

Some thoughts inspired by a current exhibition: 'Tutankhamun: His Tomb and Treasures'

Brno, Titanic Hall, Hershická 9, October 16, 2008 - March 15, 2009,
presented by Semmel Concerts GmbH and Live Nation,
www.tut-exhibition.com

I must declare my interests at the outset: the organizers of the exhibition 'Tutanchamun: jeho hrob a poklady' ('Tutankhamun: His Tomb and Treasures') invited me to give a lecture on 'The Discovery of the Tomb of Tutankhamun by Howard Carter' (in Czech) in Brno on January 23, 2009. If you feel that this may have seriously impaired my objectivity, stop here and read no further. But it gave me a chance to see this unusual exhibition, which has not yet been staged in the United Kingdom, in some detail. It is unlikely that the Brno show will be reviewed by another Egyptologist and it raises some interesting questions concerning exhibitions of Egyptian antiquities in general.

As far as Tutankhamun is concerned, the Czech Republic is a virgin territory. Not even Carter & Mace's *The Tomb of Tut.ankh.Amen* has yet been translated into Czech. The two small exhibitions of Harry Burton's photographs in Pribyslav in 2007 and in Havlíckuv Brod in 2008 probably were the first events ever specifically connected with Tutankhamun in the country.

I know of no other archaeological topic which has been the subject of more exhibitions than King Tutankhamun and his tomb. The floodgates of blockbuster shows opened when over thirty items from Tut's tomb crisscrossed the United States and Canada between 1961 and 1965. New York, Washington, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco and Los Angeles were among the eighteen cities they visited in the USA, and Montreal, Quebec and Ottawa among the six in Canada. In 1965-6 an enlarged Tutankhamun exhibition went to Japan (Tokyo, Kyoto and Fukuoka) where it was seen by nearly 3,000,000 visitors. In 1967 Tutankhamun was in Paris, and in 1972 in London to mark the fiftieth anniversary of the discovery of the tomb. In 1973-5 the show visited USSR (Moscow, Leningrad and Kiev). In 1976-9 the largest display on record (53 items from the tomb) was back at eight venues in the USA and Canada, then in 1980-1 in Germany (Berlin, Köln, Munich, Hannover and Hamburg).

Then there was a lull of some 23 years until 'Tutankhamun. The Golden Beyond' opened in Basel in April 2004 and subsequently travelled to Bonn (4 November 2004 - 1 May 2005). Somewhat modified, the show toured the USA (Los Angeles, Fort Lauderdale, Chicago and Philadelphia) for the third time in 2005-7. As 'Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs' it was shown in London at the O2 Arena (the Millennium Dome) between November 15, 2007 and August 30, 2008. More or less simultaneously, there was another exhibition, 'Tutankhamun and the World of the Pharaohs', in Vienna (March 17 - September 28, 2008). The pace seems to be getting more and more frantic. These two shows are now back in the States. The stops on their journey include Dallas (October 3, 2008 - May 2009), Atlanta (November 15, 2008 - May 2009), San Francisco (June 27, 2009 - March 2010) and Indianapolis (June 27, 2009 - October 2009). The appeal of Tutankhamun's treasures and the public's appetite to see them do not abate and seem inexhaustible.

All Tutankhamun objects, bar a few insignificant exceptions, are kept in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, and such exhibitions abroad therefore depend entirely on the good will of the Egyptian authorities (the immediate partner being the Supreme Council of Antiquities) and upon the expected financial benefits for Egypt as well as for the organizers.

Objections may be raised to such a Tutankhamun mania gone wild. The safety of the objects must be paramount. It goes without saying that globetrotting by the relics, now more than 3,300 years old, no matter how professionally managed, carries risks, and accidents have happened in the past. A somewhat more subtle consideration has also been mentioned: the Egyptians point out that these are

antiquities of their own past and that it is only appropriate that they remain on display in Cairo where they can be seen by ordinary Egyptian visitors, such as schoolchildren, who cannot easily travel abroad. The same applies to tourists for whom a visit to the Egyptian Museum and its Tutankhamun display represents a strong incentive for visiting the country and is one of the highlight of the trip. Neither of these arguments appears to have registered significantly with the popular press or radio and television reviewers. There has been bitter disappointment that some of the best-known pieces, such as Tutankhamun's mask, coffins, funerary shrines and ritual couches, have not been included in the more recent exhibitions. The 2007-8 London show suffered badly, and I feel unjustly, because of this. But would the Louvre allow Mona Lisa to be a full-time tourist? And would the Italians like to see Michelangelo's David become a peripatetic exhibit hardly ever coming back to Florence? I was going to add 'and would the British public be happy if the Rosetta Stone was away from the British Museum for prolonged periods of time?' On second thought, I shall desist from asking such a question. Few would probably notice.

Over the past forty years noticeable changes have taken place in the staging of these exhibitions and the selection of items which are included in them. Two things might be singled out: the more recent shows have had far fewer 'big' items, and their management seems to be passing from academic institutions to commercial organizations.

