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Collecting Contexts: The Representation of Early Egyptologists and Archaeologists in Museums

Lawrence Webb

Abstract

Museums traditionally have certain established roles, including object preservation and making objects available to the public through exhibitions. However, as Western museums become increasingly accountable for their role in imperialism and the context within which their collections were amassed, there is pressure to tell potentially uncomfortable stories of collection acquisition. This coincides with the increasing willingness for museums to apply their collections to current events and debates, such as issues concerning race, gender, and sexuality. Often, stories of acquisition are inseparable from certain figures in the history of Egyptology: William Matthew Flinders Petrie, Amelia Edwards, and E. A. Wallis Budge, for example. How are museums to deal with these issues? Are they obliged to do so? I examine two cases where museums have addressed Egyptological figures and their legacies through gallery analysis: the permanent galleries at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology and the temporary exhibition 'Golden Mummies of Egypt' at Manchester Museum. Also considered are debates surrounding approaches to decolonisation, including whether (and how) the founders of Western Egyptology should be presented in Western museums. Finally, I consider how effective the methods already employed are, possible reasons for their success, and further opportunities to explore these individuals' legacies in museums.

Keywords: Museums, Heritage, Decolonisation, Exhibitions

Introduction

Collecting an object, which is subsequently displayed in a museum, adds to its biography. In this way, museum objects become inseparable from their acquisition context. Should museums develop narratives surrounding these contexts? If so, how? To answer these questions, I will examine two approaches to exploring the histories of the objects in museum collections in England, United Kingdom, and those of the

people who collected them. The examples in this article are taken from the permanent galleries (including the recently renovated entrance gallery) of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London and the temporary exhibition 'Golden Mummies of Egypt' (February 2023 to April 2024) at Manchester Museum, Manchester. Both museums were influenced by a number of shared key figures, including William Matthew Flinders Petrie, Amelia Edwards, Margaret Murray, and Jesse Haworth, who were not only vital in museology but also to Egyptology as a discipline.¹ I will analyse the gallery spaces in each case, including the selection of objects and object types, authorship and content of texts, spatial distribution and other display devices, such as photographs, in order to evaluate the reasons for the efficacy of their approaches.

As a result, the approaches of both museums were judged to be somewhat effective in dealing with the legacies of early Egyptologists. I will argue that this effectiveness is the result of nuanced and varied approaches to individuals' legacies, which are integrated within the narrative of their respective galleries. Finally, examples of approaches to representing early museum collectors from outside of Egyptology will be considered, to show strategies that could also be applied to Egyptological collections. It must be mentioned that while other (non-Western) perspectives may enter into such discussions, this paper is mainly focussed on the self-representations of two English museums, and thus should not be taken as representative. Rather, the aim is to understand the methods that achieve a degree of success when considering museums' legacies in the context of these museums. Other approaches may be more or less successful in other museum contexts, constituting an interesting avenue of further research. In particular, it may be useful to compare larger Egyptian state museums and local Egyptian museums' treatment of both Egyptian and foreign archaeologists and their relation to museum legacies, but this is outside the scope of this paper.

Changing museum roles

Museum roles and responsibilities have changed significantly from the imperial era of collecting to the present day. While some core museum values remain, such as object

¹ David 2003: 9.

preservation and documentation, there has been a shift in agenda marked by an introspective approach as a result of the 'New Museology' of the 1980s (for example, Peter Vergo's edited volume *The New Museology*). This approach seeks to offer a wide range of experiences, from the aesthetic to the numinous.² There is also a need for museums to compete with other leisure activities available to prospective visitors. Museums possess a unique attraction in their collections, but if exhibitions and galleries are not engaging, potential visitors may spend their time elsewhere.

These collections can however be used to discuss topics that are both engaging and current. Collaboration with key stakeholders when refreshing permanent galleries and installing temporary exhibitions has resulted in new and thought-provoking uses of museum collections. Some recent examples of museums addressing difficult histories include the British Museum's temporary exhibition 'Tantra: Enlightenment to Revolution' (September 2020 to January 2021), and the permanent entrance display at Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA). The Tantra exhibition examined the misconceptions of the West towards Tantric philosophy as well as the connection of the goddess Kali to anti-colonial sentiment in India. The British Museum being perceived as an exemplar of the colonial storehouse means that such exhibitions are particularly important (although the reductive view of museums as a mere function of imperial power is being challenged on the grounds of being insufficiently nuanced).³ The display in Cambridge's MAA acknowledges the issues resulting from the colonial past, including racism, looting, and inadequately documented excavation (Figure 1). There are many ways that museums have addressed these histories, from self-directed object trails and guided tours examining past attitudes to sexuality, gender, race, and disability, to repatriating objects to source communities and places of origin.

² Packer and Ballantyne 2016: 128.

³ Wintle 2012: 37.



Figure 1: Display case at the MAA, Cambridge (with permission from the MAA). Photograph by Lawrence Webb.

What these approaches share is acknowledgment both of issues arising from collection histories, and the historic utilisation of collections to achieve ends that are now recognised as problematic, such as the establishment of racial hierarchies through craniometry.⁴ Egyptian collections are no exception to this, and there have been many attempts in recent years (with varying degrees of success) to explore these histories.

Egyptology and Imperialism

The West has been fascinated by Egypt for millennia. While Egyptianising art and architectural features were to be found in Italy in the Roman imperial era (27 BCE–AD

⁴ Lynch and Alberti 2010: 18.

395) as well as real Egyptian objects,⁵ the West took a wider interest in excavation and large-scale removal of Egyptian antiquities from the mid to late 1700s, as imperial interests took European powers further afield and travellers published their accounts of Egypt.⁶ For at least the next century, archaeology by Western powers in Egypt was dominated by certain key figures,⁷ including William Matthew Flinders Petrie, Auguste Mariette and Émile Brugsch.

Collecting archaeological objects was of significant importance to imperialist states, and a large, well-stocked museum was a pre-requisite of any European imperial power at this time (although the link between collecting and power was not exclusively an early-modern Western phenomenon).⁸ Many objects were collected by European museums as a result, especially due to the efforts of such figures as E. A. Wallis Budge, Henry Salt, and August Mariette (though often under questionable or even illegal circumstances; for instance, Mariette smuggled artefacts from the Serapeum in Saqqara,⁹ while Budge bought objects that were obtained from unsanctioned excavations).¹⁰ These collections were then interpreted by museums to advance certain views and narratives (though often they did not see themselves as assuming the role of interpreter, thereby conflating interpretation and objectivity); it is now accepted that museums create rather than simply relay knowledge,¹¹ and that interpretational hegemony could reinforce certain types of discourse.

