

Owning Egypt:
Appropriation Mechanisms in Beauty and Fashion Advertising in the United States, 1922-
1924

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Abstract

This paper examines how ancient Egyptian iconography was appropriated by American beauty and fashion advertisers between 1922 and 1924 following the rediscovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb. While Egyptomania is often interpreted as a positive trend, I argue that advertisers deliberately appropriated ancient Egyptian motifs to use as a commercial tool in three distinct phases: first illustrated as an exotic spectacle, then embodied as whitewashed figures, and finally reduced to a brand word. Through analysis of soap, perfume, cosmetic, and fashion advertisements, this paper demonstrates how sacred symbols, royal figures, and references to places such as Luxor were detached from their historical context and transformed into alluring signs of luxury, mystery, and exoticism. Advertisers used visual and textual strategies, like pharaonic imagery altered to fit contemporary beauty standards, and framed ancient Egypt as exotic yet accessible. By focusing on the advertiser rather than the consumer, this research reveals how the appropriation of ancient Egyptian imagery was not a harmless act of admiration but rather a calculated act of cultural appropriation used to sell product.

Introduction

In November 1922, British archaeologist Howard Carter uncovered King Tutankhamun's tomb, an event that awed Americans as it unleashed a wave of fascination for ancient Egypt across the United States. Newspapers detailed the discovery with eye catching headlines and amazed readers with descriptions of King Tutankhamun's golden mask, jewelry, including gold bracelets set with stones like turquoise, pottery, and painted wall reliefs that feature palm fronds, columns, and colorful stylized figures.¹ What began as an archaeological discovery quickly evolved into a cultural phenomenon. Elite costume balls embraced ancient Egyptian pharaohs as themes, fashion magazines announced that ancient Egyptian motifs had become the height of modern fashion, and highly stylized ancient Egyptian figures graced advertisements.

While this distant ancient civilization became suddenly visible and culturally accessible through mass media, American advertisers reshaped it to meet contemporary desires. The rediscovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb did not simply inspire admiration for ancient Egypt but created commercial opportunity. Advertisers recognized that ancient Egyptian iconography could be mobilized to sell aspiration, luxury, mystery, and exoticism at a time when American consumer culture was revitalizing after World War I. Egyptomania—the widespread Western fascination with integrating ancient Egyptian aesthetics into art and culture—was not only an artistic trend but a commercial strategy.² Advertisers no longer relied solely on practical claims about beauty or fashion products like price or effectiveness but instead began selling aspiration and self-transformation. Between 1922 and 1924, ancient Egyptian motifs became essential to

¹ Katherine A. Hunt, "Beauty That Endures: Egyptian Revival in the 1920s" (MA thesis, University of Delaware, 2003), 8-9.

² Brian A. Curran, review of "Egyptomania: Egypt in Western Art, 1730–1930," exhibition catalog by Jean-Marcel Humbert, Michael Pantazzi, and Christiane Ziegler, *The Art Bulletin* 78, no. 4 (December 1996): 739.

cosmetic and clothing advertisements as sacred religious symbols were transformed into decorative borders, imagined pharaonic inspired figures became the spokespeople of companies, monumental architecture was reduced to graphic framing devices, and names like “Luxor” and “Rameses” were detached from historical and geographical context and repurposed as brand identifiers.

Soap, perfume, cosmetic, and fashion advertisers capitalized on the media spectacle of King Tutankhamun’s tomb, sponsored ancient Egyptian themed events, and participated in the rapid integration of ancient Egyptian iconography into consumerism. Through advertisers, ancient Egypt was celebrated as ancient and luxurious yet stripped of political and cultural specificity. It was distant enough to be exotic but malleable enough to be claimed. Advertisers allowed consumers to admire ancient Egypt and then possess it, reframing ancient Egyptian culture as transferable and something that Americans could buy, wear, and embody. The strategic use of ancient Egyptian iconography by American advertisers was an act of cultural appropriation. Advertisers selectively extracted ancient Egyptian motifs and modified them to suite the contemporary stereotypes of the early 1920s. Pharaonic/queen-like figures were rendered with pale skin and redesigned to have bobbed hair. Through this process, advertisers transformed ancient Egypt into a purchasable fantasy designed to attract white female consumers.

The evolution of ancient Egypt as a marketing tool between 1922 and 1924 demonstrates how quickly cultural spectacle can be twisted into an advertiser’s tool. What began as an archaeological study became a marketable vocabulary for product. This paper traces how Egyptian iconography moved through three phases in American advertising between 1922 and 1924: first illustrated as exotic spectacle, then embodied as whitewashed figures, and finally

reduced to a brand word—each stage stripping ancient Egyptian culture further from historical context and closer to pure commodity. Egyptomania in the early 1920s was not merely a fleeting trend but a calculated reconfiguration of cultural motifs into commodity.

Literature Review

When analyzing the impact of ancient Egypt on early 1920s material culture, contemporary scholars—from 1978 and 1994-2022— highlight that Western societies borrowed ancient Egyptian motifs and symbols. These scholars' arguments fall into several interpretative frameworks: appropriation and ownership, consumer identity formation, and the gap between imagined and actual Egypt, along with the theoretical framework of Orientalism that underlies all of these arguments. Over time, the examination of Egyptomania has transitioned from aesthetic fascination to an ongoing debate about appropriation and ownership, with scholars building upon each other's ideas.

