

The Ethical Practice of Displaying Human Remains in Egyptian Museums

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The International Council of Museums (ICOM) issued a code of ethics for the museums in 2004, several parts of which addressed to how to deal with human remains. This code covers all ethical considerations concerning dealing with human remains. The most interesting part is the one that dealt with need to remove the human remains from public display upon request from the originating communities. Recently, museum professionals have started to investigate this issue from another perspective, raising the dilemma of ethical practice when displaying human remains to the public. They started to think about what the deceased would say if they were asked for their approval for their remains to be displayed to the public after death. Individual museums varied in their opinions, with some approving and others opposing the idea. Some museums have started to set their own ethical codes no how to display remains. Others reached the conclusion that all humans remains should be removed from display. Since this topic has started to be discussed in museums worldwide, I wanted to investigate the opinions of Egyptian museums regarding displaying human remains by means of interviews with museum specialists. Are they concerned about this dilemma? Do they follow ethical procedures in displaying human remains? What are the ethical challenges for museums in relation to the display of human remains, and what changes have there been? A survey was also conducted among members of the Egyptian public to learn how they feel about the display of human remains.

Keywords: ethics, mummies, human remains, Egyptian museums, display of human remains, exhibitions

1 Introduction

Human remains vary; they can be cremated, skeletal, mummified or even artefacts carved from human remains. The acquisition of human remains by museums has been considered a source of information and education. Ancient human remains provide a unique insight into human funerary practices and cultures of the past.

Displaying the dead has long been normal in western societies. An early example is displaying the relics of saints in the Middle Ages.¹ A different reason for displaying human remains started to emerge in Europe between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries in the “anatomy theatre” where human and animal remains were displayed and dissected in public as a source of entertainment.² The same era also witnessed the display of the dead with no ethical

¹ WESCHE, A. (ed.). *Recommendations for the Care of Human Remains in Museums and Collections*, German Museums Association, 2013, P. 12.

² MARRE, P., and VILLET, R. Anatomy theaters in the history and teaching of surgery, In: *Journal of visceral surgery*, 157(3), Suppl. 2, 2020, pp. 73–76.

concerns in various places, such as Sedlec Ossuary, known as the Bone Church, near Prague, or the Capuchin catacombs in Palermo. There was also the Paris Morgue in the nineteenth century, where the people of Paris were invited to enter and see corpses for free amusement.³

Mummies were sold in Egypt to be displayed in cabinets of curiosities in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In hope of finding further valuable objects under the bandages, many mummies were unwrapped with no scientific purpose in mind. Up until the twentieth century, the powder made from ground mummies was regarded in Europe as a cure for almost any disease.⁴

Since the late 1990s, there has been an increasing discussion about the rights of the dead and the ethics of storing and displaying human remains in museums. They started to question who owns the dead and speaks for them. Notably, this discussion started in countries with indigenous minorities: the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.⁵ In the 1980s, Australian communities were the first to initiate an ongoing campaign to return their ancestral remains from museums all around the world.⁶ Discussions on the same topic were held at the World Archaeological Congress in 1989, at its inter-congress meeting in South Dakota, USA. This discussion led to the adoption of the Vermillion Accord on the treatment of human remains.⁷

The International Council of Museums (ICOM) issued a code of ethics for museums in 2004, several parts of which addressed how to deal with human remains, and another code of ethics for natural history museums in 2013, in which Section 1 is dedicated to human remains. This article is concerned with the code of ethics of 2004, which covers all ethics associated with dealing with human remains, from acquisition to scientific research to their exhibition (articles 2.5, 3.7, 4.3). Arguably the most interesting part is article 4.4, as it approves removal from display upon request from originating communities.⁸

All museums started to follow the ICOM code and developed their own codes in which they set out instructions on how to preserve human remains. Most museums differentiated between two types of human remains: indigenous peoples and uncontested human remains. With regard to remains attributed to indigenous peoples, most museums agreed to remove these from display and return them to be buried upon request from the originating community in accordance with their afterlife beliefs. The Smithsonian institution repatriated over 5,000 individuals.⁹ There was also the case of the Mungo man, the oldest Indigenous human remains on the Australian continent, which were moved to the National Museum of Australia in Canberra to be studied. In 2017, the skeleton was returned to its place of origin to be buried (Fig. 1).¹⁰

³ ZOLA, E. *Therese Raquin*, Penguin Classics, 1962, pp. 109–110.

⁴ WESCHE, A. (ed.). *recommendations for the care of human remains*, P. 16.

⁵ ALBERTI, S. et al. Should we display the dead? In: *Museum and Society* 7(3), 2009, pp. 133–149.

⁶ MCKINNEY, N., Ancestral remains from Oceania: Histories and relationships in the collection of the British Museum, in: *Regarding the Dead: Human Remains in the British Museum*, Fletcher A. and Antoine D. eds., the British Museum Press, 2014, PP. 34–42.

