

# Monumenta Aegyptiaca 7

Série *IMAGO* n° 1

*Roland Tefnin : La Peinture égyptienne ancienne*  
Un monde de signes à préserver

FONDATION ÉGYPTOLOGIQUE REINE ÉLISABETH



MONUMENTA AEGYPTIACA VII

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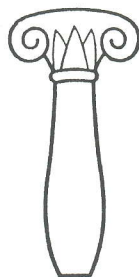
**LA PEINTURE ÉGYPTIENNE  
ANCIENNE**

**UN MONDE DE SIGNES À PRÉSERVER**

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## REFLECTIONS ON THE BANQUET SCENE

It has been demonstrated over the past few decades that many so-called scenes of daily life are far more than just a record of the way the Egyptians went about their business, although the reliefs and paintings provide a wealth of information on details of arts and crafts, agriculture, social affairs, and a variety of manners and customs.

To preserve and record the monuments is one thing; but it is rather pointless to do so if we do not at the same time try to work towards an understanding of what it all means — what it meant to Egyptians, and what it could possibly mean to us, apart from the immediate impact of the beauty of these works of art.

I would like to go beyond the surface of one of the most common and best loved subjects in Egyptian wall-decoration, the banquet scene, which is such a central feature of 18th dynasty tomb decoration. To my knowledge it was a subject that was never omitted in the Theban tombs of that date. It is also the motif that has suffered the most over the past two centuries when visitors helped themselves for various reasons. If a tomb was seriously attacked, the banquet scene will have gone. For example, in the now lost Theban Tomb A4 the only evidence of the presence of a banquet scene was no bigger than the size of a box of matches, sketched by one of the early travellers.

The banquet with the beautiful women, half naked servants and musicians is indeed very appealing. It shows the Egyptians in perfect circumstances, dressed in their finest gear, seated on mats and chairs in great numbers, drinking to their hearts' content, enjoying each other's company. They are all in a state of perpetual youth. There are no old men and women at the party. Nor are there any children. This is the first pointer to alert us to the fact that this is no ordinary social gathering.

Many of the banquet scenes can be placed in a specific context through the texts accompanying the scenes, or by their proximity to events which depict the most important feast in the necropolis: the Beautiful Feast of the Valley which took place in the summer. The occasion was the visit of Amun from Karnak who travelled with his followers across the river to visit the mortuary temples of the kings on the other side. He was carried in procession through the necropolis on his way to the temple at Deir el-Bahari where he rested in the company of Hathor. Relatives of tomb owners gathered in the tombs during the several days that this feast lasted, and as the procession passed by the tombs, offerings were made to the great god, not only by the relatives, but also by the tomb owner himself.

Now this is a peculiar situation, but it illustrates admirably how, in the tombs, we are constantly hovering somewhere between the past and the future. The minds of the Egyptians were very flexible, and to them it was not a problem that at one moment the tomb owner was like any other living person, pouring myrrh on a heap of offerings — the next, he was somewhere behind that false door, himself the recipient of 1000 heads of oxen and 1000 mugs of beer, or of a magnificent bouquet. For all that we know, after the tomb had been cut and decorated, but before it was put to its ultimate purpose, the tomb owner might have been able to celebrate many Valley Feasts on the premises. Like the Egyptians, we must accustom ourselves to transcending the barrier of time and space.

If we look carefully at any banquet scene there is one detail that stands out. It is in their hands, in their hair, around their necks, right under their noses — the lotus flower. The symbolism of the lotus flower, the blue lotus in particular, is well documented. It was the setting for a creation legend: the sun god was born from the womb of a lotus flower, bursting with divine creative energy. This may have been beyond the understanding of ordinary Egyptians; but they knew that the lotus was special, and its creative power was transferred to an area that everyone recognised: like the red rose, the lotus came to be associated with the concept of Love. If we were to rely on pictures alone, we would suspect that this was the case, for the lotus flower is found alongside female beauty from the time of the Old Kingdom. But the literature of the Egyptians comes to our aid, and we have only to read through their love poems to meet the lotus flower in situations which leave little to the imagination.

The blue lotus has a very strong scent when it is open (it closes during the night). The question of scent as such is significant. The effect of the scent of the lotus, as perceived by the Egyptians themselves, can only be gauged through the role the flower played in offering rituals which postdate the banquet scenes by a thousand years or more. No doubt the rites have more ancient roots; but it is only at this date that they are accompanied by inscriptions which are of any interest out of the ordinary. The king offering lotus to a deity is a ceremony frequently depicted on the inner walls or columns of the temple where the actual act of offering took place. The deity is «satisfied» by the lotus flower, and his/her heart «appeased» by its scent. The god «enjoys the divinity» of its scent. When the god sees the brilliance of the flower, his «eyes marvel», and when he sniffs its scent, his «nostrils dilate». The god in turn will acknowledge the offering by saying, «I receive your offering and sniff its scent. I cause you (the king) to be praised and loved by means of its scent».

