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Pharaohs and Embargos: Reinterpreting the New Kingdom in Anglophone Cultural Memory through Egyptomania Songs

*Sophia Baldassari*¹

“Cleopatra sat on his knee,”² “he ruled through many years,”³ and “born in Arizona”⁴ are several hilariously inaccurate lyrics about the life of Tutankhamen, an eighteenth-century dynasty pharaoh whose tomb’s discovery became a cornerstone of twentieth-century popular culture. Specifically, two Anglophone “Egyptomania” waves correlate with the public encountering artifacts from Tutankhamen’s tomb. The first wave in the 1920s was sparked by the tomb’s initial excavation and subsequent public fascination with the goods found inside. This led to images of Tutankhamen’s throne and burial mask quickly dominating world newspapers. In the 1970s, the second wave resulted from a well-attended exhibition of the artifacts that toured the United States. Two songs from these respective periods, the 1922 “Old King Tut” and the 1978 “King Tut,” appear to communicate a purely aesthetic approach to Ancient Egypt. However, they are riddled with historical errors, and neither mention what was objectively Tutankhamen’s most significant achievement—reversing the widely unpopular secular upheavals of the previous ruler, Pharaoh Akhenaten’s reign. Egyptomania can be conceptualized as the manufacturing of cultural artifacts (such as books, T-shirts, cigar boxes, kohl eyeliner, and music) to capitalize on social fascination with Ancient Egypt in the wake of encounters with Tutankhamen’s artifacts.

Though Egyptomania might seem to be purely aesthetic for those interested in Ancient History, this paper will examine Egyptomania’s ulterior motive, shaping cultural perspectives of contemporary Egypt to suit then-current foreign policy desires. It might initially seem far-fetched to claim that “Hands off my Tuts”⁵ shirts and faux-golden Scarab cigar boxes were manufactured and sold to alter public beliefs surrounding Egypt but to counter that, let us examine a short anecdote about the

¹ Sophia Baldassari is a current senior at Sarah Lawrence College, studying Film and Social Science. She wrote “Pharaohs and Embargos” as part of her coursework while a visiting student at Wadham College of the University of Oxford.

² Harry Von Tilzer, and William Jerome, Sophie Tucker, vocalist, “Old King Tut,” (Universal Polygram International Publishing, 1923), YouTube.

³ Von Tilzer, Jerome, and Tucker, “Old King Tut,” YouTube.

⁴ Steve Martin, “King Tut,” Warner Brothers, Track 1 on *King Tut/Sally Goodin/Hoedown at Alice’s*, released April 28th, 1978, Spotify.

⁵ Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and U.S. Interests in the Middle East since 1945*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 80.

“Treasures of Tutankhamen” exhibition. Douglas Dillon, chair of New York City’s Metropolitan Museum of Art, had allegedly expressed doubts that his museum would have the ability to guarantee the safety of such priceless objects. Soon after, Dillon received a call from Henry Kissinger, explaining that the exhibition was “a vital part of the Middle East peace process,” and if the Met did not host the artifacts, the federal government would be “disturbed” a comment which Dillon interpreted as threatening to pull the museum’s government funding if they did not host the exhibit.⁶

The United States government’s investment in the exhibition (and subsequently Egyptomania) indicates that this collective interest held greater sociopolitical benefits than the sale of museum tickets. Additionally, though some might initially object to using song lyrics as a historical document, music often reflects the cultural beliefs of that particular period. For the Ancient Egyptians, musical culture was a well-developed part of society, with instruments and song lyrics serving as cultural artifacts upon which we can catch a glimpse into the musicians’ and listener’s everyday lives. Andrew Simon’s article, *Media of the Masses*, delves deeply into the significance of music as a critical component of Middle Eastern studies, deeming songs and their lyrics a “cultural production” and “the audible past.”⁷ These two terms affirm the belief that a highly popular song can reflect common social sentiments throughout both Eastern and Western cultures. Therefore, “Old King Tut” and “King Tut” reflect cultural Anglophone perceptions of the New Kingdom in the 1920s and 1970s.

