

## SEEING MORE IN CABINETS AND BLOCKBUSTERS: A RHETORICAL STUDY OF MUSEUM EXHIBITS

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Rhetoric constructs realities in many ways and through a variety of media. While rhetoricians across generations have studied the construction of messages and meanings, mostly in speaking and writing, they have begun to create a theory that revolves around images and visual communication called visual rhetoric. Similarly to written or spoken rhetoric, visual rhetoric studies the process and strategies of developing a visual that portrays meaning to the “viewer,” formally, sensually, and cognitively (Feldman 198). “It is a critical-analytical way of approaching and analyzing visual data that highlights the communicative dimensions of images or objects” (Foss 306). Broadly speaking, visual rhetoric is therefore understood to be the study of the organization of meaning in terms of forms presented on some type of visual surface (Meltzoff 31).

Meaning, however, is a negotiation. Kenneth Bruffee, for example, quotes Jerome McGann as saying that the “‘final authority’ for literary works rests neither with the author nor with his/her affiliated institution; it resides in the actual structure of the agreements which these two cooperating authorities reach in specific cases” (784). This idea is intrinsic to applying rhetorical analysis to museum exhibits, because even though it is ultimately the visitor who determines the message portrayed and the meaning taken from it, that meaning is connected to the motives of those who create the exhibits.

In this paper, I argue that from the cabinet of curiosities model of museum exhibits to contemporary active educational museum exhibitions, people have constructed rhetorical relationships that strongly affect how the public experiences and makes meaning of these exhibits. My purpose is to illustrate not only how rhetorical constructions of exhibits influence the public’s meaning-making processes differently, but also how visual rhetoric is related to written or spoken rhetorical strategies. In this paper, I expand this theory and apply it to another form of rhetorical communication, the museum exhibit.

The three exhibits studied<sup>1</sup> display collections of an internationally well-known historical figure, King Tutankhamen. “The Egyptian Boy King” as Tutankhamen is often dubbed, has been making headlines since the discovery of his tomb by Howard Carter in 1922. The heart and soul of the Tutankhamen phenomenon is, inarguably, the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. The museum is a prime example of traditional museum exhibition theory—a theory that is slowly dying out. In 1976, a group of museums in the United States, headed by the Metropolitan Museum in New York, came together to develop a touring exhibit titled “Treasures of Tutankhamen.” The tour, which experimented with “flashy” display techniques, produced extraordinary publicity campaigns, and played on the general public’s interest in the subject, is a famous example of what has come to be known as the “blockbuster exhibit.” In 2005, King Tut returned in an exhibit to the Western world with another title, “Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs.” The purpose of each exhibit differed, as did the imagery with which each was constructed.

## **Museum Exhibitions, Visual Rhetoric, and Postmodern Rhetorical Theory**

Museums educate others, the public or specialists, about a particular collection. A museum exhibit, though sometimes containing textual information, is first and foremost a visual construction. For example, the arrangement of pieces in relation to pictures, the development of lighting to create a mood, and the inclusion of text all follow a process very similar to that used by an artist painting a mural or a photographer constructing the composition of a photo shoot. Rhetoric constructs each exhibit, which is especially important relative to the increasingly popular idea that museums are places of learning, rather than merely repositories of old objects.

Exhibitions and research within museum settings date back to ancient times, when the “muses of arts and sciences” were studied in the city of Alexandria (Kaplan 40). During the Renaissance, with flourishing levels of exploration and scientific inquiry, came the birth of “cabinets of curiosities.” At their inception, these cabinets displayed artifacts and specimens from all fields and attracted people at all levels of interest from amateur to scholar (41). Cabinets of curiosities placed collections in rooms, where visitors were to absorb information from the pieces just by being in their presence. Many continue to argue that simply having the artifacts proves the educational worth of an exhibit, so the greater the number of pieces, the more educational the exhibit.

However, the cabinet of curiosities theory does not serve the general public. Rather, it works best for people—art collectors, archaeologists, students—already trained in examining whatever the collection consists of, for the ability to analyze and appreciate objects and information from a particular field through an exhibit is not something people are born with; it involves years of training to develop and perfect (Rawlins 14). Throughout the museum community, however, there is growing support for the idea that museums need more structure in their educational goals through the creation of programs, interactive exhibits, and engaging displays. The emphasis is on the “public, democratic, and educative” functions of museums (Mariner 199).