Orientalism as the Theoretical Framework

The scholarly study of how Western cultures appropriate and transform non-Western cultures for their own gain is grounded in Edward Said's foundational 1978 book *Orientalism*. Said argues that Western representations of 'the Orient'—including Egypt—reveal more about Western power and anxieties than about the actual cultures being represented.³ This framework helps explain how 1920s American Egyptomania could simultaneously admire Egyptian culture while commodifying it for American audiences. Other scholars' key studies of whiteness, appropriation, and exploration of cultural anxieties all build on Said's insight that such representations serve Western interests and identity formation.

³ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 27-28.

Appropriation and Colonial Ownership

The two most informative pieces and most compelling interpretive framework encompassing literature on this topic are Katherine A. Hunt's 2003 master's dissertation, "Beauty that Endures: Egyptian Revival in the 1920s," and Isabella Campagnol's 2022 book, *Style from the Nile: Egyptomania in Fashion From the 19th Century to the Present Day*. Both of these sources interrogate how Egyptomania was a fad that revealed modern identity and cultural authority. Hunt's dissertation analyzes how Egyptomania was not just a fashion craze but a cultural response to deep anxieties of the decade.⁴ Egyptomania, she argues, was used as an exploitative, colonial outlet for Americans to grapple with social changes such as uncertainty about identity, shifting gender roles, and racial politics. She concludes that Egypt was used as a symbol of American permanence, an escape from modern life revealing a sense of instability underneath the prosperity of the 1920s.

Campagnol explains that prior to the discovery of King Tut's tomb, Egyptomania was already present in the visual language of fashion, but the cultural fascination with the discovery of Tut's tomb made ancient Egyptian motifs a craze in America. She notes that ownership over King Tutankhamen's tomb was an exercise in colonial power, as British excavators used former colonial dominance over Egypt to validate the removal of Egyptian artifacts from Egypt.⁵ She argues that Egyptomania is not a timeless aesthetic, but rather a trend that reflects Western power, selective appropriation, and colonial desire.⁶ Throughout the book she highlights how

⁴ Hunt, "Egyptian Revival," 3.

⁵ Isabella Campagnol, *Style from the Nile: Egyptomania in Fashion from the 19th Century to the Present Day* (Yorkshire, UK: Pen & Sword History, 2022), 9-10.

⁶ Campagnol, *Style from the Nile*, 12-13.

designers manipulated Egyptian motifs to express exoticism while detaching them from ancient Egyptian culture. For example, she highlights 1920s flapper style dresses, where geometric “Egyptian” patterns were used to emulate aesthetic appeal rather than cultural accuracy.⁷

Whiteness and the Female Consumer

Angelica J. Maier’s 2021 article, “‘Is Cleopatra Black?:’ Examining Whiteness in the American New Woman,” directly connects the normalization of white supremacy in visual media throughout the 1920s, but especially in the 1922-1924 era with primary sources like costume manuals and fashion magazines. Maier explains that “we are able to trace the continued production of whiteness in the 1920s–1930s because of their repetition and predominance in the visual realm [of fashion] at this time.”⁸ This article introduces a concept that differs compared to previous scholarship: racial contestation in Egyptomania figures.⁹ Maier explains that American culture repeatedly whitewashed famous female Egyptian figures, specifically Cleopatra, to align them with American beauty standards. She argues that the consumers—white women—of appropriated motifs ironically reinforced their privileged status as white women and the rightful owners of Egyptian beauty.¹⁰ Although white women appropriated Egyptian beauty through the purchasing and use of products marketed with whitewashed Egyptian imagery, they were manipulated by advertisers who used ancient Egyptian iconography to promise luxury, mystery, and beauty.

⁷ Campagnol, *Style from the Nile*, 12-13.

⁸ Angelica J. Maier, “‘Is Cleopatra Black?:’ Examining Whiteness and the American New Woman,” *Humanities* 10, no. 2 (2021):1.

⁹ This idea is explored more deeply in Campagnol’s 2022 book.

¹⁰ Maier, “Is Cleopatra Black?,” 4.

The Aesthetic History of Egyptomania

In his 1994 book, *Egyptomania: the Egyptian Revival, a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste*, James Stevens Curl explains how visually widespread Egyptomania was in material culture such as fashion, architecture, art, and beauty. He analyzes what patterns and motifs are repeated in Egyptomania architecture, such as obelisks, pyramids, and columns.¹¹ These patterns and motifs appear across various material domains. For example, columns also appear as a border in a 1923 *Harper's Bazaar* Egyptomania themed advertisement for boots.¹² He explains that ancient Egypt was themed as luxurious, erotic and exotic and enticed audiences interested in architecture and decor.¹³

Brian Curran's "Egyptomania: Egypt in Western Art," published in 1996, emphasizes that the West reinvents ancient Egyptian art to suit contemporary needs. Curran provides a theory about the reason for the use of ancient Egyptian imagery in consumerism: it makes the consumer feel like they are a part of something and that feeling sells.¹⁴ Curran does not examine specific advertisement imagery, like Campagnol and Hunt, but provide a background for why advertisers used ancient Egyptian iconography to sell products.

