

# Exhibition 'Discovering Tutankhamun'. Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford: 24 July 2014 - 2 November 2014

A report by Marsia Sfakianou Bealby,  
University of Birmingham

This article reports on the 'Discovering Tutankhamun' exhibition in the Ashmolean Museum,<sup>1</sup> an event which follows the development of the study of Tutankhamun from the days before his tomb was unearthed,<sup>2</sup> up to modern times. I write primarily from the museological point-of-view, although the Egyptological perspective is also considered.

## Aim and significance of the 'Discovering Tutankhamun' exhibition

Material from the archives of the Griffith Institute (University of Oxford) and loans of artefacts from museums across the globe are displayed as part of this exhibition and, according to Paul Collins, the exhibition's co-curator, the aim is:

*(...) to introduce visitors to: the meticulous process of documenting and conserving objects from the tomb; the impact of the discovery on the wider world; and what we know about Tutankhamun and his time.*<sup>3</sup>

Thus, with regards to museological value, the significance of this exhibition lies in its educational scope and the way this scope is disseminated. In fact, to my mind, 'Discovering Tutankhamun' is an excellent example of how academic-level Egyptology can be adequately and enthusiastically 'communicated' to the public. This is because the exhibition has been planned with learning and leisure in mind. It aims at visitors of all ages and backgrounds and is designed according to the 'something-for-everyone' model (see below).<sup>4</sup> Additionally, even though it is not the first time that the story of the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb is told through an exhibition, 'Discovering Tutankhamun' provides a very objective view of this event. Here, unlike other similar exhibitions,<sup>5</sup> the focus is not solely on Tutankhamun, nor on Howard Carter or Lord Carnarvon, but also on others; for example, the photographer Harry Burton,<sup>6</sup> and illustrator and copyist Nina de Garis Davies<sup>7</sup> - a strategy adding to the narrative of the discovery and thereby increasing the learning experience for the visitor.

Although items discovered in the tomb of Tutankhamun are hardly displayed,<sup>8</sup> some memorable archaeological

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1 I visited the exhibition on 5 August 2014. The pictures featured in this article are copyrighted material and

2 Tutankhamun's tomb was discovered by Howard Carter and his workmen in late 1922. Carter was financed by George Herbert, Fifth Earl of Carnarvon (Lord Carnarvon).

3 Dr Paul Collins, Jaleh Hearn Curator of Ancient Near East, Ashmolean Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Oxford. Personal communication: 4 August 2014.

4 For the cultural, educational and leisure role of museums, and how museum collections are received by different types of visitors, see for example Hein 1998; Foley and McPherson 2000; Burun et al. 2007, Falk 2009, Golding 2009 and Simon 2010.

5 An example is Howard Carter's house on the West Bank of Luxor, opened to the public in 2009. Naturally, the exhibits of this historical dig house focus on Howard Carter and his work and life in Egypt. Carter's House is not well-documented, apart from online reports of the *t3.wy* Foundation (Maessen a and b). Another example is the 'Egyptian exhibition' at Highclere Castle, where the story is mainly told from the perspective of Lord Carnarvon (see Carnarvon 2009).

6 A few of these pictures can be seen on the Griffith Institute website (n.d. a): <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/carter/gallery/>

7 For example, a copy of the facsimile of the so-called 'painted box' (Cairo, Egyptian Museum, JE 61467) by Nina de Garis Davies (Griffith Institute Davies MSS 8.2).

8 The only items on display from the tomb itself are some watermelon seeds and almonds. The Ashmolean museum had requested the loan of a few treasures from the Tutankhamun collection held by the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, yet the plan was not completed (Masters: 24 July 2014, BBC News website:

<http://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-28403598>; Mostafa: 30 July 2014: The Cairo post website:

artefacts from the Amarna Period are exhibited; many on loan from other international museums. Also, among the exhibits is rare material from the Griffith Institute (original records, photographs, drawings, etc.) which offers an insight into the history of Egyptian archaeology and Egyptology. Therefore, the exhibition is of great Egyptological significance and is likely to be welcomed by academics and Ancient Egypt enthusiasts alike.

