

Golden Mummies of Egypt

A touring exhibition by Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester, UK

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Curator: Dr. Campbell Price, Curator of Egypt and Sudan, Manchester Museum

Exhibition Designers: Nomad Exhibitions, Edinburgh, Scotland

The author worked in collaboration with the Collection Care Team at Manchester Museum
lead by Samantha Beath, Senior Conservator

Introduction

Golden Mummies of Egypt is an international touring exhibition of objects from the Egyptology collection at Manchester Museum, part of The University of Manchester. The exhibition shares highlights of the collection and questions how we interpret them. The exhibition arose as an alternative use of the collection during the part closure of the Museum's building for the £13.5 million transformation *Hello Future*. Allowing highlights of the collection to travel like this allows the museum to share its treasures and expertise to an international audience.

Working in collaboration with Nomad Exhibitions, the tour consists of over 100 objects from the Graeco-Roman period, including 10 mummies and 2 cartonnage. The mount-making and preparation for this tour took place in the Autumn of 2019.

The Brief:

My brief for this project was to prepare support cradles for ten mummies and two cartonnages. These support cradles were intended to serve as both permanent display and storage supports, and given the upcoming tour requirements, had to be suitable for international travel.

The ten mummies are: Preserved human remains encased in layers of linen, plaster and resin, decorated with gold leaf and painted details.

The two cartonnages are: Mummy cases made using layers of linen, papyrus, plaster and resin, also decorated with gold leaf and painted details. Being the outer cases of a mummy, they were empty and did not contain any human remains.

Previously these objects had been displayed at different times in the Museum, so were mounted in various ways. This new support system needed to unify them, and work with the overall design aesthetic of the exhibition.

The following factors would impact how these objects were mounted:

- Size - objects ranged from 900mm x 350mm and 1850mm x 550mm
- Weight - it took six people to lift each mummy
- Fragile condition - handling would have to be kept to an absolute minimum
- Time frame - I was working part time for approximately ten weeks
- Equipment available
- Budget



How

Initially it was planned that fully fitted cradles would be created, then tightly upholstered/covered with fabric before the mummy was place in it. However my instinct told me that to carve a perfectly fitting cradle, then cover in fabric with a seamless finish would be tremendously difficult. So I started to formulate ideas around the concept of creating a soft yet supportive 'bed' the the mummies could rest in, which would be surrounded with a crisp and precise frame that would create a smart overall appearance (below).

While working on each mount, the mummy was removed from its old mount and placed on a temporary support of polyester wadding and Tyvek® (left). This allowed me to carry out detailed measurements and to view as much of the lower profile as possible. This then helped me to plot out the shape and size of the Plastazote® cradle (below). Once the right shape was achieved, the cradle was covered in thermally bonded polyester wadding, then covered in a Tyvek® bag.



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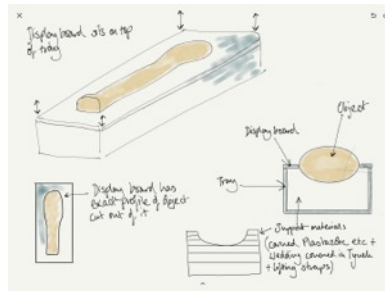
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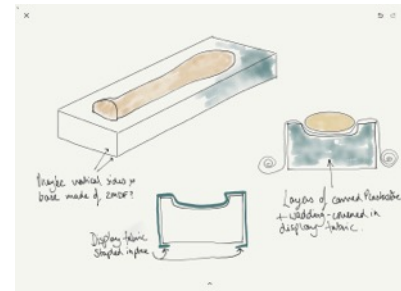
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Fortunately, one of the mummies (a child) was much smaller than the others. Mounting this served as our prototype, which the curator and designers signed off on before the larger box frames and mounts were made for the others.



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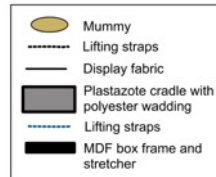
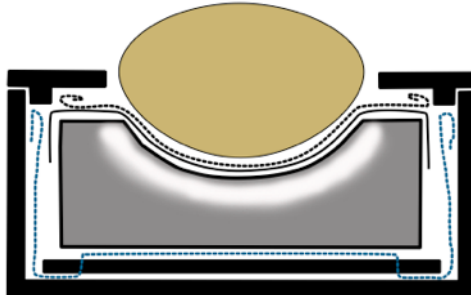
1. Mummy during measuring 2. Painted box frames 3. Plastazote® cradle 4. Box frame and stretcher with lifting straps 5. Polyester wadding covering cradle 6. Initial mount design ideas 7. Prototype finished mount

The Result

Although there were challenges during this project (no two mummies have consistent or even symmetrical profiles) I feel the overall effect for this display and storage method has been really successful. The addition of two sets of lifting straps, both under the whole cradle and just the mummy, will allow easy movement and removal in the future. Combined with great lighting and case design, an aesthetically pleasing display has been created using a relatively low tech and inexpensive technique.



In comparison to the mummies, the mounting of the cartonnages was relatively simple as although their edges are very fragile, they are overall quite robust and lightweight. In order to protect the fragile edges I made carved inserts that they could rest on, so that nothing is coming into contact with the edges. This was then attached to a fabric covered board (seen above). As with the mounts for the mummies, this will act as a long term mount and storage support, which will reduce future handling of the objects, whilst still allowing access for research and display.



Personal Professional Reflection

As Conservators, in the UK, we are encouraged to continually reflect on our work, and to assess our decision making processes within the context of the industry; in fact this forms a major part of the Institute of Conservation's accreditation process. I feel it is useful to use this project as a frame for my own professional reflection and examine my skills and the role of the freelance conservator in the industry.

Although I work mainly as a conservator, my work (whether through fate or design) is often focused on the production of exhibitions. Before training as a conservator I worked as a conservation technician in an art gallery where much of my work was focused around the exhibition programme. Having had that experience before training as a conservator, I can't help but think 'How is this going to look on display?' when confronted with an object to conserve.

In the case of this project, my exhibition mounting skills were used more than my conservation skills, although they are of course closely linked together, and I believe this is what makes me a good museum worker.

Also, as a freelance conservator, I often find myself dropped into a project, frequently towards the end with a deadline looming, and am not involved with the early planning stages. This can be both a blessing and a curse; fewer planning meetings to attend, but sometimes having to work within tighter limitations than ideal, e.g. available materials etc. This however has taught me to be quick thinking and decisive in my methods, often having to come up with creative solutions that fulfil both the conservation and display requirements of a project. In the case of the *Golden Mummies* project, it might have been possible to create bespoke fitted and upholstered display mounts for each object if there had been more time, but the packing deadline was looming and I knew I wouldn't be able to do a good enough job so had to create the method detailed in this poster. The role of mount maker and conservator are inextricably linked and I feel lucky that I am able to carry out both in my job.

I'd like to thank the whole team at Manchester Museum for allowing me to work on this project with them. I will post additional images from this project on my Instagram account (@textile_construct).



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1. The exhibition on display at Buffalo Museum of Science
2. Gathering the conservation team to lift a mummy onto the display cradle

The aspects of these mounts that I feel were particularly successful are:

- The objects are supported
- The mounts are unobtrusive and look good. Particularly under exhibition lighting, the gold and painted surfaces of the mummies look stunning.
- The mounts can be adapted in the future i.e. the cradles can be removed from the box frames, and the frames can be repainted/replaced
- The box frame lid can be removed to allow the curator/researchers further access to the object