

Egyptian Museum Marks 117th Anniversary

The Egyptian Museum in Cairo's Tahrir Square is celebrating its 117th anniversary with two temporary exhibitions and a first look at its renovations, writes Nevine El-Aref

Nevine El-Aref (<http://english.ahram.org.eg/WriterArticles/Nevine-ElAref/283/0.aspx>), Tuesday 19 Nov 2019



The neo-classical Egyptian Museum in Cairo's Tahrir Square was buzzing last Friday as the Ministry of Antiquities celebrated the downtown landmark's 117th anniversary.

To the strains of oriental music mixed with ancient Egyptian beats and the heavenly tunes of the harp, ministers, dignitaries, government officials, foreign ambassadors and cultural counsellors, as well as MPs and media representatives, flocked to the museum to attend the event. More than 100 years ago the khedive Abbas Helmi II, watched by princes and government officials, cut the ribbon at the museum's opening.

This was Egypt's treasure house and a shrine to its past. Over the years since then, kings and queens, presidents, scholars and thousands upon thousands of ordinary visitors have come to the Egyptian Museum to gaze in awe at the marvellous works of art that fill every niche and corner. As the country pays homage to all who shared in its construction, the ministry of antiquities in collaboration with Inertia Egypt, which sponsored the event in accordance with newly launched commercial sponsorship regulations, held a grand celebration starting last week.

"The Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square is one of the greatest landmarks in the world, built even before the creation of museology to showcase one of the oldest and most unique civilisations in human history," Minister of Antiquities Khaled El- Enany told Al-Ahram Weekly. He described the museum and its collection as "an ambassador extraordinaire for Egypt and a magnet for visitors and researchers. Its anniversary is a clear indication that it is also a living museum, moving from 1902 to 2019 and into the future." He said that a renovation plan for the museum had been launched to define its future role within the local and international museum landscape, giving it the prominence it has long deserved.

"The museum is not only one of Egypt's landmarks, but also one of the country's most distinguished monuments as well," El-Enany said. He added that the museum would not be closed after the completion of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) on the Giza Plateau, as some have claimed, but would be developed and some of its artefacts put on special display, including the collection of Yuya and Thuya, the grandparents of the monotheistic king Akhenaton.



El-Enany with world ambassadors and invitees (photos: Ahmed Romeih)

These are being shown in a new display to mark the anniversary, with the royal treasures of Tanis replacing the Tutankhamun treasures that will be moved to the GEM. Other objects would also be taken out of the storerooms to be shown for the first time, he said. “The museum will never die,” El-Enany added.

The Egyptian Museum houses a collection of 160,000 artefacts, only 50,000 of which are on display. “After the transportation of artefacts to the GEM and the new National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation (NMEC) in Fustat in Cairo, the Museum in Tahir Square has the opportunity to look into its store galleries and uncover more distinguished objects to put on display,” El-Enany said, adding that the Yuya Papyrus was one artefact that had been hidden in its basement since its discovery in the Yuya and Thuya tomb in 1905. It is considered to be the longest papyrus ever to be put on display in Egypt, with its length extending to almost 20 metres.

El-Enany said that the renovation of the Egyptian Museum had worked on the external and internal areas to return it to its original glory by repainting the walls and recovering the floors with tiles in original colours and designs.

According to the original plan of the museum drawn up by its French architect Marcel Dourgon, its internal walls were originally painted in red brick and light green, while the floor tiles, designed to look like limestone, were decorated with particular patterns.

As part of the present renovation work, the glass in the rooftop windows has been replaced with glass that prevents UV radiation from the sun entering the museum. The fountain in the open-air display in the museum’s garden has also been renovated.

“Work will continue with funding from the European Union in collaboration with five European museums, the Turin Museum in Italy, the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, and the Rijksmuseum Van Oudheden in Germany,” El-Enany said.



Temporary exhibits put on display

The Revival of the Egyptian Museum is at the heart of a national policy to uphold the value of Egypt's rich and diverse cultural heritage. It has been ongoing since May 2012, as a public-private partnership between Environmental Quality International (EQI), and the Ministry of Antiquities. It aims at restoring the museum building to its original state, as designed in the late 19th century.

