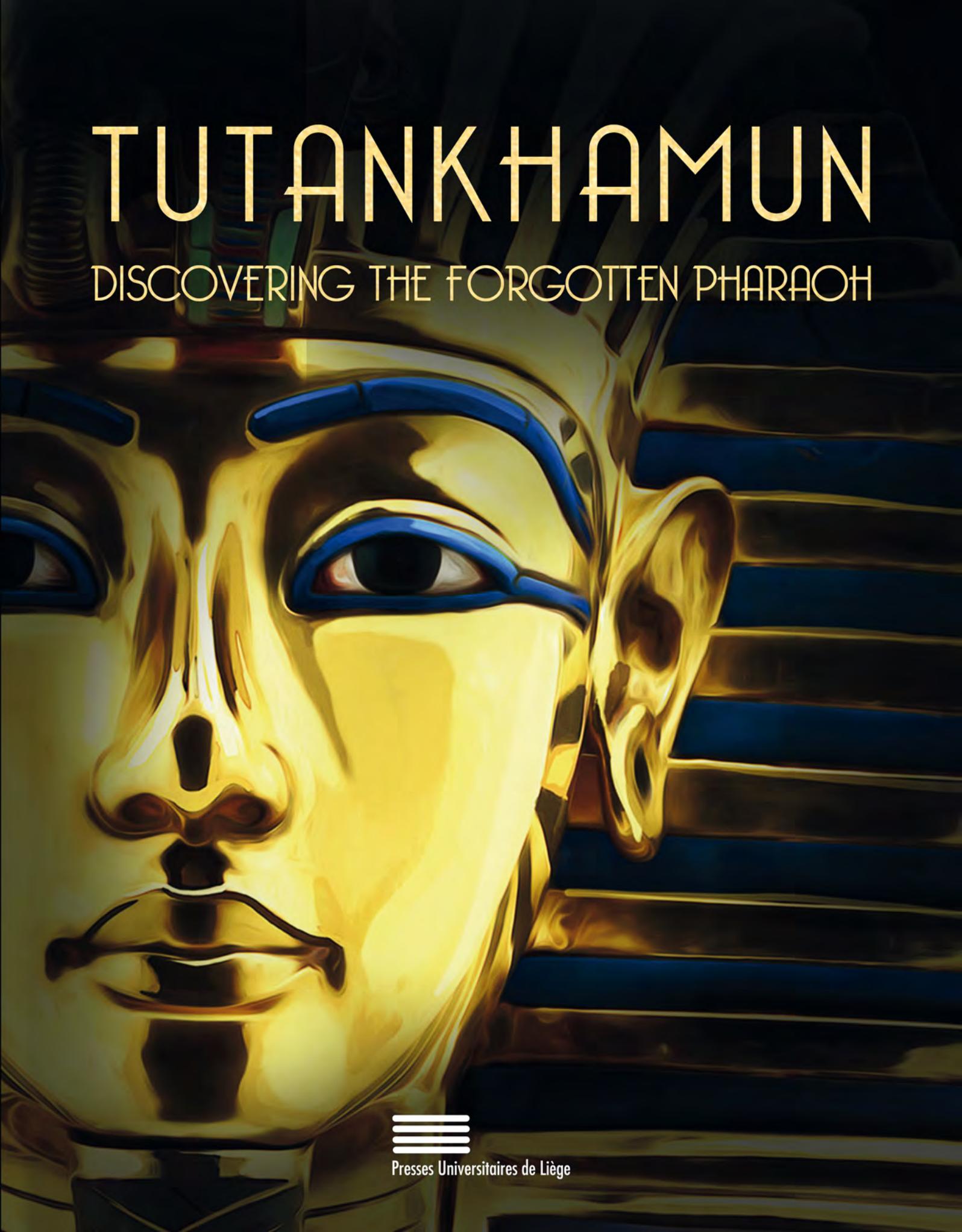


TUTANKHAMUN

DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH



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TUTANKHAMUN
DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH

Catalogue edited by

Simon CONNOR and Dimitri LABOURY

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This book is dedicated to the memory of Agostinho da Cunha, untimely seized by the Abductor, as ancient Egyptians called it.

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Amarna or the King's Childhood

Dimitri LABOURY

“The Beautiful One Has Come.” The Creation of Nefertiti’s Perfect Portrait

Anyone who sees the famous bust of Nefertiti seems fascinated by the impression of perfect beauty that emanates from this sculpture, now established as the absolute masterpiece of Egyptian art history. Ludwig Borchardt, the director of the mission that excavated the bust, wrote in his excavation diary on December 6, 1912, the very night of the discovery, “Painted bust of the queen, life-size, 47 cm high (...). Absolutely magnificent work. Description is useless, it must be seen!”

