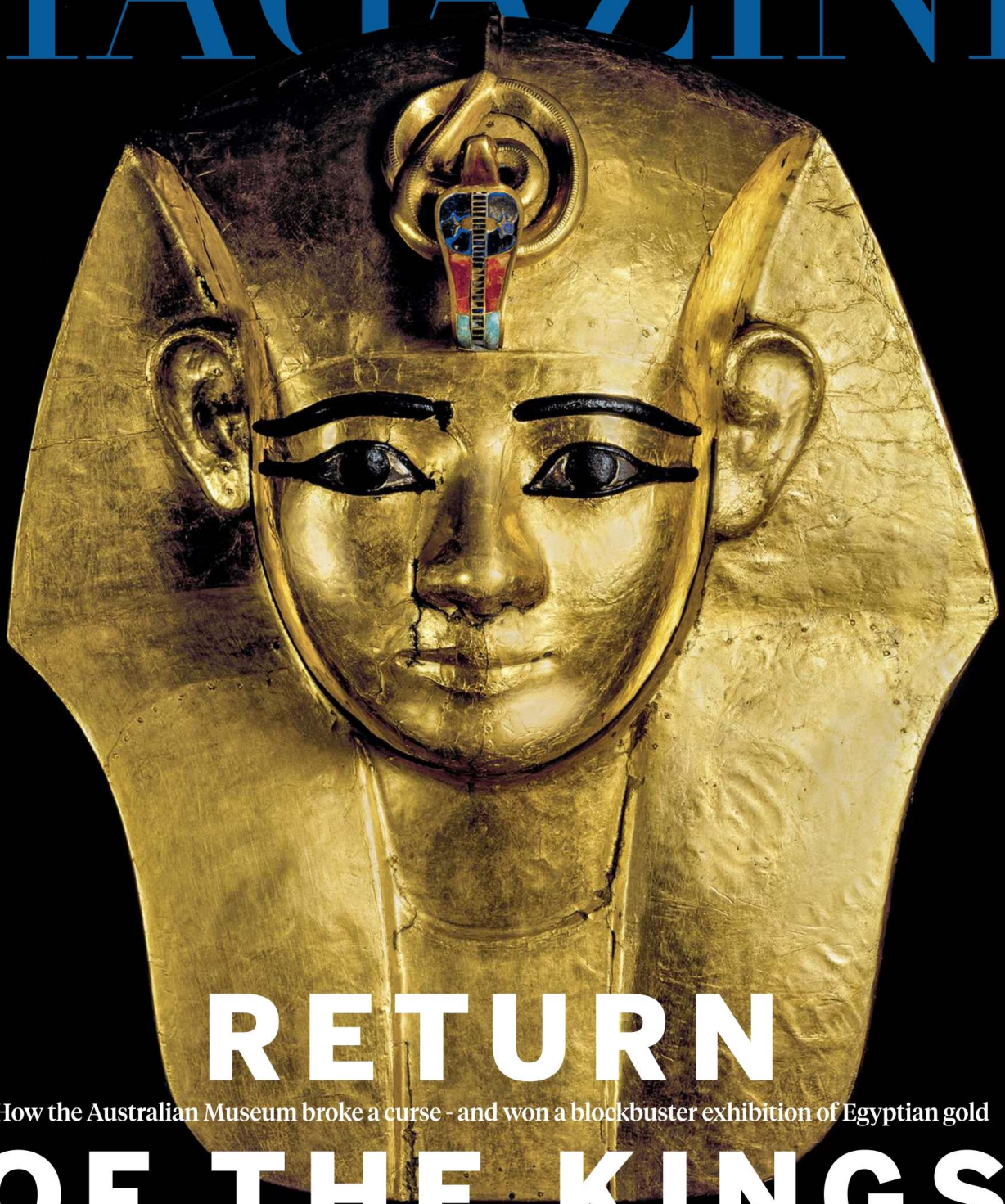


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RETURN

How the Australian Museum broke a curse - and won a blockbuster exhibition of Egyptian gold

OF THE KINGS

BY JAMIE WALKER



Night at the museum

A blockbuster exhibition about Ancient Egypt's greatest king is coming to Australia – thanks to the cajoling of an old friend

BY JAMIE WALKER

The man was barely 170cm tall and lived to the ripe age of 87, a wonder in itself. He was a warrior, peacemaker, and builder – the creator of an empire whose hazel eyes, set above an imperiously beaked nose, shone like the gold jewellery that hung from his slender frame. History knows him as Ramses II – or Ramses the Great, pharaoh of pharaohs. His name and feats more than 3000 years ago are etched in stone in the Valley of the Kings. To Zahi Hawass, the most celebrated Egyptologist of our time, it all could have happened yesterday.

