

Egypt's museums and monuments are deserted

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An Egyptian restorer fixes one the pieces that was broken by looters at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Egypt, Thursday, Feb. 10, 2011. Would-be looters broke into Cairo's famed Egyptian Museum on Saturday, Jan. 29, ripping the heads off two mummies and damaging about 75 small artifacts before being caught and detained by army soldiers. (AP Photo/Emilio Morenatti)

(AP) -- One of the world's great museums resembled a military camp on Thursday, with soldiers patrolling behind its wrought iron gates and armored vehicles parked nearby. Inside, workers with white coats and latex gloves delicately handled artifacts that were damaged in the chaos sweeping Egypt.

The country's priceless trove of antiquities has emerged mostly unscathed from the unrest so far, but tourism, a pillar of the Egyptian economy, has not. Tens of thousands of foreigners have fled Egypt,

many on evacuation flights organized by their governments, draining a key source of employment and foreign currency.

Egypt's most famous tourist attraction, the Pyramids of Giza, reopened to tourists on Wednesday after a 12-day closure. But few came to visit. The heavily guarded and shuttered Egyptian Museum in Cairo is next to Tahrir Square, a protest encampment that draws hundreds of thousands of people on some days.

"We will open the museum after the strike is finished. I don't know when the strike is finished," said Antiquities Minister Zahi Hawass, referring to the upheaval. "I need things to go back to normal."

Egypt's conflict pits autocratic President Hosni Mubarak against protesters who want him out now. Anti-government demonstrators and Mubarak supporters battled in front of the Egyptian Museum's pink-walled facade last week, raising fears of widespread destruction of the most coveted artifacts from the age of the pharaohs.

In earlier unrest, the adjacent headquarters of the ruling party was set afire, and its blackened shell looms over the museum.

Some 70 objects at the Victorian-era Egyptian Museum, many of them small statues, were damaged after looters broke into the museum and smashed showcases in late January. On Thursday, several dozen items lay on tables in a conservation room, examined by experts with small tools and adhesive.

Some were funerary items of Yuya and Tuya, parents of a queen. Their tomb was found in the Valley of the Kings at Luxor in 1905, though that remarkable find was eclipsed by the discovery of Tutankhamun's well-preserved tomb by British archaeologist Howard Carter less than two decades later.

Hawass said "the only important piece" that was damaged was a statue of Tutankhamun, the boy king, on a panther. The figure of the standing king, one arm broken off, lay separate from that of the panther.

"The skilled hand of this man will return everything back," the minister, gesturing at a colleague. "This is the most damaged piece of the group."

Workers also planned to restore a walking stick of Tutankhamun that was stripped of its thin gold sheeting when it was thrown on the floor.

The Victorian-style building is a place of marvels, even if the lighting is poor and there are none of the interactive displays and other novelties of modern museums. Faded, typewritten cards perch in the corners of display cases, explaining the heritage in tiny print.

On a normal day, the museum is jammed with foreign tourists, surveying treasures of an ancient civilization - mummies, alabaster caskets, granite statues, chariots and gold sheet thrones. One bed incorporates wildlife shapes - the head of a hippopotamus, a leopard's body and the back and tail of a crocodile.

But on Thursday, the majestic stone faces and forms lining the halls had the place largely to themselves.

Only a few museum workers, soldiers and journalists walked the dimly lit chambers. In their haste and in the darkness, looters had rampaged just a few feet from the room containing Tutankhamun's gold burial mask and other invaluable pieces. Its padlock was intact.

Hawass said the looters were looking for gold and a fictitious substance called "red mercury" that, according to local lore, can be found in the throats of ancient mummies. Some people think it has magical powers and can be used to summon spirits.

"They live thinking about it. They could kill each other to get it," Hawass said. "When I enter any place in Egypt, people ask me all the time about this."

The museum is still checking to determine whether any items are missing. On his website, Hawass said an additional five items that were stolen from an archaeological storage site in Qantara, near the Suez Canal, were apparently discarded in the desert and police returned them Tuesday.

Authorities have recovered a total of 293 objects at the Qantara site, and an inventory was under way.

Hawass sought to project a sense of normalcy, reaching high for comparisons. He suggested that other great repositories of culture - the British Museum and New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art - were equally vulnerable to plunder or destruction.

"It can happen to any place in the world," said Hawass, who faces demands for higher wages from [antiquities](#) workers who demonstrated outside his office this week.

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