

# DINNER WITH OSIRIS, OR HOW TO MAKE YOUR OWN OSIRIS *VEGETANS*

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On 20 July 2019, the North Carolina Museum of Art (NCMA) opened a small, collection research-based exhibition entitled *What in the World is a Grain Mummy?* The focus of the exhibition was the Museum's only mummy: a small lacklustre bundle with a storied past. Gifted to the NCMA in 1974 as a falcon mummy and decades later relegated to storage after x-rays and CT scans showed it contained no bird bones, the small bundle was re-examined and identified as a grain mummy during the systematic study of the Egyptian collection,<sup>1</sup> and re-established as a genuine artefact which formed part of the annual cult celebration of Osiris.

The exhibition was free to the public and presented in West Building (the permanent collection building) in a gallery located next to the Egyptian galleries.<sup>2</sup> This small room was painted green – one of the colours of Osiris – to identify it as a special treat for visitors (fig. 1).<sup>3</sup> Two events were associated

\* I wish to thank NCMA librarians Erin Rutherford and Natalia Lonchyna for their assistance in finding online resources and articles related to adult programming in museums.

1 This was conducted by the author as GlaxoSmithKline Curatorial Research Fellow (2005–6) and GSK Research Curator of Egyptian Art (2008–11). The scientific examination of the bundle included x-radiography and CT scans, both of which showed a speckled pattern similar to that seen on x-rays of grain mummies at other institutions. This pattern is interpreted as the grains (or voids left behind following their decay) present in the Nile silt that makes up the core of the grain mummy.

2 Gallery 241 was available for the exhibition as the Mesoamerican artefacts normally on display there had been removed for the study with the rest of the ancient American collection by the 2018–20 GSK Curatorial Research Fellow.

3 West Building is an open concept building painted entirely white and bathed in natural light provided by oculi and glass walls. The green gallery served as a test to determine whether colour could be used in discrete areas without disrupting the overall aesthetic of the building. Similarly, the nature of the materials on display (various mummies wrapped in linen and bird specimens) required that light levels be five foot-candles (53.8 Lux) or lower, and custom-made opaque covers on the oculi in the ceiling were used as a test to darken the gallery and determine whether these could include works of art that are more light-sensitive in future temporary installations within West Building. I am grateful to conservation technician Marianne Schmeisser for creating these covers and the NCMA Art Conservation Center for supporting this experiment.

with *What in the World is a Grain Mummy?* As a teaser to promote the exhibition, the annual Weinberg Lecture of Egyptology held on 17 March 2019 focused on festivals in ancient Egypt and highlighted the Festival of Khoiak and the Osiris Mysteries. This talk – the best attended Weinberg lecture since the inception of the series in 2012 – was delivered by Emily Teeter. The other was *Dinner with Osiris*, a special lecture-dinner-craft session-exhibition visit event that is the subject of this paper. It is a delight to present Emily with this small token of appreciation for her scholarly contribution to the understanding of ancient Egyptian religion during her prolific career.



FIG. 1: Visitor learning about the NCM grain mummy in the exhibition *What in the World is a Grain Mummy?* on opening day. (Photo courtesy of the author.)

## HANDS-ON LEARNING FOR ADULTS: DINNER WITH OSIRIS

Hands-on activities in museums are generally associated with programming designed specifically and exclusively for children,<sup>4</sup> just as play, in general, is connected to the realm of kids. Adult learning, on the other hand, is thought to be serious and intellectual, featuring lectures and activities that allow for ‘little interaction and active learning’.<sup>5</sup> Until recently, play – here defined as ‘a voluntary activity involving active cognitive and/or physical engagement that

4 Fuentes 2014. This article focuses on science museums, but to a great extent the same can be said of art museums.

5 Sachatello-Sawyer and Fellenz 2001: 17.

is pleasurable for its own sake<sup>6</sup> – rarely featured in adult museum experiences. In order to provide meaningful activities as well as for adult programming to be well attended – and thus survive – it is important for museum staff to understand how adults learn (or like to learn) during a visit to the museum and deliver programmes that reflect and target these learning aspirations.<sup>7</sup>