We're talking in Paris at the unveiling of the \$2.4 billion exhibition about Ramses' reign that Hawass has curated. Stay tuned, because after its

run at the Grande Halle de la Villette, next stop for the blockbuster show is the Australian Museum in Sydney, a coup for director and CEO Kim McKay. She and Hawass are old friends – and that's part of the rollicking background to how the deal was done to bring the collection to Australia in November. For now, let's not be distracted from what's on the bill: 181 exquisite pieces and possibly the carved cedar coffin that held the pharaoh's mummified remains, never before seen outside of Egypt. There's an 8kg necklace of rolled gold and gems inscribed for a successor, Psusennes I, and the Colossal Head of Ramses in pink granite that towers over the entrance gallery. Hawass, who is 76 but boyish in his enthusiasm, has had the hard-to-impress local media eating out of his hand.

Three millennia
old: Ramses the
Great's coffin

“You see, this is how ancient Egypt captured the hearts of people everywhere. And why does it do that? It does it because this is history you can touch – it lives and breathes through these artefacts,” he tells *The Weekend Australian Magazine* as the French TV crews pack their gear away. “For me, I still live in the time of the pharaohs. I don’t live in the time of the people here ... I found my love, and my love was ancient.”

Only someone as high-wattage as Hawass could say this with a straight face. Yet when he’s seated in front of the silver coffin of another pharaoh, Shoshenq II, debonair in a fashionably-cut navy suit, a touch of grandiloquence seems entirely in order. A smiling McKay is by his side, enjoying the performance. It’s quite the occasion for her, too, the culmination of years of painstaking work and perseverance to land the grand prize of *Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs*. And this is Paris. In spring. Blooming beautiful since they hauled away the reeking garbage that had choked the streets during the protests over Emmanuel Macron’s plan to increase the French retirement age. “I’m really excited,” she says. “I think Australians will be blown away. Now, if we can only get that coffin...”

You’ve got to hand it to her. McKay never gave up, not even when Covid-19 sank her carefully laid plans to launch a \$57.5 million renovation of the nation’s oldest museum with a flourish in 2021. Hawass had phoned in the dead of night about a prestige exhibition that had toured America, France and the UK, *Tutankhamun: Treasures of the Golden Pharaoh*. “Would you like it, Kim?” You bet, she said.

No one has more clout than he as gatekeeper of Egypt’s state collections. Sporting his trademark work hat, he famously guided US president Barack Obama through the pyramids at Giza, pointing out the discoveries he had made, naturally. As a former minister of antiquities, he also knows his way around the corridors of power in Cairo, a must in his line of work. He was purged after the autocrat Hosni Mubarak was overthrown during the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011 and brought up on corruption charges, which he successfully defended. The Islamists under Mohamed Morsi were then toppled in a military coup led by the current president, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, paving the way for Hawass to be rehabilitated. As ever, it pays to know where the political bodies are buried in the land of the pharaohs.

