



The treasure vault of ANCIENT EGYPT

MOHAMMAD ABU AL HASAN

Many of you know or have at least heard of the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London or the American Museum of Natural History in New York. I wonder though how many people have heard about the museum which has the largest collection of the artifacts of ancient Egyptian civilisation. I am talking about the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, popularly known as the Egyptian Museum.

Situated in the very heart of Cairo and the blossoming point of the Arab Spring, Tahrir Square, the Egyptian Museum is one of the oldest and largest museums on earth. It holds a collection of 160,000 pieces on display and nearly 260,000 pieces more in storage—making it the biggest museum in the world for ancient Egyptian artifacts.

History and archaeology enthusiasts from all over the world can see the famous pharaoh Tutankhamun's entire collection on display, including 5,000 objects mostly made out of gold discovered from his tomb at the Valley of the Kings in Luxor. The museum also has a collection of royal mummies, including the mummy of the greatest pharaoh of ancient Egypt, Ramesses II, who is believed to be the 'pharaon' described in the Holy Qur'an (the antagonist in the time of Prophet Musa).

Entering the faded pink old building, standing on the banks of the Nile will give anyone the feeling of entering a real vault of ancient Egyptian treasure as the arts and culture of the whole civilisation flourished on these riverbanks. The entrance ticket might seem expensive—USD 25 for foreigners (including the display of the royal mummies and Tutankhamun galleries)



Statue of Rahotep and his wife Nofret

and an extra six dollars for photography—but compared to European museums and the impressive collection of the Egyptian Museum, this seems reasonable.

Designed by French architect Marcel Dourgnon and opened in 1902, the museum building itself is a gem among early museum designs in the world. The moment you enter the building, you see a colossal statue standing in a lower grand nave. You might want to go straight towards the nave but do stand in the open space before it as it exhibits the first historical document in the world, the 'Narmer Palette', a tablet made of siltstone that was erected to commemorate the unification of both Upper and Lower Egypt by the king Menes, otherwise

known as Narmer, in 3100 BC. This started the kingship that continued for the next 2,500 years in Egypt.

After this, is the colossal statue, a 23-foot high monolithic statue of the pharaoh Amenhotep III and his queen Tiye, dominating the nave in such a way that you will forget to see the large stone sarcophaguses laying around you. Other than its size, the statue has a romantic story behind it. Before this statue was erected nearly 3,360 years ago, the trend was to keep the height of the queen below the height of the king but Amenhotep III gave her the same height as him in the statue. Queen Tiye also has an arm around her husband's waist.