⁷ FFORDE, C. Vermillion Accord on Human Remains (1989) (Indigenous Archaeology). In: Smith, C. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Global Archaeology*. Springer, New York, NY, 2014, pp 7612–7615.

⁸ ICOM. Code of Ethics for Museums. 2017. <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/ICOM-code-En-web.pdf>

⁹ SMITHSONIAN. Annual report 2020: Repatriation Activities of the Smithsonian institution. www.naturalhistory.si.edu/sites/default/files/media/file/2020-annual-report-repatriation-activities-smithsonian-institution.pdf

¹⁰ PERROTTET, T. A 42,000-Year-Old Man Finally Goes Home. In: *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 2019. <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/mungo-man-finally-goes-home-180972835/>



Fig. 1: *Mungo Man, Australia.* Source: <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/mungo-man-finally-goes-home-180972835/>.

Uncontested human remains – those which are not the subject of claims made by any community group – posed a different set of ethical dilemmas with regard to displaying them to the public. Museums varied in their opinions, some approving and others opposing the idea. However, all agreed on the need to make a clear commitment to the highest standards of governance, accountability and responsibility regarding the treatment of human remains. They also agreed that the opinion of the public in this case matters.

In 2005, the UK Government’s Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) conducted visitor surveys on this topic. The surveys indicated that most museum visitors were comfortable with and often expected to see human remains. This led to issue the 2005 “Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums”, a code of practice for handling and displaying human remains. This guideline mentions that “human remains should be displayed if the museum believes that it makes a material contribution to a particular interpretation; and that contribution could not be made effectively in another way”. Human remains should also be positioned so that people do not come across them by surprise. Such displays should always be accompanied by sufficient explanatory material.¹¹ In 2009, English Heritage and the National Trust also consulted public opinion about displaying human remains. The majority agreed that displaying human burials can help the public understand how people have lived in the past. However, in the last ten years, wider aspects of the care of human remains have been developed. This resulted in the creation of the British Museum Policy on Human Remains, issued in 2013.¹²

The German Museums Association drew up its first guidelines in 2013. These guidelines recommend that presentation of human remains must be respectful and scientifically accurate. Efforts should always be made to make visitors aware of the sensitive nature of such exhibits by providing appropriate information.¹³ Museum galleries Scotland issued their own code of ethics concerning human remains in 2011. They also distributed surveys showing that most visitors are comfortable with, and often expect to see, human remains as part of museum displays.¹⁴

¹¹ Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Guidance for the Care of Human Remains in Museums*, London, 2005.

¹² FLETCHER, D. et al. (eds), *Regarding the Dead: Human Remains in the British Museum*. British Museum, 2019. <https://www.britishmuseum.org/our-work/departments/human-remains>

¹³ WESCHE, A. (ed.). *recommendations for the care of human remains*, p. 58.

¹⁴ <https://www.museumsgalleriesscotland.org.uk/advice-article/introduction-to-human-remains-in-museums/>



Fig. 2: *Manchester Museum covers the displayed mummies.*
Source: SWANEY Meg, *The Living Dead*.



Fig. 3: *Mummy of Nesmin, Rhode Island Museum.* Source: <https://turn-to10.com/archive/risd-mummy-moved-for-new-exhibit>.

Changes in the method of display have taken place in museums. In 2008, Manchester Museum covered three of its unwrapped or partially unwrapped Egyptian mummies with white shrouds (Fig. 2), reportedly in response to complaints from visitors who were “concerned or disturbed about their display”.¹⁵ After further dialogue with the public, the museum uncovered the mummy of Khary, and the face and feet of Asru. The child mummy was removed from display and returned to its home institution. In the US, the Rhode Island School of Design Museum had had a 2,100-year-old mummified priest named Nesmin in residence since 1938. He was displayed wrapped next to his coffin. In 2014, a debate started to occur concerning this display. In 2016, the museum held a public discussion that results in the mummy being displayed inside its coffin, in 2018 (Fig. 3).¹⁶

Sometimes, human remains are banned from display. For example, the Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst in Munich, Germany, banned the display of mummies. This was mentioned in the so-called mummy taboo and was written next to a mummy’s coffin (Fig. 4) The museum holds in its display only one child mummy because it was completely wrapped. The Royal British Columbia Museum, Canada, now has a policy that does not allow for the display any human remains. This decision was made to ensure equal treatment of all human remains. In its 2018 temporary exhibition, titled “Egypt: The Time of Pharaohs”, the museum chose not to display any Egyptian mummies for ethical reasons. The San Diego Museum of Man in California (USA) now has a policy requiring permission from family members or the cultural community of the dead person to put remains on display.¹⁷

Attempts to humanize the exhibition have also appeared. In 2011, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, UK, put a label by a female mummy (Meresamun) where a translation can be found of an inscription of an offering, which visitors are invited to recite to ensure her food supply in the next world (Fig. 5). A ‘Mummified Child’ dating to the second century CE is displayed

¹⁵ SWANEY, M. *The Living Dead: Egyptian Mummies and the Ethics of Display*, MS. Thesis, New York, 2013, p. 4.

