

Plaster Casts of Ancient Egyptian Sculpture in the Pushkin Museum: Today and Tomorrow

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In this multimedia age, historical plaster casts, even those belonging to one of the most prominent museums, seem to be fragments of the past. When we speak of a significant collection of plaster casts we imagine a collection of Greek and Roman antiquities, not oriental items. However, in Moscow, in addition to casts of classical art, the collection of casts of Egyptian and Oriental Art is also stored.

Is it possible to update a museum collection of such a nature? What aspects should be noted in order to achieve this goal? These items have a certain history which begins from the late XIX century.

These monuments form the basis of the Moscow Museum of Fine Arts. These objects are also associated with the collection of W.S. Golénischeff, one of the first Russian, but world known Egyptologists. He is known mostly for his philological works, but he also gathered a fine collection of ancient items which later he had to sell due to family circumstances. He wished his collection to stay in Russia, so it was purchased by the new Museum of Fine Arts, which was under construction in the centre of Moscow. His collection consisted not only of antiquities, but also of some plaster casts. The majority of these casts were manufactured in Egypt. He realized that even his quite complete private collection could not include all important items that are to be found in Egyptian tombs, or has already been stored in other museums to demonstrate the diversity of Egyptian art. Therefore, he supplemented his collection with copies that, however, were overshadowed by his originals. At first these copies were exhibited along with the original items, but now are on view in other exhibition spaces, and their exhibition has different goals.

This collection is also connected with the name of Ivan Tsvetaev, the founder of the museum. He chose and ordered the molds for the museum items when the museum was still under construction. He purchased plaster casts in the museums of

Europe and in Egypt. Despite the fact that he was an expert in Roman antiquities, he tried to acquire casts of monuments from different periods, including casts of works of art of ancient Egypt. Well-known masterpieces were selected from among the originals for reproduction in various museum collections. Moreover, such a choice was made at the turn of the XIXth century when the list of masterpieces of Egyptian art was just being formed. We know for example, that his advisor on the selection of monuments from the Cairo Museum was E. Brugsch-bey. The Museum acquired plaster casts of monuments that are stored in the most significant museum collections of the world. The result is that one can take a tour of all of Egyptian civilization in the Egyptian collection; reliefs, sculptures, stelae, and small-sized objects are all gathered in one museum space.

Identifying the sources of casts and finding their relationships with the objects in other collections and museums is a special project carried out by the research-fellows of our department.

The story of the collection of copies, and Egyptian casts in particular, tells the history and evolution of the whole museum. The casts have been linked with the originals in one exhibit for decades. Even after the 1917 October Revolution when many new items were added to the collection, the casts still remained on display. This fact illustrates their important role in the concept of the museum. These items were not evacuated, and during World War II remained in the museum. Until 1969 they were in the permanent exhibition of the Egyptian Hall, but after reinstallation of the galleries they were relegated to the storerooms. In 1996-97 conservation and restoration work was carried out, and the casts were again on display.

In 1997 a new department of the Pushkin Museum "Ivan Tsvetaev Educational Art Museum" was opened. It is located on the campus of one of the largest universities of Russia, the Russian State University for Humanities. Therefore, the museum itself is called "educational", which emphasizes its academic character. The creation of our museum is a revival of the ideas of the

founder of the Pushkin Museum, Ivan Tsvetaev, about education through art objects.

The project is not only the museum exhibit, but also an art classroom or lecture hall. Its purpose is not just to show the history of classical ancient art, particularly Egyptian but it is a unique laboratory for students and Egyptologists.

The museum has become a base for the creation of the new learning program "Education through art." In this program, carried out jointly with the Faculty of History of Art of the Russian State University for Humanities, several teaching models are included: history of art, exhibition and project curating, restoration of museum monuments, art design, and of course, museology¹.

Through intensive integration of the Museum into the educational process of the Faculty, it has become possible to create a unique educational and scientific environment, where the student is gradually drawn into the academic life, so he would be able to link his intellectual and practical perspectives with it. Comprehensive information about the monuments, whose originals are located in the collections of different museums, is available with which to compare them, and to develop skills in reading texts directly from the monuments. The exhibit also provides the opportunity to practice the description and analysis of ancient Egyptian monuments.

Today the exposition occupies seven rooms; two of them are filled with casts of Egyptian sculpture and include more than 130 objects. Over two hundred casts are in the storerooms. The objects of the first room are devoted to the Early Dynastic, Old and Middle Kingdoms. In the second room are exhibited Egyptian objects from the era of the New Kingdom to the art of the Greco-Roman period.

