

# ANCIENT EGYPTIAN FASHIONS



TOM TIERNEY

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## Introduction

Archeologists estimate that ancient Egypt was established about 3100 B.C., a result of the union of upper Egypt (the Nile Valley) and lower Egypt (the Nile Delta). Its history has been divided into three important eras, separated by periods of turmoil: the Old Kingdom (c.2686 to 2160 B.C.), the age of pyramid building; the Middle Kingdom (c.2040 to 1786 B.C.), the period of power and growth; and the New Kingdom (c.1570 to 1085 B.C.), which began in magnificence and ended with Roman conquest.

Over the course of three thousand years, ancient Egyptian fashions changed only imperceptibly. People wore draped, sheer garments—loincloths, skirts, capes, and robes—fastened with knots, belts, or sashes.

Clothing in the Old Kingdom was notable for its simplicity. Men wore kilt-like skirts called *schenti*, which evolved from loincloths. Variations on this style depended on the wearer's rank, as well as the occasion.

Women wore tightly wrapped sheaths called *kalasiris*. Falling from below the breast to the ankle, it was held up by one or two straps. The *kalasiris* evolved into a style that was sewn down one side; eventually, *kalasiris* came to describe any seamed, dress-like piece of clothing worn by men and women.

Laborers and slaves, if clothed, wore only loincloths. For a slave, often the sole covering was a cloth belt inscribed with his or her master's name.

In ancient Egypt, nudity was a natural state. Children and slaves living in the early dynasties were unclothed. Clothing was a status symbol, but cleanliness was more important.

To keep clean, men and women shaved their bodies, including their heads. They wore wigs, which could be washed or replaced, to protect their scalps from the powerful sun. Wigs, which appear to have been made from rolled strips of corn, were often braided. Beards were

considered symbols of power, so pharaohs wore false wooden beards which were held in place by chin straps.

During the Middle Kingdom, jewelry became more refined and brightly colored. Crafted in gold, it was often set with semiprecious stones, including lapis lazuli and garnets.

With the influence of outside cultures, New Kingdom clothing became layered and more varied. Pleated and gathered fabrics in rich primary colors were popular, although diaphanous robes and gowns were usually white. Cloth produced in this period was so finely woven, that even today it cannot be duplicated.

By the time of the New Kingdom, men had discarded the *schenti* in favor of skirts made from linen rectangles which were folded into single box pleats at the front. The nobility wore skirts made from more generous amounts of fabric that fanned into wide, single triangles in the front. They were fastened with decorative belts. Hanging from each skirt was a wedge-shaped apron, elaborately embroidered, and adorned with precious stones. The front-piece, without the decoration, was adapted by the lower classes.

Another style introduced during the New Kingdom was a sleeved tunic which resembled a short-sleeved nightshirt. But the most unusual garment of this period was made from a rectangle of fabric about twice the height of the wearer. It was folded down the center and had a slit cut for the head. The sides, sewn from hem to waist, were caught up and tied in the front, creating voluminous sleeves. Inspired by a style from Asia Minor, it was worn in ancient Egypt both by men and women.

Throughout Egypt's ancient history, most people, including royalty, went barefoot. During the New Kingdom period, however, people of rank began to wear papyrus and palm leaf sandals for ceremonies. Nobles wore gloves.

