

Wondrous Curiosities: Ancient Egypt at the British Museum, by Stephanie Moser, 2006. Chicago (IL): University of Chicago Press; ISBN 0-226-54209-2 hardback £20 & US\$35; xvi+328 pp., 89 figs., 13 pls.

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Wondrous Curiosities offers an important contribution to — or better still a crucial missing piece of — the story of how the representation of ancient Egypt has been and continues to be created and re-created through museological technologies, disciplinary knowledges and audience reception. By reiterating how ‘Ancient Egypt enjoyed great popularity for what it represented rather than what it ever actually was’ (p. 3), Moser builds on the work of other critical museologists and cultural critics (notably those addressing the ‘west’s’ re-presentation of ‘non-western’ cultures) by recasting the British Museum as a potent locus of both dominant and alternative memory-work. Here, for example, we see her draw out the interventions of an embryonic Egyptology within the museum space as she highlights the interconnectedness of the acquisition, display and

reception of ancient Egyptian material and visual culture in the formation of distinctive and enduring identities of Egypt.

What Moser dubs the ‘temporal limits’ (p. 8) of her study — 1759–1880 — encompasses the fascinating formation of a number of the British Museum’s strategies in its approach to ancient Egypt. She expertly teases out the contours of change and transformation (such as the quest for legitimacy and authority in museum culture and Egyptology) by contextualizing selected ‘nodal’ points in this museological encounter. Chapter One sees Moser skilfully and critically unpack the ‘cabinets of curiosity’ as a means to address the ‘pre-history’ of museums, collecting, display and the production of knowledge. She uses this chapter historically and intellectually to ‘enframe’ the Museum’s ‘original’ installation (p. 9) of Egyptian material. The ‘pre-history of Egyptology’ and of ‘public culture’ then provide the backdrop for her critical investigation of the creation of the ‘five major installations’ at the Museum that have proved ‘so central in defining ancient Egypt’ (p. 8). These installations also provide the content of the chapters that follow.

While Moser’s book is a must for anyone studying museum history and cultural heritage, her examination of the relationships between the museum culture and Egyptology is equally absorbing and crucially important to the text. As Moser asserts (p. 7),

One of the major themes of this book is the extent to which the British Museum’s representation of ancient Egypt facilitated an understanding of this culture before the field of Egyptology was formally established.

The unfolding of the means by which Egyptology accrued substance and influence and its emergence as an expert culture is perhaps the most original aspect of Moser’s book. Moreover, the connections between the role of the museum, the activities of collecting and display, and the elite and popular reception of material and visual culture in the creation of Egyptology as a discipline is critically narrated by Moser as a movement towards a more mature and ‘distinctive phase in Egyptology’ (p. 8) and in the development of the British Museum. She demonstrates how the Museum, the Egyptological community and the museological activities become increasingly ‘institutionalized and professionalized’, resulting in a ‘completely new era in the understanding of ancient Egypt’ (p. 8) and, we might add, of museology too.

This narrative, with its motifs of formalization and institutionalization and the concomitant acquisition of cultural authority, is drawn out by Moser across the various museological activities and policy-making

at the British Museum. For example, she shows that by 1880 a formal collecting policy was emerging. No longer, therefore, was the Museum dependent on the 'small, haphazard collections and miscellaneous objects of Sloane' (p. 218) that the 'foundational display of 1759' was based upon; nor on what was offered 'for sale and donation by individuals' (p. 9). By 1808, the exhibition of the 'systematic collection seized from the French' in 1801 was instrumental in the Museum formulating its own 'dedicated collecting strategy' (p. 218) on more systematic lines; and the sculptures that were seized were understood to demand a newly designed exhibition and dedicated display space. Awareness of the need to collect 'large specialized collections and significant single items' (p. 218) also led to an installation specifically 'to display the set of antiquities purchased from Henry Salt in 1823' (p. 10). The establishment of the Egypt Exploration Fund (later Society) in 1882 strengthened this process of re-presenting and enhancing the cultural worth and value of ancient Egyptian material. Moser identifies a turning point in the mid nineteenth century, when ancient Egypt is not reduced to a narrative of ghouls and mummies but is 'recognized as an important historical document' worthy of 'intellectual contemplation' (p. 10).

