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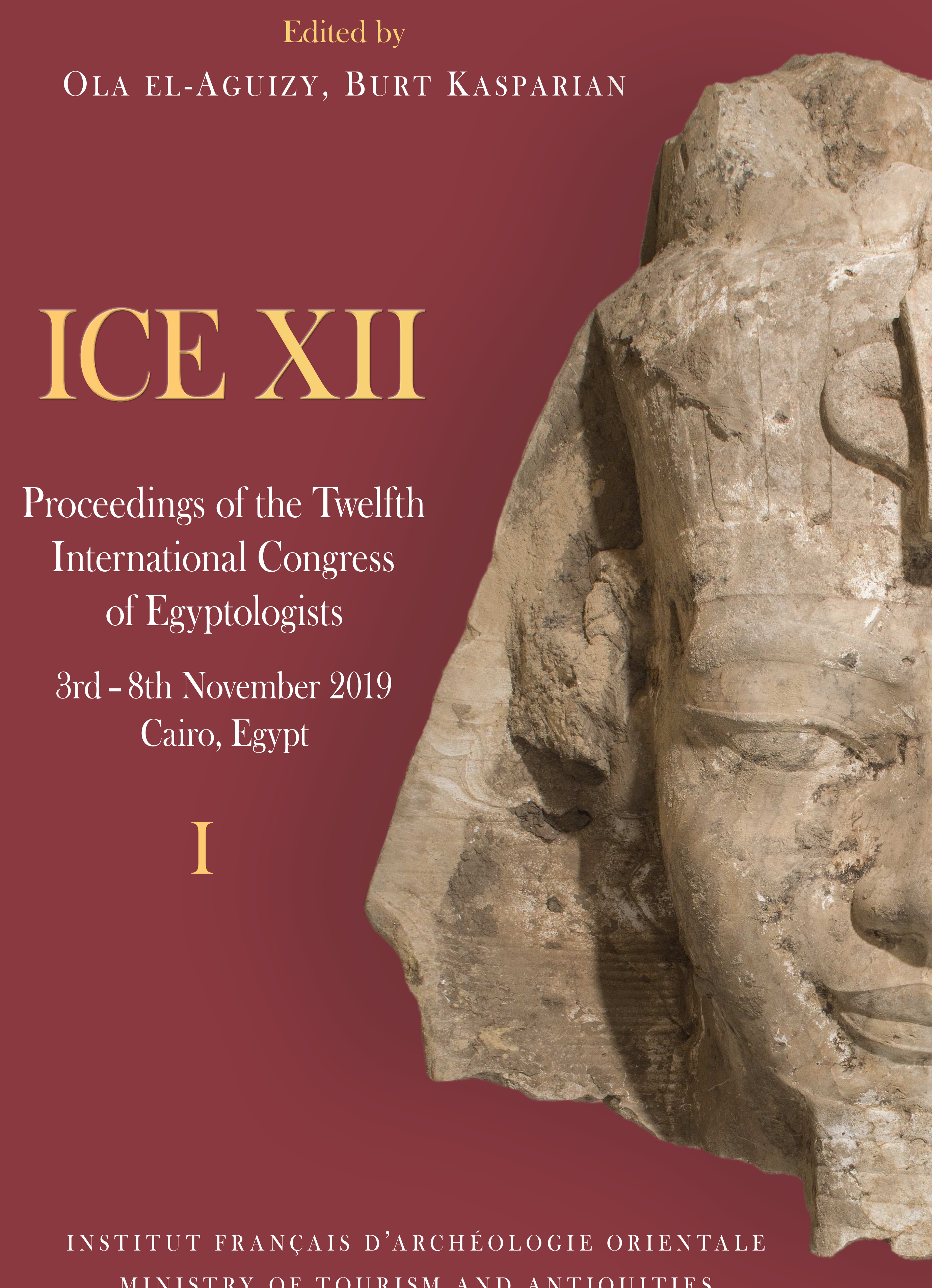

ICE XII

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I

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Ola el-Aguizy, Burt Kasparian (eds.)

