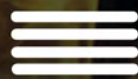
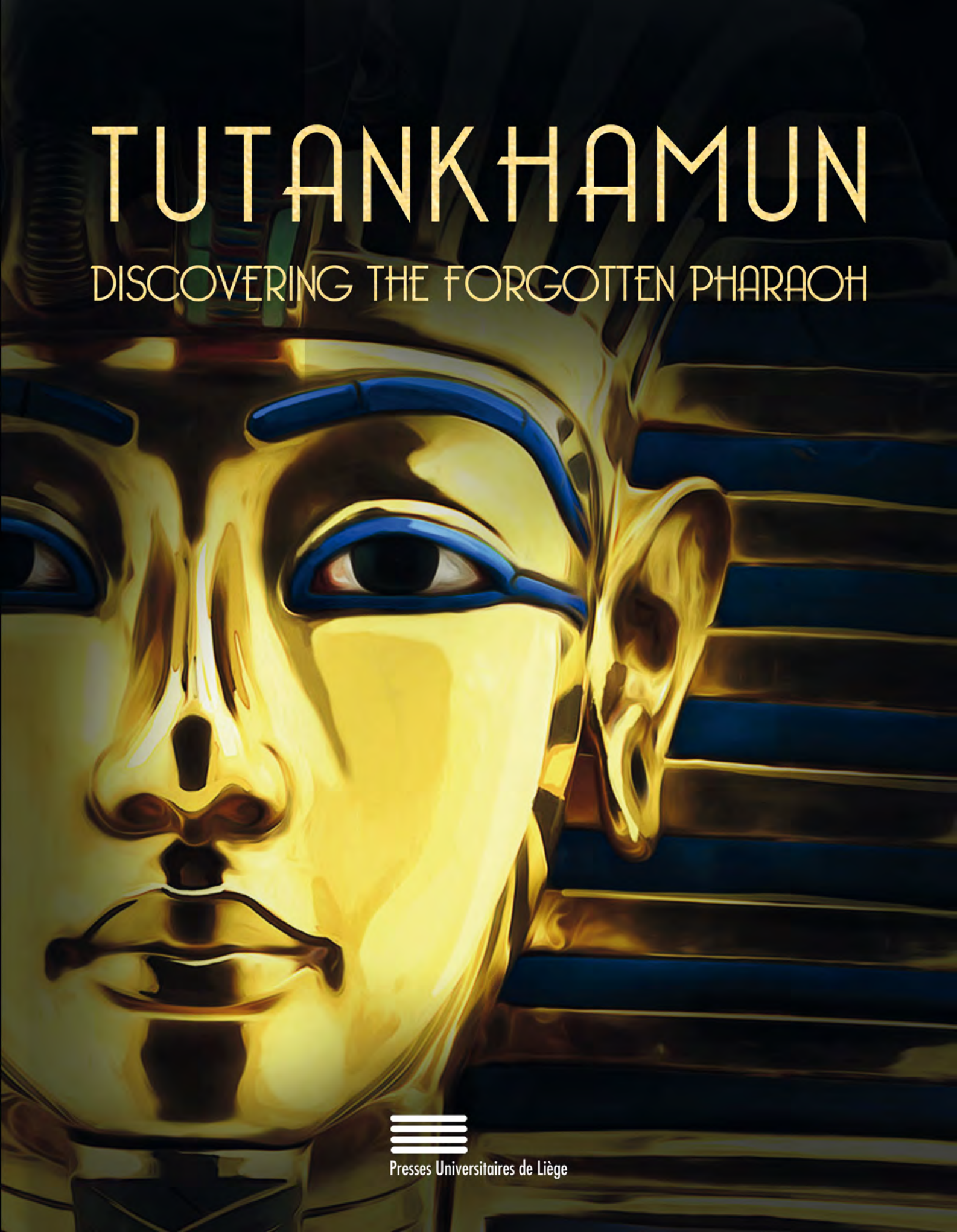


TUTANKHAMUN

DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH



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TUTANKHAMUN
DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH

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 srl-fs EUROPA EXPO and realised by the non-profit organisation Collections & Patrimoines.

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Audio guides: RSF/TRILLENIUM

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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.

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Amarna or the King's Childhood

Dimitri LABOURY

On Atenist “Realism”

Virtual Reality, the Ancient Egyptian Way

All figurative representation exists in a tension between a so-called “perceptual” tendency, that is, a desire to conform best to optical perception, and a more conceptual tendency, that is, a more artificial view of reality, evoking what the object of representation is in the reality beyond appearances. Even photography, which seems to

objectively capture reality, does not escape this tension, at least by the simple act of framing the reality that we perceive with our eyes. An inevitable tension between these two poles is created in any image of reality. In this respect, it is plain to see that traditional Egyptian art is situated among those artistic traditions with a strong conceptual tendency. The art of Akhenaten’s time (and to some extent of Tutankhamun’s reign), however, constitutes an exception, because it was marked by an ambition to be noticeably more perceptual. But does this mean that this art really shows us reality?