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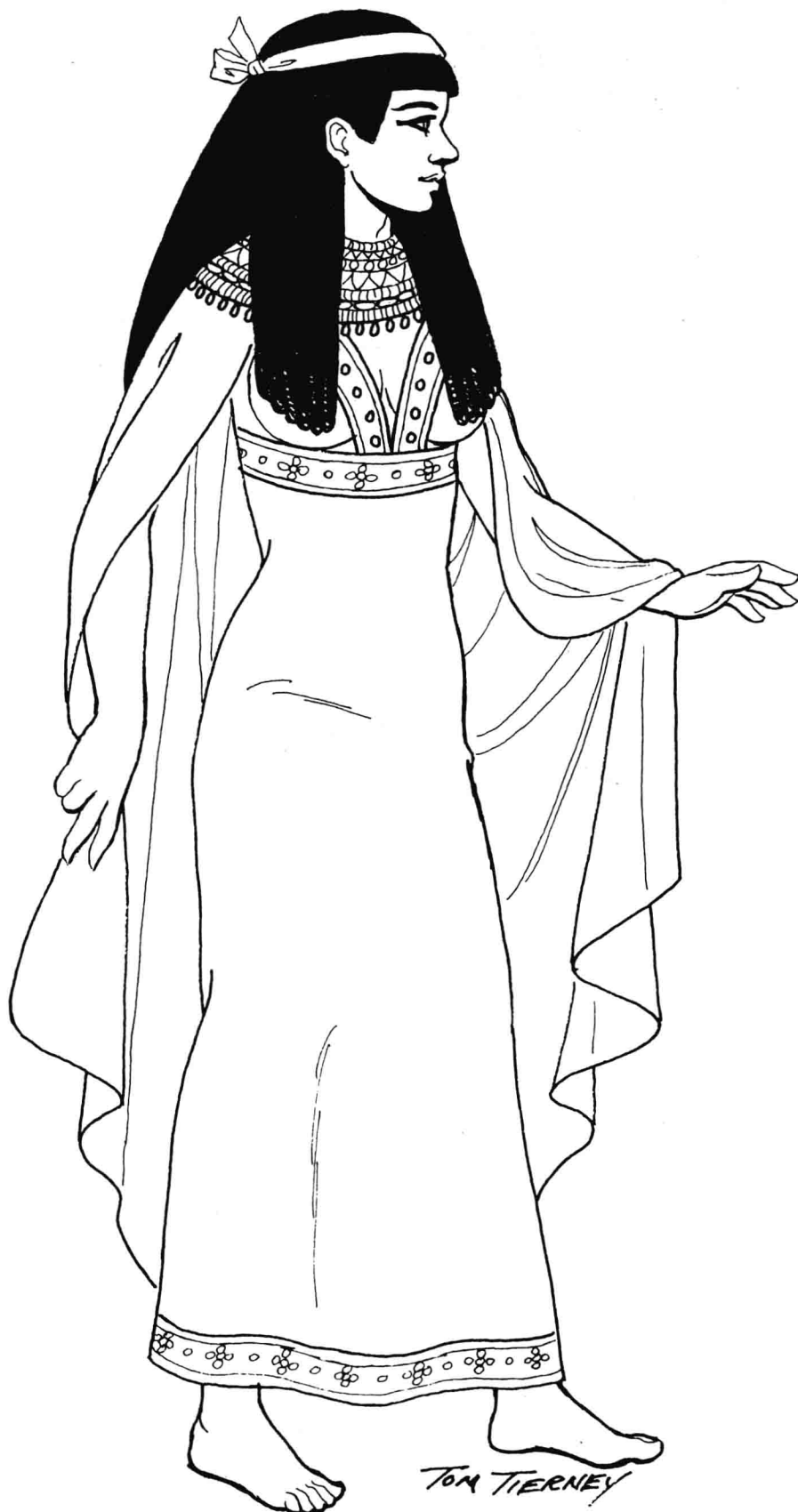
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**Old Kingdom.** *A princess*

She wears a blue, fine linen *kalasiris*, or sheath dress. Banded with embroidered trim, it is held up by two neck

