Displaying Egypt and Sudan at the Manchester Museum

In October 2012, to coincide with the centenary of its first Egypt gallery, the Manchester Museum opened three new Ancient Worlds galleries. Campbell Price describes the redevelopment.

The Manchester Museum holds more than 16,000 objects from ancient Egypt and Sudan, making it one of the largest collections in the UK. The core of the collection – and the building which still houses it – is largely due to the generosity of one man: Jesse Haworth. A wealthy Manchester cotton merchant, Haworth became interested in Egyptology after reading Amelia Edwards’ 1877 book *A Thousand Miles up the Nile*. Edwards corresponded with Haworth and encouraged him to channel his interest into financial support for the excavations of Flinders Petrie after he had parted company with the EEF. As a result, a key strength of the Manchester collection is the sound archaeological provenance of many of its objects. In particular, Petrie’s work at the town sites of Kahun and Gurob produced many domestic objects that shed light on aspects of day-to-day life.

The 2012 redisplay of the Egyptology and Archaeology collections at Manchester provided an opportunity to reassess museum visitors’ experiences and expectations. The new Ancient Worlds galleries begin with an exploration of ‘how we know’ about objects from the past, be they from Egypt, Greece or Roman Manchester. An introductory gallery addresses these questions through guide characters: mainly living archaeologists, but also Flinders Petrie himself and an ancient Egyptian tomb-robber.

Egyptian mummies have long been one of the Museum’s main attractions. Manchester has been synonymous with mummy studies since Margaret Murray’s unwrapping of the Two Brothers in 1908 and the subsequent work of the Manchester Egyptian Mummy Project from 1973, led by Rosalie David. The old galleries showcased the results of these investigations, and displayed no fewer than 14 human mummies. These displays were, however, dark and gloomy spaces that some museum visitors found intimidating. In contrast, the new galleries have been designed to allow more natural light and reveal much of the building’s original neo-Gothic architecture, previously hidden by boarding and curtains. On each side of the main Egyptian Worlds gallery, backlit panels are used to imitate the colours of sunrise and sunset in the north-east of Africa.

This gallery presents Egyptian and Sudanese material chronologically, from Predynastic to Islamic times, within which individual themes are developed relating...
to strengths in the collection. These include renowned Middle Kingdom objects: medico-magical material (including key objects from the ‘Ramesseum Tomb’), the intact ‘Two Brothers’ tomb group from Deir Rifeh, and tools from the pyramid builders’ town of Kahun. In addition to items from Gurob and Amarna that illustrate life in a New Kingdom royal city, the displays include often-overlooked material from western Thebes. The museum’s most popular mummy, the Twenty-Fifth Dynasty Chantress Asru, is placed in the context of Late Period funerary beliefs, and the role of women in temples. Manchester-based scientific investigations into Asru’s health are explained by Rosalie David. A separate space presents the Museum’s striking collection of Roman Period mummy portraits, masks and two portrait mummies.

When the Museum consulted the public, visitors expressed a desire to see more objects go on display in the new galleries. Reducing the large number of human mummies which had previously been on display allowed many more objects - some of which had been in storage for many years - to be placed on view. An ‘Exploring Objects’ space, on the galleries’ upper level, includes dense visual displays to highlight concentrations within the collection: hundreds of shabti figurines, stone vessels, jewellery and Roman glass. Another section addresses how museums organise collections, presenting traditional typologies, alternative interpretations, and addressing imitation and forgery. An innovative computer interface allows visitors to interact virtually with fragile pieces which are never usually handled. Digitally-accessible content throughout the galleries includes a wide range of new photography, video and audio clips, and 360° images of key objects. It is hoped that, in keeping with the Museum’s early appeal to a broad section of society, Ancient Worlds will provide new ways to experience objects in the collection.

While celebrating Manchester’s pioneering contribution to the scientific study of Egyptian human remains, the Museum’s Egyptology collection is well-placed to challenge the persistent stereotype of the ancient Egyptians as having been morbidly obsessed with death. The new galleries, therefore, represent a significant reorientation towards life in ancient Egypt and Sudan, allowing a new generation to share Petrie’s own astonishment that ‘it is hard to realise that over 4,000 years have glided by since those houses last echoed to the voices of their occupants’.

Campbell Price is Curator of Egypt and the Sudan at the Manchester Museum. For more information on the collection and new galleries, visit: www.ancientworlds.co.uk and read Campbell’s blog at: http://egyptmanchester.wordpress.com. He is grateful to Karen Exell, who was responsible for conceptualising the Egyptian Worlds gallery, and to all the staff at the Museum who contributed to the project.