The difference is subtle but important; museums are respected institutions and had the freedom to create narratives that represented truth within the prevailing epistemic framework, which was strongly influenced by Orientalist and pseudo-scientific notions. While collecting was a key aim of museums, the emphasis is now on interpretation of existing collections. Though collecting still takes place, often it includes more modern objects (examples include the British Museum's 'Modern Egypt Project', which began in 2016, Durham Oriental Museum's inclusion of Pokémon cards and Studio Ghibli

⁵ Lloyd 2010: 1084.

⁶ Moser 2006: 55.

⁷ Stevenson 2019: 193.

⁸ Bazin 1967: 26.

⁹ McGeough 2015: 175.

¹⁰ Miller 1974: 311–312.

¹¹ Moser 2006: 1–2.

postcards in their Japanese section, and Manchester Museum displaying a selection of Alan Garner's books in galleries relating to archaeology).

Unfortunately, some of the views of early Egyptologists have crystallised as facts which have become entrenched institutional 'knowledge'.¹² This knowledge is not without bias, however;¹³ it is constituted from within a certain (European) frame of reference (what Foucault referred to as an 'episteme')¹⁴ and thus emphasises a certain set of values, often at the expense of others. Such epistemologies facilitate the production of some forms of knowledge and suppresses others, and while having the illusion of objectivity (naturalised by the episteme), were subjectively favoured for their usefulness in reinforcing the existing epistemic framework.¹⁵ One example is the supposed inferiority of Ptolemaic material culture expressed by Petrie (although challenged by the 'Golden Mummies of Egypt' exhibition considered in this article).

Meanwhile, the views of female European and Egyptian excavators were rarely, if ever, considered by (predominantly male) Western Egyptologists. This pattern is particularly problematic when considering the spread of colonial ways of knowing. For example, Hussein Omar's claim that 'to write a history of Egyptology within Egypt, the scholar must rely greatly on sources held abroad'.¹⁶ If true, this means that hegemonic European epistemologies, if not critically examined, can be further entrenched even outside of their ostensible geographical limits.

The use of collections in advancing theories and dispersing ideas is transformative, as is the collecting process itself.¹⁷ It adds to an object's biography, and in this way, objects and their histories become inseparable. Heidegger draws out this conceptual tangle of such objects:

Manifestly these 'Things' have altered. The gear has become fragile or worm-eaten 'in the course of time'. But that specific character of the past which makes it something historical, does not lie in this transience, which continues even during the Being-present-at-hand of the equipment in the museum. What, then, is past in this equipment? What were these 'Things' which today they are no

¹² Said 1995: 23.

¹³ Colla 2007: 18; Kreps 2003: 7.

¹⁴ Foucault 1980: xxii.

¹⁵ Hooper-Greenhill 1992: 191.

¹⁶ Omar 2015: 182.

¹⁷ Hicks 2021: 26.

longer? They are still definite items of equipment for us; but they are out of use. Suppose, however, that they were still in use today, like many a household heirloom; would they then be not yet historical? All the same, whether they are in use or out of use, they are no longer what they were.¹⁸

Consider, for instance, the Rosetta Stone (British Museum, EA24). This object was fundamentally altered by the fact that it held the key for deciphering the hieroglyphic script. Now viewed as the key to the language of ancient Egypt, it could not possibly have acquired the same importance if the hieroglyphic script had already been discovered. In other words, the fact that the object was discovered at a certain time has transformed the object beyond its 'mere' objecthood. This context means that the Rosetta Stone has become symbolic, assuming historical importance, and is fundamentally changed as a result.

Adding to this contextual tangle is the inseparability of individual archaeologists and collection histories from those object biographies.¹⁹ They become 'excavated artefacts', which exist in a network of different relations to sites, documentation, people, and processes that occur as a result of transit and display.²⁰ Thus, to discuss objects without recourse to these relationships is to leave out important information, and to prioritise one aspect of an object's biography (usually its intended function) over another.²¹ Consider the collection of Egyptian antiquities adorning the desk and filling the cabinets of Sigmund Freud's study, visible to both himself and his patients during sessions.²² Which context is more important; their intended function when created, or their use in the context of Freud's psychoanalysis? The answer is far from clear (if indeed the question is a sensible one), and to impose any form of hierarchy on different phases of an object's biography would be arbitrary, reflecting merely personal or cultural preference.

¹⁸ Heidegger 1962: 431–432.

¹⁹ Zinn 2017: 696–697.

²⁰ Stevenson 2014: 99.

²¹ Stevenson 2022: 6.

²² Seigel 2019: 6.

Should museums engage with their collection histories?

The ethical question remains as to whether museums are obliged to deal with these legacies of collection. This issue has become increasingly important as museums have begun repatriating objects that were illegally acquired. Some would argue that visitors visit museums to see objects, and that interpretation of those objects is sufficient, or at least the primary objective, while others would argue that museums have a responsibility to be self-reflective,²³ and that if they do not, they intentionally obscure their colonial and imperial pasts and therefore suppress important narratives that are relevant, even crucial, to people today.²⁴ This view perhaps comes from museums' inherent potential to deliver such narratives, as they have unique evidence and documentation which can be used in interesting and effective ways.

I argue that there are multiple reasons why museums should choose to address their collection histories, whether they are obligated to or not. Firstly, legacies of collectors and contexts of collecting lend themselves to creating meaningful narratives. Since museums primarily educate visitors in this way,²⁵ forming these narratives creates an environment in the galleries that is conducive to learning, but also potentially fostering understanding and facilitating both emotional responses and social interaction. This opportunity is especially relevant as visitors continue to be interested in stories concerning Egyptian exploration and archaeology,²⁶ as well as ethical debates concerning museum practice.²⁷

Secondly, exploring collection histories allows museums to make use of their unique resources, including archaeologists' personal effects and packing materials, as well as often under-valued and under-utilised archival collections including excavation reports, ledgers, historic museum labels, and photographs.²⁸ Not only do these objects provide inherent interest, they also serve as aids to help visitors visualise archaeologists and the work that they conducted. It is far easier to imagine an excavation in the early 1900s if a display case holds objects as well as photographs

²³ Challis 2015: 35.

²⁴ Suryanarayan, Mishra, and Parikh 2021: 40–41.

²⁵ Bedford 2001: 33.

²⁶ Bednarski 2015: 81.

²⁷ Baxter 2021: 28.