### Exhibition layout

Exhibits are displayed in four consecutive galleries. These galleries can be cognitively linked with each other in the sense that they reflect both the passage of time and the progress of research (fig. 1).

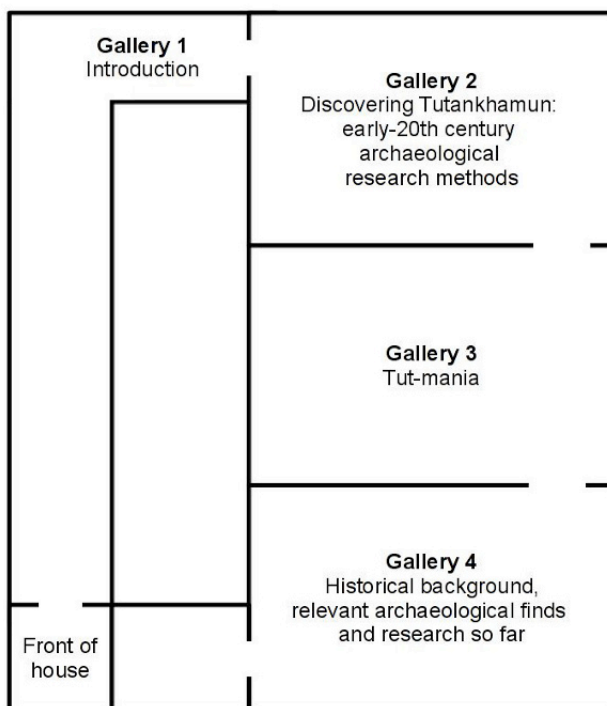


Fig. 1: Layout of the exhibition space.

In gallery 1, Howard Carter, Lord Carnarvon, Tutankhamun and his tomb are all introduced from respective temporal and geographical perspectives. The displayed material takes the visitor up to the date when the tomb of Tutankhamun was first discovered, with Carter writing to Lord Carnarvon about the exciting news (4 and 5 November 1922).<sup>9</sup>

The exhibits in gallery 2 describe what happened after the tomb was 'officially opened', introducing visitors to early Twentieth-Century archaeological methodology; for example, how the artefacts were recorded and photographed.

Gallery 3 is dedicated to 'Tut-mania', the impact of the tomb's discovery upon early Twentieth-Century art and culture, with the displayed items reflecting the growing fame of Tutankhamun and his discoverer.

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<http://thecairopost.com/news/120213/news/egypt-asks-ashmolean-museum-to-lend-it-personal-collection-of-howard-carter>).

<sup>9</sup> See the following page for a discussion of Carter's letter to Carnarvon.

Lastly, gallery 4 is focused on archaeology. It presents some original artefacts of the Amarna Period, all related to Tutankhamun and having some bearing on the background and rule of both himself and his family, and the aftermath of his death. It also informs how modern researchers study and maintain the legacy of Tutankhamun and his tomb, and how research on the tomb's artefacts has progressed to the present day.<sup>10</sup>

As the visitor moves from gallery 1 to 4, the story of the discovery 'unfolds' in a very coherent manner, with the displays answering many of the questions that visitors may have along the way. Thanks to the well-planned layout, exhibits and ideas are complementary to each other.<sup>11</sup>

## Media

The media that the curators have selected to present the exhibits are also very appropriate for the 'something-for-everyone' model.<sup>12</sup> They mainly include large reproductions of images and text,<sup>13</sup> mounted in glass display cases and accompanied by informative exhibit labels written in a large font and in easy-to-follow language.<sup>14</sup> Panels include historical information and text which prompts the audience to engage with the ancient material.<sup>15</sup> The labels are also available as a printed hand-out, also in large text that is very appropriate for the visually impaired. Children are given some beautifully-designed coloured educational activity hand-outs, with quizzes that stimulate teamwork, learning and critical thinking.<sup>16</sup> Apart from printed material, other educational media are also used; for instance, a 'mock' early Twentieth-Century camera can be used by visitors to look at some pictures of the tomb.<sup>17</sup> Other special media, which encourage learning for both children and adults in an entertaining way, include a radio broadcast with Carter describing the moment he first saw the treasures of the tomb (the poor sound quality is part of the attraction of this audio effect),<sup>18</sup> a black-and-white video featuring the discovery,<sup>19</sup> a cheerful audio track of 'Old King Tut' by Billy Jones and Ernest Hare (1923),<sup>20</sup> and replicas of artefacts from Tutankhamun's tomb. Guided tours are also provided twice a week by enthusiastic exhibition volunteers. Other events organised by the Ashmolean are also related to this exhibition.<sup>21</sup>

