

The Tutankhamun Exhibition

Dr I. E. S. Edwards, Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum, describes the sequence of events, including some strokes of luck, that has culminated in the Tutankhamun Exhibition at the British Museum.

THE Tutankhamun Exhibition at the British Museum represents the culmination of a modest plan conceived some ten years ago when the Arts Council accepted an offer from the Egyptian authorities to show in London a travelling exhibition of works of art dating from both Pharaonic and Islamic times. With a view to increasing the popular appeal of the exhibition, which had already been displayed in several European capitals, it was decided to ask the Cairo Museum to supplement it with a few relatively unimportant pieces from the tomb of Tutankhamun. We had, however, been unknowingly forestalled by a group of American museums, whose negotiations with the Egyptian authorities for a more ambitious exhibition than we had contemplated were well advanced and, although the Arts Council was offered the same exhibition on its way back from the United States, it was feared that two exhibitions of Egyptian art within so short a period of time would exceed the public demand. The plan was accordingly deferred, but not abandoned. It was next taken up five years later, in 1967, and for a time hopes were entertained that the objects shown in Paris would subsequently come to London. They were dashed, however, by the outbreak of the war between Israel and her Arab neighbours, just when it seemed likely that consent would be given. The present exhibition was agreed in principle in October 1968 and the objects were selected a year later. The previous exhibitions had shown that the delicate objects could be moved safely over long distances and be exposed to some inevitable climatic changes without damage, and the experience thus gained allowed the Egyptian authorities to agree to our request for fifty pieces, a much larger number than had been sent to America, Japan or France.

Under Amenophis III, who was either Tutankhamun's grandfather or his father, Egypt had attained its highest level of economic prosperity; gold was "as dust" and artists and craftsmen were among the beneficiaries from the boom. His tomb may well have been the richest of all, though there is no actual evidence to prove it. By the time of Tutankhamun the national wealth must have declined appreciably, but there was probably still enough gold available, as well as artistic and tech-

nical skill, to provide the king with personal and funerary possessions which were not greatly inferior to those of Amenophis III.

Its preservation was the result of several fortuitous events. Owing to his premature death, the tomb which was being constructed for him in the western branch of the valley could not be completed in time for his funeral and consequently a small tomb, which was probably intended for his elderly vizier and successor Ay, was hastily adapted for his use. Its entrance lay on the level floor of the valley and not in the walls of rock at the sides like the entrances of most of the other royal tombs. Thus placed, its mount was soon covered with wind-blown sand, and after the first heavy rainfall—usually only once in twelve to fifteen years—it would have been buried under a layer of mud, dried quickly by the sun, which would make it indistinguishable from the surrounding terrain.

It is true that robbers broke into the tomb, probably on two occasions, but their visits must have been brief. Given time, they would certainly have stripped it of all its precious objects. By chance, however, an official, who had a personal interest in its preservation, was working on another royal tomb nearby. His name was Maya, and in his official capacity as Superintendent of Building Works in the Necropolis he was almost certainly responsible for the construction of the tombs of Tutankhamun, Ay and Horemheb. When Tutankhamun's tomb was violated, the news would have reached Maya within a few hours and he would have been able not only to take immediate action to re-cover the entrance, but also to take steps to bring the thieves to book. Some of the objects which they had stolen were found in an underground chamber near the tomb in 1907 by Theodore Davis, an American archaeologist, which suggests that the robbers did not survive to get away with all they had removed. How long Maya remained in office is uncertain, but it was probably long enough for the exact location of the tomb to be forgotten. Some two hundred years later its existence was so completely unknown that Ramesses VI excavated his rock-tomb dangerously close to it and the men engaged on the work actually built their huts on top of the rock-cut staircase leading down

to Tutankhamun's tomb. They also dumped some of the rubble removed from the new tomb around the huts, thus unwittingly giving Tutankhamun's tomb further protection.

If the preservation of the tomb in antiquity owed much to a series of lucky chances, its discovery fifty years ago can be ascribed ultimately to a motor accident which undermined Lord Carnarvon's health so seriously that he went to Egypt in 1903 to escape the effects of a winter in England. Once there, he began to take an interest in Egyptian antiquities and works of art, even to the extent of embarking on his own excavations on the west bank of the river at Thebes in the year 1906. A year later he engaged Howard Carter to supervise the work.

At about the same time, Theodore Davis was excavating in the Valley of the Kings and had found a pit containing linen bandages, bags of natron, pottery wine-jars, floral collars and bones, the significance of which he failed to understand. It was Herbert Winlock, Curator of the Egyptian Department in the Metropolitan Museum, New York, who first realized their importance. On examining the linen he noticed that some of it bore the name of Tutankhamun written in ink and also the year of its manufacture. What Davis had found was in fact some of the material used by Tutankhamun's embalmers when they mummified his body and relics of the banquet attended by the chief mourners at his funeral. From the moment when Winlock made this discovery, it was certain that Tutankhamun had been buried in the valley, and probably not far from the pit in which the linen had been placed. What was not certain was that the tomb itself had survived in an identifiable condition. Theodore Davis relinquished his licence to excavate in the valley in 1914 and the concession was immediately granted to Lord Carnarvon. Both he and Howard Carter were well aware that their efforts might be fruitless, and nothing which came to light in the first six seasons gave them any encouragement to think otherwise. No organization dependent on public funds could possibly have continued the search for six seasons without result. Lord Carnarvon, however, retained his confidence in Howard Carter's judgment, though it was near to breaking-point by the end. Carter too was a man of exceptional determination and tenacity. Chance had played an important part in bringing them together and their collaboration ended triumphantly in the seventh season with the discovery of what was very probably one of the richest tombs of all time.