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# ARTISTS AND PAINTING IN ANCIENT EGYPT

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# IN SEARCH OF PAINTERS IN THE THEBAN NECROPOLIS OF THE 18<sup>TH</sup> DYNASTY

Prolegomena to an analysis of pictorial practices  
in the tomb of Amenemope (TT 29)<sup>1</sup>

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*“L’âme d’un grand artiste ne se laisse pas étouffer par des lois : elle vibre, au contraire, d’autant plus ardemment que les barrières sont rigides... Il y a, sans contredit, une manière de traiter tel ou tel thème qui varie d’une époque à l’autre ; mais il y a davantage encore un style propre à chaque artiste, et c’est ce que l’on n’a pas assez vu. Seul un examen attentif des tombes permet de déceler ce caractère individualiste. Pareille étude ne peut donner d’heureux résultats que par l’observation patiente des originaux et l’accumulation de documents relatifs à la technique, à la gamme des couleurs employées, à l’esthétique de chaque peintre. La photographie en couleurs est un appoint que nos prédécesseurs n’ont pas eu. Il faut en user judicieusement et l’appliquer surtout aux détails propres à faciliter la recherche dans la voie qu’on s’est tracée. La récompense d’un tel effort est grande : l’un après l’autre, les peintres de talent se détachent de la masse des décorateurs d’hypogées ; la « griffe » des plus grands d’entre eux se reconnaît parfois exceptionnellement dans deux tombes différentes ; et le but final est de pouvoir citer un jour le Maître de Menna ou celui de Horemheb au même titre que les Primitifs, ces autres anonymes, auxquels cependant on réussit à attribuer plusieurs œuvres.”*

(Mekhitarian 1956, 247-8)

As is well known, Roland Tefnin,<sup>2</sup> in his own research over the last decade of his life, passionately pursued this approach to Egyptian art formulated by Arpag Mekhitarian in the mid-1950s. Unfortunately, the “abductor”, as he is called in Ancient Egyptian texts, came to carry him off before he could reach the end of the long and fascinating adventure he started. Indeed, taking the opportunity of the *Mission Archéologique dans la Nécropole Thébaine* (the Belgian Archaeological Expedition in the Theban Necropolis), which he founded, Roland Tefnin undertook, with the assistance of his wife Ariane, a systematic documentation of stylistic clues that would allow him to begin the search for artists in the necropolis for the entire reign of Amenhotep II and its immediate chronological surroundings. The passion that animated and characterized Roland Tefnin, particularly his passion for Theban painting, was imparted to us during ten unforgettable years working at his side in the necropolis. And so, we too have decided to keep track of the painters of the Theban necropolis in the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, so

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1 The present article is a translated version of a contribution we made for another volume dedicated to the memory of Roland Tefnin: Laboury and Tavier 2010. We wish to express here our deepest gratitude to our colleague and friend Todd Gillen for his invaluable help in the translation of this article into English. Of course, any mistake remains entirely ours.

2 Cf. his last contributions: Tefnin 2006 and 2007.

as not to let the torch go out for this properly artistic approach to Egyptian painting, which almost became a tradition in Belgian Egyptology thanks to the pioneering work of A. Mekhitarian and R. Tefnin.

In his later contributions, R. Tefnin advocated the necessity for a “close” approach to Egyptian painting, or, to use his own words, “(une) *observation la plus rapprochée possible de la facture, de la palette, du geste, (...) qui fera surgir l’humain derrière le schéma, le geste et même la respiration de l’artiste vivant derrière le thème iconographique*”.<sup>3</sup> It is not uncommon to associate, or even assimilate, the “close” look at the work of art, the close observation of details, with the so-called Morellian method, a type of stylistic analysis developed in the nineteenth century by the famous Italian art historian and physician Giovanni Morelli (1816-1891), who succeeded in identifying “hands” by minute observation of the morphology of certain characteristic details, often at the limits of the awareness of the artist. Even if the transposition of this Morellian approach into the field of ancient art has sometimes yielded impressive results,<sup>4</sup> its application to Egyptian painting proves quite problematic, as aptly pointed out by Melinda K. Hartwig.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, in a context so readily standardized as that of Ancient Egyptian art, everything, from the aesthetic foundation of the system to its deep semiotic and magical functioning, passing by the modalities of conception and of concrete production of images, everything converges to the neutralization of the individual style of the maker of the work, which literally dissolves, at best, in the style in fashion at the time. Moreover, the distinctions highlighted by R. Tefnin<sup>6</sup> are in fact mostly of another kind: they do not pertain to iconography, to morphological details, but rather to its production and, in fact, to technique (Fig. 1). Our experience of joint work in Egyptology, epigraphy, art history and conservation–restoration in the Theban necropolis has convinced us that only a fundamentally technical approach, focusing on



Fig. 1: Three depictions of the hieroglyphic sign β in TT 74 (Tjanuny). © MANT

3 Cf. Tefnin 2006, 66.

4 Cf. the well-known work of J.D. Beazley on the painters of Greek vases, in particular Beazley 1956 and 1963; or, in a field certainly more comparable to that of Egyptian art, the study of the reliefs of the Apadana of Persepolis by Roaf 1983.

5 Cf. Hartwig, to be published. We take this opportunity to thank M.K. Hartwig for the amiability with which she shared a preliminary version of this excellent synthesis with us before its publication. Nevertheless, just like this author, we do not assert that Morellian distinctions cannot be singled out in Theban tombs paintings (cf. the very particular case of the form of certain vase handles in the context of variations on the theme of the metallic Aegean vessels in some tombs of the time of Thutmose III: Laboury 1990, 114-115, pls. 26-28). But the indices of this kind are usually too tenuous to allow distinguishing individual hands. Consequently, the role of the artist in the process of pictorial creation in ancient Egypt must be sought elsewhere, before relying on morphological criteria like those of which Morelli recommended the usage, for artistic forms much more recent and of a very different cultural context. For examples of fruitful combination of formal and technical analyses of paintings in Theban tombs, cf. the studies of TT 52, 56, 80 and 104 made by Abdel Ghaffar Shedid: Shedid 1988; Beinlich-Seeber and Shedid 1987; and Shedid and Seidel 1991, 19-21, 29-30.

