UNDOING THE NEW: Conservation of 21st Dynasty Egyptian Coffins and the impact of unsustainable treatments in the 20th century

Elisabeth Geldhof - Bluetortoise Conservation, Casey Mallinckrodt - UCLA / Getty, Jonathan Graton - De Montfort University, Jessica Hensel - University of Amsterdam

Acknowledgements: The Vaticano Coffin Project is a joint project of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (Leiden, The Netherlands), The Vatican Museums (Rome) and The Louvre (Paris, France). We would like to thank Dr. Wyn Meiklejohn, de Gheyn Monse, de Fieseler der Bacin, Dr. Berends Stokvis (RMO), Dr. René van Willigen (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands), Dr. Fabio Moroni, Giovanna Proietto (Vatican Museums), and Hema Kuikman (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden). We are also grateful to Dr. Harriet Olin (University of California, Los Angeles) for her help with the X-ray and UV photographs, and Dr.fanmenna Santarémia (Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales). We would like to extend our thanks to all the people involved in the project. This publication is a result of the project Vaticano Coffin Conservation. Duino Genève, 2014. Contact: ejg@bluetortoiseconservation.com

Introduction

After their discovery and excavation in 1893, several mummy coffin sets of the 21st Dynasty were given to the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (Leiden, the Netherlands), among 17 international institutions. The polychrome mummy coffin sets were originally bequeathed to Prist and Chantresse of Amun, in the Deir el-Bahari area during the 21st Dynasty.

Since arrival in the museum, many coffins, lids and mummy boards have had up to four different restoration phases (see Timeline). Incompatible materials introduced as fills, adhesives, and coverings have caused problems far beyond the inherent deterioration of the 3,000-year-old materials with the result that most of these objects ended up being unexhibited for at least 60 years. The conservation treatment cases show on the condition that is exemplary unsustainable 19th and 20th century interventions, the complex resulting damage, and the strategies that were undertaken in this project to mitigate the damage and secure the objects.

The Vatican Coffin Project, a collaboration between the Vatican Museums, the Louvre, and the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, investigated and preserved these coffin sets in a coherent and sustainable way.

Although research commenced in 2011, actual treatment was initially limited to four months in summer 2013, taking place in front of the public as a part of an exhibition, requiring careful prioritization of phased treatments.

1893 - 1940: Mummy board Tjepephenehuerefer

After arrival at the museum in 1893 the coffin sets were exhibited almost immediately. Tjepephenehuerefer’s mummy board was exposed to an unfortunate impact, resulting in fragmentation of large areas of the polychrome and gilded undertones. Fragments from the hands section apparently got lost or forgotten about, so that area was filled in with wax-resin lining. This grid still dramatically changed the appearance, and as a result the board had not been exhibited for over 60 years. A great deal of the missing fragments were found lying in recent years.

Treatment involved removal of the wax, and replacement of the large broken fragments. Because of the condition of the mummy board, and the complex conservation history of the coffin sets in general, it was decided to isolate the hands and the fragments in a complete reversible, non-invasive way. This was a very challenging decision, even for conservators with modern conservation ethics.

A removable support was created for the large fragments which was cast out of pigmented ‘Krylvan’ (Lubrizol)–marine-coke–butyl rubber (boron 395) latex, micro-balloons, and buffered with a layer of Japanese paper. On top, the stabilized fragments are resting in place.

1950-1980: Incompatible materials on coffin set of Gausheen

Gausheen’s coffin set went through four restoration phases that did more harm than good. Previously applied fills had damaged and cracked the wood substrate, mica layers, and polychromy. In the post war period more fills were introduced to enhance the appearance of the painted surface. These obsolete fills were mechanically removed or reduced and the exposed areas were visually integrat- ed with reversible modified tonal Japanese tissue paper over many sympathetic fills consisting of Chinese and Japanese paper, and Arbofin cellulose tissues with Krylvan®. A 1:1 distilled water/ethanol mixture. Surface treatments from prior restoration actions caused cracking and peeling of the water-sensi-tive paint and solvent-sensitive ancient materials. A more suitable sensitive solvent treatment was developed for these sensitive surfaces using linings of Japanese long-fibre Tenggo paper and starch glue.

Since 2011. Collaboration within the Vatican Coffin Project, material analysis, pigment identification, wild UV and other investigations followed an experimental approach for the basis for conservation intentions and active conservation treatment (start- ed 2019).

Acknowledgements

The Vaticano Coffin Project is a joint project of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (Leiden, The Netherlands), The Vatican Museums (Rome) and the Louvre (Paris, France). We would like to thank Dr. Wyn Meiklejohn, de Gheyn Monse, de Fieseler der Bacin, Dr. Berends Stokvis (RMO), Dr. René van Willigen (University of Amsterdam, Netherlands), Dr. Fabio Moroni, Giovanna Proietto (Vatican Museums), and Hema Kuikman (Rijksmuseum van Oudheden). We are also grateful to Dr. Harriet Olin (University of California, Los Angeles) for her help with the X-ray and UV photographs, and Dr. fanmenna Santarémia (Ecole des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales). We would like to extend our thanks to all the people involved in the project. This publication is a result of the project Vaticano Coffin Conservation. Duino Genèse, 2014. Contact: ejg@bluetortoiseconservation.com

Universiteit van Amsterdam