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| **Nefertiti's Eyes**  | Volume 61 Number 2, [March/April 2008](http://www.archaeology.org/0803/)  |
| by Earl L. Ertman  |

*Did the queen's distinctive feature become a symbol of Egyptian royalty?*

![[image]]()

Found in 1912 in the studio of the sculptor Tuthmosis at Amarna, and now in Berlin, this painted bust of Queen Nefertiti shows her with unusually shaped eyes, probably an actual physical trait. (Nina Aldin Thune)

All eyes were on the Valley of the Kings the morning of February 5, 2006, when our expedition first looked into the chamber now known as KV63, the first tomb found in Egypt's Valley of the Kings since that of Tutankhamun (KV62) in 1922.

Press speculation was rampant over what the tomb might hold. Would our expedition find the mummies of royal women from the late 18th Dynasty, such as Queen Nefertiti, thought by some to be Tut's mother? Or the six princesses she bore to the pharaoh Akhenaten, including Tut's queen, Ankhesenamun? The mummies of these women have either not been found or identified. Perhaps they were removed from Akhenaten's capital at Amarna when a later king, presumably Tut, returned to the traditional capital of Thebes on the Nile opposite the Valley of the Kings. Did Tut rebury them in the Valley?

After taking out several stones blocking the doorway from the tomb shaft into the chamber, we peered through the narrow opening. Inside, we could see many large ceramic jars and several wooden coffins, some with yellow-painted faces. The press speculation was incorrect on all counts. We found no mummies in any of the tomb's seven coffins and no inscriptions to tell us for whom these coffins were initially intended.

But while studying the coffins, I discovered--in the eyes of faces painted on three of them--an intriguing link to Nefertiti, the queen whose name means, simply, "the beautiful one has come." While none of the coffins held Nefertiti's remains, the eyes may tell us something unexpected about her celebrated beauty. Was it in part the result of a genetic syndrome?

If not a royal tomb, what was KV63? Finds include the seven coffins, a small gilt coffinette, two large alabaster vessels, floral garlands, pillows, natron (the natural salt used in mummification), and many ceramics. It seems to have been a cache of material used by embalmers, but including coffins, unused or salvaged from disturbed burials, suitable for upper-class, but not elite or royal, funerals.

Although KV63 didn't yield the mummies of Nefertiti, Ankhesenamun, and the rest, the tomb is linked to Tutankhamun's time. Seal impressions found there match some discovered in Tut's tomb, which is just 50 feet away. KV63's date should fall within or close to Tut's reign (1343-1333 B.C.), but association with his burial is uncertain at this point. Perhaps we will gain further evidence for the date of KV63 from the contents of the remaining 16, of 28 total, storage jars that we plan to open this season.

Otto Schaden, our expedition director, asked me, as staff art historian and object analyst, if any information could be gleaned from the coffins to narrow this date range. I began with the four coffins that had yellow-painted faces. The KV63 coffins were almost totally destroyed by termites, but the faces were made separately. Faces on coffins were often covered with thin plaster or gesso as a base for gilding or painting (as in the KV63 coffins). The termites seem to prefer untreated wood, so while the remainder of the coffins were mostly consumed, the gessoed and painted faces survived.

![[image]]()

Coffin F is one of three from KV63, an embalmer's cache from around the time of Tutankhamun, that shows faces with eyes shaped similarly to Nefertiti's. (Heather Alexander/Amenmesse Project)

In the art of the ancient Near East, including Egypt, females were generally depicted with lighter skin than males. Were the coffins with light yellow faces made for women? Two such coffins in museum collections, however, were inscribed for males. Furthermore, a painting in a tomb in Thebes shows coffins of Nebamun and Ipuky, sculptors who worked during the reigns of kings Amenhotep III and his son Akhenaten. Each of their black coffins has a yellow-painted face. So rather than indicating the coffins were for females, the yellow faces probably copied those of the very wealthy, who could afford gold faces on their coffins.

With no inscriptions and the ambiguous nature of the yellow face color, I began looking at other characteristics that might prove helpful, such as the shape and details of the faces. In doing that, the eyes on three of the painted KV63 coffins brought me back to Nefertiti.

Nefertiti is best known from the painted bust of her found at Amarna and now in Berlin. Her parentage is not entirely certain, but most Egyptologists believe she was the daughter of the powerful courtier Ay, who eventually succeeded Tutankhamun.

