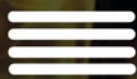


TUTANKHAMUN

DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH



Presses Universitaires de Liège

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TUTANKHAMUN

DISCOVERING THE FORGOTTEN PHARAOH

Catalogue edited by
Simon CONNOR and Dimitri LABOURY

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Jean-Lou Stefan

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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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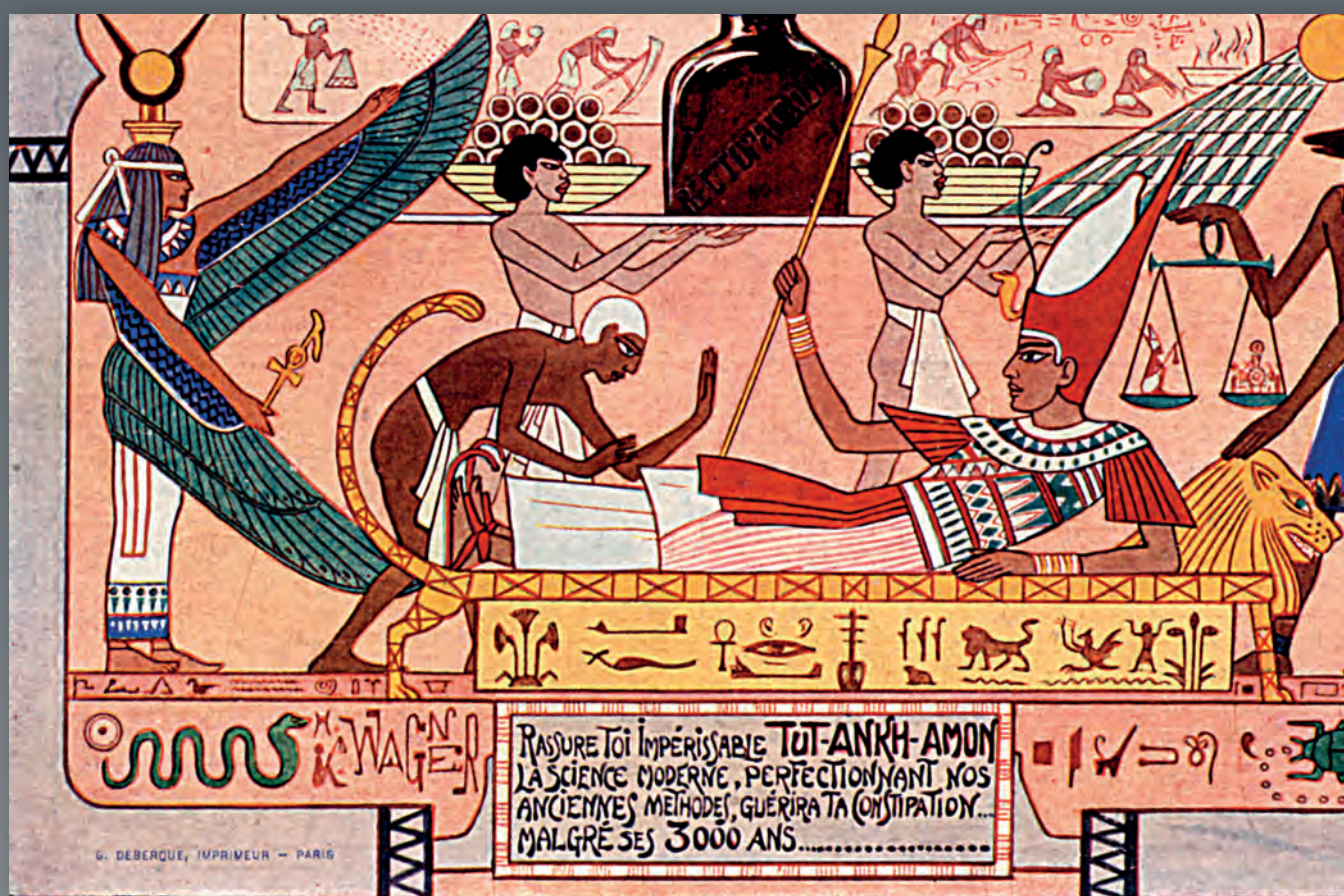
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Resurrecting Tutankhamun

Jean-Michel BRUFFAERTS

Welcome to Tutankhamun's!

