

Mistress of the House
Mistress of Heaven
WOMEN IN ANCIENT EGYPT

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Women's work: Some occupations of nonroyal women as depicted in ancient Egyptian art

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Written evidence in the form of letters, tax records, and legal documents suggests that in legal status, the right to own property, and the ability to barter goods on their own terms, Egyptian women enjoyed a higher level of equality with men than did women in other ancient cultures. Yet, because Egyptian women did not, as a rule, hold high government office, either nationally or on a local level, they do not figure prominently in historical records. Nor have they left the kinds of autobiographical texts that are found in the tombs of their male contemporaries.¹ Because individual Egyptian women have left us few written records of their own, probably the richest source of information about their occupations and activities is to be found in the art, especially the artwork associated with tombs: wall paintings, reliefs, statuary, and funerary models.

In Egyptian art, representations of nonroyal women fall into two broad categories. One depicts women from the privileged classes, who are often (but not always) identified by name and title. The other portrays women from the lower ranks of society who are almost always anonymous. The first group of women includes the wives, mothers, and daughters of government officials and civil servants, priests and temple bureaucrats, army officers and military administrators.² These women sometimes have monuments of their own, such as the lovely seated statue of Enehy (cat. no. 35a),³ but they are represented far more frequently in the tombs and on the funerary monuments of their male relatives.⁴

Women are often quite important figures in the funerary art of their husbands and sons. In most periods, the principal male and female figures are the same size in pair statues (cat. no. 93) and family groups (cat. no. 2), or else, as in the statue of Memy-Sabu and his

wife (cat. no. 3a), the difference in size might appear normal in real life.⁵

Unfortunately, one can tell little about a woman depicted in one of these statues except that she was a wife and/or mother and that she was "Mistress of the House," a title that precedes the names of most married women in the New Kingdom. These roles surely entailed a great deal of responsibility, but the specific duties are not enumerated clearly either in texts or in artistic representations. In tomb decoration and models, the tomb owner's wife is not shown directly supervising activities that certainly must have come under her authority as the mistress of a household.

Outside the home, upperclass women played an important role in the religious cults of various deities. Their positions are signaled both by title and by recognizable iconographic symbols. In the Old Kingdom, many women were priestesses of the goddess Hathor, and they are shown carrying her sacred symbols, the *menat* necklace (cat. no. 35c) and the *sistrum* (cat. no. 35b). These two instruments also were employed in the worship of other deities (both male and female) and became accoutrements of the chantresses, or singers, who were attached to various cults. In catalogue number 93, for example, Renenutet, whose titles include "Chantress of Amen" and "Chief of the Dance Troupe of Hathor of Madjet,"⁶ is shown holding a *menat*; in catalogue number 35a, Enehy, who was "Chantress of the Mistress of the Southern Sycamore (Hathor)," holds a *sistrum*.

In painting and relief, wives, mothers, and daughters of the deceased are often prominent figures. As in statuary, they are usually the same size as their male relatives or only slightly smaller. The tomb owner is usually accompanied by his wife or his mother when he makes offerings to the gods. One of these women almost always sits with him

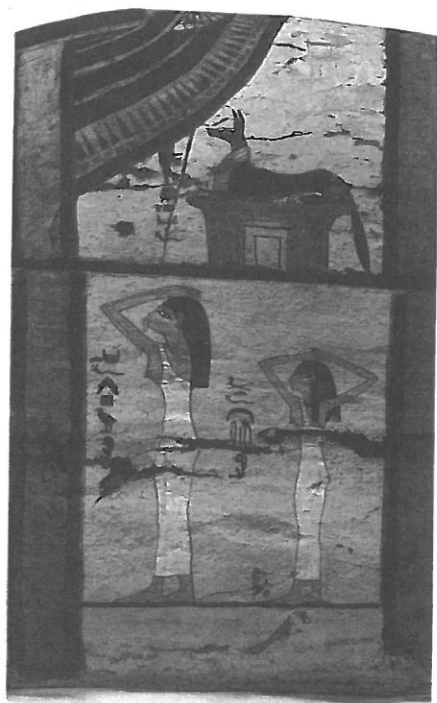


Fig. 1 Detail of the proper right side of the coffin of Ahmose. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Gift of the Earl of Carnarvon, 1914. 14.10.2. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

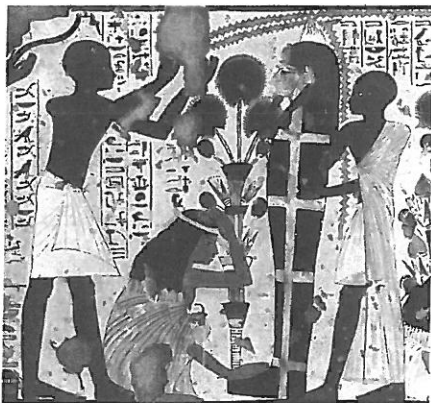


Fig. 2 Detail from the tomb of Nebamen and Ipuky (TT 181). Facsimile watercolor by Charles K. Wilkinson. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Rogers Fund, 1930. 30.4.108. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

when he receives offerings in his tomb or on a stela. In marsh scenes, the wife generally appears with her husband as he hunts birds or spears fish.⁷ In Old Kingdom tombs, wives and daughters are sometimes shown entertaining the tomb owner by playing the harp and singing. In the funerary context, this activity may be interpreted as having some ritual or symbolic function, but it probably also reflects reality. Some of these women were undoubtedly accomplished musicians who used their talents to entertain themselves and their families.⁸

Apart from the actions she performs with her husband or son, the woman in her role as wife and daughter frequently appears as an active participant in other situations. Occasionally a wife is shown offering to her husband, but far more frequently a daughter appears as the principal presenter of offerings to her parents. On the back of catalogue number 93, for example, Renenutet offers to her father and mother. While she pours a libation with her left hand, she holds a *menat* necklace in her right, as befits the title "Chantress of Amen," a title recorded in the text above her image.

