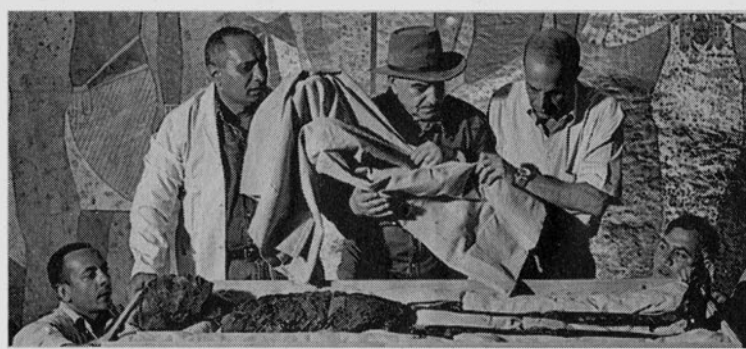




King Tut to rule Valley of the Replicas



Zahi Hawass, top left with Tutankhamun's mummy, says the replica of the tomb, above, will attract just as many visitors

Tutankhamun's tomb is to be closed and tourists directed to a mock-up in a bid to save it from destruction, writes John Follain

EIGHTY-NINE years after Howard Carter, the British archeologist, first peered into the tomb of Tutankhamun, the boy pharaoh, the vault has become a victim of its own fame: it will be closed to tourists by the end of this year.

Instead, visitors will be directed to a replica of the painted burial chamber, made by a British artist, which will be installed close to Carter's former home in Luxor. Replicas of two other closed tombs will be opened nearby.

"There's no alternative. Closing the tombs is the only way to preserve them," said Zahi Hawass, Egypt's antiquities chief. "If I don't build this 'Valley of the Replicas', the originals will be destroyed in less than 100 years. That would be a disaster for history."

The greatest damage had come from mass tourism over the past 30 years, he explained: "People's respiration, the humidity they bring into the tombs, their sweat, the fact that they use flashes when taking pictures — all this damages the tombs."

The tomb of Tutankhamun, who became king at the age of about eight and died a decade later in 1323BC, is the most popular site in the Valley of the Kings. The colours and engravings have been damaged by visitors causing changes in temperature and touching or brushing against the walls.

Hawass, head of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, said Tutankhamun's burial site would close "within a year" when the Valley of the Replicas was ready. He is

raising funds from private donors to finance the £6m project.

The new site on the west bank of the Nile will include copies of the tombs of Seti I, father of Ramesses II, in the Valley of the Kings, and of Queen Nefertari, the wife of Ramesses II, in the Valley of the Queens. The Seti tomb has been closed to tourists since the late 1980s; Nefertari's can be seen only by appointment.

Hawass expects the replicas will draw as many visitors as the Valley of the Kings — some 6,000 tourists a day, or more than 2m a year. A few professional archeologists paying "a very expensive entrance ticket" would still be allowed to see the originals, he said.

The replica of Tutankhamun's burial chamber is sitting in a workshop in an industrial estate south of Madrid. It is almost complete after two years of work and is awaiting shipment to Egypt.

"We just need to make a few finishing touches to the replica of Tutankhamun's sarcophagus," said Adam Lowe, the British artist in charge of the project. "It's all based on 3-D

laser technology — we scanned the entire surface of the tomb and what we got was a staggering level of resolution."

The scanning picked up imperfections such as the bristle of a brush, or a grain of sand embedded in paintings that depict Tutankhamun's funeral procession and his after-life.

"The data we've got doesn't just allow us to make the copy. It's also essential to help archeologists monitor the

condition of the original," said Lowe, whose previous commissions include a replica in Milan of The Last Supper by Leonardo da Vinci.

Jaromir Malek, a leading Egyptologist and keeper of the archive at the Griffith Institute in Oxford, cautioned that despite the quality of such replicas, tourists may dislike the idea. "When I stand in front of one of Tutankhamun's thrones at the Cairo Museum and I say to myself, that's the chair he sat on, that gives me a thrill," Malek said.

Marilina Betro, a fellow Egyptologist from Pisa University in Italy, urged the Egyptian authorities to keep the tomb open. "Closing the tomb to the public for ever makes no sense, the original is completely different. It would be better to limit the number of people allowed in," she said.

Bob Partridge, editor of Ancient Egypt magazine and a frequent visitor to Luxor, expects the replicas to draw even more visitors than the originals. "Today the tombs aren't comfortable places — you have to queue to get in, it's desperately hot and dusty

inside, the paintings are behind glass, the lighting isn't that good," he said.

"The replicas will be easier to see. You can light them properly and ventilate them. I've seen parts of the Tutankhamun replica and the technology is absolutely superb. Most people wouldn't know the difference and wouldn't care either."

Hawass will not be swayed by tourists' concerns. "In Lascaux in France, millions of people visit the copy of the original prehistoric caves which have been closed," he said.

"The most important thing is to preserve the monuments. I'm the guardian, I know what is good for their preservation."



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