

Editorial

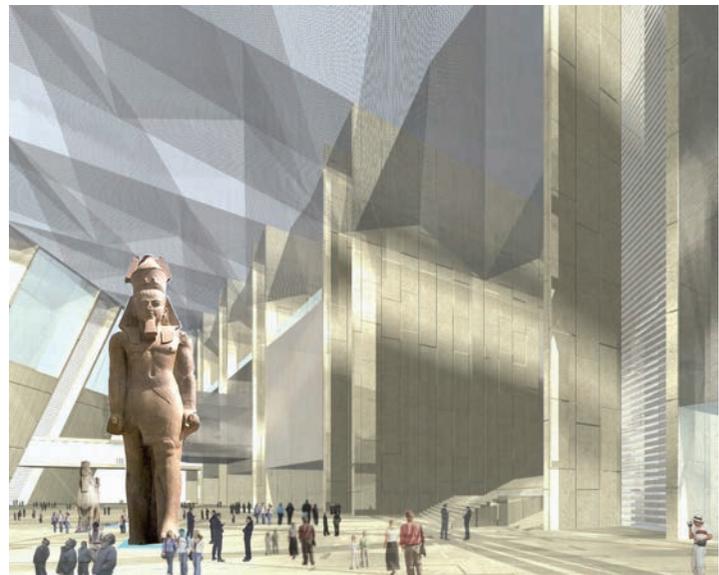
An Egyptian spring?

BEHIND THE DUSTY pink façade of the Egyptian Museum on Tahrir Square, Cairo, is crammed an astonishing range of Pharaonic artefacts. Visitors are greeted by the Narmer Palette, the great talismanic founding document of ancient Egypt, then led through a sprawling display including some of the best-known Old Kingdom sculptures, through to the treasures of Tutankhamun, Graeco-Roman period objects including funerary portraits, and the ever-popular display of royal mummies and their outsize sarcophagi. For over a century the Museum has been a Mecca for Egyptologists. Yet since its opening in 1903 the display has hardly been updated, only augmented with new discoveries, the building itself left to fall into disrepair as the various halls become ever-more crammed with objects, many simply being converted into store-rooms. This is hardly a new situation: as far back as 1926 Julius Meier-Graefe was writing in this Magazine that the Museum in Cairo ‘is the worst kept in the world, and can only be regarded as a mere storeroom for works of art’.

Since the Revolution of 2011 the crisis for museums all over Egypt has only deepened. The Ministry of State for Antiquities, which runs the country’s monuments and museums, relies for its budget on tourist revenue, drastically reduced over the past four years. Staff are paid with great difficulty, major construction projects have been put on hold, training programmes cancelled and the maintenance of museums and monuments neglected. Civil unrest has exacerbated security problems around ancient sites and museums, most notoriously with the break-in at the Egyptian Museum during the Tahrir Square protests in January 2011, opportunistic looters smashing vitrines and stealing numerous artefacts. Coupled with the notoriously bureaucratic structure of museums, the appointment of ‘officials’ rather than experts being a common cause for complaint, as well as widespread corruption, the situation might seem to offer little cause for encouragement.

Yet rays of hope, an Egyptian Museum spring, perhaps, are breaking through. At the end of last year renovated galleries were opened at the Egyptian Museum with a display of the Tutankhamun treasures. This is part of a much larger project, ‘The Revival of the Egyptian Museum’, devised and supported by the Ministry in collaboration with the German government, intended to compensate for decades of neglect and mismanagement. Restoring the Museum to its earlier appearance is just one part of a plan that will also improve conditions of display, for example by installing a working ventilation system and adequate lighting. Further plans to raze the unsightly burnt-out husk of the NPD party headquarters that stands between the Museum and the Nile, and install a ‘Pharaonic Garden’, have also been suggested.

