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Formality or flexibility? Art and artists in New Kingdom Thebes

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Ancient Egyptian art has long been considered standardized and formal, due to its visual consistency throughout three millennia. This has had as consequence a disparaging prejudice about Egyptian painters, which have been often considered simply artisans since they apparently show no expression of individuality and are thus much removed from the contemporary idea of artists.

However, as Dimitri Laboury states, “even when duplication was intended, Ancient Egyptian art never produced two exact copies” (Laboury 2017:232). The purpose of the present paper is to investigate the reasons that brought to considering Egyptian art as static, and where instead the room for individual expression and flexibility arises. This will be achieved through the analysis of the decoration of selected Theban tombs from the New Kingdom, personally investigated by the author during her doctoral research. In particular, specific pictorial units often considered repetitive, such as emblems, will show that even in supposedly fixed compositions there is the possibility of manipulation. The rendition of single hieroglyphic signs, as well, points to a certain degree of freedom on part of the artists, who can add new details or create new composite units. The amount of icon manipulation can sometimes be related to the artists’ training – or lack thereof. Either way, despite the basic unity, ancient Egyptian artists knew how to play with the details and express their craftsmanship in an individual way, taking inspiration from the models but re-interpreting them each time.