

## THE SHOW MUST GO ON: REMOTELY MONITORING THE INSTALLATION OF A TRAVELLING EXHIBITION\*

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### Preparing the touring exhibition *Egypt. Land of Discoveries*

Between 2018 and 2020, the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (RMO) in Leiden and its partners produced a touring exhibition called *Egypt. Land of Discoveries*.<sup>2</sup> The show tells the story of the European study of ancient Egypt from the time of the military invasion of Napoleon at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present day. In the exhibition, objects from the Egyptian collection of the RMO illustrate the exploits of European travellers, collectors, scientific expeditions and archaeological excavations. In addition, it explores current research projects and advanced technological research methods. The selected objects highlight Dutch contributions to the archaeology of ancient Egypt in particular, and simultaneously introduce visitors to the worlds of ancient Egyptian religious and funerary practices. The exhibition was created for a Japanese audience in collaboration with the Tokyo Shimbun, a division of the Japanese news media conglomerate the Chunichi Shimbun, together with the exhibition's supervisor, Professor Tomoaki Nakano of Chubu University. The aim of the team was to create a show that was different from previous exhibitions on ancient Egypt displayed in Japan. Professor Nakano, former associate curator of the Ancient Orient Museum in Tokyo and closely familiar with Egyptian exhibitions shown in Japan over the last five decades, helped develop the concept *Egypt. Land of Discoveries*. The exhibition allowed the RMO to invest in conservation and photography of several of the selected objects. In addition, the museum was able to investigate a number of mummified humans and animals using advanced Computed Tomography methods, the results of which were presented in sophisticated digital 3D models.<sup>3</sup>

The exhibition was planned to travel around Japan between 2020 and 2022, visiting eight venues for about two months each: the Kyushu National Museum in Fukuoka; the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art in Sapporo; the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art in Nagoya; the Shizuoka City Museum of Art; the Bunkamura Museum of Art in Tokyo; the Sendai City Museum; the Yamaguchi Prefectural Art Museum; and the Hyogo Prefectural Museum of Art in Kobe. In March 2020, the selected objects (around 250 in total) had been prepared for travel and were placed into 38 crates. The crated objects were entrusted to Crown Fine Art, a specialised shipping and installation company, which had placed them in their secured and climate-controlled storage facility prior to the transfer to Amsterdam Airport Schiphol. The

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<sup>2</sup> Nakano (ed.) 2020.

<sup>3</sup> De Bakker et al. 2020.

RMO had scheduled one collection manager, one conservator and the exhibition manager as couriers to accompany the objects and to supervise transportation and mounting of the show at the first venue in Fukuoka where the premiere of the exhibition was planned to take place on 25 April 2020.

Then, early in 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic caused a global crisis. On March 15, the Netherlands imposed its first full lockdown and Japan soon followed. With international transportation coming to a complete standstill, the RMO was unable to send the objects to Japan. Meanwhile, Japanese museums had to close their doors to visitors, making it impossible for them to receive loans.

### Remotely installing an exhibition

In August 2020, international transport resumed and Japanese museums were reopened. The RMO and the Tokyo Shimbun jointly decided not to postpone the touring exhibition, for financial and contractual reasons, but also out of a moral obligation towards the museums who had planned for the exhibition in their programmes. The tour's schedule had to be adjusted, moving the venues of Sapporo and Fukuoka after that of Kobe, and moving the Fukuoka venue from the Kyushu National Museum to the Fukuoka City Museum. Now, the tour could finally begin, but the practicalities of securely transporting and installing the exhibition posed a challenge. Because of the global health situation, related insurance issues and extended periods of quarantining required after travel, it was ruled out that RMO employees could act as couriers for the objects. After an assessment by the RMO, the Netherlands Culture Heritage Agency (RCE) and the museum's insurance company, an alternative was devised: the transportation and installation of the show was to take place without the physical presence of RMO couriers. The installation would be closely monitored through a livestreaming video connection between a team at the RMO and a Japanese team at the venue of the tour's new debut: the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art in Nagoya.

