

The Allure of Ancient Egyptian Jewelry

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For centuries, the West has been attracted to the exotic lands of the East and the cultures of the ancient world. One of the most intriguing is ancient Egypt, an African civilization that flourished during the third through the first millennium BC. In its prime, it was respected, revered, and sometimes feared. Neighboring lands were in awe of its powerful leadership, majestic architectural wonders, imposing statuary, and sophisticated decorative arts with its curious iconography and even stranger hieroglyphics. For many, Egypt held the key to understanding the world's deepest mysteries.

It was the Phoenicians (ca. 1500-300 BC), a seafaring people who lived along the Mediterranean coast in city-states now part of Lebanon, Syria, and northern Israel, who first capitalized on the fascination with all things Egyptian, especially those small objects that were easily shipped and traded. Early entrepreneurs, they served as middlemen stopping at ports in North Africa, Cyprus, Crete, the Cyclades, mainland Greece, and parts of Mesopotamia. Among the goods they bartered were raw materials, Phoenician-made glass, and an array of Egyptian adornments composed of beads and amulets fabricated from metal, stone, faience, and glass. Amuletic forms that especially resonated with Phoenician trading partners were representations of household gods, the healing (sacred) eye of Horus, and the scarab. The latter was a potent symbol of rebirth and rejuvenation based on the life-cycle of the dung beetle (*scarabaeus sacer*) whose activities the Egyptians associated with the life-giving sun. Three-dimensional representations of scarabs, typically pierced for stringing and incorporated into rings, necklaces, pectorals, and bracelets, had been a mainstay of Egyptian jewelry since the second millennium BC and by end of the first millennium, can be found throughout the ancient Near East. Not all of these were Egyptian in origin – in fact, both the Greeks and the Etruscans had adopted or “borrowed” the beetle form which they inscribed with base designs that were meaningful within the context of their own

culture. Most of these were made of hard stone, such as amethyst or carnelian,¹ and are easily differentiated from their Egyptian prototypes by their high profiles and decorative undersides (fig. 1). Other aspects of Egyptian culture, including temple architecture, literature, and religious ideology, also influenced surrounding lands which adopted aspects of what was once a mighty empire.



Figure 1: Etruscan scarab, carnelian, ca. 450 BC, Met. Museum of Art 48.11.1 (public domain)

Cultural borrowing, however, is different from revivalism, a movement in which the styles and motifs of the historic past are rediscovered, adapted, and re-interpreted in accordance with prevailing ideologies. It began in earnest during the Renaissance, a time characterized by a renewed interest in the Classical world, especially the thoughts

¹ Egyptian scarabs were largely made of faience or glazed steatite although hard stones, including rock crystal, amethyst, carnelian, and lapis lazuli, were sometimes used.

and views expressed in Greek and Roman literature.² By the 18th century, travelers, scholars, and artists had expanded their fascination with the past to include Egypt. Even in antiquity, the Great Pyramid of King Khufu at Giza (ca. 2500 BC) was one of the Wonders of the Ancient World and remained the tallest, man-made structure until the 19th century. For millennia, it was a favorite stop for tourists.



Figure 2: MetMuseum 41.71.1.20 [53] (public domain)

An early Egyptophile who aroused an interest among his contemporaries for all things Egyptian was Giambattista Piranesi (1720-1778), an Italian printmaker who was known for his mural designs for the Caffè degl' Inglesi in the Piazza di Spagna in Rome (fig. 2). Several of his etchings were published in book form, spreading his fanciful, and

² The ancient Romans were among the first to demonstrate an interest in the art, architecture, and literature of the past, often copying Greek sculpture and removing Egyptian antiquities from Egypt to Italy where they were prominently displayed. See James Stevens Curl, *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival, a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste* (Manchester and New York: The Manchester Press, 1994), 12-36.

sometimes incongruent, interpretations of Pharaonic culture. However, he did get some things right – namely, the Egyptian predilection for bilateral symmetry, the orientation of body parts, and the attributes of gods and goddesses. The rest is a hodgepodge of images taken out of context. In Piranesi's work, we find the general rule for the different Egyptian revivals – the images need to be recognizably Egyptian – but they don't have to make sense from an Egyptological point of view.

