

## Nefertiti not Beautiful?

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### Nefertiti not Beautiful?

نفرتيتي غير جميلة؟

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### Abstract

The famous bust of Nefertiti in Berlin is hailed for showing her marvelous beauty which stands in hard contrast to the reputation of the Amarna art of showing a caricature-like exaggerated realism, that has even been described as deliberately depicting the people ugly. Examining the criteria of beauty for the artistic representation of royal women especially in sculpture from the Old Kingdom until the mid of the 18th Dynasty just before the Amarna period reveals the prevalence of an interesting beauty ideal. Nefertiti's famous bust doesn't meet these beauty standards.

**Key-words:** Nefertiti, Akhenaten, Amarna art, bust, beauty standard

### المخلص

لطالما تمت الإشادة بالتمثال النصفي الشهير لنفرتيتي في برلين لإظهاره جمالها الرائع، الأمر الذي يتناقض بشدة مع ملامح فن العمارة التي أظهرت واقعية مبالغ فيها تشبه الرسوم الهزلية، والتي وصفت بأنها تصور البشر عمداً بملامح قبيحة. ودراسة نسب الجمال للأعمال الفنية التي تمثل سيدات البيت المالكة، خاصة أعمال النحت من عصر الدولة القديمة حتى منتصف الأسرة الثامنة عشرة قبل عصر العمارة مباشرة، تظهر أنه يغلب عليها معايير جمال ذات طابع خاص، لا يتوافق معها التمثال النصفي الشهير لنفرتيتي.

**الكلمات الدالة :** نفرتيتي، اخناتون، فن العمارة، تمثال نصفي ، معايير الجمال

### Introduction

Numerous literature including main reference books about history of ancient Egyptian art have described the outstanding beauty and the appeal of the bust of Queen Nefertiti in the Neues Museum Berlin<sup>1</sup>. The literal translation of Nefertiti's name "the beautiful has

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<sup>1</sup>For an extensive account of literature hailing the beauty of the Bust of Queen Nefertiti in Berlin see: Tyldesley, J., Nefertiti's Face. The Creation of an Icon, Profile Books LTD, London 2018, especially 88-136

come" has subconsciously added to the conception of the bust in Berlin as a beautiful woman, although it is an ancient Egyptian birthname, possibly referring to the festival of some feminine divinity<sup>2</sup>. W. Wolf pointed out that the appeal of the bust does not only derive from the beauty of the features, but also from the esthetic form of the head seen in the profile resting on the thin neck and carrying the heavy back leaning crown: "Die Ausgewogenheit des straffen Aufbaus kommt im Profil voll zum Tragen: die schwer nach hinten lastende Krone, die in einem scharfen Winkel gegen die wundervolle, durch keinen Rückenfehler beeinträchtigte Nackenlinie hin verläuft und das auf schlankem Halse nach vorn strebende Gesicht. Es verbindet kühle Anmut mit nervöser Spannung, die zwar betont, aber nicht überspitzt in Erscheinung tritt. Darauf und nicht etwa nur auf der frischen Erhaltung der Farben dürfte die enorme ästhetische Wirkung beruhen, die das Bildnis auf ein bereites Publikum der Gegenwart ausübt"<sup>3</sup>. But was Nefertiti meant to appear beautiful in this bust?

## **1. Amarna art as a statement of change**

It is obvious that the Amarna art was supposed to differ clearly from previous art, especially by the exaggeration of the facial features, the elongated back of the skull, the thin arms and legs, the full hips and the form of the belly. It is the visualization of a powerful statement of fundamental religious, political and social change, that starts deliberately exaggerated to obtain the intended attention and softens in later phases of the Amarna art but always remaining loyal, though attenuated, to the initial statement.

