

# REDISCOVERING THE EMPIRES OF ANCIENT NUBIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY\*

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#Blacklivesmatter, #Metoo, #Blackpanther... The world of the early 21st century differs from the world of a hundred years ago, when the Harvard University-Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition excavated in both Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia. This paper traces the history of the Nubian collection at the Museum from the time it arrived until the present. It reconsiders ways the Museum might present a gallery – or series of galleries – devoted to Nubia in a way that encompasses new perspectives on the material and engages and educates a broad audience.

## Ancient Nubia and the MFA, Boston

According to the partage system instituted by the governments of both Egypt<sup>1</sup> and Sudan<sup>2</sup> at the time of the Harvard-Boston excavations in Nubia (1907-1932), the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA) was awarded half the material discovered. Thanks to this generous policy, the MFA now has the finest collection of Nubian material outside Sudan. Nubian objects arrived at Boston shores between 1913 and 1947, at the same time as finds from the concurrent excavations in Giza and other Egyptian sites. The MFA decided at that time to install Nubian and Egyptian material together as art of the greater Nile Valley (fig. 1) in the newly opened Huntington Avenue building. The one exception was the massive sarcophagus of King Aspelta, which found a place in the Museum's Lower Rotunda (fig. 2), where visitors enjoyed tea beside it every weekday afternoon.

Recognizing the unique qualities of the Nubian material, curator Dows Dunham who had worked under George Reisner<sup>3</sup> since his graduation from Harvard in 1913 advocated for a dedicated Nubian Gallery in the 1940s and 50s. However, his pleas went unheeded and the *status quo* remained or worsened. In 1974, the Aspelta sarcophagus was moved from the Lower Rotunda to basement storage (where it remains today) and some of the galleries that included Nubian and Egyptian objects were given over to other functions.

By 1991, circumstances and attitudes had changed. At that time, the Museum closed its Huntington Avenue entrance for economic reasons and moved the gift shop that had been

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\* The focus of this paper is the talk presented at the 2018 CIPEG annual meeting in Swansea. It has been updated to include more recent developments.

<sup>1</sup> The Egyptian government was under British control, but the Antiquities Organization was run by the French.

<sup>2</sup> Sudan was at that time the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan and in its entirety under British control.

<sup>3</sup> Dows Dunham retired early so he could devote himself to publishing the Nubian excavation material. He converted his entire pension fund into an endowment whose income would cover the costs of publication, which it continues to do today.



Fig. 1: Former Late Egyptian Gallery at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1931, featuring Egyptian and Nubian objects. (Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Fig. 2: Sarcophagus of King Aspelta, 593–568 B.C., Granite gneiss. Harvard University—Boston Museum of Fine Arts Expedition. (Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

located beside it. What used to be retail space became the first dedicated Nubian Gallery in the United States, in part, thanks to a grant from the Nynex Foundation and New England Telephone. Although small (approximately 1600 square feet), it held approximately 500 objects arranged both chronologically and thematically. One long wall formed a timeline of Nubian culture, with objects

ranging in date from about 5,500 BCE through the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE. A case devoted to burial customs of the Napatan Period filled the opposite wall. A large Meroitic coffin bench, the over-five-foot tall stela of King Tanyidamani covered with Meroitic texts, a model of a Napatan Period pyramid complex and select objects in free-standing cases occupied the centre of the gallery. Visitors exited the gallery between the north and south walls of a Meroitic tomb chapel.

The popularity of the gallery was instant, with record numbers of community members attending the opening. School groups booked tours with specially trained Museum gallery guides. It remained so until 2006, when the Huntington Avenue entrance was reopened, and the Nubian Gallery space became the Museum's primary ticketing area for a newly renovated building. Plans were made to reinstall the Nubian material, but delay followed delay as ideas changed. The fact that the collection was not on view made it easier for the Museum to lend it to several international exhibitions about ancient Nubia, where it was viewed by hundreds of thousands of visitors who might not have been able to visit Boston. Most recently (December 2018 – May 2019) more than 300 Nubian objects from the MFA were featured at the Drents Museum in Assen, Netherlands, where approximately 70,000 visitors, nearly twice the population of the city, visited the exhibition.