The rage for all things Egyptian began in earnest with Napoleon's Egyptian Expedition in 1798. Along with his army, he brought approximately 160 scholars, scientists, and artists with the intention of documenting Egypt's illustrious past. One was Dominique-Vivant Denon, a diplomat and artist whose drawings were published shortly after his return to Paris following Napoleon's defeat by the British at the Battle of the Nile in 1799.³ A more extensive publishing project carried out by Napoleon's civilian team, the twelve volumes of the *Description de l'Égypte*, was completed in 1828. The public was entranced by the depth of Egypt's splendors depicted in this monumental publication and for the next century French art and culture would continue to admire and reference it.

In all likelihood, one of Denon's illustrations was the source consulted for one of the few known Egyptian revival adornments made in the first quarter of the 19th century. Made in France around 1825, the ornament is composed of six gold and enamel plaques featuring stylized Egyptian gods, goddesses, and emblems. These elements were once joined by gold hoops and worn as a bracelet or necklace. The designer is unknown although the piece was once in the collection of the Art Nouveau jeweler, Henri Vever (1854-1942). What's interesting is that Egyptian themes appear earlier in the decorative arts, notably furniture and ceramics, and relatively late in personal adornment. One reason may be that Napoleon's wife, the stylish Joséphine de Beauharnais (1763-1814), preferred dress and jewelry inspired by Greek and Roman designs. She may have reclined on a settee with Egyptian-style animal legs, but her diaphanous, high-waisted dress was most likely augmented by a cameo suite in the ancient Greek or Roman style.

Egypt was again the subject of world-wide interest during the 1860s. The Suez Canal project, which allowed for two-way water transportation between Europe and Asia, was a monumental undertaking that took nearly eleven years to construct. Completed in 1869, it had an immediate and dramatic effect on world trade. Egypt was also on

³ Denon's publication, *Voyage dans la Basse and la Haute Egypte*, appeared in 1802.

display at the 1867 “Exposition Universelle” in Paris where an entire “Egyptian Park” was reconstructed. It featured an ancient temple designed by the noted French Egyptologist, Auguste Mariette (1821-1881), that included an avenue of sphinxes as well as a triumphal arch. An engraving by M. Lancelot illustrates the grand interior of the temple, including casework with exhibits of genuine antiquities on loan from the Bulaq Museum. It was published in *Le Magasin Pittoresque*, further insuring public awareness of Egypt’s glorious past.

Historians cannot underestimate the importance of the international expositions in exposing artists and the general public to new ideas. In 1867 actual antiquities attracted attention. By the time of the 1878 “Exposition Universelle”, displays of revivalist art – art inspired by the ancient past – were found throughout the exposition grounds. Most popular with the thousands of visitors who attended the event were the spectacular jewels created by leading European jewelers, including the London jeweler, John Brogden (1842-1885), the Parisian designer Frédéric Boucheron (1830-1902), and Italian firm of Castellani (1814-1930). By the 1870s, the Castellani family – Fortunato Pio and his sons Alessandro and Augusto – were well-known for their revivalist, ‘archaeological’ ornaments and their shop in Rome’s Piazza di Trivoli was a favorite stop for those making the “Grand Tour”. The firm had access to the Campana collection of antiquities which included dozens of adornments that served as the source of many of their designs. They also re-discovered the fine art of granulation (the technique of attaching tiny gold granules to a metal base) and perfected the labor-intensive technique of using miniscule glass tesserae (micromosaics) to create intricate designs and landscapes of ancient ruins. Alessandro would eventually open shops in Paris, London, and Naples. Other firms in Europe also included revivalist jewelry among their wares while in the United States revivalism was more eclectic, with many adornments combing motifs from a range of ancient sources.

Archaeological excavations at Egyptian sites conducted during the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Western nations were also of great interest to decorative arts designers. Jewelers marveled at the extraordinary adornments found in several Middle Kingdom burials (about 2000 BC), including the stunning ornaments made of gold and semiprecious stones from the tomb of Princess Khnumet at Dahshur⁴ and a cache

⁴ The burial of Princess Khnumet was discovered in 1894-95 by the French archaeologist, Jacques de Morgan, in the pyramid field of Amenemhat II (about 1925-1895 BC) at Dahshur.

of sparkling jewels from the tomb of Princess Sithathoriunet at el-Lahun.⁵ The latter was discovered by the British School of Archaeology in Egypt and the finds were lavishly published in leading newspapers around the world. In 1916, the majority of the jewels from this trove were acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art (fig. 3).