Mourning is another function performed by the female relatives of a tomb owner. In the Old and Middle Kingdoms, mourning is treated very much as a ritual. The so-called *dryt*-mourners are usually interpreted as priestesses impersonating the goddesses Isis and Nephthys.⁹ In both periods the *dryt*-mourners are usually unnamed. Even when they are named, it is hard to identify their relationship (if any) with the deceased. The other mourners in these scenes, though they may represent family members, are usually anonymous. In the New Kingdom, however, mourners at the funeral are sometimes identified as the wives and daughters of the deceased. Although they also proba-

bly fill a ritual function, they are now portrayed as human women mourning the death of a loved one. This may be seen in a vignette on an early New Kingdom coffin from Thebes inscribed for a man named Ahmose (fig. 1).¹⁰ On either side of the coffin box, near the shoulder, his wife, Hapu, and his daughter, also named Ahmose, are shown in typical poses of mourning, their hands held up to their heads. A more poignant image appears in a later representation from the Theban tomb of Nebamen and Ipuky (TT 181). Nebamen's wife, Henutnofret, and his daughters are identified several times in various vignettes of the funeral procession. In one of these, Henutnofret appears crouched before her husband's coffin tears streaming down her face, one hand touching the foot of the coffin and the other rubbing dust into her hair (fig. 2).

Women from the privileged classes are usually designated by name and with one or more titles and epithets, but those from the lower classes are generally not identified as individuals. They appear in generic scenes on walls and in funerary models, and sometimes are accompanied by a short text describing their activity—servant, baker, weaver, spinner. These female figures, and their male counterparts, function more as hieroglyphs than as representations of real people. Some exceptions exist, of course. For example, in the Theban tomb of Djari, an official of the mid-Eleventh Dynasty, the women depicting food preparation are identified as the servant Sit-pep, the servant Senet, the servant Sit-henen, the servant Mekuty, and the servant Sit-in (fig. 3).¹¹ Although artistically the figures are merely generic representations, and quite crude at that, the addition of names makes them individual people. These women are known to us because their employer (or master) chose to name them in his tomb. This



Fig. 3 Women preparing food, from the tomb of Djari (TT 366). Drawing by Lindsley Hall. 31.6.1. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

may have been a way for a wealthy man to provide for his dependents. By being identified in the tomb, they could benefit from the funerary offerings.¹² Another example of this practice occurs in a scene on the back of catalogue number 93. In the lower register, Renenutet is followed by a woman identified as "her servant, Hathor."

Although the vast majority of the female figures in wall scenes and funerary models are anonymous, they give us at least some idea of the occupations that were considered women's work in ancient Egyptian society. In the Old Kingdom, and less frequently in later periods, groups of women are shown winnowing grain, although they are not seen cutting the stalks. They are also shown gleaning the fields, an activity represented more frequently in New Kingdom scenes. Women grind grain as well (cat. no. 28a), a task that seems to be theirs exclusively in all periods. They also bake bread, an activity they sometimes share with men. Beer is brewed more often by men, but women are also seen pressing the mash through sieves (cat. no. 28b) and preparing the ceramic storage containers. They probably even had a hand in making the pottery beer jars and bread molds used in brewing and baking, as suggested in a small limestone figurine of a woman burnishing or putting a handle on a pot (fig. 4). As a rule, however, men rather than women are shown as potters. Although the representations of these activities on tomb walls and in models usually reflect the large-scale produc-

tion necessary to supply a big estate, we know that similar pursuits took place in the households of agricultural workers and artisans. These people were usually paid in measures of grain; their town sites have yielded numerous bread molds, grinding stones, and domestic hearths.

Apart from working with certain aspects of food production, women from the lower ranks perform a number of activities that might be interpreted as professions. They are represented as musicians, singers, and dancers (fig. 5), as mourners (cat. no. 31), and as servants of the wealthy. At one time or another, they share all of these occupations with men. However, women are also depicted participating in all phases of one industrial craft that seems to have been exclusively theirs, at least through the end of the Middle Kingdom. This is the manufacture of linen textiles. Because this is the only craft viewed clearly as women's work, and because it is also the only area of women's endeavor from which a tangible product survives (in the form of linen fabric), textile manufacture will be discussed below in greater detail.

This brief survey of the activities of nonroyal women as documented in art makes it clear that there is little overlap between the methods of portraying women of the elite classes and those of the lower ranks of society. However, women of both groups shared one activity in which both are occasionally represented in art, namely the nurturing of small children.



Fig. 4 Limestone figurine of a woman burnishing or adding a handle to a pot. New Kingdom. Courtesy of the Petrie Museum, University of London, UC 15706.

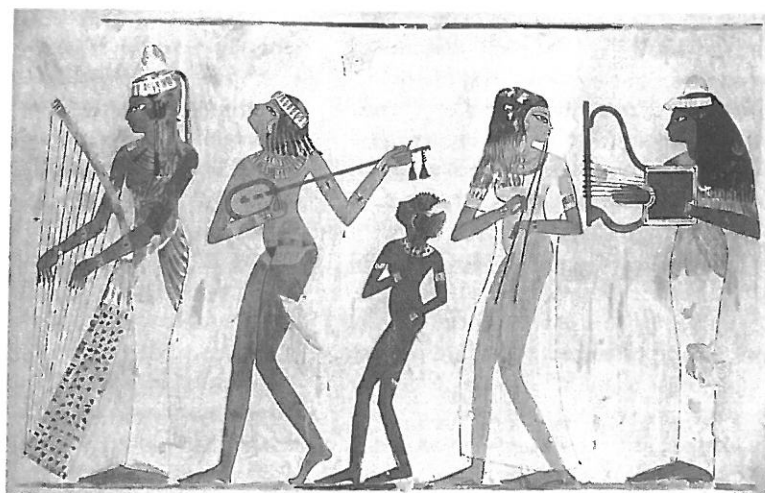


Fig. 5 Female musicians from the tomb of Djeserkarasonb (TT 38). Facsimile watercolor by Charles K. Wilkinson. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1930. 30.4.9. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 6 Limestone statuette of a woman suckling her children. Old Kingdom. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Purchase, Edward S. Harkness Gift, 1926. 26.7.1405.



