

'GATEWAY TO THE WORLD OF EGYPTOLOGY': A NEW ENTRANCE GALLERY AT THE PETRIE MUSEUM, LONDON*

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Acknowledgments

Grateful thanks are due to the DCMS Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund, to all the UCL colleagues involved in the project, in particular to Catriona Wilson, Frances Potts and Darren Stevens, to the external stakeholders who provided invaluable guidance and direction throughout the project, and to Debbie Challis for her continued support. This paper is dedicated to the memory of Nourhan Nassar, a valued member of our 'Critical Friends' group who sadly passed away unexpectedly during the project.

Introduction

In January 2019, the Petrie Museum was awarded major project funding by the DCMS Wolfson Museums and Galleries Improvement Fund to completely redesign the Museum's entrance gallery¹ (fig. 1). The scope of this project, entitled 'Petrie and Edwards: Gateway to the World of Egyptology', was to improve physical and intellectual access to this internationally important collection.²

Previous visitor surveys and research emphasised the need for improvement of the display of the collection and for clearer interpretation. Feedback focused on the confusing object displays and the lack of an explanatory narrative or context, particularly for non-specialist audiences. Respondents suggested that interpretation seemed too detached from objects in the cases, making it difficult to place items in a historical, social or geographical context. The following comment from a 2013 visitor survey sums up this general view:

*The collection itself is superb and deserves to be displayed with greater regard to both the quality of the objects themselves and for the benefit of visitors who would learn more if objects were clearly displayed and labelled with more informative text. The staff do what they can with the space and cabinets that they have, but the whole impression is very old fashioned and fragmented.*³

* This paper was presented by the author at the 25th ICOM General Conference in Kyoto, September 2019.

¹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/news/petrie-museum-awarded-capital-grant> (accessed 21 April 2020).

² More information on the collection can be found on the Petrie Museum's Online Catalogue (<http://petriecat.museums.ucl.ac.uk/>), and on the UCL Digital Egypt for Universities online resource (<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/Welcome.html>, accessed 21 April 2020).

³ Anonymous Petrie Museum visitor survey response, 2013.

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Fig. 1: The Petrie Museum’s old entrance gallery, November 2019. (Image © Oliver Siddons.)



Fig. 2: The completed Petrie Museum entrance gallery, November 2020. (Image © Oliver Siddons.)

The renovation and extension of the previously cramped entrance gallery space, completed in February 2020, has made the Museum's entrance more accessible and modern, while conservation-standard cases now provide opportunities for expanded, fresh interpretation (fig. 2). In this refreshed space, visitors can now find clear introductions to the life and work of the Museum's founders, Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) and Amelia Edwards (1831–1892), as well as information on other lesser-known characters who are also integral to the history of the Petrie Museum. The story of the Museum's Sudanese collection features in the entrance gallery for the first time, as does the vital work of Petrie's Egyptian workforces. These new displays integrate images and documents from the Petrie Museum's archive, drawing on personal items including Petrie's excavation satchel and excavation tools, notebooks, and correspondence, to provide context to the ancient objects. Using these objects to tell the human story of the collection also includes a responsibility for us to present controversial aspects of the Petrie Museum's history in a balanced and accessible way.

The choice of stories for the new gallery has been guided by a 'Critical Friends' group of internal UCL and external stakeholders, including colleagues from Egypt and Sudan, whose input into the development of the object list and the refreshed narratives has been invaluable. A representative from the 'Friends of the Petrie Museum' also joined as a member of the 'Critical Friends' group and was actively encouraged to guide the development process, ensuring that this key stakeholder group was represented. As a University museum, it was also essential that UCL students were involved in this evaluation process, which included input into the creation of the object list and the initial development of display narratives. Museum Visitor Services staff and volunteers undertook audience surveys over the course of the project using an online platform. These surveys provided valuable qualitative and quantitative data supporting the formative project evaluation, relating to issues of both physical and intellectual accessibility. As well as directing the course of this project, this data will also guide future approaches to the interpretation of the Petrie Museum collection.