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II

ART AND ARCHITECTURE

Alexis Den Doncker*

Reactions to Images in the Theban Necropolis

Towards Socio-professional *Visualities*

The following article explores one of the main guiding questions of my doctoral research on the reception of image in New Kingdom Egypt, namely the role of the beholder in the reception process.[1] Through the analysis of anthropogenic reactions to images imprinted on the walls of private tomb-chapels of the Theban necropolis, I will try to bring forward some opening remarks about the way ancient Egyptians engaged with these iconographic environments.

Ancient Egyptian pictorial representations have long fascinated various visual cultures. Today, countless art books, exhibitions, posters and postcards of all kinds clearly show the impact that ancient Egyptian images still have on us. At the same time, they reflect the way we engage with them as later beholders stemming from various exogenous socio-cultural contexts, among which Egyptologists themselves constitute a very specific category purposefully driven by objectivity. In this respect, one may refer to *non-systemic* reception patterns. Conversely, we could ask ourselves how the ancient Egyptians themselves looked at those images. How did they consider them as they wandered in their architectural setting and observed the decorated walls? How did they apprehend them intellectually; how did they understand their multiple meanings? Did they all comprehend them the same way owing to their *Egyptian* culture? How did they comment on definite visual representations or specific iconographies, whether alone, mentally, or in a group with one another? What were their reactions then, and how do these reactions reflect the way they engaged with the images?

These questions are all the more interesting as they may in fact have already been relevant in ancient times. This is to say that the issue of the reception of image by a certain audience has some emic value, as seen from an anthropological viewpoint. In his autobiographical text including an appeal to the living, the first royal herald of Thutmose III, Iamunedjeh, indeed asks the visitors to his tomb-chapel (TT 84) to "*see* what he has done on earth for the great god",[2] predicating the participation of targeted beholders in the very performance of the representations, with an eye to involving them in his funerary cult. Hence, it is tempting to wonder what these ancient visitors

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1. My PhD thesis entitled *Réactions aux images. Pour une réception des images en Égypte ancienne* is under publication. It was defended at the University of Liège in December 2019.
2. Urk. IV, 939–940.

actually saw, especially those belonging to the same cultural sphere as the tomb owner: how were these elaborated visual (and textual) rhetorical devices *received* as soon as they were *emitted*? Iamunedjeh's explicit testimony leads to a possible study of such patterns of *systemic* reception of images.

1. REACTIONS TO IMAGES

One possible way to explore the ancient beholders' reception is to examine the visible reactions that some ancient visitors to these funerary monuments left on the decorated walls. It is then possible to analyse the relation of these anthropogenic reactions to images to the iconographic units that appear to be concerned, if not specifically targeted. In this regard, the private tomb-chapels of the Theban necropolis provide one of the largest ancient Egyptian imagery archives still containing such reactions to images, namely: textual or figural graffiti (sometimes labelled as "informal writings" or "secondary epigraphy"), image altering (from attacks and damages to transformation, restoration, retouching, etc.), as well as "copies" or reproductions of single, or groups of, depictions from one chapel to another; in sum, any kind of human action that appears to *respond* to the monument's decoration or some iconographic unit. Most of these reactions to images reveal one major aspect, or potentiality, of the decorations: their "agency". Considered here as a mere methodological tool to approach the issue of image reception, Alfred Gell's concept of agency leads us to consider an artwork as an agent with which one can establish a certain relationship beyond aesthetical or material criteria[3]—whether it was seen as such by the ancients is, for now, not a matter of our concern. From this perspective, private tomb-chapel painting is not only an assemblage of aesthetical and symbolical conceptions but an object with which one can engage and interact in a specific (socio-) cultural context. In addition, Charles S. Peirce's *Theory of Signs*[4] (admittedly simplified here) helps us to distinguish the *iconic* value of an image from its *symbolic* underlying meaning and the *index* that it can possibly form according to the beholder's knowledge (with correspondence of facts; the paradigmatic example being the smoke indicating fire only to someone aware of what fire is). It thus seems that it is actually the beholder who eventually validates and therefore determines the value of the sign, beyond the author's intentions.

