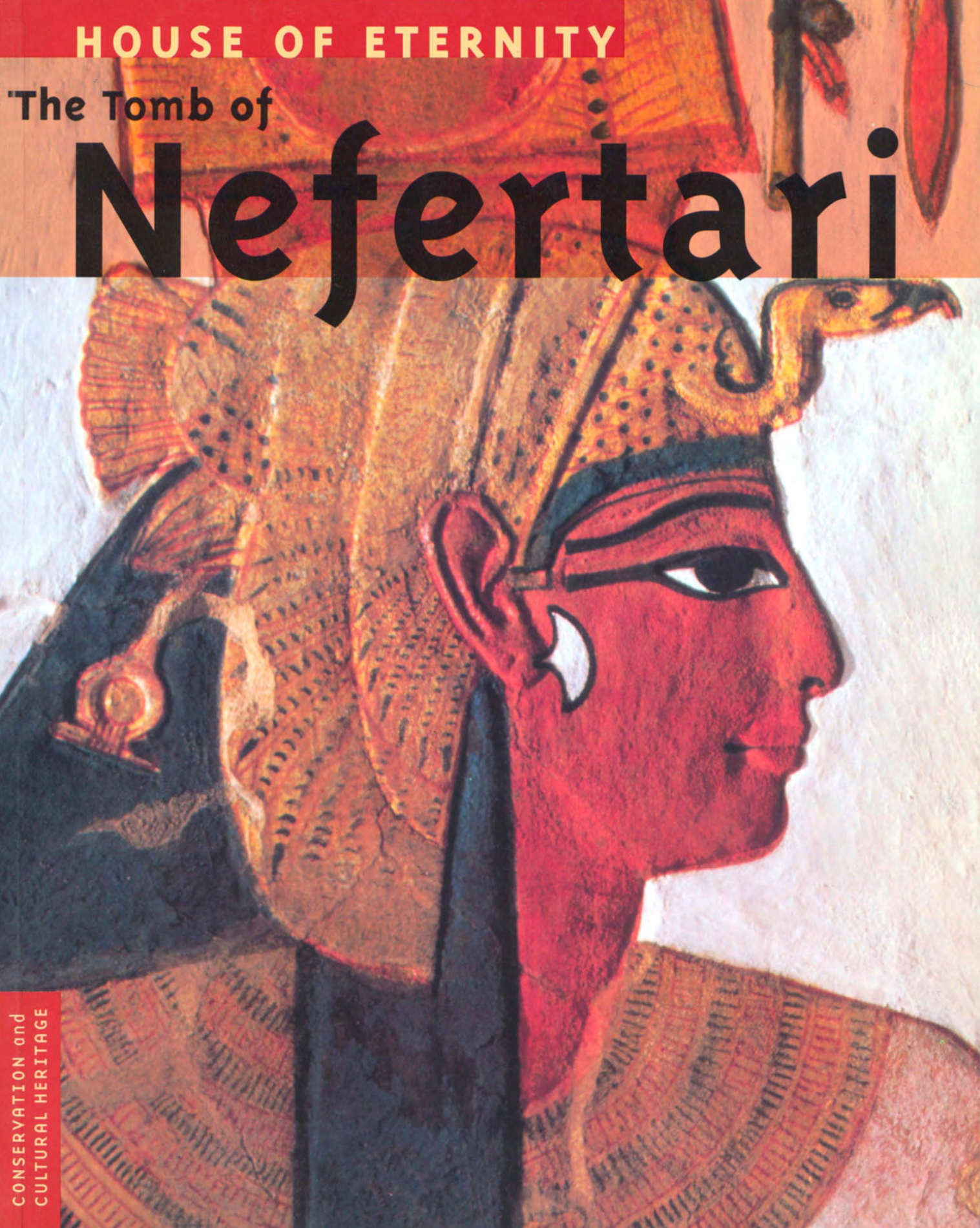


HOUSE OF ETERNITY

The Tomb of

# Nefertari

CONSERVATION and  
CULTURAL HERITAGE









HOUSE OF ETERNITY

The Tomb of

# Nefertari

John K. McDonald

The Getty Conservation Institute  
and the J. Paul Getty Museum

*Los Angeles*

*Cover/title page:  
Detail of Queen  
Nefertari on the north  
wall of Chamber G.*

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The Getty Conservation Institute works internationally to further  
the appreciation and preservation of the world's cultural heritage  
for the enrichment and use of present and future generations.