### Ancient Nubia Now

With object selection, conservation, mount-making and overall organization having been done thanks to the stewardship of MFA curator Denise Doxey, the Museum seized the moment to host the exhibition in-house when a space unexpectedly opened in its exhibition calendar just over a year hence. That collection, augmented by an additional hundred pieces too fragile to travel, opened in October 2019 as *Ancient Nubia Now*. It filled the MFA's Ann and Graham Gund Gallery, the Museum's largest special exhibition space.

Despite a short lead time, lead curator Denise Doxey and co-curators Rita Freed and Larry Berman partnered with Museum Interpretation led by Adam Tessier and reached out to both scholars and community groups to address current issues related to the exhibition. In introductory text panels, the Museum directly confronted the fact that its excavator, George Reisner, had expressed overtly racist views about Nubia like many of his contemporaries. Additionally, it acknowledged that the government of Sudan, under whom the Museum was awarded its share of the excavated finds, was led by British officials. Nubian community leader Professor Abdel-Rahman Mohamed wrote about what it meant to have ancient Nubian culture recognized and celebrated in the MFA, and Barry Gaither, Director of the Museum of the National Center of Afro-American Artists, addressed Nubia as a Black Legacy. Enriched by this material, visitors entered the exhibition.

Objects were arranged chronologically, with Kerma (fig. 3), the Egyptian hegemony, Napata (figs. 4 and 5) and Meroe in their own spaces designed by award-winning designer, Chelsea Garunay from the MFA's Design Department. Each section presented an opportunity to have an outside scholar, community member or artist comment on a topical issue in a short video produced by the MFA's New Media team, Janet O'Donohue and Michael Roper. For Kerma, biological anthropologist Dr Shomarka Keita discussed the concept of race and skin colour; in the section on the Egyptian occupation, Dr Vanessa Davies talked about racism in



Fig. 3: Kerma Gallery in *Ancient Nubia Now* exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. October 13, 2019 to January 20, 2020. Ann and Graham Gund Gallery. (Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

early scholarship and its context; in the Napatan space, Sudanese-American University of Massachusetts freshman Lana Bashir offered her thoughts upon seeing original material from her culture for the first time and photographer Chester Higgins presented his point of view on the Nubian material as an artist; and, in the final room devoted to Meroe, Nicole Aljoe, Professor of English and Director of the African Studies Program at Northeastern University, discussed early 20th century African-American fiction inspired by Meroe.<sup>4</sup> In a separate small room, Reisner's excavation equipment, photos and records were juxtaposed with drone footage and still photography provided by the current excavators of Kerma (Professor Charles Bonnet), Napata (Dr Timothy Kendall) and Meroe (Dr Pawel Wolf).

*Ancient Nubia Now* closed on Martin Luther King Day (January 20), 2020, following a run of 12 weeks, during which it attracted nearly 140,000 people. Over 3000 children came with their classes. More than 100 members of the Nubian community arrived as a group from New

<sup>4</sup> These short videos can be viewed in the *Ancient Nubia Now* playlist on the MFA's YouTube channel: [https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlaGkbYsw6cf\\_gJV5cxZzhlaQ6\\_ODdFHA](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLlaGkbYsw6cf_gJV5cxZzhlaQ6_ODdFHA).



Fig. 4: Napata Gallery in *Ancient Nubia Now* exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. October 13, 2019 to January 20, 2020. Ann and Graham Gund Gallery. (Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)



Fig. 5: Napatan Royal Shawabtis in *Ancient Nubia Now* exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. October 13, 2019 to January 20, 2020, Ann and Graham Gund Gallery. (Photograph © Museum of Fine Arts, Boston)

York, thanks to the help of the Boston Nubian community. The Sudanese Ambassador to Canada came from Ottawa with two dozen colleagues. Other groups included Boston-area clergy and the Boston Public Health Division of Violence Prevention. Members of the National Committee for Antiquities and Museums in Khartoum sent congratulatory notes.

The exhibition *Ancient Nubia Now* is over at the MFA, but a version will live on in the next few years in the form of a traveling exhibition at several other museums, and become a major component in the multi-lender exhibition *Moi, Taharqa, Pharaon des Deux Terres* held at the Louvre in 2021. In Boston, Museum staff are already discussing broad concepts for permanent spaces for Nubia at the Museum for when the objects return, and these talks will widen to involve scholars, educators, artists, and community members. A grant from a generous

donor will allow us to conserve some of the colossal objects absent from the exhibitions. But are we facing a new reality? Currently the COVID-19 crisis is forcing many museums to rethink their galleries and more broadly, their mission.