In his 2016 book, *Egyptomania: A History of Fascination, Obsession and Fantasy*, historian Ronald H. Fritze focuses on how fantasy and invention shaped "Tutmania," and argues that America relies on imagined versions of ancient Egyptian art with very little basis in

¹¹ James Stevens Curl, *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival, a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994), 210.

¹² *Harper's Bazaar*, April 1923.

¹³ Curl, *Egyptomania*, 213.

¹⁴ Curran, review of "Egyptomania," 745.

historical accuracy.¹⁵ Like Campagnol, Fritze explains that Egyptomania has been a resurrected theme in Western consumerism for over 3,000 years but explains that Egyptomania persists because Western desires can be projected upon it. Campagnol focuses and expands this idea by demonstrating how that desire became tangible in beauty and fashion. Fritze's 2016 book provides background for the cyclical nature of this trend and how it uniquely drenched the early 1920s in gold. But it does not acknowledge the ownership advertisers staked in the trend or how they used it to manipulatively market the new, white, female consumer.

My research builds on this scholarship with a focused analysis of how American fashion and beauty industries between 1922-1924 enacted cultural appropriation to turn Egypt into a niche fantastical, purchasable asset that was displayed in ads, magazines, and product packaging. Broader scholarship, while providing essential theoretical frameworks to understand the phenomenon of Egyptomania as cultural appropriation, a design language, and reflecting colonial desire, has not yet examined how Egypt was integrated from national news to everyday commercial products. Scholars, in addition, have not yet provided micro-evidence of how companies selectively appropriated Egypt to sell it.

While these scholars address the effect of Egyptomania, as a trend, scholars have yet to examine how these borrowings were appropriated for advertising in order to specifically entice the white female American consumer. My research aims to fill these gaps by interrogating the advertisers, rather than the consumers, as the reinforcer of white supremacy with a case study on how American and in some cases European promotion of consumer products transformed ancient Egyptian art into an ideal concerned with female whiteness, exoticism, and modernity. This

¹⁵ Ronald H. Fritze, *Egyptomania: A History of Fascination, Obsession and Fantasy* (London: Reaktion Books, 2016), 222, 237.

interrogation reveals both advertisers' use of Egyptian motifs to harness themes of luxury and exoticism and reveals how quickly successful advertising could shift.

Methodology

Primary source materials from archival research such as newspaper articles, advertisement inserts, and fashion catalogs demonstrate how Egyptomania was expressed in material culture and used to convince the consumer to buy. This archival research not only provides evidence of the trend but also provides contemporary historical context for Egyptomania. For example, an *Omaha Morning Bee* article from 1923, titled "How to Dress to Be Truly Egyptian," is an ancient Egyptian themed ad in a newspaper, but also details some of the discoveries in King Tut's tomb.¹⁶ These sources allowed me to trace the patterns of Egyptomania between 1922-1924 not just through ad frequency, but also through visual complexity. Advertisements, however, have one major drawback: there is little data on how consumers responded to these ads. Therefore, my study focuses on the ads themselves as evidence of how advertisers constructed and sold appropriated Egyptian imagery, even though in this focused study I cannot definitively prove how individual consumers interpreted these messages. Depending on the brand and product, some ads are much more detailed and more obviously ancient Egyptian themed than others. For example, a 1923 advertisement from *Harper's Bazaar* called "Why Most Women Choose Luxor Rouge" only references ancient Egypt through the word "Luxor."¹⁷ A June 1923 *Vogue* ad for perfume is much more Egyptomania themed with palm fronds, columns, and a queenlike figure.¹⁸ I analyze why these

¹⁶ "How to Dress to be Truly Egyptian," *Omaha Morning Bee*, April 8, 1923, 1.

¹⁷ *Harper's Bazaar*, November 1923.

¹⁸ Le Blume Import Co., "Presenting-Ramses Cairo," 1.

ads differ and how they are appropriative. Both the Library of Congress and the digital repositories at Duke University proved helpful to this research with their collections of newspapers and inserts that displayed Egyptomania as an advertising tactic used to sell beauty and fashion themed goods to a white, female consumer.

Using the method of discourse analysis—the study of how and why language is used within its cultural context—this project examines the textual and visual language used in beauty and fashion ads. Terms like “secrets,” “mysteries,” and “Luxor,” show how marketing framed ancient Egyptian iconography as a cultural resource that Americans could take and use. Visual/material cultural analysis reveals how designers took Egyptian motifs and repurposed them for American fashion and beauty packaging while divorcing them from their historical and cultural meaning. Following Edward Said's approach to analyzing how the West represents the Orient, I employ a Cultural Studies method of “reading against the grain” to examine how advertisements reveal underlying ideologies. Said demonstrates that colonial texts can be read to expose how they construct “the Orient” to serve Western interests.¹⁹ Applying this framework to 1920s beauty and fashion advertisements reveals how advertisers appropriated ancient Egyptian iconography while transforming it through racialized imagery that served American ideas about whiteness, class, and modernity. Through this textual, visual, and material analysis, three stages of appropriation are revealed—illustrated spectacle, whitewashed figure, brand word—arguing that ancient Egyptian imagery receded not because advertisers lost interest, but because the work of cultural extraction was already complete.

