

Feature



Look Like an Egyptian *Jill MacLachlan*

The discovery of a Pharaoh's tomb started a fashion craze that swept the Roaring 20s and influenced Jazz Age clothing, accessories, and beauty.

Over sixty years before 1980s girl band, *The Bangles*, were telling listeners to “Walk Like an Egyptian,” the fashion and beauty industries had the bright young things of the “roaring” 1920's era in America, (and, to a lesser extent, Britain and Europe), longing to look—and dress—like Queens of the Nile.

What spurred this wave of “Egyptomania” at this particular point in fashion history? As Tove Hermanson notes in [“Cleopatra & Egyptian Fashion in Film,”](#) “[E]arly cinema may have had a hand in setting the stage for the Egyptian craze. In particular, “the 1917 film, *Cleopatra*, with the marvelously eccentric Theda Bara . . . demonstrates how aesthetics were ripe for incorporating Egyptian motifs.”

However, it was Howard Carter's November 1922 discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb that set off an Egyptian Revival movement during the Jazz Age (see



Theda Bara as Cleopatra, from [Dr. Macro](#).

sidebar at end). How—and why—did archaeology turn into fashion statement? Mary Rekas explains that “the media, including movies and advertising, helped translate the find from a high culture event celebrated in scholarly circles to a popular

sensation that affected the mass American culture.”

As a result, as articulated by the FIDM in their blog article, [“Egyptomania,”](#) by early 1923, Carter's Tut find had set off, “a wave of Egyptian-influenced garments, accessories and decorative embellishments.” The following article presents some examples of the ways in which Egyptomania manifested itself in 1920s clothing and accessories, as well as beauty/cosmetics and hairstyles.

A *New York Times* article from February 18, 1923 entitled “They Watch Egypt for Fashion” confirms the fact that, in the weeks and months following Carter's discovery, fashion and textile designers were eagerly producing and catering to popular demand for all things Egyptian. In the words of a Shoecraft advertisement printed near the *Times* article, “Egypt Dominates Fashion Show Here.”

According to Belinda Orvata in [“Egyptian Influences on Dress in the 1920s,”](#) one of the key ways Egyptian Revivalism manifested itself in 1920s costume was through designers' use of “uniquely Egyptian motifs,” such as: “hieroglyphics (ancient Egyptian writing symbols), lotus flowers, the scarab (a beetle which symbolized the ancient Egyptian god Kepera which was associated with life,

resurrection and rebirth), mummies, sphinxes, and more.”

The image below, originally created to advertise a silk fabric design known as “the Sheba,” reflects this tendency through the hieroglyphic pattern on the pictured dress, which is of a style and vertical presentation that echoes the look of inscriptions found on ancient Egyptian tomb walls and columns.

SUPPLEMENT TO THE MASTER SILK PRINTER, APRIL, 1923.



An attractive frock designed and executed by Samuel Silver, Inc., 1237 Broadway, New York. The printed material used in fashioning this creation is known as the “Sheba” pattern and is from the print collection of The M. Ascher Silk Corporation.

THE ORIENTAL SILK PRINTING COMPANY.

Image courtesy of the Smithsonian Libraries.

Even the base color of the fabric is Egyptian influenced, as it brings to mind the color of Egyptian sand and the walls of the ancient pharaohs’ tombs.



Image courtesy of the Victoria & Albert Museum.

The fabric of this 1925-6 Jean Patou dress above may also have been chosen for its similarity in look to Egyptian materials (in this case, linen or even papyrus). Egyptian Revivalism is also reflected in the embroidered and beaded lotus patterns sewn on the chiffon overlay of the dress.

Interestingly, both the front skirt panel and the length of the Patou dress also echo the look of the loin skirts which Ancient Egyptian pharaohs were often depicting wearing.

