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New gifts of the Nile

The GEM conveys the message that history is not frozen in time, but is alive and inseparable from identity, writes **Ezzat Ibrahim**

On the Giza Plateau, where stone meets sky and history still breathes, Egypt is opening a new chapter in its long history. The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), officially opening on 1 November, stands not only as a cultural monument but also as a renewed statement of national confidence and global presence.

For years, the GEM, long imagined as the crown of Egypt's modern renaissance, has been taking shape opposite the Giza Pyramids, turning vision into reality. It is the largest archaeological museum ever built and a bridge between the ancient and the modern. Its purpose is simple and profound: to preserve the treasures of the Pharaohs, to display them in their homeland, and to carry Egypt's history into the future in a structure that blends power, beauty, and innovation.

Built on 480,000 square metres of land overlooking the Pyramids, the museum houses more than 57,000 artefacts, including the entire collection of Tutankhamun's treasures displayed together for the first time. In its vast atrium, a colossal statue of Ramses II greets visitors, restored and moved in one of the most impressive conservation projects in recent memory. Behind the galleries stretch 19 laboratories and a 30,000-square-metre conservation centre, making the museum both a scientific institution and a cultural landmark.

Its meaning, however, goes beyond preservation. Is it a national shrine or a global showcase? A gesture of cultural sovereignty or a tool of soft power? Like the Smithsonian Institution in Washington in its early days, the GEM is a philosophy as much as a building. It reminds visitors that history is not frozen in time and that instead it is alive and inseparable from identity.

Egypt's tradition of museums began in 1835, when Mohamed Ali established the first national museum on the Nile. A century later, the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square became a world symbol of archaeology. Yet, its halls grew too narrow, its displays overcrowded, and its structure tired. The GEM was conceived out of both necessity and ambition — to save the past and to renew the way it is seen.

From the start, it was an international project. The 2002 design competition drew 1,557 entries from 82 countries. The winning design by the Irish firm Heneghan Peng Architects aligned the building with the Great Pyramid of Khufu, while its alabaster façade captures the same light that once illuminated the temples of Luxor. The project combined Egyptian investment, Japanese development loans, and international expertise from Japanese engineers to European teams training Egyptian archaeologists under the supervision of

UNESCO.

The museum could only exist in Egypt. Every line of its design speaks of continuity. Its main axis aligns perfectly with the Great Pyramid, as if past and present were engaged in a quiet dialogue across 4,500 years. The GEM is not a replica of the Louvre or the British Museum. It is Egypt's response to both. Those museums were born of empire; this one is born of authenticity. Here, Egypt tells its own story in its own voice.

The road to the completion of the museum was long and difficult. Political upheaval, economic pressure, and the Covid-19 pandemic delayed progress more than once. Costs doubled to exceed \$1 billion. Yet for Egypt, a nation whose identity and growth rely on culture and tourism, the project was never in doubt. With tourism recovering strongly in 2025, the museum is expected to attract over five million visitors a year, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenues and confirming Egypt's position as a global cultural hub.

But the GEM's role is larger than tourism. Its conservation and research centres train Egyptian and African archaeologists in modern preservation techniques. Its digital archives open access to scholars around the world. Knowledge once hidden in tombs is now shared across borders.

The museum also captures a central truth about Egypt itself — a country deeply protective of its heritage, yet open to the world; a people who honour their ancestors, while shaping one of the most advanced museums on earth. The GEM's alabaster-lit halls display works that speak of originality and genius, but also of a modern nation claiming its story with reason and imagination.

Some critics question whether such grandeur diverts resources from social priorities. But Egypt's leaders see the museum as something beyond cost. A great museum, like a great city, is an act of faith. It tells citizens that their story matters, and it reminds the world that Egypt is not a relic of civilisation, but one of its enduring sources.

What makes the GEM truly remarkable is not only its treasures, but its conviction that history is a living force and something to be studied, reimagined, and renewed. Visitors who stand beneath the colossal statue of Ramses II, before Tutankhamun's chariot from his tomb, or beside the glass walls of the museum facing the Pyramids will see more than the ancient past. They will see how Egypt turns its heritage into a vision for the future.

The museum began as a bold project and out of a belief that culture could define a nation's place in the modern world. Today, that belief stands solid in stone and light. Civilisations, like the monuments they raise, do not vanish. They endure, evolve, and rise again.



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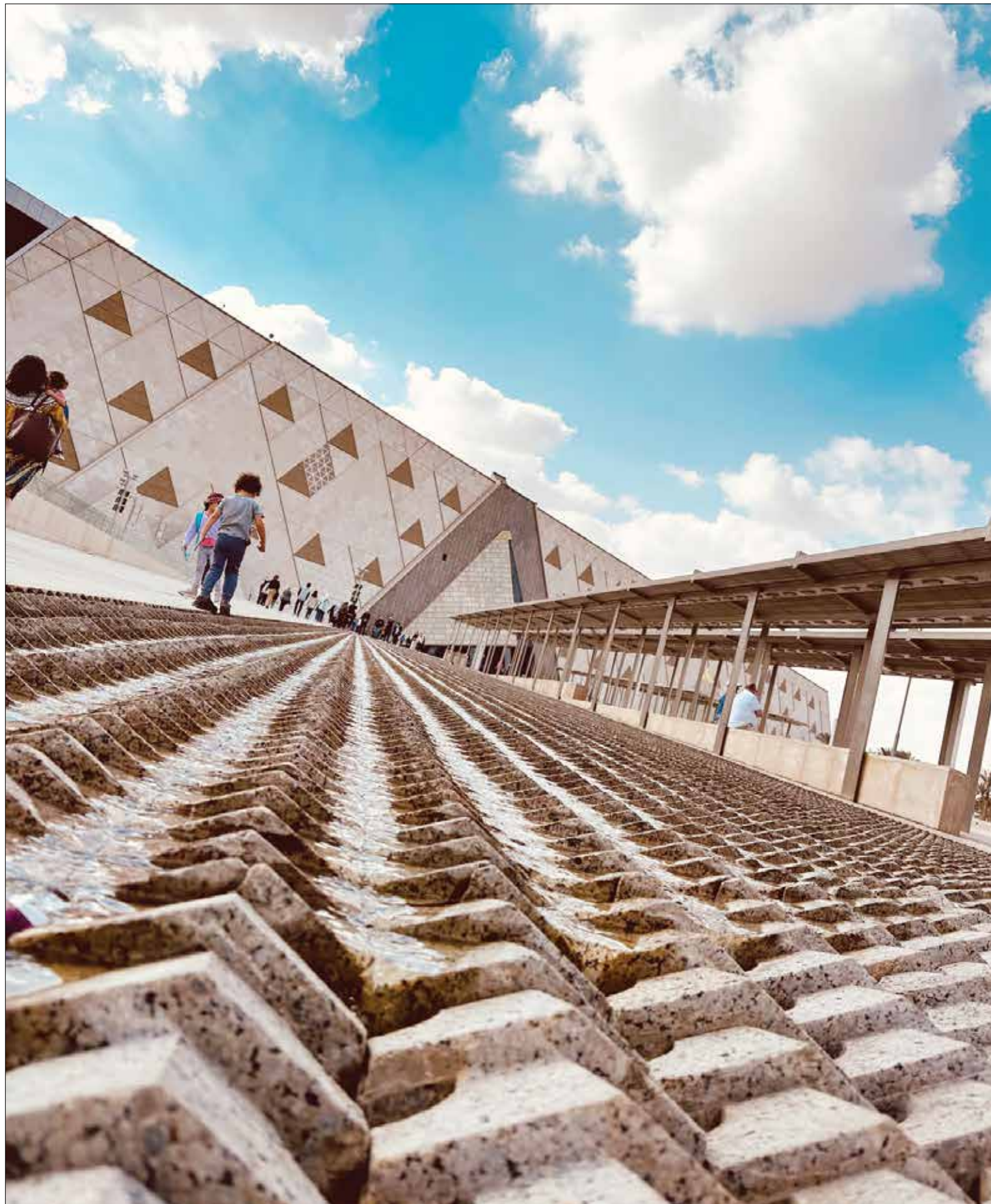
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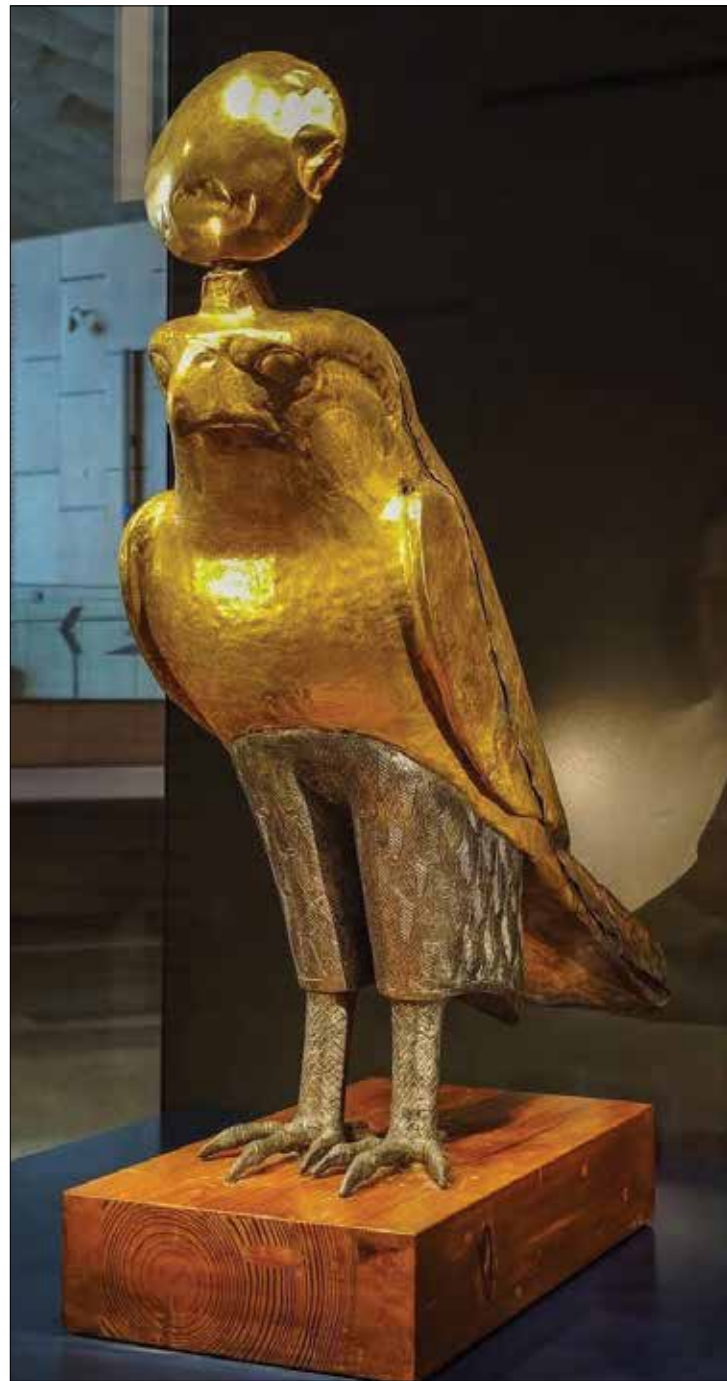
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The GEM: Vision



photos: Nora Koloyan

The design of the GEM is a bold fusion of modern architecture and ancient landscape, set against the dramatic backdrop of the Giza Plateau, writes **Nevine El-Aref**



In the heart of Giza, where the Pyramids rise against the desert sky, a new chapter in Egypt's civilisation is about to unfold. The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), the largest archaeological museum in the world, is no longer just a national project; it is a message from Egypt to humanity. It is a symbol of pride, resilience, and Egypt's unwavering commitment to preserving history while embracing the future.

The museum is not simply a building of stone and glass. It is Egypt's gift to the world and a testament to the ancient Egyptian civilisation that has captivated the human imagination for thousands of years. For decades, there have been dreams of creating a museum that would combine dignity, scientific precision, and global accessibility. Today, that dream stands complete overlooking the Giza Plateau at the gateway to one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world.

The journey to bring this monumental institution to life was not easy. In January 2002, the government launched an international architectural competition to design an institution that would house, preserve, and showcase some of the world's most extraordinary ancient treasures. Just one month later, a ceremonial foundation stone was laid at the chosen site, located a mere 2 km from the Pyramids of Giza and the Great Pyramid of Khufu, the last surviving wonder of the ancient world.

By 2003, the Irish architectural firm Heneghan Peng had won the competition, and their striking contemporary vision was selected to be brought to life as the GEM. Their design proposed a bold fusion of modern architecture and ancient landscape, set against the dramatic backdrop of the Giza Plateau.

The building follows a chamfered triangular plan that aligns precisely with the Great Pyramid of Khufu and the Pyramid of Menkaure. The philosophy of the design is to connect the axes of the building with the axes of the neighbouring Pyramids. Thus, the contemporary design of the museum is intended to show ancient and modern Egypt at one.

Its marble-clad façade, adorned with repeated geometric motifs, emits a soft glow at dusk and includes seven pyramids, a number that has held significant meaning throughout Egyptian history. The eastern façade of GEM is 46 metres high and more than 800 metres long and is divided into three parts, two of which contains three pyramids.

The use of illumination to link the earth to the sky through light represents the fourth dimension. A seventh transparent pyramid is

located on the façade facing north towards the Giza Plateau. This pyramid represents the continuity of Egypt's pioneering influence from antiquity to the modern day. The main entrance façade presents a series of cartouches containing the names of the ancient kings of Egypt to welcome all visitors.

Construction officially began in 2005. However, the project faced a series of challenges, environmental constraints, budget pressures, and political turmoil, which delayed progress. The situation worsened in 2011 with the 25 January Revolution. Work on the museum came to a standstill amid political instability, while tourism, one of the nation's primary sources of funding, plummeted.

In 2014, when political stability began to return with renewed government support and international financial backing, construction resumed in earnest. Despite previous setbacks, the vision of creating one of the world's largest and most important archaeological museums was revived.

A major turning point came in 2016, when progress on the GEM stood at just 17 per cent. From that moment, construction gained momentum and continued at full pace. Today, the museum is fully completed and will officially open on 1 November.

INSIDE THE GEM: Upon entering the GEM's main external gate visitors are greeted by the San Al-Hagar Obelisk, the first in the world to be placed in a special display, offering visitors the opportunity to walk beneath it and see the cartouche of King Ramses II engraved on it.

Ancient Egyptian royal figures used to engrave their cartouches on the bottoms of obelisks as a mark of ownership. Within the building itself the statue of Ramses II proudly greets visitors.

The 83-ton colossal statue of Ramses II is the first of the museum's 57,000 artefacts to have taken its place at the GEM. It was transported from Downtown Cairo to the GEM site even before the construction of the building began, symbolically marking the museum's future home and serving as its earliest guardian.

In addition to the towering statue of Ramses II, visitors entering the museum's grand atrium are greeted by an impressive ensemble of monumental artefacts. Among them stands the Victory Column of King Menepthah, a powerful symbol of Egypt's military triumphs.

Lining the space are ten seated statues of King Senusret, each carved with regal precision, offering a glimpse into the grandeur of

the Middle Kingdom. Also on display are two colossal statues of a Ptolemaic king and queen that were recovered from the Mediterranean Sea off Alexandria, where they had lain submerged for centuries.

Together, these masterpieces form a dramatic introduction to the GEM's vast collection, setting the tone for the journey through thousands of years of ancient Egyptian civilisation.

From the atrium, visitors are drawn towards one of the museum's most breathtaking architectural features — the Grand Staircase. Spanning more than 6,000 square metres, this functions not only as a pathway upwards but also as a "vertical museum" displaying some of the most imposing relics of Ancient Egyptian kingship and belief.

Rising through six levels, the staircase

serves as a central artery of the museum, connecting the entrance with the exhibition halls above. Visitors can ascend via steps, travellers, or elevators for the disabled, all leading to a panoramic view of the Great Pyramids of Giza framed like a living monument at the end of the ascent.

"The staircase houses 87 colossal artefacts, many of which have never been exhibited before on such a scale," said Ahmed Ghoneim, CEO of the GEM. These are presented under thematic narratives such as "Royal Image", "Kings and Gods", "Divine Houses", and "Journey to Eternity". Their presence turns the staircase into a ceremonial passage through Egypt's dynastic history.

Among the remarkable pieces displayed are a red granite colossus of King Seti I, an

imposing statue of Queen Hatshepsut, a powerful depiction of the Roman Emperor Caracalla, and an array of architectural elements including columns, obelisk fragments, *naoi* (stone shrines), niches, and temple reliefs. Each piece reinforces the grandeur of Egyptian civilisation and the divine authority of its rulers.

Standing at the intersection of architecture, history, and ritual symbolism, the Grand Staircase acts as the museum's ceremonial spine and represents a journey upwards through stone, light, and time.

The museum's main galleries offer visitors an unprecedented journey through the ancient Egyptian civilisation spanning from around 7000 BCE to 394 CE. Ghoneim explains that the galleries present this civilisation's history



to reality



photos: Nora Koloyan



Ghoneim



through a rich tapestry of ancient treasures and archaeological collections meticulously designed to tell the long story of ancient Egypt.

With 12 galleries organised into four broad time periods and three thematic pillars of Society, Kingship, and Beliefs, visitors are invited to explore Egyptian history in multiple ways. Whether choosing to move chronologically or thematically, or combining both, each visitor can create a unique and personalised journey through Egypt's past.

"The galleries offer an immersive experience into the lives of Egyptian people, kings, queens, and commoners alike," Eltayeb Abbas, CEO of the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation (NMEC) in Cairo and a former assistant to the minister of antiquities for GEM affairs, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

He said that from the daily routines of pre-historic hunter-gatherers to the burial preparations of great warrior kings, the exhibits reveal how the Ancient Egyptians lived, worshipped, and prepared for the journey into the afterlife. Magnificent objects, such as royal jewellery, ceremonial items, and everyday tools provide a glimpse into their beliefs, hopes, and fears, as well as the complex social structures that defined their society.

