

Different Ways of Experiencing the Past: A Comparative Analysis of Experiential Engagement at the Ashmolean Museum and *Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition*

Introduction

In recent decades, heritage institutions have increasingly recognised that visitor understanding is influenced not just by information and objects but also by the experiences through which heritage is encountered.¹ Contemporary museum scholarship highlights that meaningful engagement goes beyond mere information sharing to include embodied, sensory, and emotional interactions.² Experiential engagement refers to how heritage displays involve visitors on cognitive, emotional, and physical levels. This approach shapes the visitor experience through exhibition design, storytelling, sensory environments, and spatial interactions, rather than relying solely on text or artefacts. Different heritage formats offer distinct experiences that are influenced by the institution's goals, audiences, and interpretive aims.

Advances in digital technology have significantly influenced modern methods of experiential engagement by allowing immersive, interactive, and multisensory media to be utilised within heritage environments.³ Additionally, broader societal shifts associated with digital culture and social media have altered expectations around how information is encountered, leading some heritage exhibitions to prioritise immediacy, sensory impact, and emotional response, while others continue to favour more traditional forms of interpretation.

This essay explores how two distinct heritage exhibitions offer different experiential approaches to ancient Egyptian culture: the Egyptian galleries at the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford⁴, and *Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition*,⁵ a temporary ticketed event at ExCeL London in 2025. Both works focus on ancient Egypt but employ contrasting strategies in order to engage audiences. The Ashmolean functions as an academic museum, emphasising original objects, scholarly analysis, and visitor autonomy. Its Egyptian galleries showcase material culture as evidence for examination and interpretation, prompting visitors to critically engage with the objects and their historical backgrounds. The Tutankhamun Exhibition adopts a commercial, multisensory strategy that focuses on virtual

¹ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 32–33.

² Wang, 'A Bodies-On Museum', *Curator*, 66.2 (2023), p. 107.

³ Carmen Bachiller, José M. Monzo and Beatriz Rey, 'Augmented and Virtual Reality to Enhance the Didactical Experience of Technological Heritage Museums', *Applied Sciences*, 13 (2023), 3539, p. 1.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/app13063539>

⁴ Ashmolean Museum, 'Home', <https://www.ashmolean.org/> [accessed 18 January 2026].

⁵ Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition, 'Home', <https://tutankhamunexperience.com/> [accessed 18 January 2026].

reality immersion, atmosphere, and storytelling. Instead of emphasising material artefacts, it offers a guided journey through progressively theatrical spaces designed to evoke wonder and emotional responses.

This essay uses four comparative lenses (mode of engagement, visitor role, interpretive strategy, and affective tone) to analyse how each presentation constructs experiential engagement. Rather than favouring one model over the other, it demonstrates that, in the context of changing technologies and shifting patterns of attention and learning, there is space within contemporary heritage practice for multiple approaches. While these formats differ significantly in their methods and emphasis, both ultimately aim to encourage engagement with the past, albeit in different ways and for various audiences.



Figure 1: *The Egypt at its Origins Room, The Ashmolean, Oxford.* Image owned by Lucy Negus



Figure 2: *Large Digital display at Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition.* Image owned by Lucy Negus

Mode of Engagement

The mode of engagement refers to the ways visitors are invited to interact with a heritage presentation. In museum settings, the mode of engagement is closely shaped by the physical environment, as learning is situated within space and influenced by visitors' movement, attention, and awareness of place.⁶ It is shaped by factors such as spatial design, pacing, and the use of interpretive media, and sets the practical conditions under which the past is encountered.

⁶ John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000), p. 65.

At the Ashmolean Museum, visitors engage with the Egyptian galleries mainly through self-guided, object-focused exploration arranged in a loosely chronological sequence of spaces. Visitors enter the Egyptian galleries via the museum's Greek and Roman sculpture hall and move through interconnected rooms that illustrate the long history of the Nile Valley, from early settlements to dynastic Egypt in Greek and Roman times.⁷ This layout offers a broad temporal framework without a strict route or pace. Within each gallery, visitors are free to move between exhibits, revisit earlier displays, or linger with particular objects according to their individual interests, shaping their experience through choice rather than following a continuous story or a timed visit.

The focus of visitor engagement is the display of original archaeological material, with visitors encountering authentic objects presented alongside interpretive labels and thematic panels. This setup encourages a reflective experience where understanding develops through reading, observing, and comparing various objects.

