TUTANKHAMUN
DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH
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Catalogue edited by
Simon CONNOR and Dimitri LABOURY

Exhibition organized at the Europa Expo space
TGV train station “Les Guillemins”
Liège, 14th December 2019 – 30th August 2020

Presses Universitaires de Liège
2020
The exhibition “Tutankhamun. Discovering the Forgotten Pharaoh” was produced by the scrl-fs EUROPA EXPO and realised by the non-profit organisation Collections & Patrimoines.

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**Acknowledgements**  
Jean-Lou Stefan  
The anonymous private collectors who entrusted us with their pieces.  
This book is dedicated to the memory of Agostinho da Cunha, untimely seized by the Abductor, as ancient Egyptians called it.
# Table of Contents

## The Exhibition

### Tutankhamun. Discovering the Forgotten Pharaoh
[Simon Connor, Dimitri Laboury, Alain Mager and René Schyns] .......................... 15

### Behind the Scenes: How to Set up an Exhibition
[Alix Nyssen] ................................................................. 16

### Replicas on Display
[Simon Connor and Eid Mertah] ............................................. 24

## The Carter Adventure

### The Discovery of Tutankhamun’s Tomb
[Dimitri Laboury] ........................................................................ 31

### Carter’s Palette
[Hugues Tavier] ........................................................................ 32

### Tutankhamun’s Tomb: The Exception or the Rule?
[Dimitri Laboury] .................................................................... 38

### Reconstructing the Tomb: Copying as a Method of Technical and Scientific Learning
[Hugues Tavier] .................................................................... 42

### Photography and the Media at the Tomb of Tutankhamun
[Christina Riggs] ................................................................. 48

### Carter’s Papers and the Archaeological Record of Tutankhamun’s Tomb at the Griffith Institute, University of Oxford
[Francisco Bosch-Pusche, Elizabeth Flemming, Cat Warsi and Anne-Claire Salmas] .................................................... 52

### Buying and Selling Tutankhamun
[Tom Hardwick] ........................................................................ 68

## The Treasure

### A True Icon: Tutankhamun’s Gold Mask
[Katja Broschat and Christian Eckmann] ..................................... 73

### The Throne of Tutankhamun
[Dominique Farout] .................................................................. 74

### Beauty in Detail. Glass from the Tomb of Tutankhamun
[Katja Broschat] .................................................................. 78

### Boxes and Coffrets
[Christian Loeben] .................................................................. 82

### Sticks and Staves
[André J. Veldmeijer and Salima Ikram] ...................................... 86

### Brothers-In-Arms. The Two Daggers of the Tomb
[Katja Broschat, Eid Mertah and Christian Eckmann] .................... 90

### Weaponry
[André J. Veldmeijer and Salima Ikram] ...................................... 94

### Chariots
[André J. Veldmeijer] .............................................................. 98

### The Gold-Sheet Appliqués of Tutankhamun’s Tomb
[Katja Broschat and Christian Eckmann] .................................... 102

### Almost Friends. The Ancient Near East in the Tutankhamun Era
[Vera E. Allen] ................................................................. 106

### Tutankhamun and the Land of the Bow. Egyptian-Nubian Relations during the Eighteenth Dynasty
[Faïza Drici] ................................................................. 110

### The Artist Who Created the Most Famous Funerary Mask in the World?
[Dimitri Laboury] ................................................................. 114

### The Throne of Tutankhamun
[Dominique Farout] .................................................................. 118

### Beauty in Detail. Glass from the Tomb of Tutankhamun
[Katja Broschat] .................................................................. 122

### Boxes and Coffrets
[Christian Loeben] .................................................................. 126

### Sticks and Staves
[André J. Veldmeijer and Salima Ikram] ...................................... 130

### Brothers-In-Arms. The Two Daggers of the Tomb
[Katja Broschat, Eid Mertah and Christian Eckmann] .................... 134

### Weaponry
[André J. Veldmeijer and Salima Ikram] ...................................... 138

### Chariots
[André J. Veldmeijer] .............................................................. 142

### The Gold-Sheet Appliqués of Tutankhamun’s Tomb
[Katja Broschat and Christian Eckmann] .................................... 146

### Almost Friends. The Ancient Near East in the Tutankhamun Era
[Vera E. Allen] ................................................................. 150

### Tutankhamun and the Land of the Bow. Egyptian-Nubian Relations during the Eighteenth Dynasty
[Faïza Drici] ................................................................. 154
The Protagonists .............................................................................................................. 121

Amenhotep III [Christian Bayer] .......................................................................................... 122

Tiye [Christian Bayer] ........................................................................................................... 122

Akhenaten [Dimitri Laboury] .................................................................................................. 124

Nefertiti [Dimitri Laboury] ..................................................................................................... 124