To adapt to the new circumstances, a different installation plan had to be designed. Fortunately, a number of preparations had already been carried out prior to the COVID-19 crisis to expedite the installation process, as only limited time was available between venues for deinstalling and mounting. Mounts were made to measure in advance for easy installation, and some objects were pre-mounted in the Netherlands. For the operation, Japanese art installation company Yamato Transport had been selected by the Tokyo Shimbun. Previous touring exhibitions of the RMO in Japan had been transported and installed in collaboration with them, most recently in 2010 and 2011 for the show *Fascinating Mummies*. They were also hired for the installation of the exhibition *Golden Legend*, which included a loan from the RMO collection of the Classical World. The company's familiarity with RMO procedures and experience with handling particular objects from the RMO collection were important assets for the task at hand. The Tokyo Shimbun requested that Yamato Transport form a team of art handlers who had installed RMO objects before and were acquainted with the challenges of moving particular pieces. Fortunately, careful preparations had already been completed prior to the pandemic. A Japanese team consisting of Professor Nakano, the head of the Yamato team of art handlers, the exhibition designer, and museum's staff had visited the RMO in 2019 to personally examine the selected objects and study their dimensions and condition.

In the summer of 2020, transportation and installation finally began after a delay of five months. The crated objects were flown to Nagoya in late August, soon followed by a separate shipment of a cart with any tools that might be needed during the installation: silicon tubing and drops, drill sets, loggers, and conservation material. A last-minute removal from the cart was the sturgeon glue, as it turned out that sturgeon is on the CITES list of protected animals. After the objects and tools had reached the venue, the installation sessions were carried out. The sessions would start at 14:00 Japanese time, meaning the Leiden team had to be ready for the digital meetings at 06:00 Dutch time. During every session, the Leiden team consisted of a conservator, a collection manager, and the project manager, who would log onto the Microsoft Teams meeting. Due to COVID measures, most Leiden team members were working from home, with only few colleagues joining the remote installation from the meeting room in the museum in Leiden. The Japanese team consisted of Professor Hideyuki Ohara – an independent conservator hired by the Tokyo Shimbun to check the condition of the objects – Professor Nakano, the Yamato art handlers, the curator of the museum venue, and several colleagues of the Tokyo Shimbun. Four cameras with different angles were set up at the venue, allowing the Dutch team to monitor the installation process in the exhibition gallery: one camera recorded the crate that was being unpacked, one showed the table for the condition checks, one was pointed at the showcase in which the object would be mounted, and, finally, one hand-held camera offered additional perspectives. Step by step, the Japanese colleagues guided the Leiden team through the stages of unpacking, condition check, and mounting, and via the connection, the teams could communicate and conveniently discuss questions and address concerns raised by either team.

Unsurprisingly, a key factor in the whole affair, which relied on precision and specificities, was mutual intelligibility. To break the language barrier between the teams in Leiden and Japan, a Japanese-English interpreter on the Japanese side and a Dutch-Japanese interpreter with the Leiden team were present during the entirety of the installation. The interpreter hired by the RMO, Mr René Lourens, had to be primed for this very specific operation with its niche terminology, as words like *ushabti* and specific types of silicon tubes are not part of everyday Japanese vocabulary. In advance of the installation sessions, the RMO project team therefore shared with him information about the Egyptian collection, as well as a list of the materials and tools that are commonly used during installation. Ahead of time, the RMO collections managers had also sent the Japanese team a 280-page installation manual so that the Yamato art handlers could further prepare for the task. Mr Lourens translated the manual into Japanese, because of jargon that is difficult to translate by an interpreter on the spot. For each object in the exhibition the manual contained detailed information, sometimes illustrated with photos and diagrams, about how to handle and mount it. It would explain, for example, how to install supports, whether an object could be removed from its pallet, which kinds of material could be used to cover the pallet, and which areas of the object are particularly fragile. Photographs allowed the Japanese team to check the objects for any damage sustained during transportation.

## Reflecting on the process

Before COVID-19, travelling a show abroad meant forming an international team with members that would meet and closely interact with one another to produce an exhibition. During the COVID-19 pandemic, channels of communication had to be reinvented and were less direct. This led to a different logistical and sensory experience. Communicating through a live video connection made the best out of a bad situation. Under the circumstances, the interaction between the two locations went well, although all parties involved agreed that it was not ideal.