Fig. 7 Detail from the tomb of Menna (TT 69). Photo by Harry Burton. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Nurturing children

Regardless of their social status and their other occupations and responsibilities, the most important role of women in most societies is the bearing and rearing of children. The ancient Egyptian culture was no exception, and all Egyptian women, from the most powerful goddess to the lowliest peasant, are represented somewhere in Egyptian art as nurturers of the young.

Because most of the representations of daily life come to us from tomb walls and funerary models, whose main function was to provide for the continued maintenance of the tomb owner's spirit, infants and small children are far less numerous in art than they must have been in the population as a whole. Adult women are usually shown performing their duties unencumbered by toddlers and babes in arms even though Egyptian women seem to have suckled their children as long as three years.¹³ There are representations from various periods, however, that give a somewhat more realistic idea of most Egyptian women's lives.

In the Fifth Dynasty tomb of Niankhkhnum and Khnumhotep at Saqqara a woman suckles her baby while tending a fire piled with bread molds. In the register above, another mother speaks to a young boy who clings to her shoulders while she grinds grain.¹⁴ In several Fifth and Sixth Dynasty tombs a woman is shown seated on a cargo boat suckling a child, suggesting that the members of the crew and their families actually lived on the boats.¹⁵ A limestone statuette (fig. 6), also dated to the Old Kingdom, shows a woman seated on the ground, her left leg raised to support the infant she suckles at her left breast. Just behind her at the right a second, slightly older child nurses from her right breast. The woman's pose, with one knee raised, is repeated in numerous representations of mothers nursing small children. In a delightful Middle Kingdom statuette, for example, a mother suckles her child while another woman braids her hair (cat. no. 8a). This pose is repeated in the Second Intermediate Period copper depicting a woman¹⁶ suckling a small boy (cat. no. 9).

These examples of nursing mothers give some idea of the realities of domes-

tic life, in which women tend their children while they occupy themselves in the home.¹⁷ In the normal course of life, mothers must have found it necessary to take their children along when they needed to perform some task outside the home. Two scenes from New Kingdom Theban tombs seem to reflect this situation. In the tomb of Menna (TT 69), a woman is shown in an agricultural setting cradling a young child while she sits in the shade of a tree (fig. 7). This scene is reiterated in a relief fragment from the Twenty-sixth Dynasty tomb of Mentuemhat (cat. no. 8b). One assumes that at the height of the harvest, when every able-bodied person was needed, even nursing mothers probably participated.

The second New Kingdom scene comes from the tomb of Neferrenput (TT 133), who was "Foreman of the Weavers in the House of Usermaatre-Setepenre (Ramesses II) in the estate of Amen (the Ramesseum)." One wall bears a badly damaged representation of the weavers' workshop, which he oversaw.¹⁸ In the two upper registers, several women and one man bring what appear to be skeins of spun thread to be weighed.¹⁹ One woman in the top register leads a toddler by the hand; in the register below, the feet of two more children are preserved. In the third and lowest register, warping and weaving are shown taking place within the workshop. Two young children are depicted running near a doorkeeper, who holds a raised stick. Norman de Garis Davies, who published the scene, interpreted this vignette as showing the doorkeeper trying to control the children of the women seen at work in the room beyond.²⁰

Although it is not surprising to find women at the lower levels of Egyptian society in the rather realistic scenes mentioned above, representations of elite women, queens, and even goddesses also depict the nurturing role of the female. In the divine realm, Isis, in her capacity as mother and protector of Horus, is the most famous nurturing deity, but images of the goddess holding her infant son do not become common in art until quite late in Egyptian history (cat. no. 59a,b). On the other hand, representations of a goddess suckling the king occur in Egyptian art as early as the Old Kingdom²¹ and con-

tinue throughout Egyptian history, as seen, for example, in catalogue number 50. These images often appear in funerary contexts and symbolize the ruler's rebirth into the next world. In these scenes, the king is shown as a small adult dressed in full royal regalia, standing before the larger figure of the goddess, who offers her breast. The king was also thought to be suckled by a goddess at birth. This event is preserved in representations of the divine birth of Hatshepsut in her temple at Deir el-Bahri and of Amenhotep III in the temple of Luxor. In both scenes, the respective rulers and their *kas* are shown as infants, each seated on the lap of a kneeling goddess.²²

In statuary, the earliest representation of a young child seated on the lap of an adult female is the late Old Kingdom statuette of Pepy II as a miniature king seated on the lap of his mother, Queen Ankhnesmeryra. We know that Pepy ascended the throne as a child, and this statuette may commemorate the fact that Ankhnesmeryra acted in some capacity as regent for her son. Pepy is shown as a miniature adult dressed as king. Mother and son sit quite rigidly at right angles to one another. Yet in spite of the formality of this pose, there is a suggestion of the intimacy between mother and child in the way the queen places her left hand on her son's back, as though supporting an infant or toddler. Her other hand lies across the king's knees, and he places his left hand on top of hers. A related grouping of royal mother and son occurs occasionally in Old Kingdom reliefs, where a seated queen places a protective or restraining hand on the arm of a young prince standing in front of her.²³ These types of representations seem to symbolize the nurturing relationship of mother and child, and such scenes are not preserved again in royal art until the Amarna Period. At that time it is quite common for the queen and even the king to be represented interacting in a very intimate fashion with their children, as seen in catalogue number 46.

Like royal women, nonroyal women from the elite class usually are not shown actively fulfilling their maternal role. Although their offspring are often represented with them in statuary and in tombs, elite women are not portrayed interacting with their own young chil-

dren. In the Eighteenth Dynasty, however, a group of representations signal the special role filled by a small number of women with regard to the royal children. These women, who have the title "Royal Nurse" (*mn't nswt*), seem to have been wet nurses to princes and princesses of the dynasty.²⁴ A few also record the title "One Who Nurtured the God" (*šdt ntr*), a designation that seems to have been given only to wet nurses of children who later became king.