In seeking to understand the effect that the bust of Nefertiti inevitably seems to evoke, Rolf Krauss, a former curator at the Berlin Museum, had the idea — as simple as it is brilliant — to try to reconstruct the artist’s original vision, in this case, “the favorite of the perfect god (= the king), the overseer of works and sculptor Thutmose” in whose house the object was found [see the article on this subject]. To do this, R. Krauss laid on a photogrammetric reading of this bust, thus perfectly objective and without distorted perspective, a grid of proportions divided into the metric units of the time, Egyptian fingers, 1.875 cm wide, following the process of designing statues as practiced by pharaonic artists on the parallelepipedal block to be carved. It thus appeared that each of the defining features of the face is on a line or at an intersection of two lines of this grid, demonstrating how this portrait, often referred to as “the most lifelike of Egyptian art” is, in fact, artificially constructed. Following the same method

of analysis, R. Krauss also pointed out that the upper part of the faces of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, from the base of the nose to the start of the hairline on the forehead (which corresponds to a unit in the system of construction of human figures in Egyptian art), is identical both in size and in morphology. Recent investigations using 3D digital tools confirm that

Fig. 1: the so-called Berlin bust of Nefertiti (ÄM 21300; H. 49; W. 24.5; D. 35 cm), discovered in the annex of the reception hall of the house of the sculptor Thutmose at Amarna (P.47.2/19), on December 6 1912, by the Deutsche Orient Gesellschaft. Photograph © Ägyptisches Museum.



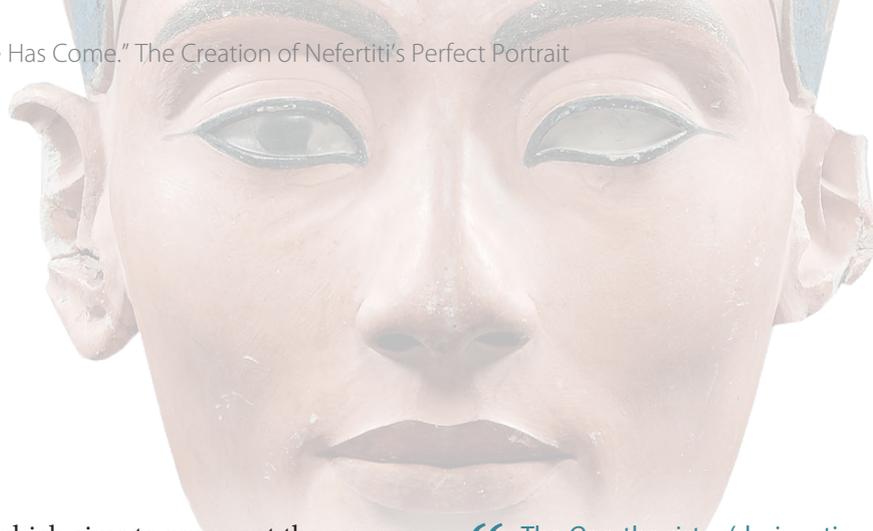


Fig. 2: projection of a grid graduated in ancient Egyptian fingers (1.875 cm) on a 3D recording of the so-called Berlin bust of Nefertiti (ÄM 21300), after R. Krauß.

the faces of the two sovereigns are constructed on the same principles and according to the same proportions with only the composition of the chin and the jaw being different. How can we explain this obvious artificiality in works that seem so realistic and that still affect us today because of this very aspect? The answer is actually quite simple. They are works of art, artistic projections of reality, and not a reproduction that would be faithful in every way or “photorealistic.”

