

TEACHER NOTES

MUSEUM COLLECTION



Mummy Coffin of Pedusiri

TITLE *Mummy Coffin of Pedusiri*

LOCATION Gallery 1, Collection Galleries

ARTIST Egyptian (Late Dynastic or
Early Greco-Roman Period)

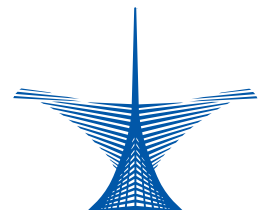
DATE ca. 500–200 BC

MEDIUM Plastered, polychromed,
and gilded wood

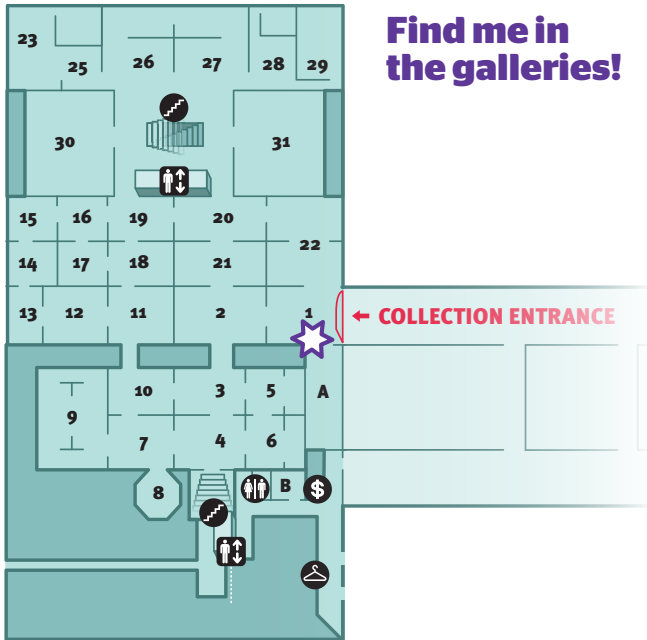
SIZE About 7 feet tall and 2½ feet wide

ACCESSION NUMBER M1967.20

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Find me in the galleries!

Who made this?

The names of the artist or group of artists who constructed and painted this coffin have been lost to time. However, thanks to the **hieroglyphics** painted on the coffin, we know who was once buried inside it: a man named Pedusiri. In ancient Egyptian, Pedusiri means “the one whom Osiris [god of the afterlife] has given.” Although we do not know what Pedusiri did for a living, he must have been of a high social class, because his coffin is made out of imported wood, covered in gold, and carefully painted with ornate images. As a result, it would have been a very expensive object, one only someone of great wealth would have been able to afford to have made.

What is it made out of?

This coffin is made of wood. Because there are so few trees in Egypt, wood was a precious commodity and probably imported. The coffin was likely made from many separate pieces of wood held together with plaster—we can see these independent pieces at the base of the coffin, where the plaster has worn off and the wood is visible. The coffin was entirely covered with plaster and then painted with **polychrome**, or pigments mixed with wax. Certain parts, like the idealized face, were **gilded**, or covered with a thin sheet of gold leaf.

When was this made?

Scholars think that this coffin was made towards the end of the ancient Egyptian civilization, between 500 and 250 BCE, just before it was completely taken over by the growing powers in Greece and Rome. Though Egypt was a consistent power in the ancient world for roughly 3,500 years, in its later years it faced persistent attacks from a variety of other empires, including the Persians, the Ancient Greeks (led by Alexander the Great), and eventually the formidable Romans.

Discussion Starters

Take your students to the *Mummy Coffin of Pedusiri*. Give them a few minutes to look closely at the whole object. Encourage them to walk around this 3-D work, and then use the following questions to guide your class discussion in the galleries.

- If you already saw an image of this work in the classroom, what do you notice now that you didn't notice when you looked at the photograph?
- What do you think this object was used for? What do you see that makes you say that?
- What materials do you see? In other words, what is this object made out of? Brainstorm a list with the group. Are these materials expensive? What does that tell us about the person who might have been buried inside this coffin?
- Look closely at the scenes painted on the chest of the object. What is going on in each scene? If you had to choose one figure or person that is most important in each scene, which one would it be? Why did you choose that figure? Who do you think they might be?

Why was this made?

