Introduction: The Egyptian Sculpture Room

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The Egyptian Sculpture Room

The image shown here, from 1825, is of the colossal bust of the Younger Memnon in the Egyptian Sculpture Room, part of the Townley Gallery in the original buildings of the British Museum. Raised on a pedestal, the bust sits among other antiquities of Egyptian provenance. While the Egyptian Sculpture Room contains only stone objects, other sorts of objects such as wooden artifacts, papyri, and mummies are displayed in other rooms, alongside similar kinds of objects. The colossal bust rests between two elevated windows, the only sources of light in the gallery. The engraving shown here frames the Egyptian Sculpture Room between columns that support a pediment of unmistakably Greek form. On the far side of the room, a well-dressed gentleman and lady study the display. We are looking at a picture of large antiquities in the gallery of a famous museum. What else is there to say? The kind of room portrayed in this image has become so familiar that it seems not to need explanation. Yet a cursory survey of the quality of the space represented in this image shows that quite a bit is happening.

Most obviously, the gallery depicted here is a space of visual exhibition. The structure of the museum display privileges one particular sensory faculty (sight) while prohibiting others (such as touch). Organized as spectacle, the gallery creates a palpable sense of separation between the viewer and the objects. One might understand this separation as an instance of what Martin Heidegger once described in terms of “the world picture,” meaning not “a picture of the world, but the world grasped as picture.” The image of the Egyptian Sculpture Room is a threefold illustration of this insight. First, the “world grasped as picture” offers a kind of human subjectivity constituted in relation to nonhuman objects. Heidegger’s critique begins from his reading of the German word for “representation,” Vorstellung (lit. “setting forth”). In Heidegger’s reading, the language by
which such an act of representation is conceived betrays its tautological quality: “This objectification of beings is accomplished in a setting-before, a representing [Vor-stellen], aimed at bringing each being before it in such a way that the man who calculates can be sure—and that means certain—of the being.” The subjectivity offered here is problematic since it posits that the being of objects—such as those collected, displayed, visited, and discussed within museums—is reducible to the human understanding of them. The subjectivities it offers (the curator, the museum-goer, the critic) depend on a fragile relationship to objects of its own making. Put this way, the mode of relationship created by the museum exhibit is one that is contingent, even precarious. This brings me to a second point in Heidegger’s critique, that the subjectivity offered by the “world as picture” is not just tautological, but also an essay of control:

That the world becomes picture is one and the same process whereby, in the midst of beings, man becomes subject. . . . The interweaving of these two processes (that the world becomes picture and man the subject), which is decisive for the essence of modernity, illuminates the founding process of modern history, a process that, at first sight, seems almost nonsensical. The process, namely, whereby the more completely and comprehensively the world, as conquered, stands at man's disposal, and the more objectively the object appears, all the more subjectively (i.e., peremptorily) does the subiectum rise up, and all the more inexorably, too, do observations and teachings about the world transform themselves into a doctrine of man, into an anthropology.  

In the museum, the “world as picture” means that human subjects stand not only separate from but also opposed to the objects on display. In the Egyptian Sculpture Room, this suggests that even if their bodies are dwarfed by the objects on display, the museum-goers stand against (and over) them, since they are offered for their gaze, their edification. Heidegger’s third observation is that the “world as picture” involves another order of confusion: the inability to see that the separation created between subjects and objects is not intrinsic, but rather the product of human imagination and labor. This critique certainly holds true in the Egyptian Sculpture Room: the arrangement of objects in the room is presented not as humanly imposed but rather as deriving naturally from the being of the objects. The “world as picture” illustrated by the museum
gallery thus involves a disavowal of its own epistemological grounds: “Be-
ings as a whole are now taken in such a way that a being is first and only in
being insofar as it is set in place by representing-producing [vorstellend-
herstellenden] humanity.”

