HAIR STYLES AND HISTORY

By CYRIL ALDRED
Assistant Keeper, The Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh

Readers of Mary Chubb’s Nefertiti Lived Here—and they seem to be legion, judging by the number of enquiries addressed to the Museum’s Information Desk—will remember that the “crowning moment” in the life of the excavators at Tell el Amarna during that season of 1931 was the discovery, in the ruins of a house in the northern suburbs, of the small but exquisite head shown on this page. After some agonizing moments of suspense during the apportioning of the finds at the end of the season, this little head fell to the share of the Egypt Exploration Society and was subsequently allocated to the Metropolitan Museum in recognition of a generous contribution by Mrs. John Hubbard to the excavation funds of the Society.

John Pendlebury, the Director of the Expedition, was convinced that he had found the head of a statuette of Ankh-en-pa-aten, the third daughter of Akhenaten and Nefertiti and subsequently the wife of Tut-anhk-emun, a charming and rather sad figure in the history of this period, about whom we would fain know much more than the thin and disturbing echoes that reach us from such a remote past. Of course in Egyptology, as in so many other studies, no sooner is one claim made than a counterclaim is promptly filed by someone else; and Pendlebury was taken to task for identifying the head as representing a woman, let alone a princess. So insistent was this criticism that when the object entered the Museum it was first catalogued as “Head of a Man.” John Pendlebury, who was killed in the fighting on Crete in 1941, has perforce left this other field of battle also, and it has devolved upon the writer, in default of anyone better, to enter the lists on his behalf and attempt to show that he was right in identifying this head as from the statuette of a woman, almost certainly a princess, and very probably Ankh-en-pa-aten.

The controversy recalls an earlier one involving the same family of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, in which Theodore M. Davis, lawyer and amateur Egyptologist, was concerned. In 1907, excavating in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes, Davis unearthed a rifled tomb containing a damaged coffin holding a greatly decayed mummy, four canopic jars, a dismembered shrine inscribed for Queen Tiy and her son Akhenaten, whose figure was obliterated, and other funerary objects bearing the names of the same queen and her husband, Amenophis III. It was at first thought, therefore, that the tomb of Queen Tiy had been found, a belief that Davis maintained to his dying day. In the publication of his discoveries the canopic jars, with their covers in the form of human heads, are described as belonging to this queen, and the one he gave to the Museum (p. 142) was thus labeled. But in the meantime an examination of the bones in the coffin had shown that they were those of a man who had died at the age of about twenty-five, and the view was therefore advanced that the tomb had contained the dishonored remains of Akhenaten himself, one of the supporting arguments being that the heads on the canopic jars were shown wearing a man’s wig. Accordingly the label of the Museum’s specimen was altered to take these new theories into account. Then some twenty years later another scholar, re-examining all the material from the Davis
Lid of Meritaten's canopic jar with her portrait, showing the short Nubian wig. The hole above the forehead was made for the insertion of a uraeus (now missing) when the jar was used for her husband, Smenkh-ka-re.

Helmet. A wooden fragment from the tomb of this same king suggests that at least one funerary statue showed him with the military hair style, which he also wears in a scene on a relief on the Eighth Pylon at Karnak. During the succeeding two reigns examples of the fashion are rare, but at Amarna what we may refer to as the short Nubian cut is much more in evidence, though it is confined to the men of the army and police and is seldom, if ever, worn by the officers; in
fact they seem to be carefully distinguished from the rank and file by the possession, among other accouterments, of a different pattern of wig. This is also the case in the later reign of Tutankh-amun, when the reliefs in the tomb of the general Horemheb, for instance, show the private soldiers with the short Nubian haircut and their officers with a rather longer version. That the short style could occasionally be worn at this time by the higher ranks, however, is seen in several representations of Tut-ankh-amun in which he wears the short Nubian wig, usually
with a military or hunting costume but sometimes merely for the sake of variety in his dress. At Amarna, however, there is a scrupulous distinction between the ranks in the fashion of their haircuts.