Coffins like this one housed the body of an Egyptian person—in this case, a man named Pedusiri. Ancient Egyptians had a deep belief in the importance of the afterlife. To ensure that a person's spirit (or *ka*) would have safe passage from this world to the next, the physical body had to be preserved properly. This coffin has a rare depiction of one of the steps in the process of **mummification**, which is performed to protect the deceased's body from decay. Just below the ornate, beaded funerary collar on the chest, a priest dressed as Anubis, the jackal-headed god of mummification, prepares the **canopic jars**, into which internal organs were placed after being removed from the body. The four jars pictured here would have held the stomach, intestines, liver, and lungs of the deceased person, and are decorated with protective gods of various human and animal shapes. The ancient Egyptians removed and discarded the brains of the deceased but left the heart in the body, because they believed that the heart was the home of thought and feeling and, therefore, necessary for the afterlife.

What do the decorations mean?

This coffin is an **anthropoid** coffin—it is shaped like a human. Throughout ancient Egyptian civilization, coffins evolved from rectangular boxes (thought to be inspired by the shape of a house) to receptacles that echoed the shapes of the human body. Some aspects of the painted images on the coffin correspond to the human figure: the head, the chest, the legs, and the feet.

The head of the coffin shows an **idealized** human face. In other words, this was probably not what Pedusiri actually looked like but, perhaps, what he wanted to look like. His almond-shaped eyes, smooth skin, and high cheekbones were all considered conventionally beautiful features by ancient Egyptians.

The figure's chest is entirely engulfed by an ornate, beaded funerary collar. **Registers** filled with illustrations and hieroglyphic text make up the rest of the coffin's decoration: Nut, the sky goddess, spreads her wings across the length of the chest; below, the mummification scene takes place.

Is there a mummy inside?

Not anymore! The body has not survived, but it would probably have been wrapped in a **cartonnage**, a series of plastered, painted, and varnished linens, and then placed inside this coffin.

Ideas for the classroom

- **LANGUAGE ARTS** What would Pedusiri say? Write a monologue from the point of view of the man who would have been buried inside this coffin. You may want to read up on the life of ancient Egyptians before you begin. (Try Egyptology Online in the Resources section.)
- **HISTORY** What does an archaeologist do and how were Egyptian tombs discovered and catalogued? Research how scholars and historians have learned about ancient Egyptian life through excavating tombs. See Resources for some ideas.
- **SCIENCE** Look closely at the surface of the coffin. Choose an area where you can see lots of different layers of the object. What materials are these layers made out of? Make a cutaway diagram of the layers and label what each material is. Describe the textures. See Resources to learn more about how these objects are **conserved**, or taken care of, by people who work in museums.
- **ART** Look closely at the register in the center of the coffin that shows the ritual of mummification. Watch the video on mummification in the Resources section, and then draw more registers to show what would come before or after the preparation of the canopic jars.

Resources



Books

- Defrates, Joanna. *What Do We Know about the Egyptians?* New York: Peter Bedrick, 1991.
- Millard, Anne. *Pyramids*. New York: Kingfisher, 1996.
- Perl, Lila. *Mummies, Tombs, and Treasure: Secrets of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Scholastic, 1987.
- Winters, Laurie. "Mummy Coffin of Pedusiri." *Building a Masterpiece: Milwaukee Art Museum*, 47. New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2001.



On the Web

- *Life in Ancient Egypt* from the Carnegie Museum of Natural History (<http://www.carnegiemnh.org/exhibitions/egypt/index.htm>) gives a good introduction to various aspects of living in ancient Egypt.
- *Ancient Egypt* (<http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk/>) an interactive website with games and stories about Ancient Egyptian life and culture.
- *Egyptology Online* (<http://www.egyptologyonline.com/welcome.htm>) has resources and articles about ancient Egyptian life.
- "Egyptian Art" at the Metropolitan Museum of Art's *Timeline of Art History*. (http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hi/te_index.asp?i=14) has a detailed, illustrated overview of Egyptian art.
- The J. Paul Getty Museum's "Mummification Process" video (<http://www.artbabble.org/video/mummification-process>) shows the many steps and layers of mummification.
- The Institute of Conservation (<http://www.icon.org.uk/>) has resources about how art objects are conserved.

Vocabulary

Anthropoid Human-shaped

Canopic jar Funerary object that held the internal organs of the deceased body

Cartonnage Layers of plastered, painted, and varnished linen wrapped around the deceased's body

Conservation Prevention of damage to an art object to keep it in its original form as long as possible

Gilded Covered in a thin layer of gold

Hieroglyphics The picture-based writing system used by ancient Egyptians, read right to left

Idealized Represented as a perfected, ideal form

Ka The ancient Egyptian term for a person's spirit

Mummification The process used by ancient Egyptians to protect the physical body from decay

Polychrome Colored pigments mixed with wax

Register Section of a work of art that visually divides one narrative area from another

Sarcophagus Another word for coffin; a holding place for the body of a deceased person

Let us know what you think of this guide and how you use it—email us at **teachers@mam.org**.