In Colonising Egypt, Timothy Mitchell famously applied the Heidegger-
erian critique of representation to nineteenth-century exhibitions of
Egypt. In Mitchell’s reading, the exhibition presents objects as if they
were faithful copies of original objects whose existence is separate from
the act of representation. Mitchell draws out the significance of this in two
directions. He emphasizes that the exhibition is foremost a productive in-
stitution, creating presence-effects which may or may not have previously
existed. In this way, Mitchell shows that the exhibition in Paris in 1889 of
“an Egyptian alley” did not so much copy an actual place as constitute a
new one. The second line of critique in Mitchell’s analysis stems from the
observation that the exhibition creates a separation between representa-
tions and the world of real things. This point is central to understand-
ing the power of the exhibition in modern history and suggests that the
act of representation embodied in the exhibition of an Egyptian alley in
Paris involves more than the construction of a new material object like
an alley. The production of separation means that one could also gener-
ate a concept of the thing represented and create from it typologies and
taxonomies. Thus the exhibit in Paris is not merely of an Egyptian alley,
but rather the typical Egyptian alley. As Mitchell points out, the episte-
mology of separation was crucial to the formulation of abstract concepts
(such as tradition and backwardness) which framed Egypt as an object to
be worked upon, the target of an overarching plan whose slogans were
modernity, reform, and development. In this way, the epistemology of the
exhibition is one that follows the logic of instrumentality—“the world as
picture” looks for and produces projects of making and transformation.

Large plans may not have been so evident in the exhibit of the Egyptian
Sculpture Room in 1825, but the pedagogical mission of the British Mu-
seum certainly did present its objects as instruments. The antiquities on
display were conceived of as instruments for the edification of museum-
goers. Following Heidegger, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno the-
orized that such instrumentalization was more than an epistemological
mistake. It was also the source of potential violence. Describing the kind
of knowledge and subjectivity that are based on the objectification of the
world, they write, “The awakening of the self is paid for by acknowledge-
ment of power as the principle of all relations.... Enlightenment behaves
toward things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he
can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he
can make them. In this way their potentiality is turned to his ends.” For
Horkheimer and Adorno, as for Heidegger, founding human subjectivity
on an essential opposition toward the world may have produced pow-
erful forms of knowledge that treat the world as an object to be made,
undone, and remade. But this means that knowledge becomes conceived
of chiefly in terms of its use, and its use measured by the standards of ef-
ficacy, power, and control. To read the Egyptian Sculpture Room in light
of such critiques is to recognize that it is a space able to create subjects
who conceive of themselves as separate from and superior to the objects
of their study. In this reading, the Egyptian Sculpture Room socializes its
subjects into seeing Egypt, already in 1825, as being under the power of
their civilized gaze.

The Heideggerian critique of the “world grasped as picture” suggests
that the relation obtained in the museum display is one of domination and
control. Although this critique is compelling, it does not correspond to ac-
counts of travelers and museum-goers who described their experience of
viewing Egyptian antiquities not in these terms, but in ones of familiarity
and closeness. Rarely did individuals who viewed these objects, both in
Egypt and in the British Museum, talk about their immediate experience
in terms of domination. On the contrary, they tended to emphasize the fact
that they felt awe, marvel, even humility. They describe the experience of
being moved by the huge scale of many Egyptian antiquities. In sum, they
routinely describe the objects as the site of an experience in which objects
are bearers of their own meaning and active participants in the event. In
this reading, the Egyptian artifacts appear to run the show, subjecting Brit-
ish museum-goers to the image of Egyptian grandeur they embody. What
this suggests is that by itself the “world as picture” model does not explain
everything that is happening in this museum display, or that, if the “world
as picture” model is to hold, we need to understand the paradoxical way in
which it disavows its form of power. While it is significant that the objects
on display in the Egyptian Sculpture Room were concrete reminders of
the power held by those who gazed at them, it is no less significant that
they—and not those who looked at them—were thought to be the primary
bearers of that power. The ambiguous form of power associated with, but also unacknowledged by, the explicit structure of Egyptological exhibitions from this period would have lasting effects. I will leave for the moment the questions about objects raised (but not fully answered) by this line of thought to address other aspects of the Egyptian Sculpture Room.

The Egyptian Sculpture Room depicted here is a national space, part of the National Repository (as the British Museum was called), funded publicly by act of Parliament,8 and expressly designed to promote patriotic sensibilities.9 Like other rooms in the gallery, this room displays an arrangement that attests to the cultural refinement of the English nation and to the reach of the British Empire. The various galleries of the museum present an array of concrete objects from around the world. As an assemblage, these objects form an abstract image of the globe with London at its center. This room is thus also a pedagogical space, creating for metropolitan audiences a material inventory of the stuff of empire and its abstract concept.

