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King Tut: The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs Ignore the naysayers — the new AGO blockbuster is worthwhile

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BY DAVID BALZER December 04, 2009 11:12

EDITORIAL RATING:

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The AGO's "King Tut" show has caused uproar, and not just because of long queues and heftier-than-usual ticket prices. Spurred by the critical likes of the *Toronto Star's* Murray Whyte, who has blogged disparagingly about the show and, last Sunday, published a piece [giving voice to a few artists' and curators' discontent](#), the local visual arts community is now apt to dismiss the whole thing as worthlessly Disneyworldish — a blatant cash grab on the part of the AGO, who, just a year ago on reopening, had made a commitment to renew its ties with vital, contemporary scenes and practices, among

them local ones.

The backlash, however, seems to me embarrassingly myopic (there are baffling cries online that the AGO is a "gallery," not a "museum," and that this belongs at the ROM, ignoring the fact that many so-called galleries in Canada and abroad contain significant anthropological holdings, which one wouldn't want to hold against them) and, to be perfectly honest, vain and whinging.

It is telling, after all, that the show heralds time's indifference to authorship in favour of the artifact and its subjects: myth, history and politics, indeed the only compelling insignia you will see here. However unselfconscious the presentation at "Tut" — yes, Harrison Ford gives an introduction and is on the audio guide; yes, there is stupid New Age music piped in; yes, Dr. Zahi Hawass, superstar Egyptologist and focus of a [recent *New Yorker* exposé](#), is the unctuous voice of authority (the exhibit is his mercenary brainchild) — one might choose to feel the objects more strongly because of the pernicious context in which they are patently presented. Call it the installation art of museumology: the objects have, after all, been prey to thousands of years of pillaging and repillaging. Greed is an important, implacable aspect of their meaning.

But there is, of course, so much more. Ignore the cynical intrusions and find yourself in a close encounter with another, sprawling civilization so deeply like, and yet so deeply unlike, our own — one in which, for example, gold is construed as the flesh of the gods. As a viewer, one feels as anonymous as the artists who created these pieces, dwarfed by the aesthetics of absolutism (an imposing statue of monotheist Amenhotep IV vies with a concluding one of polytheist Tut as the exhibit's most sublime moment) and recondite superstitions. To take in the canopic calcite container designed for one of Tut's organs (pictured), from an inner chamber of his tomb, is to fathom how much Ancient Egypt depended on art as a bridge between private and public, transcendent and earthly, royal and common. Everything seems a neurotic offering.

Fairer, more constructive criticisms can be levelled at the show. The phase dealing with Howard Carter's discovery of Tut's tomb in the '20s, for instance, comes too abruptly, is underdeveloped and ultimately disappointing. Where are the inner casings of the sarcophagus (ahem, death mask!)? Overall, the curation is mediocre, giving only minimal information about what's on display, in overly basic language (which, as is overly basic language's wont, tends to confuse more than it clarifies). Any adult with a generalist's knowledge of Egypt will leave "Tut" fascinated and refreshed, but not enlightened. Make no mistake: there is a real, legitimate hunger for a show like this — disgruntled scenesters be damned — but why not make the meal as nutritious as it is filling?

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