¹⁶ TARLE, L., *Exhibiting Respect: Investigating Ethical Practice for the Display of Human Remains in Museums*, PhD Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2020, p 96.

¹⁷ Ibidem.



13.35-13.45

Jan Dahms Museum of Egyptian Art, Munich

Respect for the wishes of the deceased

The Egyptian Museum in Munich does not display ancient Egyptian human remains. The mummies, which were purchased together with the wooden coffins at the beginning of the 19th century, are kept in a separate storage room. This decision is actively communicated and explained in the museum. The vast majority of our visitors understand and support this position. The basis for this is the respect for the wishes and religious ideas of the ancient Egyptians, which are clearly documented by the tombs and their furnishings, as well as their texts. An exception is the presentation of a wrapped mummy from Roman times, that completely covers the corpse and includes a mummy portrait. These late mummies were intended to be viewed by tomb visitors. Therefore, we see here a possibility to meet museum visitor interest in the topic of mummification.

Fig. 4: *Mummy taboo, Staatliches Museum Ägyptischer Kunst, Munich, Germany.* Source: photographed by the researcher.

next to a glass showcase showing a 3D construction based on the scans of his body, made by artist Angela Palmer.¹⁸ The same idea of reciting an incantation was used by Petrie Museum in its exhibition “Ancient Egypt: Digging for Dreams”. The Bristol Museum and Art Gallery in the UK uses a darkened box. When a visitor approaches the exhibit, a motion-activated interpretation appears on a screen one letter at a time, reading:



Fig. 5: *Female mummy (Meresamun), Ashmolean Museum, England.* Source: <https://oxfordshireremummies.co.uk/days-out-in-and-around-oxfordshire/ashmolean-museum-review-for-kids/>.

¹⁸ <https://www.uncomfortableoxford.com/bones-of-contention-the-ethics-of-displaying-human-remains-in-museums>

Remember that all bodies were once living people, like us. They are not just objects or scientific specimens. Do you think his body should be on display in the gallery? If you want to see his body, touch the two glowing circles to light up the case.¹⁹

Some museums have moved beyond thinking about the display of human remains to considering photos of human remains on their website. The National Museum of Scotland has removed all images of unwrapped human remains from its online database. If an image is required for scientific purposes, the researcher must contact the museum library. The guidelines adopted by Australian museums states that images and replicas of ancestral remains held in museums must not be exhibited or in any other way made available to the public without the prior permission of the traditional custodians or those authorized by them.²⁰

2 Literature review

Recent studies have examined the ethical considerations surrounding the display of remains. Articles have addressed the issue not only in the museums but also in the archeological sites such as the Capuchin Catacombs in Italy.²¹ In recent years, this subject has received increased attention, particularly in relation to the ongoing decolonization efforts in the museums. The question of displaying Egyptian mummies has been more thoroughly examined in museums and memory institutions in North America,²² as well as in certain European countries.²³

While most visitors support exhibiting these remains, some argue for a more respectful approach to displaying them. Some emphasize the educational value of respectful exhibition to combat stereotypes, as changing the mindset of visitors can prevent such assumptions from arising.²⁴ The sustainability of mummy research depends on an ethical orientation, requiring an interdisciplinary approach; a balanced approach that respects both scientific inquiry and ethical considerations is essential.²⁵

The literature explores arguments for and against displaying human remains, offering no definitive conclusions but rather a respectful dissensus. These studies highlight the complex ethical landscape surrounding human remains in museums, emphasizing the need for careful consideration of the points of view of various stakeholders as well as cultural sensitivities.²⁶

However, thus far, no study has addressed the topic of displaying human remains in Egyptian museums or examined the views of the Egyptian people regarding their ancestors being displayed in museums.

¹⁹ TARLE, L., *Exhibiting Respect...*, p. 97.

²⁰ Museums Australia, *Continuing cultures, ongoing responsibilities: principles and guidelines for Australian museums working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural heritage*. Museums Australia Inc, 2005.

²¹ SQUIRES, K. and PIOMBINO-MASCALI, D., Ethical Considerations Associated with the Display and Analysis of Juvenile Mummies from the Capuchin Catacombs of Palermo, Sicily, *Public Archaeology* 20(3), 2022, pp.1–19; Squires, K. and Piombino-Mascal, D., Public attitudes towards the display of non-adult mummies in the Capuchin Catacombs of Palermo, Sicily. *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 30(8), 2024, pp. 888–904.

²² TARLE, L., *Exhibiting Respect: Investigating Ethical Practice for the Display of Human Remains in Museums*, PhD Thesis, Simon Fraser University, 2020.