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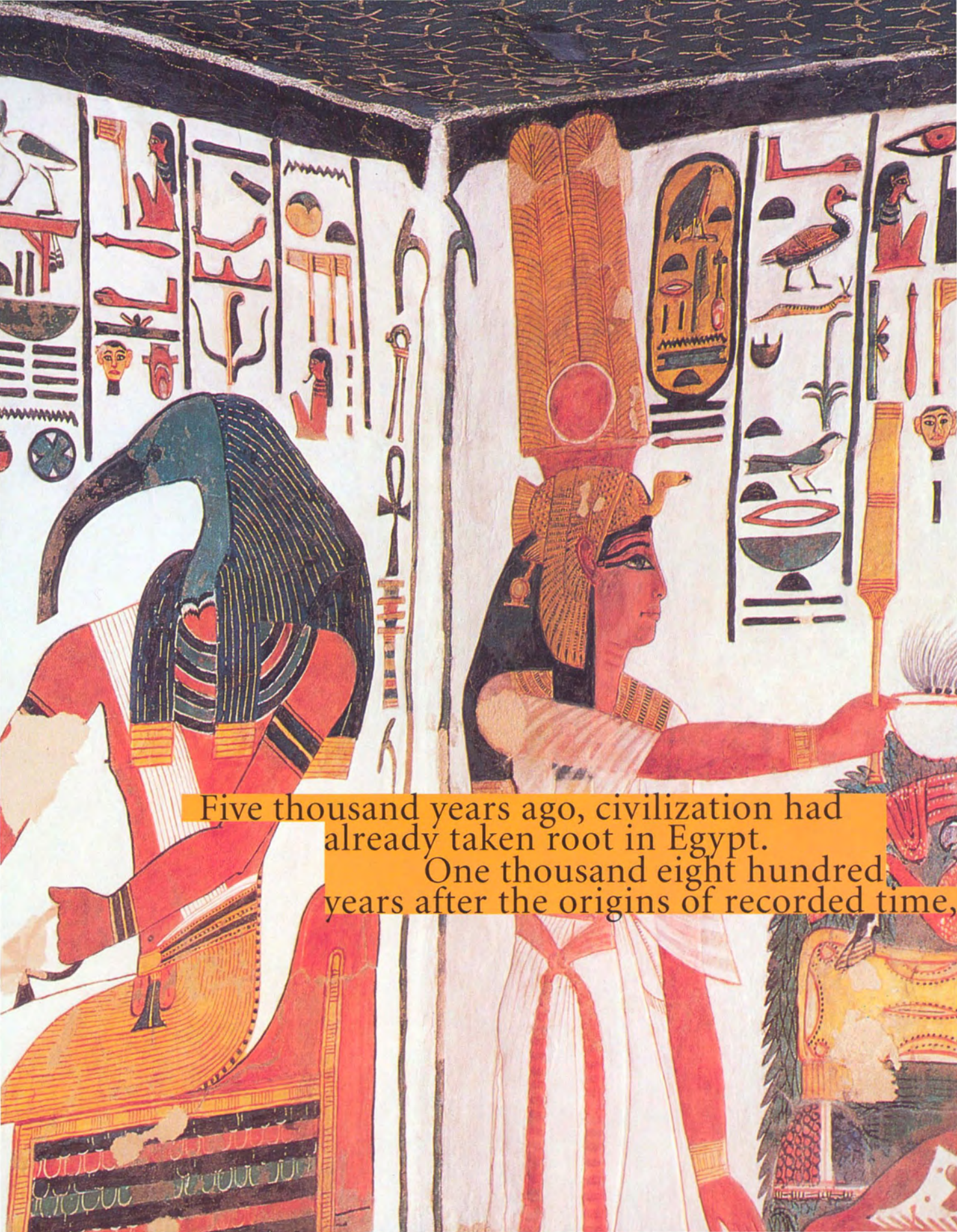
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Five thousand years ago, civilization had already taken root in Egypt. One thousand eight hundred years after the origins of recorded time,



## an honored and beloved queen, still in the prime of earthly

existence, set off upon a voyage to the netherworld, in quest of eternal life.

In our own time, the art and culture of ancient Egypt have come to reflect the aesthetic imagination and spiritual aspirations of peoples everywhere. In Egypt, enduring yet endangered monuments embody some of the finest craftsmanship that has ever graced the planet.

The tomb of Nefertari, its brilliant images vividly depicting her voyage to the hereafter, ranks among the most precious and most fragile of Egyptian treasures, indeed of humanity. Moreover, it represents perhaps the most exquisite gift to be passed down through more than a hundred generations, a centerpiece of cultural heritage and a priceless patrimony of our time.

Yet ever since its modern discovery in 1904, the art in Nefertari's tomb—among the most beautiful examples of pharaonic wall paintings ever found—has been known to be in fragile and precarious condition. Consequently, for most of this time, the tomb has been closed to the public.

If the Nefertari paintings had continued to deteriorate, the world would have suffered an incalculable cultural loss. Instead, between 1986 and 1992, the

*The last four columns of text behind Nefertari on the north wall of Chamber G. The inscription, which reads from right to left, is from Chapter 94 of the Book of the Dead.*

*Previous page: Sections of the north and east walls of Chamber G. On the left, Nefertari pays homage to Thoth, the god of writing. On the right, she makes offerings of incense, food, and cowhide.*





Egyptian Antiquities Organization and the Getty Conservation Institute undertook an intensive collaborative effort to conserve the wall paintings in the queen's "house of eternity." This joint project proved exemplary in preserving for posterity one of the greatest treasures ever yet created by the human mind and hand.

In 1986, I was privileged to see the tomb for the first time. Like so many before me, I was both awed by the beauty of the paintings and appalled by the damage they had sustained. Ten years later, the ravages of time, nature, and humankind have been arrested. The surviving paintings have been rescued from destruction, with their historical integrity and authenticity intact.