Royal nurses are usually represented prominently in the tombs of their husbands or sons, and at least two received the signal honor of burial in the Valley of the Kings.²⁵ Sometimes an individual nurse is depicted holding and even suckling her royal nursling, who usually appears as a child, but occasionally is shown as a miniature king. The earliest of these representations that include the king is a statue of Hatshepsut seated on the lap of her nurse Sitra (fig. 8). The formal pose is the same as that of Pepy II on his mother's lap, but here the nurse is life-sized. Like Pepy and his mother, Hatshepsut and her nurse are seated at right angles to one another. Part of Hatshepsut's body is missing, but the preserved fragments show clearly that she is represented as a small adult dressed as a king. The fragmentary inscription indicates that she had already made herself coruler with Thutmose III when the statue was commissioned. Although Hatshepsut is depicted as ruler, it is clear that Sitra is not merely holding a statue of the reigning pharaoh.²⁶ Her broken left arm was originally around Hatshepsut's shoulders, and enough of Sitra's right arm remains to suggest that she was offering her breast to her nursling in the same gesture as seen in the much later representations of Isis and Horus (cat. no. 59a,b). Hatshepsut's head and upper torso are not preserved, but traces of her right arm can be seen wrapped around Sitra's waist in what appears to be an affectionate gesture.

The image of a nurse holding a small king also appears in relief and painting in the Eighteenth Dynasty. In the tomb

Fig. 8a Queen Ankhnesmeryra II with her son Pepy II on her lap. Dynasty 6. The Brooklyn Museum. 39.119. Photograph courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

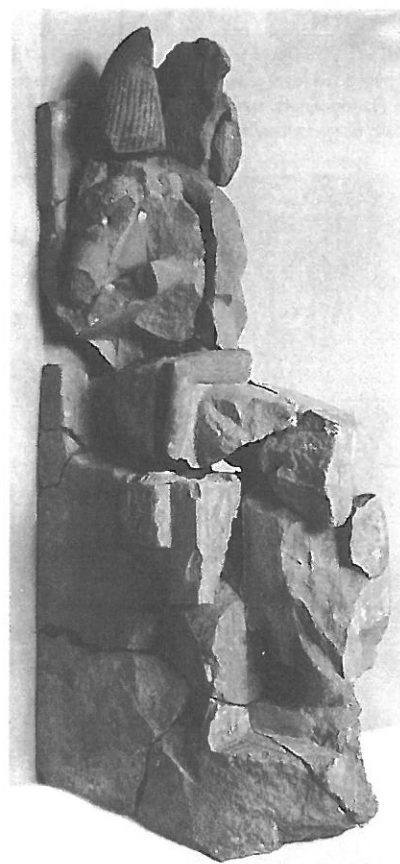
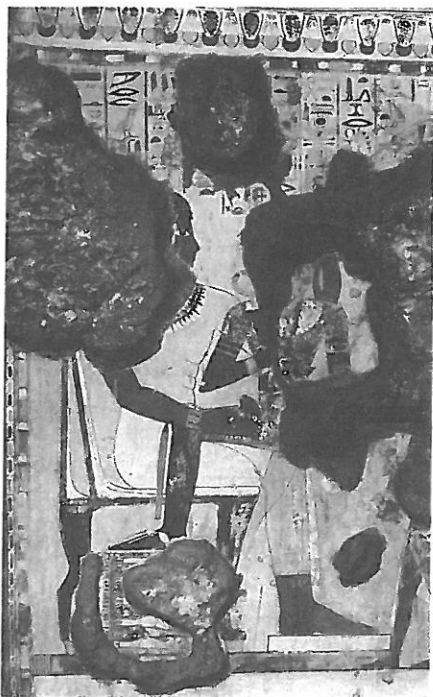


Fig. 8b Fragmentary statue of Hatshepsut seated on the lap of her nurse Sitra. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. JE 56264. Expedition photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 9 Detail from the tomb of Kenamen (TT 93) showing the royal nurse Amenemopet with Amenhotep II. Facsimile watercolor by Nina de Garis Davies. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Rogers Fund, 1930. 30.4.72. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 10 Detail from the tomb of Hekaneheh (TT 64) showing the royal guardian Hekareshu with Thutmose IV. Photograph by Harry Burton. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



of Kenamen (TT 93), the owner's mother, Amenemopet, is shown holding the figure of Amenhotep II on her lap (fig. 9). The scene is beautifully composed. The nurse sits looking left, with the king seated facing her. His feet rest on nine bound captives, representing enemies of Egypt, who kneel beside the nurse's chair. Within the canonical formality of the pose, the two seem to exchange affectionate gestures.²⁷ Amenhotep reaches forward with his left hand to touch his nurse's shoulder, or perhaps to stroke her hair. Amenemopet's right arm is around his shoulders, and her hand rests on the back of his head as though supporting the head of a small child. Her left hand seems to support the king's left arm, but probably it is actually beneath her breast in the typical gesture of a woman nursing a child. Above the scene an inscription identifies Amenemopet as "Chief Nurse, Who Nurtured the God."

