

Cleopatra, Egypt, and Early Twentieth-Century Female Dress

As is well known, there was a Egyptian revival in art and dress after the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb by archaeologist Howard Carter in 1923: hieroglyphs, scarabs, lotuses, and cartouches were fashionably employed on everything from dresses to cigarette packages to jewelry. But there were other periods in fashion history when Egyptianizing motifs, as well as sartorial references to Cleopatra, were in vogue (Bohleke 2014). Thus women in nineteenth-century America and England could wear a Cleopatra cloak (1860), a Cleopatra sack coat (1861), or a Cleopatra dinner dress of grey silk (1862). In 1893, bronze and gold Cleopatra slippers were obtainable. One nineteenth-century corset was called "The Cleopatra" (Steele 1999: 464). These instances were likely a fashionable result of major excavations and finds in Egypt throughout the nineteenth century, a process which began with Napoleon's Egyptian expedition (1798) and the illustrated publications that came out of that excursion (*Description de l'Égypte* 1809-29).

Because of this, one might assume that in American cinematic history, the release of Theda Bara's enormously popular *Cleopatra* (1917) would trigger a corresponding upsurge in Egyptian-themed ornament; after all, similar instances of "Cleomania" in female fashion and dress occurred after the premiers of DeMille's *Cleopatra* (1934, with Claudette Colbert) and Mankiewicz's *Cleopatra* (1963, with Elizabeth Taylor) (Wyke and Monserrat 2011). However, this presentation examines why there is hardly any trace of this in the clothing and accessories of the period 1917-19. Bara specialized in playing murderous *femme fatales*, or "vamps," of which her Cleopatra was another in a long line. Ideas of female sexuality were changing in this period: the so-called "New Woman" was casting off the passivity and the mores of the Victorian era, and extreme cinematic images of dangerous femininity echoed this modern disruption in gender roles (Somerville 2014: 78). But, as this presentation argues, women were not encouraged on the

whole to identify with such titillating characters outside the movie theatre, and thus there is a corresponding lack of Egyptian-themed dress and ornament until “Tutmania” gripped the fashion world in the years following 1923.

Bibliography

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