This change in museum theory parallels the rise of interest in visual culture and rhetoric, which follows a period of much focus on “textuality” and proper meaning that characterized the structuralism and post-structuralism movements of the 1970s and 1980s. Visual culture explores the realm of various senses—most importantly, vision—as opposed to the “self-referential world of linguistic relations” (Homer 7). Significantly, visual rhetoric analyzes a realm “where meanings are created and contested” at every moment.

Especially in Western cultures, the tendency has been to emphasize the verbal and written word because of its supposed legitimacy. This mindset has privileged verbal discourse as the highest form of intellectual practice, while placing visual media as the “second-rate illustrations of ideas” (Mirzoeff 6). Fortunately, postmodern culture has grasped visual culture as something more than second rate and has provoked increased interest in visual culture and rhetoric. Even though some state that visual rhetoric is “easier or more holistic than verbal” rhetoric, or try to refer to verbal and visual rhetoric as two independent modes of communication, the development of rhetorical theory has blurred the line between the verbal and the visual. New modes of communication must recognize this phenomenon and require “hybrid forms” of rhetorical theory (Hocks 630).

Museums of all disciplines are therefore moving away from a “conserve and display” approach to the use of more hybrid approaches. Tracy Davis, examining several such exhibits, noted that they “are fulfilling educational functions through the presentation of artifacts within manipulated environments and built forms” (16). She goes on to say that “they encourage an encounter with the ideology and its mise-en-scène.” This “pluralist mentality” encourages the use of imagination and interaction

with the “Other” rather than isolating artifacts; in other words, such displays do more than show off an object.

### **Looking for the Picture in a Cabinet: The Egyptian Museum**

The Egyptian Museum in Cairo was founded on 1 April 1897, and opened to the public on 15 November 1902. The creators of the museum were responding to the rapid increase in Western archaeologists procuring artifacts from Egypt. The Egyptian Museum’s goal was to create a place where archaeologists were required to store their discoveries so that these pieces of history would not be taken out of the country.

The Egyptian Museum obviously regards the King Tut collection very highly, since it represents the power and authority of ancient Egyptian royalty. The museum understands the country’s pride in the slice of history that included Tutankhamen. Nonetheless, the audience, consisting of foreign and Egyptian tourists alike, becomes a group of passive observers instead of being truly engaged in how the rule of the Boy King played out. Cairo’s continued European elitist view of museums is due to the strong Victorian influence still evident in Egypt from the days of colonialism. Unfortunately, these factors can have negative effects for the museum, as “the precious objects [it contains] have been either hidden away in basements or poorly displayed in ways that fail to interest and inform the public” (Hawass 7).

When one views layouts of various rooms in the museum, the “cabinet of curiosities” theory becomes very evident. The displays leave out a lot of context. Visual rhetorical theory reminds us that context is vital to the ability of the viewer to understand a message and to make meaning. When viewing any image, “intertextuality” plays a key role in the meaning the viewer creates. Intertextuality is defined as the ability to make connections and to reference various images to each other, all to better comprehend any one image. The viewer or audience must have some previous knowledge or understanding in order to participate in this negotiation of communication: “If the reader is unaware of the precursors, the image will have a different meaning, or no meaning at all” (Helmets and Hill 5). Exhibit designers rely on the audience’s knowledge when they decide how much context to provide in the display. The cabinet of curiosities model relies on the viewer’s previous knowledge to the extreme, thus failing the general public..

The rooms that include the pieces from the Tut collection generally consist of Victorian-style glass display cases, furniture, and décor. Represented in Figure 1,<sup>2</sup> the artifacts are neatly laid out in cases, with the most popular and extravagant, such as the golden mask, in the center of the room. While one can circle the mask and see it from many directions, the room itself does very little to jog the imagination and re-create a picture of Egyptian royalty. Visitors walk by each case looking at the objects, displayed on black cloth. While the gold certainly contrasts with the cloth, thus catching the viewer’s attention, there is little educational benefit for the general person. What the viewer sees is a piece of gold propped up and distant, as opposed to a burial object lying on the face of one of the youngest rulers of an ancient civilization. The daggers are placed next to each other, but unless the viewer has already seen an image of the mummification practices of the ancient Egyptians, the image before the viewer reveals little about the past. The wood and glass display cases contribute very little to actively teaching the visitor about the burial chamber or the person in it. In other words, very little meaning-making opportunity exists for the visitor.