THEMES: The Society theme highlights the daily lives of various groups in ancient Egypt, from hunter-gatherers and farmers to scribes, priests, and government officials.

Through carefully curated artefacts such as furniture, tools, and personal items, the exhibition brings to life the contrast between the

lifestyles of the rich and those of the poor. It also focuses on the innovations that shaped ancient Egyptian society, offering insights into the agricultural and cultural advances that transformed the country over thousands of years.

The Kingship theme traces the evolving role of Egypt's kings and queens over more than 3,000 years of the dynastic periods. Beginning with the Early Dynastic Period, the section illustrates how royal power and influence grew, culminating in Egypt's establishment as one of the world's largest empires. Visitors can explore the rise and fall of the royal dynasties, from the establishment of centralised authority to the eventual decline of Egypt as it became a province under the Roman Empire.

In the Beliefs section, Abbas said, the galleries delve into the spiritual and religious world of ancient Egypt. This section explores the pantheon of Egypt's gods and goddesses, their temples, and the divine cults that shaped Egyptian religion. Visitors can also learn about complex funerary rituals, including the construction of tombs and burial complexes, as well as about the various objects and equipment such as canopic jars and *shabti* figures that accompanied the dead into the afterlife.

Through these exhibits, the profound connection between religion and governance in ancient Egypt becomes evident.

"The main galleries at the GEM offer an extraordinary journey through Egypt's rich history, providing visitors with an in-depth understanding of how one of the world's greatest civilisations lived, ruled, and believed. Whether focused on Society, Kingship, or Beliefs, each gallery invites visitors to step into the daily

lives, monumental reigns, and spiritual realms of the ancient Egyptians," Abbas said.

Each gallery highlights key artefacts and treasures from different periods of Egypt's history. Abbas said that the first three galleries cover the earliest periods of Egyptian history from the Prehistoric Period to the end of the First Intermediate Period. The fourth, fifth, and sixth galleries of the GEM explore Egypt's Middle Kingdom and the Second Intermediate Period.

The seventh, eighth, and ninth galleries are dedicated to the New Kingdom, showcasing the glory of Egypt's expanding empire. On display are statues, documents, and personal items belonging to viziers, soldiers, and priests who played key roles in managing Egypt's dominion. The final three galleries span from the Third Intermediate Period through the Graeco-Roman era.

The main galleries also take visitors on an immersive journey through Egypt's rich history that is enhanced by state-of-the-art digital displays and interactive installations.

At the pinnacle of the visitor journey lies one of the most anticipated elements of the GEM — the Tutankhamun Galleries. For the first time since Howard Carter discovered the boy-king's tomb in 1922, the entire collection of over 5,400 artefacts is displayed together in one place, just as they were found in the Valley of the Kings.

Occupying more than 7,000 square metres, the galleries are designed as an immersive narrative that follows Tutankhamun's life, death, and afterlife. Rather than presenting the artefacts simply as treasures, the museum curates them as part of a story, divided into themes of Identity, Lifestyle, Funeral, Rebirth, and Discovery and culminating in the grandeur of his burial and the journey to eternity.

Among the highlights are the iconic golden funerary mask, the three nested coffins, the gilded shrines, ceremonial chariots, jewellery, weapons, and the remarkable textiles and garments that survived more than 3,000 years. Many of these objects, particularly delicate items such as linen, food offerings, and personal belongings, have never been exhibited before due to conservation challenges.

The galleries are designed to resemble a conceptual recon-

struction of his tomb's chambers, including the Antechamber, Annex, Burial Chamber, and Treasury, allowing visitors to experience the discovery as Carter saw it a century ago. Advanced display technology, controlled lighting, and climate systems ensure that the artefacts are preserved while being shown in unprecedented clarity.

More than just a royal exhibit, the Tutankhamun collections reflect the artistry, beliefs, and daily life of ancient Egypt's 18th Dynasty. For many, this will be the museum's emotional core: a golden world frozen in time and now brought back to life on the edge of the desert overlooking the Pyramids.

Beyond its galleries and archaeological wonders, Ghoneim pointed out, the GEM is also designed as a vibrant cultural and commercial destination. It features an expansive commercial area that includes shops, bookshops, artisanal craft stores, cafés, and restaurants. Visitors will be able to purchase high-quality replicas, jewellery inspired by ancient designs, contemporary Egyptian fashion, traditional crafts, and curated branded souvenirs.

The GEM includes a dedicated Children's Museum, designed to introduce young visitors to ancient Egypt in an interactive, engaging, and educational way. Far from being a traditional gallery, this space uses state-of-the-art technology, augmented reality, and hands-on displays to help children explore how the ancient Egyptians lived, built their monuments, worshipped their gods, and prepared for the afterlife.



**The Egyptian Holding Company
for Airports and Air Navigation
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Cairo Airport Company announces the **rescheduling of the submission date** for the **pre-qualification documents** related to the activities of (*Food & Beverages – Specialty Retail*).

The new submission deadline will be **November 16, 2025**, instead of **November 2, 2025**, while maintaining the **same conditions and requirements** stated in the **previous announcement** published in the same newspaper on **October 2, 2025**



A nation's dream comes true

A dreamer and a doer are the visionaries who brought the GEM to life, writes **Nevine El-Aref**

Every great monument begins with a dream. The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), a symbol of Egypt's pride and cultural revival, was no exception.

It began as an idea in the mind of Farouk Hosny, the former minister of culture, who imagined a museum that would present Egypt's ancient legacy with the grandeur it deserves. He planted the seed of what would become one of the most significant cultural projects of the century.

Years later, Khaled ElEnany, former minister of tourism and antiquities and now the elected UNESCO director-general, became the engine driving that vision forward. With persistence, diplomacy, and strategic direction, he guided the project through its final stages, uniting teams of engineers, conservators, and archaeologists in pursuit of a single goal – to deliver Egypt's gift to the world.

Together, Hosny and ElEnany represent the spirit behind the GEM, one the dreamer, the other the doer, and both forever etched into the story of a landmark that bridges Egypt's past with its future.

The seed of the idea sprouted in the early 1990s during a trip to Paris, where Hosny visited the Institut du Monde Arabe with French politician Edgard Pisani. There, a conversation with Italian publisher Franco Maria Ricci pushed his thinking further. Ricci jokingly asked, "what are you going to do with your warehouse?" referring to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo's Tahrir Square.

Stung by the remark, Hosny replied with conviction, "you don't know it yet, but we're going to build the largest museum in the world."

Ricci was intrigued. He promised to visit Egypt and, if convinced, to help secure funding through former Italian prime minister Giulio Andreotti. Back home, Hosny took the bold idea directly to then president Hosni Mubarak. "I told him we wanted to build the biggest museum in the world," Hosny recalls. "He asked, 'where will you find the money?' and I answered that great projects attract great financing."

The next challenge was finding the right location and after touring the Giza Plateau a location was found at the elevated site that today houses the GEM. From there, a view of the Pyramids could be seen across the desert. "I knew immediately," Hosny says, "that this was the place."

A four-year feasibility study, funded by Italy at a cost of \$4 million, followed. It examined everything, from soil mechanics and wind patterns to projected visitor numbers and costs, spread across eight volumes of detailed planning. The findings became the foundation for one of the most ambitious cultural projects in the modern Arab world.

Hosny then launched an international architectural competition overseen by a jury representing UNESCO, the International Union of Architects, and Egypt's Ministry of Culture. "Impartiality was absolute," he notes.

From 1,557 proposals submitted by leading international architects, three were shortlisted, and one was selected. The winning design was celebrated for its subtle integration of the Pyramids into the museum's layout, allowing visitors, from within the museum's vast atrium, to see the ancient monuments framed in the distance.

As the project moved towards execution, some adjustments were made to the original plans. The façade, initially intended to be built of translucent alabaster that would glow in the sunlight, had to be modified. Egypt's alabaster supply was insufficient, and importing it from Turkey or Greece proved too costly.

Hosny hoped new funding would emerge and even considered substituting Hashemite marble with decorative glass inlays to preserve the luminous quality of the concept. But before those plans could be realised, he left the ministry, leaving the final design to evolve under new hands.

Securing the financial foundation for a project of such a scale was no less daunting. Japan offered at that time a \$300 million loan, repayable over more than two decades. Additional funding came from Egypt's Antiquities Fund, the Nubia Fund, and other ministry resources. This combination allowed the project to begin in earnest.

Construction crews soon started preparing the site, divided across two levels that required complex geological studies. Among the early challenges was the relocation of major artefacts, including the monumental statue of Ramses II, which remained outside until the foundations were fully stabilised.

Alongside the main construction, Hosny oversaw the creation of the conservation centre, now regarded as one of the largest and most advanced restoration facilities in the world. Adjacent storage halls were also established to safeguard thousands of priceless artefacts in gold, wood, and granite, many destined for the museum's grand staircase, including the gilded sarcophagi of Tutankhamun.

"We completed the first phase and moved into the second," Hosny recalls. "Every detail mattered. I was surrounded by an exceptional team of engineers and experts who made sure every step respected the project's spirit. It was an epic journey, and with every passing day, I felt immense pride watching the past conquer the future."

Then came 2011 when the revolution brought construction to an abrupt halt. "I had left the ministry," he says quietly, "and no one seemed to care about the museum anymore."



Even as the GEM rose into reality, Hosny's thoughts turned to the fate of the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square. With global attention shifting to the GEM, he worried the old museum might lose its place in the national narrative. "Visitors to the GEM might no longer feel the need to go to Tahrir," he said. "Some major pieces should probably be transferred to the new museum to complete the collections."

Yet, Hosny insists that the Egyptian Museum, a century-old architectural gem, must never be abandoned. He envisions transforming it into the world's largest Egyptological research centre, capitalising on the 300 foreign excavation and restoration missions operating in Egypt each year.

The plan, he says, would also include a grand hall for rotating exhibitions every six months or annually featuring works from other Egyptian museums. "It would create a living link between the two museums," he explains, "and encourage visitors to continue their discovery of Egypt's heritage in Tahrir."

TOWARDS THE OPENING: "Great dreams are not born overnight," reflects Khaled ElEnany, the man who steered the project through its most defining years.

"They are built through vision, collaboration, and perseverance. Above all, they are driven by the collective spirit of those who believe in them."

The museum's inauguration will not merely unveil artefacts; it will open a gateway to Egypt's soul. For children, scholars, and travellers from across the globe, it will stand as an open invitation to walk through time, to feel the pulse of an ancient civilisation that

still speaks to humanity today through its enduring values: peace, dialogue, knowledge, harmony, and justice.

"That is the story of GEM, a project that stands today not merely as a monument to Egypt's ancient civilisation, but as a testament to the human capacity for collaboration and vision."

Over more than six years of work as a minister of antiquities and then minister of tourism and antiquities, ElEnany had the privilege of witnessing this dream evolve, stone by stone, idea by idea, alongside an exceptional team of colleagues, engineers, restorers, and dreamers who never lost faith in the mission.

"The lessons I learned through this journey have shaped my own vision for the future, a vision I call 'UNESCO for the People.' It is built on the same foundations that guided us through the making of the museum: inclusivity, creativity, and the belief that culture belongs to everyone," he pointed out.

As the GEM opens its doors, it offers more than history – it extends an invitation. To children and students, to families and communities, to researchers and travellers from around the world, it says come and explore. Walk through the corridors of time. Feel the pulse of a civilisation that still speaks to the world through its eternal values, peace, dialogue, knowledge, harmony, and justice.

"Because in the end, great dreams do not only preserve the past, but they also illuminate the path forward for humanity."

During ElEnany's tenure, the GEM witnessed many achievements. The years between 2016 and 2020 marked a turning point. The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) played a decisive role by extending a second loan and deepening its technical cooperation, while the Tokyo National Museum partnered with

Egypt to exchange curatorial and conservation expertise.

In 2016, Egypt officially established the GEM Authority, granting it legal and administrative independence, later enhanced by a Board of Trustees chaired by the president of Egypt.

Progress moved rapidly. International consultants were hired, fundraising mechanisms were launched, and in early 2018 the museum celebrated a symbolic moment: the colossal statue of Ramses II was carefully relocated inside its new home in the atrium, a defining image of the project's transformation from blueprint to reality.

Throughout 2018 and 2019, cooperation between Egypt and Japan deepened through research, technology, and training partnerships.

"By 2019, the museum was no longer just a national dream; it was an almost finished masterpiece," ElEnany said. From only 17 per cent completion in early 2016, progress had surged to an impressive 96 per cent, marking one of the fastest and most ambitious cultural construction efforts in Egypt's modern history.

The museum's massive steel and concrete structure was fully completed, its interiors nearing perfection, and its external plazas, landscaping, and electromechanical systems almost done. Roads around the site were 90 per cent finished, while the museum's intelligent communication systems, powering its digital and interactive experiences, had reached 80 per cent. Behind those figures stood years of rigorous coordination, funding negotiations, and technical innovation.

By that time, global tenders were also underway to select an international company to manage and operate the museum's services, with consortia from Italy, the US, France, the UK, and the UAE competing for the contract.

In 2020, nearly 96 per cent of the museum's total construction work had been finalised. Every structural and architectural element was in place, from the soaring steel frames to the polished granite floors of the grand staircase. The museum had received over 54,000 artefacts, and 53,000 of them had already undergone restoration.

The project gained institutional and legal autonomy under Law No. 9 of 2020, which recognised the GEM as an independent economic authority under the minister of tourism and antiquities. Soon after, the prime minister issued a decree forming its Board of Directors, while digital infrastructure, smart communications, and virtual reality systems reached advanced stages of implementation, laying the foundation for a truly immersive visitor experience.

"By the end of that year, the GEM stood at the threshold of completion: a living testament to Egypt's ambition, scientific rigour, and unwavering commitment to preserving its past for the world," ElEnany said.

The GEM also achieved international recognition, with its conservation centre earning three ISO certifications for occupational safety, environmental management, and quality, setting a new standard for museum conservation practices in Egypt and the region.

In 2021, the project reached 99 per cent completion. The finishing touches were underway: 98 per cent of the external plazas and gardens were completed, 96 per cent of the electromechanical systems were installed, and 99.8 per cent of the façades and the Tutankhamun galleries were finalised.

More than 55,000 artefacts had been transferred and restored, including all the heavy pieces in the grand hall and the monumental staircase, and over 65 per cent of the Tutankhamun collection was displayed in custom-designed vitrines.

That same year, the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities signed a landmark contract with Hassan Allam Holding, entrusting the company with operating and managing the museum's visitor services. Another milestone followed in the transportation of Khufu's first boat from the Giza Plateau to the museum, an extraordinary feat of engineering that marked one of the most complex heritage relocations in modern archaeology.

By 2022, the Grand Egyptian Museum was in its final phase with 99.5 per cent of it complete. The structure, interiors, and galleries were ready, with more than 55,000 artefacts restored and installed.

Recognition soon followed. In September 2022, the project won the Best Green Building Award at the Environment and Development Forum: The Road to COP27 organised in Cairo by the Arab Water Council. A month later, it earned the Egyptian Green Pyramid Gold Award for sustainability from the National Housing and Building Research Centre, making the museum not just a monument to history, but a model for the future of green architecture.

As 2022 drew to a close, the museum stood ready to open its doors, a masterpiece a decade in the making. What began as an idea in the mind of a visionary minister had become a global symbol of Egyptian ingenuity and international collaboration. Each stone, artefact, and gallery told a story, not just of ancient kings and dynasties, but of a modern nation that dared to dream big, build boldly, and preserve its legacy for generations to come.

As the GEM stands on the brink of opening, it represents far more than a cultural landmark: it is the embodiment of a nation's dream made real. What began as a spark of imagination in the mind of a visionary artist grew, over decades, into one of the greatest museum projects in modern history.

'Bridge between the past and present'

Egypt is unveiling a dream that has taken decades to bring to life on 1 November with the official opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), the largest archaeological museum ever built and a global beacon of a single civilisation as well as of the relationship between culture and innovation, writes **Nevine El-Aref**.

Standing proudly overlooking the Great Pyramids on the Giza Plateau, the museum is more than a cultural institution. It is a message of peace and creativity and a symbol of Egypt's ability to safeguard the past while shaping the future.

"This monumental project is the result of visionary leadership supported by President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi and the determined efforts of thousands of Egyptian experts, engineers, archaeologists, and conservators who have worked for years to make the GEM dream come true," Minister of Tourism and Antiquities Sherif Fathy told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

"It is one of the most significant cultural achievements in modern Egyptian history and a national gift from Egypt to the world."

Fathy described the GEM as more than a home for treasured artefacts, seeing it as a place where humanity's story is told through the lens of ancient Egypt. In his view, the museum stands as a living monument to one of the world's most enduring and influential civilisations, a space where history is presented to the highest global standards of curation, conservation, and visitor experience.

It is, he suggested, not just a display of artefacts, but a bridge between the past and present, inviting the world to experience Egypt's heritage in a way that feels alive and immediate.

The museum comprises three main exhibition

zones, the most celebrated being the galleries of the golden boy-king Tutankhamun. For the first time ever, all the treasures of the boy-king, more than 5,000 artefacts, will be displayed together, allowing visitors to experience the splendour of this treasured collection.

Another cornerstone of the museum is the Khufu Boats Museum, which houses 4,600-year-old magnificent masterpieces of ancient engineering and craftsmanship.

Beyond its galleries, the museum also hosts one of the world's largest centres for conservation and restoration, containing cutting-edge laboratories for the study of wood, metals, papyrus, mummies, and textiles. These facilities are not only devoted to preserving Egypt's treasures but are also shaping the future of archaeological science.

"The GEM's Conservation Centre will serve as a regional and global hub for Egyptology and be open to scholars from around the world," Fathy said. He said that plans are already in place to launch an annual international conference that will bring together leading researchers, archaeologists, and heritage experts to share the latest discoveries, research methods, and preservation technologies in Egypt.