The operation was successful, but to reduce the risk of damage, it was decided not to install a handful of objects. Three stelae that were shipped to Japan have a centre of gravity located in such an unexpected spot that they can only be handled by people who are thoroughly familiar with the objects. The risk of damage was deemed too great by the RMO and therefore the stelae were kept in their crates. Despite initial disappointment over the exclusion of these pieces in the show, their omission eventually turned out to be a blessing in disguise when more space had to be created in the floor plan of the exhibition to comply with Japan's strict social distancing regulations.

In a few ways, the adopted installation method was insightful. Leaving the installation in the hands of another team sometimes proved to be educational in practical matters. For example, instead of sliding paper to install heavy sculptures, the Japanese colleagues made use of sliding sheets, a material the Dutch colleagues were not very familiar with. Because the installation was monitored digitally, conservators, collection managers, other colleagues and museum interns at the RMO could rotate and join the Microsoft Teams meetings to learn about specific details of the installation.

Regarding installation procedures, the teams found that the preparations for mounting the objects saved a lot of time. This suggests that touring exhibitions can be improved by shipping objects in a manner that anticipates unexpected restrictions in the availability of museum couriers. This includes pre-mounting objects and preparing an installation manual before transportation. The deinstallation of the exhibition in Nagoya progressed efficiently because of the experience in collaborating, communicating online and object handling the Japanese and the Dutch teams had gained. Deinstalling and packing objects is a more precarious procedure than removing objects from their crates and mounting them. The former process posed a bigger challenge to the two teams, because it required more handling of the objects. Both teams agreed that, more than during the installation, the physical presence of the Leiden team would have been preferred during deinstallation to assist and to be able to immediately call attention to unstable objects.

Perhaps the most crucial aspect of unpacking and deinstalling is the condition check, which cannot be properly carried out through a video connection. It requires couriers that are able to inspect objects from close up and at different angles, and to carefully touch and listen to the material of objects. This essential task was performed by Professor Ohara, who had worked with the museum's collection during previous travelling exhibitions. In addition to his expert scrutiny, the RMO received numerous condition photos of the objects for a supplementary check. Although this solution was effective and indispensable for the success

of the installation, the RMO would like to send conservators and collections managers to Japan as soon as circumstances allow for a personal condition check of the objects.

The history of more than 25 years of fruitful collaboration between the RMO and the Tokyo Shimbun created a basis for reciprocal trust, and indeed, the museum could confidently depend on the expert organisation of the Tokyo Shimbun. As the pandemic and the related distancing and quarantining measures continued, the exhibition has been mounted and deinstalled without the physical presence of RMO couriers at three Japanese venues at the time of writing. Each time, installation and deinstallation were carried out by the same team of handlers from Yamato Transport, while the RMO teams monitored and assisted the installation remotely, always assisted by interpreters. All parties came to the conclusion that in this time of crisis, when personal contact is hindered, it was most important to show understanding towards each other and to rely on the professionalism of all colleagues involved. More than ever, empathy and close cooperation turned out to be key in successfully mounting an internationally organised exhibition. The experience has taught us that installing and deinstalling an exhibition with ancient Egyptian objects without the physical presence of its couriers is possible for a museum, and for the RMO and the Tokyo Shimbun it proved to be an important alternative to postponing the entire touring exhibition. It is, however, not an ideal procedure that could ever substitute the intricacies of in-person communication required for unpacking, installing, deinstalling and boxing heavy and fragile antiquities.

## Bibliography

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Figure 1: Art handlers of Yamato Transport placing a coffin lid into a showcase, with a camera operator in the background. Installation of the show at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art in Nagoya. (Courtesy of the Tokyo Shimbun.)



Figure 2: During installation, the feed from the cameras leads into the Microsoft Teams meeting, attended by colleagues of the RMO and the Tokyo Shimbun. Installation of the show at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art in Nagoya. (Courtesy of the Tokyo Shimbun.)



Figure 3: Unpacking of the objects is monitored by RMO collection manager Jeroen Rensen in the RMO meeting room in Leiden. Installation of the show at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art in Nagoya. (Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden.)



Figure 4: RMO exhibition manager Hanneke Kik and interpreter René Lourens communicating with the team in Japan through the video connection. Installation of the show at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art in Nagoya. (Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden.)



Figure 5: The installation of limestone stelae is followed from different angles. Installation of the show at the Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art in Nagoya. (Courtesy of the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden.)