

Analysing current Egyptian displays in the UK

Lindsay Siviter - Essam Elsaed

ملخص:

‘The UK has a large number of excellent museums with remarkable Egyptian collections. Reading about them is one thing, but there is no substitution for seeing the real things’.¹

Introduction

Despite there being over 200 collections in the UK containing Egyptian material, it is only within the last few years that attempts have been made to actually locate and collate this information to gain insights into the state and nature of Egyptian collections in the UK. Since 1988 the British Museum has been researching this topic, sending questionnaires to museums, institutions, universities, schools and historic houses across the UK to discover information about the Egyptian and Sudanese objects they have on display or in storage.² In 2006, The Petrie Museum in London, funded by the MLA researched and compiled a report entitled *Past, Present and Future: an Overview of Ancient Egyptian and Sudanese Collections in the UK*.³ Based on the results of a survey sent to curators across the UK, it contains information on the scope and content of Egyptian collections currently in the UK.⁴ An analysis of this report’s statistics reveals that:

- 195 collections containing Egyptian material were traced in the production of the report.

Case Studies

Galleries and exhibitions from the following twenty sites were chosen for the study:

Name of museum/display	Location	Type	No of Egyptian objects
The British Museum	London	National	110,000
The Science Museum	London	National	1387
World Museum	Liverpool	National	18,000
Bristol City Museum & Art Gallery	Bristol	Local	10,000
Birmingham City Museum & Art Gallery	Birmingham	Local	7898
Brighton City Museum & Art Gallery	Brighton	Local	1,300

- The report presents the following figures for the approximate number of objects in UK collections: England 348,000 Scotland 18,275 Wales 5,500 Northern Ireland 2,000.
- 93% of the ancient Egyptian objects located in the UK are concentrated in only 17 collections and the remaining 7% are distributed between 178 collections dispersed across the UK.

England holds the highest number of Egyptian objects and a distribution map reveals the greatest number of objects is in Greater London, which has 167, 110.⁵

Methodology

We chose to look at 20 Egyptian displays across the UK and compiled analysis sheets which helped us to look at the displays and analyse how they were created and presented. We also created a questionnaire which had numerous questions regarding the interpretative techniques used in the displays, and asked 100 museum visitors to fill these in.

New Walk Museum & Art Gallery	Leicester	Local	500
Swansea Museum	Swansea	Local	200
Bushey Museum	Herts	Local	?
Petrie Museum-University of Central London	London	University	80,000
Garstang Museum-University of Liverpool	Liverpool	University	?
Manchester Museum-University of Manchester	Manchester	University	16,000
Fitzwilliam Museum-University of Cambridge	Cambridge	University	7,000
Ashmolean Museum-University of Oxford	Oxford	University	?
The Egypt Centre	Swansea	University	5321
Tutankhamen & the Golden Age of the Pharaohs	O2 London	Independent	116
Tutankhamen & Mummies Exhibitions (2)	Dorchester	Independent	123
Highclere Castle	Berkshire	Independent	500
Horniman Museum	London	Independent	850

The table above illustrates the chosen case study displays, which have been divided into four categories: National, Local/Provincial, University and Independent.⁶ This has been done intentionally as one of this project's objectives was to see if the 'type' or category of museum or venue-influenced display and approaches to interpretation. An attempt has been made for an equal distribution of displays within the categories where possible.⁷

Our conclusions are based on data compiled and collected from gallery analysis record sheets and staff questionnaires which we created. We have then used these as evidence for our examination into the analysis of current Egyptian displays in the UK.

Results and analysis of displays of Egyptian collections in the UK as a whole

There are many factors that can affect and determine the display and interpretations of collections. However, Egyptian displays are governed by one main factor. Nearly all displays of Egyptian artefacts in the UK are dominated by objects representing death and the afterlife. This is because the majority of Egyptian objects that have survived have been recovered from burial and tomb sites.

Objects used in Egyptian daily life do not exist in the same capacity, sometimes being quite rare.⁸ Therefore, one could argue that the predominance of burial objects presents a selected version of Egyptian culture, not representing or providing a full accurate record of life in ancient Egypt, but edited highlights. Archaeologist Gemma Tully also believes this to be the case, asking 'Was there more to life in ancient Egypt than the preparation for death? Looking at most Egyptology shows, you wouldn't think so'.⁹ In order to discuss the results from data from the case studies we chose to examine them via a set of criteria used by historian Stephanie Moser in her pioneering analysis, of past Egyptian displays at The British Museum.¹⁰ In her display analysis, Moser identifies the following criteria:

1. How much space is dedicated to presenting the collection.
2. Where the collection was located in the museum.
3. How it was structured and organised.
4. The manner in which objects were displayed and spatially arranged.
5. The architectural and interior settings they

were featured in.

6. The interpretive aids that were used to present them.

Due to the lack of space this essay sadly only has time to look at the final one on Moser's list of criteria: The Interpretive aids used to present Egyptian displays.

