

Egyptian Mummy and Coffin

A Life's Journey

During the time of the pharaohs in Egypt, mummification, as well as tomb and coffin decoration funerary scenes, served to protect the deceased during the perilous journey through the underworld on the way to obtaining eternal life. This journey was frequently interrupted when tombs were robbed for valuables by local thieves and even government officials. Much later, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, European and American museums were responsible for yet more raiding due to Western fascination with Egyptian civilization. The Washington State Museum, now the Burke Museum of Natural History and Culture, got caught up in this fad when, in 1902, a University of Washington regent, the Hon. Manson Backus, purchased for the museum a Ptolemaic (300 – 30 BC) mummy and a late 21st Dynasty (959 – 889 BC) coffin from the National Museum of Egyptian Antiquities in Cairo. Nearly a century later, this mummy and coffin have become an important part of Seattle's history, and they continue to provide insights into the reverent practices of ancient Egypt.

Who Was Nellie?

The mummy, who is affectionately called "Nellie" by many Seattleites (in reference to Nellie Cornish, the founder of Cornish College of the Arts), has been the subject of considerable study over the past century. In 1916, the poorly preserved linens on her back were removed, along with some bones, to reveal two lotus bulbs placed in her abdomen. Lotus, or water lilies, were often placed with the deceased to represent eternal life.

In 1999, the Burke Museum brought the mummy to the UW Medical Center for a CT scan as part of an effort to preserve her. The

CT scan revealed that a steel rod, chicken wire, and foam held up her chest cavity— a 1963 effort to prevent her chest from collapsing. The CT scan also confirmed that the mummy was indeed female and was probably about five feet tall. Her bones show no sign of malnutrition, and they are in good condition, except her nose, which was broken during mummification to extract the brain. Her teeth are in excellent condition, including her third molars (wisdom teeth). She was at least 19 years old, and cause of her death is still unknown.

Sometime after 1902, Nellie's feet fell off due to the poor condition of her wrappings. Other feet were added, perhaps in 1963 when the other work was done. These were removed in 2003 during conservation. Her real feet cannot be re-affixed due to their fragile condition.

What is Mummification?

Mummification is a process of preserving the body. Based on Roman records, mummification usually took approximately 70 days. As part of this process the internal organs and brain were removed. Only the heart, which signified intelligence and personality, remained in place to be weighed at Judgment. The body was then packed in natron, a natural salt compound with desiccating and defatting properties. After drying, the deceased was rinsed, perfumes were rubbed on the body, and resin was poured over it to disinfect and inhibit bacteria. Linens were wrapped around the body as protection from moisture and to bind the spirit to the mortal body. They also confined the deceased to the world of the dead.

During the Ptolemaic Period (300 – 30 BC), middle class funerary practices included a mask and body plates made from cartonnage (plaster-



soaked linen), which rested on the mummy. Nellie's mask is gilded, and the body plate designs are typical of the time period.

A New Home

Over one hundred years of research and exhibition have taken their toll on the Burke's mummy. In the late-1990s, the Burke prioritized conservation of the mummy and coffin and made plans to create a stable, protective environment for their preservation. Donations for conservation and case construction were made in honor of Frany Backus, an active supporter of the collection and the granddaughter-in-law of the Hon. Manson Backus, who donated the mummy to the museum.

The new case, built by Snow & Company, is constructed of stainless steel with separately-sealed compartments to provide different environments for the mummy and the coffin. The UV-filtered laminated glass and fiber optic lighting protects the coffin from further fading and deterioration, but ensure adequate views from all angles for research and display purposes. A passive air filtration passive system regulates the relative humidity and air quality in the top portion of the case.

The mummy is respectfully placed in a discrete, nearly flush drawer below. This separate

compartment has different environmental controls from the main case and can be locked in the open position for exhibits.

The Journey Continues

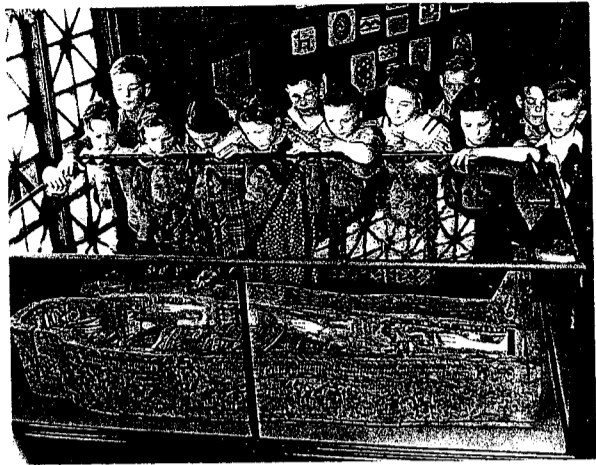


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The mummy and coffin have become closely linked to the history and identity of the Burke Museum. For decades, school children eagerly flocked to the Museum to see Seattle's only Egyptian mummy and coffin. Thanks to the outpouring of community care and support, the Burke can serve as respectful caretaker and educator, preserving the dignity of the deceased. Future work to return all the mummy's bones to her body will ensure her continued journey in the afterlife.

Special thanks to Dr. Paul LeRoy and Susan Cottman.

Timeline