### **1.1. Caricature-like naturalism**

Describing the new appearance of Akhenaton, G. Steindorff states that the image of an ugly human has taken the place of that of a beautiful half-god. In full awareness the artist turned away from the former beautifying artistic style and tried to create a new form of the royal image that seems to be more inspired by the real life appearance of the King. This led to the other extreme which resulted in an untamed, caricature-like naturalism, which was then quickly reduced again into a milder form that produced the marvelous Amarna portraits of Akhenaten and his family, which conveying the impression of personality are more appealing to the modern spectator<sup>4</sup>. H. Schäfer claims that the Amarna period produced almost expressionist figures<sup>5</sup>, while D. Wildung remarks that

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<sup>2</sup> Redford, D. B., Akhenaten The Heretic King, Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey 1984, 78

<sup>3</sup> Wolf, W., Die Kunst Ägyptens Gestalt und Geschichte, Stuttgart 1957, 457

<sup>4</sup> Steindorff, G., Die Kunst der Ägypter. Bauten Plastik Kunstgewerbe, Leipzig 1928, p. 72-73

<sup>5</sup> Schäfer, H., Principles of Egyptian Art, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1974, 19-20

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the royal appearance of Akhenaten with exaggerated features becomes the guideline for representing a human being, and that the main features of his portrait dominate the depictions of the queen and the royal daughters and eventually all human figures<sup>6</sup>.

### 1.2. Nefertiti represented in conventional manner

Amenhotep IV himself is represented during his much debated possible co-regency with his father Amenhotep III and in the early years of his own reign in the traditional contemporary way<sup>7</sup> until around the 5<sup>th</sup> year he changes his name into Akhenaten and appears together with his wife Nefertiti in the new fashion<sup>8</sup>. Before the 5<sup>th</sup> year she is again associated with beauty as the title "*nfr-nfrw-iten*" is conferred on her, but the name here which is translated "exquisite beauty of the sun-disc"<sup>9</sup> refers to the beauty of Aton and not the beauty of Nefertiti.

In the early phase of the Amarna art the "new" different features of representing especially the royal couple are shown very strongly, underlining the difference to the previous period and its representation of ideal royal features.

At least in one instance at the beginning of introducing the new art style Nefertiti is depicted in a conventional manner with full cheeks, fleshy lips, a normal rounded chin and wide eyes (fig. 1) while her husband already is represented in the new style. A transitional style follows, where Nefertiti's face starts transforming into the "new" image of Amenhotep IV concerning the eyes, the lips and the chin but maintaining the full cheeks as is visible on "Talatat" blocks from the *gm(t) p3 Itn* at Karnak (Munich ÄS4231-7261) (fig. 2)<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> Wildung, D., Die Kunst des alten Ägypten, Freiburg im Breisgau 1988, 180

<sup>7</sup> Amenhotep IV is represented in the traditional royal image for example south side of the west wall in the Tomb of Ramose (TT55), see: Davies, N. de G., The Tomb of the Vizier Ramose, London 1941, Pl. XXIX; and also on a block found by Lepsius in the 10<sup>th</sup> Pylon of Karnak (BerlinÄM 2072) together with Aton in an early depiction as a human figure with a falcons head topped by the sun disk nearly encircled by the Uraeus, see: Ridley, R. T., Akhenaten A historian's view, Cairo, New York 2019, 49 with Fig. 19

<sup>8</sup> Dodson, A., Amarna Sunset. Nefertiti, Tutankhamun, Ay, Horemheb, and the Egyptian Counter-Reformation, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo New York, 2009, 8-9

<sup>9</sup> Redford, Akhenaten The Heretic King, 79

<sup>10</sup> Dodson, A., Nefertiti Queen and Pharaoh of Egypt. Her Life and Afterlife, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo New York, 2020, 11-12



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

(Fig. 1 & 2 show details from photos after: Dodson, A., Nefertiti Queen and Pharaoh of Egypt, p.11 fig. 9 & p.12 fig. 10)

### 1.3. Nefertiti represented with facial features very similar to Akhenaten

Reliefs in tombs, temples and on stelae depict Nefertiti with very similar facial features to her husband with large ears, lips and narrow almond shaped eyes (figs. 3). Very striking, because unusual for ancient Egyptian art, are the hollow cheeks and sharp elevated cheekbones. A difference occurs in the later phase of the Amarna art in the representation of the chin. The lower line of the face in the representation of Nefertiti then goes straight from the chin to the neck without showing the very distinctive and down hanging chin of Akhenaten. Especially the early depiction of Nefertiti loses any realism or personalized features and becomes often a mere copy of the image of her husband to highlight further the Amarna art statement that concentrates on conveying new religious messages and accentuating the Aten with the rays projecting from the sun-disc and ending in human hands. Realistic individual facial features and beauty are abandoned in favor of the Amarna art statement.