²³ SWANEY, M., *The Living Dead: Egyptian Mummies and the Ethics of Display*, MS Thesis, New York University, 2013.

²⁴ DAY, J., Thinking makes it so: Reflection on the ethics of displaying Egyptian mummies, In: *Papers on Anthropology* XXIII/1, 2014, pp. 29–44.

²⁵ BARTALSKÝ, A., Ludské telo v múzejných zbierkach. In: *Museologica Brunensia*, 12(2), 2023, pp. 1–11.

²⁶ KAUFMANN, I. M. and RÜHLI, F. J., Without ‘informed consent’? Ethics and ancient mummy research, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 36(10), 2010, pp. 608–613.

3 Methodology

The objective of this empirical study was to evaluate the ethical practices of Egyptian museums when it comes to displaying human remains. In addition, it aimed to investigate the opinion of Egyptians on displaying human remains in museums. The main research questions were:

- Do the Egyptian museums follow any guidelines in dealing with human remains?
- What is the opinion of Egyptians about displaying the human remains of their ancestors to the public?
- Can technology be used as an alternative for displaying human remains?

To fulfil the research objectives and answer these questions, a mixed method approach was employed. The descriptive method was used to narrate the ethical debate that has arisen with regard to displaying human remains and to determine which Egyptian museums hold human remains in their display. For the quantitative aspects of the research, a questionnaire was chosen as a survey instrument for collecting data on a case study. The aim was to seek the opinion of the Egyptian general public regarding the display of the human remains of their ancestors to the public. For the qualitative aspect of the research, interviews were conducted with Egyptian museum professionals.

3.1 Data collection

In Egypt, dead bodies have sanctity. For this reason, Egyptian museums do not display modern human remains; these are only preserved in university museums within faculties of medicine, and for educational purposes only. But what about our ancestors' human remains – do they not have the same right to respectful treatment? Although modern Egyptians do not share the same religious and burial customs of our ancestors, we should still respect their desires. Our ancestors hid their tombs, sealed the doors and inscribed them with magical incarnations to protect them from thieves. They wished their bodies to remain undisturbed. Studies have shown that the evolution of the tomb structure resulted from a desire to secure the tomb.²⁷ The individuals entombed within never thought that their mummies would be found and displayed to the public.

The Egyptian constitution, issued in 2019, mentions in one of its articles (No. 60) that the human body has its own privacy and should not be tampered with.²⁸ Neither the Egyptian Penal Code No. 58 of 1937 nor its amendment, No. 141 of 2021, include any penalty for tampering with dead bodies. This issue is only included in article No. 160, with regard to a penalty for cemetery violations.²⁹

The debate around the ethical issues of dealing with the mummies emerged in Egypt started during the reign of King Fouad I, following the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun. In 1925, one of the members of the Egyptian parliament sent a telegram to the King asking him not to permit the unwrapping of the mummy of Tutankhamun and to use x-rays instead to study it instead, out of respect for the sanctity of the dead king. The demand was refused, and the mummy of Tutankhamun faced a violation by Carter and his team while it was removed

²⁷ CLARK, R., *Tomb Security in Ancient Egypt from the Predynastic to the Pyramid Age*, Oxford: Archaeopress Publishing Ltd, 2016.

²⁸ <https://www.presidency.eg/ar/%D9%85%D8%B5%D8%B1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AF%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%B1/>

²⁹ <https://manshurat.org/node/14677>

from its coffin.³⁰

In 1977, Egyptian president El-Sadat held an international press conference inside the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, asking the opinion of archaeologists about the ethical display of the mummies. Should they be displayed to the public or returned to be buried in their tombs? Some of the El-Azhar sheikhs, headed by Sheikh Abdel Halim Mahmoud, presented a proposal to the president asking him to close the hall of the mummies in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, as they considered displaying mummies to the public to be unethical. The president agreed to the proposal and the hall was closed for seven years, but reopened in 1987.³¹

In 1980, a fatwa was issued (No. 1279) by Sheikh Gad El-Haq Ali Gad El-Haq, the former head of the El-Azhar, prohibiting the display of dead bodies, including mummies, to the public. However, other Sheikhs allowed them to be displayed, as they considered mummies to be archaeological objects rather than corpses.³² During the parade of transferring the mummies of Egyptian pharaohs and queens to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC) in Cairo, debate about this ethical dilemma was again stirred. In 2021, Dar El-Ifta (an Egyptian governmental non-profit organisation that offers pragmatic guidance to Muslim institutions) held a public conference announcing that museums were allowed to display mummies to the public if it was done in a disciplined way.³³

Human remains are displayed in Egyptian museums either as cremated remains, skeletons or mummies. I traced 13 Egyptian museums which hold human remains in their displays:

