

## **Beauty and Ageing spin doctors at work in Ancient Egypt!**

Although an abundance of artworks in Ancient Egyptian tombs, temples and palaces show the ancient Egyptian people as eternally youthful and beautiful, realistic images of old age actually exist for both royalty and the commoner. As an alternative to painting an entirely old person just the *symbolism* of age could be applied. For this the artist had a repertoire of tools at their command - grey wigs for unlined and youthful faces, adding corpulence to body parts thereby denoting success through office, or painting or carving an extra fold on an eyelid and a drooping, aged eyebrow. Such images were proudly represented or subtly hinted at, thus acknowledging the older individual in society. As the artist drew upon their palette they could simply and conveniently add the *symbolism* of age without creating a completely old body or face. The addition of wrinkles was a symbol of wisdom and influence and was used in both male and female interpretations.

In an era when life expectancy was relatively low, both beauty and age were admired - the former for its youth, vitality and allure and the latter for its wisdom and long life. Elements of *realism* can be found not only in the commoner's representation but also incorporated into royal images. One's appearance in life was just as important as one's presentation in death, where belief held that the body should be even more perfect, thereby symbolically preserving the deceased's prime state for an everlasting life.



**Grey wigs denoting old age (Manniche 1987, p.82).**

The depiction of age did not necessarily have to depend on showing an aged face. There were other symbols that the artist could make use of. An innovative, rare and subtle interpretation for those '*who have reached blessed old age*' was achieved by the use of grey wigs as painted in the Theban tomb 290 of Irinufer in the Ramesside period, New Kingdom. Irinufer's parents are shown with beautifully coiffured, but stark *grey* wigs which, rather than detracting from the wall scene, actually *add* an elegance and dignity to the aged couple. Their youthful face, slim body and manicured nails belie the fact that old age is upon them.

The Egyptians were acutely aware of the ageing effects of the environment over time on the face and the body and both physicians and magicians sought the means to remedy these maladies, attesting to them in their ancient writings. The literature of the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms celebrated the beauty of the gods and of the people themselves, capturing the essence of both and considered the positive and negative consequences of ageing. On the negative side, they observed and recorded the loss of one's senses and abilities with age; and positively, they recognised that

wisdom can be attained with the passage of time. Consequently, in this area the writings of the Egyptian sages are as relevant and instructive today as they were all that millennia ago. Their literature also documented many other aspects of daily life and included prescriptions for arresting the maladies of ageing, the drying effects of the sun on skin, recipes for turning old age into youth, removing signs of age and countless others. We also read of concoctions for covering grey hair where the colour or quality of the animal or product was believed to be imparted to the user.

The yearning for reaching old age and being provided for at that stage of one's life is also preserved in their writings. For the purpose of appearing younger or more attractive, beauty and cleanliness remedies also had a practical use in warding off bacteria. Therefore, if they did not necessarily feel better or younger for having used a particular concoction, the ancients may have still have achieved the *look* of being better or appearing younger, thus symbolically retaining beauty in life and in death. The desire to be depicted beautiful and youthful for eternity was important to many ancient Egyptians who called upon their own artistic 'spin doctors' to preserve that image!

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Manniche, L. (1987) *City of the Dead Thebes in Egypt.* London: British Museum Publications.

[Elemental Egyptian Dance](#)