

**Natacha Rambova, 1897-1966** by B. S. Lesko

Born Winifred Shaughnessy in Salt Lake City Utah into a wealthy and socially prominent Mormon family, but sent off at age eight to be educated in England. Winifred exhibited talent for dancing from an early age, and thus from school went on to join the Imperial Russian Ballet for which she, not only danced, but designed costumes and sets. It was this association that prompted her to change her name to one suitably Russian. Tall and strikingly beautiful, Natacha won the heart of the aspiring young silent film actor Rudolf Valentino when they met in Hollywood in 1920. His subsequent stardom is credited in large part to her handling of his early career. She designed his publicity as well his costumes and dances, and they married in 1922 in Mexico, even though he was intellectually and socially her inferior. After their marriage disintegrated, she continued to be devoted to his memory (he died young in 1926). She also developed her own career more, assuming roles as an actress and trying her hand at play writing as well.

Deeply interested, since schooldays, in Greek mythology, Rambova became entranced with Egypt during her first visit there in 1936 with her second husband Alvaro de Urzdziz, a descendent of a noble Basque family. During this tour, which took them to Luxor and Edfu, they met Howard Carter. Egypt enchanted her and Rambova recorded that she "felt as if I had at last returned home. The first few days I couldn't stop the tears streaming from my eyes." She was of a mystical turn of mind and believed in re-incarnation and that she had lived before in ancient Egypt. Inspired to learn more about this ancient culture, she became a student briefly at University College London under Glanville. Ten years later, she returned, at age 50, to Egypt. Of an inquiring mind, she had, in the meantime delved deeply into astrology, mythology, dream analysis, and comparative religions. She had explored ancient sites in Guatemala and begun an archive on comparative universal symbolism. She was strongly influenced by Madam Blavatsky and her Atlantean theories.

Rambova's friendship with the Mellons, American philanthropists, led to her being awarded a Mellon grant in 1946 to travel to Egypt to analyze the symbols on ancient scarabs. Apparently she thought she would find evidence of a link between the belief system of Egypt and that of ancient American cultures. She soon, however, became more absorbed by Egyptian religion exclusively and aimed at a greater understanding of the wisdom that lay behind it. "Magic is in the very soil of Egypt," she once exclaimed. It was this quest to find meaning in the symbols which everywhere greeted her from the monuments, artifacts, and religious rituals and dances of modern Egypt, that led her to seek out a "fellow Russian" Egyptologist, Alexandre Piankoff, who had recently translated the Book of Caves, an ancient work of royal funerary literature. Their initial meeting was held in the library of the French Institute in Cairo. He was working on religious texts in the royal tombs of the New Kingdom, such as Rameses VI's, and apparently excited her about these, as well as even earlier religious literature on the interior walls of Old Kingdom pyramids. An eye-witness to this first meeting, <sup>British Egyptologist,</sup> I.E.S. Edwards, remarked later that the future collaborators had become so deeply engrossed in conversation that he did not dare interrupt them and let a prearranged date with Piankoff pass.

Due to her association with the Mellons and their Bollingen Foundation, Rambova was able to gain further support, an astounding (for the time) \$50,000, as a two-year project grant, with Professor Piankoff as director and translator, to photograph and publish the royal mortuary literature. Because only one pyramid at Saqqara was open for study, the research team, which included Elizabeth Thomas (q.v.) spent their first winter at Luxor devoted to work in the Valley of the Kings, which resulted in the two volume work *The Tomb of Ramses VI*. When the heat of spring arrived, the small team repaired to Cairo where they were given permission to photograph and study the lengthy inscriptions on the golden shrines that had once enclosed the sarcophagus of Tutankhamun. Finally they returned to Sakkara and the inscriptions inside the Unas

pyramid., the oldest religious texts of all. The collected work of this expedition appeared over the next several years as *Egyptian Religious Texts and Representations*, translated by Piankoff and edited by Rambova. Her photographer, Mark Hasselriis, later recalled her to Rosalind Janssen as tall, elegant, gracious, courteous but detached "the only thing that excited her was art."

During her visits to Egypt, Rambova had collected antiquities. These she donated over a period of years, beginning in 1952, to the Utah Museum of Fine Arts, to which much of her mother's art collection had been bequeathed.

By 1953 her health, never strong since a 1936 heart attack, had begun to decline markedly. Still Rambova worked relentlessly on her own contribution to *Mythological Papyri* while Piankoff took over the preparation of the other volumes in the series. She felt strongly that a purely intellectual approach to spiritual matters was inadequate while the University of Chicago epigraphers she met in Luxor were too "pragmatically minded" to accept her iconological research. She evidently had met the director Richard A. Parker there and after he returned to the States to become the first holder of the Wilbour Chair in Egyptology at Brown University, they maintained a correspondence for many years. He and Professor Otto Neugebauer were collaborating on *Egyptian Astronomical Texts* and would naturally have attracted Rambova's attention. In her numerous letters she questioned Parker closely about the Egyptian zodiac, as she believed the Greek Zodiac had to have Egyptian antecedents. Parker was cautious in his advice and tried to persuade her to be the same in her approach to the Egyptian data. As her letter of August 1, 1955 makes clear, she was quite ready to back down from her earlier interpretations when confronted by reasoned scholarly literature. She wrote to Parker: "I have reread your *Calendars of Ancient Egypt*. It has clarified much that I had forgotten since my first reading of it five years ago in Egypt. In consequence I wish to correct the hasty and thoughtless conclusion re. the Egyptian calendar "problem" given in my letter of the 11th. It is obvious from your very sound deductions and reconstructions that not only was there

no fixed year in Egypt but there was no need for it." Her published chapter in *Mythological Papyri* is a scholarly contribution and, eminent Egyptologists all, Rudolf Anthes, Edward Wente and Erik Hornung, have found merit in her metaphysical interpretations. Indeed, her descriptive writing in the Piankoff volume is her attempt to present a rational explanation for the scenes on Egyptian tomb walls and papyri. It demonstrates her organizational skills and her commitment to searching out truths and does not reek of unfounded theories or other eccentricity.

Mme. Rambova resided in New York City and New Milford Connecticut and was in close contact with William C. Hayes of the Metropolitan Museum, Donald Hanson of the Institute of Fine Arts of New York University, Richard Parker of Brown University and other scholars. She tenaciously pursued information from scholars and professional literature of several languages to keep abreast of current thinking and in every respect showed a personality that was serious, dedicated and disciplined.

Mme. Rambova spent the last years of her sixth decade researching, writing and editing her Egyptological studies for up to twelve hours a day despite suffering from a fatal illness. Rambova and Piankoff died the same year, 1966. He had nearly completed the *Pyramid of Unas* and *The Wandering of the Soul*, (Bollingen series volumes 5 and 6). She left an unfinished manuscript of over one thousand pages of text and photographs to the Brooklyn Museum on the myth pattern. The remainder of her Egyptian artifacts went to the Utah Museum where there is now a gallery called the Natacha Rambova Collection of Egyptian Antiquities. The Philadelphia Museum of Art has the Natasha Rambova Gallery of Nepali and Lamaistic art.

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