Edwards and Petrie: presenting old legacies in a new light

One of the two new large display cases in the new entrance gallery highlights the work of Amelia Edwards and Flinders Petrie, whose stories are integral to the development of Egyptology at UCL.⁴ The Petrie Museum would not exist without Edwards, who bequeathed her collection of Egyptian antiquities and her library to UCL on her death in 1892⁵ (fig. 3). This bequest also created the UK's first Chair for Egyptian Archaeology and Philology at UCL, which was taken up by Flinders Petrie.⁶ Edwards, an active feminist, chose UCL for her bequest since at that time it was the only English university to award degrees equally to men and women.⁷ Edwards purchased some of the objects in her collection while in Egypt,

⁴ Janssen 1992: 1–5.

⁵ Janssen 1992: 2–3; Moon 2006: 240–241.

⁶ Janssen 1992: 4–5.

⁷ Stevenson and Challis 2015: 13.

and received others from contemporary excavations including those of Petrie in Egypt.⁸ While we do not know exactly how many objects were originally part of the 'Edwards Collection', it may have been around a thousand.⁹



Fig. 3: Selection of the objects from the 'Edwards Collection' that are now displayed together in the new entrance gallery. Left to right: UC60100, UC15513, UC45378. (Image © Mary Hinkley.)

As well as telling the story of the 'Edwards Collection', which is key for visitors to understand how the Egyptian collection came to be at UCL, the new interpretation also addresses Edwards' personal interests, including women's rights and feminist issues. She held the post of vice-president of the Society for Promoting Women's Suffrage and was one of the first contributors to the feminist *English Women's Journal*.¹⁰ The following quote reflecting this work, written on her death by her cousin Matilda Betham-Edwards (1836–1919), is now mounted on a wall in the new entrance gallery in large print:

*Who knows? She might have thrown herself heart and soul into the Women's Rights agitation [...] Not only might we have had in her a powerful statesman and party leader, but a lady Prime Minister.*¹¹

As well as revealing details of Edwards' personal life and her interests beyond Egyptology, stories chosen for this display also highlight her controversial views on subjects relating to ancient and modern Egypt. For example, a copy of *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (1877), Edwards' critically acclaimed memoir of her visit to Egypt in 1873, is included in the new displays. While highlighting the importance of this book for the early development of the subject of Egyptology, the new interpretation also describes how some of the language Edwards used to describe Egyptian people in her book is outdated and now considered

⁸ Edwards 1891; Stevenson 2019: 51; Stevenson and Challis 2015: 12–13.

⁹ <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt/archaeology/edwards.html>, accessed 21 April 2020.

¹⁰ <https://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-8529;jsessionid=EEB24A4006FED28E4863456D619292DC>, accessed 21 April 2020.

¹¹ Matilda Betham-Edwards, 1892.

offensive. This direct interpretive approach is vital to communicate a balanced, transparent, account of Edwards' work for visitors.

Flinders Petrie's legacy in the field of Egyptian archaeology is well documented, and the story of his excavations in Egypt have formed the focus of permanent displays at the Petrie Museum for many years. The more controversial aspects of Petrie's work in Egypt, and his personal beliefs and opinions, have been explored in temporary displays at the Petrie Museum for the past decade, including the pioneering 2010 exhibition *Typecasts: Petrie, Politics and Eugenics*, but have not yet formed the focus of a permanent display.¹² The new interpretation introduces Petrie's life, work and personal interests for a broad audience, whilst clearly acknowledging that this is not a neutral history. For example, Petrie strongly believed that 'race' defines character and intelligence and was part of a group of UCL academics who established eugenics—the racist theory that human populations can be improved by selective breeding—as a science.¹³ Petrie's publications clearly define his approach to the racial stereotyping of both ancient and modern peoples:

*[...] it may be that eugenics will, in some future civilization, carefully segregate fine races, and prohibit continual mixture, until they have a distinct type, which will start a new civilization when transplanted.*¹⁴

We chose to tell this part of Petrie's story with one of the Museum's so-called 'Memphis Heads', around 300 clay heads dating to the Greco-Roman Period excavated by Petrie from Memphis, which he described as representing different racial types.¹⁵ Petrie used generalising and racist language when he described one of these clay heads, now on display in the new entrance gallery, as representing a 'Kurd':

*The Kurd [...] has the crossed turban which belongs to the Central Asian and Kurd race, but not to the Semitic peoples [...] the type of the face agrees to that of the modern Kurds.*¹⁶

Petrie's eugenic approach to aspects of the collection continues to influence our understanding today, and it is important that we hold these legacies to account. By including these more controversial narratives in the new entrance gallery, it is hoped that visitors will now gain a more nuanced understanding of Petrie's work and his complex legacy.

Revealing the 'hidden hands' behind the collection

While it is undoubtedly important to highlight Edwards' and Petrie's legacies in the new displays, it is also essential to emphasise that they were not the only people responsible for the development, care and interpretation of the collection over the past century. The dedicated and skilled work of Hilda Petrie (1871–1956), which she undertook every year on her husband's excavations, is also presented in the new displays, as is the story of Flinders

¹² Challis 2013b; Picton 2013: 36.

¹³ Challis 2013b: 67–70; Sheppard 2010: 17.

¹⁴ Petrie 1911: 131.

¹⁵ Challis 2015, 2013a: 205–221, 233–246.

¹⁶ UC48501, Challis 2013a: 219–220.

Petrie’s students, including Margaret Murray (1863–1963) whose support of Petrie’s UCL teaching and fieldwork was vital to his success.¹⁷

We chose to highlight the work of two key characters in individual ‘spotlight’ showcases, without whose contributions the collection would not exist today. The many Egyptian men, women and children who excavated many objects in the Petrie Museum collection have only recently begun to be recognised for their work, and we are pleased that the project stakeholders considered it vital to highlight this in the new displays.¹⁸

One of these new ‘spotlight’ cases is dedicated to telling the story of Ali Suefi, a skilled archaeologist from el-Lahun¹⁹ (fig. 4). Suefi worked as Petrie’s right-hand man on his excavations from 1891–1924 and oversaw his workforces all over Egypt.²⁰ Petrie considered him a trustworthy assistant and friend:

*It will be a great pleasure to have him about me again; for I feel as if all must go well with such a faithful, quiet, unselfish right-hand to help’.*²¹



Fig. 4: Ali Suefi (centre) at Abydos in 1899–1900. (Image courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, UCL.)

¹⁷ Drower 1985: 231–248; Janssen 1992: 6–14; Sheppard 2013: 81–104; Whitehouse 2013: 120–122.

¹⁸ Quirke 2015; 2010.

¹⁹ Drower 1985: 226; Quirke 2015: 75–79.

²⁰ Quirke 2015: 75–79.

²¹ Drower 1985: 226.



Fig. 5: Violette Lafleur in her conservation lab at UCL. (Image courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, UCL.)

The second ‘spotlight’ display tells the story of a UCL student, Violette Lafleur (1897–1965), without whom the collection would have been destroyed in the Second World War (fig. 5). During the aerial bombardment of London in the Blitz, a direct hit gutted the UCL Egyptology Department.²² Luckily, some of the most important objects were sent to safe locations outside London before the outbreak of war. A group of loyal staff and students packed the remaining objects into 160 tea chests and carried them down to the UCL basement, in dangerous and frantic conditions.²³

One of these student volunteers, Violette Lafleur, oversaw the hasty packing and removal of these tea chests as well as the subsequent conservation of the collection after water damage from firefighters’ hoses. She did this at considerable personal risk as bombs were dropping around her, even after having lost her own home during the Blitz.²⁴ It is because of Lafleur’s bravery that we are able to enjoy these remarkable objects today, but despite this, her story has not yet featured in a permanent display at the Petrie Museum. We are pleased to have rectified this situation in the new entrance gallery, displaying her handwritten packing lists of collection objects for visitors to enjoy for the first time.