Before uncovering several inaccurate depictions of Tutankhamen and twentieth-century Egyptian music, we must quickly recount the relevant aspects of his life and burial. Tutankhamen (originally named Tutankhaten) was perhaps the son of Akhenaten and a mummy who possesses the moniker “The Younger Lady.” Akhenaten’s reign was marked by a transition to the Amarna period when worshipping the old gods was banned and replaced by the singular sun god of Aten. This “perhaps” in reference to Tutankhamen’s royal parentage is due to the mummy in KV-55 (the official moniker for Tutankhamen’s tomb) being identified as Tutankhamen’s father but was not definitively identified as Akhenaten. As stated in *Tutankhamun and the Tomb That Changed the World*, the bones found in KV-55 indicated an age of around thirty-two young to be Akhenaten and just in the ballpark.⁸ Though we cannot absolutely state whether or not Akhenaten was Tutankhamen’s father, their connection solidified after the former’s reign had ceased. In some previous cases of ascension to the Pharaoh as a child, women would have stepped in as co-regents. Since this was not the case, as Tutankhamen’s closest royal woman, Nefertiti, might have ruled as Pharaoh before her stepson’s ascension, or “the role of regent was played by a senior military official with no blood links with the

⁶ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, p. 128.

⁷ Andrew Simon, *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2022), p. 9.

⁸ Bob Brier, *Tutankhamun and the Tomb That Changed the World*, (Oxford: 2022), p. 160.

royal family, the commander-in-chief of the army, Horemheb.”⁹ Though two Pharaohs ruled between the end of Akhenaten’s reign and Tutankhamen’s ascension, they were likely co-regents with the former.

Thus, Horemheb’s status as a non-royal and the fact that Tutankhamen did not co-rule with his father signified that the Boy-King was free to restore Egypt to its former religion. A young Tutankhamen ascended the throne at Amarna, but perhaps as early as the following year, abandoned the city designated as Egypt’s capital by his father.¹⁰ Since Horemheb was likely in battle during Tutankhamen’s passing at the age of nineteen from a bevy of diseases, a senior court advisor named Ay took over the funerary arrangements and ascended the throne soon after. During his reign, Tutankhamen’s significance would have been the undoing of Akhenaten’s extreme religious changes. In the present, however, Tutankhamen’s significance is primarily because his tomb escaped looting and was found almost entirely intact.¹¹ Nevertheless, highlighting the reign of Tutankhamen distances oneself from the inaccurate, exaggerated, and anachronistic tales of the Pharaoh, which Egyptomania introduced to the cultural narrative.

The term “Egyptomania” has been affixed to multiple waves of Western cultural fascination with Ancient Egypt throughout history. Other earlier examples include the popular “Description de l’Égypte” series of publications which accompanied Napoleon Bonaparte’s expedition to Egypt in the early nineteenth-century, or the premiere of Amadeus Mozart’s Ancient Egypt-set *The Magic Flute* at Vienna’s Freihaus-Theater auf der Wieden in 1791. This paper will focus on only two waves of Egyptomania—one in Great Britain in the 1920s and one in the United States in the 1970s. The former was sparked in 1922 when British archaeologist Howard Carter discovered Tutankhamen’s final resting place in the Valley of the Kings. Though the artifacts’ storage in the Cairo Museum meant that a person wishing to view Tutankhamen’s burial mask would have to travel to Egypt to see it in person, the aesthetic embodied by objects found in KV-55 would travel throughout the world thanks to trendy paraphernalia such as faux-gold t-shirts and notebooks encrusted with plastic gems. Egyptomania intended to evoke New Kingdom style into modern architecture, clothing, jewelry, and artwork. Additionally, as Christina Riggs states in her book, *Photographing Tutankhamen*, “the uniqueness of the find, the intense media coverage it generated, and the timing of its discovery in the aftermath of the First World War...with the emergent Egyptian nation-state...contributed to the impact the Tutankhamen photographs had and continue to have.”¹²

⁹ Ian Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, (Toronto: C.N.I.B, 2006), p. 282.

¹⁰ Shaw, *The Oxford History of Ancient Egypt*, p. 281.

¹¹ Anne Kerr and Edmund Wright, “Tutankhamun,” *A Dictionary of World History*, (Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 695.

