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Looking Up: Interpreting Patterned Ceiling Decoration in Elite Theban Tombs

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Abstract

The ceilings of Theban New Kingdom tombs display a wide range of decorative patterns, which previous scholarship has interpreted as representations of textile materials. This article examines the consequences of this interpretation, particularly considering how this interpretation could reshape our understanding of broader tomb decoration and where the value of pattern representations might lie. These consequences have not yet been fully explored in academic literature, and this study therefore offers a fresh perspective on the purpose and meaning of tomb decoration. Drawing on comparative evidence from archaeological models and wall paintings in tombs and palaces, this article assesses first the validity of this textile interpretation, and then uses the comparative evidence to draw conclusions of further interpretations of meaning and value for these decorations. This article ultimately argues that there is evidence supporting the view that ceiling decoration represents canopy structures, and demonstrates that the consequences of this interpretation are multifaceted, ranging from a visual display of status to protection from outside forces and the creation of a dwelling for eternity. In doing so, this study situates the ceiling decoration firmly within the wider decorative and conceptual programme of the tomb, aiming to encourage researchers to incorporate the evidence seen in ceilings more fully into their research frameworks.

Introduction

This article explores the value of ceiling patterns in New Kingdom Elite Theban Tombs.¹ The visual power of a tomb is well known, both providing protection for the

¹ Abbreviations within this article are limited to: TT (Theban Tomb), OK (Old Kingdom), FIP (First Intermediate Period), MK (Middle Kingdom), NK (New Kingdom), D18 (Dynasty 18) and IFAO (Institut français d'archéologie orientale).

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tomb owner,² and being a commemorative image.³ It is reasonable to assume that the ceiling decoration was a deliberate part of the whole, being a key part of the tomb's visual scheme. While figural decoration and textual aspects of Theban Tomb ceiling decoration have been studied,⁴ their patterned decoration has not received much attention. Particularly, this article assesses previous interpretations of Theban tomb ceilings as canopy representations and allusions to lived architectural space, considering what impact this should have on our broader understanding of tomb ceiling decoration and its place within the wider tomb decoration. The following questions will be addressed: whether specific patterns are associated with canopies, and how this may affect interpretation; whether a tradition of canopy depiction in tomb settings is present; what depicting a canopy might add to a tomb space, and where its value might therefore lie.

Patterns on Theban Tomb ceilings have previously been compared with textile crafts, for example, textile, mat, or leather work,⁵ and this generally accepted interpretation is mentioned in passing in various tomb publications.⁶ This interpretation has foregrounded a comparison to textiles used within the architecture of daily life. The painted yellow bands that separate these ceiling patterns have been interpreted as wooden beams,⁷ encouraging this comparison to textiles used in architecture. These yellow bands are the subject of ongoing research.⁸

Combining both these interpretations of tomb ceilings (as representing both textile and wooden beams), the ceiling decoration has been likened to a wooden frame holding up a free-standing canopy,⁹ or alternatively to the beams, mat and mud fillings that help hold up a mud brick house.¹⁰ Theban Tombs have been argued to reflect a lived system where exposed architraves, roofing-timbers, and the mats between them were

² Hartwig 2004: 38–39.

³ Hartwig 2004: 41.

⁴ For example, Paksi 2025 on the ceiling inscriptions of TT84; Galán 2013 on the representation of Nut on the ceiling of TT11.

⁵ Davies 1917: 25; Barber 1991: 341.

⁶ For example, Seyfried 1991: 27; Guksch *et al.* 1995: 166.

⁷ Davies 1917: 24; Davies and Gardiner 1915: 12; Säve-Söderbergh 1957: 29; Brack and Brack 1980: 17. See also Plate 1.

⁸ Desjardins 2023.

⁹ Borchardt 1929; Seyfried 1991: 27.

¹⁰ Smith 1958: 171–172; Hartwig 2013: 117–118.

covered and painted.¹¹ A somewhat different interpretation prefers ‘mats’ being hung from the ceiling with geometric designs,¹² supported by both the appearance of TT359¹³ and Hesy-Re’s tomb from the Old Kingdom,¹⁴ where the borders appear to evoke fringes of hung mats.¹⁵ Mats in houses most likely created a pleasant living area, as they are air-permeable and allow breezes to enter the space.¹⁶

These hypotheses are rarely subjected to further discussion. One notable exception is a brief proposal that the ceiling decoration functioned to create a “house for eternity.”¹⁷ The only recent analysis of a tomb ceiling which fully considers reasons behind ceiling decoration is Jochem Kahl’s *Ornamente in Bewegung* (2016), which argues that ceiling decoration in Middle Kingdom Asyut adds aesthetic quality and shows off prestige. The first of these is based on perception and sensation: the technical beauty of textile craft as expressed in the medium of paint shows a thoughtful decorative program that has aesthetic quality, even today.¹⁸ The second is based on the display of internationality, the control of knowledge, and the inclusion of the foreign world, showing the owner as a “Mann von Welt.”¹⁹ This argument is founded on the spiral-form motifs on this ceiling being Aegean in origin.²⁰ Thus, international knowledge and control thereof increases the reputation of the owner.²¹

Kahl also compared the patterns seen in tomb ceilings at Middle Kingdom Asyut to those in New Kingdom Theban tombs.²² This comparison has been continued to include Old Kingdom tombs.²³

¹¹ Davies 1917: 24; Smith 1958: 171–172.

