


BLIND SPOTS IN MUSEUM ANTHROPOLOGY: Ancient Egypt in the Ethnographic Museum

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ABSTRACT

In the past few decades, the literature in museum anthropology has advocated efforts to be more transparent about its colonial origins, address the historical injustices of imperial collecting, and rethink display narratives in collaboration with source communities. In this paper, however, we question the extent to which the epistemic and political predicaments underlying ethnographic representations are being fundamentally and systematically confronted. As we highlight with the example of ancient Egyptian material, it is apparent that significant parts of museum holdings remain freighted by unquestioned colonial and Eurocentric discourses. We employ a case study of the Egyptian material redisplayed in the “World Cultures” gallery of the Horniman Museum, London, to demonstrate how the ethnographic museum continues to unwittingly produce “silences” around collections. To redress the lacunae we provide examples of the way in which this body of material could be more meaningfully integrated within museological discourses that have informed the rethinking of other aspects of world culture. [ancient Egypt, colonialism, Horniman Museum]

Ethnographic museums have been the subject of intense scrutiny over the past four decades, with such institutions being reconceived as spaces for the interrogation of colonialism, for engagement with source communities, and as sites of redress through repatriation initiatives (e.g., Golding and Modest 2013; Harris and O’Hanlon 2013; Macdonald et al. 2017; Peers and Brown 2003; Schorch and McCarthy 2018; Van Broekhoven 2019). From First Nations groups to communities across the Pacific Islands, many have seen their museological representation reconsidered. Yet the reflexive approaches that have been adopted in practice and widely promoted in the academic

literature to this end, mask a more piecemeal and selective appraisal of ethnographic collections as a whole. The extent to which the epistemic and political predicaments underlying ethnographic representations are being fundamentally and systematically confronted can be questioned when it is apparent that significant parts of museum holdings remain freighted by colonial and Eurocentric discourses. The interpretation of now ubiquitous assemblages of material procured from Egypt in ethnographic museums is a case in point.

Ancient Egyptian material culture has a pervasive and well-established presence in the world’s museums. A marketing banner hanging in the British Museum’s Great Court places Egypt front and last in its list of highlights, effectively bookending everything else in the institution. Egypt’s exceptionalism is equally encapsulated by the division of gallery space on floor three of the newly displayed collections at Liverpool World Museum, opened in 2017, with a dedicated area for ancient Egypt in one gallery and a separate “World Cultures” in another. More recent is the insertion of ancient Egypt into the Horniman Museum’s refreshed and reinterpreted “World Cultures” gallery, which opened in June 2018. Despite the care taken with many parts of the collection to continue to redress the colonialism and “imperial nostalgia” (Rosaldo 1989) that shaped past museum narratives—through community engagement, curation, and contemporary collecting initiatives that have characterized the Horniman’s approach since the late 1990s (Alivizatou 2012, 135–58; Shelton 2000a)—the Egyptian collection has, throughout, remained relatively unproblematized. It is a seemingly “orphaned culture” (Swain 2007, 293). Its colonial baggage, the cultural diversity it encompasses, and the processes of othering that it constitutes have not been confronted in the same way as other parts of the collection. It is a pattern repeated across museums worldwide, where ancient Egypt has become an iconic “museum culture” divorced from the modern country and its people (Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson 2021).

Some critical reevaluation has occurred around mummified human remains, frequently central to “ancient Egypt” displays (Exell 2016; Weiss 2018). This greater sensitivity has been borne out of Indigenous activism in other parts of the world, where

legislation, such as the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (1990) in the United States, has had a ripple effect across the museum sector, with institutions now more averse to displaying body parts. Yet initiatives have been driven by curatorial agendas that have not taken into account views of modern-day Egyptians, imposing the wishes of some groups onto others (see Overholtzer and Argueta 2018).

In this paper we employ a case study of the Horniman Museum, including its large collection of mummified human remains and coffins, to establish how these “silences” (Mason and Sayner 2019) in the ethnographic museum have been historically produced and continue to be socially constructed. To redress the lacunae, we suggest some ways in which this body of material could be more meaningfully integrated within museological discourses that have informed the rethinking of other aspects of world culture and which do not necessarily rely on specialist Egyptological knowledge. This includes acknowledgment of the colonial context of the acquisition of Egyptian antiquities alongside consideration of the agencies of their source communities in the recent past and present and the importance of enfranchising a fuller range of Egyptian voices. We conclude with a reflection on repatriation, which we argue is overstated and oversimplified as a decolonizing practice with regard to Egypt, and highlight more recent collaborative work at the Horniman that provides a counterpoint.