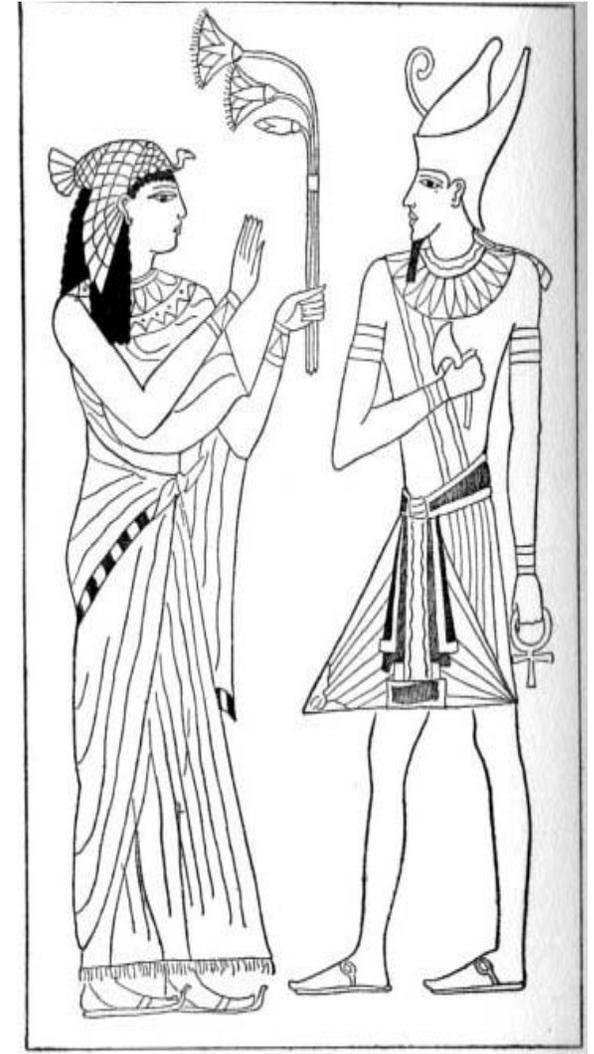


Image courtesy of Tara Maginnis, [The Costumer's Manifesto](#).

The Egyptian details on this 1920's "going away" suit are perhaps more subtly rendered than on other pieces from the period, but they are no less stunning.



Image courtesy of the [Fashion History Museum](#), Cambridge, Canada.

In this case, the dark background color of the suit allows the amazing front sash buttons, which display cameo style shadow head profiles of King Tut, and the embroidered cuff and sash border patterns, to stand out to best advantage. As Egyptomania gripped the fashion designers, a plethora of matching accessories flooded the marketplace as well.

As is seen in this 1923 advertisement, companies like Regal shoes scrambled to market Egyptian influenced shoe designs, like the Regal Egyptian sandal, with a "Lotus flower" "petal shaped cut out design" and "Isis buckle" strap fasteners.



Image courtesy of Smithsonian Libraries

Another popular accessory trend in the years following Carter's Tut tomb discovery was Egyptian-inspired headwear, in the form of hats and headpieces. According a *New York Times* article, for example, by April 1923, members of the fashionable set were often being seen donning a "Tut-ankh-Amen Hat" style.



Image Courtesy of [El Matadero Anticuario](#) on eBay.

Every luxurious detail on the velvet headpiece above, from the exotic peacock feather, to the cobra head-like front portion, to the carved scarab button, seems to have

been designed to make its flapper-wearer feel and look like a Queen of the Nile.

While the brass and pearl Egyptian Revival headpiece below may also have been inspired by the costumes worn by film star Theda Bara in *Cleopatra*, there is no question that it is also an important (and very covetable) example of the Egyptomania fashion style.



Image courtesy of Jill MacLachlan, [Adeline's Attic Vintage](#).



Image courtesy of [Holly Jenkins-Evans](#).

The gold cubistic pyramidal pattern woven on the silk evening purse above is a gorgeous example of how Art Deco design

and Egyptomania were often combined in the 1920s, with stunning results. The turquoise glass beads and gold wash used on the frame of the bag reflects ancient Egyptian use of (and reverence for) these materials.

Alongside other accessories, Egyptian inspired jewelry also became more prominent in the 1920s. Popular motifs seem to have been scarabs or, as shown below, King Tut-like pharaohs etched onto beads.

The Egyptian revival necklace seen on the next page boasts an incredible pharaoh head that pivots inside an amber marble [galalith](#) pyramid. As with the evening bag, the turquoise and amber hues used in the composition of the necklace reflect a knowledge of the hues and materials that ancient Egyptians used and considered sacred.



Image by courtesy of Cynthia of [Essie Vintage](#).



Image courtesy of [El Matadero Anticuario](#) on eBay.

One of the most stunning and detailed examples of Egyptian Revival design is the 1920s parasol at right, with a Tut head detail on its tasseled strap, a scarab lotus carving for its handle, and hieroglyphic details on its tip.

The discovery of King Tut's tomb was not only evoked in the fashion and accessories of the 1920s; it also became a central theme in advertising for products such as shampoo and perfume, which in turn extended Egyptomania in the realms of 1920s beauty and cosmetics.



