

# Ancient Egyptian mummies are moving home



The coffin lid of ancient Egyptian priest Nedjemankh.  
[Photo: [www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org)]

*Museums around the world have been returning Egyptian mummies back to their rightful owner — the people of Egypt. CHEW WEI SHAN brings us the story.*

Nedjemankh was a priest in Ancient Egypt 2,000 years ago. For the past three years his mummified body lay in a gilded coffin in New York City, on display at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Last year, U.S. authorities studied the journey of Nedjemankh's coffin. They learned that it had originally been looted and smuggled from Egypt before passing through the Middle East, Germany, and France. So, New York respectfully returned the mummy to its rightful home, at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation in Cairo.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art apologised to Egypt, explaining that it was an **unwitting** victim of fraud. They were shown fake documents, and had no idea that they had acquired a stolen **artifact**.

The **repatriation** made Egyptian Antiquities Minister Khaled el-Anany very happy. He felt that this sincere gesture showed a “very strong solidarity” between Egypt and the U.S.

## Returning stolen artifacts

Like Nedjemankh, wandering mummies around the world have been making their way home. Egyptian archaeologist Dr Zahi Hawass is one of many historians working hard to reclaim these lost artifacts. “When (looters) steal these artifacts to put in their museums, they damage the value of the tomb,” he laments. “They damage a civilisation.”

Tomb raiders have long been stealing precious artifacts from Egyptian sites and selling them to museums. Over the past two decades, many stolen antiquities have been recovered and repatriated back to Egypt.

Another such example is the mummy of Rameses I. Rameses I was an Egyptian king who reigned over 3,000 years ago, and the grandfather of Egypt’s most famous king, Rameses II. It is said that professional tomb robbers stole the mummy in 1871, from the Valley of the Kings in southern Egypt. It was then sold to a Canadian antiquities dealer, and ended up in Canada’s Michael C. Carlos Museum (MCCM). After learning that the mummy had been illegally obtained, MCCM returned it to Egypt in 2003.

Thieves have not only trafficked whole mummies, but their **dismembered** body parts, too. Two years ago, American authorities found a skull and two hands that belonged to three ancient mummies. A tourist had smuggled them out of Egypt in 1927. U.S. federal investigators seized the remains and returned them to Egypt in 2018.

Historian Bassam el-Shamaa is enraged by these acts of theft. “It is against all human rights to sell dismembered parts of human bodies even if they are mummies,” he asserts. Passionately, he implores the world to “stop selling and smuggling Egypt’s heritage”.

## New museums in Egypt

Egypt made a major discovery just last October. Researchers unearthed 30 ancient coffins, or sarcophagi, buried neatly in the sand. This is the first cache of coffins to be discovered by an Egyptian mission, after years of foreign-led archeological digs. The sarcophagi were so well kept that the colours and details on their paintings have remained vibrant and intricate for 3,000 years. When archaeologists opened the coffins, they found perfectly preserved mummies inside.

The mummies will be restored before being moved to the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), which will be opening at the end of 2020. Egypt says that when the GEM opens, it will be the largest archaeological museum in the world. The museum sits on 50 hectares of land — the size of 93 football fields — and is located about two kilometers from the Great Pyramids of Giza.

The museum will showcase a world-famous collection surrounding the legendary King Tutankhamun, affectionately known as “King Tut”, an ancient Egyptian pharaoh from the 18th dynasty. Egypt is expecting the museum to attract more than 5 million visitors every year.



King Tutankhamun's death mask.  
[Photo: Mary Harrsch]

Egypt's ever-growing collection of priceless artifacts is more than its current museums can handle. Another attraction being built to cope with this is the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC). It has been partially open since 2017, but construction is still incomplete.

The museum will offer a collection of 50,000 artifacts, showing how Egyptian civilization has evolved from prehistoric times to the present day. Excitingly, the gold coffin of Nedjemankh has recently arrived and is on display there, and NMEC is expecting it to attract many more visitors in the years to come.

**VOCAB BUILDER**

**unwitting** (say “an-wit-ting”; adjective) = unsuspecting; unaware of the full facts.

**artifact** (say “ar-ti-fakt”; noun) = a man-made object of historical or cultural interest.

**repatriation** (say “ri-pat-tree-ay-shen”; noun) = the return of a person to his or her home country.

**dismembered** (say “dis-mem-ber’d”; adjective) = having had body parts cut off.

## *Transporting ancient mummies*

A mummy is a dead human or animal whose body has been preserved. Ancient Egyptians used sophisticated techniques to keep these bodies intact, in a process called mummification. They believed this would prepare the dead person for the journey into the afterlife.

Mummification was a complex process that evolved over time. The Egyptians aimed to stop the body from decaying by using natural salts, cold environments, removal of air, and other techniques. Before lowering the body into a sarcophagus, they would wrap it tightly in linen bandages.

Today, thousands of years later, these ancient mummies are very fragile. Their skin, bone, tissue, and hair can be easily damaged, along with the linen wrappings that have become delicate and brittle over time.

It takes a lot of effort to pack and transport a mummy safely. Handlers have to be very gentle. Many layers of foam products and, sometimes, specially-designed soft bean bags are used as pillows for the mummy to support its irregular shapes snugly. Air is then drawn out with a vacuum to secure the body in place. On the mummy’s journey home, vehicles are climate controlled to keep the sarcophagus cool and dry.

Imagine just how many careful hands a mummy passes through before it arrives at a museum for you to look at!