6 Cf. Angénot and Vaneigem in this volume.

the systematic study of artistic practices and procedures, can allow us to track the artists who decorated the Theban tombs, and thus to reconstruct the ergonomics of such painting sites.<sup>7</sup>

The vast project we have only just begun<sup>8</sup> is part of a general evolution of the Egyptological look at Ancient Egyptian painting. The history of the discipline still defines Egyptology today as a science deeply marked by philology. And, in this sense, the Egyptian image has often and for a long time been disembodied from its materiality and read as some sort of a set of hieroglyphs – in keeping with the conception that ancient Egyptians themselves developed about both their art and their hieroglyphic writing. The epistemological dimension of this epigraphic and documentary usage of Egyptian painting is admirably illustrated in the comparison made by Daniel Polz between two line drawings of the scene that adorns the passage of the front door of the tomb of Huy (TT 54): one that he made, the other, a copy of the same panel produced a few

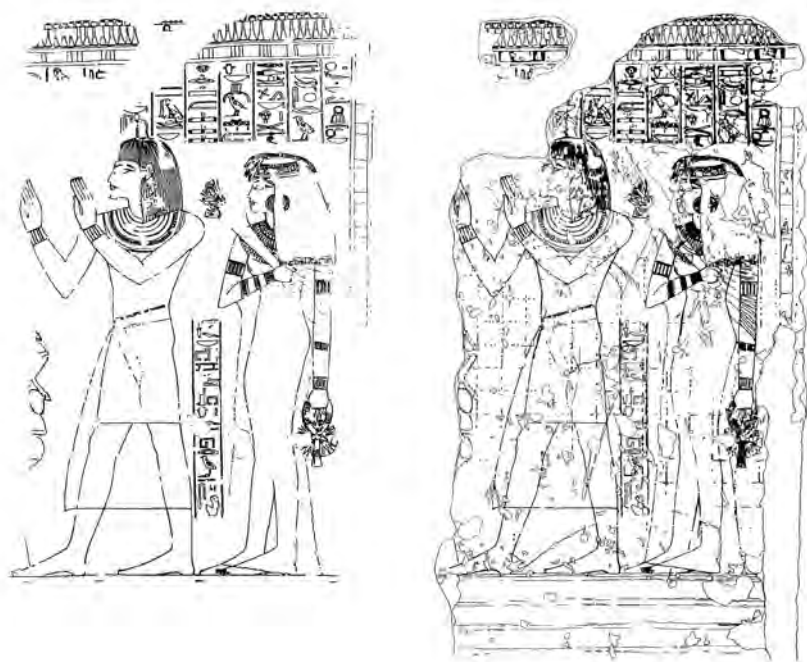


Fig. 2: Line drawing of the scene in the doorway of TT 54 (Huy / Kel), after Polz 1987, 136-137

7 The remarkable study that Betsy M. Bryan and her team have realized for TT 92 (Suemniwet) is based on the same principle: the description and analysis of the “technical process” highlighting, above all, variants of production or of decoration procedure: Bryan 2001 and McCarthy 2001. The same holds true for the observations of Nozomu Kawai (2004) in the tomb of Amenhotep III (WV 22). For a comparable study carried out on another type of decorated pharaonic objects – coffins of the 21<sup>st</sup> dynasty – and leading to analogous methodological conclusions, cf. Singleton 2001. Note in this sense the crucial significance of the understanding of the ergonomic organization of the work site, and in particular of the role of each participant in the process of decorating a tomb, understanding without which it is simply illusory to seek isolating individual hands: how, indeed, seriously claiming to identify the mark of an individual painter, if one cannot even estimate the number of people involved in the colouring phase? The two aspects, individuality and ergonomics, are thus inextricably connected and should be studied together.

8 The new main research project of D. Laboury submitted to the F.R.S.-FNRS and entitled “Towards a stylistic analysis of Ancient Egyptian Image integrating its materiality” precisely deals with the issues discussed in the present article. It is supported by an Incentive Grant for Scientific Research (MIS - Mandat d’Impulsion Scientifique) of the F.R.S.-FNRS, on the theme “Painters and Painting in the Theban Necropolis during the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty”. Hugues Tavier is currently preparing a PhD dissertation devoted to the study of “The technology of painting in the Theban Necropolis during the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. Material approach to the artistic practices within the painting workshops”, thanks to a doctoral scholarship granted by the Liège University.

decades earlier by Norman de Garis Davies (Fig. 2).<sup>9</sup> Whereas “the best archaeological draftsman of his generation,” as Nicholas Reeves called him,<sup>10</sup> and certainly one of the most famous and most prolific epigraphists in the history of Egyptology, created a neat image purified of anything that could affect its hieroglyphic readability, Daniel Polz, as an archaeologist of the Theban necropolis, on the other hand, seeks to record the physical condition of the archaeological object that he has before his eyes, in the same manner as he might do for a ceramic vessel or a fragment of funerary furniture. Because of their respective training, the two Egyptologists, facing the same object, do not see the same thing and indeed do not present the same visual and mental image.<sup>11</sup> The very fact of publishing Egyptian painting in the form of line drawings, beyond the editorial constraints of the last century (which nevertheless produced the superb watercolour copies of Nina and Norman de Garis Davies and their team, before colour photographic reproduction became available),<sup>12</sup> implies and reflects a focus of interest on the documentary readability of the work, a focus that almost completely obscures its painterly dimension, even though the latter constitutes an indispensable condition of the work’s physical and artistic existence.<sup>13</sup> We want to argue here for a deepening of the process of recognition of the work’s materiality as reflected in the suggestions of Daniel Polz, by affirming the necessity to record also the artistic materiality of the painted object. The materiality of the work has certainly been better taken into consideration in recent years with the development of archaeometry on topics related to Egyptian painting, but this materiality beyond the visible often causes us to forget the visual materiality of the painting, that with which the painter was confronted in the exercise of his art, that which he manipulated and fashioned.

We therefore advocate an anatomical reading of Theban paintings that does not require the often complex implementation of sophisticated and expensive technology, but, more simply, the careful observation of painterly processes and practices, for which a photograph, at close range or under raking light, is usually sufficient. This approach to the work through the structure of its visible pictorial or paint materiality allows us to address the issues of technical sequence and of ergonomic organization of painting sites in the necropolis, while identifying as closely as possible the role of the artist, of the individual, in the process of codified and collective creation of Ancient Egyptian paintings.<sup>14</sup> In addition, by merely recording material facts, it offers the advantage of keeping the observation firmly separate from – almost – any interpretation and from any attempt to characterize formal style, which is often difficult to free from all subjectivity.

To illustrate such a reading, we present, as a tribute to Roland Tefnin, a preliminary analysis from this perspective of the paintings in the long hall of Theban Tomb 29, the tomb chapel of the vizier Amenemope at Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, which, together with that of his cousin Sennefer (TT 96),<sup>15</sup> forms the basis of the investigation initiated by Roland Tefnin and the original concession of the *Mission Archéologique*

9 Cf. Polz 1987, 134-138.

10 Cf. Reeves 2001, 22

11 This inextricable link between training or experience and visual perception is of course very well known in cognitive psychology and cognitive science (at least since the middle of the previous century; see, for example, Arnheim 1954 and 1969; or Edeline *et al.* 1992), but it seems to have been totally neglected within Egyptology and its own practices.

12 On these reproductions and their integration in the facsimile project of the Egyptian Expedition of the New York MMA, cf. Wilkinson and Hill 1983.