Fig. 3 Nefertiti with very similar facial features to her husband (EMC RT 10.11.26.4)  
(Fig. 3 photo by author)

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## 2. Standards for presenting feminine beauty

Apart from the well known conventional coloring of the skin with a reddish brown color for men and a pale yellow color for noble women, which is an idealized skin coloring that doesn't reflect the real skin color<sup>11</sup> and is also maintained in examples from the Amarna art, there are several standard features for representing a noble or royal woman. These features, obviously reflecting a conception of feminine beauty have prevailed throughout ancient Egyptian history except for the Amarna Period.

### 2.1. From the Old Kingdom onwards

Since the Old Kingdom fleshy faces, full cheeks, large eyes and thick necks in sculptures of royal ladies were obviously considered signs of beauty. Already the statue of Princess Redji (Turin C. 3065) (fig. 4) from the 3rd dynasty and then dating to the 4th dynasty the statue of Nofret (EMC CG 4) wife of Rahotep show exactly these features (figs. 5 & 6). The face of a Queen, wife of king Menkaura in a perfectly preserved statue showing the couple (Boston 11.1738) (fig. 7) and the faces of Goddess Hathor as well as the female representative of the 7th Upper Egyptian nome, together with King Menkaura (EMC triad JE 46499) (fig. 8) show again that this was the conception of female beauty. Statue of Queen Nofret (EMC JE 37487=CG381) (fig. 9) wife of Sesostris II follows the same tradition.



Fig. 4 Princess Redji



Fig. 5 Lady Nofret



Fig. 6 Nofret (detail)

(Fig. 4 photo courtesy of the Museo Egizio Turin; figs 5, 6 photos by author)

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<sup>11</sup>Wolf, Die Kunst Aegyptens Gestalt und Geschichte, 137-138



Fig. 7 Wife of Menkaura



Fig. 8 Triad of Menkaura



Fig. 9 Queen Nofret

(Fig. 7 detail from: <https://www.mfa.org/collections/ancient-egypt-nubia-and-the-near-east>, cover photo accessed 30.11.2023; figs. 8,9 photos by author)

## **2.2. Statues of Queens in the early and mid-18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty**

The royal portrait in the early New Kingdom gradually refines to reach its peak in the time of Queen Hatshepsut then Thutmose III and especially in the art of the time of Amenhotep III. Marvelous royal sculptures show Hatshepsut as a male ruler yet with discrete feminine aspects<sup>12</sup>. followed by the fine, still determine features of Thutmose III and then the majestic appearance of Amenhotep III. This also applies to the representations of royal women who mostly appear with fleshy faces, full cheeks and thick necks. Statues like the ones of Senay with her husband Sennefer (EMC JE 36574 = CG 42126) (fig. 10), Manana with her husband Khaemwas (EMC JE 87911) (fig. 11), lady Henut-Nakhtu (EMC JE 6056 = CG 804) (fig. 12) and the mask of Thuya (EMC JE 95254 = CG 51009) (fig. 13) mother of Queen Tiye. They all show the women with these same features indicating that these were the criteria of female beauty according to the taste of that time and their wish for eternal youth. Usually the age was intentionally not specified, which is why Queen Mutneferet (EMC CG 572) (fig. 14), wife of Thutmose I and mother of Thutmose II, as well as Queen Iset (EMC JE37417=CG42072) (fig. 15) mother of Thutmose III and Queen Tio beside her son Thutmose IV (EMC CG42080) are represented with a lively young face. It is the appearance they wished for when they would be resurrected for the second life after death. The first indications of change appear already at the end of the reign of king Amenhotep III, visible in the statue of Amenhotep son of Hapu (EMC JE 38368 = CG 42127) represented as an aged man of eighty years.

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<sup>12</sup> Roehrig C. H., *Hatshepsut From Queen to Pharaoh*, Yale University Press, New Haven & London 2005, 158-173



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Fig. 10 Lady Senay



Fig. 11 Lady Manana



Fig. 12 Lady Henut-Nakhtu

(Figs.10, 11, 12 are details from photos after: Saleh, M. & Sourouzian, H., The Egyptian Museum Cairo (official catalogue), objects 140, 152, 155)