National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC)
Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square
Egypt's Capitals' Museum in the new administrative capital
Museum of Imhotep in Saqqara, Museum of Cairo International Airport
Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria
Antiquities Museum in Bibliotheca Alexandrina
National Museum in Alexandria
Mummification Museum in Luxor
Luxor Museum
Nuba Museum in Aswan
Sharm El-Sheikh Museum South Sinai
Hurghada Museum, Red Sea Governorate

The Greco-Roman Museum is the only museum that holds a cremation urn (Fig. 6). The NMEC and Nuba Museum are the only museums that hold skeletal remains. The one at NMEC is considered the second oldest skeleton in Egypt; it originates from Nazlet Khater archaeological site. It belongs to a boy who used to work in a quarry. The other one, at Nuba Museum, is a 200,000-year-old human skeleton which was found in the Edkobateh area in Aswan (Fig. 7). Both skeletons are displayed in the main hall of the museum, represented in their funerary context. The one in the NMEC is accompanied by stones and tools from the same era. There

³⁰ HAWASS, Z. and SALEEM S., *scanning the Pharaohs*, The American University press, Cairo, 2016, p. 104

³¹ HAWAS, Z. سواح يهاز مايا، سراجا [The Gard: days of Zahi Hawass]. Cairo, Nahdet Mesr press, 2020. [in Arabic].

³² NADA, A., فحات ملاب امضرعو اهل قنو تثجلا طينحت [Mummifying corpses, moving and displaying them in museums], in: *Journal of Religious Researches*, 36, 2021, pp. 545–622. [in Arabic].

³³ Dar El-Iftaa Facebook page 2 February 2021.



Fig. 6: *Cremation urn, Greco-Roman Museum, Alexandria.* Source: photographed by the researcher.

is also an explanatory video representing the shape of primitive humans. The Mummification Museum at Luxor displays a vertical section of a skull filled with linen (Fig. 8). The rest of the human remains displayed in the museums are in the form of mummies.

The researcher noticed no obvious regulations concerning the display of human remains in Egyptian museums. The museum in Cairo International Airport displays two mummies (Fig. 9). This museum was intended for passengers using the airport, with the aim of helping to acquaint them with Egyptian civilization. There is no need to display human remains in such museums, as it is considered a violation of their sanctity.



Skeleton from Nazlet Khater, NMEC



200000 years old skeleton from Aswan, Nuba Museum

Fig. 7: *Skeletons displayed in Egyptian Museums.* Source: photographed by the researcher.

Each museum follows its own perspective in the display of mummies. The majority of Egyptian museums (eight museums, or 62%) use special rooms called the mummy room or rooms for the afterlife. However, the remainder display mummies in their main hall. It is worth noting that dedicating a special room for the mummies does not relate to any ethical concern; it is only a method of display. That is why we see museums that display certain mummies in special rooms while others are in the main hall. The NMEC, for example, displays 20 mummies in a special room, while the skeleton is in the main hall. The Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria displays two mummies in a room specified for the afterlife, while two other mummies are in the main hall, as is the cremation urn. Luxor Museum displays one mummy in a special room and three others in the main hall. Nuba museum displays five mummies in a special room for the afterlife, while the skeleton is in the main hall.

As for how the mummy itself is displayed, this also differs from one museum to another – and even within the same museum from one mummy to another – with no clear regulations governing the reasons. Some mummies are displayed completely wrapped in linen and sometimes covered by their cartonnage, such as the mummy displayed in the Antiquities Museum at Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Fig. 10). Others are displayed intentionally covered with linen shrouds



Fig. 8: *Vertical section of a skull filled with linen, The Mummification Museum, Luxor.* Source: photographed by the researcher.



Fig. 9: *Two mummies displayed in Cairo International Airport Museum.* Source: photographed by the researcher.



Fig. 10: *Female Mummy, Roman period, Antiquities Museum, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Alexandria.* Source: Photographed by the researcher.

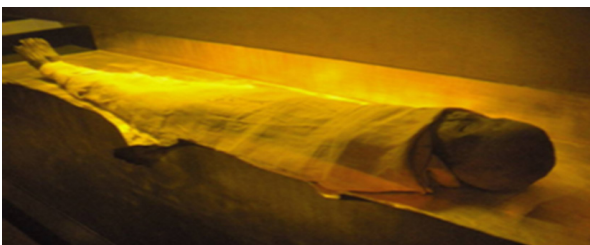


Fig. 11: *Mummy of Merenre, the oldest known royal mummy, Museum of Imhotep, Saqqara.* Source: photographed by the researcher.

except for the head and feet, such as the mummy of Merenre, at the Museum of Imhotep at Saqqara (Fig. 11). There is only one mummy displayed partially wrapped, namely the one from the New Kingdom at the Museum of Cairo International Airport (Fig. 9). Only one mummy is displayed completely unwrapped: the Mummy of a child from the Ptolemaic period at the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square (Fig. 12).