Meritaten [Dimitri Laboury] .................................................................................................. 125

Ankhesenamun [Dimitri Laboury] .......................................................................................... 126

Tutankhamun [Dimitri Laboury] .............................................................................................. 127

Ay [Dimitri Laboury] ............................................................................................................... 128

Horemheb [Dimitri Laboury] .................................................................................................. 129

Focus: Plaquette Featuring Akhenaten, Nefertiti and Two of Their Daughters [Dimitri Laboury] .. 131

Amarna or the King’s Childhood .................................................................................................. 133

The City of Akhetaten: Amarna [Robert Vergnieux] .................................................................. 134

Focus: A Fragment of Face, Royal Museums of Art and History [Héloïse Depluvrez] ........ 137

Focus: Head of a Princess, Fitzwilliam Museum [Dimitri Laboury] ........................................ 138

Talatat Blocks [Robert Vergnieux] .................................................................................................. 140

Focus: A Royal Behind [Tom Hardwick] .................................................................................. 143

Focus: A Talatat Block Showing a Group of Royal Nurses [W. Raymond Johnson] .............. 144

Statuary from the Great Aten Temple [Harsha Hill] .................................................................. 146

Focus: A Statue Torso, University of Tübingen [Dimitri Laboury] .......................................... 148

Focus: Fragment of the Face of a Statue of Akhenaten [Dimitri Laboury] ................................. 150

Focus: Arm Fragment of a Colossal Statue of Nefertiti [Dimitri Laboury] ................................. 152

Focus: Wrist Fragment of a Royal Statue [Dimitri Laboury] ...................................................... 153

The Reproduction of an Amarna Palace Room [Hugues Tavier] .................................................. 154

The Workshop of the Sculptor Thutmose: “In the Studio of an Artist” [Dimitri Laboury] .... 156

The Reconstruction of a Sculptor’s Workshop [Hugues Tavier] .................................................. 161

“The Beautiful One Has Come.” The Creation of Nefertiti’s Perfect Portrait [Dimitri Laboury] 162

On Atenist “Realism”. Virtual Reality, the Ancient Egyptian Way [Dimitri Laboury] .................. 166
## Table of Contents

**Living at the Court of Tutankhamun** .......................................................... 171

- Life at Pharaoh’s Court [Claudia Venier] ...................................................... 172
- Focus: Mechanical Toy in the Shape of a Dog, Metropolitan Museum of Art [Dimitri Laboury] ................................................................. 176
- “Show Me Your Chair, I’ll Tell You Who You Are.” Palace Furniture [Claudia Venier] ................................................................. 178
- Tutankhamun’s Pottery [Tom Hardwick] ......................................................... 186
  - Focus: Two Mycenaean Greek Pottery ‘Stirrup Jars’, Manchester Museum [Claudia Venier] ......................................................... 190
  - Focus: Two Fragments of Ceramics with Hathoric Figures [Alisée Devillers] .................................................................................. 191
- Glass Production in the Amarna Period [Paul Nicholson] .............................. 192
- The Basketry [André Veldmeijer and Salima Ikram] ...................................... 196
  - Focus: Lot of Baskets [Alisée Devillers] .......................................................... 199
- Eating at the Court of Tutankhamun or Feasting with the King. What Did Tutankhamun Eat? [Salima Ikram] ......................................................... 200
- Tutankhamun’s Wine Cellar [Pierre Tallet] ...................................................... 204
- Tutankhamun’s Linen [Nagm Hamza] ............................................................. 208
- Tutankhamun’s Gloves [Dominique Farout and Amandine Mérat] .............. 214
- Sandals and Shoes [André Veldmeijer] ............................................................ 218
- Looking Good in the Time of Tutankhamun [Guillemette André-Lanoë] ... 222
- Enchanted Trumpets [Sibylle Emerit] .............................................................. 228

**Religion and Politics** ................................................................................. 237

- Aten vs Amun. Religious Politics and Political Religion under Tutankhamun and His Father, Akhenaten [Dimitri Laboury] ................................................ 238
  - Focus: Two Talatats Representing Nefertiti Praying [Jacquelyn Williamson] ......................................................................................... 244
- Popular Devotion in Amarna [Alisée Devillers] ............................................ 246
  - Focus: Two Moulds for Amulets Showing Dwarvish Figures [Alisée Devillers] ......................................................................................... 248
  - Focus: Mould for an Amulet in the Shape of Taweret [Alisée Devillers] ......................................................................................... 249
- The Spectrum of Belief. Amulets in the Time of Tutankhamun [Tom Hardwick] ......................................................................................... 250
- The Life, Lives, and Death of Images [Simon Connor] ................................ 254
- After Amarna. Restoring the Cult of Amun [Marianne Eaton-Krauss] ......................................................................................... 260
DEATH COMES AS THE END ...............................................................269