¹² Christina Riggs, *Photographing Tutankhamun*, (Bloomsbury Visual Arts, 2018), p. 3.

The most crucial political detail concerning the 1920s wave of Egyptomania was that, at the time, Egypt lay under semi-colonial British rule. Though Egypt technically declared independence in 1922, Britain retained its military presence near the Suez Canal for another two decades. Narratives that portray Egypt as a magical, mythical land where a great civilization *once* thrived but not anymore (as is present in “Old King Tut,” which will be addressed momentarily) justified the British occupation. After all, KV-55 had been discovered by a Briton. Simultaneously, the tomb’s opening sparked a strong interest in Tutankhamen among the Egyptian people as a symbol of their country’s greatness and, in turn, denied freedom. The tomb’s discovery directly correlates with ensuing political actions, specifically that “foreign control of the Antiquities Service would end, Egypt would decide that none of its antiquities should leave Egypt, and the Egyptians would demand self-rule.”¹³ Contemporary scholars understand that Tutankhamen has become a mythological figure, even to Egyptians. According to historian Elliot Colla, “the mummy became something of a national hero in Egyptian literature, vanquishing the colonizers from beyond the grave.”¹⁴ Below are the lyrics of “Old King Tut,” written by William Jerome and Harry Von Tilzer and first recorded by singer Sophie Tucker. Though its lyrics stress that “ancient history” can be learned from the tomb’s artifacts, what the narrative of “Old King Tut” achieves is the creation of an overly-exotic, depoliticized version of Tutankhamen’s New Kingdom.

*Three thousand years ago, King Tutty reigned you know,
He must have traveled greatly in his time.
For in his tomb out there, was gold and silver ware,
From big hotels of every land and clime.
While going through his royal robes they found up in his sleeve,
The first fig leaf that Adam gave to Eve.*

*In old King Tut-Tut-Tut-enkhamen’s day,
Beneath the tropic skies
King Tut-Tut-Tut was very wise,
Now old King Tut-Tut-Tut was always gay,
Cleopatra she sat upon his knee,
Pat! that’s where she sat.*

¹³ Brier, *Tutankhamun and the Tomb That Changed the World*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Elliot Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, (Duke University Press, 2007), p. 220.

*The girls would dance for him and every move a treat,
They'd move and move and move but never move their feet.
A thousand girls would dance each day,
With lots of hip-hip-hip-hooray,
In old King Tut-Tut-Tut-Tut-Tut-Tut, King Tutty's Day.*

*Three thousand years ago, In history we know,
King Tutenkhamen ruled a mighty land.
He ruled for many years,
'Mid laughter, song and tears,
He made a record that will always stand.
They opened up his tomb the other day and jumped with glee,
They learned a lot of ancient history.¹⁵*

In particular lines of the song, it becomes evident that “Old King Tut” reflects Anglophone cultural beliefs surrounding Egyptomania—mainly that Tutankhamen ruled during a far-off time. On a subtextual level, it even asserts British and Egyptian superiority in the struggle for independence. One of the most easily refutable lyrics is “he ruled for many years,” as Tutankhamen likely died in the tenth year of his reign. Another lyric mentions that a fig leaf that belonged to Adam and Eve was found in the tomb and that Tutankhamen knew Cleopatra. These create a jumbled sense of history as if Ancient Egypt was not the long-reigning empire it should have been portrayed as. Instead, it implies that these four separate (and fictional, in terms of Adam and Eve) figures all happened to live simultaneously. Additionally, if a listener of “Old King Tut” possessed only a basic grasp of Ancient Egyptian history, they would likely know that Cleopatra was the last Pharaoh before Egypt became part of the Roman Empire.

A correlation that should be addressed is that the song alludes to the Roman Empire, while Egypt was part of the British Empire. This allusion affirms Britain’s might and claims to imperial continuity. The song contains the lyrics, “for in his tomb out there, was gold and silverware/from big hotels of every land and clime.” The etymology of “hotel” relates to foreignness and travel (which, in the early twentieth-century, was a great luxury), while “gold and silver ware” is another symbol of riches. This line and the mention of a “dancing girl” portray Ancient Egypt as fixated more on sensuality and lavishness than on government. These lyrics fail to mention any of Tutankhamen’s actual achievements. Its current colonization is justified by portraying Egypt as a land of riches and its people as more focused on parties than politics.