## Featured exhibited items

There are several noteworthy elements of the exhibition that I would like to present. However, due to space limitations

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10 On a panel in gallery 4, visitors are informed that to date only about 30% of the finds from Tutankhamun's tomb have been processed and properly published.

11 Thus, the high-quality standards of this exhibition match international exhibition standards (for example, National Association of Museum Exhibition: 'American Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence' <http://name-aam.org/about/past-winners/standards-for-museum-exhibitions>).

12 For participatory museums see in particular Simon 2010.

13 For example, photographs of the tomb, taken by Harry Burton, are presented in enlarged reproductions covering the wall surfaces from floor to ceiling. Similar reproductions present text such as the famous conversation between Lord Carnarvon and Carter. Lord Carnarvon: - *'Can you see anything?'* Carter: - *'Yes, wonderful things'*.

14 There are numerous examples of material displayed in glass cases. For instance, in gallery 2, Carter's original drawings and glass lantern slides are presented in glass display cases and cabinets.

15 For example, in gallery 3, where a board game inspired by king Tut is displayed in a glass box (date of board game is 1923), visitors are asked: *'How do you think board game Tuttoom is played?'* followed by a joke: *'How do you ring an Egyptian bell? Tut an' kum in!'*

16 1) Handout titled 'Tutankhamun Scavenger Hunt', containing such prompts as, *'Search the galleries to find...'* an Egyptian hieroglyph, something tiny, etc.' 2) Handout: 'Discover Tutankhamun Family Trail', with quizzes and games appropriate for all the family.

17 The question visitors are asked in order to encourage the use of the 'mock camera' and 'glass plates' is: *'What did Harry Burton see when he looked into his camera?'*

18 Audio copyright: the British Library and BBC Archives. The 'poor sound quality' enhances the exhibition experience in that it assists visitors to mentally place this audio work in time - it makes it more authentic. On the beauty and originality of 'old exhibits' see for example Rosenstein 2014 (antiques) and van de Wetering 2012 (old objects). These two authors refer to material objects, although an old audio would operate similarly.

19 Video copyright: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

20 The recording is made from an original Bakelite record displayed in the exhibition, from a private collection. The audio is available on YouTube: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wCze\\_\\_MSZs](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-wCze__MSZs). See note 18.

21 Events are listed on the Ashmolean Museum website, on <http://www.ashmolean.org/exhibitions/discovertut/events/>.

within this work, just a few examples have been shared here.

In gallery 1, Carter, in his personal diary, which is displayed in a glass display case, describes the moment of the big discovery: '*Discovered tomb under tomb of Ramses VI...*' (Sunday, 5 November 1922).<sup>22</sup> Thus, through this diary and other similar displays in galleries 1 and 2, the visitor is reminded that before computers were employed, all excavation records (logbook, site plans, small finds, wall-paintings, hieroglyphic inscriptions, etc.) were handwritten or drawn by hand, with the occasional black-and-white picture taken. That was time-consuming and difficult work indeed.