Moser's meticulously detailed narrative combines a critical investigation of museum history and of the professionalization of Egyptology with a close and critical reading of the Museum's Central Archive. The archives reveal the change and transformation of the Museum's internal strategies (at times understood as responses to rivalries with other European nations and, at other times, dominated by conservative ruses) and, while Moser demonstrates that the 'ultimate control' of decision-making was wielded by the 'authority of trustees', she also charts the ways in which Museum becomes 'more dependent on the advice of Egyptologists' (p. 6). The importance of studying the British Museum — the 'king of the hill' when it comes to understanding the influence that national museums exert within the secular public space — is demonstrated by Moser at the level of elite diplomacy and politics in terms of the power exerted in forging national identity and carving out a presence and 'central role' in 'international affairs' (p. 6). Not only have 'modern Egyptologists ... defined' the Museum 'as the most famous Egyptian collection outside Egypt' but the Museum 'created ideas of ancient Egypt that remain influential today' (p. 7). In charting the Museum's 'profoundly significant role in the construction of knowledge about ancient Egypt', a key contribution Moser makes is to argue that it

'defined ancient Egypt in distinctive ways' and that a number of 'distinctive identities for Egypt' (p. 217) co-exist in its galleries.

The relationships between the power and authority of the British Museum, Egyptology and the acquisition, display and representation of ancient Egyptian material are brought together with and confronted by Moser's final strategic cache of sources: those relating to the visitors' voices. This constituency, she reiterates, is a crucially important part of the museological 'process'. Visitors and the public are given a presence and influence through Moser's appeals to documents such as diaries, travel writings, guidebooks and media reports. This range of sources allows her to produce a 'more comprehensive investigation of the representational system ... created for the depiction of a subject' and to examine the 'new "life" of objects' that emerges once they are 'placed in an exhibition': she seeks to draw out the material and visual culture and its function as a 'mental picture' and 'as an interpretative framework for understanding a particular theme, social group, or historical episode' (p. 2).

Moser critically reviews the processes of representation and reception by which ancient Egypt has been cast as, variously, 'wondrous curiosities', 'colossal monstrosities', 'accessible oddities', 'grotesque aberrations', 'monumental masterpieces' and 'historical documents', to select but a few (pp. 219–20). She draws out the repressive aesthetics of display by which non-western contexts are represented as 'static and without history' (p. 223): in common with the 'concept of visual colonialism', such exhibitions 'sever objects from their wider cultural context' (p. 5). She also exposes the negative implications of displaying Egyptian sculptures 'in rows against the walls': this 'reinforced a sense of rigidity and stiffness commonly associated with Egyptian works' and exacerbates the sense of 'strangeness' and otherness evoked by such material (p. 223). More subversively, Moser draws out how different interpretations of Egypt co-exist in different galleries at the British Museum with reference to different types of material collected. While the mummies are inextricably linked to the aforementioned ghoulishness, by way of contrast, domestic Egyptian artefacts are re-presented as 'intimate and accessible' (p. 224). This contradictory reception of ancient Egypt as both 'love/hate' and a palimpsest of 'curiosity, disgust, horror, delight' (pp. 224–6) is yet again construed by Moser as potentially subversive. The key here is that ancient Egypt, as a feature of the popular imagination, is afforded an 'accessibility' in the sense that it is 'not intellectually owned' by experts (p. 217). Moreover, Moser argues that not only do

'different manifestations of Egypt co-exist' and that 'the real "magic" of ancient Egypt lies in its ability to tolerate these alternative identities' but more: Egypt, she concludes, is 'multidimensional for all audiences' and has the capacity to respond to the visitor's wish 'to be intellectually satisfied yet emotionally stimulated at the same time' (p. 217).

The depth of scholarship of *Wondrous Curiosities* is echoed in the sumptuous images and illustrations. The book is certainly essential for museologists, Egyptologists and archaeologists and it will, I am sure, be valued for its interdisciplinary perspectives and, as such, succeed as a critical cultural text. At times, it is reminiscent of and a worthy complement to Coombes's ground-breaking *Reinventing Africa* (1994), which focuses on the British Museum's sub-Saharan collections and their reception in both the popular imagination through public displays and their formative influence on the foundation of anthropology as an intellectual-expert culture. Yet Moser's book is clear in defining its own agendas. Moreover, her conclusions are powerful enough to leave open the door for other researchers and theorists to ponder the radical possibilities of ancient Egypt's 'multiplicity of meanings' (p. 230) for alternative (post-)national and international audiences and for a future in which museology and Egyptology need to be opened up to alternative affinities — notably, to constituencies previously excluded. In re-asserting the value of ancient Egypt as 'everybody's domain' (p. 232), it is a priority to express the ethical debt of museology and Egyptology to 'source' communities and for ancient Egypt to be, more than an Orientalist fantasy, a locus of fresh and alternative memory-work and identity-work capable of creating new popular public cultural engagements across North and South.

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Reference

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