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Thirty years after causing pandemonium at the Grange, the Egyptians are back with priceless treasures from the tombs of King Tut and other ancient pharaohs – just in time to give the Art Gallery of Ontario a needed boost.

The 1979 Tut show ushered in the age of the museum blockbuster. The current show, *King Tut: The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs*, begins a five-month stay this week for what could be a turning point in the AGO's fortunes.

"King Tut will bring us thousands of new visitors," says Matthew Teitelbaum, CEO of the gallery. "They will discover not only the remarkable treasures of the boy king but the extraordinary art and architecture of the AGO... This exhibition is our platform. It is a chance to show thousands of newcomers who we are."

Gail Lord, whose company Lord Cultural Resources is consulted by major museums all over the world, observes: "This exhibit is tremendously important, because it signals that the AGO now understands, as the Royal Ontario Museum does as well, that bringing major exhibitions of international importance to Toronto is part of their mandate."

By coincidence, Tut overlaps with two other Toronto blockbusters: the ROM's *Dead Sea Scrolls* (closing Jan. 3 after a six-month stay) and the Ontario Science Centre's *Body Worlds and the Story of the Heart* (closing Feb. 28 after 4 1/2 months).

The upshot: dramatic increases in attendance for all three institutions and a signal that it's folly for any of them to consider populist, commercial blockbusters beneath their dignity.

It's a lesson the AGO learned the hard way.

One year ago, the gallery reopened after its splashy expansion and transformation by architectural superstar Frank Gehry. The building won acclaim, as did the AGO's impressive upgrading of its permanent collection.

But what followed was a winter of discontent, as crowds failed to show up. Attendance over the first several months of 2009 was dismal, except for free Wednesday nights. Budgets were slashed and staff downsized. Crisis was averted only because the Ontario government came through with a \$10 million increase in the gallery's annual operating subsidy.

What went wrong? Negative factors included the economy, lacklustre ads and an excessively high admission price. But the biggest problem was the lack of crowd-pleasing temporary exhibits.

Much to its credit, the AGO has improved its lineup of special shows in the past six months. Attendance for the 12 months since the reopening is up to 700,000.

But, to be truly successful, the gallery needs to reach and sustain annual attendance of one million or more. And it needs blockbuster exhibits like *Tut* to get there. A show like *Tut* or *Dead Sea Scrolls* makes the host museum front-of-mind for millions who otherwise might pay little or no attention. With the right courtship, many can be persuaded to keep coming back after that big show is gone.



A statue of Tutankhamun is inspected by a staff member from Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities.

TONY BOCK/TORONTO STAR

Thirty years ago, in November 1979, the AGO benefited enormously from the first wave of Tutmania, three years after the first Tut exhibit toured major U.S. cities. In two months, it brought in an astonishing 750,000 visitors. Extended hours and lines around the block were daily occurrences.

Mark Lach, senior vice-president of Arts and Exhibitions International (the U.S. company that organizes the Tut tours), said in an interview he is confident the show opening at the AGO this week has just as strong popular appeal as both the 1979 show and the other touring exhibit, *Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs*, currently in San Francisco.

That other exhibit, which began in 2005, has brought in an average of one million visitors in each of the seven cities it has visited. Can the newer exhibit (launched last year) bring in that many people before it leaves Toronto in April?

That would be an all-time attendance record for Toronto. So far, 50,000 tickets have been sold in advance. Even if attendance falls well short of a million, it will still provide a huge boost.

At the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, almost half the approximately one million Tut ticket-buyers had never set foot in the museum before the 2005 show.

According to Lach, in cities that have recently had Tut exhibits, one-third of those attending typically buy memberships in the museum they visit. And about 12 or 13 per cent renew their memberships in years following.

That could translate into more than 100,000 additional visitors for the AGO in years to come – if the gallery has the savvy to keep them coming back.

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