Some mummies are displayed without a coffin, such as the previously mentioned mummy in the Antiquities Museum, Bibliotheca Alexandrina (Fig. 10). Other mummies are displayed inside their coffin. The coffin might be completely open, such as the mummy of a female called Shepenkhonsu (1080–740 BC) in Luxor Museum (Fig. 13), or it could be semi-closed, as with the two mummies of Yuya and Thuya (eighteenth dynasty) in the Egyptian Museum in Tahrir Square (Fig. 14). There is only one mummy displayed inside a completely closed coffin (Fig. 15), located in the Antiquities Museum in Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The curator clarifies that the for this is that the mummy was in very bad condition, therefore there is no need for the visitors to see it as long as there is another mummy on display without a coffin.

It is worth noting also that all the mummies are displayed in special display cases filled with nitrogen to maintain their condition. All are displayed lying on linen sheets (which is important to prevent any reactions that could occur between the mummy and the surface) except for one mummy that is displayed in the Antiquities Museum at Bibliotheca Alexandrina which lies directly on the wooden surface (Fig. 10).

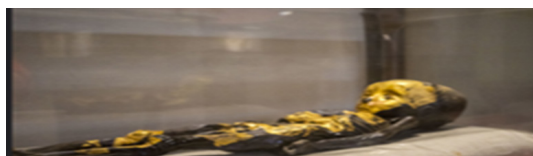


Fig. 12: *Child mummy, Ptolemaic period, Egyptian Museum, Cairo.* Source: photographed by the researcher.



Fig. 13: *Mummy of a female called Shepenkhonsu, Luxor Museum.* Source: photographed by the researcher.



Fig. 14: *Mummies of Yuya, Eighteenth Dynasty, Egyptian Museum, Cairo.* Source: photographed by the researcher.



Fig. 15: *Anthropoid coffin with a female mummy inside, Ptolemaic period, Antiquities Museum, Bibliotheca Alexandrina.* Source: photographed by the researcher.

There are no regulations concerning visitors viewing human remains. Photographs without flash are allowed in all museums, as they are for any other artifacts in the museums. Even for mummies displayed in special rooms there are no regulations concerning the number of visitors that can enter the room and no sign

by the room's entrance referring to the fact that human remains are displayed within. Children of all ages are allowed to view the human remains. The behaviour of some visitors (especially youngsters) who make jokes or act in a relaxed manner in the presence of the human remains reveals that the educational purpose of displaying human remains is not being achieved.

The NMEC is the only museum that applies some regulations to those visiting the hall of the mummies (excluding the skeleton, which is displayed in the main hall without any regulations). In the hall of the mummies, photography is not allowed and talking is not permitted – even tour guides are not allowed to speak inside. There are guards inside the hall to make sure people follow these rules.

However, with no limitations on the number of visitors that can enter, it is hard for the guards to ensure

there are no infractions. The hall has only one sign at the entrance, mentioning that entry is not recommended for visitors with claustrophobia. Despite the regulations, shooting a TV episode inside the hall of mummies is allowed! Visitors sometimes faint because the length of stay inside the hall is long and some people cannot bear to see 20 mummies with no break.

3.2 Survey - questionnaire

An online survey was distributed among the study population of Egyptian citizens via Facebook. The questionnaire was divided into five sections. The first section covered respondents' profiles. The second section comprised five questions examining respondents' opinions regarding the display of human remains in museums. The third section contained four questions about the regulations museums should put in place concerning the display of human remains. The fourth section, with five questions, investigated respondents' preferred

method for displaying human remains. The fifth section contained four questions investigating respondents' opinions on the display of the human remains in Egyptian museums.

The questionnaire was distributed in February 2024 and 1,301 completed questionnaires were returned. This is considered a high response rate. Frequency analysis was used as a descriptive statistical method to analyse the results and draw conclusions from the collected data.

The majority of respondents were between 18 and 24 years of age (65.8%). Respondents with a higher education constituted 58.7% of the sample. 37.3% visited museums moderately often, followed by 23.2% who visited repeatedly, 23.2% who rarely visited museums and 9.2% never visited museums.

When asked about their opinion on human remains in museums, the majority (66.1%) considered them either historical or artistic objects, while (33.9%) considered them relics of dead humans. In terms of motivation, 58.0% of respondents said they visited human remains out of historical interest; only 26.3% said they visited them out of curiosity. When asked how they felt when viewing human remains in museums, 66.4% said they were fascinated, while 13% said they felt uncomfortable. Regarding the importance of displaying human remains, 91.1% said that this helped them gain a deeper understanding of our ancestors, while only 6.3% saw no importance in their display. When asked how museums should deal with human remains in their possession, almost half (47.6%) felt that they should be displayed to the public, 23.2% said that they should be kept in the museum's storeroom for study and research only, and 22.9% of felt that they should be returned to be buried in their tombs. Other minority opinions also emerged: for example, some felt that the human remains should be displayed in their tombs, as in the case of the mummy of Tutankhamun; others thought that only royal mummies should be displayed, while other unknown mummies could be studied and then returned to be buried in their tombs.

