

The sound and the fury

Two exhibitions of Egyptian treasures could not be more different, writes Christopher Allen

THE Greeks were fascinated by what already seemed to them the immemorably ancient culture of Egypt: the country has more wonders than any other place in the world, wrote Herodotus, author of a gripping witness account composed in the 5th century BC.

From Caesar and Mark Antony, lovers of Cleopatra in Hellenistic Alexandria, to baroque Rome with its obelisks, then the great surge in Egyptology that followed Napoleon's conquests two centuries ago, we have never stopped wondering at the strange, impassive, unchanging culture of the land of the Nile, so different from the dynamic and humanistic one we have inherited from the Greeks.

The appeal of Egypt is such that exhibitions seldom fail to arouse interest, even among children and people who do not usually care for art. As it happens, there are two on in Sydney at the moment. The first is at the Australian Museum and comes from the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. There are some fine objects here, although there appears to be little sense in the selection or the juxtapositions. Above all, though, the installation is so dreadful that the show is an ordeal to visit.

Several museum exhibitions I have discussed recently have been poorly set out. Modern Times, at Sydney's Powerhouse (2008), was surprisingly bad in this respect; A Day in Pompeii at the Melbourne Museum, reviewed here a few months ago, was cluttered with materials that seemed to be designed for primary-school children and constantly distracted our attention from the works on display, with the merciful exception of the body casts.

There appears to be a fundamental difference in culture between such institutions and art galleries. At bottom, and understandably enough, it seems that museums take a more didactic approach and galleries a more aesthetic one.

But these concerns do not have to be mutually exclusive, as was demonstrated by the outstanding Buddha: Radiant Awakening (2001-02) and Goddess: Divine Energy (2006) shows at the Art Gallery of NSW.

These were exhibitions of the highest standard. The didactic element, which was indispensable, was tactfully introduced to support works of great power in themselves, but the focus always remained on those works. Everything was co-ordinated under the eye of the curator, with a view to enhancing the experience of the works in the most sensitive way. It should be added that the Australian Museum itself had a didactically and aesthetically successful Egyptian exhibition a few years ago, Life Beyond the Tomb (2004-05).

In the present show, however, we see what happens when low-level didactic hyperactivity reigns in the absence of any high-level didactic vision. One feels that the boxes of antiquities were shipped over from Vienna and the whole thing abandoned to the people who organise school visits, who all had different bright ideas about how to display them. There is certainly no one at home curatorially.

You walk first into a room full of screens that confuse and distract, although they are meant to have thematic inscriptions. The exhibits are scattered in different boxes and cases among these screens. On the wall is some unspeakable pseudo-Egyptian relief of figures holding jewellery.

To make matters worse, there is an infuriating and unrelenting soundtrack of chisels chipping away at stone, as well as voices and music. For good measure, some pieces of contemporary design have been included in the cases, to suggest the continued influence of Egyptian themes; not enough to make any sense, mind you, just to be distracting and to confuse the majority of the visitors.

There are some beautiful funerary reliefs in this first section, showing the deceased making offerings to Osiris, god of the underworld, but it is a constant effort to block out the visual and aural distractions.

Then it gets worse. You progress into the central space, an angular construction with mirrors like a 1970s strip club. The installation is not only ugly but labyrinthine and confusing, and makes it hard to find the displays.

Of the large works in the centre, the first and one of the most important is a colossal head of a ruler from the Ptolemaic period; there is something poignant, as so often in the art of this time, in the uncertain balance between the hieratic impassivity of the Egyptian tradition and the naturalism of the Greeks. The impression is adventitiously enhanced by the deep, hollow cavities of the eyes, once filled with some coloured stone or stucco.

Or at least this might be experienced as poignant if the ambient racket ever ceased; but the imagination cannot open up to works and their meanings if it is constantly occupied in blocking out aural assaults.

Around the perimeter of this space and behind the central area are many interesting things: a papyrus of the book of the dead, some small reliefs, sarcophagi and cartonnage inner boxes painted with religious and symbolic motifs. But as you try to look at the sarcophagi and their intricate religious symbolism, you are subjected to an infuriating, attention-shredding voice recording on a 40-second loop.

When I went down to the bathroom afterwards and found the light bulb flashing on and off irregularly, my thoughts turned to methods of psychological torture in a detention centre.

There is probably not much that can be done for this exhibition short of closing it and reinstalling it entirely, but at least the soundtrack could be turned off at once. Silence is a precondition of any kind of attention, and there is nothing more distracting than the human voice.

Then one might be able to contemplate the dramatic and inhuman figure of the lion-headed goddess Sakhmet, the terrifying deity who accompanied the pharaoh to war. (Someone has inscribed the statue, at the top, with the name Bellona, the Roman war



goddess.) One could also appreciate what is potentially the most interesting part of the exhibition, the pairing of painted cartonnage cases with X-rays of the mummies to which they belong, demonstrating how much can be learned in a non-invasive way about these people who lived thousands of years ago.

In one, for example, we see that a man who died in middle age shows signs of a bone condition in the tibia that implies something like malnourishment or, more probably since only those from wealthy families were buried in such expensive coffins, illness in infancy. In another, we recognise between the legs of a dead young woman the ghostly images of two little skeletons: twins who died while she was giving birth and evidently caused her death too, and who were buried with their young mother.

The Egyptian exhibition at the Nicholson Museum at the University of Sydney is, as one may imagine, completely different, and is in fact as fine an example of how to show things off to their best advantage as the Australian Museum is of the opposite. The Nicholson has more didactic material, and of incomparably superior quality, yet it is unobtrusive. Nothing distracts from the focus on the remarkable objects, all drawn from the museum's collection.

On the contrary, as soon as you enter, the rich but discreet colours, the simple elegance of the installation, the silence that is enhanced only by very quiet music, as though in the distance, and the intriguing objects picked out by intelligent lighting, all invite attention and even wonder.

This is the essence of the art of display: to prepare the mind and to direct attention; the rest is up to the viewer.

The Nicholson show has mummy cases and mummies, as well as several heads, feet and hands detached long ago from unknown mummies. They evoke the excitement of the early days of Egyptology.

But the show also includes a sophisticated scientific display presenting the results of CT scans carried out only this year on a child mummy in the collection and proving that it was a little boy, not a girl as an inscription had suggested.

There are fine paintings and sculptures, but one of the most remarkable objects in the exhibition is a colossal red granite capital with the head of the cow-goddess Hathor. All alumni of the university will remember her: she waited for 120 years in a hallway in the quad outside the original rooms occupied by the museum before at last being relocated inside the Nicholson. Two and half millennia ago, she stood atop a column in the temple of Bastet at Bubastis, looking down on Herodotus as he took notes for his History.

The whole of the Nicholson exhibition is conceived in relation to this great historian's account of ancient Egypt, mentioned at the outset.

Displays are co-ordinated with panels in which he explains, for example, the process of mummification and the difference between the most elaborate version, in which the viscera are removed, and the economy-class procedure in which they are dissolved in cedar oil introduced by a syringe through the anus. In both cases, the body is then packed in natron for 70 days until the living tissues are desiccated, before being wrapped or put in a sarcophagus and entombed.

Other panels and displays deal with the Egyptian ideas of