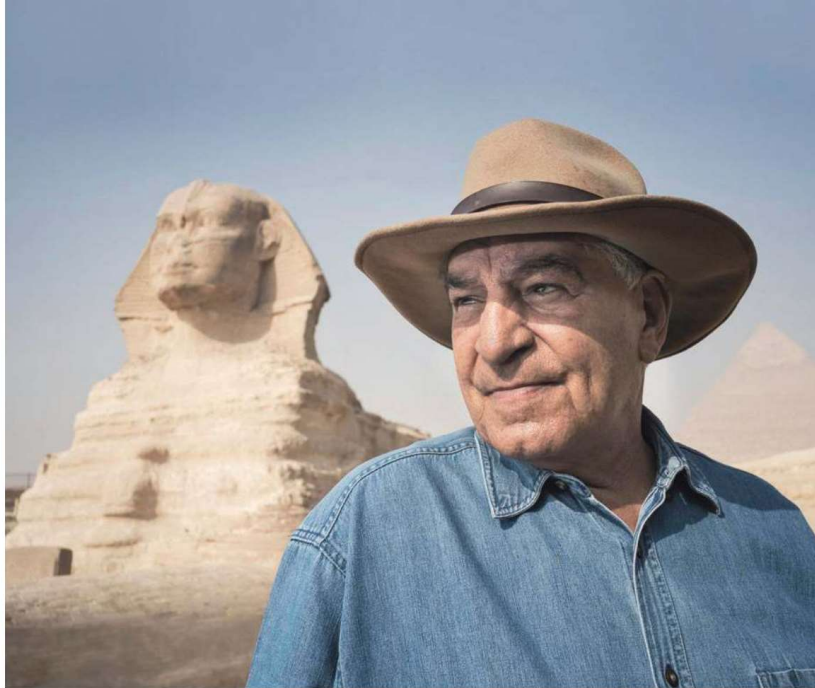
When the *Tutankhamun* show was pulled back by the Egyptian government at the height of the pandemic, McKay trusted him to make good on his promise to find her something better. “If anyone could do it, I knew Zahi would,” she remembers. There was a lot on the line if he didn’t come through. McKay had gone out on a limb, you see, to convince the NSW government to fund the upgrade of the Australian Museum at 1 William Street in Sydney. Tipped off that the project had not made it into the 2018 state budget, she pulled out the stops. McKay realised her only



Persuasive: Kim McKay; Zahi Hawass; the Great Temple of Ramses the Great at Abu Simbel

hope was to make the case directly to then premier Gladys Berejikian – easier said than done when the budget was about to be locked in. As it happened, she had a lead on where the premier was going to be that Sunday. The museum’s chief scientist had been asked to stand up with Berejikian at a media conference at Taronga Zoo for a good news announcement about koalas. So McKay rolled up, too.

It wasn’t quite an ambush: she had told the premier’s office what she wanted to see her about, and cleared it with the zoo people. Berejikian took it in her stride. She had a family lunch to get to so could they walk and talk? McKay gave her the spiel: the millions *Tutankhamun* would generate if it came to Sydney, the crying need for more room at the museum to attract blockbuster exhibitions. She even had an artist’s impression of the upgrade on hand. Berejikli-



“This is history you can touch – it lives and breathes through these artefacts”

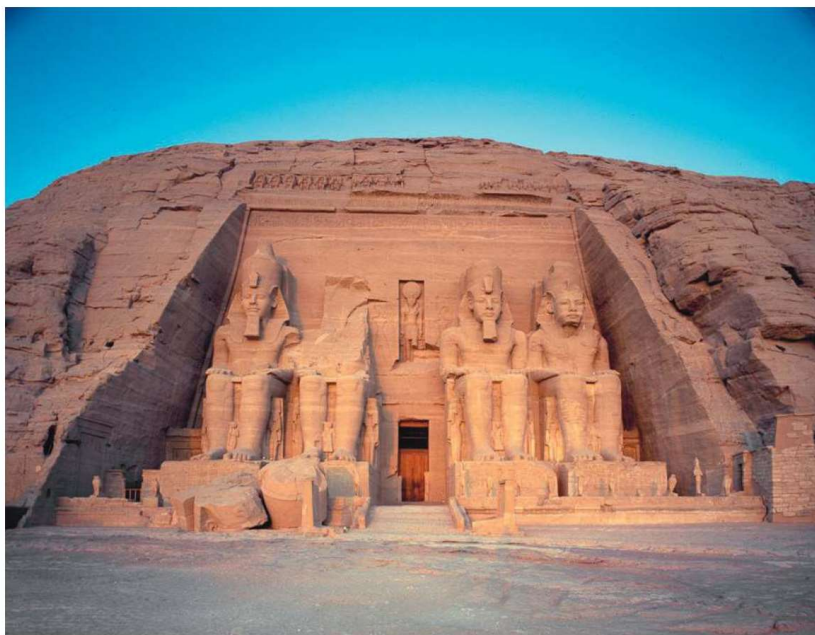
ring them and say, ‘Sorry, I have to recall it’. They were OK, they understood,” she says. “And as it turned out, it was the right thing to do. The exhibition was ours, created by our team, but it hadn’t been here for something like seven years. So there was a new generation of kids and families who hadn’t seen it. Dinosaurs are like gold to museums.”

