



“NEGOTIATING CHRONOLOGY AND GEOGRAPHY IN MUSEUM SPACES: AFRICA AND EGYPT ON DISPLAY,” AT THE COLLEGE ART ASSOCIATION IN FEBRUARY 2016

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The relationship between Egypt and Africa is changeable, without true consensus. Egyptologists cite a lack of archaeological evidence for an ancient Egyptian presence in sub-Saharan Africa; however, Egypt’s influence permeates the contemporary construction of identity in all civilizations, including those of modern Africa. If there is no relationship between ancient Egypt and traditional African art, should Egyptian and African objects rightly share gallery spaces? Several recent exhibitions and reinstallations of African collections, including those at the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Krannert Museum of Art at the University of Illinois, and the Birmingham Museum of Art, have integrated ancient Egyptian material into their displays. The 2012 exhibition *African Cosmos: Stellar Arts*, organized by the National Museum of African Art and continuing to travel through 2015, examines the visual reproduction of heavenly bodies by cultures occupying the African continent. By design, the show incorporated material produced by so-called “traditional” sub-Saharan African societies with that of contemporary artists and, notably, works from ancient Egypt.

With these recent curatorial decisions in mind, we are excited to chair a panel on the issue of museums displaying ancient Egyptian and sub-Saharan African artworks together at the 104th College Art Association Annual Conference in Washington, DC in February 2016. For the session, we asked participants to evaluate the past, present, and future of Egypt and Africa in conversation in the museum space and to consider questions of whether Egypt and Africa belong in shared context. Our goals are to address several questions: What is the best curatorial strategy for integrating these materials? What is the responsibility of the museum in mediating between these

two cultures? How should curators address the existence of many Egypts and many Africas? Is the discrepancy of methodologies within these two fields problematic? At the outset, we posited the possibility that there is no single rectifying approach to these issues.

We see our session, “Negotiating chronology and geography in museum spaces: Africa and Egypt on display,” as the start of an ongoing inquiry into the relationship between Africa and Egypt in art museums. At CAA we will hear from curators and scholars of both ancient Egyptian and traditional African arts who will address a wide range of issues. Liz Cummins will present case studies of exhibitions from the past 20 years that considered Egypt’s place in Africa, while Clare Fitzgerald will discuss issues of audience reception. Ed Bleiberg and Kevin Dumouchelle of the Brooklyn Museum are collaborating on a presentation of how these issues impact collaboration within institutions. The curator of *African Cosmos*, Christine Mullen Kreamer of the National Museum for African Art, will reflect on her experience bringing African and Egyptian materials together for a major traveling exhibition. Together, these papers will establish a historical background and envision a potential future for our topic while showing how experts in both fields are shaping the current landscape of curatorial practice.

The existence of a journal covering ancient Egyptian interconnections demonstrates that we are living through a watershed moment in how non-Western cultures caught in the grip of postcolonial thinking are viewed by researchers and non-specialists. Museums are the primary archive for both Egyptology and African studies—yet the museum is also the public face of such scholarship. Museum goers are unlikely to be as informed as the specialists who conceive

Hellman and Kreiter | “Negotiating Chronology and Geography in Museum . . .”

and install exhibitions, but managing visitor expectations is challenging. What are the general public’s concerns, and how should curators and museum educators address them? Museums occupy a special space partway between educational institutions and entertainment. Yet we are also occupying a space in which social issues relating to race and class are at the forefront of people’s minds. Change in the way the general public understands Egypt and Africa can be determined by the way museums display these works. Discourses on the Western intervention on the African continent and its impact on our perceptions of race in ancient Egypt have become popular recently. Yet that is not the only social inequality museums could address; objects in African and Egyptian collections represent what is, as one Michael C. Carlos Museum display once put it, “art for the few.” Museum audiences comprise visitors who come not only from the privileged “few” but from the many to whom these works were not accessible in their original contexts. We admire the activist mentality out of which serious criticism of institutional ownership of African and Egyptian arts arises, but our greater concern is that the incompleteness of many Egyptian and African objects in museums leads to visitors viewing these artworks as anthropological artifacts rather than appreciating their aesthetic values. We wonder what changes in display need

to be made to encourage a shift in how museumgoers define what is “African” or “Egyptian.” For example, African collections are expected to represent the entire continent, but this rarely includes North Africa, with Egypt as an exception. We are thinking about the relationship between this question and the classification of African and Egyptian cultures as art history, archaeology, or ethnography.

While working on our CAA panel it has become apparent that the issues we are dealing with are sprawling and answers are not easily forthcoming. It is our hope to be able to collect both the papers from the session and perhaps future scholarship and criticism into a volume that lays out the issues in interconnectivity between Egypt and Africa alongside creative problem solving for museum displays. Although it is unfortunate that there is seemingly less archaeological data to suggest a clear relationship between Egypt and the rest of the continent than some might like, the questions and resulting discussions surrounding the material records of ancient Egypt and its sub-Saharan neighbors have the potential to push thinking about how we define art and how we frame interconnections between distant times and places. There may be no definite answers to these questions, but in their absence we see a space in which curators and scholars can and should take risks.