

## ANCIENT EGYPT IN OUR MIDST

by Lana Troy



The Smithsonian's National Museum of Natural History (NMNH) recently opened a new exhibition, *Eternal Life in Ancient Egypt*.

Here, as in museums all over the world, visitors crowd around not only images and objects but the long dead Egyptians themselves. Now equipped with catalogue numbers, these were people who left behind monuments and tomb equipment. They also gifted us with their concerns, reflections, and imaginations inscribed in stone and set down on papyrus. No other ancient culture is preserved in such multi-perspective detail, spanning a period close to 5,000 years.

Beyond the final demise of all forms of hieroglyphic writing in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD, ancient Egypt lived on, first in tradition, then in collective memory, and finally in the imagination that transformed it to meet the needs of different ages in, for example, the works of Shakespeare and Verdi. With Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1822, a new reality was revealed peopled by real men and women. For the larger public, a meeting point was found in the emergence of the museum as a preserver and narrator of the human experience embedded in the objects they left behind.

### Collecting Ancient Egypt

From fragments of stone walls to the smallest of amulets, ancient Egyptian artifacts have always held a cherished place with collectors. Beginning in the 1600s, the 'curiosity cabinet,' the precursor of the modern museum, inevitably included the funerary figures we call *shabtis*, a 'fragment of the Great Pyramid,' and most likely a mummified limb or two. These objects also made their way into the earliest American collections.

The acquisition of these objects quickly became part of the politics of the day. The Rosetta Stone, discovered in 1799 by the French army but displayed today in London, is a footnote in the history of the Napoleonic wars. A number of the Egyptian objects in the NMNH collection relate to, in a less dramatic way, the political and cultural climate and events of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The British-born George Robins Gliddon (1809-1857) is sometimes referred to as the first 'American' Egyptologist. After serving as the US consul in Alexandria, Gliddon arrived in the US in the 1830s and embarked upon a career as lecturer and author. Fourteen collection numbers are attributed to a Gliddon donation (or perhaps purchase), including the Neshor cartonnage coffin lid fragment, now on display. Gliddon did not limit his efforts to Egyptology, however, but also authored a book on cotton production in Egypt and more notably, co-authored *Types of Mankind*. This book advocated the 'polygenesis' or multitude origins for mankind and fed into the idea of the hierarchy of the 'races' that offered an excuse for slavery. The presence of a 'high civilization' in Africa became a point of contention in this discussion.

The Union General Charles Pomeroy Stone (1824-1887) was among the Civil War veterans to sign up for a stint in the Egyptian Army. Functioning as chief of staff, he stayed on until the revolt of the Egyptian officer corps that led to the deposal of the Khedive Ishmail in 1879. During his stay, he acquired a collection of 'squeezes' (accession 3289) — impressions of stone monuments made with thick moistened paper that he donated to the National Museum in 1874. The 89 numbers represent a mixture ranging from Old Kingdom tomb reliefs to Latin inscriptions.

Samuel Sullivan 'Sunset' Cox (1824-1889) had a successful career as diplomat and congressman. In 1886 President Cleveland appointed him 'Envoy Extraordinary and



Fragment of a cartonnage coffin lid belonging to Neshor. Dynasty 26, 664-525 BC. NMNH Department of Anthropology, (A1415). Photo courtesy Lana Troy.

Minister Plenipotentiary to Turkey'. Serving only 17 months, the first winter was spent in Greece and Egypt, where he acquired two mummies and an unknown number of other antiquities. One of the mummies was immediately donated to the National Museum; it was dubbed Minister Cox and is currently on exhibit.

The 1880s and 90s was a pivotal period for Egyptian archaeology and the storage space available in Cairo's Bulaq Museum was quickly filled with new discoveries. Bab el-Gasus, a large collective tomb excavated at Deir el Bahri in 1892, with its 153 coffin sets and other grave goods, proved too much for the remaining space in the flood-damaged museum. The solution was to use a portion of the wonderfully decorated coffins as diplomatic gifts. Feverish communiqués put the diplomatic community in Cairo and Alexandria on alert as 17 countries applied for consideration. The coffins, along with a large number of shabtis and some boxes, were divided into numbered lots and a drawing was held. Lot 10, consisting of six coffins, three mummy boards, two boxes, and some 80 shabtis (accession nos 27543 and 123711) arrived at the National Museum in Washington some months later. Today, these coffins and the objects that accompanied them, unique in North America, are central to the NMNH's Egyptian collection.



'Minister Cox,' mummy in coffin with a cartonnage body covering, 150 BC-AD 50. Photo by Chip Clark, NMNH, A126790.



The inner coffin of Amenhotep, from the Bab el-Gasus tomb, Deir el-Bahri, Dynasty 21, 1064-940 BC. NMNH Department of Anthropology, A154959.

