

UNIT 1: NEBAMUN FOWLING IN THE MARSHES



PREVIEW THE ARTWORK

What is your **first impression** or emotional response to this artwork? *(Consider mood, tone, or feeling before analyzing details)*

What **questions** or **ideas** come to mind immediately? *(About the subject, artist, or technique)*

LEARN ABOUT THE ARTWORK:

NEBAMUN FOWLING IN THE MARSHES

Tomb-chapel of Nebamun, Thebes, Egypt • c. 1350 BCE • Paint on plaster

In the golden age of Egypt's New Kingdom, when pharaohs built vast temples and the land was filled with wealth and stability, a man named **Nebamun** held an important role. He was a **scribe and a counter of grain** in the great Temple of Amun at Thebes. Though not a noble of the highest rank, Nebamun's work gave him security, influence, and resources. Like many Egyptians of means, he longed for his tomb to reflect the life he hoped to enjoy forever in eternity.

One of the most striking paintings from his tomb-chapel shows **him hunting birds in the marshes of the Nile**. The image bursts with life. Nebamun stands tall and vigorous on a papyrus skiff, striding forward, a throwing stick raised high in one hand and three decoy herons in the other. At his side, his wife Hatshepsut appears in elegant dress and jewelry, holding either lotus flowers or musical instruments tied to her role as some suggest she was a priestess of Hathor, the goddess of love and music. Beneath his stride crouches their young daughter, cleverly tucked into the triangular space created by his legs and the boat. Even the family cat joins the scene, leaping into the reeds with energy, its golden eye glinting, claws gripping birds in mid-flight. Around them the marsh teems with life: papyrus stems, lotus blossoms opening and closing, fish shimmering under the water, butterflies drifting in the air. **Nothing is left still; the painting is filled with motion and abundance.**

At first sight, it may look like a snapshot of recreation – an afternoon of hunting with family. Yet for the Egyptians, **tomb paintings were never decoration alone**. The marshes held deep meaning. They were **symbols of fertility, renewal, and rebirth**. To show Nebamun conquering birds and fish was to show him conquering chaos itself, securing eternal order in the afterlife. The leaping cat, painted with careful fur details and a rare gilded eye, may symbolize the sun-god Ra himself, catching the enemies of light. The hieroglyphs that border the painting tell us that Nebamun is “enjoying himself and seeing beauty” – a reminder that joy and abundance were seen as divine gifts to be continued forever beyond death.

The style of the painting itself also tells us something about Egyptian art. Nebamun is shown larger than his wife and daughter, not because he was literally bigger, but because of the **hierarchy of scale** – the more important a person was, the larger they appeared. Figures are drawn in a composite way: heads and legs in profile, shoulders facing forward, eyes looking out. Lines are sharp and deliberate rather than soft or blended, creating clear outlines around every form. Surfaces are smooth, not layered, and the brushwork is steady and controlled. There is no single light source casting shadows as we might see in Renaissance art; instead, the whole image is brightly lit, clear, and symbolic rather than naturalistic. Yet within this ordered system, the painter included astonishing detail: scales on the fish, veins in the lotus petals, patterned wings of butterflies. Color is rich and varied – reds, blues, greens, and yellows arranged in balance, a harmony of warm and cool hues that fills the surface with rhythm and order. The result is a scene that is both decorative and meaningful, at once natural and symbolic.

This fragment was once part of a larger wall painting that also showed Nebamun spearing fish, now mostly lost. Together, the scenes formed a vision of the afterlife as Nebamun wished it to be: **youthful, joyful, victorious, and surrounded by beauty**. It reminds us that Egyptian tomb art was not about memory alone. It was about making the eternal real – securing a good life that would last forever.

The story of the painting after its creation is also striking. In 1820, the tomb was discovered by Giovanni d'Athanasia, a young Greek working for Henry Salt, the British Consul-General. Instead of carefully recording it, he and his workers hacked out fragments with knives and crowbars, selling them to Salt, who in turn sold them to the British Museum. The exact location of the tomb was never revealed and has since been lost. The fragments spent nearly two centuries in London, where they were admired but also badly damaged. Between 2001 and 2007, conservators painstakingly cleaned and reassembled them, and in 2009 the British Museum opened a new gallery dedicated to these extraordinary paintings. Today, *Fowling in the Marshes* is considered one of the finest examples of Egyptian painting ever to survive.

When we stand before this painting, we glimpse more than Nebamun's life. For the Egyptians, art was not a simple copy of everyday life. It was meant to secure eternal truths – order over chaos, joy, and renewal in the afterlife. Later civilizations, such as the Greeks, would describe this kind of art in terms of *mimesis* (imitation) and *telos* (purpose). While the Egyptians did not use those words, their paintings still point toward the same idea: art as a reflection of a higher order and as a guide toward life's ultimate goal – harmony with the divine and eternity beyond death.

OBSERVE THE ARTWORK

What is the **subject**?