First of all, we must remember that the perception of realism or of the degree of realism is, in itself, a cultural construct that varies according to one’s frame of reference. Thus, to take an example from contemporary Western popular culture, the first film in George Lucas’s *Star Wars* saga has been a resounding success since its release in 1977, among other things, for the impression that it was able to produce in its viewers of actually finding themselves in outer space. Today, a little more than a generation later, after the advent of the virtual reality of the digital age and films such as James Cameron’s *Avatar* (2009), the special effects used at that time, with



Fig. 1: head of a princess discovered during the excavation of the estate of the sculptor Thutmose in Amarna (Cairo JE 44870), illustrating the use of quartzite in Atenist art to suggest the rendering of human skin. Photograph D. Laboury.

reduced-scale plastic models manually operated in front of cameras, appear seriously lacking in believability. Everything depends on the visual or referential universe in which we are located. From this point of view, even if the art of the Atenist period has its roots in aesthetic explorations that we see in development for nearly a century (propelled by a new metaphysical approach to reality), the works produced during Akhenaten's reign undoubtedly must have seemed at the time striking in their realism, lending statues, for example, a presentness never before attained. Thus, the deliberately geometrizing volumes that define traditional Egyptian art were replaced by particularly sophisticated textural effects in rendering clothing, hair and wigs, and even skin. The regular use of quartzite in ochre hues intentionally finished with less polish made it possible to allude to skin tones in composite statues, whose white linen garments were rendered in limestone of the same color. The imposing dorsal pillars and the spaces left filled between the elements of the statue (what in Egyptology are called “negative spaces”) were also reduced to their simplest expression. Sculptures that previously showed the pharaoh in a hieratic and solemn pose, as a transcendent being, now show him prostrated, either lying on his belly or kissing the ground, in order to venerate his tutelary deity [see M. Hill's chapter and the focuses that follow it].

An excerpt of the diplomatic correspondence between Akhenaten and his Babylonian counterpart, Burna-Buriash II, suggests that this new stylistic orientation was perceived and even recognized as such. In one of his letters (EA 10), he addresses the Atenist ruler of Egypt as follows:

“ There are good woodworkers where you are. Have them make a figure of a wild animal, either terrestrial or aquatic, from nature, so that the hide is exactly like that of a living animal. Have your messenger bring it to me! ”



Fig. 2: fragmentary statue of a group depicting the general Nakhtmin, son of Ay, and his wife, dating from the reign of Tutankhamun or Ay (Cairo CG 779B). Notice the sophistication of the sculptural rendering of the texture of the wig and the wet-drapery technique of the woman's garment. Photograph D. Laboury.

All Atenist iconography partakes of this more perceptual aesthetic, showing us, for example, the royal family as if being surprised in an intimate moment [see the focus on a carnelian plaque from the Fitzwilliam Museum]. But, again, is the art really showing us reality? Should we succumb to the

voyeuristic and very “celebrity magazines” driven temptation to see Akhenaten or Nefertiti as historical figures of flesh and blood in the representations they have chosen for themselves? In this regard, the question of the royal portrait in the Atenist era is particularly interesting from an art historical vantage point. As we have seen in previous chapters, the depiction of the ruling couple is artificially constructed on an almost mathematical model that defines them as the embodiments of the perfect beauty with which Aten fills his creation. A comparison of the depiction of their faces and bodies with their mummies reveals that while the art of the time was clearly inspired by the reality of their appearance and offers a version of that reality that still remains plausible, we are undoubtedly seeing artificial constructions here. For example, Tutankhamun still has the appearance of a young king, a child or teenager, but his physiognomy, partially preserved by his mummy, was different

from that of his mask or statues, most notably for his mummy’s longer face. Similarly, the symptoms of severe genetic disorders — which nearly always involve infertility — that we have wanted to see in the images of Akhenaten — father of many offspring — are not detectable in the analysis of his skeletal remains. It is clear that Atenist art, despite its more perceptual or, in this sense of the word, realistic appearance and stylistic tendencies, does not seek to render reality as one could have perceived it, but simply to look realistic, without that actually being the case. The expression “reality effect,” used by Roland Barthes to describe the rhetorical and narrative tricks used by any fiction — think of the adventures of the young wizard Harry Potter written by J.K. Rowling — is perfectly adequate to describe the aesthetics of the Atenist period. They were full of details that look true, even if they did not correspond to any reality.

Fig. 3: *talatat* block discovered in Hermopolis, depicting a team of horses, in which one horse, in the foreground, bites its leg in a “reality effect,” whose sole purpose is to lend more life and presentness to the scene (MMA 1985.328.18; H. 22.9; W. 52.1; D. 3.8 cm). Photograph © Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 4: “a figure of a wild animal, either terrestrial or aquatic, from nature, so that the hide is exactly like that of a living animal.” Painted fragment from Nebamun’s tomb (TT E2; BM EA 37977), dated only a few years before the advent of the Atenism of Amenhotep IV – Akhenaten. Photograph D. Laboury.