Besides representing aspects of nation and empire, the room presents lessons in aesthetic taste and historical appreciation that serve as “civilizing rituals” for museum visitors.10 One part of this ritual is bound up in the notion of direct aesthetic experience. Unlike the descriptions of Egyptian objects in travel accounts and unlike the famous visual images of Egyptian monuments in books like the Description de l’Égypte, the Egyptian Sculpture Room offers the appearance of an unmediated sensation of the objects themselves. In this sense, “the museum is more than a location . . . it is a script” directing aesthetic experience.11 Beyond being a site for the cultivation of (certain kinds of) corporeal experience and taste, the museum offers other sorts of lessons as well. On the one hand, there is the synchronic lesson of taxonomy and order. This is realized by the placement of like objects with one another or by the division of arts, mediums, and national traditions from one another in the space of the museum.12 On the other hand, there are the diachronic lessons of art history, development, and progress. In this way, the material objects mark events within the plot of the universal survey museum:13 the forward march of human civilization from its classical origins in Greece and Rome, through Renaissance Italy, to modern-day London.14

The space of the Egyptian Sculpture Room is organized around both kinds of scripts. We can certainly interpret the objects in this room
taxonomically insofar as we find only sculpture of a certain provenance (Egypt), scale (monumental), and material (stone). Other kinds of Egyptian objects—smaller stone objects and objects made of wood, metal, papyrus, and human flesh (mummy)—are displayed in other places in the British Museum. Moreover, the Egyptian Sculpture Room is located at the end of the long hall of the Townley Gallery, which houses only stone sculptures of ancient Mediterranean provenance. At the same time, we are encouraged to read these objects as part of a historical narrative. The location of the Egyptian Sculpture Room nestles its objects within a broader survey of fine art. Indeed, the lesson about Egyptian art and culture that emerges from this arrangement is itself situated against (and in the engraving is literally framed by) classical Greek styles whose aesthetic and historical values were taken to be axiomatic.

Overarching these wider lessons in history and taste is arguably the most important, though most abstract, value concretized in the museum room: conservation. Like air, this value permeates the Egyptian Sculpture Room but is impossible to see in itself. Its effects, however, are everywhere—from the cleanliness of the floor and lack of dust on the sculptures to the neatness of the displays and care with which the objects are treated. Conservation implies not just the act of preserving the objects from material decay, but also the cultivation of good administration as a virtue in itself. The clean, well-structured look of the Egyptian Sculpture Room attests to its conscientious management and gives rise to an ethical discourse surrounding the treatment of museum pieces by the curatorial staff. The moral value of rational management cannot therefore be underestimated: it is fundamental to the museum belief that the objects rightfully belong where they are because that is where they are best cared for. Far from clarifying our understanding of the gallery’s meaning, however, the theme of conservation introduces a tension between competing notions of temporality. Just as the museum organizes its objects to suggest a developmental narrative of history writ large, the gallery space itself is static and designed to insulate objects from the ravages of history. The capacity to stop time, to preserve, is what enables the presentation of objects as diachronic history.

Less obviously to us now, this room is an emergent space. In 1825, the Townley Gallery (completed in 1808) was a relatively recent addition to the older museum building (Montagu House), which had, by 1805, become
too small to adequately display the rapidly growing collection of antique
statuary. Many of the objects in the collection—like the colossal bust of
the Younger Memnon—were themselves very recent additions. Thus, the
placement of these objects in relation to one another was also fairly new.
Indeed, when the Memnon head arrived in 1819, the curator of the Town-
ley Gallery had to rearrange the entire space drastically to make room for
it. At the same time, this room is a temporary space. By the late 1820s,
Montagu House had been torn down to make way for the much grander
galleries designed by Robert Smirke that remain to this day. Within an-
other few years, the Townley Gallery too would be demolished to make
way for the new building. By 1834, the Memnon head would be relocated
to the Egyptian Sculpture Gallery in the new wing of the museum.