A HISTORY OF ANCIENT EGYPT AT THE HORNIMAN MUSEUM

Since 1891, when the Horniman Museum was founded, a direct physical relationship between ancient Egyptian and ethnographic material has been maintained throughout its displays. London tea merchant Frederick John Horniman (1835–1906) amassed a typically eclectic Victorian collection composed of natural history specimens together with antiquarian and Oriental objects, including Egyptian material, that was initially displayed in his private Surrey House Museum (Shelton 2001a, 206–9). In this context, ancient Egypt was situated firmly within the antiquarian tradition, with objects set into a chain of thematic rooms leading from the Gallery of Antiquities to the Ancient Urn Room and finally the Egyptian Mummy Room (Watkins and Quick, n.d.a,

n.d.b, n.d.c). It was an arrangement that had dominated nineteenth-century national museum displays, generating meaning for ancient Egyptian objects in contradistinction to the classical archaeology of Greece and Italy (Moser 2006). This, combined with Horniman’s preference for popular art-market “antiquities,” such as mummified human remains and funerary equipment (Figure 1), reinforced the concept of ancient Egypt as a curiosity.

On Horniman’s return from his world tour, including Egypt in 1896, his acquisitions prompted a redisplay, and Egypt was separated from classical antiquities over two rooms: the Egyptian Mummy Room and the New Oriental Saloon. Here, more than 160 objects from Egypt formed part of the visitor’s conceptual journey across a homogenized “East” through a series of rooms dedicated to India, Ceylon, and Burma (Quick 1898). As a visual expression of Orientalist ideology, Egypt’s inclusion in this narrative built upon the romance and exoticism of the East



Figure 1. Inner coffin (museum number 4514) presented to Frederick Horniman by the Egypt Exploration Fund after he visited and donated money towards excavations at Deir el-Bahri in 1896. Part of a wider assemblage including a sarcophagus and enclosed human mummified remains. (© Horniman Museum and Gardens.)

as “other” in contrast to the familiar Western “self” (Karp and Kratz 2000, 195–99).

With the creation of a purpose-built museum in Forest Hill in 1901, donated to the London County Council for the people of London, a “retrospective discourse” was initiated (Shelton 2000b, 155), with the Egyptian collection rebranded in line with the academic classifications of Anthropology and Natural History. Although Egyptian antiquities were categorized as art, museum guidebooks reveal that in the display they occupied a less secure position. The South Hall was devoted to thematic and chronological displays of “archaeology and ethnology,” but the “Egyptian Court” was situated opposite in the North Hall amidst the Natural History specimens (Gomme and Haddon 1904). In divorcing ancient Egypt from archaeological and ethnographic material, an independent identity outside emerging disciplinary boundaries was forged. This ultimately replicated early Egyptian displays elsewhere in which the association of ancient Egypt with natural curiosities cemented their status as unusual, negating their historical importance (Moser 2006, 50–51). Notably, the space allocated to ancient Egypt far outweighed that given over to any other culture in the museum. The “Egyptian Court” recalled the exhibit of the same name in the Crystal Palace in Sydenham from 1854 (Teague 2001). This reference, embedded within local and national memory, may have impacted the reception of the Egyptian display by replicating the values of imperial pride and spectacle that the Great Exhibition was designed to embody. In this setting, one of the key messages presented was that ancient Egypt was the origin of civilization (Wilkinson 1857, 1), a privileged status in the development of cultural-evolutionary sequences (e.g., Lane Fox [Pitt-Rivers] 1875, 413).

Alfred Haddon was appointed as advisory curator in 1902, the first in a succession of curators connected with Cambridge evolutionary anthropology. An intentional break from conventional art-market curiosities followed, with a focus on acquiring prehistoric Egyptian material and technological implements more akin to the developmental sequences that had structured displays at the Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford, as well as other regional institutions (Shelton 2000b). This materialized British anthropology’s protean nature, which then encompassed primate

evolution, archaeology, folklore, and ethnography. This shift further reveals that a greater significance was placed upon the object as “scientific document” than before. Accession registers show a preference for excavated material that would enhance the authenticity and authority of the displays. To this end, the museum secured donations from organizations such as the Egypt Exploration Fund (later Society) and the British School of Archaeology in Egypt, up until the mid-1930s. In this endeavor, the Horniman was one of some 320 institutions in 27 countries that benefited from these societies’ leveraging of “partage,” whereby all finds not taken by the French-run Antiquities Service in Egypt for the Cairo Museum were permitted to be exported (Stevenson 2019). The types of material acquired by the Horniman were thus representative of the Egyptian artifacts that became increasingly commonplace in museums across the UK and its colonies.