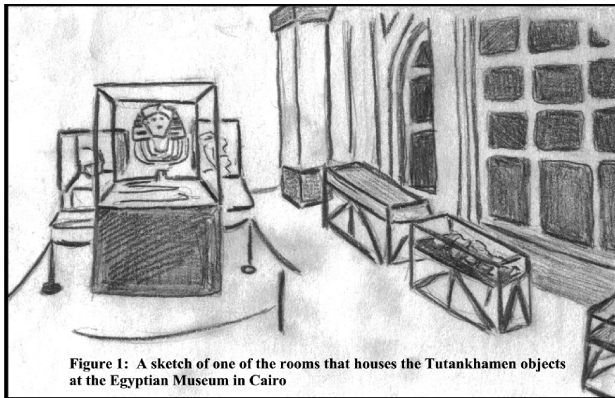


Figure 1: A sketch of one of the rooms that houses the Tutankhamen objects at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo

Rhetorically, however, these aspects combine to emphasize the ethos at work in the Egyptian display of Tutankhamen's treasures, including how privileged visitors are expected to feel in the presence of the king's final belongings. Visitors understand that they are to be in awe and honor the pieces they are observing. They worry about breaking the glass or tripping the alarm system. This construction is the result of Egyptians trying to prove that outsiders cannot come in and take dazzling archaeological discoveries from Egypt for their own benefit. The museum strives to prove that Egypt is an intellectual country that can appeal to the scholarly. The success in creating the aura of "intellect," unfortunately, leads to the average person not embracing the collection as having anything to do with him or her, much less with acquiring an in-depth understanding of the meaning of the image. The visitor leaves with a disjointed image of a "shadowy figure" that he or she cannot truly appreciate.

Some criticize the Egyptian Museum in Cairo for being out of date and not embracing current concepts of the modern museum. But similarly to other institutions in a changing society, the Egyptian Museum is looking to alter its image. The increasing popularity of active educational emphasis in museums has led to plans for the construction of new buildings and for renovations inspired by the theories of Western museums.

### **Tut's Blockbuster Beginnings: "Treasures of Tutankhamen"**

"Treasures of Tutankhamen" went on tour between 1976 and 1979. The tour stopped in Washington, D.C.; New York City; Chicago; New Orleans; Los Angeles; and Seattle (Charlton). The creators of the exhibit wanted to emphasize the universal and aesthetic beauty of the items rather than provide historical analysis. At the time of the exhibit's run, curators, Egyptologists, and the press constructed the "official" narrative to focus on the individual artifacts as "universal art, something too ennobling and too precious (too 'human') to belong to any one people (Arabs) or any one nation (Egypt)" (McAlister 82). The exhibit contained impressive golden objects that "looked great." Historical context was provided only "for a detailed appreciation of the quality and extraordinary value of the tomb's contents" (83).

While the exhibit was not large in terms of what its contemporaries deemed "blockbuster shows," the magnificence of the objects and people's fascination with them rightly established "Treasures" within the "blockbuster exhibit" phenomenon (Kramer). On 14 February 1977, the *Los Angeles Times* reported that "half a million persons" had visited the exhibit since 11 November 1976 (Cimons). The Metropolitan Museum of Art also established an expansive marketing campaign to promote the exhib-

it, which was described in the *Christian Monitor* as “the widest variety of related publications and merchandise ever made for any exhibition” (Loercher).

The basic premise of the exhibit’s design mimicked Carter’s archaeological site. The fifty-five objects included in the tour were arranged in the order of the rooms in which they were found: the Antechamber, Burial Chamber, Treasury, and Annex. This arrangement was meant to create a picture of the tomb itself, even though nothing of the tomb context existed, only the artifacts themselves. A few of the objects displayed were the famous gold funerary mask, decorated with colored glass and obsidian; a gilded wooden figure of the boy Tutankhamen harpooning; and a small gold shrine (Glueck).

