

# EGYPTIAN ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE 21ST-CENTURY MUSEUM

Alice Stevenson – UCL Institute of Archaeology

## Abstract

This Element addresses the cultural production of ancient Egypt in the museum as a mixture of multiple pasts and presents that cohere around collections; their artefacts, documentation, storage, research, and display. Its four sections examine how ideas about the past are formed by museum assemblages: how their histories of acquisition and documentation shape interpretation, the range of materials that comprise them, the influence of their geographical framing, and the moments of remaking that might be possible. Throughout, the importance of critical approaches to interpretation is underscored, reasserting the museum as a site of active research and experiment, rather than only exhibitionary product or communicative media. It argues for a multi-directional approach to museum work that seeks to reveal the inter-relations of collection histories and which has implications not just for museum representation and documentation, but also for archaeological practice more broadly.

## 1 INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

In 2010, a radio programme produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the British Museum, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, was aired, narrated by the then Director of the British Museum, Neil MacGregor. The initiative was enormously successful, garnering bestseller status for the accompanying book and providing a narrative model that was widely emulated. In the first episode, MacGregor, outlined its rationale:

In these programmes I'm travelling back in time and across the globe, to see how we humans, over two million years, have shaped our world, and been shaped by it.

(MacGregor 2010: xv).

Despite travelling far and wide, it is telling that the departure point for the entire series was an Egyptian coffin and the human remains it enclosed; 'the mummy of Hornedjitef' dating to around 240 BC (Fig. 1.1). The choice implicitly recognized the cache that 'ancient Egypt' has as an iconic museum culture to be desired and consumed, and which has come to stand for the museum and for the idea of 'antiquity' itself (Meskell 2004: 179–207). The explicit justification for opening a view on the world with Hornedjitef's coffin was that it would help listeners and readers comprehend what it means to be human. But, as Riggs notes,

To impose modern sensibilities onto ancient society implies that shared humanity equates to shared cultural values. It does not... the complexity of how past and present intertwine is one of the legacies with which the object world endows us.

(Riggs 2014: 221)

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This Element takes up this challenge to examine such complexity by addressing the cultural production of ancient Egypt in the museum as a mixture of multiple pasts and presents that cohere around collections. In particular, it sets out to problematize the time and place of ‘ancient Egypt’ as an ‘exotic chronotope’ with both historical depth—a verticality that is both real and figurative—and a contemporary horizontality, a product of present contexts. How these layers are collapsed, teased apart, transcended, or otherwise placed into dialogue to inform constructs about Egypt through the museum is explored in four sections. These highlight the challenges of forming ideas about the past using museum assemblages: how their histories of acquisition and documentation shape interpretation, the range of materials that comprise them, the influence of where they are physically located and geographically framed, but also the moments of remaking that might be possible.

The role of museums in providing a sense of place, identity, and meaning for communities is a vital aspect of the contemporary museum sector, with new societal purposes being sought for such institutions in regard to well-being, activism, and social justice. Questions of ownership, repatriation, and restitution are equally pressing topics. These are relevant and necessary developments but although they are implicated in this Element, they are not my primary focus. Rather, I seek throughout to demonstrate the importance of critical approaches to interpretation, reasserting the significance of the museum as a site of active research, a place of interpretive process and experiment, rather than only exhibitionary product or communicative media. To these ends, I argue for a multi-directional approach to museum work that seeks to reveal the intertextuality of collection histories. With lateral thinking this has implications not just for museum representation and documentation, but also Egyptological practice. Adopting a museum sensibility marshals for interdisciplinary projects the professional skills that have been developed in museum contexts. This includes navigating networks of related documentation, exploring juxtapositions of different media, and finding opportunities to intersect the multiplicity of voices that seek to understand the past. And because of museum commitments to public accountability and transparency, it also raises the very ethics of archaeological research. Therefore, questions that are raised across the museum sector and which have implications for how the Egyptian past is approached and constructed, are also brought into discussion throughout.