Museum guidebooks for the years 1912, 1921, and 1936 show relative consistency in the spatial and thematic arrangement of the material from ancient Egypt, but also a gradual decline in the space allocated to its illustration (Haddon et al. 1912, 1921; Rich 1936). No longer presented as an isolated culture, Egyptian antiquities instead featured heavily in the display cases designed to showcase evolutionary progress and degeneration, in both the South Hall (Haddon et al. 1912, 1921) and later the West Hall (Rich 1936). Here, ancient Egypt was presented as being amongst the founders of modern European civilization and disassociated from the heritage of modern Egypt and North Africa, which remained conspicuously missing from the narrative.

The postwar period is largely defined by a change in collecting practices under curator Otto Samson (1947–1965) and his advocacy of diffusionism (Rodríguez 2001, 98–100). Acquisition of ancient Egyptian material remained consistently low, although there was an increase in the collection of contemporary ethnographic Egyptian objects. Gallery photographs suggest that the representation of ancient Egypt during this period was centered upon a specific regional culture, and funerary archaeology in particular. This style of arrangement reflected regional monocultural displays, designed for a more holistic, global comparison of cultural traits

(Rodríguez 2001, 101), but the comparative framework also resulted in a series of typological cases across which ancient Egyptian objects were distributed (Figure 2). Although the literature appears to emphasize the successive, linear nature of theoretical perspectives within the museum (Shelton 2001a), archival photographs show that these evolutionary and diffusionist displays remained into the 1960s. The Horniman, as in many provincial museums outside the academic sphere, was increasingly out of step with developments in current anthropological theory (Shelton 2000b, 179).

The redevelopment of the African displays in 1984, within the global context of the ethnographic South Hall, saw the repositioning of ancient Egypt within an African-centered narrative under Africanist curators Valerie Vowles (1976–1982) and Keith Nicklin (1982–1994) (Shelton 2001a, 218; 2001b, 287–90). Archival lists demonstrate that ancient Egypt, framed by regionalized displays of Islamic North Africa (excluding modern Egypt) and West Africa, was initially installed over three display cases. As well as the more traditional representation of ancient Egyptian religion and the afterlife, the objects chosen reflected a more concerted effort to present daily life, in keeping with the kinds of ethnographic material being collected and displayed. It could be concluded that the Egyptian case was guided by ethnographic

principles so as to be more visually comparable. This theory would certainly fit with museum ethnography's then focus on the cross-cultural comparison of human activities (Shelton 1997, 14–15), and Nicklin's (1987, 83) objective to remind visitors that "Egypt . . . is part of the African continent!" However, analysis of exhibition guides indicates that ancient Egypt had become a legacy the museum felt obliged to include because of historical, popular, and educational commitments (Nicklin 1987, 83; The Horniman Museum 1980, 1982).

The African Worlds gallery opened in 1999. As the UK's first permanent African exhibition, it was designed with a focus upon the past and contemporary relationships between Africa and Europe, highlighting the contribution of African cultures to common world heritage (Mears and Modest 2012, 300–301; Shelton 2000a, 6–7). In developing a response to the outdated practices of anthropology's past, this initiative embarked upon a "revisionary" direction to promote a more inclusive, self-reflective, and contextual approach to its history and collections (Arnaut 2000a, 13). One strategy adopted to this end was a rebranding of Egypt as *Kemet*, a term that has become synonymous with the Afrocentric and Black Power movement for the intellectual repatriation of ancient Egyptian heritage from the West (Asante 1995; Folorunso and Quirke 2011).



Figure 2. Comparative cross-cultural display of masks, ca. 1956, including three ancient Egyptian examples. (Photograph courtesy of the London Metropolitan Archives, City of London SC/PHL/02/007-56-935.)

The inclusion of ancient Egypt within the African Worlds gallery, however, was not subjected to the same level of critical examination as other parts of the collection. Despite critical research underpinning the gallery's development, ancient Egypt remained the only exhibit excluded from postcolonial critique (Arnaut 2000b). A significantly reduced display relative to previous periods, its presence was left conceptually peripheral to the strategies adopted for the rest of the collection. Nevertheless, its physical position horizontally across the far wall, predominately featuring the coffins and mummified remains originally acquired by Horniman (Figure 3), dominated the vista of vertical displays, being visible from all areas of the exhibition space. Shelton (2000b, 17) contended that such positioning served as a physical reminder of Egypt's geographical situation in Africa and its central role within the continent's history, but it also arguably encouraged visitors to move through the exhibition towards the familiarity of ancient Egypt's visual culture. And as the only display within the thematically arranged exhibition to focus on a single culture, ancient Egypt occupied a seemingly more significant position than other African cultures.