Most of the exhibit locations used large, bright, and elaborate entryways to entice visitors. The actual displays consisted of darker walls, such as the medium charcoal gray at the New Orleans Museum of Art. Included in each presentation were photomurals of Carter’s crew recovering the objects, quotations from Carter’s journals (Loercher), and didactic charts (Kramer). The order of the objects and the inclusion of the images of Carter’s work presented a snapshot of ancient Egypt and a “dramatic account of the tomb’s discovery” (Kramer). The exhibit constructed the mystery of the tomb and the majesty of Carter’s work while focusing on the “moment of discovery” and the magnificent pieces of art found (McAlister 84). While this sequential order provided the viewer with some reference and context for the artifacts, as opposed to the complete lack of context found in the Cairo exhibit, the setting was limited, for the lighting and color of backdrops were not designed to paint a picture of where the treasures came from or the time period they represent.

The assembly of each room consisted of special lighting focused on individual pieces isolated from each other. Visitors no longer read these images as artifacts from the tomb of the “Boy King.” The image created was of separate marvels of the world that the public should embrace. Kramer reported that “we experience them, of course, as modern objects, not as ancient relics. The light that transforms those alabaster vases is the light of modern display technology—it has nothing to do with the light (or the dark) of ancient Egypt.” Visitors were to leave the exhibit in awe of the magnificence of Tutankhamen’s funeral belongings, but not because of the king or the religion, people, and nation they represented. The uncovering of the tomb and its treasures was not portrayed as being specific to Egypt or defining that country’s culture. Instead, these moments were considered a part of “universal art,” so the fact that the pieces were from Egypt was essentially a moot point (McAlister 84). The notion of “universal art” uses pathos hoping to have the viewer establish a connection with the pieces. “Treasures” represented what “humankind” could do, not just ancient Egyptians. The viewer of the exhibit was supposed to feel as if the pieces were representative of the great things “people” as a whole could do.

As visitors of the exhibit entered, they saw the collection displayed piece by piece, as if in an art gallery or auction. Rhetorically, the image created by a gold mask and the child’s chair in a glass case suggested to the viewer that he or she should share the beauty of these pieces and not regard them as being foreign. Take, for instance, the image of a man and woman observing a chair from the tomb (Figure 2). The intricate carvings detail a story known only to those learned in hieroglyphics, yet the glass case and lighting from overhead focus the audience’s attention on the chair itself and not on the who, when, why, or how of the chair. If a cartoonist were to write a thought bubble, the text might read, “Where could I put this in the living room? Does it match the table set?” The royal chair is not presented as specifically from Egypt, the burial object of a pharaoh, but as a piece of art to which anyone could be expected to relate.

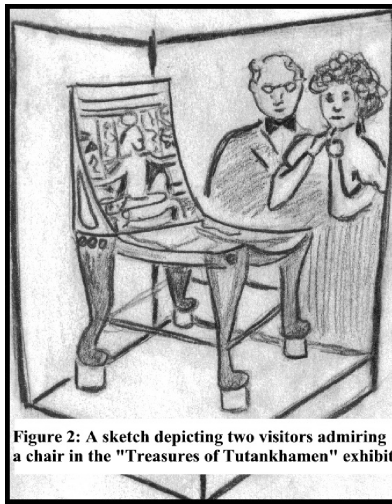


Figure 2: A sketch depicting two visitors admiring a chair in the "Treasures of Tutankhamen" exhibit

Looking at the imagery and display of the exhibit comparatively, the audience could notice the differences in the attitudes and intentions of those communicating through the exhibits. "Treasures," created by a collaboration of American curators, anthropologists, and advertising gurus, looked at times more like an art show than an anthropological exhibit. That image develops the message of "universal art" intended by the energetic curators and artists involved in the project. In contrast, the exhibit at the Egyptian Museum reflects the culture that developed the entire museum: colonized and Anglo-infiltrated Egypt striving to gain control over its cultural history.