Because of the ritual significance of the king being suckled by a goddess at various stages of his existence, it is tempting to give a ritual interpretation to these representations of royal nurses. There is no evidence, however, that royal nurses in the Eighteenth Dynasty performed any ritual duties with regard to the pharaoh. They hold no titles that associate them with Hathor or any of the other goddesses who suckle the king at birth, coronation, or death. Royal nurses are shown holding young princes and princesses as well as small kings. This pose, whether in statuary or in painting, seems to commemorate, often retrospectively, the very human relationship between a child and his or her nurse. In cases where the nursling has already ascended the throne, he or she must be portrayed as pharaoh, not as a mere child.²⁸

Another argument against reading a ritual meaning into these representations is the fact that men occasionally are shown in the same pose. These men, who are usually high officials, have a title similar to "Royal Nurse." The title is generally translated as "Royal Tutor" (*mn' nswt*), though it might be rendered more correctly as "Royal Guardian." These officials included Senenmut, who was guardian to Hatshepsut's daughter, Nefrura. At least ten statues were commissioned in commemoration of Senenmut's position with regard to

the princess. One is a unique seated statue in which Nefrura sits facing forward on Senenmut's lap and is enveloped completely in the cloaklike garment he wears.²⁹ Another statue, also unique, shows Senenmut seated on the ground with his left knee raised in a position reminiscent of the nursing mother in fig. 6 or catalogue number 8b. A young Nefrura is seated sideways on his lap, and he holds her protectively close to his chest, her head just under his chin.³⁰ Seven other images, many of them fragmentary, are block statues in which Senenmut sits with both knees drawn up in front of his chest, wrapped in a cloak.³¹ Only Senenmut's head and the small head of Nefrura are visible, the body of the child being surrounded completely by that of her guardian. These nine statues are strongly expressive of a guardian protecting a young child. The tenth statue, catalogue number 43, is another unique type. Here, even though Senenmut shows a less protective stance, Nefrura's left arm passes around her guardian's left shoulder in what might be interpreted as an affectionate gesture similar to those found in the representations of royal nurses and their charges.

Like royal nurses, the male guardians of royal children of the Eighteenth Dynasty usually are shown holding their nurslings as children, but one exception exists. In TT 64 at Thebes, Hekareshu, guardian of Thutmose IV, holds the king on his lap (fig. 10). This painting is very similar to that of Amenhotep II and his nurse Amenemopet (fig. 9), and the artist who painted the scene in TT 64 may have used the earlier image as a model. Hekareshu, who is portrayed as an older man with folds of flesh on his chest, places his left hand behind the king's head, as with a child, and his right hand rests on the king's hip. Thutmose is dressed as a king, and his feet rest on a stool decorated with the crouching enemies of Egypt.

Although the scenes in TT 93 and TT 64 are essentially the same, there is one interesting difference. Whereas Amenhotep II interacts with his nurse by touching her shoulder, Thutmose IV does not make such a gesture toward his guardian.³² This may reflect a difference between the understanding of a

nurse's and a guardian's relationship with a former nursling who had become king.³³ As the child grew older, the role of the guardian seems to have developed into that of a mentor,³⁴ whereas the nurse's role probably remained that of an affectionate surrogate mother. This is not to say that one relationship was valued more or less than the other; they merely may have evolved in different ways as the nursling grew older.

These images form a special group, whether they depict a nurse or a tutor and whether the adult holds a child or a small king. They are the only works of Egyptian art in which a nonroyal person is shown in close physical contact with any member of the royal family, not to mention the reigning king. They also represent the only situation in which a nonroyal person is shown on a scale larger than the king. This departure from two basic rules of royal iconography emphasizes the special relationship that must have existed between the nurse/guardian and the royal child—a relationship that clearly extended throughout their lives.

Textile manufacture

During most of pharaonic history, linen was the basic material used for clothing, blankets, sheets, and other goods made of cloth. Because linen fabric and finished clothing were not perishable in the same sense as agricultural goods such as grain, they were also valuable commodities in the barter system on which the Egyptian economy was based.³⁵ Not surprisingly, linen cloth was one of the items included in funerary offering texts, beginning in the Old Kingdom. Intact burials from all periods have produced chests full of shawls, loincloths, blankets, tunics, shirts, dresses, and lengths of uncut cloth varying in texture from very coarse to superfine.³⁶ Linen was also an important component in the process of mummification, and in some periods phenomenal amounts of linen bandaging and padding were used to wrap the body.³⁷ Although much of the bandaging was made of strips of worn fabric, newly woven shrouds and lengths of cloth were also used. Clearly, the manufacture of linen was a major industry in Egypt throughout pharaonic times.

In view of the importance of linen in all aspects of Egyptian culture, it is surprising that so few representations of its manufacture have been preserved. The earliest of these is found on a decorated bowl discovered in a Predynastic cemetery at Badari by W.M.F. Petrie.³⁸ Two human figures are shown measuring warp threads, while two others appear near a loom. This horizontal loom does not differ substantially from those represented in wall paintings and models dating to the Middle Kingdom, more than one thousand years later. Although it is impossible to say with certainty who was producing linen cloth in prehistoric times, the fact that the bowl was found in a woman's grave suggests that weaving cloth was considered women's work even in that early period.

No representations of cloth manufacture appear in the tomb decorations of the Old Kingdom, but the Old Kingdom hieroglyph for "weaver" is a seated woman holding what is probably a shuttle or weaver's sword, used for beating in the weft threads.³⁹ Women also are shown accepting payment for finished cloth,⁴⁰ and a number of women have administrative titles such as "Overseer of the House of Weavers." This rather scanty evidence suggests that women not only made the cloth, but were also responsible for supervising its manufacture on a large scale in workshops attached to private estates, temples, and royal palaces.

