

The Sensual Banquet Scene: Sex and the Senses in Eighteenth Dynasty Theban Tomb Paintings

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In ancient Egypt, death and sexuality were intimately connected. Rebirth into the afterlife was a literal process: after death, the male tomb owner was thought to impregnate a woman, generally his wife, with his own spirit in order to birth himself into the next world. References to sexuality, therefore, proliferated in tombs to stimulate this act of postmortem conception. The Eighteenth Dynasty non-royal tombs in the Theban necropolis offer particularly rich examples in which sexuality is elaborately encoded in paintings of everyday life. The intricate banquet scenes, most of all, feature the physical, sensual experiences of the body – sight, touch, taste, and smell – to connote sexuality, enforcing the connection between the corporeal experiences of life and the spiritual experiences of death.

Unlike the majority of lavishly crafted tombs in Egypt, Eighteenth Dynasty tombs in the Theban necropolis were built for wealthy, though non-royal, citizens. Geographical expansion of the empire during the reign of Tuthmosis III (1479-1424 BCE) resulted in an influx of wealth through importation of exotic materials and successful foreign trade. This expansion not only increased prosperity among non-royals, it also required a governmental reorganisation that benefited the wealthy class; for the first time, a significant population of non-noble citizens was appointed as viziers, military officers, and bureaucrats to manage the ever expanding stretches of the kingdom.¹ Through the wealth they garnered via the booming economy and their governmental positions, elite citizens had unprecedented access to ornate burial rituals, funeral paraphernalia, and well-situated, beautifully decorated tombs. The tomb paintings and inscriptions in such mortuary sites, therefore, give rare evidence for non-royal life and burial practices in ancient Egypt.

Cut into the limestone cliffs, approximately four hundred and fifteen private, decorated tombs have been discovered in the Theban necropolis, the majority of which have a uniform and distinctive T-shaped structure.

With a passage extending into the cliff from the entrance in the east to the westernmost shrine room, the internal layout symbolically traced the sun's daily course of birth and death.² After the internment, the passage to the burial chamber was immediately sealed, leaving a courtyard and an internal sanctuary accessible to friends and family members who would return periodically to pay their respects.

Stylistically, the wall decorations in these tombs are unique to Eighteenth Dynasty Thebes. While much Egyptian wall art consisted of painted relief, the decoration in these tombs relied instead on a smooth plaster support with artistic modeling achieved purely through painterly techniques, without carving into the limestone.³ Painted scenes covered most surfaces and, throughout the necropolis, many of the private tombs contained a common canon of themes. Lise Manniche, who has extensively studied the New Kingdom Theban tombs, identified eleven typical subjects: representations of the king, depictions of the tomb owner completing the actions of his government office, the tomb owner making offerings, fishing and fowling, desert hunting, agricultural scenes, wine making, funeral rites, the voyage to Abydos, the Opening of the Mouth ceremony, and banquet scenes.⁴ While many of the scenes appear to illustrate themes from everyday life, all had distinctly imbedded messages about rebirth and were painted in the service of transporting the deceased into the afterlife.

Agricultural and vintage scenes may have served to provide nourishment for the tomb owner in the afterlife. Food and drink, the symbols of prosperity and abundance, would have been brought as offerings by the deceased's relatives after the internment, but in the case that such offerings ceased, the bounty symbolically harvested by the figures in the wall paintings could continue to provide sustenance for the tomb's inhabitants.⁵ Agricultural scenes additionally emphasise the recurring progression of the flood-dependent seasons, signifying the cyclical birth, death, and rebirth of the deceased.

The very particular iconography of fishing and fowling scenes also indicated themes of rebirth and regeneration. Tilapia fish, which usually appear at the very center of such scenes, were thought to swallow their young in times of danger and excrete them alive once the threat had passed.⁶ Egyptians may have believed that this phenomenon indicated the fish had multiple lives.⁷ Further, this occurrence may have been associated to the myth of Nut, the sky goddess, who was believed to swallow the sun each night and rebirth it the next morning. The papyrus thickets in which such fishing and fowling scenes were set may have referred to Horus' birthplace or to the primordial swamp from which life was believed to have originally

sprung.⁸ Finally, lotus flowers proliferated in such scenes and the lotus' tendency to open in the mornings and close each night inherently connected it to the rebirthing process.

