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THE DOMESTIC CAT IN EGYPTIAN TOMB PAINTINGS
Brenda L. Lowe

The Domestic Cat in Egyptian Tomb Paintings

Brenda L. Lowe

There are two species of indigenous small cats in Egypt: the swamp cat and the African wild cat. The swamp or jungle cat, *Felis chaus*, is the heavier of the two species with a short tail and long, tufted ears. They are usually plain-colored without distinctive body markings, ranging from light reddish brown or sandy fawn to gray, with black-tipped ears, faint stripes on the head, a darker dorsal line, and stripes on the upper legs and the tail (Malek 1997, 24). The African wild cat is more lightly built, with a longer body, legs and tail. It has the markings of a striped tabby on its sandy fawn-colored coat, with stripes sometimes appearing on the head and legs, and with a black-tipped, ringed tail. Small cats comprised part of the original Egyptian fauna and those occurring in art were descendants of the African wild cat, *Felis libyca*, although some interbreeding with the swamp cat was not impossible (Janssen 1989, 15).

Throughout its long history, Egypt has been a primarily agrarian society with grain and other agricultural products stored in villages, towns and temples. The Egyptians could not have failed to notice the cat's ability and mastery in catching and killing pests and vermin. Realizing what economically valuable assets the cats were, the Egyptians would certainly have wanted to encourage and maintain a relationship with these wild animals. Over time, the cats became more than simply pest controllers; they became part of the home and field environment, and eventually were domesticated.

Although the majority of tomb scenes depicting domestic cats date to the 18th, 19th and 20th Dynasties of the New Kingdom, there are several examples from the Middle Kingdom. Most of these are fowling scenes with a cat in a boat or in a thicket, as seen in several tombs at Beni Hasan. At this site in Middle Egypt, on the east bank of the Nile about 23 km south of el-Minya, there are 39 large, rock-cut tombs that were dug into the cliffs for princes of the Oryx nome (the 16th nome of Upper Egypt) in the late 11th and early 12th Dynasties. Many of these tombs can be seen from the Nile, at various points stretching along a high ridge. From the tombs, there is a spectacular view of the green fields below, flanking both sides of the river, which may have been a primary reason the tomb owners chose this area.

The earliest known depiction of a domestic cat is found at Beni Hasan, in the tomb of Bakhet III (tomb number 15). The female cat, its sex indicated by a sign above the animal, is shown confronting a field rat of its same size. The cat, facing right, is shown in its "hieroglyphic" form (Sir Alan Gardiner's glyph D13). The cat's tail, partially obscured by the right haunch on the inside of which it curls, points straight up (Malek 1997, 40). A similar hunting scene is found in the tomb of Khnumhotep (no. 3). Sometimes included in the same hunting scene are an ichneumon or Egyptian mongoose, and a genet, a catlike carnivore that is now extinct in Egypt (Malek 1997, 55). In fact, concealed among the tall rushes painted in the tomb of Khnumhotep are not only a cat but also two genets and an ichneumon.

From the reign of Tuthmosis III (1479–1425 BCE), the domestic cat began to be shown quite frequently in tomb decorations, indicating that cats were considered part of the family by at least the 18th Dynasty. Since royal tombs never depicted domestic scenes, only the tombs of nobles contained paintings of cats. During the Amarna Period under the reign of Akhenaten (1353-1335 BCE), nobles' tombs constructed at Tel el-Amarna contain only religious and official scenes, often including members of the royal family; domestic scenes are not shown. As a result, the Amarna Period is the

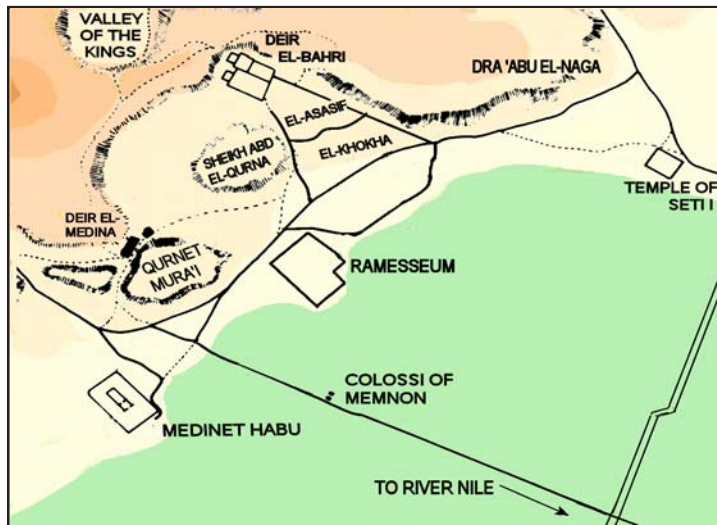


Fig. 1. Western Thebes.

