

# The Mask of Tutankhamun



## ***Background***

The tombs of the Egyptian pharaohs in the Valley of the Dead (near Luxor, Egypt) had been raided by ancient grave robbers and fully excavated by archeologists prior to 1920, but British Egyptologist, Howard Carter, believed more riches lay beneath the sands. He pressed on to excavate one more site and made a phenomenal discovery in November of 1922: the tomb of King Tut. It is the only untouched tomb of an ancient pharaoh ever discovered. In it Carter found *5000 perfectly preserved artifacts* dating back 3000 years!

The centerpiece and crowning glory of Carter's haul was the luminous golden burial mask of the boy king, which covered his mummified remains in the inner sanctum of the tomb. Thomas Hoving of the Metropolitan Museum of Art wrote that King Tut's mask "is the most beautiful and evocative work of decorative art to have survived early antiquity. It is perfect in execution and flawless in condition." Nothing could be truer.

The name Tutankhamun is translated, "the living image of Amun", who was the principle deity of the Egyptians at the time. The young pharaoh ruled Egypt for a decade (1332-1323 BC) and died at the tender age of 18 or 19, probably from severe genetic deformations due to generations of royal inbreeding.

## ***Fascinating Details***

Tut's burial mask is hollow and constructed of two thin sheets of pure gold. The stylized face emphasizes godlike radiance, vitality, and wisdom. Inlaid glass and semi-precious stones (turquoise, carnelian, amazonite) decorate the headdress and collar. The face is pure gold with eyes made of quartz (whites) and obsidian (pupils), outlined by a thin line of lapis lazuli.

The headdress flares out at the neck like a cobra. It flows onto an ornate collar with polished golden falcon emblems of Horus, god of the underworld, on each shoulder. The king's brow is decorated with carved figures of the vulture and the cobra, symbols of his rule over both Lower and Upper Egypt. The decorative beard was a mark of royalty and was lying separately in the tomb when discovered. It was re-attached to the mask in 1944.

At back, the headdress culminates in a stylized pony tail while the shoulders are covered with hieroglyphic writing. Hieroglyphics inside the mask indicate that it may have been created for Tutankhamun's step-mother, Nefertiti, but repurposed for Tut when he died first. King Tut's death mask weighs 22.5 pounds, and the value of the gold alone amounts to over \$3 million US dollars today.

## ***Arti-Facts***

- Date: around 1325 BC
- Medium: gold; inlaid glass; semi-precious stones
- Height: 21¼ in.; Width: 15½ in.; Depth: 19 in.
- Location: Cairo Museum, Cairo, Egypt.