Figure 3: Metropolitan Museum of Art, Sithathoriunet's pectoral necklace 16.1.3a, b (public domain)

Among the jewelers and design houses inspired by the spectacular finds from Egypt were several American firms, including Black, Starr & Frost (1810-present), Tiffany & Co. (1837-present), and Marcus & Co. (1895-1942) [Tiffany Archives, 1870 brooch in the form of an Egyptian queen, A2002.18]. These luxury-goods houses were on the cutting edge of high-end jewelry design and their ornaments were often copied by smaller firms. A typical example is a ladies' belt buckle of cast silver fabricated by R. Blackinton & Co. (1862-1967) around 1910 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 2008.1044). The buckle features a winged scarab as well as stylized lotus blossoms with

⁵ Flinders Petrie and Guy Brunton excavated the 12th dynasty pyramid complex at el-Lahun in 1914. In the tomb of Princess Sithathoriunet (reign of King Senwosret II (1887-1878 BC)), they found boxes filled with jewelry and cosmetic items located in a niche that had eluded earlier tomb robbers.

buds. Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933), son of Charles Tiffany and the founder of Tiffany Studios, incorporated Egyptian themes in his “art jewelry” as well as his home (Laurelton Hall) in Oyster Bay, New York. A 1908 *Jewelers’ Circular Weekly* article, a leading American trade magazine, noted that “the jeweler is resuscitating” a number of Egyptian motifs, especially that of the scarab.⁶

By the time Lord Carnavon and Howard Carter discovered the tomb of Tutankhamen in 1922, there was already a fascination with Egyptian history, monuments, material culture, and religion. However, news of the marvelous contents of Tutankhamen’s burial created an Egyptian craze, dubbed in the press as Egyptomania. Although the tomb had been plundered in antiquity, the looters were discovered and the goods returned to the king’s final resting place in the Valley of the Kings. Among them were dozens of ornaments, including finger rings, earrings, necklaces, collars, bracelets, and pectorals – all in addition to the king’s golden funerary mask and inlaid coffin. The jewelry was made of gold, silver, semi-precious stones, glass, and faience – a colorful quartz-based, glazed ceramic.

Nearly overnight, references to ancient Egypt became part of popular culture and an integral part of the geometricized Art Deco style. Movie theater facades and interiors influenced by Egyptian architecture were built in several cities, including the Carlton Cinema in Islington, London and the Fox Theatre in Atlanta, Georgia. In Paris, couturiers produced dresses and accessories of Egyptian inspiration. Several new designs appeared in *Vogue* with the caption, “Paris Reads the Riddle of the Egyptian Sphinx.”⁷ In the United States, ads in *The Saturday Evening Post*, *Town & Country*, and *McCall’s Magazine* promoted a range of goods alongside images of the sphinx, the pyramids, and Egyptian notables such as Cleopatra and Nefertiti. A *New York Times* clothing ad noted, “The decorative splendors of the Tut-ankh-amen period are reflected in the rich embroidery motif on this distinguished Wrap-Over Coat with its aristocratic collar of bisque squirrel.”⁸ Jewelry with Egyptian themes also appeared in fashion magazines and quickly hit the markets. Many of the ornaments fell into the costume jewelry category although several leading high-style jewelry houses, such as the

⁶ Quoted in Clement W. Coumbe, “The Ancient Egyptian Scarab – Its History and Symbolic Significance”, *The Jewelers’ Circular Weekly* 56, 22 (July 1, 1908): 43-4.

⁷ As quoted in Jean-Marcel Humbert, Michael Pantazzi, and Christiane Ziegler, *Egyptomania: Egypt in Western Art 1730-1930* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1994), 509.

⁸ *New York Times*, February 25, 1923:6.

Parisian firm, Van Cleef & Arpels (1896-present), also took advantage of the obsession with the boy-king.

