



Kid Reporter Nicholas Wu and Detroit Science Center spokesperson Kelly Fulford with mummies from the Accidental Mummies exhibit in Detroit, Michigan. (Photo courtesy Nicholas Wu)

Accidental Mummies

Unique exhibit reveals secrets of the past

By [Nicholas Wu](#) | November 10, 2009



The dead are rising in Detroit. The Accidental Mummies of Guanajuato have arrived. In a world premiere exhibit, 36 mummies are currently on display at the Detroit Science Center.

The preserved bodies are called "accidental" mummies because they were created naturally. They are different from Egyptian mummies, which were preserved artificially with chemicals. And because they were never meant to be mummies, their bodies tell a fascinating story about their lives and the local culture.

The mummies are on loan from the Museo de las Momias de Guanajuato in the city of Guanajuato, Mexico. After Detroit, the exhibit will tour six other cities in North America.

Naturally Preserved

The accidental mummies formed in a very rare process that only 1 in 100 bodies in Guanajuato experience.

Bodies in this dry Mexican city are not buried. They are interred in an above-ground crypt completely sealed from the outside world. Some of the bodies dried out before the process of decomposition could start. This process "accidentally" mummified the bodies.

"The cemetery of Guanajuato had a policy of a grave tax, which could be paid annually or in a lifetime fee," said Kelly Fulford, a spokesperson for the Detroit Science Center. "If the tax was unpaid, they would remove the mummies and make that space available for other bodies."

That led to the discovery in 1865 of the first accidental mummy. Dr. Remigo Leroy, a French doctor who died of cholera, was exhumed because he had no family to pay the tax. Expecting to find a bare skeleton, the people found a naturally mummified body.

Eventually, more than 100 mummies were found when other bodies were disinterred (taken out of a grave) because no one paid the grave tax.

When the Dead Tell Tales

These mummies also differ from Egyptian mummies because they are not the bodies of the rich and royal. They are preserved bodies of regular, everyday people.

Scientists have been able to piece together the lives of the mummies based on their clothing, personal articles, and bodies. One example is La Bruja, "The Witch."

"Scientists could tell that she had a hunched appearance, that she had a fractured hip, and that she walked with a lot of pain," Fulford said.

She also carried a small medicinal pouch, which can be seen with her remains. Based on the

scientists' description, it is understandable that local people would have thought of her as a witch.

Most mummy exhibits distance the public from the bodies. This exhibit highlights the people and the lives they lived. One of the mummies even has a personal connection to Michigan.

Simon Lazano, who is one of the mummies on display, is an ancestor of the head of the Hispanic Chamber of Commerce of Michigan, Raymond Lozano.

"We made a point of finding this mummy, Simon Lazano, and bringing him back here," said Kevin Prihod, President and CEO of the Detroit Science Center. The resemblance between Simon, the mummy, and a display photo of Raymond, the community leader, was quite evident.

Prihod explained his decision to incorporate history and culture in the exhibit.

"Normally we would have pretty much straight science exhibits here, but I think this is something where we needed to tell the whole cultural story," he said.

The tour will head to six other cities in the U.S. sometime in 2010, but the cities have not yet been announced.

For more information about the exhibit, and a student learning guide, visit the [Accidental Mummies website](#).

About the Author

Nicholas Wu is a member of the Scholastic Kids Press Corps.

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