¹² Angenot 2010: 37; Schiaparelli 1927, 2008: 126.

¹³ See: NU_2004_02251, IFAO 2015, website, available at: <https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/ttdem/> (accessed 31st March 2025).

¹⁴ See: Roik 1988: abb. 127.

¹⁵ Barber 1991: 342.

¹⁶ Roik 1988: 96.

¹⁷ Davies 1917: 18–19.

¹⁸ Kahl 2016: 20.

¹⁹ Kahl 2016: 20–21.

²⁰ Kahl 2016: 16–19.

²¹ Kahl 2016: 20.

²² Kahl 2016: 34–38.

²³ Barber 1991: 340–341, 345–346 describes the Old Kingdom tomb of Hesy-Re at Saqqara with regards to Theban Tomb ceiling patterns.

This article presents a condensed portion of a master's dissertation that examined 90 New Kingdom elite Theban tombs and developed a typology of patterned ceiling decoration derived from this corpus. The tombs included in the study were selected based on the available evidence for their ceiling decoration, whether in the form of textual description, painted reconstruction, or photographic documentation. The ceiling patterns discussed here were chosen because they are the most representative of the broader dataset. Comparative material was identified in accordance with the established typology. For the purposes of this article, such material was selected primarily on the basis of visual and colour similarities to the Theban tomb ceiling patterns, supporting the conclusion that they reflect the same—or closely related—decorative patterns.

Depictions of Canopies

Exploring the hypothesis that ceiling patterns are truly related to canopies,²⁴ I first consider whether there were specific patterns associated with canopies, through the analysis of comparative evidence, and whether this would add to our understanding and interpretation of the decoration and purpose of tomb ceilings in New Kingdom Thebes.

Ludwig Borchardt (1929) briefly mentioned comparative evidence from boat models bearing similar decorative patterns as those appearing in canopy portrayals. However, he did not undertake a detailed survey of the evidence. In order to find the evidence Borchardt alluded to, this study utilised Ann Merriman's (2011) catalogue on surviving boat models from the Old Kingdom to the New Kingdom. Twenty-nine boat models were found to have extant patterns comparable to those seen on Theban tomb ceilings (Table 1; see reference Table 2). Patterns were found on wooden vaulted or rectangular tent-like structures in the centre of the boat models, with the painted patterns on their outward facing sides. It has been assumed that tent structures on boats were covered with fabric, based on depictions of their patterning,²⁵ and based on their ease of use and lighter frame.²⁶ The underlying hypothesis guiding the search

²⁴ For example, Borchardt 1929; Seyfried 1991: 27.

²⁵ Borchardt 1929: 115.

²⁶ Merriman 2011: 100.

for comparative evidence in this study was that, if a particular pattern appeared frequently on boat models, this prevalence might indicate an association between that pattern and a specific type of textile canopy.

As can be seen from Table 1, there is a preference towards a simpler checkerboard pattern throughout the First Intermediate Period and continuing into the New Kingdom, and the same kind of checkerboard does appear in Theban Tomb ceilings (see reference Table 2). A few examples of other patterns paralleling Theban Tomb ceiling patterns are: a spiral design shared by TT40²⁷ and Merriman no.555;²⁸ a beaded design shared by TT49²⁹ and Merriman no.458;³⁰ a checkerboard design shared by TT90³¹ and Merriman no.156.³²

Further evidence for boat canopies having similar patterns to those in Theban tombs appears in wall paintings during the New Kingdom. Again, these patterns hold visual and colour combinations that parallel those seen in the patterns on Theban Tomb ceilings. This includes spiral patterns in TT49,³³ TT139,³⁴ TT181,³⁵ floral patterns in TT40³⁶ (MMA 30.4.19; Figure 1), and beaded patterns in TT207 (MMA 15.5.7; Figure 2), and in Hatshepsut's Temple at Deir el-Bahari, a spiral pattern is mentioned by E. Barber (see, for reference, Table 2).³⁷ In TT207, the patterned canopy covers and protects the deceased in the funerary procession (indicated by the woman in mourning, and the goddesses Isis and Nephthys flanking the canopy). This detailed analysis supports Borchardt's (1929) suggestion that boat canopies have patterns comparable to those on tomb ceilings; this is supported both by models and painted portrayals of boats.

²⁷ Gardiner 1926: Plate I.

²⁸ Hornung and Bryan 2002: 76, cat. No. 1.

²⁹ See photo under 'Consolidación y estabilización' from: Proyecto Neferhotep, no date, website, available at: <https://proyectoneferhotep.org/conservacion/> (accessed 26th March 2025).

³⁰ Rijksmuseum can Oudheden, F 1939/1.3, RMO 2025, website, available at: <https://www.rmo.nl/en/collection/search-collection/> (accessed 2nd June 2025).

³¹ Jéquier 1911: Plate VI, Plafond 12.

³² Jones 1990: Plate XXXIII.

³³ Davies 1933: Plate IV.

³⁴ Davies and Gardiner 1936 (II): Plate LVI.

³⁵ Davies and Gardiner 1936 (II): Plate LXIII.

³⁶ Davies and Gardiner 1936 (II): Plate LXXXII.

³⁷ Barber 1991: 343.

