

A Visit with the Real Painted Tomb

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As we get started on the conservation of F. W. Green's paper facsimile of the Hierakonpolis Painted Tomb (Tomb 100), the Egyptian Museum in Cairo is also beginning to conserve what remains of the ancient original. Shortly before leaving the site in May 1899, Green removed the painted plaster and the backing bricks from this special tomb and shipped them to Cairo. How much of the main scene was taken is unknown, but a portion of it was prepared at the museum for exhibition within a framed panel in a supporting matrix of gypsum plaster. For many years this has been on display on the Museum's second floor, but it has now been removed to the restoration lab for an intensive round of analysis and conservation. Through the kindness of Dr. Sabah Abdel-Razek, the Director of the Egyptian Museum, in November 2017 we were granted the privilege of visiting the tomb painting in the company of the Restoration Department's director, Moamen Mohamed Othman. After scrutinizing the printed facsimiles for so many years, it was truly a remarkable experience to be up close and personal with the real thing.

The original decoration is somewhat overwhelmed by the bright colours of the reconstructed designs surrounding it, but there is a lot more surviving than one might initially think. Remnants of the original paint are clearly visible on close inspection, but what is most interesting is the scoring of the mud plaster to either side of some of these pigment remains. While Green does not comment on this in the published description of the tomb, in his diary entry for 20/4/99 he writes: "*The designs were lined in the plaster before the colour was put on*", and then goes on to say that in several cases these lines were completely disregarded.

Be that as it may, one can still make out the incised lines around the hulls of the boats and some of the human figures on the preserved fragments. These lines, made when the mud plaster was still moist, have important implications for comprehending the composition of the main scene and how the designs were initially laid out and drafted. They take on further significance in light of a recent suggestion that certain elements in the Painted Tomb's main scene were added later when the tomb was 'updated' or 'renewed', presumably during the Naqada III period. If evidence of different work practices or phasing can be scientifically distinguished among the different motifs, it would be a major contribution to our understanding of its scenes and the history of the tomb itself.

Nearly 120 years after its discovery, detailed analyses are now underway on both the surviving remnants of the original plaster from the Painted Tomb and the facsimile copy of its elaborate scenes. New and probably unexpected insights are sure to follow as we re-visit and get more intimately acquainted with this most intriguing (and inscrutable) of all decorated tombs.