A mummy from the Old Kingdom lies on his side with his neck cradled in a headrest at the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory University. Jason Getz jgetz@ajc.com

Secrets from a mummy

Emory specimen in storage for 90 years.
Conservators think man in his 20s may be older than 4,000.

By Howard Pousner hpousner@ajc.com

The mummy that lies in cool repose in the Michael C. Carlos Museum is an international man of mystery who recently has revealed remarkable secrets more than 4,000 years old while holding onto others, perhaps for eternity. At the Emory University museum, he is the commanding focal point of a just-opened exhibit, “Life and Death in the Pyramid Age: The Emory Old Kingdom Mummy,” including 120 art works and everyday objects from the twilight of Egypt’s Pyramid Age. Acquired by Emory professor of Semitic languages and literature William A. Shelton from the sacred site of Abydos in 1920, the oldest Egyptian mummy in the Western Hemisphere remained in storage in Atlant-

On view
“Life and Death in the Pyramid Age: The Emory Old Kingdom Mummy”

Through Dec. 11. 10 a.m.–4 p.m. Tuesdays–Fridays, 10 a.m.–5 p.m. Saturdays, noon–5 p.m. Sundays. $8; students, seniors, ages 6-17, $6; ages 5 and under, free. Michael C. Carlos Museum, 571 S. Kilgo Circle, Atlanta. 404-727-4282, www.carlos.emory.edu.

Display continued on D2
Mummy comes to light

Display continued from D1.

For nine decades, awaiting a conservation effort so involved that experts initially thought it impossible.

The first object officially accessioned for the archaeology museum that eventually became the Carols, the mummy is believed to have been displayed for Emory students only once more than a half-century ago. But it has not been glimpsed by the public until now.

Even Peter Lacovara, the Carlos Museum’s senior curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian and Near Eastern art, admits he was “horrified” when he first opened the storage container shortly after he arrived in Atlanta nearly 13 years ago.

The mummy’s head had been removed—probably by jewelry-seeking tomb robbers in Egypt. Lacovara suspects—and was held in a separate box. Hands, knees and feet were unwrapped, leaving bones exposed. The left arm, which now drapes over the mummy’s chest and gives the sense that he’s lost in peaceful sleep, was broken off at the shoulder. Linen wrappings were torn, flesh exposed, and deteriorated. Gaping body cavities were stuffed with raw cotton.

“The condition was so compromised, it didn’t have much structure to work with,” recalled Carlos conservator Renee Stein of her first examination of the mummy a dozen years ago. She and Boston conservation expert Mimi LeVeque, who has labored frequently on the Atlanta museum’s mummy collection, deduced that “there was nothing we could do to put it back into a whole.”

But Lacovara, the curator who helped bring the exhibit “Tutankhamun: The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs” to Atlanta in 2008 as part of a smash national tour, had done archaeological work at Abydos. He determined that the mummy was even more precious than anyone at Emory had thought, a rare specimen dating from the Old Kingdom (around 2300 B.C.), one of the earliest periods of artificial Egyptian mummification.

Only a half-dozen Old Kingdom mummies are known to exist anywhere in the world and, because of the scarcity of examples, little was known about initial attempts at artificial preservation in Egypt. So Lacovara never gave up hope that conservation, including detailed research, would one day be possible.

Lacovara finally began what became a one-year conservation project in June 2010. There had been no dramatic advancement or new technology in the field of conservation, Stein acknowledged, simply the conservators’ changing mindset. What emboldened them, she said, was “experience and greater flexibility that comes with experience.”

They proceeded with surgical precision to change, in as low impact as possible, only what demanded change.

“Conservation is really more about conserving what’s left to you by history and then compensating it where necessary in order to achieve a unified appearance that reflects a more accurate representation of that historical object,” Stein said. “So given that, we would not unwrap and replace the linens but instead kept every little scrap we could of the original and gently encouraged [body parts] to go back into position based on the memory that they have.”

The conservation work, which Lacovara termed “brave,” allowed time for examinations, CT scans and radiocarbon dating at Emory Hospital.

Based on the width of the skull and the size of the bones, the mummy was determined to be a man in his 20s. Those bones reflect that he did not die of a trauma; in fact, they showed that he had access to good nutrition (though the Egyptian diet then was dominated by bread and beer). Given the burial site, it’s safe to assume he was a member of privileged society.

His linen wrappings, with bandages 6 to 8 inches wide, were applied in many layers, were probably put on wet, an assumption from the taut manner in which they were wound and the way they conform to what researchers believe was a flesh-covered skeleton, Stein said. His linen wrappings are one of the oldest surviving pieces of clothing in the world. We have no idea. But that was rather personal to encounter an article of clothing.

“It kind of makes your imagination roam a bit.”

In his 1922 travelogue, “Dust and Ashes of Empires,” the late Emory University professor William A. Shelton struck an Indiana Jones note when describing his antiquities-buying trip to Abydos, the Egyptian site famous for its vast early graves:

“Here in these graves are the bodies of these prehistoric peoples, preserved by the climate and the dry sands. Here they lie surrounded by jars ... and other provisions for the long journey, and also flint weapons and instruments of that period long ago. One is impressed by the enormous amount of human bones, grinning skulls sticking out of the debris, and the great mounds of broken pottery.

“And as we walked over the sands of this ancient place, we were conscious of a feeling of awe in the presence of a civilization so much older than recorded history. We spent our time here with a feeling of security, which was born of our ignorance of the situation, for when we returned to town we were surrounded by the Egyptian army and some officials, for most of the [visitors] who had gone to that place never came away...”