¹⁹ Said, *Orientalism*, 3-4.

Background

By the late nineteenth century, soap companies had developed a very deliberate practice of using exotic imagery and the language of civilization to market their products. Soap was not just being sold to clean bodies—it was being sold as proof that the user was civilized, refined, and modern. By the time advertisers used ancient Egyptian iconography in the early 1920s, the public association between soap, beauty products, and civilizational status was thoroughly established. Advertisers marketing Egyptian-themed products were drawing on decades of this tradition, and strategically linking ancient Egypt to beauty, mystery, and desirability.²⁰ Two major factors contributed to the revitalization and unique saturation of Egyptomania in American consumerism between 1922 and 1924.

In November 1922, Howard Carter, British Archeologist and Egyptologist, and Lord Carnarvon, aristocrat and financial backer, rediscovered King Tutankhamun and his tomb of treasures. This discovery captivated Americans as they marveled at his golden treasures. Although Carter and Carnarvon rediscovered Tut's tomb in November 1922, reports of the discovery did not flood American newspapers until early 1923. Carter and Carnarvon awarded the *New York Times* exclusive first report access to news and pictures of the tomb. On January 27, 1923, the *New York Times* notified the public of this exclusive access in an advertisement promising to educate readers about the various treasures found in the tomb.²¹ The trend that would shape U.S. fashion and beauty advertisements ironically began in an advertisement.

²⁰ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851-1914* (New York: Verso Books, 1991), 119-123.

²¹ Hunt, "Egyptian Revival," 5-7.

A few weeks later, on February 17, 1923, the *New York Times* detailed the treasures that were revealed in the tomb in a lengthy front page article.²² The rediscovered Egyptian artifacts and iconography found and advertised by Carter and Carnarvon and detailed by leading U.S. newspapers included King Tutankhamun's funeral mask made of gold and lapis lazuli, and two-dimensional wall paintings of figures with black hair, palm fronds, and ankhs. These and other artifacts inspired advertisers and the general public. Americans were in awe of the discovery and responded to it with a fascination for all things Egyptian history and archaeology. The *New York Times* reported that there was an increase of over 5,000 visitors to the Egyptian section of the Metropolitan Museum of Art as Egyptomania spread throughout America.²³

The discovery of King Tutankhamun's tomb of treasures—the epitome of luxury and wealth—correlated with a new period of prosperity in the United States. Between the end of World War I and 1922, the United States entered a recession due to a decrease in manufacturing output and a sharp decline in price levels.²⁴ According to labor scholars Haelim Anderson and Jin-Wook Chang, “Unemployment rose slowly afterward, peaking 11.4 percent at the height of the recession in 1921.”²⁵ In 1922, the economy recovered as mass industrial production boomed and America shifted to a consumer culture as the government supported and encouraged material progress. This created fertile ground for advertisers to capitalize on Egyptomania.

Although the early 1920s are remembered as a time of prosperity, this was not the case for the majority of individuals. The rich gained wealth as the average worker faced a new era of

²² Hunt, “Egyptian Revival,” 7-8.

²³ Hunt, “Egyptian Revival,” 9.

²⁴ Haelim Anderson and Jin-Wook Chang, “Labor Market Tightness during WWI and the Postwar Recession of 1920-1921,” *Finance and Economics Discussion Series* 049, (2022): 10.

²⁵ Anderson and Chang, “Labor Market Tightness,” 10.

industrialization, creating class disparity throughout the 1920s.²⁶ These average workers were often minorities facing legalized segregation, restrictive immigration laws, and nationalist white supremacy. This storm of events created the space for revitalized Egyptomania to influence appropriate advertising in 1922-1924 consumer America.

In the early twentieth century, advertising was illustration heavy and worked to establish brand identity. In the 1920s, as the post-war economy blossomed, advertising was just becoming popular again as a sense of normalcy quietly returned. One of the most popular ways to advertise products or brands in the early 1920s was through newspapers and magazines. These adverts were text heavy with bold headlines and featured illustrations of the product and often people presenting the product. This made for a crowded page. The text (often multiple paragraphs) often underscored the feeling of the product, promising improvement, transformation, or revealing a secret or mystery to the buyer. For example, an Egyptomania themed *Palm Olive* soap advertisement, in the *Ladies' Home Journal* from 1922, titled "Pretty Girls Have Always Known the Secret," promises perfect radiant skin while describing the instructions, common complaints it solves, and the importance of popularity and success.²⁷

Advertisers also newly recognized the importance and purchasing power of the female consumer. White women in the early 1920s, in particular, were often targeted by advertisers because of their unique place within society. Their roles were changing as there were more job and education prospects in newly urbanized America and the percentage of female employment increased from 16% to 24%.²⁸ During this time, advertisers stepped in and provided a tangible

²⁶ Hunt, "Egyptian Revival," 20.

²⁷ Palmolive, "Pretty Girls Have Always Known the Secret," advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, 1922, 1.

²⁸ Barry R. Chiswick and RaeAnn-Halenda Robinson, "Women at Work in the United States since 1860: An Analysis of Unreported Family Workers," *Institute of Labor Economics Discussion Paper Series* 14449, (2021): 4.

opportunity to escape the odd duality of being an educated, working, white woman still bound by society's persistent rules of expected housewifery. This era was marked by a transition in advertising, as brands realized that highlighting the performance of the product was not as effective as selling hope, luxury, escape, and exoticism.