Gallery 2 features a giant reproduction of a photograph that is likely to surprise visitors because of its unusual theme. The photograph (fig. 2) is taken by Lord Carnarvon and depicts famous Egyptologists and mission members, among them Howard Carter and Harry Burton, dining in relative splendour inside the tomb of Ramesses XI (KV 4).<sup>23</sup> From the perspective of modern museology, such images may look shockingly bizarre, and present something of a paradox or appear somewhat ironic. The presentation of such exhibits is seemingly a strategy which never fails to impress and educate the public.<sup>24</sup>

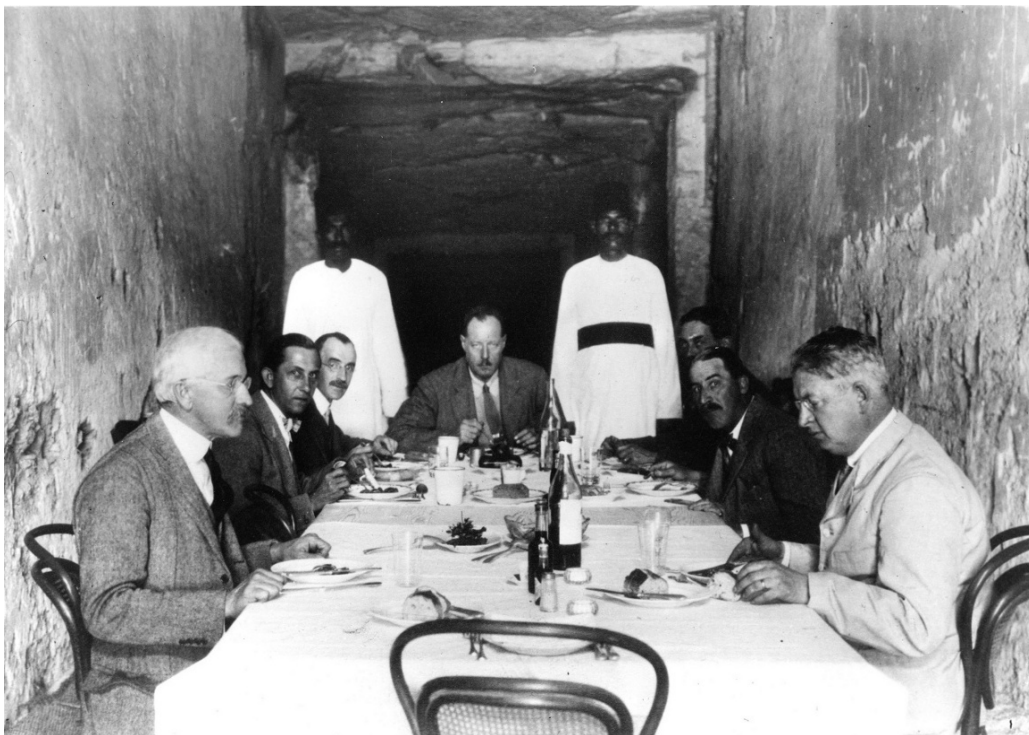


Fig. 2: Lunch in the tomb of Ramesses XI. Photograph courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.

In gallery 3, many extraordinary early Twentieth-Century items are displayed, from books to advertising posters, exhibition tickets and even a sheet of music, all prompted by 'Tut-mania' and Egyptomania. The displays include some original postcards sent to Carter to congratulate him; among them a handmade card sent by a six year old boy which is an excellent medium with which to engage children in the events surrounding the discovery of

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22 Catalogue number Griffith Institute T.A.A.i.2.21177-8. The complete text of the diary can be read on the Griffith Institute website: <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/gri/4sea1not.html> (Malet et al. n.d.).

23 The photograph is Griffith institute p1. 544. Diners are (from left to right) J. H. Breasted, H. Burton, A. Lucas, A. Callender, A. Mace, H. Carter and A. Gardiner.

24 See for instance Golding 2013 and Robins 2013: 89-118 with examples.

Tutankhamun's tomb.<sup>25</sup> A jacket, dating to c 1930 and inspired by Ancient Egyptian themes (fig. 3), mentally transports the beholder back to the fashion shows of the late twenties and early thirties: being redolent of the mood of that time.<sup>26</sup>



Fig. 3: Jacket with Egyptian motifs.  
Photograph courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.

