Museum to bring Egyptian exhibit out of the shadows

Houston Museum of Natural Science employee Eydie Roja examines a 2,000 plus-year-old mask that is a new acquisition for the Egyptian gallery.

By Allan Turner

February 18, 2013

It’s a long way from the Bayou City to Egypt, and, for the Houston Museum of Natural Science, the pharaonic splendor of the ancient kingdom somehow got lost along the way.

Eye-dazzling gems, energy-industry technology and fearsome carnivores from the prehistoric world the museum has in spades. The institution’s Egypt gallery, though, tucked away in a shadowy corner in the museum’s basement, offers little more than a few mummies - a human, a cat, a hawk and a fish - and a small collection of amulets.

That deficiency should be rectified in May, museum officials say, with the opening of an approximately 10,000-square-foot hall of Egyptian antiquities drawn from the world’s leading public and private collections. As many as 800 items will be exhibited in a third-floor space of the building housing the new paleontology hall, completing the goals of the museum’s $85 million capital campaign.

'Immersive' settings

Museum Executive Director Joel Bartusch said the artifacts, dating from about 4000 B.C. to 1000 A.D., will be displayed in "immersive" settings evocative of ancient tombs and ruins. Addressed, too, will be the Egyptian influence on American popular culture.
"There was a rage for Egyptology in the late 1800s that was reflected in the designs of Cartier and Tiffany," Bartsch said. "We'll define popular culture broadly. ... There will be the serious side - Howard Carter discovering King Tut's tomb in the 1920s - and the crazy side of movie posters."

"A lot of magic" attaches to ancient Egypt, added conservator Ron Harvey, noting that the mysteries of the pyramids, the intricacies of religion and belief in an afterlife have fascinated outsiders for centuries.

From the consolidation of upper and lower Egypt about 3100 B.C., the Kingdom on the Nile grew into a Mediterranean superpower. It pioneered writing and mathematics, engineering and irrigation, before succumbing to a wave of invaders and finally falling to Rome in the last century B.C..

"It's always held a special interest for the museum visitor," Harvey said.

**Late arrival**

Bartsch conceded that the Houston museum came late to developing a significant Egyptian exhibition.

"This makes things interesting, and dangerous," he said. "When you look at acquiring Egyptian antiquities now, there is a huge number of fakes out there and an equal number of pieces with murky provenance."

He said the museum's strategy is to gradually build a collection while augmenting those artifacts with items on long-term loan from other institutions. To that end, the science museum has entered agreements with, among others, Germany's Roemer-Pelizaeus

[CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE]
Museum, England's Chiddingstone Castle, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and Emory University's Michael C. Carlos Museum.

"These museums have hundreds, thousands, if not tens of thousands, of objects," Bartsch said. "This is a nice, symbiotic relationship: We have the square footage. They have the artifacts."

Catches imaginations

Bartsch said the museum's commitment to building an Egyptian collection may spur collectors to contribute artifacts.

"That worked for gems and minerals, energy and paleontology," he said.

When the exhibit opens - May 24 for members, May 31 for the general public - it will feature "about three" human mummies, sarcophagi and a dozen or so coffins, ranging from clay urns to an intricately painted, form-fitting, plaster-and-fiber coating.

"Even with dinosaurs, there is nothing that catches the imagination of the young like mummies, mummies, mummies," Bartsch said. However, as significant in the exhibition will be the smaller artifacts that illuminate Egyptian culture's ties to its African setting.

"Their gods were based on the natural world, the wildlife of the Nile," Bartsch said. "For a natural science museum, that's an excellent starting point. ... Defended by water and desert, they didn't have to spend all their time fighting enemies. Given fertile land for farming, they didn't have to hunt and gather. Thus, their society could grow and flourish. ... Every little piece in the exhibition ties into the fabric of their culture."