Such regenerative imagery would have been integrally related to sexuality because, as Gay Robins notes, "the concepts of sexual union, fertility, birth into this world, and rebirth into the next were indissolubly linked in the minds of elite ancient Egyptians."⁹ Ann Macy Roth lays out a compelling case for the prevalent depictions of sexuality in tomb art, proposing that the Egyptian agricultural cycle largely dictated perceptions of gender roles and fertility.¹⁰ Unlike many other cultures in which the sky is perceived as the male force, actively fertilizing the passive, female earth, such personifications were possibly reversed in Ancient Egypt. As Roth suggests, the silt and Nile floodwaters that fertilised the crops were considered to be active, and therefore both earth and water were portrayed as masculine, or occasionally androgynous. The sky, on the other hand, represented by Nut, was decidedly feminine.¹¹ Applying these gender roles to perceptions of fertility, it seems that men were considered to hold the creative power while women "received" the impregnating force.¹² Although the female body may have been considered a mere vessel for male fertility, Roth notes that women did have two vital roles in the creative process: "first, to stimulate fertility in a man; and second, to nurture the results of that fertility, before birth and after."¹³ This first role, the stimulation of fertility, is likely the reason for the erotic portrayal of women in so many tombs throughout ancient Egyptian history; in just the way women stimulated male fertility in life, women served to "stimulate man to (re)create himself," in death, allowing for his rebirth into the afterlife.¹⁴

Consequently, the painted scenes in Eighteenth Dynasty Theban tombs include innumerable coded references linking ideas of rebirth with those of sexuality, sensuality, and eroticism. In fishing and fowling scenes, for instance, many of the men wield spears aimed at the fish; Egyptians would have been aware that the word for "spear" or "to throw" could also mean "to beget" or "to ejaculate."¹⁵ Ducks, which were often depicted riding on the tomb owner's raft, were known symbols of eroticism.¹⁶ In the fishing and fowling paintings from Nebamun's tomb, fragments of which are now in the British Museum, Nebamun's wife is depicted carrying a bouquet of lotus in her arms, a sprig adorning her hair [Fig. 1]. In addition to its associations with rebirth, the lotus flower's feminine shape gave it underlying sexual connotations. Finally, the marsh, itself, was a site with sexual implications as a common setting for erotic poetry.¹⁷



Fig. 1. *Nebamun Hunting in the Marshes*, c. 1350 BCE. Wall painting from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun, British Museum.

Yet, more than any other theme within the tombs' iconographic canon, banquet scenes contained the most intricately coded representations of sexuality, revealing the ways Egyptians connected their earthly sensations to the experiences of the afterlife. Banquet scenes appeared widely in tombs in the Theban necropolis during the Eighteenth Dynasty, and examples are evident in fifty-seven tombs in the area.¹⁸ Most

of the scenes appear at the entrance to the inner tomb chamber, prominently placed along the walls of the transverse hall. The texts that accompany the scenes indicate that the banquets often represent the Beautiful Feast of the Valley, an annual event when the statue of Amun was carried from the Karnack temple, across the Nile, through the Theban necropolis, and to the chapels of Hathor in Deir el-Bahri. The festival, held between the harvest and the annual Nile flood, was a time of remembrance of the dead and was an opportunity for the tomb owners' relatives to return to the tombs to hold feasts and to make offerings. Banquet scenes depicting these festivals frequently show the tomb owner celebrating with his kin. While accompanying texts often explicitly identify the banquet as a celebration of the Beautiful Feast of the Valley, they rarely situate the scene in a particular place or time.¹⁹ As Egyptians believed that the events of life were repeated following death, the scenes can be taken as a conflation of both the tomb owner's celebrations of the Beautiful Feast of the Valley during his lifetime, and simultaneously, the celebration in honor of the tomb owner following his death.²⁰

Because of the association with death, the Beautiful Feast of the Valley held an implicit correlation with rebirth and the sexuality that allowed for rebirth. As Lynn Meskell suggests, "the connection between religiosity, ritual experience, and sexuality is most fully articulated in this festival."²¹ The correlation with sexuality was also reinforced by the festival's focus on Hathor, who was associated with love, birth, and sex. During the rituals, "Amun-Re in ithyphallic form visited and 'slept' with Hathor" and, Meskell proposes, "couples may have used this moment to invoke blessing on their sexual lives, possibly associating themselves with the divine couple and their union."²² While sexuality in daily life may have been

restrained and discreet, festival times gave license for people to "escape into a sensual, intoxicating realm" with many Egyptian texts describing such parties as precursors to lovemaking.²³

