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Patrizia Piacentini, Christian Orsenigo, Stephen Quirke
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Museum collections and moving objects in Egypt: an approach to amend the current situation

Maher A. Eissa · Louay M. Saied

Defining museum, collection, institution or “heritage” are key questions in museum studies and practice. Even the term “museum object” hides the idea that the museum is the place not only to shelter objects, but principally to transform things into objects. Such fundamental questions are still not adequately considered by the authorities for antiquities and museums in Egypt. One example to be highlighted here concerns the practice and procedures of moving objects. In Egypt as elsewhere, museums lack shared guidelines for moving objects. Examples are given here of the physical damage and loss of information that resulted from repeated moves, often in the context of founding new museums without clear rationale. These risks highlight the need for national authorities in Egypt, and elsewhere, to reconsider a common collection policy, both for moving museum objects and for establishing new museums.

Introduction

What is a museum? And what are its tasks, duties and responsibilities? How do we define a collection? What is an institution? What does the term “heritage” encompass? Museum experts have inevitably developed answers to such questions, which are fundamental to their work. The expression “museum object” could almost be a pleonasm, as the museum is not only the place which shelters objects, but also a place with the principal mission of transforming things into objects.¹

Yet it seems that the answers to these questions are still not considered clearly by the authorities of the antiquities and museums in Egypt (Supreme Council of Antiquities / SCA or lately the Ministry of State for Antiquities affairs). One example to be highlighted here is “moving objects”. In Egyptian museums, there are no common rules and regulations for moving objects. To take one example, in the 1980s, a group of Coptic papyri were moved from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo to the Coptic Museum in Cairo. This movement itself could be considered as a logical decision. However, without any clear reason

¹. A. DESVALLÉES - F. MAIRESSE (eds), Key concepts of Museology, Paris 2010, p. 15.
one object from this group was transferred again from the Coptic Museum in Cairo (P. Coptic 4063) to the Port Said Museum (P. Port Said 3955). Again, without any evident need, the same piece was transferred to a third place, the Ismailia Museum, where it received a new register number (P. Ismailia 2241).2 The only explanation given for these papyrus transfers was the establishment of these new museums. Any object move carries risks, even within one building; in this case, the repeated relocation from one museum to another may have caused severe damage to a large part of the papyrus. This single example emphasizes the need to reconsider common regulations or a “collection policy” of both the moving of museum objects and the establishing new museums in Egypt.

During the past few decades, the Antiquities authorities have established several museums, without a clear and precise philosophy or policy on the role and aim of these museums. As a result, conflicts of interest have arisen between new museums, simply because there is no common “collection policy” to be followed. Fundamentally, there was no vision of the real requirements of building new museums, specifically the regional ones.

The main museum functions, such as collecting, preservation and social communication, can be considered as tools to enlighten and educate the people living in or visiting the country.3 Moving objects or establishing a new museum without thinking through all these aspects, will minimize the effect of the museum.

Before dealing with the problem of collecting and moving objects, it should be necessary to mention briefly the history of the first Egyptian Museum which was built in Boulaq (Cairo). In 1858,4 Mohamed Ali established in 1835 the Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte, mainly to stop the plunder of archaeological sites and to arrange the exhibition of the collected artifacts owned by the government. The Azbakiah garden in Cairo was first site used as a storage place for these artifacts. The collection was later transferred to another building, located in the citadel. Cf., e.g., P. Piacentini, The Preservation of Antiquities. Creation of Museums in Egypt during the Nineteenth Century, in EAD. (ed.), Egypt and the Pharaohs: From the Sand to the Library. Pharaonic Egypt in the Archives and Libraries of the Università degli Studi di Milano, Milano 2010, pp. 5–6.

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building in Tahrir square. It was built during the reign of Khedive Abbass Helmi II starting from 1897, and opened on November 15, 1902. The fundamental concepts of building museums or moving objects were quite clear. The first generation of Egyptian archaeologists led by Ahmed Pasha Kamal was aiming mainly to protect monuments from international and local theft or looting, and from flood or fire danger. Afterwards, the Egyptian government started to build other and different specialized museums. Egypt now has more than 200 museums, of which about fifty are archaeological museums placed under the Antiquities authorities. The total may be divided into six types of museums:

- The main museums: such as the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria, the Coptic Museum and the Islamic Art Museum in Cairo.
- Regional Museums: Port Said Museum, Ismailia Museum, Luxor Museum, etc.
- Location Museums: museums of the properties of the Mohamed Ali Family, usually located in the historical palaces.
- Archaeological Site Museums: such as Tell Basta or San El-Hagar museums, located within archaeological sites, and designed to house monuments which have been discovered there in situ.
- Specialized or single topic Museums: such as the Nubia Museum at Aswan, the Military Museum in Cairo, and the Maritime Museum in Alexandria.
- Educational Museums: these exist at universities and educational institutes, and include the Cairo University museums.

