

3. Magic Light

Senenmut, *Temple of Queen Hatshepsut*, Deir el-Bahari, 1473 BCE

Queen Hatshepsut was obviously aware of the fact that when a society accumulates shadows without a timely cognition it might produce a drama or even a tragedy that could have a disastrous impact on the society itself and its survival. Intending to prevail her reign from potential destruction, Queen Hatshepsut introduced a special annual miracle in the sanctuary of her mortuary temple to neutralize the accumulated shadows of her subjects. The miracle occurred twice a year during winter when the sun was low and nights prolonged. That was during the time when people's survival was most uncertain. The miracle gave them hope for living by reassuring them that light was eternal and that the queen with the god Amun-Ra cared for them.

Queen Hatshepsut¹ was born in the 15th century BCE in the Middle Kingdom. She was the daughter of Pharaoh Thutmose I and his wife Ahmose, who ruled the 18th dynasty at the time. On her father's death, she was still a minor when she got married to her equally young half-brother, Thutmose II, who was the heir to the throne. Thutmose II died soon after, though, and thus she became regent to her stepson and nephew, the son of her husband and half-brother, the heir to the throne, Thutmose III, who was then only two years old. While not the first female leader in the history of ancient Egypt, she was certainly the most powerful, and ruled as the fifth pharaoh of the 18th dynasty in the following years. As depicted in a sculpture held at the

1 <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Hatshepsut>

Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Met, NY), she was a divinely beautiful young woman with a delicate, sweet face and large, almond-shaped eyes. She received all the same royal insignia as the male pharaohs did, with a *Khat* (a headdress), the traditional fake beard, and a *Shendyt*, a short skirt wrapped around her hips. Her status title was reinforced by the high priests with the story that Queen Hatshepsut had been assigned the role of pharaoh by the god Amun.

Amun, the “invisible,” the god of air, was originally the local god of Thebes, the capital of the Middle Kingdom and later of the New Kingdom. By the time of the 12th dynasty, Thebes on the Nile had already become a religious centre. During the 18th dynasty, it took on a cosmopolitan image, but also reinforced its religious significance when Thutmose I commissioned a major extension to the Karnak Temple in Thebes. Later, during her reign, his daughter Queen Hatshepsut renovated the father’s hypostyle hall, added a barque shrine, and introduced two pairs of pink granite obelisks. The original name of the temple was *Ipet-Isut*, because the temple stands on the ancient Egyptian *Chosen Place*, on a natural stone platform on the Nile, slightly raised above the river so that the area would not be flooded. The 18th dynasty dedicated it to the Theban Triad of Egyptian gods, consisting of Amun and Mut – the mother and the Earth goddess – and their son Khonsu. Amun was the most important of the three, and during the reign of Queen Hatshepsut he became the most important Egyptian god in general, the creator of souls and the god of fertility, the one who decided that she should become pharaoh. He merged with the sun god Ra to become Amun-Ra (also Amun-Re and Amen-Re). The largest area of the Karnak temple complex was dedicated to him. The main, longitudinal axis of the temple runs from the sanctuary of Amun-Ra in the east through the main hypostyle hall and three sets of pylons, and is perpendicular to the River Nile. It was additionally marked by the queen’s two pink granite obelisks. It runs across the river, westwards.

The Egyptian hieroglyph for a town explains the ancient Egyptian understanding of their world. It was defined by two axes, the north-south axis, along which the River Nile flows, and – perpendicular to it – the east-west axis, along which travels the Sun. Both axes bring life. The Nile, with its annual flooding of the fertile plain along its banks, has provided water for agriculture for millennia, and the Sun, with each passing day, is the carrier of the light and warmth that all living things need. It rises every morning in the east and dies every evening in the west, plunging into the darkness of the underworld. The system goes around in circles, repeating itself day after day, night after night, year after year. And these years are counted in millennia. The eternal circle in which the two axes of the Egyptian world are caught.

The Nile divided Egypt into the right bank on the east side, where there were settlements for the living, and the left bank, where every evening the sun went underground, only to be reborn the next morning in the east. In the west was the city of the dead, and here is where the pharaohs were buried mummified to continue to look after the welfare of their country.

Queen Hatshepsut, the pharaoh, reigned for 21 years, from 1479 to 1458 BCE, during which time the country flourished, prospered, and achieved general peace. Thanks to the queen, Thebes' economy flourished as she renewed its trade networks, including those on the shores of the Red Sea. She also oversaw hundreds of large-scale construction projects in Upper and Lower Egypt. Among them were many temples, scattered throughout the country, dedicated to Amun-Ra, her spiritual father and partner, in order to consolidate her position as an equal to the gods.

Every year a multi-day celebration was held in the Middle Kingdom and beyond, in honour of the dead who lived in the Theban necropolis across the river below the western mountains. In a procession on the new moon of the second month of the

harvest season of Shemu² Amun-Ra set out from the temple of Karnak, from his sanctuary, from where the sun rises, with his wife Mut and his son Khonsu in his sacred barque, through the hypostyle hall, along the axial path flanked by animal-headed sphinxes, to the river and across it on the central axis of the temple, westwards – into the world of the dead. The Theban necropolis was marked by the rocky hill of El Qurn, in ancient Egyptian Ta Dehent, 450 m high, with a summit in the shape of a pyramid. The Valley of the Kings is right below this peak.

