“YOU CAN TAKE IT WITH YOU: MUMMIES OF THE WORLD” (4 WEEKS, Spring 2016)

Summary: Some people believe that in order to have an afterlife, the body must be preserved and clothes, tools, jewelry, pets, and food must accompany the human body into its tomb. Others believe preserved bodies allow ancestors to exert a benevolent influence on their descendants. This four-week class will explore mummies from Egypt, South America, the Canary Islands, Papua New Guinea, and China. The materials and methods used on mummies illustrate religious beliefs, burial rituals, concepts of good and evil, and social status. The human bodies inside, revealed by medical imaging and chemical analysis, teach us about ancient health and disease, diet, and ancestry.

Why study mummies? Mummies can teach us about human beings and how they lived in different times and places. Study of the physical body reveals health, disease, diet, occupations, and much more. Burial context, from tomb architecture to artifacts surrounding the dead person, illustrate beliefs, burial rituals, art, and technology. Multiple disciplines (e.g. anthropology, medicine, chemistry, biology, art history) are used to study mummies.

What is a mummy? A. An accidentally preserved “spontaneous” mummy, or B. a deliberately prepared body, human or animal. Body treatments include separating the bones, removing internal organs, defleshing, embalming, reconstructing the body or face out of mineral and plant materials, and decoration.

Themes:
- We can learn much more about an ancient person if he or she is preserved in context.
- Climate is crucial for preservation: dry and hot or dry and cold are the best environments. Exceptions: slightly acidic bogs, where oxygen is excluded.
- Non-destructive techniques such as X-ray radiography and CT scanning are preferable to autopsies (ancient mummies are irreplaceable artifacts).
- New dating and DNA techniques requiring ever smaller samples continue to provide new information on old mummies.
- For prehistoric mummies, there are limits in what we can know about why mummies were prepared (beliefs in an afterlife, ancestor worship, fertility and regeneration).

Class organization (subject to change):
Week 1: Introduction, definitions, accidental or “spontaneous” mummies (Egyptian, European bog bodies, Otzi the Iceman, Chinese red-haired mummies)

Class resources:
Olli website, class downloads: http://olli.illinois.edu/downloads/courses/Spring%202016/
The Mummy Blog: http://themummyblog.blogspot.com/
Sarah Wisseman: suwissem@gmail.com