During the Beautiful Feast of the Valley, sex was a form of worship, bringing revelers nearer to the gods and honoring the physical interactions that supposedly transitioned their loved ones into the afterlife. In the festival, where the worlds of the living and the dead intersected, sexuality represented the link between the human and divine, between life and afterlife. Therefore, tomb paintings of banquet scenes appropriated imagery of sensuality in life to represent the type of sensuality that was required to transition the tomb owner to a life after death.

While banquet scenes render sexual all sensory experience, visually imagery is the most overtly sensual. For instance, all figures within the banquet scenes are physically idealised, at the peak of perfection [Fig. 2]. Bodies are primed for reproduction and elderly or childlike figures are not represented as banqueters. There are, though, clearly sexualised nude adolescent girls. The image of the nude adolescent began appearing in the second half of the dynasty with unclothed girls frequently featured as servants or dancers.²⁴ Aside from representations of young children, nude female figures were rare in Egyptian iconography, and even common female laborers were generally depicted wearing some form of covering. The adolescent nudes in banquet scenes may be linked to a larger tradition of similar imagery found on fertility objects – mirrors, spoons, and makeup pots – discovered both in domestic and burial contexts. This connection to fertility suggests that the unrobed girls may have been intended to inspire the sexual stimulation necessary for the tomb owner to be reborn into the afterlife.²⁵

While the adolescent girls may have been sexualised by their nudity, the elite party guests were rendered erotic through their clothing and other accoutrements. Banquet scenes depict some of the most elaborate hairstyles shown in Egyptian art. Hair was considered a highly sensual accessory, and the intricately plaited wigs women wore had direct sexual connotations. In one New Kingdom love poem, for instance, a man requests his lover to "don your wig and let us go to bed!"²⁶ Additionally, as in other periods in Egyptian history, women's clothing is starkly sexualised: in both painting and sculpture, gowns appear transparent, fully revealing the curvatures of the body and the pubic triangle beneath the cloth. Robins argues for a dichotomy between male clothing, which did not reveal the genitals, and female clothing. Although women's attire "stresses the importance of

the role of women as bearers of fertility,” it simultaneously “reveals women’s lack of male potency, making visible their disempowerment in relation to elite men.”²⁷ Yet perhaps rather than demonstrating a lack, such displays of sexual difference may have simply suggested the necessary convergence of the sexes in the creative process. As Roth might propose, while the male was required to act as the fertile power and the female as the nurturing vessel, both genders were integral to earthly birth and otherworldly rebirth.

The tomb paintings’ complex iconographies not only employ *visually* sensual imagery, but also represent the corporeal experiences of the banquet through the more intangible sensations of touch, taste, and smell. The sense of touch is strongly conjured both when touching is explicitly depicted and when it is noticeably absent, a notion that is particularly salient in the portrayal of the physical relationships between men and women. Within the paintings, the sexes are generally separated into opposing registers and only the tomb owner and his wife share direct physical contact: they are often posed in a seated embrace with their arms intertwined.²⁸ The gender separation for all figures aside from this couple reserves the sexual spotlight and, connotatively the focus on rebirth, solely for the tomb owner. Even so, inter-sex touching abounds. Women are frequently depicted caressing one another and lifting mandrake or lotus flowers to one another’s noses. In the tomb of Ptahemhet, for example, one woman holds a mandrake to her companion’s nose, gently stroking her shoulder. The friend caresses back, laying her hand on the woman’s thigh. Three servants surround them, two touching the women’s arms and shoulders, and the third servant stroking another servant’s back [Fig. 3]. The proliferation of touches may not have been literally erotic, but it serves to focus attention to the scene’s physicality and its emphasis on bodily experience.



Fig. 2. A Feast for Nebamun, c. 1350 BCE. Wall painting from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun, British Museum.