¹⁵ Von Tilzer, and Jerome. Tucker, vocalist, “Old King Tut,” 1923, YouTube.

This song also promotes what Edward Said would later define as Orientalism. In his landmark 1978 text, Said wrote, “The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.”¹⁶ Indeed, “Old King Tut” portrays Egypt as romantic (the lyric about dancing girls), exoticism (its mention of “tropic skies” a completely foreign and exotic notion to most Anglophone citizens due to the aforementioned high cost of travel), and remarkable experiences in terms of these imagined sights. Said also stated that the purpose of Orientalism is to imagine spectacular ancient sites and promote imperial might. Said states, “I myself believe that Orientalism is more particularly valuable as a sign of European-Atlantic power over the Orient than it is as a veridic discourse about the Orient (which is what, in its academic or scholarly form, it claims to be).”¹⁷ “Old King Tut” communicates that if Egypt gains its independence, this section of the Orient will be gone to European cultural memory. Finally, it should also be noted that in the song’s final lyric, “they” refers to British archaeologists. By asserting that history is intended as an educational moment for whoever discovers it rather than the lived experiences of an ancient civilization, the song implies that Egyptian history belongs to those who discovered it—Britons—rather than those who have created it and their descendants: Egyptians.

While it might seem a bit of a stretch to dive into the cultural genealogy and implications of lyrics that objectively have no accurate basis in the New Kingdom, these lyrics matter nonetheless as they would have shaped cultural beliefs during the period in which Tutankhamen’s descendants fought for self-sovereignty. The book *Conflicted Antiquities*, referencing the artifacts’ significance to the then-present political situation, states, “they were important not just for what they said about the past, but also for how they signified in modern Egypt as material upon which identities and sovereignties could be expressed.”¹⁸ With “Old King Tut’s” implication that the New Kingdom was merely a brief flash of glory before being conquered by the Romans and that the artifacts of KV-55 were imported, modern Egyptian inferiority is inferred. Furthermore, then-contemporary media coverage asserted the Orientalism of Egypt by peddling a so-called “Mummy’s curse,” a phenomenon that has zero credible evidence to support its existence. A 1923 article from the St. Louis Post-Dispatch about the illness of Lord Carnarvon, who funded the Valley of the Kings excavation, outright acknowledges in its introduction that Carnarvon suffered from a streptococcus infection. However, it puzzlingly claims that even staid Egyptologists know this illness is the result of an Egyptian “voodoo.”¹⁹ Attention should be paid to the fact that those who supposedly believe in a “mummy’s curse” go

¹⁶ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, N.Y.: Vintage Books, 1978), p. 1.

¹⁷ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 6.

¹⁸ Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*, p. 224.

¹⁹ “Some believe Lord Carnarvon’s illness may be linked to ancient curse,” *Newspapers.com*, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, March 21, 1923.

<https://www.newspapers.com/article/st-louis-post-dispatch-some-believe-lor/25567917/>.

unnamed. The article's only named Egyptologist is the British Museum's Egyptian expert, Sir Ernest Budge, who firmly denies the curse's existence. By compromising journalistic integrity to present the claim that Ancient Egyptians somehow had magical powers, their descendants are further ostracized and othered—and for the reason of supporting Orientalism. While analyzing Aeschylus's play *The Persians* as an inversion of the usual tropes, Said mentions that one major characteristic of Orientalist text is that the Orient is portrayed as a far-off, distant, and often threatening Otherness, a claim which the so-called "Mummy's curse" absolutely supports.²⁰

Throughout the early twentieth century, Tutankhamen became a symbol of the richness of the Egyptian people and their culture. Simultaneously, Anglophone media corrupted his image to justify British occupation and portray the Ancient Egyptians as somehow magical, further ostracizing and othering their descendants. In the 1920s, Tutankhamen symbolized freedom for the Egyptians, while Anglophones corrupted his image to justify the British occupation.