- | | | | |
|---|--|---|-------------------------------------|
| ☐ Person | ☐ Group of people | ☐ Landscape | ☐ Still Life |
| ☐ Scene: Scripture | ☐ Scene: History | ☐ Scene: Mythology | ☐ Other: |
-

How would you **classify** this artwork?

- | | | | |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| ☐ Secular | ☐ Religious | ☐ Abstract | ☐ Concrete/Representational |
|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|

TECHNIQUE & DESIGN

What is the medium used in this piece of artwork?

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What do you observe about **brushwork**?

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|---|---|---------------------------------|
| ☐ Invisible and smooth | ☐ Careful and methodical | ☐ Other: |
| ☐ Visible and expressive | ☐ Quick and free | |
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What do you observe about **texture**?

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|---|---|
| ☐ Smooth, polished surface | ☐ Rough or layered surface |
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What do you observe about **line**?

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| ☐ Sharp outlines around forms | ☐ Blended/soft transitions |
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What do you observe about the **proportions**?

- | | | |
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| ☐ Natural / Realistic | ☐ Idealized / Perfected | ☐ Distorted / Altered |
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LIGHT & SPACE

Can you locate the **light source**?

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|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
| ☐ No | ☐ Yes | If yes, from where? |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------|
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What do you observe about the light?

☐ Natural ☐ Symbolic/Unrealistic ☐ Studio Light ☐ Direct Light/Harsh

Are there areas of shadow or deep darkness? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Is there a sense of **movement**?

☐ Everything appears still & stable ☐ A sense of motion (describe what suggests it):

Is there a sense of **depth**?

☐ Illusion of distance ☐ flat/lacking depth

How did the artist suggest depth? (*Overlap, scale, perspective, color, etc*)

COLOR & SYMBOLISM

What **hues** do you see?

☐ Red ☐ Red-Orange ☐ Orange ☐ Yellow-Orange ☐ Yellow ☐ Yellow-Green
☐ Green ☐ Blue-Green ☐ Blue ☐ Blue-Violet ☐ Violet ☐ Red-Violet

Where do these hues appear on the **color wheel**?

☐ Complementary (*opposite*) ☐ Analogous (*side-by-side*) ☐ Warm ☐ Cool

What **saturation**s are used?

☐ Bright/Intense ☐ Pale ☐ Darkened

Are there **symbolic uses** of color? Explain.

INTERPRETATION & MEANING

What do you notice about the **gesture**, **posture**, or **gaze** of the figures?

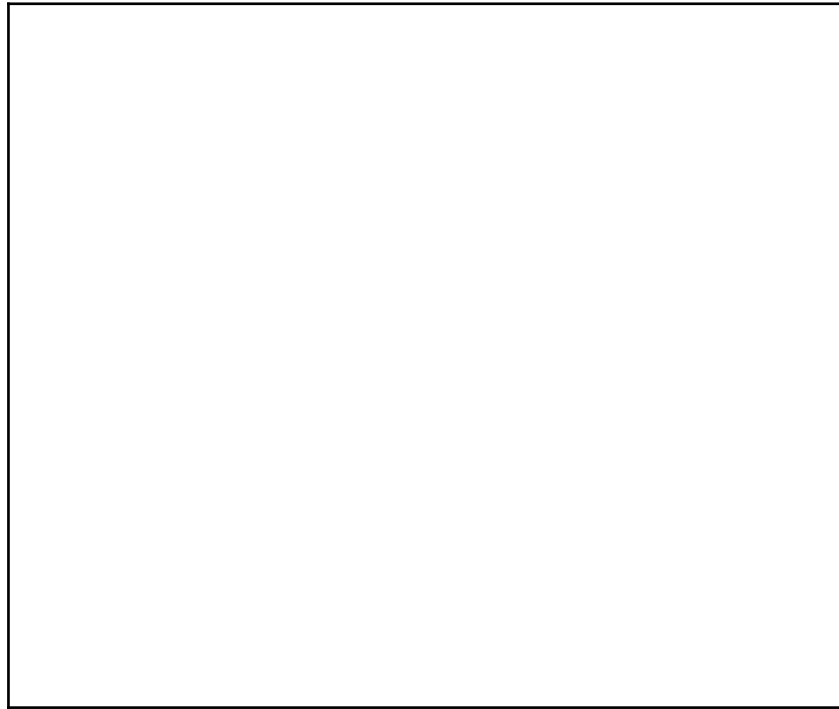
What **story**, **idea** or **emotion** might the artist be communicating?

How might someone in the original time and place have understood this artwork differently than we do today?

Does this work remind you of another artwork, story, or cultural symbol?

COMPOSITION SKETCH

Draw (only) the major shapes and composition in simplified shape form.



* KEY FACTS FOR MEMORIZATION *

TITLE:

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ARTIST:

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YEAR:

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LOCATION:

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MEDIUM:

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STYLE:

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Sources consulted: British Museum online collection, "Tomb of Nebamun" entries; catalogue descriptions and curatorial texts; educational essays on Nebamun's tomb paintings; conservation records (2001–07).