While it is easy to see the significance of the large and more opulent donations with easily identifiable donors, many of the smaller objects have more muted but still compelling backgrounds. Olive Risley Seward (1844-1908) was the adopted daughter and companion of William Henry Seward, Lincoln's Secretary of State. After Seward's retirement in 1870, the two spent fourteen months travelling the world, returning just before his death in 1872. In 1892, Olive Seward donated three shabti figures of Imhotep (A154538), apparently acquired on this trip, that were displayed from 1976 until 2010.

### **Tombs: Ancient Egypt Showcased**

Egyptian artifacts, familiar from many collections, can come from villages, workplaces, and temples but most often it is the tomb that has been their point of origin. The physical preservation of the body was the tomb's primary purpose for more than 4,000 years until Christianity finally edged out native practices in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD. The corpse, it was believed, was a source of power for the different components of the potentially eternal 'persona' of the dead. The body, confined to the tomb, provided energy for the birdlike "ba" who was free to leave the tomb, partake of the offerings, fly to heaven, and return to the tomb and its owner. The head, in particular, was essential, so much so that during a short period around 2300 BC

an extra replacement head sculpted in stone was placed in the tomb. The face functioned as a key element of identity. The eye with which to see, the mouth with which to eat and speak, and the ears with which to hear were all important in order for the deceased to maintain a physicality, interact with the living, and participate in the rituals that sustained existence in the tomb.

The peak of mummification techniques was not reached until the 21<sup>st</sup> dynasty, around 1000 BC. As described by Herodotus back in the fifth century BC, mummification required, in essence, the removal of all liquid from the body. The internal organs, liver, lungs, stomach, and intestines — all recognized as having a function in the living person — were specially preserved in four characteristic ‘canopic’ jars, associated with four deities called the sons of Horus. By about 2000 BC, these jars became personifications of these deities, who were represented by the heads sculpted on the jar lids. These were first given the face of the tomb owner with the custom gradually shifting to identify these gods as a man (Imsety), a baboon (Hapy), a jackal (Duamutef) and a falcon (Kehebsenuf). These gods also protected the body in the form of amulets on the body and images on the coffin. As an affirmation of the mummy as a living being, the moisture, taken away in death, was returned by a water offering, equated with the annual flooding that returned life to the fields.

The wrapping of the mummy, accompanied by ritual prayer, included placing protective amulets between the layers of linen. There was found a heart scarab referring to the heart that would testify to the innocence of the dead at his trial before Osiris and hieroglyphs such as the *nadj-pillar* that confirmed the body’s ability to “green” (*wadi*) or regenerate itself. The djed-pillar reinforced the identity of the dead as Osiris, the first to ever experience death and, by defeating it, introduced an immortality no longer confined to the gods. Every amulet contributed to the protective shield of the wrappings.

The mummy’s continued life in the tomb was dependent upon the successful transformation of the deceased into a spirit of light called an ‘Akh,’ achieved by following the path of the sun. Called before a court of the gods to account for his or her life on earth, the dead was interrogated: “Have you ever denied food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothing to the naked.” A denial of wrongdoing was followed by the heart being weighed



Portrait lid from a canopic jar. 18th dynasty, 1550-1398 BC. NMNH Department of Anthropology, A439853.

against “truth” in the form of a feather or goddess. A lie meant a second death, an absolute annihilation. Only those judged ‘true of voice’ could continue on a journey that emulated the sun traveling through the dangers of the night to reach the sunrise that ended the darkness of death.

The deceased was assisted on this journey by many of the objects in the tomb. A text, Chapter 30 of the *Book of the Dead*, inscribed on a large scarab that was placed on the breast, called upon the heart to tell the truth: “Do not witness against me in the tribunal!”; “Do not tell lies about me!”; “How good are the good things that you say!” By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, chapters from the *Book of the Dead* were being inscribed on narrow strips of linen that made up the final wrappings of the mummy.

The coffin was also conceptualized as an aid in the rebirth of the dead. It was not merely a container for the body, but also the mother of the newborn soul. The Egyptians saw theological truths in analogies. The coffin, associ-



Carnelian heart amulet. NMNH Department of Anthropology, A454209.



Osiris as Djed pillar, from the interior of the outer coffin of Tentkhonsu, Bab el-Gasus, Deir el-Bahri, Dynasty 21, 1064-940 BC. NMNH Department of Anthropology, A154953.

ated with the sky goddess Nut (mother of both Osiris and the sun god Re) contained the body just as the womb contained the child, and the night sky Nut, the sun before its reappearance at dawn. The primary wood used for the coffin was the native sycamore, a tree often depicted as Nut nourishing the dead. Changing form through the ages, by c. 1000, the coffin had also become a canvas, inside and out, that charted the successful transformation of the dead, often expressed using the winged scarab, a multilayered image combining the scarab's hieroglyphic meaning "to become" with its role as the manifestation of the morning sun.

