Drag Queen: The Liminal Sex of the Bust of Queen Nefertiti

KEVIN MCGUINESS
Brock University
kmguiness@cogeco.ca

She is considered one of the great beauties of the ancient world and her image has adorned posters and tourist trinkets throughout Germany and Egypt. Her portrait has been termed the perfect female face, and the epitome of grace and sophistication. Indeed, the bust of Nefertiti has been universally embraced as an icon of feminine allure. As Dietrich Wildung points out, almost immediately following its unveiling, “the bust rapidly advanced to become an idol of female beauty”\(^1\). With its “pale skin, slender neck and delicate bone structure” Nefertiti’s portrait possesses “clean cut, almost contemporary good looks”, contributing to its acclaimed reception among present day audiences\(^2\). The sleek lines and strong stylistic elements present within the bust have allowed it to become one of the most distinguished works of art in the world. The portrait sculpture of the Queen has never failed to engage the public since its recovery from the ruins of the abandoned city of Akhetaten and subsequent Berlin

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unveiling in 1924. Indeed, evidence of the adoration the public holds for Nefertiti’s image can be seen in the millions of tourists she attracts annually to Berlin.

Composed of a soft limestone core, gypsum plaster, crystal and pigment, the sculptural representation of Queen Nefertiti (c. 1370-1330 BCE) dating from ancient Egypt is an enduring piece of artisan craftsmanship. Though little is known for certain about the historic Nefertiti, the bust has ensured the celebrity of the Queen, who helped direct the Egyptian empire during the tempestuous Amarna period (c.1350 – 1320 BCE). Despite its ancient origins, the piece still exudes the same sensuous allure it undoubtedly did upon its creation around 1340 BCE. The bust consists of a stunning arrangement of forms; the angular features of the crown are complimented by the harsh cropping of the bust at the shoulders and base. The body is trimmed away, focusing attention solely on the face, permitting the viewer only the pure essence of this woman.

The fact that it has been preserved in almost pristine condition, allows present day audiences to appreciate the significance of the bust despite its ancient origins. Though there are other works from antiquity which equal the bust in terms of artistic genius, the public seems to gravitate towards the Nefertiti portrait with an unprecedented degree of ardour. This intrigue has ensured the longevity of the bust and solidified its role as a masterpiece in the Western canon of art. However the affinity that the public holds for the bust begs the question why – why do audiences feel such a connection to the Queen’s portrait?

I propose that it is not simply the beauty of the bust which has fascinated the public, but instead a strange mixture of physical properties resulting in an impression of sensuous androgyny. The enduring fame of the bust can be directly traced to the liminal sexuality of the Queen. The long nose, squared jaw line and strong chin contribute to a striking portrait of a woman who possesses distinctly masculine characteristics. The Queen’s likeness operates between the dichotomous realms of the masculine and feminine, merging features associated with both sexes and creating a hybrid face which is at once captivating and unsettling.

Utilizing a theory of semiotics, this article intends to assess the visual cues included in the bust and reveal the fact that Nefertiti’s portrait possesses physical properties commonly observed in both sexes. Employing the writings of such theorists as Catalina Bogdan, and Camille Paglia, as well as the observations of art historians Rudolf Anthes and Dorothea Arnold, I will probe the bust for its visual characteristics.

The field of semiotics functions as a Structuralist method of reading and interpreting both textual and visual artefacts. Deriving from the Greek word *semeiotikos*, which means “an interpreter of signs”, semiotics
revolves around the notion of exposing all forms of visual communication\(^3\). Specifically, it entails the analysis of the underlying signifying relationships with a work and the values or assumptions within the world they represent\(^4\). The core of semiotic theory involves those factors which produce the process of signmaking, interpreting and the development of conceptual tools that help the viewer grasp the meaning of artefacts as they operate in various arenas of cultural activity\(^5\). The job of the semiotician is therefore to reveal those factors which sustain and provide the background for the various forms of communication that we often take for granted\(^6\). Within the social setting of semiotics, signs acquire conventional meanings and codes which are developed and adapted over time\(^7\). In the end, meanings are produced not solely by the viewers, but also through a process of negotiation among individuals within a particular culture, and their interactions with artefacts, images, and texts\(^8\). Semiotics therefore encapsulates the analysis of the reception and overall meaning of objects, and represents a valuable method of characterizing products of the plastic arts.

The process of assessing the significance of an artefact therefore entails a thorough cataloguing of the physical properties of the object. According to Catalina Bogdan, when analysing a work of art under a semiotic lens, it is necessary to scan the image in order to organize the visual elements\(^9\). Through the process of ‘reading the image’, the viewer will recognize emotional attitudes and interpretations within the image\(^10\). Various visual facets within the piece may operate as signs, indicating to the viewer certain ideas or evoking a particular concept. This is a necessary practice in interpreting a work of art in order to ascertain the components of the piece and how they interplay with one another and create an impression upon the viewer.