Egyptomania was not a trend that simply evolved organically; it was bolstered by news outlets, designers, and wealthy women. In February 1923, the *New York Times* in their "Society Current Doings" section, defined spring as "the annual Cleopatra season of fancy-dress balls."²⁹ This proclamation paved the way for ancient Egyptian iconography to dominate advertising aesthetics. Miss Slaughter, an American designer who researched Egyptian design sources, credits the *New York Times* and their exclusive access to the discovery of King Tutankhamen's tomb for the rise in interest in ancient Egypt and the subsequent reflection of this interest on beauty and fashion.³⁰ Two months later, ancient Egypt made its grand debut into America's upper class society: it became the theme of the benefit of the Woman's International Alliance at the Ritz-Carlton in New York. In June, Bryn Mawr college in Pennsylvania hosted a Tut-themed costume event for alumni, which made headlines in the *New York Times*.³¹ As this trend was approved by the elite, society became eager to associate themselves with all things ancient Egyptian, and advertisers capitalized on this desire.

Ironically, in February 1923, Alexander M. Grean, honorary President of the Model Marker's Association, warned in the *New York Times* that ancient Egypt was a "...dangerous

²⁹ Campagnol, *Style from the Nile*, 111.

³⁰ Hunt, "Egyptian Revival," 13.

³¹ Campagnol, *Style from the Nile*, 113.

“secret.” As the blonde girl looks to the ancient Egyptian figure, the illustration portrays an underlying message of inheritance and ownership. Palm Olive reiterates the message with this phrase: “Pretty girls used a form of Palm Olive in the days of ancient Egypt, just as they do today.”³⁴ The advertisers chose to explicitly link Palm Olive soap with the ancient beauty practices of Egyptian royalty and suggests that modern, white, American women can easily and rightfully access this passed down secret.

This advertisement does not acknowledge actual ancient Egyptian beauty practices but rather selects and romanticizes an imagined version of ancient Egypt to sell soap. The name "Palmolive" comes from palm and olive oils, which were genuinely used in ancient and medieval soap-making across North Africa and the Middle East. But—and this is key—the actual conduit through which these ingredients and formulations entered European soap-making was the medieval Islamic world, not ancient Egypt directly. Arab and North African traders and craftspeople were the ones who developed and transmitted these techniques to Europe. So, when Palmolive claims an unbroken line from ancient Egypt to modern American women, they are erasing not one but two layers of actual history: ancient Egyptian cosmetic practice, and the Islamic world that actually bridged that knowledge into European tradition.³⁵ As Said argues, the West collapsed distinct cultures, histories, and geographies into a single exotic "Orient," and that is exactly what Palmolive does by invoking "ancient Egypt" while actually exploiting a much longer and more complex transmission of knowledge.³⁶ Palm Olive fabricates a historical connection between ancient Egypt and American women while positioning itself as the custodian

³⁴ Palmolive, "Pretty Girls," 1.

³⁵ Beshara Doumani, *Rediscovering Palestine Merchants and Peasants in Jabal Nablus, 1700-1900*. (California: University of California Press, 1995).

³⁶ Said, *Orientalism*.

of a cultural beauty “secret” that supposedly originated in Egypt. Yet Palm Olive was ahead of its time, as this advertisement was published in April 1922, seven months before the sensational discovery of King Tutankhamun’s tomb.

The rapid integration of Egyptian motifs into American fashion that followed was neither subtle nor accidental. In February 1923, the *New York Times* announced the influence of ancient Egypt on fashion with the headline: “Egypt Dominates Fashion Show Here: Designs Copied From Luxor Pictures Decorate Many Suit Models. Prize Wrap Has Hathor A.M. Grean Predicts Tomb Vogue Will Prolong Short Skirts and Bobbed Hair.” The article reports that designers were copying the designs and inscriptions on the pictures recently received from Luxor (a city in ancient Egypt known for monumental temples and tombs), which were “cleverly worked into wraps and gowns.”³⁷ The article asserts that ancient Egypt and King Tut do not merely inspire fashion but dominate it. This proclamation points to ancient Egypt as an aesthetic force overtaking American style, yet it was purposely transformed by advertisers. Grean predicting that “Tomb Vogue will prolong short skirts, and bobbed hair” directly links ancient Egypt to the stereotypical modern woman’s appearance.³⁸ In doing so, this article uses ancient Egypt as the guiding authority for contemporary female identity. The article, while urging designers to not copy things blindly just because they can be called imported, does not question the ethics of copying, but instead treats transformative replication as innovation and appropriation as creative advancement—legitimizing the extraction of ancient Egyptian motifs from their cultural context. When advertisers like Palm Olive, Ramses perfume, Henning Custom Made Boot Shop, and

³⁷ “Egypt Dominates Fashion Show,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1923, 12.

³⁸ “Egypt Dominates Fashion Show,” *New York Times*, February 25, 1923, 12.

Luxor Rouge utilized Egyptian iconography, they were capitalizing on a trend that had been endorsed by the press, experts, and high society.