Image source: eBay.

The Palmolive shampoo advertisement below exemplifies a larger marketing trend which emerged shortly after Carter's discovery; this trend generally involved advertisers using images of ancient Egyptian beauties like Cleopatra, in order to sell women the promise of "eternal" beauty if their products were used religiously.

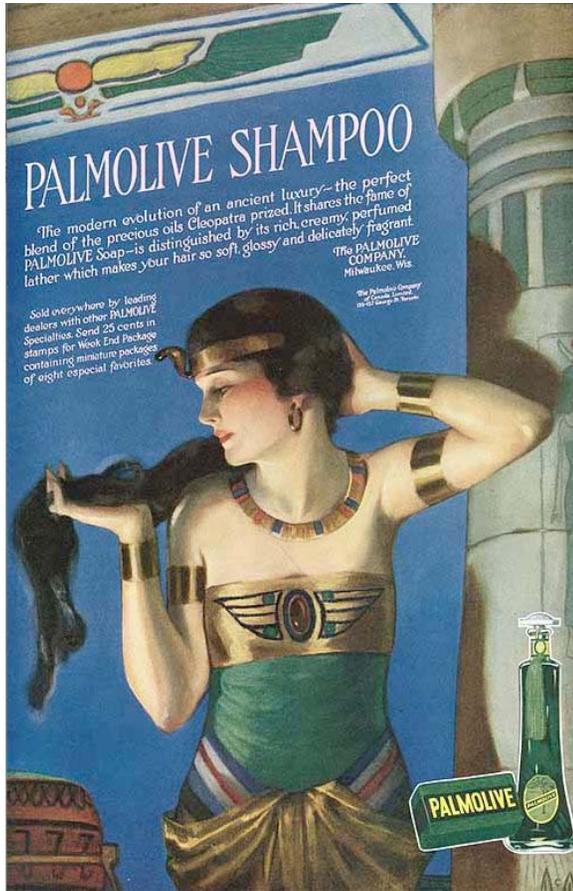


Image from All-American Ads of the 1920s, Heimann, Jim, and Steven Heller, eds.

At the same time, these images encouraged women of the 1920s to see

ancient Egyptian ideals of beauty as ones worthy of "resurrecting" in the Jazz Age, through Cleopatra-esque bathing rituals, and through the application of Egyptian-inspired perfumes and cosmetics.

These advertisements are also interesting when looked at from a fashion history perspective because they showcase the Egyptian headbands, jewelry, and dresses which were at the centre of the Egyptomania trend. In fact, they portray the clothing and accessories more prominently than the actual products being sold.

In terms of the King Tut influence on 1920s hairstyles, it is possible that the blunt bobbed haircut (also often called the "Dutch Doll") was inspired—or at least heavily popularized—by the Egyptomania trend.



Image from "Old World Meets New World: America Meets Tutankhamen" by Mary Rekas.

The image below left from an article on Hollywood in a 1923 American newspaper, overtly connects the fad for bobbed hair and Egypt Revivalism in the caption that reads "the Egyptian influence in architecture and bobbed hair has reached Hollywood."

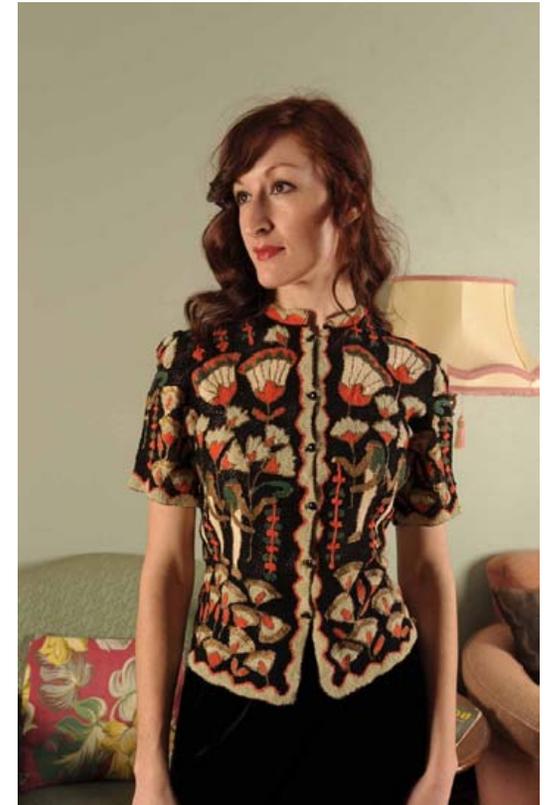


Image by [Lulu Rudolph](#), courtesy of [Fab Gabs Vintage](#).