Concerning the regulations that should be set for visiting human remains, only 29% of respondents felt that children should be allowed to visit human remains; 27.2% opposed the idea, and the majority 43.9% were not sure. However, 81.6% of the respondents felt that if children were allowed to visit human remains, they should be over 10 years old. As for photographing human remains, 44.3% of the respondents felt that it should not be allowed. When asked whether it is important to place warning signs referring to the existence of human remains in a room, out of concern for the feelings of sensitive people and children, a large majority (88.3%) felt such signs were essential.

As for respondents' opinions about the preferred method of display, 74.4% felt that human remains should be displayed in special rooms to give the visitor the choice of visiting them or not. However, 13.7% felt that it was fine for them to be displayed in the museum's main hall, while 11.5% opposed the idea of displaying them at all. About half (49.7%) preferred the mummy to be completely wrapped or covered, while the rest preferred the mummy to be totally or partially exposed. When asked about what the information that they would like to see accompanying the human remains, people mentioned the name, position, age at death, cause of death, diseases that they suffered from, place of discovery, and information about the mummification process. Lastly, when asked if they would accept the display of human remains using technology, such as a video or a hologram, instead of displaying the human remain itself, 58.4% of the respondents accepted the idea.

In the last section, the respondents were asked for their opinion about how human remains are displayed in Egyptian museums. Among respondents, 81.1% felt that Egyptian museums

displayed them respectfully, while 18.9% observed that there are no regulations in Egyptian museums concerning human remains. When asked if the accompanying information was satisfactory, 41.2% said that it was not. The questionnaire ended with a clear question about whether they thought it was ethical to display human remains: 65.9% of the respondents said it was ethically acceptable, 12.6% said it was unethical, and 21.5% were not sure. Thus, the majority (over two thirds) of respondents were accepting of the exhibition of human remains.

The survey finished with an open-ended space inviting respondents' suggestions. Some highlighted the importance of using technology alongside the mummies. Facial reconstruction can produce very powerful images, acting as a visual reminder that the people of the past were just like us. Other respondents suggested technologies that could be used as an alternative to displaying human remains. Improvements in 2D and 3D imaging as well as VR technology, for example, could allow museums to carefully catalogue and replicate human remains.

3.3 Interviews

The interviews were conducted with museum professionals responsible for museum displays in Egypt. The aim was to explore ethical changes and challenges for museums in relation to the display of human remains.

Dr Osama Abdel Wareth, Head of the International Council of Museums of Egypt, mentioned that Egyptian museums follow the ICOM's code of ethics. The museums tend to treat human remains as objects that illustrate ancient Egyptians belief in the afterlife rather than as dead human dead bodies. He added that there is no obligation for museums to display human remains in private halls. Regarding museums that consecrate a specific room for human remains, it comes down to the museum's perspective regarding the method of display. As for the restrictions Egyptian museums impose on those visiting human remains, he confirmed that there are no fixed obligations; however, the hall of the mummies in the NMEC specifies that no photos should be taken inside. This obligation does not relate to the ethics of display, only to protecting the mummies as objects by not exposing them to flashes. There is also no regulation regarding at what age children should be allowed to enter such rooms.

Dr Hussein Abdel Baseer, Manager of the Antiquities Museum in Bibliotheca Alexandrina, informed the researcher that the museum has two mummies on display in a special room consecrated for the afterlife. The reason they are displayed in a special room does not relate to any ethical concerns but rather to the method of display. He added that there is no regulation that obliges a museum display a mummy in a particular way, and also no comprehensive regulations dealing with the ethical concerns surrounding displaying human remains. He mentioned that having a code of ethics concerning the human remains in Egyptian museums would be a good idea.

Sami Shanshori, Head of the conservation team in the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria and the Antiquities Museum in Bibliotheca Alexandrina, said that all human remains in Egyptian museums were conserved using the latest scientific methods and displayed in cases that are supplied with nitrogen, either through pipes or from capsules. The mummies are checked regularly for any changes that might have occurred. He also mentioned that mummies from upper Egypt were sometimes brought to Alexandria to be displayed. The more humid weather of Alexandria has the potential to affect the mummy, so in such cases conservators exert extra efforts to maintain the mummy. However, he mentioned that there is no unified conservation protocol concerning human remains across all Egyptian museums, adding that the existence

of such protocol is very important as it allows the conservator to follow set procedures when dealing with different cases. Such a protocol should also contain a section specifying procedures that ensure the safety of conservators.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

With regard to the display of human remains in Egyptian museums, I found that museums are following ICOM's code of ethics and displaying human remains respectfully. However, there are no specific criteria for displaying human remains that all museums are obliged to follow. Each museum has its own perspective on how remains should be displayed, whether in specified rooms or in the main hall. Mummies might be displayed wrapped, unwrapped, partially wrapped, or covered with linen sheets. There are no regulations concerning visitors' behaviour around or access to human remains.