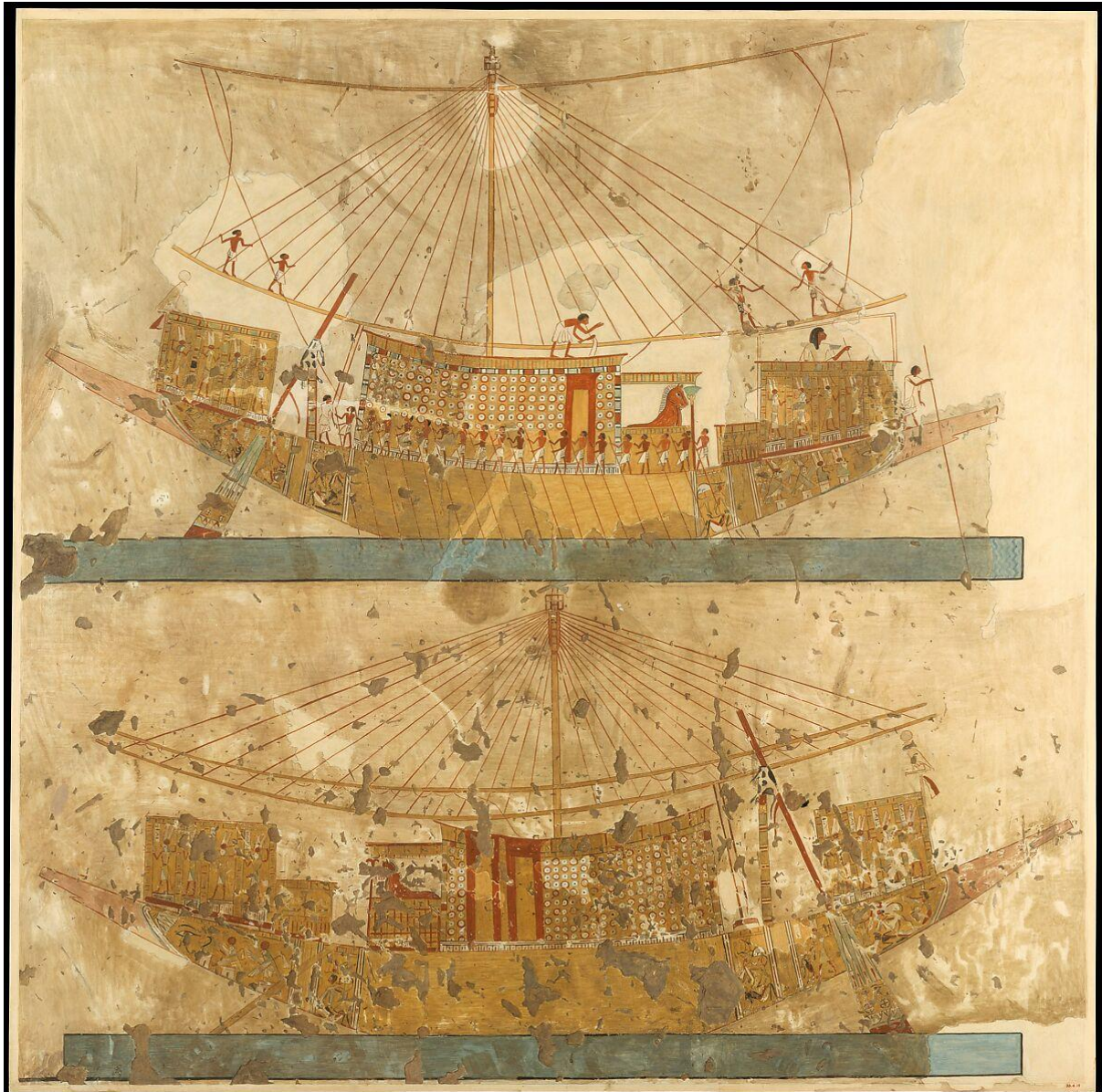


Figure 1: Boat canopies in TT40 (MMA 30.4.19, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 20th August 2025).



Figure 2: The funerary boat in TT207, with a tent-canopy (MMA 15.5.7, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 20th August 2025).

The question arises whether patterns associated with boats were recreated with the intention to allude to a boat canopy in Theban tombs. Traditionally, boat models as depicted and deposited in tombs have been interpreted as “solar” or “funerary” in design, evoking the mythology of crossing the river in the underworld.³⁸ If patterns on ceilings are intended to evoke the same, then these patterns reflect the canopies of funerary barques that the deceased journeys through the afterlife with—a fitting comparison for a tomb decorated to aid transition into the afterlife.³⁹ Certainly, one is reminded of the pleasant journey described in the following lines from *The Dialogue of a Man and his Ba*:

³⁸ Vinson 2013: 7.

³⁹ Hartwig 2004: 121.

“Death is to me today,
Like the smell of myrrh,
Like sitting under a sail on a windy day.”⁴⁰

More recently, scholarship has moved away from this traditional interpretation of tomb models. Boat models have been re-interpreted as the connection point between the deceased to ongoing cultic activity performed for them by the living.⁴¹ In essence, the models can be seen to encapsulate mythological journeys and their cyclical repetitions, ritual journeys in the funerary and mortuary cult, and act as a connection point to the living world,⁴² rather than being merely for provision and sustenance, though provision is still considered a part of their purpose.⁴³

Considering these reinterpretations of boat models within the funerary space, how might ceiling decoration be interpreted if it encouraged a comparison with boat canopies? As the boat models can be understood as marking relationships between the living, the mortuary cult, and mythological journeys, perhaps the ceiling design could evoke similar concepts. That is, the ceiling decoration could, through similarity with boat canopy designs, be creating a space wherein the living form relationships with the deceased through the enactment of the mortuary cult, forming a key part of the ritualised space of the tomb.