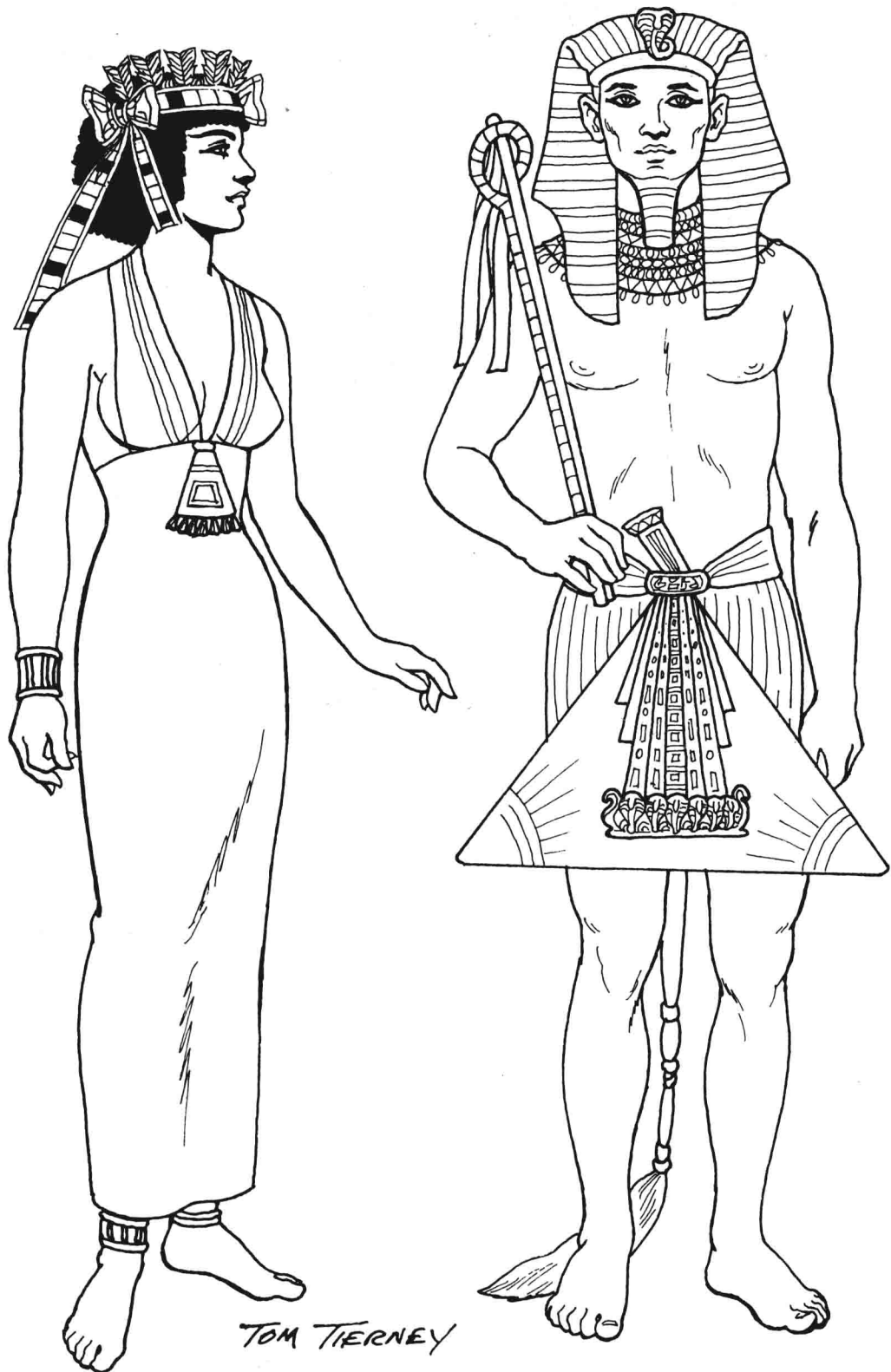
straps. Her wig is adorned with a circlet of ribbon. A sheer mantle is draped over her shoulders.



**Old Kingdom. A king**

Wearing the "Red Crown" of lower Egypt, the king wears a jeweled collar, or "corsalet," on his upper torso. Wrapped around his lower torso is a sheer kilt, or *schen-*

*ti*. A jeweled loin pendant hangs from the front of his belt, with a fur tail hanging from the back.