Now, more than ever before, these marvelous paintings have a chance to survive for future generations. But only a chance. The tomb has been open to the public since November 1995. Consequently, in spite of all the painstaking conservation work, the paintings remain vulnerable.

Today, they stand as vibrant testimony to the creative genius of ancient Egyptian artists and as a celebration of art by an international community of policymakers and conservation professionals. Tomorrow, the paintings' survival will depend largely on the vigilant protection they receive in the years that lie ahead.

The mutual mandate of the renamed Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities and the Getty Conservation Institute will not be fulfilled until we succeed in generating broad awareness of the pressing problems facing endangered cultural properties worldwide. Solving these problems is not the exclusive privilege or responsibility of cultural, scientific, and political elites. It is rightly a matter of general public concern. Cultural treasures provide a record of our human condition on both a spiritual

and a material plane. To decipher this record is to know our past. And so, ourselves. To preserve it is to pass that knowledge on to future generations. In this sense, the tomb of Nefertari belongs to—and must be preserved by—all of us.

We have already learned that the public's interest in the tomb is remarkable. In 1992 the J. Paul Getty Museum and the Getty Conservation Institute organized an exhibition devoted to enhancing public awareness of the conservation problems and created a replica of one of the chambers. The exhibition, which subsequently traveled to Rome and Turin, proved to be a great success.

At the Getty Conservation Institute, our goal is to ensure that people everywhere come to recognize, appreciate, and acknowledge that the tomb of Nefertari and similarly rare and delicate works of art comprise precarious treasures of humanity. Paradoxically, they need to be protected above all from the risks of unrestrained exposure to those who admire them most.

In entering the tomb of Nefertari, you are about to experience a unique and sublime example of human creativity, in its aesthetic, material, and spiritual aspects. As we marvel at this priceless heirloom, let us find equally creative ways to provide not only public access to the treasures housed within the tomb, but also the means for their perpetual existence.

In this way, we may both respect the original intent of the creators and inspire future generations, as they too embark on our collective journey to the beyond.