We can gather from this that the scent of the lotus was taken to have an effect on the deity which could be interpreted as being in modern terms sedative or hypnotic,



and that the scent would cause the nostrils to be dilated (lit. «widened»). If at this late stage in Egyptian history the flower was presented to the deity with the specific purpose of producing a psychic effect, it goes without saying that this same effect had been experienced by ordinary mortals for some considerable time beforehand.

It has been argued in more recent times that the lotus, especially species of *Nymphaea*, does indeed have narcotic properties. The ability to cause sedation and excitement often goes hand in hand in narcotic plants. It is common to a considerable number of them that the effect is a liberation of the mind. To the Egyptians, this would not be an alien concept at all, for they were accustomed to the independent life of the soul in its various aspects, and the changing forms which the deceased person would be able to achieve if he were equipped with the appropriate magical spells. One of these transformations was actually into a lotus flower. During the Feast of the Valley, which was above all a celebration of communication with the divine on the one hand, and with the world of the dead on the other, a state of mind controlled by inhaling lightly narcotic substances would have added greatly to the experience.

In the banquet scenes the lotus is at times replaced by a yellow, slightly pointed fruit. A girl may give it to another to sniff, or the women can play games with the fruits, hiding them behind their backs. In theory the fruit could be one of two, persea or mandrake. In the banquet scene we are probably talking about the mandrake, not because of its edible quality, for it is not really, but because of its symbolism and its connection with erotica which makes it fit in admirably with the connotations of the lotus — not to mention its hallucinogenic properties.

A true banquet scene should depict people eating and drinking. The Egyptian banquet scenes omit an important part, for we really do not see people eating anything, although some food may be depicted nearby. But drink they do. References to ancient Egyptian drinking customs give rather a conflicting picture. On the one hand we have representations showing people indulging in wine or beer, and texts, both pharaonic and classical, describing how the Egyptians enjoyed the intoxicating effects of the beverages; on the other we have, among others, the sober statement of Athenaeus who says that «among Egyptians, every kind of symposium was conducted with moderation in ancient time — for they say that they dined, making use of the simplest and most healthful food, and drinking only so much wine as would be sufficient to promote good cheer» (*The Deipnosophists* V, 191, E-F); and we read of how the ancients in the classical world diluted their wine with water, a habit which in our western civilisation is reserved for novices to drinking. It is important, however, to make a distinction between the various occasions on which drinking occurred in order to assess the reasons for doing so in the first place.

We do not have to search for long to discover that heavy drinking took place in connection with religious festivals. There is an often quoted passage in Herodotus II, 60 describing the festival at Bubastis during which more wine was drunk than during the rest of the year. And the goddess Hathor was endowed with a more suggestive epithet. Not only was she mistress of the mountain that formed the barrier between the world of the dead and the world of the living at Thebes. She was the goddess of love and music, of fertility and birth, and she was called «mistress of drunkenness». Inebriation was always particularly connected with her cult.

The Feast of the Valley took place under the auspices of Hathor, for the necropolis was her domain. She was the one, no doubt, who was described in a song performed at the Feast as:

The goddess is like a woman  
who sits drunken outside her room  
with locks of hair falling on her breast .  
(Theban Tomb no. 82)

During the celebrations drinks were in plentiful supply, and the object of the exercise was intoxication. This is clear from the pictures as well as from accompanying texts. This fact alone provides a significant clue to an understanding of the nature of the banquet scene. This is not an everyday social occasion.

It is evident from the texts that it was not the taste of the wine that thrilled the guests, but the effect. The drunken state was obviously equivalent with joy, and how better to celebrate the goddess than with a cup of her own medicine! Drinking chased away sorrows and anxieties of daily life. The beverage was understood to have been provided by the god.

To your *ka*!  
Drink the potent drink.  
Spend a happy day  
with what your master Amun has given you,  
the god who loves you.  
(Theban Tomb no. 21)

After emptying the cup, the day would become «a happy day». Drunkenness was intended, and it was achieved under the auspices of the deity. Using intoxicating substances for ritual purposes is common to many so-called primitive civilisations. When under the influence of such matter, barriers are broken down; the soul is liberated and will travel; and exploits are possible which are otherwise unthinkable. There



are various ways of achieving this state, and inebriation is one of them. It was a means of communicating with the divine, of being close to the deity.

It remains a possibility that the beverages which were enjoyed during the Feast of the Valley and other similar occasions were more potent than what the alcohol content alone would achieve. There is evidence, which is now more than a mere suggestion, that the drinks were laced with something. After all, it was from an Egyptian that Helen of Troy had been taught how to doctor drinks to make her visitors relax. In addition there is the question of the opium trade in the Mediterranean which has recently been investigated, as well as the general herbal skills of the Egyptians as displayed in their writings. As a footnote one may mention once again the mandrakes, the use of mandrake in antiquity to treat fear and depression, the addition of mandrake to wine at Bacchanalian orgies, and the fact that mandrake is emetic — in other words it makes you sick. It is in Brussels that there is the best example of an illustration of just that. Maybe the poor fellow in E 2877 had had too much to drink. But maybe his drink contained more than just the wine...