Hawass hadn’t forgotten his promise, either. They’re something of an odd couple, the smooth-as-silk Egyptian archaeologist and his blunt-spoken Australian friend. Before taking charge of the museum a decade ago, McKay, 63, had an eclectic background in communications, the environment, event management, television production and non-fiction writing. Having grown up on Sydney’s northern beaches, she helped promote a nascent pro-surfing circuit getting behind Australian of the Year Ian Kiernan’s Clean Up campaign, taking it worldwide.

She joined the Discovery Channel in 1997, moved to Washington DC and partnered with British producer Mark Burnett on a hot new show called *Eco-Challenge: the Expedition Race*. It was a template for reality TV and Burnett’s subsequent success with the likes of *Survivor*, *The Apprentice*, *Shark Tank* and *The Voice*. (“He’s gone on to make hundreds of millions,” she chortles.) Then it was on to the National Geographic Channel, where McKay ran global marketing and communications for the cable platform. She was weighing whether to make her home permanently in the US when her parents’ declining health made the decision for her: she returned to Sydney, co-wrote a series of books on the environment, *True Green*, and was brought on as a trustee of the venerable, 196-year-old Australian Museum.

She put her hand up for the director’s role after it became vacant in 2013. If the job was to clear out the cobwebs, she was up for it. Actually, no other woman had run the show before her. McKay, a people person, made it her business to break into the international “boy’s club” of her then peers. Clicking with Hawass certainly helped. While she was at NatGeo, he had led her through the secret depths of the Great Pyramid of Giza where he is convinced the tomb of the great pharaoh Khufu lies undiscovered. She loved it.

Hawass insists that the Ramses exhibition is worth the wait. Tutankhamun’s death at age 19, without an heir and before he could make anything of himself, would have relegated the boy king to a footnote in history had his burial chamber not been found intact with its treasures in 1922 by Howard Carter. Ramses’ reign from 1279-1213 BC, four generations on, was something else altogether.



an peppered her with questions. How much do you need, Kim? \$50 million from the state, she replied evenly, and we’ll raise the rest. All upfront? No, we’ll take it any way you want. Leave it with me, the premier said.

The money duly came through, and the work was completed on time and within budget to create 3000sqm of additional floor space despite the travails of Covid. But now there was no *Tutankhamun* to open with; no option, either, of pulling in a replacement from overseas. McKay turned to the tried and true crowd-pleaser of dinosaurs.

The Australian Museum’s trove of prehistoric fossils is world renowned. Unfortunately, its *Tyrannosaurs – Meet the Family* exhibition was then on the road, about to open at the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh after touring the US. This time she was the one pulling the plug. “I had to

He too ascended to the throne as a young man, scion of the 19th Dynasty founded by his grandfather, Ramses I. He was no pampered dilettante, though, having already proved his mettle in war. The new pharaoh fought the Nubians in the south, Libyans on the western border, pirates on the Mediterranean, and Hittites – with whom he signed the world’s first known peace treaty – through the Syrian littoral. Egypt entered a golden age of prosperity, one that was dutifully recorded on the countless monuments Ramses II raised to his own glory. It’s unclear if he was responsible for ordering the massacre of baby boys that led to the Exodus of the Israelites under Moses; attributing it to him was a Hollywood invention, some historians reckon.

Two of his numerous wives, beloved Nefertari and beautiful Isetnofret, became historical figures in their own right. A vibrant New Kingdom was at the zenith of its power and influence when the 13th of his 50 sons, Merneptah, succeeded him, aged 50. “I am telling you and I told everyone that this exhibition is a lot more than Tutankhamun,” Hamass says. “Ramses was a bigger name, a bigger personality in every respect. You see that in these 181 beautiful objects. This is why this exhibition will be a great gift from us to Australia and from me to my friend, Kim.”

It starts by transporting you back in time, past the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, beyond the birth of Christ and the rise and fall of imperial Rome, back more than 100 generations until you arrive at Memphis, seat of power in ancient Egypt. The exhibition’s introduction theatre, with its video projected in 180 degrees and rumbling surround-sound, is where 21st-century tech meets early human civilisation. Drone footage soars over and then zooms in to the Great Pyramid and the Sphinx.

Headsets fixed, you move through a vestibule under the implacable gaze of a 2.3m bust in red granite, the Colossal Head of Ramses, a taste of the grandeur to come. The exhibition unfolds across nine galleries, each themed to a different aspect of his life: warrior, builder, living god, tomb maker. The artefacts are displayed alongside interactive elements including video timelines and scale models. For an additional cost, you can take a virtual reality tour of the majestic rock-cut temples of Abu Simbel and the Tomb of Nefertari, led by the spirit of Ramses’ adored queen herself.