Miguel Angel Corzo

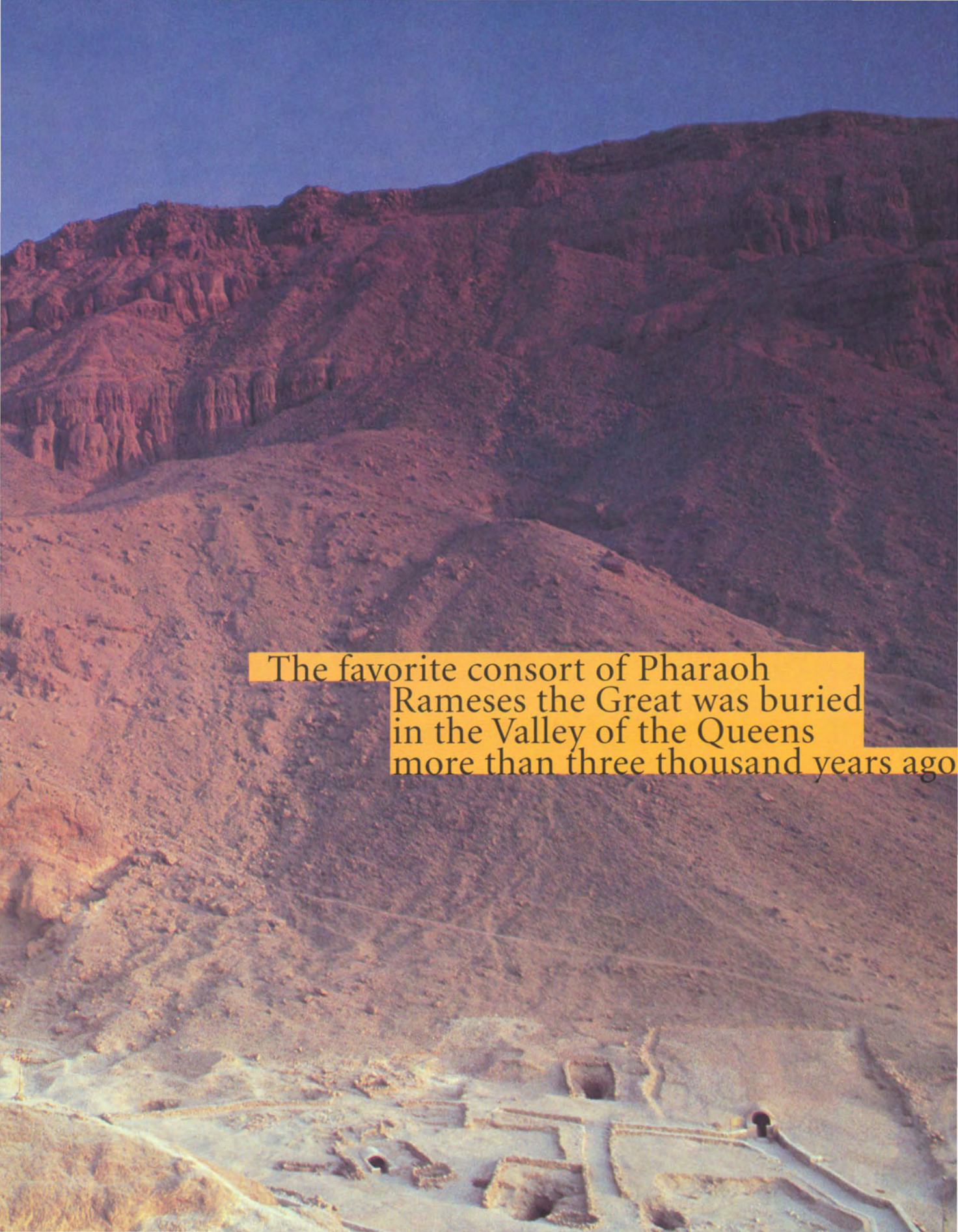
*Director*

The Getty Conservation Institute









The favorite consort of Pharaoh  
Rameses the Great was buried  
in the Valley of the Queens  
more than three thousand years ago



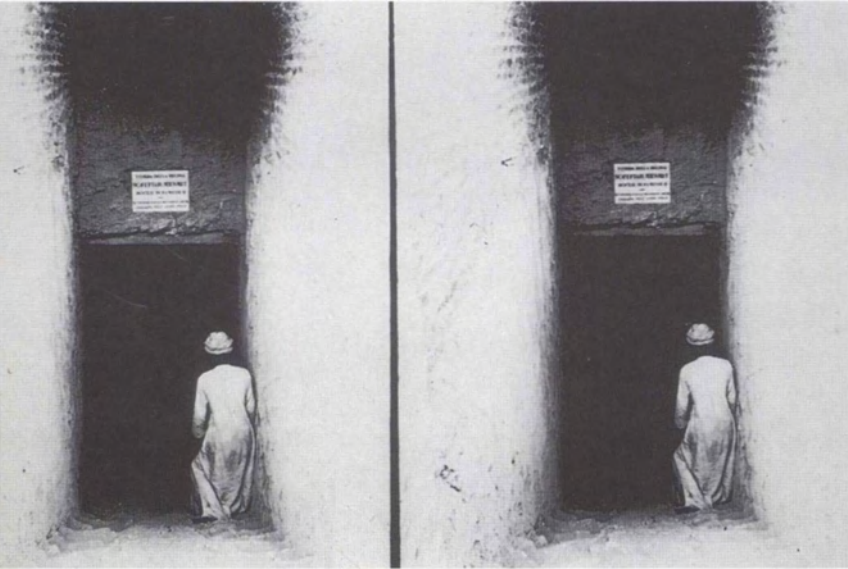
## Tunneled into the northern slope of the necropolis,

Nefertari's "house of eternity" is one of the finest tombs ever created by ancient Egypt's master craftsmen.

Emblazoned on its walls and corridors, some 520 square meters of exquisite wall paintings reveal a ritual process and illustrate Nefertari's journey of transformation into a blessed soul in the hereafter. It would prove a long and perilous passage; but she could rely on these hieroglyphic texts and illustrations to be her beacons to the beyond.

The Valley of the Queens is not renowned for the quality of its limestone. Indeed, like much of the rock in the Theban area, the limestone has been fractured by earthquakes and is banded with veins of flint. As a result, it is not well suited to painting or carving. Several layers of plaster had to be applied to the walls to build a suitable surface for the wall paintings. Vignettes and texts were lightly carved into the plaster when dry. The walls were then primed with a gypsum wash and painted in brilliant color.

The carved plaster in Nefertari's tomb is an early but sublimely successful instance of what was then a novel technique. The multitude of colors in her tomb is exceptional, especially the lighter ones, set off against the luxurious blacks and blue-whites.



*Stereo view of the tomb entrance taken by Don Michele Pizzio/Francesco Ballerini, members of the Italian Mission led by Ernesto Schiaparelli in 1904.*

*Photo: Courtesy of the Museo Egizio, Turin.*

*Previous page:  
The Valley of the Queens, across the river Nile from Luxor.*

*Opposite:  
Detail from the south face of Pillar 1 in the sarcophagus chamber before conservation.*









*Conservators at work during final treatment on the northeast corner of Chamber K.*

The theme of the tomb is timelessness: the decoration exclusively funerary. No references are made to any specific historic events or to anything that actually happened to Nefertari in her lifetime. Both aesthetically and spiritually, the transient concerns of this life are considered to be incompatible with eternity.

Similarly incompatible is the salt-laden nature of the limestone from which the tomb was hewn, as well as the Nile River mud used to plaster its walls. In the presence of moisture, salt, dormant in the rock and the plaster, migrated to the surface of the walls. Over time, fluctuations in humidity within the tomb, whether from the workmen who built it, subsequent flooding, seepage through fissures in the porous rock above, or perspiration and

respiration from contemporary visitors eager to view its marvels, have all served to mobilize the salt, bringing it to the painted surfaces, where it crystallized to damage and in some cases irretrievably destroy the art within the tomb.