"In doing so, the museum will ensure that Egypt remains at the epicentre of world knowledge on Egyptology," he said.

The GEM is conceived not only as a museum, but also as a self-contained tourist destination. Owing to its strategic location beside the Giza Pyramids, its proximity to the new Sphinx International Airport, and the ongoing development of the surrounding area extending to Saqqara and Dahshour, the GEM will form the nucleus of an

Minister of Tourism and Antiquities Sherif Fathy talks about the cultural, scientific, and tourism impacts of the GEM



integrated destination that connects culture, leisure, and modern hospitality.

It is also the cornerstone of a broader tourism corridor connecting these areas with Historic

Cairo, contributing to a network that will allow visitors to explore Egypt's heritage with unprecedented ease and blending archaeological discovery with contemporary comfort and expanding the numbers of nights tourists typically spend in the capital city.

From Cairo, tourists will be able to enjoy one-day excursions to Hurgada, linking the country's cultural tourism with its coastal leisure destinations. This integration will extend the average length of stay, increase spending, and reinforce Egypt's standing among the world's leading destinations.

"The museum's soft opening has already attracted between 5,000 and 6,000 visitors a day," Fathy confirmed, adding that he expects that following the official inauguration, this number will triple to between 15,000 and 20,000, equalling more than five million visitors a year and placing the GEM among the most-visited cultural institutions in the world.

"This achievement will not only enhance Egypt's international image but will also stimulate domestic industries from hospitality and transportation to crafts and creative services, generating thousands of jobs and contributing significantly to the national economy," Fathy said.

To ensure that the GEM receives the global recognition it deserves, a comprehensive international marketing strategy has been developed. The campaign highlights the museum's unique value proposition, a place where authenticity meets innovation, where visitors can explore Egypt's great civilisation and history not only through the exhibited artefacts but also through state-of-the-art design and digital

storytelling.

The GEM is being promoted across international tourism exhibitions and digital platforms, while familiarisation visits for leading journalists, influencers, and tour operators are being organised.

"These efforts are aligned with the ministry's tourism strategy, launched last year and branded under the slogan 'Unmatched Diversity', which positions Egypt as the world's leading tourist destination offering a rich spectrum of unparalleled diversity owing to its tourism products and experiences, from heritage and cultural discovery to beach tourism, nature, wellness, gastronomy, and contemporary art," Fathy said.

He highlighted the fact that Egypt's tourism sector continues to demonstrate remarkable resilience and performance. During the first nine months of this year, 13.97 million tourists visited the country, compared with 10 million in the same period of 2024, a growth rate of 21 per cent despite regional and global geopolitical challenges.

"We expect to reach between 17.5 and 18 million tourists by the end of 2025, representing a 15 per cent annual increase," he added. "These results reflect global confidence in Egypt's stability, safety, and leadership in tourism."

The GEM achievement is a tribute to the Egyptian people, whose dedication, talent, and perseverance have transformed an ambitious vision into reality. The museum is a celebration of the past, a catalyst for the present, and an inspiration for the generations to come.

"The GEM is Egypt's timeless gift to humanity and is a message of peace, knowledge, and beauty from the land where civilisation began."

The world comes to Egypt



The official opening of the GEM will be an important gathering moment for world leaders in Egypt, writes **Dina Ezzat**



On 1 November, leaders from across the globe will arrive in Cairo to take part in a one-of-a-kind international event: the opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) on the Pyramids Plateau and its unparalleled collection of Pharaonic treasures.

The event has been rescheduled twice due to regional political developments and is now set to be one of the world's largest gatherings of world leaders, with a high-level attendance that is expected to come second only to the UN General Assembly.

The number of participants will certainly exceed those who were in Sharm El-Sheikh for the international conference to end the war in Gaza in the second week of October. A government source said that most of the leaders who were in Sharm El-Sheikh are expected also to take part in the opening of the GEM.

The final list of participants was not available when *Al-Ahram Weekly* went to press. However, around 55 leaders were expected to attend, with some coming just for the opening and others planning a longer stay. Most of the leaders, according to a government source, will be arriving on 31 and 1 November, but others are expected to fly into Cairo a day earlier.

The invitations extended by the Egyptian Presidency include the spouses of the leaders, the government official said. Leaders who are planning to arrive earlier or stay later will

probably also take tours of the Pyramids Plateau or other sites.

The source said that President Abdel-Fattah Al-Sisi and his top aides will be receiving the dignitaries as they arrive at three airports in Cairo, with some of them planning to stay at hotels near the Pyramids and others at the residences of their respective embassies.

He said that with leaders from the Arab world, Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas expected to show up for the opening, it is expected that there will also be political and economic talks on the sidelines of the event, either with President Al-Sisi or among the leaders themselves.

The opening of the GEM comes over a century after the November 1902 opening of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo during the reign of the Khedive Abbas Helmy II. However, at that time the international attendance was limited, especially when compared to that at the inauguration of the Suez Canal under Khedive Ismail in 1869.

However, the world's fascination with ancient Egypt civilisation was already growing. Twenty years later, with Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in November 1922, this fascination reached unprecedented levels.

Several international museums today display collections, large and small, of pieces from ancient Egyptian civilisation. They include the British Museum, which has over 100,000 pieces, and the Neues Museum in Berlin,

which houses around 80,000 pieces including the famous Nefertiti bust. The Louvre in Paris has 50,000 pieces in its Department of Egyptian Antiquities, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York has over 30,000 pieces.

However, the GEM will offer a unique experience, not just in the number of pieces it contains but also in the value of the collections to be displayed, which include the Tutankhamun collection that has been taken from the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square to the GEM.

According to three former Egyptian ambassadors who have served during their careers in cities having museums with significant collections from ancient Egypt, Pharaonic history and monuments are infallible sources of attention. Every visiting dignitary to Egypt requests to see them.

"It is always a treat to send travel packages to dignitaries who want to see Pharaonic monuments during their stay in Egypt," recalled one of the ambassadors. It is not unusual for world leaders to arrive in Egypt on unannounced visits to visit Pharaonic sites, he said.

"These are mostly Europeans," he said, recalling the affinity that late French president François Mitterrand felt towards Aswan in Upper Egypt. Mitterrand chose to spend his final Christmas in the city just days before he passed away on 8 January 1996.

Jacques Chirac, another former French president, was also

heavily supportive of the display and promotion of ancient Egyptian civilisation. This passion was behind the building of the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris, which opened in 2006.

The Japanese, according to the same ambassador, have developed an immense interest in the history of ancient Egypt during the past few decades, he said. When he served in Japan towards the end of the last century, there were huge numbers of books on Pharaonic history that were being translated and published in Japanese, he said, encouraging more and more Japanese tourists to visit Egypt.

Four tour guides who have been working in the industry since the late 1980s said that the opening of the GEM will reinvigorate the world's attention on Pharaonic history. "All eyes will be on Egypt in the next few days, and reporting on the opening and the presence of world dignitaries will only be part of the coverage," said Noha, a guide who works with German-speaking tourists.

She added that beyond the coverage there will be more material put out the history of ancient Egypt in the papers and on TV channels.

Should the region be spared further hiccups, these tour guides said that they hoped the opening of the GEM and the international presence at it would lead to an ever-greater number of tourists coming to Egypt.

Celebration of continuity

With preparations ongoing to unveil one of the most anticipated cultural events of the century, **Nevine El-Aref** shares some of the highlights of the opening

While preparations for the long-awaited opening ceremony of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) have for long remained confidential, *Al-Ahram Weekly* has succeeded in having a sneak peek at the historic event, one that promises to position Egypt once again at the heart of global cultural attention.

With months of anticipation surrounding the official inauguration of the GEM, officials, organisers, and participants have gone to great lengths to maintain secrecy over the details of the ceremony. Every aspect, from performances and stage design to the guest list, has been closely guarded, underscoring both the scale of the event and Egypt's ambition to deliver a world-class celebration of its heritage.

It has been announced that the ceremony will feature a grand orchestral performance led by renowned Egyptian maestro Nayer Nagy, with an original score composed by renowned music composer Hesham Nazih. The performance will unite 120 Egyptian musicians, including

soloists, brass players, and a full choir, joined by international instrumentalists and vocalists representing nearly 80 countries carefully selected for this historic occasion and forming what insiders describe as "a global symphony for humanity."

Nagy has expressed his pride in taking part in such a monumental event, calling it "an honour for any artist to participate in a global occasion like the opening of the GEM." He emphasised that this dream has been two decades in the making and realised through immense dedication and collaboration.

According to Nagy, the concept for the opening ceremony is "new and unprecedented, uniting artists from all over the world with distinguished Egyptian musicians in one harmonious, universal performance."

There is speculation that the GEM's opening ceremony will resemble Egypt's famed Pharaohs Golden Parade or similar large-scale processions. The Golden Parade took place in

April 2021 when 22 ancient Egyptian mummies from the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square were transferred to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation in Fustat.

However, organisers have dismissed these assumptions. On the contrary, the event will present an entirely new artistic experience, one that forgoes traditional spectacle for a modern, immersive production designed to reflect Egypt's contemporary cultural identity while honouring its timeless heritage, they say.

A senior official close to the organising committee told the *Weekly* that the ceremony will be "unlike the Golden Parade and the Sphinx Avenue [in Luxor]. Instead, it will be a performance that captures the spirit of the ancient world through the language of modern art."

The official emphasised that the event is designed to reflect Egypt's message of peace, culture, and humanity to the world.

According to those familiar with the project, the opening will not only mark the completion

of one of the most ambitious cultural developments of the century but also reaffirm Egypt's role as a beacon of dialogue and civilisation, where history and modernity meet on one stage.

As part of the GEM's opening celebrations, a series of dance tableaux will be performed across historic landmarks around the world, weaving art, history, and movement into one universal language. Among these performances is a striking piece showing a visual journey through time that pays homage to the nation's enduring spirit of creation.

From the towering Pyramids of Giza, the only surviving Wonder of the Ancient World, to the rising architectural marvels of the GEM and the New Administrative Capital, the performance traces Egypt's unbroken legacy of building, innovation, and vision.

Each step and gesture in the tableaux tell the story of a civilisation that has been constructing not only monuments of stone, but

also monuments of culture, knowledge, and humanity. More than a performance, it is a celebration of continuity and a reminder that Egypt's builders have never stopped. They have simply evolved, carrying the same creative spark that once shaped the desert sands into timeless history.

Unconfirmed reports suggest that the evening may also include a dazzling drone show, merging art, light, and technology in a visual salute to Egypt's journey from the age of the Pyramids to the present.

Among the attendees delivering recorded speeches at the opening ceremony are Farouk Hosny, former minister of culture, Khaled ElEnany, elected UNESCO director-general, and renowned heart surgeon Sir Magdi Yacoub.

Until the *Weekly* went to print, nothing has been officially announced. For now, the world can only wait and watch as Egypt prepares to unveil one of the most anticipated cultural events of the century.



photo: Nora Koloyan



Artisanal skill

Beyond the awe-inspiring halls and dazzling treasures of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) lies an untold story, a journey of science, patience, and craftsmanship whose true hero is the museum's Conservation Centre.

While millions of eyes will marvel at the GEM's extraordinary display of ancient wonders after its official opening on 1 November, few will know the story unfolding quietly behind the scenes. Before each artefact took its place under the museum lights, it passed through the hands of dedicated conservators at the GEM Conservation Centre, the largest and most advanced in the world.

Here, the relics of Egypt's past were meticulously restored to their original allure, revived from the wear of time and history.

This centre is where the magic begins. From gilded funerary sarcophagi and colossal statues to delicate papyri and wooden funerary boats, every piece has been cared for with a blend of art, science, and devotion. It is within these labs and workshops that history has been carefully pieced back together, allowing the collection to transport visitors on a timeless journey through the splendour of ancient Egyptian

Behind the masterpieces of the GEM are the skilful hands of restorers and conservators breathing new life into ancient history, writes **Nevine El-Aref**

civilisation.

"Established as part of the second phase of Egypt's national project to build the GEM, the Conservation Centre was created to receive, study, and prepare artefacts for display according to the highest international standards of preservation. Work began in 2006, the facility was fully equipped by 2009, and it officially opened its doors in 2010," said Hussein Kamal, director-general of the Conservation Centre.

Spanning 32,000 square metres, it stands today as the largest conservation complex in the world, not only in scale, but also in the sophistication of its equipment and expertise. Inside, 19 state-of-the-art laboratories operate side by side: six dedicated to restorative treatment, five to preventive conservation, and eight advanced scientific labs for examination and analysis.

Since its inception, the centre has meticulously restored tens of thousands of artefacts

from across Egypt's ancient eras, using a finely tuned system that blends scientific precision with artisanal skill. Every piece that enters its doors is studied, conserved, and stabilised before being moved to the museum's galleries.

Beyond its primary role of safeguarding Egypt's heritage, Kamal said, the centre serves as a regional hub for research and training. It is designed not only as a workshop of conservation but also as an academic institution, equipped with digital microscopes, X-ray machines, and spectroscopic technologies that train Egyptian and Arab specialists in the science of heritage preservation.

"What makes the GEM even more remarkable is that every artefact on display has been restored by Egyptian specialists. Teams of archaeologists, conservators, and scientists have brought history back to life using cutting-edge technologies and unrivalled craftsmanship," said Eissa Zidan, director-general of restoration

and the transportation of antiquities at the GEM.

Inside the centre and before any artefact reaches the museum floor, it undergoes a meticulous journey, scientific examination, damage assessment, preliminary restoration, and finally, secure packaging and transportation using advanced preservation methods.

These processes are not random acts of repair, but part of a strict scientific methodology. Every piece is studied, analysed, and treated according to its unique composition and condition. Using digital microscopy, spectrometry, X-ray imaging, and other advanced techniques, conservators first diagnose any hidden weaknesses or signs of deterioration. Only then do the skilled hands of restorers intervene, ensuring accuracy, authenticity, and minimal alteration to the original structure of each artefact.

"Among the most extraordinary, and technically demanding, restoration and transport projects undertaken was the relocation of King

Tutankhamun's four gilded shrines," Zidan said. Considered by international experts to be nearly impossible to move, the shrines posed a significant challenge due to their fragile condition. Made of wood coated with gesso, materials extremely sensitive to humidity, temperature, and vibration, they had deteriorated over time, making any intervention risky.

"Egyptian conservators, however, designed a meticulous scientific plan that turned the impossible into reality," Zidan explained. Before a single fragment was touched, the shrines were fully documented using the latest technologies, laser scanning, high-resolution photography, X-ray imaging, and 3D modelling. This was followed by delicate restoration work at the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square, in cooperation with the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA).

Only then were the structures carefully dismantled, packaged, and transported to the GEM using advanced shock-absorption and climate-control techniques. Once there, they were reassembled using construction methods identical to those used by ancient craftsmen, techniques uncovered through extensive docu-



at its finest

mentation and scientific analysis.

"Today, the shrines stand restored in the museum's permanent galleries, marking one of the most complex heritage transport operations ever accomplished," Zidan concluded.

"Every moment inside the GEM carries a sense of pride and reverence, but there are certain milestones that will remain etched in memory forever." Among the most remarkable were the successful completion of missions once deemed "impossible" by many international archaeological institutions.

ACHIEVEMENTS: At a time when international experts agreed that relocating King Tutankhamun's four shrines or transporting the colossal Khufu Boat were unachievable, the restoration team at the GEM in collaboration with the SCA accomplished these delicate tasks with extraordinary precision and professionalism. It was an archaeological and scientific achievement unlike any other.

Another monumental achievement, Zidan said, was the transfer of Khufu's First Boat from the Giza Plateau to the GEM. At 42.3 metres in length, it is the largest wooden artefact

in the world and moving it intact was a mission that required precision, structural engineering, and months of scientific preparation. The boat was transported in one piece inside a specially designed steel container, an operation hailed internationally as a breakthrough in heritage logistics.

The restoration of Khufu's Second Boat is no less remarkable. Discovered in a severely deteriorated state, the vessel consisted of 1,650 fragments of ancient cedar wood buried for over 4,500 years. Each piece had to be extracted, cleaned, sterilised, and stabilised independently. This ongoing project, carried out by Egyptian specialists in collaboration with Japanese experts, is considered one of the most challenging organic restoration efforts in modern archaeological history.

Another unforgettable moment came when the gilded wooden coffin of King Tutankhamun was removed from his original tomb in the Valley of the Kings for the first time since the ancient Egyptians laid him to rest. It was transferred to the GEM to be displayed in a historic and long-awaited scene.

"These are priceless moments, a testament to

the pride of the Egyptian people, to the hands and minds that made them possible, and to the deep sense of belonging and indescribable joy felt by all who witnessed them," Zidan said.

Of all the delicate treasures restored at the GEM, Kamal most remembers King Tutankhamun's leather and textile shield, one of the most fragile objects in the collection.

When it arrived at the conservation labs, the shield was extremely brittle, with its layers at risk of disintegration. The restoration team began by creating a full 3D digital record of the object, followed by scientific analysis of the leather and metal components to understand the extent and nature of the damage.

Using precise reinforcement techniques and materials fully compatible with the originals, conservators were able to stabilise the shield's structure. Layers of leather were carefully consolidated, and accumulated deposits were removed without altering its original texture or colour. The shield has now been returned to a stable condition and can once again be displayed to the public.

"Restoring thousands of artefacts, each crafted from different materials, posed challenges

of a different kind," Kamal said. He added that the diversity of the objects, made from organic materials like wood, textile, and leather and inorganic ones like metals and stone, demanded multidisciplinary expertise and a deep understanding of chemistry, engineering, history, and art.

The most complex restorations involved pieces composed of mixed materials, such as wood inlaid with metal or textiles combined with leather. These required particularly sensitive interventions to preserve each component without compromising their authenticity or historical integrity.

"Every object told a different story of deterioration, and each required its own science, patience, and artistic skill to bring it back to life," Kamal said.