The space of this room is also a socially exclusive space, as intimated
by the fine dress of the museum-goers in the image: in 1825 one still had
to apply and be recognized as a proper visitor in order to be admitted.
For this reason it is also a space of conflicts: not only did many of those
excluded from the room contest the legitimacy of the museum as a pub-
lic institution, but within the room itself, curators doubted whether the
objects belonged in a museum at all. For all the above reasons, this par-
ticular room was an ambiguous space. The ambiguity was related to, but
also far more pervasive than, the fact that while the Memnon bust was
duly catalogued and displayed as a discrete piece, little was known about
it other than its material composition and general location of modern ac-
quision. Nothing beyond classical myth was known about its origins or
original use, not to mention the ruler depicted in the sculpture. Indeed,
such basic information as this was lacking for most of the pieces in the
Egyptian Sculpture Room. Given that deficit, it is difficult to say what the
lesson of the exhibition hall could be, let alone how it was supposed to
fit into the larger nineteenth-century debates about taste and the history
of fine art. This ambiguity does not mean the Egyptian Sculpture Room
had no meaning, but rather that at this point its sense had more to do
with the emergence of the British Museum than with the Egyptian past.
It might be objected that the ambiguity was itself temporary, since by the
1830s, following widespread acceptance of Jean-François Champollion’s
theories about the hieroglyphic language, curators and museum-goers
had access to increasingly certain historical information about the Phar-
aonic past and the significance of its objects. Yet it is precisely at this

THE EGYPTIAN SCULPTURE ROOM

7
moment—before such knowledge was produced—that one should begin to study it.

The 1825 setting of the Egyptian Sculpture Room is central to the story of this book. The story is not just about a room, however, or just about the objects it contained. It is about the broad array of discourses and institutions made possible by the existence of such rooms and objects and by the kinds of people who worked in the rooms, who passed through them, and who thought about their social and cultural meanings.

Nevertheless, objects—and the Memnon head especially—are a good place to enter these discourses. Though the Memnon bust was an old object, in many senses its status as an artifact was a new avatar. The modern sense of an art object as an artifact in a museum was being invented at the same time the Memnon bust was arriving in London. While I will soon have more to say about the subject, let me signal what I mean by “artifact,” since my usage deviates slightly from convention. Usually, the term is associated with the emergence of new methods of treating material culture during the early nineteenth century. In particular, the term is linked to the work of the Danish archaeologist Christian Jürgensen Thomsen, whose innovations in the study of the palaeolithic past stressed the context and arrangements in which objects were found. Instead of using material culture to confirm already known chronologies, Thomsen looked to deduce information about prehistoric periods from the objects themselves. Key to Thomsen’s method were a number of practices: the treatment of excavation sites as self-contained units, that is as evidence that spoke to the significance of the objects found within them; the study of objects’ material composition, their usage, patterns of style and decoration, and their relation to other objects found in their proximity. Notably, this method bracketed considerations of taste—what was sought was data, not art. Likewise, considerations of Biblical or classical history were no longer automatically assumed as relevant. As a consequence, an artifact was not considered as a unique piece, but rather as part of a class of objects arranged within an emerging taxonomical grid. In conventional accounts of archaeology, this shift in the treatment of material culture marks the change from eighteenth-century antiquarianism to the modern science of archaeology. As these accounts point out, Egyptology was quite slow to make a shift in the direction of “true science,” and the advent of a “self-
contained and systematic study . . . as distinguished from the antiquarian-
ism of earlier times” does not occur until the career of William Matthews
Flinders Petrie in the late nineteenth century.16

In this study, I do not seek to redefine the term “artifact” so much as to
explore its conceptual roots and the institutions of its birth. Admittedly,
my use of the term with reference to the reception of Pharaonic antiq-
uities during the 1820s may strike some as anachronistic. Indeed, during
this period, the meaning of Egyptian antiquities was still very much tied
to debates about taste and Biblical history. Similarly, it would be many
decades before the scientific methods employed by Thomsen and his stu-
dents gained a foothold in Egyptology. Still, there are important reasons
for starting a study of the concept at this moment, for the term was de-
ployed with reference to ancient Egyptian objects long before the period
that is described as “scientific” by the histories of archaeology. Critically,
the emergence of the new treatment of Egyptian antiquities was itself
rooted in the long process of separating naturalia and artificialia within
the early modern museum collections of Europe. As Stephanie Moser has
pointed out, during the eighteenth century Egyptian antiquities were reg-
ularly treated as both natural and as man-made (artificial) objects.17 The
term “artifact,” a nominalization derived from the latter category, sought
to redefine such ambiguities by establishing two things: on the one hand,
the human rather than natural origin of an object; and on the other, its sta-
tus as the product of an act of making. Most especially, its concept seeks to
separate factual questions of what it means to have been made by human
labor from questions of value. The birth of the artifact is thus embedded
in the history of how the museum (as a “public” place of study) emerged
from the curiosity cabinet, and how the modern “scientific” disciplines
of the ancient past (such as archaeology and Egyptology) emerged from
older traditions of antiquarianism.