## **1.1 THE TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY MUSEUM**

The European accumulation of Egyptian antiquities has a centuries’ long history, but the vast majority of public Egyptology collections are today housed in museums established in the nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. Such institutions have been cast as sites of ‘civilizing rituals’, as a means of boosting the prestige of emergent nation-states, and as arenas for the accumulation of cultural capital (Bennett 1995; Duncan 1995). As both a product and a tool of European colonial ideologies, the museum categorized, organized, and racialized the world, seeking to control and ultimately dominate world cultures within modernity’s image. In so doing, they embedded social evolutionary conceptions of time and linear sequence at their core (see 2.1). This is a rather crude characterization of museum development given that no two museums are alike and that there are global differences in the social, cultural, and political contexts of institutional growth and decline. Indeed, the ‘museum as monolith’ has recently been challenged by studies that have examined the historical particularities behind the assembly of museum collections. These were not always reducible to imperial strategies or national status, but involved a mix of personal agendas, local agencies, and historical happenstance (Křížová 2021; Morphy 2015). Nevertheless, as museums were increasingly professionalized, there was a widespread projection (not always realized) of an authority that was certain and a hierarchy of times and places that was deemed stable.

Attempts to characterize the twenty-first-century museum, in contrast, are riven by a combination of anxiety and ambition. This was thrown into relief in 2019 when the International Council of Museums (ICOM) attempted, but failed, to agree upon a new definition of ‘museum’ (Mairesse 2019). Tensions emerged between those that wished to retain the importance of the supposed certainties of education, collecting, and conservation, and those that wanted an expanded, more aspirational and critical remit, including social justice agendas and an attention to the politics of recognition. Such a ‘crisis of

authority' has deeper roots within the museum sector itself, often identified in the 1980s as a 'new museology' that took an interest not just in the methods of museums, but their purposes (Desvallées et al. 1992; Vergo 1989; but see Kstović 2020). Who museums were for, how they represented (or misrepresented) peoples and cultures, became foci for disciplinary introspection, as old convictions concerning fixed, bounded meanings dissolved. Disciplines such as archaeology and anthropology equally faced representational critique in these decades, as the inherently political and socially contingent nature of their practices was recognized. By the late 2010s, broader social movements such as Black Lives Matter, brought debates over museum authority into a more visible and immediate public global discourse (Szántó 2020). Significantly for this study, in being drawn into this 'global contemporary' (Kneil 2019), foundational assumptions about time and history that have long organized the Eurocentric museum were destabilized (Clifford 2019).

One word in particular has coursed through disciplines, institutions, and museums worldwide; decolonization (Coombes and Phillips 2020). For some this translates into efforts toward more inclusive representation by, for, and about minoritized groups. But decolonization also requires addressing white Eurocentric voices that still make up the majority of both museum visitors and the discipline of Egyptology, by making transparent the histories that have profoundly shaped present circumstances and knowledge production, but which have been marginalized or neglected. Now there is still a vital project of decoloniality that needs to take place as part of decolonization—that is a radical exercise of 'un-thinking, de-disciplining, and re-educating' (Maldonado-Torres cited in Muñiz-Reed 2017) that establishes fresh research questions and frames of reference that do not necessarily derive from European thought or categories. It is not my intention to co-opt such scholarship, as there is another necessary first step as Minott advocates (2019); to challenge the notion of a museum as neutral space. It is this need to reveal the fundamental processes of the museum—the way it continues produce the data and frames of reference in use today—that is my focus in this Element.

Some Egyptologists are affronted by and explicitly reject the idea of decolonization (Gertzen 2021), where it has been seen as negative, simplistic, and confrontational. In what is reminiscent of challenges to disciplinary authority experienced by archaeology and anthropology in the late twentieth century, Egyptology's academic identity has been shaken. Decolonization cannot, however, simply be rejected. It is a contemporary discourse that cuts across disciplines in what is an intensified cultural moment of political action and redress based upon decades of campaigning by Indigenous peoples and civil-rights activists rather than just a theory or a metaphor (Tuck and Wang 2012). Decolonization is now fundamentally part of the lexicon of the twenty-first-century museum sector, albeit one often appropriated or misunderstood as a form of additive diversification rather than as a central challenge to the structures underpinning institutional and disciplinary practice. It has equally been misconstrued as a reductive process. The prefix 'de', however, does not signal negation (which is impossible), rather it seeks to confront colonial histories with fresh perspectives.

