

The University of Manchester

KNH Centre for Biomedical Egyptology: Certificate in Egyptology



**Keeping up appearances: beauty, ageing and realism and its symbolism in art
and literature in ancient Egypt**

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I hereby declare that the materials contained in this essay are entirely the product of my own work, that sources used are fully documented and that the whole has not previously been submitted for any other purpose.

Dedicated to my loving husband

Greg Ellis

**With my love, gratitude and sincere thanks for your unending supporting in my lifetime
studies of Egyptology.**

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will attempt to explain that despite an abundance of artworks depicting ancient Egyptians as eternally youthful and beautiful, realistic images of old age did exist throughout their history of both royalty and the commoner. However, there was an alternative to painting an entirely old person by merely adding the symbolism of age. For this, the artist had a repertoire of tools at his command, grey wigs for unlined and youthful faces, adding corpulence to body parts denoting success through office or painting or carving an extra fold on the eyelid and a drooping, aged eyebrow. Such images were proudly represented or subtly hinted at, thus acknowledging the older individual in society.

Acutely aware of the ageing effects of the environment over time on the face and the body, both physicians and magicians sought the means to remedy these maladies, attesting to them in their ancient writings. The literature of the eras also 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.

The notion of beauty and one's appearance in life and death is also explored for both men and women. Beauty in the form of symbolism versus the realistic portrayal of such is also considered, in an endeavour to understand if the ancient artist drew realistically or not what he saw at the time, versus our perceptions of realism in our own era. The evidence under discussion will consider the portrayal of the human figure on wall decorations in tombs, votive objects and statues from funerary or religious perspectives. Reference is made to the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms and Amarna period for ageing, beauty, realism and literary examples.