Before proceeding to the second song about Tutankhamen, we must understand why Egyptomania returned with such force fifty years later. While the 1970s wave of Egyptomania still exhibited a purely aesthetic and blatantly nonfactual view of the New Kingdom, its resurrection at a pivotal moment in global politics and affairs points to this cultural moment's causation being more than a sudden, unexplained public interest in Ancient Egypt. This second wave of Egyptomania demonstrates a correlation between archaeology and current-day politics. This is to say that history can teach the complexity of the present when antiquity re-enters the cultural lexicon. The years after Egyptian Independence saw much instability in Tutankhamen's former homeland. An attempt to rescue this land began the fourth Arab-Israeli war, with Egypt receiving support from the Soviet Union as the United States sided with Israel. Throughout the conflict, Soviet forces aided the Egyptians by providing weaponry, to which the United States responded by giving an even larger amount of provisions, granting emergency security assistance of \$2.2 billion to Israel.²¹

In retaliation, the Organization of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries placed an oil embargo upon all nations that supported Israel in the conflict. Egypt's subsequent ceasefire appeared, in part, motivated by a desire to become allies with the United States. "The massive transportation of arms by sea and air to Israel while the fighting was continuing had an undeniable effect on the outcome of the war and, according to President Sadat, on Egypt's decision to accept the cease-fire."²² Despite the oil embargo being lifted in March of 1974, oil prices remained absurdly expensive in its aftermath. In June of that year, U.S. President Richard Nixon stopped in Egypt during a tour of the Middle East, during which he proposed to Sadat that a "Treasures of Tutankhamen" exhibition which had previously

²⁰ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 21.

²¹ Edmund Ghareeb, "The US Arms Supply to Israel during the War," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, p. 117.

²² Ghareeb, "The US Arms Supply to Israel during the War," p. 118.

toured the Soviet Union visit the United States. Egypt's desire for allegiance with the United States was at significant risk by the 1973 embargo's lingering effects. Namely, as other oil-rich countries scrambled to fill an industrial gap left by the Arab's embargo, they offered considerably higher salaries than Egypt had previously provided. The country was at threat of suffering from "brain drain" as its most skilled employees began moving abroad. If the United States and Egypt could mend their relationship, American oil companies would be dissuaded from acquiring their raw material in Norway or Venezuela instead. The Egyptian oil industry would thus be saved from collapse.²³ Sadat concluded that one way to rectify this situation was to bring the Tutankhamen exhibition to America. In the subsequent negotiation, American representatives pushed to include more objects and one more city than the Soviet Union, with whom the United States was still engaged in a Cold War. Here, we see once again the corruption of history to suit the needs of the present as even Tutankhamen's artifacts became pawns in the conflict between two non-Egyptian countries.

It is interesting to note that this assertion of nationalism would continue with the exhibition's marketing. Rather than framing the "Treasures of Tutankhamen" as the result of efforts to fortify relations with not just the Middle East but the Soviet Union as well through a shared cultural milestone and to lower the price of oil, it was instead promoted as "a gift from the Egyptian people" to celebrate America's Bicentennial. The exhibition was funded by the National Endowment of the Humanities, and the ExxonMobil oil and gas corporation also provided sponsorship.²⁴ As the exhibition toured for two years between 1977 and 1979, a new form of Egyptomania was evidenced in American culture, now dubbed "Tutomania."²⁵ This new phenomenon indicates no fascination with all of Ancient Egyptian history but an interest only in Tutankhamen and the exhibit as millions flocked to see the promised splendor. In response to the exhibition's arrival in New York, comedian Steve Martin wrote and performed a song titled "King Tut."

King Tut (King Tut)
Now when he was a young man,
He never thought he'd see
People stand in line to see the boy king.
(King Tut) How'd you get so funky?
(Funky Tut) Did you do the monkey?
Born in Arizona,
Moved to Babylonia (King Tut, King Tut).

²³ Simon, *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt*, p. 28.

²⁴ "Treasures of Tutankhamun" Past Exhibitions Archive, The National Gallery of Art, November 17th, 1976, https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/1976/tutankhamun_treasures.html.

²⁵ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, p. 125.

