

NEWS International

The real curse of Tutankhamun

As Howard Carter's archive goes on display in Oxford, the contents of the boy king's tomb remain in bad condition and seriously under-researched

RESEARCH

Cairo. The tomb of Tutankhamun, in the Valley of the Kings, near Luxor, is one of the top attractions in Egypt – so much so that a replica made by the Madrid-based company Factum Arte opened nearby in May to limit the damage caused to the original by visitors. But despite the fame and importance of the tomb, specialists say that its contents have still not been properly studied and catalogued, nearly a century after its discovery.

"The real curse is that too few scholars have devoted attention to the contents of the tomb," says Paul Collins, the co-curator of "Discovering Tutankhamun" (24 July–2 November), a forthcoming exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology in Oxford.

Collins believes that specialists have shied away from serious study of the boy king's tomb because he "so quickly became imbued with glamour and mystery" in the public imagination. "It is assumed that we know all about Tutankhamun, whereas we know virtually nothing," he says.

Collins estimates that detailed descriptions and analyses have still not been published for 80% of the 5,398 objects originally found in Tutankhamun's tomb. At this rate, it will take centuries to complete the task. According to Jaromir Malek, a retired Egyptologist at Oxford's Griffith

Institute, the failure to publish the tomb's contents is "one of the best-kept secrets about Egyptology". (The archive of Howard Carter, who discovered the tomb, is in the institute.)

Nine volumes of "Tutankhamun's Tomb" were published between 1963 and 1990 by the university's Griffith Institute, but the series was ended for financial reasons. Since then, there have been a few independently produced books, but no more are currently scheduled for publication.

Unplundered – and ignored

Why have Egyptologists tended to ignore the only royal tomb that survived unplundered? Many scholars have been put off by Tutankhamun's cult status, although this has not discouraged some specialists, notably Zahi Hawass in Egypt and Nicholas Reeves (now at New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art).

Popular books have tended to focus on Tutankhamun's relationship with his father (Akhmenaten), the questions around his death in 1323BC, and his place in history. Exhibition catalogues and some monographs describe the key objects from the tomb, but they are not examined in systematic detail.

The contents of the tomb were jumbled, so some scholars assume that they were not carefully selected and are therefore not so important. But with no other undisturbed royal tombs for comparison, we can only speculate about the significance of the items that accompanied Tutankhamun on his voyage

to the afterlife. Other scholars feel that his reign was, historically, relatively unimportant, because he died at around the age of 18.

Richard Parkinson, a professor of Egyptology at the University of Oxford, thinks the main problem is the sheer quantity and variety of objects and materials, which makes detailed cataloguing a daunting task. He believes that Tutankhamun's tomb is "well published", even though the publication of detailed catalogues has slowed almost to a halt. Parkinson predicts that further research into the objects will not tell us much more about Tutankhamun, but says that it could "add immensely

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to our understanding of the culture of the 18th Dynasty. We will understand an entire royal world, and the sheer richness of Egyptian art of the period."

Scholars face logistical problems, too: nearly all of the objects are in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, while Carter's archive is in Oxford. Although the institute recently posted its Carter material online, accessing the objects can be more difficult. The vast majority are on display in Cairo, but it is hard to study them closely, particularly those made of precious materials.



A photograph by Harry Burton of Howard Carter examining the coffin in 1925

This helps to explain why Tutankhamun's famous golden mask has not had the study it deserves. It remains uncertain how much of the goldsmith's work was made specifically for the boy king. The mask is made of two thick sheets of beaten gold, inlaid with blue glass and riveted together. Reeves has suggested that the outer part was not originally intended for Tutankhamun, but for Queen Nefertiti, the wife of Tutankhamun's father. However, the face is that of the boy king.

Reeves believes that the most important revelations from Tutankhamun's tomb will be about the development of technology; the contents are objects, not merely representations depicted on tombs or temple walls. "We can study how they were made and what

techniques and what materials were used in their manufacture," he says. This gives us an insight into furniture, jewellery, textiles and basketware.

The Ashmolean's exhibition will focus on Carter's archaeological methods: borrowing restrictions mean that it will not include artefacts from the tomb. Tutankhamun exhibitions toured internationally from 2004 to 2013, but these were undertaken primarily to raise money. Hawass says that these brought in £120m to help fund the Grand Egyptian Museum, which is under construction at Giza and is scheduled to be completed next year. The museum's key attraction will be the Tutankhamun treasures, which will be moved from the Egyptian Museum.

Hawass tells *The Art Newspaper* that

"many [of the objects] are in bad condition" – an important admission. However, he says that Carter's archives "will provide a useful guide to the conservators who are beginning to restore Tutankhamun items for display in the Grand Egyptian Museum".

Martin Bailey

Carter's treasures

The heart of "Discovering Tutankhamun" (24 July–2 November) at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford will be Howard Carter's diaries, journals, object cards, letters and drawings, together with the photographs taken by the archaeological photographer Harry Burton.

Carter was a talented artist, and many of his watercolours will be on show for the first time. His niece donated his material to the Griffith Institute after he died in 1939. Among the exhibits will be Carter's diary entry for 26 November 1922, in which he wrote the word "wonderful" to describe his first glimpse into the tomb.

Carter numbered each of the 5,398 objects from the tomb, meticulously describing each item on cards. These records, which show where individual items were found and describe their condition, provide an invaluable source. Carter later published a three-volume overview of the tomb, but he died before he could write his planned catalogue of the contents.

Paul Collins, the co-curator of the Ashmolean's exhibition, did not request loans from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo because of the shortage of time and the problems of borrowing from Egypt. The overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and the resulting political uncertainty added to these difficulties. M.B.