Upon investigating the opinion of the Egyptian public, it was found that the majority agreed it is ethically acceptable to display human remains in museums. Respondents saw the remains as historical artefacts rather than as their dead ancestors. They found visiting such exhibits provided an educational benefit, teaching them about the past, but felt that comprehensive information should be provided to accompany the display. However, the majority said that they would prefer more regulations to maintain the sanctity of human remains. On the majority agreed it was acceptable to display all kinds of human remains in specified rooms, but highlighted the need for warning signs at the entrance so that people could make an informed choice about whether to visit the room or not. The consensus was that children under the age of ten should not be allowed to enter such rooms, that photography should not be allowed, and that mummies should be displayed totally wrapped or covered with linen sheets.

Reflecting on these findings, I recommend that ICOM Egypt should, in cooperation with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, work on a code of ethics concerning how all types of human remains are dealt with in Egyptian museums. The code should cover the following areas:

Storage: the temperature and humidity of the storeroom; the method of storing human remains; criteria for deciding which mummies should be displayed and which should be kept in the storeroom. The Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria decided not to display two mummies that were in too bad a condition to display, instead keeping them in its storeroom, whereas the Antiquities Museum in Bibliotheca Alexandrina decided to display a more fragile mummy in a completely closed coffin.

Research: factors determining which human remains it is permissible to conduct research on. A handling protocol for those studying or working with such items should be available and referred to before studying or handling. A record of the research that has been conducted on each mummy should be kept in order not to duplicate the same research.

Conservation: regulations governing conservation and a guide for conservators to follow on how to maintain the condition of the mummy and also keep themselves in good health. Inspection and monitoring routines should be defined and an integrated pest management program should be established. Mummies found in upper Egypt should not be transferred to be displayed in lower Egypt, to maintain their preservation.

Display: any code should include rules for how mummies are displayed, according to the opinions of the Egyptian public. Conclusions regarding the display of mummies are summarised as follows:

- Displaying human remains should be allowed as long as their sanctity is retained, visitors are made aware of the sensitive nature of such exhibits, and the museum believes that exhibiting them makes a material contribution to a particular interpretation that could not be made effectively in another way. According to this logic, the mummies in Cairo International Airport Museum should be removed from display.
 - Specifying certain rooms for human remains is preferred so that visitors do not come across such displays unawares.
 - There should be warning signs at the entrance of such rooms to give the visitor a free choice of visiting the room or not, and to allow visitors to prepare themselves to view the remains respectfully.
 - The number of visitors at any one time should be limited.
 - Children under 10 years old should not be permitted to enter such rooms.
 - Photography of human remains should not be allowed.
 - Mummies with wrappings should be presented wrapped and exposed are should be covered with linen sheets, unless certain parts of the body were exposed to show the effect of a certain disease or show the cause of death.
 - There should be criteria defining whether the mummy is displayed in its coffin or not.
 - A mummy should not be displayed in a completely closed coffin – in such cases it would be preserved in the storeroom and kept for research only.
 - Display cases should meet the standards required to maintain the condition of the mummy. All mummies should be placed upon linen sheets to avoid interaction with other surfaces.
 - The accompanying information should meet visitors' needs. Important information includes the name, position, age, cause of death, any diseases that the individual suffered from, the place of discovery and information about the mummification process.
 - Humanizing the exhibition is important. This could be done by the accompanying text, which should provide the name, origin, age of death, and cause of death. Using modern technology as part of the display should be considered, such as videos that explain ancient Egyptians' beliefs regarding the afterlife and the mummification process, or facial reconstruction. However, with regard to the latter it is important not to show features that are not justified by scientific evidence, and not to reinforce racial stereotypes or popular notions of racial identity.
 - Using technology to display human remains by was accepted by respondents, and this could be applied in certain cases that can be determined.
- Images of Egyptian human remains should not be reproduced on gift shop items or featured in museum marketing materials.
- The visiting time inside the NMEC's hall of mummies inside the NMEC should be shortened, as some people cannot bear seeing so many mummies. Either the mummies could be distributed between two rooms, or a rest area should be created inside the hall in which visitors can watch a movie about the afterlife in ancient Egypt or learn about the mummification process before continuing to explore the exhibition.

- Finally, ICOM Egypt should conduct regular questionnaires with visitors to Egyptian museums, to continually develop this code in light of the ongoing changes. Public awareness should be raised to inform people that human remains in museums should be considered as museum objects but as the remains of once living humans that have dignity and should be treated respectfully. Museums have to realize that the respectful professional standards of the exhibition designers do not necessarily mean that visitors will respect the dead. It is therefore still necessary to provide the appropriate and comprehensible context that will lead the visitors to respect the human remains.

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