*Now, if I'd known
They'd line up just to see you,
I'd trade in all my money
And bought me a museum. (King Tut)*

*Buried with a donkey (Funky Tut)
He's my favorite honky!
Born in Arizona,
Moved to Babylonia (King Tut)
Dancin' by the Nile, (Disco Tut)
The ladies love his style, (Waltzing Tut)
Rockin' for a mile (Rockin' Tut)
He ate a crocodile.
He gave his life for tourism.
Golden idol!
He's an Egyptian
They're sellin' you.*

*Now, when I die,
Don't think I'm a nut,
Don't want no fancy funeral,
Just one like ole king Tut. (king Tut)
He coulda won a Grammy,
Buried in his jammies,
Born in Arizona, moved to Babylonia,
He was born in Arizona, lived in a condo made of stone-a,
King Tut.²⁶*

While the first wave presented Ancient Egypt as a lavish, exotic foreign civilization, 1970s Egyptomania saw more awareness that this cultural moment resulted from deliberate work by the U.S. government, as evidenced by Martin's tongue-in-cheek humor. While these lyrics might initially present its speaker as another completely ill-educated fanatic of Tutankhamen, they represent why millions would have flocked to a new wave of "Tutomania" for reasons other than historical interest. As Melani McAlister writes:

²⁶ Martin, "King Tut," 1978, Spotify.

In the dominant construction of the Tut exhibit as “art,” Tut could not be owned, only managed. As a commodity, however, Tut became purchasable. The explosion of inexpensive Tut items, from desk calendars to coffee mugs, posited access to a symbol of riches in affordable terms.²⁷

In other words, some of the appeal of Tutankhamen’s artifacts, and why a person might purchase items bearing a similar aesthetic, is that anybody has access to this wealth as it cannot be owned. All they need to do is buy a museum ticket. This is unquestionably a “win” for capitalism during the Cold War era and the rise of Egyptian neoliberalism. Egypt’s stance on the battle between capitalism and communism undoubtedly fell on the American side. In the coming years, Sadat’s government promoted industrial privatization, capitalist engagement, and an overall Egyptian culture of consumption.²⁸ This cultural shift was achieved with the opportunity of Cairo’s post-colonialism development. Rather than allowing Cairo inhabitants to maintain their ability to shop locally, markets were spread across the city in post-colonial developments, increasing the amount of time the average Egyptian spent shopping and thus the cultural cachet of consumption itself.²⁹ After Sadat’s assassination by Islamic Militants in 1981, his successor, Hosni Mubarak, continued to stress neoliberal policies as a key factor in developing and maintaining alliances with Western countries. He claimed that this move from state-sponsored socialism to open-door capitalism would “generate foreign investment, strengthen private enterprises, and curtail state intervention in economic matters.”³⁰ Mubarak would use these goals as a guise to craft a totalitarian surveillance state until he was finally forced to resign amid Egypt’s 2011 revolution.

Returning to Martin’s song, one of its most puzzling lyrics is “don’t want no fancy funeral/Just one like ol’ King Tut.” This line has no historical basis, as a New Kingdom Pharaoh’s funeral would have been lavish. But again, we see how the Tutankhamen exhibition represented a method for accessing extreme wealth in an economy wrecked by the aftermath of an oil embargo and the Vietnam War. Another line pointing to this interpretation describes how Tutankhamen “got a condo made of stone-a.” While the average listener might genuinely believe that Cleopatra and Tutankhamen lived at the same time, this is an anachronism—Egyptomania is thus separated from actual Egyptology. This was the case with the commodification of Tutankhamen, where audiences were interested in the aesthetics of Tutankhamen’s treasures, not the Pharaoh’s actual life. McAlister points out that the exhibit always intended to distinguish between fact and commodifiable aesthetics. Thomas Hoving, Director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art from 1967 to 1977, claims that when he traveled to

²⁷McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, p. 139.

²⁸ Simon, *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt*, p. 88.

²⁹ Nancy Reynolds, *A City Consumed: Urban Commerce, the Cairo Fire, and the Politics of Decolonization in Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 7.

³⁰ Simon, *Media of the Masses: Cassette Culture in Modern Egypt*, p. 17.