The influence of ancient Egyptian culture on fashion was not limited to New York; regional newspapers like the *Omaha Morning Bee* also participated in the normalization of appropriative Egyptian aesthetics. This participation demonstrates how the normalization of appropriative of Egyptian aesthetics was not confined to elite coastal fashion culture but had become mainstream. By appearing in a Midwestern newspaper, Egyptomania moved beyond exclusive New York socialites and into the visual language of everyday consumers.

The *Omaha Morning Bee* article “How to Dress to Be Truly Egyptian” blends references to King Tut’s tomb with fashion advice, presenting Egyptian-inspired dress as both trendy and desirable.³⁹ Rather than honoring ancient Egypt as a civilization with a complex material culture, the article creates an instruction guide that encourages American women to incorporate so-called Egyptian elements into their wardrobes. For example, the article calls upon the advice of Professor Jane Fales of the Department of Household Arts at Columbia University, who recommends consumers wear “red, saffron, and blue,” and insists that, “The hair of the Egyptian woman was well cared for and elaborately dressed. Wigs were evidently frequently if not generally worn.”⁴⁰ The *Omaha Morning Bee* did not acknowledge the ancient cultural context of King Tut or seek to preserve the history of ancient Egyptian fashion but took ownership of ancient Egypt by framing this trend as fashionable innovation. Through the national coverage of ancient Egyptian imagery as an innovation rather than an aspect of a foreign culture, American

³⁹ “How to Dress to be Truly Egyptian,” *Omaha Morning Bee*, April 8, 1923, 1.

⁴⁰ “How to Dress,” *Omaha Morning Bee*, April 8, 1923, 1.

audiences had been primed to see ancient Egyptian motifs as modern and fashionable rather than Egyptian.

While Palm Olive strategically appropriated ancient Egypt to sell beauty as an inherited “secret,” fashion advertisers extended this logic by transforming Egyptian material culture into a wearable commodity. This is evident in an advertisement for Henning Custom Made Boot Shop published in *Harper's Bazaar* in 1923 (figure 2).⁴¹ This “Tut-ankh-Amen” advertisement text,



detailing their spring collection, is centered and flanked with two symmetrical proto-doric columns that frame the composition like a temple facade. Atop each of the columns is a figure standing in profile. The identical figures are draped in cloth, holding a staff, in sandals, and wearing a veiled cloth headdress with a cobra ferrennière. Upon first look, these identical figures invoke stereotypical aspects of ancient Egyptian material culture, like frontal eye, stiff posture, and hieratic stillness, but with further inspection these figures are

Figure 2. Henning Custom Made Boot Shop, *Tut-ankh-Amen*, 1923.

odd. For example, the staffs are unusually thin and appear to be more similar to jousting sticks than staffs. Also, there

is a strange parasol-like object protruding from the figures’ torso, blending Egyptian motifs with contemporary fashion accessories. Sandwiching the text is an elongated winged disk, which in ancient Egyptian religious beliefs symbolizes the sun’s continuous cycle of death and rebirth.⁴² This is a sacred ancient Egyptian symbol removed from its cultural context, and deliberately

⁴¹ *Harper's Bazaar*, April 1923, 152.

⁴² Curl, *Egyptomania*, 94-95.

stripped as decorative framing used to sell boots, even as the ad markets itself as “true interpretations as expressed in these models...”⁴³ This sacred religious symbol and stylized human figures are flattened into graphic ornaments to enhance aesthetic appeal and legitimize luxury footwear. Ancient Egyptian iconography in the early 1920s was not merely admired but repositioned as a cultural resource that American companies and advertisers could selectively extract, obscure, and misrepresent in order to sell product by enhancing the exclusivity of modern fashion.

As the “Tut-ankh-Amen” Henning Custom Made Boot Shop advertisement transformed ancient Egyptian iconography into decorative borders, another advertisement for Parfumerie Ramsès published in *Vogue* in 1923 appropriates ancient Egypt at a more intimate level (figure



3). The advertisement promises “scent bases known and used since the days of Tut-ankh-Amen,” claiming access to ancient Egyptian secrets.⁴⁴ The scent ingredients and formulations that European and American perfumers drew on in this period traveled through the medieval Islamic world, not directly from ancient Egypt. So, when Ramses perfume makes these scent claims, advertisers are again invoking ancient Egypt while erasing the actual historical agents of transmission.⁴⁵

Figure 3. Le Blume Import Co.,
Parfumerie Ramsès, 1923.

The imagery within this black and white advertisement attempts to reinforce this outlandish claim. A stylized queenlike

⁴³ *Harper's Bazaar*, April 1923, 152.

⁴⁴ Le Blume Import Co., "Presenting-Ramses Cairo," advertisement, *Vogue*, June 15, 1923, 1.

⁴⁵ Amar Zohar and Efraim Lev, "Trends in the Use of Perfumes and Incense in the Near East after the Muslim Conquests," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 23, no. 1 (2013): 11–13.

figure lounges on top of an elongated lion in profile, her eyes, accentuated with heavy makeup, confront the viewer. She wears draped garments as palm fronds surround her and column-like forms flank the text. Her skin appears light, her posture sensual, and she wears arm jewelry and a flat King-Tut like headdress that mimics bobbed hair. This advertisement suggests that its fragrance formula was derived from the royal courts of King Tutankhamun, fabricating an unbroken lineage between ancient Egypt and modern luxury consumption—not out of lack of historical knowledge, but by design.

