

Manchester Museum Podcast
Season 1: Episode 2

Who owns Egyptian heritage?

Heba Abd el Gawad in conversation with Dr Campbell Price

00:00:01 Heba Abd el Gawad

One of the problems of the museums is that they want to always be these happy places, but our memories are not just happiness. The way we're taught colonialism in our history books we are taught about the many millions of Egyptian lives lost in the process and the brutality, the violence of it. That's something that I wish a museum label would involve. Because this is the primary process of healing.

00:00:31 Lowell Wallbank, Manchester Museum

In this episode of the Manchester Museum Podcast, we are joined by Heba Abdel Gawad, a researcher putting modern day Egyptians at the heart of the conversation about Egyptian heritage.

Working with comic artists, street performers and educators, paper communicates the history of dispersal and creates opportunities for dialogue with Egyptian communities, amplifying their voice, visibility and validity in a narrative often presented through Western colonial lens.

Heba is joined in conversation today by the Manchester Museum's Curator of Egypt and Sudan. Campbell Price, who tells us a bit more about the colonial legacies that tie Manchester to Egypt.

00:01:15 Campbell Price, Curator of Egypt and Sudan, Manchester Museum

In Manchester, we've been doing a lot of thinking about the history of Egypt and its connection to Britain. Egypt was dominated and indebted to Europe from the end of the 1700s and Britain invaded Egypt in 1882 at the bombardment of Alexandria, which led to a more or less Imperial presence right the way through into the 1950s. An important reason why Manchester Museum has such a big collection of Egyptian and Sudanese antiquities at some 18,000 of them is because of something called 'finds division'. That was government policy conceived by a British archaeologist and the French Head of Antiquities in Egypt in the 1880s, and it allowed for archaeologists to

export a proportion of their finds, often a very generous proportion of their finds, and this results in the dispersed heritage of Egyptian antiquity all over the world. The museum in Manchester is increasingly open to addressing this aspect of Egyptian history, but also of British history. And it's important because often when you see Egyptian and Sudanese antiquities in museums, it is not clear exactly how they came to be where they are today. It was through this exploration a few years ago that I met my friend and colleague Heba Abd el Gawad and we got talking about how you map this distribution of finds and how you can bring in the voices of contemporary Egyptians to a conversation about how and why that material has been so widely distributed. So we talked about questions of identity, questions of entitlement and ownership, and questions of history which are sometimes rather difficult or rather uncomfortable to talk about. And we asked, ultimately, who owns Egyptian history? Who owns Egyptian heritage and why might those questions be of relevance to us in Manchester Museum today?

Can I begin then, Heba, thank you so much for joining us. You have been leading a project recently called Egypt's Dispersed Heritage. Could you tell us a little bit about that please?

00:04:09 Heba Abd el Gawad

So the project is on, as the title said, Egypt's Dispersed Heritage. All of the listeners would know that there is a piece of ancient Egypt just at the doorstep of nearly every town, not only in the UK, but perhaps all over the world. So the question that always would come up is like how did something very tiny or very large from Egypt end up all the way being dispersed in Japan in the UK, in Ghana, in Australia, in North America, and the labels never tell us how it ended up being in the museum, why? But most importantly, it never tells us how the Egyptians have felt back then, when the objects left Egypt, or today on having their heritage exported and extracted out of Egypt. So the project came after the Artefacts of Excavation project that was equally funded by the Arts and Research, the AHRC, the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK funding body, and between 2012 and 2017 a group of researchers led by Alice Stephenson, who is currently based at UCL, were doing some sort of documentation of the British archaeological fieldwork in Egypt between 1880 and 1980, and they've documented that around 350 institutions in 27 countries in five continents have received ancient Egyptian objects from British led excavation. So like, this is such the largest archaeological endeavour in the world. But the question that came up to Alice, and it's part of my interest as well, is where are the Egyptians from this story of dispersal? Such a huge scale and scope? Where is Egypt? Where are the Egyptian voices and views in these itineraries or in these travel itineraries of their objects? So we thought that given that nowhere do we know how the Egyptians felt about this that we start our own adventure in, rather than centring the Egypt that is in the Western museums we centre the Egyptians back into the story of Egypt be it in

Egyptian museums or in Western museums because the Egypt that we see in museums is void of Egypt. It's the construct of this colonial effort, or this British colonial adventure. And it's much of imagined space, it's a concept rather than a culture, and the only way to bring Egyptians back into the story is having their views and voices centred around such export and extraction of finds. So what we're doing is that we're working closely, and this has been even from the phase of planning with Egyptian partners. These partners are comic artists, visual artists, educators and community activists, into how we can use these stories of how Egyptian objects were extracted and exported from Egypt to the world. Use it to serve the communities back and also to centre the Egyptian voices into the stories, for them to know better how their objects and ended up being all over the world, and to have their views on how they want to use these pieces of information to serve their own needs and interests.