The exhibition includes copies of monuments from famous museums: the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the British Museum, the Louvre, the Turin Museum, Gregorian Museum in the Vatican, Baracco Museum, Albertinum at Dresden, and the State Hermitage Museum.

¹ Баканова И.В. Образование средствами искусства. Интервью. См. <http://fii.rsuh.ru/article.html?id=55127> (дата обращения 29.07.2015)

A significant number of exhibits reproduce monuments in the State Hermitage. They came to the museum as an exchange during the 1920s and 1930s. Several casts were made from the items in the Ancient Orient Department of the Pushkin museum especially for this exhibition. In addition, the collection includes copies of reliefs from the tomb of Ti at Saqqara, originating from the collection of W.S. Goléenishcheff². Apparently, they were made to complement his collection of reliefs from the tomb of Isi and on the other hand could serve him for scientific comparison and the study of his collection. Some casts reproduce monuments, which for various reasons for more than one decade were not copied, so their importance is increasing through time.

One of the most important aspects of the museum work is the problem of links between the plaster casts and the original items in their historical context. Each item eventually creates its own history; the safety, toning, exhibition concept, and comparison with original monuments.

How can such a museum attract not only future Egyptologists but the general public? Plaster copies, even of the masterpieces of Egyptian art, do not always awaken the desire for detailed viewing of every item of the exposition. Also, the return of visitors to the museum is very important for us. Each monument has a fascinating story to tell: stories of people and historical events. We can tell these stories, sometimes having unexpected turns, and inspiring emotional moments, to interested visitors.

How can we tell these stories? The relationship with the originals can be demonstrated between the material of the copies and original items from our museum collection, or objects from the Hermitage. Since we rarely have a chance to have a true masterpiece from other museums, electronic media may allow such comparison. Materials can also be taken from the archives of documents and photographs. These materials are gradually assembled in the exhibition about the

² Лаврентьева Н.В. «Лунный мир» египетских слепков. Собрание слепков Древнего Востока ГМИИ имени А.С. Пушкина: специфика коллекции // Оригинал и повторение. Подлинник, реплика, имитация в искусстве Востока. Сборник статей / Ред.-сост П.А. Куценков, М.А. Чегодаев. М.: Государственный институт искусствознания, 2014. С. 36-47.

history of the museum. The archival material also helps to make one-piece special exhibitions.

We have a permanent display, but the items in the storerooms allow us to include the casts in different temporary exhibitions. One such exhibition illustrated the acquisitions of the Museum during the time of its construction in the exhibition-project "The dream came true", devoted to the work of Ivan Tsvetaev, who created the concept of the museum, and philanthropist Yuri Nekhayev-Maltsov who gave funds for the construction and purchase of sculpture and other items. The successful run of the exhibition at the University (2013-14), it is now on temporary display at the Fine Arts Museum in Ulyanovsk, where it marked the opening of the first branch of the Pushkin Museum outside Moscow.

We are considering the possibility of including the Egyptian casts in an exhibition dedicated to Piranesi's graphics. In addition, we have decided to engage with contemporary art and are planning an exhibition of contemporary sculpture. This is an ambitious project which will help us discover and understand new aspects of our collection.

We have designed different forms of activities for visitors to the museum. Some events for the public have already become a tradition such as "Night of Art", "Heritage Days," and "University Open Days". During these events, guided tours by the museum staff and student volunteers take place in the galleries of the museum. The audience is attracted to various educational events and quests, and concerts of classical music.

The use of multimedia technologies and new forms of interaction with visitors help the actualization of the collection for training and educational purposes.

The high quality of our historical plaster casts, their toning, and exact reproduction size (based on the use of lay contact form gypsum) helps to improve the perception of the monument. This method of viewing the monument allows us to customize the viewing experience of the visitor because we have a clear understanding that the plaster casts are much more difficult to perceive than

originals. Eyes should be prepared for the fact that a close look at the plaster statue (if one has the observational skills that we try to develop) can bring one closer to the image of the original item. This is serious practical skill to help one understand the works of art. "Looking at the cast prepares one for the perception of the original", so wrote I. Tsvetaev more than a century ago. Techniques can change but the idea is still modern. Thus, from the amateur visitor we try to create experts and connoisseurs of classical art.

Fortunately, I. Tsvetayev made a mistake only once. He wrote: "gypsum dies sooner or later, and one of the following generations will be forced to throw out the old stuff that is now created with such effort and cost". By contrast, a century after he wrote these words the casts are carefully preserved and restored, and their history and their significance continue unchanged. Even more, they continue to "live" in space and time, and are a source of experiences that generates new meanings.