

Research Project

On the Uses of Varnishes in Theban Tomb-Chapels: Crossed Perspectives on Multisensory Painting

Project funded by own resources

Project title On the Uses of Varnishes in Theban Tomb-Chapels: Crossed Perspectives on Multisensory Painting

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Organisation / Research unit

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Status Active

In 2017, an investigation in the tomb of Tjanuny in the Theban necropolis (TTä74) led to detecting residues of scented pictorial varnish over the wig and complexions of the tomb owner's figures. So far, conforming to its use in other artistic cultures, and generally bringing forward a system of chromatic distribution, scholars have interpreted the function of this painterly technique as a solution to enhance the brilliance and hue of the pigments. The scented nature of these varnishes has never been signalled. The project follows three approaches in view of giving possible meaning to these scents.ä

1. In order to characterise the nature of the scents, Hugues Tavier (University of Liège) first developed an experimental method as a way to test the applicability of scented resins included in varnish recipes used on other material (mostly coffins and other wooden funerary objects). As a result, it appears that onlyä*pistacia*ä*terebinthus*, frankincense and Aleppo pine resins could have been technically applicable onto painted coating—optionally melt with beeswax (Den Doncker & Tavier 2018).äArchaeometric analyses will help confirm the identification of the resins (in cooperation with the Museo Egizio in Turin, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York).

2. An art-historical examination of the varnished iconographic units already reveals interesting matches between the composition of the varnishes and the scenes in question. These connections are all the more significant when the use of varnish seems to have been restricted (most probably due to the scarcity of the imported resins). As it happens, these scenes and motifs often have anäolfactoryädimension; two representative examples being the anointed wigs, dresses and complexions of guests in banquet scenes, and piles of incensed offerings to the deceased. Moreover, it is well established that the numerous oils, unguents, perfumes and balsams of all kinds that were used as cosmetics in such occasion, as well as in religious contexts, were composed of scented resins, including those presumably present in the varnish recipes—this also concernsä*senetjer*-incense.

3. The proper Egyptological investigation will therefore explore the material, physical and conceptual link that seems to have existed in these painters' mind between the varnished motifs and the depicted reality, as though the materialisation of scents onto the paint layer was a way to represent the immaterial nature of scents and to impart the images with their possible symbolic function. In this respect, it is worth mentioning the ancient Egyptian verbal rootä*mrh*äreferring both to the anointment (of a person) and to varnishing (an object).äCould the scent associated to these resin-made varnishes be meaningful and functional, and therefore justify their application over specific iconographic units, beyond their aesthetical function operating merely on visual level? In other words, could we believe what we *smell* like what we see?

Keywords Theban Necropolis, private tomb-chapels, multisensory painting, pictorial varnishes, scented resins, multi-functional materials, senses in painting, individual agency

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ID	Kreditinhaber	Kooperationspartner	Institution	Laufzeit - von	Laufzeit - bis
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