For those still in doubt, one may quote one of the verses sung at the Feast of the Valley:

The goddess Mut came with her beautiful face  
to place food on the table,  
to shake her sistra,  
and to *mix her drink*  
in a golden bowl,  
set in another of lapis lazuli,  
and filled to the brim.  
(Theban Tomb no. 78)

And let us return to the pictures. Again and again we see a girl, either a servant or a daughter, pouring a drink to the tomb owner. She holds in her hand one or two juglets which are so tiny that they would never be able to fill the tomb owner's cup. The juglets must contain a concentrate of some sort, either a sweetener, or something more potent, like a herbal mixture.

The ritual of 'pouring' has been studied and interpreted in detail by W. Westendorf. Suffice it to say here that it brings the act of drinking into the sphere of activities which have a strong erotic connotation, which in turn will give us a clue as to what the banquet scene is all about.

Apart from the lotus flowers, there is one more object in the banquet scenes which attracts our attention, and mystifies us a little, perhaps, for its presence is not quite

straightforward to explain: the unguent cone. Various scholars have expressed an opinion, but I would like to draw your attention to what S. Schott said about them in the 1950s. What if, in real life, the scented unguent was rubbed or poured into the hair? The artist would never be able to get this fact across in his painting, so he chose to indicate the fragrance of the hair by positioning a generous helping of the material on top of the head instead. This is just the way the Egyptian mind would work. Maybe the cones were the artist's aid to depict a shapeless substance which could only be detected visually by the shiny or greasy surface (which he would not be able to render), or by its smell. On the other hand, the custom of placing a lump of grease on the hair survived until the beginning of the present century among a bedouin tribe in the south of the country, a tribe which had apparently retained other pharaonic customs.

Scent had a deeply religious and symbolic significance in Egypt. This would in the first place have been caused by the ingredients that went into the preparations, and subsequently by the cunning play on words that was worked out as if to force the concept into funerary beliefs (I am referring here to the interpretation of Westendorf of the letters *sti* for the word «to pour» and its sexual connotations. The pun would work equally well for the word for «scent»). The motif of the unguent cones involving such an obvious demonstration of the presence of scent became a coded message conveying 'sexuality', understood by those who had been taught the code.

Scent, like intoxicating drinks, effected the mind. A passage in Plutarch illustrates this beautifully. Speaking on *kyphi*, a substance which can be traced back to the Pyramid Texts, he says:

Without drunkenness it relaxes and loosens the vicious circle of sorrows and tensions of daily cares. It polishes and purifies like a mirror the faculty which is imagination, and receptive to dreams, like the notes of the lyre which the Pythagoreans used before sleep, to charm and heal the emotive and irrational of the soul. For odours often recall the power of perception when it is failing, while often they obscure and calm it since the exhalations penetrate through the body by reason of their smooth softness (*De Iside*, 80).

Scent is certainly being handled or displayed in such a significant way in the banquet scenes that we cannot ignore it. The artist wants to remind us of the transcendent nature of the scene. This is far from being merely an episode of daily life — it is a strong pointer towards an existence beyond this world at a very sophisticated level, an existence to which sexuality is a precondition. The pictures in the tomb prepare the ground for its owner.

We must also consider the role of music. We have just seen how to Plutarch it was one of the ways of opening and relaxing the mind. Apart from the that, music was the



vehicle for the words which give a clue to the nature of the scenes. The musicians were the mediators in the ongoing efforts of communicating with the divine. Through the phrases that they chanted in between their musical accompaniment, or coinciding with it, they expressed in crystallized form the thoughts of the participants. Through the power of the spoken word, emphasized by the music, they made the situation come true. The god was there with them, in their midst, sharing the moment with the deceased relatives in whose monument they were sheltering. Aided by the paraphernalia of the feast it became what can only be described as a 'total experience', and in that sense it was comparable to popular religious feasts in our own time in countries where an overt display of emotions is a matter of course.

Although the banquet can be said to represent a specific event, its scope goes beyond the realm of life on earth. Our minds are constantly stretched and reminded of the infinity of the universe and the place of the individual in it. The wish to encompass endless time is succinctly expressed by a musician in Theban Tomb no. 82 of Amenemhet: «You embrace eternity (*nḥḥ*) and unite with everlasting time (*ḏt*)». And elsewhere in the same tomb: «You partake of music... everlastingly». The scented oils and unguents brought to the tomb owner are «for your use in thousand years which your master Amun has decreed for you in your house of the living, there being for you life and health and justification». As the beverages supplied are said to come from the offering tables of the god, and thus are of the kind that permit intoxication, so by implication are the oils that will assist eternal life either by their composition or by their provenance.

It all contributes towards the making of the concept which is called in Egyptian a *hrw nfr*, an expression much more complex than the general easy translation of «a happy day». *Nfr* implies dynamism, potency, efficiency, virility, qualities which are all needed to achieve the miracle of rebirth which was the ultimate purpose of the tomb, its decoration, its equipment and the role it played in the destiny of the dead.

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