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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE

Taking the Wraps Off Of Egypt

For years, I have been a closet Egyptologist. A ritual part of my childhood was the walk through the mastaba of Pernebi at the entrance to the Metropolitan's Egyptian galleries, leading to a dimly-lit clutter of mummy cases, stones, shards and statuary—as fascinating as it was fusty. In those days you came by way of a far less soigné Great Hall, where the odd knight on horseback pointed his lance to treasures beyond. Turn right for Egypt; turn left for Assyria and Mesopotamia.

You still turn right for Egypt, but the only thing that is the same is the mastaba of Pernebi—it is too much of a problem to move it. Everything else in the Metropolitan's vast Egyptian collection is being reorganized and reinstalled in newly designed galleries, of which the first group, containing about one third of the collection, opens this week. Eventually there will be 23 refurbished galleries, covering 40,000 square feet.

Whatever controversies have plagued the Metropolitan in the recent past, or will continue to do so, the new Egyptian installation is beyond cavil: it is a model of scholarship and beauty. Putting the entire collection on display for the first time—not an item is to be left in storage—has been a herculean task. It has required painstaking organization into primary and secondary material, which has then had to be arranged for chronological sequence and esthetic effect, to serve both a popular and a specialized audience.

This dual objective—to permit serious study by scholars and to provide an illuminating overview of Egyptian art and civilization for the average visitor —has been carried out with consummate clarity and style. But the style never upstages the collection, a fault of many exhibitions in which the installation is more visible than the objects, and important innovative display techniques remain firmly in the background. Meaning and content are not sacrificed to visual impact, nor are esthetics sabotaged by scholarly concerns. (Egyptology, in spite of the popular romance of tomb curses and treasures, is one of the

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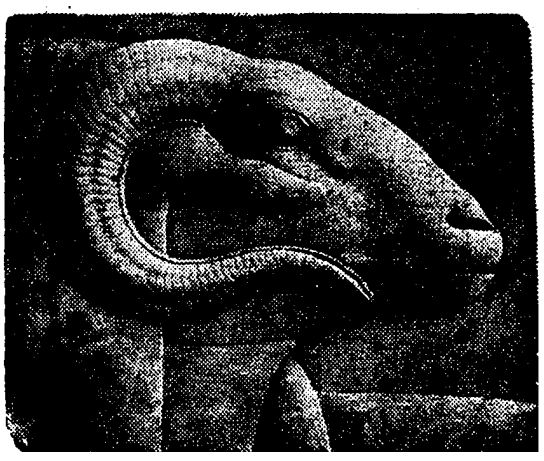
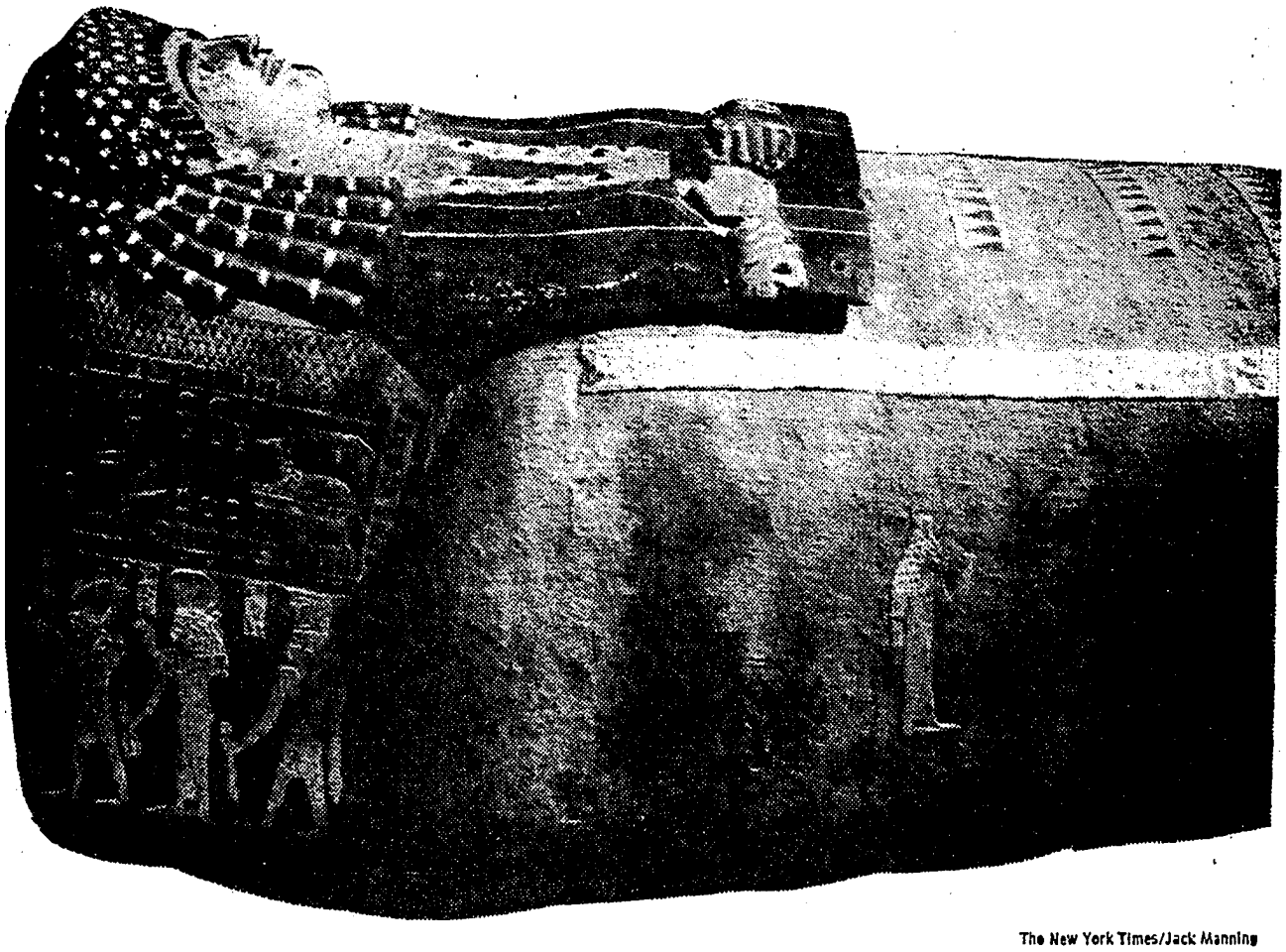


