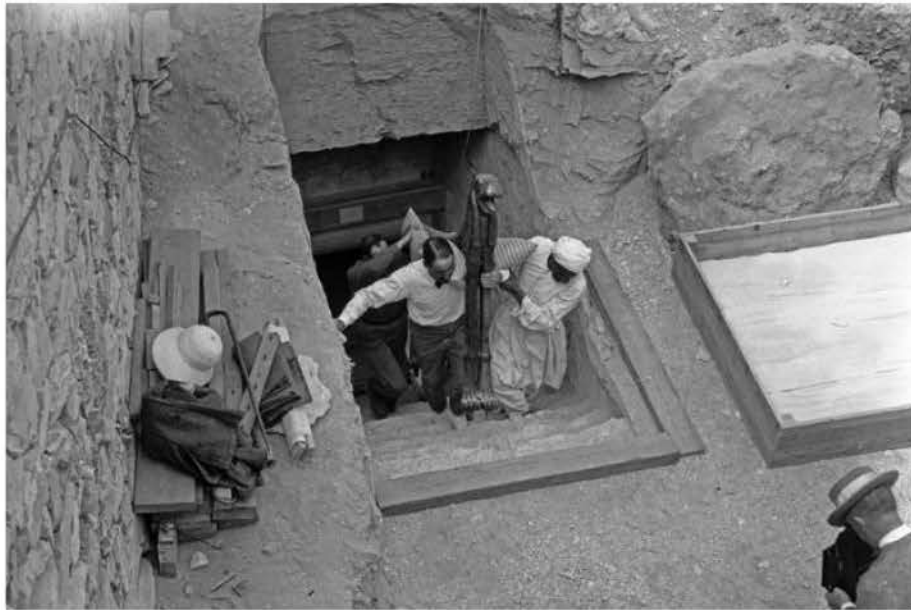


Treasures of the pharaohs recreated in exquisite detail



The discovery of Tutankhamun's Tomb in the Valley of the Kings, Luxor, Egypt by Howard Carter Times Newspapers Ltd

Bel Trew Luxor

Last updated at 12:01AM, May 5 2014

Two of Egypt's most famous ancient tombs, sealed off from the public's gaze for decades, will soon be attracting visitors again. The 3,200-year-old tomb of Seti I, considered one of the most important sites in the Valley of the Kings, has been closed since the 1980s after years of tourism left it irreparably damaged.

The nearby vault of Ramses II's wife, Nefertari, which is known as the "Sistine Chapel of Egypt" due to the astonishing intricacy of its murals, has been unseen for more than half a century.

The original chambers are too valuable to be put at risk once again, but in an exciting initiative, facsimiles of the pharaonic treasures are to be meticulously "rematerialised" by a Madrid-based company.

The project follows the successful opening in Luxor of an exact copy of King Tutankhamun's burial chamber. Factum Arte spent five years replicating the tomb, discovered by the British archaeologist Howard Carter in 1922.

The £420,000 facsimile has revolutionised methods of preserving and documenting precious archeological sites while pointing to a radically different future for cultural tourism.

The reconstruction, which is installed in an underground chamber by Carter's house on Luxor's West Bank, is eerily similar to the real vault. "I have seen the original more than 200 times and this replica is astonishing," said Salah Bauommi, a Luxor tour guide and Egyptologist, adding that even the lighting and smell were the same.

The only criticism made by holidaymakers was that the magic of breathing the tomb's atmosphere first hand could not be digitally replicated. "Otherwise you don't see the difference. It's exactly the same," Caroline Jones, 34, a teacher from Lyons, said.

The team, led by Adam Lowe, a British artist, have meticulously captured the beauty of the relief that depicts the 19-year-old pharaoh in the underworld, as well as the pockmarks, botched reconstructive paint jobs and cracks in the tomb's ceiling. They have even mimicked the worn walls of the viewing platform, where visitors' sleeves have polished the limestone.

The original vault contains Tutankhamun's mummified body and is reached by a tunnel, which was omitted from the facsimile to ease disabled access. A gallery highlighting the damage to the murals has been added. Otherwise it is impossible to tell the two apart.

Using 3D scanners and high-resolution photography, Factum Arte began in 2009 to record the surface of the walls and the sarcophagus lid at high resolution.

The data was used to mould a resin panel. The photographs were then printed on to a stretchable membrane and vacuum packed on to the panels. The results is an exact copy "down to the dust that covers the walls", Mr Lowe said.

The data is so accurate that Egyptologists, hampered by the protective barricades in the original tombs, are now studying it.

The replicas are expected to boost tourism in Luxor, which has been the hardest hit by the political turbulence of recent years. The numbers of visitors to the Valley of the Kings has plummeted from 11,000 a day to just over a hundred. "What we need is good news like this," Hisham Zazou, Egypt's tourism minister, said.

The real tomb is still open for the time being. Entry costs about £8.50 while the replica is currently free. The aim is to allow visitors to compare the two and learn about the damage to the real tomb, the team said.

Factum Arte is planning to replicate many more tombs in the future and is building an on-site training centre for Egyptians to pass on the skills.

"Egypt's future is dependent on its past. If the tombs are destroyed by tourism people won't be visiting Luxor," said Mr Lowe. "We have to think in terms of thousands of years — just like the pharaonic craftsmen did."