The King Is Dead! CSI Biban el-Moluk [Angelique Corthals] ............................................................... 270
Suffering from Malaria in the Age of Tutankhamun [Bernard Lalanne] ................................................. 273
Mosquitos in Egypt [Stéphane Polis] ........................................................................................................ 275
The Chromosomes of Tutankhamun [Marc Gabolde] .............................................................................. 276
The King’s Funeral [Alisée Devillers] ........................................................................................................... 282
Tutankhamun’s Tomb, or the First Botanical Reference Collection in Egyptology
   [Gersande Eschenbrenner-Diemer] ........................................................................................................ 286
Reconstructing Tutankhamun’s Floral Collars. Some Lessons from an Experiment in Flowers
   [Jean-Lou Stefan] ..................................................................................................................................... 289
The Looting of Tombs in the Valley of the Kings [Susanne Bickel] ............................................................ 290
Papyrus Leopold II-(Amherst). An Ancient Investigation into the Plundering of the Theban Necropolis
   [Stéphane Polis] ..................................................................................................................................... 294
   Focus: A Funerary Deity in Gilded Cartonnage [Tom Hardwick] .............................................................. 298
   Focus: Canopic Vases with the Name of Ipy [Dimitri Laboury] ................................................................. 300

RESURRECTING TUTANKHAMUN ..........................................................303

“King Tut” and the Worldwide Tut-mania [Jean-Marcel Humbert] ............................................................ 304
A Queen, an Egyptologist and a Pharaoh [Jean-Michel Bruffaerts] ............................................................ 310
Welcome to Tutankhamun’s! A Belgian Touch of Egyptomania in the Roaring Twenties
   [Jean-Michel Bruffaerts] .......................................................................................................................... 314
Belgians Cursed by Tutankhamun [Jean-Michel Bruffaerts] .................................................................... 318
Tutankhamun and Akhenaten at the Musée du Cinquantenaire [Luc Delvaux] ............................................ 322
Tutankhamun. The Man behind the Mask [Simon Connor and Dimitri Laboury] ....................................... 326

BIBLIOGRAPHY ..................................................................................328
The Treasure
Like our modern society, pharaonic culture divided artificially created objects into categories: those that were simply “made” and those in which an added aesthetic value was acknowledged, with all the prestige that comes along with that acknowledgement, in other words, what we call “art” and the ancient Egyptians called hemut, ḫꜣ. Accordingly, the manufacturer of arrows was just an “arrow maker,” while his fellow craftsmen who made chariots, statues, or temple decoration were considered to be “artists” (literally, hemut-practitioners). Among these crafts that the ancient Egyptians characterized as artistic, the craft of the goldsmith ranked very high, because goldsmiths were called upon to shape a precious material that was the source of the wealth of the empire of the pharaohs and that the ancient Egyptians considered to be “the flesh of the gods.” Some goldsmiths apparently could have a highly successful career in the royal court. This was certainly the case of the “director of artistic functions (or arts) of the Lord of the Two Lands (= the king), the highly praised of the Good God (= the king), Chief of the King’s Goldsmiths,” Ameneminet.

Ameneminet’s tomb was rediscovered at the end of the last century by an Australian mission on the Saqqara plateau, not far from the first pyramid of the pharaonic era, in a venerated place steeped in sanctity and prestige for a millennium, just on the edge of the desert that bordered the ancient capital of Memphis, the main residence of the pharaohs of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The sumptuous reliefs that decorated the walls allow us to date it stylistically to the period that followed the Atenist moment of Akhenaten, to the reign of Tutankhamun.

Although no such claim has been preserved on the fragments of this imposing funerary monument (but the context of a tomb hardly lends itself to this kind of assertion), it is very tempting to recognize this chief of the king’s goldsmiths of Tutankhamun’s time as the likely creator of the funerary mask of the young sovereign, an absolute masterpiece of Egyptian art, notwithstanding its funerary and magical function, as a protection and substitute for the monarch’s head in case he were to be deprived of it in the afterlife, the iconic symbol of all pharaonic culture in the realm of our collective contemporary representations.

Formula for the Mysterious Head: Words spoken by N., who says: “Hail to you, handsome (of your) face, gifted with sight, whom Ptah-Sokar has fashioned, whom Anubis prepared, whom Shu holds up, the most beautiful face among the gods!”

Excerpt from Chapter 151 B of the “Book of the Dead,” inscribed on Tutankhamun’s mask
Fig. 1: relief from the tomb of the Chief of the Goldsmiths Ameneminet, contemporary of Tutankhamun, from his tomb in Saqqara (Cairo, Egyptian Museum, RT 106/24/8). Photograph D. Laboury.