Fig. 13 Lady Thuya

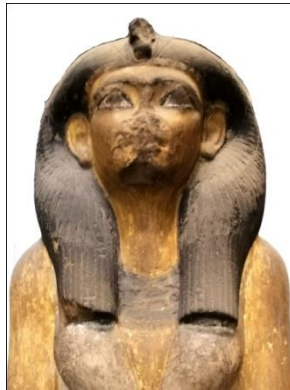


Fig.14 Queen Mutneferet



Fig. 15 Queen Iset

(Figs. 13, 14 photos by author, fig.15 detail from photo after: Saleh, M. & Sourouzian, H., The Egyptian Museum Cairo (official catalogue), object137)

### 3.The bust of Nefertiti in Berlin in comparison

Returning to the famous bust of Nefertiti in Berlin (ÄM 21300)(fig. 16), we find that these traditional norms of female beauty were on purpose not used: the face is thin and elongated, the cheekbones are lifted high and the cheeks are not full, the neck is long and the eyes are comparatively small and narrow, while age is indicated by visible veins on both sides of the neck, aging eyelids, barely visible thin lines going from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth and lines going from the inner corner of the eyes towards the cheeks.



Fig. 16 Bust of Nefertiti

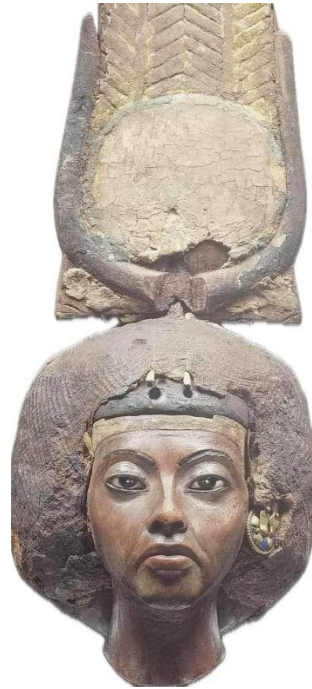


Fig. 17 Tiye

(Figs. 16, 17 details from photos after: Lepper V. M. (edit.), *Persönlichkeiten aus dem Alten Ägypten im Neuen Museum*, p.21 fig. 12, p.25 fig. 15b)

### 3.1 Comparison to representations of Queen Tiye

This is not only the case with Nefertiti but looking at the wooden head of Queen Tiye (Berlin ÄM 21834) (fig. 17), which presumably comes from the site of Medinet Ghurab, one can see clear similarities. It is the head of an elderly woman on a thin neck, with narrow, slanting eyes, heavy eyelids, lips prominently downturned at the corners<sup>13</sup> and deep lines reaching between her nose and the corners of the mouth pointing out the cheeks. Different than Nefertiti she maintains her rounded full cheeks from her stereotype initial appearance. The same cheeks are also distinctly shown in her small green steatite head from Serabit el-Khadim (JE 38257)<sup>14</sup> (fig. 18) that dates roughly in the same time.

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<sup>13</sup>Fay B., *Egyptian Museum Berlin (catalogue)*, Philip von Zabern, Mainz 1986, 50; Lepper V. M. (edit.), *Persönlichkeiten aus dem Alten Ägypten im Neuen Museum*, Michael Imhof Verlag, Petersberg 2014, 18

<sup>14</sup>Saleh M. & Sourouzian H., *The Egyptian Museum Cairo (official catalogue)*, Philipp von Zabern, Mainz 1987, object 144



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Fig . 18 Queen Tiye from Serabit el-Khadim

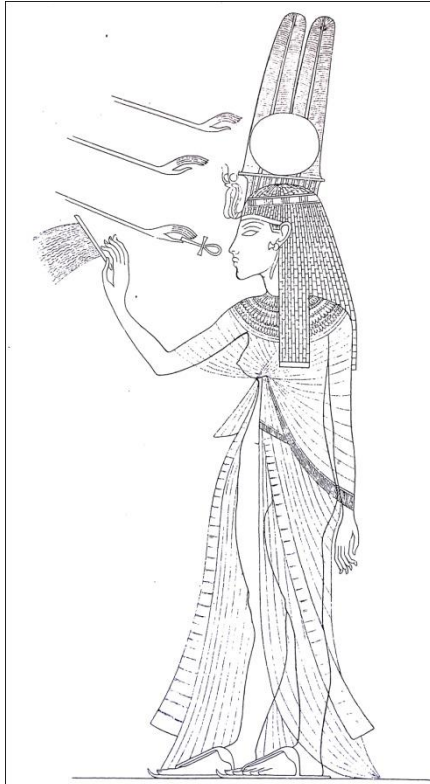


Fig. 19 Queen Tiye relief (KV 55)

