

## HIDDEN TREASURE

# Uncovering the Secrets of an Egyptian Coffin

## A treasure re-discovered

*Paula Metzner, KVM collections manager:* When I was a student at Michigan State University in the 1970s, I loved to visit its museum. Tucked back in the corner of the ground floor exhibits was an empty wall with a tiny window. A peak through that window revealed a mummy's coffin. Little did I know that 20 years later I would actually be taking care of that coffin and learning about the person who was buried in it.

I was thrilled when I was hired by the Kalamazoo Valley Museum in 1986. The museum had an Egyptian collection and I was going to be working with it! I was reviewing our records and discovered we had a mummy coffin on loan to the MSU Museum. I called and learned it was the one tucked back in its exhibit gallery. Then, in 1994, I was given the task of curating a new mummy exhibit, along with Valerie Eisenberg, our director of visitor services. We both loved Egyptology so it was a great project for us. Of course, our first thought was of the coffin at MSU and how it would be a wonderful asset to the new *Mystery of the Mummy* exhibit. The coffin's return to KVM began a journey of discovery that revealed how old it was, who was buried in the coffin, and who owned it before we did.



*Above: the outer coffin before restoration—note its colors darkened by age and dirt, as well as its damaged surface. At left, the outer coffin is cleaned and filled prior to inpainting.*



sent it to conservators in Ohio and Massachusetts. When it came back, the coffin was breathtaking! There, hidden for years, were the rich and vibrant colors of a beautifully painted face and hieroglyphics.

## A shiny new face

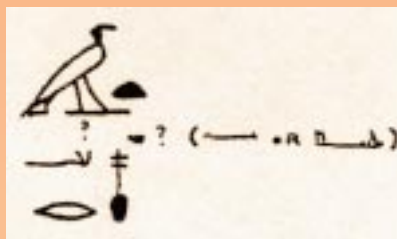
Our first responsibility when the coffin was returned was to clean and stabilize it. The boards of the coffin had been kept in place with wire; it was covered in layers of old shellac and varnish; and it had accumulated years of dirt and grime. Its fragile condition and delicate decorations required the expertise of professional conservators to clean and repair it. So, we crated it up and



## Her name uncovered

Valerie Eisenberg, director of visitor services: We contacted Egyptologist Dr. Jonathan Elias and asked the all-important questions: "How old was it and who was buried in the coffin?" Dr. Elias carefully studied the construction and painted decoration, and read the hieroglyphics. He determined that the coffin was from the 22nd Dynasty (sometime between 900 and 800 B.C.), giving the coffin an approximate age of 2,800 years. He told us coffin practices from that period of time included the single, central column of inscription and the exposure of the natural wood below a highly decorative collar design, which is exactly what you see when you look at the outer coffin.

The inscription on the coffin lid reads: "A grant which the king gives, and Osiris—the foremost of the west, lord of Abydos, may they give offerings and necessities, cattle and fowl, invocation offerings, incense, cloth, and refreshing drink to the Osiris (an honor conferred on the deceased person) Tjenet-nefer, daughter of Paka..." (the remaining symbols for the family name are missing).



*Tjenet-nefer's name in hieroglyphics.*



*The coffin after restoration; the image of the goddess Nut can be seen on the inner lining of the coffin.*

## How she came here

The coffin and its mummy were first in the collection of John Barker, British Consul-General in Egypt between 1825 and 1833. It was then acquired by John Lee, a British lawyer and collector. Mr. Lee and his friend Dr. Thomas Pettigrew were known to have examined a number of mummies. On the 24th of June, 1833 in the presence of a group of British gentlemen, the mummy was unwrapped and dissected. Pieces were probably distributed to members of the audience, a rather grisly thought.

Two years after the death of John Lee in 1866, Lord Amherst of Hackney purchased the coffin. In June of 1921 Amherst's family put the coffin on the auction block at Sotheby's in London. Attending the sale was A. M. Todd from Kalamazoo, Michigan who purchased this and many other antiquities. In 1932 Todd's family donated the coffin to the museum.

Today, the coffin is no longer hidden but it's still a treasure. Look for it in the Mystery of the Mummy display on the museum's third floor.\*

