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New Kingdom Toilet Articles

James Romano: You're now standing in front of a case that contains a wide array of cosmetic items used by the ancient Egyptians in the 18th Dynasty. The Egyptians' concern for cosmetics focused on two distinct goals. They wanted to be sexy, and they wanted to be clean. You'll notice, for example, these little pots in the case. They contained a substance called kohl, which the Egyptians rubbed around their eyes.

They did it for two reasons. First of all, they considered the eyes to be the mirror of the soul, the most attractive part of the face. But kohl also retarded flies from coming around the eyes, and in a very hot country like Egypt, this could be a considerable problem.

At the center of the case is a typical mirror used in the 18th Dynasty. It consists of an oval disc and a long slender handle in the form of a maiden. You notice that part of her head is shaved, but she has these wonderful tufts of hair projecting from the sides and the crown of her head. I've seen this hairstyle in Brooklyn among many young girls even today.

Arnold Lehman: Now walk around to the opposite side of the case and look at the object on the right.

James Romano: Notice the rather ominous-looking razor that we have in the case. The Egyptians used razors like this to shave their heads. This was done, again, for two reasons. First of all, they were concerned that their hair might be infested by lice. Secondly, sex was often preceded by the man and the woman putting on elaborate wigs. In fact, one of the metaphors for sex in ancient Egypt was to "put on your wig."