The current Brno show departs substantially from all previous occasions: it does not display genuine ancient artifacts, but modern replicas. This idea is not entirely original. A copy of Tutankhamun's tomb was constructed, under Arthur Weigall's supervision and, apparently, much to Howard Carter's chagrin, for the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley in 1924. Many of the replicas are still preserved in the 'Hands on History' Museum in the Old Grammar School in Hull. A reconstruction of the tomb can also be seen in The Tutankhamun Exhibition in Dorchester, Dorset where it has been since 1987. A replica of the tomb was created by Dr Hassan Ragab in his Pharaonic Village at Giza, Cairo in 1992. Perhaps unsurprisingly, one is also at the Luxor Las Vegas Hotel. Replicas of a number of objects were displayed at the Lynx Exhibit in El Paso, Texas in 2008. Individual pieces can be seen at a number of other places, for example the innermost gold coffin in the Rosicrucian Egyptian Museum in San Jose, California.

The genesis of the concept of the current exhibition is described in *Tutankhamun. His Tomb and his Treasures* (translated into several other languages), a publication edited by Walter M. Weiss. The idea originated with the project developer Paul Heinen and the artist Wulf Kohl. Semmel Concerts Veranstaltung GmbH, of Bayreuth in Germany, decided to take on the project and Christoph Scholz became its chief supervisor. Two Egyptologists, Martin von Falck and Wolfgang Wettengel, acted as scientific advisors. All the items were made in Egypt by Fine Art Cairo, first in plaster and then finished in synthetic resin. A number of other specialists were involved in the the initial research and design of the show and the making of the exhibition films. The manager of the Brno show is Thomas Englberger.

I must admit that I had always been skeptical about replicating Egyptian antiquities, for example when reconstructions of tombs in the Valley of the Kings were planned to be built on the outskirts of Cairo. I understand the argument about the danger of over-visiting monuments and the almost inevitable damage it causes, and the need to restrict access to the real tomb of Tutankhamun. I am also aware of the fact that some tourists never venture south of Cairo. But most of those who spend long hours on the plane to come to Egypt are unlikely to be satisfied with imitations rather than the real things. So can there be any advantages in exhibiting mere replicas of objects found by Carter&Carnarvon in Tutankhamun's tomb?

The Brno exhibition is big, measuring some 4,000 square metres, and has over 1,000 items. These include copies of all the famous pieces, such as three out of the four funerary shrines, all the three coffins, the sarcophagus, all the major furniture items, one fully assembled chariot and literally hundreds of small items. The attention which was paid to detail is astounding. There are few things

with which one would seriously like to quarrel. On the one hand, it must be admitted that replicas, no matter how good, do not allow one to experience the *frisson* of being face to face with the original items removed from Tutankhamun's tomb. Some of the original objects, such as furniture, would have been used by the King in his lifetime, and the idea that Tutankhamun's bottom once rested on the chair in front of us is mind-boggling. Such items would have been handled first by the ancient Egyptians responsible for depositing them in the tomb and then by Carter and his team. On the other hand, the Brno show, with its near-perfect re-creations, provides an overview of the contents of the tomb which no exhibition of the genuine artifacts, with the qualified exception of the display in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, can match. It provides a fresh approach to a subject where the traditional presentation is soon bound to start showing signs of fatigue.

In addition, and most importantly, the Antechamber, the Treasury and, perhaps less successfully, the Burial Chamber are being shown as they were found, albeit on a somewhat reduced scale. It would, surely, be out of the question to use the original objects to reconstruct scenes recorded on the unsurpassable photographs by Harry Burton.

The organizers of the exhibition have made a genuine effort to inform visitors about ancient Egypt's geography, history, religion and other aspects of its civilization. Large informative panels with stunning photographs greet visitors at the beginning. There are three short film shows which focus on the three main historical figures of the period: Amenophis III, Akhenaten and Tutankhamun. These are followed by a longer film show about Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon and the events surrounding the discovery of the tomb. As visitors leave the exhibition, they pass through a well-stocked shop which is far superior to the collection of *kitsch* available at the recent London exhibition. The intention to inform and to approach the topic seriously are unmistakably felt from the beginning to the end. Just in passing, it may be mentioned that the organizers, rather symptomatically, are prepared to welcome pre-arranged visits by visually impaired people who are allowed to handle the objects.

So, somewhat reluctantly, from being a sceptic I have become a convert. This exhibition can do things which no other, perhaps with the exception of future virtual reality shows, is able to.

Before coming to Brno, the show was in Zurich between March 8 and June 29, 2008, and was seen by about 250,000 visitors. When it closes in Brno, it will travel to the Event-Arena in the Olympiapark in Munich where it will be on display from 9 April to 30 August 2009. Its success can be measured by the fact that a twin exhibition will run in Barcelona from June 2009. Other future venues, such as Budapest, are being considered.

The exhibition is unlikely to decrease the yearning to visit Egypt and see 'the real things' and may, in fact, have the opposite effect. Its educational and informative value surpasses that of the usual Tut shows. For me, as an Egyptologist, nothing can substitute for the original Tut objects but for a non-specialist, and here I am not being condescending, these are 'wonderful things'. The show in Brno attracts about 30,000 visitors a month, and the total attendance of some 150,000 when it ends is on the cards. For Brno, a city of some 400,000 inhabitants, that is not bad going.

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