The invention of the Egyptian artifact in the context of spaces like the
Townley Gallery was to have many consequences (see chapter 1). First,
it produced a new understanding of the material of the ancient Egyptian
past, without which Egyptology could not have come into being. At the
same time, the artifact brought into being a new relation to the material
world of modern Egypt and its inhabitants. This aspect was not lost on
travelers, politicians, and archaeologists of the period, who recognized
that to know ancient Egypt, one needed to gain control of as many artifacts
as possible. To reach this end, they might need to control modern Egypt. The possibility was already a matter of discussion as the Memnon head was being removed from Egypt. As Richard Robertson, traveling in Egypt during this time, put it, “Let us not complain of the want of information respecting ancient Egypt, till we have made ourselves thoroughly masters of all that remains in the country.” Thus, the artifact was becoming not just a crucial object for producing solid knowledge about the ancient past, but also an instrument of colonial intervention sixty years before the start of direct British rule in Egypt. Much of this book is dedicated to exploring these links between museum collecting, Egyptology, and colonial rule, while also showing how the conflict over Pharaonic material culture became both a source of nationalist culture and a central issue in Egyptian contestations of European hegemony.

**EGYPTOLOGY’S HISTORIES**

The first years of the history of Pharaonic artifacts reveal much about the emergence of museum acquisition in Egypt, the forms of knowledge—like Egyptology—it helped create, and the forms of colonial power that emerged in tandem with them. Not surprisingly, the 1810s feature prominently in the standard histories of Egyptology, though in an uneasy way. In these accounts, the decade marks a turning point in the history of understanding ancient Egypt and its objects, and thus the beginning of a new set of social relations and cultural practices made possible by the new acquisitions and the new institution of the Egyptian artifact. Yet, whether the histories present this period as an unfortunate (but forgivable) prehistory or condemn its protagonists for their excesses, they sharply distinguish the 1810s from a later moment of enlightenment in which the values of true science and responsible administration prevail. In other words, the dominant story told in all these histories is actually concerned with the advent of modern Egyptology, which is a triumphalist history of “us moderns.” It is time to reconnect our history with the events that put the Memnon head on display in the Egyptian Sculpture Room if we want to see just where our sense of modernity comes from and what sensibilities its emergence precluded. Conversely, if we want to say that the 1810s represent an era of ignorance and a detachable prehistory of Egyptology, then we are
obliged to consider how this era and its traditions shaped what we take to be professional, that is, disinterested, science. If we hope to understand the power of Egyptology we need to explore at more length what precedes it and consider the ways in which earlier discourses and practices contributed to the emergence of this modern science. Far from emerging sui generis, Egyptology is built upon the practices against which it sought to distinguish itself. Far from being successfully purged, these older practices and concepts are embedded in the customs that govern the reception of antiquities to this day, whether in the field or in the museum.

My discussion of the Egyptian Sculpture Room to this point has been framed in terms of the contingent and conflicted understanding of the European reception of its objects. The sense of conflict becomes even more acute when the place of modern Egypt within this history is taken into account. The emergence of Egyptology in Europe was as consequential for modern Egyptians as it was for Europeans. Starting in the late eighteenth century, excavation sites and museum exhibitions were very often the terrain where the contradictions and struggles of Egyptian modernity were most sharply revealed. On the level of colonial rivalries, the French and British often clashed at these sites; however, the larger picture delineates antagonisms between Europeans and the Egyptians themselves. These conflicts intensified during the twentieth century when excavation sites and museums became the scene of struggles between many Egyptian national groups: urban elites and rural peasants, secularists and Islamists, proponents of pan-Arabism and territorial nationalists, and so on.