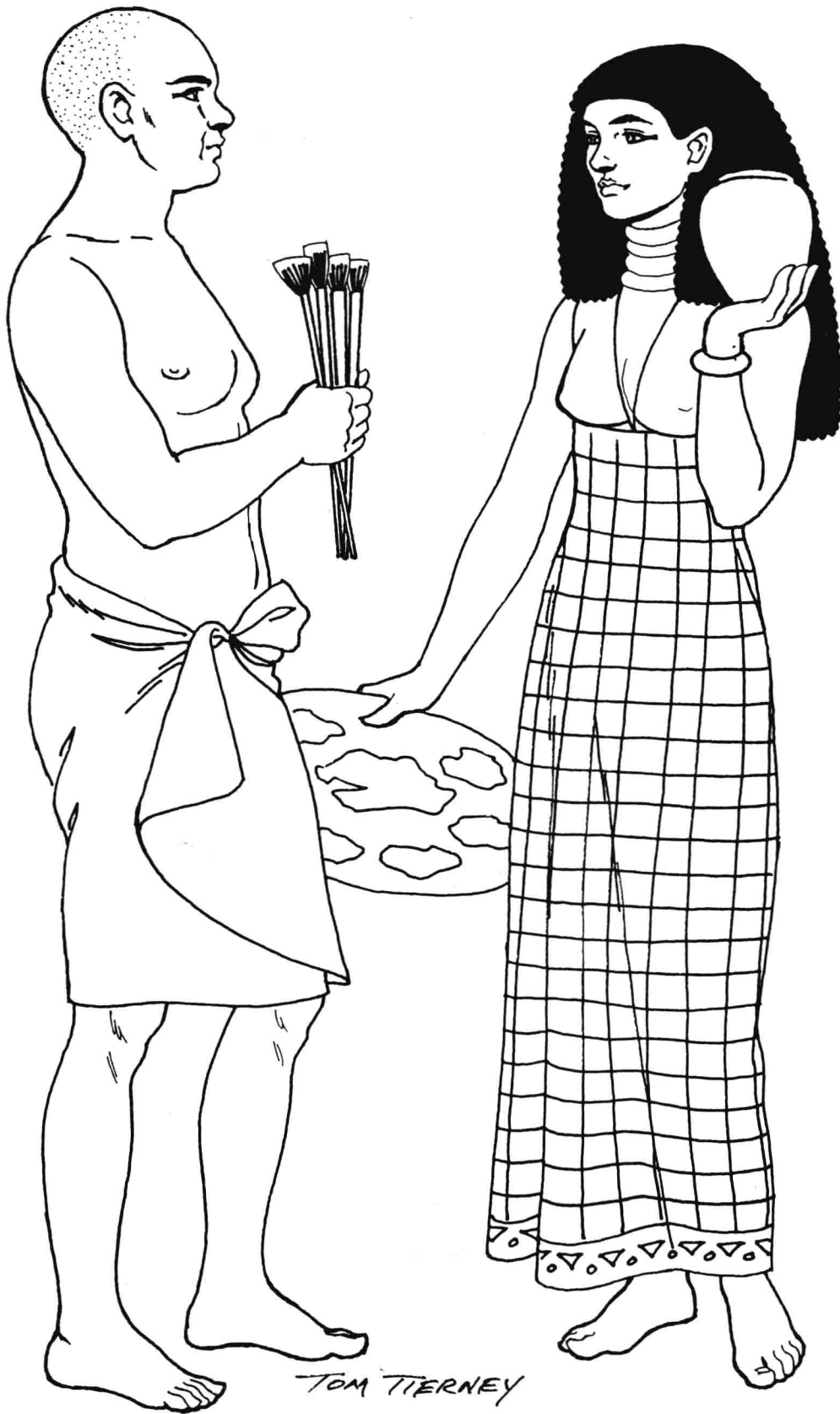


**Old Kingdom. *A king and a woman***

The king wears a loincloth fashioned from pleated, gold fabric. A symbolic lion's tail is attached to the back. From his waist hangs a stiffened triangle of embroidered fabric covered with a jeweled loin pendant. The king carries the royal crook and flail, signs of his authority. A

jeweled club is tucked into his waistband. The woman wears a sheath with two shoulder straps. A jeweled pendant hangs from her neck. On her head is a ribbon circlet with gold feathers arranged to form a coronet.





**Old Kingdom.** *A painter, or scribe, and his wife*

His simple knee length kilt, or *schenti*, is made of coarse linen. He wears no protective head cover, indicating that he works indoors. The woman wears a checked *kalasiris*,

or sheath, with wide shoulder straps. Instead of a collar, she wears bands of necklaces.