The reasons for establishing the main Egyptian museums seem explicit, and this explains also how the objects of these older institutions were collected. Directors

or committees selected objects from prehistory to the end of Ancient Egypt for the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. They also collected the objects relating to the Graeco-Roman period for the Graeco-Roman Museum in Alexandria. They collected the objects relating to Arabic and Islamic periods for the Museum of Islamic Art. By contrast, other museums old and new seem to lack any clear or common policy and regulations for collecting objects. Generally, objects to the other museums were transferred from either store-rooms or the main museums (especially the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, from which most of the transferred objects were taken), without considering the needs of both the old and the new: the loss of the context of the source museum or the real added value for the end museum scenario as well.

Yet Egyptian Museums are supposed to be established as the most important scientific and educational centres of the Egyptian civilization from the historical, archaeological and ethnological point of view. They exist to collect, record, conserve, and exhibit and interpret for the purpose of study, education and enjoyment of the material evidence of people and their environment.8

The problem

In the past few decades, then, Antiquities authorities have established several museums, without a defined policy with clear roles and aims. How has this affected the sources of the objects selected for exhibition?

For example, at the end of the 1990s, the Antiquities and Museums authorities decided to establish a new museum “National Museum of Alexandria” in that city. It is logical to expect that they would collect objects relating to the history and the heritage of the city of Alexandria and its region, and that, mostly, they would choose these objects from magazines, stores or archaeological sites located in or related to Alexandria.9 In practice, nothing of the kind happened. Surprisingly, most of the objects were selected from the Egyptian

Museum in Cairo with no relation to Alexandria. The principal criterion for choosing exhibits was that “they look nice”, as some members of the committee are said to have stated? Such a random attitude surely amounts to a “non-policy”.

An initial look at the first catalogue of the National Museum in Alexandria may be disappointing, as it gives the impression that the Egyptian Museum in Cairo had been deprived of its most famous masterpieces, transferred to Alexandria. However, a full two-thirds of the objects pictured in that catalogue do not belong to it. They remained in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and have never been transferred to any other place. The only reason for including these photographs seems to be to surprise the reader of that catalogue and give a brief history of the Egyptian art.

The second example concerns the two scientific committees responsible for object selection, one of the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC) and the other of the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM). Although theoretically NMEC is the first museum to cover all Egyptian history, whereas GEM is trying to create a new version of the (Pharaonic) Egyptian Museum, surprisingly, both have chosen almost the same exhibits for their museums from the old main museums (Egyptian Museum in Cairo, Greco-Roman Museum and the Coptic Museum). It seems that the two committees were not following the supposed vision of collection policy of the two new museums.

Museum objects can be defined as any kind of reality in general; it could be also a pleonasm in so far as the museum is not only the place which shelters objects, but also a place with the principal mission of transforming things into objects. Egyptian Antiquities authorities are dealing with a museum collection or a museum object as a “thing”: they can move it from one place to another without any regulating principles. They do not think that the museum object is

10. This museum was inaugurated in 2002.
14. Desvallées - Mairesse (eds), Key concepts, p. 61.
also an abstract category, something closed on itself, as evidenced by that series of objects which is a collection.\textsuperscript{15}

Among the many instances of object moves among the Egyptian museums, the Egyptian Museum in Cairo has been the centre point. If someone wants to find out a reason for moving objects from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo to other museums, he will figure out that the only policy which could be found is “a random policy”. The exceptions are the minority of accurately targeted and successful transfers of objects to the Luxor and Nubia Museums. Good examples are rare: most of the objects in new museum collections of Egyptian antiquities have been and are being collected without any scientific purpose.\textsuperscript{16}

One of the most astonishing and disappointing cases occurred in the store room basement of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. This basement used to house the finds from the great number of archaeological expeditions working in Egypt over the last century and more, along with confiscated or requisitioned antiquities. It was supposed to house tens of thousands of pieces,\textsuperscript{17} although unfortunately no accurate statistics can be provided, because not all of them had been registered in the Egyptian museum archives or registers. With no announced archaeological requirements, the authorities of the time decided to move away most of the basement content (perhaps some 60 to 80 thousand pieces) to Dahshur site magazines, in which they are still there now. Although, cleaning and renewal of the basement have completely finished a long time ago, the moved objects did not return back to the basement which is used currently for cultural purposes.