The evidence presented here shows no single pattern is consistently associated with funerary boat models or tomb depictions, nor does any one pattern dominate Theban tomb ceilings. It is, therefore, more accurate to compare ceiling patterns with canopies in general, with boat canopies treated as a subset of that broader category.

Some ceiling patterns found on Theban tomb ceilings also appear on shrine and kiosk depictions, and on canopies represented within funerary contexts. For example, some beaded patterns occur in TT55, TT65 and TT192 (see Table 2), which recall the decoration of Osiris’ shrine as the tomb owner adores him, for example, in TT296

⁴⁰ *The Dialogue of a Man and his Ba*: Lines 132–34. Translation following Parkinson 2009: 159–160.

⁴¹ Whitehead 2025: 191; cf. Nyord (forthcoming).

⁴² Whitehead 2025: 191; cf. Nyord (forthcoming).

⁴³ Zöller-Engelhardt 2023: 633.

(twice) and TT31;⁴⁴ a similar pattern decorates the kiosk of Amenophis II in TT93.⁴⁵ The beaded pattern appears as a funerary related canopy twice in TT1. Both over the coffin of Sennedjem⁴⁶ and separately in a similar scene with Anubis tending to the Mummy.⁴⁷ It appears a third time in TT296, decorating the entire back wall of a statue niche as if a fabric backdrop.⁴⁸ Whether this common beaded decorative pattern, used on both Theban Tombs ceilings and shrine/kiosk representations, indicates that tomb ceilings were conceptualised as divine or royal canopies, remains to be established.

The function of the tomb as a secretive and protective space, particularly regarding hiding and protecting the physical body of the deceased, is widely recognised.⁴⁹ Part of this secrecy is expressed in the separation of the burial chamber from the accessible section of the tomb, keeping it sealed off and protected.⁵⁰ Given that the shrine serves similar functions, shrouding a divine image in layers of protection and secrecy from the outside world,⁵¹ some of the patterns on Theban tomb ceilings may evoke shrine canopies, and hence be contributing to creating a protective and secretive space.

To add to this, linen more generally having protective qualities has been argued from the evidence surrounding its use in ritual and cult, particularly when considering the wrapping of statues, the king (or the god) during ritual, or the newly deceased.⁵² It has been discussed that in textual sources from the New Kingdom, textiles were explicitly linked to protective powers, because of the brightness of linen which banishes darkness and evil.⁵³ Extending this, if linen in general has protective qualities, then its representation may well also contain these qualities. Surrounding and encompassing the funerary space by depicting textiles on the ceiling, creates a layer of protection—

⁴⁴ Feucht and Assmann 1985: Plate XXXVII, XVI; Davies and Gardiner 1948: Plate XIV.

⁴⁵ Davies *et al.* 1930: Plate XI.

⁴⁶ See: TT1, DI_2004_00221, IFAO 2015, website, available at: <https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/ttdem/> (accessed 31st March 2025).

⁴⁷ See: TT1, DI_2004_00238, IFAO 2015, website, available at: <https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/ttdem/> (accessed 31st March 2025).

⁴⁸ Feucht and Assmann 1985: Plate XX.

⁴⁹ Assmann 2003: 46.

⁵⁰ Assmann 2003: 50.

⁵¹ Spencer 2010: 1.

⁵² Riggs 2014: 170; Galczynski 2024: 77.

⁵³ Galczynski 2024: 42.

just as a layer of linen over the newly deceased—over both the body, the wall decoration, and all contained within.

The evidence presented above suggests that depictions or models of canopies do indeed include patterns that are similar to the ones used on Theban tomb ceilings, further justifying the comparison between the two. It appears, through comparison with other canopy depictions, that these patterns on tomb ceilings might evoke a variety of funerary connotations, including implying a protective, secretive space, reflecting the barque that would be part of their journey through the afterlife and reflecting and creating a space where the web of relationships between the living and the dead can be created through the mortuary cult.

It is worth noting that there are two patterns of Theban tomb ceiling decoration that may not be textile related: the grape and vine decoration, and the bird decoration seen in some Theban tomb ceilings⁵⁴ and on New Kingdom palace ceilings. Despite the apparent lack of indications that they form part of a textile canopy, both these patterns depict things seen overhead. For example, the vine can be hung overhead on a pavilion for decoration and shade.⁵⁵ Indeed, the ceiling of TT340 appears to have vines on a wooden canopy lashed together by white rope.⁵⁶ Both present abundance: birds, eggs, and grapes are all items of sustenance, connected to the regenerative and abundant agriculture of Egypt. Perhaps for these connotations, those of provision and abundance, they are found in the decoration of ceilings.

Ceiling Patterns: A Wider Tradition of Decoration?

The ceiling decoration of New Kingdom Theban tombs sits in a longer tradition; there are five published tombs from the Old and Middle Kingdoms that contain comparable patterns to those seen in the Theban tombs of the New Kingdom (Table 3). As previously noted, the oldest—the tomb of Hesy-re—has a painted textile fringe as a ceiling border, as if textiles were being stretched up against the ceiling.⁵⁷ The tomb of

⁵⁴ For one example, see: TT359, NU_2004_02251, IFAO 2015, website, available at: <https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/ttdem/>, accessed 31st March 2025.

