

Treasures of a Boy-King

The first American exhibition of the treasure of 'King Tut's' tomb offers a unique glimpse of ancient splendor and modern archaeological patience

BY JOHN H. DOUGLAS

King Tutankhamun now enjoys two claims to fame, but his own actions probably had little to do with either one of them: He was the figurehead for the overthrow of ancient Egypt's brief experiment with monotheism, and his tomb has survived nearly intact while those of far more powerful kings were looted long ago.

As a boy-king, Tutankhamun would have had little understanding of the theological counter-reformation he nominally led. The survival of his small but richly appointed tomb resulted in part from having been hidden beneath the rubble of a greater tomb. Yet this very coincidence of revolution and obscurity has provided the modern world with an ancient treasure of unparalleled splendor.

Over the next two years many Americans will have their first opportunity to see a part of this treasure as the largest exhibition of Tutankhamun artifacts ever to leave the Cairo Museum tours six U.S. cities. The tour is sponsored by a consortium of the six host museums, in cooperation with the government of the Arab Republic of Egypt, with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Exxon Corporation and the Robert Wood Johnson Jr. Charitable Trust.

"King Tut," as the newspapers once called him, captured the imagination of the 1920s when his tomb was discovered after years of futile searching. Other tombs in the Valley of the Kings were already a tourist attraction, but their precious contents had been removed long before by grave robbers, and British archaeologist Howard Carter had only slim evidence that an intact tomb might still be hidden in the valley.

Then, in the autumn of 1922, on what he admitted would be his last attempt, Carter ordered digging begun in an area covered with the rubble left over from construction of the great tomb of Ramses VI. It seemed unlikely that Ramses would have intentionally covered over the tomb of a predecessor to build his own—preparation to join one's antecedents in the next life was, after all, the goal of the project. But Carter had exhausted more likely areas, and underneath the rubble workmen found a doorway bearing royal seals intact.

On Nov. 26, standing beside his patron, the Earl of Carnarvon, Carter drilled a small hole into the door:

"At first I could see nothing, the hot air escaping from the chamber causing the

candle flame to flicker, but presently, as my eyes grew accustomed to the light, details of the room within emerged slowly from the mist, strange animals, statues, and gold—everywhere the glint of gold."

Adding to the excitement of the parade of artifacts that would be brought out over the following years was a newspaper-manufactured legend of "King Tut's Curse." With a lack of sophistication that still marks much scientific communication, Lord Carnarvon sold to The Times of London exclusive rights to cover the excavation. Other reporters had to stand outside the tomb in the hot sun waiting to see what would be brought out. When Lord Carnarvon suddenly died from an infected mosquito bite, they took their revenge, saying the Curse had caught up with him. (Those who still perpetuate the Curse story usually ignore the fact that Carter completed the excavation and died peacefully, years later in England.)

Now, a half-century after their discovery, Tut's treasures are attracting large crowds of viewers for reasons that have little to do with the early publicity. The intervening time has only enhanced appreciation of just how singular a find this was, and additional scholarly effort has shed new light on the revolutionary era that produced the artifacts.

When the nine-year-old Tutankhamun ascended to the throne in about 1334 B.C., Egypt's New Kingdom was near its zenith of power. Moses would not lead the Hebrew slaves back to Palestine for almost another century, and the pyramids were already a thousand years old. Rebellion was brewing as priests of traditional gods tried to regain the power taken from them when the late King Akhenaton had decreed worship for only one god—Aton, the sun. Within four years the young king would be persuaded to return Egypt to the orthodox religion; within another four years he would be dead, possibly murdered.

It is hard to imagine this turmoil as one looks at the serene, chubby face of the boy's portrait in alabaster (cover). Yet this very naturalism is a product of the revolution in art that accompanied Akhenaton's religious reformation. The old con-

ventions of art had been broken, opening the way for more graceful and informal expression. The gilded statue of the goddess Selket (facing page, top left), for example, is not facing rigidly forward as in earlier representations. She turns her head sideways, exposing her elongated neck in a fashion reminiscent of the famous bust of Nefertiti, Akhenaton's queen.

Naturalistic expression and reference to the sun god are most clearly evident in the painted wooden figure of the child Tutankhamun's head emerging from a lotus blossom (lower left). According to legend, the sun god emerged from the lotus as the first living being of creation.



Carter working on mummy of Tut.

The small wooden statue of the standing king (upper right) clearly symbolizes his return to traditional religion—he holds the signs of the god Osiris—but again the naturalism of the preceding period persists.

The jeweled falcon (lower right) also represents the sun god. The "ankh" sign above each talon stands for life; grasped in each talon is the sign for infinity.

Although the young Tutankhamun was evidently dominated throughout his reign by two advisers that eventually succeeded him, he likely enjoyed the gratitude of his subjects as a symbol of return to tradition and order. Thus his tomb, though small, was filled with rich tokens of gratitude—some of which bear inscriptions to this effect. By luck, the collection has survived almost intact, offering modern viewers a rare glimpse into a time historically so remote, yet culturally so near.

Cities included in the tour are Washington (until March '77), Chicago (April '77 to August '77), New Orleans (September '77 to January '78), Los Angeles (February '78 to June '78) and New York (December '78 to April '79). □

Color photos by John H. Douglas

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