Equally problematic was that despite considerable periods of ethnographic collecting by the museum, the selection of objects for display excluded contemporary Egyptian and North African material, once

again reinforcing an image prevalent in the museum's history—that of an Africa without the “Middle Eastern” and Arabic-speaking countries with which most Egyptians identify today. This omission was further mirrored in the choice of African curators and community groups involved in the planning of the African Worlds gallery (Shelton 2000a, 10). For instance, the museum had aimed to incorporate multivocality into interpretation, challenging the authority of ethnographic processes (Levell and Shelton 1998). The African Voices project collated memories, feelings, and comments from members of London's African communities into object labels in order to contemporize the collection and maintain its relevance. Ancient Egypt was the only collection not to have been substantially included in this dialogue. The interview transcripts, now archived at the museum, show that Egyptian artifacts were not presented for any detailed discussion. This exclusion highlights the selective nature of such processes and the museum's role in maintaining authority. It furthermore reinforces the idea that the study and cultural “ownership” of ancient Egypt is the privilege of Western specialist knowledge (Ashton 2011, 106–7).

These historical patterns of display were replicated in different times and in numerous institutions, drawing variously on the mutability of ancient Egyptian objects (Stevenson 2019). They could be



Figure 3. African Worlds Kemet display and interpretation panel, ca. 2012. (Photograph © Alice Williams.)

presented as curiosities, testaments to biblical narratives, a model for civilization's (the "West's") progress, or symbols of African identity. Their widespread distribution across museums and universities was one of the key elements in the Western domestication of ancient Egyptian cultures—alongside their place in the "exhibitionary order" of the nineteenth century (Mitchell 1992), "Egyptian revival" art traditions, and phases of "Egyptomania" (Moser 2015)—all of which have produced a cognitive bias anchoring ancient Egypt (and its associated tropes) as familiar to museum visitors and staff. The most serious implication, where ethnographic museums are concerned, is that unlike many anthropological displays in which modes of exhibition were central to the definition of Indigenous people and source communities, museum presentations of ancient Egypt, with their lack of recognition of Egypt's modernity, serve to implicitly define modern Egyptians in opposition, alienating them from the popularized "Egypt" offered up for consumption.¹ These processes remain ongoing and too frequently unchallenged.

ANCIENT EGYPT REDISPLAYED AT THE HORNIMAN MUSEUM

The Horniman Museum's World Gallery opened in June 2018. The redisplay incorporates more than 3000 objects from the anthropology collection, many of which had previously been found in the African Worlds galleries, alongside artifacts never before exhibited, in order to "celebrate human creativity, imagination and adaptability" (according to the introductory text panel). Like the previous African Worlds installation, these new displays drew from community networks with Horniman staff—with local groups, arts organizations, community leaders, international museums, academic partners, and representatives of those who made or used objects in the collection—to inform the design. The World Gallery is divided into four areas: an introductory space providing a window onto the collection's scope; a central portion entitled "Encounters," arranged by continent to display different ways of living in various times and places; a "Perspectives" section that engages with the intellectual development of ethnographic collections, their interpretation, and classification; and, on the balcony above, a display presenting the history of the founding collection and Frederick Horniman's vision

for the museum. It is a vibrant tableau of cultures, voices, and stories. It incorporates many positive examples of transparent and accountable collections histories, such as the acknowledgment of the violent looting of the Benin Bronzes by British forces in the nineteenth century.

A refreshing thread in the new galleries is the notion that the peoples and cultures represented are not confined to a hermetically sealed, static moment but are seen as dynamic and diverse, fully engaged with the modern world, yet retaining a sense of the past in the formation of future identities. Egypt, unfortunately, is not afforded the same courtesy. From a collection of roughly 724 Egyptian objects, only around 36 are featured in three of the four sections: two objects in the introductory vestibule, four artifacts in the "Perspectives" area, and a more substantial display on the balcony, where they are integrated into the account of the history of the collection. From this balcony vitrine, the inner mummy case from Deir el-Bahri (museum number 4514; Figure 1), along with mummified ibis, canopic jars, figures of deities, scarab amulets, and shabti figures stare across the large, central "Encounters" gallery below (Figure 4). They are accompanied by simple labels making no reference to their historical date. The only substantial interpretation of the artifacts relates to the well-worn theme of Egyptian funerary beliefs and "the afterlife." The objects are consequently left to float in an unspecified, unknowable time simply designated "ancient Egypt"—an isolated, monolithic, and hyperreal representation of Egypt as concept (MacDonald 2003; Meskell 2005)—one that is implicitly tethered to the Victorian era. They are treated as relics of historical collecting that have no place in contemporary narratives. A similar impression is made by the "Perspectives" display, where an ancient Egyptian cat mummy is set amongst material labelled "Curiosities." As in previous gallery incarnations, a firm dichotomy is established, associating Egypt with curiosities, archaeology, or art, and the rest of Africa with anthropology.