⁵⁵ Barber 1991: 34.

⁵⁶ See: NU_2009_05977, IFAO 2015, website, available at: <https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/ttdem/>, accessed 31st March 2025.

⁵⁷ Angenot 2010: 37; see: Roik 1988: abb. 127.

Djefai-Hapi I has many patterns that are comparable to New Kingdom Theban tombs, including a variety of spiral patterns.⁵⁸

Decorators of the earliest New Kingdom Theban tombs may have been aware of their predecessors, and deliberately emulated this style of ceiling decoration. Jochem Kahl has cited aesthetics and prestige—based on the display of international knowledge—as motivations for the collection of patterns on the tomb of Djefai-Hapi I;⁵⁹ one wonders whether the New Kingdom officials had similar motives. Were these patterns, reproduced specifically on the ceiling, to be associated with the historical elite? That is, are these patterns associated with the elite of previous generations? If so, inclusion of these patterns on the New Kingdom Tomb ceilings could imply an internal historical knowledge of the elite, which—upon use—situates the New Kingdom tomb owner among a wider group of elites. This would comprise, then, a tradition of decoration begun by elites, used by elites, and perpetuated by them. Perhaps the use of patterns in this way became an associative marker of elite-hood—an obvious sign that this tomb owner was part of the upper echelons of society.

There are other mediums that these patterns can be found, attesting a wider tradition of using the patterns like those found on tomb ceilings. For example, similar patterns decorate funerary boxes, like that of Perpawty and his wife Ady,⁶⁰ and a series of boxes in the tomb of Kha,⁶¹ which have been likened to the patterns seen on tomb ceilings and textiles in houses.⁶² Patterns akin to those in this study are also found on false doors, which have been presumed to be modelled after festival pavilions or early sanctuaries.⁶³ Patterns can also be found adorning coffins, like the 12th Dynasty inner coffins of Nakht-ankh and Khnum-nakht in the Manchester Museum which have beaded patterns painted across their body.⁶⁴ Patterns on coffins could be interpreted as an extension of the wrapping of the body during mummification, in turn being

⁵⁸ Kahl 2016: Plate 26—compare TT138 and TT155; Feucht 2006: Plate IV and Plate 1 respectively.

⁵⁹ Kahl 2016: 20–21.

⁶⁰ Durham University Oriental Museum, no. N.1460 285; cf. Kozloff *et al.* 1992: 285.

⁶¹ Bryan and Berman 1992: 285; Schiaparelli 1927, 2008: 123–129.

⁶² Schiaparelli 1927, 2008: 126.

⁶³ Lauer 1999: 860–861.

⁶⁴ Manchester Museum no. 4739 and 4740 respectively.

associated with certain gods with regenerative powers who are almost exclusively depicted wrapped in linen as if mummified.⁶⁵

It is key that all the above examples of the usage of these patterns in other media have been independently associated with textiles or canopies, which encourages anew the assessment that the same patterns on tomb ceiling context can also be associated with textiles or canopies. Textiles being used in a variety of canopy and house spaces has already been noted above, as has the protective quality of linen. Connections to earlier shrine spaces through false doors and mummification processes through coffin decoration, further reinforces these associations, as explored earlier in this article.

A Palatial Comparison?

A further point of comparison is offered by similar patterns found in New Kingdom palaces. Franck Monnier and Paul François have digitally restored the architecture and decoration of the palace of Malkata, based on the 20th century archaeological missions and the wall and ceiling fragments found at the site.⁶⁶ The ceiling patterns found at the site include a mixture of spiral, checkerboard and bird and fauna patterns (MMA 11.215.451; 30.4.147; 12.180.257; Figure 3 and 4),⁶⁷ which are comparable to Theban Tomb ceiling patterns.⁶⁸ Further, the North Palace at Amarna has a grape and vine pattern,⁶⁹ and a spiral ceiling pattern is also mentioned at Amarna.⁷⁰

The inclusion of these patterns in palaces implies that they were good enough for the very highest of society. These officials may, then, be imitating patterns found in palaces. As many of these officials would have visited the royal court, these patterns would be recognisable to them, and upon view, would remind them of palace architecture. An implication, then, of using these patterns is that the tomb owners wanted to depict a house of eternity as lavish as a palace space. Emulation of royal

⁶⁵ Riggs 2014: 162.

⁶⁶ Monnier 2023, website, available at: <https://antiqueprofil.wixsite.com/palais3d/en>, (accessed: 15th June 2025).

⁶⁷ Monnier 2023, website, available at: <https://antiqueprofil.wixsite.com/palais3d/en>, (accessed: 15th June 2025).

⁶⁸ Compare Figure 3 to: Gardiner 1926: Plate I; Davies *et al.* 1925: Plate XXX. See also Table 2.

⁶⁹ Newton 1924: 297, Plate XXXII.