When we examine the bust for its visual properties, we find that it is an exquisite rendering of a young woman of powerful political rank in the bloom of adulthood. The bust ultimately operates as what semioti-
cians refer to as a synecdoche, whereupon “part of something” stands in for the whole thing, in this case the head, crown and collar represent the remainder of the Queen’s imagined body, which is absent. The sculpture includes the area from the clavicles to just above the breasts, while the shoulders have been cut off vertically, functioning as a pedestal for the piece. The head, under the crown with its royal asp, is held proudly on the sinewy, lotus-stem throat. The woman rendered in stone and pigment has slightly sunken cheeks, a narrow face, and a long nose. The eyes under kohl-marked brows are large, almond-shaped and vividly realistic. Rock crystal was utilized to simulate the liquid nature of the human oculus, and a shallow layer of black colour has been imposed to imitate the shape of the pupil, while the limestone background of the eyeocket shines through and acts as the white of the eye. The exquisitely moulded face is tinted a pale golden apricot with a coloring made of red chalk and lime. At the rear of the sculpture, the neck is dominated by the strongly emphasized sternocleidomastid muscles at either side, and two red ribbons are represented as tied into a bow given the traditional shape of a roundel, to which lotus flowers are attached. Rendering her features with tremendous detail and naturalism, the bust is an impressive testament to the Queen and her political prowess.

Many Egyptologists have proposed that the bust was intended to serve as a trial piece, indicating the proper method for eye inlays, exhibited through the absence of the right ocular stone. Ludwig Borchardt, the leader of the expedition that discovered the bust, was the first to propose that Nefertiti’s likeness served as a model for artists. According to Borchardt, the bust “was not created as a separately made piece from a larger statue” and therefore was most likely used exclusively within the sculptors’ workshop. However retired curator Dorothea Arnold

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has proposed that in addition to this utilitarian function, the bust also marked the new official “mature” style for portraying the queen. The bust therefore “may have served as a formal, iconographic, stylistic, and handicraft model for numerous statues” of the Queen which were subsequently produced, helping to designate “the position of the neck and head”, as well as the “form of the crown and the eye inlays”. New characteristics become apparent in the bust, namely the delineated, acute jaw line, and a firm and compacted chin. These characteristics not only work to create a more streamlined image of the queen, but also evoke a markedly male impression.

The masculine nature of the bust parallels that of Nefertiti’s political life, assuming a uniquely strong presence during her husband’s rule. Significant shifts in visual renderings of the Queen’s likeness seem to coincide with religious and political events that took place during the Amarna period. With the migration of the capital of ancient Egypt to the desert location of Akhetaten in Year 5 of Akhenaten’s reign, the sculptor Thutmose and his protégés created a new face for the queen. Recent examinations of appropriated funerary equipment from Tutankhamun’s tomb, as well as various relief images from Akhetaten have caused Egyptologists such as Nicholas Reeves to postulate Nefertiti “may well have gone on to rule as pharaoh in her own right following the death of Akhenaten in his 17th regnal year”. As Nefertiti’s role within the political realm grew from queen to co-regent, her visual persona became increasingly distinct from her husband. Therefore there may have been a political purpose for endowing depictions of the Queen with masculine physical properties, as it would allow her greater political leverage in the ancient Egyptian world.

However when Nefertiti first emerged on the stage of Egyptian politics during the late eighteenth dynasty, she was depicted in quite a different manner from the iconic image by which she has become known. Instead, she was rendered in the shadow of her husband, Pharaoh Akhenaten, exhibiting many of the same exaggerated and distorted features associated with the “heretic king”. As Dorothea Arnold states in her text *The Royal Women of Amarna*, the “similarity of Nefertiti’s features to those of the king... was a recurrent phenomenon in art during the early years of their reign”. This convention is evidenced in numerous relief sculptures

depicting the royal family, such as a fragmentary portion of a talatat believed to be part of a temple dedicated to Aten. In this image the Queen is shown with the same distorted features as her husband. Commenting on this piece in his 1973 publication Akhenaten and Nefertiti, Cyril Aldred stated that Nefertiti’s “hollow cheeks, slit eyes, lined jaw, and hanging chin, duplicate the characteristics of her husband’s face”25. The trend of depicting the Queen as a female doppelganger of her husband continued throughout the early Amarna period and reached its zenith in the sculpted figures of Karnak.

The colossal Karnak statues dating from the early period in Akhenaten’s reign show the Queen as virtually indistinguishable from her husband. Erected in East Karnak, the colossi were “4-5 m high and made of painted sandstone” and occupied the southern part of a vast courtyard26. Discovered in 1925, these massive statues were initially believed to depict Akhenaten alongside an asexual being tied to the worship of the sun god Aten, however they have since been determined to represent the royal couple.

