Letter to the Editor

An enigmatic eye in an enigmatic bust

Un ojo enigmático en un busto enigmático

Dear Sir,

I have read with interest the article published in the iconographic section of this Journal by Drs. Diez-Lage and González and titled The enigmatic eye of Nefertiti. After publishing a review on the topic in the February issue of the British Journal of Ophthalmology, I would like to make a few comments.

Queen Nefertiti (c. 1370–1330 AC) was the Great Royal Wife of Akhenaten (Amenhotep or Amenophis IV), who was not a general as the authors indicate but the tenth pharaoh of the XVIII Dynasty. The bust of Nefertiti, presently housed in the Neues Museum (not the Altes Museum) of Berlin, is not only lacking the left iris but also the entire ocular globe.

The artificial eyes made by ancient Egyptian sculptors were frequently inlaid in metal for artistic purposes and manufactured with a white opaque quartz fragment (which represented the sclera), with a circular rock crystal placed in the center to simulate the cornea. The pupil was drawn and painted in the reverse. Apparently, Nefertiti’s anophthalmic cavity, made of limestone and without any type of decoration or signs of manipulation, never housed an ocular prosthesis. A detailed analysis thereof did not even reveal remains of the wax with which ancient Egyptian craftsmen adhered artificial eyes to the anophthalmic cavity. Although there is no consensus to explain this archeological mystery, one of the most accepted theories is that the ocular globe was never inserted because the famous bust was a model for official portraits used by Tutmosis, the master sculptor, to teach his students to work on the arbitrary cavity.

Quite recently, Henri Stierling, a well-reputed art historian, has questioned the authenticity of this famous bust. According to this Swiss expert, who wrote dozens of books about ancient Egypt, the bust was sculpted in the Tell-el-Amarna site (90 miles south of Cairo) where it was allegedly found in 1912. Gerardt Marks, an artist in charge of testing the pigments applied by ancient Egyptians in their sculptures, received from Ludwig Borchardt, the German archeologist in charge of the excavation, a request to make the sculpture. However, when the bust was admired as an original by a Prussian Prince who was enthralled by the beauty of Nefertiti, the archeologist did not dare contradict the Prince in order to avoid embarrassing him for mistaking a fake ancient bust for a genuine work of art.

Since the bust was presented to the German public in 1923, Egypt has been unsuccessfully demanding the return of the bust which was discovered on the shore of the Nile River and taken out of the country in strange circumstances. At present it is the most valuable treasure of the Berlin Museum and one of the main attractions of the city. Perhaps those strange circumstances were related to the fact that the bust remained 10 years decorating the living room of James Simon, the German patron who financed Borchardt’s excavations (Fig. 1).


Fig. 1 – The treasures of Tell el-Amarna, including the polychrome bust of Queen Nefertiti (in the center), remained for 10 years in the Berlin house of James Simon, the rich German patron, before being shown to the public in 1923. Photograph taken from the book by Henri Stierling

REFERENCES


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