### **Returning to the Western World: "Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs"**

"Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs" consisted of more than 130 treasures from the tomb of Tutankhamen, other Valley of the Kings' tombs, and additional ancient sites that began touring in Los Angeles on 16 June 2005.<sup>3</sup> The different locations of the tour each had their own unique flair, yet the essence remained the same for each. The use of a magnificent collection in coordination with new technology created an image of majesty, royalty, and mystery. Aside from the glitter and glam, "Golden Age" attempted to emphasize the educational aspect of the Tutankhamen collection. As opposed to a message of equality and universality found in "Treasures," "Golden Age" was designed to teach about the lives of the ancient Egyptians while at the same time using carefully arranged lighting to highlight certain pieces that were sure to catch the interest of visitors. Despite the goal of educating rather than providing spectacle, some reviewed the exhibit as being "glitzier," wherein "the Boy king [was] the central focus, like some sort of pop star" (Thrasher). "Golden Age" also differed from "Treasures" in that the arrangement focused on the bigger context, including the Boy King, rather than just on the discovery of his belongings. "Golden Age" had a story to tell about Tutankhamen and the world he came from, and each room in "Golden Age" was a chapter in the story of one of the most famous kings of all time.

The collection included more than seventy artifacts from other pharaohs who were King Tut's contemporaries as well as his relatives, including the rich intact tomb of Yuya and Tjuya, parents-in-law of Amenhotep II and great-grandparents of Tutankhamen. Yuya and Tjuya's tomb was the most celebrated historical find in the Valley of the Kings until the discovery of Tut's undisturbed burial chamber by Carter. The exhibit also included National Geographic imagery and films detailing the

Valley from which the Boy King came, along with “cutting-edge” research being done in that area.

After experiencing the entrance colonnade of giant lotus columns and walls made to look like the inside of a pyramid, the “Golden Age” visitor started in the “Introductory Theater,” where he or she watched a film narrated by Omar Sharif that introduced Tutankhamen’s life. Immediately after the video, visitors saw a single object, one of the many statues of the Egyptian king, displayed in a Plexiglas case with a spotlight and black curtains lining the walls. The image of importance and focus was created by the simplicity of the design in this room. This strategy was repeated frequently throughout the exhibit, particularly when the narrative came to a key point in the history of King Tut.

The second room illustrated “Egypt Before Tutankhamun” and displayed objects from the Boy King’s family. The educational experience was enhanced through the images created in this room. “What was it like?” and “Who was Tutankhamen related to?” were questions answered by everyday objects, time lines, and blown-up photographs decorating the walls. No longer was the visitor merely seeing funeral objects on display at a museum, he or she was looking upon the landscape of ancient Egypt itself. Objects in this room varied from small pieces of jewelry and makeup containers to elaborate model boats spanning several feet in length. The warm lighting, beige paint on the walls, and sand-colored fabric lining the cases mimicked the natural habitat of the objects.

The next room, “Traditional Beliefs,” shifted gears from everyday happenings to the sacred. The walls were painted a dominant shade of reddish-brown, and two large photographs of carved hieroglyphics lined two of the walls. The slightly darker light expressed reverence and a place of worship as visitors viewed statuettes of some of the most important gods and figures of ancient Egypt. Tutankhamen’s tomb and those of his equals were visual examples of some of the religious beliefs of the Egyptians. Both royalty and wealthy citizens practiced mummification of the dead. The practice mimicked the myth of Osiris, whose body was dismembered by his brother and put together and preserved by his wife. According to ancient Egyptian tradition, the *ba*, or the spiritual essence of an individual, had to return to the mummy to ensure its continued life, so the body was preserved through an elaborate embalming process.

In the “Death, Burial, and the Afterlife” room, visitors learned more about ancient Egyptians’ explicit interest in death as a miniature universe for the deceased and of how they prepared their dead for the journey across the river. Black walls and blue lighting provided a striking contrast to the preceding two rooms, as the viewer experienced the Egyptian image of death rather than Egyptian life. Text described the practices and beliefs behind the collection of the tomb and the preparatory objects displayed. In the center was the massive gold coffin of Queen Tjuya, around which visitors circled to examine the elaborate designs and intricate craftsmanship, almost as if they were paying their last respects to the queen herself. “Death, Burial, and the Afterlife” is a clear example of how “Golden Age” visually created the story of Tutankhamen and the ancient Egyptians. Pieces used in burial practices were reverently displayed in cases against the backdrop of a hologram that mimicked the walls of a tomb or chamber where the mummification process took place. The prominent gold coffin of Tjuya in the center of the room represented the ultimate goal of the burial practice. The elegant coffin, covered with hieroglyphs and other symbols, depicted stories of and prayers for the queen. “Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs” placed the coffin in a setting where it represented key lifestyles and beliefs.

