



‘Follow the happy day’

The tomb-chapel of Nebamun

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Abstract: Around 1350 BC a wealthy grain accountant in the Temple of Amun, in Karnak, died and a tomb-chapel was constructed to house his mortal remains. Millennia later, in the early 1800s, the then British consul had several sections of the lavish wall paintings removed from the tomb and exhibited in the British Museum in London. Early this year a new gallery housing the newly-conserved wall paintings was opened, allowing visitors a vivid glimpse of the Ancient Egyptian way of life and death.

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Influenced as many of us are by the Hollywood fascination with ‘the mummy’, and by the inescapable fact that most of our knowledge of Ancient Egypt comes from tombs, the contents of which have survived precisely because they were interred in the arid desert hills, people tend to think that the Ancient Egyptians were obsessed with death. This is very far from the case. On the contrary, death was for them an enemy: their elaborate funerary rituals and the mummification of the body were devised to allow the dead to survive, so they could be transfigured into spirits and live eternally, united with the gods.

Death was thus regarded as the beginning of an eternal life and as such could be welcomed as a release from the suffering and limitations of life on earth. However, attitudes in the face of loss were complex and often contradictory, as in many cultures. Intense mourning accompanied burials, despite the assurances of a better life to come. This duality finds expression in one evocative poem written around 1850 BC. On the one hand, the poet welcomes death:

‘Death seems to me today
like the smell of myrrh,
like sitting under a sail on a windy day.
Death seems to me today
like the smell of flowers,
like sitting on the shore of Drunkenness.’

But the poem goes on to describe the horrors of burial:

‘If you call burial to mind, it is heart-break;
it is bringing the gift of tears, causing a man misery;
it is taking a man away from his house,
and throwing him onto the high ground.
You will not come up again to see the sunlight...
Follow the happy day! Forget care!’
(Parkinson, 1999, pp156–160)

Resurrection into eternal life was assisted with food offerings and prayers that continued long after the funeral, making the tomb both a burial place for the body and a ‘house of eternity’ where the person would continue to dwell and be remembered. The dead remained integral members of the community, but now with powers to intercede with the gods on behalf of the living. Sometimes surviving relatives wrote letters to them and placed them in the tomb, asking them to help out in the tangled affairs of the family members. Around 1990 BC one husband wrote to his dead wife:

‘How are you? Is the West [the land of the dead] taking care of you, as you want? Look, I am your beloved on earth, so please fight for me... Please appear as a blessed spirit before me, so I can see you fighting for me in a dream. If you do I will make offerings for you when the sun’s light has risen.’ (Parkinson, 2006, p142)

Communication with the dead is an almost universal psychological need in the face of loss. These tombs thus served not only as memorials and burial places but also as meeting places

between the worlds of the living and the dead – locations for remembering, celebrating and communing with the dead. This is reflected in the basic structure of the tomb throughout Egyptian history: the body would be placed in a burial-chamber that would then be sealed and hidden, but a chapel above it would remain open for visits and offerings by the living.

Nebamun tomb-chapel

A new permanent gallery has recently opened in the British Museum to display some of the wall paintings from just such a tomb-chapel that was built on the west bank of the Nile, near modern Luxor. The tomb was that of Nebamun, a grain accountant in the Temple of Amun at Karnak, who died around 1350 BC, a generation or so before Tutankhamun. We know nothing about him apart from what we can deduce from these

paintings. Two small rooms were carved into the rocky hillside, and the stone was covered with a thick layer of plaster to provide the team of artists with a smooth surface to work on. The tomb-chapel was exceptionally fine in design and execution, and the surviving paintings are some of the best-known images of Egyptian elite culture – above all, the scene showing Nebamun hunting in the marshes, forever joyful, forever young.

Millennia later, in AD 1820, Giovanni d’Athanas, the local agent of the British consul Henry Salt, discovered the chapel. He removed several scenes from the walls, cutting out areas of the plaster with saws and crowbars, and they were shipped to the British Museum in London, as parts of the consul’s large collection. Such brutal activity was typical of the period. The fragile paintings were on public display in the museum continually until the late 1990s. Since then they have been intensively conserved and



Fragments from the Nebamun tomb-chapel displayed in the new Michael Cohen Gallery of Ancient Egyptian Life and Death at the British Museum in London

analysed in one of the largest conservation projects in the museum's history, and the new display was opened by the Egyptian ambassador to the United Kingdom on 20 January 2009.