**Old Kingdom.** *An Egyptian couple of rank.*

The man, wearing a ceremonial kilt, carries a spear, and has a cudgel, or club, tucked into his belt. A short wig covers his head. The woman, grinding grain on a hand

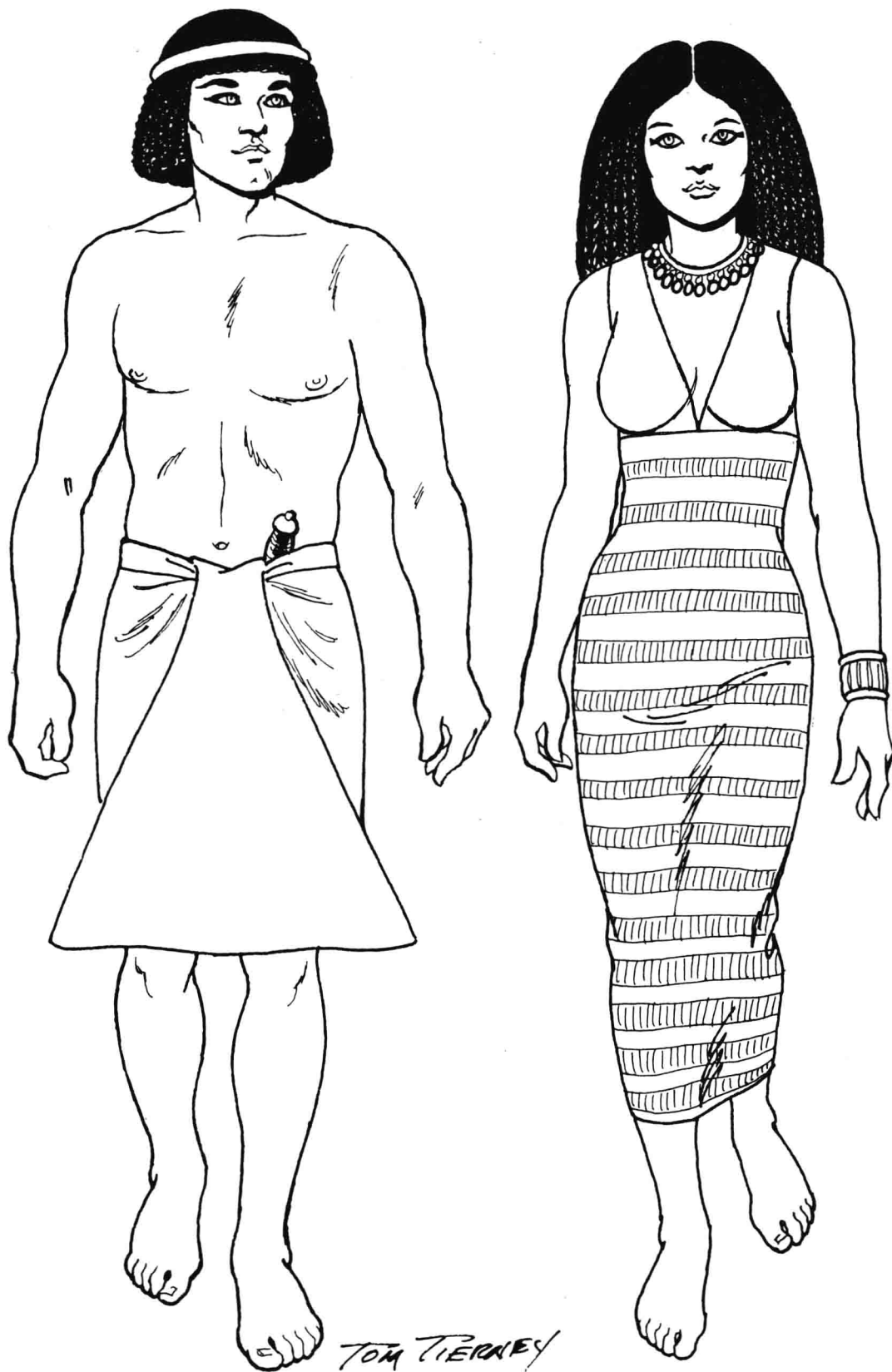
mill, wears a tunic draped over one shoulder. Her clothing indicates that she is a member of the upper class; a slave would wear little or nothing.



**Old Kingdom. A dancer**

This dancer wears a sheer, knee-length, pleated kilt. Riding low on the hips, the kilt is held with a ribbon. A

matching ribbon loops around her neck, crosses over her chest, and ties at her waist.



**Old Kingdom. A scribe**

The man, probably a scribe, wears a knee-length kilt, the front of which is covered by a starched apron of the same fabric. A baton is tucked into his waist. The woman

wears a striped sheath with broad shoulder straps, and a jeweled collar.