The face of one, which we designated coffin A, had eyes rimmed with blue glass in a traditional shape, unlike the other three coffins with yellow faces, designated B, F, and G. What links the eyes of these three coffins, beside the fact that all are painted, is that the inner canthus--the corner of the eye near the nose--descends abruptly and abuts the upper lid, giving them an East Asian appearance. Nefertiti's famous bust illustrates this eye shape better than words. Both her proper right eye and the empty socket of the left show this form. What is the meaning of this eye shape?

Art of the Amarna period, when Akhenaten and Nefertiti reigned, is noted for its naturalistic depiction of plants and animals and, in some cases, candid scenes of daily life. So one might suggest that the shape of Nefertiti's eyes may be an attempt to render her features as they actually appeared.

One of the earliest appearances of Nefertiti's unusual eye shape is on a stela showing the royal family. Found at Amarna and now in Berlin, it is dated by an inscription to before years 8 through 12 of Akhenaten's reign, or around 1350 B.C. On the stela, however, Akhenaten's eye shape is "normal" and resembles those seen on sculptures of him in Thebes, but Nefertiti's is not. So this stela may show a real, physical condition.

It could be that Nefertiti had an epicanthic fold, a piece of skin from the upper eyelid covering the inner edge of the eye. This feature is found not just in people of East Asian descent, but also in individuals with a number of different syndromes--groups of symptoms characteristic of an abnormality--some of which are genetically based. Some syndromes are debilitating, others less so, and still others are passed only from mothers to daughters. We are currently investigating the possibility that Nefertiti's eyes reflect such an underlying physical condition, but without her remains no diagnosis can be made (and the evidence may have been destroyed or altered during mummification).

If a genetically based physical trait was the basis for this eye shape, did Nefertiti pass it on to her children and was it recorded in the appearance of their eyes in artwork? Images of Nefertiti show the trait more frequently and markedly than those of any other individual portrayed at Amarna. German excavators at Amarna in 1912 found many representations of Nefertiti and her daughters in the studio of an artist named Tuthmosis, including the painted bust of Nefertiti. Many of these representations are in various stages of completion, but their distinctive eyes are easily noticed. This is especially clear in a relief, now in the Brooklyn Museum, that may show Meritaten, the queen's eldest daughter.

It is possible that Nefertiti was Tutankhamun's mother. If so, it wouldn't be surprising if he were shown with an eye shape similar to hers. This is the case with some depictions, such as a wooden head of the young pharaoh that was found in his tomb. It shows his head, sprouting from a lotus bloom, with eyes that match those of Nefertiti. Other explanations for its appearance with Tut include the possibility that his mother was not Nefertiti but perhaps a woman of the extended royal family who also carried the trait. And it could even be that Tut did not have the eye shape himself, if his mother was a woman other than Nefertiti who did not have it or if the trait was passed only from mothers to daughters. In either case, Tut could be shown with it simply as an artistic continuance of the characteristic.

If the sculptor Tuthmosis were responsible for recording and then re-creating this eye shape, perhaps he extended its use from those who actually had it to--as an artistic convention--a "royal marker" to distinguish images of the king and a few select nobles. For example, this eye shape is also seen on a representation of King Amenhotep III, Akhenaten's father, seated in a relaxed pose with his wife Queen Tiy on a stela found at Amarna, and now in the British Museum. Amenhotep III was Nefertiti's father-in-law, but this stela was probably carved after his death, so the eye shape does not predate its appearance on Nefertiti. It is also used in the 19th Dynasty, such as in depictions of the pharaoh Seti I at Abydos and of Nefertari, queen of Rameses II, who died around 1254 B.C.

And this brings us back to KV63, with its upper-class coffins. Like the yellow faces meant to represent gilding, did the eye shape seek to portray a "royal marker" derived from Nefertiti's own eyes?

The final word is not yet in, but there seems to be a high probability that Nefertiti herself had eyes with epicanthic folds or eyes with a similar shape with descending inner canthi. Eyes of this type undoubtedly created what must have been quite a striking feature to all who saw her. This may have been passed along to some of her royal offspring. Moreover, in the sun cult that they fostered, both Nefertiti and her husband Akhenaten were the only ones through whom prayers could be directed to the solar god Aten. This divine or semi-divine status may have accounted for this eye shape being transformed into an artistic convention that was copied by high-ranking officials and subsequent rulers.

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