The confusion surrounding the identity of the Karnak statues is largely due to the fact that one of the figures had “no male genitalia” and therefore was believed to be “that of a female”27. Scholar J.R. Harris was the first to suggest in 1977 that the so-called “sexless” colossus may represent Nefertiti28. According to Lise Manniche in her text The Akhenaten Colossi of Karnak, Harris based his conclusions on a number of physical properties present within the statue:

The arguments in favor of interpreting the ‘sexless’ colossus (H26) as a female (Nefertiti) can be summed up as follows: its female body; the absence of the names of Akhenaten; its secondary beard; the mutilation of the face; and the fact that Nefertiti is known to have had another colossus of similar dimensions set up at Karnak29.

As Dorothea Arnold states in reference to the Karnak figures, aside from superficial “differences in hairstyle and royal accoutrements, the Queen’s head is remarkably similar to that of the king”30. She goes on to state that for viewers in ancient Egypt these images of Nefertiti and

26 — Dorothea Arnold, “From Karnak to Amarna: An Artistic Breakthrough and Its Consequences”, in In the Light of Amarna: 100 Years of the Nefertiti Discovery, ed. Friederike Seyfried (Petersburg: Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, 2012), 145.
27 — Arnold, “From Karnak to Amarna”, 146.
29 — Lise Manniche, The Akhenaten Colossi of Karnak (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2010), 94.
Akhenaten “must have seemed to be portrayals of the same person in different clothes”\textsuperscript{31}. This practice of conflating the royal couple is also perpetuated in other representations of the Queen from Karnak, most prominently in relief images.

The relief images from Karnak rank among the most bizarre and fantastical from the Amarna period, embodying the exaggerated and almost monstrous qualities that became synonymous with the early phase of Akhenaten’s reign. Dorothea Arnold provides an ample description of the bizarre manner in which Karnak artists from the early Amarna period depicted the Queen:

Above a strikingly long neck, the face protrudes forward to a degree that in reality is only found with heads of animals, not humans. The queen’s nose is so long that its tip forms a unit with the full mouth and drooping, round chin, while the slitlike eye under the bony brow is placed so high that it almost touches the edge of the wig. This leaves ample space for the cheeks and jaws, and the artist has used it to emphasize the jawbones as a major structural element of the head... The cheeks are ascetically hollow, the chin droops unbecomingly, and the lines between nose and mouth and at the corner of the mouth are more appropriate for an old woman than a young queen”\textsuperscript{32}.

As Arnold states, these images of the Queen are “fascinating and otherworldly”, though they do not project “an image of pleasing, sweetly feminine beauty”\textsuperscript{33}. It would not be until after the move to Amarna and further developments in Egyptian art practices that a more naturalistic image of Nefertiti would emerge.

With the transition to the isolated desert location of Akhetaten, artists under Akhenaten’s rule continued their experimentation with form and structure, creating a softer vision of the human form. As the eccentric style of the early Amarna period softened, depictions of Nefertiti began to take on a more distinct character and particular features became more refined. Namely, her jaw line became much more defined and the trademark “drooping chin” that characterized Akhenaten was replaced with a much firmer and more compact one. As Camille Paglia points out in \textit{Sexual Personae}, the Nefertiti bust “leads with her chin”\textsuperscript{34}. Though these alterations may appear arbitrary, they quite likely signified Nefertiti’s growing political prowess and her emancipation from her husband’s rule.

\textsuperscript{31} — Arnold, \textit{The Royal Women of Amarna}, 18.
\textsuperscript{33} — Arnold, \textit{The Royal Women of Amarna}, 19.
\textsuperscript{34} — Camille Paglia, \textit{Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson} (London: Yale University Press, 1990), 69.
The changing face of the queen operated not only to cement her increasing social power, but also to indicate her role within the masculine sphere of Egyptian politics. As German curator Dietrich Wildung points out in *The Many Faces of Nefertiti*, Nefertiti “is not simply an escort but rather an acting partner” to Akhenaten\(^{35}\), and she is often shown in a uniquely assertive role in relief images, “smiting enemies” and defending Egypt from invaders\(^{36}\). Therefore the unique manner in which artists depicted the queen during the latter portion of the Amarna period may indicate her enhanced role within the political sphere and her transition into the position of pharaonic power. This trend is observed in representations of Queen Hatshepsut, who similarly assumed the role of ruler in ancient Egypt during the preceding century.