13 For this question from the point of view of conservation-restoration, cf. Tavier 2007.

14 Cf., again, the results of the pioneering work of Betsy M. Bryan in TT 92: Bryan 2001.

15 For the familial relationship that connects Amenemope and Sennefer, cf. Laboury 2007.

*dans la Nécropole Thébaine*. This painted chapel is indeed particularly appropriate for establishing the prolegomena to a study of the painterly practices in the Theban necropolis in the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty, given its state of incompleteness and degradation (which always offers considerable interest for a technical approach to the works) and its location in a key chronological period in the evolution of ancient Egyptian painting: the reign of Amenhotep II, which sets in motion a series of technical innovations in pictorial processes, innovations that paved the way for the exploration (well known for the subsequent reigns) of pictoriality and of a new aesthetic driven by fundamental changes in Pharaonic epistemology and metaphysics, topics that are outside the scope of this paper.

From a methodological point of view, our commentary is primarily based on a “close” descriptive approach, as systematic and as neutral as possible, without a priori theory, and that follows the successive stages of the sequence of technical realisation of the paintings. Moreover, this anatomical observation has been complemented and tested by an experimental dimension, since several members of the *Mission Archéologique dans la Nécropole Thébaine* have agreed, under the direction of Hugues Tavier, to attempt to reconstruct, in size and under (almost) authentic conditions, a room painted in standard decoration techniques attested in the necropolis during the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty.<sup>16</sup> This experience has provided a wealth of information beyond all expectations, allowing us to validate or invalidate certain interpretive hypotheses of technical sequence and shedding light on constraints and technical aspects that only experimentation could reveal.

Like most of the tombs in the Theban necropolis, the tomb of Amenemope in Sheikh Abd el-Qurna is, as mentioned above, unfinished.<sup>17</sup> Although the cutting of the chapel architecture in the rock was almost completed,<sup>18</sup> the same cannot be said for the coating of the walls in preparation for painting. Careful observation of these preliminary steps led immediately to several interesting conclusions in terms of ergonomic organization of the site. Indeed, in the broad hall, several sections of wall and some pillar faces have been coated with a rather crude plaster (white or pinkish, depending on location and parts of the tomb, and probably made of a basis of gypsum or plaster [calcium sulfate], plus a filler),<sup>19</sup> following work zones that go almost from ceiling to floor, but only extend in width to a few meters at most.<sup>20</sup> In addition, the finish of this first coating is not at all comparable to the surface destined to receive paint. The coat laid on the cut rock actually has a rough consistency and a fairly uneven outer surface,

16 Other reconstitution attempts have already been undertaken (cf., for example, Le Fur 1994 et Ohno 2004), but never under real – our equivalent – conditions, i.e. in a space in which the dimensions – and thus the ergonomic possibilities – are truly comparable to those of a Theban tomb and on vertical walls or ceilings, where the parameters are considerably different from those attempts made on the small scale and only on the horizontal plane (Le Fur 1994 et Ohno 2004).

17 This incompleteness is certainly to be linked to the endowment of a tomb in the Valley of the Kings for Amenemope (KV 48) and to the latter’s death. We will come back to this question in the final publication of TT 29.

18 As noted by Bavay 2007, 15, “*le plafond de la chapelle ainsi que le mur ouest, à la verticale de la descendrie, n’ont pas été régularisés au même niveau qu’ailleurs dans cette salle*”, probably because of the excavation of this sloping passage, numbered II in the archaeological description of the tomb

19 In the southeastern corner of the transverse hall, the pinkish coating of the south wall comes to be applied over the whitish plaster of the eastern wall. But the inverted sequence can be observed elsewhere in the tomb, demonstrating that this colour and composition variation does not reveal two chronological phases in the plastering of the walls of the monument, but rather two different recipes, and possibly the habits of two different groups of plasterers.

20 Thus, for example, on both sides of the door marking the passage to the long hall, the wall has been coated over a surface of about 3.5m (simply coated on the right, and coated and decorated on the left), while beyond, the hewn rock remains bare of any support for the paintings.

while all the walls or portions of wall that bear painted decoration have been made with a perfectly smooth finish. This clear distinction implies that the surface prepared for painting cannot be the result of a trowelling operation, of placing pressure on the still-wet architectural layer to make it smoother, harder and glossier.<sup>21</sup> But, on the contrary, it inevitably corresponds to another step in the technical sequence, linked to the beginning of the painting process.<sup>22</sup> Because of this, it is necessary to distinguish a pictorial coat from an architectural layer (which can itself sometimes be done in multiple phases).<sup>23</sup> Finally, the distribution in the tomb of zones of relatively small (and clearly circumscribed) surface area, where the first thick and lumpy architectural layer appears without any pictorial coat or paint, invites us to consider the ergonomics of the decoration of the monument in terms of working zones at the scale of a human being and not according to the often repeated but never proven theory that the tomb was systematically divided into two symmetrical halves along its longitudinal axis,<sup>24</sup> a theory that actually derives from the administrative allocation of “workers of the Tomb” at Deir el-Medina in “left” and “right” teams, or “port” and “starboard” gangs.

As we will see, the unfinished state of the paintings in the long hall of TT 29 confirms such a segmentation of the decoration process of the tomb in work zones corresponding to the capacity for action of an individual located in a given place<sup>25</sup> and progressing by vertical segments on – almost – the height of a wall.

Even though the doorframe and the wall cut against it, on the eastern side of the room, were prepared with a pictorial coat, they received no intentional decoration during Pharaonic times.<sup>26</sup> In contrast, what remains of the western or rear wall offers

21 The experimentation in real conditions, that is to say in large dimensions on a vertical surface, has indeed revealed the difficulty of ensuring the proper adherence between architectural and pictorial layers. Since a smoothing by pressure was not used to transform the surface of the first into the second, one can deduce that its lumpy character was intentional, so as to optimize engagement with the pictorial coat, probably supplemented with clay – or even gum arabic or another type of binder – as its darker and more brownish colour clearly suggests (in TT 29, as in most of contemporary tombs in the necropolis).

22 Our observations permit us to suppose that the preparation and the application of the pictorial coat were carried out by the painter himself, the *zš-ḳd*, and not the plasterer, which, according to the ostraca referred to in the next footnote, belonged to another trade, designated – at least in the Ramesside period – as the *ḳdj.w* (Steinmann 1980, 148 and 154-155). The regular translation of *zš-ḳd*, as “outline draughtsman” for painter (*ibidem*), is to us hardly convincing, and we prefer to translate this title as the “scribe of forms”, which conforms better, it seems to us, to the opposition that Egyptian thought regularly expressed between *ḳd* “external form” and *ḥmw* “interior”, of a sort not necessarily visual or even visible.

23 One can cite, for example, the case of TT 96A (Sennefer), where eight successive layers could be distinguished in some places; cf. Tavier 2007, 33, fig. 1 and 37. The ostraca that record the progress of the work in Theban tombs of the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty refer to different operations of coating for the walls, performed by different types of workers. In the context of the project “Painters and Painting in the Theban Necropolis during the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty” mentioned above (n. 7), Dimitri Laboury, Stéphane Polis and Todd Gillen (F.R.S.-FNRS – University of Liège) have taken up the systematic study of this group of daily work texts.