Like touch, the sensation of taste is loaded with sexual significance. Although banquet scenes are often flanked by piles of food offerings, guests are never seen eating; only drink is consumed. Unclad servant girls pour beverages and, similar to the verbal punning above, the verb “to pour” could have equally meant “to engage in a sexual act”²⁹ or “to impregnate.”³⁰ Herodotus



Fig. 3. Achille-Constant-Théodore-Émile Prisse d’Avennes, *Nécropole de Thèbes. Peinture copiée dans un hypogée*, 1847. Drawing after wall painting, published in the book *Les Monuments Égyptiens*, Paris: 1847, plate XLV.

records that while Egyptians were usually moderate drinkers, festival times presented an opportunity to indulge in more drink than was consumed the whole rest of the year combined.³¹ In particular, drink played a special role in the Beautiful Feast of the Valley because of the relationship with the feast’s patron, Hathor. The goddess not only represented love, birth, and rebirth, she was also known as the “mistress of intoxication”³² and, as Manniche notes in *Reflections on the Banquet Scene*, “inebriation was always particularly connected with her cult.”³³ Inebriation was precisely the goal of the drinking guests in painted banquet scenes, as drunkenness was perceived as a means of honoring Hathor and Amun. Texts on Theban tomb walls describe how alcohol was a gift delivered directly from the gods. One inscription, for instance, orders the drinkers to “drink your potent drink. Spend a happy day with what your master Amun has given you, the god who loves you.”³⁴ Consuming alcoholic drinks was, therefore, a form of worship, and inebriation may have been a means of bridging the human and divine worlds, enabling Egyptians to communicate with the gods more profoundly.

Finally, scent was vividly depicted as a sexually infused sensory experience. Ancient Egyptians believed that all earthly scents were composed of the same resinous substances of which the gods were made, and to smell was to merge oneself with the deities.³⁵ Scent in funerary contexts, like the incense that was burned in tomb temples, would have allowed the visitors to “experience the god’s essence, which acted as the intermediary between the blessed dead and the living.”³⁶ Because of this connection between the living and dead, and implicitly birth and rebirth, smelling had the familiar erotic connotations of the other bodily sensations. As in other

instances of wordplay, the Egyptian word for scent could also mean “erotic stimulation,” and love poetry regularly mentions olfactory experience in reference to both the literal erotic scents of the body and the metaphoric descriptions of the sexual act.³⁷ In one poem a man describes his beloved, saying “Your scent is like someone from incense land.”³⁸

Lotus and mandrake fruit played an important role in the erotic depictions of scent, and banquet guests are often represented wearing and sniffing lotus flowers or holding up mandrakes [Fig. 4]. Both lotus and mandrake were thought to be aphrodisiacs, and their shapes may have invoked feminine and masculine anatomy, respectively. Examples of the two plants as sexual stimulants proliferate in Egyptian art and writing, and in the erotic Turin papyrus, for instance, a woman is depicted performing acrobatic sexual acts under an image of a large lotus flower. A love poem describes the act of smelling the mandrake as a form of seduction: “She would make me bring a bowl of mandrake fruits, and when she holds it in her hand, should would breathe from it, thus offering me the color of her entire body.”³⁹ Additionally, both lotus and mandrake were thought to have sense-heightening narcotic properties. During the Beautiful Feast of the Valley, such drugs may have been employed to produce a psychic effect that allowed participants to better communicate with both the divine and the dead.⁴⁰

Unguent cones, one of the most recognised icons of the banquet scenes, had similar sexual associations. The sweet smelling and distinctly phallic globs of fat were worn atop banqueters’ wigs, and melted over the course of the evening, drenching the wearer in scent. The smell of the perfumed fat was deliberately intoxicating, enhancing the effects of other mind-altering substances. As Melinda Hartwig explains, “the scented unguent cone on the heads of the deceased and wife related to their transcended state as well as the promise of their sexual union, which would result in their rebirth in the hereafter.”⁴¹ Additionally, spoons for distributing unguent were often decorated with carvings of nude adolescent girls, similar to the sexualised dancers and servants portrayed in banquet scenes.⁴²

Since the 1950s scholars have argued that unguent cones may have never actually existed, and some suggest that the cones may represent the concept of scent itself. Egyptians certainly rubbed globs of scented fat on their wigs, but there may not have been a means for artists to depict the sheen or the smell of the perfume. Instead, the artists possibly employed a concrete representation, the unguent cone, to stand in for the intangibly luscious smell.⁴³ This theory is consistent with the ways tomb painters



Fig. 4. *A Feast for Nebamun*, c. 1350 BCE. Wall painting from the tomb-chapel of Nebamun, British Museum.

depicted other ethereal bodily senses: wine, lotus, and mandrake indicate intoxication; the nude adolescents represent fertility and the sexuality that allows for rebirth; therefore, it is not beyond the iconographic coding employed throughout the scenes to assume that the concept of “scent” may have been indicated by this invented representational icon.

