

Why do Australians love Egyptian blockbusters ... still?

Why does an over 3000-year-old culture still pull audiences, and what is the lure of the Egyptian blockbuster for Australians?

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VISUAL ARTS

Granite bust of Merneptah, New Empire, 19th Dynasty, in Australian Museum's exhibition 'Ramses & The Gold of the Pharaohs'. Image: World Heritage Exhibitions.

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It all feels very familiar – images of pharaohs and mummies – in an *Indiana Jones-cum-Tomb Raider* kind of way. As audiences, we have been tutored into the world of Egyptology via the big screen, coffee table books, TV documentaries and even graphic cartoons. So, what does it feel like to stand in front of these objects? And is it worth the cost of bringing these exhibitions to Australia?

This week, the Australian Museum (AM) gave us a teaser to its \$2.6 billion exhibition ***Ramses & the Gold of the Pharaohs***, scheduled to open in November. The Museum was forced to cancel its 2021 blockbuster, *Tutankhamun: Treasures of the Golden Pharaoh*, due to COVID touring complications.

That was to be the first blockbuster presented by the AM after its \$57.5 million refurbishment, and had received funding under the NSW Government's Create NSW blockbusters funding initiative to do so. 'Obviously that blockbuster funding was cut with the exhibition not coming in,' explains Fran Dorey, Archaeologist and Head of Exhibitions at AM. 'However, with *Ramses* on offer, we had to reapply for new blockbuster funding, and we've been successful with that.'

But there is no loss to be felt with *Tut* replaced. Born circa 1303 BCE, Ramses the Great (Ramses II, who reigned from 1279 to 1213 BCE) lived longer than any other Egyptian pharaoh – including King Tut – had 100 children, and was a zealous architect and self-promoter. 'Ramses would have been the rock star of the ancient world,' Dorey tells ArtsHub.



Installation view of 'Ramses & the Gold of the Pharaohs' in Paris, soon to be Sydney. Image: Paris Exhibitions.

Why is Ramses such a rock star?

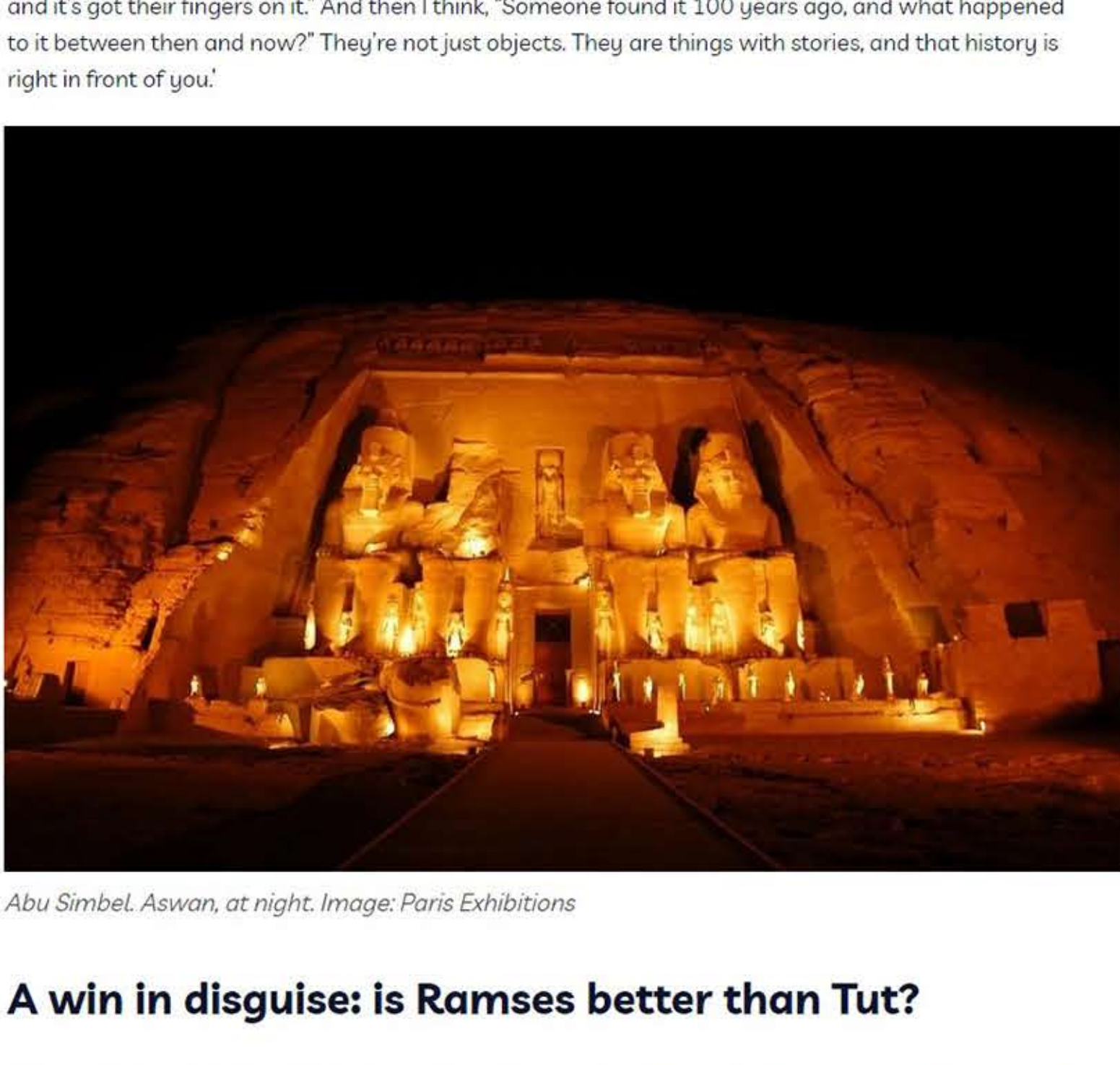
Ramses lived to about 92, and came to epitomise the power and wealth during the New Kingdom period, with at least nine kings taking their name after him. Dorey says: 'He was out there as a teenager being a great warrior and general in the Egyptian army. He became king when he was around 25 and ruled for about 66 years. He was also like a wanton PR machine. Wherever you go in Egypt – from the north all the way down to the south – he built temples, palaces and buildings with colossal statues of himself, and we're talking 12- to 20-metre statues.'