24 Again, cf. the quite convergent conclusions of Bryan 2001.

25 In her study of TT 92, Betsy M. Bryan arrives at a concept similar to work zones: Bryan 2001, 64-71. For archaeological observations in the same vein, regarding the work of the quarrymen as well as that of the decorators in relation to the unfinished private tombs at Amarna, cf. Owen and Kemp 1994. It is also to be noted that many ostraca of the New Kingdom describe work in a Theban tomb in terms of *dnj.t* units (etymologically “delimited zones”?): the ostraca of TT 71 (Hayes, 1942, 40-41); O. Ashmolean HO 183, which relates the decoration of an unidentified tomb and subdivides it into *dni* units (Cooney 2008, 88); likewise a group of ostraca still unpublished, discovered during the excavation of TT 29, report about the preparation of the tomb just above, TT 95 of the high-priest of Amun, Mery (on this tomb, cf. Gnirs and Grothe 1997), and describe at various times the work of the quarrymen in *dnj.t* units. These texts show that the notion of units or of work zones (for which we advocate here the use from the perspective of a study of the procedures and practices of decoration of Theban tombs) seems to correspond to an ergonomic reality in the ancient Egyptian sense and practical habits.

26 Of course, we exclude here the traces of overflow and smearing of white paint that result from the decoration of the ceiling of the hall, just above the door, revealing precious indications on the texture and consistency of the paint medium used.



all signs that painting was finished. The south wall of the room (10.4 m long) appears, on the other hand, also to have been almost completed, save for a few finishing touches: there seems to be no evidence that black was ever applied, the white background awaited at least another finishing layer, and the guests in the only preserved register of the funeral banquet scene, at the eastern end of the wall, have a degree of incompleteness that grows progressively as we approach the front door. Finally, the state of the north wall, opposite, is again quite different.<sup>27</sup> It was supposed to display two scenes of unequal length: near the entrance and over most of the wall can be found an evocation, mostly set in colour but unfinished, of various funerary rituals depicted in four registers (the two lowermost are almost totally destroyed)<sup>28</sup> before a standing Amenemope; and on the last quarter of the wall, most likely a funerary offering scene in the presence of the deceased, of which only the image and the identifying caption have been – almost totally – completed. In fact, even if the cutting of a niche has led to the disappearance of the central part of this tableau, its eastern end, at the junction with the figure of Amenemope in the funerary ritual scene, remains ostensibly unfinished, carrying only a pictorial coat without any decoration, without even a preparatory sketch or a grid of proportion (Fig. 3). So it might seem, at first sight, that we are dealing here with



Fig. 3: View of the western extremity of the north wall of the long hall of TT 29.

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a very good case where two work zones were to meet one another on a single wall. The uncompleted area common to both converging work zones naturally induces to

<sup>27</sup> Note that the painting of a motif of a mat or a carpet on the ceiling of the hall presents also a zone less finished than the others, situated precisely in the second part of the northern half of the room, i.e., above portions of the north wall still in process of being decorated.

<sup>28</sup> A line drawing of this scene has been published by Davies 1913, pl. 43.

think of a situation in which two painters worked side by side at the same time. But actually, there is nothing to assert such a hypothesis. And in any case, it happened to be impossible to highlight any difference in morphological style to contrast the two figures of Amenemope or their hieroglyphs in the two panels under discussion, or to recognize the hands of two distinct painters (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4: Comparison of the two figures of Amenemope on the north wall of the long hall of TT 29

The pictorial procedure used is nevertheless clearly identifiable and its description allows us to go forward in our interpretation of these two areas of unfinished painting converging on the same wall.

Once the pictorial coat was placed and had dried, the structure of the decoration was fixed, wall by wall, following the well known and well documented technique of snapping a string soaked in diluted red ochre against the surface of the wall, as evidenced by the small splashes that surround the lines thus produced. Such a process requires the presence of at least two people to stretch and snap the string. One can observe that this first step, preceding any painting operation itself, was definitely not made on the eastern wall of the room, against the entry doorway. This placing process of composition guidelines goes with that of a grid (either for the transfer of motifs or the maintaining of proportions). In both cases, reference marks established with the help of measurement tools or means are affixed to the wall with the same light ochre. As Gay Robins has convincingly shown, the use of the grid for setting in place patterns and characters in proper proportions is not perfectly consistent and systematic at the time that concerns us: “Beginning in the reign of Amenhotep II and continuing for the rest of the dynasty, there was an increasing tendency to reserve the grid for major figures only, while secondary, less important, figures were added freehand or with the aid of a few guide lines, which were most often used to line up rows of figures in an even and regular manner”.<sup>29</sup> The long hall of TT 29 is no exception to the rule, but one

<sup>29</sup> Robins 2001, 61; the experimentations revealed that for large figures, it is sometimes difficult to respect their correct proportions without the assistance of a grid, because of the lack of distance, a fact that confirms the observations and deductions Gay Robins developed in this article.

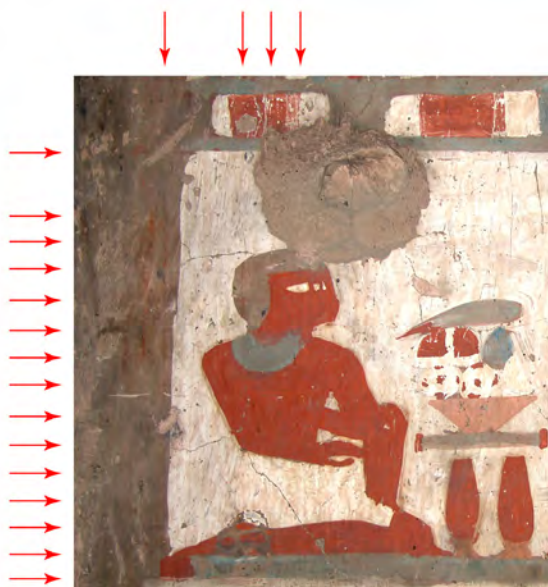


Fig. 5: Traces of the grid of proportions in the funerary banquet scene of the south wall of the long hall of TT 29

has to note that although a strict grid (following the canon of proportions in use at the time)<sup>30</sup> was used to align the anonymous guests in the funerary banquet scene on the southern wall (Fig. 5), the officiants of the funerary rituals on the north wall, although represented in paratactic procession, were all made virtually freehand. As a result, their size and proportions fluctuate (Fig. 6) and they underwent multiple corrections during painting.

