



America Welcomes the King: The Influence of King Tut on American Women and Fashion

Sara B. Marcketti, Jong Geun Lee, Katherine Greder, Rachel Charlton-Halweg

Iowa State University

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Most fashion history students know of the ‘Egyptomania’ that inspired fashionable dress following the opening of King Tut’s tomb in November 1922 (Mendes & de la Haye, 1999). This paper explores the ways in which the discovery of the young king’s tomb eased anxieties about societal pressures of the time, as well as promoted “original” American design, not dependent upon Paris. Data for this study included analysis of the popular (*The New York Times*), trade (*Women’s Wear*), and fashion (*Vogue*, *Harper’s Bazaar*) press.

Upon discovery of King Tutankhamen’s tomb, *The New York Times* hailed: “Lord Carnarvon’s discoveries in Egypt have had a tremendous effect upon the styles which will be the vogue next season” (Pharaonic styles, 1923, p. 3). Everyone from apparel and jewelry designers to “coiffure creators, beauty specialists, and cosmetic manufacturers” sought inspiration from Egypt (They watch Egypt, 1923, p. 3). Beyond these stylistic influences, however, the press wondered if America, with its “bobbed-haired beauties [were] linked in some mystic bond with ancient Egypt...” (Wilcox, 1923, p. 9). From sun worship, to the short coif, painted nails, bright red lips to the brightly colored sheath dresses, the fashion and popular press looked to the deeply rooted ancient traditions of Egyptian civilization to justify and explain the myriad societal changes impacting women in the 1920s.

American designers and manufacturers seemed particularly influenced by the Luxor discovery (Luxor, 1923). Alexandre M. Grean, honorary president of the United Cloak and Suit Designers’ Association of America declared, “American fashions are now a success” (Egypt

dominates, 1923, p. 12). He continued that the supply within the U.S. was so great that buyers who traveled to Paris for new models would be “disappointed, as styles have suddenly changed. Paris has not taken up the Egyptian trend as vigorously as the designers of this country” (Egypt dominates, 1923, p.12). Although the discovery of the tomb did not turn American’s interest away from Paris as the fashion capital, the Egyptian craze gave room for American designers to create their own trends. This was evidenced by the flood of applications to the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office to protect clothing design, silk prints, furniture, and jewelry designs inspired and named after Egypt (Tut-ankh-amen bag, 1923).

Despite the profound influence of Egypt on American styles, by 1925 the direct reference to Egypt declined partly due to the amalgamation of *Art Deco* influences on fashion (Models, 1925). Although Egyptian-inspired styles waned, rarely has a news story been used to justify fashion trends for a nation and helped to differentiate the American fashion industry from its competitors.

References

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