00:07:53 Campbell Price

That's wonderful, thank you. As you know, I think the Egypt Dispersed Heritage project is a fantastic endeavour and I think it's really important and I'm delighted Manchester Museum has been able to support it in a small way. How would you say your work has actually been viewed in Egypt itself? Because I know you've done events there.

00:08:15 Heba Abd el Gawad

Yes, we've been, well, actually, we were meant to have like more in person events, but we're very lucky that we managed to had one recently. But COVID-19 has hit us hard, but it was very interesting, because perhaps that was like, I know it's awful to say this, but not COVID-19 actually, we've benefited of it that everything ended up into the virtual, digital world and we had some sort of a social media plan into using social media as a platform to reach as many Egyptians as we can at a single moment, and also to give them an opportunity to respond back. And Egypt is one of the leading countries in the number of social media users all over the world. And the demography of these users, it's very much representative of the whole of Egypt, be it from a social perspective and an education and cultural perspective as well. So it's very much representative of Egypt's multi-vocality.

So we decided that we do something that is interactive, but that can be relatable to the Egyptians, and it can be responsive to local and global events and relevant to people's lives, and Egyptians are renowned for their fantastic sense of humour and satire and ability to convert everything into a joke, and perhaps it's one of our coping mechanisms that we've adopted along the years. So, we started releasing comic strips, biweekly ones with our fantastic comic artist Nasser Junior, and Nasser uses mainly social media as the main medium to disperse if I'm allowed to say, disperse this work as well. So he's very much, he knows very well the workings of Egyptian social media and knows the

taste of audiences very well and we've been working closely with him, releasing the comic series called Nasser, Heba and our Dispersed Heritage, and the idea came to us when I was discussing the project with Nasser and it hit us when I was telling him the scale and scope of dispersal, and he made something that is really funny, he made himself like as if he was wrapping himself with tissue paper as a mummy, that he equally wants to travel the world and he would tell me, can you tell the museums that there is another mummy ready to travel the world too? And that was amazing, because that was everyone's response and that also is relevant to how, like as you know, Egyptians do struggle to get visas to travel the world. The modern Egyptians, but the ancient Egyptians don't have this problem at all whatsoever, every country is very much happy to welcome ancient Egyptian objects, but we, the modern Egyptians are usually denied access for a variety of political, social and cultural reasons, to travel the world. So, that was a way of how, like, the irony and perhaps like the misrepresentation of modern Egypt and ancient Egypt, and this was our starting point. So Nasser, Heba and our Dispersed Heritage is the backstage dialogue that Nasser and myself have on the stories, and perhaps the colonial legacies of heritage. And it's our way to engage more Egyptians into discussion because the comics are released in Egyptian Arabic and usually they are, they rely on Egyptian memes like from Egyptian movies and Egyptian jokes. And it's also a critique of the heritage discourse. So it's a way that we are not only telling, we are not only engaging the Egyptians with the stories of how the heritage left Egypt, but we're equally involving them in current debates on the colonial legacies of Western museums, which is usually a debate that interestingly, Egypt ends up being a blind spot in like whenever we hear about, yes, like the current decolonisation wave, and how Western museums are urged more and more to confront their colonial legacies. The Egyptian Gallery seems to be a blind spot. No one talks about colonialism and ancient Egypt, although 'Ancient Egypt' is the result of colonialism. This is, yeah, this is colonialism in your face, so we're trying to make this more apparent for Western and for Egyptian audiences, but primarily to make the Egyptian audiences involved more and more into these discussions which are usually very Western and very academic. So it's again centring the Egyptians into even current debates.

00:12:58 Campbell Price

Yeah, it's a fantastic project and I think you know, because we've talked about it, and I think, coming off of what you just said, one thing I'd love to know, it's really kind of putting you on the spot. What would you like, you know people in the UK, the kind of people who go into museums like we have in Manchester, what would you like them to understand better about Egyptian heritage?

00:13:24 Heba Abd el Gawad

Well.

00:13:25 Campbell Price

That's a big one, I know.

00:13:28 Heba Abd el Gawad

It is a big one, but it's a very interesting one, and one that I've always thought of because whenever I'm in an Ancient Egypt Gallery be it in an Egyptian museum, that's a museum in Egypt or anywhere around the world, I feel totally disconnected. This is not the Egypt that I know and this is not the conception of heritage that I feel. This is not Egypt. This is not my Egypt at least, and I've always thought that Egypt comes in three Cs, let's say, or we can solve this problem through like a formula of three Cs. First of all, I would love people to know that Egypt is a country, it's not a concept, because usually whenever you, in any map, for like in any museum map you would see that there is the Ancient Egypt Gallery and then there is the World Cultures. Egypt is totally alienated from the rest of the world, be it the ancient world or the modern world, and the image that is usually represented is one that is very frozen in time and place, as if Egypt stopped being Egypt after the Pharaohs, so the other C, the first C, is that it's a country, the second C would be continuity. There was, Egypt continued to exist after the Pharaohs, and it has such a multiplicity of cultures, multiplicity of layers. And the last C would be a C of change, that change is inevitable and it doesn't stop making it Egypt. So if when you go and visit Egypt today, if it looks nothing like the ancient Egypt that you have in your mind, that doesn't stop it being Egypt, that makes it the new Egypt, the change that happens everywhere around the world. So, I would love them to know that it's a country and there is a continuity of its history and its people. The people, the places. And also it's a country of constant, it's buzzing with change as well, and that makes it even more interesting.