A painter then traced the outline of each scene within the compositional framework, still using relatively diluted red ochre paint. The total absence of this draft in the anterior part of the second scene of the north wall – behind Amenemope attending the funerary rites – while the figure of the deceased in the same tableau was already nearing pictorial

completion shows, firstly, that the realization of the preparatory sketch was closely associated with the application of colour and, secondly, that it was completed panel by panel within one and the same scene. Such a procedure, segmented in this way, also implies the existence of a plan for the decoration of the room that was set in advance,

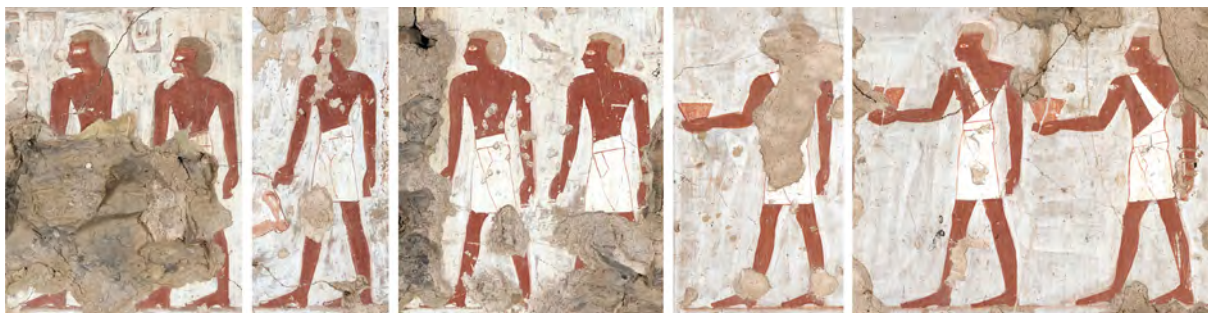


Fig. 6: Selection of eight standing people of the upper register of the funerary ritual scene of the north wall of the long hall of TT 29

as is also strongly suggested by the coherence of the decorative schemes of the Theban tombs,<sup>31</sup> as well as by the limit of the first scene of this same wall, just before the gap in decoration between two almost completed panels, a limit fixed at precisely five cubits from the western end of the wall.

The next step in the pictorial process consisted in the application by a painter – without any doubt the same person, given the perfect correspondence between draft

30 The upper register of this scene, the only one preserved in full, was subdivided not by simple – and more expeditious – guide lines, but following a grid of 15 vertical units, of which ten served to place the kneeling banquet guests, from the mat on which their legs rested on the horizontal to the hair line (Fig. 5), i.e. following a grid of 18 squares between this line and the sole of the feet for a standing figure (cf. Robins 1994).

31 The establishment of this decorative scheme went back to a specialist of sacerdotal science who, according to several signatures preserved throughout all of pharaonic history, was in the majority of cases a “ritual priest” or a “scribe of divine writings”, i.e. a member of the two categories of priests especially trained and qualified in the knowledge of hieroglyphs, as “the divine words”, by opposition to hieratic, that all the other scribes practiced; on this subject, cf. the masterly synthesis of Vernus 1990, notably 39.

zones and zones set in colour – of a first relatively transparent whitewash for the background of the scenes, executed with a large paintbrush (about 1 to 2 cm wide). Again, the procedure has left physical traces on the north and south walls that indicate a clear division of labour in quite narrow vertical sections: a large horizontal line was first drawn to mark the top edge of the scene or register – along the guide line previously established for this purpose by the string soaked with red ochre – on a distance of about 50 to 90 cm, i.e. an area at arm's length and comfortable to work in without having to move. Then the brush defines the perimeter to be bleached under this first guiding line, and carefully avoids – or contours – each of the major figures of the representation, before completing the white background. It should be noted here that large compositional motifs and small ones were treated differently, since the latter, and especially the hieroglyphs, are not avoided, but, on the contrary, covered with a layer of white that mostly conceals the preparatory drawing. Given the relative transparency of this first layer of white (especially when it is not completely dried), the outline thus remains legible and allows for the subsequent colouring of the motif. The probable advantage of this technique of partial masking of small elements is to allow a more rapid filling of the background with larger movements than if it were necessary to skirt carefully around every detail of these little iconographic or hieroglyphic elements once they had been coloured. This filling of large white areas between the significant motifs

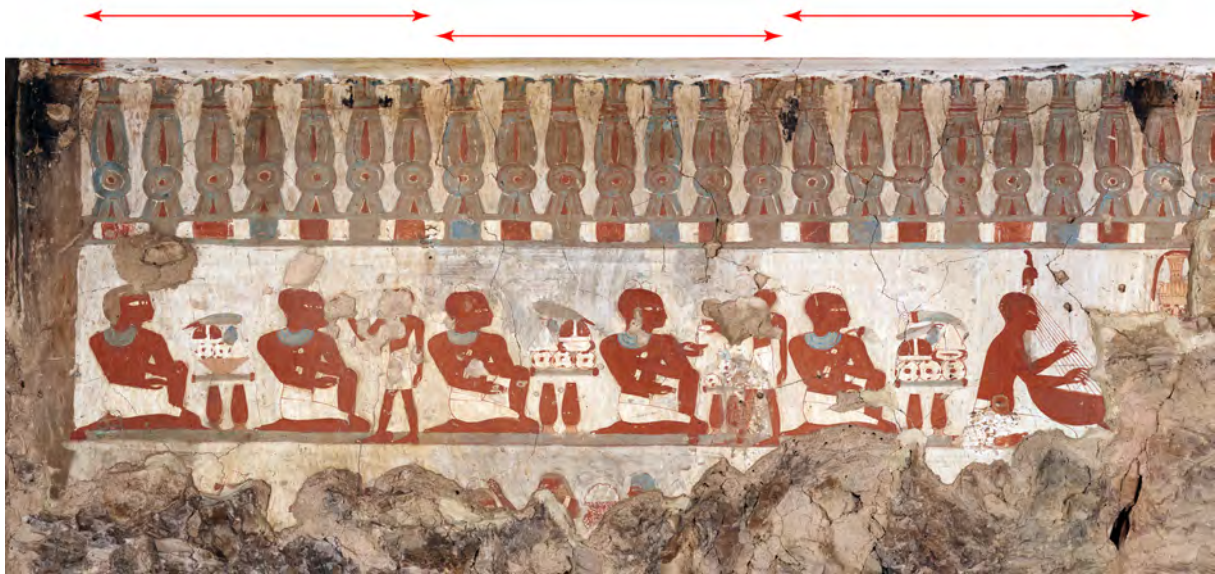


Fig. 7: Different successive zones of white background in the funerary banquet scene at the eastern extremity of the south wall of the long hall of TT 29

varies in opacity from one vertical work zone to the next, according to the preparation of the colour, highlighting and confirming the ergonomic division described above (Fig. 7). In addition, because of its more mechanical character, it betrays the laterality of the artist. In this case, he was right-handed: so when the painter quickly aligned from top to bottom a series of horizontal lines toward the right, his strokes tend to rise (Fig. 8) and not to descend,<sup>32</sup> an observation that holds for both lateral walls of the room. There is also a fairly (but not absolutely) systematic process of contouring<sup>33</sup> items, large

<sup>32</sup> Cf., for example, the graphical treatment of the hatched shadows in the drawings of Hans Holbein the young, who was left-handed, as is historically well attested: Parker 1947, 31.

<sup>33</sup> We use this term as a technical one to describe the way the painter avoided to extend his whitewash on some motifs but, on the contrary contoured them, just like he did for large figures (see above).