'He also took over other people's statues and ripped their names up and put his name on them. Egyptians would have seen him everywhere. We know he had at least eight wives and at least 100 children – so he was very prolific as a builder, a warrior, a politician and a breeder,' Dorey continues.

And if that isn't enough, Hollywood, in the iconic Cecil B DeMille film ***Ten Commandments***, made him the pharaoh of the Exodus. The exhibition checks off all the boxes that the public expects to see, especially the mystery and mythology of 'king as intercessor' between gods and men.

Dorey says the story that surrounds the history is as exciting as the objects themselves. 'These are the things you see in movies, and you see them in textbooks and marketing imagery, and there is that, "Oh, that's pretty cool" response. But there is something about actually seeing the real thing, and standing in front of it. I always get this tingly feeling.'

She continues: 'When I look at something, I think, "Oh, my God, somebody touched that 3000 years ago, and it's got their fingers on it." And then I think, "Someone found it 100 years ago, and what happened to it between then and now?" They're not just objects. They are things with stories, and that history is right in front of you.'



Abu Simbel, Aswan, at night. Image: Paris Exhibitions

A win in disguise: is Ramses better than Tut?

Ramses & the Gold of the Pharaohs has been presented in Houston, San Francisco and Paris en route to Sydney. The AM is gearing up to welcome upwards of 500,000 people through its doors.

The *Tut* tour was managed by the US touring company IMG and the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities and Culture. Essentially, a new breakaway company, World Heritage Exhibitions/Neon Global, is responsible for this new blockbuster.

The *Tutankhamun* exhibition was going to be the largest exhibition of his treasures ever to leave Egypt, but will now be confined to the Grand Egyptian Museum in Giza, which is due to open later this year. But Dorey doesn't believe we've missed out, admitting to ArtsHub: 'To be honest, I think [*Ramses* is] a better exhibition, I think there's a lot more to do and see, and there is also a greater depth of objects.'

'One of the things that most people don't realise, is that Tut's tomb isn't the only pharaoh's tomb that was found intact. And, in fact, his had been robbed at least twice in antiquity,' she says. Alongside Ramses, there are other pharaohs featured in this exhibition – Amenemope and Wendjebauendjed, with gold masks and a granite bust of Merneptah.