He said that international collaboration stands as one of the core pillars of the GEM's Conservation Centre. Far from being an isolated institution, it actively engages with leading global museums, research bodies, and heritage organisations to exchange expertise and integrate the latest technologies in restoration and preventive conservation.

Among its most notable partnerships is its longstanding collaboration with Japan's International Cooperation Agency, a model of how Egyptian craftsmanship and advanced international technology can work hand in hand. These collaborations do more than enhance technical skills; they also reinforce Egypt's position as a global hub for heritage preservation and a leader in safeguarding human history.

Inside the exhibition halls of the GEM, Kamal said, conservation does not end when an artefact is placed on display. A meticulous monitoring system ensures that every piece is constantly safeguarded. Each artefact is documented in detail before, during, and after installation, allowing conservators to detect even the slightest change in structure, colour, or material.

Environmental conditions, including temperature, humidity, and light levels, are monitored around the clock using advanced sensors and control systems to create a stable and protective display environment. This meticulous approach ensures that Egypt's ancient treasures are not only restored for public view but also preserved for future generations.

'Landmark of economic and cultural partnership'

The GEM brings to life a shared story of partnership and mutual admiration, Japanese Ambassador to Egypt Iwai Fumio tells **Nevine El-Aref**



As Egypt inaugurates the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), one of the most ambitious cultural projects in modern history, Japan's role in bringing this vision to life stands as a story of partnership, perseverance, and shared admiration for heritage.

Japanese Ambassador to Egypt Iwai Fumio reflected on what this cooperation means to Japan and the personal pride he takes in witnessing the culmination of two decades of collaboration.

"I am proud that the world's largest museum dedicated to a single civilisation has opened with Japan's cooperation," Fumio told *Al-Ahram Weekly*. "For more than 20 years, Japan and Egypt have worked side by side on the GEM, and today it stands as a landmark of our economic and cultural partnership."

"For us, it is more than just a museum; it is a symbol that will represent Egypt for generations to come, and Japan's contribution is a source of great honour," the ambassador said.

He noted that the GEM carries significance not just for the governments but also for the people on both sides. "Many Japanese people have always been fascinated by the ancient Egyptian civilisation. With the opening of the GEM, even more of them will visit Egypt, deepening people-to-people connections while also contributing to tourism and broader socio-economic development," Fumio said.

Beyond Egypt's borders, the GEM is already regarded as a milestone in world culture. "It is not only the largest museum of its kind," Fumio explained, "but also a centre where internationally renowned treasures, including the iconic collection of Tutankhamun, have been transferred,

preserved, and restored."

"The techniques developed here are valuable for museums across Egypt and for institutions around the world. The GEM's opening will share both the allure of Egyptian civilisation and advanced conservation knowledge with a global audience."

Perhaps the most profound achievements, he suggested, lie in the human connections that have been forged. Since 2008, around 120 Japanese experts have worked in Egypt, training more than 2,000 Egyptians in the delicate science of artefact preservation. Together, they have successfully restored 72 fragile objects, including murals and funerary items from the Tutankhamun collection.

"This exchange of knowledge was only possible because of the deep trust built over years of cooperation," Fumio said, pointing particularly to the restoration of King Khufu's Second Solar Boat as a remarkable project involving nearly 1,700 wooden components and led by Japanese expert Yoshimura Sakuji, who has devoted six decades to Egyptian archaeology. "This is one of the greatest Egypt-Japan cultural projects, and though the restoration is not yet complete, visitors will be able to witness the process themselves at the GEM," he added.

He described the official opening of the GEM as "a milestone in the long-standing friendship between Egypt and Japan," adding that the GEM's opening does not mark the end of Japan's role. "On the contrary, Japan will continue to support the GEM in becoming a leading museum not only in this region but also in the world as a whole. From management to op-

erations, we will keep dispatching personnel and building capacity. The GEM can also serve as a hub for sharing knowledge with other countries."

He pointed to other projects in Egypt that have been carried out with the cooperation of Japan, such as the new Cairo Opera House in 1988, the UNESCO-Japan Trust Fund Project on the Restoration of the Tomb Murals of Amenhotep III that was implemented in three phases from 2000, and many other initiatives.

"Our cooperation is broad and enduring and is not confined to the GEM alone," Fumio said, relating that Japan's support also stretches far beyond culture alone. "From the Suez Peace Bridge to the Cairo Metro Line 4 and from the Children's Hospital at Cairo University to the Borg Al-Arab Airport and the Dairut Barrage, our cooperation underpins essential infrastructure and services for Egyptian society," he said.

"In education, projects such as the Egypt-Japan University of Science and Technology (E-JUST) and the Egypt-Japan School initiative continue to flourish. Our relationship was elevated to a Strategic Partnership in 2023, and we are determined to respond to Egypt's needs in ways that truly serve its people."

Looking ahead, he was reflective and hopeful. "The GEM will not only be a source of pride for Egyptians but also a monument to Egypt's strength and to the friendship between our two nations. It will build bridges of culture, understanding, peace, and cooperation among peoples. Japan will always stand with Egypt in preserving its heritage and supporting its development," the ambassador concluded.

Japan and the GEM

JICA Egypt Representative Ebisawa Yo talks about Japan's contribution to the GEM and the close ties between the two nations

The inauguration of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) marks more than the unveiling of one of the world's most significant cultural landmarks. It reflects a story of international collaboration that spans decades. At the heart of this cooperation is Japan, whose government and institutions have provided financial support, technical expertise, and training to help bring the project to completion.

In Cairo, the Chief Representative of the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) is Ebisawa Yo, who spoke to **Nevine El-Aref** about Japan's role in creating the GEM and the deep cultural ties between Japan and Egypt that it embodies. For both countries, the GEM represents more than a monumental achievement and stands as a symbol of trust, friendship, and a shared commitment to safeguarding cultural heritage for generations to come.

"When Egypt first approached Japan in the early 2000s for support with the GEM, it set in motion a partnership that stretched over two decades to shape one of the most ambitious cultural and tourism projects in the region," Yo said. He added that Japan's support was motivated by profound respect for Egypt's unique cultural heritage and a shared commitment to preserve it for future generations and all humanity.

For JICA, the GEM embodies the agency's mission of promoting human security, quality growth, and socioeconomic development through international cooperation. "We believe cultural heritage is not only a matter of national identity but also a bridge for international dialogue. Supporting the GEM aligns with JICA's core values of partnership, respect, and knowledge sharing," Yo explained.

JICA's financial involvement was cemented with two substantial concessional loans provided to the Egyptian government totalling 84.247 million yen across two phases. The first loan was given in 2006 and amounted to 34.838 million yen with a 30-year tenor and an interest rate of 1.5 per cent, while the second loan, for phase two of the GEM, was in 2016 for an amount of 49.409 million yen for a tenor of 25 years with an interest rate of 1.4 per cent.

These loans were meticulously allocated, covering the construction of the gigantic museum building, the intricate exhibition spaces, the necessary ICT equipment, and the crucial consultancy services for construction management. The successful execution of the project's construction contracts, implemented under the JICA loans, was recently recognised with a Highly Commended Award at the International Federation of Consulting Engineers (FIDIC) Contract Users Awards 2024.

The decision to use long-term concessional financing was strategic. "The GEM is a landmark cultural, touristic and economic project. It goes beyond infrastructure to touch education, skills development in conservation and museum management, and lots of people-to-people exchange," Yo said.

He noted that the GEM's expected contribution to enhancing tourism and job creation made it an excellent fit for Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA) Charter, which prioritises co-creation, human security, and cultural exchange. "We saw in the GEM not only an opportunity to contribute to global heritage and the economy, but also a powerful symbol of the friendship and trust between Japan and Egypt," he said.

JICA's contribution also extends far beyond financial aid, delving into intensive technical cooperation. Since 2008, it has invested heavily in knowledge transfer and capacity building. It has launched a series of technical cooperation projects ranging from artefact data registration and staff training at the GEM Conservation Centre to joint conservation efforts on 72 key objects, many from the iconic Tutankhamun collection.

One of the most ambitious undertakings has been the

excavation, conservation, and reassembly of the ancient Egyptian King Khufu's Second Boat, alongside capacity-building programmes in museum management and training opportunities in Japan.

Approximately 120 Japanese experts were dispatched to Egypt, dedicating their efforts to the transport, preservation, and restoration of artefacts. These experts, in turn, trained over 2,000 Egyptians, passing on specialised conservation and restoration techniques. A total of 107 training sessions were conducted for a total of 2,250 participants, covering everything from conservation and research science to safe transportation and packing and management.

A key early challenge was reconciling differing conservation principles between Japanese and Egyptian experts. JICA's training programmes, held in both Egypt and Japan, fostered a "shared understanding of conservation principles" and served as a critical foundation for successful joint work on artefacts, including those from the priceless Tutankhamun collection.

A highlight of the collaboration is the ambitious conservation and reassembly of King Khufu's Second Boat. Since 2013, the project, guided by renowned Japanese Egyptologist Sakuji Yoshimura, has aimed to recover, conserve, and reconstruct nearly 1,700 wooden pieces of this.

"The restoration of the Second Boat is, without a doubt, an archaeological miracle and one of the most important Egypt-Japan cultural projects that we are most proud of," Yo said. Visitors will be able to see this work-in-progress even before the boat's final reconstruction is complete.

CONTRIBUTIONS: JICA's contribution went far beyond training. The agency has also equipped the GEM with cutting-edge tools, from digital microscopes and portable X-ray radiography devices to 3D scanners, electric forklifts, and spider cranes designed to move fragile and heavy artefacts safely.

Alongside the technology came expertise, as Japanese specialists shared their know-how in preventive conservation, ensuring that the museum's priceless collection would be preserved to the highest standards. "These combined efforts not only safeguarded invaluable artefacts but also fostered a shared conservation philosophy between Egyptian and Japanese experts, laying the groundwork for successful joint preservation," Yo said.

For JICA and Japan, the GEM represents an "everlasting icon of friendship" and a showcase of co-creation, bringing together Japanese financing, expertise, and technology with Egyptian vision, talent, and extraordinary heritage. This cultural cooperation is also rooted in a long history, dating back to the Cairo Opera House, a gift from Japan in 1988, which is now receiving new Japanese grant support for technical upgrades.

Looking ahead, JICA's commitment to the GEM will only deepen after the official inauguration. At the top of this is the GEM Global Conservation and Scientific Research Hub Project, which will tentatively run from December 2025 to December 2028. The goal is for the GEM to build the foundations to function as a global hub for scientific research, conservation, and training for other cultural heritage institutions across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

The museum's opening is a "historical moment to enjoy and take pride in the fruits of our development cooperation," Yo said. The GEM will not only be a world-class attraction, making Egypt's history more accessible, especially with projects like the Cairo Metro Line 4 contributing to smooth transportation, but will also serve as a profound symbol of what is possible when nations work together hand in hand.

"The GEM is a model of international cooperation in heritage preservation, promoting education, research, and

cultural exchange across nations," Yo stated. "It will stand as a monument symbolising Egypt's strength and Japan's contribution to build bridges of culture, understanding, peace and friendship among nations."

"I would like to extend my heartfelt congratulations to all Egyptians on the inauguration of the GEM and my deep appreciation to the government of Egypt for its unwavering commitment, strong leadership, and ownership in making this historic achievement possible."

"Japan has always had a profound respect for the ancient Egyptian civilisation. There is even a famous photograph of Samurai visiting Egypt in 1862, an image that captures the long-standing bond of admiration between our peoples. The GEM will now stand as a lasting symbol of that admiration, trust, and friendship for decades to come."

"With the official opening of the GEM, we expect that even more Japanese visitors will come to Egypt to enjoy the museum's world-class experience. Strengthening people-to-people exchanges is the cornerstone of our bilateral relations, and in this respect the GEM will play an invaluable role in deepening the ties between our two nations."

Reflecting on this long-term collaboration, he noted that what makes him most proud of JICA's partnership with the GEM is the spirit of trust and co-creation that defined it.

"Egypt is highly advanced in the fields of archaeology and Egyptology and blessed with immense cultural wealth. Our cooperation was therefore built on exchanging expertise between Egyptian and Japanese specialists to achieve the highest standards in the safe transfer and conservation of artefacts, including some of the most delicate and precious items from the King Tutankhamun collection," he explained.

One of the major challenges early on, he recalled, was the difference in conservation principles between Japanese and Egyptian experts. "Safeguarding invaluable artefacts required us to first reach a shared understanding of conservation approaches. JICA's support for the GEM Conservation Centre, through training programmes for conservators and scientists in both Egypt and Japan, was a turning point. This initiative created a common language of conservation, enabling us to successfully restore and preserve treasures such as those from Tutankhamun's collection. Japanese experts also shared their know-how in preventive conservation, ensuring the highest standards of preservation for GEM's outstanding holdings."

He added with pride that the partnership was not only about technical excellence but also resilience. "Despite immense challenges including political instability around 2011, the determination to deliver this project to the highest quality never wavered. In 2016, seeing the strong political will and the efforts of the Egyptian government, JICA complemented its financing with an additional loan, while advancing several technical cooperation projects in parallel. These supported GEM's operation and management to ensure it would stand as a truly world-class museum," Yo said.

Looking ahead, he believes the GEM offers a model for cultural collaboration with global resonance. "The GEM is not only a museum; it is a source of inspiration, pride, and opportunity for Egyptians, especially the younger generation who will shape the future. It is expected to generate employment, support small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) and handicrafts, and promote community development by engaging people with their rich heritage. Beyond the museum walls, the GEM will act as a catalyst for the entire Giza Plateau's development and foster sustainable urban development in the surrounding area."

"Through these far-reaching impacts, we are confident the GEM will stand as a monument symbolising Egypt's strength and Japan's contribution to building bridges of culture, understanding, peace, and friendship among nations."



Inside the world of the Boy King



Renowned
British
archaeologist
Howard Carter
on the day of the
Tutankhamun
tomb discovery

Nine magical artefacts

The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) is officially opening its doors to the world on 1 November, standing as the largest archaeological museum ever dedicated to a single civilisation.

At its heart lies the dazzling, unparalleled collection of the golden boy-king Tutankhamun displayed for the first time in its entirety. These treasures, hidden for over 3,000 years, are now presented in exquisitely designed galleries that bring each artefact to life through elegant lighting, immersive storytelling, and refined décor.

Every object captures the imagination, inviting visitors to step into the world of ancient Egypt.

Standing before the legendary golden mask of Tutankhamun, you may find yourself mesmerised, wondering how a sculptor more than three millennia ago could create such a timeless masterpiece. The collection was revealed thanks to the ground-breaking discovery of Tutankhamun’s intact tomb by British archaeologist Howard Carter in 1922, funded by Lord Carnarvon.

Today, for the first time ever, all of the tomb’s contents are united under one roof at the GEM in a once-in-a-lifetime experience for any lover of history and beauty. This article takes readers on a journey through nine of the most magical and enchanting objects from this iconic collection.

HEAD OF NEFERTEM: This wonderful head of Tutankhamun as a child was apparently among the first objects Carter discovered in the tomb lying in the Entrance Corridor next to a pile of waterskins.

However, it seems he did not report this piece to the authorities immediately, and it was discovered by representatives of the then Antiquities Service in the tomb of Ramses XI that was then used by the excavation team for storage on 30 March 1924. It was carefully wrapped and packed in a wooden wine crate at Fortnum and Mason, a London store.

At the time, Carter was in the United States on a lecture tour. The Egyptian authorities immediately suspected that he had been planning so steal this fabulous statue. Herbert Winlock from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York tried to help out by suggesting that Carter had purchased it for Lord Carnarvon from excavations at Amarna in 1923, but the archaeologist himself insisted that it had been found in the tomb and had simply been packed for regular transport to Cairo.

What is the truth here? It is interesting that Carter does not mention this piece in his original notes detailing excavations on the day when this object should have been discovered. “As we cleared the passage, we found mixed with the rubble broken potsherds, jar seals, and numerous fragments of small objects; waterskins lying on the floor together with alabaster jars, whole and broken, and coloured pottery vases; all pertaining to some disturbed burial, but telling us nothing to whom they belonged further than by their type which was of the late XVIII Dynasty,” he wrote.

Why didn’t Carter mention the head? It is certainly one of the most spectacular pieces from the tomb. Carved of wood, then plastered and painted in warm, life-like colours, it represents the king as the god Nefertem, incarnation of the sun god at dawn. The head rises from a lotus blossom, which closes at night and opens at sunrise, and was thus symbolic of resurrection and rebirth.

In one version of the Egyptian creation myth, the infant sun god was born on top of a lotus blossom that arose from the primordial waters and created light through his eyes. In two-dimensional art, Nefertem is often identified by a lotus-blossom crown on his head; this piece instead places the god on the lotus as if he is being reborn from the heart of a flower.

If the head was indeed found in the corridor of the tomb, the link with rebirth is strengthened, as it might have been placed there by Tutankhamun’s priests to magically ensure that the king would leave the tomb through the eastern corridor each morning to be reborn with the sun. Alternatively, it might have been dropped in the corridor by tomb robbers, who would not have been interested in the head itself but in the jewellery that might once have adorned it.

None of this jewellery remains, save on the back and on the post of the earring that once dangled from the pierced left ear. I always use the head of Nefertem as an example of the excellent work done by Egyptian conservators over the years. It travelled overseas with the first Tutankhamun exhibitions in the 1970s and 1980s and was skilfully restored at this time.

I like to show this piece to people who object to the fact that Egypt sends treasures abroad, arguing that they can be damaged. I tell them to look at the head of Nefertem: if it had not travelled, it would not have been restored so beautifully. Objects that travel receive more attention from museum conservators — and surely this is a good thing.

DRINKING CUP IN THE SHAPE OF A LOTUS: Found just inside the inner blocking of the Antechamber doorway of the tomb, where perhaps it had been dropped by the thieves, this goblet, nicknamed the “Wishing Cup”, is in the form of the opened blossom of a white lotus flanked by other blossoms and buds.