Fig. 8: Mutnofret paying tribute to her parents, Sennefer and Senetnay, on the south wall of the long hall of TT 29

or small, to be coloured blue, green or black.<sup>34</sup> This treatment is probably motivated by the technical qualities and physical characteristics of the pigments used to make these tones, especially the weak covering power of blues and greens and the difficulty of correcting black (without corrupting the new colour), which encourage the artist to avoid unnecessary overlap of several layers of colour.<sup>35</sup> Indeed, this technique of contouring presupposes a precise knowledge of the work's final aspect and is, again, a clue that strongly suggests that we should identify the author of the preparatory sketch with the painter of the white background, as well as with the one who realized the scenes in polychrome. It also served to redefine or even rectify the preparatory sketch when necessary. This possibility of correction has been intensely exploited in the funerary ritual scene to adjust for the compositional consistency of the entire scene, particularly because the participants in the religious actions have been drafted, as we have seen, without a general network of lines or a systematic grid of proportions, a process that has often left them oversized (Fig. 6 and 9).

Then comes the colouring itself. The colours of the paintings in the tomb of Amenemope are quite special in the sense that they are characterized by a predominance of more or less dark red ochres, by playing with this colour, together with white and various shades of blue or (turquoise-toned) green, and especially by the total absence

34 Certain hues of blue or green are nonetheless obtained - above all for the highlights - by superposition on a white background (notably for certain details in the plumage of ducks or on the lotus flowers in the heap of offerings). Note also that many occurrences of the hieroglyph of the stream of water *n*, as well as the jackal for the sign *s3b* in the titles of Ahmose Humay, the father of Amenemope, have been detailed according to the principle of contouring and by subtraction of the paint material with the help of a hard object (most probably a brush or the edge of a brush) in the still wet whitewash of white paint.

35 Once more, we are dealing with findings that result as much from the observation of the works themselves and from their present state of conservation as from experimentation carried out within the context of this project.

of yellow.<sup>36</sup> Elements traditionally painted in this colour - such as the hieroglyphic chicks *w* and *B*, the wings of the owl *m*, the horned viper *f*, the hare *wn*, and some fruits in baskets of offerings - are treated in pink<sup>37</sup> while the female flesh appears as red as that of the men. This chromatic specificity of the paintings in the tomb of Amenemope is without any doubt deliberate and not accidental - for instance due to the effect of fire and burning of the pigments - since two and only two scenes in the funerary chapel were once painted in reds and blues/greens and later on over-painted in polychrome.

Observation under raking light reveals perfectly that, in general, the painter begins by applying the white of the clothes in a colour thicker than the one used previously for the background (and probably of a different mineral composition) and then the red of the human complexions, and finally the blue of the wigs, jewellery and other incidental elements that call for that colour (Fig. 10). Although this sequence seems very well attested throughout the necropolis, there are nonetheless many exceptions on the walls considered here. For example, to limit ourselves to the human characters, the red of the face of Ahmose Humay slightly but clearly overlaps the thickness of



Fig. 10: Two anonymous guests of the funerary banquet scene on the south wall of the long hall of TT 29, with raking light.



Fig. 9: Corrected silhouette of one of the officiants of the funerary ritual scene on the north wall of the long hall of TT 29, with diffuse and raking light

the blue of his wig, reflecting a reversed order of application of colours (Fig. 11). These anomalies in the usual sequence show that the colours are not systematically applied one after the other - nor, a fortiori, each by a separate person, as has sometimes been supposed. Rather, they imply that the artist has several containers of different paints at hand at the same time. The most frequent chromatic sequence corresponds, once more, to imperatives of a technical order, principally the capacity of a given pigment to cover another (red on white, and not vice-versa, for

<sup>36</sup> This absence of yellow is to be found in a few rare other funerary chapels of the necropolis, as the contemporaneous TT 84, of Iamunedjeh, usurped by the high priest of Amun Mery (on this tomb, cf. Gnirs and Grothe 1997) or TT 104, of Djehutynefer (on this tomb, cf. Shedid 1988).

<sup>37</sup> One also finds this conversion of yellow motifs into pink in the majority of scenes which decorate the large hall of TT 29, as, for example, in the golden background of the royal kiosk, on the south-western wall or for the jewellery of Amenemope, and notably the golden reward collar, i.e. the "gold of honour", on the north-eastern wall. However, black has been painted here, in contrast to the long hall.

example).<sup>38</sup> However, this can be changed due to an oversight or for a correction, a highlight or a complex pattern.<sup>39</sup>

The sequencing observed (which is therefore not to be over-interpreted in terms of ergonomics and work or team work organization) basically results from the need to allow a layer of colour to dry before proceeding to the next one in the same area, so as to prevent

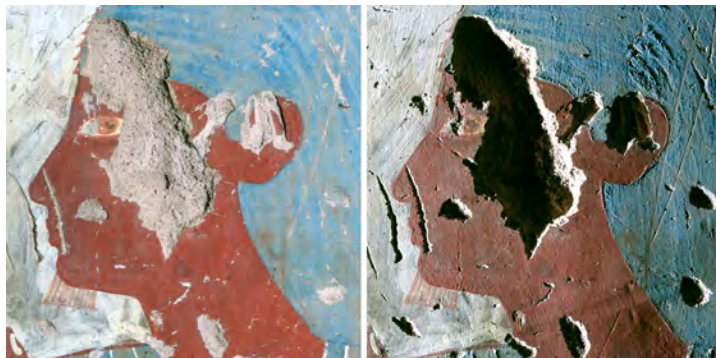


Fig. 11: Detail of the face and the wig of Ahmose Humay on the south wall of the long hall of TT 29 with diffuse and raking light

contamination of colours. This constraint is clearly demonstrated by the figure of Amenemope attending the funerary rites, on the north wall, where the painter sought to correct a faulty flood of red on white background around the face of the tomb owner by wetting the stained area, creating a fusion of ochre pigments into the layer of redampened white and impregnating it with a slightly orange tone (Fig. 12).

Diverse layering arrangements are attested in the paintings of TT 29, but they all conform – unless we are mistaken – to this requirement that the lower layer be allowed to dry. This applies to overpaintings and details treated in an opaque manner, but also to translucent (i.e. glazed) layers. Again, the image of Ahmose Humay on the south wall offers a great example: the clothing covering his torso was represented with a layer of pink – certainly from a mixture of red ochre and white – covered



Fig. 12: Face of Amenemope in the funerary ritual scene of the north wall of the long hall of TT 29, with diffuse and raking light

with a white glaze, as is revealed at the edge of this kind of shirt between the belt and the left arm of the character, where the painter failed to complete his whitewash (Fig. 13). On a chromatic level, such a superposition allowed the artist to nuance the colour of the different parts of the garment of Amenemope's father, reflecting a difference in thickness between the opaque loincloth and the more translucent shirt, while suggesting the texture of the fabric by producing an irregular surface using the fibres of a relatively hard brush on a combination of glaze and undercoat.<sup>40</sup> So there are

<sup>38</sup> Certain alterations with corrective white are attested on the background of zones that have already been painted in red, as for example in the contraction of the rear shoulder of Paser, the son of Amenemope officiating in the last scene of the south wall. In these cases, the modification remains clearly visible, the red being perceptible despite the thick layer of white.