Out of the Mets' closet—an 11th Dynasty wooden figure and a ram-headed divinity.

Taking the Wraps Off of Egypt at the Met



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most snobbishly pedantic areas of the Germanic art-historical establishment.)

Even with the Metropolitan's strict adherence to chronology and an encyclopedic display, the arrangements are dominated by a superlatively sensitive eye. Credit must go to Christine Lilyquist, curator of the Department of Egyptian Art, Kevin Roche, of the architectural firm of Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates, the graphic design firm of Rudolph de Harak Associates, the museum's vice director for Architecture and Planning, Arthur Rosenblatt, and the museum's director, Thomas Hoving.

The exemplary balance between art and information has been achieved primarily through new ways of handling and displaying the collection, in a design of extraordinary finesse. Ultimately, the job is done through design—all of the physical ways in which the curatorial point of view is carried out.

One of the most important new devices is a "walk-in" exhibition case, which continues along the entire length of several galleries, or fills a single wall, and is accessible to the staff through doors that are part of its glass facade. These cases are framed only at the top, where the mechanical systems are accommodated; otherwise glass is butted to glass in large panels set directly into a channel in the floor, for the least visual distraction. This is the most subtle kind of panache.

These glass enclosures are built in projecting and receding patterns, rather than on a straight line, to allow for emphasis on choice articles, or greater visibility. They are, in effect, simply skillfully partitioned areas with intricate climate control and complex security systems. But what they appear to do, almost miraculously, is to organize items that range from the miniature to the monumental into a beautiful and communicative whole.

Other items of particular quality or interest are freestanding in the rooms. The central figure of a king sets the stage for three galleries of treasures from his tomb; lotus-topped columns and giant sarcophagi focus the look and feel of a period or a place. Several small, subsidiary rooms contain study collection material.

'A balance between art and information has been achieved.'

Colors and materials are muted, keyed directly to the contents of the galleries. All walls are a tint of the ancient stone that forms so much of the display; backgrounds are unbleached linen. New floors have been laid of unpolished rose-gray granite, very close in color to the Aswan granite on view. There is an occasional carpet or velvet rail of forest green; everything else is designed to draw out the subtleties of the objects themselves.

Stone is placed on stone, with tomb walls and fragments displayed vertically on heavy limestone backgrounds rather than on concrete or plaster. Wood is placed on wood; mellow carved statues stand on Honduras mahogany bases. There is an occasional slim flash of polished chrome steel in rails or cases, or at a column base, indicating that the column is shown at less than full height.

The key to the solid elegance of the installation is in the fact that this is a permanent display of a permanent collection, and the approach, materials and techniques therefore differ markedly from a temporary exhibition. (There is an inner gallery for changing shows.) Permanent, stable and beautiful solutions have been stressed.

This is also a very sophisticated kind of display that represents not only a particular architect's fine hand, but also a stage of installation practice that goes beyond the popular theatrics or the white-walled asceticism to which museums have accustomed us. The emphasis here is on eloquently understated richness and veracity. This is the very fine art of encouraging the objects to speak for themselves.

Last and far from least, information is given generously, without didacticism or "communication" gimmicks. Clear and readable labels silk-screened on the glass are usually in direct eye line with the exhibits. There is none of the eyestrain and backing and bobbing of the National Gallery's "Eye of Jefferson" or the Whitney's "Two Hundred Years of American Sculpture," to name two recent, conspicuous labeling failures. There are table-like cases with illuminated text and pictures of geographical, historical and cultural material, and there will be chairs for their leisurely perusal.

Some of the best is still to come. But it will be hard to top the wide-eyed, high-style, 11th Dynasty polychromed wood beauty with a basket on her head, or the remains of those jewelled Coptic ladies more suggestive of temporal pleasures than of immortality. It will all be out of the closet, superbly, by 1978.