A Belgian Touch of Egyptomania in the Roaring Twenties

Who has never seen or heard of *Aida*, the renowned opera by Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi, based on the libretto written by his compatriot Antonio Ghislanzoni and on an original plot conceived by French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette? Since its premiere at the Khedivial Opera House of Cairo in 1871, it has been considered the most successful match between Egyptology and the performing arts. However, are we aware of the fact that half a century later, at a time when Belgium was among the leading countries

in worldwide Egyptology, a team directed by Jean Capart, the pioneer of Belgian Egyptology, managed to put the Egypt of the pharaohs back on stage? A less significant event perhaps, but worthy of being told nonetheless.

In January 1926, the two industrialists Max Vandekerckhove and Gustave Wyns made the acquaintance of Jean Capart, who at the time was professor in Egyptology at the University of Liège and head curator of the *Musées Royaux du Cinquante-naire* in Brussels. It was in this circumstance that

Fig. 1: invitation card of the "Réception chez Toutankhamon" (Brussels, 1926).

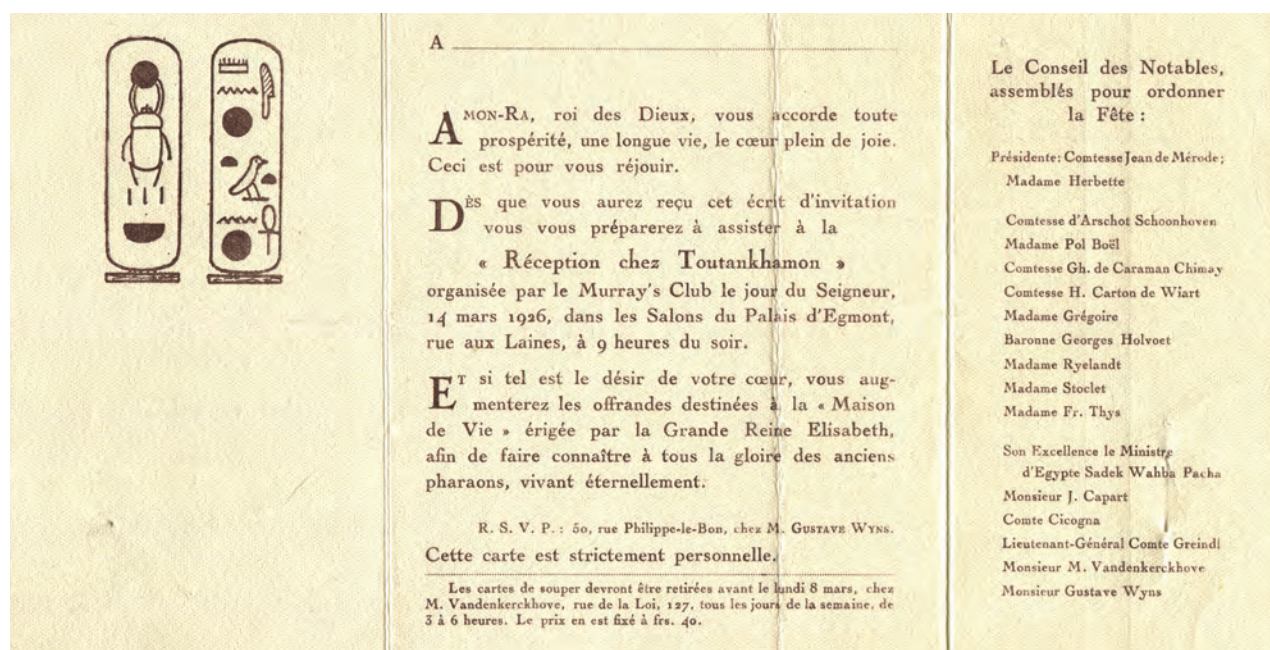




Fig. 2: *Égyptien*. Drawing J. Thiriar used to make the costumes for the "Réception chez Toutankhamon" (1926).



Fig. 3: Princess Marie-José dressed up as an Egyptian princess (Brussels, Palais d'Egmont, March 14th 1926).