Cairo to select artifacts from the Tut collection for exhibition, Hoving merely chose the objects that “looked great.” Despite input from the Met’s Egyptian curator as to which of the objects had the greatest anthropological value, Hoving claims, “I didn’t listen. I knew what I wanted.”³¹

Additional commodification of Tutankhamen at the time occurred through the lens of nationalist ownership for African Americans. As the exhibition toured the United States, advertising materials presented Tutankhamen’s treasures as “universal art” and part of “common heritage.”³² In countering this claim, African-American scholars argue that Egyptology should be categorized as a section of Black History since Egypt is in Africa. Martin satirically comments on this then-contemporary debate through musical and semiotic symbols. Firstly, the song’s structure “incorporate(s) samples of almost every mainstream black music style of the 1960s and 1970s...(such as) the high falsetto and the deep bass that were the trademark of Motown groups like the Temptations.”³³ Martin’s backup dancers in the Saturday Night Live performance were both cast as African-American women. At the song’s climax, a saxophone player emerges from a sarcophagus intended to resemble Tutankhamen’s, wearing face paint, which appears to be a mix of gold (alluding to the Pharaoh’s burial mask) and brown. Indeed, the performance portrays Tutankhamen as Martin’s “favorite honkey...a hip sax player with darkened skin, a funky Tut who pleased the ‘ladies,’ a ‘rockin’ Tut’ to whom one pays homage with a Motown-funk-disco beat.”³⁴ While most illusions to symbols of musical stardom are intended to be interpreted as satirical, one cannot ignore that Martin chose to align the Pharaoh with Motown motifs when Tutankhamen’s racial categorization was a subject of debate. Another hallmark of this performance is when Martin offers a blender to the saxophone-playing Tutankhamen, establishing the song’s aspiration of avoiding Orientalism. Previous portrayals of the Orient presented its citizens as mysterious and extremely distant from the lives of its audience. By presenting Tutankhamen with an incredibly familiar object like a blender, Egypt is not mysterious to Martin’s audience—in fact, its contemporary citizens probably have the same appliances.³⁵

Finally, a moment that reflects the true motivations of Egyptomania’s American resurrection in the 1970s is two exclamations in the middle of the song—“he gave his life for tourism” and “they’re selling you.”³⁶ The latter statement especially encapsulates the dual ulterior motives to 1970s Egyptomania as an opportunity for Soviet competition in the Cold War era and a desire to rectify relations between twentieth-century Egypt and the U.S. Additionally, the original Saturday Night Live sketch commenced with a brief monologue wherein Martin’s onstage persona expresses disgust at the

³¹ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, p. 83.

³² Walter Levy, “Oil and the Decline of the West,” *Foreign Affairs* 58, no. 5 (Summer 1980): p. 1014.

³³ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, p. 96.

³⁴ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, p. 96.

³⁵ Said, *Orientalism*, p. 20.

³⁶ Martin, “King Tut,” Spotify.

commodification of Tutankhamen. He claims that the following song utilizes historically accurate Egyptian melodies, the joke being that in about five seconds, we will see this is a bald-faced lie. While the SNL sketch received a warm reception from that night's live audience, its success was objectively eclipsed by that of Martin's recorded version of "King Tut"-which topped the Billboard Charts and became the 18th most popular single of 1978.³⁷ In October 2023 alone, the song logged 17,000 listeners on Spotify, 45 years after its release. In the change from sketch to song, Martin's introductory monologue was axed. The Platinum-certified single instead launches straight into gleeful singing about Tutankhamen. To the uninformed listener, "King Tut" is a straightforward example of Egyptomania. This symbolizes that more focus is placed on the (albeit tongue-in-cheek) glorification of Tutankhamen rather than attempting to criticize 1970s Egyptomania. The positivity and glorification in Egyptomania's late 1977-1978 revival shifted American beliefs away from associating Egypt with the oil shortage and more towards seeing the country as descended from a fascinating kingdom filled with great splendor. Once again, the artifacts of Tutankhamen's tomb are twisted to suit contemporary state agendas.