<sup>39</sup> If, in a general manner, the painter only seems to work on large-scale monuments like a tomb with one colour at a time (though changing regularly), this is simply because, from an ergonomic perspective, he does not use a palette, with many colours within reach, like western painters of modern times, but pigments prepared in separate pots (like those published by Brack and Brack 1977 [80; pls. 57 (c-d) and 66 (5/29)], Dorman 1991, [90, pl. 45e-g] and Polz 1997, of which the excavation of TT 29 has delivered a number of analogous examples in what appeared to be a waste material area of our painter), and that he can only hold one at a time, since his other hand is busy handling the brush.

<sup>40</sup> The nature of the brushes used is clearly evidenced by the photographs in raking light, which allow us to follow

definitely uses of glazes and of undercoats that any study of painterly practices should isolate and distinguish.<sup>41</sup>

As to the outlines that define the forms and the details of motifs, close examination shows that their application is integrated into the painting process and does not necessarily constitute the final phase, far from it. Thus, there is no white background completed and all the elements to be coloured in black remained contoured



Fig. 13: Detail of the shirt of Ahmose Humay on the south wall of the long hall of TT 29

and unpainted, while the ochre outlines are usually already applied in most scenes. Moreover, on the rear shoulder of Ahmose Humay, the outline of the edge of the shirt goes under the blue of the wig, before being redefined later on with a new red line, which is now barely visible at the top of the collar near the neck (fig. 14). A little further on the same wall, the white highlights that define the arm bracelets of Mutnofret (the daughter of Sennefer and Senetnay), as she pays tribute to her parents, encroach on the dark ochre contour of her arms (Fig. 15). The same applies to the blue collars of her mother and father facing her (Fig. 16).

These details, together with the observation (noted above) that the preparatory sketch advances in step with the application of colour, highlight the deep integration of the successive stages of the painting process, from the application of the decorative scheme to the precise details of the paintings, even if purely technical constraints – such as the necessity of allowing the various layers of colours to dry – naturally require an inevitable sequencing. The topographic distribution of the different phases of this sequence in the room also shows clearly that there is no systematic sequencing of operations, for example a completion of all the sketches on all the walls, a successive laying of colours everywhere, and finally a finishing of the totality of the decoration thus realized. On the contrary, all phases are managed and accomplished continuously within a single



Fig. 14: Detail of the collar and wig at the back of the neck of Ahmose Humay on the south wall of the long hall of TT 29, with diffuse and raking light

their widths and hardnesses as well as the brushstrokes and their paths (Fig. 10). The archaeological discoveries, including those in the excavation of TT 29, furthermore confirm that the brushes of pharaonic painters were made of vegetal material (cf., notably Le Fur 1974, 72-78; and Polz 1997) and the experimentation conducted within the frame of this project has revealed the surprising range of possibilities offered by this type of brush, which at first could seem quite crude and not very handy.

41 For other example of glazes at exactly the same period, see the research carried out in TT 92 (Suemniwet): cf. McCarthy 2001 and Bryan 2001.





Fig. 15: Detail of the torso of Mutneferet on the south wall of the long hall of TT 29 with diffuse and raking light

work zone.<sup>42</sup> Such material observations invalidate an interpretative ergonomic model that would involve as many artists or artisans as there are phases (or even colours); they induce rather the hypothesis of a single artist, capable of managing all operations involved<sup>43</sup> and moving through the tomb step by step, segment by segment.

Indeed, in this ergonomic context, the consistency of painterly practices attested in the long hall of TT 29 encourages us to recognize the work of a single artist: the fairly limited range of pigments used, their textures and chromatic properties, the tools to implement them, the repertoire of gestures used for colouring figures,<sup>44</sup> and, ultimately, the entire production process of the paintings, all constitute perfectly consistent material facts in the decoration of the room, except for a few shortcuts observed in its northern, more unfinished part. As

a matter of fact, the northern wall has a number of traces that collectively indicate an attempt to finish in a hurry: as we have seen, the officiants of the ritual scenes were drawn without prior grid of proportions, unlike the anonymous funeral banquet guests in front, which were very carefully aligned on a grid (Fig. 5); the successive zones of white background are generally larger than on the south wall (tending more towards 90 cm rather than 50 cm wide); corrections during the application of colours (Fig. 9) are particularly numerous on this wall; and finally, the decorative elements that

42 According to a procedure found in fact quite clearly in the majority of the unfinished tombs of the Theban necropolis, even if we know of different variations from one tomb to another (see, for example, the case of TT 92 [*ibidem*], both similar and different to that of the long hall of TT 29).

43 The fact that every step is used as an opportunity to redefine or correct the previous one also points to a single painter. The experimental approach to the ergonomic problem raised here has also clearly shown the ineffectiveness of multiplying the number of contributors by fragmenting the tasks to be performed. In addition, both ancient textual sources for the decoration of Theban tombs (*inter alia* Hayes 1960, 39-43; Keller 2001; Cooney 2008, 96; the ostraca mentioned above, note 23; or the few artists signatures in the tombs [for example Keller 2001; Davies 2001; or Kanawati and Woods 2009, 8-10]) and studies conducted so far to isolate individual artists in the same type of buildings lead to the conclusion that we are dealing with relatively small teams or even individual craftsmen, or nearly so (*inter alia* one for TT 52 and 3, perhaps successively, for TT 56, 80 and 104 [*supra*, note 5]; 2 for TT 359 [Keller 2001]), which is consistent with the volume of most of the chapels in question.

44 The complexions of the medium-sized characters are painted with a great economy of means. A few brush strokes are enough to fill the outline of the shape. The torso is treated from the centre outward, more coarsely filled and with more application for the edges, but without great precision. The brush follows two routes to define the arm: one stroke downwards from the armpit traces the four fingers together (the application of nails and outlines individualize them in a later stage) while a second route down from the shoulder forms the other half of the arm and thumb. The two lines intersect at the wrist. A large curved line joining the two arms is sufficient to constitute the shoulders. The faces are coloured quickly without being too systematic, but a white background was placed in advance to form the basis of the eye (Figs. 9-10), which recalls the use of white background colour for the hieroglyphs and small motifs (see above). The legs are also made of very few lines: a stroke for the front of the leg, knee and top of the foot; and a second for the inside of the leg, heel and base of the foot. The loincloths are treated, in principle, in the same manner as the torsos: the centre is painted before the contours are specified by a stroke of which the turns are wide. Small alterations are sufficient to homogenize the colour and to define the angles. The attentive observation of brush marks shows the variations in possible lines with the same tool according to its orientation and its discharge capacity. The largest figures have been the object of a more applied treatment where the repertoire of gestures is less spontaneous and less easy to identify.