Following this visual of death in terms of Egyptian culture, the visitor was then directed to a dramatic time in Egyptian history. Visitors met Tut’s father, Akhenaten, in “Religious Revolution.” In front of the room were large pillars and a marble floor mimicking impressive temples along the Nile.

Akhenaten preceded Tutankhamen and took it upon himself to change the official Egyptian religion from a polytheistic practice to a monotheistic belief in the Aten (Sun God). Akhenaten was known as a “heretic pharaoh” and remembered for his unusual features, which expressed a sort of uniqueness and divinity. At the end of the first portion of this section was the large head from a statue of the revolutionary pharaoh, presented on a high platform as if in a temple or palace. The second portion presented a few of the objects belonging to Akhenaten against the backdrop of a blown-up photograph overlooking the Nile valley and bordered by mock pillars resembling a temple. The image connected the objects to a specific historical time and place, demonstrating a distinct move from the “curiosities” philosophy.

Next, visitors stepped into a dark hallway with black curtains and a lighted image of Howard Carter discovering the tomb. Then viewers of the exhibit walked through a hallway with speckled lighting and broken text arranged in a way that forced them to slow down and read the questions and issues concerning the reign of Tutankhamen. The lighting and placement of text created an image of confusion and turmoil representative of the state that Egypt was in when Tutankhamen took the throne. Some believe that by reinstating the original religion, Tutankhamen conquered this state of chaos and brought Egypt back to its original grandeur. Visitors then continued to another completely black-curtained room, “The Boy King.” Once again, a single object was spotlighted to create the image of importance and royalty; the bust of Tut highlighted his youth when he took the throne.

Then visitors came face-to-face with “Tutankhamun, King of Egypt” as they entered a room designed to represent Tutankhamen’s temple. The room captured the concept of bringing the world of Tutankhamen to life. “Daily Life in Tut’s World” contained everyday and personal items buried with him. The viewer learned about Tutankhamen’s rule over a country in turmoil and how he attained “divine immortality.” The floor had elaborate carpeting, contrasting with the marble and linoleum of the previous rooms. Walls were decorated with murals of hieroglyphs and photographs from inside temples in Egypt, and the room was accented with pillars similar to the Greco-Roman tradition and faux bricks, no doubt a result of trade and interaction with other cultures.

“Causing His Name to Live” contained Tutankhamen’s gold canopic coffinettes for his liver. Visitors watched a high-definition video to get an up-close and personal view inside and out of the object. Once again, the exhibit utilized the single-object strategy to demonstrate another significant moment in the story of Tutankhamen: his sudden and tragic death. After the dramatic presentation of the icon came another darkly lit room with black curtains. Here, instead of a single object, there were several of the most precious pieces from King Tut’s reign. The viewer read Carter’s famous quote from 1922—“everywhere the glint of gold”—and could not help but be in awe of the magnificent royal funerary pieces. The dark backdrop contrasted with the gold and attracted the eye to its brilliance, similar to the goal of the Cairo and “Treasures” displays. Finally, the exhibit presented a miniature image of the famous tomb’s layout (Figure 3). Included in the display were photographs from Carter’s discovery, a glowing green image of the sarcophagus, and exceptional gold pieces such as a ceremonial dagger and sheath. The sarcophagus hologram rotated through the layers of the coffin from the cover to where the pieces on display were placed, finally reaching the royal figure’s body. The blue-lighted walls and suspension of the objects created an eeriness one might feel at a cemetery or in the catacombs of a cathedral. Rhetorically, this imagery reminded the audience that what Carter found was more than just a pile of shimmering objects—it was an actual tomb where a king was laid to rest.