The copy of the vizier's office scene from the famous tomb-chapel of Rekhmire (TT 100) in that of his successor, Amenemopet (TT 29) clarifies this well. If, as an icon, the depiction in TT 29 represents an idealised and stylised version of the real office where Amenemopet used to receive petitioners, it also refers, on a more symbolical level, to the *Duties of the Vizier* text inscribed right next to it (fig. 1). Taking into account the numerous parallels between the scene and its textual referent (or prototype), it is likely that the draughtsman who originally created it was asked to transcribe the text in image so as to make the statements explicit to illiterate visitors. However, as an index, the depiction directly points to Rekhmire's version of the same scene in the neighbouring TT 100 (fig. 2), provided that the beholder knows about it and can therefore

3. Gell 1998.
4. Hartshorne, Weiss, Burks (eds.) 1965, pp. 2247–2249.

recognise the reference itself.[5] Considered as a direct copy of a model related to an individual's identity (Rekhmire's) in the eyes of the targeted audience (= the same community of people), the depiction can be approached as a reaction to image (the model) and thereby as a medium communicating implicitly a certain socio-professional positioning with regard to its original owner, the predecessor.[6] As Jan Assmann suggested: in this respect, Egyptian art can be referred to as an *eponym* art, insofar as it carries the name (and identity) of the owner of the object or the monument, and almost never its designer.[7] As Amenemopet commissioned the same depiction of the vizier's office as Rekhmire's, one should indeed suspect he expected a certain audience to appreciate the reference, but even more the way he positioned himself *vis-à-vis* his predecessor. While he made use of same visual codes in reaction to the need for legitimating his position within the Thutmoside vizieral tradition, he also re-contextualised them in a different architectural environment and a new personal apparatus with smart adaptations in order to define his *own* self-fashioning.[8] In this context, it is clear that Amenemopet's position as Rekhmire's successor had a strong impact on his reception of the depiction he used as a model.

Another category of such responses to images is textual graffiti. These are the most explicit sources as much as they provide textual evidence for the reception of either specific depictions or the whole tomb-chapel decoration. To further explore the links between identity and reception, one might recall two visitor inscriptions from the well-known corpus of the 12th Dynasty tomb-chapel of Antefiqer and/or Senet (TT 60). They can be dated to the first half of the 18th Dynasty on palaeographical grounds.[9] Graffito G.60.2 runs as follows: "This is a visit [made] by the scribe [… to see] this tomb of Sobeknefer[u]. He found it as if [the sky] was in it."[10] As suggested by Chloé Ragazzoli, G.60.3 could be an addition to G.60.2: "The scribe Bak, to see the tomb of the time of Sobekneferu. He found it as if the sky was in it."[11] As will be seen, it seems likely that the scribe(s) who wrote these two inscriptions visited the chapel in the beginning of the reign of Hatshepsut. First of all, they both mentioned Queen Sobekneferu as the owner of the tomb, which is of course an erroneous attribution. Two "false clues" probably led to this mistake: 1) the sole and unusual presence of the female statue of Senet in the shrine at the back of the chapel alongside with her numerous and conspicuous depictions within the iconographic programme; 2) and perhaps, the name of a wife of Antefiqer, Satessobek, as suspected by Richard Parkinson.[12]

Several scholars have shown and described the interest that Hatshepsut had for the late 12th Dynasty queen, whom she actually emulated in various ways, notably in her statuary, aiming to introduce her as female pharaoh in the early times of the coregency.[13] In the context of the ideological and political definition of the Thutmoside kingship, the emulation of Middle Kingdom

5. On the mechanics of visual indexicality, see Den Doncker 2022.
6. See Den Doncker 2017.
7. Assmann 1991, p. 139.
8. Den Doncker 2017, pp. 349–351.
9. Ragazzoli 2013, p. 272.
10. Ragazzoli 2013, p. 299.
11. Ragazzoli 2013, p. 300.
12. Parkinson 1991, p. 147.
13. See Laboury 2014, pp. 19–20, n. 56 for complete bibliography.