Fig. 4: *Libyen*. Drawing J. Thiriar used to make the costumes for the "Réception chez Toutankhamon" (1926).

they confessed to Capart their intention to offer the members of Murray's Club, an association under their direction, a costume party which would have had both an artistic and archaeological character. They asked him to take care of the *mise-en-scene*, the scenic design and the costumes. In exchange, they would have provided material support to the Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth, created by Capart to promote Egyptology in Belgium. Capart accepted.

Reception at Tut-Ankh-Amun's: the name of the party came naturally, given that three years had passed since Capart's journey in the company of Queen Elisabeth and Prince Leopold (the future King Leopold III), for the inauguration of the funerary chamber belonging to the most popular pharaoh of them all, Tutankhamun. A committee was soon set up under the somewhat pompous name of *Conseil des Notables*, while the Library of Antiquities of the Cinquanteenaire soon came up with the documentation relating to Egyptian costumes, hairstyles, accessories and jewellery. Jean Delescluze, the scenographer of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels, worked on set-design, while the painter James Thiriar, the costume designer

working for the same theatre, created costumes with the help of the Egyptologist Marcelle Baud, from Auvergne. Rehearsals went on, one after the other. On stage, all the roles were due to be played either by members of Belgian high society or by Capart's collaborators, namely Marcelle Werbrouck (the first female Egyptologist in Belgium), Éléonore De Mot and Marie Weynants-Rondan. After a few weeks, the "*Tout Bruxelles*" received an invitation letter that looked like having been written by an ancient Egyptian scribe: "Amun-Ra, King of the Gods, offers you all prosperity, a long-lasting life, and a heart filled with joy. This is to rejoice you. As soon as you receive the present letter, you will prepare yourself to come along to the reception at Tut-Ankh-Amun's, organized by Murray's Club, on the day of the Lord, March 14th, 1926, at the halls of the Palais d'Egmont, rue aux Laines, 9.00 PM. And if your heart desires it, you may increase offerings for the "House of the Life", established by the Great Queen Elisabeth, so that the glory of the ancient pharaohs, living in eternity, may be acknowledged by everyone."

Night fell on the Palais d'Egmont, surrounded by photographers and camera operators. Upon entering, each guest was provided with a "papyrus"

that, once unrolled, allowed for a reading of the evening program. The focus was on the guest of honour: the 25-year-old Marie-José, daughter of King Albert and Queen Elisabeth. The Belgian princess, who would become the last Queen of Italy twenty years later, made her appearance completely dressed up as an Egyptian princess. She was wearing a straight dress wrapped up in the golden wings of a sacred bird, and was holding a mirror decorated with the head of the goddess Hathor by its papyrus-shaped handle. One of the guests present found good reason to enthuse: "She is not an Egyptian. Whether princess or simple mortal, she is a true reminder of Egypt." Behind her walked her lady-in-waiting, also dressed up as an Egyptian, and waving a big *flabellum* made of ostrich feathers — a copy from the original of Tutankhamun.

Once the public was seated, the master of ceremony, Jean Capart, took the floor and welcomed the guests, whom he called *Shadows of the Egyptians* ("Ombres des Égyptiens"). He then started off by telling them a popular story from ancient Egypt: the tale of King Ousimares and his son, Satni-Khamois. Thence came the moment of the Summoning, when Tutankhamun "spoke" (with the voice of Capart) to receive the homage of his subjects, and welcome those foreigners who had come in peace from every corner of the Earth. The pharaoh preceded his wife, Ankhesenamun, his mother Nefertiti and her lady-

in-waiting. Hence, the eminent gods and deceased of Egypt appeared, one by one. First came Osiris, together with the four guardian goddesses of the sarcophagus of Tutankhamun (Isis, Nephtys, Neith and Selkhit). Then it was Amun's turn, followed by Amunet, Maat and other goddesses. Last but not least, the high priest of Amun together with two chantresses of Amun. A few Egyptian and Libyan people then wrapped up the parade. Following this summoning, the focus of the entertainment shifted to the ballet company of the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, under the direction of the *ballerino* and choreographer François Ambrosiny. Later on, while the music was playing, the *Shadows of the Egyptians* marched in a procession towards the halls where dinner was served on Egyptian plates, custom-made especially for the occasion by the faïence factory of Ligny. The menu consisted of: "Extract of Apis – Latus rose with fruits of the Great Green – Fowl from the Table of the Gods – Liver of sacred goose from the Temple of Amun – Spring greens – Various desserts from the North and the South." The celebrations continued until late at night, leaving everyone enchanted. The next day the press concurred that it had been a total success.

