

Mummifying Alan Documentary Review

In the documentary "Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret" they utilized their understanding of Egyptian mummies to attempt their own mummification. The intended audience would likely be those in the field of Egyptology or archaeology, but may also have been intended for skeptics who thought modern mummification would not work. The purpose of this documentary was to understand the process behind Egyptian mummification. They wanted to test if their theories of how the Egyptians of the 18th dynasty were correct and had made the documentary to be able to document a potential groundbreaking discovery. The main message of the documentary was to answer the question that archaeologists have been asking of how did the Egyptians mummify their own.

Prior to watching the documentary, the only knowledge I had of the subject was what I learned in the lecture "Ancient Lives in Death" meaning it was not a vast amount of knowledge. I had expected to see a little less insects from decomposing bodies and had expected to see a mummification which was exactly what was shown. Though I had not expected them to focus on the 18th dynasty and thought they would have covered the body with natron salt instead of using a salt bath. Some questions I had previously included not knowing how the body would not decompose once the mummification was finished, as well as wondering how the Egyptians started mummification and why they had started.

This documentary focuses on two experts in their fields, Joann Fletcher who is an Egyptologist and Stephen Buckley who is an archaeological chemist. They wanted to test their theories of Egyptian mummification with the help of a human donor by the name of Alan. After Alan had passed away, they had used their findings of mummification during the 18th dynasty to perform a modern mummification on Alan. They began with removing his internal organs except the heart and brain and had covered him completely with a mixture of sesame oil, resin, and beeswax which was the technique the Ancient Egyptians had used. Then Alan's body was placed into a salt bath which contained natron salt and left him there for 35 days. After the 35 days Alan's body was taken out and left to dry for two weeks. Once dried, his body was wrapped in linen sheets and left to dry for another 6 weeks. All these events had taken place in a science lab and had modified the temperature to mimic Egyptian weather. Throughout this process there are also cuts to other experts in the field who insert their own thoughts, including Dr. Fletcher who visited Egypt's Valley of the Kings to explain more about the mummies which had already been discovered. They also included segments of American experts including professor Bill Bass and Rebecca Taylor who are forensic anthropologists who provide insight on the decomposition of the human body and show images of human decomposition from the Body Farm.

The quality of the documentary shows its age since it was released in 2011 and is a bit grainy. The sound effects used throughout give it a very serious and mysterious vibe to the work being performed. Since this is a documentary that is answering the mystery of Egypt mummies it works well and engages the viewer into wanting to know what the end result will be. The filming angles used showed the viewer exactly what was happening to ensure that what is being discussed is shown clearly and does not leave the viewer wondering how the experiment was performed. The interviews were also very educational and important to the experiment. They provided much needed context into the hows and whys of the experiment and also into the dangers and missteps that could happen if their hypotheses were incorrect. The interviews from Dr. Fletcher provided the background into the Egyptian mummies and why it was important to answer these questions. Interviews from

Dr. Buckley showed and explained the science behind the experiment while the interviews from the forensic anthropologists gave a detailed explanation of how bodies decompose and how this experiment could have gone wrong. The interviews done from the perspective of Alan and his wife were very heartfelt and showed the other side of the experiment, it was not just a body they were experimenting on but a real person who had a life and family.

The most memorable part of the documentary was the experiment itself. There were moments throughout the documentary where it was unsure if the salt bath would have worked or not which could have potential consequences that would have ended the experiment. It was interesting to see how the Egyptians would have performed these surgeries since there was no way of knowing or viewing them done on a real person before. It was interesting to see the interviews and photos of Alan's life and it made the experiment more human and personal for everyone involved. It gave the viewers a more emotional connection to who he was instead of just seeing him as a science experiment. Something to learn from the documentary was how different the mummifications of the 18th dynasty were from other dynasties since they had used the salt baths while others did not. It was also interesting to learn how they had stuffed the bodies with small bags of linen to kind of reform the body. Some drawbacks from this documentary would be the quality of the documentary since it is older, as well as the ethical stance of the entire experiment. How ethical can it be to perform and televise a mummification of someone who had just passed away. I would recommend this documentary to anyone interested in understanding how the Egyptians of the 18th dynasty had performed their mummifications.

Bibliography

Mummifying Alan: Egypt's Last Secret. (2011). [DVD]. Directed by Kenny Scott. United Kingdom: Blink Films