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## ART : Can You Dig It? : LACMA's 'American Discovery of Ancient Egypt' brings achievements of U.S. archeologists to light.

November 05, 1995 | Hunter Drohojowska-Philp | *Hunter Drohojowska-Philp is a frequent contributor to Calendar*

Indiana Jones notwithstanding, when the subject of ancient Egypt comes to mind, whether it is the opening of King Tut's tomb or the deciphering of hieroglyphics, Europeans have most often been in the spotlight. But during the 20th Century, Americans have had more than their share of the action. That is the subject of "The American Discovery of Ancient Egypt," opening today at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

To bring to light the achievements of American archeologists and present more than 250 objects spanning 4,500 years, Nancy Thomas, LACMA curator of ancient and Islamic art, and Gerry Scott III, curator of ancient art at the San Antonio Museum of Art, worked with scholars from around the country and the American Research Center in Egypt.

From the Pre-Dynastic Era, about 4000 BC, to the end of the Roman occupation of Egypt in AD 395, the Egyptians produced a stunning array of sculpture, jewelry, tools, vessels and other objects, which they often buried with their dead in private tombs. Because of the dry desert climate, many of these objects, even complex sculptures and hieroglyphic reliefs, have survived in surprisingly good condition, down to bright paint that looks as though it was applied yesterday.

Unlike their European counterparts, American archeologists did not confine their explorations to Egypt proper but included the entire Nile Valley. An important aspect of LACMA's exhibition is the attention to the culture of Nubia, now Sudan, which developed parallel to Egypt but with different customs.

"The focus on America is new for an exhibition," Thomas says, "and a subject that has never been explored. There was a burst of American activity from 1899 to the early 1930s and then a lull until the mid-'60s, when there was a resurgence of American projects in Egypt. That was a result of the Nubian Salvage Campaign, when scholars from around the world rushed to save valuable sites from flooding as the Aswan High Dam was to be completed. "It seemed logical to step back and look at both those periods of activity," she says.

Currently, she said, there are about 42 excavations by American scholars under way in Egypt, such as the tomb of the sons of Ramesses II that made international news last May. But she points out that there is an emphasis on conservation that outweighs the acquisition of objects today. "These sites are being destroyed slowly, due to weather, the rising water table, wind and salt. It is urgent to conserve them and record the facts for the future."

She mentions the tomb of Nefertari, which was deteriorating rapidly before the recent intervention of the Getty Conservation Institute. Photomurals documenting such conservation efforts are included in the show.

At the entrance to the exhibition, as a symbol, Thomas has placed a 26th Dynasty sarcophagus purchased in 1900 by William Randolph Hearst. It represents a dividing line between a time when major pieces were purchased in Egypt without much regard for the culture, and the start of the American excavations when knowledge of what these objects meant became important.

"It sets up the theme of the American collector going to Egypt in the 18th and 19th centuries and acquiring objects that eventually wound up in museums," Thomas says. "There were people like Charles Wilbour, who was the first American scholar to deal with Egypt in an appropriate way, learning the language, reading hieroglyphics. He made invaluable contributions to the study of Egyptology and the objects he collected wound up in the Brooklyn Museum."

The first galleries of the exhibition include objects purchased by Wilbour and others, as well as objects that came to the United States as the result of American patronage of British excavations led by Flinders Petrie for the Egypt Exploration Fund and the British School of Archeology. The rest of the exhibition proceeds chronologically to document the cultural history of Egypt and Nubia and to demonstrate the role of American archeologists.

At the turn of the century, California played a significant role. Phoebe Apperson Hearst, wife of mining millionaire George Randolph Hearst, was the first to underwrite an American expedition to Egypt, in 1899, led by George Andrew Reisner, then associated with UC Berkeley. She continued to sponsor the excavations until 1903.

As Hearst decreased funding, Reisner was lured away by Harvard University and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. Many objects discovered by Reisner are on loan to the exhibition, including a Pre-Dynastic slate palette from around 3900 BC, shaped like twin birds and used to grind eye pigments. The pigments were used not only for cosmetic reasons, but also to diminish chances of eye disease, Thomas says.

The Early Dynastic Period beginning in 2920 BC developed after Upper and Lower Egypt were unified and the culture first achieved literacy. While still at Berkeley, Reisner excavated copper tools--an ax, chisel and adz--from the Second Dynasty of this period.

"Egyptians believed they needed all the equipment of this life in the afterlife," Thomas says. "A carpenter would need woodworking tools. A perfumer would need vessels. Even people who couldn't afford tombs would be wrapped and buried with a necklace."

The Old Kingdom, beginning in 2649 BC, produced two of the most important monuments to have survived, the Great Pyramid and the Sphinx. "Reisner made headway understanding the social and political history of the Old Kingdom by excavating the mortuary complex of King Menkaure, at the Third Pyramid at Giza Plateau," Thomas says.

The exhibition includes a portrait of Menkaure as well as what archeologists call a "magic set," that belonged to Menkaure's grandfather, King Cheops, builder of the Great Pyramid. "It includes a wand that would be touched to the lips of the statues in a funeral ceremony to reanimate the deceased," Thomas says.

Reisner also was in charge of excavating 425 private tombs at Giza. "Through the excavated 'tombs, we can understand the roles of officials at the royal court, their names, titles, the political structure of the time," says Thomas. Among the objects from such tombs are a statue from the tomb of Ikhetneb, showing a man and woman standing together, and a funerary relief of the royal acquaintance Nofer, which lists all of the finest linen garments that she would require in the afterlife.

Reisner was one of several key American archeologists whose work on Egypt differed from their European counterparts. "Americans had a particular interest

in unraveling questions about Egyptian history," says Thomas.

"In general, German archeologists have focused on the architecture of the complexes. The French and English have conducted excavations that would result in the recovery of objects, whereas Americans have gone in search of the historical record. For example, the succession of kings in the 25th Dynasty in Nubia was of interest to Reisner. And by excavating royal tombs of that period, he was able to establish their historical line."

Nubians did not mummify their dead. Rather, they placed them on elaborately decorated funeral beds with their precious objects. The show includes Nubian jewelry, such as blue faience beads and the bronze "Mirror of Shabako," with a gilded silver handle of female figures and palm fronds.

The Nubian objects of the Kerma period coincided with the First Intermediate Period in Egypt, years of political turmoil and artistic ferment. There followed the Middle Kingdom in Egypt, beginning in 2040 BC, and ruled in the 11th Dynasty by King Nebhepetre Mentuhotep. His funerary temple at Deir el-Bahri was the site of extensive excavations.

During the New Kingdom of 1550 to 1070 BC, Egypt evolved as the world's first imperial state stretching from the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers in Mesopotamia to the Nile in Nubia. Under the kings Akhenaten, Tutankhamun, and Ramesses II as well as Queen Hatshepsut, remarkable works of art and literature were produced and ultimately discovered during American excavations. Reisner uncovered 1,000 *shawabtis*, or funerary figurines, 17 of which are in the exhibition.

While Reisner is considered the founding father of American Egyptian archeology, the exhibition charts the work of other historic figures such as Herbert E. Winlock, who worked on the excavations of the Metropolitan Museum of Art at Deir el-Bahri in 1919 and contributed to an understanding of the mortuary temple of Queen Hatshepsut, Pharaoh of the mid-18th dynasty. He found the kneeling red granite statue of the Queen as well as a drawing and sculpture of her chief courtier Senenmut.

James Henry Breasted introduced Egyptology into the university system in 1895 and founded the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago with the support of John D. Rockefeller Jr. Breasted was dedicated to the copying and publication of Egyptian texts, especially in the area of Thebes. The drawings in the exhibition demonstrate his exacting methods.

A recent discovery, and one of the highlights of the show, is a 12-ton Ptolemaic sandstone gateway covered with reliefs. Egypt had fallen to Alexander the Great and after his death in 332 BC, Ptolemy Lagus became governor and then king of Egypt. The Ptolemaic dynasty flourished until 30 BC when the last of the line, Cleopatra VII, committed suicide with her lover Marc Antony.

The gateway depicts Ptolemy making offerings to Egyptian deities such as Thoth and it has a drama all of its own. The blocks of the gateway were uncovered as foundation fill for a post-Pharaonic structure during a 1923 excavation. They went on view at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston until a doctoral student, Diana Wolfe-Larkin, correctly identified them as part of a larger gateway. As a result of conservation efforts by the Boston museum, the gateway has been reassembled for the first time, with the blocks threaded on steel rods for support. In certain areas, red and blue pigment and some gilt are still visible.

"We are used to seeing Ptolemaic structures weathered, but this is so beautifully preserved," Thomas says. "I think for the general public, it is a surprise to see the sophistication of Egyptian culture and artistic production. The knowledge that many objects are 3,000 or 4,000 years old is something that stops us in our tracks. It is a link with the past that we don't have with many other civilizations."

\* *"The American Discovery of Ancient Egypt , " Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 5905 Wilshire Blvd. Today through Jan. 21. Tuesdays-Thursdays, 10 a.m.-5 p.m.; Fridays, 10 a.m.-9 p.m.; Saturdays and Sundays, 11 a.m.-6 p.m. Adults, \$6; students with ID and senior citizens, \$4; children 6-17, \$1; under age 5, free. (213) 857-6522.*