

Review: ‘Ramses the Great’ show in S.F. uncovers the ‘fine art’ in immersive experiences

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Installation view of “Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs.”
Photo: World Heritage Exhibitions

Concepts of spectacle and immersion have gotten a bad rap lately in the art world. Believe me, I understand.

When a dazzling presentation comes at the cost of curatorial substance, it’s not only disappointing, it fails to honor the subject. The term “immersive experience” has also become such a cliché that many of us cringe when we spot the words in the description of a new exhibition.

But when the concepts are used intelligently, they make museum-going more immediate, more educational and sometimes more complete.

“Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs,” the newly arrived exhibition at the de Young Museum that opened Saturday, Aug. 20, benefits from all the enhancements spectacle and immersion can offer. The touring exhibition was curated by Zahi Hawass — the famed Egyptian archaeologist and former minister of state for antiquities affairs — and comes to San Francisco in partnership with the Supreme Council of Antiquities of the Arab Republic of Egypt. It is produced by World Heritage Exhibitions, a subsidiary of Cityneon Holdings. The exhibition is overseen at the de Young by Renée Dreyfus, the George and Judy Marcus Distinguished Curator and the person in charge of ancient art at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco.



Falcon-headed collar and counterweight of Princess Neferuptah, Egyptian Middle Kingdom, Dynasty 12.
Photo: Sandro Vannini / Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

With its set-like exhibition design, dramatically backlit photo blowups, use of video elements, evocative soundtrack and moody lighting, it is as much a theatrical experience as a museum visit. It’s easy to get swept up in the drama, as though carried pleasantly on the tides of the Nile.

Ramses II (1303-1213 B.C.) reigned for 67 years as the third pharaoh of the 19th Dynasty of Egypt. His time on the throne was marked by distinguished military campaigns, along with building projects like the Ramesseum temple complex at Qurna and the Abu Simbel temple complex near the Egypt-Sudan border. He is also thought to be the pharaoh depicted in the Old Testament story of Moses by some historians.



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Immediately upon entering, visitors are plunged into his world, starting with a slick introductory video that explains his reign, and also the looting of his tomb in the Valley of the Kings – providing context to why artifacts from other royal tombs in Dahshur and Tanis are featured. After the video, the doors to the exhibition open as if by decree of the gods, bringing you face to face with a spectacular head of the ruler taken from a colossal statue.

Forms of Egyptian revival have been seen through the ages in the West, seemingly coming back into vogue with major archaeological discoveries and excavations. Gazing at objects like a gold Haset Ewer pitcher for liquid offerings in the temple, alabaster kohl jars, intricately colored Faience tiles depicting captives from military campaigns and numerous statues of the sphinx, one sees just how much movements like Neoclassicism, Art Nouveau and Art Deco have been inspired by the simple forms and intricate detailing of the New Kingdom era.



The Battle of Kadesh, depicted at “Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs.”
Photo: World Heritage Exhibitions

Throughout the exhibition, you enter the different worlds of Ramses’ time. It can be almost theme-park-like, in the best possible way.

With so much of Ramses’ story told in monumental buildings and works of sculpture that cannot tour, the design helps fill many of those gaps. Adjacent galleries showcase how tried-and-true exhibition tools are still effective, with a model of the great temple at Abu Simbel and its epic statues of the ruler on display. A nearby viewing room features a digital re-creation of the Battle of Kadesh that feels 3-D in its use of both conventional, wall-mounted screens and a flat viewing surface below it in the shape of a burnt papyrus map that shows the topography of the battleground and displays additional images. Later re-creations of tombs are also beautiful in their own artistry.

But when presenting objects like the stunning dynastic jewelry, the exhibition design lets the gold headpieces, bracelets, amulets and neckpieces speak for themselves. When you have items like the gold face mask of Sheshonq II, it doesn't need anything extra. This is also true for the stone sarcophagi and the intricately painted, gilded wood interior coffins. And naturally, no exhibition on ancient Egypt would be complete without mummies, represented in "Ramses" by numerous preserved animals.



A model of the great temple at Abu Simbel is on view at "Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs."
Photo: World Heritage Exhibitions

Upstairs in the museum's Piazzoni Murals Room, the virtual reality experience "Ramses and Nefertari: Journey to Osiris" is available at an extra cost. See the exhibition first, then take the 10-minute "tour" through Abu Simbel, guided by the apparition of the pharaoh's beloved wife, Nefertari. It's a nice additional component after learning the basics about the ruler, but its motion and fragrance components might not be suitable for all museumgoers; some of the imagery may also be too frightening for children.

I left the show not only astounded by its presentation and objects, but also truly awed by the artistic and cultural accomplishments of the pharaoh's reign. It's an exhibition that proves when spectacle and immersion are given a subject with the depth of Ramses II, they can be truly in the service of greater understanding.

"Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesday-Sunday. Opens Saturday, Aug. 20. On view through Feb. 12. \$20-\$40. "Ramses and Nefertari: Journey to Osiris" tickets are \$18 general admission, \$16 members. De Young Museum, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. 415-750-3600. deyoung.famsf.org



Installation view of “Ramses the Great and the Gold of the Pharaohs.”
Photo: World Heritage Exhibitions

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