only time during the last half of the New Kingdom in which no domestic cats are depicted in any tombs. Most of the New Kingdom cat-scenes are found in the Theban tombs of nobles on the West Bank of the Nile, across from Luxor. This area is a vast region honeycombed with over 400 documented tombs dug into the hillsides and cliffs beyond the line of cultivation. Most of the tombs are concentrated between Deir el-Medina, the village of the tomb-builders (Bierbrier 1982, 9), to the south and Dra 'Abu el-Naga to the north. Between these points lie semi-separate tomb areas known today as Qurnet Mura'i, Sheikh 'Abd el-Qurna, el-Khokha, and the Asasif which lies on both sides of the causeway leading to the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri (Fig.1).

The ancient Egyptian artist worked under what would today seem like almost inhumane conditions, with inadequate lighting, hot humid air, and unreasonably long hours in a ten-day work week. Their coarse brushes were made from bundles of palm fibers or pieces of chewed or beaten wood. In spite of their limited tools, these artists were innovative and invented square grid patterns to help position and draw their figures on the large tomb walls and in temples. The lines were made by dipping a length of string into red paint, stretching it taut across the surface at the appropriate level, and then snapping it against the wall. In many unfinished scenes, the splashes made by the paint as the string hit the wall can still be seen (Robins 1986, 20). This grid method is still used today by some artists.

The domestic cat is depicted in Theban tomb paintings in two main areas: the cat under a chair, and the cat in fishing and fowling scenes. Many of these familiar scenes can be seen in tombs open to the general public. [See table 1, page 10 for a list of Theban tomb paintings with cats — Ed.] Others are on view in museum collections throughout the world. And some, now lost or destroyed, can be found only in photographs or drawings in publications and unpublished manuscripts.

The most common of these scenes show a man and his wife seated in separate chairs, either side-by-side or facing each other, with a cat under the wife's chair and, in many cases, a monkey under the husband's chair (Malek 1997, 59). Since women seem to be the most prominent cat-owners in these compositions, and because of its association with the mother goddess, Mut, it has been postulated that the cat had some subtle erotic significance, or perhaps was a symbol of female sexuality (Houlihan 1996, 83).

In most cases, the cat is displayed with love and humorous touches. In the Theban tomb of Anen, the second prophet of Amun (TT 120), Queen Tiy (the wife of Amenhotep III [1391-1353 BCE] and sister of Anen) is included in one scene. Under her chair there is an unlikely scene of a cat embracing a goose with a green monkey jumping over the pair (Fig.2). The cat has a clearly painted black-tipped ringtail and the tabby pattern is painted with individual black strokes along the arched back, with stripes extending part way down the animal's side. The front right paw curls in a natural and realistic pose around the goose. Unfortunately, the cat's face is severely damaged. However, the tip of the ears and nose are distinguishable, as is the slight projection of its eye. The whiskers at the nose and eyes are still visible. The monkey springing over the pair is delightful with the rendering of its individual black hairs over the brown, gray and white fur.

Another example of a cat and goose under a chair—in a less friendly relationship—features a cat spitting at a goose in the tomb of Penbuy and Kasa (TT 10). Other notable examples of cats under the wife's chair and monkeys under the husband's chair are the Ramesside tombs of Raya (TT 159) and Penna (called Sunero; TT 331).

The majority of cats depicted in Theban tombs show them eating, devouring fish, and gnawing on bones. In the tomb of Nakht (TT 52), a cat is eating a fish under the chair of Nakht's wife, Tawi (Fig.3). The tabby markings are indicated with quick, short strokes on the dramatically arched back, then zigzag strokes for the pattern on the side and legs. The scene is a very realistic rendering of a long-bodied and long-legged cat with its long ringed tail. The cat is holding the fish down firmly between its front paws. Its mouth is opened, ready to bite into the fish, with its solid pink tongue visible. Even though the cat is shown in profile, both ears are painted.