SILENCES AND THEIR DISRUPTION

Egyptology has been robustly critiqued in the past few years for ignoring the "nested" colonialisms—Ottoman, French, and British (El-Shakry 2007, 3)—that shaped and enabled its development. Christina



Figure 4. Balcony display on the history of Horniman's collection in the World Culture Gallery, July 2018. (Photograph © Alice Stevenson.)

Riggs, for example, has done much to expose the “imperial amnesia” (Fletcher 2012) that characterizes the majority of representations of ancient Egypt, its collection and significance (Riggs 2014). Community consultations and audience research on galleries focused on ancient Egypt, meanwhile, have highlighted a second problematic consequence of contemporary displays: largely negative and dismissive views of modern Egypt amongst Western museum visitors in contrast to the reverence for its ancient (almost exclusively pharaonic) past (e.g., Exell 2015; MacDonald and Shaw 2004, 122–23). In turn, modern Egyptians’ disenfranchisement from representation and from participation in Western Egyptology, together with the taken-for-granted status of their country’s antiquities, has made many Egyptians distrustful of foreign institutions (e.g., Ashmawi 2012; Quirke and Stevenson 2015). But even in a discipline such as anthropology, which has been proactive in addressing similar issues, Egypt’s modernity remains denied and the presentation of material procured under colonial structures sanitized. The historical and contemporary reasons for blind spots can usefully be highlighted with reference to Mason and Sayner’s (2019) examination of “museal silence,” such as those produced because of perceived absences

in archival records, state-sponsored educational expectations, and exhibitionary logistics. These silences can be productively redressed by engaging explicitly with the colonial status of these collections.

Silences, Mason and Sayner observe (2019, 7), may be produced when a museum does not have the sources or artifacts to animate particular narratives. Alternatively, it may simply be the case that a museum is used to looking at its collections through a specific disciplinary lens, resulting in oversights, rather than because there is a structural absence preventing critical commentary. We would suggest that the latter is the case for the Horniman, emerging from unacknowledged traditions, expectations, and historical habits of taxonomy. The complex and uneven disciplinary cleavages of archaeology, anthropology, and Egyptology certainly have a part to play here (Stevenson 2014), as has the historical division of academic labor along the Nile Valley in which Sudan has been the focus for canonical ethnographic enquiries and Egypt, archaeological (Rowlands 1994, 137–38). And while ethnography in Egypt does have a genealogy—from the establishment of the Royal Geographic Society of Egypt in Cairo in 1875 to the interest in modern “survivals” from pharaonic times that reached a peak in the 1920s (El-Shakry 2007, 25–53)—Egypt still remains something of a “black hole” (Fassin 2013) in ethnographic analyses today relative to other areas.

In a museum context, the permeability of archaeological and anthropological designations for accessions have been noted, with no strict or straightforward definition being applicable to all cultures, times, or places (e.g., Hicks 2010, 3–6). We contend, however, that regardless of how ancient Egypt has been or is currently categorized, it is still possible to interrogate these collections with the same anthropological lens as has been applied elsewhere. In doing so, it becomes clear that the archive of the museum is not silent, it is only rendered as such. There is material already present that can, with minimal intervention, address more complex histories. For instance, in the current “Horniman’s Vision” balcony display, a text panel entitled “Travels” is surmounted by an enlarged Victorian photograph captioned simply as “Tourists are helped to climb onto a pyramid, 1890s,” while a Horniman Museum archive photograph of individuals scaling the Sphinx

on a text panel adjacent to the coffin lid, “Travels in Egypt,” similarly states only that “Tourists are helped to climb onto the Sphinx, 1890s.” Unacknowledged in the written credit lines for both images are the numerous Egyptian guides who are clearly visible doing the helping, a silence that speaks volumes about the inequalities that suffuse Western encounters with Egypt’s communities. Visual and historical anthropological accounts of the role of photography in the museum (e.g., Edwards and Morton 2015) provides a much-needed critical prompt here; the presence of Egyptians in these images is testament to the fact that tourism and exploration in Egypt was just as much a contact zone as other anthropological encounters (Riggs 2017).

