

Chicago museum lifts lid on Egyptian mummy coffin

December 8 2014, byCaryn Rousseau



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, the mummified body of Minirdis, a 14-year-old Egyptian boy and his exposed toes lie in his opened coffin after J.P. Brown and his team of curators at the Field Museum opened the coffin for the first time to begin a conservation process on the 2,500-year-old boy before it becomes part of a traveling exhibition. Brown says they have to fix his burial mask, shroud, reconnect his detached feet, and do work this week to shore up the coffin and mummy so they can withstand travel. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

Not until the lid was off the wood coffin—exposing the 2,500-year-old mummified remains of a 14-year-old Egyptian boy—could J.P. Brown relax.

The conservator at Chicago's Field Museum and three other scientists had just employed specially created clamps as a cradle to raise the fragile coffin lid. Wearing blue surgical gloves, they lifted the contraption and delicately walked it to safe spot on a table in a humidity-controlled lab.

"Sweet!" Brown said after helping set the lid down, before later acknowledging the stress. "Oh yeah, god, I was nervous."

The much-planned procedure Friday at the museum, revealing the burial mask and blackened toes of Minirdis, the son of a priest, will allow museum conservators to stabilize the mummy so it can travel in an upcoming exhibit.

"Mummies: Images of the Afterlife" is expected to premier in September at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, then travel to the Denver Museum of Nature and Science in fall 2016.

The Field Museum has had the mummy since the 1920s, when the institution received it from the Chicago Historical Society. It's part of the museum's collection of 30 complete human mummies from Egypt.



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, P.J. Brown, Regenstein Conservator at the Field Museum describes the conservation process that will be given to the coffin and mummified body of Minirdis, a 14-year-old Egyptian boy who was the son of a priest. Brown says they have to fix his burial mask, shroud, reconnect his detached feet, and do work to shore up the coffin and mummy so they can withstand travel. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

"There's always a risk of damage," said Brown, who works in a lab filled with plastic-covered examination tables behind a large window that allows schoolchildren to watch him work. "So we like to handle these things as little as possible."

Even before opening the coffin, the conservators knew some of what to expect. CT scans, which make X-ray images allowing scientists to see

inside, showed the boy's feet were detached and partially unwrapped with his toes sticking out. His shroud and mask were torn and twisted sideways. Those also will be repaired.

Pieces of the coffin had previously gone missing, so the mummy had been exposed to the elements before. For that reason, Brown wasn't worried about the mummy scattering to dust when the lid came off—a notion familiar to moviegoers.

"The last bit of 'Indiana Jones' and all that—that's not going to happen," he reassured before the lid-raising began.

Walking around the opened coffin, Brown pointed and explained the significance of a particular marking, the colored resin on linen wrappings and the gilded gold on the mask. If Minirdis had lived, he would have been a priest like his father, Brown said.



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, Richard Lariviere, left, President and CEO of the Field Museum, gives visiting students from Liberty Intermediate School in Bourbonnais, Ill., an impromptu, up close look at the mummified body of Minirdis, a 14-year-old Egyptian boy who was the son of a priest. Scientists at the Field Museum in Chicago have opened the coffin of the 2,500-year-old mummy to perform conservation work before it becomes part of a traveling exhibition. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

Scientists don't know why he died so young.

"The fascinating thing about any mummy is that it's survived as long as it has," Brown said. "They're actually amazingly fragile."



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, is the mummified body of Minirdis, a 14-year-old Egyptian boy, his exposed toes, and burial shroud with gold painted toenails as they lie in his opened coffin. J.P. Brown and his team of curators at the Field Museum opened the coffin for the first time to begin a conservation process on the 2,500-year-old boy before it becomes part of a traveling exhibition. Brown says they have to fix his burial mask, shroud, reconnect his detached feet, and do work this week to shore up the coffin and mummy so they can withstand travel. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

This kind of work is always painstaking, with lots of pre-planning and tests to prevent the unexpected, said Molly Gleeson, who works with mummies as project conservator at Penn Museum's "In the Artifact Lab: Conserving Egyptian Mummies" exhibition in Philadelphia.

"There's nothing else like them," she said, noting that if something goes wrong, "We can't put things back together exactly the way they were before."



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, P.J. Brown, Regenstein Conservator at the Field Museum examines the burial mask on the mummified body of Minirdis, a 14-year-old Egyptian boy who was the son of a priest. Brown and his team have opened the coffin of the 2,500-year-old mummy to perform conservation work before it becomes part of a traveling exhibition. Brown says they have to fix his burial mask, shroud, reconnect his detached feet, and do work to shore up the coffin and mummy so they can withstand travel. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, Egyptian hieroglyphics etched on top of a 2500 year-old Egyptian coffin identify the mummy's name and lineage inside. P.J. Brown, Regenstein Conservator at the Field Museum and his team opened the coffin of Minirdis, a 14-year-old boy, to perform conservation work before it becomes part of a traveling exhibition. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, P.J. Brown, Regenstein Conservator at the Field Museum describes what a CT scan revealed about the mummified body of Minirdis, a 14-year-old Egyptian boy who was the son of a priest. Brown and his team have opened the coffin of the 2,500-year-old boy to perform conservation work before it becomes part of a traveling exhibition. Brown says they have to fix his burial mask, shroud, reconnect his detached feet, and do work to shore up the coffin and mummy so they can withstand travel. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, the mummified body of Minirdis, a 14-year-old Egyptian boy lies in his opened coffin after J.P. Brown and his team of curators at the Field Museum opened the coffin for the first time. Brown and his team will begin conservation work on the 2,500-year-old boy before it becomes part of a traveling exhibition. Brown says they have to fix his burial mask, shroud, reconnect his detached feet, and do work to shore up the coffin and mummy so they can withstand travel. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, the mummified body of Minirdis, a 14-year-old Egyptian boy and his burial mask lie in his opened coffin after J.P. Brown and his team of curators at the Field Museum opened the coffin for the first time. Brown and his team will begin conservation work on the 2,500-year-old boy before it becomes part of a traveling exhibition. Brown says they have to fix his burial mask, shroud, reconnect his detached feet, and do

work to shore up the coffin and mummy so they can withstand travel. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)



In this photo taken Friday, Dec. 5, 2014, in Chicago, P.J. Brown, second from left, Regenstein Conservator at the Field Museum, and his team of scientists open the coffin containing the mummified body of Minirdis, a 14-year-old Egyptian boy who was the son of a priest. Brown and his team will begin conservation work on the 2,500-year-old boy before it becomes part of a traveling exhibition. Brown says they have to fix his burial mask, shroud, reconnect his detached feet, and do work to shore up the coffin and mummy so they can withstand travel. (AP Photo/Charles Rex Arbogast)

More information: Field Museum, www.fieldmuseum.org

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