Opposite the Temple of Karnak, on its axis perpendicular to the river, and in the distance to the west, just in front of the rocky ridge bordering the Valley of the Kings, Queen Hatshepsut built a mortuary temple for her immortal soul, as required by the tradition of the pharaohs.

And it was to this temple that Amun-Ra and his entourage set out from Karnak in a sacred barque every year on the new moon in the season of *Shemu*.

The queen began building her temple a few years after her inauguration, in 1473 BCE, dedicating it to the mighty creator god Amun-Ra. The temple became Djeser-Djeseru, the holiest of the holy, the home of the god Amun-Ra and the intended abode of the queen's soul after her death, when her soul would deservedly dwell beside Amun-Ra forever in the timeless future.

Centuries before Queen Hatshepsut, the ruler of the 11th dynasty, Pharaoh Mentuhotep II, was the first to build his mortuary temple on a mighty rectangular stone base, pushed to the foot of the cliff, right under the rocky ridge that borders the Valley of the Kings. Mentuhotep's temple was clearly the inspiration for Queen

2 Ancient Egyptians had three seasons: the *Akhet*, the time of the inundation, when heavy summer rains in the highlands of Ethiopia filled the Nile; the *Peret*, the time of sowing, which followed when the Nile receded from its flooded banks, leaving behind fertile land; and the *Shemu*, the time of harvest. Each season lasted four months.

Hatshepsut's even larger and more imposing temple, and was at the same time also her quarry.

The Queen's Temple consists of three high bases – the last, third base carries the whole mountain above it – and three terraces, the last two accessible by two long and wide ramps set on a central spatial east-west axis, starting in the east at the Amun-Ra sanctuary of the Karnak temple. The construction was probably supervised by the architect and high official Senenmut.

At the end of the central axis, on the far west and deep inside the mountain, there was a sanctuary dedicated to the god Amun-Ra and to Queen Hatshepsut. Amun-Ra sat there on his throne, waiting for his queen while she reigned.

He had also another important task. At the beginning of the *Peret* season, the sowing time, after the Nile had receded from its flooded banks and left behind fertile black earth, the sun began to slowly approach the winter solstice. Amun-Ra, responsible for fertile soil and abundant crops, and sunlight personified, would become illuminated in the depths of the dark sanctuary by the rays of the rising sun in order to encourage his people and alleviate their worries as to whether the seeds would germinate. In the second half of the sowing season, when the seeds had already sprouted, the rays of the rising sun once again shone on his image to make it clear to the people who it was that had enabled germination. In between these two miraculous events in the sanctuary of Queen Hatshepsut's mortuary temple, and precisely on the morning of the winter solstice, through the door openings of the pylons, the narrow rays of the rising sun illuminated the central axis of the Temple of Amun-Ra at Karnak and also the apparent axis to Queen Hatshepsut's temple. Who could thus not believe that Amun-Ra was the sun deity personified, providing light even when the nights were the longest?

The two wonders, which took place twice a year during the sowing season, were architecturally and astronomically planned with utmost precision. In mid-November and mid-February, the sun's rays entered the sacred space of Amun-Ra, deep in the

depths of the cliff, along the central east-west axis of the temple, through two carefully planned yet hidden openings. First through the square opening above the entrance stone portal of the hall of Amun-Ra's barque, and then, at an angle to the sun, further on through an opening in the form of a horizontal narrow rectangle hidden above the stone portal of the Sculpture Hall. From there, rays in the form of a brilliant sun-yellow horizontal rectangle of light illuminated most probably the eyes of Amun-Ra. Each time the event lasted for about 10 days, when Amun-Ra gazed out of the darkness at his people with his shining eyes, letting them know, as a consolation, that the sun and he himself, the sunlight personified, were eternally recurring, even though the sun dies every day behind the mountains of the Theban necropolis and his strength was failing at the end of the harvest season.

Egyptian architecture – or what we know of it, the rest having been probably mainly destroyed by the Nile inundations – is, like Moholy-Nagy's the *Light-Space-Modulator*, a dance of sharply delineated shadows and sunlight. The shadows are all the darker the sharper the sunlight. The colonnades of Queen Hatshepsut's temple cast black columns of shadows on the floor and on the walls of the colonnades. From morning to evening, they draw on the walls and on the floor the time of the sundial, which determines the daily routine of life.

But in the Amun-Ra sanctuary of Queen Hatshepsut's temple, something completely different happened twice a year, something that lifted everyday life out of the greyness of the mundane. The light of Amun-Ra's eyes was light in the midst of darkness, and not set in opposition to darkness. It was timeless and not spatial. The event in the sanctuary is a creative synthesis that glorifies the whole reality of the Egyptian world, showing that the glowing light in the midst of deep darkness is indestructible and eternal. It was the touch of sunlight rays in which Amun-Ra's eyes were manifested. In this moment, the divine light manifested itself. It was Amun-Ra's, the personified sunlight's manifestation. At the same time, the miraculous light manifesting itself, manifested the di-

vine pharaoh's credibility. A simple but artificially dramatized interaction between God's eyes in the midst of darkness and sun rays caught in a rectangular shape manifested a confidence in the queen. Few moments twice a year were enough to convince and calm down the queen's subjects. A true miracle.

