

The Editorial Notebook

Tut Tut

Impossible as it seems, the Treasures of Tutankhamun live up to their advance billing. There are greater periods in Egyptian art, but none with more appeal. The impressions are vivid; the gold is dazzling; the colors breathtakingly fresh. Set against the drama of the photographs of the search and discovery in the desert, the Tutankhamun story has no peer. But it has its price.

The supershow — the gilded extravaganza that is the current star attraction of the museum circuit — brings special problems. The publicity helps museums in their struggle for visibility, funds and even survival in a time of mounting expenses and shrinking endowments. At the same time, it brings subtle costs and corruptions.

The expense of simply servicing the supershow is enormous. In addition to deflecting a disproportionate share of available resources, there is also the distortion of museum priorities. The supershow shortchanges other departments, programs and interests.

What is still more dismaying is that these exhibitions have become commercial as well as esthetic ventures. The production and merchandising of reproductions, under museum auspices, is now big business. The museum gains financially; in the case of this exhibition Egyptian museums also will benefit. The unfortunate tradeoff is the implicit endorsement of confused esthetic values that contradict what the art museum stands for — the real, the rare, the unreproducible.



The problem is that those who buy replicas believe they are buying art: The knockoffs are purchased not in some ordinary shop, but in the museum itself. For fancy prices up to \$2,000, the relationship between art and authenticity ought to be made clear. It is a perversion for museums to muddy that distinction.

Tutankhamun will be a particularly hard act to follow, but those who have created the supershow industry are

right in there trying. Another solid-gold spectacular, on the art and times of Alexander the Great, is in preparation for the 1980's. That such shows bring joy to millions is a boon, but reservations persist.

What happens to the necessary one-to-one relationship between the art work and the viewer in these crowds? What of the spontaneous or return visit — impossible with ticketed, restricted admission? Cannot ways be found to promote the smaller shows that are every bit as fine and rewarding, like the current Nubian show at the Brooklyn Museum?

The growth of the museum as circus, or spectacle, or cash register, makes one view even Tutankhamun's treasures with mixed feelings. The hope, of course, is that some people, attracted by status symbol or event, will return for what the museum really offers — the intensely private experience of truth and beauty that permanently changes one's perception of the world. **ADA LOUISE HUXTABLE**