

MUMMIES

A JOURNEY INTO IMMORTALITY

by Lucy Gordan-Rastelli

Photos courtesy the exhibition, unless otherwise noted



Thanks to Napoleon's Egyptian Campaign (1798-1801) and its extensive scientific study of ancient Egyptian culture, during the first half of the Nineteenth Century Egyptomania spread across Europe. Art collectors, antique dealers and merchants in Egypt, as well as — above all — European consuls in Egypt collected and shipped home artifacts and mummies, those consuls usually selling these to their own or other governments. This is how many of the great European private and public Egyptian collections started in Britain, France, Germany, Austria, The Netherlands and Italy.

The core collection of Florence's Egyptian Museum — founded in 1885 and today housed in the city's Museum of Archaeology (and considered the second-best in Italy, after Turin) — came primarily from four sources, its initial nucleus preceding even Egyptomania and dating to the 1700s, originally belonging to Florence's greatest art-patronage family from the Renaissance onwards, the Medici.

The second source was Giuseppe Nizzoli, an Austrian diplomat of Italian origin in the service of the Austrian consul in Egypt. In 1824 he sold his collection in three parts: to the Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna; to Pelagio Palagi, a collector in Bologna, whose portion became the core Egyptian collection of his hometown; and to Leopold II, archduke of Tuscany.

Florence's third source was the joint Franco-Tuscan Expedition from Alexandria to Abu Simbel and back again, lasting from July 31, 1828, to November 27, 1829, co-directed by Jean-François Champollion and Ippolito Rosellini. After their premature deaths (Champollion's in 1832 and Rosel-



Exceptionally well-preserved mummified head of a male dating to the Late Period, featured in the "Mummies: A Journey into Immortality" exhibition in Florence.

Opposite, A centerpiece of the exhibition, the 3rd Intermediate Period coffin of a priest, Padimut, originally in the Nizzoli collection.

lini's in 1843), their finds were divided between the Louvre and Florence.

The fourth source was the purchase by Leopold II in 1832 of the antiquities acquired by Sienese doctor and architect Alessandro Ricci during his stay in Egypt and Sudan from 1817-22; he worked in the Tomb of Seti I with Giovanni Belzoni, with the British Consul General Henry Salt and with British explorer William John Banks.

A fifth source, but which arrived after the Museum's founding in 1855 so not in its core collection, were finds from Ernesto Schiaparelli's expeditions in 1884-'85 to Luxor; and in 1892-'93 to Cairo, to make purchases for the Museum. Schiaparelli was the Museum's first director.

Each of these five sources included mummies, the subject of the Museum's present temporary exhibition, "Mummies: A Journey Into Immortality," which opened on July 17 and runs until February 2, 2020. Florence's first mummy was already there in the Sixteenth Century and was sent to the city's Museum of Zoology and Natural History in 1775, when it was founded, so was never in today's Egyptian Museum.

Dr. Maria Cristina Guidotti, director of the Egyptian Museum in Florence since 1998, has written two books on the subject of mummies: *Le Mummie del Museo Egizio di Firenze* (2001); and, with Nicola Bianchini, *Mummies in Ancient Egypt* (2014). The earlier book and the present exhibition were both inspired by the scientific research done on the Museum's mummies in 2000, by the University of Pisa under the guidance of Dr. Gino Fornaciari. In an article, "Paleopatologia delle Mummie Egizie del Museo Archeologico di Firenze," published in 2007, Fornaciari reports the details of that research.

The Museum houses seventeen intact human mummies. Eight are male, three female, one is of unidentifiable sex and five are infants. In addition there's an adult male's head, two adult hands and one foot. "Although the sample is small," wrote Fornaciari, "it's possible to make some general observations. The age at death: on average 29 years old, while that of adult men is 36 (range 20 to 60) and adult women 44 (range 25 to 70). These statistics are similar to those of the mummies in other museums.... It seems that ancient Egyptians had short lives, though longer ones than other ancient populations. The mummies of the five infants all date to the Roman period. ...It seems that the only female mummy of fertile age died in childbirth."

The balance of the article concerns the individuals' health and diseases, with arthritis being prevalent. There was a lack of stress, malnutrition and infectious diseases during adolescence. Only one young male had suffered from high blood-pressure. Despite being well nourished, the majority



Left, Painted-wood ushabti box of Nektamentu, dating to the late New Kingdom.



Ptolemaic painted-&-gilded cartonnage funerary mask.

Author's photo

had dental problems.

A later (2010) article, "Radiological Evaluation of Ancient Egyptian Mummies in Italian Museums," written by several authors including Fornaciari, reports the statistics on both complete mummies and body-parts, including specimens in Florence, but also those in museums in Biella, Milan, Pavia, Asti, Parma, Genoa, Lucca, Pisa, Cortona, Narni and Naples. It concluded: "The value of the data presented is limited to the randomness of the findings and by the limited number of specimens, 33 mummies, which belong to different periods of Egyptian history from the New Kingdom to the Roman Period, and to different geographic regions of the Nile Valley. Such heterogeneity does not allow... any statistical or epidemiological analyses." These researches show that the majority of the mummies in Florence are from the Third Intermediate and Roman periods. Only one is older, dating to the New Kingdom.