During the renewal\textsuperscript{18} of the Islamic Art Museum,\textsuperscript{19} which started around the year 2000, all the contents were transferred, either to the basement of the same building, or away to other magazines.\textsuperscript{20} During reconstruction,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Ibidem.
\item HAWASS, Hidden Treasures of the Egyptian Museum, pp. ix-xii.
\item B. O’KANE (ed.), The Treasures of Islamic Art in the Museums of Cairo, Cairo - New York 2006.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
the unsuitable storage conditions and threats which resulted in severe damage and deterioration of some items caused that some curators refused to participate in that transfer. In addition to that, the authorities of the Egyptian Antiquities had to face a parliamentary questioning by 50 members of the Egyptian parliament.21

The Graeco-roman Museum building in Alexandria suffered in recent years from some severe construction problems. Therefore, the authorities decided to evacuate all its contents, exhibited or stored; objects were removed to different magazines in Alexandria. They had even to dismantle the small Fayoum temple which used to be in the museum garden for a hundred years.22 The plan was to keep them stored only about two years, until the end of construction works, but the period has been extended up to five years, and still counting.

Theoretically, the scientific background of the Egyptian curators or restorers concerning the concept and restrictions of moving objects is very poor. This is mainly due to the lack of the interest in teaching Museology topics at the Egyptian archaeological institutions. For example, Faculties and Departments of Archaeology which teach only one brief topic called “Museology and Excavations”.23 This makes it difficult for museum staff to cope with transfers e.g. “On the ground, museum staff may be excellent in the logistics and physical care of objects, but they cannot protect the objects in practice, if museum executives lack knowledge of museum theory and principles.

Collection Policy (The Approach)

In January 2011, amid the chaos resulting from the Egyptian revolution, the Egyptian Museum in Cairo was broken into, perhaps for the first time in its history. Many showcases were broken and objects were scattered throughout

the museum and others were stolen.\textsuperscript{24} This case highlighted the importance of establishing a collection policy\textsuperscript{25} including a disaster plan.

Museums have played a fundamental role in making Egyptian antiquities accessible to the largest possible public,\textsuperscript{26} even though there is no collection management in Egyptian museums. Museum administrations should examine current strengths and weaknesses of the collections, and set out priorities for both active and passive collecting.\textsuperscript{27}

Each Egyptian museum should categorize its contents into three main types upon which it can build its collection policy:

- Pieces which are essential to the main scenario of the museum and are prohibited to be moved away under any circumstances.
- Objects with lesser importance to the scenario and can be loaned temporarily (either to external or internal exhibitions).
- Objects with low importance to the scenario (similar objects, or object not directly connected to it), which can be loaned or even moved away to another museum.

The Egyptian antiquities authorities need to establish a general “collection policy” for the Egyptian museums. Each museum has to follow this general policy within which it can establish a special “collection policy” for its own objects. It means that environmental and local requirements of the surrounding society should be taken into consideration. This could also be achieved by involving the local society, including local NGOs, in forming this policy. More open policy-making will help maintain, develop, research and conserve the museum collections held in trust for future generations. The museum sector or authorities should develop policies consistent with academic standards, applicable national standards, and international agreements.

\textsuperscript{25} ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, 2013, p. 3.
\textsuperscript{27} N. Ladkin, Collections Management, in Boylan (ed.), Running a Museum, p. 17.
and international laws and treaty obligations and the local requirements of the regional museums and society.\textsuperscript{28}

The “collection policy” of the museum should only be undertaken with respect and consideration for the views of local communities, their environmental resources and cultural practices as well as efforts to enhance the cultural heritage. The governing body for each museum should adopt and publish a written “collection policy” that addresses the acquisition, care and use of collections. The policy should clarify the position of any of its collections.\textsuperscript{29}

The Egyptian museums have to accept and take into consideration when establishing a national “collection policy” that the international conventions prohibit the illicit import, export and transfer of ownership of cultural property.\textsuperscript{30} This policy should also consider that lending or moving any objects or work of art is not accepted unless it is done under a valid legal process.\textsuperscript{31}

The Egyptian museum collection policy needs to cover explicitly at least the following considerations:

- Acquisition conditions (accepting objects into collections).
- Circumstances of Disposal (removing objects from collections).
- Care of Collections (loans and conservation).
- Registration and Documentation.
- Archive records and library.