In the tomb of May (TT 130), constructed during the reign of Tuthmosis III, there is a frustrated and wild-eyed cat tied with a red ribbon to a black lacquered chair leg, hungrily eyeing a bowl of meat that is just out of its reach (Fig.4). The front left paw is struggling with the ribbon and the right paw is partially extended. The cat's head is turned back over its shoulder, eyeing the food, with its mouth open and its pink tongue hanging out. The ancient artist obviously had some difficulty with the position of the cat's tail. Upon close examination next to the painted tail, there is another, pale red outline of a tail drawn but not painted. Evidently, the artist decided that the original tail was not drawn in the best position and it was not to be used in the final scene.

Another popular motif in Theban tombs was of a cat sitting under a chair in a banquet scene. A well-known example is found in the tomb of Nebamun (TT 181) which depicts a [tabby?] cat sitting under a lady's chair with another lady painted directly behind her. A serving girl stands before them, offering scented cones on a tray. The tabby cat, shown in profile, is painted with both ears, an open mouth, its pink tongue extended, and an unusually long ringtail.

Animals, like people, were usually rendered in profile. However, there are some notable exceptions where the full view of the cat's

face is shown. In the tomb of Neferhotep (TT 50), constructed at Sheikh 'Abd el-Qurna during the reign of Horemheb, is a very interesting and whimsical scene of a cat and a monkey (Fig.5). The cat, its face shown in full-front view, seems to have taken the monkey by surprise and is

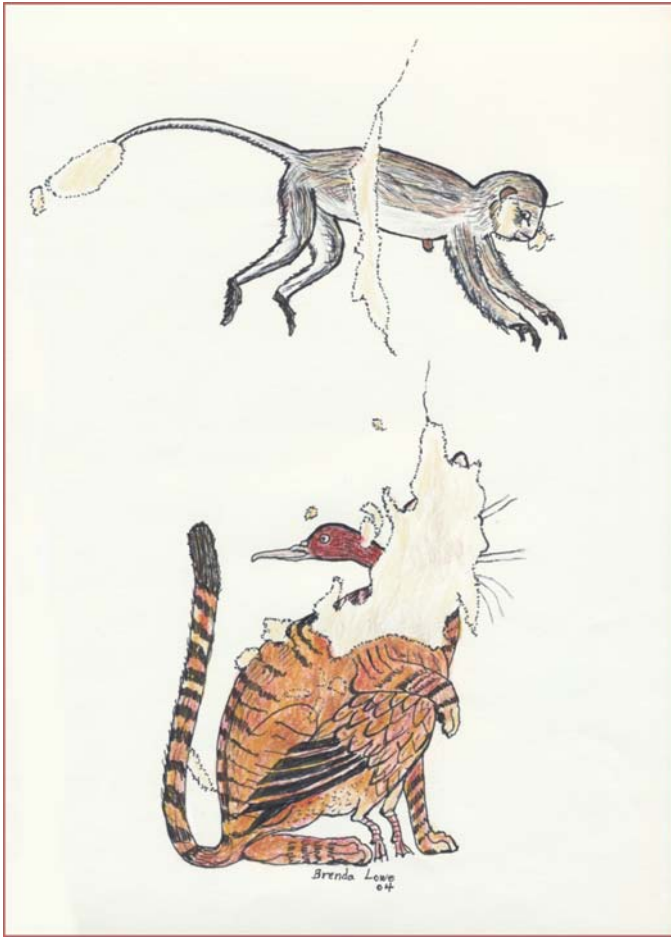


Fig. 2. Cat, Goose, and Monkey. Artwork by Brenda Lowe.

