Mummies Tour

We are used to hearing about the mummies found in the tombs of Egyptian royalty and of their glorious treasures. But the process of mummification actual started with ‘natural mummies’ around 3000 BC. Bodies were buried in the desert and naturally preserved by the hot sand. The process of embalming was developed around 2575BC, and in the beginning only the rich and powerful could afford to be mummified. But as mummification techniques progressed over the centuries, more and more people subscribed to this new technique of preserving remains of the dead until almost all members of society were mummified to a certain degree.

Mummification stemmed from religious beliefs as well as from the climate of Egypt. (*Start with papyrus reproduction from The Book of the Dead in first case*). Egyptians wrote with a system of pictures called hieroglyphics. However, while much of the language was pictographic (like Chinese), there were also phonetic aspects to it (like English or French). Hieroglyphics were probably brought from Mesopotamia and were first used for trading—keeping lists of inventory, business transactions, etc.

It was believed that after death, the Ba, or soul (more precisely everything that made a person unique; their personality – represented by the person’s head with wings attached to it) went before Osiris (the God of death) to be judged. The person’s heart was placed on one side of a scale, opposite the omniscient (all-knowing) Feather of Truth. As Anubis, the God of embalming, read aloud the events of the person’s life, the scribe-God Thoth made a record. If by the end of the life, the number of bad deeds exceeded the number of good ones, the heart was thrown to Ammit, a hideous crocodile-headed lion. If however, the person’s good deeds outweighed the bad, they could return to their body, which therefore needed to be mummified so the Ba would have an eternal home.

Mummification was also done to avoid the decomposition of the body. Because of the heat of Egypt, the embalmers (a highly respected trade) had to act fast. The first things which had to be done away with were the parts of the body which were known to rot quickly, the moist parts of the body. Thus the stomach, liver, lungs and intestines were quickly removed through an incision in the left side of the abdomen and placed in Canopic jars. Each jar’s lid featured a God to protect each organ. Duamutef, the jackal, guarded the stomach, Qebehsenuef the falcon kept the intestines, Imsety, with the human head, kept the liver, and Hapy, the baboon preserved the lungs. The heart was left inside the body because it was believed to be the seat of the Ba. Another organ that decomposed quickly was the gray matter inside the head that we call the brain. The ancient Egyptians had no use for this mysterious substance and simply discarded it by shoving a rod up through the nostril, swirling it around and draining out the brain-goo. (*When you talk about the canopic jars, make sure to show them!)*

Next, the body had to be dried of its remaining moisture. Packing it with natron, a naturally occurring desert salt, did this – it also worked as an antiseptic. *(This is because salt absorbs water – explain if they look confused / are children)*

Forty days later, [when the body was nice and dry], the embalmers would fill the empty cavities with straw, herbs and spices, and rub the skin with sweet ointment. The body was then covered in resin (sticky plant sap) to seal it and wrapped up. Often protective incantations and amulets would be wrapped up within the bandages as well. Amulets served to protect certain parts of the mummy. For example, the heart scarab protected the residence of the soul, and the two-fingered amulet protected the incision site where the organs were removed. Pages with prayers, the person’s name and good-luck incantations might also be included.

This describes the most basic mummification, carried out on even the poorest member of Ancient Egyptian society. The more money someone had, the more elaborate became their mummification. Some had sarcophagi (always made of stone) with prayers painted onto them. Some had masks of gold. Some had sarcophagi within sarcophagi (like Russian onion-dolls). The richest and most power-hungry (the kings) had pyramids.

Depending from what time period a person was buried; there will be different kinds of grave goods. However, grave goods generally have one thing in common: they’re purpose is to protect or supply the dead in the underworld. For example, some tombs have been found with food and drink for the dead, potter, toys and jewelry, along with books of magic spells and instructions on how to navigate through the underworld.

One interesting type of burial object that we begin to find in the Middle Kingdom (2040-1640BC) are little figurines called shabtis. You see, in the underworld the deceased is supposed to work for Osiris in the fields. However, if they had a shabti, the shabti would do the work instead. Some people had many, many shabtis to the point where the figurines were organized into working hierarchies of managers and underlings.

**The Redpath Mummies**

The museum has three human mummies. Do you think the first one is a man or a woman? Well, which ever you choose, you’ll be partially correct. While the coffin was intended for a man, there is actually a woman inside! We don’t know how this happened, but perhaps the embalmers were so busy that they got two jobs mixed up (oops).

Our second mummy is named Red II. He died at 30 years of age, probably from a tooth infection. We know this because x-rays indicated that he had some dental work done—there’s a piece of wood wedged in his mouth. Eventually he would not have been able to use his jaw to chew and presumably would have starved. There are some interesting things to note about Red II. Despite his short stature, this was a normal height for adult Egyptian males. Unlike today, nutrition standards were not as high in ancient times, and people simply did not have the resources to grow very tall. This mummy is also a good example of the level of preservation achievable by mummification—if you stand in the corner, you can still see some hairs on the back of his head!

Our last mummy is covered in a golden facemask and intricate designs (*later period – point out Greek style of facemask)*. We don’t know much about this mummy, besides that she’s a female between the ages of 20-40 and was probably upper class due to the quality of her mummification.

The other mummies you see on the wall are of a cat, two kestrels and two baby crocodiles. Animals signified many spiritual things to the Ancient Egyptians. The cat, for example, was the exemplifier of happiness, so if someone with a devotion to this virtue died, a mummy cat might be placed in the tomb with them.

If it were not for mummification, we would know a lot less about the Ancient Egyptians. Because the goal of the whole process was to leave the dead person with a living environment similar to the one they knew during life, the tombs of that era are like time capsules to be studied by us thousands of years later.