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Detroit Science Center launches 'Accidental Mummies of Guanajuato'

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They could almost give the pharaohs a run for their money.

On Oct. 10, the Detroit Science Center will open "The Accidental Mummies of Guanajuato" -- a scientific, medical and cultural look at 36 Mexicans buried between about 1850 and 1950 whose bodies were unintentionally mummified in cement crypts. The \$2 million, 10,000-square-foot show -- the first the center has organized for a national tour -- runs till April 11, and then will tour the U.S. for three years.

That the mummies are coming to Detroit -- their first visit abroad -- has everything to do with chance and quick reflexes on the part of the Science Center, which wrested the show away from a Chicago-area competitor. The DSC staff was ultimately able to convince Mexican authorities that Detroit's curatorial proposal offered the best chance the exhibit wouldn't turn the mummies, long revered as national treasures, into a carnival show.

"In Mexican folklore," says Tim Vargas, a Mexican-American who grew up in southwest Detroit, "everyone's familiar with Guanajuato."

Indeed, their import is such that former Mexican President Vicente Fox, who is from Guanajuato, will attend the Oct. 9 special sneak preview.

Humanizing the exhibit's mummies, who range in age from infancy to about 80, was key to winning Mexican approval.

"One of our goals was to get visitors to see them as people who lived 100 years ago," says Detroit Science Center president Kevin F. Prihod, who was instrumental in convincing local officials to let them travel to Detroit "not as gruesome mummies."

Accidental mummies

Originally discovered in 1865, the mummies appear to have dried through a combination of high heat and low humidity associated with the university town's mountainous, mile-high location 200 miles northwest of Mexico City.

Subsequent mummies were found over the years when bodies were relocated, generally when families failed to pay the municipal grave tax.

"Because of the cemetery's steep geography," says Detroit News business reporter Louis Aguilar, "there was no room to grow. They gave you five years to pay the cost of the burial. If you didn't, they just pulled you out."

Aguilar wrote the coffee-table book, "Long Live the Dead: The Accidental Mummies of Guanajuato," which the Science Center commissioned to accompany the show.

Crypts in the steep old Guanajuato cemetery were essentially free-standing cement walls with niches seven-high for caskets.

"If the heat and humidity were right," says Ronald G. Beckett, former co-host of National Geographic's "Mummy Road Show" and one of two experts the Science Center brought in to examine the bodies, "the crypt could become a baking oven, rapidly desiccating the individual and stopping decomposition."

Bodies that mummified tended to come from the middle vaults, which Beckett attributes to their insulation from rainwater above and seepage below, as well as cement's ability in the airtight crypts to draw moisture out of the bodies.

The first part of the Science Center's exhibit will be an introduction to Guanajuato 100 years ago. From there, visitors enter a re-creation of part of the public cemetery. The third section will showcase the mummies in individual glass cases, along with what biographical and medical data could be discerned. The last room will focus on the Mexican Day of the Dead.

'CSI: Mummies'

Modern-day mummies are not unheard-of, Beckett says. During the U.S. Civil War, soldiers were often embalmed in part with arsenic, which mummified them. Some of those bodies, Beckett adds, did in fact end up in carnival sideshows.

For more than a century, the 100-plus Guanajuato mummies -- who represent an almost random cross-section of the town's population -- were kept in nearby catacombs. But in 1970, Guanajuato's Museo de las Momias (Museum of the Mummies) was built, and has since become a devotional shrine for Mexicans.

Indeed, says Randy Walz, a former Detroitier who now heads the fine arts department at the University of Guanajuato, "People wait hours to get into the museum."

Once the mummies arrived in Michigan last April, the 36 bodies were subjected to gentle endoscopic examination and CT scans, much as a sick person might be. The aim was to assemble as detailed a picture as possible of the individuals' lives and subsequent deaths.

Think of it as "CSI: Mummies."

Additionally, the center engaged Barbara A. Martin Bailey, an FBI-trained forensic artist in the Oakland County Sheriff's crime lab, to re-create what they might have looked like. Full-body sketches will hang next to each mummy.

Vargas had a chance to get up close and personal with the mummies, since he heads the Imaging Center at Dearborn's Oakwood Hospital & Medical Center where 10 of them underwent CT scans.

"To see the mummies right there in front of you after hearing all the stories from your parents, aunts, uncles and grandparents," he says, "well -- that was breathtaking."

Lobbying for the show

But had the Science Center's Prihod not come across an article in the Chicago Tribune almost two years ago, the mummies might well have ended up in a cheesy glass case in a community-center gym in Cicero, Ill.

"It just seemed so wrong," Prihod says of the proposed exhibit. "So I went down to Guanajuato to tell them this could be a wonderful story of Mexican culture, but that if they went with Cicero, those mummies would be little more than a freak show."

Authorities from the museum and the city council visited Detroit for further discussions, and ultimately granted Prihod the right to stage the exhibit.

"I don't think I'm welcome in Cicero," Prihod says.

One Detroiter in particular who helped lobby the Mexicans was Ray Lozano, who heads the Michigan Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

Remarkably, one of the mummies is a Lozano -- date of death unknown -- that Ray thinks could be a distant relative, since Ray's father grew up in a nearby town.

"We talked about maybe doing a DNA test," Lozano says, "but now, to preserve the mummies as carefully as possible, they don't want to."

Still, he adds, he can't wait to see the sketch that forensic artist Bailey came up with.

"The Science Center has asked me for a photo," Lozano says. "We'll see if there's any family resemblance."

Exhibit

'The Accidental Mummies of Guanajuato'

Oct. 10-April 11

Detroit Science Center, 5020 John R St., Detroit

Members preview: 7-9 p.m. Oct. 9; \$125 per person, \$100 if buying more than one ticket

Tickets \$24.95 adults, \$22.95 seniors, \$19.95

12 and under

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Additional Facts

Exhibit

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