

Egyptomania

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There's something about all that gold, all those snakes, the insouciant kohl-rimmed stares that makes the blood run high. When the Egyptian Hall opened in 1812 at number 22 Piccadilly, displaying "upwards of Fifteen thousand Natural and Foreign Curiosities, Antiques and Productions of The Fine Arts", there followed a crush and one fatality. The last time King Tut was seen in London in 1972 at the British Museum, 1.7 million people came to pay homage, the largest exhibition in human history. And still everyone wants a part of Egypt's past - now Egyptomania has hit our capital once more: Tutankhamun And The Golden Age of The Pharaohs opens at the O2 next

week. This time, Charles and Camilla are being given a private tour before the show opens, and the Gold Tie evening (in association with Prince's Trust) has become the hottest ticket in town.

So why does Egyptomania persist? There are many splendid civilisations from the distant past: the Hittites, the Thracians, the Assyrians, the Phoenecians. All equally powerful and equally prolific:but their names raise only a flicker of interest. I have yet to see a Phoenecian-themed mousepad (journalists have been sent a glitzy Egyptian-style-hologram version for the O2 exhibition, where Tut, at certain angles, suddenly looms out of his tomb). Why do we love the boy-king, Nefertiti, Isis, Horus et al with such a passion? Is it because a Cleopatra outfit is sexier than the tunics of our own Celtic tribes? Is it the allure of code-breaking? Well, I believe it is symptomatic of our desire for Golden Ages - for a time when human beings did superhuman things. If, as a race, we have achieved absolute brilliance once, we think we can do so again.. Rulers such as Khufu managed to build a pyramid that was for 4,000 years the tallest structure on earth, and still find the time to father 96 sons and 104 daughters. Temples boast columns 70 feet high; Egyptian arrows were developed that could be shot the length of three football pitches. Recent research shows that the pyramids were built not on the sweat of slaves, but by paid farmers who dragged those monumental stones into place, for nine days out of a ten day week, as a religious act, a gift to their gods and glorious community. Of course there were bad times, but evidence – from graffiti scratched onto ostraka (broken shards of pottery) through to touching, poetic confessions in Books of The Dead, demonstrates that many Egyptians had a gratifying sense of common purpose, and of the genius of their civilisation. Women even had rights.. Two weeks ago I visited the Temple of Denderah to investigate the massive sanatorium where heavily pregnant ladies were cared for by priests with herb poultices, hot baths and the like. Now that is impressive. The Egyptians also appear to have wanted the same things that we do. They despised chaos (isfet), and yearned for truth, order, the right way – (maat). Their presence might spice things up a little now, but the irony is that vast stretches of Egypt's 4,000 year ancient history, were peaceful. The Egyptians went so far as to compose, with their arch rivals the Hittites, the Treaty of Kadesh. The world's first extant peace treaty, a copy is now kept in the United Nations building in New York. Mind you, modern-day leaders have tripped over themselves to associate with the military-muscle of the Egyptian superpower. Napoleon sent his soldiers in search of

papyri and monumental sculptures: as if these totems would abrogate global supremacy to the short Frenchman. In Cairo you can still sleep in Churchill's suite under the shadow of The Great Pyramid at Giza. In 1943 it was here that Winston, Roosevelt and Chiang Kai Shek agreed at the Cairo Conference that Japan should give to the allies its unconditional surrender. Ancient Egypt is potent; in fact Ancient Egyptians can cause more trouble dead than alive. The Carnarvon family famously suffered 'the Mummy's Curse' (the 5th Earl funded Howard Carter's digs and died from an Egyptian insect bite). The search for treasure in the Valley of the Kings drove many to death through exhaustion or bankruptcy. Now, following the Luxor Massacre in 1997, and 9/11, ancient sites are a top target for terrorism and security is unnervingly tight. On my way from Luxor to Qina last month, our boat was suddenly swamped by gun-toting police; heavily armed special operations officers, head to toe in black, drove us in convoy through roadblocks to Denderah.

Not that any of this can tarnish Egypt's appeal. The Ancient Egyptians were 're-discovered' at a time when mass media could push an idea or an image to a global audience. Liz Taylor swooned as Cleo; the first night audience at the Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood included Charlie Chaplin and Cecil B DeMille. And thanks to the efforts of Howard Carter, the Rosetta Stone team et al, the British feel a curious ownership of the Egyptian legacy. In fact it is not such a simple story. Mediaeval Islamic scholars investigated their Bronze Age forefathers: one even cracked Egyptian hieroglyphs centuries before Champillion. That fact was neatly swept under the carpet; it suited our egos to claim responsibility for saving the Egyptians from the sands. Then of course there is their perennial ghoulish allure. The Valley of the Kings is a vast necropolis. Every child knows that you mummify an Egyptian by pulling his/her brain out through the nose. Back from half-term, kids in London playgrounds are trading not Pokemon or Uglio cards, but tickets for the O2. I remember the frenzy well. 35 years ago, I went to see Tut when he first visited the capital. I've never been the same since. Aged five I was inspired to write my first book - about the king who died because "it waz a bit germy".

Maybe the appeal is that simple. Golden tombs, atragic boy-king, lotus-eating princesses; these have emerged from the desert before our eyes. It is the stuff of fairy-tales. Egypt's geology and climate combine to preserve remains with unique excellence. Only a fraction of the bodies, treasures, tomb-paintings, sculptures have been unearthed. Just last year, eight new coffins were uncovered in the Valley of the Kings. So if you go to see Egypt's Golden Age in London this time round, I can guarantee you that in 35 years you'll be taking the next generation to see yet more untold wonders – and they'll be as keen for a ticket as we are today.