Art, as an aesthetic statement recognized as such in a given culture, always deals, implicitly, with

the beautiful, but this essential component takes on an absolutely fundamental importance in the productions of the Atenist era. The programmatic texts of the new ideology of kingship (by definition of divine right) advocated by Akhenaten [see the article on this subject], repeat over and over again that the god Aten fills his creation with his love, his light and his beauty, the three being interchangeable and beauty, like light, being perceived as the tangible manifestation of the god’s love for his creatures and, quite simply, of his presence on earth. In this ideology, and following the fundamental principles



of Egyptian art, which aims to represent the essence rather than the appearance of things, the royal couple embodies the luminosity, love and beauty which Aten gives the world. If Akhenaten presents himself as "the beautiful child of Aten," his queen, Nefertiti, whose very name (probably a name that came with her official position) means "the beautiful one has come," like all the "first ladies" of history (through today), represents the perfect beauty that must accompany the charismatic ruler. Once again, the texts of this era insist she is "the one whose face is perfect, great of joy, the one who garners praise and whose voice is delightful to hear, mistress of charm, great of love, the one whose appearance delights the Lord of the Two Lands (= the king), great of the beauty (or love) of Aten, the one who satisfies him when he appears in the horizon; whatever she says, is done for her." No wonder, then, that the artistic appearance given to her translates into images the ideal feminine beauty as depicted in Egyptian love poetry, which was emerging around the same time.

“ The *One*, the sister (designation of the beloved) without peer,
The handsomest of all!
She looks like the rising morning star
At the start of a happy year.
Shining bright, fair of skin,
Lovely the look of her eyes,
Sweet the speech of her lips,
She has not a word too much.
Upright neck, shining breast,
Hair true lapis lazuli;
Arms surpassing gold,
Fingers like lotuses.
Heavy thighs, narrow waist,
So that her hips increase her beauty;
With graceful step she treads the ground,
Captures my heart by her movements.
She causes all men’s necks
To turn about to see her.

(translation after Miriam Lichtheim)



Fig. 3-4 : two excerpts of the statue ritual, which starts the "ritual of opening the mouth and giving birth" to the statue, depicting the meditation of the *sem*-priest, who manages to visualize the sculpture to be made (on the right), then the same priest communicating his vision and instructions to the sculptors (on the left). Murals from the tomb of Rekhmira (TT 100). Photographs D. Laboury.



Fig. 5: torso of an indurated limestone statue of Nefertiti found during the excavations of H. Carter and W.M.F.I. Petrie for the *Egypt Exploration Fund* to the south of the precinct of the great Aten temple at Amarna (MMA 21.9.4; H. 28; W. 29.5; D. 21.5 cm). Photograph © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

How did the sculptor Thutmose transcribe this ideal of beauty in his plastic, almost mathematical, rendering of the face of Nefertiti, as “the one whose face is perfect?” The beginning of the “ritual of opening the mouth and giving birth” to the statue perhaps provides some additional information that allow us to better see the work through the eyes of its creator, as R. Krauss aspired to do. According to this ritual, a higher-ranking priest, who replaced the son in charge of the funerary worship of the person to be represented, entered a meditative state that allowed him to visualize in anticipation the work to be performed. This, which is supposed to pre-exist in the block to be sculpted and must therefore be extracted from it, is compared to a praying mantis that emerges from a spider’s web, a metaphorical designation of the network of the grid of proportions, also called “net,” which serves to capture the vision of the statue. The priest could then give instructions to the sculptors in order to translate his vision into an actual sculpture. This ritual and mystical conception of artistic creation, according to the ancient Egyptians, is obviously theoretical, and it concerns the cult image of the deceased. Nevertheless, it allows us to understand the intellectual framework

in which Thutmose was likely to perceive his own actions in fashioning Nefertiti’s perfect face. After the creation of a series of sketches, which gave shape to his vision of the work to be produced and were to be approved by his sponsor [see the article on his workshop], he transferred the approved model onto a proportional grid painted on the different faces of a parallelepipedal block in order to literally calculate his labor of gradual extraction of the work he sought to bring out. There was no contradiction in his mind between his inspiration — presumably inspired by the actual face of the queen — which he sought to translate and refine in his successive sketches and the mathematical equation of his model using a strict proportional grid, which served, according to Egyptian thought, to visualize and “capture” the work supposed to pre-exist in the block to be sculpted. The way he conceived his work was not fundamentally different from that of so many sculptors in the world history of art, such as Michelangelo or Rodin. As evidenced in the different techniques he obviously mastered (modeling, plaster casting, sculpture, painting and drawing), the remarkable precision of his compositions and the equally exceptional quality of the works he produced, the royal sculptor Thutmose was certainly one of the great artists of his time, a kind of Michelangelo or Rodin of the Amarna era.

Fig. 6: *talatat* found in Hermopolis, depicting a royal hand (likely Nefertiti’s; MMA 1985.328.1; H. 23.5; W. 27.5; D. 3.6 cm). One should notice the “whiplash line” style of the fingers, elongated “like lotuses”, with an extra phalanx compared to anatomic reality. Photograph © Metropolitan Museum of Art.