To combat these dangers, the international team of conservators assembled in 1986 by the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) and the Egyptian Antiquities Organization (EAO) undertook conservation of the tomb. First, emergency stabilization of detaching painted plaster; then meticulous conservation to preserve the tomb for present and future generations.

Nowhere in this process has “restoration” of the paintings been undertaken. Nor will it be. The GCI is philosophically committed never to engage in restoration,



believing that to restore an ancient work by adding to it is inevitably to assault its authenticity. In the tomb of Nefertari, not a single drop of new paint was added to the images. Similarly, all cleaning processes and materials used in the conservation were reversible.

The paintings that remain are in every way authentic, entirely the work of the original artists and artisans. They have been carefully and respectfully conserved, stabilized where in danger of detachment, and cleaned of dirt and salt to regain their original luster. Where the original paintings have been lost, patches of blank plaster (made from local, natural products) now cover the walls.

Systematic, complex, laborious, devoted, and respectful—such conservation work has much in common with the journey undertaken by Nefertari in her transition from this world to the next. Within her “house of eternity,” descending stairways, asymmetries of design, and the skewing of the tomb’s axis are all thought to allude to the tortuous topography of the Egyptian netherworld. This is the daunting domain that Nefertari must traverse successfully in her search for everlasting life.

DYNASTIES OF ANCIENT EGYPT

circa 3000 B.C.E.	1391–1353
Late Predynastic Period	Amenhotep III
2920–2575	1353–1335
Early Dynastic Period	Amenhotep IV/ Akhenaten
(Dynasties I–II)	
2575–2134	1335–1333
Old Kingdom	Smenkhkare
(Dynasties III–VIII)	1333–1323
2134–2040	Tutankhamun
First Intermediate	1323–1319
Period	Ay
(Dynasties IX–XI/1)	1319–1307
2040–1640	Horemheb
Middle Kingdom	(Dynasty XIX)
(Dynasties XII/2–XIII)	1307–1306
1640–1532	Rameses I
Second Intermediate	1306–1290
Period	Sety I
(Dynasties XIV–XV)	1290–1224
	Rameses II
New Kingdom	(The Great)
(Dynasty XVI)	1224–1214
1550–1525	Merneptah
Ahmosé	1214–1204
1525–1504	Sety II
Amenhotep III	1204–1198
1504–1492	Siptah
Thutmose III	1198–1196
1492–1479	Twosre
Thutmose III	1196–1070
1479–1425	(Dynasty XX)
Thutmose III	1070–712
1473–1458	Third Intermediate
Hatshepsut	Period
1427–1401	(Dynasties XXI–XXIV)
Amenhotep III	712–332
1401–1391	Late Period
Thutmose IV	(Dynasties XXV–XXXI)
	332–30 B.C.E.
	Macedonian–
	Ptolemaic Period
	30 B.C.E.–C.E. 395
	Roman Period

\* Dates given for individuals represent regnal period.

Adapted from John Baines and Jaromir Málek, *Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, Oxford: 1980.

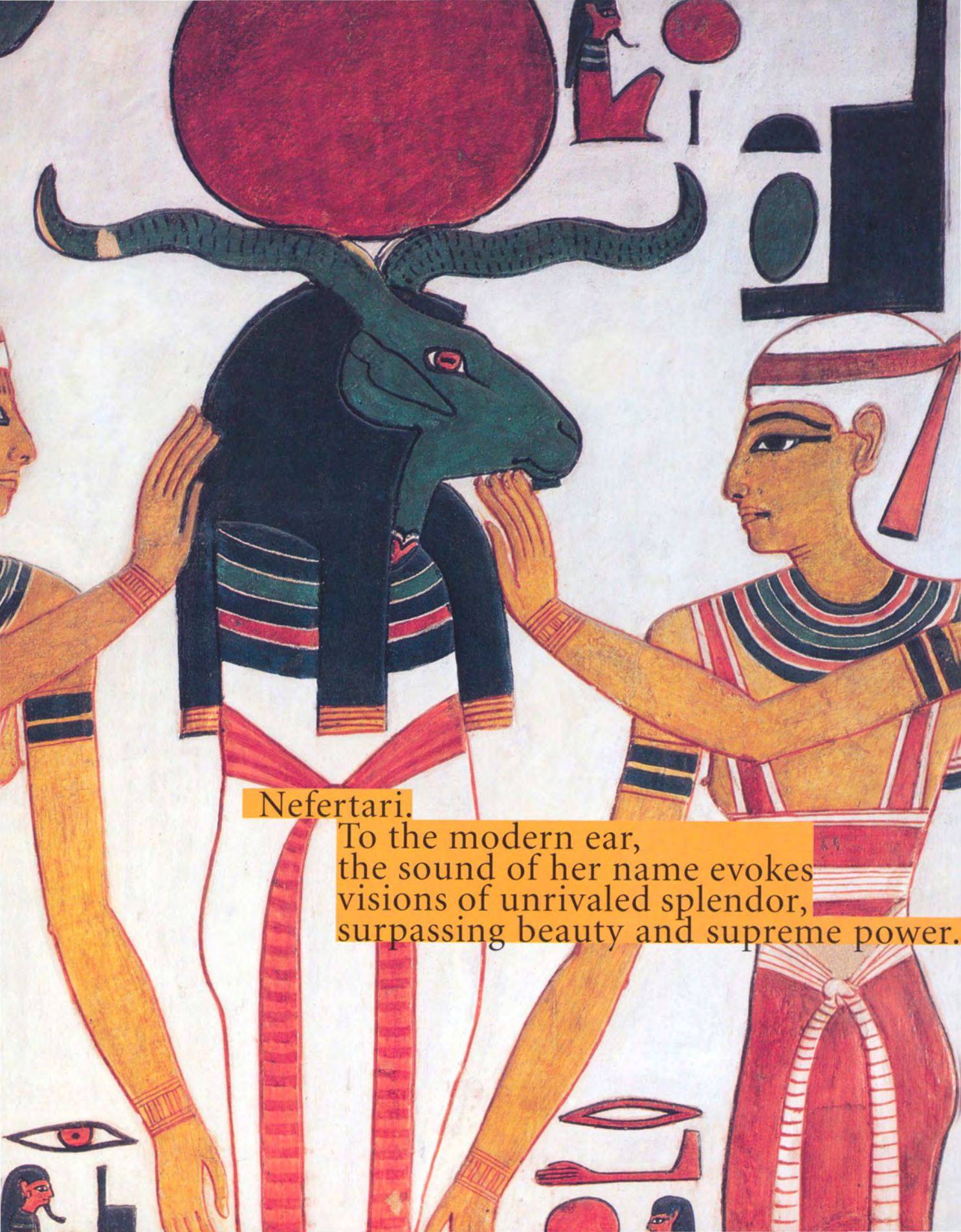
One of two statues of Rameses II on the façade of the Temple of Hathor at Abu Simbel.