**Old Kingdom.** *A king and his wife*

The king wears a *schenti* made of pleated fabric which is fastened at the waist by a belt. During the Old Kingdom, men wore bare torsos. This king wears the "White Crown" of upper Egypt and the royal ceremonial false

beard. His wife wears a striped sheath with narrow shoulder straps. She nurses her baby whom she supports with a square of fabric wrapped into a sling.

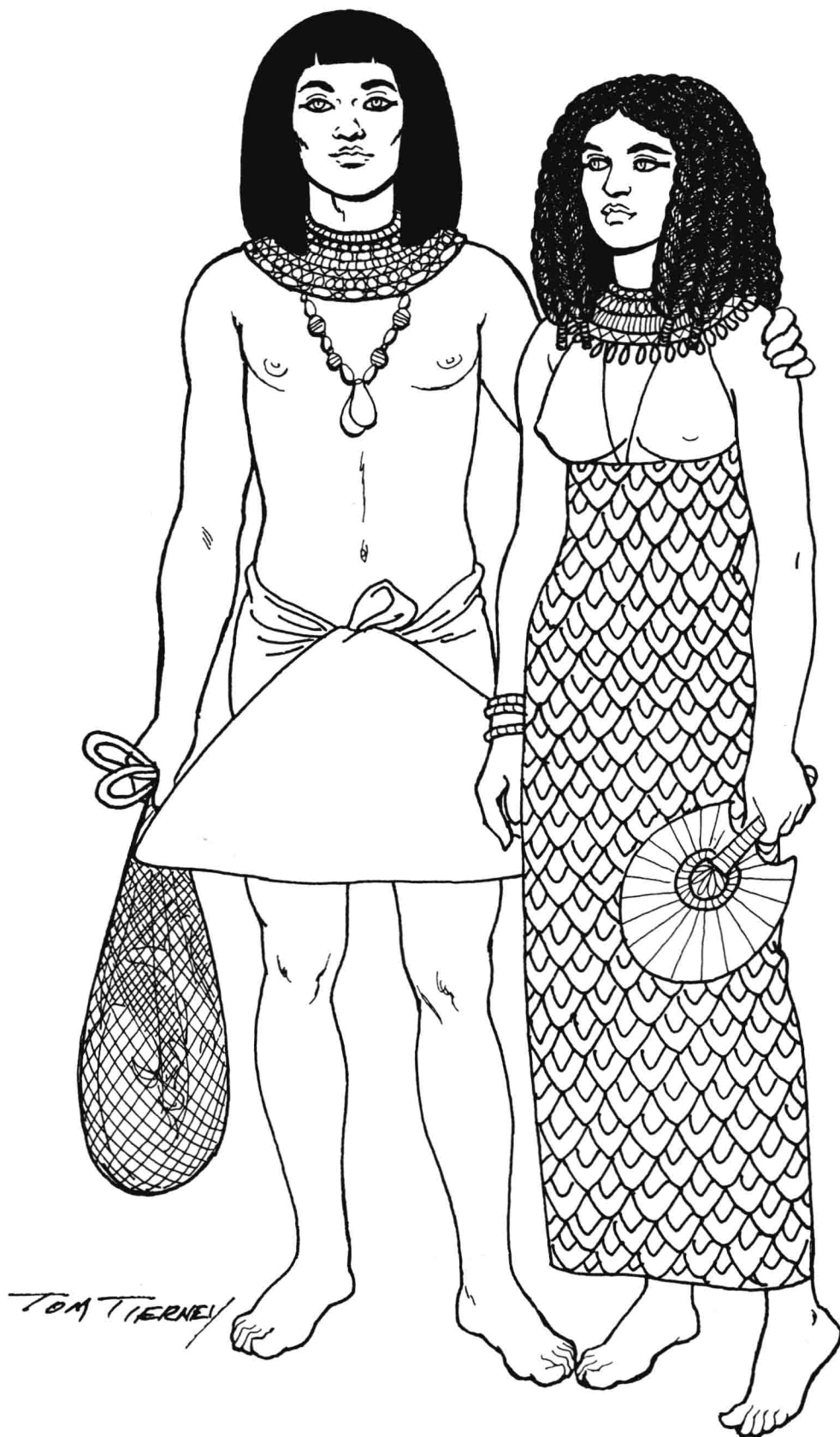




**Middle Kingdom. A king and a woman**

The king's clothing, worn as priestly garb, reflects a transition into the New Kingdom. Of sheer pleated linen, it is tied in the front to form a stiffened and embroidered loin pendant. On his head he wears the *khat*, a cloth wig cover which is pulled to the back and tied like a ponytail. On the front of the *khat* is a golden *uraeus*, a cobra