During the Middle Kingdom, representations of cloth manufacture appear in wall paintings⁴¹ and wooden funerary models.⁴² The workers in these scenes are invariably women, who seem to have been involved in all aspects of production from harvesting the flax⁴³ to weaving the fabric.⁴⁴ The most complete scenes show women hackling and roving the flax fibers⁴⁵ and spinning them into thread. Others measure the warp by winding the thread around pegs on a wall or stakes set in the ground. The actual weaving is done on horizontal looms, each loom tended by two or sometimes three women. These weaving scenes often depict several looms and numerous workers supervised by an overseer, who is usually a woman. They probably document the mass production that would have been accomplished in a workshop attached



Fig. 11 Representation of spinners and weavers from the tomb of Khnumhotep at Beni Hasan. Dynasty 12. Facsimile painted by Norman de Garis Davies, 1933. Rogers Fund, 1933. 33.8.16. Photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

to a large private estate, one of the royal palaces, or a temple, but the tasks shown were undoubtedly repeated on a cottage-industry level in the villages of artisans and agricultural workers throughout Egypt.⁴⁶

One well-preserved Middle Kingdom weaving scene is found in the Twelfth Dynasty tomb of Khnumhotep (Tomb 3) at Beni Hasan. Five women are shown occupied in different stages of linen manufacture (fig. 11). The woman kneeling at the center right is roving flax and has wound the loosely twisted fibers into a ball in front of her. The ball then would have been placed in one of the spinning bowls to the right, which probably kept the fibers damp and provided tension during spinning.⁴⁷ The spinner stands at the right, using two spindles simultaneously.⁴⁸ The second spindle is held in

her left hand and is partially obscured by her body. At the center of the scene a woman identified as the overseer supervises two weavers, who work at a horizontal loom. This loom appears to be upright because of the Egyptian artistic convention in which objects are depicted from their most recognizable angle. The warp threads are wound around two beams held apart by four pegs in the ground. The extra warp is wound around the upper beam, and finished cloth is rolled up around the lower beam. Along the left-hand side of the newly woven cloth, a short, looped fringe has been woven into the selvedge.⁴⁹ The wide, uncut lengths of linen from this period invariably have this supplementary or inlaid weft fringe.

In this scene, it is interesting to note that women of all ages are depicted. The overseer, with her drooping breasts and rolls of fat, is clearly meant to be old. The rover and the weaver seated at the left each have large, slightly drooping breasts and probably are meant to be mature, though perhaps not old. The other two figures, with their rather small breasts, seem to represent either girls or young women.

An even more highly detailed representation of linen manufacture is preserved in a weavers' shed from the Theban tomb of Meketra (TT 280), who lived into the early reign of Amenemhat I of Dynasty 12 (fig. 12).⁵⁰ The three rovers, three spinners, and five weavers in this model are accompanied by two women who measure out warp threads by winding them around pegs on the shed wall. The spindles, spinning bowls, shuttles, and other

Fig. 12 Weavers' shed from the tomb of Meketra (TT 280). Now in the Egyptian Museum, Cairo. JE 46723. Excavation photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



implements are all reproduced. The loom is a solid block of wood onto which the warp threads and the finished cloth have been painted. Along the left-hand selvedge of the newly woven fabric on each loom, an inlaid warp fringe is visible.⁵¹

All of the representations of cloth manufacture from the First Intermediate Period and the Middle Kingdom suggest that this particular craft was exclusively women's province. This impression is reinforced by textual evidence. For example, the Middle Kingdom mortuary priest Hekanakhte negotiates with a woman about the processing of his flax harvest,⁵² and a late Middle Kingdom papyrus listing servants includes twenty women who are designated as cloth-makers.⁵³ By the New Kingdom, however, the situation seems to have changed somewhat, and men as well as women are employed in weaving linen cloth.

Only three representations of weavers have survived from the New Kingdom, all of which come from the tombs in the Theban necropolis.⁵⁴ In these scenes, two from townhouses or private estates and one representing a temple workshop, only upright looms are shown and all but one of the preserved weavers are male. On the basis of this scanty information, it has often been stated that in the New Kingdom men replaced women as weavers and/or that the upright loom replaced the horizontal loom as the mode of cloth manufacture.⁵⁵ The first of these statements is contradicted by one of the New Kingdom wall paintings. In the tomb of Neferrenput (TT 133), who was chief of weavers in the Ramesseum (the mortuary temple of Ramesses II), four upright looms are shown, one of which is worked by two persons. In the original publication, one of the five weavers is shown clearly as a woman.⁵⁶ Written sources also document that although men shared in the task, women were still very much involved in weaving cloth.⁵⁷

The contention that the upright loom replaced the ground loom in the New Kingdom is difficult to support or to contradict.⁵⁸ Although many spinning and weaving tools have been preserved, such as spindles, spinning bowls, heddle-jacks,⁵⁹ and weaver's swords, no looms have been found.⁶⁰ From a

purely industrial point of view it is not surprising that Egyptians began to use the vertical loom, because more looms could be set up in a smaller space.⁶¹ Egyptian society was very traditional, however, and the Egyptians seldom completely abandoned an older, proven method in favor of a newer one. Instead they usually preferred to use both concurrently. One argument favoring the continued use of the ground loom is based on a study of the preserved textiles. It has been suggested that the supplementary weft fringe found along one selvedge of so many pieces of Egyptian linen was developed, at least in part, as a way of keeping the weft straight when weaving on a horizontal loom.⁶² This theory is supported by the extant representations of looms. In Middle Kingdom scenes depicting horizontal looms, a weft fringe is always indicated along the left-hand selvedge of the finished cloth.⁶³ In the three New Kingdom representations of vertical looms, however, the finished cloth never has this feature. This evidence suggests that the large number of New Kingdom textiles that have inlaid warp fringes were woven on traditional horizontal looms rather than the newer vertical loom.

Authors frequently express wonder that the ancient Egyptians, using such simple equipment, were able to produce the fine fabrics that have survived from pharaonic times. In doing so, they fail to acknowledge that in most textile manufacture the quality of the cloth is determined by the skill and inventiveness of the spinners and weavers rather than by the sophistication of the tools. Because women played a major role in the production of textiles throughout pharaonic times, and since linen cloth is one of the few products of women's labor that survives today, a few examples of their handiwork deserve description.