The happy ending of this journey is found in the simultaneous experience of new life of the many components of the dead: the light-spirit, the Akh, joins the gods; and the bird-soul, the ba, travels back and forth between the body in the tomb, the offerings, and the stars in heaven. Yet another part of the persona arrives at the Green Fields, an idealized agricultural life, where all labor is carried out by the funerary figures known as the shabtis, also identified by yet another chapter from the *Book of the Dead*. A bill of sale tells us that these came (ideally) in a set of 365 workers plus 36 overseers, so the new owner of this fine estate could count on leisure time.

The body, however, continued a life in the tomb, that in its ideal form, contained the necessities of life and a little more. There was access to perfumed oils, jars of kohl

eye-paint, tweezers, razors, combs, and mirrors. Boxes, and sometimes baskets of linen sheets and sometimes finished clothing, were often the targets of plunderers, as they, among the tomb objects, had the highest resale value. Meat could itself be mummified and placed in appropriately shaped containers for the next life.

Repeated images of the owner, in the form of the coffin and additional statues, made sure that the wandering ba-soul could recognize its home. The survival of the 'persona' was further ensured by the repeated writing of his or her name and titles. Furniture such as beds, chairs, and storage containers furnished the tomb as a home. The leisure of family life was replicated with musical instruments and board games. The earthly existence of the owner might be preserved in an idealized narrative inscribed in columns of hieroglyphs. The funerary procession itself, ending with the restoration of the senses in the ritual of the Opening of the Mouth, is repeatedly enacted in eternity with its inclusion. And the heavens to which the successful spirit would ascend could be found on the tomb's ceiling.

Two essential texts connected the worlds of the dead and the living. Inserted in the walls of an outer room in the tomb could be a slab, formed either as a rectangular 'door,' a so-called 'falsedoor,' or with a rounded top, a 'stela.' Written on the slab was a formula intended to transfer offerings given by the king to a god, to the tomb owner.



Shabti of Ameneminet from Deir el-Medina. Dynasty 19, 1292-1190 BC. NMNH Department of Anthropology, A553172.

A gift that the king gives to Osiris, Foremost of the Westerners, that he may give a going forth of the voice consisting of bread and beer, beef and fowl, alabaster and linen, and all good and pure thing upon which a god lives to the ka-spirit of (*tomb owner's name*).

These words, as time goes by, were inscribed on many of the tomb's objects, their existence was enough to perpetuate the provisioning listed in the text.

However, it was better if the words and the tomb owner's name were pronounced. On an outside wall, the passer-by could be asked to stop and 'listen to the words' of the dead and pronounce his or her name. This, they could read, was an act beneficial for both. Furthermore, the failure to do so, or worse, desecrating the tomb, would result in punishment. Some examples of this text genre are especially poignant, bringing the idealized world of the hope for eternal life into the reality of human loss. Outside the Middle Egyptian tomb of Petosiris (c. 300 BC), his young son Thothrekht, now interred, speaks to the living.

"O living who are on earth, who will come to this desert tomb to make an offering, may you pronounce my name. It is a good thing to act for one who cannot. The one who hears my words will grieve. I was a child seized by force, a little one seized quickly as if by sleep. I was only a few years old when I was taken to the city of eternity. I was rich in friends but no one could protect me. All of the townspeople, men and women, lamented greatly when they saw what had happened to me. Father and Mother pleaded with Death and my brothers and sisters despaired. But since I have reached this land of loss, where people are held accountable before the Lord of the Gods, no fault has been found with me and I have been given bread in the Hall of Justice and water from the sycamore, like one of the ba-souls of the necropolis."

The grief of loss is followed by an affirmation of a successful journey to an eternal life.

The ancient Egyptians have left behind a myriad of archeological sites, artifacts, and texts and not least their own physical remains. Although far away and long ago, they remain familiar in their humanity and are, indeed, still in our midst.

## Further Reading

- Brewer, D.J. and E. Teeter 2007. *Egypt and the Egyptians*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Cambridge University Press.
- Taylor, J.H. 2001. *Death & the Afterlife in Ancient Egypt*. British Museum Press.
- Trafton, S. 2004. *Egypt Land. Race and Nineteenth Century American Egyptomania*. Duke University Press.
- Wolfe, S. J. 2009. *Mummies in Nineteenth Century America. Ancient Egyptians as Artifacts*. McFarland and Co.
- Lana Troy is professor of Egyptology at the University of Uppsala, Sweden and Guest Curator for the exhibition "Eternal Life in Ancient Egypt" at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, DC.