

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

## EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

### Fact Sheet



## The Ancient Egyptians Mummification

From earliest times in ancient Egypt, bodies placed in shallow graves dried naturally in the hot dry climate. This may have influenced the later tradition of preserving bodies after death. The ancient Egyptians believed that the preserved body of the deceased was needed as a central focal point to which the spirits of the deceased, including the ka, the ba and the shu could return. Therefore, in order to survive in the afterlife the body had to be preserved and treated appropriately.

The purpose of mummification was not to recreate the body as it had looked in life, but rather to create a new, magical image, for eternity, that was ready to go into the realm of the dead.

There is written and archaeological evidence to show that there were several different ways to carry out mummification depending on the period, as well as the status and wealth of the deceased. For example, during the Roman period when the mummy shown on the left was made, the internal organs were not removed. X-rays of Late Period mummies show that the embalmers were very careless and several mummies from that period have been found to have missing or extra limbs!

The most elaborate process of mummification is described below.

**Mummy of a Young Man**  
Gallery 19, Case 19, No. 28

## The Process of Mummification

Each stage of the mummification process involved spells, prayers and magical or religious acts to protect and help the deceased on their way. Many of the materials used in mummification were symbolic as well as practical, such as beeswax, meaning rebirth, and resin, perhaps meaning royalty or divinity. The main features of the process developed over the centuries were as follows :

### 1. Washing

Before mummification began, the body needed to be purified by washing. This was important ritually as well as practically, as water was associated with purification and life, and was linked to rebirth.

### 2. The Removal of Organs

Next, the body was taken to the wabet or per nefer, the 'House of Purification'. The internal organs – lungs, liver, intestines and stomach were removed through an incision in the left side of the abdomen. These organs were kept, washed, then soaked in natron, a naturally occurring salt-like substance, treated with hot resin, bandaged and placed in canopic jars (see below). The heart was left inside the body as the ancient Egyptians believed it controlled intellect and memory, and would

be needed for the Judgement of the Dead in the afterlife. The body cavity was then washed and cleaned, ready to be dried. The brain was not needed so was removed through the nostrils and discarded.

## Examples of Canopic Jars

### Four Canopic Jars (827 - 773 B.C.)

Gallery 19, Case 20, Label 10, Museum No: E217-1900

Canopic jars contained the preserved organs of the deceased. They were buried in the tomb with the mummy. A full set of Canopic jars comprised four containers, one each for the lungs, liver, stomach and intestines of the deceased. The organs were preserved and wrapped, put into the jars and then placed in the tomb next to the coffin. At the time of rebirth it was thought that the preserved organs would re-enter the body, which could therefore function again in the after life.

Images of the deceased or of the four sons of Horus, (each of whom protected an internal organ), were represented on the lids of the four canopic jars:

|            |               |
|------------|---------------|
| Imseti     | human-headed  |
| Hapy       | ape-headed    |
| Duamutef   | jackal-headed |
| Qebehseuef | falcon-headed |

### 3. Drying

Natron was used to dessicate the body. It was placed both on the body and also in linen bags inside the body cavity, until the body had dried out. This process took several weeks.

### 4. Packing

The whole body was then ritually washed with Nile water. The body and head were packed with a permanent stuffing of resin-soaked linen, (or sometimes sawdust or earth) to make a more natural shape. Aromatic resin packing also gave a pleasant smell. The abdominal incision was sewn up, the nose plugged and pads of linen placed under the eyelids.

### 5. Anointing and Adornment

Oils, spices, perfumes and coniferous resins were rubbed and sprinkled onto the skin to make it aromatic and to maintain suppleness. Ritually this helped to give the body the 'odour of a god'. A hot resin coating was applied to the whole body. This coating gives us the word 'mummy' - Some later mummies have been found that are coated in bitumen. The Arabic word for bitumen is "mummiya" - but in fact most mummies were actually coated with resin. The body was treated with great care - cosmetics might be added to the face, and perhaps hair added too if needed.

### 6. Wrapping

The body was then wrapped carefully in many layers of linen. Head and limbs were wrapped first individually and then the whole body. Many protective amulets and pieces of jewellery were placed within the wrappings and appropriate protective prayers and spells were recited throughout this precise ritual. One of the prayers ends "you will live again, you will live forever". In later periods, outer layers of bandage were often dyed red-pink with plant dyes. This was a solar colour and is thought to represent the life giving powers of the sun.

### 7. Masks and External Ornament

In the later periods, mummy masks began to be used. The head was considered extremely important in ancient Egypt and to lose it on the way to the afterlife was greatly feared. The mask protected the head and also gave an idealised identity of the deceased for eternity. In ancient Egyptian belief, images and words could become real in the afterlife. Destroying a name on a

monument or defacing a person's image was therefore considered a grave act of violence – as that person could not then exist for eternity in the afterlife.

The type of mask used varied depending on the period, and wealth of the individual. Solid gold could be used for a king, but for ordinary people cartonnage, linen and plaster, was usual. In the Roman period, wooden painted panel portraits were used and sometimes plaster heads.

### Examples of Mummy Masks

You can compare these later masks and portraits, late 1<sup>st</sup> – early 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD **linen and plaster heads** and wrapped **mummy with panel portrait** (Gallery 19, Middle of Case 19) to the much earlier **Mummy Mask of Thay** (2106 – 1963) B.C. (Gallery 19, Case 21, Label 29, Museum No: E198.1903).

The style of the Mask of Thay is wholly Egyptian, as can be seen from the wig, eye make-up and the shapes of the eyes and ears. This mask was placed directly over the face of the deceased and then bound into the layers of wrapping. The mask is made of layers of linen and plaster.

### 8. Coffins

The complete mummy was then placed in a coffin and taken for burial (see **Coffins Fact Sheet**).

### Mummy of a Young Man

Gallery 19, Case 19, Label 28, Museum No: E63.1903

This mummy dates from the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD. From x- rays it can be seen that the individual inside the wrappings was aged 30-35 years old. He seems to have died of natural causes.

The panel portrait of his face appears modern and Western European because it was made in Egypt; but under Roman influence. The gilded laurel wreath on his hair and the beard are traditional Classical features.

Painted on his mummy wrappings, of stiffened, dyed, red cloth are gilded symbolic decorations - the symbols of the winged sun disk, falcons and a funerary deity painted on the chest, and a wedjat eye on each shoulder show that this individual is protected magically.