²⁸ Stevenson 2022: 30–31.

of the site and workers, lists of finds or drawings and diagrams. However, there are various representational issues inherent in photography, which is far from objective.²⁹ For example, Katharina Zinn found that ‘archaeologically correct’ photographs were perceived as less interesting than more dramatic photographs of the same objects, while Christina Riggs has demonstrated the efficacy of photography in representing archaeologists during of the excavations of Tutankhamun’s tomb.³⁰³¹

Again, some might argue that what is really important is the archaeological objects themselves, and that without them there is no basis for display. This view comes from an assumption of the primacy of ancient objects. This assumption may be naturalised by past attitudes, and perhaps even to some degree by archaeology itself. However, it is by no means objective to say that archaeological objects are more important than exploring collection histories in a museum space. It merely reflects a historically contingent prioritisation of archaeology over meta-history (at least in the museum environment), or a cultural preference for certain narrative content. This preference is itself based on expectations of what a museum should be (which is based in part on what a museum has been in the past, and is therefore somewhat self-defining). This choice may be particularly relevant in the case of Egyptian museums. Mohamed Rashed has noted that archaeology museums in Egypt must compete with archaeological sites, which are relatively accessible.³² Therefore, presenting archaeological objects alone is not sufficient to attract Egyptian visitors. Presenting narratives addressing collection histories may be one avenue to increase prospective visitors’ interest.

Finally, by explicitly using examples of scenarios, practices and beliefs from the history of collecting, the past can be interrogated without generalising. For example, providing quotations in galleries can show exactly what important figures from the history of archaeology thought, without the ‘baggage’ of interpretation necessarily introduced by curators. We must remember, however, that the incorporation of quotations is itself a curatorial decision, as is the selection of which quotation to use.

²⁹ Barthes 2020: 78.

³⁰ Zinn 2025: 10.

³¹ Riggs 2017: 349.

³² Rashed 2017: 7.

Of course, it may be argued that addressing the legacies of individual people can lead to fragmentary and disjointed narratives. Counterintuitively, this can be a positive outcome, as it often more closely resembles the nature of archaeology. While narratives may become more convoluted, they may also be more rewarding, informative, and thought-provoking.³³ New ideas and concepts in archaeology were (and still are) often met with a mixture of scepticism and support. Using real examples rather than generalising shows the individual thoughts of historical archaeologists and museum curators that may now be outdated. Far from museums' oracular voices,³⁴ exploring legacies in this way can highlight contributions of many figures, some of which may be relatively unknown to the public. Crucially, showing disagreement or differing ideas invites visitors to reflect on who, if anyone, they think might be correct and thereby promoting critical engagement instead of uncritical acceptance of the museum's interpretation that is more common.³⁵

Theoretical and practical problems

There are many issues faced by museums when they attempt to realise narratives surrounding their collection histories. The usual issues that plague museums are considerable, including funding, time, space limitations, conservation requirements of objects, and visitor expectations,³⁶ but there are also issues specific to addressing the legacies of early archaeologists.

Firstly, there is the question of whose legacies to address. Many museums have extensive histories of collecting and curating, often involving a large number of important figures, some of whom now exist in relative obscurity, even when they enjoyed contemporary renown.³⁷ Choosing which figure's legacy is important is one thing, but museums must also ask who that figure is important to. This answer might include the museum itself (for example, William Matthew Flinders Petrie and Giovanni Battista Belzoni were instrumental in collecting for multiple institutions), the general public, or visitors (who may want different legacies to be addressed, such as H. Rider Haggard in Liverpool's World Museum). Nonetheless, 'museum visitors' is an

³³ Stevenson 2022: 8.

³⁴ Boyd 1999: 200.

³⁵ Monti and Keene 2013: 141.

³⁶ Polm 2016: 238.

³⁷ Gange 2013: 46.

extremely heterogenous group comprising many different races, genders, sexualities, religions, cultures, and social groups. It is also likely that visitors would like to know about a mixture of these people, reflecting their individual preferences and interests. As ever, meaningful collaboration is a vital tool to help museums understand the views of a diverse group of stakeholders. It should be noted that this approach is not without its own difficulties, including accidental exclusion of stakeholder voices as a result of hidden institutional biases and traditions, the inheritance of collections and galleries with their own biographies,³⁸ and fears to relinquish control in favour of 'radical trust', that is, freedom from control by museum agendas.³⁹

Also important is the question of how much space to dedicate to addressing collection histories and collectors' legacies, and which narrative to employ in order to do so. It is difficult to create satisfactory narratives criticising the very institution within which the visitor is viewing the exhibits,⁴⁰ especially given the possibility (or even probability) for museums to overlook certain narratives relating to other cultural groups. Indeed, with the reliance on categorisations that ultimately have their roots in the Enlightenment and colonial eras (though changed since then), museums need other perspectives to step outside of traditional institutional interpretations.⁴¹ This process is complicated by the expectation that visitors will be able to view a wide variety of objects. Visitors are also likely to have conceptions of archaeologists and Egyptologists which are outdated if not wholly false; in a study carried out at the Petrie Museum, it appeared that visitors likened archaeologists to fictional characters including Indiana Jones.⁴² Dedicating space to addressing colonial and imperial histories is certainly a risk, and museums tend to be more cautious when acknowledging their colonial histories. This approach is particularly relevant regarding Egyptian collections, where curators are aware of the ability of Egyptian collections to attract visitors to the museum. Indeed, many Egyptian galleries have been criticised for glossing over controversial histories relating to early archaeologists.⁴³ When done inappropriately, addressing collection legacies can feel insincere, rushed, or even self-congratulatory.

³⁸ Lynch and Alberti 2010: 20.

³⁹ Lynch and Alberti 2010: 15.

⁴⁰ Stevenson 2015: 8.

⁴¹ Stevenson 2022: 4.

⁴² MacDonald and Shaw 2004: 124.

⁴³ For example, Stevenson 2019: 245.

A possible tension may be conceived between institutional self-critique and museums' justification for their continued existence. However, such a tension is illusory. In fact, museums seem the ideal place to address historical institutional wrongs, incorporating the very same objects that were once used in problematic narratives into new narratives in line with more inclusive and socially conscious museology. Rather than condemning museums on the basis of their past practices and entanglement in colonial and imperial networks, museums can utilise such practices and narratives as a tool for remembrance and education regarding the past. Indeed, the museum galleries considered in this paper do just that.