Most of the textiles from ancient Egypt are executed in plain weave, the same simple technique that many of us (both male and female) learned as children in art classes at school. The apparent simplicity of this technique is deceptive. Depending on the type of thread and the openness of the weave, cloth of many textures and uses can be produced (fig. 13). Some surviving examples are woven tightly with two-

Fig. 13 Five sheets of linen of varying texture from the tomb of Hatnofer and Ramose at Thebes. Excavation photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



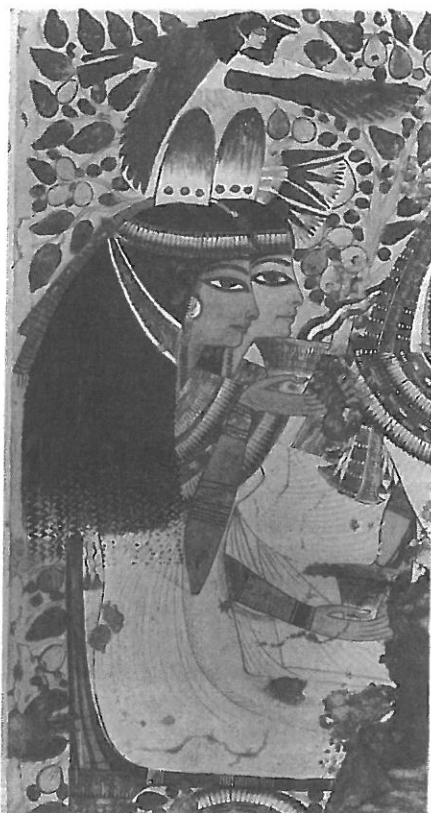


Fig. 14 Detail from the tomb of Userhat (TT 51). Watercolor facsimile, copyist unknown. Rogers Fund, 1930. 30.4.162. Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

or three-ply thread and have the softness of fine table linen. Others, using a coarser thread, are more akin to canvas or burlap. Still other examples, woven from single-ply thread, have the quality of the sheerest lawn.

Among the linen sheets found in the early Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Hatnofer, Senenmut's mother, were two lengths of cloth made of this sheer fabric. The diaphanous quality is the result of a loose weave of superfine thread that must have been spun from flax harvested when the plants were very young.⁶⁴ One of these pieces of cloth, which is about sixty-three inches wide and almost seventeen feet long, weighs a mere quarter-pound.⁶⁵ Without knowing the particular artisans involved, one can only imagine the amount of time it would have taken to rove the fibers, spin the thread, warp the loom,⁶⁶ and weave a length of cloth this size. The sheeriness of the featherweight fabric, with its silken softness, gives credence to New Kingdom representations of elaborately pleated outer garments that allow the contours of the body and even the color of the skin to show through. In figure 14, for example, the woman's upper right arm is visible through the cloth.

As on many of the preserved uncut lengths of cloth, one end of Hatnofer's

sheet has a warp selvedge, the other end is finished with a plied fringe, and one weft selvedge is decorated with an inlaid fringe. These two types of fringe are visible on the garments shown in several statues of women in this volume. In the pair statue of Yuni and Renenutet (cat. no. 93), the latter is wearing a garment with a looped fringe along the selvedge that runs diagonally across her chest. The pleated garment worn by Enehy (cat. no. 35a) shows a similar short-looped selvedge fringe along the upper edge, and a longer warp fringe is visible down the front along the top of her left leg. Both types of fringe are also visible in figure 14. On the end of cloth directly behind the left arm of the woman in the foreground, one can see the very short weft fringe (above her arm) and the longer warp fringe (below her arm).

Although the only decoration on most preserved pieces of Egyptian linen consists of fringes and pleats, a few pieces of patterned fabric have survived. Three of the earliest examples come from Middle Kingdom Thebes and were found by the Egyptian Expedition of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. These are made with a simple pile technique in which supplementary weft threads are pulled out from the surface of the cloth at intervals during weaving

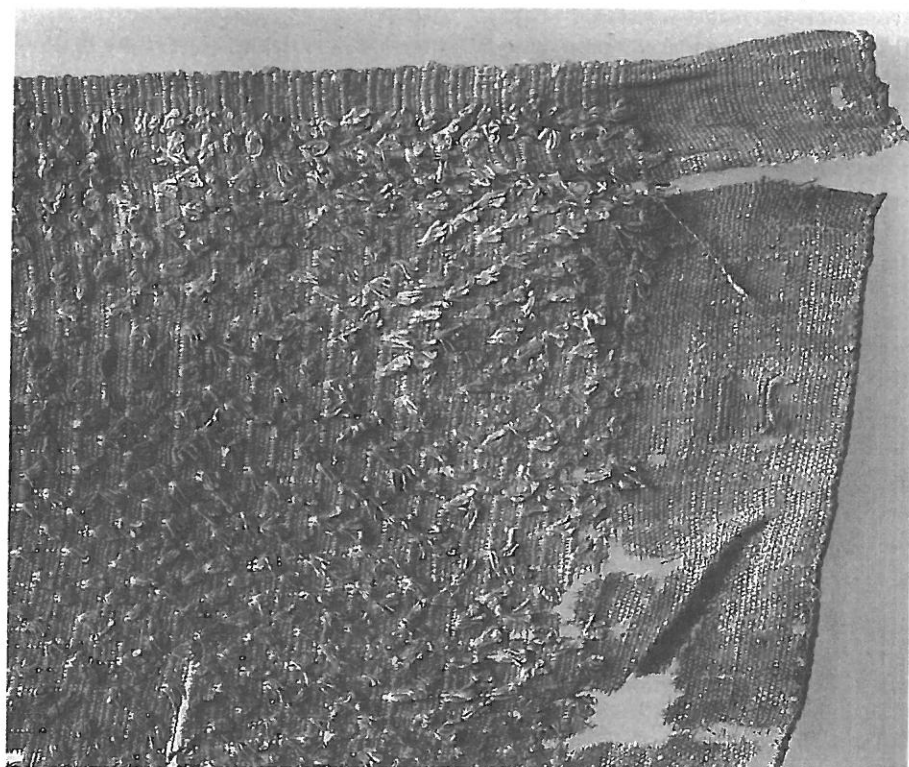
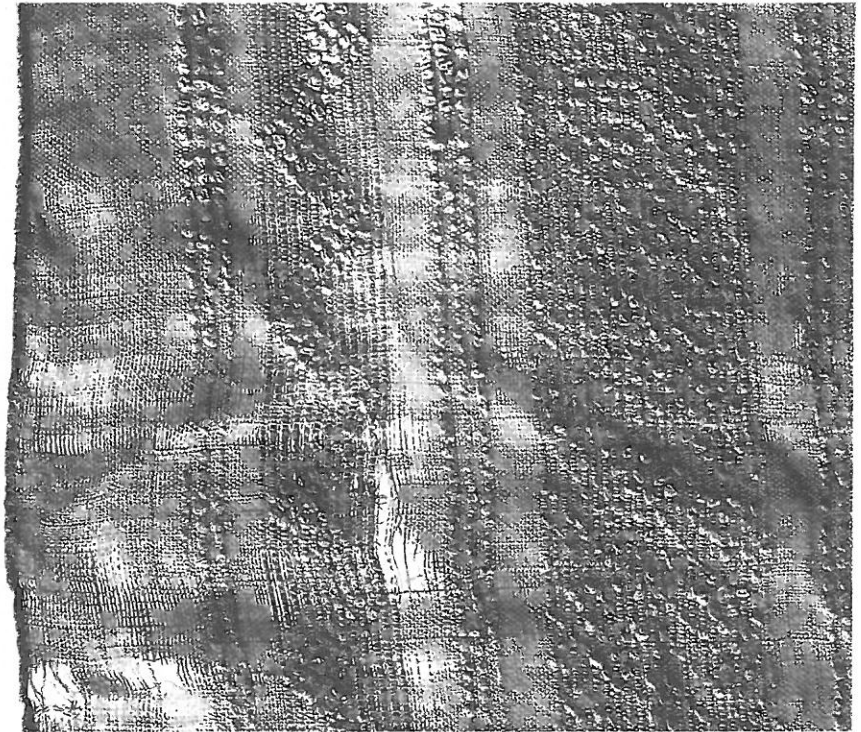