The story of the 1275 BC Battle of Kadesh is vividly recreated through CGI, a spectacle of clanging swords and hissing arrows, paired with the display of part of a wooden bow from the time. The clash was trumpeted by Ramses as a smashing victory over the Hittite empire. In fact, the outcome was more like a punch-drunk draw. Five years into his reign, nearing his 30th birthday, the pharaoh had led his army into an ambush on the Orontes River near the present-day border of Lebanon and Syria. The Egyptians were facing disaster when the Hittites stopped to loot their camp; Ramses rallied his troops and drove the enemy into



Treasures: top, a statue of Ramses the Great; golden amulets; bottom, Princess Neferuptah’s collar; Hawass and McKay. Opposite, the coffin of Shoshenq II; necklace of Psusennes I; a gold amulet from Psusennes I’s mummy. Below right, bracelets made for Shoshenq II

the river, forcing the survivors to swim for their lives. Yet his badly mauled forces lacked the strength to finish the Hittites, who fell back on the fortified city of Kadesh. Ramses also retreated.

No matter. By the time he secured his historic peace agreement with the Hittites – the treaty was inscribed on a silver tablet that today hangs in replica in the United Nations building in New York – Ramses showed he had absorbed history’s cardinal rule: it is written by the victor. Again and again as it turned out, chiselled into every available stone surface in his expanding realm. His cartouche or royal seal, etched in an oval pattern of hieroglyphs, litters the exhibition, just as it did in ancient Egypt. A gold-tipped obelisk even has Ramses’ name written over that of another king.

A time-lapse sequence depicts the new capital, Pi-Ramesse, that he established in the Nile Delta, complete with more than 50 towering statues of himself and sumptuous palaces for the royal family. They needed the space: he is said to have amassed some 200 wives or concubines and fathered at least 110 children, many of whom he outlived.

In a chamber dedicated to Ramses at Peace, we meet the pharaoh in his prime, his face round and youthful, a slight smile playing on his full lips. He holds the heka sceptre, a

PHOTOGRAPHY: SANDRO VANNINI



5000 disks arranged in five coils, flaring into a bib of gold chains finished with intricate gold bells. The funerary mask of one of his generals, Wendjebauendjet, exudes a very human warmth through eyes highlighted with glass inlay. An otherwise simple signet ring inscribed with the throne name of Ramses contrasts with the magnificent scarab ring with cartouche of Queen Tausret, one of the few women to become pharaoh and the last to rule in the 19th Dynasty. What a sight their courts must have been.

Sadly, the contents of Ramses' tomb are long gone, plundered by thieves. But there's a glimpse of the lost grandeur in the outer coffin and lid of the master artisan Sennedjem, a "servant in the place of truth" who would have decorated the royal crypt. Sennedjem's own tomb was discovered untouched in 1886, filled with the accoutrements of everyday life including the bed he shared with his wife, Lyneferti, before she was interred by his side. Painted reliefs from the walls and ceiling of the chamber are reproduced in the exhibition, vividly charting their imagined progress from death into the afterlife. His wooden sarcophagus is finished in rich hues that look like they could have been painted yesterday, along with texts and vignettes from the Book of the Dead. In one scene, the couple are shown playing *senet*, a backgammon-like board game which had a dual function of connecting the living with the departed. Rich and poor alike were devoted to it.

Royal mummies were generally considered worthless by grave robbers and discarded. But during the 21st Dynasty the embalmed remains of New Kingdom rulers, Ramses' among them, his haughty nose still recognisable, were hidden by temple priests inside an out-of-the-way cliff-face overlooking the Theban Necropolis at modern-day Luxor, between the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens. They lay there until archaeologists were led to them in 1881. The breathtaking Royal Cache is recreated in a stand-alone gallery with a cameo by the man credited with recovering the 50-odd mummies, German Egyptologist Emile

symbol of earthly power. The royal diadem with a uraeus (a stylised rearing cobra) representing the protective goddess Wadjet adorns his shaved scalp. The ancient Egyptians' preoccupation with the afterlife was the measure of a precarious earthly existence, blighted by disease and often hunger for ordinary folk. The median lifespan was barely 19: people were old by their mid-30s, few and far between after 40. No wonder they hailed long-lived Ramses as divine.