The exhibition of 181 artefacts also includes sarcophagi, animal mummies, jewellery and amulets. Dorey says her highlights are the aforementioned gold masks, and the recreation of a tomb from the Valley of the Kings. 'We've got Ramses' coffin, and it is displayed with wall paintings and roof paintings – so it's like you're going back into his tomb. It tells the story of the people who painted tomb, and cut the tomb and made the coffins, and I love that.'

That immersive experience is extended with a VR (virtual reality) element that will take visitors on a whirlwind tour of two of Ramses' most impressive monuments: the Tomb of Queen Nefertari, his favourite Royal Consort, and the temples of Abu Simbel.

Dorey says she has given the separate ticketed experience a whirl. 'You sit in these fancy chairs that look like giant eggs and your feet are off the ground, and you have a VR headset on. So, if you can imagine a cross between an archaeologist taking you on a tour of Abu Simbel and a film director coming in doing their impression, and you do also meet Ramses – it's very cool; I loved it.'

She adds of the \$2.6 billion value of the show: 'Once you add the value of the objects – which is the highest value for a collection that we've ever had – plus the VR technology, the exhibition furniture, such as the showcases and the audio guides, then that is about right.'



Gold Bracelet of Shoshenq II with wadjet eye; Intermediate Period, Twenty-Second Dynasty. Image: World Heritage Exhibitions.

The Egyptian blockbuster is not a new thing

While VR may feel new regarding an Egyptian narrative, the Egyptian blockbuster is hardly a new thing. So what's the lure for Australian audiences?

Dorey puts it simply: 'We have to look at the history of the popularisation of Egypt. We had the 'Egyptomania' of the 20s and 30s, but it never goes away. That 100-year history of looking at the discoveries, we've all heard of it.' By 1930 about **70% of the AM's Egyptian Collection** was assembled, following the global trend.

'You can turn the TV on at any given day and there's an Egyptian documentary. So it's constantly in our mindset. But I think, when you look at the Egyptian art, and the way they made things and the way they bought in nature and animals, it's very different – it's engaging. And then there's lots of gold – Egyptians loved gold.'

'I think all that combined suggests that it's exotic, that it's amazing. And yet, we all feel like we know something because we've all watched a documentary, which is nice,' Dorey adds.

Audiences feel an additional layer of familiarity, having experienced their share of Egyptian exhibitions to date. Alongside the AM's *Ramses* exhibition this year, WA Museum Boola Bardip, Perth is currently showing *Discovering Ancient Egypt*. It partnered with the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in the Netherlands, the National Museum of Australia and the Queensland Museum to bring over 240 objects together, including extracts from the *Book of the Dead*.

Regarding the exhibition's section containing human remains (i.e. the mummies), ArtsHub reviewer Nanci Nott wrote: 'More fascinating than morbid, here curatorial emphasis rests on the intrinsic value of historical knowledge, as opposed to the cheap sensationalism associated with early archaeology.'

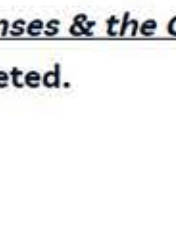
Prior to this year's offerings, the Powerhouse Museum presented *Egyptian Mummies: Exploring Ancient Lives* in 2017, while in 2011 Melbourne Museum presented the Melbourne Winter Geographic blockbuster ***Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs*** – produced by *National Geographic*. And in 2007 the National Gallery of Australia presented ***Egyptian Antiquities from the Louvre: Journey to the Afterlife***.

The AM last presented an Egyptian blockbuster in 1998, *Life and Death Under the Pharaohs*, which led to a reported **51% increase** in visitors to the Museum during its presentation. So clearly the repetition means it works.

And, on any given day of the week, visitors can see – free of charge – exhibitions at the Chau Chak Wing Museum at the University of Sydney, with its purpose-built *The Egyptian Galleries: The Mummy Room* and *Pharaonic Obsessions* (including four mummies), and the Museum of South Australia's display *The Ancient Egypt* gallery, which was unveiled in 1939. While it is pretty much 'as-it-was' since opening with its sarcophagus and mummy of Renpit-Nefert – it remains a favourite with visitors.

Adding to that permanent offering, the AM is planning to refurbish its Egyptian galleries as part of its forward vision for 2027 onwards.

***Ramses & the Gold of the Pharaohs* opens 18 November at the Australian Museum, Sydney; ticketed.**



Gina Fairley

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