Fig. 15 Fragment of linen towel. Middle Kingdom. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. 31.3.62. Expedition photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Fig. 16 Fragment of linen towel with pile decoration. Middle Kingdom. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. JE 56279. Expedition photograph courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



(fig. 15). Two of the pieces are often described as towels because they bear some resemblance to terry cloth and because the preserved width of one, about 17¾ inches, is more suited to toweling than to clothing.⁶⁷ The third fragment was woven with the same technique but has a more complicated geometric pattern of zigzags and stripes (fig. 16).⁶⁸ Because all of these fragments were made in the Middle Kingdom, it seems likely that they were woven by women using horizontal looms.

One final textile, perhaps the most interesting piece of fabric excavated by the Egyptian Expedition, deserves comment. It was discovered among the funerary offerings in the Eighteenth Dynasty tomb of Senenmut's parents.⁶⁹ Inside a basket, bunched together with a knotted pot sling, was a linen pad with rows of long pile on one side (fig. 17a,b). The woven section of the pad, measuring 26 x 19¼ inches, was

Fig. 17a,b Expedition photographs of a tufted pad from the tomb of Hatnofer and Ramose at Thebes. Egyptian Museum, Cairo. JE 66243. Expedition photographs courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.



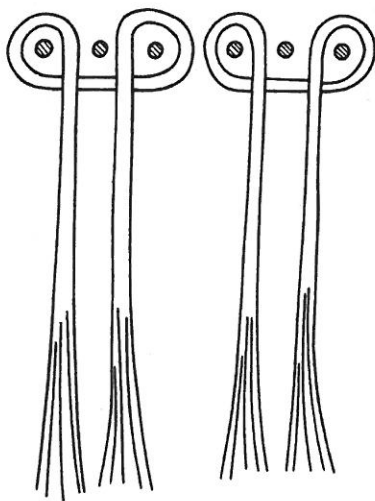


Fig. 18 Method of knotting used to make the pile of the tufted pad in figure 17a,b. Drawing by B. Girsh from MMA tomb card no. 4886.

executed in tight, plain weave and is described in the excavation notes as having a texture similar to burlap.⁷⁰ The selvages are plain, and the warp threads are caught together in a braided fringe at either end.⁷¹ The fascinating feature of this small piece of fabric is the method of making the pile. Unlike the Middle Kingdom examples mentioned above, in which the pile is created by pulling loops of the weft out from the surface of the fabric, this pile is made with a symmetrical rug knot, the so-called Turkish or Ghiordes knot, that is associated most frequently with the manufacture of carpets (fig. 18). This is not a unique example of this type of knotted pile. A similar textile from the Eighteenth Dynasty Theban tomb of Kha and his wife, Meryt, has ten rows of pile that appear, in available photographs, to have been made with the Ghiordes knot.⁷²

In view of the many uses of linen cloth by Egyptians from all levels of society, both living and dead, its manufacture must have been a major industry in ancient Egypt, second only to the production of food. Unlike scenes of food production, however, which account for much of the decoration in most well-preserved tombs and funer-

ary models, scenes of linen manufacture are quite rare. Such scenes are underrepresented even in comparison with depictions of other crafts.⁷³

This underrepresentation is something that all types of women's work have in common. In Egyptian art, although women are portrayed frequently and quite positively, many of their occupations and day-to-day activities, from nurturing children to producing such a valuable commodity as linen cloth, seem to be taken for granted to the point of almost being ignored. This may be partly a function of the funerary nature of much of the art. Certainly it is also a result of the patriarchal nature of Egyptian society, which quite naturally placed more importance on the occupations of men than on those of women. After all, it was men who commissioned and created most of the art. In addition, however, the majority of women's work in ancient Egypt was done in the home, which, in most cultures, is considered a private place. Although this work was extremely important to the smooth running of the society, it was done in the background. Thus, we catch only glimpses of the activities that occupied the majority of ancient Egyptian women.