Echoes of the Tut-Ankh-Amun reception travelled all the way to Egypt. Someone came up with the idea of repeating the celebration in Heliopolis, the green city built in the outskirts of Cairo by the Belgian engineer and industrial Édouard Empain. Once again Capart accepted, but not without hesitation ("To start again is easily said... But one does not try to repeat the same party, especially one of this kind, where the surprise and the unknown played a fundamental role in its being successful"). This time, it would be called *The Egyptian Party*. A new organization committee was set up under the direction of Anny Etty, the wife of Henri Naus bey, the (Belgian) president of the Société Générale des Sucreries et de la Raffinerie d'Égypte, who was also the president of the Fondation Égyptologique Reine Élisabeth.

As Capart reported to the Queen, the preparations were sumptuous: "It is hard to imagine the wealth suggested by the costumes and jewels. I was assured that Tutankhamun spent more than two



Fig. 5: pectoral necklace made for the ball of 1926 on the advice of Jean Capart after an original jewel of Queen Mereret kept at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (JE 30875). Private collection.

thousand pounds for his outfit. Madam Naus was looking for vulture feathers in every shop. In the end, we told her: ‘Do you really want them?’ — ‘Yes’ — ‘Well then, let’s go hunting.’ And the next day we were shooting down vultures to decorate hairstyles.”

On the evening of March 10th, 1927, it was the turn of the sumptuous Heliopolis Palace to open its vast hall and glowing galleries to a crowd of curious individuals, who did not hesitate to spend a fortune just to participate. Accompanied by the sound of Theban trumpets, Jean Capart (once again promoted to master of ceremonies), appeared on the steps of a still empty stage under the guise of the famous “mayor of the village” Ka-Aper, whose name phonetically resembled his own. After having recited his script, he invited the many protagonists of the scene, all members of the local élite, to step out and speak. He emphatically asked them to temporarily bring back the glory of the past. He then went on to bless the gathering and disappeared, leaving the stage to the performance of ancient dances. Towards the end of the show, he made his last appearance, while actors and extra performers mingled with the crowd. The Heliopolitan night would be a long-lasting one. And, just like in Brussels one year earlier, it was a resounding success: “The sumptuous reception at Tut-Ankh-Amun’s. A wonderful celebration of art and a breathtaking evocation”, were the headlines in the next morning’s issue of *Le Journal du Caire*, while *La Bourse égyptienne* on its part, called

it “A splendid reception at the pharaoh Tut-Ankh-Amun’s.” Not only, but the party also turned out to be a popular matter of discussion for a long time; Capart himself, no doubt, went back to it with his mind two days later, when he attended the Cairo Opera House and a performance of...*Aida*.

Looking back on the successes of 1926 and 1927, Jean Capart decided for a third project in 1930 — an even more lavish show to be hosted in Alexandria, in the presence of the Belgian and Egyptian rulers. The actress-protagonists of this spectacle were planned to be authentic Egyptian princesses: the daughters of King Fuad. However, this idea was turned down by Belgian diplomacy, and the project fell in the way-side. Jean Capart’s incursion into the performing arts ended as the Roaring Twenties came to a close. In the meantime, the pioneer of Belgian Egyptology won his bet: just as the Egypt of Ramesses resounded in all its glory in the *Aida* of his colleague Mariette, so did Tutankhamun’s Egypt answer the call to come back to life twice, first in Brussels and then in Heliopolis. Thanks to him, Belgium was able to bring once again a unique touch to the world of Egyptomania, and to express its fascination for Tutankhamun and the place where he was born.

FURTHER READING

On egyptomania, see Humbert, Pantazzi & Ziegler 1994; Warmenbol 2012.

Fig. 6: the “Réception chez Toutankhamon” (Brussels, Palais d’Egmont, March 14th 1926).