(Fig. 18 detail from photo after: Saleh, M. & Sourouzian, H., *The Egyptian Museum Cairo* (official catalogue), object144; fig. 19 after: Davis, T. M., *The Tomb of Queen Tiye . The Discovery of the Tomb*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1990, Pl. XXXIII)

A shrine stela showing Amenhotep III and his wife Queen Tiye seated in front of a loaded offering table (BM EA 57399) was discovered in the house of the high official Panehsy (house R.44.2) in Tell el-Amarna. Amenhotep III is shown in Amarna art style as possibly an elderly king. His wife beside him is depicted it seems similarly aged (Unfortunately most of the body from the waist up and parts of the head are missing). It has been suggested that Amenhotep III might be represented here as a creator god<sup>15</sup> which leaves open the question whether the wife Queen Tiye, also played a religious role.

In the so-called Tomb of Queen Tiye, also known as the Amarna Cache (KV 55) parts of a gilded wooden shrine of Queen Tiye were discovered. On one of the gilded panels Queen Tiye is depicted behind her son Akhenaten (who was in the aftermath of the

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<sup>15</sup> Strudwick, N., *Masterpieces of Ancient Egypt from the British Museum*, AUC Press, Cairo 2006, 180

Amarna period completely hacked out) offering to Aton<sup>16</sup>. Queen Tiye is shown here in the typical Amarna style in a way nearly identical to the representations of Nefertiti (fig. 19 ). A unique power equal to that of the king demonstrated by either or both queens is doubted by J. Tyldesley<sup>17</sup>. But actually this distinct way of showing a queen in the Amarna period can be seen as yet another part of the Amarna art statement and makes us wonder in what ways Nefertiti had taken over political and possibly religious status, duties and privileges from Queen Tiye, which is indicated by this very similar appearance in the representation of the facial features, the indication of elder age, the body posture and the royal headdress including the sun-disc with the two tall feathers.

### **3.2 The bust of Nefertiti as guiding model for artisans**

According to the division of the Amarna art into three phases suggested by Aldred the bust of Nefertiti in Berlin would have been produced in the third and final phase after regnal year 12 of Akhenaten<sup>18</sup>. Before, Nefertiti had gradually in her depictions lost the drooping chin and the deep furrows from the areas around the mouth, while acquiring a square jaw and straighter lips. Unlike before the blue crown of the queen also tends to extend her head upward rather than backward<sup>19</sup>.

The bust in Berlin shows the head with the blue crown, the neck and the clavicle just above the breasts used as a base for the bust. It has thus been interpreted as a guiding model in the workshop of Thutmose for the production of other statues or reliefs providing a standard image of the queen<sup>20</sup>. This again would mean that the bust was still reflecting the initial statement of the Amarna art that started with a caricature-like naturalism, that cannot be described as beautiful. The bust's fascination attributed to an androgynous appearance (mixture of male and female traits) suggested by McGuinness<sup>21</sup> fits with the initial early relief representations showing Akhenaten and Nefertiti with similar facial features and stands in clear distance from conventional art standards showing the royal female image.

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<sup>16</sup> Davis, T. M., *The Tomb of Queen Tiye . The Discovery of the Tomb*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1990, KMT Communications, San Francisco 1990, vi

<sup>17</sup> Tyldesley, J., *op. cit.*, 86-87

<sup>18</sup> Cyril Aldred, *Akhenaten and Nefertiti*, Thames and Hudson, London and New York 1973, 48-66

<sup>19</sup> Arnold, D., *The Royal Women of Amarna. Images of Beauty from Ancient Egypt*, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York 1996, 38-39.

<sup>20</sup> Discussed by Ashton, S.-A. , *Egyptian Sculptors' Models:: functions and fashions in the 18th Dynasty*, in J. Bourriau & J. Phillips, eds, *Invention and Innovation. The Social Context of Technological Change*, vol II: Egypt, the Aegean and the Near East, 1650-1150 B.C. Oxbow Books, Oxford 2016, 176-199

<sup>21</sup> McGuinness, K., *Drag Queen: The Liminal Sex of the Bust of Queen Nefertiti*, *EuGeStA* 5, 2015, 2-13

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Hawass, referring to the famous head of Nefertiti in Berlin and the quartzite unfinished head in Cairo (JE59286) dating towards the end of Akhenaten's reign, states that "had not the two later portraits of Nefertiti survived, we would know her only as a grotesquely bottom-heavy matron"<sup>22</sup>.