Approaches in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology

The first example of museums examining individual legacies is from the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, henceforth the Petrie Museum. Remodelled in early 2020, there have been significant changes to the permanent galleries. Most of the changes relevant to this paper are located in the new entrance gallery. Some of the key aims of these updated spaces relate to creating narratives surrounding the individuals that were historically important to the museum. These range from well-known figures, such as William Matthew Flinders Petrie and Amelia Edwards, to lesser-known ones, such as Ali Suefi, Hussein Osman, and Violette Lafleur. The museum was also aware that when considering the legacies of these figures, some uncomfortable and potentially controversial points needed to be made if the updated galleries were to be successful.⁴⁴

There are three main aspects of the approach taken by the Petrie Museum to the legacies of important individuals: visual representations, personal effects, and textual approaches. Among the first are busts of Amelia Edwards and Margaret Murray, portraits of Petrie and Edwards, and also photographs, often of Egyptian workforces, including individuals such as Hussein Osman and Ali Suefi (Figure 2). Among the personal effects on display are a packing list made by Violette Lafleur, a letter from Petrie to Edwards, Petrie's satchel and excavation tools, and his sequence dating

⁴⁴ Garnett 2020: 26.

slips. The textual approaches mainly take the form of labels for these objects, but also include some larger text panels. Within these three approaches, I have identified three main areas where the permanent galleries of the Petrie Museum are effective in their treatment of the legacies of individual characters in its institutional history: previously excluded legacies, investigating nuanced and complex legacies, and collaborative approaches.



Figure 2: Photographs of Ali Suefi and Hussein Osman (Permission from the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology). Photograph by Lawrence Webb.

Previously Excluded Legacies

The Petrie Museum has clearly made efforts to address the previously excluded legacies of many of those who were instrumental in collecting and maintaining the objects found within, but I will take the museum's treatment of Ali Suefi as an example. It should be noted, however, that the legacies now considered within the museum space include Violette Lafleur, who helped save the collections during World War Two,⁴⁵ Hilda Petrie, who worked tirelessly in Egypt with her husband Flinders Petrie,

⁴⁵ Pike 2015: 26.

Margaret Murray, who taught students while Petrie was working in Egypt, Xia Nai, who catalogued the bead collection in the 1930s, Hussein Osman and Muhammad Abu Daud, who both supervised excavations, and Georgina Aitken, one of Margaret Murray's students. This presentation is a much more inclusive sample of relevant legacies, but the legacies of better-known figures such as William Matthew Flinders Petrie, Amelia Edwards and Anthony Arkell have not been neglected either.

Considerations of these different legacies are spread throughout the museum, with photographs of excavators and text panels concerning others being spatially dispersed to reinforce the message that these legacies matter. Acknowledgement of the work of other figures can be as minor as adding a couple of words; on the label for a pot (UC44417), the following provenance is given: 'Excavated from Cemetery 300 at Meroe, Sudan by John Garstang *and his Sudanese workforce*' (my emphasis). This demythologises the idea found in popular histories, for instance, of single individuals conducting excavations single-handedly and acknowledges the work of others by the addition of a mere four words. This step is reinforced, for example, by a text panel dedicated to the people of Quft, which also acknowledges the work of living descendants working in archaeology today. While the efficacy of such a small change can be questioned, especially given visitors' tendency to pay less attention to text panels, this change can be taken as a statement of intent by the museum, and a small part of a much larger programme of decolonisation. The spatial dispersion of this narrative is key to the success of the Petrie Museum's approach.

It is, in this way, difficult for visitors to miss the museum's treatments of different legacies during a visit: even if some individually remain unnoticed, the narrative reoccurs throughout the space, and therefore at multiple points during the museum visit. Of course, where ascertainable, it is desirable to name individuals, drawing them forth from a relatively undifferentiated mass. For instance, such an approach is used in the Grand Egyptian Museum (Giza, Cairo, Egypt) on text panels considering the Egyptian people involved in the excavation of Tutankhamun's tomb. This approach is being made increasingly possible by work carried out in Egypt on Egyptian excavators: for example, Fatma Mohamed Amin Fowzy has conducted research on the

involvement of the Abdul Rasul family in excavations in Thebes.⁴⁶ In the case of living descendants of such workers, their input could be sought (within the confines of museums' external and internal limitations mentioned previously).

Ali Suefi, a hugely important figure in the context of the Petrie Museum's collection history, has been given significant attention in the galleries, presumably reflecting his prominence in Petrie's workforce (though he is one of many important figures in this sense). Not only does this presentation provide potentially new information to visitors, who may be unaware of his involvement, but it also serves to undermine the Orientalist tendency to erase the individuality of Arabic peoples.⁴⁷ Indeed, Ali Suefi was the finder of many objects (as evidenced in the Petrie Museum archives) for which he was not given due credit in publications.⁴⁸ In the museum his individuality is shown visually through photographs, alongside various text panels explaining his importance. Many different aspects of Ali Suefi are discussed, including his skills as an archaeologist and supervisor, his indispensable local knowledge, his personal disposition (one text panel quotes Petrie describing him as 'faithful', 'quiet' and 'unselfish') and his position as Petrie's 'right hand man'.

However, the Petrie Museum also takes the opportunity to clearly present some of Petrie's conflicting views towards Ali Suefi. For example, one text panel shows a somewhat patronising attitude on Petrie's part: 'Flinders considered Ali as a colleague, yet still called him "My Best Lad"'. Another panel quotes Petrie as saying 'As far as character goes he is really more to me than almost any of my own race', and in another instance 'The freshman from England is their [Egyptian excavators] inferior in everything except in recording'. The museum here contrasts Petrie's views with modern historiography, which highlights the importance of Ali Suefi and other Egyptian workers. For example, a text panel reads:

We have only recently begun to recognise the essential work of the men, women and children in early excavations in Egypt, Sudan and other parts of the colonial world.

The museum manages to present the important figure of Ali Suefi, while examining the nuances and contradictions inherent in the views of Petrie towards him (which,

⁴⁶ Fowzy 2025.

⁴⁷ Said 1995: 229.

⁴⁸ Quirke 2015: 56.

incidentally addresses the legacy of Petrie himself too, albeit indirectly). In so doing, the museum is acknowledging the wrongs of the past, particularly the construction of certain categorisations and frames of reference that still permeate how western Egyptologists conceptualise the ancient world. Also demonstrated is how academia and museology are beginning to recognise the extent of colonial influence over history and historiography, the removal of non-Europeans from histories of archaeology, and the importance of those same non-European archaeologists. While the focus here is Ali Suefi, the same can be applied to early female figures whose involvement is beginning to be more fully recognised in museums, including the Petrie Museum, which, for example, presents a list of female workers under Petrie's employ on a wall panel. Though there are no accompanying photographs or further information, this presentation may be due to the zero-sum nature of museum exhibiting: not every narrative can be expansively developed in a finite space. To delve into the biographies of all of the characters important to the Petrie Museum would be impossible due to the available space. Nonetheless, the people relating to these legacies are, at the very least made present by their mention and acknowledged, again dispelling the glorification of the individual (in this instance, Petrie himself).

