Explores a period when mummifying process was in flux.

By Catherine Fox
For the AJC

The mud-brown figure wrapped in yards of linen lies curled on his side, skull cradled by a headrest. He might be mistaken for a George Segal sculpture or a victim at Pompeii frozen in the ash. This man, however, lived thousands of years before Mount Vesuvius erupted. His remains are among the fewer than a dozen mummies extant from Egypt’s Old Kingdom, and the only one on this continent, and it belongs to the Michael C. Carlos Museum.

Recently conserved after almost a centurylong hibernation in storage, it is the star of and impetus for the museum’s “Life & Death in the Pyramid Age: The Emory Old Kingdom Mummy.” Egyptologist Peter Lacovara conveys the historical, religious and geographical context for the prized artifact through tomb objects from the Carlos collection—many acquired with this show in mind—loans, large-scale photographs and informative texts.

The exhibition designers created a particularly dramatic tableau by transforming a gallery doorway into the entrance to a tomb. The visitor walks through it, just as an ancient Egyptian bringing an offering for the deceased would have done, to reach the offering plate (one of the new Carlos acquisitions), which sits in front of an actual “false door” of a tomb.

Off to one side, a wooden sculpture—a repository for the tomb-owner’s soul—“watches” the proceedings through a back-lit slit in the wall.

The video about the mummy’s conservation, definitely a highlight, recounts the lengths to which a multidisciplinary team went to reassemble and secure the severely deteriorated mummy—a prospect a daunted conservator described as the equivalent of piecing together a bag of crushed potato chips.

In some respects, conservation was uncharted territory. The mummy represents a period in which Egyptians were still experimenting with the process and conventions of mummification—before they arrived, for example, at the stiff prone position to which we are accustomed.

It’s fascinating to see how creatively Carlos conservator Renee Stein and colleague Mimi Leveque solved structural problems inherent in putting a 4,000-year-old Humpty Dumpty back together, and how they made use of discoveries Lacovara reported from the field during the process. (Hint: ears and mittens.)

As in life, there was a hierarchy in death. The farmers and other laborers depicted in murals, reliefs and statues placed in the tombs were proxies for the mortals who continued to work for their masters in the afterlife. A group of crude clay offering plates and a “soul” house exemplify the poor man’s version of the elaborate burial rituals that have yielded such lovely artifacts as the little statue of Pharaoh Pepi I and an elegant relief of a raven-haired figure (an ancient version of painter Alex Katz’s portraits of wife Ada?) from the Middle Kingdom.

I got a kick out of the relief depicting a man walking his dog: For humankind, some things never change.

Catherine Fox is chief visual arts critic of www.ArtsCriticATL.com.

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

Gallery review
“Life & Death in the Pyramid Age: The Emory Old Kingdom Mummy”

Through Dec. 11. $8; $6, seniors, students, children 6-17; free for 5 and younger, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. Tuesdays-Fridays; until 5 p.m. Saturdays; noon-5 p.m. Sundays. Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University, 571 S. Kilgo Circle. 404-727-4282. www.carlos.emory.edu

Bottom line: Emory’s Old Kingdom mummy, among the world’s oldest, is the chief, but hardly the only, attraction of this illuminating exhibition.