SAN FRANCISCO—Ancient Egyptian mummies meet modern medicine in an exhibition that merges science and technology, archaeology and history, medicine, culture and art with Egyptian religion and magic. Scientists, Egyptologists, physicians, museum curators and conservators worked together to explore two mummies in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. Thanks to the high-resolution, three-dimensional computed tomography (CT) scans conducted at Stanford Medical School’s Department of Radiology, secrets long-held within the sarcophagus have now been brought to light. By using these state-of-the-art scientific techniques—more commonly used on the living—this interdisciplinary team discovered vast differences between the two mummies.

One mummy investigated is that of Irethorrou, a priest from an important family living in Akhmim in middle Egypt, about 2,600 years ago. In 2009 his mummy was scanned and his coffin examined, bringing Egyptologists closer to understanding Egypt’s final era of greatness during the Late Period, from the Saite Dynasty (664–525 BC) and later. Inscriptions on Irethorrou’s coffin describe his social position within the clergy of the fertility god Min.

With the scanning of a second mummy, perhaps 500 years older, from the late New Kingdom (Dynasty 20 or Dynasty 21 1100–1000 BC), visitors can see how funerary beliefs and mummification practices changed between these two periods in Egyptian history. The older mummy is of a woman traditionally known as “Hatason” and presents a stark contrast to the perfectly preserved body of Irethorrou. Hatason came from Asyut, a large site on the west bank of the Nile about midway between Cairo and Aswan. Neither her mummy, which was not fully desiccated by the time of her burial causing her body to decompose, nor her coffin fared as well as those of Irethorrou.
Visitors can examine both mummies by means of an interactive virtual dissection table supplied by Anatomage, a San Jose medical solutions company. Through the table, they can recreate the CT scan and virtually “remove the lids of the coffins.” The coffins of Irethorrou and Hatason and are accompanied by examples of hauntingly beautiful amulets and tomb furnishings.

The results of the CT scans were studied by Jonathan Elias of the Akhmim Mummy Studies Consortium.

Installation

Los Angeles–based artist RETNA created a bold design for the gallery walls by combining modern-day graffiti art with influences from Egyptian hieroglyphs. RETNA (b. Marquis Duriel Lewis, 1979) uses a distinctive language of calligraphic forms to create a deeply personal poetry, drawing from a variety of typographies, including Arabic, Egyptian, Hebrew, Old English and Native American.

Visiting | Legion of Honor
Lincoln Park, 100 34th Avenue, San Francisco. Open 9:30 a.m.–5:15 p.m. Tuesdays–Sundays. Open select holidays; closed most Mondays.

About the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco
The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, comprising the de Young in Golden Gate Park and the Legion of Honor in Lincoln Park, are the largest public arts institution in San Francisco.

The Legion of Honor was inspired by the French pavilion at San Francisco’s Panama-Pacific International Exposition of 1915 and, like that structure, was modeled after the neoclassical Palais de la Légion d’Honneur, in Paris. The museum, designed by George Applegarth, opened in 1924 on a bluff in Lincoln Park overlooking the Golden Gate. Its holdings span 4,000 years and include European painting, sculpture, and decorative arts; ancient art from the Mediterranean basin; and the largest collection of works on paper in the American West.

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Images (L-R)