

The Amarna Princess

Bolton Museums, Art Gallery & Aquarium have succeeded in raising the funds to purchase an important piece of Ancient Egyptian sculpture so that this can remain in Britain and in particular so that it can be enjoyed by people in the North West of England.

The sculpture is carved in translucent Egyptian alabaster (calcite), is 52 centimetres high and represents a royal female of the Amarna Period (c.1350-1334 B.C.), with head, arms and lower legs not surviving. The body wears an elegant, pleated robe with fringes and side streamers and is that of a princess with the remains of the sidelock of youth on the shoulder. The back pillar shows that she was once part of a double statue. She is one of the daughters of the Pharaoh Akhenaten and his chief queen, Nefertiti, whose beautiful features are revealed on the famous, painted limestone bust of her which is in Berlin. Elements of the extreme style of the sculpture suggest a date early in Akhenaten's reign. This may be the eldest daughter, Meritaten, but the piece is not inscribed so the exact identity is uncertain. Akhenaten and Nefertiti's third daughter, Ankhsenpaaten (later Ankhsenamun) became the wife of Tutankhamun, who succeeded Akhenaten on the throne and was probably his son, but perhaps not by Nefertiti.

Although various sculptures survive from Akhenaten's reign, pieces like this are rare and of great significance. A similar torso on a smaller scale and less extreme in style in red quartzite, probably of Nefertiti and later in the reign is in the Louvre in Paris. A draped headless figure of a princess in limestone, again on a smaller scale and later in the reign is in the University of Pennsylvania Museum in Philadelphia. The bust of a princess with the sidelock of youth in limestone, who was also wearing a pleated robe, is in the Louvre.

The sculpture was privately owned in Bolton. It was purchased by the owner's great grandfather in 1892 at a sale of the contents of Silverton Park in Devon, the home of the 4th Earl of Egremont. The sale catalogue does not contain a recognisable description of this piece and it appears to have been one of a number of sculptures on display in the long gallery of the house. George Francis Wyndham (1785-1845) became 4th Earl of Egremont on the death of his uncle, George O' Brien Wyndham, the 3rd Earl in 1837. Although inheriting the title, the 4th Earl was disappointed not to acquire the grand family home at Petworth in Sussex which was left to the 3rd Earl's illegitimate son and adopted heir, George Wyndham. The 4th Earl decided to build a great house for himself on the estates in Devon and employed James Thomas Knowles as architect. Knowles's plan was for a house about 600 feet long. The final scheme was slightly smaller but even so resulted in a mansion, covering an acre of land, of 187 rooms, 130 marble mantelpieces and 150 cellars. It was built from 1839-1845, but the inside was never to be finished entirely as the 4th Earl died in 1845. His widow died in 1876 and they had no children. After the sale of the contents in 1892, the house was demolished with the aid of dynamite in 1902. All that survives now are the impressive stables, owned by the Landmark Trust, who hope to raise money to carry out a full restoration.

The 4th Earl of Egremont was not particularly known as a collector and it seems likely that some of the contents of Silverton Park could have come from Petworth or the family estates in Cumberland. The 3rd Earl of Egremont was a renowned patron of art welcoming Turner, Constable and other artists to Petworth. The 2nd Earl had collected classical sculptures and the 3rd Earl added to this and also commissioned works for his gallery from leading sculptors of the time. The 3rd Earl and his brother Charles Wyndham both knew Gavin Hamilton who acquired ancient sculpture mainly in Rome.

One of the two cartonnage mummy cases sold at Silverton Park was probably that purchased later from the dealer, Sherratt's of Chester, by William Hesketh Lever, 1st Viscount Leverhulme. The upright wooden-framed display case was surmounted by a plaque with an armorial shield and the legend "George Windham, Earl of Egremont. Mut-em-Mennu. Brought by Chas. Windham for Ye Museum of Egremont. Ameu-Ra. Thebes. Roma. MDXXI". The date in Roman numerals is clearly a blunder. George Wyndham became 3rd Earl in 1763 and as the display case was in Georgian style, the mummy case was perhaps acquired in Rome in the later 18th century before Gavin Hamilton's death in 1797 or before 1820. The Amarna princess may also have been acquired in Rome in the time of the 3rd Earl and with other pieces was transferred to grace the 4th Earl's gallery at Silverton Park. It is unlikely that her real identity would be recognised at this stage and the torso might have been viewed as a voluptuous classical draped figure.

Since leaving Silverton Park, the Amarna princess has spent the last 110 years in Lancashire in family hands. Now she has the opportunity to be seen and admired by a wide public thanks to the wishes of her owner in wanting her to find a home in Bolton Museums, Art Gallery & Aquarium and with many thanks to the National Heritage Memorial Fund, the National Art Collections Fund, the Friends of Bolton Museum & Art Gallery and the John Bradshaw Gass Charitable Trust whose generosity has made this possible.