

## UK museum is relying on 'Egypt' to pull in crowds

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By Mary Meehan

*Excavating Egypt*, opening Sunday at The Art Museum at the University of Kentucky, has been the arts equivalent of a Miley Cyrus concert tour as it has traveled to nine cities in three years.

"It actually broke a lot of box office records in cities where it has been," said Peter Lacovara, a curator at Emory University who is handling exhibit arrangements for *Excavating Egypt: Great Discoveries From the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology* for the Petrie in London, England. The previous success of the exhibit — which features 221 artifacts and is the most extensive display of Egyptian objects to come to Central Kentucky — points to both the need for spectacular show-stoppers for the arts community and the draw of an ancient culture that is mysterious but accessible.

For museums in general, a big show "is really important to bolstering the bottom line but also to fulfill the mission of the museum," Lacovara said.

The American Association of Museums reports that some 885 million people visit museums and zoos each year. But entrance fees account for only about 33 percent of museums' expenses, the group says, making the venues dependent on charitable donations and sponsorships.

So museums work hard to get people outside of a built-in audience of art lovers to come through the doors.

The obscurity of the Lexington museum's location — tucked inside the Singletary Center for the Arts on UK's campus — and a lack of parking tend to dampen its profile in the community, said Executive Director Kathy Walsh-Piper.

"We need a really big show," she said.

Sometimes people feel as if they've already seen what the UK museum has to offer, said Walsh-Piper.

In general, the museum presents more art-focused shows instead of historical exhibits such as *Excavating Egypt*. The last really big draw, Walsh-Piper said, was an exhibit of

Armand Hammer's *Five Centuries of Masterpieces*, which brought 100,000 visitors to the museum in 1981 and 1982.

She is hoping the Egyptian exhibit will pull in crowds from around the region who will also enjoy the museum's permanent collection — with nearly 4,000 European and American paintings, sculptures, prints, drawings, photographs and decorative arts — enough to return.

Even if throngs come through the door, though, the museum is unlikely to recover its \$60,000-plus investment in the show. But, she said, she considers the exhibit the museum's "gift to the community." If it can raise the museum's profile, that would be a plus, she said.

The tactic has worked in other places. *Excavating Egypt* pulled in what amounted to 30 percent of the average number of annual visitors during its run at the Robert V. Fullerton Art Museum at California State University, San Bernardino, said public relations associate Andrea Callahan. The crowds in Southern California included some who came from as far away as Nevada.

Planning a blockbuster show is "a balancing act in attracting the popular draw and satisfying the more highbrow patrons," said Steve Cantrell, spokesman for the New Mexico Museum of Art. There, *Excavating Egypt* drew more than 16,000 visitors during its run in 2007-08.

Actually, *Excavating Egypt* is something of an unexpected hit because of its scholarly bent and lack of the cornerstone of many Egyptian exhibits: an actual mummy.

The exacting research of W.M. Flinders Petrie, who excavated the objects on display, breathes life into the artifacts by exploring their purpose in ancient times, Lacovara said. But the exhibit is not as flashy as some other well-known Egyptian shows, he said.

Egyptian exhibits, as a whole, benefit from their connections to popular culture, including the plethora of movies tied to the culture, Callahan said. "Hollywood helps," he said.

At the same time, the ancient Egyptian practice of sending folks off to the underworld fully equipped to set up house in the afterlife provides a wealth of artifacts that offer a full picture of the ancients' daily lives. And that makes the exotic creatures pictured in the famous gilded masks relatable.

It's easy to see your own life in an everyday bowl or a beautiful hair ornament from ancient Egypt because, thousands of years later, we still use objects in much the same way, Cantrell said.

Lacovara added, "It's a collection you can visit again and again."

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