

## **Nebamun: ancient Egyptian tomb painting**

### **Aims**

- To provide students with visual encounters with the equipment and techniques used to create ancient Egyptian tomb paintings.
- To provide teachers with an opportunity to build student familiarity in terms of object identification and object vocabulary.
- To provide a visual starting point for cross-curricular work on ancient Egyptian paintings.

### **Description**

- A sequence of 13 slides

### **Teaching ideas**

- If you are planning to visit the British Museum, use the images to familiarize the students with some of the objects they will be seeing in the galleries.
- Introduce vocabulary associated with the objects such as materials (e.g. carbon, red ochre, mineral, reed) and names of objects (e.g. brush, palette, pigment).
- Try creating paint brushes from a range of materials. Ask pupils to consider where they will hold the brush and how to create 'bristles'. What results do you achieve from each type of material?
- Where might you find examples of modern wall paintings (indoor and outdoor murals)? What tools are used to create them (brushes, tins of paint, spray paint)?
- Research the process of tomb painting in ancient Egypt – what happened and in what order? Create a flow diagram or an instruction manual.
- Try out some of the painting techniques. For example ask the pupils to choose an animal, draw an outline, paint in with a single colour (let this dry) and then decide what colours and brush strokes to use to best represent the animal's coat (fur, feathers, scales etc).

## Notes on the pictures

### *Painting surfaces*

#### **Two fragment of Nebamun's tomb painting**

Nebamun's tomb was cut from crumbling limestone on the west bank of the Nile at Thebes leaving a rough surface that had to be rendered and plastered before painting. The first coat was a thick layer of mud render; a mixture of Nile mud and plant material that helped bind the render together and prevent it cracking. Among the added straw and reeds were flower heads, suggesting that the work was carried out during the summer. Once the render had dried, it was given a smooth top surface of white plaster made from local gypsum.

(left) This fragment shows where a layer of white plaster has been applied to the underlying mud surface to create a smooth painting surface. The detail comes from the banqueting scene.

(right) This fragment shows a procession of servants bringing offerings of food (including sheaves of grain and desert animals) to Nebamun. The border at the bottom shows that this scene was the lowest one on this wall. The rough edges of the fragment show the background layer of thick mud render applied directly to the tomb walls with the white plaster surface of painting on top of the render. In the top right hand corner the thin layer of white plaster has cracked.

#### **Fragment of wall painting showing woman**

The ancient Egyptians applied a layer of white plaster to other stone surfaces too. This fragment of sandstone shows a female figure from a wall painting. The stone underneath is sandstone which can be smoothed to create a flat surface over which the artist has applied a layer of white gypsum plaster before starting to paint the main figure. The fragment dates from the New Kingdom period.

#### **Painted high relief fragment of Kemsit**

The ancient Egyptians also applied paint to carved wall pictures. Usually the limestone background was left unpainted to create a white background and the raised parts of the relief were coloured. Many limestone reliefs in museum collections have lost their ancient colour over time.

This painted high relief fragment shows an ancient Egyptian woman called Kemsit sitting on a wide chair holding a vase of perfume to her nose. In front of her was a servant - only their hand remains, holding a small cup which is filling with liquid being poured in with their other hand. The paint has come off in some places - for example, on the eyebrow and cosmetic eye line, which were certainly painted black. Kemsit's skin, necklace and bracelets are pink. The pink may have been an undercoat and traces of a darker brown colour on her skin may have been the actual colour of her skin when the relief was originally painted.

## ***Painting tools***

### **Writing and painting tools**

This collection of equipment shows the tools used to write and paint. Hieroglyphs were written using black and red ink and these two colours can often be seen on writing equipment such as a scribe's palette and reed pens. A greater range of colours was used for painting and the brushes for a large wall painting would be larger and chunkier than those used for a small, delicate picture on a papyrus scroll.

Top: (left to right)

A small container holding blue pigment.

Pigment grinder and stone (further information below).

A thick paint-brush made from plant fibres held together by twists of thin rope. The brush end is stained with red pigment.

Second row down:

Paint-brush formed from sticks bound together and frayed at one end; stained with red paint.

Third row down:

A wooden scribal palette with 12 oval and two circular ink hollows. There are traces of black and red around some of the wells and in the pen slot. Thutmose IV's name appears in a cartouche at the top of palette. Along the sides, are the names and titles of an ancient Egyptian called Meryra together with funerary prayers addressed to the god Amun and to Thoth, the god of writing and patron of scribes.

Bottom:

A rectangular wooden scribal palette with a row of 9 oval ink wells and two longer and narrower ink wells cut in one corner. These wells contain traces of red, yellow and black pigments. Beneath the pen-slot, a horizontal inscription states 'the outline draughtsman, Min-nakht, true of voice'. Beneath this, in thick black ink strokes, three signs are roughly drawn: a falcon head wearing a sun-disc and uraeus, and two examples of a disc and crescent.