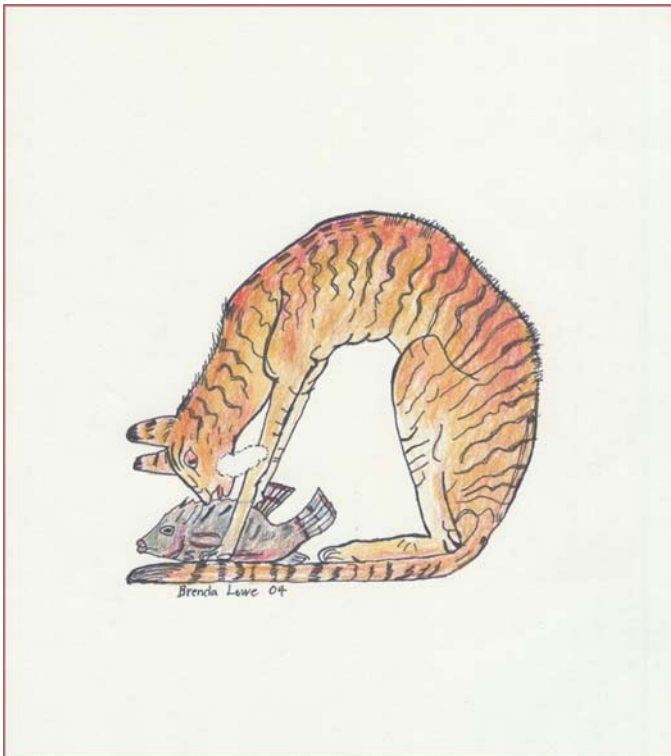


Fig. 3. Cat with a Fish. Artwork by Brenda Lowe.

carried by it in piggyback fashion. The cat has one of its front paws on the monkey's head and the hind paws firmly on its back (Malek 1997, 62).

In the tomb of Penbuy and Kasa (TT 10), constructed at Deir el-Medina during the reign of Ramesses II, there is a painting



Fig. 4. Cat Beneath a Chair. Artwork by Brenda Lowe.

of a plump, unhappy, and full-faced feline. Its grumpiness may be due to the fact that it is adorned with a necklace of three strands of beads and wearing earrings with large dangling pendants. Another fancy-dressed cat is found in the Deir el-Medina tomb of Ipuu (TT 217). The tomb owner and his wife, Duammeres, dressed in festive clothes, are seated on high-backed chairs while their son and daughter offer them decorative bouquets (Malek 1997, 59). A mother cat, positioned under the wife's chair, is shown with her face in front view. She has a light brown coat with tabby stripes indicated by stippling strokes and appears to be wearing one earring and a striped collar around her neck. In Ipuu's lap sits a playful kitten, shown in profile, with similar fur markings and with a raised front paw batting at its owner's fancy sleeve.

The other major motif found in Theban tombs is with a cat in fishing and fowling scenes. These are highly imaginative, showing the tomb owner and his family with the family cat on a hunting trip in the Nile swamplands. The tomb owner is usually depicted standing tall in a rather flimsy looking papyrus skiff, his throw stick in his hand, while his wife and children are seated or standing behind him.

One of the most popular tombs with tourists is the tomb of Menna (TT 69) at Sheikh 'Abd el-Qurna, a Scribe of the Fields during the reign of Tuthmosis IV and/or Amenhotep III (1401–1353 BCE). Here a cat jumps nimbly from one papyrus stalk to another toward several birds' nests with tempting eggs. The cat in this scene has yellowish brown fur, with a heavily painted black stripe pattern that is not as easily identified or as detailed as in many other tombs. The cat in the 18th Dynasty tomb of Simut (TT A24) at Dra 'Abu el-Naga has a much more pronounced, striped coat with a ringed tail, and stands on its hind legs with its front paws clinging to its owner's long kilt. In another hunting scene, in the tomb of Ipuu (TT 217), the hunting cat has a thick dark line along its back and the tabby pattern is painted with dots in horizontal rows. In fact, the tomb of Ipuu depicts three different cats, including the mother and kitten mentioned above, leading one to believe that either Ipuu or the artist especially liked cats.

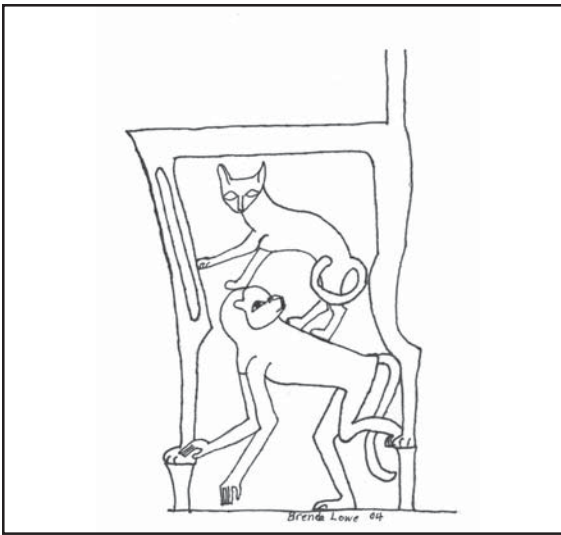


Fig. 5. Cat and Monkey. Sketch by Brenda Lowe.