⁷⁰ Frankfort 1929: 2.

buildings could reflect a desire to show physical proximity to the king, as reflected, for example, in private emulation of royal statuary as an element of competitive status.⁷¹ It has been effectively argued that the decoration at the palace of Malqata has Minoan influence, potentially originating from a movement of artists between the Aegean and Egypt.⁷² Indeed, spirals in any form have been connected to Aegean iconography,⁷³ appearing on tomb ceilings as early as the Middle Kingdom.⁷⁴ As Barber (1991) convincingly argued through comparison with Aegean motifs and New Kingdom tomb wall paintings, spiral motifs that are seen from the 12th dynasty onwards, but increasingly in the New Kingdom they should be connected to the import of Aegean textiles, particularly after the reign of Hatshepsut.⁷⁵ Of the 43 tombs with spiral pattern decoration on the ceiling within the corpus examined within the master's dissertation, only 3 could be dated before the reign of Hatshepsut, without later usurpation.⁷⁶

Taking these factors into account, it appears that Kahl's suggestion of decoration presenting the tomb owner as a "Mann von Welt" who had access to international motifs extends beyond the Middle Kingdom tombs in Asyut and into the New Kingdom in both the Palace of Malqata and the Theban Necropolis.⁷⁷ Thus, Kahl's considerations can be extended to the Theban New Kingdom elite. Namely, the display of internationality, knowledge control, and the introduction of a foreign world into that of the Egyptian world by using foreign motifs of increasing reputation and social status.⁷⁸

⁷¹ Connor 2020: 258.

⁷² Vivas Sainz 2013: 138.

⁷³ For example, on Scarab imports: Quirke and Fitton 1997.

⁷⁴ Shaw 1970: 25.

⁷⁵ Barber 1991: 331.

⁷⁶ These three tombs are: TT99, PM I/1 [204], Kampp-Seyfried 1996(I): 368; TT297, PM I/1 [379], Kampp-Seyfried 1996(II): 567; TT349, PM I/1 [415], Kampp-Seyfried 1996(II): 586.

⁷⁷ Kahl 2016: 20–21.

⁷⁸ Kahl 2016: 20.



Figure 3: Ceiling Patterns at Malqata (MMA 30.4.147, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 19th August 2025).



Figure 4: Ceiling Pattern at Malqata (MMA 12.180.257, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 19th August 2025).

Conclusions

There are, then, a variety of canopy structures that parallel the patterns seen in New Kingdom elite Theban Tombs, which encourage the conclusion that the patterns upon the ceilings do indeed represent forms of canopies. How does this change our interpretation of the decorative tomb space?

It is important to consider why there is a wider tradition of decorative painted patterns appearing on ceilings. As has been theorised, this could be due to an imitation of textiles and canopies, but in the medium of paint.⁷⁹ Imitating the architectural features seen in elite life in tomb architecture⁸⁰ would remind the visitor to the tomb of the elite-owned space they had entered, by imitating elite houses, and as such could be seen

⁷⁹ For example, Davies 1917: 25.

⁸⁰ Roik 1988: 96.

as a marker of status. Seen in this light, the depiction of textile patterns in Theban Tombs contribute to the tomb being a dwelling for eternity, (*a pr-ḏt* or *ḥwt nt nḥḥ*). This view of a tomb being a ‘house’ is well-established,⁸¹ and on this reading a ceiling is as much a part of the creation of the house of eternity as the walls are.

One can also consider the point of a canopy. A canopy protects from the weather, creating a space that is airy, cool and clean—all things important in a hot climate.⁸² Shade for the soul is also deemed important in literature:

“I will make a cool shelter, so that you will not be too cold,
and will make another soul who is scorched envious!”⁸³

Not only is shade soothing, but it protects from the sun. A canopy protects from natural forces on land or by sea. The tomb is also meant to be a place for the protection and continuation of eternal well-being, as evidenced by the numerous funerary texts inscribed in the tomb, replicating rituals and giving the deceased all the information they need to transition into a blessed spirit (*sꜥḥ*).⁸⁴ The beams themselves are not without purpose either: they serve a function for the cult of the dead in carrying inscriptions of offering formulae.⁸⁵ These offering formulae, in turn, ensure the continuance of offerings and provision in the afterlife.

Additionally, the more complex the patterns, the more likely they would only be found in wealthier houses; the simpler, the more likely to appear in a modest house.⁸⁶ Royal connections to patterns in palaces, as well as on boat canopies, has been noted. A sense of showing off—of flaunting patterns one depicted—is also at play. If elite-hood is based on the comparison of the rank of a human being amongst their peers,⁸⁷ the desire to visually display status appear to be a main factor in a patterns’ use, which is also seen in the use of foreign patterns portraying an elite display of internationality and access.⁸⁸

⁸¹ Hartwig 2004: 5ff.

⁸² Roik 1988: 95.

⁸³ The Dialogue of a Man and his Ba: Lines 45–47. Translation following Parkinson 2009: 156.

⁸⁴ Hartwig 2004: 7.

⁸⁵ Roik 1988: 96.

⁸⁶ Roik 1988: 96.

⁸⁷ Connor 2020: 258.

⁸⁸ Kahl 2016: 20–21.

Further, these patterns are, without a doubt, aesthetically pleasing. As was recognised for the tomb of Djefai-Hapi I, ceiling patterns have a role in both perception and sensation.⁸⁹ This is paralleled by the famous inscription from the Late Period tomb of Ibi at Thebes,⁹⁰ which calls for the viewer to enjoy the multi-sensory experience of the Tomb decoration.

New Kingdom tombs seem to follow the tradition already attested at Beni Hasan and Asyut. Tapping into a tradition is also a status ploy: the ability to have access to old elite markers, to use them, to repeat their taste and aesthetic, is the ultimate show of elite-hood.