These admirable, if ambitious, plans in the current financial climate, are part of a wider campaign of modernisation being waged by the Ministry of State for Antiquities, which promises to transform the museum landscape in Egypt. The centrepiece of these plans is the Grand Egyptian Museum, or GEM, currently being built south of Cairo at Giza. It is hard to think of



I. Projected image of the interior of the Grand Egyptian Museum, Giza, with the statue of Rameses II, formerly standing in Ramses Square, Cairo. (Courtesy Heneghen Peng Architects. 2015).

another more daring museum under construction anywhere at present. GEM sits at the foot of the Giza desert plateau, just two kilometres from the Pyramids at the Memphis necropolis. Its wedge-shaped structure, designed by the Ireland-based architects Heneghan Peng, is aligned with the Pyramids, and incorporates a viewing platform with an uninterrupted view of the site as the culmination of the museum visit. GEM will house objects from Pharaonic times, and will have as its guiding theme the idea of kingship in ancient Egypt, with the colossal red granite statue of Rameses II (formerly standing in Ramses Square in Cairo) greeting visitors to its vast interior (Fig.I). The Tutankhamun treasure will be on display at GEM in its entirety – some 4,500 objects, many of which have already arrived. They are being stored and treated at GEM’s Conservation Centre, a vast complex of laboratories, the first part of the site to open, which aims to become a centre for conservation in the Middle East. Both Museum and Conservation Centre (built with Japanese investment) set new standards for museum architecture in Egypt, although in the current economic situation the Museum itself may well take almost as long to build as the Great Pyramid.

Ambition on a Pharaonic scale has certainly not dwindled in modern Egypt. Alongside GEM, another grand museum project, the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation (NMEC) has been built on a sprawling site in El-Fustat, one of the oldest, and now one of the poorest parts of modern Cairo. NMEC is a building of two parts: on one side what might be described as a cultural mall, with shops, cinema, theatre and cafés; on the other an impressive museum with six vast galleries surrounding a central sunken court, conceived to symbolise the ‘underworld’.

¹ J. Meier-Graefe: ‘The Destruction of the Sphinx’, *THE BURLINGTON MAGAZINE* 281 (1926), pp.90–94.

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Surmounting the galleries a glass viewing 'diamond' at the top of the Museum gives stunning views in one direction to the dusty ridge of Mokkotam and the Citadel, to the other over the city haze to the Giza Pyramids. The differing views that both museums offer of the Giza necropolis are also highly symbolic: where GEM provides a close-up of Pharaonic culture, NMEC will offer an account of Egyptian civilisation from prehistory to the present. It will draw on objects from a range of museums, and will feature as its highlight the royal mummies from the Egyptian Museum.

Where GEM is international in ambition, NMEC gives more the sense of a national institution, with the specific goal of acting as a prism for Egyptian identity. Its origins were in a UNESCO initiative that also gave rise to the excellent Nubian Museum in Aswan, opened in 1997, a response to the creation of Lake Nasser by the construction of the High Dam, and the vast campaign of cultural salvage that this entailed. The Nubian Museum is one of a handful of museums in Egypt devoted to regional identities – the Suez National Museum, and the Alexandria National Museum are two other notable examples – which over the past decade or so have signalled a change in the profile of museums in the country, so long considered either storerooms for antiquities, or stop-offs on the tourist itinerary.

Construction of NMEC began in 2002, and was virtually complete by 2011, at which point the project went dead. For over four years it has been left hanging, acres of storerooms empty, another vast complex of conservation labs unused, and the gallery interiors still incomplete. But the appointment of a new director, Khaled El-Enany, at the end of 2014 marked the revival of the NMEC project, which now plans to open at least a small exhibition space at the end of this year.