On each side, the god of infinity Heh kneels on a basket. In each hand he holds an *ankh* sign (symbol of life) and the notched palm rib that signifies “millions of years”. Below the ribs are tadpoles, the hieroglyph for “100,000”.

The names and titles of the king, who is said here to be beloved of the god Amun, are incised on the belly of the cup and painted in blue. The horizontal inscription around the rim reads “may your *ka* [lifeforce] live, and may you pass [live] one million years, one who loves Thebes and dwells in it, your face towards the northern wind: may your eyes see the good place.”

A powerful symbol of rebirth, this lotus cup, from which the king would probably have drunk water or wine, magically offered resurrection, happiness, and eternal life to Tutankhamun.

Egyptian artisans had already mastered the art of carving hard stone by the beginning of the Early Dynastic Period (around 3000 BCE). Examples from the early periods of Egyptian history, made from stones such as granite, diorite, basalt, schist, and calcite, have a bold simplicity of design and execution. Stone vessels went out of fashion after the early Old Kingdom, but stone working techniques were never lost, and the art was revived in the New Kingdom.

Far from being similar to the simple shapes seen in the Early Dynastic Period, however, many of the over 80 calcite vases from Tutankhamun’s tomb are elaborate, complex expressions of the stone-carver’s art.

This elegant cup was carved from a single piece of calcite, except for the separately carved handles. The stone came from the site of Hatnub in Middle Egypt, the name of which means “Place of Gold”, and it is thought that this material was associated with the sun god Amun-Re and thus with the king in his identification with this deity.

CORSELET: This remarkable work of art is a ceremonial version of the leather and metal chest protector that the king would have worn when he went hunting or into battle.

Such body armour is often depicted in temples and tombs,



In the dazzling world of ancient Egypt, few names evoke as much awe and mystery as the golden boy-king Tutankhamun, writes **Zahi Hawass**

but this is the only example known from ancient Egypt. The god Amun, patron of the warrior Pharaohs of the New Kingdom, often wears a corselet like this one. It thus has links with the role of the king as the earthly incarnation of Amun and emphasises Tutankhamun’s connection to this god.

Tutankhamun himself is seen wearing such a corselet on a number of objects found in his tomb, for instance on the Golden Fan, as he rides into the desert to hunt ostriches, and on the Hunting Box, where the king is depicted both hunting and riding his chariot into battle.

Again, when he stands between Ptah and Sekhmet in the pendant of his “Coronation” Pectoral, Tutankhamun wears a jewelled garment similar to this one.

One of the most elaborately worked objects found in the tomb, the corselet consists of several major parts. First is a wide band made up of pieces of coloured glass sewn onto a cloth backing that would have wrapped around the king’s torso, covering him from his waist to just below his pectorals.

Carter found long golden elements with the corselet that fastened the garment at the sides. Thin straps inlaid with glass and an elaborate collar held the corselet over the shoulders and around the neck.

The broad collar, both front and back, was composed of alternating rows of pieces of light and dark blue faience and carnelian, with a band of floral ornaments along the outer edge. At the front, a pectoral joined the broad collar to the main body of the corselet; it is made of carnelian, green and blue glass, and a whitish material that Carter thought might be agate but has now been identified as an unusual white glass, all set into a frame of gold.

The scene shows Amun-Re, king of the Egyptian pantheon, presenting Tutankhamun with a palm rib representing millions of years, from which hangs a pavilion containing two thrones, symbolising a long reign. Behind the king is the creator god Arum shown as a falcon-headed man and his consort.

Balancing this pectoral at the back of the broad collar is an arrangement with a winged scarab beetle with the hind legs of a bird pushing a sun disk, symbol of the dawn; on either side are hooded cobras, one in the white crown of Upper Egypt and the other in the red crown of Lower Egypt.

Ankhs, the hieroglyphs for life, hang from the claws of the scarab/bird and the bodies of the cobras. It seems that the god Amun was granting the king the rule of the Two Lands on earth and welcoming him to the ranks of the divine.

The craftsmanship of this entire piece, notably the way in which the individual parts were painstakingly put together and the attention to detail evident in the composition, is extraordinary. It seems that the artist drew the meaning and shape from his imagination and began to create his masterpiece.

Unfortunately, we do not know the name of the jeweller responsible for this corselet: in ancient Egypt, all art was for the sake of religion, and most ancient artists remain anonymous. I have found one exception to this, however, in a beautiful tomb that I recently excavated at Giza belonging to a priest named Kai, where the master artisan had secretly signed his name under one scene.

Most of the corselet was discovered inside Box 54 in the

tomb lying on top of a group of vases. However, as a result of the depredations of the tomb robbers and the carelessness with which the necropolis officials replaced the stolen objects, other elements were found on the floor nearby, and still others were scattered around the antechamber.

Much of the corselet’s broad collar was found in the Small Golden Shrine; another part was discovered mixed with dates inside a dish; and one of the feather inlays was found jumbled together with pieces of a royal chariot.

GOLDEN THRONE: Found bound with linen bands and hidden beneath the Ammut Couch, the Golden Throne is a match for any item of royal furniture ever created. It is easy to imagine Tutankhamun seated on this exquisite chair, with its slightly tilted back and roll top, receiving dignitaries from foreign lands in a stately manner.

Built of multiple pieces of wood fastened together, the entire chair has been covered with either painted gilding or sheets of gold on which intricate images have been chased and then, in many places, inlaid with semiprecious stones and coloured glass. The throne is almost completely intact, having lost only the vertical struts that decorated the area between the seat and the leg braces.

On the back is an image of the king seated on a throne apparently identical in shape to this one. Tutankhamun is shown wearing a pleated kilt, a broad collar, and a short round wig held in place by a fillet topped by an extremely elaborate headdress known as an *atef* crown.

Ribbons flutter behind him, and his feet rest on a footstool, probably decorated with Egypt’s enemies so that he could trample them symbolically even while seated.

The Pharaoh’s wife Ankhsenamun stands before him, anointing him with perfumed oil from a silver vessel. The bejewelled queen wears a flowing pleated robe and a sort of Nubian wig adopted from a hairstyle worn by Nubian mercenaries in the Egyptian army topped by a crown composed of two plumes and a sun disk.

Behind the queen is a stand on which rests a broad collar similar to the one worn by both figures (shown as if in a bird’s eye view, as the principal purpose of Egyptian art was to convey information rather than represent reality). The royal garments here are made of silver, a metal much less common in Egypt than gold.

The exposed skin of both king and queen has been inset with dark red glass. This is not unusual for a male, as traditionally men were shown in this colour. However, women are more often shown with golden-yellow skin, presumably because they spent most of their time indoors out of the fierce Egyptian sun. Here, however, husband and wife are both standing in the rays of the sun disk, an image of the great god Aten, which extend towards them, offering them life in the form of *ankh* signs.

The arms of the throne are composed of winged cobras wearing the double crown of a united Egypt. Between the tips of each snake’s wings are cartouches containing the name of the king. Smaller cobras peer out from the space between the throne’s sloping back and the perpendicular slats that support it; the co-

bra on the right wears a tall silver crown — the white crown of Upper Egypt — and the cobra on the left wears a short golden crown — the red crown of Lower Egypt.

This distinction may indicate the proper orientation at which the throne would have been set, with the silver-crowned cobra to the south and the gold-crowned one to the north, an arrangement probably echoed by the now-lost struts, with lilies, representing Upper Egypt, on the right, and papyrus, for Lower Egypt on the left. Beautifully crafted lion’s heads adorn the front of the seat, and the legs are shaped like feline limbs, complete with inlaid claws.

This magnificent throne clearly dates from the beginning of Tutankhamun’s reign if not before: the names which the king and queen were given at birth and under which they ruled for almost two years — Tutankhaten, “living image of the Aren,” and Ankhsenpaaten, “may she live for the Aren” — are still visible on the back slats. Both the iconography and the style of the figures, with their soft, rounded forms and relaxed postures, are very much of the Amarna Period.

The throne is one of the great masterpieces from the tomb, along with the mask and the innermost coffin. Carter himself stated that “I have no hesitation in claiming for it that it is the most beautiful thing that has yet been found in Egypt.” I also see it as both a seat on which the Pharaoh could ascend to the sun and a wonderful image of the deep love between the king and his queen.

TORSO OF TUTANKHAMUN: When I look at this object found below one of the chariots in the tomb, I feel as if I am looking directly at Tutankhamun himself.

Made of gessoed and painted wood, this unique figure is a life-size model of the head and torso of the king. The colours with which it has been painted — pale yellow for the shirt that covers the torso, yellow for the crown, and a dark reddish brown for the face, with details of the features and *uraeus* on the front of the crown added in other hues — give this an incredibly life-like appearance.

The face is clearly Tutankhamun’s, with its distinctive oval shape, full cheeks, rounded chin, large eyes, elegant nose, and Cupid’s bow lips. Set next to the Nefertem head, there is no doubt that the same youth, albeit older here, is represented. Even the slightly protruding ears with their large piercings are a match. To me, this is one of the most beautiful objects from the tomb.

The purpose of this figure remains a mystery to scholars. Only the upper arms are included, and Carter suggested that it was a mannequin used to hold the king’s robes and jewellery in preparation for ritual occasions or for fittings like a dressmaker’s dummy. There are marks on the surface that might match a corselet, adding credence to this theory. If this were the case, it perhaps once stood in the royal palace or in a temple. However, I do not accept this interpretation, as it seems to me that it is a European construct and a concept that would not have applied to an ancient Egyptian object.

It is possible instead that it was some sort of ritual figure, like the Nefertem head. It cannot, however, be interpreted as a *ka* figure for receiving offerings, like many tomb figures,

in the GEM



because it has no arms.

Scholars have drawn parallels between this artefact and some Middle Kingdom statues that seem to relate to the identification of the king with Osiris and thus his eternal rebirth. It might be linked to even earlier sculptures, seen in several Old Kingdom tombs, where heads or torsos are shown emerging from the floor or wall, but again, these have arms.

In some ways it also resembles the ancestor busts found in private contexts in the later New Kingdom, but in other respects it is quite different from these. Another possible explanation is that it is only part of a larger statue. Egyptian statuary was often made in several pieces that were then joined together.

In many cases, a variety of materials were used in a single sculpture. Although there are no signs of attachment here, and no evidence for additional pieces was found nearby, I still believe that this might be only part of what was meant to be a complete statue of the king.

The crown is unusual. It most resembles the flat leather bonnet worn by the god Amun (the head of the Egyptian pantheon at this time), but Amun's headdress does not include a *uraeus* as is seen here. The face also lacks a divine beard, so although some link with Amun can be suggested, the figure cannot be interpreted strictly as an image of the king as this god.

The crown also brings to mind a platform crown seen worn by Akhenaten in many relief scenes, but we do not know what this meant to either Akhenaten or Tutankhamun. One thing seems certain: Egyptologists will surely continue to struggle with the interpretation of this object for some time to come.

THE THIRD COFFIN: The second coffin in the tomb had no handles and fitted closely inside the first; there was also almost no gap between its lid and its shell. Thus, the task of extracting it and raising its lid presented the archaeological team with an immensely difficult challenge.

Carter's diary for 20 October 1925 expresses his feelings at this time. "Without some experience of handling heavy and yet fragile antiquities under very difficult circumstances, few can realise that nerve racking undertaking and responsibility," he wrote.

"The raising of a lid of a coffin or lifting the coffin itself seems a comparatively simple job; but when one realises that it is deep down in the interior of a sarcophagus where it fits quite closely, that it is in a very fragile condition, that it is immensely heavy, that the overhead room in the chamber is very limited, and that one does not even know whether its wood is sufficiently well preserved to bear its own weight, the reader will perhaps begin to realise what an anxious work it really is."

"After consultation with one's colleagues and careful consideration, a plan of action is formed, you begin to carry it out... Special appliances are devised, and as far as it is humanly possible you have taken every precaution. Everything goes well until suddenly, in the middle of the process, you hear a crack — little pieces of surface ornament fall clink on the floor of the sarcophagus or chamber — the only space available is now crowded with your men, and in a moment you have to discover what is happening — what is the trouble and what immediate action is required to pre-

vent a catastrophe."

"Again, the interest of seeing some fresh and beautiful object exposed as a lid is being raised will often distract your workmen; for a moment they forget their duty and irreparable damage may be done. Such is more often an archaeologist's lot and afterwards he is asked what his sensations were when so and so was first discovered."

I can vouch for the enormous stress that comes with being the one ultimately responsible for the safety of a priceless artefact. Carter's team solved the problem of raising the second coffin out of the first by pulling the pins that held the lid to the shell part of the sarcophagus out and using them for purchase.

Wires were attached to these pins, and then separate wires were threaded through metal eyelets screwed into the shell of the outermost coffin. All the wires were attached to a scaffold. The wooden planks supporting all the coffins were removed and the outer coffin was lowered back. Next, a new wooden tray was slid beneath the second coffin to support it, and preparations were made to remove the fragile lid.

Again, using a system of modern metal eyelets, screwed in where they were least likely to disfigure the decoration, the team succeeded in raising the lid. Beneath was a third anthropoid form, shrouded this time with a pall of red-dish linen. The face had been left uncovered and gleamed with gold.

When they had first raised the nested coffins, the excavators had been surprised by their great weight. As they removed this garland and linen pall, the mystery was solved: the innermost coffin was of solid gold, tribute to the great wealth commanded by the pharaohs of the 18th Dynasty. Carter cleaned off the dark, resinous material with which it had been coated during the funeral ceremonies, making it possible to appreciate the exquisite piece.

"Both technically and artistically," Carter commented, the coffin is "a unique example of the metal workers art".

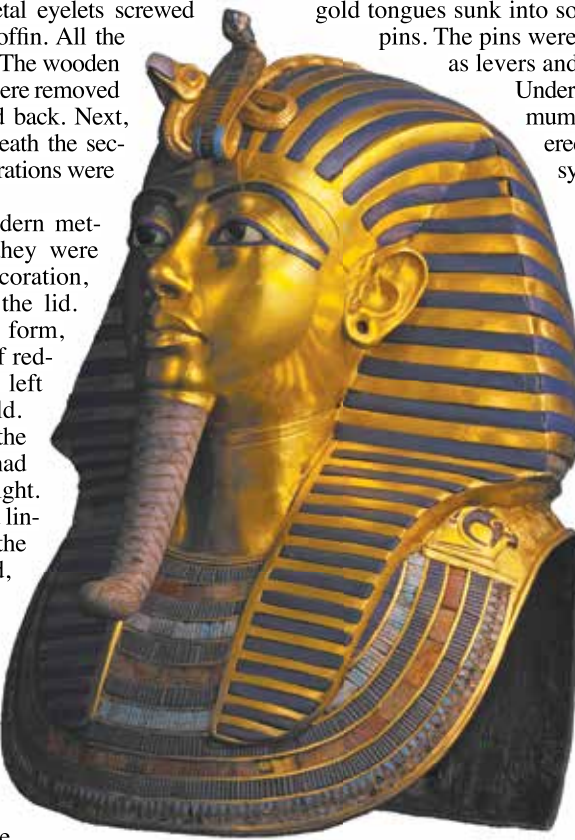
It is made of beaten solid gold, ranging in thickness from 2.5 to 3 mm, with details skilfully chased into the surface. Like the second coffin, it takes the form of the king as Osiris, wearing the Nemes headdress with cobra and vulture, and holding the crook and flail. Two gold and faience *shehyu* collars were hung around Tutankhamun's neck, emphasising the deceased king's divinity. The body is covered with a *rishi* pattern and is here protected by Nekhbet and Wadjet across the king's chest just below his crossed arms and Isis and Nephthys over his legs.

Various parts of the decoration, especially on the head-dress, face, and upper part of the body, were added in sheet gold and inlaid in coloured glass and semiprecious stones; the other details were engraved into the surface. The calcite used for the whites of the eyes had decayed, leaving behind only the obsidian pupils.

The sticky, hardened unguents poured over the innermost coffin during the funeral had attached it firmly to the second coffin. Carter therefore decided to raise the lid of the third coffin before trying to remove it from the second, and moved both together into the antechamber, where there was more space.

The lid of the innermost coffin was joined to its shell by gold tongues sunk into sockets and fixed in place with gold pins. The pins were extracted using long screwdrivers as levers and the lid was raised.

Underneath was the "very nearly wrapped" mummy of the king himself, his head covered by the gold mask that has become a symbol for the glory of Ancient Egypt.



THE GOLDEN MASK: This spectacular mask represents an idealised portrait of the king.

Intrinsically beautiful due to the precious materials and masterful workmanship that went into its creation, it was also an essential item of the royal burial equipment, serving as an image that the soul could enter and occupy during the afterlife if something happened to the body.

Carter found that the resinous material that had been used to anoint the body during mummification and the funeral had left this mask stuck to the king's head and shoulders. After several failed experiments he ended up using hot knives to cut the mask free removing the mummy's head in the process.

This mask is always in my mind. I imagine that it is 1925, and I am seeing it for the first time, hiding the

head and chest of the king. Do I remove the mask and damage the mummy, or do I leave it in place and exhibit the mummy with the mask? I would do what Carter did and take the mask off, even if I had to dismantle the mummy to do so.

The artisans who crafted this masterpiece began by hammering together two thick sheets of gold, thought by the ancient Egyptians to echo the flesh of the gods. They then shaped this metal into the likeness of the king wearing the striped Nemes headcloth, using inlays or semiprecious stones and coloured glass to add colour and detail. The whites of the eyes were inlaid with quartz, and obsidian was used for the

pupils. Red paint was lightly brushed into the corners of the eyes, subtly increasing their realism.

Recent X-ray analysis of the mask by professor Uda Yoshimura of Waseda University has shown that a very thin layer of a silver-rich gold, whiter than the core of the mask, was added to the burnished surface to enhance its radiance.