Lastly, among the exhibits in gallery 4, I should mention a limestone fragment of Queen Nefertiti offering a bouquet to the Aten (fig. 4).<sup>27</sup> Other excellent artistic examples displayed are the head of the god Amun with features resembling those of Tutankhamun, on loan by the Metropolitan Museum of New York,<sup>28</sup> and another notable artefact depicting the nose and lips of Akhenaten, which has also travelled all the way from New York to be displayed in Oxford.<sup>29</sup> Particularly notable are the quartzite clasped hands of a royal double statue from Tell el-Amarna, loaned from Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung in Berlin.<sup>30</sup>

#### Final remarks

In galleries 1 to 3, the story of the discovery of Tutankhamun is told from the Western perspective, while gallery 4 focuses on the material culture of Ancient Egypt. As a result, the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb is considered from a range of viewpoints relevant to the study of ancient Egypt.

25 The display of the handmade card sent to Howard Carter by a six year old boy from Ireland named Luke Mahon (TAA ii.3.14.). A picture of this card can be seen on the Griffith Institute website (n.d.b): <http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/learning/look/fan-mail.html>. This postcard operates as an educational activity, as on the educational hand-out 'Discover Tutankhamun Family Trail' (see note 16), the young visitors are asked what gift they would sent to Carter to congratulate him.

26 Loan from the Museum of London, catalogue number E.697.

27 From Tell el-Amarna; c. 1345 BC. Ashmolean Museum, catalogue number AN1893.1-41[171]. Arnold 1996: 84; pic. 75.

28 Metropolitan Museum of New York catalogue number 1907 (07.228.34), c. 1336 - 1327 BC, possibly from Thebes. Pictures and further information are available on the Metropolitan Museum of New York website (2010), on <http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/07.228.34>. See also Arnold 1996: 81, pic. 73.

29 Metropolitan Museum of New York catalogue number 26.7.1395, Tell el-Amarna, c 1345 - 1335 BC. Pictures and further information are available on the Metropolitan Museum of New York website (n.d.) on <http://www.metmuseum.org/collection/the-collection-online/search/544710>. Arnold 1996: 24, pic. 16.

30 Tell el-Amarna, c. 1345-1335 BC. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Ägyptisches Museum und Papyrussammlung, ÄM 20494. A picture is available on the museum's official website, slideshow on the left: <http://www.smb.museum/en/museums-and-institutions/aegyptisches-museum-und-papyrussammlung/about-the-collection.html#>



Fig. 4: Nefertiti offering a bouquet to the Aten. Photograph courtesy of the Ashmolean Museum.

Yet, while visiting the exhibition, I gathered that some visitors were disappointed because of the absence of actual artefacts from Tutankhamun's tomb. It is true that a few finds from the tomb of Tutankhamun, loaned from Egypt, would act as a major attraction for the visiting public. Nonetheless, if such prestigious artefacts were displayed, other important exhibits could have been outshined. After all, it appears to me that the priority of the curators was not to display finds from the tomb of Tutankhamun in the first place, but instead to educate the public about the research itinerary of the discovery and, in this respect, the educational aims of the project, as established by the curatorial team, are well met.<sup>31</sup>

As it stands, the presented ideas of the 'Discovering Tutankhamun' exhibition are clear and easy-to-follow. The content is informative and engaging, and all knowledge shared with the public appears highly reliable. The topic is not entirely original, as in parts it has been the subject of other exhibitions,<sup>32</sup> but its presentation in the Ashmolean (particularly 'Tut-mania') is, thanks to a variety of captivating media, innovative and profoundly memorable. Overall, the exhibition is tailored to the needs of the majority of the visitors, including visitors with special needs.

The unique character of the exhibits and the well-researched exhibition displays, all reflect an eye-pleasing aesthetic value. As a result, the exhibition - and particularly gallery 3 - has the relaxing atmosphere that one would find in a modern art gallery.

Lastly, the well-written and richly illustrated exhibition catalogue, 'Discovering Tutankhamun', presents the main points that visitors can take with them after leaving the museum.<sup>33</sup>

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31 For the aims of this exhibition see the beginning of the report.

32 Particularly the story of the discovery. See examples in note 5.

33 Written by the curators of the 'Discovering Tutankhamun' exhibition, Collins and McNamara 2014.

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