was already in vogue at that time, especially among the professional milieus concerned by the conception and decoration of royal monuments, and the fashioning of royal portraits. Whereas the early Thutmoside kings used to refer to the 12th Dynasty on various levels—with a clear focus on Senusret I—,[14] Hatshepsut found in Sobekneferu the ideal legitimating figure to model herself on as a prototype of female kingship. Furthermore, some of the officials who were concretely involved in these royal commissions are attested in the graffiti of TT 60. This is the case of the steward of the vizier Useramun, Amenemhat (owner of TT 82),[15] as well as possibly the seal-bearer Nehesy and the overseer of the Treasure Djehuty (TT 11).[16] While a number of graffiti from the Memphite necropolis include dates that correspond precisely to royal monumental works led by Hatshepsut and Thutmose III all over Egypt,[17] one might postulate accordingly that their visit to TT 60 was commissioned similarly by the court (or higher officials) in the context of the works carried in Deir el-Bahari and the search for iconographic models from the 12th Dynasty. To some extent, copies of representations from TT 60 to TT 61, TT 131 (Useramun), and TT 82 (Amenemhat), who were active in these operations, support this suggestion.[18]

In regard to the reception of image, the scribes' mistaken attribution of TT 60 to Sobekneferu reveals, in a way, what they had in mind when they entered the chapel. It also underlines the predetermined mindset that made them see what they probably *expected* to see under the influence of their socio-professional environment, particularly receptive to the growing interest for Sobekneferu. One might say that this mindset affected, or even *conditioned*, their reception of the decoration, leading them to see Sobekneferu instead of Senet, and to really believe that they were in the "famous" queen's tomb. Intimately linked to, and stimulated by a certain socio-professional knowledge and experience, the two scribes somehow *projected* this mindset on the depictions, as seen from a psychological viewpoint. In some ways, one sees what one is looking for.

Like most other visitor inscriptions, G.60.2 and G.60.3 are composed of standard formulae. The use of formality to express their impressions and transcribe, in this case, some kind of aesthetical emotion about the tomb-chapel decoration (indicated by the use of the metaphor "as if the sky was in it") was a way to display their knowledge and education as members of a certain community of literate people, as C. Ragazzoli aptly showed.[19] Moreover, beyond the formality of these so-called "informal writings", it is likely that their authors not only influenced each other's compositions, but also affected their personal feelings on a mere emotional level, as is well established by social anthropology.[20] This phenomenon results from their socio-professional experience and commonly shared identity, that also seem to have determined the way they regarded old monuments, assessed the decorations, and comprehended and reacted to specific depictions.

14. Laboury 2014, p. 13. G.60.29 evokes "the time of Kheperkare (= Senusret I)", see Ragazzoli 2013, p. 311.
15. Ragazzoli 2013, p. 313; Den Doncker 2017, pp. 335–336.
16. G.60.7, see Galán 2014, p. 266; Ragazzoli 2013, p. 302.
17. See Navrátilová 2017, p. 553.
18. Den Doncker 2017, pp. 340–346, with bibliography.
19. Ragazzoli 2013, pp. 279–282.
20. See among others Hochschild 2003; Barrett 2017.

As a third category of reactions to images, various processes of image altering confirm how the socio-professional affiliation, activity and identity of the ancient beholders had a strong impact on the way they engaged with tomb-chapel decorations. This is the case of the 20th Dynasty head of the weavers of Amun in the temple of Karnak, Djehutyemheb, who reused the tomb of a kind of professional ancestor and homonym, another Djehuty, from the time of Amenhotep II (TT 45).[21] Multiple transformations of the chapel's decorative programme consist essentially in: 1) the addition of totally new scenes on initially undecorated walls, in accordance with new religious needs for divine presence and proximity within the funerary monument (characteristic of the Ramesside period); 2) compositional changes in the main offering scene, with the replacement of the figures of the original tomb owner and his wife by personally selected divinities; 3) the retouching of several iconographic motifs.