**Nefertari.**

To the modern ear, the sound of her name evokes visions of unrivaled splendor, surpassing beauty and supreme power.



## Why? Only because we have been blessed with brilliant images from her tomb in the Valley of the Queens.



*Detail of the colossus of Nefertari at the Temple of Luxor.*

*Previous page: On the west wall of Chamber G, south side, a band of relief separates Nefertari from Nephthys and Isis who flank the ram-headed god representing a union of Re' and Osiris.*

If Nefertari's magnificent "house of eternity" had not survived, perhaps scholars of Egyptian history might still recognize her name. But could anyone even begin to imagine the elegant, dazzling young woman, the radiant being, we see so vividly portrayed throughout her tomb? With such evocative images enduring, no doubt remains that Nefertari was indeed the beautiful queen of one of history's most powerful and celebrated rulers, Rameses the Great.

What can historians tell us about the actual woman behind this compelling portrait? Certainly, Nefertari played important roles in state and religious affairs. Her importance was amply confirmed by her titles and the multiplicity of her images on monuments throughout Egypt: at the temples of Karnak and Luxor; in her tomb; and at a sandstone temple built at Abu Simbel, in far-distant Nubia, where her impact was literally colossal.

It is impossible to judge how much Nefertari's prestige was due to her personal qualities. It is also prudent to recall that she was by no means the first Egyptian queen to wield such power. Two of her predecessors — Ahmes-Nefertari and Nefertiti, wife of Akhenaten — figured prominently in the history of the New Kingdom. And the Eighteenth Dynasty King Hatshepsut was in fact a woman.

*Opposite: Nefertari on the east side of the upper descending corridor. The vignette differs from the correspond-*

*ing west-side composition in that here the queen's headdress is without the high plumes.*







## A LETTER FROM NEFERTARI

"Says Naptera [Nefertari], the great queen of Egypt to Padukhepa, the great queen of Hatti, my sister, thus. With you, my sister, may all be well, and with your country may all be well. Behold, I have noted that you, my sister, have written me enquiring after my well being. And you have written me about the matter of peace and brotherhood between the great king of Egypt and his brother, the great king of Hatti. May the sun god [of Egypt] and the storm god [of Hatti] bring you joy and may the sun god cause the peace to be good.... I in friendship and sisterly relation with the great queen [of Hatti] now and forever."

*Nefertari's letter to Padukhepa, the Hittite queen, expresses her wishes for lasting peace. The Hittites were the Indo-European invaders of the Anatolian highlands. They established an empire during the course of the second millennium B.C.E. and challenged the supremacy of Egypt in the Middle East during the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Dynasties.*

*The relief on the inner face of the First Pylon at the Temple of Luxor. Nefertari, shaking a sacred rattle, is preceded by her husband, Rameses II.*





The outline of Nefertari's life can be sketched. Of noble birth and perhaps from the Theban area, she was married, when barely a teenager, to User-maat-re' Setepen-re', who was known to posterity as Rameses the Great. Their first-born child was a son, named Amenhirwenemef/ Amenhirkhepeshef. Their eldest daughter was named Meryetamun.