Indigenous representation within the museum has been a concerted focus of enquiry in museum ethnography, with “one of the most important developments in the history of museums” being the “dramatic change in the nature of relationships between museums and their source communities, the communities from which museums’ collections originate” (Peers and Brown 2003, 1). Nevertheless, with regard to gallery spaces, concerns continue to be expressed about the lack of recognition of the ways in which Indigenous people have been active in shaping museum collections (Harrison 2013, 6–8). This is a particularly acute issue for Egypt’s presentation worldwide. The collective agency behind the Egyptian material in the Horniman could, however, be easily acknowledged as counternarratives to the “hero-discoverers” that are currently exalted in the interpretative panels: Howard Carter and Frederick Horniman. An abundance of literature has called attention to the roles that Egyptians have played in the discovery, retrieval, and interpretation of antiquities (e.g., Colla 2007; Doyon 2018; Reid 2015; Riggs 2017) and how “hidden hands” may be accessible through documentary and photographic archives (Mohamed 2021). For example, one of the Horniman Museum’s “highlight objects”—indeed one of the pieces chosen to front posters marketing the new galleries—is the late first millennium BC inner coffin presented to Horniman following his visit to ongoing excavations by the Egypt Exploration Fund (EEF) at Deir el-Bahri in 1896 and a financial donation to their efforts. The accessible EEF archive is replete with images of the colonial working conditions at the site

and the vast teams of Egyptian labor that made possible its clearance (Figure 5). Moreover, these images attest to the active erasure of other parts of Egypt’s heritage, including a Coptic monastery destroyed by the EEF in order to access the pharaonic materials below. Indeed, the very name “Deir el-Bahri” is not the ancient, nor even the Coptic, name for the site; rather it is Arabic for “Monastery of the North,” a building that had stood there since the seventh century AD.

Multiple histories are implicated in these displays. Representation in galleries always, however, involves a focus on specific aspects of history at the expense of others because of the limited space, time, and finances, with state-sponsored discourses sometimes dictating versions of the past that are more likely to be made visible. This leads to a second process by which silences are produced—through the echoing of those already present more widely in society, meaning that museums effectively collude in society’s own silences (Mason and Sayner 2019, 9). One external state-sponsored factor that has strongly influenced the Horniman’s displays is its historical and contemporary educational focus, linked both to its founder’s

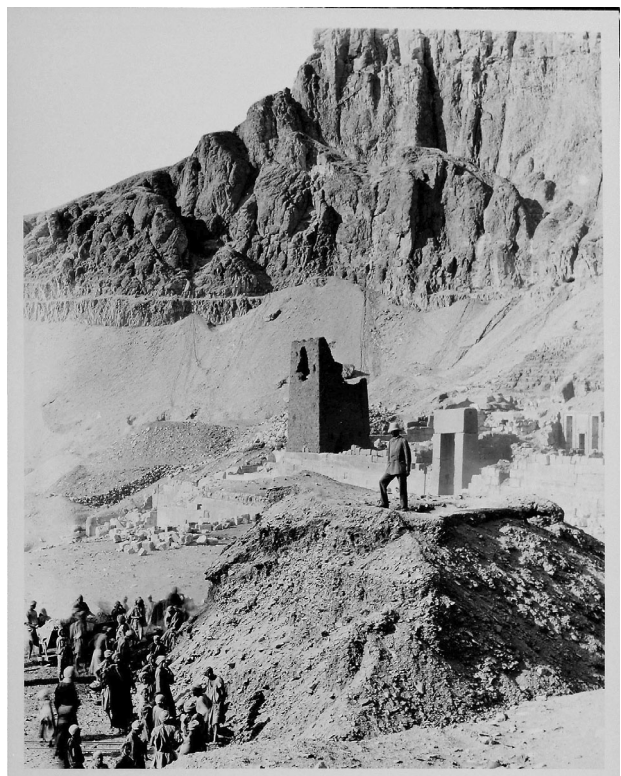


Figure 5. Photograph of excavations in the late-nineteenth century at Deir el-Bahri. (Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society.)

wishes and the fact that for more than a century the museum has been accountable to a public body under pressure to demonstrate its relevance to society. For instance, correspondence held in the EEF archive suggests that a primary rationale for the Horniman Museum approaching them was to provide objects to meet the requirements of a “teaching museum.”² Similarly, in the 1980s redevelopment, Nicklin (1987, 83) stated that the ancient Egyptian display was “designed primarily as a resource for teachers of schoolchildren.”

