

MUSEUM MATTERS II

*(How) do we display ancient Egyptian
mummified remains in our museums?*

April 15, 2023

13:00-16:00 Paris time (UTC+01:00) on Zoom

Registration required; max. 300 participants

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Dear colleagues and friends,

In 2022 CIPEG organised its first panel discussion of the MUSEUM MATTERS series. This first panel discussion focused on Egyptian and Sudanese collections in Latin America and the Caribbean. The discussion was intended to answer certain questions: what was the impetus for the creation of the collections in Mexico City, Havana, La Plata, and Rio de Janeiro? How do these collections fit within European colonialism, the ‘Age of Enlightenment’ and the building of national identity? Around 70 participants attended from all over the world, and we thought this was a good start for our new series. This year, the topic of a second panel discussion will focus on human remains, starting from the principles of the ICOM Code of Ethics:

2.5 Culturally Sensitive Material – *Collections of human remains and material of sacred significance should be acquired only if they can be housed securely and cared for respectfully. This must be accomplished in a manner consistent with professional standards and the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from which the objects originated, where these are known.*

3.7 Human Remains and Materials of Sacred Significance – *Research on human remains and materials of sacred significance must be accomplished in a manner consistent with professional standards and take into account the interests and beliefs of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated, where these are known.*

4.3 Exhibition of Sensitive Materials – *Human remains and materials of sacred significance must be displayed in a manner consistent with professional standards and, where known, taking into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic or religious groups from whom the objects originated. They must be presented with great tact and respect for the feelings of human dignity held by all peoples.*

We aim to discuss some questions that curators working with Egyptian mummies and mummified human remains have to deal with. We ask the audience to keep these questions in mind and to refer to them in the discussions. They are as follows:

1. What constitutes the ‘acceptable’ display of mummified human remains?
2. Is it acceptable to display mummified body parts?
3. What is the role of Egyptian mummified remains in the context of human remains from other cultures? How are Egyptian mummified remains treated differently?
4. If we do not want to display mummified human remains, what do we do with them? Re-bury, discard, put in storage, ... etc.?
5. What is the role of alternative or supporting displays (e.g. adding CT scans, holograms and photos to the display? Should these be shown instead of or support the display of mummies (some see these visualisations as filters, some as exposing)?
6. Are facial reconstructions useful/attractive?
7. Do we need trigger warnings?
8. Do we need to cover the bodies and to what extent? Should we show unwrapped mummies?

MUSEUM MATTERS II – PROGRAMME

13.00-13.05

Tine Bagh Chair CIPEG

SESSION 1

13.05-13.15

Steph Scholten The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Uncomfortable conversations: past people in museums’ collections

Museums are political places: they are monuments to a system that privileges some people over others, reflected powerfully in their collections of colonial loot and ancestral remains. Museums

hold collections from donors who benefited from racial slavery, violent endeavours, forced removal and the systematic oppression of indigenous peoples. Museums and collections developed within this context, and they remain spaces that celebrate and memorialise colonial systems. Museums are only now recognising that they are not neutral and that they have, without consideration, been complicit in perpetuating the racialised ideologies of previous centuries.

13.15-13.25

Rosalie David University of Manchester

Egyptian mummies: their significant contribution to understanding an ancient civilisation

Knowledge about the health status of an ancient civilisation is vital to understanding that particular society. Interdisciplinary, non/minimally invasive research on Egyptian human remains can produce definitive evidence about everyday existence which is not available from iconographic, inscriptional and archaeological sources.

These significant results, presented in the context of a dignified display of human remains, will enhance museum visitors' understanding of how the ancient Egyptians lived and died. Wherever possible, items from any associated burial assemblages or historical contexts, as well as the results and suitable commentary on any health issues, should be included in the display, to provide visitors with a unique opportunity to engage personally with an ancient, once-living 'person' rather than a museum 'object'.

