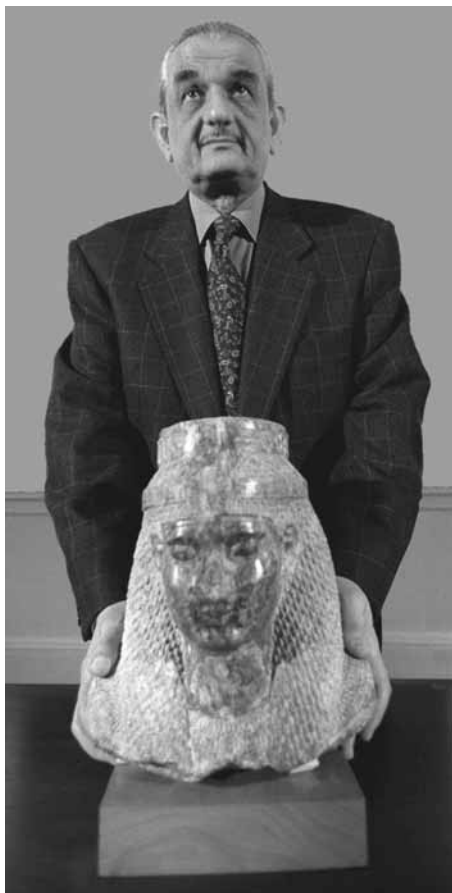


The Curious Case of Nefertari's Head

In the Spring of 2000 the British Museum staged a press conference. The great and the good were all assembled, and the mood was triumphant, for a sculpted head of Queen Nefertari—an Egyptian national treasure, and valued at \$10 million—was being returned to the Egyptian government. It was a splendid occasion, and rightly hailed as a token of everlasting friendship, and the fruit of a 'joint campaign against illegal looting'.

There was only one fly in the ointment. Or perhaps two. First, the head wasn't Queen Nefertari. Second, and more pertinent, it was almost certainly a *worthless fake*.



His Excellency Adel al-Gazzar, the Egyptian Ambassador, takes possession of 'Queen Nefertari's Head' for the Egyptian people (or at least for the Egyptian government).

First, the little matter of identity. When I had originally seen the head in Cairo, and promptly bought it—oh yes, I was the one—it had a hieroglyphic inscription on the back. I photographed this immediately (date stamped), as a matter of routine (and recorded the event in my journal):



*Taken on the same day I acquired the head, this photograph shows the original (and **only**) inscription, exactly the same as the White Queen's.*

And then I strolled across to Cairo Museum to follow up the clues. I soon discovered that my head's inscription was exactly the same as the one on a famous statue called the 'White Queen.' Now this had been discovered in 1894 but its inscription had been broken off before it reached a name, so nobody knew who it was. Then another statue was found in the 1980s, this time with a complete inscription *and* a name—Meryet-Amun, one of the daughters of Ramesses the Great. It followed that the famous White Queen was Meryet-Amun. And it also followed, or so it seemed, that morning in 1991, that my head was also Meryet-Amun.

JOURNAL: Sunday 24th November 1991, Dokki Flat, Cairo
Ali arrived with the new head. I unwrapped the inevitable newspaper, and saw the perfect necklace and lappets... I exclaimed that it was either Tiye, or Meryet-Amun, the Princess-Queen of Ramesses the II—it has a double ureaus, and it's late New Kingdom. I started for the museum, to examine the two candidates, and concluded that it's Meryet-Amun, because the inscription on the back plinth exactly matches the 'White Queen's'!



The famous 'White Queen' in Cairo, found by Sir Flinders Petrie in 1894, and for nearly a century an unsolved mystery.

But its identity hardly mattered, unless the thing was genuine. I was able to smuggle it out disguised as a tourist trinket—Egypt's laws forbid the export of antiquities—but the face was badly damaged, and needed extensive restoration. And as I was struggling with this I gradually realized—to my considerable embarrassment—that it was actually a fake. It was bloody good, as fakes go. But definitely a fake.¹

Eventually I sold it on, as a fake by the 'Berlin Master'.² *And the British Museum should have known this.* I sold the head, incidentally, for £35,000, the going rate for a modern masterpiece, but a tiny fraction of the real price—if it *had* been a genuine antiquity, that is to say.

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- [1] This was eventually confirmed in New York, by the world's leading Egyptologists—Professor Bernard von Bothmer of the New York Institute, now sadly deceased, but the acknowledged authority at the time, and the curators of the Metropolitan and Brooklyn Museums, amongst others.
- [2] We don't actually know who the Berlin Master was, only that he was Albanian, worked in Cairo in the 1950s, and was the greatest faker of them all. His title is honorific, derived from the resting place of some of his best efforts. For more of his work, see page 223.