### **Pigment blocks**

In Nebamun's tomb the artists used a standard colour palette - soot for black, calcium sulphate for creamy white, ochres for red and yellow, and 'frit' - a synthetic glassy material ground into powder - for blue and green. These pigment blocks include 2 lumps of deep Egyptian blue and 1 lump of Egyptian blue pigment (bottom left), white limestone, red ochre and yellow ochre.

**Pigment blocks on grinder**

The pigment blocks were ground into a fine powder and mixed with water or a liquid gum to create the liquid paint. This pigment grinder is made from a rectangular slab of basalt rock and has an oval depression on the top for grinding pigment. The pigment block would be ground using the small hand-held grinding stone rather like a modern pestle and mortar.

**Three brushes**

Painting brushes could be made from a variety of materials. Sometimes they were bound onto a wooden handle and at other times the fibre itself was bound to create a self handle. Some brushes have been found by archaeologists, left behind in the tombs they were being used to paint.

(top) Fibre brush held together with bitumen at one end and bound with cord.

(middle) Paint-brush made from fine palm fibres bound with string fibres. The palm fibres have been cut at one end to create a brushing tip. Traces of red pigment are preserved on the brush end.

(bottom) Paint-brush formed from sticks bound together and frayed at one end; stained with red paint.

***Painting preparations*****Limestone ostrakon**

An ostrakon is a small fragment of limestone (or pottery) which was used in ancient Egypt for making quick notes or sketches. An artist might sketch out part of a painting before drawing it on to the wall. This is a limestone ostrakon with an ink drawing on one side. The drawing shows a goose on her nest, with four eggs shown beneath the bird. In the upper left corner are two very faint drawings of goslings in red. Red was often used to draw the initial outline of an object and the main goose was possibly painted black over a red draft. This ostrakon dates to the New Kingdom period.

**Wall painting with grid marked**

To help lay out the painting with the correct proportions the surface to be painted would first be marked out with a grid of squares. The grid lines were made with string covered in red pigment which were stretched across the wall and then 'pinged' to leave a red line. On the finished painting this grid would not show but on this unfinished fragment the red grid can still be seen. This fragment shows a man seated with hieroglyphs above. It dates from the New Kingdom period and comes from the tomb of an unknown ancient Egyptian.

**Nebamun seated holding a staff**

Using the red grid to keep the figures and objects in proportion and correctly aligned, the artist would mark out the initial sketch for the painting using red paint. This red outline would then be painted over and filled in to create the final painting. Sometimes the artists would change their mind when they came to do the final painting and on this fragment the original red sketch of the staff can be seen to the left of where the artist decided to paint the staff in the final painting.

***Painting techniques*****Cattle scene**

This scene shows Nebamun inspecting herds of cattle. The hieroglyphs describe the scene and record what is being said. The herdsman is telling the farmer in front of him in the queue: 'Come on! Get away! Don't speak in the presence of the praised one! He detests people talking .... Pass on in quiet and in order ... He knows all affairs, does the scribe and counter of grain of [Amun], Neb[amun]'. The alternating colours and patterns of cattle create a sense of animal movement. The artists have left out some of the cattle's legs to preserve the clarity of the design. The scene is divided into two registers (lines of painting) which allows the artist to show a long procession of cattle and herdsman in a small space. In addition, lines have been used to organize the hieroglyphs which are arranged (and red) in vertical columns in the top register and horizontal rows in the bottom register.

**Nebamun and family**

This scene shows Nebamun, his wife Hatshepsut and their small daughter. The artist has used depth of colour to highlight the most important figure – Nebamun – since the tone of his skin is brighter than for the other two figures. This is because when the artist painted the skin of Hatshepsut and the daughter, they mixed red and white together and painted a flat single layer, but when they painted Nebamun, they applied a layer of white first and then added the red separately on top.

**Details from hunting in the marshes scene**

(left) Detail of Hatshepsut showing how the artist has used lines painted onto a background colour to create detail such as the beads on the collar necklace, uses outline to create the shape of the lips and paints a lock of hair over the earring to create a sense of depth.

(right) Detail of bird showing how the artist has applied dots and lines painted on the under paint to built up details such as the bird's plumage.

## Background information

### Web resources

Interactive learning site for Ancient Egypt at [www.ancientegypt.co.uk](http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk)

Further Egyptian objects at [www.britishmuseum.org/explore/introduction.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/introduction.aspx)

### Books for adults

Parkinson, Richard. *The painted tomb chapel of Nebamun*, British Museum Press, 2008

### Books for children

Hooper, Meredith. *The Tomb of Nebamun*, British Museum Press, 2008

Thorne, Claire. *Draw like an Egyptian*. British Museum Press, 2007