Collecting Objects

In developing the collections, there is a common emphasis on the importance of recording provenance, to place objects in the context of their unique or distinctive histories of production, ownership and usage.\textsuperscript{32} To collect objects, each museum should think of presenting a complete display according to the main

\begin{itemize}
  \item Acquisition conditions (accepting objects into collections).
  \item Circumstances of Disposal (removing objects from collections).
  \item Care of Collections (loans and conservation).
  \item Registration and Documentation.
  \item Archive records and library.
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{28} ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums, 2013.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibidem.
purpose and type of the museum. In Regional Museums, the museum collection should be based upon the objects which were discovered in the surrounding area, from places rich in both archaeology and ethnography materials, or at least objects from other institutions or museums which have a historical connection with any proposed new museum. To achieve an appropriate national “collection policy” in Egypt, two main procedures should be started with:

- The importance of establishing a national database and record of all objects housed in all museums, magazines and stores. This will greatly facilitate the selection process “national register”.
- The “collection policy” of collecting objects (acquiring collections) for museums must involve some central co-ordination, in order to avoid the negative effects from overlapping interests of individual museums (see above).

Circumstances of Disposal Objects

Each museum has to figure out the conditions of a “disposal policy” which should be followed against disposal of any of its objects, and it must recognize that only under very specific conditions may such disposal occur. So, disposal from a museum collection might only take place in the rare cases when an object is so badly damaged or deteriorated that it cannot be exhibited or even safely stored.33

In the case of establishing a new museum, the objects should be selected from the source museums, magazines and archaeological sites, only if they have a great value in serving the scenario, are in a good condition, and fit with the nature and the aims of the new museum. Otherwise, there will be no reason to move or remove those objects.

Care Objects

Loan care of Objects

Inter-museum loans are another widespread practice particularly at the moment

33. MEGUID, Nubia Museum Collection, p. 3.
of establishing new museums. Any loans from any collection have to be carried out according to the national collection policy and considering the following points:

- According to Egyptian Antiquities law: « It is allowed to exchange some of the movable objects of similar characteristic or design, only by presidential decision according to suggestion made by the Minister of Culture… ».

- Any loaned object must be insured, packed and transported according to the standards of the international museums loan conditions (based upon Governmental Indemnity standards).

- Loans should not occur if they do not have valid educational, scientific or academic requirements.

- Security measures of the object transfer should be satisfactory.

**Handling and Transport**

All object moves require some basic conservation principles, where museum staff from all levels, executive as well as manual, must work together to achieve good conditions. Objects should be handled as little as possible, very carefully, and should be lifted and moved in padded containers (trays, baskets, trolleys, etc.) by means of specialized professional experts. In some cases, curators have carried and transferred objects from museum to another with no proper and secure means of transport. Ideally, packing and object transportation should be supervised by professional conservators, and carried out by trained staff with experience in object handling and packing.

**Documentation**

Documentation and registration are essential processes to run museum collections. They are important to establish the identity of objects in the collection; record essential information relating to them; to allow rapid search and retrieval

34. *Antiquities law 117-2010*: Article 10.
without physical handling; and as essential aspects of security and audit. The Egyptian museums should follow one numbering system “Code” to facilitate the recognition of museum objects when moved from one museum to another.

Library and Archive

The Library / Archives provides interlibrary loan access to its collections through cooperating libraries and institutions to researchers who cannot obtain the material or information elsewhere. Libraries and Archives aim to acquire and preserve publications and documentation concerning the museum collections and to make the material available to researchers and interested public. The museum should only collect archive material if it is directly related to collections.

Each museum has to keep rules and regulations on requests for loan of Library / Archives materials, which are placed using the Interlibrary Loan Form and in accord with the international Loan Code except for legal or curatorial considerations. The Original manuscripts, maps, state archives records and rare books should not be loaned for research purposes.

Conclusion

After the Egyptian Revolution of 25th January 2011 and the deep political and social changes that occurred after replacing the ruling regime, the authority of the Egyptian Antiquities was supposed to change as well. The old traditional system of operating and managing the Egyptian antiquities had to change. They had, at least, to start developing new concepts which could follow the international rules and regulations concerning the Egyptian museums. They were supposed to start establishing a new “Egyptian Collection policy”, to meet international standards, and rejecting the old random policy. It seems that the time has come for the young Egyptian researchers, Egyptologists and archaeologists to take a step forward and develop the work of the Egyptian Antiquities.

They have to establish a sustainable new policy consistent with the international standards meshing and arranging with the experienced institutions and organizations for planning a better future for the Egyptian Antiquities.

The authority of Egyptian Museums, *i.e.* Museums Sector, should examine current strengths and weaknesses of museum policies, and especially the planning of new museums and the related “collection policy”. So, they have to establish a general standard “collection policy” for the Egyptian museums taking in account the local community requirements. This will help minimizing random decisions concerning object transfers from one museum or magazine to another. This will allow the decision maker also to have a clear idea about the current situation of the “object stock”, and the actual need for building new museums, and the priority of such museums to be built.

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