On the advice of the Metropolitan Police Arts Squad, the Egyptian government took its new owner to court – claiming it ‘stolen’ from Egypt, and rightfully theirs. The owner simply said it was a fake but, interestingly, the case folded without a shot being fired, his legal aid being withdrawn the very day before the case was to be heard. A curious coincidence.

Anyway, since the BM had reluctantly admitted my market reputation – that I was ‘one of the world’s finest restorers’, and could ‘only helplessly admire the skill with which [I]...had recreated the face’³ – it would surely have been sensible to consult me regarding the authenticity of the piece.

So why *didn’t* they pick up the phone and ask me? Presumably because at the time I was languishing at Her Majesty’s Pleasure, serving a sentence for having ‘smuggled’ the thing – or things like it – and they didn’t have the phone number for Wormwood Scrubs. It was a pity they didn’t ask, however, because their own conservator could only devote four hours to its authentication (as opposed to my four months) and his brief, apparently, was to expose my restoration of the face. Consequently he missed everything else.⁴

[3] The Guardian, January 22nd 2000.

[4] For those of an inquisitive bent, these are:

- The inscription on its ‘back column’ was a straight lift from the so-called ‘White Queen’ statue in Cairo Museum, which ended in exactly the same place, in the same mid-sentence, but with certain modern ‘spelling mistakes’ (proportion and spacing) which implied a modern ‘illiterate’s’ hand.
- Although the material appeared to be *Gneiss*, a hard crystalline stone much used by ancient Egyptian sculptors, it definitely wasn’t. It was a suspiciously soft imitation, most likely an imported marble, and as such, it was completely unknown in Egyptian sculpture. There is no other known example.
- The impressive bronze stump in the head-dress does not ‘belong’, as the trade says. It seems to comprise a selection of bronze fragments – themselves undoubtedly ancient – but glued together to give a favourable impression.
- The torso was broken at its strongest point, which suggests that the stone was broken *before* it was sculpted and that a composition containing all the most desirable bits was squeezed onto the available space. This unexpected completeness usually suggests a forgery, or that a fragment had recently been cut from an original statue. But in *that* case, the cut-edge would have been raw stone, showing saw-marks, not weathered (patinated) the same as the rest.
- The stone showed microscopic evidence of working by modern (tungsten-steel) tools, and modern garnet-based abrasives and, last but far from least:
- Its patination was not ancient, but indicative of oxalic acid immersion (or chicken-slurry immersion, in the style of modern Italian forgers).

With all due professional respect to Mr. Ken Uprichard, the BM’s head of stone conservation, he is not an Egyptologist. Hence he wasn’t the man to ‘authenticate’ such an object, and certainly not in an afternoon.

The real puzzle, however, was the mistaken identity. Because there is one thing clear in all this. If the British Museum had known that the head's inscription was the same as the White Queen's—ending at exactly the same place, in mid-sentence—they would have been as suspicious as I became. And they would probably have concluded that one was a copy of the other. That's what fakers do, after all. They make copies.

But they were told an extraordinary thing. They were told that I had '*hacked off the original inscription (presumably naming Nefertari) and disguised the sculpture with a copy of the White Queen's inscription.*'⁵

No rationale was ever offered for this—for this brutal replacement of an inscription. Why would anyone reduce an object to a tiny fraction of its value—especially if 'greed' was supposedly his motivation? If a racehorse is kidnapped for stud, why geld it for disguise? And how could a restorer who had spent his career bringing such things back to life, and preserving them for the future, be supposed capable of such brutality? Doctors do not habitually mutilate their patients.

But it quickly established itself as a matter of faith—that smugglers '*habitually mutilate antiquities so as to 'disguise' them.*' But changing an inscription as an aid to smuggling? Surely not. The Egyptian customs service would hardly dismiss something because it bore the same inscription as the White Queen's, even if they recognized it as such. Quite the contrary. Any inscription at all would alert them. Hence my smuggler's practise of *concealing* any inscription until it reached a safe haven (as I did with this sculpture—see illustrations overleaf). But a harmless, removable conservator's disguise is a far far cry from 'mutilation.' Considerably farther than face-paint from major plastic surgery.

And the result of all this? That a noble institution—and with a great deal of pious fanfare—has returned a *howling fake* to a foreign government. Which has to count as a splendid joke, unless you happen to be Egyptian, and were expecting—and agitating for—something *genuinely* important, such as the Rosetta Stone...

But how to account for such a farce? The probing reader will already have his suspicions. There are people here—

[5] Published in The Times Legal Supplement, admittedly by a lawyer acting for the Egyptian government, which presumably had its own agenda.



The head being plastered by myself to conceal its inscription from prying eyes...



...and then being gilded by my partner, Ali Farag

parties, factions— with a definite *agenda* in mind. And there are others— decidedly less scrupulous in their methods— who are willing to help it along. Spin, disinformation, propaganda, call it what you like.

For sadly, whatever the high-minded pronouncements of its standard bearers, the *truth* has been the first casualty of the Cultural Heritage Crusade.