00:15:40 Campbell Price

Absolutely, absolutely it is, yeah. You're biased and so am I, I guess. But I'm lucky and I've been to Egypt but for a lot of people, you know coming into museum, say in the UK, maybe they personally have not visited. I think you're absolutely right. People come with these preconceived notions of what it must be like in what it should be like, and what they've learned about it, and especially in Manchester where we have this long industrial heritage, I've been looking into this more recently, there's a feeling, especially in the Victorian period when there was that intense finds distribution, there is the feeling that people in Manchester, you know, who are working in the cotton mills, actually, ironically, using cotton from Egypt, there's a feeling that they kind of deserve these objects, because they've worked hard and at the weekend they are going to go

and learn something about the ancient past and they really kind of deserve this material and that really leads me to my last question, which is the biggest of all and it's kind of the overall theme of this particular podcast, who owns Egyptian heritage, nowadays?

00:16:54 Heba Abd el Gawad

Well that is the big one. I think this comes into like, this is a very, very important question, Campbell, and it's a question that I myself struggle to respond to. I don't have one single answer for it. But what I would like the new museum world, or if there is any change coming up, in the whole world, not only in the museums, after recent events, that we realise that we don't, it belongs to everyone, yes, it's part of human history, but there are priorities, and that we don't all own it at the same level. If I'm allowed to say. So, I would say that the priority would usually stand with those people that the heritage was extracted from because they share with the ancient Egyptians the roots, the land, and that's a conception that was very important in ancient Egypt and it continues to be important in modern Egypt up until today, that we are all bound to Egypt by our roots, Egypt is our root, and once we're taken out of it, we are dead. We're out of our roots. And that's the connection that we have with our past that we share the same land. This is part of us, so, we are the primary beneficiaries, if I'm allowed to say, and that priority should be for the Egyptians. But that doesn't make us the sole owners of it. We share it with the rest of the world, but the world needs to acknowledge that our needs and our perception of it, and the meanings that we derive from it should be prioritised, and then comes the rest of the world. If I'm allowed to say, so we don't solely own it, everyone owns it, but the degree and level of ownership, of course, there should be a difference between the communities that still inhabit the land of Egypt and the people from all over the world that we happily share our heritage and our past with.

00:19:02 Campbell Price

Sure, I think especially this year in 2020 where we're speaking now, people ask that question more. They go into the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery of the British Museum and ask who owns this and how does this material come to be in London and so hopefully in Manchester we can address these questions more explicitly because as you said, it's really colonialism in your face, but in the past it's been such a blind spot.

00:19:33 Heba Abd el Gawad

It is, it is. It's interesting also because I think one of the ways that we can confirm this easily is just being honest, and one of the problems of the museums is that they want to always be these happy places, but our memories are not just happiness, and if you, I think, I'm not trying to be pessimistic, but it's these moments of sadness or these

moments of change, this is what makes up the world more than the happy moments because, well, it's unfortunate, but that's the reality of things. We remember wars than we remember victories, and we owe this to the many lives that have been lost in the process and the many resources that has been exploited. So, I think that one way of doing this is just being honest, and realising that this is a public duty that we have to ourselves and to the future generations as well, not only the future generations in Egypt, but equally the future generations in the UK. This is part of their past too, and we all, all of us together collectively perhaps can work together to making sure that this never happens again. But if we don't remember what happened, how can we ever stop it from happening again? It is important that we are reminded of what happened, so we can really know that this will never happen again and the only way to make it not happen again is by being honest about what actually happened.

Because it's one thing that's saying that this came to Egypt through colonialism, but it's another thing explaining to people what colonialism really involved? And because at times it's usually also written in this happy story, and that's totally untrue and unrealistic, and it's not, at least our memories of it. The way we're taught colonialism in our history books, we are taught about the many, the millions of Egyptian lives lost in the process, and the brutality, the violence of it. That's something that I wish a museum label would involve, because this is the primary process of healing, and I think that Manchester Museum has already started looking into this de-colonial healing process, and we would love to be part of that story as well as the Egypt Dispersed Heritage, or as the Egyptian galleries on tour, by working closely with you.

00:21:59 Campbell Price

Yeah, wonderful. I think museums do tend to put it on a basic level, they do tend to simplify reality, and reality as we all know is much more complicated than a museum would present. So I really look forward to working with you again and in the future, Heba, and I want to thank you for joining us on the Manchester Museum Podcast.

00:22:23 Heba Abd el Gawad

Thank you so much. It's been an honour. Thank you so much.

00:22:26 Campbell Price

Thanks.