

Ancient Egyptian tomb paintings often show blue and white water lilies, commonly called lotuses, in bouquets, marsh scenes, and banquet scenes. The blue water lily is especially easy to recognize by its pointed petals and yellow center.

Blue and white water lilies

The blue water lily, Nymphaea caerulea, grows in fresh water. Its flowers have pale blue petals that taper to points around a yellow center. In tomb paintings, artists often showed the open bloom from the side or arranged several flowers in a bouquet with long, slender stems.

The white water lily, Nymphaea lotus, also appears in Egyptian art. It has white petals and a yellow center. Both plants send their leaves and flowers up from roots in the mud, a detail that helps explain their place in pictures of the river and its marshes.

In modern descriptions, these flowers are often called Egyptian lotuses. Botanically, they are water lilies rather than the lotus of the genus Nelumbo. That distinction can be useful when comparing a painting with a living plant.

Flowers at banquets and in bouquets

A tomb banquet scene can feel surprisingly familiar: guests sit together, musicians play, and someone holds a flower close to the face. In Egyptian paintings, guests may hold or smell water lilies. The flowers appear as part of a carefully arranged social setting, alongside food, drink, and other pleasures.

Artists also painted flowers in bouquets and offerings. A bouquet might bring together open blooms and buds, making a pleasing pattern of different shapes. Long stems could be tied or gathered, much as someone might arrange cut flowers on a table today.

Look for these details in a painted flower:

- Pointed blue petals around a yellow center.
- A closed bud on a long, narrow stem.
- An open bloom held near a guest's nose.
- Flowers grouped with leaves in an offering.

Flowers in the marsh

Water lilies also appear in scenes of the Nile marshes, where they share the water with fish, birds, and papyrus. These pictures are not simply flower studies. They place plants among the creatures and activities of a watery landscape.

Papyrus is another common plant in Egyptian art, but its tall stalk and feathery head look different from a water lily bloom. In a busy painting, following the stem can help: a lily rises from the water with a distinct flower, while papyrus has a clustered head atop a straight stalk.

Paintings can simplify plant shapes, and colors may have changed with age. It is sensible to be cautious about naming every small bloom. The pointed blue petals of the water lily, however, are a useful clue.

Questions about the flowers

Why are water lilies called lotuses in Egyptian art?

Lotus is a long established common name for these Egyptian water lilies. The plants belong to the genus Nymphaea, not Nelumbo.

Were the flowers only decoration?

No. They add beauty to scenes, but they also appear in offerings and in images associated with renewal and life. Their meaning depends on the setting of the painting.

Take a look at https://theologischer-ausblick.com/blumen-fuer-kirchliche-anlaesse-in-europa-hochzeiten-taufen/