



Mummies and Mummification

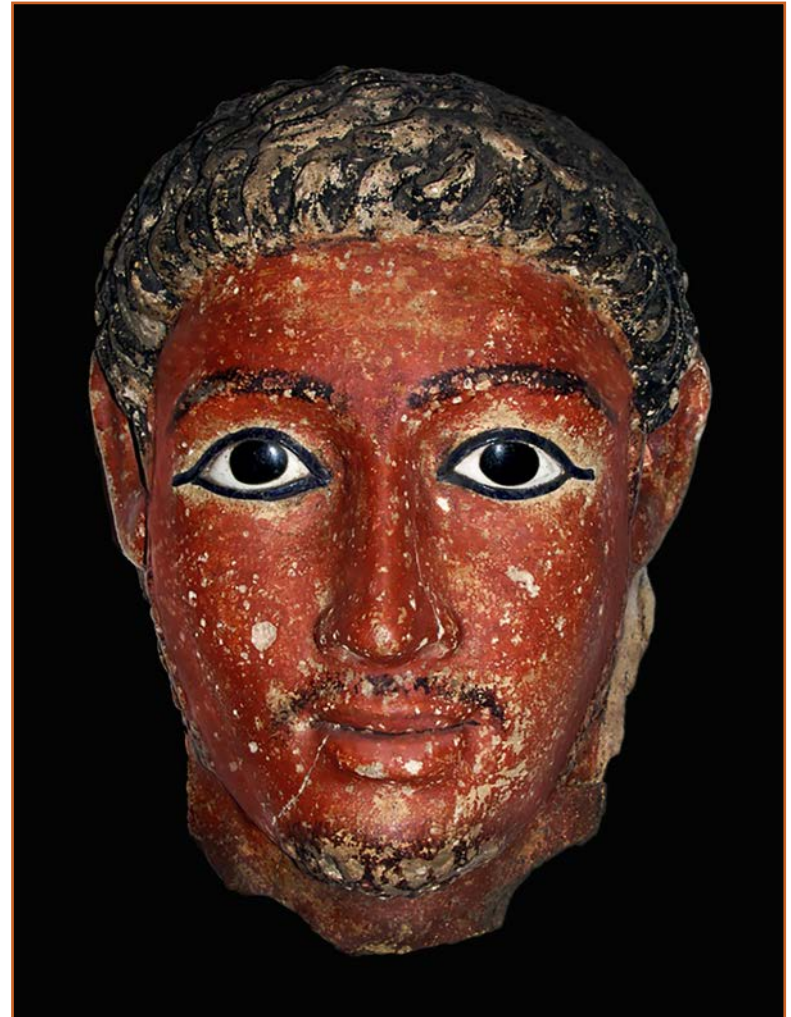
by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

The Egyptian Ministry of Tourism reported that a whopping 13.6 million tourists visited the country in 2019, up 21% from the previous year. While there are many reasons to visit this fascinating country, we might surmise that a substantial portion of Egypt's eternal allure can be summed in one word: mummies. They are as synonymous with Egypt as sand is to the Sahara. Take the mummies and tombs away from Egypt, and its timeless appeal would evaporate like a drop of water on the desert.

Mummification in ancient Egypt arose from beliefs surrounding the afterlife, and the idea that the *ka* (soul) left the body at death, but reunited with it if the deceased passed successfully into *Aaru* or the "Field of Reeds," a heaven-like place for the righteous. Final judgment involved weighing the heart (in which the *ka* resided) before the god Osiris in the Underworld.

In 2018, Egyptologists broke the news of the astounding discovery of an underground mummification chamber at Saqqara. The facility included a natural ventilation system, channels to drain blood, an enormous incense burner (to repel insects), and the remains of hundreds of small jars, many of which contained antibacterial agents. Substances like myrrh, cassia, cedar, etc., could be used to inhibit decomposition, but they came with a cost, and thus turning a human body into a mummy was not cheap. Full mummification took seventy days, but only the elite could afford such a deluxe funeral package. For the less affluent, other options were available, just as more economical options are offered by today's funeral homes. Various animals with sacred significance also underwent the process and accompanied the deceased into the grave.

Once a human cadaver was received by priests, the seventy-day process began by draining the blood. A single incision in the flank allowed removal of viscera, and lungs, liver, stomach, and intestines were preserved separately in "canopic" jars. Flushing the empty body cavity with palm wine and antibacterial spices disinfected it. The brain, which



Male Mummy Mask
Egyptian, Roman period, 1st-2nd c. CE
Perhaps from Luxor
Polychromed plaster with glass inlay
Gift of Mr. H.K. Negbaur (63.12)

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MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

was discarded, was removed through the nose by inserting a tool up through the nasal cavity into the cranium. The heart remained undisturbed since it was the home of the *ka*.

Next the body was dehydrated by covering it with a naturally occurring salt called natron, which preserved the skin, rendering it into a leathery consistency. After a lengthy period of dehydration, the body was anointed with antiseptic oils to retard decay and then wrapped tightly in linen strips. Apotropaic talismans were placed between the folds of cloth, and masks of various materials protected the face. The linen itself was treated with resins to guard against moisture and decay. The mummy was then laid to rest in a tomb replete with provisions for the afterlife, provided one could afford the expense. Well-preserved tombs are goldmines for archaeologists, not only for their material contents, but also for the mummies themselves, which have yielded vast amounts of information about ancient Egyptians and their everyday habits.

We should not leave any summation of Egyptian mummies without mention of the tomb of pharaoh Tutankhamun, unearthed by Howard Carter and team in 1922. That iconic discovery was arguably the most astonishing and impactful of twentieth-century archaeology, enormously advancing our understanding of both the nature of pharaonic tombs and of the young pharaoh himself. Studies of Tut's mummy have revealed a host of health issues that probably contributed to early death (about age nineteen). More broadly, the discovery was remarkable for its profound influence on pop culture, creating an undying fascination with all things Egyptian. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the public could not get enough of Egyptian-inspired themes in everything from music to clothing to home décor. Armchair Egyptology became the fashion, and even Herbert Hoover (Secretary of Commerce in November 1922) was an enthusiast, immediately naming his newly acquired Belgian shepherd "King Tut." Hollywood did not lag far behind. After the release of the classic Karloff film in 1932, a studio publicist proclaimed: "America held rapt (pun intended?) by Universal's *Mummy!*" Needless to say, America and the world have continued to be held rapt ever since. ■



Canopic Jars

Example from antiquities market for illustrative purposes.
Authenticity not established.



Hawk Mummy (and X-Ray)

Egyptian, New Kingdom, ca. 1400–1330 BCE
Said to be from the tomb of Queen Tiye, Valley of the Kings
Linen and bird remains
Transferred from the Museum of Anthropology (2011.9)