The imagery of the idealized queenlike figure bridges this gap. She is not modeled after an ancient Egyptian woman as she historically existed, but as an imagined pharaonic archetype reconfigured to align with 1920s beauty standards such as bobbed hair, a slender figure, and bold makeup as an aspirational figure to *Vogue's* white female readership. The advertisement speaks with confident authority while ignoring knowledge of what was actually found in King Tutankhamun's tomb, therefore collapsing ancient Egyptian knowledge into a manipulative marketing narrative. Like soap, this perfume advertisement does not appreciate or preserve ancient Egyptian culture, but rather extracts aspects of it to selectively function as symbolic authority and decoration. Once again, ancient Egypt is reimagined in order for American advertisers to align their product with spectacle and luxury to sell.

The 1923 advertisement “Why Most Women Choose Luxor Rouge” demonstrates how advertisers deliberately reduced ancient Egypt to a single word (figure 4).⁴⁶ Unlike the heavily ornamented perfume and soap advertisements, Luxor Rouge does not use columns, palm fronds, winged sun disks, or stylized pharaonic figures to signal ancient Egyptian affiliation but relies on the title “Luxor.” Luxor was a city in ancient Egypt known for monumental temples and tombs.

⁴⁶ Luxor Limited, “Why Most Women Choose Luxor Rouge,” advertisement, *Harper's Bazaar*, 1923, 101.

Luxor Rouge relies on this word in an attempt to evoke mystery, exoticism, and archaeological prestige. The geographical name becomes a cosmetic brand detached from its cultural location



Figure 4. Luxor Limited, *Why Most Women Choose Luxor Rouge*, 1923.

and repurposed as a signifier of luxury. Visually, the advertisement reinforces this abstraction as its only mention of ancient Egypt is the word “Luxor.” This black and cream ad strategically features a stereotypical early 1920s idealized white woman with a feather hat, bobbed hair, dark lipstick, and white gloves. She gazes at a small compact while applying rouge with a puff. Ancient Egypt has become so normalized within American consumer culture that a single reference suffices and

transitions ancient Egypt’s function as a place to an atmosphere. By transforming an ancient Egyptian city into a cosmetic label, the advertisement exemplifies how ancient

Egypt is no longer a spectacle but rather a language of commodity. This Luxor Rouge advertisement represents a broader visual shift across 1922-1924 advertisements: first ancient Egypt is illustrated, then embodied, and finally it becomes a brand. Each of these stages removes ancient Egyptian culture and iconography further from historical context and closer to simply a marketing tactic advertisers chose to enhance consumer desire to buy products that would make them feel luxurious and mysterious.

In 1924, Palm Olive published an advertisement titled “Most Men Ask ‘Is She Pretty?’ Not ‘Is She Clever?’” This advertisement marked a shift in Egyptomania advertising as ancient Egyptian iconography in this advertisement was less overt, yet still present (figure 5).⁴⁷ The 1924

⁴⁷ Palmolive, “Most Men Ask ‘Is She Pretty?’ Not ‘Is She Clever?’” advertisement, *Ladies' Home Journal*, 1924, 1.

advertisement declares that “Most Men Ask ‘Is She Pretty?’” as advertisements are changing to a focus on social pressure instead of exoticism. Unlike the 1922 “Pretty Girls Have Always Known the Secret” campaign, which visually demonstrated a visual exchange of the “secret” between ancient Egypt and modern America, the 1924 Palm Olive advertisement foregrounds gender expectations and beauty stereotypes rather than the appropriation of ancient Egyptian archeological discoveries.⁴⁸ Palm Olive no longer emphasizes inherited ancient Egyptian royal



Figure 5. Palm Olive, *Most Men Ask “Is She Pretty?” Not “Is She Clever?”* 1924.

beauty secrets, but straightforwardly frames female value within the approval of the male gaze. Suddenly, Palm Olive emphasizes that beauty is no longer a mystical inheritance but a necessity, of course made possible with their soap that makes your skin “of fine texture... good color... and wrinkles will not be your problem as the years advance.”⁴⁹ Visually, advertisers have dramatically reduced Egyptian motifs featured in this advertisement. The advertisement centers on an illustration of a white woman, with delicate features and a curly blonde bob.

She stares at the viewer, and her dark red robe is draped across her with her shoulder exposed. She is no longer

positioned in dialogue with an ancient Egyptian figure, nor does a stylized pharaonic body appear as an historical authority, nor is there a reference to a famous ancient Egyptian city, and the advertisement is not flanked by columns. Instead, there is only a small presence of ancient Egyptian iconography: in the left-hand corner, there is a line of highly stylized caricatures that

⁴⁸ Palmolive, “Pretty Girls,” 1.

⁴⁹ Palmolive, “Most Men,” 1.

seemingly represent ancient Egyptian culture. There are three figures at the forefront of this line, two women and one man. The two hyperfeminine women are white-skinned, flat gold, red, and blue striped King-Tut like headdress that mimic bobbed hair. They are wearing gold body jewelry, heavy makeup and brightly colored skirts and bras that reveal their midriffs. One of the women is holding a large palm frond. The hypermasculine man is dark skinned with a flat blue and white striped King-Tut like headdress. He is shirtless and wears a green skirt. Where the 1922 advertisement required a literal Egyptian figure to accredit its claims to an ancient beauty “secret,” the 1924 advertisement assumes the authority of beauty—the brand Palm Olive—as already established.⁵⁰ Ancient Egyptian iconography, once valued as a foreground spectacle, has been deliberately stripped and reduced to background aesthetic residue by advertisers.