This article has confirmed that the decoration on Theban tomb ceilings can be associated with canopies more generally, and that there is a tradition of patterned decoration in tomb settings in both ceiling decoration and funerary equipment. Crucially, this article has assessed how understanding the ceiling decoration as a representation of a canopy or textiles can affect the interpretation of the tomb decoration. The ceiling decoration has value in its ability to connect the tomb owner to the living and the mortuary cult, to protection from outside forces and a dwelling for eternity, and to various markers of elite-hood. In total, ceiling decoration offers a rich opportunity to further wider interpretations of tomb decoration, and its purpose and value across studies of Egyptian tombs.

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⁸⁹ Kahl 2016: 20.

⁹⁰ TT36; Kuhlmann 1973.

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Appendix

Tables

Table 1: Boat Models with Patterned Canopies, following Merriman 2011.

Museum	Accession Number	Merriman Catalogue Number	Period	Findspot	Pattern
The Egyptian Museum	JE61330	155	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain); “circle and semi-circle decoration” (197)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61328	156	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard
The Egyptian Museum	JE61329	157	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard
Louvre	MLP E 284-N 1616	246	FIP	Saqqara (?)	Zigzag; Checkerboard (Plain)
Location Unknown	N/A	335	MK	Saqqara, Tomb of Nefer-Smedet and Karenen	Zigzag; Checkerboard (Plain)
Roemer- und Pelizaeus-Museum Hildesheim	1697	340	MK	Meir/Saqqara	Checkerboard (Plain)
British Museum	EA59011	347	MK	Meir (?)	Checkerboard (Plain)
Musee Municipal de l'Eveche	E.965	412	FIP	Asyut (?)	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE39145	422	MK	Saqqara, Tomb 289 of Khennu	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE45318	439	MK	Saqqara, Tomb 2757 of Anpuemhat and Usermut	Checkerboard (Plain)

Rijksmuseum van Oudheden	F1939/1.3	458	MK	Deir el-Bersha	Beaded
The Egyptian Museum	JE46720	484	MK	Deir el-Bahari, Tomb TT280 of Meket-Re	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE46719	485	MK	Deir el-Bahari, Tomb TT280 of Meket-Re	Zigzag
MET	20.3.1	514	MK	Deir el-Bahari, Tomb TT280 of Meket-Re	Checkerboard (Plain)
University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology	E14260	516	MK	Sedment, Tomb 2111 of Khenty-Khety	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE46766	519	MK	Saqqara, Tomb 2757 of Anpuemhat and Usermut	Diamond Checkerboard
The Egyptian Museum	CG4944	555	NK: D18	Thebes, KV35 of Pharaoh Amenhotep II	Spiral
The Egyptian Museum	JE61334	559	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61338	560	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61335	562	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61336	563	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61339	564	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)

The Egyptian Museum	JE61340	565	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61341	566	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61342	567	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61337	568	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61331	572	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61332	573	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)
The Egyptian Museum	JE61333	574	NK: D18	Thebes, KV62 of Pharaoh Tutankhamun	Checkerboard (Plain)

Table 2: Pattern Reference Table, Author's Own.

Pattern	Description	Example
Checkerboard (Plain)	Alternating plain squares of colour, in a checkerboard layout	T96; Osirisnet 2024, website, available at: https://web.archive.org/web/20210616172809/https://osirisnet.net/tombes/nobles/sennefer/e_sennefer_01.htm , accessed 20th October 2024
Checkerboard	Alternating squares of colour with decoration, in a checkerboard layout	Plate 1 TT71; Dorman <i>et al.</i> 1991: Plate 28
Grape and Vine	Alternating squares decorated with grapes and vines, in a checkerboard layout	TT359; NU_2004_02251, IFAO 2015, website, available at: https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/ttdem/ , accessed 31st March 2025

Diamond Checkerboard	Alternating diamonds of colour, plain or with decoration, in a diamond checkerboard layout	Plates 4, 6 TT67; Jéquier 1911: Plate X, Plafond 18
Zigzag	Zigzag decoration, plain or with additional decoration	Plates 3, 6 TT80; Shedid 1988: Plate 58 TT253; Strudwick 1996: Plate 4
Beaded	Ovoid lattices, plain or with decoration in between the gaps of the lattice	Plate 2 TT65; Harsányi <i>et al.</i> 2001: 13 TT192; The Epigraphic Survey 1980: Plate 66 TT296; Feucht and Assmann 1985: Colour Plate V
Spiral	Spiral lattices, plain or with decoration in between the gaps of the lattice	Plates 5, 6 TT101; Guksch <i>et al.</i> 1995: Plate 5 TT138; Feucht 2006: Plate IV TT155; MMA 48.105.21, The Met 2025, website, available at: https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection , accessed 19th February 2025
Floral	Floral motifs arranged in a grided layout	Plate 6 TT359; DI_2007_00918, IFAO 2015, website, available at: https://www.ifao.egnet.net/bases/archives/ttdem/ , accessed 31st March 2025
Birds in Flight	Free form birds in flight, sometimes with nests and fauna	TT31; Davies and Gardiner 1948: Plate XIX, XX

Table 3: Previous Tomb Ceilings with Patterns

Tomb Owner	Geographical Area	Period	Publication	Patterns found in New Kingdom Theban Tombs
Hesy-Re	Saqqara	OK	Quibell 1913: Plate VIII	Zigzag
Khnumhotep II	Beni Hasan	MK	Newberry, Griffith and	Checkerboard (Plain); Checkerboard

			Fraser 1893: Plate VI	
Djefai-Hapi I	Asyut	MK	Kahl 2016: Farbtafel I	Spiral; Zigzag; Checkerboard
Djefai-Hapi	Beni Hasan	MK	Shaw 1970: Plate 5	Spiral; Checkerboard
Small Tomb	Asyut	MK	Kahl, el- Khadragy and Verhoeven 2008: 210	Checkerboard

Plates



Plate 1: Ceiling Pattern, Tomb of Tetiky, TT15 (MMA 30.4.4, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 15th February 2025).