The cosmetic lines around the eyes and the curving eyebrows were inlaid with lapis lazuli. The earlobes were pierced with large holes, which were then covered with gold foil that was present at the time of the discovery but has since been removed. Two horizontal lines were engraved on the front of the neck; this feature, along with the almond-shaped eyes, full lips, and elongated face, identifies the mask as a product of artists trained during the Amarna Period.

Glass inlays of deep blue, imitating lapis lazuli, form the stripes of the headcloth. The vulture and cobra adorning the king's brow, images of the protective goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt, respectively, were made of solid gold with inlays of lapis lazuli, carnelian, faience, and glass. The long-curved beard on the king's chin, emblematic of divinity, is made of blue glass laid into a golden framework.

Covering the chest is an elaborate broad collar consisting of 12 rows of beads made of lapis lazuli, carnelian, amazonite, and glass paste. The clasps of the collar take the form of the head of the falcon god Horus. Such collars were traditionally worn for festival and cultic celebrations.

On the shoulders and the back of the mask is a magical text that refers to the different parts of the body and mask and their connection to gods and to particular gods or goddesses. This served to protect the king's body and render it functional for the afterlife.

Although the Golden Mask formed part of the original Tutankhamun touring exhibition in 1972, it has not left Egypt since the early 1980s and will not travel again. I am often asked about the mask and whether it will ever go on exhibition outside Egypt again. I reply that it is too fragile to travel and that taking it away from Egypt would disappoint the thousands of tourists who come to Cairo just to see this unique object.

Whenever a television programme wants to interview me about the golden boy-king, I go directly to the mask. While the film crew is setting up the cameras, I have a chance to look again at the mask and I always discover something new. Each time, its beauty makes my heart tremble.

CANOPIC SHRINE AND CANOPY: This gilded wooden canopic shrine and its matching canopy were set against the eastern wall of the treasury, positioned facing the west, the land of the dead. The canopy consists of four posts inscribed with the names, titles, and epithets of Tutankhamun and supporting architraves topped by a cavetto cornice that imitates the top of a reed wall.

Around the upper edge of the canopy rears a frieze of solar *uraei* (cobras with sun disks on their heads) of blue-glazed pottery and wood inlaid with copper and coloured glass. At the bottom the posts fit into the runners of a sledge; both canopy and sledge are gessoed and gilded with gold foil. On the roof are engraved spells spoken by Nut, Isis, and Nephthys.

The shrine within the canopy takes the form of the *per-wer*, the sacred cult structure originally associated with Upper Egypt, and on top is another frieze of solar *uraei*. The walls are gessoed and gilded and decorated with paired images of the goddesses and gods charged with protecting the viscera of the king: on the west are Isis and Imsety (the liver); on the south are Nephthys and Hapy (lungs); to the north are Neith with Duamutef (stomach), accompanied by the earth god Geb; and on the east are Selket and Qebehsenuef (intestines), with the creator god Arum and the composite funerary god Prah-Sokar-Osiris. These images are surrounded by hieroglyphic spells spoken by various divinities.

The shrine was the subject of rumours of a curse and was reported to bear the inscription "those who will enter the sacred tomb, they will be visited by the wings of death quickly."

Exquisitely carved and gilded figures of the four tutelary canopic goddesses stand on the sledge: Isis to the west; Nephthys to the east; Neith to the north; and, my personal favourite, Selket, to the south. Each is dressed in a pleated dress and bead collar and identified by a large hieroglyphic symbol on her head. The four graceful figures face inward with their heads turned slightly to one side and their arms outstretched to protect the shrine. It is interesting to note that the figures of Nephthys and Selket were switched.

The statuette of Selket was sent abroad with the Tutankhamun exhibition that travelled in the 1970s and 1980s. While she was in Germany, the scorpion hieroglyph on her head was damaged. Fortunately, it was repaired, but this accident caused the Egyptian parliament to decide that the treasures of Tutankhamun should not be allowed to travel in the future.

It was only recently that this ban was lifted, although some of the most important artefacts will never again leave Egypt.

CANOPIC STOPPERS: The canopic shrine had no bottom, and inside it, atop a smaller sledge with silver-coated runners, stood a chest carved from a single block of calcite. Draped over this was a folded linen sheet.

The lid of the chest echoes the sloping *per-wer* roof of the outer shrine and canopy, while its sides are inclined slightly inward and are decorated at their corners with carved images of the same four protective goddesses who stood on each side of the canopic shrine.

The interior of the chest is of unusual design. Where one would normally expect to find four separate compartments, each containing an actual canopic jar, there are instead indications of the divisions for the four sections carved into the solid body of the chest, each occupied by a cylindric hollow with a raised hem in imitation of a canopic jar. Each of the jars thus formed is topped with a separately carved human-headed stopper in the form of the king in Nemes head-dress, also made of calcite with details such as eyes, lips, and ornaments of the protective Nemes and vulture picked out in red and black parts.

The four stoppers face inwards toward the centre of the chest. All are marked underneath with a symbol indicating their corner position. Inside the hollows were the four canopic coffinettes.

Whether these stoppers were in fact carved for Tutankhamun is the subject of some controversy: the facial features of the four lids vary slightly, but all show the same large almond-shaped and heavy-lidded eyes, narrow toned-down mouth, and square but delicate chin. Because these characteristics do not exactly match those found in the portraits of Tutankhamun like the Golden Mask, it is possible that this chest, like a number of other objects in the tomb, was actually carved for his predecessor Ankhkheperure.

It is unclear how these became part of Tutankhamun's burial assemblage. Perhaps they were left in storage when the ones made for their intended were left over, or they may have been used in the other tomb and then usurped by Tutankhamun.

The legacy of the GEM



photos: Nora Koloyan

From adopting global benchmarks and empowering local teams to integrating Egyptian expertise at every level, the GEM's PPP model tells a story of innovation, authenticity, and national pride, writes **Nevine El-Aref**



While the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) captures the world's attention with its architectural grandeur and unrivalled collection of antiquities, much of its success lies in what happens behind the scenes. At the heart of this operation stands a pioneering model in Egypt built on a Public-Private Partnership (PPP) for managing the museum's services and facilities.

"We have always invested in core infrastructure, water, electricity, and other essential utilities but when we entered the GEM's tender to manage visitors' services in a PPP initiative, it marked a turning point," Merette Al-Sayed, CEO of Legacy Development and Management, a subsidiary of Hassan Allam Holding and the operator of visitors' services and facilities at the GEM, explained.

The company began to expand its investment pillars to include social infrastructure, being projects that serve communities not just through utilities, but through education, culture, and heritage. The idea of the initiative, she explained, was to bring the company's infrastructure expertise into spaces that shape people's lives more directly, such as cultural institutions, training centres, and museums.

"The Grand Egyptian Museum project embodies this vision: it's where infrastructure meets culture," she said.

Rather than bringing in an international operator to lead the process, the company made a deliberate choice to invest in developing local capacity. "We decided to organise it ourselves," Al-Sayed continued. "To do that, we reached out to experts in the United States, in France, and across other regions who helped us understand how these cultural ecosystems work, what to think about, what to plan for, and how to sustain it over time."

These collaborations proved transformative. Through months of exchanges, workshops, and planning sessions, a group of Egyptian companies began to take shape that blended global expertise with local insight. "It became a learning journey as much as a development project," she said.

At the heart of this approach was a vision to ensure that Egyptian companies did not just participate, but led the process, gaining the technical and managerial know-how to run such projects independently in the future.

"With an ambitious vision aiming not just to build, but to imagine, we put forward a grand concept," Al-Sayed pointed out, saying that it was an opportunity to invest in thinking differently and in how to design, how to activate spaces, and how to make every corner meaningful.

What emerged was a mindset of purposeful creativity. Each decision from lay

out to visitor flow was guided by a single question: how can this place serve people better? "We wanted to use the space in the smartest, most impactful way possible," she said. "It was a commercial investment, yes, but also a social one. We were building something that could host ideas, emotions, and community."

Running a cultural destination under a PPP, Al-Sayed explained, comes with a unique kind of challenge, one that is not about construction or finance, but about people. As an investor, developer, or operator, you are surrounded by multiple entities working within the same ecosystem, she said.

"You are responsible for the overall experience, but most of the people delivering it do not actually report to you. You cannot manage through hierarchy; you have to manage through influence," she noted.

"If, for example, the ticketing officer is not welcoming, or the café service disappoints a visitor, it reflects on you, even though those employees are not your direct staff. You still have to step in, but you can only do it with persuasion, encouragement, and empathy, not authority," she explained.

"That is one of the biggest tests of this PPP model. It forces you to lead through connection rather than control. You do not dictate, you inspire. You build relationships and sometimes, that is the hardest and most rewarding part of the entire experience."

LOCAL VISION: The vision behind the project, she explained, was always grounded in the local fabric of Egypt itself.

"Much of what we eventually built was designed for Egyptians, by Egyptians, keeping in mind that we are not operating a shopping mall or a commercial complex. This is something entirely different. It is a space that belongs to the people, that reflects their culture, their habits, their rhythms," Al-Sayed said.

She underlined that the project's strength lies in its national character. "If you look at our teams across all sites, they are 100 per cent Egyptian, from the engineers and artisans to the front-of-house staff."

"We wanted every detail, every experience, to carry the imprint of Egyptian talent and creativity. That's what gives the project its authenticity, and that is what makes it resonate so deeply with the public."

What do visitors want to see, to buy, to experience? That question, she said, guided every decision. "We wanted the GEM to showcase Egypt, not just its history, but its living craftsmanship and creativity." From the retail arcades to the event spaces, every element was designed to celebrate local talent. All the shops, restaurants, every decorative detail are Egyptian made.

"The goal was for the museum to feel like Egypt and look, sound, and even smell like it."

The approach extended far beyond the museum's walls. The team worked closely with communities from Siwa, Nubia, and across Upper and Lower Egypt, partnering with cooperatives specialising in textiles, palm crafts, and handmade goods. "We wanted to bring Egypt's craftsmanship to the forefront," Al-Sayed added. "To connect visitors not just to monuments, but to the people who carry that heritage forward."

The result, she said, is a kind of living marketplace, a space where culture, commerce, and community meet. "Anyone in Egypt creating something beautiful and authentic should feel represented in the museum," she added. "That what makes this museum truly Egyptian — it's built by its people, for its people."

The project also introduced a select mix of international brands in a step towards showing the world that Egypt is an international destination but one defined by its own identity. Hence, there are a few global names, but always alongside Egyptian brands that reflect Egypt's craftsmanship, style, and quality.

That combination, Al-Sayed said, proved more successful than anyone anticipated. "At first, there was doubt as people wondered whether a space so firmly anchored in Egyptian identity could also carry an international sensibility," she said. "But it worked. The dialogue between Egyptian authenticity and global refinement produced something unmistakably original. It proved that local character and international ambition can coexist and, in our case, thrive."

"We are positioning the museum very in-

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photos: Nora Koloyan

tionally,” Al-Sayed continued, explaining that it is not meant to be an exclusive place where only a few can afford to visit, but at the same time it is not a casual park where people can just drop by without a thought.

The vision was for accessibility without losing dignity. “We want any Egyptian family to feel welcome to visit during a holiday, to spend a couple of hundred pounds, and to have a meaningful day.” At the same time, she continued, “we desire the museum to maintain its sense of occasion, its grace. It is about striking that balance as a place that feels open to everyone yet is still extraordinary.”

She explained that through events organised in the GEM, meaningful messages are also conveyed. “Unlike other institutions where the focus is on hosting musical or purely entertainment-oriented events, our approach is more deliberate. Each event is designed to engage visitors emotionally and intellectually, reflecting the museum’s cultural and educational mission.”

EVENTS: The GEM Talks, for example, a monthly public event, has quickly become a cornerstone of the GEM’s cultural programming. Open to all and free of charge, the series brings together leading thinkers and creatives to engage audiences in thought-provoking discussions on art, heritage, and contemporary culture.

The first edition featured founding director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Ismail Serageldin, who explored the rising prominence of cultures from the Global South on the world stage and reflected on the profound legacy of Egyptian civilisation. Since then, the GEM Talks have continued to attract notable speakers, including renowned jewellery designer Azza Fahmy, offering visitors an ever-evolving platform for dialogue, inspiration, and cultural exchange within the museum’s walls.

“Through these activities, we aim to convey a clear message, asserting that the GEM is not merely a place to display antiquities, but a living cultural institution where history itself takes centre stage,” Al-Sayed said.

She added that the museum also organises a wide range of high-quality cultural events, from gastronomy festivals that bring together renowned international and national chefs during themed food weeks, to musical performances inspired by Egypt’s golden age, and are reminiscent of the concerts of Um Kolthoum, but have a contemporary touch, such as a recent concert by renowned Egyptian singer Angham.

The museum also embraces sports and community engagement, hosting marathons and outdoor activities around its landmark grounds, further reinforcing its role as a dynamic cultural and social hub.

The GEM is also reimagining how people interact with culture beyond traditional visits. “We invite corporations to enter the world of heritage through team-building experiences at the museum,” Al-Sayed explained. “Companies can hold meetings in our dedicated conference rooms, enjoy curated dining experiences overlooking the artefacts, and take part in customised corporate and family programmes.”

These initiatives include Family Days and Weekend Experiences, where employees of corporates and their families can spend a full day at the museum engaging in creative and educational activities, from children’s art workshops and papyrus writing to guided runs around the grounds.

Looking ahead, the GEM plans to transform its third floor into a co-working space and innovation hub. In collaboration with RiseUp, the region’s leading entrepreneurship platform, the space will serve as a shared office environment designed to encourage creativity, start-up incubation, and cultural collaboration.

“The idea emerged after the RiseUp team organised an event in the GEM three years ago, Al-Sayed noted. “Participants repeatedly said that the museum’s atmosphere was truly inspiring, and that inspired us to create a space where innovation and history meet.”

For future generations, Al-Sayed said, it offers an exceptional starting point, architecturally, intellectually, and historically. It provides a gateway to the past that inspires the future. “People often say you cannot buy a ticket to travel through time, but at the Grand Egyptian Museum, you truly can,” she said.

SERVICES: “One main challenge we also faced was how to manage services within such a monumental and unique establishment,” Al-Sayed explained, adding that there is no comparable institution in the world or a site on this scale and richness operated through a private-sector management model.

“We therefore studied global benchmarks to identify best practices that could be adapted to the GEM’s cultural and educational context,” she said.

For instance, to handle crowd management and the high volume of visitors, elements from Disneyland’s operational model were adopted, as it is the most visited destination in the world. “In every aspect, we looked at who does it best globally, whether in logistics, visitor flow, or guest experience, and integrated those lessons into our own system. The result is a carefully crafted puzzle of global best practices that together form a uniquely Egyptian model of management,” she said.

Financial sustainability, she explained, remains one of the GEM’s greatest challenges as no museum in the world operates entirely on a cash-positive basis. This reality has driven the GEM Legacy Team to adopt a disciplined approach, keeping costs tightly controlled, optimising resources, and pursuing innovative revenue streams.

Their goal is to strike a delicate balance between cultural stewardship and financial viability, ensuring the museum’s long-term sustainability without compromising its mission.

“Our key message is to redefine what a museum represents in people’s minds,” Al-Sayed said. “It is not merely a place that displays artefacts, but an educational, scientific, and cultural institution that also offers entertainment and engagement.”

She pointed out that the GEM is introducing new and interactive ways of storytelling, from treasure hunts for children and the immersive Tutankhamun exhibition to GEM Talks and Family Weekends, all designed to attract visitors of all ages and interests.

Technology plays a vital role in this transformation. “We use it to enhance the visitor experience, from facilitating ticket purchases and providing information about the museum, to engaging audiences before and after their visit. It allows us to connect with people in more dynamic and meaningful ways, turning the museum into a living, interactive space,” she said.

The GEM, she said, is also strengthening its role as an educational hub through partnerships with Egyptian universities, giving students hands-on exposure to the intersection of culture, heritage, and innovation. These collaborations aim to nurture a new generation that views the museum not just as a place to visit, but as a space to learn, research, and create.

Building on this success, the GEM plans to extend its academic outreach internationally. Future collaborations with universities abroad will include summer courses and exchange programmes, allowing students from around the world to experience the museum as a living classroom, one that bridges Egypt’s ancient past with the curiosity and creativity of future generations.