Early in Rameses' reign, Nefertari took an active role alongside her husband: at Abydos, in Thebes, and at Gebel el-Silsila. Then came a long silence, unbroken until Year Twenty-one, when she suddenly reemerged at the signing of a peace treaty with Hatti, the other superpower of the times. Scarcely three years later, Nefertari died, was mourned, and was conveyed to her "house of eternity" in the Valley of the Queens. The year was 1255 B.C.E.

Images, inscriptions, and artifacts found in her tomb tell us more. Nefertari was of noble birth but not royal. Nowhere is she identified as king's daughter. Her family probably came from Thebes. Invariably, Nefertari's name was followed by "beloved of [the goddess] Mut." In the Theban area, Mut was an important deity. Together with her husband Amun-re' and their son Khonsu, she formed the sacred Theban triad of Karnak Temple. The consistent affiliation of Nefertari with Mut may point to the queen's Theban origins.

To her countrymen, Nefertari's name no doubt evoked a wealth of positive associations, above all with the memory of Ahmose-Nefertari, the founder of the Eighteenth Dynasty. As wife and sister of Pharaoh Ahmose and mother of Amenhotep I, Ahmose-Nefertari lived through the glorious days of Thebes' rise to power and her husband's expulsion of Asiatic invaders, the Hyksos, events occurring about 1560 B.C.E. It was probably intentional that Nefertari's chosen head-

dress—a vulture surmounted by double plumes—was also the headdress favored by Ahmose-Nefertari.

For Rameses to marry the daughter of a Theban nobleman would have been politically shrewd. The Ramesside clan was based in the Delta and had no blood ties with Egyptian royalty. Their rise to social prominence occurred through military service under Pharaoh Horemheb. Horemheb had no heir and designated his chief general, Parameses, as successor. When the old king died in 1307 B.C.E., Parameses assumed the throne, and changed the family name to Rameses, the name used by no less than eleven succeeding sovereigns.

Although Rameses I ruled only a year, he had time enough to inaugurate what Egyptian historians regard as a new era, the Nineteenth Dynasty. In a concerted effort to validate and legitimize Ramesside kingship, Rameses the Great, grandson of Rameses I, may well have sought a daughter of Thebes as his queen. Her given name recalled a resplendent moment in Egypt's history and her sobriquet invoked the Temple of Karnak, home of Egypt's first divine family.

In all likelihood, Nefertari married in her early teenage years and bore Rameses a son almost immediately. Together with his father, the boy was depicted as early as the first year of Rameses' reign, in the rock shrine of Beit el Wali in Nubia. Historians assume that Nefertari's firstborn child died young.

The queen's youth proved no impediment to her participating in religious and state business. Another depiction from Year One shows her officiating with the king at the investiture of the new Chief Prophet of Amun, Nebwenenef. This investiture was such a signal honor that Nebwenenef had the event memorialized on the walls of his own tomb.

Throughout his sixty-seven years of rule, Rameses took at least eight wives: Nefertari; Istnofret; Bintanath (his daughter by Istnofret); Meryetamun (his daughter by Nefertari); Nebtawy; Henetmire' (the king's own sister); Maat-Hor-Neferure' (the first Hittite princess); and a second Hittite princess. He fathered at least forty-five sons, perhaps as many as fifty-two, as well as some forty daughters.

As Rameses' first and favorite queen, Nefertari must have expected to see a child of hers inherit the throne. She is, after all, called "king's mother" in the great temple of Abu Simbel. Given her enormous importance, it is doubly ironic that Nefertari's children figure not at all in the succession. In fact, they all died prior to their father.

The enormous family catacomb that came to light in 1995 in the Valley of the Kings (KV5) may have been destined for the luckless, aging sons of Rameses II. Scattered throughout its more than ninety rooms are short inscriptions, at least one mentioning Nefertari's firstborn son, Amenhirwenemef/ Amenhirkhepeshef. The catacomb is thus the likely place of his burial, along with scores of his half-brothers.





*The façade of the small Temple of Hathor at Abu Simbel. On either side a colossus of Nefertari is flanked by colossi of Rameses II. Nefertari is crowned with the cow horns and sun disk symbolic of Hathor.*

More evidence of Nefertari's role as religious officiant comes from the rock shrine of Gebel el-Silsila, where she was depicted "appeasing the gods." This portrayal of the queen was extraordinary, for making such offerings was a responsibility of kings, in their capacity as Chief Priest of Egypt. On the walls of Rameses' own mortuary temple in western Thebes, Nefertari was again shown taking part in an important religious holiday, the annual festival of the god Min.

Moreover, at Gebel el-Silsila, Nefertari was called "mistress of the two lands." Normal usage was for kings alone to be called lords of the two lands, a reference to the mythic union of the northern kingdom of Lower Egypt, the Delta where the Nile flows into the sea, with the southern kingdom of Upper Egypt, up river toward its headwaters. Applied to Nefertari, the phrase suggested that she exercised power in secular affairs.

In Year Three of Rameses' reign, Nefertari was shown beside the king in monumental scale on the interior face of the new pylon of Luxor Temple. Yet for a long while after that, no datable reference to the queen can be found.