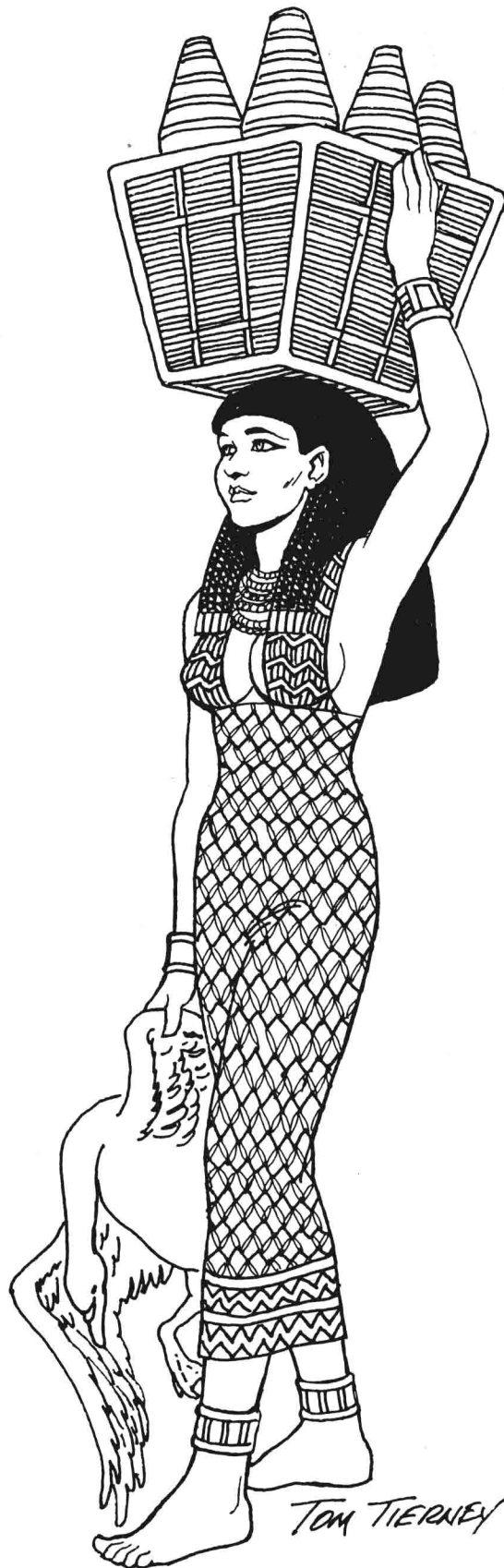
emblem denoting power. Across the king's chest is a folded cloth which acts as a suspender. The woman wears a *kalasiris*, in the style of the Old Kingdom. Made of a lightweight, multicolor linen, it has wide shoulder straps. She wears a mantle made of heavier linen, as well as a collar, diadem, bracelets, and a wig.



**Middle Kingdom. *A man and a woman***

The man wears a loincloth covered with a starched and stiffened triangle. At his neck is a jeweled collar and a pendant. His torso is bare. He carries a fish in a net bag.