The *Study of Adult Museum Programs* conducted by the Museum of the Rockies in the mid- to late-1990s<sup>8</sup> has demonstrated that adult learners are motivated by different factors and fall into four main categories: *knowledge seekers* (people who enjoy learning new things), *museum lovers* (who enjoy museums and are often docents or volunteers at these institutions), *skill builders* (who learn by doing or want to build something), and *socializers* (who want to meet others like them or spend time with those they came with).<sup>9</sup> The survey also investigated the strategies that resulted in successful and meaningful adult learning experiences. In this regard, the interaction with other participants as well as a connection with the instructor were deemed essential traits of these successful programmes.<sup>10</sup> Amongst those surveyed, a whopping 94% indicated that it was also ‘very important to have new or challenging content’.<sup>11</sup> In addition to connections with other individuals and stimulating content, participants in the survey also responded that the physical environment and the engagement of multiple senses during the event played an important role in the creation of a memorable atmosphere. In other words, an unforgettable museum learning experience ‘involves the whole person, not only the intellectual, but the sensory and emotional faculties as well. And when complex information is presented in a way that is enjoyable – intrinsically rewarding – the person will be motivated to pursue further learning’.<sup>12</sup> In further support of this, research conducted by Reach Advisors<sup>13</sup> to measure the meaningfulness of a museum experience indicates that the core of a successful adult programme is ‘a combination of object-based, multi-sensory, and interactive experience’.<sup>14</sup>

6 Grenier 2010: 78.

7 Hein 1998: 8.

8 From 1996 to 1999, Museum of the Rockies project staff interviewed 508 museum program participants, 75 instructors, and 143 museum program planners and attended more than 100 museum programs throughout the United States to learn more about the kinds of programs being offered, how they are organized, adults’ learning preferences in these programs, what adults remember, and what constitutes an excellent experience. Description copied verbatim (with American spelling) from Sachatello-Sawyer and Fellenz 2001: 17.

9 Sachatello-Sawyer and Fellenz 2001: 19.

10 Sachatello-Sawyer and Fellenz 2001: 20.

11 Sachatello-Sawyer and Fellenz 2001: 19.

12 Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995: 35.

13 Reach Advisors is a strategy, research, and predictive analytics firm with offices in New York and Massachusetts.

14 The data compiled and analysed were based on adult memories of childhood museum experiences and the most meaningful experiences visitors have had in museums as adults collected via online surveys. For further details, see Wilkening 2015.

*Dinner with Osiris* was part of the NCMA's Dining After Dark series, a regular adult learning experience with visitor outcomes in line with those described above. Participants in the activity will: (1) gain a better understanding of the art, artistic process, and/or topic being explored; (2) meet new people; (3) spend quality time with others (friends, family, other participants); (4) have a fun, enjoyable experience; (5) develop a new (or expand an existing) interest or curiosity, and (6) feel a sense of connection with art and/or nature. Typically, Dining After Dark events include a lecture followed by a buffet dinner and a walking tour of an exhibition.

*Dinner with Osiris* was designed by the author and Laura Finan, in collaboration with Steve Wallawender and Rachel Siegel,<sup>15</sup> and aimed to engage adults in a multi-sensory learning experience directly related to concepts explored in the exhibition. In this instance, the event went a step further: it included a 30-minute lecture, a buffet dinner, and a hands-on activity that gave enough time for participants to complete their project and visit the exhibition where they could interact with the presenter. The lecture explored the concept of grain mummies, described how they were made, explained their role in the cult of Osiris and introduced other types of Osiris *vegetans* – the Osiris brick and the Osiris bed. The buffet dinner offered delicious grain-based dishes<sup>16</sup> that reminded visitors (in a rather tasty way!) of the importance of agriculture in ancient Egypt and the agricultural cycle of life and its symbolic connection to the life and death of Osiris. The hands-on activity – the result of a summer full of experiments (see below) – immersed participants in the creation of their own Osiris 'chia pet,' exploring in a tactile way the role of the priests who made grain mummies during the month of Khoiak. Finally, the visit to the exhibition brought all the concepts learned during the course of the event together with the curatorial research and scientific analysis of the grain mummy and its rehabilitation as a genuine ancient Egyptian artefact, providing an in-depth understanding of the NCMA's grain mummy.

### MAKING YOUR OWN OSIRIS VEGETANS

The inscriptions at the Temple of Dendera are the most important source describing the creation of grain mummies, furnishing materials, instructions, and dates for each of the various steps in this ritualistic process.<sup>17</sup>

15 Finan is Assistant Director of Advancement Events, Wallawender former Executive Chef, and Siegel former Director of Food Service Operations at NCMA. The author is grateful to these colleagues for their collaboration as well as Helen Stefanidis, former Manager of Volunteer and Community Experience, who lent a helping hand during the event.

16 The menu consisted of lamb/beef brochettes, mjadarah (lentils and rice with caramelized onions), Egyptian barley salad with pomegranate vinaigrette, quinoa chickpea salad served with naan bread, and Egyptian basbousa (semolina cake) for dessert.

17 Although the Dendera texts are not presented in a particularly coherent fashion, they nonetheless offer insight in the ritual making of these Osiris figures. See Chassinat 1966: 53–57, Goddio and Masson-Berghoff 2016: 168–9.