By contrast, *Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition* employs a staged mode of engagement that develops over the course of the visit. The exhibition begins in more traditional gallery-style spaces, where visitors move through a series of rooms, encounter replicas of ancient Egyptian objects, and engage with extensive interpretive panels. As the experience progresses, access to subsequent spaces becomes increasingly timed and structured, with visitors guided into immersive environments centred on large-scale digital projection, sound, and virtual reality. Attention is gradually directed away from individual objects and towards the overall sensory experience, creating an immersive atmosphere that prioritises continuity and spectacle over close inspection.



Figure 3: *Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition*. Image owned by Lucy Negus

One of the key strengths of this mode of engagement is its ability to build drama and sustain excitement. By regulating pacing and progression, the exhibition creates a clear sense of momentum, guiding visitors through a sequence of increasingly spectacular environments

⁷ Ashmolean Museum, *Ashmolean Museum Floor Plan* (December 2023) <https://www.ashmolean.org/sitefiles/ashmolean-museum-floor-plan-dec-2023> [accessed 18 January 2026].

that heighten anticipation and emotional impact. This structured progression ensures key moments are experienced in a particular order, producing a coherent, engaging narrative that is easy to follow, particularly for visitors unfamiliar with museum settings.

At the same time, this structure places clear limits on how visitors can interact with the exhibition. The fixed order and duration of immersive elements limit the ability to revisit content, pause extensively, or straying from the intended flow. Additionally, the ticketed format prevents visitors from re-entering the experience multiple times. Consequently, engagement is governed more by the event's time and space constraints than by personal curiosity or focused attention.

When compared with the Ashmolean's mode of engagement, these differences become clearer. At the Ashmolean, the open gallery format allows visitors to move freely, revisit objects, and spend extended time with material of particular interest, supporting slower, more selective engagement. However, this openness can also lead to uneven experiences, as visitors may miss connections or struggle to form a coherent sense of progression without a guiding narrative. By comparison, the immersive exhibition offers coherence, momentum, and emotional impact, but at the cost of flexibility and depth. This contrast demonstrates that different heritage formats prioritise different forms of engagement, each enabling certain kinds of attention while constraining others.

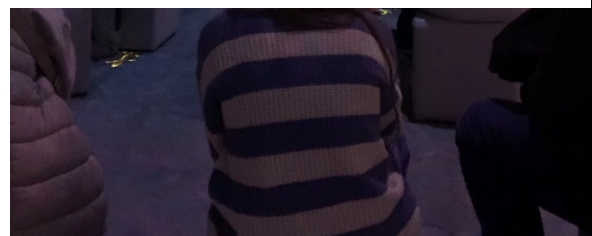
Role of the Visitor

The role of the visitor refers to how a heritage presentation positions its audience in relation to interpretation and authority. It concerns what role the visitors take, whether they are expected to interpret material independently, follow a structured narrative, or engage with the past from a particular perspective.

At the Ashmolean Museum, visitors are positioned as autonomous interpreters or researchers. Objects are presented alongside contextual information that supports understanding without prescribing a single narrative or conclusion. Rather than being led through a story, visitors must make sense of the material for themselves, forming their own connections and interpretations without being guided towards a particular response. In this



Figure 4: Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition. Image owned by Lucy Negus



sense, the Ashmolean positions the visitor in a role comparable to that of the academic or researcher, engaging with material evidence on their own terms.

In contrast, *Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition* positions the visitor less as an independent interpreter and more as a participant within a constructed narrative. Through immersive digital environments and virtual reality, visitors are invited to experience events from within the story itself, such as through Howard Carter's eyes at his base camp or from the perspective of Tutankhamun in the afterlife. Virtual reality does more than just present information; it immerses the visitor within the narrative, fostering an emotional connection rather than detached analysis.

These contrasting visitor roles illustrate how experiential engagement goes beyond just exhibition design, involving assumptions about knowledge, agency, and interpretation. The Ashmolean encourages visitors to actively build understanding from material evidence, while the immersive exhibition views visitors as participants in a narrative, where their engagement is influenced by identification and emotional reactions. Collectively, these examples demonstrate that various heritage formats assign distinct roles to their audiences, affecting not only how the past is experienced but also what it means to engage with it.

