

CULTURE

Review: 'Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs' exhibit a must-see at HMNS

The high-tech exhibit made its world premiere Saturday in Houston, impressing with its scale and detail.

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Nov. 22, 2021



The coffin of the workman Sennedjem, displayed beside images of his burial chamber at HMNS.
Mike Rathke/HMNS

Billionaires may be able send you to outer space, but the Houston Museum of Natural Science can now transport you 3,200 years back in time.

And what a trip. The museum's stunningly reincarnated Hall of Ancient Egypt reopened Saturday in tandem with the world premiere of “Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs.”

Combining the 12,500-square-foot hall with the 20,000-square-foot Ramses exhibit, the space is fit for a pharaoh. The immersive experience was created by HMNS and the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities in Cairo. This is the first stop of a planned 10-city world tour, having opened at HMNS Nov. 20 and showing through May 23.

Entering the exhibit gateway feels like stepping into a Hollywood movie set. The lighting, music, desert-like quietude, the rows of replica columns — we're off to ancient Egypt.



The entrance to the Hall of Ancient Egypt at HMNS sports a gateway with hieroglyphic inscriptions.
Mike Rathke/HMNS

Initially, I get whiplash glancing to and fro at jewels, amulets and gold masks, knowing these are not props; they come from ancient tombs. Calm returns as the pathways lead smoothly around the exhibit spaces.

Their appeal goes beyond objects. The carefully choreographed experience puts the artifacts – including mummies – in the context of their time. Ramses the Great ruled 67 years, advancing Egypt's culture and influence; he expanded national borders, brokered history's first known peace treaty and spearheaded the building of cities, temples and monuments.

A high-definition projection, surround sound, precision lighting and special effects whisk visitors from the golden age up to the 1881 discovery of the ruler's remains and tomb treasures. Naturally, there's a virtual reality tour; it's led by an apparition of Queen Nefertari, Ramses' wife, and journeys through temples and sandstorms to the afterlife.

