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Lucy ready to show what Ethiopia's about

Fossil on U.S. tour to help lure tourists, rebuild nation's image

By William Mullen | Tribune staff reporter
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HOUSTON - When Ethiopia decided six years ago it needed to find a goodwill ambassador to send on the road to spruce up its image as a nation and a tourist destination, the government turned to one of its oldest residents and perhaps the only one to be truly world-famous, a diminutive bag of bones named Lucy.

A special exhibition built around the 3.2 million-year-old pre-human fossil was unveiled to the press Tuesday at the Houston Museum of Natural Science, the first stop of a six-year American tour much criticized by top international anthropologists and paleontologists. Ethiopian officials on hand defended the exhibit by saying that Lucy, considered by many to be the most important hominid fossil in the world, has to serve other interests in addition to science.

"To suggest that research trumps everything else" that has to do with Lucy is wrong, said Samuel Assefa, Ethiopia's ambassador to the U.S., suggesting the fossil should be used to educate as well. "Lucy belongs to the world. She is the origin of humanity. We all see ourselves in Lucy."

The Ethiopians clearly want Lucy to act as a fundraiser, too, hoping that American audiences will pay fairly hefty special admissions fees to see her bones. The Houston museum is charging an admission fee of \$20 for adults and \$12 for children for the exhibit, which opens Friday and runs for eight months.

A percentage of the fees is supposed to go to Ethiopia in support of museums and scientists. The government also hopes the exhibition will boost its tiny international tourism industry by inspiring Americans to visit.

To that end, the government also sent more than 100 historical objects from Ethiopia's rich national history from the last 3,000 years, many of them priceless religious artifacts from Judaism, Christianity and Islam, each of which found very early African footholds in Ethiopia.

"The little that Americans do know about Ethiopia is the horror of the images of famine and warfare," said Assefa. Ethiopia partnered with the Houston museum to create the exhibition, but from the outset insisted it had to include both Lucy, more than 3 million years old, and the historical objects, going back just 3,000 years.

"It offers two grand narratives, not just one," Assefa said of the seemingly odd juxtaposition. "First there is the story of the evolution of humanity that Lucy represents."

Second, he said, it is important to use the historical objects to show that "Ethiopia is one of the great cradles of civilization."

The objects range from early tools, pottery and weavings to extraordinary examples of artwork, architecture and religious objects from Axum, the first Christian nation in Africa, and ancient cities such as Lalibela and Gondar. It also focuses on a dynasty of emperors Ethiopians say extends from biblical King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba to Emperor Haile Selassie, a popular world figure who ruled Ethiopia for much of the 20th Century until he was murdered in 1975.

The history section, which comes first, is rich with the vibrant colors that Ethiopian artists have used in paintings and fabrics, making the transition into Lucy's portion all the more jarring as viewers move from the richness of human culture into the stark world of early human ancestors.

To build drama around the one fossil, the exhibition brings visitors through a gallery stocked with replica casts of many of the fossil hominid species recovered in Ethiopia.

Then, in a darkened oval gallery, Lucy's bones are laid out in a glass-topped black display case almost like a funeral bier. The museum also commissioned a lifelike model of Lucy made of fleshlike plastic resins and covered in long black bear hair.

A sumptuous mural of the region Lucy was found in covers the perimeter wall, following other hominid species who lived in the area in chronological order.

None of the other nine museums where the exhibition is supposed to appear have been identified, though Houston officials said they will be named by the end of the year. Field Museum officials in Chicago have said they have been in negotiations to book the exhibition.

Critics of the long American tour have complained that it puts Lucy's fragile bones at risk of being damaged and removes the fossil from scientific study while it sits in museum galleries. The bones normally are stored in a vault at the Ethiopian National Museum.