Today, the national curriculum exerts a strong anchoring effect on the sorts of displays and narratives that are expected to be present in the gallery. Egypt has long been the most popular ancient culture sanctioned for study by the History National Curriculum for key stages 1 and 2 (children aged between 5 and 11) (MacDonald and Shaw 2004, 127–28) and which all local-authority-maintained schools in England and Wales are required to follow (Department for Education 2013, 5). Many museums provide programs for teachers and school groups, facilitating the alignment of the history curriculum with their collections. The Horniman is no exception, providing a series of school worksheets on the ancient Egyptians. These reinforce the usual preconceptions about ancient Egypt—mummification, the afterlife, a few aspects of daily living—amongst both the school-age children who attend classes and the adults that are involved in delivering these learning experiences. Although this formal program teaches elements of ancient culture, a “hidden curriculum” is at work here, reproducing stereotypes and colonial assumptions around “civilization.” Within the established curriculum for key stage 2, however, is the possibility for children to “regularly address and sometimes devise historically valid questions about change, cause, similarity and difference, and significance” (Department for Education 2013, 3), as well as the need to understand “how Britain has influenced and been influenced by the wider world” (Department for Education 2013, 1). There have also been numerous calls to encourage a more inclusive, coherent curriculum by establishing linkages across subjects from math to geography and creative art to science (Johnson 2007). Egyptian collections need not, therefore, simply provide insights on ancient culture. Collections can equally speak to colonial history and its

influence on Egypt, or they may provide opportunities for introducing schoolchildren to the modern country of Egypt by comparing past and present uses of materials and the landscape. Geography lessons, for instance, could be enhanced by considering how travel and tourism has developed at Egypt’s major cities and their key sites. These would be easy to incorporate into the museum’s school packs, if not the displays.

Silences may also be generated through exhibition design. We have already noted that the location of materials from ancient Egypt within the Horniman can be linked to particular narratives, be they evolutionary or Africanist. In the new galleries, by almost exclusively incorporating Egypt into the “Horniman’s Vision” section, Egypt is presented as belonging to the past and not the present, which runs counter to the rhetoric developed elsewhere. Although choices must be made regarding what can and cannot be displayed given logistical constraints, we suggest that some consistency of message could, nevertheless, have been maintained. Some reference to Egypt might have been made in the “Encounters” Africa section (in the gallery or online) given that the opening text panel for the section ends with the note that “Africa was, is and will be many different things,”³ providing an opportunity to present a view of thousands of years of multi-ethnic and transculturally engaged cultures, rather than the monolithic category “ancient Egypt.” However, the gallery design is a limitation. Many modern Egyptians do not themselves identify with Africa (particularly those in northern Egypt and metropolitan areas), but variously with the idea of a “Middle East” or “Arab-speaking world,” and this is not comfortably accommodated within the current gallery’s continental division.

There is also Egypt’s modernity to address. To assume that ethnographic museums have not effectively tackled objects of “antiquity” because of the temporal removes from the subjects that are usually anthropology’s focus merely perpetuates a common refrain that contemporary groups have no historical relation to the ancient material they live amongst. In the case of Egypt, it is an attitude that stems in part from Enlightenment distrust of Islamic culture and is deeply rooted in the appropriation of ancient Egypt to perpetuate narratives of European modernity. It is

predicated on a set of sharp Orientalist oppositions in which, as Colla (2007, 103) has noted, ancient Egypt is associated with the modern West and present-day Egypt, the East. Such a dichotomy overlooks the realities of the centuries in which diverse groups have inhabited the landscape of northeastern Africa, imbuing and drawing meaning from it. As Egyptian scholar Gamal Hamdan (1967) argued, the character of Egypt today draws from the soul of “place” and its long heritage. The antiquities that speak to these interactions are not so easily divorced from those settings, and modern “connected” communities continue to elicit meaning in their presence (Ingold 2000, 132–51).

Deploying contemporary art is one popular approach to transcending temporal and geographic distance. It would certainly be in keeping with the Horniman World Culture Gallery’s stated objective to “celebrate human creativity, imagination and adaptability.” Such strategies have been explored for Egypt by Gemma Tully in collaboration with contemporary artist Khaled Hafez at Saffron Waldon Museum to produce the temporary exhibition “Reimagining Egypt” in 2013–2014 (Tully 2011). Quotes on the gallery walls emphasized that “all periods of history played a part in shaping the next and were shaped by what went before . . . in Egypt all history blends into one,” calling attention to the multilayered fluidities of an ethnically diverse ancient Egypt, paralleled with a range of modern Egyptian identities. Nevertheless, as is the case with ethnographic display, contemporary art needs to be considered as historically and culturally constituted (Geismar 2015). As Geismar argues, using artists merely shifts the responsibility for developing counternarratives from the museum to external practitioners, undermining an institution’s resolve to address change itself. Furthermore, contemporary art may have ramifications for modern Egyptian identity politics, which are as complex an intersection of class, gender, religious, political, and ethnic differences as anywhere. For instance, the Egyptian state’s extensive use of pharaonic imagery does not necessarily reflect wider society’s attitudes about that past and indeed can be perceived as oppressive, nationalistic propaganda (Omar & Hussein 2021). Initiatives to juxtapose ancient Egyptian material and contemporary art in Egyptian museums have themselves been subjected to considerable local