²² Janssen 1992: 42–45; Pike 2015.

²³ Janssen 1992: 42–45; Pike 2015.

²⁴ Janssen 1992: 42–45.

Telling the story of Sudan and object distribution

Of the 80,600 objects in the Petrie Museum collection, around 4000 are from the Sudanese Nile Valley. Many of these objects are on permanent display, however they are mainly shown amongst the more visually dominant archaeological material from Egypt.²⁵ The second of the large new cases in the entrance gallery displays the history of this collection in its own right, in the context of the story of Anthony Arkell (1898–1980). Arkell was a colonial administrator of Sudan and Honorary Curator of the Petrie Museum from 1948–1963.²⁶



Fig. 6: Selection of the Sudanese objects that are now displayed together in the new entrance gallery. Left to right: UC19625, UC13215, UC43984. (Image © Mary Hinkley.)

He also led important excavations in Sudan in the 1940s that revealed early human activity in the area of Khartoum, finds from which were shared between UCL and the Sudan National Museum to promote teaching and research in Sudanese antiquity.²⁷ The new displays highlight this special link between UCL and the Sudan National Museum (fig. 6); a subject that we anticipate will become the focus of further future permanent displays at the Petrie Museum.

During the 1960s, the Petrie Museum continued to receive object donations through the division of finds from the Egypt Exploration Society excavations at Saqqara, Buhen and Qasr Ibrim.²⁸ A group of objects in the new displays, which come from these excavations,

²⁵ Garnett 2020: 66.

²⁶ Garnett 2020: 66–67; Smith 1981: 144–147.

²⁷ Arkell 1949, 1953; Garnett 2020: 67; Smith 1981: 144–145.

²⁸ Emory, Millard and Smith 1979; Janssen 1992: 83.

highlight that the export of ancient objects outside Egypt continued until the present past and prompts visitors to question the ethics of this process. Visitors are now made aware of modern legislation relating to the export of objects from Egypt on their entry to the Museum, and they are invited to question why objects continued to be removed from Egypt in the mid-late 20th century.²⁹ This section also highlights why the Petrie Museum no longer receives material from fieldwork, nor seeks to purchase undocumented material from Egypt.³⁰ It is hoped that these stories will encourage visitors to leave with a more holistic understanding of the complexities of object acquisition, and of issues surrounding the modern trade of antiquities.

Beyond a teaching collection: the Petrie Museum today

As well as being publicly accessible, the collection is in constant use for both teaching and research, and objects are used for subjects beyond Egyptology and archaeology, including law, engineering and anatomy.³¹ Modern techniques, such as 3D-printing replicas and digital imaging, encourage students and visitors to see these ancient objects in new ways³² (fig. 7). This is a living collection, and the new entrance displays now help to tell these stories of the Museum's modern relevance.

Alongside teaching and research, artists and performers are also encouraged to interpret objects in the collection. The Sudanese poet Al-Saddiq Al-Raddi, one of the most



Fig. 7: Amanda Ford Spora, PhD student in the UCL Institute of Archaeology, using 3D-printed replica objects in public handling sessions at the Petrie Museum. (Image courtesy of Amanda Ford Spora.)

important African poets writing in Arabic today, worked closely with objects from the site of Meroe in Sudan during a residency in 2012.³³ During his residency, Al-Raddi worked closely with Stephen Quirke (then-Curator) and Debbie Challis (Audience Development Officer) to create a series of poems inspired by the Museum's collection of objects from Meroe in Sudan that reflected aspects of ancient and modern Sudanese culture.³⁴ The new entrance displays showcase Al-Raddi's work on

²⁹ Stevenson 2019: 25.