Until very recently, the history of colonial archaeology in Egypt has been restricted to a very narrow range of account, one that might be called the colonial enlightenment narrative. This body of writing tends to reproduce (consciously or otherwise) one of the central colonial assumptions of early European antiquity collectors, namely, that ancient Egypt and its treasures were the rightful patrimony of the West. Key in this body of writing is the ideology of conservation, itself an important component of nineteenth-century museum formation and archaeological research and an operative term in texts composed by European explorers, excavators, tourists, and administrators in Egypt. Later writers of the colonial enlightenment version of this history tend to reproduce the assumptions contained in their primary sources, composed by such European explorers and archaeologists. They argue the legitimacy of colonial archaeology.
and artifact acquisition in terms of conserving objects which, if left in situ, would surely have been lost or destroyed. These are narratives in which great men—from Champollion and Karl Richard Lepsius to Gaston Maspero and Howard Carter—figure large, saving monuments from throngs of fellaheen and deciphering their secrets back home in London, Paris, and Berlin. While these accounts of Egyptology often admit unfortunate commercial abuses that occurred in this history of acquisitions (such as those surrounding the Memnon head), they usually stress that the necessity and benefit of acquisition outweighed all harm.21 Though the terms of the colonial enlightenment narrative belong to their nineteenth-century progenitors, they remain to this day dominant in popular writing and even in much of the scholarship on Egyptology’s history.

During the 1970s, a revisionist history of colonial archaeology in Egypt began to appear. This new narrative, produced mostly in the West, criticized European acquisition projects while characterizing them as haphazard pillage and organized theft.22 This body of writing might be called the colonial rape narrative, since the infelicitous trope of sexual violation recurs often in them. These accounts cover more or less the same events as the older histories and only rarely seek out new primary sources. As narratives, they also tell the same story of Europeans discovering artifacts in the wilderness of Egypt. However, they display a greater degree of skepticism toward the colonial rhetorics of scientific disinterest and altruistic curiosity. Another body of literature on Egyptology that is especially attuned to its familiar pattern of material dispossession has been associated with Afrocentrism. Most famously among these, Martin Bernal’s Black Athena theorized the broader consequences that colonial excavation and acquisition had for the science of Egyptology.23 As others besides Bernal have pointed out, since the issue of historical interpretation is closely tied to the question of control, the significance of colonialism goes beyond the issue of material dispossession.24 Indeed, because material custody was a necessary condition for scientific and historical interpretation, colonized peoples were effectively barred from interpreting their own past. Bernal’s argument goes beyond this, of course, to explore the ways in which nineteenth-century Egyptology incorporated racist assumptions about the nature of civilization and in the process effectively “whitened” the Pharaonic phenotype. While there is much to doubt in his positive claims about the (black) African identity of ancient Egyptians,25 Bernal does convincingly show how
Europeans had often made claims on the Pharaohs that were no less racial than his. Moreover, Bernal succeeded in putting the issue of colonial epistemology on the table, even if others have been tardy in continuing his critique of the epistemology of Egyptology.

The most obvious fault in both the revisionist accounts (including Afrocentric accounts) and the colonial enlightenment narrative is that modern Egyptians simply do not figure in the story. For instance, scholars of European Egyptomania, even those attuned to its postcolonial critique, have been largely unaware of the fact that a comparable cultural phenomenon occurred in Egypt during the 1920s and 1930s as Egyptian intellectuals and artists studied ancient Egypt and considered it the source of modern Egyptian identity. Likewise, while revisionist accounts speak against injustices against Egypt, they tend to represent Egyptians merely as victims or bystanders, not participants, in the history of Egyptology. The reason is simple: both kinds of accounts were written by scholars who did not consult the extensive Arabic-language archives on the subject. Predictably, by ignoring Egyptian sources these historians came to think that colonial archaeology in Egypt was a conversation that took place only among European travelers, explorers, tourists, administrators, and archaeologists. In such accounts, the backdrop of modern Egypt is incidental, sometimes tragic, and, most of all, obscure. As a consequence of this style of writing, conventional histories of Egyptology stress the infamous Anglo-Franco rivalry in nineteenth-century museum acquisitions and in Egyptology itself. While no doubt worthy of the attention it has received, the focus has obscured the existence of other actors and other lines of antagonism.