Interpretive Strategy

Interpretive strategy refers to how a heritage presentation structures information and shapes understanding of the past.⁸ It encompasses the narratives presented, the perspectives prioritised, and the extent to which interpretation accommodates complexity or uncertainty. Interpretive strategy, therefore, influences not only what visitors learn but also how they understand the nature of historical knowledge itself.

At the Ashmolean Museum, the interpretive strategy centres on displaying original archaeological objects, supported by contextual information. The Egyptian galleries present large numbers of objects spanning royal, elite, and domestic contexts, allowing ancient Egyptian civilisation to be encountered as a complex and internally varied society rather than a single moment or story.

⁸ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 3rd edn (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), pp. 3–4.

Interpretation is influenced by display choices. Some objects are protected behind glass, whereas others are exhibited openly, enabling visitors to get closer and interact more directly with their physical qualities. Situated within a museum that presents many other cultures and time periods, the Egyptian galleries are further contextualised within a broader global and historical framework, positioning ancient Egypt as one civilisation among many rather than an isolated or mythic world.

By contrast, *Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition* uses a tightly structured interpretive strategy built around a single story: the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb by Howard Carter. This narrative provides a clear framework for the exhibition and guides visitors through a linear sequence that maintains focus and momentum. Interpretation is delivered primarily through storytelling, digital projection, and virtual reality, rather than through engagement with original archaeological objects.

Ancient Egypt is presented largely through royal and mythological perspectives, with particular emphasis on Tutankhamun and afterlife beliefs. The exhibition visualises events and environments, such as Carter's excavation camp, Tutankhamun's tomb, and the journey through the underworld, using immersive media to create a complete, visually coherent experience. With the exception of a single holographic display of the mummification process, non-royal Egyptians are not featured in the exhibition.

These interpretive strategies, when compared, reveal differing priorities in how the past is showcased. The Ashmolean's method emphasises depth, variety, and evidence-rich presentations, enabling visitors to explore ancient Egyptian civilisation over extensive periods and diverse social settings. This wide scope promotes ongoing and analytical



Figure 5: Display cabinet, the Ashmolean Museum. Image owned by Lucy Negus



Figure 6: A VR experience room, Tutankhamun, the Immersive Experience. Image owned by Lucy Negus

interaction with the material culture, but it also presumes a certain confidence, time investment, and familiarity with museum conventions that some visitors might lack, which could reduce accessibility and immediate engagement.

In contrast, the immersive exhibition focuses on clarity, emotional impact, and visual completeness. Its use of immersive technology necessitates filling evidence gaps with creative reconstructions. This method effectively helps visitors grasp spaces, processes, and stories that are hard to envision, but it also risks oversimplification or 'Disneyfication'.⁹ For example, dramatic visualisations, such as the virtual reality depiction of the underworld, might appear historically accurate even without solid archaeological support, blurring the line between interpretation and invention. Although this approach offers a memorable and engaging experience, it may hinder visitors' ability to differentiate between evidence-based interpretations and imaginative reconstructions.

Affective Tone

Affective tone refers to the emotional register through which a heritage presentation frames the past and shapes visitors' responses. Museums do not simply communicate information; they also influence how visitors feel, whether through restraint, awe, intimacy, or spectacle.¹⁰ These emotional cues affect how the past is perceived, how seriously it is taken as historical evidence, and whether visitors are encouraged to reflect critically or become absorbed in an atmosphere.

At the Ashmolean Museum, the affective tone of the Egyptian galleries is relatively restrained. Emotional responses are not overtly engineered through sound, lighting, or immersive media but develop gradually through sustained encounters with original artefacts. Wonder is evoked through material authenticity and historical depth, as well as from contrast in scale. Monumental objects, such as large stone statues encountered early in the galleries, create moments of visual impact and seriousness, while smaller domestic objects invite close looking and more intimate forms of engagement. Together, these encounters encourage both awe and empathy, grounded in material objects rather than theatrical effect.

⁹ Bojan Popović, 'The Phenomenon of Disneyfication: The Necessity in Archaeological Heritage Protection', in *Archaeological Heritage – Its Role in Education, Presentation and Popularization of Science*, ed. by Momir Korać and Slaviša Perić (Belgrade–Viminacium: Institute of Archaeology, 2012), p. 24.