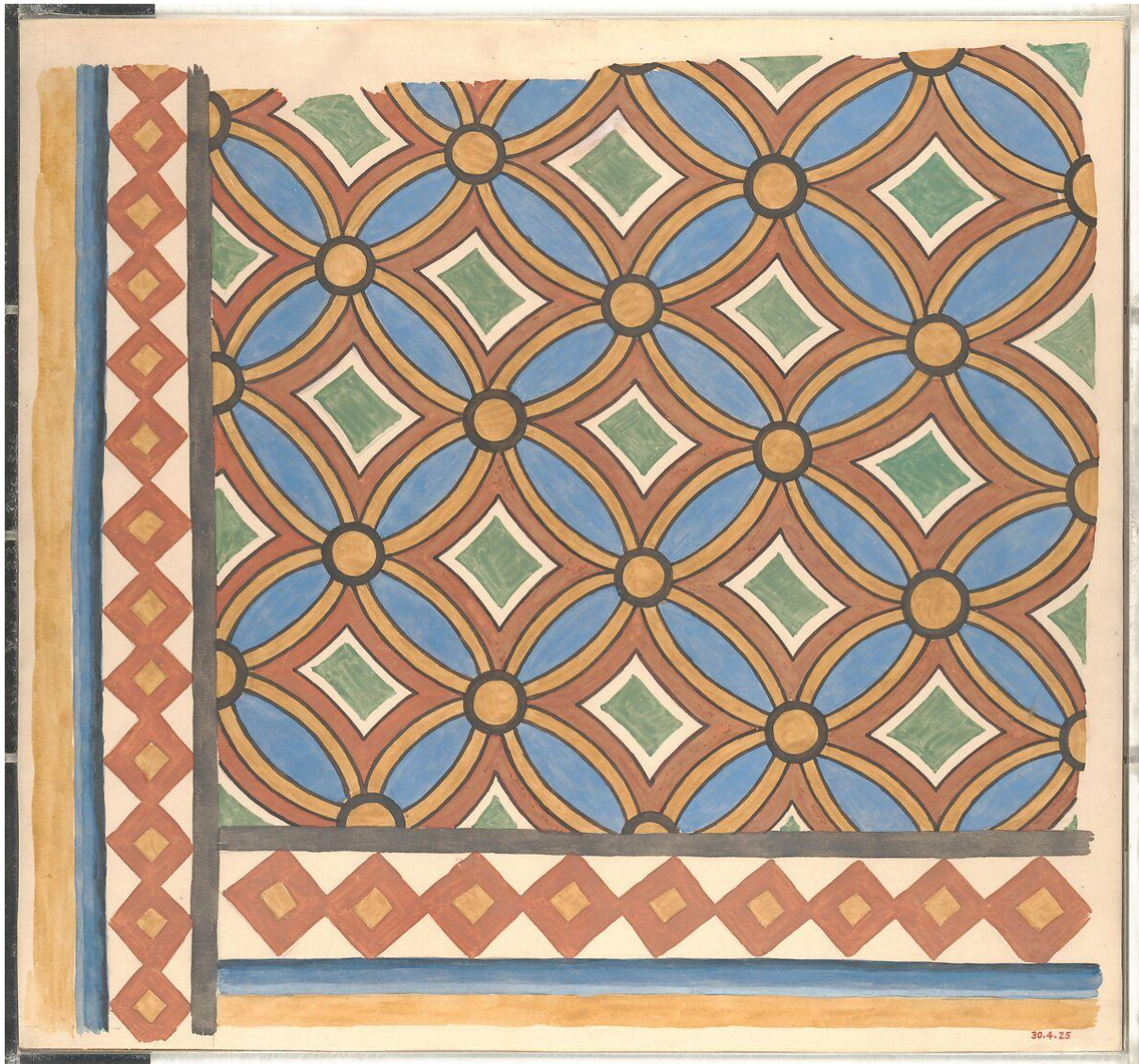


Plate 2: Ceiling Pattern, Tomb of Amenemhat Surer, TT48 (MMA 30.4.25, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 15th February 2025).



Plate 3: Ceiling on the South Side of Nakht's Offering Chapel, Tomb of Nakht, TT52 (MMA 15.5.19o, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 15th February 2025).



Plate 4: Two Fragments of Ceiling Patterns, Tomb of Senenmut, TT71 (MMA 31.6.37, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 15th February 2025).



Plate 5: Fragment of Ceiling Pattern, Tomb of Intef, TT155 (MMA 48.105.21, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 15th February 2025).



Plate 6: Eight Ceiling Patterns, Tomb of Nebamun and Ipuky, TT181 (MMA 30.4.102, The Met 2025, website, available at: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection>, accessed 19th August 2025).