There are numerous elements employed within the bust to evoke a masculine impression; most prominent is the use of strong, geometric lines which give the image of the Queen an elegant simplicity. It is clear that the line is privileged in the bust, as evidenced in the sleek silhouette of the overall work. When viewed in profile (Fig. 2), the statue has a streamlined appearance; the shape of the forehead extending upwards in an unbroken line to the top of the crown. In order to balance the mass of the headdress, the artist has “elongated the neck”\(^{37}\) which is depicted with an inward curve at the rear, and transitions directly into the silhouette of the crown\(^{38}\). As Camille Paglia articulates in *Sexual Personae*, Nefertiti “bears the burden of state upon her head”; the massive crown which symbolizes her power and rank threatening to “snap [her] neck like a stalk”\(^{39}\). The sharp and angular edges of the bust are used effectively to create an impression of authority and gravitas, communicating the political station of the queen.

Similar trends are present when the sculpture is viewed directly (Fig. 1), as the sleek form of the bust guides the viewer’s eye to the Queen’s royal regalia, drawing emphasis to her political prowess. The sides of the crown extend the lines of the triangular face upwards toward the uraues at the centre, the symbol of Egyptian power\(^{40}\). Likewise, the lines at the corners of the mouth and nose are a continuation of the contours of the neck and its upward straining muscles, leading the eye over the nose


\(^{38}\) — Arnold, *The Royal Women of Amarna*, 64.


to the eyebrows. The viewer’s eye follows the pronounced shape of the headband, and finally comes to rest once again on the cobra. Through the use of delineated forms and clean lines within the bust, the sculptor is able to guide the viewer’s attention to this symbol of Nefertiti’s power, reaffirming her monarchic station.

The position and posture of the Queen’s face endows the bust with a powerful visual presence, creating the impression of an assertive personality. There is nothing remotely demure or passive about Nefertiti’s stance, her glare is direct, demanding the attention of the viewer. The Queen’s upturned head forces her eyes to lower in order to look forward, giving the face a look of haughtiness and condescension. Her gaze confronts audience members in a manner that is immediate and disconcerting, and she returns their looks dismissively. Certain scholars have commented on this quality of the bust, claiming that she possesses a coldness which is at once captivating and unsettling. Egyptologist Joann Fletcher discussed the stoic qualities of the sculpture in her writings, claiming that “the famous bust leaves me completely cold…[it] has always unsettled me—even scared me a little with its expression of thinly disguised disdain.”

Camille Paglia reaffirms this perspective in her text *Sexual Personae*, stating Nefertiti “is sexually unapproachable... her full lips invite but remain firmly pressed together”, adding that the Queen’s “perfection is for display, not for use.” These sentiments are reiterated in many of the responses to the bust and, as Rolf Krauss points out, adjectives such as “cool”, “artificial” and even “lifeless” are often used to describe her likeness. The harshness of the bust is amplified through the inclusion of sharp, androgynous anatomical features, which endow the Queen with a beguiling though rigid beauty.

Nefertiti’s delineated jaw line, firm and compacted chin and inordinately long and slender nose all reference physical traits synonymous with the male sex. These characteristics not only work to create a streamlined image of the Queen, but also evoke a markedly masculine impression. Camille Paglia commented on this property of the Queen’s face in her book *Sexual Personae*, stating the bust “shows [Akhenaten’s] Queen half-masculine...she is femaleness impersonalized by masculine abstraction.” Paglia goes on to state that Nefertiti is rendered “beauti-
ful but desexed"\textsuperscript{46}, she is a captivating subject who straddles the sexual schism. Similarly, Ludwig Borchardt described how the forward position of the neck caused the throat of the statue to protrude “more than usual in women”\textsuperscript{47}. This projection of the head produced what Rolf Kruass called “a slight Adam’s apple on the Queen’s throat”\textsuperscript{48}. These anomalous features are physically androgynous, and invest the bust with masculine properties, creating a hybrid face.

I believe it is these androgynous qualities outlined in this article that have contributed to the public’s persistent interest in Nefertiti’s portrait. The sexual ambivalence and tension present within the features of the Queen’s image has ensured Nefertiti’s legacy and won her a position within the Western canon of art. The popularity of the bust has never waned since its unveiling, and the perpetual use of the Queen’s image in popular culture has ensured its continued presence within public consciousness. As Evelyn Wells points out, Nefertiti’s portrait has become “the most celebrated, copied, and admired bust in the world, the most famous face of all Egyptian Queens”\textsuperscript{49}. This is both a testament to the sculptor’s genius and the subject’s innate beauty which resonates from the corridors of a Berlin museum to the hot sands of Egypt.

\textsuperscript{46} — Paglia, Sexual Personae, 69.
Appendix

Fig.1. Frontal view of Nefertiti bust (Photo Courtesy of Andrea Field)
Fig. 2. Profile view of Nefertiti bust (Photo Courtesy of Andrea Field)
Bibliography