Also please note that most display names will be abbreviated due to lack of space, e.g. Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery will often be referred to simply as Bristol.

Interpretive aids used in Egyptian displays in the UK

Text panels and object labels are still the most commonly used method of interpretation in museums today, yet there are many ways in which written information is used in exhibitions. These include hand-outs, books, guides, as well as more creative uses of text. Several new galleries, including those at Bristol and Liverpool, have chosen to integrate captions and quotations from ancient historical documents and sources, inviting discussion within the galleries. Some displays are attempting a multi-layered approach to information that focuses on object and imagery rather than text. Indeed, Bristol City Museums' new gallery is unique as it contains no object labels, all the information being available on adjacent touch screens; thus, computers become information rich, layered graphic panels.¹¹

Computer and digital interactives are used in just under half of the case studies, and tasks include unwrapping virtual mummies and writing names in hieroglyphs.¹²

Other media technology is used in Egyptian displays in the UK, including video and film, projections, sound effects and music. Different sounds

are used in several displays. The O2 Exhibition has a different ambient musical soundtrack in each room reflecting the tone and mood of that particular section. At World Museum Liverpool visitors can 'Listen to a 3,500 year old voice!', as a sound wall displaying hieroglyphics produces animal noises and other voices which help the text to be translated. On entering the Egypt Gallery in Bristol, visitors hear whispers of Egyptian names all around them, as though they are entering the realm of the Underworld with spirits of Egypt's past nation all around them.

One way we interpret the world is through our bodies and, in particular, through our senses.¹³ The sense of touch is often used by museums as a medium through which to educate visitors, its successful didactic elements being used in many museums today.¹⁴ Younger children especially learn through play whether dressing up, using props or playing games and other hands-on activities. Participatory devices are used in exactly half of the displays investigated. These include puzzles, question flaps and drawing activities. Both the Egypt Centre and Bushey Museum include a dummy mummy and other toys in their galleries. At Highclere Castle, visitors can 'Do Some Excavating' in a makeshift archaeological sand pit complete with seven artefacts to discover. At the Egypt Centre, visitors have the chance to play with a huge scale version of the Egyptian board game Senet. Museums in Egypt clearly also believe in the constructivist ideas of the power of play and touch to engage younger visitors. Above the entrance to The Childrens's Museum, Luxor, is an Arabic proverb which reads:

'If I hear I may forget, when I see I will remember, but when I do with my hands I will understand'.¹⁵

In the final gallery of the O2 Tutankhamen exhibition, visitors are invited to 'Touch the Boy

King' through touching a bronze cast of the famous Pharaohs' reconstructed head. Here, visitors who have been unable to touch any other object in this art-based approach exhibition can at last through touching this object, become close to the King himself. This object should have been positioned as the very last object which visitors touched on their way out, almost as a parting gesture of admiration to the boy king, whose objects they had just spent two hours looking at. Instead, it was badly positioned being hidden in a corner with hardly any visitors noticing it.¹⁶ Replicas can also provide access to objects that are too fragile to travel and can be touched and handled by visitors.¹⁷ Thirteen out of the twenty Egyptian exhibitions investigated use them in their displays. Some provide teaching tools; others help to fill in gaps in the narrative and provide visitors the chance of seeing a famous object normally residing in a display abroad. Reproductions can also be seen as representations of craftsmanship, human ingenuity in their own right¹⁸ and the Tutankhamen exhibition in Dorchester is very proud of their facsimiles of the famous King's treasure:

'All the exhibits have been carefully crafted by meticulous reference to the original artefacts, photographic records, detailed measurements and diagrams'.¹⁹

Results also reveal that nearly half of the displays within the study use the interpretive device of historical scene reconstructions in Egyptian galleries. These include a tomb chapel at Liverpool, a workman's tool bench and 'your dream kitchen' in Leicester and an underground burial grave revealed through a glass floor area complete with grave goods at Brighton. However, the venue that uses this interpretive idea the most is the Tutankhamen exhibition in Dorchester where visitors can see the moment when Howard Carter breaks through the wall to reveal the treasure. Exterior and interior scenes of the antechamber and

the actual burial chamber complete with golden sarcophagus are also recreated, for here 'sight, sound and smell combine to recreate in superb facsimiles the world's greatest discovery of ancient treasure'.²⁰

Lighting is also used to aid interpretation. At Leicester and Swansea, light is used to internally illuminate large wall light boxes on which mummy x-rays are shown. In the O2 exhibition coloured lighting is used very dramatically, creating colour symbolism reflecting the nature and content of the gallery themes. Providing contrast from dark to lighter areas, red coloured gels are used in the area titled 'Revolution'. Even a replica gold treasure dazzles with lighting effects cleverly emerging from the darkness through spotlighting in Dorchester.