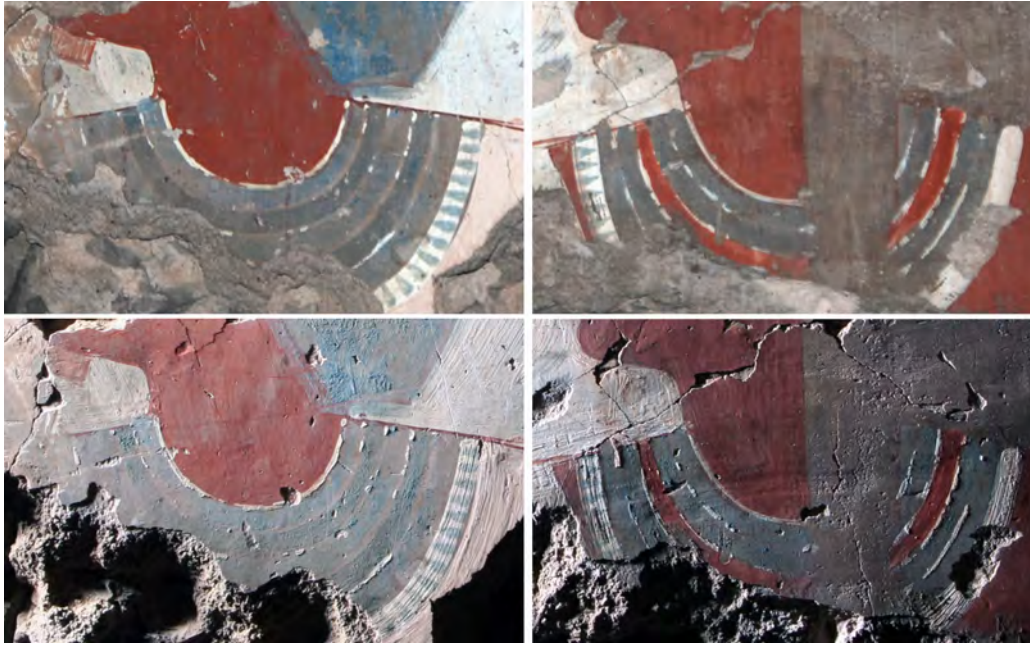


Fig. 16: Detail of the collar of Sennefer and Senetnay on the south wall of the long hall of TT 29, with diffuse and raking light

crown the scenes also reveal a hastier manner.<sup>45</sup> Thus, over the unfinished tableaux on the north wall, *khekeru*-knots were not prepared with a precise outline of their form with light red ochre, as everywhere else in the room, but were simply placed on the sole basis of some parallel guidelines, which normally precede this precise sketch and have been here considered sufficient to guarantee the homogeneity of proportion for those decorative elements (Fig. 17). Just below them, the horizontal border pattern alternating white-red-white, made on most walls of the room by means of a long white stripe in the middle of which a red rectangle was later placed, was hastily generated by the juxtaposition of three discrete rectangles, white, red and white respectively (Fig. 17), which had the advantage of not requiring for the white coat to dry before applying the red.<sup>46</sup>

The systematic material description of painterly practices implemented in the long hall of TT 29 leads, it appears, to the following conclusion: only one artist – probably with a collaborator<sup>47</sup> – seems to have been responsible for the decoration of this room; once the pictorial plaster was affixed to the walls, he began by decorating the back wall (the focal point of the room, with its statue niche) and then began on the south wall, moving towards the entrance doorway, and the north wall, again starting from the back of the room. However, realizing he was running out of time to complete the room, he began to paint the first and main scene of the northern wall as quickly as possible in his usual pictorial procedure, but nevertheless did not manage to finish it.<sup>48</sup>

45 The examination of these types of repetitive motifs is often considered as unrewarding and even repellent, but one cannot overemphasize its importance in an analysis of painterly practices such as the one proposed here.

46 In several cases, the painter did not wait for this period of drying, and colour contamination occurred on the overlapping areas of red on white.

47 Necessary for tightening the rope dipped in ochre and perhaps for the preparation of certain materials.

48 According to ostracoon MMA Field No. 270574, commented by Hayes 1960 (n. 14) and those of the same type found during the excavation of TT 29 (discussed above, notes 23 and 25), the activities of the workers, craftsmen and artists in a private tomb seems to have been accounted for by month (although for Deir el-Medina in the Ramesside period, Cooney 2008, p. 97, notes that no text “from the private sector clearly link labor time to price”). To our knowledge, the only tomb for which we have information preserved about the duration of its decoration is that of Kynebu (TT 113), of the 20<sup>th</sup> dynasty. An inscription states that it was decorated in three and a half

The fortunate example of the unfinished paintings in the long hall of TT 29 shows that it is actually possible to track the painters of the tombs of the Theban necropolis, as Arpag Mekhitarian aspired to do, and Roland Tefnin after him. But to identify more closely the “*style propre à chaque artiste*”, that is, the part corresponding to the individuality of the maker of the work of art in the highly codified and collective process of pictorial creation in ancient Egypt, it is necessary to complement the traditional stylistic approach of iconography and forms with a stylistic approach of techniques or technical styles, by engaging in a “close” and – more precisely – anatomical observation of the pictorial materiality of the images. In other words, it is appropriate to apply the approach pioneered by Giovanni Morelli not only to the morphology of motifs, but also, and primarily in the context of Ancient



Fig. 17: *Khekeru*-knots on the south and north walls of the long hall of TT 29

Egyptian art, to their production process. As Roland Tefnin expected, this analysis of painterly practices allows us to “*faire surgir l’humain derrière le schéma, le geste et*” – almost – “*la respiration de l’artiste derrière le thème iconographique*”. It also leads to a new vision of the ergonomics of decoration of the Theban tombs and to a new image of the Egyptian painter: he is far from a workman mechanically carrying out limited and specialised technical operations in a vast collective system where a kind of law of (hyper-)fragmentation of tasks would have reigned, as has often been postulated in the past for all kinds of ancient Egyptian works of art. Rather, he appears as a true artist (in the sense of the Egyptian word *ḥmw(.w)*<sup>49</sup>), who manages all operations in the decoration process, from the preparation of the pictorial plaster coat to the application of final outlines, working with several colours at the same time in a true artistic perspective and interacting with the image created by his knowledge, his technical skills and, quite simply, his fingers – as Ancient Egyptian texts recall.

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months (or 105 days, all holidays included), for a tomb smaller than the long hall of TT 29 (Cooney 2008, 97). For the origin of this skilled workforce, probably otherwise busy at state official work places, see the model - that we would call “opportunistic” - suggested by Owen and Kemp 1994 and the theory defended by Hartwig 2004, both supported by the ostraca that Hayes 1960 studied, as well as the recent work of Cooney 2008 on the material from Deir el-Medina. We will return to the clues that allow us to specify the administrative and social identity of the painters of the necropolis of Thebes in a monograph planned under the project “Painters and Painting in the Theban Necropolis during the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty” mentioned above (note 8).

49 Laboury 2016, 374-375.

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