In Year Twenty-one, however, Nefertari sent a letter to the distant capital of Hatti (modern Boghazköy) in Anatolia. With words of warmth and friendship, the queen sent her wishes for lasting peace to the Hittite queen, Padukhepa, on the occasion of the signing of a treaty between Rameses and the Hittite king, Hattushilis III. The treaty ended two decades of uneasy relations between their two countries.

At Abu Simbel in Nubia, on the Sudanese border, rises the great rock shrine of Rameses II. Beside it is the small temple of Hathor of Ibshak, dedicated to Nefertari. Here the queen is shown making offerings before a local form of the cow-goddess, Hathor, and Mut, Nefertari's patron. This in itself is impressive, but even more astonishing are the two enormous statues of the queen. On either side of the temple entrance stands a colossus of Nefertari, flanked by colossi of her husband. The two statues of the queen are every bit as large as those of Rameses. In the Egyptian artistic tradition, the scale of an image, whether in two or three dimensions, signifies its relative importance. Kings are made larger than their wives, children, courtiers, subjects, or enemies. For the queen to warrant a statue as large as her husband was an unparalleled honor.

The text on the temple façade is similarly remarkable, for it declares: "Rameses II has made a temple, excavated in the mountain of eternal workmanship in Nubia... for the king's great wife Nefertari, beloved of Mut, forever and ever, ... Nefertari... for whom the sun does shine."



The great shrines at Abu Simbel were dedicated three years after the Hittite treaty, in the twenty-fourth year of Rameses' reign. Yet Nefertari, noticeably absent from memorials of these consecration ceremonies, had probably already died.

A number of rock inscriptions set into the cliff face around the temples recorded the events. One of these inscriptions, by the Viceroy Hekanakht, includes a picture of the royal entourage: Rameses was shown not with Nefertari but rather with his daughter Meryetamun, now identified as queen.

We cannot say how Nefertari died. All that is known is that, sometime toward the end of her fourth decade, she began her journey to the hereafter.

Transported to the netherworld by the magnificent tomb that Rameses had built for her, she would henceforth dwell in a new domain, a resplendent "house of eternity." For Rameses, it would be another forty years before he would pass through the portals of his own tomb, perhaps anticipating renewed union with the blessed spirit of his beautiful, beloved wife.



The titles and epithets of Nefertari define her various roles as divine consort, queen, and mother. The scope of her activities is consistent with the expanding importance of queenship in the New Kingdom generally.

"[The one] to whom beauty pertains" is one of several translations of her name. Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphic script does not show vowels, so no one can be certain how the queen's name was spoken.

Cuneiform script documents from the Hittite capital of Bogazköy in Anatolia suggest the name was pronounced "Naptera" or something similar.

"Beloved of Mut" is a standard component of Nefertari's full name and occurs even within her cartouche, the oval ring surrounding royal names. The goddess Mut, together with her husband Amun and their son Khonsu, form the great Theban triad of gods residing within or near Karnak Temple.

"King's great wife" identifies Nefertari as preeminent among Rameses the Great's eight known spouses.

## THE QUEEN'S TITLES AND EPITHETS

"Mother of the king" is the title held by the crown prince's mother, confirming that one of Nefertari's sons had already been picked to succeed Rameses.

"God's wife," a term first encountered early in the Eighteenth Dynasty but falling into disuse after the reign of Thutmose IV (1401–1391 B.C.E.). It is revived in the Nineteenth Dynasty in association with the dynasty's first three queens: Sat-re, wife of Rameses I; Mut-tuy, wife of Sety I; and Nefertari. The term was probably resurrected partly to strengthen the dynastic claims of the Ramesside kings, who were not of royal blood. It embodied a theological concept. Any child of a queen bearing this title was the issue not only of the king but also of the god Amun, the queen's mythical consort; and so, the child would be singularly fit to serve as king of Egypt.

"Hereditary noblewoman" is an honorific designation signaling that Nefertari came from noble stock.

"Mistress of the two lands." The masculine form is an epithet of Egyptian kings and proclaims their suzerainty over both Upper and Lower Egypt. It indicates that Nefertari exercised some role in state affairs.

"Mistress of Upper and Lower Egypt." This term may also hint at an active role in state affairs.

"Who satisfies the gods" is a phrase normally reserved for kings, in their role as Chief Ritualist.

"For whom the sun shines" (inscription from the façade of the Small Temple at Abu Simbel) is unique. In conjunction with the Great Temple of Abu Simbel, any invocation of the sun—either its disk (the Aten) or the sun god (Re)—is appropriate. The Great Temple of Abu Simbel was purposely orientated so that rays from the rising sun would shine straight into the sanctuary on February 22 and again October 22.

"Great of favors" possibly carried a judicial implication, along the lines of intercessor. That is how the term was used much earlier, in the popular Egyptian tale of the wanderings of Sinuhe.

"Pleasant in the twin plumes" (on the great seated statue of Rameses, now in the Museo Egizio, Turin) is a reference to the twin-plumed headdress favored by Nefertari. The god Amun wears a similar crown; one of his titles is "he of the high plumes." Nefertari's namesake, Ahmose-Nefertari, is often shown wearing a double-plumed headdress.