“We strive to make the visitor experience as seamless, enjoyable, and effortless as possible,” Al-Sayed said.



photos: Nora Koloyan



Al-Sayed

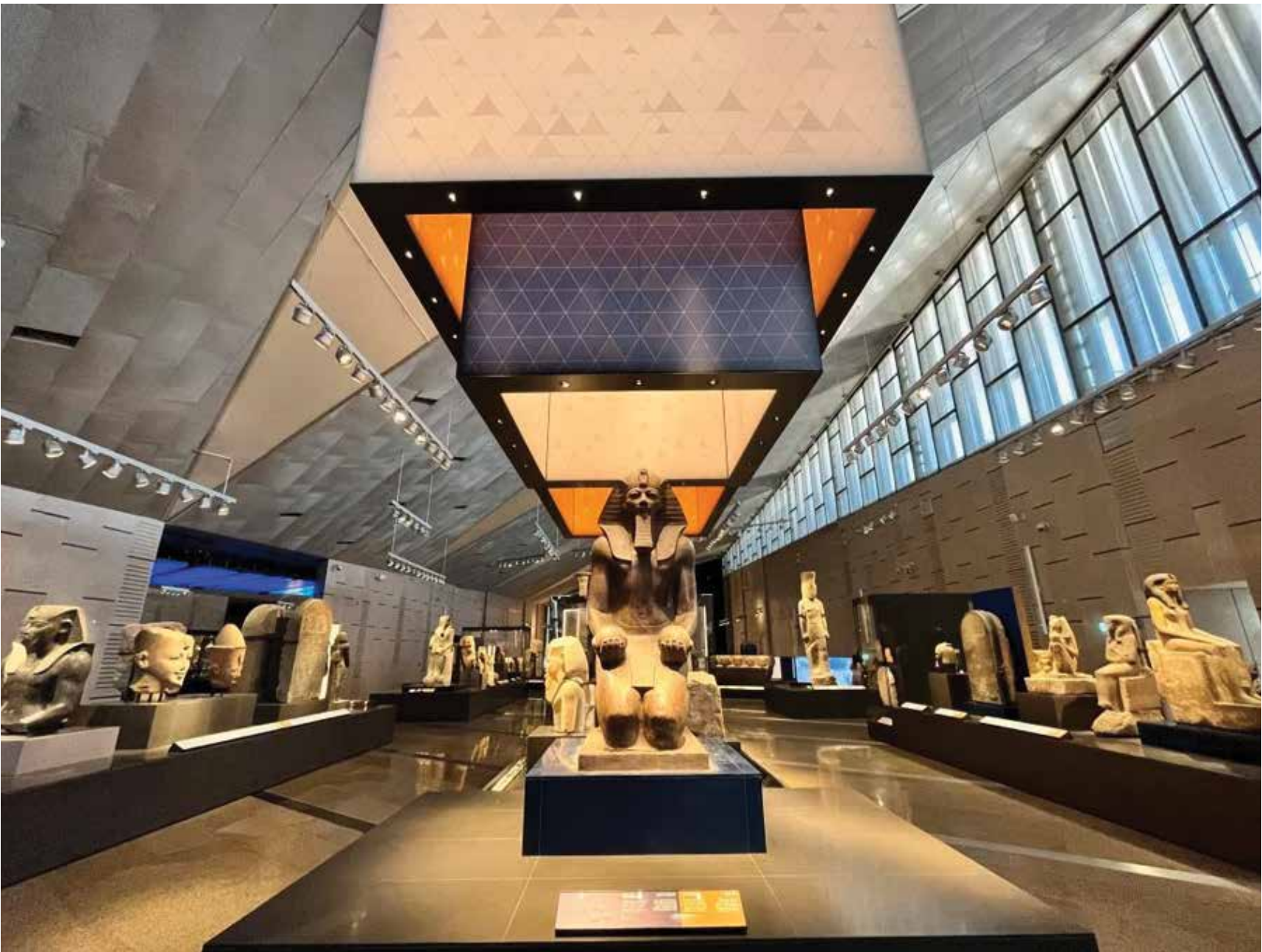




photo: Amr Nabil, AP

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"The GEM will offer foreign and Egyptian visitors a unique opportunity to explore more than 5,000 years of ancient Egyptian history."

Lonely Planet

"The GEM is the largest archaeological museum complex in the world dedicated to a single civilisation. It is divided into four sections covering the period from 700,000 BC to 394 AD."



The world's largest single-civilisation museum

The GEM is spread over **490,000** sq m. About **5 million** visitors are expected to visit the museum annually.

57,000 artefacts are displayed at the GEM.

The atrium housing the colossus of Ramses II is sized at **7,000** sq m.

At **6,000** sq m, the area of the

Grand Staircase is equivalent to six floors.

The area of the Tutankhamun galleries is **7,500** sq m, exhibiting more than **5,000** of his treasured artefacts. **12** main galleries spread over around **18,000** sq m.

The Children's Museum is built over **5,000** sq m.





Timeline

May 2005
Site preparation and waste removal.

2016
Museum launch and construction work.

October 2024
Soft opening.
1 November 2025
Official inauguration.

Expected attendees
Presidents, kings, senior public figures, and international entities.

Presidents and officials who visited the GEM before the official opening

President of France
Emmanuel Macron
President of Vietnam
Lương Cường
President of the Comoros
Ghazali Othmani
President of Singapore
Tharman Shanmugaratnam
Prime Minister of Croatia
Andrej Plenković
Prime Minister of Serbia
Đuro Macut
Prime Minister of Lebanon
Nawaf Salam
US senior presidential adviser for African, Arab, and Middle Eastern affairs
Massad Boulos
Former UN Secretary-General
Ban Ki-moon



photo: Amr Nabil, AP

From ancient times to the digital age



The GEM's innovative use of technology is ushering in a new dawn for ancient history in the digital age, writes **Nevine El-Aref**



At the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) the past is not only preserved but also brought back to life.

From holographic religious rituals and virtual reality journeys along the Nile to live-streamed trading missions to the Land of Punt and animated scenes showing figures and animals moving around the landscape, the museum blends archaeology with innovation. It offers a new way of experiencing Ancient Egypt, not as silent relics behind glass, but as a living civilisation revived through light, motion, and digital storytelling.

At the entrance of the GEM, large digital screens offer visitors a unique souvenir experience. Guests can take a photograph with any artefact of their choice digitally superimposed beside them and receive the image instantly via email free of charge.

"It is a modern, interactive way to connect visitors to the museum's treasures and leave them with a personalised memory of their visit," explained Ahmed Ghoneim, GEM's CEO.

He revealed that among the most innovative features at the GEM is the mixed-reality experience powered by Microsoft HoloLens, where history is no longer static, but moves, speaks, and surrounds the visitor. "Using HoloLens technology, visitors don't just look at history, they step inside it," he said.

Visitors wear augmented-reality headsets and watch Ancient Egypt come to life around them. Artefacts transform into holograms, pyramid scenes unfold in light and sound, and narrated storytelling guides them through history.

In one experience, voiced by Egyptian actor Ahmed Helmi, users walk among virtual burial chambers and witness the evolution of funerary practices from simple shaft tombs to the construction of the Giza Pyramids. This immersive journey blends archaeology with technology, offering a powerful new way to understand ancient rituals and daily life. It is a must-try experience for anyone seeking to understand heritage through innovation.

"The Tutankhamun galleries are among the most captivating spaces in the GEM, blending archaeology with advanced

technology to retell one of the greatest discoveries in history," Ghoneim said. He added that visitors are not just presented with artefacts, but they are transported back to 1922, when Howard Carter first peered into the sealed tomb and declared he saw "wonderful things."

A full virtual simulation of the tomb allows viewers to walk through its chambers as they were found, untouched for thousands of years. Through immersive digital storytelling, the moment of discovery is recreated using archival footage, Carter's original notes, lighting effects, and sound design.

Rather than a static exhibition, the Tutankhamun galleries offer a cinematic, emotional experience and one that connects visitors not only to the treasures of the boy-king, but to the thrill of discovery, the science of conservation, and the enduring mystery of Egypt's most famous pharaoh.

Inside the museum's main galleries, advanced displays are designed to bring Ancient Egypt into vivid narrative life through state-of-the-art technology including advanced digital displays, interactive installations, and immersive environments.

"Visitors will be able to experience Egypt's past through dynamic multimedia presentations that blend historical artefacts with modern storytelling techniques," said Al-Tayeb Abbas, CEO of the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation (NMEC), who was former assistant minister for GEM archaeological affairs.

He explained that nine digital streams with interactive and media displays are featured in the galleries, enhancing the storytelling experience with the addition of four smaller downstairs galleries or "caves" that provide focused, self-contained exhibitions that spotlight specific aspects of Ancient Egyptian history.

Each gallery's showcases and plinths are organised into interconnected storeys and sub-storeys, with clear visitor pathways designed to offer a flexible exploration of Egyptian history. Modern bilingual labelling in Arabic and English ensures accessibility for visitors. For those seeking a quicker visit, star objects are highlighted with dark blue signage and mounts for easy identification.

"The nine digital streams are designed to create a different experience, offering ebbs and flows in the visitor journey," Abbas said, explaining that they provide breathing spaces and downtime between the galleries where people can sit, relax, and recharge.

"Their content is related to the exhibition but offered in different ways with images, projections, videos and backlit screens," he said.

ANIMATIONS: One of the most popular features is a large-screen animation titled "Pyramid Builders," which follows a typical day in the lives of the workers who constructed the Great Pyramid at Giza.

Nearby, "Houses of Eternity" presents four illuminated cubes displaying painted tomb scenes from the Old Kingdom, illustrating how the Ancient Egyptians prepared for the afterlife.

The Middle Kingdom is brought to life through a digital recreation of the tomb chapel of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan, where animated figures, animals, and desert landscapes move across the walls. Another installation, "The Book of Two Ways," uses a massive screen to depict the journey of the deceased through the world's oldest known map of the underworld.

Trade and exploration are explored in the "Expedition to Punt," where a curved cinematic screen and 3D visual layers recreate Queen Hatshepsut's famous trading voyage. A theatrical replica of her temple at Deir Al-Bahari forms part of this striking presentation.

The power and reach of the pharaohs are highlighted in the "New Kingdom Empire" room, where the walls are adorned with scenes of kings defending their lands, sourced from the temples of Luxor. This is followed by "Hymn to the Aten," a multi-screen projection that shows King Akhenaten worshipping the solar deity Aten, synchronised with verses from ancient religious texts.

The multicultural nature of Ancient Egypt is showcased in a vivid projection of a bustling Graeco-Roman marketplace, complete with animated merchants, buyers, and a chorus of

Greek, Egyptian, and Latin voices. Finally, "Foreign Influences" presents a 3D map charting migrations and settlements in Egypt, accompanied by projected faces of rulers from the Old Kingdom to the Roman era.

"The four 'caves' are designed to be isolated, self-contained galleries between the main exhibition spaces and offer immersive, atmospheric experiences with a greater use of sound, atmosphere, lighting, reconstructions, projections and screens," Abbas said.

The first cave's theme is the priestesses of the goddess Hathor, the deity of music and fertility. Her priestesses, including queens and princesses, celebrated her cult by singing hymns, shaking rattles, and playing musical instruments during temple rituals. The exhibits relate to Hathor's cult, including burial goods of the priestess Amunet, complemented by backlit screens and a rendition of an ancient hymn.

The second cave shows the Valley of the Kings on the west bank of the Nile at Luxor through displaying objects from royal tombs and a multimedia interpretation of the royal journey to the afterlife.

The third cave represents the Deir Al-Medina Necropolis on Luxor's west bank and displays artefacts from the ancient village, including a reconstruction of a typical village house. Deir Al-Medina is the site of an ancient walled village and cemetery lived in by the artists who carved and decorated the tombs in the Valleys of the Kings and Queens.

The fourth cave is dedicated to the underwater cities that originally were parts of the ancient city of Alexandria but sank over time or disappeared under the Mediterranean. The cave focuses on ancient Alexandria, with animations and smaller screens showing divers exploring the sunken sites.

The famous Lighthouse and ancient Library of Alexandria are among the features of the cave. Smaller screens also show divers investigating the remains of sunken palaces, temples, and shipwrecks.

"The Grand Egyptian Museum's main galleries and caves offer a comprehensive and engaging exploration of Ancient Egypt, blending historical artefacts with modern technology to create a unique visitor experience," Abbas concluded.

Journeying to the afterlife

The Khufu Boats Museum at the GEM is reviving a 4,600-year-old journey to the afterlife, writes
Nevine El-Aref



For the first time since their discovery in 1954, the two boats of King Khufu, the oldest and largest wooden vessels ever discovered, are being brought together under one roof at the Khufu Boats Museum at the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), offering visitors a living encounter with Ancient Egypt.

Containing a specially designed gallery, the Khufu Boats Museum is one of the most groundbreaking experiences at the GEM. It showcases the 4,500-year-old funerary boats of the Old Kingdom King Khufu that were built to carry him on his eternal journey with the sun god Re.

The first boat, fully restored after its transfer from the Giza Plateau, is displayed in meticulous detail. The second, restored and removed to the GEM over the past few years, will be reassembled plank by plank in full view of the public, allowing visitors to witness a live archaeological restoration for the first time.

Eissa Zidan, director of Restoration and the Transfer of Antiquities at the GEM, explained that the Khufu Boats Museum's narrative begins in the open-air area outside the museum's main building with a reimagined Nile landscape complete with statue of the deities and a replica of the original boat pit, setting the stage for a story that blends mythology, engineering, and modern science.

This outdoor display prepares visitors for the story ahead through a simulation illustrating the flow of the Nile and its symbolic connection to funerary boats in the Ancient Egyptian belief system. At the centre stands a statue of the Nile deity Hapi positioned beside a water channel representing the river and surrounded by ten statues of the goddess Sekhmet as protectors.

This area also features a full-scale replica of one of the original boat pits that is fully accurate in dimensions and design. Alongside it are 18 original limestone blocks that once sealed the pits, carved with authentic inscriptions, worker graffiti from the ancient builders, stone measurements, and the cartouches of Kings Khufu and Djedefre and offering visitors a true-to-life understanding of the discovery site.

"Inside the museum, the exhibition unfolds like a journey through time. Visitors are first introduced to the spiritual and tangible significant of the Nile River in Ancient Egyptian life and religion," Zidan said. The exhibition then traces the history of the Giza Plateau and the role of Khufu's boats, not as mere royal possessions, but as sacred vessels meant to transport the king across the heavens each night and into the afterlife.

Interactive displays trace the dramatic discovery of the first boat beside the Great Pyramid of Khufu where it was buried intact in a limestone pit and lay sealed since antiquity.

Measuring over 42 metres long, it is the largest and oldest surviving wooden artefact in the world. Nearby, glass-walled laboratories reveal another extraordinary scene: the live restoration of Khufu's second boat. More than 1,600 fragile wooden and metal pieces, excavated from a second pit, are being carefully conserved and reassembled by Egyptian and Japanese experts as visitors watch from a viewing platform, turning preservation into a public performance of archaeology.

The story continues with the excavation and conservation of the second boat, while also offering detailed insights into King Khufu, the builder of the Great Pyramid, the engineers behind its construction, and the workers who helped build this monumental funerary complex.

Zidan said that Khufu's second boat lay untouched for decades after it was discovered in 1954 alongside the first vessel by Egyptian archaeologist and architect Kamal Al-Mallakh and his colleague Zaki Nour during routine excavations



Khufu's first boat



on the southern side of the Great Pyramid.

While the first boat was excavated and reassembled, the second remained sealed in its limestone pit to preserve its fragile wooden structure.

It was not until 1987 that the US National Geographic Society, in coordination with Egypt's Office for Historical Monuments, conducted the first scientific inspection of the sealed pit. A small hole was drilled into the pit's ceiling, and a miniature camera was lowered inside to assess the boat's condition. The pit was resealed shortly afterwards. However, the breach allowed air and insects to enter, resulting in the deterioration of some of the ancient wooden beams.

Recognising the urgency of the boat's preservation, Japan stepped in to support the rescue mission. The Japanese government, working through Waseda University, provided a \$10 million grant to fund the extraction, restoration, and reassembly of the boat.

"A joint Egyptian-Japanese team began work soon afterwards, carefully removing 1,698 wooden pieces from 13 stacked layers inside the pit," Zidan said, adding that initial conservation treatments were applied on site before the fragments were transferred to the restoration laboratories of the GEM where the long and meticulous process of preservation has been completed and reconstruction will continue.

He explained that the project began in 2008 when the team conducted radar and topographical surveys around the second boat pit. To protect the fragile remains, a large climate-controlled hangar was built over the site, with a smaller inner structure directly above the boat itself. Laser scanning was used to document the site, including the wall between the Great Pyramid and the burial pit.

Zidan said that 41 limestone blocks that had sealed the pit for 4,500 years were carefully removed. Beneath them, the team uncovered 1,698 wooden components of the second boat arranged in 13 layers. Each piece was documented, stabilised, and treated on site before being transferred to the restoration labs at the GEM.

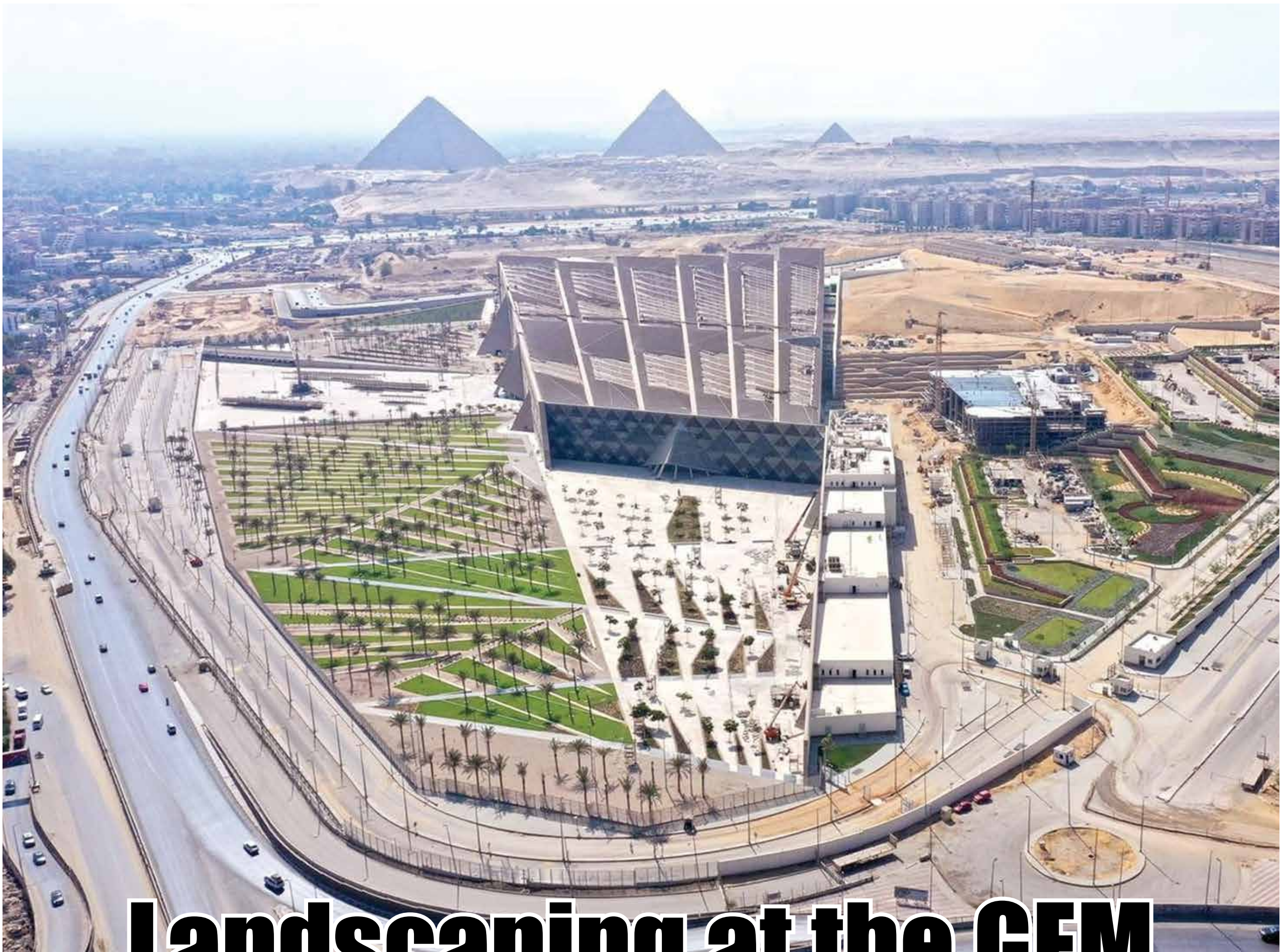
Khufu's two boats are the largest ancient royal vessels ever found and among the oldest surviving wooden ships in the world. They were built for King Khufu, a ruler of Egypt's fourth Dynasty and the builder of the Great Pyramid.