Let us finally consider the title for one of the text panels, which reads 'The Ali Suefi Museum?' This title, in very few words, challenges the assumption of the pre-eminence of the white, male Egyptologist (Petrie), encouraging the audience to question who really is important to the story of the Petrie Museum. It tells the audience that there is more nuance to the history of the collection than the name of the museum implies, and asks the visitor what they think of this idea, inviting introspection. This emphasises the importance of diverse experiences in museums in addition to the traditional educational objectives. It also demonstrates the museum's potential for effecting changes in social values. Without even reading the rest of the label, the title signifies that people other than Petrie were instrumental in the museum's history, and in Egyptian archaeology more generally.

Complex Legacies

As already mentioned, there has been a historical tendency to portray early Egyptologists in basic and insufficiently critical terms. The Petrie Museum, however, addresses such legacies with an appropriate degree of nuance. While not every

aspect of any person's legacy can be addressed in a finite space such as a museum gallery, the Petrie Museum has managed to highlight different but important aspects of the figures associated with its institutional history. Indeed, a nuanced presentation was one of the stated aims of the updated permanent galleries.⁴⁹

Immediately upon entering the museum, visitors see a plaster bust of Amelia Edwards (Figure 3).⁵⁰ This confirms the importance of Edwards in this context and also constitutes a statement of intent by the museum to shift the historical focus away from only Petrie (as it did by examining the work of Ali Suefi), in order to explore other important institutional figures. A label highlights the bust's connotative power: 'Amelia is dressed as a Roman, reflecting Victorian Imperialism and her colonial context'. This presentation again indicates a commitment to exploring institutional figures with nuance in order to give visitors more insight into their lives. Furthermore, with visitors expecting ancient Egyptian objects, this plaster bust might be seen as somewhat surprising in this sense, signifying to the visitor that not only ancient Egyptian archaeological material, but the colonially-entangled *practice* of Egyptian archaeology and museology will be laid out for their consideration.

⁴⁹ Garnett 2020: 34.

⁵⁰ Garnett 2020: 33.

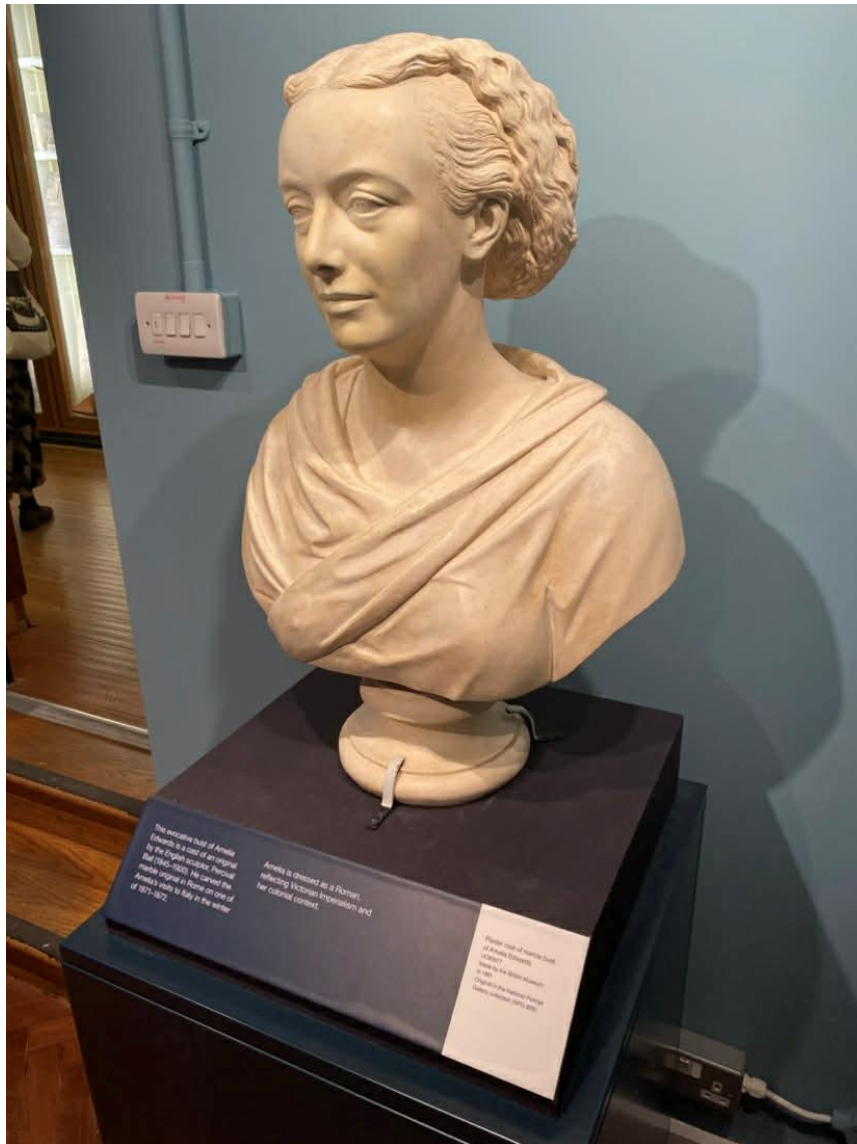


Figure 3: Bust of Amelia Edwards (Permission from the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology). Photograph by Lawrence Webb.

It would be easy for the Petrie Museum to simply emphasise the importance of Amelia Edwards in the formation of the museum and its collection. While this is one aspect of her legacy which is mentioned (for example: ‘This museum would not exist without Amelia Edwards’), there is a great deal more information for visitors to consider. She is presented simultaneously as a collector, a major source of funding for excavations, and a ‘feminist campaigner, journalist, musician and best-selling novelist’ all in one text panel. Again, the limitation of space means that a great deal of possible information must be excluded in favour of a concise overview. In addition to this, Edwards is demonstrated to have been committed to increasing awareness of Egyptian archaeology, especially through her book ‘A Thousand Miles up the Nile’, but

employing language that is ‘outdated and prejudiced’.⁵¹ The employment of examples of such outdated language may be useful, however, to provide a direct, unmediated insight into her thoughts, though of course it may be controversial. As with the title of the Ali Suefi text panel, the title of Amelia Edwards’ main panel takes the form of a question; ‘Why is there an ancient Egyptian collection at UCL?’,⁵² before immediately stating Edwards’ fundamental importance in its creation. We have, then, an approach to Edwards’ legacy which celebrates her importance and positive impact, but acknowledges the now-outdated language that she used and stereotypes inherent in her personal beliefs which find expression in her writing, and rightly criticises her for them.

