

Egypt Gallery, Bristol's City Museum and Art Gallery

Amid hoards of enthusiastic children, *Jane Weeks* discovers that Bristol's Egyptology gallery is as much about people as objects

Everyone knows that exhibitions on ancient Egypt and dinosaurs never fail to attract delighted children. And so, when I visited Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery's new permanent exhibition on ancient Egypt during half term, it was predictably heaving with kids.

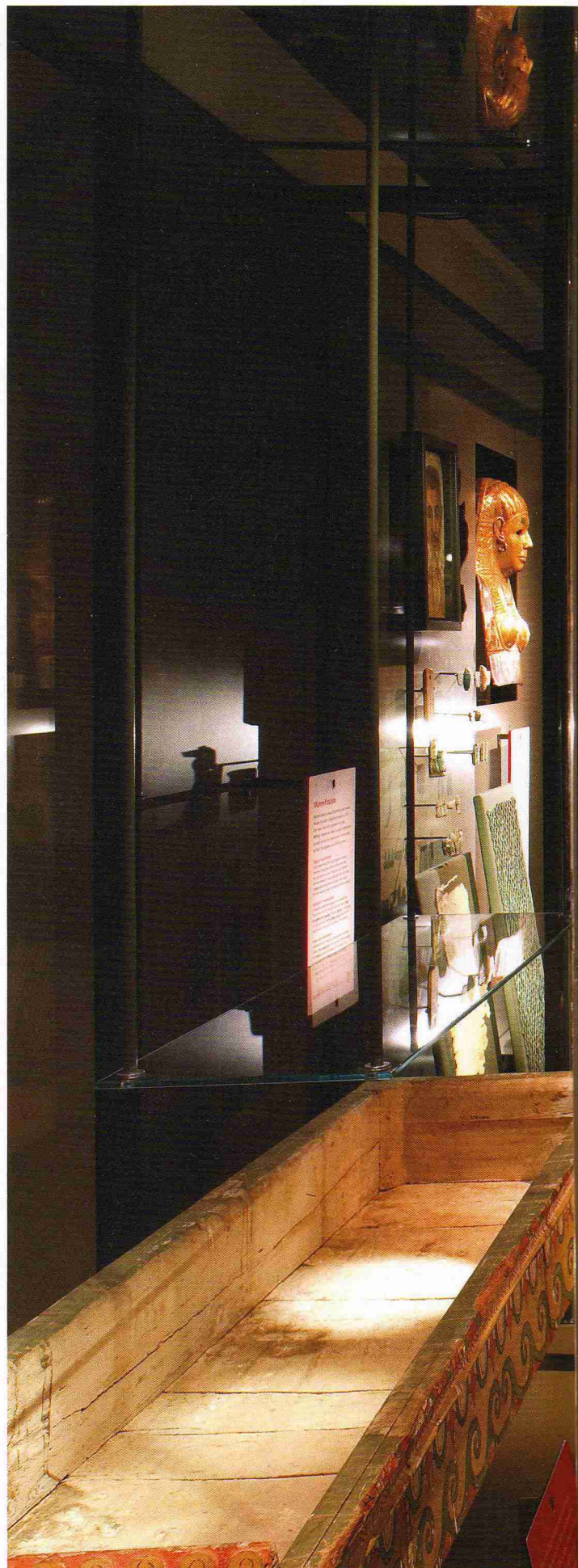
This gallery, which opened in May, displays more than 600 objects from the museum's collections. The space is divided by a blue corridor, representing the River Nile, with sections on Belief and Life on one side of the river and Death and Afterlife on the other. Belief covers the religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians, Life looks at the social structure of the society, from pharaoh to farm labourer. Death addresses funerary belief, the mummification process and the symbolism of coffins, while Afterlife considers the ancient Egyptians' ideas about the world after death. The cases are filled with beautiful objects, from an elaborately decorated mummy case to mummified cats, rows of funerary figurines and boat models.