The first boat was discovered in a limestone-covered pit beside the Pyramid and was found disassembled but carefully arranged, along with ropes, mats, flint tools, oars, poles, and structural elements. It was reassembled over more than two decades by master conservator Ahmed Youssef, who studied ancient tomb carvings and modern boat-building techniques to solve the intricate wooden puzzle.

Initially displayed in a dedicated museum beside the Pyramid, it was relocated to its permanent home at the GEM in 2021.

Its transfer was carried out using a specially designed remote-controlled vehicle brought in from Belgium. The vehicle underwent preliminary trials to ensure it could safely transport the ancient vessel, which proved highly successful. For the move, the boat was carefully encased in protective scientific foam and secured within a custom-made iron frame to safeguard it from vibration or damage.

The discovery of Khufu's boats has sparked scholarly debate. Many Egyptologists believe they were solar barques intended to carry the resurrected king across the sky with the sun god Re. Others suggest the vessels may have been used during Khufu's lifetime for religious pilgrimages, pointing to rope markings and wear that indicate they once sailed on water.



Landscaping at the GEM

In preparation for the official inauguration of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM), the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities announced its temporary closure from 15 October until the opening scheduled for 1 November.

Government bodies have been carrying out extensive developments in the area of the museum, extending some 10 km from the Sphinx International Airport 20 minutes west of the GEM to the Middle Ring Road to the east. These entities include the Cairo Governorate, representing the Ministry of Local Development, the Armed Forces Engineering Authority, and the ministries of Housing and Transport.

Over the past two years, 14 traffic axes in the vicinity of the GEM have been developed to maintain smooth traffic flows. According to Giza Governor Adel Al-Naggar, the GEM, covering several feddans, is located where major traffic arteries in the Giza Governorate intersect, such as Hadeyeh October and New October City.

Because one of the museum's façades overlooks the Giza Plateau, already a world-renowned attraction, it was essential to connect the two sites and provide all the necessary services to expand and upgrade the entire area, Al-Naggar said. The goal is to ensure visitors enjoy an unforgettable experience, whether on their way to the museum, after their visit, or as they head to their hotels, restaurants, or other archaeological landmarks across Cairo, he said.

According to the Giza Governorate, the development projects included upgrading the Mansourya Road, the Saqqara Tourist Road, and the Tagmid Road adjacent to the GEM. The work

The area surrounding the GEM has been carefully landscaped and the roads upgraded to maintain smooth traffic flows, reports **Ahmed Abdel-Hafez**

has comprised paving, lighting, and developing new green spaces. The museum has also been linked to the main road network, including the Ring Road and the Fayoum and Cairo-Alexandria Desert roads, alongside improvements to the Marioutiya and Moneeb axes.

The development of Remaya Square has been completed, turning it into a cultural gateway to the area, while a new tourist promenade has been built to provide direct access between the GEM and the Giza Pyramids.

The Nazlet Al-Semman area has also received a facelift. "The project was meant to revive, not remove, the area," according to previous statements by a senior official in the Giza Governorate.

He said that "the plan for Nazlet Al-Semman was revised to focus on revitalising the district instead of demolishing it, in cooperation with local residents and in recognition of their tourism-related livelihoods. The aim is to preserve the authentic character of the neighbourhood while presenting it in a more organised form, including the establishment of hotels and service facilities as part of a broader plan to transform it into a distinctive tourist destination."

The project to develop the area west of Sphinx International Airport aims to strike a balance between the requirements of tourism development

and the preservation of the archaeological and heritage character of the area. This includes the establishment of a tourist and sports promenade, a cycling path, and a social club west of the airport as part of plans to develop Western Greater Cairo.

All the roads leading to the GEM, the Giza Pyramids, and the Sphinx International Airport have been developed to create a modern urban appearance and ensure smoother traffic flows.

The goal is to attract more tourists to the area while introducing new forms of accommodation through the construction of hotels along the route from the airport to the museum and the Pyramids area. Most of these projects have been completed through work done jointly by the ministries of Transport, Housing, and Antiquities, along with the Giza Governorate, the Cabinet stated.

Abdel-Khaleq Ibrahim, assistant minister of housing for technical affairs, explained that the strategy guiding the development projects around the GEM is based on the principle that a distinctive and personalised visitor experience is the key to attracting international tourism.

Accordingly, the goal is to achieve an integrated urban design that meets visitor aspirations and expectations, creating a memorable and unique experience that encourages them to return.

This meant a broader plan for the comprehensive development of Greater Cairo to ensure harmony among its various components, since tourists generally do not remain confined to their hotel rooms but rather explore the streets in search of new cultural, intellectual, and civilisational experiences, Ibrahim added.

For example, the new tourist promenade linking the GEM and the Pyramids Plateau embodies the connection between Egypt's ancient civilisation and its modern museum. It is not merely a pedestrian route but also a cultural space where visitors can immerse themselves in heritage and capture unique photographs. The vision, therefore, is for every district across Greater Cairo to reflect this spirit of integration and distinctiveness, he noted.

None of the bodies and ministries that worked on developing the area around the GEM have released any figures regarding the total cost of the projects involved.

However, regarding the beautification of the area around the GEM, the Giza governor earlier stated that more than 4,000 trees have been planted, six wells dug to irrigate them, and 750 sculptures installed along the Cairo-Alexandria Desert Road, representing historical, artistic, and political figures and reflecting Egypt's long heritage.

The Ring Road has also been redesigned with harmonised colour schemes and decorated with banners featuring symbols of Ancient Egyptian civilisation.

The façades of around 3,000 buildings have been repainted in the area overlooking the Ring Road, particularly in the Southern Giza, Omraneya, and Talbeya districts, to create a unified visual identity for the area around the GEM and to "achieve a unique aesthetic character," the Giza governor added.

This project also included painting the façades of 482 schools in Giza.

The work has included new lighting and decorative banners displaying images of ancient kings and archaeological landmarks near the GEM.

Samir Gharib, head of the National Organisation for Urban Harmony (NOUH), said that the idea of a common visual identity was introduced with the establishment of the organisation in 2008 and the issuance of the Unified Building Law that sets out planning regulations.

Among the NOUH's key functions is defining and codifying legal concepts, including that of visual identity, which Gharib described as the "character" of an area and the expression of its unique components.

"Every district has its own architectural character that reflects its particular nature," Gharib said. "For instance, an informal area has a visual identity that is itself informal, while more developed areas display architectural patterns and imagery that reflect the social level of their residents."

Connecting the GEM and the Pyramids

A newly completed tourist promenade offers a seamless passage through time and space from the GEM to the Giza Pyramids, writes **Nevine El-Aref**

In a landmark step to redefine the visitor experience, a world-class pedestrian walkway has been laid out to connect the GEM to the Giza Pyramids, blending heritage, landscape, and modern design.

Just steps away from the largest archaeological museum in the world, a new journey is taking shape on foot, with a tourist promenade that stretches approximately 1.27 km from the GEM directly to the Giza Pyramids, offering visitors a seamless and immersive experience between two of Egypt's most iconic sites.

"The walkway is designed to preserve the visual identity and historical character of the area," said Major General Atef Mofteh, general supervisor of the GEM project. He explained that its width varies between 13.5 and 27.5 metres, giving ample space for visitors to walk, pause, or use eco-friendly electric vehicles while taking in the desert horizon.

Beginning at the museum's main visitor parking area, the path crosses the Fayoum Road and follows the architectural language of the GEM before gently transitioning into the timeless landscape of the Pyramids.

"Designed at ground level below the plateau,



the promenade ensures panoramic views of the Pyramids, while also preventing any environmental or visual disruption to the UNESCO

World Heritage Site," Mofteh said.

The walkway is also more than just a path; it is part of a broader plan to improve the Giza Plateau into one of the world's most sophisticated

heritage tourism destinations. When completed, visitors will be able to step out of the modern

marvel of the GEM and walk into the heart of ancient civilisation.

The new walkway is designed not only for beauty but also for accessibility and sustainability. It features landscaped green areas, ticketing facilities, and service kiosks and shaded rest areas, along with dedicated paths for more established walkers, ensuring both comfort and inclusivity.

The project is also equipped with advanced lighting and security systems to accommodate evening visits, extending the site's hours of activity and tourism appeal.

The new promenade is expected to open to visitors soon, marking a major milestone in the government's plan to develop the Giza Plateau into a fully integrated tourist destination. Once operational, it will provide a direct and organised route between both landmarks, enhancing accessibility, easing visitor movement, and offering a unified cultural experience that connects Egypt's ancient legacy with its modern vision for tourism.

When fully completed, the new promenade is expected to redefine how visitors move through Egypt's most celebrated heritage zone.



'Tourism multiplier effects'

Experts are betting on the positive impact of the landmark GEM on Egypt's tourism sector, writes **Niveen Wahish**



photo: Amr Nabil, AP

The opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) will redefine tourism to Egypt, Elhamy ElZayat, owner of Emeco Travel and former head of the Egyptian Tourism Federation, told *Al-Ahram Weekly*.

Aside from the official inauguration on 1 November, which in itself will focus international attention on Egypt, everything about the GEM from concept to content is remarkable, he added.

The GEM opening will act as a catalyst for increased visitor numbers, bigger spending per tourist, extended stays, and a stronger international profile for the country as a whole, Sherif Fahmy, CEO of consultancy the N Gage Group, told the *Weekly*.

Countries with strong cultural resources and investment in heritage-based attractions experience higher international arrivals and longer visitor stays, he noted.

Egypt recorded an increase of around 24 per cent in tourist arrivals during the first half of 2025, reaching 8.7 million visitors, compared to the same period in 2024. Sherif Fahmy, minister of tourism and antiquities, said in July that Egypt aims to attract around 18 million visitors by the end of 2025.

The GEM is not only a new destination, since its location on the Giza Plateau also makes up a new package for tourists, said ElZayat. He explained that the Sphinx International Airport, located a half hour drive from the GEM, provides easy accessibility to the area and enables tourists to visit both the Giza and Saqqara Pyramids along with the GEM. This new package, he believes, will attract both first-time visitors and return tourism.

Fahmy agreed, saying that the GEM's proximity to the Giza plateau creates a cluster effect, where tourists can experience multiple attractions

within a single area supported by improved transport and hospitality infrastructure. This integration will likely encourage longer stays in Cairo, helping the capital reclaim its position as a central tourism hub, he said.

According to Fahmy, major projects such as the GEM are perceived by tourists and industry stakeholders as critical catalysts for rebranding Egypt's image, attracting new market segments, and stimulating investment in surrounding hospitality and service sectors.

It has been shown that integrating sustainability practices, digital marketing, and partnerships with global tour operators — all strategies already embedded in the GEM's operational plans — can elevate Egypt's competitiveness and resilience, Fahmy stressed.

Adla Ragab, economist and former vice minister of tourism, said that a lot of effort has been put into marketing the GEM through social media, influencers, and bloggers, aside from the local awareness campaigns targeting domestic visitors.

She is expecting tourists from all over the world to visit Egypt as a result of the opening of the GEM, with people from Spain, France, Italy, the UK, and Germany arriving as a result, as well as Saudi Arabians and people from the UAE topping Gulf visitors. She is also expecting greater interest from Japanese and Chinese tourists as well as from the US and Latin America.

ElZayat has also seen a growing number of Canadians returning to Egypt in greater numbers since 2024. He believes that more direct flights can make a huge difference in decisions to come to Egypt. He would like to see more direct flights to different spots in the US, among them Chicago and Detroit, facilitating travel for more tourists

from the mid-West of the US.

He sees greater potential from Latin America, particularly Brazil and Argentina, from where people have been coming in increasing numbers and whose nationals spend freely in Egypt, benefitting everyone in the travel industry down to the smallest souvenir shops.

He noted that steps are underway to stabilise the geopolitical situation in the region and that this will improve tourism gradually. Prime Minister Mustafa Madbouli announced in January 2025 that Egypt targets to attract 30 million tourists by 2030.

According to Fahmy, the GEM will diversify Egypt's tourism base. Historically, Egypt's tourism industry has relied heavily on seasonal beach tourism and classical heritage sites such as those in Luxor and Aswan. The museum introduces a new form of high-value cultural tourism, appealing to international travellers who seek immersive educational experiences, he said. These visitors tend to spend more per trip, stay longer, and engage with other urban attractions such as fine dining, cultural performances, and shopping, significantly increasing the average revenue per visitor.

The GEM's opening is also expected to stimulate substantial secondary economic activity. Hotels, restaurants, transport providers, tour guides, and small businesses in the Giza area will directly benefit from increased visitor traffic, Fahmy said. This will create thousands of new jobs, support local entrepreneurship, and generate higher tax revenues.

This is the "tourism multiplier effect", whereby every dollar spent by a visitor circulates through the economy and supports multiple layers of employment and business growth, Fahmy explained.

He added that by blending ancient heritage with world-class architecture and modern technology, the GEM signals that Egypt is not only the guardian of ancient civilisation but also a contemporary cultural innovator. This enhanced image will attract not only tourists but also investors and event organisers, leading to broader economic diversification within the tourism sector, such as international conferences, film productions, and cultural festivals hosted in Egypt.

The GEM is not just an attraction, Fahmy stressed. It is a strategic investment capable of reshaping Egypt's tourism sector for decades to come.

In order to realise the full potential of Egypt's tourism sector, critical structural challenges must be addressed, however. According to economist Adla Ragab, more rooms and accommodation either in hotels or apartment rentals need to be available. There also need to be more and better tourist services such as public transportation and toilets and shops in every tourist location.

Connectivity, whether local transportation or air transport and airport infrastructure, is another important factor in ensuring a positive tourist experience, she added.

Fahmy agreed, noting that the ongoing privatisation of airport management in Egypt represents a critical shift towards world-class operational standards. For instance, the ongoing process to privatise the management of Terminal 2 at the Cairo International Airport (CAI) is explicitly intended to leverage international expertise for this very purpose.

A new infrastructure project is also underway to establish an additional terminal at CAI (Terminal 4), which is expected to raise the overall capacity of the airport to over 60 million

passengers. These efforts collectively signal a commitment to bridging infrastructure gaps and ensuring that Egypt is well-prepared to accommodate a surge in international tourism, Fahmy said.

According to Fahmy, the implementation of a streamlined e-visa platform and the provision of e-visas on arrival has significantly improved barriers to entry, simplifying the planning process for international visitors. This digital transformation also extends to major attractions, with the widespread adoption of online ticketing systems for sites like the Giza Pyramids and the GEM.

This will not only improve the visitor experience by reducing queues but will also provide the authorities with invaluable data on tourist flows, origins, and preferences. This data-driven approach allows for the more effective and dynamic management of crowds and resources.

However, according to Fahmy, there are still some drawbacks that pose a tangible risk of creating bottlenecks that could constrain economic returns. The transportation network is a primary concern, especially when it comes to local connectivity. The existing road infrastructure and public transit systems, such as the Cairo Metro, are not fully optimised for tourists, and they lack integrated routes and multilingual support for seamless travel between the GEM, central Cairo, and other key sites, he said.

Congestion and disjointed access can detract from the overall visitor experience and limit the economic spill-over to other parts of the city.

Beyond infrastructure, the human capital and accommodation sectors also require strategic focus. The hospitality industry faces the dual challenge of capacity and quality.

Fahmy warned that hotel room supply in high-demand areas like Giza may be insufficient for the projected influx, potentially driving up prices and limiting options. Consistent service quality and professional training across the sector, particularly outside resort enclaves, are imperative to meet the expectations of a diverse, international clientele and to justify premium pricing linked to the GEM experience.

However, Fahmy acknowledged that current efforts to overcome these challenges, including the Egyptian National Tourism Strategy, provide a robust foundation for managing the anticipated surge in tourism. To accommodate increased arrivals, the government has collaborated with the Ministry of Civil Aviation to triple flight seat capacity and expand airport passenger capacity to 72.2 million by the end of 2025.

Alongside transport infrastructure, substantial investments are being made to increase hotel room capacity, with over 200,000 additional rooms planned in the coming years. In line with this, the government has recently signed a \$265 million memorandum of understanding (MoU) to develop new hotel rooms and branded residential units in key tourist destinations.

Licensing requirements for vacation apartment units has also been developed, offering tourists alternative accommodation and raising the country's hotel capacity to approximately half a million rooms.

Fahmy said that the World Economic Forum's Travel & Tourism Development Index 2024 (TTDI) shows that Egypt improved its ranking by 4.3 percentage points (from 66th to 61st place) between 2019 and 2024, signalling better enabling conditions for travel and tourism.

