

Ancient Egypt: The Art of Mummification

By UShistory.org, adapted by Newsela staff on 03.06.17

Word Count **969**

Level **MAX**



Picture of a wall painting from the tomb of an ancient Egyptian named Sennedjem. The painting shows the god Anubis attending the mummy of the deceased. Photo from: Wikimedia Commons.

Ancient Egyptian civilization lasted for several thousand years. It spanned from 3000 B.C. until 30 B.C, when Egypt was annexed, or taken over, by the Roman Empire.

Many of the discoveries and practices of ancient Egypt have survived an even greater test of time. The sands of the Nile River Valley hold many clues about this mysterious, progressive and artistic ancient civilization.

A dead noble stands trembling in the Hall of Truth. Behind the noble, Horus, the half-falcon, half-man ruler of Earth, unleashes a piercing stare at the quivering man. Thoth, the sharp-beaked, ibis-headed deity of scribes, sharpens his quill — poised to record a verdict of divine judgment.

Seated before the noble on a golden throne is Osiris, the king of the dead. Upon his head rests a glittering crown with a gorgeous white feather plume on either side. Behind Osiris stands Isis, the revered goddess of nature, who is responsible for bringing the dead earth back to life each year. She holds an ankh, a cross with a loop above the bar. An ankh guarantees that a dead person will live forever.

The noble wonders if he will live forever. Or will he be fed to the hideous crocodilelike god called the Eater of the Dead and forever cease to exist. (How can the noble wonder about all this if he's already dead? The noble is actually in limbo, a place where the souls of dead people go while being judged.)

Osiris begins the process of judging the noble's life. On one side of a scale, Osiris places the heart of the noble, which bares the secrets of the soul. Had the soul lied, cheated or lived an evil life? The soul defends itself before a variety of interrogating gods.

The noble thinks about his second self, called the ka. The ka lives within every human being. When the physical body expires, the ka goes on to enjoy eternal life, where it can hunt, fish, live with its family, be entertained and eat favorite foods.

Now Osiris holds up the sacred feather, the emblem of truth, and places it on the other side of the scale. If the scales balance, eternal life awaits. If not, the Eater of the Dead has his favorite food for lunch: noble.



Mummification

Before being judged by Osiris, the noble's soul had undertaken a journey that lasted over two months. When the noble died he was brought to the Beautiful House, where an embalmer (often a priest with knowledge of rituals, wrapping and anatomy) prepared the body to cross to the afterlife.

Egyptians believed that the afterlife would be much like life on Earth and that the soul would want use of its body in eternity. That's why Egyptians made an art out of mummification, or the preservation of the dead.

The process of embalming took great skill and required many steps. What follows is a crash course on the Egyptian embalming technique.

Removal of the Brain: With long hooks, the brain is extracted through the nasal passage. The Egyptians didn't think that the brain had any special use.

Organ Removal (Evisceration): A cut is made on the left side of the body, and the liver, lungs and other organs are removed, dried out and stored in sacred vessels called canopic jars. The heart is left in the body, because it will be needed to be weighed in judgment by Osiris.



Dehydration with Natron Crystals: Now the body must be dehydrated (have the liquids removed) to stop decay. A type of salt called natron is used. Natron crystals are packed around the body. The

crystals absorb body fat and fluids and keep the body from decaying. After being treated for about 40 days, the corpse is washed and dried.

Stuffing: Because the body has lost much of its mass, resin-stained clothes or bits of sawdust are used to pack the corpse, which by now has also lost its eyeballs. Pieces of cloth are stuffed in the eye sockets and painted black. At this point, the corpse's lips and cheeks are painted.

Oiling the Body: This elaborate process includes, massaging, perfuming and anointing (blessing with oil) the corpse.

Coloring: After the nose and mouth are filled with cloth scraps to restore the shape of the face, the body is colored. Men are colored red; women are colored yellow. After the coloring, resin is poured into body cavities.

Arrangement of the Body: Depending on which period of Egyptian history the deceased lived in, the arms are either placed to the side of the corpse, folded on its chest or placed with hands on shoulders.

Wrapping: The body is wrapped in several layers of fine linen, and various body parts receive particular attention. This process takes two weeks, after which a resin is added to the bandages.

Funerary Mask: A mask, sometimes made entirely of gold, is fitted to the mummy's body. Symbols of gods often adorned masks.

Burial of Waste: All materials used to prepare the corpse (such as natron and bloody linen) are placed in a jar and buried away from the mummy's tomb.

Finally, the time has come to entomb the mummy. Jewelry, games, furniture, food, clothing, and cosmetics might be entombed with the corpse. These things would be used in the afterlife. The Book of the Dead, a collection of hymns and prayers, might also be included in the tomb to protect the body on its journey to the realm of the dead.

So how did the noble fare before the great Osiris? Ask his mummy.