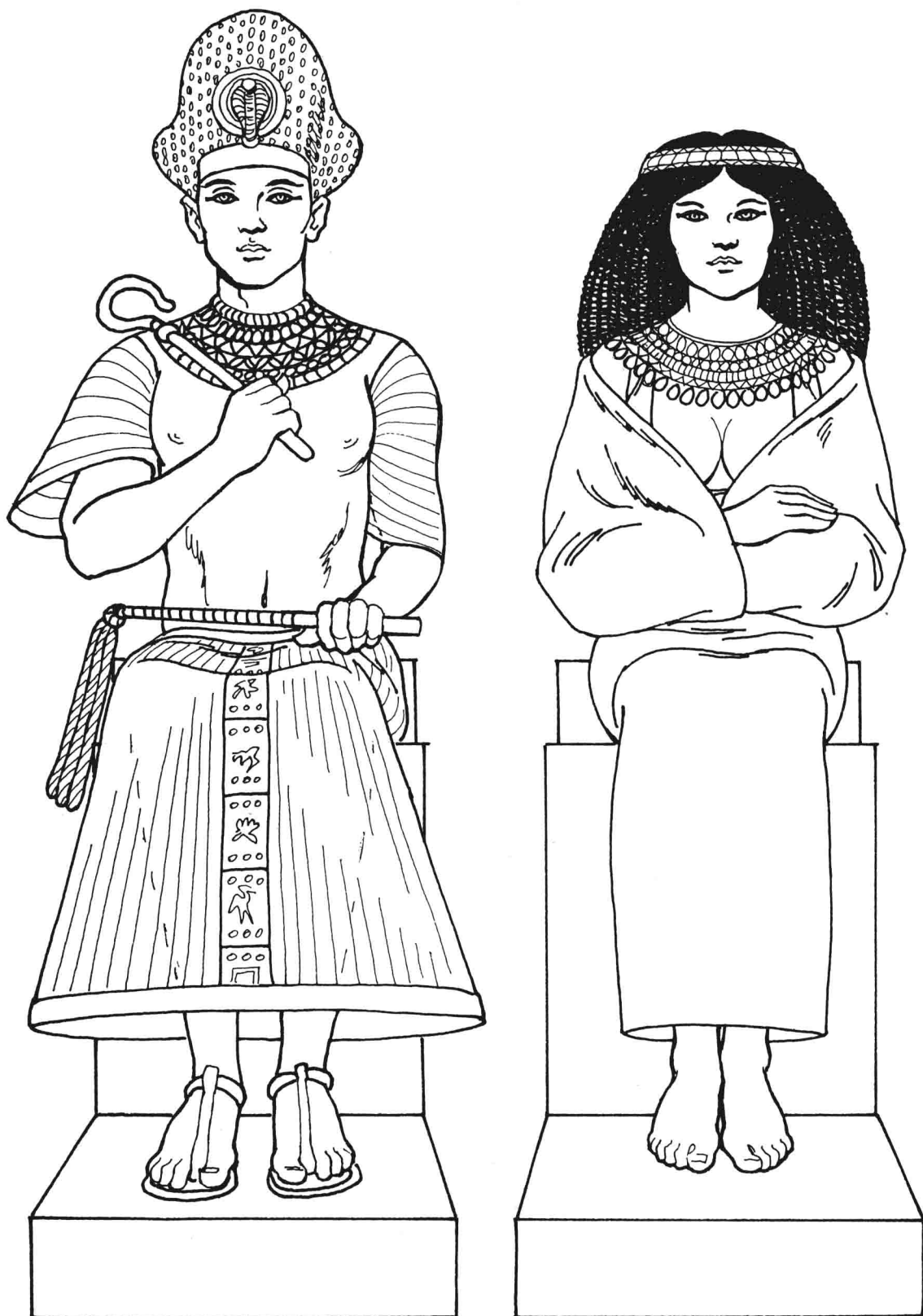
The woman, wearing a scale-patterned sheath with broad shoulder straps, carries a straw fan. Her wig has been corn-rolled and braided.



**Middle Kingdom.** *A maidservant from the court*

Carrying a basketful of vases on her head and a goose for cooking, she wears a sheath, or *kalasiris*, with wide,

beaded shoulder straps. Her body sheath is overlaid with a net made from multicolor leather strips.



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**Middle Kingdom. A seated pharaoh and his queen**

On his head is the “Blue Crown.” Trimmed in gold, it is studded with gold brads. The pharaoh wears a long, pleated, sheer linen overskirt with a pleated shawl around his shoulders and arms. He carries the royal crook and flail. His power is affirmed by the golden

uraeus, or cobra, on his crown. The queen wears a sheath in the style of the Old Kingdom. Under the long, linen wraparound stole are two shoulder straps. Both king and queen wear jeweled collars.