Figure 3: A sketch of the room "The Tomb," which is part of the exhibit "Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaoh"



In many other displays of King Tut's burial pieces, the viewer saw, for example, a gold dagger with a card saying how old it was and when it was found. "Golden Age" took a more active educational route. The suspended dagger caught the visitor's attention and allowed him or her to see this intricate blade from many angles. When a visitor finished circling the case, looking up and down at the dagger, he or she could take a moment to read the literature explaining the dagger's role in the king's tomb. Instead of the traditional suit-and-tie intellectual walking through nodding his or her head in agreement of the date assigned, children on field trips might run to their classmates saying, "Did you know what they did with that?!" To accomplish this, each room of the exhibit used the most up-to-date technology in museum display, with protective casing, light-imposed text, video, holograms, lighting, and strategic placement of texts both next to the object and along the top of the case for reading accessibility.

Even though King Tut's belongings were found eighty-five years ago, the new crisp look produced by modern display techniques distinguished the collection as something significant for the present day. The mixture of wood, obsidian, and gold, sacred and everyday-use items, as well as the images created by the individual rooms, attempted to educate the public of a significant period in Egyptian and archaeological history. One could hear the rhetoric in action as mothers bent down to their children to say, "King Tut became king when he was only two years older than you!" connecting the visitor to the image and subject of the exhibit.

Some remnants of the "blockbuster" image survived, as the exhibit certainly utilized the commercial and publicity strategies that made "Treasures of Tutankhamen" such a success. Those who had visited the 1970s display expressed mixed feelings for "Golden Age" due to the exclusion of the famous funerary mask and more elaborate pieces from the tomb. However, suspended objects in cases with cables such as in the room "The Tomb" played to the mystery and exoticism of Tutankhamen that has fascinated people for generations.

### **What You See Is What You Get?**

The success of any museum display is often measured by the number of people who visit the exhibit. This assessment seems flawed if attendance is accredited to the marketing and advertising pre-

ceding an exhibit. So how are the accomplishments of an exhibit to be determined? While statisticians and accountants will not be pleased, there seems to be only one true answer: the ability of the exhibit to co-construct meaning with its viewers. More and more, the tendency is for museums to establish elaborate interactive exhibits in hopes of engaging visitors and ultimately educating them about whatever discipline the museum promotes. Yet, exhibition as a visual rhetorical strategy certainly contributes to the education of viewers and to the meaning making viewers negotiate.

Tut-mania has been around for decades and will most likely survive for many years to come. The artifacts recovered from the “Boy King’s” tomb are treasured among archaeologists, Egyptian scholars, and the public. The use of these objects in a number of exhibitions has led to varying levels of understanding of Egyptian culture and of the last pharaoh of royal blood. In some cases, the exhibit did not create an image of the subject at all, but instead used imagery to intrigue or spark the curiosity of the viewer. As demonstrated by the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the cabinet of curiosities approach does not paint a picture of the culture that the artifacts are said to represent, but it does play to the encouragement of intellectual thought and the importance of artifacts within a museum. Moving forward in the realm of museum exhibition, “Treasures of Tutankhamen” and “Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs” both go above and beyond to present images with a particular rhetoric using the ancient king’s final possessions. “Treasures” used the objects in addition to text and photographs to create the image of artistic expression and dramatic discovery, while the intricate design of “Golden Age” set out to give a slide show of ancient Egypt and all it entailed for Tutankhamen while making a connection with Egyptian culture.

Visual rhetorical theory reminds museum scholars and museum enthusiasts alike that what is seen plays a large role in what is understood. Although all three exhibits presented the same subject and even some of the same objects, the images created by each exhibit rhetorically embraced different meanings. In a day and age when most are concerned with the growing popularity of interactive exhibits, taking a moment to utilize the rise in conscious visual rhetorical construction and understanding can strengthen the abilities of museum exhibits to more effectively educate and negotiate meaning with their visitors.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>The author of this paper visited only one of the three exhibits, “Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs.” The author conducted research through literature written about the three exhibits as well as viewing pictures of the displays found in journal articles, reviews, and online documentation.

<sup>2</sup>The sketches included in this paper were created by the author based on images from articles and websites.

<sup>3</sup>The author visited the exhibit at the Franklin Institute of Science in Philadelphia on 30 September 2007. Analysis of this exhibit is primarily based on that experience, but also uses documentation that applies to the tour as a whole, which does not conclude until 2009.

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