13.25-13.35

Alice Stevenson UCL

Questions of Contents

Museums have created particular cultures and historically situated expectations around viewing the dead. I would argue that museums need to challenge their own display histories and be bolder in how they challenge public expectations. Whether to display remains is often framed in absolute terms, 'should we', but answers are entirely context dependent, contingent upon time and place. Ethics is never static. Who is the 'we', and when, where, and how is it appropriate to display

remains. Here we need to be cognisant not only of source communities, but also communities of implication.

13.35-13.45

Jan Dahms Museum of Egyptian Art, Munich

Respect for the wishes of the deceased

The Egyptian Museum in Munich does not display ancient Egyptian human remains. The mummies, which were purchased together with the wooden coffins at the beginning of the 19th century, are kept in a separate storage room. This decision is actively communicated and explained in the museum. The vast majority of our visitors understand and support this position. The basis for this is the respect for the wishes and religious ideas of the ancient Egyptians, which are clearly documented by the tombs and their furnishings, as well as their texts. An exception is the presentation of a wrapped mummy from Roman times, that completely covers the corpse and includes a mummy portrait. These late mummies were intended to be viewed by tomb visitors. Therefore, we see here a possibility to meet museum visitor interest in the topic of mummification.

13.45-14.15

Discussion Session 1

14.15-14.20

Short break

SESSION 2:

14.20-14.30

Paolo Del Vesco Museo Egizio, Turin

“In Search of Life”. Displaying human remains in the Turin Museum

Attitudes towards human remains can vary greatly, depending on a range of factors, among which the dating and type of the remains or the history of their acquisition. They also change according

to one's own personal experiences, religious beliefs or country and culture of origin. The setting of the encounter is not less important. The colonial history of most Egyptological collections and the worldwide dispersal of ancient Egyptian human remains complicate an already complex picture. Whose final consent to the display of these remains should be sought by the collections hosting them? The paper will discuss the results of specific audience surveys conducted by the Museo Egizio (Turin, Italy) since 2019 and present the recent design of a new gallery devoted to human remains as the main case study.

14.30-14.40

Caroline Wilkinson Liverpool John Moores University

Presenting the Faces of Preserved Human Remains: Ethical, Academic and Practical Challenges

Many museums around the world are critical of the exhibition of human remains, and the presentation of faces of the dead can be viewed as unnecessary and exploitative.

This paper will discuss the ethical, practical and academic challenges associated with craniofacial analysis and facial depiction of preserved human remains and will be illustrated with examples, including Ancient Egyptian Pharaohs, Northern European Bog Bodies, South American Tsantsa and natural mummies.

14.40-14.50

Eman Ibrahim Mohamed Ain Shams University

Ethics of displaying mummies in museums

Human relics such as mummies or skeletons should be dealt with respectfully, without offending the viewers or their beliefs. Human remains and mummies must be displayed in a manner consistent with professional standards and show the work of the conservator and scientific research in displaying mummies (documentation - cleaning- re-attaching detached pieces – re-integrating linens and trappings - maintaining all original material with the mummy - stabilisation).

To act ethically museums can use new technologies, IT and tools in our daily work with mummies according to the best tested standards reached in these fields to re-draw the attention of the community and the public's interest to the significant value of the mummies. They must be presented in a way that is both easily accessible and contextualised within the cultural framework of ancient Egypt.

14.50-15.00

Matt Poll Australian National Maritime Museum

Curating, consent, and Indigenous protocols regarding exhibiting ancestral knowledges

Critical engagement of Indigenous Australians with museum exhibition practices have changed how museums depict first nations Australian culture in museum exhibitions worldwide. This presentation explores interventions by Aboriginal and Torres Strait community members concerning the display of ancestral knowledge and material culture in Australian museums since 1970. As museum networks and audiences have become more globalised, alternative viewpoints about the historical purposes of museums have transformed conversations about the ability of museum collections to stand for cultural entities – both historical and contemporary.

15.00-16.00

Final Discussion