## IDEA – Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, Accessibility

These major concepts will play a major role in our future if we, as museums, are to remain relevant in the post-COVID-19 world. *Ancient Nubia Now* taught us a lot as we engaged with a broad group in the planning process, including staff from our newly formed Learning and Community Engagement Department. It taught us even more as we observed the audience moving through the exhibition. The objects and their displays were beautiful, but crowds gathered and remained longest in front of the videos discussing the relevance of the objects. Triple the number of visitors than usual showed up for museum member tours, suggesting that people were intrigued and eager to be guided through a topic about which they knew little. Casual observation hinted that the audience was more diverse in term of age, race, and ethnicity than most others at the MFA.

Efforts to update the way we looked at our Nubian collection in preparation for the exhibition led to the realization that things Nubian were all around us in the popular imagination. A mural painted by local youth in 1993 on the side wall of Davey’s Supermarket in Roxbury, a centre of the Boston African-American community and not far from the Museum, featured members of the local population of all ages and “Nubian Roots” writ large (fig. 6). We were reminded that “Nubian Notion”, an Afro-centric convenience store, which had been a major presence in the same area for nearly 50 years (1968-2016) had only recently closed.



Fig. 6: “Nubian Roots” mural on Dudley St., Roxbury, MA. (Photo: Stacey Leonard)

While we were preparing the exhibition, the existence of a multi-year movement to change the name of Dudley Square, a hub in Roxbury, to Nubian Square came to our attention. This was motivated, at least in part, by the fact that Thomas Dudley, the second governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony after whom the square was named, had owned slaves. In a city-wide, non-binding referendum in 2019, the proposal was narrowly defeated. Nevertheless, realizing that a majority of the people living in the area were in favour of the name change, the Mayor of Boston overrode the referendum. Was it coincidental that the approval for the re-naming came during the run of *Ancient Nubia Now*? A statement from the Boston Nubian community about the empires of ancient Nubia and its glorious history accompanied the name change.

Beyond the immediate area, it was not hard to find references to Nubia, and Museum volunteers formed a committee, self-described as “Team Nubia,” to research it. They found abundant references to Nubia in literature, music, graphic novels, art, and personal names. For example, few of us were aware that since 1973, Wonder Woman of DC Comics had a sister, Wonder Woman Nubia, and that she was immortalized as a doll in 1976. Harvard Hutchins Fellow Harry Allen taught us about the origins of hip-hop in the street culture of the late ‘70’s, and how Nubia in that genre signified blackness, power, and beauty. In Mr Allen’s words,

What’s always been clear to me is that ‘Nubia’, in the African-American imagination, has typically represented an almost primeval, essential form of Blackness; an ‘undisturbed’ kind, if you will, distinctly apart from the turbulent variety Africans endured while being transformed into chattel.

I think this notion is a mix of history, myth, revisionism, poetry, and other elements. But, in short: When a woman describes her hair, or features, as ‘Nubian’, she is alluding to a form of Blackness *past which one cannot go*; the *limit*, so to speak. All of which makes this corpus, apart from its factual, archaeological bases, a rather dynamic one with which to engage.<sup>5</sup>

As he noted, not only were there a number of Rap groups whose names included Nubia, but Nubia also appeared a significant number of times in Rap lyrics (fig. 7).

