KEEPER OF THE COLLECTION
Snellville's Bonnie Speed oversees Emory's prestigious museum

By Phylecia Wilson
Bonnie Ann Speed knew even as a child that art was what she wanted to do. Once she realized that she could talk about art better than she could make it, she soon gave up the idea of being an artist to pursue becoming an art historian, one that worked in a museum.
After receiving her BA in fine art/art education at the University of Southern Maine, Speed studied art history, received her MA from the University of

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Michael C. Carlos

Bonnie Speed (far right) is the Director of Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum, which is next to the King Tut exhibition, Tutankhamun: The Golden King and The Great Pharaohs, currently showing at the Atlanta Civic Center. Part of this exhibition, at left, is a Canopic Ossuary, which held some of Tut's vital organs, and at right, a Canopic Casket, which held some of Tut's vital organs.
Kansas, and began a distinguished career as a museum curator and then director who is well-known in the world of ancient art as one who works diligently to strengthen institutions’ artistic visions, build new audiences, and to form strategic partnerships.

Collaboration is a word the Snellville resident uses often as she explains how Emory University’s Michael C. Carlos Museum, where she is Director, consistently procures outstanding permanent collections and successful exhibitions, including the King Tut exhibition, Tutankhamun: The Golden King and The Great Pharaohs currently showing at the Atlanta Civic Center.

It was a relationship with the Egyptian Museum in downtown Cairo, Egypt through Dr. Peter Lacovara, an Egyptologist and archaeologist who serves as Senior Curator of ancient Egyptian, Nubian, and Near Eastern art at the Michael C. Carlos Museum that resulted in the Carlos Museum hosting the King Tut exhibition.

“Two and a half years ago we received a phone call from Dr. Zahi Hawass saying he was organizing another King Tut exhibition and did we want to be a host,” Speed recalled. brought incredible artifacts from ancient civilizations to Atlanta.

Recent exhibitions (normally twice a year to coordinate with academic semesters) include: Cradle of Christianity, a collaboration with the Israel Museum in Jerusalem; Buddha in Paradise, a show of Tibetan thangka paintings; Lost Kingdoms of the Nile, a show exploring ancient Nubia (present day Sudan), and; Domains of Wonder, a show of Indian miniature paintings. Their permanent collection of ancient art is one of the largest in the Southeast.

“Our collections are devoted primarily to art of the ancient world – Classical, Ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman, Ancient American, Asian, and African art,” Speed explained. However, we do have a works on
Dr. Hawass is Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Egypt and a world-renowned archaeologist often seen on National Geographic. Dr. Hawass is also an honorary member of the Carlos Museum’s board.

“Our answer was ‘Yes’, but the exhibition was much larger than our museum could handle,” she said. The answer was the Boisfeuillet Jones Atlanta Civic Center where the exhibition opened in mid-November and will continue through May 25.

“It’s an amazing exhibition — over 25,000 square feet — with a colossal 10 foot sculpture of Tutankhamun and works of art representing 2,000 years of Egyptian history,” she stated. With an audio guide narrated by Harrison Ford, the exhibition addresses the greatest eras of Egyptian pharonic rule between 2600 and 660 BC. The exhibition includes extraordinary finds not only from the tomb of Tutankhamun but also from royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings and from temples and palaces from other ancient Egyptian sites.

The show will travel to Indianapolis from Atlanta and to a number of US cities, but Atlanta is the only city on the entire eastern seaboard to host it.

While King Tut is the largest, and probably most ambitious exhibition the Carlos Museum has ever undertaken, it is one of many that have paper collection that spans from the Renaissance to Contemporary.

Though collections date from 1876 on the original Emory campus at Oxford, Georgia, the museum officially started in 1919 when Emory moved to Atlanta and has grown to become one of the Southeast’s premier art museums. However, Speed still hears it is the best kept secret in Atlanta. “I like the ‘best’ part, but we are working on the ‘secret’,” Speed said, smiling. “We are not able to market as much as other museums because our focus, and thus often, our money goes toward education programs and exhibitions. A lot is word of mouth and we get excellent reviews from AJC and other publications.”

Still, from 100,000 to 150,000 people, including 30,000 school children from Georgia, Alabama, Tennessee, and South Carolina, visit the Museum annually.

That’s because of the Museum’s strong educational mission and the fact that educational outreach is one of Speed’s passions. “One of the ways we market is through our website www.carlos.emory.edu” she said. “Teachers from around the world, not just the U.S., use the site and can teach with the Museum’s collections by downloading educational programs on site’s education section, Odyssey Online.”

Speed came to Atlanta after being recruited by a headhunter from her

Necklace with a triple-scarab pendant position as Director of the Trammell & Margaret Crow Collection of Asian Art in Dallas. She already knew about the Carlos Museum and its reputation for quality of exhibitions and programs.

She was excited about the move, but in 2002, Atlanta real estate was at its prime, so she started looking east of Emory and landed south of Highway 78 in Snellville, home to many horse farms. “I couldn’t afford to live close to Emory so I decided to live close to my horse,” she laughed.

Speed encourages everyone to take in the King Tut exhibition at the Atlanta Civic Center, but she also hopes that through this well-marketed exhibition people will learn more about Emory’s Michael C. Carlos Museum.

“I encourage people, especially parents, to become familiar with our website and to visit our museum,” she said.

“One of the most effective means of understanding ancient civilizations is by studying what they left behind. These ancient objects, whether everyday or ritual, are the artworks that now populate our museums forming the foundation of our education programs and scholarly research. I think our museum is doing some of the most exciting work to facilitate such learning.”