skepticism (Elnozahy 2021). For many, sculpture and painting retain connotations of elite high culture and overlook opportunities for other forms of locally relevant cultural production and commentary that might find space in museum dialogues, employing locally relevant idioms and cultural references (Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson 2021).

A dialogue that has profoundly challenged ethnographic museums is repatriation (Fforde et al. 2020), a concern given political impetus by the report by Sarr and Savoy (2018). Egypt (along with northern Africa), however, was explicitly excluded from this document, despite high-profile Egyptian state and media rhetoric regarding the return of iconic artifacts such as Nefertiti’s bust from the Neues Museum (Ikram 2010). Yet as Abd el-Gawad (2020; Ahmed 2019) has implored, a focus on repatriation as a means of decolonizing practice for Egyptian material is not one that necessarily provides social justice or direct benefit to Egyptian communities given that the vast majority are disenfranchised from such claims, which are framed within Eurocentric and nationalistic discourses (Omar & Hussein 2021). Moreover, issues of auto-colonialism are particularly acute within the Egyptian museum sector and international Egyptology (Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson 2021). A simplistic co-option of repatriation does little to address those issues, focused as rhetoric is on objects, rather than people. We therefore advocate approaches that seek to enfranchise the diverse and heterogeneous Egyptian population at home and in the diaspora to have a stake in how Egypt is represented around the world and to do so in their own terms—in other words, a project of decoloniality (Muñiz-Reed 2017) using cultural references of relevance and benefit to Egyptian communities, and which provides opportunities for the development of autochthonous critical heritage (e.g., Abu-Khafajah and Miqdadi 2019). In so doing, it might be possible to move from acknowledging silences to countering them.

An example is the “Egypt’s Dispersed Heritage” project, which sought to engage Egyptians with museum collections in the UK, and in which the Horniman Museum participated during 2020. Although UK-funded, the project was developed in partnership with a range of Egyptian stakeholders. It commenced with a rejection by Egyptian participants

about an ancient Egypt that has been culturally constructed outside Egypt. As a result, few visitors today are likely to be attentive to these absences, and they are likely already primed to passively consume long-held assumptions about the significance of a mummy, an Egyptian amulet, or a monument inscribed with hieroglyphs.

These reference points need not be abandoned, but they should be contextualized. Understandably, the popularity of “ancient Egypt” within the public realm, together with the sheer volume of research conducted on its remains and the vast range of perspectives on what it constitutes (e.g., Montserrat 2000), is a daunting prospect for any museum to address. They cannot all be tackled in display. An ethnographic museum, however, has a curatorial responsibility related to obligations arising from the historical, physical, and political “weight” of objects (Harrison 2013, 5, 13–15) that should be acknowledged. Approaches that have been developed in the ethnographic museum for other areas of world culture are relevant here, such as critical consideration of the colonial conditions under which material was procured; the ways in which societies are presented as dynamic, multicultural, and fluid; and the need to foster negotiations with contemporary source communities.

Although we have focused on the Horniman Museum, many of our observations are likely to be valid for other institutions that have otherwise proactively developed more critical approaches to their collections. Blind spots are just as liable to inhabit other parts of the ethnographic museum, with similar dislocations evident between the ancient and modern communities of the Middle East and Latin America, for instance. These are not “orphaned cultures”; they have only been conceptualized as such because of Western colonial narratives. We have provided some possible strategies for interventions in museum spaces (or associated collections information systems, digital media platforms, or educational materials), but they remain to be implemented and evaluated. The ethnographic museum is well placed to take forward these initiatives.

NOTES

1. There were, however, frequent Orientalist representations of what was purported to be modern Egypt in the world fairs.

2. Mary Jonas, correspondence, August 3, 1926, Egypt Exploration Society Archive, uncatalogued; Mary Jonas, correspondence, December 11, 1937, Egypt Exploration Society Archive, uncatalogued. Curated in the Lucy Gura Archive, EES, London.
3. Text available at horniman.ac.uk/africa, accessed August 14, 2018.

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