



Alice Stevenson: Egyptian Archaeology and the Twenty-First Century Museum

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Recent controversy surrounding a 2023 exhibition entitled “Kemet: Egypt in Hip-hop, Jazz, Soul and Funk” at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden highlights the contested place of “ancient Egypt” in the modern museum and its significant role in identity politics. Alice Stevenson’s timely study encapsulates, with uncommonly erudite prose, many of the issues inherent in the consumption of Pharaonic antiquities more broadly and the presentation of a monolithic “ancient Egypt.” Although this book deals almost exclusively with archaeological material from Egypt and Sudan, many of the epistemological challenges will resonate with those dealing with archaeological presentations about other areas in Africa or elsewhere around the world, as well as anyone working in or with museums.

In keeping with the concise format of the Cambridge Elements series, a great deal of discussion (and very useful references to further scholarship) is pithily distilled into what is essentially a long essay. The Element opens by challenging the prevalent (and admittedly convenient) shorthand of rendering a subject (or a culture) in a manageable number of objects—Neil MacGregor’s “A History of the World in 100 Objects” being the best-known example of this trope. Given the significant blow to institutional

authority after 2023 reports of internal thefts from the British Museum, this challenge has a particular resonance.

The essay proceeds by tackling modes of acquisition, materials, spaces, and reconfiguring objects in the present. Ancient Egypt’s glamour has to an extent put it beyond reproach as a “safe” museum culture; it has not heretofore received the same critical engagement afforded to other display disciplines. Stevenson shows that display strategies have genealogies, servicing a shifting set of curatorial priorities. Exactly how and why these trends have developed prompt questions beyond the scope of the present slim volume.

Museums have themselves created the particular curiosity for collecting, storing, and viewing Pharaonic remains. They are actively implicated in producing the tautology that we find ancient Egypt fascinating because it is so inherently fascinating. The circularity of that reasoning is sometimes projected back onto assemblages of already-ancient material in the distant past that are often said to resemble “museums.” To assume such a universal appreciation of Pharaonic visual culture normalizes the act of looking and invites the visitor into a lineage back to the ancient Egyptians themselves. Ways of looking depend, as Stevenson shows, on a plethora of different factors.

The magnetism of the “exotic chronotype” of “ancient Egypt” upon museum visitors, documentary producers, and schoolteachers (to name but a few constituencies) is undeniable. But rather than

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reflecting an already existing curiosity among the general population of potential visitors and passively conveying “facts” about what people want to know, museum collections (both on display and in storage) proactively create trends, instigate tastes, appetites, and desires. Stevenson calls attention (p. 15) to a particularly important but little-recognized circularity: by prioritizing items specifically for export to museum collections, excavators of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were often tailoring their own fieldwork; museum displays therefore drove the interpretational activity that many might assume was undertaken during fieldwork or in the pages of resulting publications before any of those selected objects actually ended up in a glass case.

Academic efforts to identify, describe, and understand the formation of collections of Egyptian antiquities have burgeoned in the last decade or more and constitute a significant component of the decolonization drive in museums. In striving towards equity in the present there ought to be a recognition of the processes of intellectual and material disenfranchisement in the past. Museum spaces are, as the author reminds us, never neutral—nor are the pieces of evidence often cited concerning their history. Archives, Stevenson reiterates, are not a source to be mined directly for straightforward “facts” but are most productively read “against the grain.”

Doing just that, the author very effectively dispels the myth of objectivity in museums, drawing instructive examples from her significant previous work interrogating the processes of international finds distribution (or “partage”) of Egyptian antiquities from the 1880s to the 1980s. Particularly relevant for display settings, Stevenson emphasizes that photography does not simply capture self-evident truths but actively creates facts. Use of site photography is pervasive and is offered as informative context to items on display. Yet, that context provides an anchor to just one of the presents in which an object has existed, but also decisively divorces archaeological material from any sense of Egypt being in our present.

Anyone working with archaeological material will be aware of the tyranny of terminological nomenclature stuck in the moment it was coined—usually the nineteenth century. “Fuller’s ball” is one example of an obscure terminology created by Flinders Petrie that still appears in records at Manchester Museum. In some ways, with sensibilities shifting so rapidly,

past museum interpretations offer an easy target for critique. This makes it all the more important, then, to keep records of these designations—some of which may be acutely distasteful today—as a way of tracking (and owning up to) changing interpretations.

Recent news stories of repatriations of antiquities to Egypt may seem emblematic of the return of stolen cultural heritage but press reports often carry photographs of what look to be forgeries among such batch returns, in some sense subverting the whole enterprise and hinting at the “counter-expertise” (p. 18) of forgers. The co-dependence of consumer and purveyor of antiquities is thus not only a historical “complication” of the archaeological record but a very contemporary drive that sees the number of unprovenanced antiquities leaving Egypt annually on the black market potentially dwarfing what was exported at colonial high noon. Demand remains voracious.

Another informative light cast by this Element is the role of museums themselves as sites of experiment, with arrangements and interpretations already described as provisional back into the nineteenth century. Visual and written configurations of objects printed in archaeological site reports mirrored (or inspired) displays. These initial convenient orderings cast a long shadow and unintentionally seem to defy scrutiny or revision. Contemporary art installations have been, as Stevenson notes, one new way of reframing typologies—although it ought also to be mentioned that some surveys (at least at Manchester Museum) revealed these to be unpopular with some visitors.

Here too the use of digital replication is sometimes cited as a panacea for redistributive, research, and educational purposes. Stevenson’s sketch of the issues involved is particularly insightful, posing questions of authenticity, authority, and access (p. 34–41). In all of this, there is a welcome sense—reflecting real life in museums—that what is on public display is merely the shop window into a much larger, even more complex world. And those displays are, it must be stressed, conditioned by many factors beyond curatorial vision—costs of updating being an important one. Asked why a particular display arrangement was adopted, museum studies students seem slightly crushed when the answer is simply “that was the only place that it would fit.”

An underlying theme throughout the study is the contingency of knowledge production in museums,

which has in the past constructed the unassailable position of the know-it-all curator. A major challenge to this notion is the explicit recognition of other agencies at work in a modern museum. Curatorial staff with specific Egyptological training are, it seems, increasingly rare in the sector, and those that there are do not make decisions in isolation. The highlighted use of replications of objects is one case in point.

Beyond pedagogic value, it is expense and expediency as much as subject specialist knowledge that often influence decision making in learning and engagement teams. Thus, there exists a shared, collective culpability for the presentation of “ancient Egypt” in museums. In the same way as we ought to reflect “subaltern interests and influences” (p. 5–6), effectively de-centering curatorial positionality will require the first-hand, honest accounts of other people that advocate for and interact with collections—from non-specialist museum directors to visitor team members and shop buyers. Writing about, and reflecting upon, experiences in museums still tends to be a privilege of those with an academic background; that is, those who stand to gain professional kudos or score

points from grant-awarding bodies from publishing about their practice. The realities of this sector are reflected in the literature cited in the bibliography, which is only rarely authored by those who work day-to-day in museums.

Ambitious new plans for museums in Egypt project their own sense of timeless monumentality but also elide traditional chronological segmentations (as noted, at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation and likely also at the much-anticipated Grand Egyptian Museum). The present volume will be of great service for students of archaeology, art history, and museum studies. Stevenson offers a provocative and eloquent challenge to critically rethink the underpinnings of Egyptological museum collections, and their processes and futures.

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