objects displaying new motifs and posed arrived to Egypt, and were appreciated by the elite. We think the skilled artists working in the court or linked to Egyptian temples had access to that kind of foreign iconography, which may have also inspired the poses in private tombs scenes.

## **Conclusions**

Although most ancient Egyptian artists will remain anonymous forever, we would like to remark the need and importance of analysing their process of training and working. The artists working in the private tombs in Thebes during the XVIIIth Dynasty are an interesting and suitable case study, as they worked in a limited area and in a certain period of time, and their artistic production is remarkable in quality and number. We believe Theban painters were organised in workshops with a fixed hierarchy and linked to the temples or to the royal palace, and we think they were lent or hired to build and decorate the private Theban tombs. The high number of tomb chapels dated to the XVIIIth Dynasty implies that artists should create a tomb with original and attractive scenes, for instance looking for a sense of perspective or using new poses such as frontal images.

As we have seen, there are multiple and disperse pieces of information regarding the Egyptian artist work, such as finished or unfinished tomb scenes, graffiti, ostraca or drawings on wooden boards. It is not an easy task to join all this evidence, but it could provide valuable insights of the way artists worked in the tomb and their sources of inspiration.

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