The taste for all things Egyptian did not end in the 1920s. The beautiful embroidered lotuses and pharaohs on the 1930s sweater above highlights the idea that Egyptomania was a movement that continued well into the 30s and beyond.

Here is another example of Egyptian Revival fashion from the 1930s. This dramatic caped gown is made of Nile green silk velvet and has a belt and matching brooch reminiscent of ancient Egyptian jewelry.

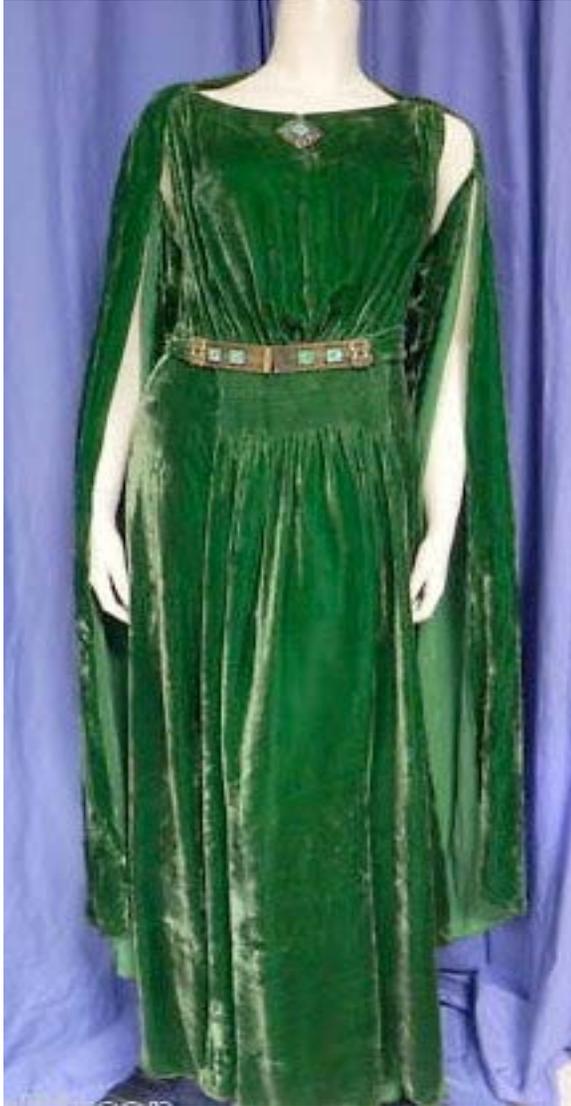


Image courtesy of ATTICCON on eBay.

Judging from the renewed popularity of Egyptian fashion amongst present-day starlets, such as Nicole Kidman, who wore this Egyptian inspired Oscar de la Renta gown to the 2010 SAG Awards, it is fair to say Egyptomania is one fashion style that is bound for “eternal life.”



Image from Tove Hermanson's [Worn Through: Apparel from an Academic Perspective](#). 2 Feb. 2010.

Jill MacLachlan is a vintage clothing seller and 1930s fashion enthusiast. She has a Ph.D in Victorian Literature and Culture and was crowned Queen of Vintage #65 by [Queens of Vintage](#). Visit her Etsy shop, [Adeline's Attic Vintage](#).

Discovering The Boy King

Archeologist Howard Carter was an unlikely fashion trend-setter. After working as an excavation artist, he was appointed Chief Inspector of the Egyptian Antiquities Services, but resigned in 1905 after siding with Egyptian site guards in a dispute with a group of French tourists.

Three hard years later, Carter was hired by wealthy Egyptian enthusiast Lord Carnarvon to locate lost tombs in the [Valley of the Kings](#). After several years of fruitless searching following WWI, Carnarvon grew restless and gave him one more season to find the tomb of an obscure Pharaoh that Carter knew must be there.

His water carrier finally found the steps leading to Tutankhamun's tomb. On 26 November 1922, Carter made the famous "tiny breach" in the doorway, and peered in by the light of a candle. When Carnarvon asked if he saw anything, Carter replied: "Yes, yes, It is wonderful!" Those words equally well describe the birth of Egyptomania from nearly that moment.

