

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Fact Sheet



### The Ancient Egyptians Coffins

The ancient Egyptians believed that they had more than one soul, and that an individual's physical body needed to be preserved because the body and the souls would need to be re-united in the afterlife (see Mummification Fact Sheet). The fragile, mummified body needed protection – both physical and spiritual. The coffin provided a box in which the body could be placed to prevent it from being damaged. Just as importantly, the symbolic decoration, painted scenes and hieroglyphs gave spiritual protection to the deceased. These often elaborate paintings and patterns were believed to have the power to become real in the afterlife and would help to ensure the wellbeing of the deceased as they travelled from one world to another. In the case of the later highly decorated coffins, such as those for Nakhtefmut and Nespawersheft, the decoration was a substitute for a decorated tomb chapel.

**Mummy Case (Gallery 19, Case 25)**  
E.64-1896

The care and skill evident in the construction, design and decoration of the coffins on display, reflect ideas and beliefs that lie at the heart of ancient Egyptian culture.

### Construction of Wooden Coffins

Many Egyptian coffins were made of wood, although bodies were also buried in large clay pots, an example of which can be seen in Gallery 19 (Case 23, Label 67, Museum No:EP549). Wood was an expensive material in Egypt, a dry, desert land. Although some trees such as palm and almond grew along the banks of the River Nile, these both had slim trunks and produced soft wood, which made them unsuitable for making coffins. Hard wood had to be imported from countries such as the Lebanon and transported to Egypt by sea and then along the river. A wooden coffin was, therefore, a sign of status.

To make the coffin, the wood was cut into planks, using metal tools, which were first made of copper, then bronze and later iron. Sandstone, rather than metal planes, was used to smooth rough edges and flatten surfaces. As technology advanced, so did the skills of the carpenters and joiners, who developed sophisticated methods of holding the coffin together using dowels, dovetailing and mortise and tenons. Evidence of their work can still be seen on exposed sections of the displayed coffins.

Glue was used to make the coffins more secure. This was produced by boiling and then reducing animal products such as skin, bone and cartilage. Many coffins had a coating of lime plaster to provide a smooth painting surface. Clay and gypsum plasters were used on tomb walls. Paint was

made from ground minerals mixed with gum, egg-white or gelatine, and a final protective coating of varnish or beeswax was sometimes applied over the completed decorations.

## Cartonnage

In addition to wooden coffins, during the Third Intermediate Period the Egyptians moved to making mummy cases out of linen soaked in animal glue, which is known as cartonnage. The mummy case was formed on a mud and straw core, starting with a layer of plaster. Layers of linen and glue were then laid around this core (a bit like papier-maché). It would dry in a matter of hours after which the back would be split open and the core removed by hand. A final coating of plaster would go on the outside once the body had been inserted. The case was then laced together down the back and decorated. The mummy case of Nekhtefmut (E.64.I896) is a particularly fine example of cartonnage

## The Coffin of Khety

Gallery 19, Case 25, Museum No: E71.I903  
1985-1950 BC.

### Construction

This is the oldest wooden coffin on display. It is rectangular with the floor missing, but the surviving upper section and lid are made from at least 23 pieces of timber, jointed and pegged. The corner joints were bound together with leather thongs to make sure there was a tight joint before the pegs were inserted. The coffin would have been carefully positioned on a north-south axis.

### Paintings

The mummy's head was positioned behind the painted eyes on the coffin's side. These painted eyes had several purposes. They were thought to be a "window" which would enable the dead to look out onto the world. S/he could receive offerings, and benefit from the life-giving rays of the sun, through these magical painted eyes. Beneath each eye is a sign meaning wholeness and healing. This sign, which can be seen on many other objects in the galleries, represents the markings on a falcon's head, and is derived from the story of a fight between Horus and Seth (see Gods fact sheet). The four corners of the coffin are guarded by inscriptions to the four sons of Horus, the guardians of the dead, Imseti (human-headed) Hapy (ape-headed), Duamutef (jackal-headed) and Qebhsenuf, (falcon-headed). These four can also be seen on the lids of canopic jars, guarding the contents within (see Mummification Fact Sheet)

## The Coffins of Nespawershefyt

Gallery 19, Case 17, Museum No: E.I.1822

Dynasty XXI, circa 990 B.C.

### Construction

This coffin was made for an important official at the temple of Amun-Re at Thebes and its grandeur reflects the status of its owner. There is evidence that Nespawershefyt received promotion after the coffins were decorated. This can be seen in the patches of darker varnish, e.g. in the middle of the outside of the mummy board. Much later than the coffin of Khety, this is a far more complex object. It is anthropoid (person-shaped) and made in three sections to fit, like a Russian doll, one inside the other. The smallest section lay over the actual mummy, like a mask made to fit the whole body. This was then encased in the further two layers of coffin. All the elements of the coffin are made of wood coated in plaster. The construction can be seen where it is damaged. Wooden pegs fix the sections of wood that make up the faces, and they are also used to fix some of the corners. The wood has been analysed and found to be Christ's Thorn and Sycamore Fig, both native to Egypt.

### Paintings

The elaborate paintings, inside and out, depict many scenes from Egyptian mythology. On the middle section of the coffin is a scene depicting the weighing of the heart. Here, Anubis, the jackal-headed god of mummification, adjusts a set of weighing scales. In one pan of the scales sits the feather hieroglyph meaning divine order (Maat) and in the other lies the heart of the deceased. In order to enter the afterlife, the heart must balance with the feather to be in harmony with divine order. To the left of the scales, Thoth, the god of writing with his ibis head, records the result of the test. Also pictured are Horus, the hawk headed god, Osiris and his wife Isis (see Gods and Goddesses fact sheet). At the feet of Osiris stands a creature called the devourer, who waits to gobble up the heart if the deceased fails to pass the test.

On the opposite side of the middle section, Re-Atum, the god of the evening sun (shown with a ram's head), is painted on his solar barque (boat) as he takes his nightly journey through the underworld. Beneath is Apopis, the serpent of darkness, who tries every night to devour the sun on his journey. Horus, standing at the prow of the boat, tries to spear Apopis to allow the sun to pass safely and rise again for a new day. On the same side of the middle section, Nut, Shu and Geb, deities of sky, air and earth respectively, can be seen. Nut is uppermost, Shu stands with arms raised and Geb lies at his feet.

On the same side of the middle section is a scene with a tree goddess. Here Nesperwashefyt kneels in his finely pleated linen garments as he makes an offering to the tree goddess. The Ba, or bird-like aspect of his soul, rests in the shade of the tree drinking the water being poured by the goddess. Behind the goddess you can see the tomb, with its doorway and colourful cornice, and above it is a pyramid. The sloped bands of red with rows of dots represent the Western desert, where the Egyptians sited their tombs. Quite often trees were planted close to tombs to provide the comfort of shelter from the sun for the dead and their Bas.