The modernisation campaign, and the construction of two major new museums in Cairo raise a number of pressing questions. What, for example, will happen to the old Egyptian Museum, relieved of two of its best-known groups of works, the Tutankhamun treasures and the royal mummies? The current plan is that it will become a gallery of sculptural 'masterpieces', a museum devoted to art rather than archaeology. This in turn raises questions about what constituted 'art' in Pharaonic times, hardly an easy topic, but one that might lead to interesting reflections not only on matters of taste, but also on the antiquarian impulse that can be found in much later Dynastic art, looking back to the golden age of Old Kingdom craftsmanship. How such a display would actually be deployed remains to be seen.

Other questions are harder to answer. Is there really a need for two new museums in the capital, involving the duplication of conservation laboratories and storage facilities? Rather than further centralisation, it could be argued that there is a greater need for bigger, better-sited museums, showing objects in or near their original findspot. The universal museum is a Western concept that seems at odds with the overriding importance of sites and locations in Egypt, and the lack of any tradition of collecting. One of the best examples of site museums is the excellent Imhotep Museum at Saqqara, instigated by the former Minister of Antiquities Zahi Hawass. This small, largely unvisited museum (tour guides prefer to give it a miss, rushing off instead to Memphis), provides all the information and context one needs about the High Priest and architect who built one of the first stone buildings, the stepped Pyramid of Djoser, just a short walk away. Imhotep's own burial

place at Saqqara remains one of the tantalisingly undiscovered great tombs of ancient Egypt.

A further question might be asked about the nature of the displays in the two new museums. One of the primary purposes of Egyptian museums is the receipt, storage and classification of the vast amount of objects that are being discovered. The lack of any acquisition policy has as its corollary an absence of any tradition of contextual or thematic – or even just plain informative – displays. It is a case of storage rather than stories. New forms of interpretation will clearly be essential for the success both of GEM and NMEC, alongside all the other 'public-facing' aspects of display that this entails, from audio guides to community outreach. The absence of any interpretation, wall panels, in many cases labels, or even a map, is the cause for the most common complaint about the Egyptian Museum. Well-devised displays in all three museums have the potential to form a thrilling object lesson in the history of an ancient civilisation, and it would seem essential in all three museums to appoint curators of interpretation. There is no lack of scholarship on which to base this interpretation, although international researchers have often expressed frustration at the difficulties of accessing objects for research – as if the papyri had been buried and lost once again in the storeroom on Tahrir Square, as one specialist lamented. A unified database of all objects registered with the Ministry of Antiquities would provide an invaluable tool for research, and also a log that would inevitably aid in tracing objects that go missing – for whatever reason – from museum stores (the question of looted art, and the implication of museum officials, is another large topic). Such a project is underway, it appears, but far from completion.

Autonomy for Egyptian museums means not only escaping the dead hand of officialdom, but also asserting independence in the field of scholarship and museum expertise. Zahi Hawass remains a controversial figure for his often heavy-handed dominance of the field of Egyptology both at home and internationally, but is recognised for setting up training programmes for Egyptian curators and archaeologists, and for supporting homegrown talent. A strong spirit of resilience and independence is apparent in some quarters at least. In January 2014 a car bomb, intended for the police headquarters opposite, ripped through the façade of the Islamic Museum in central Cairo. The damage to the building and destruction of many objects in adjacent galleries was particularly tragic in the light of the seven-year renovation project that had concluded only a few years earlier. Painstaking reconstruction of shattered objects, including a display of Mamluk glassware in the front galleries, has been undertaken by a team of restorers who, the Museum is rightly proud to point out, are all Egyptian, many of them volunteers. The Museum is scheduled to reopen later this year and will include an undoubtedly moving before-and-after display of the restoration campaign.

The fate of museums in Egypt should be of wide international concern, given the importance of their holdings, and the strong need for international collaboration in the fields of conservation, scholarship and museology. Above all it is essential that museums are given more independence and the opportunity to train their own curators, control their own budgets, and to operate apart from the sticky sphere of politics. All this of course depends on resources, and that means tourists, and it can only be hoped that the situation soon improves. The plan to revive the Egyptian Museum is certainly a step in the right direction.

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