Collaboration

Feeding into the previously discussed approaches of addressing neglected legacies and providing nuanced interpretation, is collaboration. Collaboration here takes two forms: providing direct alternative approaches and consulting with stakeholders. The updates to the galleries are the result of the Petrie Museum’s collaboration with a ‘Critical Friends’ group, including Egyptian and Sudanese colleagues, a representative of the ‘Friends of the Petrie Museum’, and UCL students.⁵³ From such a diverse group, multiple points of view can be considered, resulting in diverse interpretations in the museum displays. From what has been previously been discussed, evidence of this collaboration is apparent.

To complement this, the Petrie Museum has a section in the entrance gallery celebrating the work of Al-Saddiq Al-Raddi, a Sudanese poet who held a residency at the museum in 2012.⁵⁴ He used the Petrie Museum’s collections as inspiration during this time, and an extract from one of his poems, ‘He Tells Tales of Meroe’, is reproduced on the text panel. This panel simultaneously shows the importance of the collections not only to the British public, but also to Egyptian and Sudanese people (who historically have been grievously overlooked or ignored as stakeholders by Western museums), as well as the museum’s commitment to presenting many points of view, not just the traditional Western perspective. This approach also serves to

⁵¹ For example, Edwards 2010: 34.

⁵² UCL stands for University College London.

⁵³ Garnett 2020: 26.

⁵⁴ Garnett 2020: 32.

undermine the often-held perception of the museum's institutional voice as objective, demonstrating the value of other approaches to (and interpretation of) the material on display.

These three approaches are strong because they appear in tandem and show a unified method to positively and transparently address the legacies of individuals in the museum. Text and objects work together to offer nuance and a more “human” connection, by showing personal objects and quoting those whose legacies are being considered. This method is particularly important, as visitors are known to sometimes neglect lengthy text panels.⁵⁵ This unified approach offers an option that represents a commitment to post-colonial museology, that aims at tangible change, rather than a theoretical commitment that falls short of effective materialisation, which is unfortunately common in museums.⁵⁶

Such a unified approach is particularly rare in permanent galleries. Indeed, there have been temporary exhibitions that have addressed controversial topics surrounding Petrie,⁵⁷ but putting this information in permanent galleries shows a concerted effort at affecting change, and highlights to visitors the importance (and historical neglect) of this topic. In this way, there is a sense of active re-interpretation taking place at the Petrie Museum, where meaning is constantly being reconsidered and reconstituted. Acknowledgement of prior biases is handled honestly, and self-absolution is avoided by acknowledging biases which are still being highlighted and navigated in the present. For example, on a temporary label for a Badarian ‘pot burial’, which reads:

We are currently working on a consultation and collections care project which will shape the future of this display. Participants will include Egyptian people and stakeholders from our wider communities.

The fact that the museum acknowledges that changes take time and consideration challenges the illusion that interpretation is a task with an end-point, or can ever be fully completed.

⁵⁵ Macdonald 2007: 155.

⁵⁶ Tully 2011: 147.

⁵⁷ Garnett 2020: 28.

Approaches in Manchester Museum

'Golden Mummies of Egypt' was a temporary exhibition at Manchester Museum which ran from February 2023 to April 2024, looking at the Graeco-Roman mummies of ancient Egypt and views related to the afterlife from the same period. However, one of the explicit aims of the exhibition was to address the historical context of collection and categorisation of the objects displayed,⁵⁸ including historical disparaging attitudes towards Graeco-Roman material and the legacies of relevant Egyptologists.

Temporary exhibitions come with a range of affordances and restrictions. They are able to be more experimental than permanent galleries as they do not require repeat visits in the same way that permanent galleries do.⁵⁹ As a result of the possibility to experiment, temporary exhibitions also have the potential to inspire qualitatively different experiences and responses that permanent galleries may find more difficult to achieve, including aesthetic experiences and emotional responses, as well as functioning as spaces for critical dialogue and the espousal of different viewpoints.⁶⁰

While affording more freedom to experiment in both form and content, temporary exhibitions are limited by space, meaning the selection process is even more important, as objects must justify their inclusion and ability to add to the desired narrative. This environment also means, however, that there is not space to consider a large number of complementary or opposed narratives, meaning selection of information is equally important. Decisions regarding the selection of both objects and information must be justified through their relevance to the exhibition narrative, while the importance of the exhibition's narrative itself also requires justification.

In the exhibition 'Golden Mummies of Egypt', the approach was slightly different when addressing legacies of individuals than in the Petrie Museum's permanent galleries. Here, at Manchester Museum, the focus was on addressing the legacies of relatively well-known individuals, such as William Matthew Flinders Petrie and Amelia Edwards, rather than also examining legacies of those lesser known. This approach is to be expected, since one of the aims of the exhibition was to address the legacies of

⁵⁸ Price 2020: 10.

⁵⁹ McLean 1999: 101.

⁶⁰ Stevenson 2022: 57.

collecting and knowledge creation, which would have been to a greater extent influenced by the important, well-known figures as opposed to the more obscure except of course, where important figures have faded into relative obscurity. David Gange places Reginald Stuart Poole and Archibald Sayce in this category,⁶¹ although Sayce did appear in the Manchester Museum exhibition (as we shall see later). Although there were other methods of exploring these legacies in the exhibition, I will focus in this article on textual approaches, which were particularly effective in this case. Most of these took a similar form: a quote from early archaeologist/Egyptologist, a reference to the source, followed by a modern interpretation.

Textual Approaches

The text panels used were printed with large, clear white text on a black background, clearly intended to stand out, especially as the exhibition gallery itself was dark. It would have been near-impossible for visitors to move around the galleries without at least noticing these text panels. It should, however, be noted that white text on black backgrounds is not necessarily accessible to all visitors, depending on contrast ratio.⁶² Therefore, the contrast designed to grab visitor attention may be unsuccessful among certain groups.

The texts presented had the virtue of being short, which is important as visitors are known to engage with text in a limited way. Visitors might reasonably think that as it stands out, it is worth reading (even if this is subconscious). There were also rarely objects directly adjacent to these panels that could have distracted visitors, since objects draw visitor attention more easily than text (Figure 4).⁶³ It is, however, also possible that a visitor may see only a text panel and have their attention drawn to other objects elsewhere, though such an object-focussed visitor, we might suppose, would not have read the panel regardless. This approach marks these texts as important in themselves, not only as supplementary materials that they are often perceived to be. Without paying attention to these texts, the exhibition message would be much more

⁶¹ Gange 2013: 46.

⁶² Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) gives information about recommended contrast ratios: <https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/>

⁶³ Macdonald 2007: 155.

difficult to grasp. This presentation also calls into question whether traditional ideas concerning the number of objects displayed still holds; more is not necessarily better, especially in a temporary exhibition that requires narrative structure.