Since the artifacts found in Tutankhamen's tomb were used to rectify Egypt-U.S. relations in 1973, another exhibition of these items with ulterior motives occurred in 1997. A terrorist attack at the site of Hatshepsut's temple of Deir El-Bahari killed fifty-eight tourists, the majority of whom were Swiss nationals. Responding to the subsequent decline in Helvetian tourism, the Egyptian government sent several Tutankhamen-related items to an exhibition in Basel.³⁸ This evidence shows that the contemporary Egyptian government has used Egyptomania as a tool, essentially prostituting its past for present gain. But how exactly does a traveling exhibition morph into the subject of overwhelming cultural fascination? In LMU Munich's *Aegyptiaca*. In the *Journal of The History of Reception of Ancient Egypt*, Jean-Marcel Humbert classifies Egyptomania into two forms-"the collective relationship, stemming from history, religion and culture" and "the individual relationship, where each person mixes their own spiritual or playful approach with their more ideologically-sentient behavior."³⁹

Through a combination of the two, "emerges a strong and even growing relation with ancient Egypt, where each individual finally brings to it what they wish to find there."⁴⁰ The collective relationship leads to an individual relationship. When one is barraged by advertisements for the

³⁷ "Cash Box Top 100 Singles," *Cash Box*, August 12, 1978, Vol. XL, no. 13, p. 4.

³⁸ Tom Holland, "The King and Us: The Treasures of Tutankhamun are Coming Back to London," (May 19th, 2019), <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-king-and-us-the-treasures-of-tutankhamun-are-coming-back-to-london-x668v38ww>.

³⁹ Jean-Marcel Humbert, "Egyptian Revival in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries Home Daily Life," *Aegyptiaca. Journal of the History of Reception of Ancient Egypt*, p. 116.

⁴⁰ Humbert, "Egyptian Revival in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries Home Daily Life," p. 116.

exhibition and hears of friends and family admiring the ancient displays of beauty, the individual will develop a personal method through which Egyptomania manifests. This may be through listening to Egyptomania songs, purchasing a T-shirt, or, ideally, a genuine interest in the life of Tutankhamen. No matter which method the individual chooses, a subconscious parallel is drawn between Ancient Egypt and Contemporary Egypt-it can be either a once-great exotic land whose colonization by the British is justified or filled with indescribable craftsmanship and aesthetics that we should try to replicate in our lives.

Throughout several major “waves” of Egyptomania, we see a connection between modern culture and New Kingdom imagery-for example, the image of Tutankhamen’s newly-opened tomb as a symbol of the glory of Ancient Egypt even as the country suffered under imperialism. In two distinct periods of Tutankhamen-related Egyptomania-the early 1920s and early-to-late 1970s-we see over and over again the use of history to fulfill present political needs. When used as examples of cultural Egyptomania, these two songs showcase that this phenomenon was not wholly the result of a genuine interest in the New Kingdom-see the numerous, highly inaccurate depictions of Tutankhamen’s life. As evidenced by “Old King Tut,” the period shortly after Howard Carter’s discovery in 1922 designated Egypt as an exotic, magical place with strong historical significance, affirming its then-present British rule. At the same time, a moment of Egyptomania (if we define it simply as a strong, cultural interest in Ancient Egypt) occurred in Egypt as Tutankhamen morphed into a symbol of Egyptian independence.

Twenty years later, two Arab-Israeli wars and an embargo on oil to the United States (among other nations) had severely harmed Egypt-U.S. relations. To rectify this, Tutankhamen artifacts toured the country for the first time, thus inspiring “Tutomania,” a similar phenomenon that showcased awareness that the exhibition commodified Tutankhamen. Throughout all these events, one of the strongest themes present is nationalism-in the 1920s for both Egyptians and the British, and in the 1970s, the bicentennial being used as a guise for the “Treasures of Tutankhamen” exhibition. On top of this, the U.S. government sought more artifacts than the Soviets received, once again weaponizing Egyptomania as a political tool for the Cold War. Nevertheless, we see the legacy of the New Kingdom throughout the Anglophone twentieth century as a co-opting of Egyptian aesthetics and a fascination with Tutankhamen, though not for anything the eighteenth dynasty pharaoh had actually achieved.