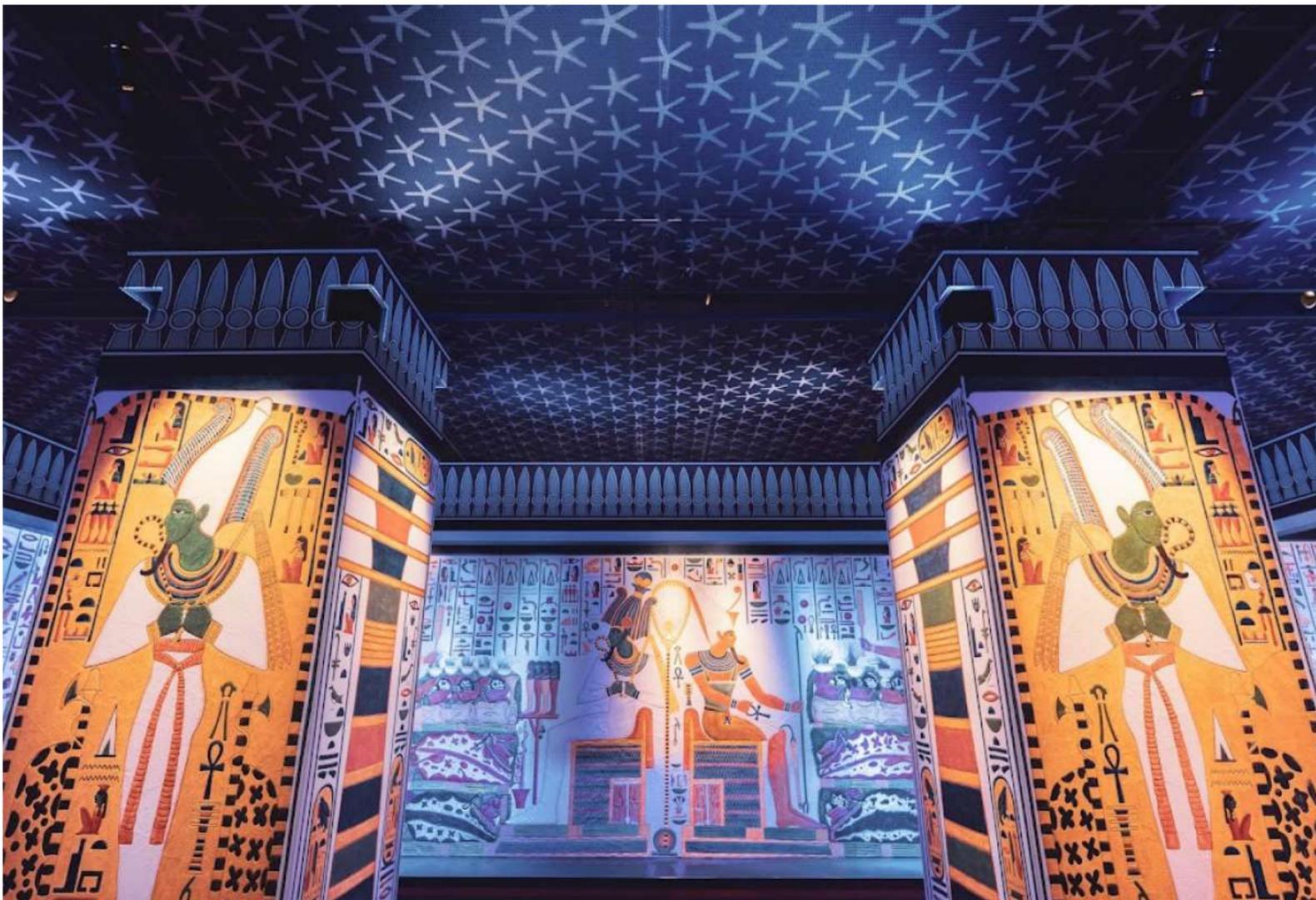


A colossal statue of Ramses the Great is part of the new HMNS exhibit focused on the pharaoh.
Mike Rathke/HMNS

HMNS exhibit designers explored temples, towns and tombs in Egypt to accurately recreate the art and architecture.

“We paid extremely close attention to detail,” says consulting curator Tom Hardwick, “to create artistic environments that would transport visitors to another time and place, allowing the look and feel of ancient Egypt to wash over them.”

Hardwick gives me a sense of the passion shared by archaeologists, scholars and museum exhibit designers who work with these precious tangible pieces of history. After years, the Cairo resident at long last gets to see the results of his labor, sharing details with me.



— This room with carved and painted reliefs in the Hall of Ancient Egypt at HMNS is derived from the Tomb of Nefertari in the valley of the Queens.

Mike Rathke/HMNS

A glittering stone vessel from a grave dating to the time the pyramids were built turns on a pedestal. It would have held precious oils used to prepare deceased royals for journeying to the afterlife.

A 3,000-year-old mummy lies in a glass case. Overhead, CT scans show the man, named Neskhons, turn as if on a barbecue spit, revealing amulets that were placed inside his body.

Hardwick explains the aim of mummification: the subject is being transitioned from a mortal into a god. The preservation process — akin to “being turned into beef jerky” — enables “transformation into a radiant being.” Masks covered in gold transfigure the dead person “in the rays of the sun.” And the hair on mummies’ heads? It’s real.



— A room inspired by the golden funerary shrines of Tutankhamun in the Hall of Ancient Egypt at HMNS.
Mike Rathke/HMNS

A cradle of tiny figures reminds me of vintage Playskool wooden peg people. Hardwick explains they represent servants left in the crypt to attend to the deceased's needs through eternity (now that's a long gig).

The prevailing belief that you *can* take it with you extended to pets; even mummified cats are on view. In a replica burial chamber, I shyly touch gleaming gold leaf walls covered with storytelling engravings. The tech team digitized imagery found in shrines to create these walls and coated them to allow touching.

Displaying nearly 200 objects, some over 5,000 years old, the exhibit flows through eight rooms. Its ambiance feels fitting for viewers bearing witness to ancient secrets and rituals, while the combination of technology, research and care make the exhibit a journey worth taking.

Find tickets and hours [here](#).

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