Figure 4: Golden Mummies Exhibition (@Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester). Photograph by Campbell Price.

Using direct quotations, as the exhibition did, is useful for a number of reasons. To show this, let us consider the quotation from one of the text panels from the exhibition. It reads:

The skull of the mummy showed that its possessor had been young and attractive looking, with features at once small, intellectual and finely chiselled, and belonging distinctively to the Greek type.

This quote is attributed to Archibald Sayce from 1889. Firstly, this approach lays out the exact views of the person in question, seemingly without any interpretive baggage or possibility of the museum incorporating any bias. We must be careful here, as the selection of the quotation and the very choice to use a quotation in the first place implies choice and is therefore not neutral. Theoretical concerns notwithstanding, using a quotation does provide a (relatively) unmediated snapshot of the relevant person's thoughts. Secondly, quoting serves to differentiate individuals' points of view;

it is easy to see the views of Egyptologists and experts as one homogeneous body of knowledge,⁶⁴ which is to annihilate the individual author. Bodies of knowledge are made up of a mass of opinions and theories and often contain significant disagreement, which the layperson will not necessarily be aware of. Therefore, presenting the views of individuals instead of using general terms like ‘Egyptologists thought that...’ allows visitors to engage with the actual views of real people instead of an amalgamated mass of opinions which have been generalised to present a (illusory) degree of consistency.

Take now the modern interpretation presented on the same text panel, below the quote from Sayce:

Sayce, like many other scholars at the time, used baseless typologies of race and believed features of the skull carried information about a person’s personality and intelligence. This simplistic view has since been disproven, but still causes harm.

This serves to highlight a number of important points. Firstly, it situates Sayce in the relevant context; while his personal view is presented, he is shown not to be a fringe or marginal scholar, and his views were somewhat accepted (by Western archaeologists) at the time in which he expressed them. However, it does not excuse his views either and notes that the effect of such views is still causing harm (and is therefore still relevant) today. Often museums play down the ethical implications of certain views and relativise their own values to justify those of the past,⁶⁵ and the exhibition manages to tackle this issue directly by pointing out that it was somewhat accepted by Western scholars at the time but is certainly not acceptable now. In doing so, it points out that the ‘science’ behind such approaches was actually a type of pseudo-science that is untenable. As mentioned, exhibition space is limited, which may be why a more nuanced account of exactly why these historical quotations are now viewed as incorrect in academia.

Above all, the text panels in the exhibition (of which this is only one example) encouraged visitors to engage with the legacies of early Egyptologists and question them (Figure 5). It prompts critical thinking about, for example, why views based on craniometry or colonial Orientalism are not accepted now. In the case of Petrie’s

⁶⁴ Stevenson 2025: 5.

⁶⁵ Hicks 2021: 214.

denigration of material from the Graeco-Roman Period, it asks visitors to consider the extent to which personal preference and opinions have (and continue to) affect archaeology and Egyptology. In this way, it allows the layperson to engage with the specialised field of Egyptology and points out that any of our theories could (at least theoretically) be mistaken. It may even prompt them to question the views that the modern museum presents on this basis.

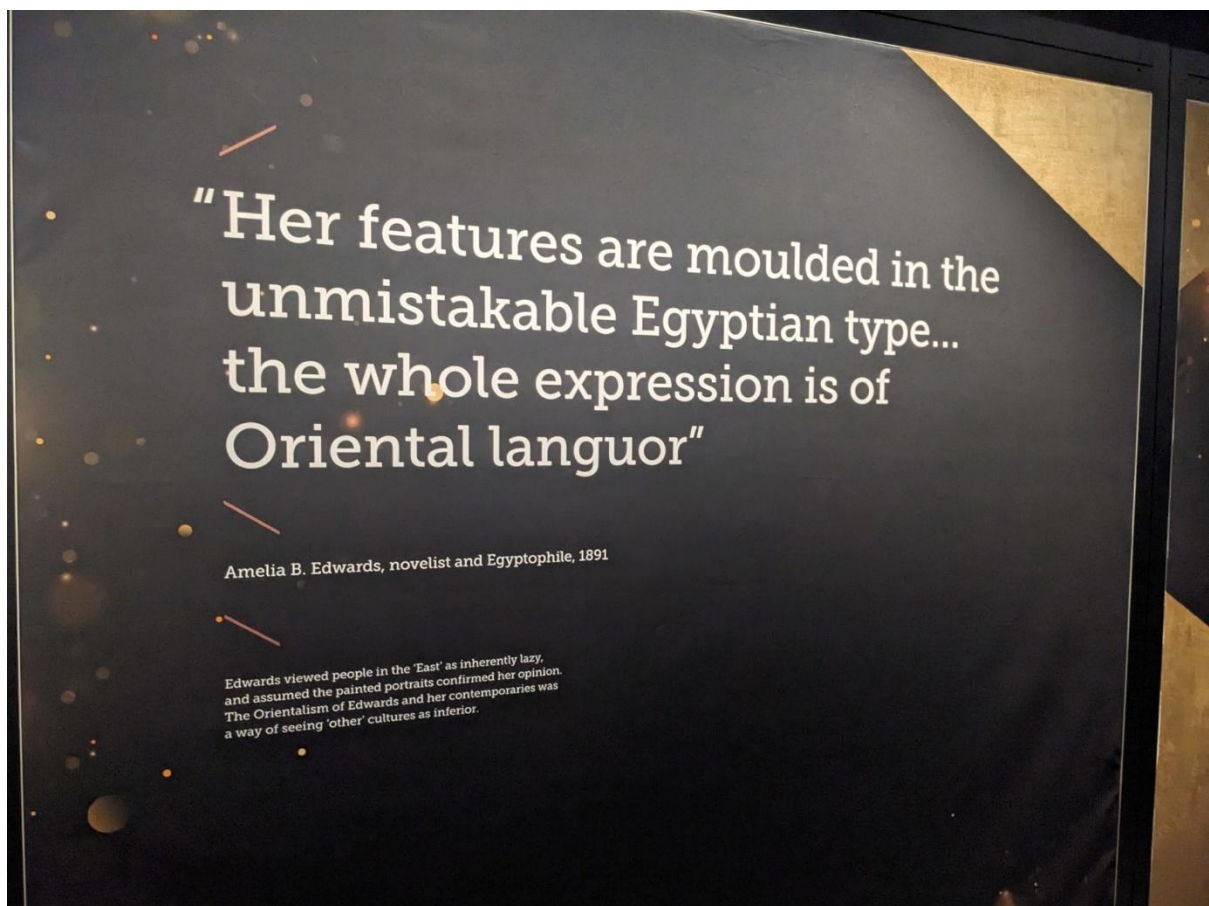


Figure 5: Golden Mummies Exhibition (©Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester). Photograph by Campbell Price.