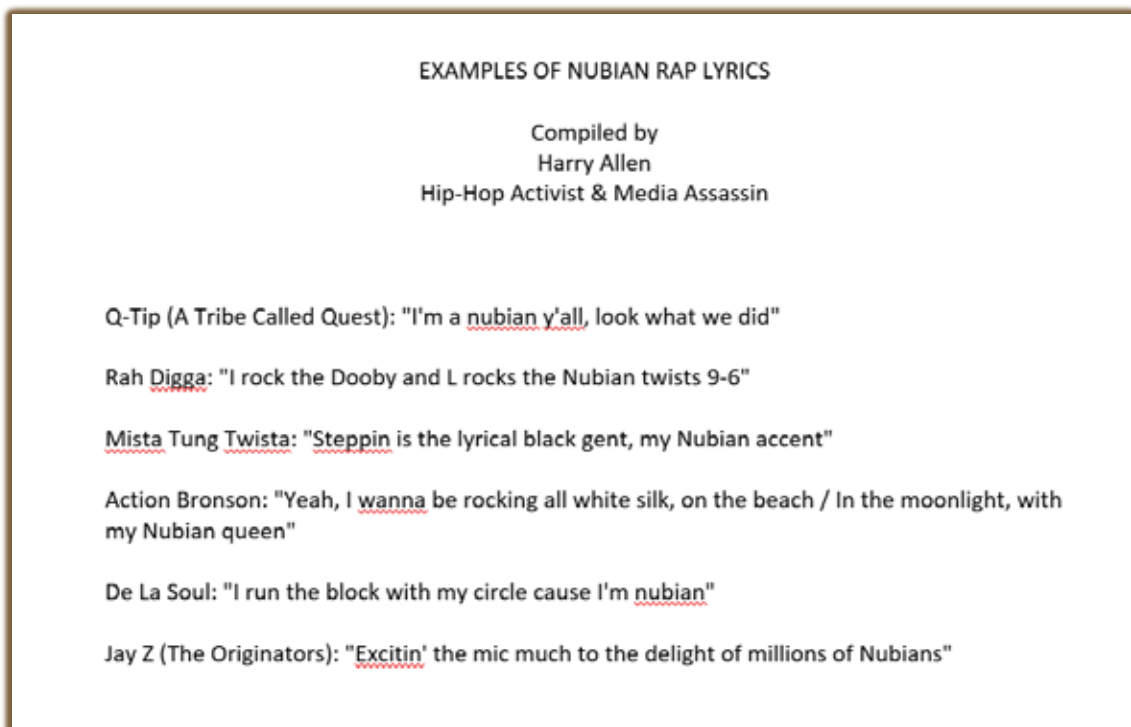


Fig. 7: Sampling of Rap Lyrics featuring Nubia assembled by Harry Allen, Hip-Hop Activist and Media Assassin.

<sup>5</sup> Harry Allen, personal communication, April 14, 2017.

It was a member of “Team Nubia” who discovered that the designer of a lavish dress worn by the American singer, songwriter, producer, and actress Beyoncé to the Wearable Art Gala her mother hosted in 2019 was inspired by the Nubian Queen Amanishaketo. Team member Sharon Lourie noted a dramatic increase in the number of patent applications including the word Nubia in the last 20 years.

In this writer’s opinion, *whether* we weave the contemporary popular significance of Nubia into new galleries devoted to a culture that goes back over 7,000 years is not in question. Rather, the question is *how* we use it to reach the greatest possible audience and enhance its understanding of Nubia via the objects and the stories they tell.

### New galleries for Nubia: The author’s vision

Imagine stepping into the world of Ancient Nubia, a space that would explain Nubia in terms of concepts important today: landscape and geography as influencers of culture, ancient cultural appropriations and interconnections, rise and fall of empires, writing and its significance in what we know and how we know it, structure of society, religion and daily life. This introductory section would also discuss colonialism and archaeology and early interpretations of the material. Continuing on, with the MFA’s encyclopaedic collection, it would be possible to create experiential environments. A space devoted to temples might combine large scale photographs of Gebel Barkal with the colossal statues of Kings Anlamani and Aspelta, the barque stand of King Atlanersa, and a sampling of the Egyptian objects, such as the large falcon that King Piankhy “relocated” to Gebel Barkal from Soleb. A recreation of Aspelta’s tomb combining the shawabtis which lined the walls of his burial chambers with his 16-ton sarcophagus would allow visitors to experience a king’s tomb of the Napatan Period. A Meroitic tomb chapel and coffin benches could help re-create a tomb of that period. Small precious objects of all periods might be best viewed in a spot-lit treasury. Given the contemporary relevance of Nubia, a final space might be devoted to reflections, comments, and Nubia today.

While they constitute a wish list, these concepts demonstrate the richness of the collection and how it might be used to excite and inform. Ultimately, space and available funding will determine Nubia’s fate at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.