³⁰ Stevenson and Challis 2015: 20.

³¹ MacDonald 2000; Stevenson and Challis 2015: 22–23.

³² For example the 3D Petrie Project, which ran from 2009–2011 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/3dpetriemuseum/> (accessed 21 April 2020).

³³ Al-Raddi 2015; Quirke 2015.

³⁴ Al-Raddi 2015.

the collection, focusing on his poem ‘He Tells Tales of Meroe’, inspired by a stone frog.³⁵ This poem is now displayed alongside the object in the entrance gallery, highlighting the potential of creative interpretation to attract diverse audiences and adding a new contextual dimension to the ancient object on display.

Collections care and improving physical access

Decanting the previous entrance gallery displays involved a major object move of around 500 papyrus frames, 75 bundles of archival material, and 60 stone inscriptions. This work was co-ordinated by Frances Potts and Alice Williams (Collections Assistants) who also undertook a space survey of the Petrie Museum over several months to prepare for this work to take place.³⁶ Conservation of objects chosen for display included the skilled repair of the Museum’s copy of Arkell’s *Early Khartoum* (1949) by an MA Conservation student from the UCL Institute of Archaeology. The first object that visitors see when they enter through the front door is now the Petrie Museum’s painted plaster bust of Amelia Edwards, which has been non-destructively laser-cleaned by UCL Conservator Graeme McArthur.³⁷ This bust was made by the British Museum for the UCL Egyptology Department in 1961, cast



Fig. 8: Amelia Edwards’ bust: before laser cleaning (left) and after (right). (Image courtesy of Graeme McArthur.)

³⁵ UC43984, Al-Raddi 2015: 96.

³⁶ Garnett, Potts and Wilson 2020: 43.

³⁷ UC80677, <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/2020/04/15/laser-cleaning-the-petrie-museums-plaster-cast-bust-of-amelia-edwards/> (accessed 21 April 2020).

from Percival Ball's (1845–1900) marble original.³⁸ Layers of paint and accumulated dirt have now been removed, revealing the original painted surface beneath which has not been seen for many years (fig. 8).

A formal access audit commissioned at the start of the project determined how we should approach improvements in physical accessibility: a key factor in the success of the funding application.³⁹ This included an assessment of entry routes into the Petrie Museum, as well as the Museum space itself. The entry routes to the Museum have now been improved as part of this project, meaning that the entrance gallery is now much more accessible to visitors who use a wheelchair. Improved wayfinding measures and welcome areas also create a welcoming and accessible experience for all visitors. User-friendly equipment is now available for visitors, including a touchscreen and portable mobile devices for visitors to access our location-enabled app within the Museum.⁴⁰ In partnership with ThinkSee3D, we have also produced three sets of high-quality 3D-printed objects for use in the Museum and in local schools to enable tactile object-handling experiences for all visitors.

Conclusion

We anticipate that this project will significantly improve the overall visitor experience at the Petrie Museum by offering a more balanced, engaging and accessible introduction to the collection for all visitors. A more physically- and intellectually-accessible 'gateway' space offers visitors the chance to acquaint themselves with Amelia Edwards and Flinders Petrie, as well as other characters from the history of the Museum, before moving into the main galleries to see the stunning results of Petrie's excavations. Through this nuanced, honest interpretation of the Museum's history, informed by representatives of our key stakeholder groups, we aimed to fulfil our ethical responsibility to deal with provocative and complex issues in a transparent way. Future summative evaluation of the visitor experience, when the Petrie Museum reopens after the COVID-19 pandemic, will determine whether we have succeeded in this aim.

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³⁸ <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/portrait/mw02045/Amelia-Edwards?LinkID=mp01434&role=sit&rNo=1> (accessed 21 April 2020).

³⁹ Garnett, Potts and Wilson 2020: 43.

⁴⁰ Garnett 2018: 67.

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