The latter includes Egyptian perspectives. Contrary to erroneous assertions that 'any claim of modern Egyptians to "their" cultural heritage seems just as doubtful [as Coptic ancestry]' (Gertzen 2021: 194), there is a fundamental moral significance to foregrounding Egyptian viewpoints within decolonial agendas. What constitutes 'source communities' or 'communities of origin', is not simply reducible to kinship or ethnicity; they are equally fostered through long-term relationships to and lived experiences within landscapes and their histories, as indeed was emphasized by Egyptian political geographer Gamal Hamdan (1967). It refers to the groups in the past amongst which, and on whose labour, colonial administrators, archaeologists, and collectors operated, and it recognizes that these artefacts can play an important role in the identities of groups today (Peers and Brown 2005). The term is not without its issues, reasserting binary oppositions which dissolve when source community members also constitute professional or disciplinary communities. But as Peers (2014) has observed, the term has a directness that speaks to the global contemporary, the needs of redress, and the intractable tensions between groups.

In this regard, the history of Egyptian efforts to understand the ancient past has become an important subject of research (Colla 2007; Reid 2002; Riggs 2017a). Some redressive histories have focussed principally on Cairo-based institutions, such as the Antiquities Service, or elite Egyptians (who attempted or claimed to speak for Egyptian national interests). Other histories have brought attention to a broader range of individuals, from *reises* to basket-carriers, who had agency in the discovery, recovery, and excavation of artefacts that are now scattered across museums worldwide. Working with museum collections opens up possibilities for intersecting these subaltern interests and influences. This is more than just an exercise in inserting other voices; it reveals the nested colonialisms at work in the very infrastructures of disciplinary production that reach through to the present and influence how we speak about the past (Carruthers 2014).

## 1.2 EGYPT, AN EXOTIC CHRONOTOPE

The cross-cultural appeal of ancient Egypt is longstanding (Versluys 2020), but the museum is not simply a site for its popularization or for encounters with pre-existing facts. Examining an object from antiquity is never an unmediated connection to the past. Perceptions are informed by historical and social conditions, that in turn shape those conditions. When encountered in the museum some periods of an object's existence may be privileged over others, be that details of its production and use, its discovery and re-discovery, or its historic and contemporary interpretations from Afrocentrism to Science Fiction. Context is 'infinitely divisible and infinitely expandable' (Karp and Kratz 2014: 52), meaning that there are multiple temporalities for objects and all archaeological objects are polytemporal (Shalem 2012). Artefacts may attest to their own biographies, but they can also represent whole periods or cultures. They can be co-opted within narratives of change over long interludes of time or used to understand a single moment within it. Fundamentally, objects from the past exist in the present, as they have done in other presents. There can be, therefore, a tension between time as presented in linear historical sequences on the one hand and pasts that are co-present and overlapping on the other (Harris 2021). Can the multiplicity of times to which an object has belonged be effectively interwoven in academic interpretation and public display? Given the palimpsests that characterize Egyptian archaeology—from the Palaeolithic through to modern era in which sites, monuments, and artefacts were encountered, re-encountered, and transformed across millennia by different cultural, religious, and social groups—this becomes a tricky proposition.

Historical moments of meaning making, and how they are placed into dialogue with the present, is further contingent upon place. As a museum culture, ancient Egypt is a global phenomenon. Collections exist on every continent, apart from Antarctica, and in almost every country where local 'object habits'—that is the habituated attitudes to and practices around object engagements in a society or community generally—shape perceptions (Stevenson et al. 2017): in Brazil (Brancaglion 2018), China (Clarysse and Yan 2006), Ghana (Morfini 2016), India (Bresciani and Betrò 2004), Russia and central Asia (Hodjash 1995), to sketch just a few contours. Ancient Egyptian assemblages have also found a niche in multiple types of institution, including modern art galleries, ethnographic museums, and science centres. These positionalities are just one indication of the extraordinary breadth of relevancies of Egyptian collections, the multiple ways of knowing and realizing them, but also the potential for contesting them. Nevertheless, as Riggs (2013: 70) notes, the majority of museums today favour 'a presentation that avoids making temporal or geographic links with modernity', occluding the fact that modernity created those presentations.