A third article, "Oldest Pharaonic Mummy from the Museum of Florence Finally has a Face" (2015), describes the forensic techniques used by international scientists — led by forensic anthropologist Dr. Matteo Borrini — which have led to the facial reconstruction of the oldest preserved mummy in the Egyptian Museum of Florence. "The mummy [known as Qent] was a high ranking person, a dignitary or a priest of the XVIII dynasty. ...and the reconstruc-

tion was revealed at the International Congress of Egyptologists," organized by Dr. Guidotti in Florence. "A CAT-scan of the mummy revealed that Qent was 50 years old when he died. ...An exact copy of the skull was modeled so that the individual muscles of the face could be produced. The bandages of the mummy were never removed." The forensics procedure utilized the 'Manchester protocol,' a standard investigative method for archaeological and criminal reconstructions.

Only one mummy in Florence (inv. n. 2164) — actually in all of Italy except Turin's Museo Egizio — of a female named Diasethebsed, who dates to the Third Intermediate Period, died at an older age than Qent: she was sixty to seventy.

Like Dr. Guidotti's 2014 book on mummies, "Mummies: A Journey into Immortality" is very well explained and suitable for children to experts. Long in the planning, it was organized as a traveling exhibition by Contemporanea Progetti in Florence, with the support of Expona-museum exhibition-network in Bolzano. As curator Guidotti chose eighty-five artifacts and mummies from the Museum's store-rooms, most of which have never been exhibited before. For logistical reasons these artifacts traveled first internationally, with the exhibitions's final venue at Florence. The itinerary included Germany (four museums), Austria, Finland and China (five museums).

"Into Immortality" is divided into



Above, Late Period faience winged heart-scarab. Author's photo



Left, Selection of every-day ceramic vessels included in funerary furnishing for practical use in the Afterlife. Author's photo

Right, Green-basalt statue of the priest Henat, attired in a Persian garment, so dating it to the Persian occupation of Egypt, 525-404 BC.



two sections. The first deals with the concept of survival of the soul and mummification of the corpse. The second concerns the objects which accompanied the deceased into the Afterlife and were found in tombs; it is subdivided into two parts: funerary objects like stelae, ushabtis and an offering table; and objects from the deceased's daily life such as clothing, jewelry and furniture.

The exhibition's first section is divided into three parts: "The Religious Concept of Life After Death," "Preservation of the Body" and "Mummies' Coffins." On display here are two funerary papyri, statuettes of Osiris, Isis, Horus and the Ba, plus a false door.

On display in "Preservation Practice of the Body" are: the mummy of the young woman who died in childbirth (inv. n. 2167); one of the Museum's five infant-mummies (inv. n. 2171); the mummified head of a male (inv. n. 8643); and a mummified hand (inv. n.1 4532). Also exhibited is a coffin with a pseudo-mummy (inv. n. 5740), instruments used during mummification (a knife, pliers, awls), an unguent jar, bandages and a funerary net, as well as scarabs, amulets and canopic jars.

Exhibited in "Mummies' Coffins" are several of such, parts thereof and funerary masks. The richly decorated coffin of the priest Padimut, dating to the Third Intermediate Period and part of the Nizzoli collection is also on view. It has never been studied or displayed before.

The second part of "Coffins" is

subdivided into "Funerary Objects" and "Daily Life Objects in the Funeral Equipment." On view here are numerous ushabtis, a wooden box to hold ushabtis, small statues, two funerary stelae, a pyramidion, three funerary cones, an offering table and two terracotta bread-models.

"Daily Life Objects in the Funeral Equipment" include a headrest, a stool, two goblets, vases, a bottle and a bowl (all terracotta), a vegetable-fiber tray and basket, sandals, a comb, a mirror, two cosmetic bowls, kohl pots and several items of jewelry.

In addition to the coffin of Padimut, the other two highlights of "Mummies: The Journey Into Eternity" are both found in the "Funerary Objects" section. One is the green-basalt statue of a priest, Henat, one of the few statues of a dignitary in Persian dress, dating to 525-404 BC when Egypt was under control of the Persian Empire. The other is Nekhtamentu's beautifully painted ushabti box dating to the late New Kingdom. However it should not go unmentioned that the male mummy's head (656-332 BC) underwent x-rays and a CT-scan in 1997, so as to be able to reconstruct his face.

The exhibition ends with an excellent video of Guidotti and University of Pisa Egyptologist Dr. Flora Silvano discussing mummification techniques and how those evolved over time.

About the Author Lucy Gordan-Rastelli is the Journal's European correspondent and home-based in Rome.