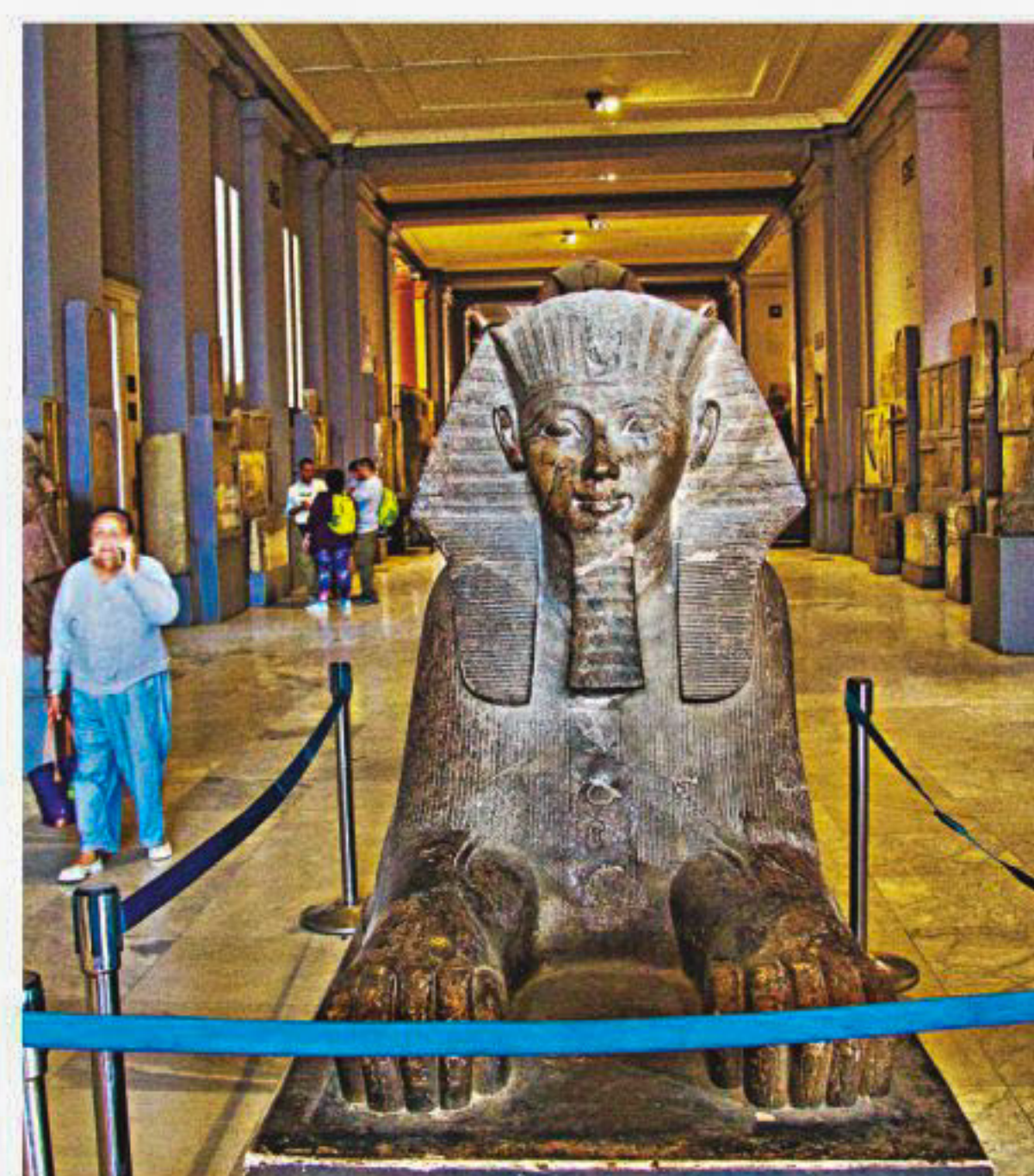
If you wish to be daring and make your way through Egyptian civilization chronologically, you can take a long tour through the galleries which are jam-packed with thousands of statues, busts, canopies, coffins, sarcophagi, boats, stone

plaques, pillars with hieroglyphic texts, painted statues, tablets and many more from the ages of the Old Kingdom, Middle Kingdom, New Kingdom, Ptolemaic Period to the Greco-Roman Period.

While walking through the galleries of the Old Kingdom, you will find people gathering in front of a tiny (rather unattractive) statue. The 7.5-centimetre high ivory statue is of the pharaoh Khufu, the builder of the Great Pyramid of Giza. Interestingly, this tiny statue is the only surviving complete statue of the king who created such a gigantic wonder of the world.

In different galleries of this floor, visitors will find the triad of pharaoh Menkaure, beautifully painted statues of Prince Rahotep and his wife Nofret, the sphinx, a painted bust of queen Hatshepsut, a bust of queen Nefertiti, the Stela of Akhenaten and his family, among many other statues, altars, tablets, and stone coffins.

If you are done with the first floor, it is time now to dive into the collection of treasures of the tombs of the pharaohs and the royal mummies. Mummies of Egyptian royalty, mostly unearthed from the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens in Luxor, have been kept in a separate climate-controlled chamber (for their preservation). One of the must-see areas of the museum, you see the mummies of the greatest king Ramesses II and queen Hatshepsut (a female pharaoh who later ruled with the full powers of a 'king') among others as you walk in the chamber. Sadly, you cannot photograph the royal mummies, but only marvel at the preservation process which keeps the mummies intact till today.



Sphinx