



AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

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MUMMIES OPENS AT THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

SPECIAL EXHIBITION BRINGS VISITORS FACE-TO-FACE WITH MUMMIES FROM ANCIENT EGYPT AND PERU

The upcoming exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History will shed new light on ancient mummies that have been recently re-examined using 21st-century tools and technologies. [Mummies](#) features one of the largest collections of mummies housed in North America and provides an unparalleled glimpse into the lives and traditions of people from cultures of the past. *Mummies* opens for a weekend of Member previews on Friday, March 17, and will be on view to the general public from Monday, March 20, 2017, to January 7, 2018.

“Mummies have long been fascinating, and now the intersection of these ancient relics and cutting-edge technology is revealing new and intriguing secrets,” said Ellen V. Futter, President of the American Museum of Natural History. “For generations, the Museum has studied and presented the diverse cultures of humanity, past and present, to help us better understand one another and ourselves. Today, when such understanding is more important than ever, *Mummies* invites us all to consider both what may be distinct among cultures and what is universal in the human condition.”

On a special, limited tour from the collections of The Field Museum in Chicago – and presented for the first time on the East Coast – *Mummies* showcases the ritually preserved remains of 18 individuals from ancient Egypt and pre-Columbian Peru, many on view for the first time since the 1893 Chicago World’s Fair. Visitors can discover how modern imaging techniques have transformed the study of mummification by letting researchers peer inside centuries-old mummies without damaging them. Digital touchscreens allow visitors to virtually peer into Peruvian mummy bundles as well as

animal mummies buried as offerings to Egyptian gods, while visitors can handle 3D-printed figurines of burial goods that were encased within mummy wrappings for millennia and only recently revealed.

“For centuries, scientists have utilized the research tools of their time to decipher the intriguing stories encased within a mummy’s wrappings, flesh, and bones,” said Michael Novacek, the Museum’s senior vice president and provost for science. “With the full suite of contemporary technologies like computerized tomography (CT) scanning, DNA testing, and isotopic sampling brought to bear on the mysteries contained within mummies, this exhibition provides an immersive new window through which to view these remarkable cultures.”

While Egypt and parts of Peru share similarly dry desert climates, the style of mummification found in the regions – and the beliefs underlying their respective traditions – are markedly different. *Mummies* probes these similarities and differences, exploring the intersection between societies, their environments, and their fascinating burial traditions revealed by archaeological artifacts.

“As an anthropologist, I’m in awe of today’s technologies that quite literally let us explore – in a wholly respectful and non-destructive way – how societies and individuals of the past came to grips with the universal human conflicts surrounding life, death, and immortality,” said David Hurst Thomas, co-curator for *Mummies* at the American Museum of Natural History and curator of North American Archaeology in the Division of Anthropology. “In Peru, mummification meant relatives could stay connected with their loved ones, with the process often carried out by family members of the departed. In Egypt, the practice was fueled by a thriving industry of embalmers, artisans, builders, and priests who provided the deceased with everything required for the afterlife.”

In *Mummies*, visitors see each mummy as an individual with a unique life story told through detailed imaging and analysis of their burial goods – including musical instruments and tools like weaving spindles or fishing nets – that provide insights into communal beliefs and personal interests. Forensically-reconstructed sculptural busts of mummies enable exhibit-goers to encounter an Egyptian teenager who was mysteriously buried in someone else’s coffin, as well as the “Gilded Lady,” a middle-aged woman who lived in Roman-era Egypt, just over 2,000 years ago.

“Since their discovery, mummies have loomed large in the public’s imagination, not only inspiring fascination but also a number of misunderstandings that have been sensationalized in books and movies,” said John Flynn, co-curator for *Mummies* at the American Museum of Natural History and Frick Curator of Fossil Mammals in the Division of Paleontology. “By bringing visitors face-to-face with individuals that were preserved centuries ago – as well as gazelles, cats, birds and other animals that were ritually mummified and buried with them – this exhibition helps visitors better understand the significance of mummification across cultures separated by the gulf of millennia.”

New Technologies Reveal Details About Ancient Mummies

When researchers uncover a tomb, they step back into the past, to the moment of burial. In *Mummies*, visitors learn how examining ancient remains offers new ways to understand who these individuals were, learn more about their culture and how new tools are revealing details about centuries-old collections.

The use of non-invasive technologies is a relatively recent development in the study of mummies. It was once common for archaeologists to unwrap mummies - sometimes even in front of crowds - to examine them and occasionally damaging them in the process. The exhibition includes an empty Egyptian coffin that once contained a mummy now too fragile to exhibit, and which may have been damaged during an earlier study. Modern technologies have given researchers non-invasive methods of examining collections, and today researchers employ a range of non-destructive tools, including **computerized tomography (CT) scanners** that take hundreds of X-ray images, illuminating the mysteries within.

Peruvian Mummies

People living along the Pacific coast of South America in what is now Peru began to mummify their dead more than 5,000 years ago. Scholars think that the Chinchorro culture (5,000–2,000 BC) – the world’s first practitioners of mummification – prepared the bodies of their loved ones personally, removing the deceased’s skin, de-fleshing the bones, and removing the organs before reinforcing the skeleton with reeds and clay and reattaching the skin. The mummy was then painted black or red and given a wig and an individualized

clay portrait of the deceased.

In addition to the Chinchorro, dozens of societies in the region mummified their dead to remember, and remain connected with, the departed. Visitors continuing through *Mummies* encounter a number of Peruvian mummy bundles, including the remains of three **children mummies from the Chancay culture** (AD 1000–1400), which placed their dead into a sitting position and wrapped them in layers of cloth. At **digital touchscreens**, visitors can examine composite CT scans of these mummies and virtually “unwrap” them to reveal figurines and other burial offerings found within. **A life-sized diorama of a Chancay pit burial** demonstrates the common practice of interring members of an extended family together. These burial pits were accessible to living family members, allowing relatives to bring food or drink to their loved ones’ graves, or even to remove mummies to take them to festivals or other special events. Examples of real burial offerings – including **chicha (corn beer) pots** – are also on display at the exhibition.