The reader will by now be wondering what ever led Pendlebury to believe that the head of the statuette could be that of a princess since the coiffure is so essentially military in character. For answer we must go to the tomb of the vizier Ramose at Thebes, where one of the first manifestations of the “new art” in the Amarna style is the relief of the young co-regent Akhenaten and his queen, Nefertiti, at the palace window bestowing decorations on their followers. The king wears a loose flowing garment, like a woman’s outer robe, and, as if in compensation, the queen wears the short Nubian wig. Thereafter at Amarna the queen is not infrequently seen with this style of coiffure having the uraeus cobra in the front, a headdress which the king on the other hand affects only in one certain example in the tomb of Mery-re. Failure to recognize this idiosyncracy has been responsible for some peculiar misconceptions, and fragments bearing portraits of Nefertiti have often been identified as representing her husband. A careful study of the reliefs at Amarna will show that it is not only the queen among the royal women who may use this kind of wig; maids of honor or high-ranking attendants on the queen’s children also invariably wear it, and the princesses themselves as soon as they attain maturity are shown with it. The hair style of the latter, in fact, is governed by their ages: as infants their heads are shaven, as minors they wear the side lock, and when they reach adolescence they assume the short Nubian wig. If it may be thought incongruous that the princesses of a luxurious court should trim their hair into the same pattern as that worn by a rough and unmannered soldiery, we can point to the “urchin,” or “gamin” cut of a more recent past as providing a comparable parallel.

The absence of a uraeus makes it certain that our little head cannot represent the king or queen, and it must therefore have come from the statue of a common soldier, a maid of honor,
or a princess who had reached marriageable age. The first two can be excluded right away as unlikely to commission a sculptor to make a statuette that can have served only a decorative or aesthetic function. In addition, of course, the soldier would have been too poor to afford such a luxury. Statues of private persons at Amarna are exceedingly rare and their true purpose uncertain; but they were doubtless meant for ultimate funerary use. On the other hand, sculptures showing members of the royal family are not uncommon and seem to have served the needs of ritual in the chapels attached to the larger houses of the city. The northern suburb was built late in the reign, when Akhenaten’s eldest surviving daughters, Merit-aten and Ankh-es-en-pa-aten were already playing a prominent role in the politics of the period. The head almost certainly represents one of these two princesses, probably the latter, who seems to have differed from her sister in having a chubbier face with more rounded contours, judging from the relief that appears on the back panel of the throne belonging to the early years of Tut-ankh-amun.
We may now be in a better position to decide who the canopic jar lid represents. It is certainly not Smenkh-ka-re, who would have been shown as a king wearing the striped wig cover, royal uraeus, and probably a beard. The jars have, in fact, only been adapted for Smenkh-ka-re, the body of the cobra having been subsequently cut on top of the head and a hole made in the brow for the insertion of a uraeus hood, of metal or dark stone, now missing. The incised inscription on the body of each jar has also been ground away until nothing can now be read. It seems most plausible that, like the coffin in which the king was buried, they belonged to a woman; and since both coffin and jar lids show the owner as wearing the short Nubian wig, it is safe to surmise that they both represent a royal princess and undoubtedly the same woman. Moreover, the face of that princess has the rather gaunt, faintly consumptive features that seem to distinguish Merit-aten from her younger sister, so far as we can judge from the few and uncertain portraits of her that have come down to us. We have little hesitation, therefore, in suggesting that Smenkh-ka-re was buried in surplus equipment that belonged formerly to his wife and was probably made for her while she was still unmarried. Just why all this was done is another story and does not concern us here.

What may capture our interest in these two heads of royal sisters is the curious side light they throw upon the character of the age. For we may see in this epicene charade, in which members of the royal family exchange each other’s clothes, the kings wearing a type of woman’s gown and appearing with heavy hips and breasts and the womenfolk wearing their hair cut in a brusque military crop, a masquerade almost unparalleled in the course of the human comedy, and one whose implications have still to be properly assessed. One problem it has bequeathed to us is the occasional difficulty of distinguishing the sexes at Amarna, especially where only fragments of the monuments have survived.

It will be noted that Mr. Aldred’s spelling of proper names sometimes differs from that adopted by the Museum’s Egyptian Department, as shown by the next article.

Ankhes-en-pa-aten anointing Tut-ankh-amun; from a throne, about 1360 B.C.