'Ancient Egypt' remains one of the most popular subjects for temporary exhibitions worldwide (Shaya 2021). For many, it constitutes a temporally collapsed 'time-space' or what could be called a chronotope, a term introduced by Russian literary scholar Bakhtin (1981) to describe how combinations of time and space are represented in language and discourse. Here, 'ancient Egypt' is considered a spatial-temporal whole, a particular type of setting made up variously of hieroglyphs, desert landscapes, riverine environments, mummies, pyramids, pharaohs, and antiquities, in which time, or more specifically the concept of 'ancient', 'thickens, takes on flesh, become[s] artistically viable' (Bakhtin 1981: 4). Collecting for, and display in, museums has had a large part to play in the

creation of this chronotope. Things are valued because they are, paradoxically, timelessly old. Scholars are not immune to these ways of thinking as they share with museum professionals and publics a ‘museal consciousness’ (Crane 2000: 7).

This chronotope can further be characterized as being ‘exotic’, a term I use here in its anthropological sense not as something inherent to a place, time, or its objects, but as an aesthetic mode of perception that emerges from colonialism, ‘a stimulating or exciting difference, something with which the domestic could be safely spiced’ (Ashcroft et al. 2000: 94). Foster (1982), adds a further dimension presenting the exotic as dialectically functioning within a symbolic system, domesticating the foreign so that it is comprehensible yet defiant of total familiarity. And therein lies one of the challenges of addressing the colonial histories (and fantasies) that adhere to Egypt’s objects regardless of their date; a resistance to the postcolonial imperative to demystify other cultures. It is why decolonization too has been unsettling for many, as it is seen to freight an antiquity of wonder and awe with modern baggage, thereby seemingly detracting from or disrupting that encounter. The problem is that that awe and wonder is itself a subjective product of the ‘specific historical, intellectual and even economic setting’ of colonialism (Said 1978: 273) and tinged with imperial nostalgia (Fletcher 2012). How then can interpretive strategies be developed that both avoid exoticism and provide critical insights into the multiple times and places that constitute perceptions of Egyptian material while retaining a dialogue between those times rather than supplanting them? I suggest that multi-directional curation might be one means to achieve this.

### **1.3 MULTI-DIRECTIONAL CURATORSHIP**

The project of assembling the variegated interpretive elements for museum objects—their records of acquisition, their archival ecosystems, and the places they operate in—often proceeds with reference to object biographies (Alberti 2005). It is a framework attentive to the shifting meanings and values of objects as they are continually recontextualized and brought into transformative relationships with people be they labourers, archaeologists, collectors, curators, conservators, or visitors. The model has been particularly productive for unfurling the numerous agencies that lie behind the formation of collections, including source communities that have been otherwise marginalized within heroic tales of Western discovery. One of the reasons for the prominence of the biographical approach to understanding museum objects is that it provides a compelling narrative hook (Alberti 2005: 561), a narrative being a communicative mode that conveys a succession of events within a temporal frame. However, as I will argue in section 5 of this Element, rather than seeking to create linear biographies or fully fleshed stories, a multi-directional approach can encourage more nuanced life stories that foreground the fragmentary nature of archaeological knowledge, permitting alternative triangulations of time, place, and people simultaneously.