Of all the French jewelry establishments prominent during the 19th and 20th centuries, the house of Cartier, founded by Louis-François Cartier in 1847, was one of the most cosmopolitan and receptive to non-Western design. Even before the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb, Louis Cartier was attracted to the mysterious land of the pharaohs. He even owned a copy of the *Description de l'Égypte*. Two shrine-shaped pendants made of platinum, precious stones, and onyx – one made in 1913, the other in 1923 – were no doubt inspired by the architecture illustrated in the publication.⁹ Cartier was also one of a small number of jewelers to incorporate fragments of Egyptian antiquities into contemporary bejeweled settings. These artifacts were purchased from a numbers of dealers operating in Paris during the early decades of the 20th century. Among them were the Kalebajian brothers located at 12 Rue de la Paix and Dikran Kelekian who had a shop at 2 Place Vendôme.¹⁰

Like the ancient Phoenicians, Cartier was attracted to the scarab and created several ornaments with small, three-dimensional versions of the amulet. The motif remained fashionable through the 1920s and several brooches/belt buckles by Cartier utilized a specific form of the scarab – the three-part, winged funerary beetle with outstretched wings. Each segment of this amulet has multiple piercings along the perimeter to facilitate attachment to the linen wrappings of a mummy (fig. 4). In one Cartier brooch, the feathered wings of bright-blue faience are ancient while the carved topaz body is contemporary. Following the decorative pattern on the antiquity, the wings are embellished by two bands of glittering, pave-set diamonds while small, bezel-set emerald cabochons are cleverly employed to disguise the stringing holes in the faience. Similar stones serve as three-dimensional eyes. Another brooch features an ancient scarab body with elaborate, curved wings composed of platinum, gold, diamond, ruby, citrine, emerald, and onyx. A third example has ancient wings and an antique scarab body although it is not clear if they were part of a set in antiquity as the glaze on the body is darker than on the wings. Again, sparkling bezel-set cabochon stones were used to conceal the piercings in the faience.

⁹ Hans Nadelhoffer, *Cartier* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2007), 151.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 146.



Figure 4: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 72.3019a-c (public domain)

Two Cartier ornaments incorporate rarer antiquities. One features the profile head of Horus, the falcon-headed god who was the personification of kingship. This artifact once served as one of two decorative terminals at the back of a Middle Kingdom broad collar, an ornament typically composed of multiple rows of strung beads. Cartier designers embellished the terminal along the base by adding a delicate row of coral and onyx lotus blossoms, an Egyptian symbol of creation and rebirth. The flowers emerge from a bed of white diamonds, a reference perhaps to the life-giving Nile. Further additions include a pyramidal border of onyx on the back of the head and a brow of glittering diamonds above an emerald cabochon eye. A second brooch incorporates a faience pendant of *Sekhmet*, a fearsome warrior goddess often depicted as a lion-headed woman wearing a sun disc with a rearing cobra. Here, the goddess rises from a thicket of lotus blossoms made of precious stones set in platinum with onyx and black enamel highlights. It is an unusual composition that may have its source in an object from Tutankhamen's tomb – a sculpture showing the head of the young king as it emerges from an open lotus. The goddess is further afforded a gem-studded belt and matching diamond wristlets, paying homage to the Egyptian predilection for symmetrical adornment. To balance the applied ornamentation, the sun disc is decorated with dazzling diamonds and small ruby cabochons.

One of the most extraordinary Egyptianizing objects fashioned by Cartier designers is the *Egyptian Temple Gate* clock made in 1927. It resembles the gateway to the Khonsu Temple at Karnak with its cavetto cornice and pylons ornamented with images of the king and gods. On the original, however, the cornice is decorated with a winged sun disk whereas the clock cornice boasts a kneeling, winged goddess – a figure often found in funerary contexts. The open and closed lotus blossom hands on the mother-of-pearl dial are based on the Egyptian observation that during the night, the lotus closes its bloom and sinks into the water, re-emerging in the morning. As such it was a powerful symbol of re-birth of the sun and a suitable image for a modern device tracking the hours of the day and night. Below the dial is a colorful scene depicting two images of the king and the kneeling Nile god, Hapy. As for the hieroglyphs that accompany the figures on the pylons, they are nonsensical but suggestive of the ancient glyphs.

