

Artisans, Pharaonic Egypt

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The status of artisans in ancient Egyptian civilization differs greatly for most of its history from that obtained by their counterparts in ancient Greece and Rome (*see* ARTISANS, GREECE AND ROME), as there are very few traces of their individual identity. An idea of artisans as freely-working creators driven by their artistic inventions and individual non-traditional approaches (individuality and creativity) engaged in creation of works of art cannot be justified in ancient Egyptian society, as other merits were valued at that time, such as knowledge and adherence to traditional, already proven approaches and technical skills. On the other hand, their creations, even though viewed in Egyptological literature mostly as products of a workshop-based craft industry, are unquestionably works of arts aimed at specific audiences: both living and dead Egyptians, as well as their gods. Ancient Egyptian artisans can be generally described as “craftsmen” or “skilled workmen”; consequently, the Egyptian language had no specific term that

can be translated as “artisan” or “artist.” The closest word is *Hmwty* “craftsman,” which distinguishes various types of “craftsmen” by specifying the different materials with which they worked.

In ancient Egypt the artisans did not work as free agents but as members of structured workshops or ateliers working for the central administration (the king) or temples or as members of large households. In consequence, they appeared in written and pictorial evidence as holders of various titles illustrating their status in the social hierarchy, with those working for royalty generally having a higher status than any others (as would have been the case for the artists living in DEIR EL-MEDINA and decorating the royal tombs). From the point of view of the social organization of their work, the ancient Egyptian artisan was always responsible to a patron. In between both might stand a designer who devised what was to be produced; this person might be, but was not always, the artisan who actually produced the piece of art (the executant). Beyond getting commissions from official patrons, the artisans probably undertook freelance work to increase their income and social status in the

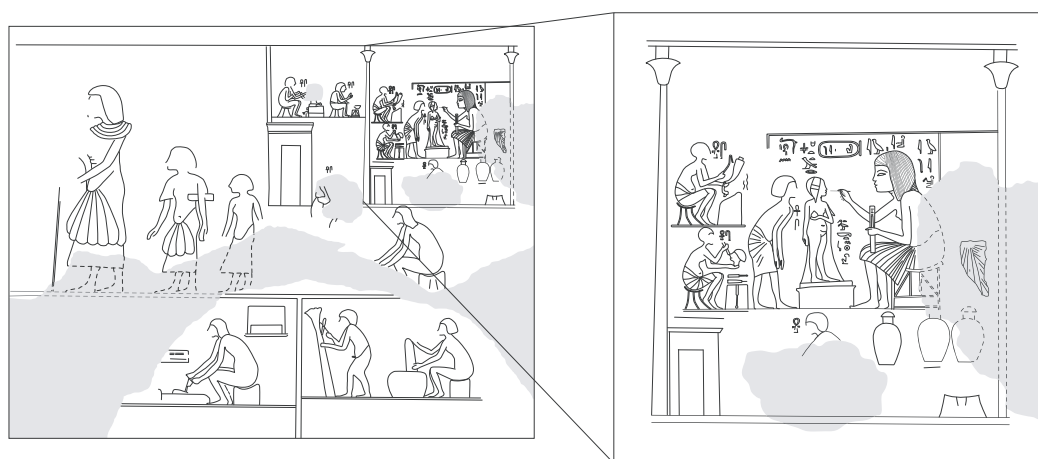


Figure 1 Organization of a sculptor's workshop as it is depicted on a relief in the tomb of Huya, Amarna. Drawn by the author after Davies, *The Rock Tombs of el Amarna: Part III. The Tomb of Huya and Ahmes* (1905, pl. 18).

community. While working on some commissions, for example, in the decoration of a tomb, it seems highly probable that several artisans of the same kind (e.g., painters or relief sculptors) worked together, as is corroborated by careful examination of wall scenes and inscriptions.

Workshops producing various objects of art dating to almost all periods of Egyptian history have been excavated on archaeological sites all over Egypt; see, for example, ABYDOS, EGYPT, ALEXANDRIA (EGYPT), AMARNA, AVARIS/TELL EL-DAB'A, DASHUR, ELEPHANTINE, PHARAONIC, EL-KAB, GIZA, HIERAKONPOLIS, MEMPHIS, PHARAONIC, and Thebes (Malqata). Those workshops produced a wide range of objects, including statuary, plaster casts, stone vessels, faience, bone inlays, glass objects, etc.

Although the majority of ancient Egyptian artisans have remained silent through the course of history, there are several famous artisans known to us: the architects IMHOTEP, Hemiuunu, Ineni, Senenmut, and Amenhotep, son of Hapu, the painters Seni or Dedia, and the sculptors Thutmose and Bak, just to mention a few. It was for their extraordinary achievements that two of these – IMHOTEP and AMENHOTEP, SON OF HAPU, were deified in later periods of Egyptian history. Additionally, there are depictions of artisans with their names and titles on tomb reliefs or on other monuments (e.g., stelae). Sometimes they even left us with opinions on their own person and skills: “I am a craftsman excellent in his craft . . . I know (how to express) the movement of a man and the stride of a woman, position of a trapped bird, the cringing of a solitary captive . . . I know the making of things . . . without letting the fire

burn them, nor do they wash off in water either” (autobiographical text of sculptor Irtisen, after Barta 1970: 78–126).

SEE ALSO: Architecture, Egyptian; Art, Egypt; Paint and painting, Pharaonic Egypt; Ptah; Sculpture, Pharaonic Egypt; Stoneworking, Pharaonic Egypt.

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