### 4. Return to traditional female beauty representations

Already in the time of Akhenaten's immediate successors the representation of royal women and goddesses returns rapidly to previous criteria of beauty. Thick necks, fleshy faces, rounded cheeks, full lips and large eyes become the beauty standard again and remain until the end of dynastic Egypt and even beyond. On the gilded throne of Tutankhamun the facial features of his wife Ankhesenamun already show the tendency towards the conventional art traditions with the cheeks filling up and the eyes getting wider again (fig. 20). Mainly the thin neck, the long nose and the emphasized chin are reminiscent of the Amarna art. Dyad statues of Amun and Mut in the Karnak and Luxor temples bare the facial features of Tutankhamun and Ankhesenamun, later usurped by Horemheb, still mildly reflecting the mature Amarna art style but reverting in general to pre-Amarna proportions of the human image<sup>23</sup>. Dodson identifies the colossal statue of a queen discovered and re-erected in Akhmim as Tey wife of king Ay and reinscribed for Rameses II's daughter Meryetamun<sup>24</sup> (fig. 21). In this huge statue only the oversized facial features with the narrow eyes remained of Amarna. With Horemheb everything returns completely to conventional pre-Amarna art standards. The image of his wife Queen Mutnedjemet in their statue (Turin C.1379) (fig. 22) almost entirely reverts to the standards of traditional art and does not show any Amarna art influence concerning the facial features anymore. She has the fleshy face with rounded cheeks, the large eyes and the thick neck. All these criteria that the ancient Egyptians seem to have deemed beautiful for a woman continue in the time of the Ramessides, then throughout the late Period and become even more accentuated in the Ptolemaic Period.

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<sup>22</sup> Zahi Hawass, *Silent Images. Women in Pharaonic Egypt*, Cairo 1995, 213

<sup>23</sup> Robins, G., *Proportion and style in Ancient Egyptian Art*, Thames & Hudson, London 1994, 148-155

<sup>24</sup> Dodson, A., *Amarna Sunset. Nefertiti, Tutankhamun, Ay, Horemheb, and the Egyptian Counter-Reformation*, The American University in Cairo Press, Cairo New York, 2009, 103



Fig. 20 Ankhesenamun

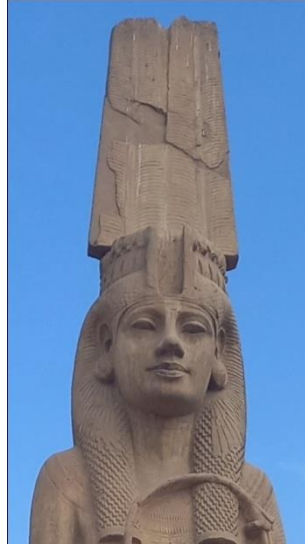


Fig. 21 Tye



Fig. 22 Mutnedjemet

(Fig. 20 detail from photo after: James, T. G. H., Tutankhamun. The Eternal Splendor of the Boy Pharaoh, AUC Press, Cairo 2000, 12; fig. 21 photo by author; fig. 22 photo courtesy of the Museo Egizio Turin)

## Conclusion

Regardless whether Nefertiti in reality was a beautiful woman or not, which is subjective to personal taste and beauty criteria of the society of her time and will remain concealed for us, the question is whether the bust of Nefertiti in Berlin was supposed to show her as a beautiful woman or not. In comparison to beauty criteria of royal women representations prevailing from the Old Kingdom until the time of Amenhotep III she does not meet these beauty norms. She appeals to the taste of visitors today as she meets modern, mainly western, beauty standards and criteria. Although the bust was probably produced in the final softer phase of the Amarna art it remained loyal to the initial Amarna art statement showing a very different representation of human appearance. The thin neck, the high cheekbones, the small eyes and the veins reflecting age were not at all in compliance with the traditional youthful appearance of women representations throughout ancient Egyptian art with their thick necks, fleshy faces, rounded cheeks, full lips and large eyes.

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