According to Johnson,³ one does not stand such experiences for a long time precisely because they are timeless and spatially undefined. Yet, experiencing even just a moment of such an event is enough to give meaning back to everyday life, which is otherwise intertwined with a constant dance of light and visible (as well as invisible) shadows.

Queen Hatshepsut was obviously aware of this psychological need of her people. As Johnson argues, culture can only thrive if it realizes the unwanted layers of life symbolically.⁴ Less healthy societies depend on unconscious shadow layers and manifest them, according to Johnson, in "[. . .] low grade ways of living out the shadow."⁵

Thutmose III, the stepson and nephew of Queen Hatshepsut, reacted in neurotic manner after her death. He was born heir to the throne, but he was only two years old when he should have taken it. Queen Hatshepsut was at first his regent. But then, by Amun-Ra's will, she became pharaoh in her own right and pushed the young Thutmose III into her shadow. When she died after having reigned for 21 years, the young heir was 23 years old. Judging by his actions, he could hardly wait to see the death of his stepmother and aunt. After the queen's death, Thutmose III had her images removed from the temple walls and replaced with his own. He went to great lengths to erase the collective memory of her, so that even Jean-François Champollion had difficulty understanding the hieroglyphs, as they spoke of a queen, while the reliefs and paintings spoke of Thutmose III. She was not buried in her mor-

3 Johnson, Robert A., *ibid.*, p. 48.

4 Johnson, Robert A., *ibid.*, p. 52.

5 Johnson, Robert A., *ibid.*, p. 53.

tuary temple, which she built for herself and for Amun-Ra, but in the tomb of her father, Thutmose I. His remains were moved elsewhere, and Queen Hatshepsut was placed in his tomb, which was dug deep in the eastern rock ridge above the Valley of the Kings, virtually behind the back of the sanctuary of Queen Hatshepsut's temple, behind Amun-Ra's back, and almost on the central east-west axis leading there from Amun-Ra's temple at Karnak. Down a 200 m ramp, deep in the heart of the mountain, Queen Hatshepsut is buried in a tomb marked KV20.⁶ It seems that darkness finally prevailed despite of the annually induced miracles in the Amun-Ra's sanctuary of the Queen Hatshepsut's temple.

6 Queen Hatshepsut's tomb was visited by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1799. The marker system for open tombs was introduced by John Gardner Wilkinson in 1821, KV20 meaning King's Valley tomb number 20. By coincidence a motet by W.A. Mozart is also marked KV20 by Ludwig Ritter von Köchel (Köchel-Verzeichnis, 1863).



*Fig. 4.1: paper model of micro natural structures and photo:
Tatjana Capuder Vidmar*

From the exhibition SPACE = LIGHT + (SHADDOW), DLUL, Ljubljana,
2024



*Fig. 4.2: paper model of micro natural structures and photo:
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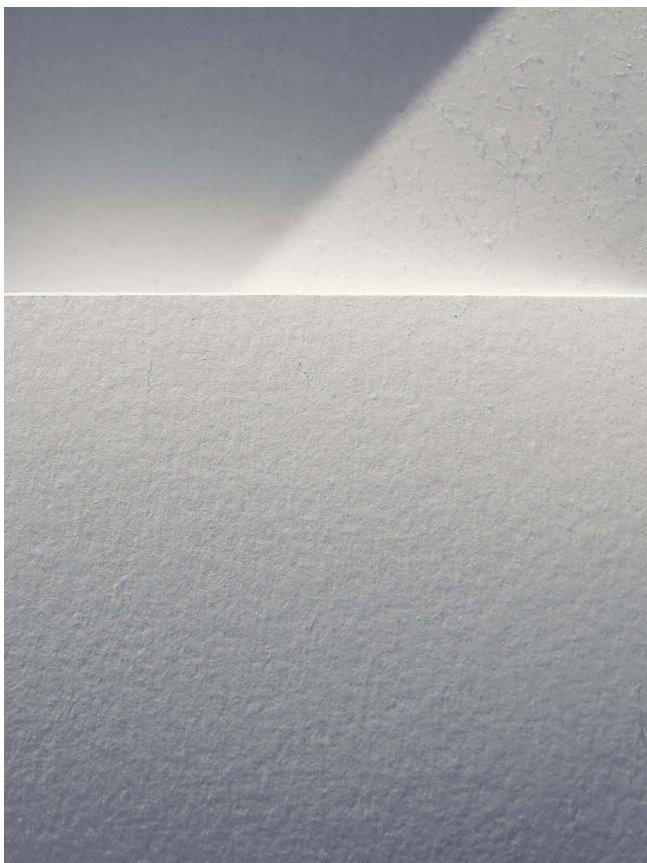


Fig. 4.3: paper model of micro natural structures and photo:

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