A river runs through it: the Death and Afterlife displays at Bristol's new gallery. The space is bisected by a blue corridor that highlights the centrality of the Nile to the ancient Egyptians

Though each case has small colour-coded graphic panels, there are no labels. Instead, small touchscreens for each case provide layers of information. They are very user-friendly – just by touching the outline of one of the artefacts on display you can access information about the object, such as how it fits into the ancient Egypt timeline, how it was made and where it was found.

At the end of the gallery, visitors are invited to record their thoughts on individual objects. Comments range from the reflective – “Incredible to think it is 3,500 years old” (of a necklace of beads) – to the cheeky: “This has to be the weirdest thing I have ever seen... Can I borrow it for the Easter holidays?” (of a wooden head rest).

So far, so relatively predictable. But there are many interesting aspects to the approach adopted by the team at Bristol. This gallery is very much about the





Ways of seeing: the Egyptian gallery takes care not to focus on pharaonic finery alone. The lives of the ordinary, nameless, ancient Egyptians are also considered

people of ancient Egypt, not just the objects they left behind. And it tells the story of all sections of society. So as well as hearing about the royal family, visitors can also find out about the poorest, those who had short and harsh lives, and were buried with no grave goods at all.

Visitors are constantly reminded how we can connect to the ancient Egyptians. A series of images of Egypt today sets the scene, and Then and Now notes, aimed at children, highlight some of the similarities: "Ancient Egyptian children played with this ball over 4,000 years ago. Today, the only difference is that we have balls that can bounce."

This is an exhibition that aims to make you think. In one corner, a screen above a black box fills with words: "4,600 years ago a man died... His body is below." You can then choose whether to push a button to illuminate his body, a crouched skeleton

Project data

Cost £500,000
Funding Renaissance in the Regions, Friends of Bristol Museum and Art Gallery, V&A Purchase Grant Fund, South West Screen, Henry Moore Foundation
Exhibition design in-house
3D design and project management in-house (Simon Fenn)
Graphic design in-house (Jeremy Dixon, Helen Rawsthorn)
Lighting design in-house (Simon Fenn)
Touchscreens Lexara
Multimedia design Atacama AV Audionation UK
Audio recording and production Films@59
Object mounts in-house, the Museum Workshop, Cliveden Conservation
Showcases in-house, Solaglas, Alrod, Hinton Plamer, Click Netherfield
Building contractor Hemmings
Lighting suppliers Concord Lighting, Absolute Action
Graphic supply and installation BAF Graphics

wrapped in the remains of a resin-soaked textile. But before you make the choice, you are reminded that all bodies were once living people and should not be seen as objects or scientific specimens. Elsewhere, you are offered the choice of whether to unwrap a mummy that is beginning to decompose, or explore it with non-invasive techniques. The slow-motion video "striptease" of the mummy is strangely moving, as each layer reveals more information about the body. It ends, "out of respect", without everything being totally revealed.

Not everything succeeds. There is slightly too much going on in what feels like a small space. Does it really need two art installations by the same artist, Mariele Neudecker? A specially commissioned video artwork takes up one wall of the gallery and shows time-delayed live CCTV video streaming of visitors to the exhibition superimposed on video footage taken from a hot-air balloon trip over the Land of the Dead near Luxor in Upper Egypt. The narrowness of the space

means it's difficult to take it in and I'm not sure how much it adds to the experience.

The touchscreens are engaging, but a mixed blessing. They can repel older visitors and act as magnets for younger ones. During my visit, some excited children ran from screen to screen, without ever looking in the cases. And there aren't enough screens; "screen rage" will be a problem during busy periods. With only three terminals in the Explore and Respond section, there is no time for leisurely exploration, as the next users are hovering expectantly.

This is one of those rare exhibitions that dares to ask questions without providing the answers. All around me in the gallery, parents and children were talking animatedly. And you're encouraged to continue thinking after you have left the gallery. A final question written on the wall is: "Have your ideas changed?" For me, and for many other visitors, I suspect that they have.

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