

# Ashmolean: Age of the Pharaohs in all its glory

The Ashmolean's six new galleries dedicated to the age of the pharaohs are exhibiting their treasures.

Art of ancient Egypt



The museum in Oxford re-opened two years ago after its multi-million pound renovation. Though

architect Rick Mather left Sir Charles Cockerell's 1845 neoclassical structure intact, he

replaced the Victorian additions at the rear with a six-story ultra-modern extension that made little attempt to blend in with the original structure or with the surrounding buildings.

In December the museum completed the second phase of the renovation when it opened six new galleries for the display of material from Ancient Egypt and Nubia. They are located on the ground floor of the original building in a space that is contiguous to — and in many ways completes —

the run of galleries devoted to ancient Greek, Roman and Cretan civilisations.

With new lighting and floor-to-ceiling glass cases, the display is presented along a circular route in broadly chronological order, beginning with a pre-dynastic (3300 BC) limestone carving of the fertility god Min, (which, in its damaged state looks as mysterious and forbidding as something out of Raiders of the Lost Ark), to uncannily lifelike portraits set into

Ashmolean Museum Oxford



mummy cases made in the first century BC. There is also a massive sandstone shrine of the Nubian King Taharqa found in the temple complex at Kawa in what is today the Sudan (690-664 BC). It is carved on the outside with a scene in which the deceased heart is weighted in judgment before a ram-headed deity to determine



Coffin lid



Mummy portrait

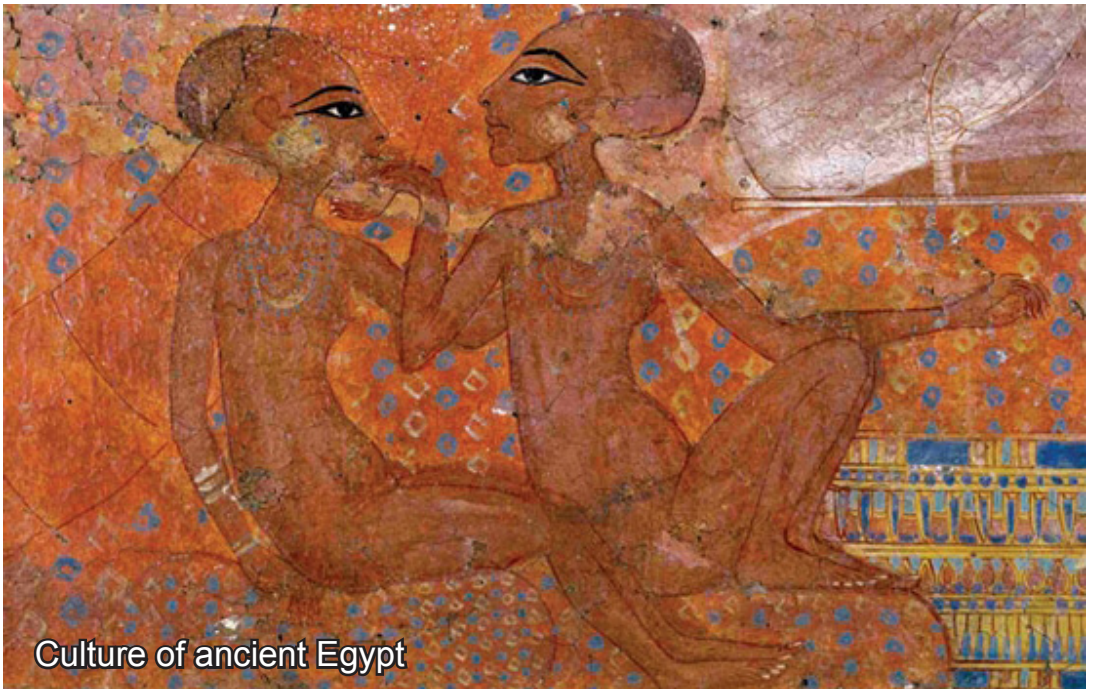


whether his soul will live for ever or be fed to the crocodile god whose head, crisply carved in hard stone, is displayed nearby.

The Egyptian collections of the Ashmolean are amongst the most extensive in Britain, and they represent every period of Egyptian civilisation from prehistory to the 7th century AD. Predynastic Egypt is a notable strength. The first objects arrived in the Museum in 1683, the year of its foundation, but the major holdings come from British excavations in Egypt from the 1880s until the late 1930s.

Oxford University excavations in Southern Egypt and Sudan from 1910 on added a representative collection of Nubian material. The Department also houses extensive collections of papyri, ostraca, wooden labels and writing boards, including the Bodleian Library's ostraca collections.

Although the first objects came to the Ashmolean in the year the museum was founded, 1683, other Egyptian antiquities are derived from British excavations in Egypt from the 1880s until the late 1930s. During this time, bodies such as



Entrance to the Egyptian galleries



the Egypt Exploration Fund and the British School of Archaeology in Egypt (directed by W.M.F. Petrie, the founder of Egyptian field-archaeology) received financial support from the University for their excavations. Some of the resulting finds thus came to Oxford, together with comparable items donated by individuals such as H.M Kennard and Jesse Haworth, both staunch supporters of Petrie's early work. In the early twentieth century, the University itself sent expeditions to Lower Nubia, directed and

largely funded by Francis Llewellyn Griffith, the first Professor of Egyptology at Oxford.

The collections are currently displayed in four galleries: the Griffith Gallery houses Egyptian sculpture, paintings and funerary objects, and the Nubian collection, centred on the Shrine of Taharqa. The Petrie Room features a representative selection of Predynastic (prehistoric) material; the Chester Room contains thematic displays of some of the most familiar categories of



Restoring the mummies

Egyptian artefacts – amulets, seals and scarabs, jewellery, bronze statuettes, shabtis and canopic jars; and the Sackler Gallery houses a chronological view of Egyptian history and material culture from early dynastic

times (2950 BC) to the seventh century AD.

Among the most significant groups of material are the objects of Predynastic and Early Dynastic date (5000-2650- BC) from



Mummy of Meresamun



## Ptolemaic Queen



excavations at Naqada, Abydos, Koptos, and Hierakonpolis. These include such masterpieces as the Scorpion and Narmer mace-heads, and a statue of King Khasekhem.

The museum's extensive collection of funerary material includes the finest set of coffins from a group belonging to a family burial of Theban priests within the temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri. These were discovered by the first archaeologist to work for the Egypt Exploration Fund, Edouard Naville.

From excavations at Tell el-Amarna, the capital of the so-called 'heretic king' Akhenaten

(1353-1335 BC), came many pieces of sculpture, objects of daily life, and fragmentary paintings, of which the 'Princesses fresco' is the best known.

Professor Griffith's excavations in Nubia brought to Oxford a representative collection of material from this region (the area now comprising southern Egypt and northern Sudan). It includes the largest object in the museum – the Shrine of Taharqa, the only complete pharaonic building in this country.

Many of the donations and bequests which have enriched the collections are associated with famous Egyptologists and Oxford

scholars. From Sir Alan Gardiner, the greatest twentieth-century English scholar of Egyptian language, came documents on papyrus, such as the Will of Naunakhte.

In addition to papyri, the Ashmolean houses many ostraca, the potsherds and fragments of limestone which served as a cheap writing medium in the ancient

world. These include the Gardiner collection of hieratic ostraca, as well as the Bodleian Library's collections of writing boards, labels, and ostraca. They provide examples of all the scripts and languages that have been used in Egypt (Egyptian, Greek, Coptic, Aramaic, and Arabic), and documents which range from school texts to private letters.

One of the numerous exhibits