Among the nobility, men and women alike used perfumed ointments, applied makeup and dripped in jewellery. Gold, the flesh of the gods, was worked into the funerary treasures with silver, electrum, lapis lazuli, obsidian, turquoise stone and chalcedony. You transit a dark corridor, ethereal music playing, to be dazzled by a glittering tableau of the pharaohs' wealth. Enhanced by fibre-optic case lighting, the scene cuts across a number of dynasties; there are amulets studded with precious stones, gorgeous jewelled collars, 5cm-long gold earrings adorned with heraldic dolphins, and heavy toe stalls that would have weighed on the entitled wearer, despite their ageless beauty.

The 8kg necklace named for Psusennes I, who reigned nearly 300 years after Ramses the Great in the 21st Dynasty, is a masterpiece of the goldsmith's art forged from nearly



Brugsch, in another piece of technological wizardry. “Soon we came upon cases of porcelain funerary offerings, metal and alabaster vessels, draperies and trinkets, until, reaching the turn in the passage, a cluster of mummy cases came into view in such number as to stagger me,” you hear him say. Sadly, the mummies themselves are too precious to tour.

But mummified animals that were routinely entombed with a pharaoh are displayed for the first time outside of Egypt in their form-fitting linen wraps: cats, mongoose, even a lion cub, its facial features sketched in. More CGI magic allows us to envisage how Ramses would have aged from the vigorous young warlord to hunchbacked old man, his face lined, a thatch of grey hair clumped beneath his bald crown, still clear-eyed and now all-powerful.

I ask Hawass what he would do if he could sit down with the great man. “We would play chess,” he answers. “And I would ask him many questions. But the most important question would be about his many wives. As someone who was deeply in love with Nefertari and who built this very important tomb to her, why did he marry the other queens? I wonder about that.”

Which brings us to the coffin, the showstopper in Paris.

The cedar surface would have been stripped and painted yellow, with a handful of details highlighted in vibrant colours and the eyes outlined in black. Ramses is represented as the god Osiris: arms crossed on his chest, he holds the heqa (shepherd’s crook) and nekhakha (flail). The striped headdress depicts a rearing cobra; a false beard is braided beneath the chin.

The coffin last travelled to France 45 years ago, when the pharaoh’s fungi-infested remains were painstakingly restored at the Musée de l’Homme. The present loan was to be a one-off for the exhibition’s Paris sojourn, which began in April. But Hawass is adamant Australia will have it too. “I will get it for you, Kim,” he avows. “Definitely. For sure.”

If only it were that easy, McKay sighs. Bringing the coffin to Sydney will require ministerial if not presidential sign-off in Egypt. She’s optimistic, but knows it’s a big ask. Transporting the rest of the artefacts to the other side of the planet for the Sydney opening on November 18 is already an epic undertaking. Given the collection’s eye-watering value – \$2.4 billion is probably conservative, McKay says – security must be airtight. Promoter World Heritage Exhibitions is understandably tight-lipped about the arrangements. “The insurers don’t like us talking too much,” says executive vice-

Given the collection’s eye-watering value – \$2.4 billion is probably conservative – security must be airtight



Coup: Kim McKay

president Troy Collins. A team of specialist Egyptian conservators are to accompany the treasures, and the Australian Museum will be bringing in additional help to cope with the 500,000 people expected through the door. NSW Minister for the Arts and Tourism John Graham says: “Egyptian civilisation has captured the imagination of generations of Australians. *Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs* is one of the most impressive exhibitions of the Egyptian golden age ever to come to Australia.”

Hawass will be on hand, of course, and he’s talking about springing some surprises. In Paris, he hijacked the media launch on the morning of the grand opening, teasing his “big news” on the hunt for Khufu’s tomb in the Great Pyramid and new findings on the cause of Tutankhamun’s death. The boy king might have died in an accident or even been murdered, he said, promising all would be revealed in “four months or so”, neatly in time for his visit to Australia.

“Zahi is such a showman,” McKay says admiringly. “Look at him up there ... he’s completely taken over the event.” Energetic as ever, she’s working the room. One of Hawass’s successors as Minister for Antiquities, Mostafa Waziry, has flown in from Cairo and she takes him aside for a quiet word because there is always something you can do, someone else you to talk to when you’re chasing a new prize. Now, about that coffin... ●

Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs opens in November

JAMIE WALKER TRAVELLED TO PARIS COURTESY OF THE AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM