On November 4, 1922, English archaeologist Howard Carter was about to unearth a find that would transfix people across the world. Never in the history of Egyptology had a sealed royal tomb been found intact. While clearing ancient workman’s huts near the entrance to the tomb of Ramesses VI in the Valley of the Kings, Carter found the first of 16 steps leading down to an underground burial chamber. The excited archaeologist soon came upon an ancient royal seal of the necropolis that was still in place on the door at the bottom of the stairs. This meant that the tomb and its contents had been undisturbed since the seal was put in place! Howard Carter knew that this find would be unprecedented.

Realizing the work that would be required to excavate and document the tomb, Carter cabled the head of the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s Egyptian Department to ask if they could provide some assistance to the expedition team. Among the men lent to Carter’s project by the Metropolitan was Harry Burton, an accomplished art photographer who had mastered his craft in Europe and gained experience working on the Metropolitan Museum’s excavations in Thebes.

To photograph the tomb of Tutankhamun, Burton used a large format “view camera” similar to the one shown here. It was a square wooden box placed on an adjustable tripod. The bellows controlled the backward and forward movement of the lens in order to focus the image on the glass plate inside. To the photographer looking into the camera from under a black cloth, the image appeared upside down and reversed right to left. Removing a black card that had been placed between the negative and the lens let in the light necessary to expose the image. Great care had to be taken by the photographer to time the exposure correctly.

The “film” for the camera was actually a plate of glass coated with a light sensitive mixture of gelatin and silver. These plates came in two different formats: 13 x 18 cm (approximately 5 x 7 inches) and 18 x 24 cm (7 x 9.4 inches). They were heavy and fragile and had to be imported from Europe or the United States. Once exposed to light the image (negative) captured on the glass plate was “fixed” in a chemical solution, which would preserve the image. The negative could then be contact printed by placing it against a sheet of photo-sensitive paper and exposing it to strong light. This was a time consuming and difficult process, yet Burton was able to produce remarkable images with what would now be considered very primitive equipment. He illuminated the tomb with electric bulbs, which allowed more control than using only a flash, and he positioned mirrors and reflectors to create special lighting effects.

Burton worked with Carter and the team of excavators for 10 years, taking more than 1,400 images. These included images that record the process of excavation and images of the objects once they had been removed from the tomb and cleaned.
The tomb contained thousands of objects, piled one on top of the other. Burton had to record each object as it was found. An example of this painstaking process can be seen in the image of alabaster vessels found in the Antechamber.

Burton also captured images that document the archaeological process, such as the image of the careful packing of the guardian statues. In this image, Carter, assisted by a workman, prepares a length of fabric used to secure one of the guardian statues to a transit cradle. Arthur Callender, Carter’s architect and engineer, is in the background. Packing crates for smaller objects can be seen under the worktable. After objects were removed from the tomb, they were cleaned and photographed, like the horse blinders at left.

Perhaps the most striking of Burton’s images are the ones that capture a lost moment in time. There are many such photographs that give one a sense of the jumble of the tomb as it was found. One of the most powerful of these “moments in time” photographs depicts the sealed doors of the third shrine. While viewing this image it is possible to imagine the excitement of being in the tomb moments before the seal was broken, the rope removed, and the shrine opened.

Burton’s photos are more than just a record of the excavation of the tomb. His attention to lighting, composition, and texture reflect his training in fine art photography and make these “documentary” photographs works of art in their own right. They capture the excitement, as well as the hard work, of the greatest archaeological discovery of all time.