The contrast between the 1922 and 1924 Palm Olive campaigns demonstrates a broader cultural shift. In the immediate aftermath of the discovery of King Tut’s tomb, advertisers capitalized on the spectacle. Ancient Egyptian motifs functioned as visual novelty and exotic authority. In 1924, however, the novelty had begun to normalize. Egyptian imagery no longer needed to dominate advertisement composition because it had already been integrated into advertising language. What began as explicit appropriation became implicit branding. The fading of overt ancient Egyptian iconography within advertising does not signal a shift in cultural awareness but indicates, rather, a successful assimilation. Ancient Egyptian culture had been significantly mined for aesthetic capital; its visual vocabulary could now recede while its symbolic word continues. Palm Olive no longer needed to display stylized pharaonic figures to evoke luxury and legitimacy because it had already laid the groundwork. Ancient Egypt had already been determined to be accessible, transferrable, and whitewashed.

⁵⁰ Palmolive, "Pretty Girls," 1.

Conclusion

In the United States, between 1922 and 1924, ancient Egypt was transformed by advertisers from simply an archaeological discovery to a promotional tool. What began as a national fascination with King Tutankhamun's tomb became a visual resource advertisers used to sell soap, perfume, boots, and cosmetics. As Alexander M. Grean cautioned in a *New York Times* article in 1923, ancient Egypt should be treated as a "dangerous theme" not because advertisers feared the backlash from appropriation but because it needed to be modified, "beautified," and selectively presented in order to be accepted by the public.⁵¹ The advertisements examined in this paper demonstrate how thoroughly that advice was followed. Ancient Egypt was not preserved in its complexity; it was contorted into marketable fragments designed to entice white female consumers with promises of luxury, mystery, and beauty.

Palm Olive's 1922 "Pretty Girls Have Always Known the Secret" campaign first established the idea of inheritance. By visually pairing a pharaonic Egyptian figure with a blonde stereotypically American girl, advertisers constructed an imagined lineage in which ancient Egyptian beauty was transferred to modern white females.⁵² This advertisement, published before the discovery of King Tut's tomb, reveals that ancient Egypt was already circulating as a trend that was poised to be intensified once the tomb was discovered. The press accelerated this appropriation, headlines declaring that "Egypt Dominates Fashion" normalized ancient Egypt as an innovation rather than an established material culture. The *Omaha Morning Bee* took this idea nationally and took it a step further by reframing ancient Egypt as a style guide.⁵³ By the time

⁵¹ "Egypt Dominates Fashion Show," *New York Times*, February 25, 1923, 12.

⁵² Palmolive, "Pretty Girls," 1.

⁵³ "How to Dress," *Omaha Morning Bee*, April 8, 1923, 1.

advertisers like Henning Custom Made Boot Shop incorporated winged sun disks, columns, and pharaonic figures, consumers had already been conditioned to view ancient Egyptian iconography as transferrable graphical ornaments rather than culturally embedded symbols.⁵⁴ Rameses perfume reshaped ancient Egypt to match 1920s white female beauty standards while promising access to ancient Egyptian scents.⁵⁵ And Luxor Rouge reduced ancient Egypt to a single word.⁵⁶ Finally, the 1924 Palm Olive advertisement reduced ancient Egyptian iconography to existing only in the margins as small decorative caricatures.⁵⁷ The exotic authority that once justified the product had already been internalized into the brand's credibility, and beauty advertising would move on to the next trend.

The distortion of ancient Egyptian motifs and iconography in American advertising between 1922 and 1924 reveals that Egyptomania was not harmless fascination with an ancient civilization, but instead a process of selective appropriation chosen by advertisers to sell luxury, mystery, exoticism, and beauty. The internalization of Egyptomania as exotic through advertising continues into the twenty-first century: original 1920s Palm Olive Egyptomania-themed advertisements are sold by online marketplaces like eBay. They are marketed to the e-consumer as “vintage collectibles” or “nostalgic décor.” What once functioned as a promotional tool in the early 1920s now operates over one hundred years later as a commodity in the mid-2020s. E-consumers purchase these advertisements not for soap but for retro, nostalgic design appeal. The advertisements no longer sell beauty or fashion products but instead entice the viewer with the allure of the past. The cultural extraction and appropriation that occurred a century ago is

⁵⁴ *Harper's Bazaar*, April 1923, 152.

⁵⁵ Le Blume Import Co., "Presenting-Ramses Cairo," 1.

⁵⁶ Luxor Limited, "Why Most Women," 101.

⁵⁷ Palmolive, "Most Men," 1.

preserved and perpetuated. Buyers may see these advertisements as harmless, charming vintage design, but to those unaware of the Orientalist ideology embedded in them, they continue to circulate—now as nostalgic décor—the same racial logic that sold products a century ago to the next generation of consumers, therefore continuing this appropriative cycle.

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