Although France was on the forefront of Egyptian-inspired jewelry design during the Deco period, several high-style jewelers in the United States, including Louis Comfort Tiffany (for Tiffany & Co.) and Oscar Heyman Bros. (1912-present), designed ornaments with Egyptian themes. During the early decades of its history, Oscar Heyman Bros. was a manufacturing jeweler that provided platinum and gemstone ornaments to luxury-goods retailers throughout America. During the 1920s, they specialized in wide-linked “strap” bracelets, which were a staple of Jazz Age consumers. One of their most successful designs in this genre was a wrist ornament with sphinxes and stylized hieroglyphs that was made around 1926 for the New York City firm, Black, Starr, & Frost (Oscar Heyman Archive, NYC, C474).

Inexpensive, mass-produced ornaments made in accord with each season’s fashions (costume jewelry) were common clothing accessories in Europe and the Americas during the first half of the 20th century. While many in this category were low-priced imitations of fine jewels, other items were novel, whimsical, and audacious – a result, no doubt, of artisans working without the constraints imposed by designs requiring precious stones and metals. One American firm known for their innovative, bold jewelry was The Napier Co. (1878-present) located in southern Massachusetts. Shortly after the discovery of Tutankhamen’s tomb, they introduced a gold-tone cobra necklace with matching bracelet. In a promotional campaign, the company described the suite as “[...] flexible as the cobra that fashion has elevated to the pinnacle of chic [...] together they make the most effective punctuation marks for the costume

complete.”¹¹ Other companies capitalizing on the demand for Egyptian-style adornments were Miriam Haskell (1926-present), Hobé (1927-19xx), and Coro (1900-1979).

Interest in Egypt was rekindled in the mid-1950s with Cecil B. DeMille’s production of *The Ten Commandments* (Paramount Pictures, 1956). For the jewelry in the movie, DeMille consulted with Egyptologists at the Brooklyn Museum, so the movie-set jewelry had historically accurate forms, emblems, and colors. The jewelry trade once again focused on the scarab and thousands of bracelets composed by bezel-set, colored-glass scarabs were made by several jewelry manufacturers and retailed in department stores around the country. A decade later, another Hollywood extravaganza, *Cleopatra* (Twentieth Century Fox, 1963), starring the voluptuous Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton as Mark Antony, reintroduced Egyptian themes and motifs into the popular culture. One ornament available at the time – a wide, golden bangle featuring a frieze of Egyptian gods, hieroglyphs, and emblems – was a joint venture between Taylor and the cosmetic company, Avon Products, Inc., a direct sales company specializing in beauty and personal care products, fragrances, and costume jewelry.¹²

In the early 1970s, treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamen toured several European and American museums, including the Metropolitan Museum of Art.¹³ It was the first time objects from the tomb had left Egypt and hundreds of thousands of visitors waited on long lines to see the jewels and funerary mask of the young king. The exhibition was dubbed the first museum blockbuster. Museum shops had record sales of trinkets and several costume jewelry manufacturers took advantage of the publicity. One of the finest ornaments available was a gilt-metal brooch by Trifari (1910-2000) featuring the head of the underworld god, Osiris.

¹¹ Melinda L. Lewis with Henry Swen, *The Napier Co.: Defining 20th Century American Costume Jewelry* (Benicia, California: Life by Design Publishing, 2013), 108-109.

¹² Dale Reeves Nicholls, *Egyptian Revival Jewelry and Design* (Atglen, Pennsylvania: Schiffer Publishing, Ltd., 2007), 44.

¹³ The exhibition, which featured fifty-five antiquities, toured six American cities and was seen by eight million visitors. The last venue was the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1978).



Figure 5: Museum of Fine Arts, Boston 2006.633 (public domain)

Even today, the rich imagery of ancient Egypt continues to inspire jewelry designers and metalsmiths. One example is a necklace by the modernist jeweler, Jan Yager (America, b. 1951), Entitled *American Collar II*, the ornament reiterates the form of an Egyptian broadcollar but is composed of empty crack (cocaine) vials rather than beads – a political comment on the urban landscape outside her studio (fig. 5). The 21st century will, in all likelihood, continue to rediscover the jewels of Egypt’s ancient past.