*Priests began preparing grain mummies on the twelfth day of the month of Khoiak (mid-October to mid-November), mixing mud, grain seeds, and water from the flood into two gold molds shaped like a mummified being. By the twenty-first of Khoiak, grains had sprouted, and the two halves were tied together and dried, to be wrapped the next day.*<sup>18</sup>

Within a museum event context, it is impossible to faithfully replicate the creation of a grain mummy: the production time frame measures days not hours or minutes, and the materials necessary are prohibited in gallery spaces.<sup>19</sup> Instead of grain mummies, the hands-on activity was to focus on another type of Osiris *vegetans*. The author carried out experiments (with frequent discussion and brainstorming with Finan) to determine which material was to be used and whether it was better suited to the Osiris brick or Osiris bed, which method could fit within a 45-minute time frame and require as few finishing touches at home, and which necessitates the least ‘gardening’ maintenance (participants were to plant their Osiris *vegetans* at home as this could not be done at the museum).

#### THE OSIRIS BRICK

In an attempt to remain as faithful as possible to a terracotta Osiris brick, the first experiment used modelling clay onto which a figure of Osiris in profile was traced and hollowed out using tools found around the house. The process was simple as a stencil was used to trace the figure and clay scooped out to create the hollowed form. The brick was left to dry in the sun for several days before soil and chia seeds were added. The earth was moistened with water from a spray bottle at least twice daily for a few days. The spray bottle was used to prevent the sun-baked clay from returning to a soft, malleable state when in contact with significant amounts of water.

After several days of constant tending, no germination was to be seen. It is possible that edible chia seeds do not germinate when planted, had not been sufficiently moistened to do so, or did not grow well when covered with soil. Water poured from a watering can was used to create a much wetter soil, but the results were as expected: the clay became soft to the touch and even cracked. And chia seeds had still not germinated (fig. 2). While the sun-baked clay Osiris brick had the look of an ancient artefact, this material was not the best for the purpose of the activity and this option was eliminated.

The next material to be tested for the Osiris bricks was wet foam used by florists. Again, the Osiris stencil helped trace the god’s profile in the foam

<sup>18</sup> The description used here is the short paragraph from the exhibition didactic that explained how grain mummies were made.

<sup>19</sup> This event was held in the Sip Café area of West Building to allow visitors easy access to the exhibition atypically situated in the collection gallery spaces, just a few steps away. The lecture was held across the Gipson Plaza in the SECU Auditorium in East Building.



FIG. 2: Various stages of the creation of the Osiris brick using modelling clay. (Photos courtesy of the author.)

and, using a small X-acto knife, a grid was cut inside the figure to break small sections to hollow out the shape. The bottom was smoothed out with a plastic clay sculpting tool. Instead of chia seeds, grass seeds were sown in the soil placed in the hollowed-out Osiris figure and, following instructions on the packaging, the foam Osiris brick was placed in a shallow container and filled with water. The foam absorbed the wetness and provided an excellent growing environment for the grass seeds. Osiris sprouted within three days and continued to do so for weeks with occasional moistening of the foam—eventually requiring a ‘haircut’ or two (fig. 3).

Despite the spectacular germination and the fun while caring for the grass seed Osiris brick, this material was eventually abandoned due to health concerns. Florist’s wet foam is toxic with repetitive exposure and, while this was a one-time use, there were worries that some participants might not want to work with this material. Another material had to be found and perhaps a different type of *Osiris vegetans* was in order.



FIG. 3: Various stages of the creation of the Osiris brick using florist's wet foam. (Photos courtesy of the author.)

### THE OSIRIS BED

The search for another material that was easy to manipulate, water-resistant, and required minimal finishing touches at home led to polymer clay. Using the smallest block of clay available, it was actually possible to create an Osiris bed using the same stencil mentioned above.<sup>20</sup> With polymer clay, it was necessary to create an Osiris bed because the thickness of the clay needed to be consistent to ensure even firing. Here, the instructions were to flatten the clay to an even thickness of no more than 6 mm, creating a surface large enough to place the stencil and cut an Osiris figure out of it. By removing the extra clay around the figure, forming a ball, and flattening it again, one could cut strips of equal width to create the sides of the Osiris bed. Several strips were used to go around the entire figure carefully, with very little clay leftover.

