

Coffins and Sarcophagi

Ancient Egyptians were very focused on preserving the body of a deceased person. According to their religion, for a person to achieve everlasting life after death, his or her body had to be preserved for eternity. Egyptians worked to figure out the best ways to preserve the body, and keep it safe from tomb robbers and desert scavengers such as jackals or other animals.

For the majority of the Pre-dynastic Period (6000-3000 B.C.), bodies were just put into small rectangular or oval pits in the desert. Toward the end of the period, Egyptians began to place bodies in plain wooden chests before putting the corpse into the ground. These rectangular boxes were the first true coffins of ancient Egypt. This type of coffin changed very little until the end of the Middle Kingdom when masks made of cartonnage- (like paper maché, but using linen or papyrus) were placed over the heads of the mummies within the coffin. Over time, these masks grew longer and developed into complete body covers.

By the New Kingdom, the mummy-shaped or anthropoid coffin became common. They were often carved of fine, imported hardwood and could be gilded and inlaid with glass and stones. The coffins could be nested with an inner and outer mummy-shaped coffin or even then put into a large, rectangular wood coffin. High- ranking people and royalty could also be put into massive stone coffins, called sarcophagi that could be rectangular or mummy-shaped.

During the impoverished 21st Dynasty in the Third Intermediate Period, coffins were made of rough local softwood, covered with thick layers of mud and gesso, and brightly painted decorations -- sometimes rendered in gesso to give them a three dimensional quality. Amuletic devices and vignettes from the Book of the Dead were painted on the exterior of coffins and covered with a golden yellow varnish. A 'Mummy board" or "coffin board" was placed below the lid; echoing earlier mummy masks and serving as another home for additional amuletic symbols to protect the body.

During the Late Period, coffins were even more roughly made and by the time of Cleopatra and the Romans they reflected many of the art styles of the wider Mediterranean world.