The gallery is coloured by light golden limestone against sky-blue walls in an attempt to recreate the welcoming atmosphere of the tomb-chapel. These tomb-chapels must have presented a comforting vision of death – the tomb-owner surrounded by the continuing life of the world, and by friends and family. The surviving scenes show Nebamun at work and at play, supervising farmers and enjoying feasts and offerings, making it a highly colourful, lively and even welcoming space. The scenes are tightly composed, and almost floridly crowded with exuberant detail, producing a mixture of apparently naturalistic and spontaneous innovation and a superb handling of traditional motifs. In the scene of Nebamun hunting in the marshes, a standard iconic motif of funerary decoration is here made full of marsh life; even the texture on the butterflies' wings is represented with freely-applied paint as they flutter between a mass of swirling waterfowl. The painters were obviously working quickly and painting almost impressionistically in places, and their technical skill and sheer draughtsmanship is almost unparalleled among the paintings that survive today.

Everything was of course designed to commemorate the status of Nebamun for eternity, but since the tomb-chapel was a meeting place between this and the Otherworld, the painters blurred the divisions between life and death, so that in many of the paintings it is hard to know whether the scene shows the idealised record of Nebamun's actual life or the pleasures he hoped to enjoy in the Otherworld. The painting of his wonderful garden, for example, looks like any normal garden of the wealthy, with a pool surrounded by shady fruit trees, until you notice that a small goddess is leaning out of a tree in the corner and welcoming Nebamun into his garden in the Otherworld. In another scene Nebamun

inspects cattle and geese from the temple's estates, but here there is nothing otherworldly; the farmers are painted as squabbling figures, with their sarcastic conversations recorded in hieroglyphic speech bubbles above their heads. The artists have caught and preserved the sheer liveliness of life, as well as Nebamun's social status, and their skill has ensured that his name has been kept alive more effectively than any elaborate rituals of mummification.

Since the tomb-chapel was a meeting place between this and the Otherworld, the painters blurred the divisions between life and death

The meaning and style of these paintings was shaped by their original funerary context, which we have tried to evoke in the new gallery. Early on in the project, we decided that we must remount and re-join the fragments wherever possible, in order to provide an impression of whole walls of colour, as they would have been seen by the ancient visitors to the tomb-chapel, to try to evoke and recreate their feelings.

The fragility of the painted surfaces means that these wall-paintings must now be displayed at an angle of 70 degrees, but this was a minor design problem compared with the challenge of recreating the sensation of being in a tiny tomb-chapel for the over six million people who visit the British Museum each year. To convey this intimacy, the gallery includes a computer reconstruction of how we think the chapel looked (an interactive version is also available on the British Museum's website, allowing people to explore it for themselves).

The gallery also includes artefacts evoking the original use of the tomb-chapel as an interface



One of the scenes from the tomb-chapel – Nebamun hunting in the marshes, 'forever joyful, forever young'

between the living and the dead. Ancient loaves, fruit and flowers are now placed next to one of the paintings that shows an offering table piled with food for the dead Nebamun. This display case evokes the innermost part of the tomb-chapel, where a statue of Nebamun and his wife would once have stood, the centre of visitors' attention, and where offerings of food would have been left. One round flat loaf of bread, 3350 years old, still bears the handprint of the person who baked it, a vivid reminder that these ancient people once lived, breathed and ate like us.

We have also tried to place the paintings in the larger context of contemporary life, and to

remind the visitor that these seductive paintings were idealised images of an elite world that would not have been the experience of most Egyptians – possibly not even that of Nebamun himself. Like so much of the surviving evidence, the paintings represent the lives of a small class of officials who could afford to commemorate themselves in monuments; the histories of most of the population remain unrecorded – a message that is all too easily forgotten when we are confronted with the hypnotic grandeur of the surviving monuments to the elite. So, while half of the gallery is designed to evoke the feeling of entering the tomb-chapel, the other half evokes the

world of the living, with a selection of some 150 contemporaneous artefacts similar to those in the paintings. Here, a fish net will remind visitors that fishing may have been a glamorous leisure activity for Nebamun, but it was a means of survival for most of the population.

Like the tomb-chapel, the gallery is structured as a dialogue between the artefacts of the living and the dead, and it is appropriate that the patron who funded it has dedicated it to the memory of his Egyptian father, Michael Cohen. My own work over the past 10 years has also been gently haunted by my father, an artist, on whose bookshelves I first saw photographs of these paintings over 30 years ago. Whenever I stand in front of them, wondering at their ability to involve us in a conversation with a vanished society, I still hear him mutter: 'That's all you need – bloody good draughtsmanship'. ■

The Michael Cohen Gallery of Ancient Egyptian Life and Death (Gallery 61), British Museum, London, UK. See <http://www.britishmuseum.org/nebamun> for further information. For details of a new Open University online course, Art and Life in Ancient Egypt: the Nebamun Wall Paintings, visit: http://www.britishmuseum.org/learning/adult_learning/events_and_courses/ou_nebamun.aspx

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