¹⁰ Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, 3rd edn (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 27.

This restraint is reinforced by the Ashmolean's architectural and institutional setting. High ceilings, formal gallery layouts, and a quiet atmosphere create a reverential environment that encourages slow movement and careful observation. A key strength of this affective approach is that it supports reflective engagement, allowing emotional responses to emerge organically through time spent with objects and their contexts. However, this same restraint can also function as a limitation. For visitors accustomed to more immersive or visually stimulating experiences, the absence of strong affective cues may reduce immediate emotional impact, making the galleries feel demanding or understated rather than immediately engaging.



Figure 7: The Ashmolean Museum. Image property of Lucy Negus

In contrast, Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition employs an affective approach focused on intensity, excitement, and spectacle. It uses large-scale projections, immersive soundscapes, and dramatic visuals to craft a vivid sensory environment that triggers strong emotional reactions. Virtual reality immerses visitors in stylised journeys through the afterlife and reconstructed archaeological moments, creating an experience characterised by movement, scale, and sensory engagement rather than subdued reflection.

Compared with the Ashmolean, this heightened affective intensity creates a very different relationship with the past. A key strength of this approach is its ability to generate excitement and sustain attention, particularly among audiences drawn to immersive, visually striking experiences. However, this emphasis on spectacle also affects authenticity. Ancient Egypt is framed through fantasy and dramatic imagery, with imaginative reconstructions filling gaps in the archaeological record. While this enhances immersion, it also limits opportunities for reflection and critical distance, as emotional responses are guided by the experience itself rather than developing through prolonged engagement with historical material.

Taken together, these contrasting affective strategies show how emotional design shapes distinct forms of engagement with the past. At the Ashmolean, restrained affect fosters reflection, depth, and critical distance, whereas the immersive exhibition relies on heightened emotion to sustain attention and generate excitement. Rather than competing,

these approaches represent different responses to contemporary expectations of engagement and attention, helping to explain why both formats continue to coexist within heritage practice.

Conclusion

This essay compares the experiential engagement in two different heritage displays: the Egyptian galleries at the Ashmolean Museum and Tutankhamun: The Immersive Exhibition. By examining the mode of engagement, visitor role, interpretive strategy, and emotional tone of each exhibition, it demonstrates how each example offers a unique way for visitors to encounter and interpret the ancient past.

Regarding mode of engagement, the Ashmolean offers an open, self-directed experience shaped by movement through interconnected gallery spaces and sustained encounters with original objects. This allows visitors to control their pace, revisit material, and engage selectively, but can result in uneven or fragmented experiences without a guiding narrative. By contrast, the immersive exhibition employs a tightly structured sequence of spaces and timed experiences that build drama and momentum. This creates a coherent and engaging journey, but limits flexibility, revisitation, and individual exploration.

The role of the visitor further differentiates these experiences. At the Ashmolean, visitors are positioned as autonomous interpreters, expected to construct meaning through observation, comparison, and engagement with material evidence. In the immersive exhibition, visitors are positioned as participants in a narrative, experiencing events from a predetermined perspective.

Interpretive strategy also reflects contrasting priorities. The Ashmolean presents ancient Egypt across a broad chronological and social range, situating it within a broader museum context and emphasising material evidence over narrative closure. This approach supports complexity and critical engagement but assumes visitor confidence and time. In contrast, the immersive exhibition prioritises narrative clarity and visual completeness, using immersive media to reconstruct spaces, processes, and beliefs. While this aids comprehension and accessibility, it also requires imaginative reconstruction that can blur the boundary between evidence and invention.

Finally, affective tone plays a key role in shaping engagement. The Ashmolean's restrained environment encourages reflection and critical distance, with emotional responses emerging gradually through encounters with objects and space. The immersive exhibition relies on heightened affect, spectacle, and sensory intensity to generate excitement and immediacy. Each approach enables different forms of emotional engagement while constraining others.

Taken together, this comparison demonstrates that experiential engagement is not a neutral backdrop to heritage interpretation, but a structuring force that shapes how the past is encountered, understood, and valued. Rather than competing, these exhibitions reflect different responses to changing technologies, audiences, and engagement expectations. In a contemporary heritage landscape characterised by diverse modes of learning and attention, there is space for both object-based museums and immersive exhibitions, each offering distinct yet valid ways of engaging people with history.

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