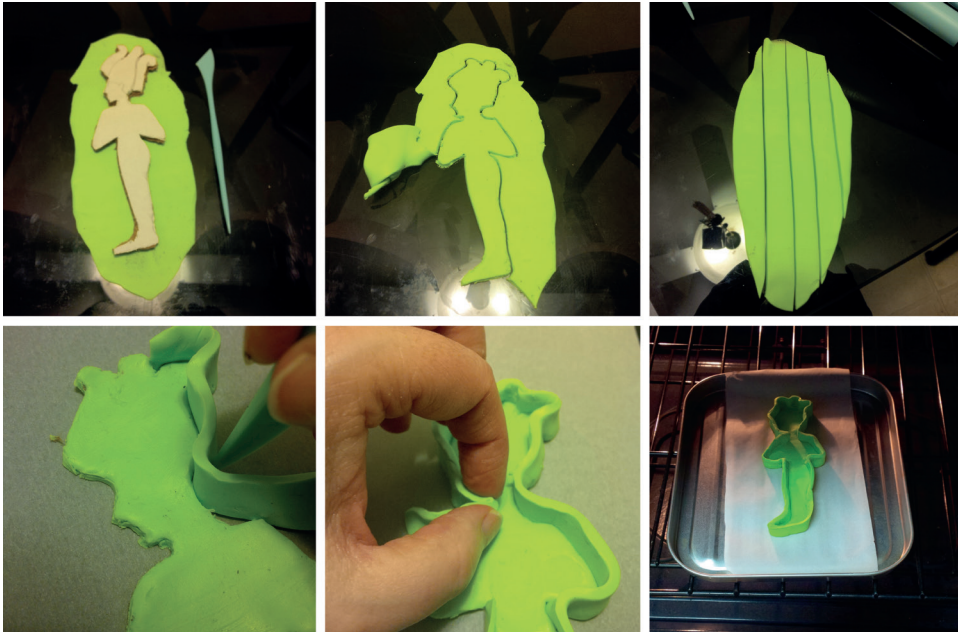


FIG. 4: Various stages of the creation of the Osiris bed using polymer clay. (Photos courtesy of the author.)

The process is more elaborate than scooping out a hollow in a brick, but the clay was malleable and stuck to itself with just a little pinching. Unlike the previous materials, polymer clay needs to be baked (fired); however, this can be done in 15 minutes in one's oven at home (fig. 4).<sup>21</sup> Once cooled, the Osiris bed could be filled with soil and grass seeds, and sprayed with water. Like the foam brick Osiris, the grass sprouted within three days; like the modelling clay brick, it required watering twice a day. The polymer Osiris did very well on the

<sup>20</sup> The stencil was max. height 15,7 cm x max. width 5,5 cm.

<sup>21</sup> The time of firing is 15 minutes for a thickness of 6 mm; the duration of firing increases by 15 minutes for each 6 mm of thickness.





FIG. 5: Participants enjoying the various phases of the Dinner with Osiris event. (Photos courtesy of Laura Finan and Helen Stefanidis.)

balcony in bright sunlight and on a windowsill inside the home (it was planted twice to test this). As a final test before deciding whether this was the *Osiris vegetans* participants would make, the author gave Finan and her husband the illustrated instructions, two bricks of polymer clay, and clay working tools, and tasked both with creating the *Osiris bed* within 45 minutes or less. Even with different levels of manual skills and dexterity, both succeeded with time to spare.

### HOW WAS DINNER WITH OSIRIS?

*Dinner with Osiris* sold out very quickly, the hands-on activity added to the typical Dining After Dark programme having been a motivator for many participants to sign up for the event. The ‘*Osiris chia pet*’ mentioned in the description had provided a familiar entry point into the little-known world of grain mummies and *Osiris vegetans*.

During the event, it was obvious to staff and volunteers that participants – from adults in their thirties to retirees, and even a family with an older child – had enjoyed themselves (fig. 5). There was laughter, camaraderie, discussions, and questions. Participants were not only surprised to know the NCMA had a mummy but also that it was nothing like they expected.<sup>22</sup> They were intrigued by its interesting story and thrilled to learn more about a curator’s work. Attendees were excited to take their *Osiris bed* home to bake it, and plant it with the soil and seeds provided them in small plastic bags (some emailed us to show they had been successful, fig. 6). People helped each other with their project, friends were made, and business cards were exchanged. Some wanted the recipe for the Egyptian barley salad.<sup>23</sup> Others were wow-ed that they had made a small polymer version of the large wooden *Osiris bed* found in King Tutankhamun’s tomb – a nugget of information mentioned in the instructions provided for the hands-on activity. Several were amazed (and some quite touched) that the author and Finan had gone above and beyond, discussing and experimenting all summer to find the way to create the best *Osiris vegetans* for them to replicate.



FIG. 6: Photo of the sprouting *Osiris vegetans* shared by a participant. (Reproduced with permission.)

22 One participant admitted being much relieved that a grain mummy was not a human mummy stuffed with emmer wheat and barley, as she thought.

23 The recipe can be found here: <https://www.onceuponachef.com/recipes/egyptian-barley-salad-with-pomegranate-vinaigrette.html>.

## CONCLUSION

The feedback provided to both the author and Finan at the event and afterwards indicated that we had succeeded in satisfying the participants' curiosity and adding to their knowledge, in giving them food for thought and titillating their taste buds, in challenging their manual skills, and providing the opportunity to socialise together and engage with event staff.

Now the participants all know what a grain mummy is... and they will never forget because they had a wonderful time learning about it. 🙌

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