Often, a criticism of including meta-historical elements in exhibitions is that they are not sufficiently integrated and feel disjointed, or are presented simply because museums feel pressured to do so. The scope of the 'Golden Mummies of Egypt' exhibition is such that not only do these texts addressing legacies fall within it, but that they are vital to the exhibition narrative. As such, putting the same text panels, which are effective in this temporary exhibition, into a permanent exhibition is likely to feel disjointed. The Manchester Museum exhibition avoided such tokenism; it interrogated the legacies of early archaeologists not only because the museum felt an obligation to do so, but because it deemed them important for visitors to know in the context of the

exhibition, as well as more generally. Thus, perhaps building museum legacies into the scope of an exhibition is one effective way to facilitate narrative integration. However, approaches that are effective are likely to be specific to individual situations and narratives; we should not try to devise a standard approach to dealing with the legacies of individuals in museums; subtle differences in collections, narratives and formats may require different solutions.

Approaches from outside of Egyptology

Now that we have seen two approaches from different museums, we can ask the question of how else legacies may be addressed, and to do so, we can look to examples outside of Egyptology. I consider two here, and one possibility which I have not seen attempted, but may prove interesting to visitors and is thus worthy of consideration.

While we have seen the Petrie Museum use archival materials to strengthen the approach to interrogating institutional figures' legacies, one could equally critique materials produced by the institution itself. For example, the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, UK, contains an intriguing text panel, which shows the text from a historical object label, with annotated comments showing the issues that are now evident with it. It shows that small choices in language can have a large effect on the impressions which arise from reading it. The British Museum collaborative exhibition with Guyanese-British artist Hew Locke ('What have we here?' (October 2024 to February 2025)) also used historical object labels to examine colonial collection histories. Importantly, the authors of such labels are likely to have introduced their own biases and values into their writing, which can be viewed as a historical document with a definite author. Their brute facticity (i.e. they were actually used in historical displays) may allow for a critical analysis of their legacies. Unfortunately, some institutions may have lost or disposed of old labels, or be unable to identify their author, so this approach is not necessarily open to all museums. However, even object information recorded in online databases is based on historical precedent and conventions. This reality is especially true regarding the types of information initially collected during object acquisition, such as find spot, or objects' belonging to different assemblages, which can itself be analysed as a historical document.

Another interesting approach is implementing decolonisation trails. It should be noted that the Petrie Museum has a trail ('Bricks + Mortals') drawing out the connections between UCL and eugenics, which features Petrie. Similarly, the British Museum has a trail ('Collecting and Empire'), with different lengths depending on how invested a visitor might be or how much time they have. This approach can be an excellent way to use existing galleries to promote new meanings, with less financial and time expenditure than larger-scale changes; re-interpretation is often cheaper and quicker than larger-scale changes to galleries.⁶⁶ However, due to the brevity of individual panels, such trails can fail to give sufficient depth to discussions, and as a result can be less critical. This concern is especially true given the often-used monologue-style format, which excludes the incorporation of multiple voices for the sake of clarity. This issue must be avoided in order to be effective when addressing controversial collection histories. An example of the incorporation of different voices is the Ashmolean Museum's 'Our Museum Our Voices' text panels, which included the thoughts of various students from different universities and disciplines, offering a wide range of perspectives.

As already discussed, the early history of Egyptology was dominated by a small number of well-known and influential figures whose Egyptological influence persists globally; for example, Petrie's teaching and excavation was important in the foundation and development of Japanese Egyptology.⁶⁷ While there are many more professional Egyptologists now than there were at that time, the contributions of some modern Egyptologists have been hugely influential,⁶⁸ and their work has often made use of museum collections. There is an inclination for museums to address only the past; a choice which is no doubt influenced by the ancient objects housed within, but modern museums aim to address present and even future concerns.⁶⁹

Why, then, should museums not consider relatively modern Egyptologists and their work to form the basis of exhibits, either temporary or permanent? While a full examination of this concept is beyond the scope of this paper, I offer it here as a

⁶⁶ Polm 2016: 238.

⁶⁷ Kawai 2017: 53.

⁶⁸ Garcia 2015: 56.

⁶⁹ Rashed 2017: 6.

possibility which may add to the educational offerings of the museum by presenting more recent scholarship in an accessible manner, potentially inspiring further reading and interest in visitors. It could also serve to address outdated opinions and theories that used to prevail such as craniometry, showing the issues that modern scholars have with them and highlighting advances and progress in the field of Egyptology. Whereas in the 'Golden Mummies' exhibition it was pointed out that historical views were often now outdated, this novel approach would allow further clarification regarding why this judgement had been made. Importantly, it could also give an insight into modern Egyptology which is relatively inaccessible to the layperson.

There are potential problems with this approach, however, such as the selection of whose views to present and the possible subsequent entrenchment of those scholars' views. There is also the issue of scholars' connection to museums and therefore possible biases towards some individuals to the exclusion of others, not to mention the possibility for unequal representation based on unequal weighting assigned to different scholarly or national traditions. Similar problems are to be contended with whether the views expressed in a museum are attributed to an individual, a group, or the museum's voice, however, and such fears should not dissuade museums from attempting such approaches; trial and evaluation are key in the production of knowledge concerning museum theory and practice.

Conclusion

While many museums find it difficult to adequately address their institutional histories, especially where individual people are concerned, I have given two examples that achieve this aim. In the Petrie Museum's permanent galleries, visual representations, personal objects, and text come together to give new information about forgotten or suppressed legacies, to give nuance to better-known legacies, and to show a collaborative approach. In terms of the 'Golden Mummies of Egypt' exhibition, I have focussed on the textual approach, which addressed individuals' legacies and provided modern counter-interpretations that encouraged visitors to reflect on their own, as well as the museum's values. I have also presented a number of alternative possibilities from outside of Egyptological displays which may be useful to museum practitioners in certain scenarios. However, there is no blueprint for what would be effective in any

given exhibition or gallery scenario, and collaboration will remain vital in presenting legacies of early Egyptologists in a satisfactory manner in any given context. Collaboration and accessibility have seen improvement in the museums examined here, resulting, for example, in the 'Shabtis in Schools' project in Manchester Museum and the recent exhibit 'Tutankhamun the Boy: Growing up in Ancient Egypt' (May 2022 to February 2024) in the Petrie Museum, both of which seek to increase the representation of children's voices in their respective museums, the latter engaging directly with children from Deir Mawas in Egypt. Therefore, we should be optimistic that museums can offer satisfactory narratives concerning their historical figures, should they choose to do so.

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