Exhibitions must also be physically accessible to visitors. Museums have many different types of visitors, and all should be accommodated for. Visitors' with visual and hearing impairments are sadly often not catered for. However, The British Museum, the Egypt Centre and the Fitzwilliam have Braille books, labels and large print books in their galleries, thus endorsing the guidelines for accessible exhibition design suggested by the Smithsonian Institute.²¹ Wheelchair users also need consideration. Ideally, labels should be mounted at a height suitable for standing and sitting levels; however, only a few displays such as the Fitzwilliam and Birmingham do this. The O2 exhibition cleverly placed labels high up at the top of showcases to allow more visitors to see. Most museums in the UK do not cater for foreign visitors, having only English text; however, Egyptian displays at Swansea Museum and The Egypt Centre had labels and panels in both Welsh and English.

Many of the above interpretative aids support both Behaviourist and Constructivist approaches to learning. Twelve case studies have both elements within their display strategies. However, thirteen

of the displays reflect a transmission mode of communication with the other seven displays having elements of both transmission and cultural modes. Interestingly, all University displays endorse the transmission mode while most of the local museums use both modes of communication in their displays.

To conclude, Egyptian displays in the UK until recently tended to be similar in their traditional didactic approach. However, museums and galleries are now using new and innovative approaches in their displays, and many technological advances are being used to interpret Egyptian collections. Many museums recognise the popularity of their Egyptian objects and many more are planning to update their displays. There is no doubt that visitors in the UK share with the Egyptians themselves a great passion for their history, and will wish to see objects from your great country. How future displays of Egyptian material will be displayed in the UK will remain to be seen, but no doubt, our admiration and fascination will continue forever...

Notes

- 1 B. Partridge, 'Editorial', *Ancient Egypt Magazine*, August/September (2008), 4.
- 2 Much of this information is now accessible having been placed on a website which provides useful knowledge about collections in the UK www.cornucopia.co.uk.
- 3 The primary aim of the project was 'to make information about the content and scope of Ancient Egyptian and Sudanese collections in the UK fully publicly available for the first time'. It was also hoped the information produced would assist the newly formed ACCES network (Association of Curators for Collections from Egypt and Sudan) in their planning of increased access to such material.
- 4
- 5 The overall percentage of collections which currently exist on display in the UK is very low, there being a high percentage of collections which have no objects at all on permanent display.
- 6 These categories follow the ones used in J. Thompson (ed.), *A Manual of Curatorship: A Guide to Museum Practice* (London, 1984) which describes the different types of museums in the UK.
- 7 The choices of displays were governed not by a particular strict rationale but by a variety of factors including fame, popularity, wanting to see brand new ideas and locations, which due to time and money, was a big restraint, sadly preventing the chance to visit many museums in several parts of the UK.
- 8 Though many displays do include daily life objects, many were found in tombs, often not actually used but placed near the deceased for use in the afterlife
- 9 G. Tully, 'Was there more to life in ancient Egypt than the preparation for death?', *Museums Journal*, November (2007), 18-24.
- 10 S. Moser, *Wondrous Curiosities: Ancient Egypt at The British Museum* (Chicago, 2006), 32, 48.
- 11 P. Locker, 'Putting on a show', *Museums & Heritage* 1 (2007), 19.
- 12 Bushey Museum, World Museum Liverpool, The Egypt Centre and the Petrie Museum all offer opportunities for visitors to write their names in hieroglyphs.
- 13 Author Susan Pearce argues our contact with objects starts with our bodies and extends to the world of things. See Anon. PG Dip/Masters degree in Museum Studies by Distance Learning *Module 2. Objects of Interpretation* (Leicester: University of Leicester, Department of Museum Studies, October, 2005).
- 14 The Science Museum, The Egypt Centre and Manchester Museum all organise 'Egyptian Touch Tables' and 'Object Handling Sessions' allowing visitors to experience objects close up.
- 15 A. Wahby, 'A special workshop for children in Luxor Museum', *Ancient Egypt Magazine*, April/May (2007), 35.
- 16 According to the designer I spoke to, they did not want to include this statue, but had to as it was part of the sponsor's agreement. The designers themselves, however, hated it and therefore placed it round a corner and out of the way of most visitors' immediate vision!
- 17 A. M. Le Pensee, 'Replicating and Egyptian relief', *Ancient Egypt Magazine*, Dec. (2005)/Jan. (2006), 45.
- 18 Le Pensee, *Ancient Egypt Magazine*, 45.
- 19 M. Ridley, *Tutankhamen Exhibition Guide* (Dorchester, 2007), 14. This is the only display outside Egypt to include accurate replicas of the gold death mask and Tutankhamen's mummy.
- 20 Leaflet from the Tutankhamen Exhibition, Dorchester, date unknown.
- 21 The Smithsonian Institute Guidelines For Accessible Exhibition Design. <http://www.si.edu/opa/accessibility/exdesign/sectionb.htm#1dt>, p.6. These guidelines

suggest that 'label design must present main exhibitions copy legibly for all visitors and that such exhibition label information must be available within the galleries in alternative formats, e.g. Braille.