



October 10, 2009

Science Center shares stories behind Mexico's mummies

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The mummies of Guanajuato happened by accident, but it's no accident that they're making their first appearance outside of Mexico at the Detroit Science Center today.

Science Center President Kevin Prihod assembled a team that worked vigorously to convince Guanajuato officials that Detroit would present the 36 mummies in a way that embraces Mexican history and culture.

"Mexico is a country that reveres its deceased," said Martina Guzman, a native Detroiter who helped develop the traveling exhibit that will be in Detroit until April 11. "We created the exhibit in a way that really honors the lives of the deceased."

Detroit will be the first of six North American museums to host the "Accidental Mummies of Guanajuato Exhibition." It is the first traveling exhibition designed and built by the Science Center.

The 10,000-square-foot exhibit is far from a macabre display of dead bodies. It offers a dramatic artistic and scientific immersion into the community the mummies hailed from and the lives they once lived.

Exhibit a trip to a sacred Mexican city

Visitors will be transported to a sacred city in Mexico the way it existed more than 100 years ago.

A trip through the exhibit offers a rare opportunity to see, hear and feel what life may have been like in that region northwest of Mexico City. Here's a glimpse inside the exhibit's five main galleries:

- "A Look Into the Past" presents an overview of Mexico's history and the life of the people of Guanajuato, the birthplace of artist Diego Rivera.

A map of Mexico covers one wall; another wall displays a time line that marks the year 1865, when the first mummy was discovered. Back then, bodies were exhumed from the cemetery if the families of the deceased didn't pay crypt rental fees for five years. The body of Dr. Remigio Leroy, a French doctor with no local family to pay his fees, was exhumed.

Subsequently, 112 naturally mummified bodies were exhumed from crypts.

- When visitors walk through the gate of the Panteón Municipal, they are in what looks like a cemetery. This colorful area is called "Death and Transformation."

Crypts stacked five deep are painted on walls. Only by touching them do you realize that they are not engraved tombstones. The tombs are adorned as they would be in Mexico, with flowers, purses and artwork -- mementos the living leave for the dead.

The bodies are in the center of the wall as they likely would have been found. It's believed these bodies became mummified because the crypts' placement in the cemetery – sandwiched on all sides by other crypts – caused the bodies to dry rather than decay.

As a result, the mummies are covered with leathery-looking, tawny-colored skin. In some cases, they have hair, teeth, fingernails and remnants of clothing and footwear.

- From the cemetery, it's on to "Life and Lore," the gallery containing 26 mummies, including five infants.

The mummies either stand vertically or lie horizontally on a glass stand adorned at the base with colorful tiles. Each mummy has a name and a written story, based on information that was known about them or created from historical accounts.

Oakland County Sheriff's Office forensic artist Barbara Martin Bailey sketched the faces of each mummy in this gallery. Another local artist, Christine Chambers, sketched their bodies and clothing. The result is near life-size drawings of each mummy as they likely looked.

- The "Solving Mysteries" gallery gives visitors a look inside the mummies.

The folks at Oakwood Imaging Center in Dearborn did full body scans on seven of the mummies. X-rays, endoscopy and other exams also were conducted in hopes of getting clues about their health at the time of death.

Audio-visual recordings give information about the internal conditions of the mummies, three of which are in this gallery, including one laid out on an imaging machine.

- The final stop is "Celebrating Life and Death." It offers information about the Mexican holiday of Día de los Muertos, or the Day of the Dead, which has come to be celebrated Nov. 1 and Nov. 2.

The gallery contains an altar, adorned with flowers in tribute to the deceased.

A section of this gallery also houses a market where visitors can buy items from Mexico, including sugar skulls, pottery, scarves, masks and silver jewelry, because Guanajuato was once a popular silver mining town

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Additional Facts

"Accidental Mummies of Guanajuato Exhibition"

Today through April 11 at the Detroit Science Center, 5020 John R St., Detroit

Hours: 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Mondays-Friday; 10 a.m.-6 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays; 9 a.m.-5 p.m. Oct. 12

- \$24.95, ages 13 to 59
- \$22.95, 60 and older

- \$19.95, ages 2 to 12

For tickets and info, go to: www.detroitssciencecenter.org