Perhaps the most beautiful hunting scene, known as “Fowling in the Marshes”, was acquired by the British Museum in the 1820s along with nine other fragments. The provenance of these fragments, however, is not certain. They are commonly believed to be from the tomb of Nebamun (TT 181 mentioned above) at el-Khokha since part of his name appears on one of the fragments; Lisa Manniche believes that all of the fragments came from a damaged and now lost tomb located at Dra ‘Abu el-Naga and decorated at about the same time as the tombs of Nakht and Menna during the reign of Tuthmosis IV (Manniche 1987, 59).

In this scene, the tomb owner stands with a throw stick in one hand and clutches three ducks in the other. His wife stands behind him, dressed in an elaborate costume, and their daughter with a princess lock sits between her father’s legs with one hand holding papyrus flowers and the other holding her father’s front leg. The family cat is balanced on two papyrus stalks with one bird in its front claws, another under his hind paws, and its teeth holding a duck by its wing (Fig.6). The painting is filled with energy and excitement, with birds flapping their wings, butterflies, papyrus reeds, and an Egyptian goose that may be a decoy in the front of the boat. This scene has led some scholars to believe that cats were used to flush out the fowl for their owners to fell with their throw sticks (Malek 1997, 66). There is no concrete evidence, however, that ancient Egyptian hunters actually used cats to flush or retrieve prey, and such activities would be contrary to a cat’s basic nature.

As we watch our cats and kittens play and entertain us with their agility and cleverness, it is interesting to remember that the ancient Egyptians shared our same emotions and even wanted to carry their pets with them into the afterlife in the form of beautiful tomb paintings. Indeed, the Egyptians revered cats throughout most of their history and worshipped them as manifestations of various gods and goddesses. As many owners would attest today, their cats would simply accept this adoration as totally natural, and as their due.



Fig. 6. Cat with 3 Birds. Artwork by Brenda Lowe.

Theban tombs showing cats under a chair. (after Porter and Moss 1960)
 TT 10, *Penbuy and Kasa*; Deir el-Medina; reign of Ramesses II; cat (full face) and goose.
 TT 50, *Neferhotep*; Sheikh ‘Abd el-Qurna; reign of Horemheb; cat (full face) and monkey.
 TT 52, *Nakht*; Sheikh ‘Abd el-Qurna; reign of Tuthmosis IV; cat eating a fish.
 TT 55, *Ramose*; Sheikh ‘Abd el-Qurna; reigns of Amenhotep III and Akhenaten; cat and goose.
 TT 96, *Sennufer*; Sheikh ‘Abd el-Qurna; reign of Amenhotep II; cat and haunch.
 TT 120, *Anen*; Sheikh ‘Abd el-Qurna; reign of Amenhotep III; cat, monkey and goose.
 TT 130, *Maya*; Sheikh ‘Abd el-Qurna; reign of Tuthmosis III; cat tied to chair.
 TT 159, *Raya*; Dra ‘Abu el-Naga; 19th Dynasty; cat and monkey.
 TT 178, *Neferronpet*; el-Khokha; reign of Ramesses II; cat gnawing on a bone.
 TT 181, *Nebamun*; el-Khokha; reigns of Amenhotep III and Akhenaten; long-tailed cat.
 TT 217, *Ipyu*; Deir el-Medina; reign of Ramesses II; mother cat (full face), kitten, bird and cat.
 TT 219, *Nebenamet*; Deir el-Medina; Ramesside; kitten.
 TT 331, *Penna* (called *Sunero*); Sheikh ‘Abd el-Qurna; Ramesside; cat and monkey.
 TT 357, *Dhutihirmaktuf*; Deir el-Medina; 19th Dynasty; cat and monkey.

Theban tombs showing cats in fishing and fowling scenes. (after Malek 1997)
 TT 53, *Amenemhat*; Sheikh ‘Abd el-Qurna; reign of Tuthmosis III.
 TT 69, *Menna*; Sheikh ‘Abd el-Qurna; Reign of Tuthmosis IV or Amenhotep III.
 TT 93, *Kenamun*; Dra ‘Abu el-Naga; reign of Amenhotep III.
 TT A24, *Simut*; Dra ‘Abu el-Naga; reign of Amenhotep III.
 TT 217, *Ipyu*; Deir el-Medina; reign of Ramesses II.

Table 1: Cats in Tomb Paintings. Names of tomb owners are italicized.

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