The idea derives from the work of Michael Rothberg (2009, 2014), whose concern has been the relationship between different social groups’ histories of oppression and how they confront each other in the public sphere, in his case collective memories of Holocaust, colonialism, and slavery. Rothberg’s work examines remembrances of the past and formations of identity in the present. He argues for a multi-directional memory in which, rather than different histories competing with each other, work ‘productively through negotiation, cross-referencing, and borrowing’ so that ‘collective memories of seemingly distinct histories are not easily separable from each other, but emerge dialogically’ (Rothberg 2014: 176). The past as a creation of the present infuses this study, and I suggest that multi-directionality might be a helpful framing device for subjects like Egyptology and archaeology which have multiple resonances for different publics, stakeholders, and scholars. Focussing on colonial histories in Egypt does not divert attention from understanding the ancient past, rather it demonstrates how these histories are implicated. Memory is the central theme of Rothberg’s analysis, but it plays a more peripheral role in this discussion. My focus is a more general and looser leveraging of his concept toward the interpretation of the past in the present and the ‘dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times’ (Rothberg 2009: 11). In this project, I draw too from Max Silverman who notes that the layers that are created in this process capture ‘the

superimposition and productive interaction of different inscriptions and the spatialization of time' with the potential to offer 'a dynamic and open space composed of interconnecting traces of different voices, sites, and times' (Silverman 2013: 4).

The applicability of multidirectional memory to museums has been advanced by those working on histories of collection (Driver et al. 2021), although how these might be implemented into museum practice has yet to be addressed. I raise the issue of public display in the context of the production of academic discourse because all museum work is fundamentally critical practice. As Moser (2008: 1050) notes, 'different types of non-academic discourse interact with academic ones in a complex and interdependent manner'. Exhibitions, along with cataloguing and database searches, can be recognized as forms of research experiment that have implications for insights into the past. Such a view aligns with developments in the history of science, which have collapsed distinctions between laboratories, field sites, and museums, underscoring how archaeological data evolves in its surrounds and is never fixed (Brusius 2017). Understanding museum formations and experimenting within them is a central part of how we think and know the past (see 5.2 for further development of these points).

## 2 COLLECTING HISTORIES

It is increasingly recognized that Egyptologists 'continue to write our own history and not that of the ancient Egyptians' (Miniaci 2020: 414) through their projection of Western categories (Ambridge 2012; Lipson 2013), that the chronological structure for ancient Egypt was 'directly informed by the political state of affairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century' (Schneider 2008: 182), and that frameworks for interpreting ancient Egypt emerge less from the sources than from earlier deductive Victorian categories (Nyord 2018). Museums and their collections have been central to these projects and their examination affords the opportunity to interrogate those constructions. This section is therefore not meant to provide a history of discovery or an account of the acquisition of the collections Egyptologists work with today. Rather, it is an examination of how different sorts of historical narrative are themselves materially formed through collecting to represent knowledge claims. Modes of acquisition, together with the subsequent organization of collections, their documentation, and their display, all play a central role in the creation of disciplinary knowledge, including the definition of 'culture' (e.g. Kaplan 1995; Moser 2010). The practicalities of arranging collections did not just represent ancient cultures, rather they actualized the projection of European times and places onto them and in so doing became ingrained within the frameworks and the language that still underpins archaeological enquiry today. The imperative to understand collecting histories has further implications for morally accountable academic and museological practice, specifically in the context of the antiquities market through which Egyptian material continues to circulate, to which the last part of this section turns.

### 2.1 PERIODIZATION

How museums and their collections shape knowledge of the ancient past has varied throughout history. Hooper-Greenhill (1992), for example, in her explanation for how specific ideas around collections became validated at certain times, was influenced by Foucault's formulation of Renaissance, Classical, and Modern *epistemes* (systems of knowledge). For each of these historical eras, Foucault maintained, there existed distinctive *epistemes* that governed how people thought and formed discourse. Hooper-Greenhill extended this to the history of museums, arguing that systems of knowledge were materialized in the organization of collections. This is one means of viewing how ancient Egyptian artefacts were understood. In the Renaissance, Egyptian funerary figurines (*shabtis*) were frequently incorporated into the aesthetically and comparatively arranged sixteenth-century royal *Wunderkammer* and elite cabinets of curiosity, with little concern for date or provenance (MacGregor 2007: 180–3). During the Classical episteme of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, taxonomic classificatory schemes situated Egyptian art as inferior to that of Greek art (Moser 2006). Within the Modern episteme of the later nineteenth-century public museum colonialism,