Eighteenth Dynasty banquet scenes achieve a stunning feat by translating elusive sensual experiences into a concrete, visual language. Touching, tasting, and smelling are made tangible through extensive coding and an emphasis on the erotic experiences of the body. By showcasing the way the body encounters and experiences the world, the banquet scenes highlight Egyptians’ fluid concept of the boundaries between life and death: the physicality, sensuality, and sexuality that exist in life are equally important in the transition to the life beyond death.

- 1 L. Manniche, *Lost Tombs: A Study of Certain Eighteenth Dynasty Monuments in the Theban Necropolis* (London: Kegan Paul International Limited, 1988).
- 2 S. Hodel-Hoernes, *Life and Death in Ancient Egypt: Scenes from Private Tombs in New Kingdom Thebes* (Ithica: Cornell University Press, 2000) 7.
- 3 L. Manniche, *City of the Dead: Thebes in Egypt* (London: British Museum Publications, 1987).
- 4 Manniche, *Lost Tombs*, 33.
- 5 Manniche, *City of the Dead*, 39.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 36.
- 7 L. Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).
- 8 M. K. Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes, 1419-1372 BCE* (Turnhout, Belgium: Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 2004).

- 9 G. Robins, 'Dress, Undress, and the Representation of Fertility and Potency in New Kingdom Egyptian Art', in *Sexuality in Ancient Art*, (ed.) N. B. Kampen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- 10 A. M. Roth, 'Father Earth, Mother Sky: Ancient Egyptian Beliefs About Conception and Fertility', in *Reading the Body: Representations and Remains in the Archaeological Record*, (ed.) A. E. Rautman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 189.
- 13 Ibid., 194.
- 14 Ibid., 198. This concept was necessarily problematic when the tomb owner was female, but as there is no evidence for female tomb owners in the Eighteenth Dynasty Theban necropolis, these complications will not be addressed here.
- 15 Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, 150.
- 16 Manniche, *City of the Dead*, 37.
- 17 Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes*, 106.
- 18 Manniche, *Lost Tombs*, 37.
- 19 Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes*, 98.
- 20 Hodel-Hoernes, *Life and Death in Ancient Egypt*, 15.
- 21 Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, 171.
- 22 Ibid., 172.
- 23 Hodel-Hoernes, *Life and Death in Ancient Egypt*, 14.
- 24 Robins, 'Dress, Undress, and the Representation of Fertility and Potency in New Kingdom Egyptian Art', 30.
- 25 Ibid., 33.
- 26 Reproduced and translated in L. Manniche, *Sexual Life in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987).
- 27 Robins, 'Dress, Undress, and the Representation of Fertility and Potency in New Kingdom Egyptian Art', 39.
- 28 Manniche, *City of the Dead*, 44.
- 29 Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes*, 101.
- 30 Robins, 'Dress, Undress, and the Representation of Fertility and Potency in New Kingdom Egyptian Art', 31.
- 31 Herodotus, *Histories*, ed. George Rawlinson (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 1996) II, 60.
- 32 Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes*, 101.
- 33 L. Manniche, 'Reflections on the Banquet Scene', in *La Peinture Égyptienne Ancienne: Un Monde de Signes à Préserver*, (ed.) R. Tefnin (Brussels Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, 1997), 32.
- 34 Ibid.
- 35 Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes*, 100.
- 36 Ibid., 101.
- 37 Ibid.
- 38 Manniche, *City of the Dead*, 44.
- 39 Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes*, 100.
- 40 Manniche, *Reflections on the Banquet Scene*, 31.
- 41 Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes*, 92.
- 42 Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, 153.
- 43 Manniche, *Reflections on the Banquet Scene*, 34; Hartwig, *Tomb Painting and Identity in Ancient Thebes*, 92.