

Bringing the Book of the Dead to Life

Roberta Shaw

Assistant Curator, Egyptian Arts and Culture

Royal Ontario Museum—

[Animated Logo with sound sting]

[Close-up of framed scroll laid out on a table in a collections area of the Royal Ontario Museum; pans up to show Roberta Shaw, Assistant Curator of Egyptian Art and Culture speaking] Roberta Shaw: So, the ancient Egyptian Book of the Dead as it is popularly called today, is essentially...um...a series of chapters [panning close-up of a length of the scroll, showing alternating panels of hieroglyphics and a painting on the scroll] written on long, long scroll of papyrus, um with accompanying paintings and drawings and basically these chapters or spells, they're often called, are little—little aids for the deceased to sort of get through all the dangers of the underworld and giving him knowledge that he must know to sort of achieve, well achieve paradise in the next life. They're...um...they are the original illuminated manuscripts, really; certainly that tradition was born in ancient Egypt, along with a lot of other traditions.

So we have a particularly beautiful one here *[View of Roberta behind a table in the collection area with the scroll]* and um...it's been a fascinating discovery—we've discovered this in our storage here in the Museum. This particular piece, which is less than a metre, has been on display *[pan down to show scroll in a pale wood frame on the counter]* um in the Egyptian gallery for I don't know how long. *[Still view of entrance to the Egyptian gallery in the ROM, followed by a panning view of artifacts and displays in the Egyptian gallery]*. Certainly, it was re-mounted—the only thing I can find on this in our files—it was remounted in 1972. *[Roberta, speaking at the counter in the collections area]* The word "re-mounting" means that it was mounted at that time. I don't know when it was actually first mounted. I know it came into the Museum early in the 20th Century with the founder, Charles Trick Currelly. *[Zooming view of Charles Trick Currelly as depicted in a painting]*. I have a feeling—this is what I think happened—*[fade back to Roberta in the collections area]* he mounted this piece at that time and put the rest away, which *[makes turning motions with her right hand]* was still rolled up and put it away in storage and somehow it just got forgotten, and this was...we thought that this *[gestures down to the scroll on the counter]* was the only piece we had of this particular papyrus.

Well to make a long story short, the University of Bonn, *[zooming view of façade of University of Bonn]* because of all the wonderful, digital and computers and the Internet and everything—the new technology—*[Fade to Roberta at the counter in the collections area]* has made the University of Bonn the central repository of all the *Books of the Dead* in museums all over the world, they are gathering together um photographic record and they are starting to piece little bits together. You know, Milan has a piece, Rome or Toronto has a piece, and suddenly, “Oh! These were from the same manuscript.”

Well! They took a look at some of the um...they sent a student over studying at University of Toronto, a Bonn student came to look at what we had for their information and the student sort of phoned central depository and said, “Oh my goodness! They’ve got some good stuff here!” So, Dr. Monroe actually came over shortly after that to indeed look in this one drawer we have. And what she found was a roll that she was able to sort of gingerly you know, unroll a bit of it, and she said, “Well, it belongs to this,” *[series of panning close-up views of fragments of a scroll arranged in sequence on a white table]* And she said, “There are six metres or so in this roll. It’s a very important piece, look at the beauty of the drawings *[view of drawing of figures arranged in two registers with gold accents]* and look at the amount of gold that is applied. Look at the writing, *[panning detail of a fragment of the scroll covered in writing]* which is beautiful...” Um she said it’s probably the finest of its kind in the world for its date, which is about 320 BC.

[Overview of plastic tent set up in the conservation lab; a preparator emerges from the tent carrying a tray of scroll fragments] So then we new something had to be done. And so then we tried very, very hard, fundraising, we’ve got the funds, *[view of three people consulting with Dr. Monro in the conservation lab]* we have now got three people from Bonn here, we have the language expert who knows how to read this stuff and of course, put it together because it is a jigsaw puzzle...*[Close-up view of a woman’s hands opening and arranging a small box of scroll fragments]*...because lots of little bits have fallen off and we have the conservators, um, the two women who are expert *[overview of woman arranging scroll fragments at a table in the conservation lab; cut to overview of plastic tent set up in the lab]* in actually conserving the papyrus paper itself. *[View of conservator working within the tent]* They are pulling it apart, laying it out, and they are humidifying it and flattening it *[close-up of conservator’s hands as she uses tweezers to manipulate the scroll]* and then it will be all put together and it’s going to be six metres. It’s, you know, the length of these two tables.

Ahh...she has found his father’s name, *[fade to Roberta standing at the counter in the collections area]* she’s starting to turn up little bits of information. His name is

on it here *[gestures to the mounted portion of scroll in front of her]*, Amen-em-hat is his name, ah she has found his father's name, she may find his mother's name somewhere, so she's looking at and she's identifying, of course, all the chapters, the little chapters that make up the *Book of the Dead*. Not every scroll has every chapter; it's one of those things where a person must have picked out what they wanted for their *Book of the Dead*. *[Fade to view of scroll fragments arranged in order with reference numbers; the image sharpens; cut to detail of four seated figures]* I can't remember how many chapters are known *[detail of four standing figures]* a couple of hundred, I think. No one has the complete corpus in their scroll *[detail of standing figure and four seated figures; cut to close-up of conservator's hands as she arranges scroll fragments]* So, it's certainly an exciting project, it's going to take us at least a month to put it together, first take it apart, then put it together, then conserve it, *[view of Roberta speaking from behind a counter in the collections area, the framed portion of the scroll is on the counter in front of her]* mount it and a fun part is, and we have of course, part of what they found, is the bottom part of this *[Roberta gestures to indicate the bottom of the framed scroll fragment in front of her]* so this will come out of its frame and it will be mounted with its bottom part and more nice, more nice illustrations here *[gestures to lower left-hand portion of scroll fragment]* and more verses under here.

So um...it's an amazing project, it's been in storage, the scroll, the rolled scroll has been in storage for one hundred years and now we're literally bringing the *Book of the Dead* to life and it is just tremendously exciting.

[Podcast ends with animated ROM logo and soundsting]