Pilot restoration work on the building was carried out by EQI between 2014 and 2017, with support from the EU and private sponsors. The current cycle started in February 2018 and will last until July 2020 and is funded mainly by the EU. It will see the restoration of the 89 exhibition halls of the museum and focus on the walls, floors, and skylights. The work also includes capacity-building activities for museum staff, as well as educational tours for children.

The highlight of the museum's 117th anniversary is the two temporary exhibitions entitled "Education in Ancient Egypt" and "The Cachettes", however.

EDUCATION IN ANCIENT EGYPT: The first exhibition is in line with the government's announcement to dedicate 2019 as the Year of Education in Egypt, underlining the role of education as one of the pillars of sustainable development. It puts on show a unique collection of 70 objects, among which are pieces displayed for the first time and arranged according to their use. The significance of many of the pieces is that they are still in use today, even if in different ways.

Sabah Abdel-Razak, director of the Egyptian Museum, said the exhibition shed light on education in ancient Egypt and the techniques closely related to mathematics that had made up the nucleus of applied sciences on which ancient Egyptian civilization had been built. Archaeological evidence had led to the discovery of ancient Egyptian mathematics, astronomy and geometry, as well as other sub-sciences such as calendar time, measurements and calculations, and the work of ancient Egyptian scribes who used mathematics and arithmetic to form ancient Egyptian civilization, she said.

In addition to presenting the different aspects of life that were affected by these sciences, the exhibition also shows how they affected individuals and the educational process and its role in the progress of society. This is demonstrated by measuring instruments and engineering and architectural equipment, as well as by papyri featuring computations.

"We are seeking a deeper engagement with children and families, and so we have produced the Museum Rally Programme," Nevine Nizar, assistant to the minister of antiquities for museum exhibitions, told the Weekly. She said that this was a series of tasks that visitors have to do in order to get a reward at the end. These tasks are very different from each other and can be quizzes, mathematical equations, or riddles or puzzles, she said. They could be finding something hidden in the exhibition rooms, creative tasks such as drawing, or hands-on activities.



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Nizar said that the objective was to link visitors, especially children, with the exhibition themes and objects in a simple and innovative way with tasks chosen to be connected to the objects and topics in the exhibition. Some tasks give clues to reach a solution, whereas others can be just for fun. "The solution could be a word, with clues giving the different letters of that word. Or the clues could be numbers that add up to another number," Nizar said.

THE CACHETTES: The second exhibition displays selected objects from four previously discovered cachettes in Luxor, including those of the royal mummies of Deir Al-Bahari, discovered in 1881, King Amenhotep II, unveiled in 1898, a cachette of priests found in the Bab Al-Gusus area, unearthed in 1891, and the Asasif cachette, uncovered in October 2019.

Among the mummies uncovered in the royal mummies cachette are those of the kings Seqenere Raa, Ahmose, Tuthmosis I, II and III, Seti I and II, Ramses I, II, III, IV, V, VI, and IX, and queen Tiye, the wife of Amenhotep III.

The Bab Al-Gusus cachette contained the mummies of priests and priestesses of Amun from the 21st Dynasty, while those in the Al-Asasif cachette contained 30 intact anthropoid wooden painted coffins with mummies inside of priests and priestesses of the 22nd Dynasty, among them three mummies of children.



Agricultural Life in Ancient Egypt

EI-Enany announced that the results of CT scans carried out on three of the mummies of the Asasif cachette, including of a man, a woman and a child, had revealed that the three mummies were in very good condition. The man had died in his fifties, the woman when she was 35 years old, and the child when he was ten years old, he said.

The scans showed that the child had two gold bracelets in his hands. “More scientific studies will be carried out on all the mummies, as well as DNA analysis, in order to know their lineage and links with each other,” EI-Enany added.

Ahmed Al-Adawi, the CEO of Inertia, expressed his company’s keenness to nurture the cultural scene in Egypt as the sole and main sponsor of the 117th anniversary of the museum, telling the Weekly that “Egypt’s cultural and touristic status are enhancing the overall image of Egypt in the region and the world.

“We are proud that we are not only making our mark on the real-estate sector in Egypt, but also empowering the Egyptian economy through uplifting tourism,” he said.

Al-Adawi added that this year Inertia had particularly set its sights on fostering the anniversary of the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square, describing this as a step towards realising the company’s belief in developing the community.

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