Egyptian Mummies of the Nile Valley

Unlike people in Peru, ancient Egyptians believed the dead could live on in the next world if provided with a physical home, preferably within the body itself. This belief made it essential to preserve the corpse, and Egyptians used an elaborate process of mummification to halt the natural process of decay. Scholars think that natural mummification – an example of which can be seen in the **remains of a woman whose preservation occurred naturally** in the hot, dry sand about 5,500 years ago – gave Egyptians the idea for artificial mummification.

Within centuries, ritual burial in Egypt evolved into a complex practice that included elaborate embalming, brilliantly decorated sarcophagi, and grandiose tombs designed to deter grave-robbers. Organs that would hasten decay – the liver, lungs, intestines, and stomach – were removed, preserved, wrapped, and housed in separate containers. The heart – thought to be the source of emotion and intellect – often stayed in place, since it would be necessary in the afterlife, while the brain, thought to have no use, was removed through the nose. Forty days in salt desiccated the body, and embalmers then used resins, oils, and padding to restore its appearance before wrapping it in linen. Artifacts on view include a **Ptolemaic Period mummy** (332–30 BC) along with **canopic jars** containing the

person's organs. **Stations where guests can handle 3D-printed burial figurines** that depict ancient Egyptian gods provide visitors with an opportunity to explore the hidden artifacts within its wrappings.

The objects found in Egyptian tombs were meant to provide for the deceased in the afterlife. Burials of wealthy Egyptians include their servants, represented by **figurines called shawabti**; ideally there would be 365 of these, one for each day of the year, with 36 overseers, one for each week in the Egyptian calendar. Even mummified animals were included in tombs, and archaeologists have uncovered cemeteries containing millions of **animal mummies**, including cats, baboons, gazelles, birds and even crocodiles, some of which are on view. Grave-robbing was rampant in ancient Egypt, and visitors to *Mummies* will encounter an **Egyptian tomb diorama** representing a type of crypt that Egyptians with rank or wealth constructed to guard against such thefts. Within the tomb, a plain **stone sarcophagus** contains a smaller **stone sarcophagus** and a **wooden coffin from the Late Period** (525-343 BC) covered in hieroglyphs. Most of the imagery on the coffin was inspired by scenes in *The Book of the Dead*, a collection of funerary texts believed to assist a person's journey into the afterlife.

Together, all components of the burial ritual – the mummy, coffin, and its wrappings – tell the story of a person's life, death, and their culture. Near the end of the exhibition lies the "**Gilded Lady**," the **gold-masked coffin of a middle-aged woman** who was mummified during the Roman Period (30 BC-AD 395). Recent CT scans show that she had curly hair and a damaged spine, possibly as a result of tuberculosis. Another mummy, which hieroglyphs on the coffin indicate was named **Minirdis**, was opened for the first time in a century for this exhibition. In examining the remains, researchers discovered the teenaged boy inside was mummified around 250 BC, or 200 years after the construction of the coffin – indicating that the mummified individual wasn't Minirdis after all, and confirming that coffins were occasionally recycled.

The CT scans enabled scientists to generate 3D-printed skull reconstructions of both the "Gilded Lady" and Minirdis. Renowned artist Elisabeth Daynès then studied the replicas and built facial muscles and skin layer by layer. At the closing of *Mummies*, visitors will see the result of this work: stunning, **hyper-realistic portraits** that allow us to come

face-to-face with these ancient people, seeing them as they may have looked in life – all without unwrapping the actual mummy.

Exhibition Organization

Mummies will be open to the public from Monday, March 20, 2017, to January 7, 2018. Museum Members will be able to preview the exhibition on Friday, March 17, Saturday, March 18, and Sunday, March 19.

The exhibition is co-curated at the American Museum of Natural History by David Hurst Thomas, Curator of North American Archaeology in the Division of Anthropology, and John J. Flynn, Frick Curator of Fossil Mammals in the Division of Paleontology.

Mummies was developed by The Field Museum, Chicago.

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Mummies is proudly supported by **Chase Private Client**.

Explorer

Mummies is featured in the Museum's recently re-launched [Explorer app](#), developed with support from Bloomberg Philanthropies, which lets visitors think like an explorer by personalizing their onsite experience using cutting-edge location-aware technology that provides unique journeys through the Museum's 45 permanent halls.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY (AMNH.ORG)

The American Museum of Natural History, founded in 1869, is one of the world's preeminent scientific, educational, and cultural institutions. The Museum encompasses 45 permanent exhibition halls, including the Rose Center for Earth and Space and the Hayden Planetarium, as well as galleries for temporary exhibitions. It is home to the Theodore Roosevelt Memorial, New York State's official memorial to its 33rd governor and the nation's 26th president, and a tribute to Roosevelt's enduring legacy of conservation. The Museum's five active research divisions and three cross-disciplinary centers support approximately 200 scientists, whose work draws on a world-class permanent collection of

more than 33 million specimens and artifacts, as well as specialized collections for frozen tissue and genomic and astrophysical data, and one of the largest natural history libraries in the world. Through its Richard Gilder Graduate School, it is the only American museum authorized to grant the Ph.D. degree and the Master of Arts in Teaching degree. Annual attendance has grown to approximately 5 million, and the Museum's exhibitions and Space Shows can be seen in venues on five continents. The Museum's website and apps for mobile devices extend its collections, exhibitions, and educational programs to millions more beyond its walls. Visit amnh.org for more information.

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No. 19