By way of explaining the retouching of the originally naked maidservants of the banquet scene (fig. 3), Sigfried Schott suggested in 1939 that Djehutyemheb did not tolerate such depictions of scantily clad young women as a matter of prudery[22] (his assessment being clearly reminiscent of his own value system). However, the clear relation between Djehutyemheb's socio-professional background and status, and his reception of the motif of the naked maidservants helps us understand that he probably sought to promote his identity as the head of the weavers and fabricant of fine linen of Amun as he asked his painter to have them clothed. A careful examination of the wall in 2012 revealed that the scene had been left unfinished in the 18th Dynasty, so that the Ramesside painter was in fact probably requested to complete it (as evidenced by the re-outlining of some of the figures) and, at the same time, to add a long dress on the maidservants and transform their hairstyle. His patron, Djehutyemheb, considered these motifs had to be completed but also apparently *refashioned*. In the same way, he indeed ordered the retouching of a large number of iconographic motifs of the chapel decoration with a significant focus on the kilts of the male and the dresses of the female figures, which were consequently redesigned meticulously by the painter into the Ramesside style (figs. 3–4). This process of refashioning the stylistic characteristics of distinctive figures betrays Djehutyemheb's will to make the depictions reflect accurately his socio-professional identity. As the head of the weavers of Amun, had he kept the old-fashioned figures of his new tomb-chapel decoration, it would surely not have helped his self-presentation and socio-professional credibility within his community. With regards to the naked maidservants, one might add that nudity could also directly refer to poverty and misery, as it was a frequently used topos in literature, especially in Ramesside times. It thus appears that, again, some socio-professional predispositions most probably determined the way the beholder, Djehutyemheb, projected his identity on the images as he evaluated the tomb decoration and focused more specifically on the iconographic motifs to which he was clearly more receptive due to his life experience as professional weaver and fabricant of linen.

21. Polz 1990, pp. 304–307. The tomb is going to be republished by Carina van den Hoven (Leiden University).
22. Schott 1939.

2. TOWARDS SOCIO-PROFESSIONAL “VISUALITIES”

These three case studies lead us to propose some opening remarks about the reception of image in New Kingdom Egypt, particularly in this context of the productive reuse of sacred yet accessible iconographic environments.

As a rule, it appears that one sees in the image what one is actually projecting on it in terms of self-centred personal needs, expectations, motivations, knowledge and experience, albeit common to other members of one’s community. Consequently, there was most likely no single culturally predetermined “Egyptian” way of looking at visual representations. It rather seems that constructed socio-professional predispositions contributed to defining identity and therefore, as a result, the way individuals engaged with images reflecting it. Conditioned by the socio-professional situation and experience, these predispositions reveal, in terms of meaning, a broad range of potentialities somehow enclosed in the images. The actualisation of these potentialities depends on the beholder’s active participation in the definition of the representation. In this respect, meaning and agency are as dynamic as they shift in accordance with the beholder.[23] Hence, as regards the process of image reception, to take on Whitney Davis’s concept of “visuality”—that can be defined as the cultural part of vision and the visual part of culture—,[24] I would like to plead for clear socio-professional conditioning in the way ancient Egyptians assessed and appreciated the images, and therefore to raise the notion of *socio-professional visualities*. Including the external beholder in the very description of monumental decorative programmes might help reassess their meaning and function, their various significances, as well as, to some extent, our Egyptological definitions.

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23. For other examples of such dynamics, see Den Doncker 2019.
24. Davis 2011, p. 8.

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Fig. 1. Vizier's office (copy in TT 29).

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Fig. 2. Vizier's office (model in TT 100).

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Fig. 3. Completion and refashioning of the maidservant and the female guests (TT 45).

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Fig. 4. Refashioning of the dress of the tomb owner's wife (TT 45).