

Bloor West Egyptologist brings 'Archaeology Alive'

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For those who dream of climbing inside dusty 4,000-year-old pyramids and exploring isolated tombs in true 'Chasing Mummies' fashion, a unique opportunity approaches to do just that with Bloor West's very own mummy chaser.

Egyptologist Gayle Gibson, 62, is a respected lecturer, tour leader, educator and mummy/coffin expert based at the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM). She's set to lead a public Egypt expedition in 2012 called Archaeology Alive that goes beyond the typical Egypt tourist itinerary to include a rare journey through the middle of the country to newly accessible ancient sites, including a private tour of Akhenaten's lost kingdom of Amarna.

A High Park and Bloor resident since 1976, Gibson grew up in Scarborough in the Birchmount and Kingston Road area where she once was "a correspondent for The Scarborough Mirror in days long gone."

Quite the opposite of the dry academic stereotype, Gibson's radiance exudes in her complete fascination with Egyptology - a subject, she confesses, gripped her at a young age.

"The first book I took out of the library as a young child was John Gardner Wilkinson's 'Lives of the ancient Egyptians'" she said. "I couldn't read it very well but I thought the pictures were pretty cool. Then my mother bought me 'Lost Worlds' by Anne Terry White and I read that book until it fell into pieces."

"I used to go down to the ROM every weekend and walk around until my feet were bleeding," she said. "I would sit on the floor and copy all the hieroglyphs off the wall and try to read them. I remember one really thrilling day as a young teenager when I found the name 'Metjetji' and realized I could actually read a little bit."

With this childhood obsession, an Egyptology degree after high school seemed a natural for Gibson but it was not to be. She was deterred from her dream profession by a guidance counsellor who dismissed it as "stupid" and certainly not something that could ever make her a living. Instead, she went on to study drama and English at The University of Toronto and became a high school teacher for the Chatham-Kent, York, North York and Toronto Boards of Education.

It was only after her son was born that she rediscovered her true calling and returned to the University of Toronto to put together most of a second Bachelor of Arts (BA) in Ancient Near Eastern Studies. She then went on to finally attain an Master of Arts (MA) in Egyptian language and literature as a mature student.

"I was still buying books on Egyptology, still avidly reading about it," she says. "I thought if I was good, the museum just might let me dust the coffins or something."



Bloor West Egyptologist brings 'Archaeology Alive'. Egyptologist Gayle Gibson stands amidst some of the Egyptian artifacts at the Royal Ontario Museum. The Bloor West resident is leading an Egypt tour in 2012. *Photo/MIKE POCHWAT*

But that's all history now, and Gibson is well-known as an accomplished Egyptologist and one of the ROM's most popular educators. She is immensely proud of the institution and its many contributions to historical preservation, study and education.

"The ROM was one of the first museums in the world to take the study of mummies very seriously. Long before I worked here in 1973, the museum did a very fine autopsy of Nakht, a common working man from Thebes," said Gibson. "The mummy of Djedmaatesankh was one of the first mummies to get a proper modern CT scan - and we are now continuing that work with other mummies who are more obscure but I think deserve the attention just as much."

FINDING RAMSES I AT NIAGARA FALLS

When it comes to mummy chasing, one of Gibson's defining career achievements surround the re-discovery of Ramses I. Until the 1990s, his mummy lay unidentified on the dusty third floor of the obscure and rather spooky old Niagara Falls museum.

During her trips to Niagara Falls, Gibson would stop in at the Niagara Falls Museum to see its mummy coffins.

"It was really intriguing that the one mummy looked like a Ramesside - a member of Ramses the Great's family," she said. "He had been found in a coffin that was exactly the kind of coffin he should have been found in to be such a person. The more I studied him, the more I thought he might really be a royal person - and I began to call him 'Ramses for luck'."

Gibson turned her interest in the mummy's origins into a lecture and an article for KMT, the Journal of Modern Egyptology, suggesting he was most likely a Ptolemaic priest but supporting the possibility he could be Ramses I.

When the Niagara museum was sold in the late 1990s, Gibson was consultant to the buyer William Jamieson and helped sell the coffins and mummies to the Michael C. Carlos Museum of Emory at Atlanta. It was in Atlanta that the positive identification of the mummy as Ramses the I was made, and the great Pharaoh was triumphantly returned home to Luxor.

Gibson, however, remains modest about the accomplishment: "(William) Jamieson and I got an assist for getting Ramses back to Egypt. The goal went to Emory University and Dr. Peter Lacovara."

In addition to her work with the ROM mummies and her busy schedule of lectures and courses, Gibson is passionate about travel to Egypt today - and is thrilled to be gearing up to lead the two-week Archaeology Alive tour in January 2012.

"Now is a very exciting time to visit Egypt. More and more sites, tombs and pyramids are opening every year," says Gibson. "With new roads and many tourism improvements by the Supreme Council of Antiquities it is a much more comfortable travel experience than it was even a decade ago. For a long time, in fact, one could not venture into Middle Egypt, and now it is possible to take a bus trip right through the heart of the country and see famous sites like Beni Hassan, Hermopolis and especially the great city of Akhenaten and Nefertiti called Amarna."

Gibson's upcoming tour through adventure company Your Journey Travel will tour Cairo and the Pyramids at Giza, but also take in some of the less usual sites, like the pyramid of Meydum and those at Dashour. Then the group will continue via luxury bus through middle Egypt and Amarna, stopping at the great temples of Abydos and Dendera before ending up in the city of Luxor. The tour also will include a private tour of Amarna by lead archaeologist Barry Kemp- with proceeds supporting excavations there.

At the close of the interview at the local Timothy's coffee shop, Gibson responded exuberantly to one last challenging question: If Bloor West Village was an Egyptian era, which one would it be?

"Bloor West village would definitely be my kind of time - the late period. I like the late period because it is very multicultural and very interesting. You probably needed three or four languages to get around - and that would be very handy out here in Bloor West. Also in late period Egypt there were probably many different cuisines, all kinds of unique flowers... wonderful things to eat and interesting people to meet. A wide variety, and I think that is what I like most - variety!"

Gayle Gibson's Archaeology Alive Egypt tour takes place Jan. 12 to Feb. 4, 2012 and costs \$5,395 USD per person. Visit www.youregyptjourney.com email info@yourjourney.com or call 1-800-978-0544 for more information.

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