This shortcoming has been addressed in a third body of writing on colonial Egyptology that might be called the national enlightenment narrative. Drawing on primary sources within the Egyptian archives (and also on a minor tradition within Egyptian historiography), the national enlightenment narrative foregrounds the place of ancient Egypt in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Egyptian culture and sketches the formation of national museums, the academic study of the ancient past, and the popular dissemination of images and stories that take ancient Egypt as a theme and contemporary issue. In many ways, the national enlightenment narrative diverges from the traditional colonial narrative: the colonial argues that Egyptians were indifferent to antiquities and thus lacking in culture, while the national argues that modern Egyptians have a more legitimate
claim to Egyptian antiquities than do Europeans; the colonial claims that the best home for Pharaonic artifacts is in London or Paris, while the national argues they belong in Cairo; the colonial asserts that the ancient Egyptians were the indirect progenitors of Western civilization, while the national claims them as the direct ancestors of modern Egyptians. But, importantly, the two versions share at least one attitude: like the colonial enlightenment narrative, the national enlightenment narrative argues that Egyptian peasants were the chief threat to ancient monuments. In both narratives, the values of preservation and acquisition serve as unambiguous, desirable indices of modernity and civilization.

A fourth, more diffuse style of writing this history may be thought of in terms of agnostic narrative, since it highlights the constructed, contingent, and contested character of archaeological practices and of the civilizational narratives that are built upon them. All told, this body of writing on colonial and postindependence archaeology in Egypt underscores the fact that its practices are constructed and that its accomplishments are more ambiguous than previously acknowledged. Agnostic narratives recognize the contingency of archaeological knowledge and also of its application in narratives and images designed to legitimate contemporary identities, be they Egyptian, European, or African. The writers in this body of work display a deep ambivalence toward positivist claims on artifacts and history, whether composed by apologists of empire, of the nation, or of Afrocentrism. In all versions of this style of historiography, the term “conservation” does not have the stable, privileged place it has in the other narratives of colonial archaeology in Egypt. For instance, Jacques Tagher’s singular account of antiquities collection illustrates that there was no clean break between the rapacious practices of the early nineteenth century and the allegedly more legitimate forms of museum acquisition later in the century. Similarly, the groundbreaking but underappreciated work of Antoine Khater on Egyptian antiquities law and its inconsistent application went far to illustrate a deep ambivalence toward conservation ideology even among those figures who appear as heroes within the national enlightenment narrative. In his researches, Neil Asher Silberman has described how the relationship between the Egyptian present and its antiquity is constructed, ever shifting, and informed by a range of conflicting social and political pressures. Likewise, in their work Israel Gershoni and James Jankowski have shown how the political identification between
ancient and modern Egypt sometimes encouraged by secularist national elites during the 1930s—Pharaonism—was one that was tenuous and intensely debated.34 Jan Assmann’s work problematizes the relation between material evidence and narrative claims on ancient Egypt in other directions.35 Recently, Lynn Meskell has submitted the methods and categories of Egyptology to questions raised by contemporary science studies.36 Meskell does not merely show that the claims of Egyptology are affected by the political context around them, but rather that the very structures and methods of the most professional and competent archaeological science contain their own kind of politics.37 In this sense, the political aspects of Egyptology’s history cannot be explained away as instances of bad, impure, or unobjective science.38 Writing also in this vein, Timothy Mitchell has demonstrated how Egyptology has functioned as one administrative institution among others specially authorized, under the banner of technical expertise, to manage Egypt’s wealth, resources, and, most important, population. As Mitchell shows, these forms of expert knowledge have constituted their own special mode of power.39

ANTIQUITIES AND CONFLICT

To give some sense of how the work of Egyptology takes place amidst sets of conflicts, one could not do better than start with a brief consideration of the most exemplary kind of Egyptological institution: the excavation site. While they are in the field, Egyptologists seek as much as they can to create laboratory conditions.40 To do this, they cordon off their site as much as possible from the social, political, and cultural contexts around it, effectively creating an interior (“the dig,” where scientists work to create conditions of objective research) separated from what is around it, which becomes a place of “externalities.” The standards, practices, and technical ability to achieve this end may have changed dramatically over Egyptology’s history, but the ideal of clinical separation has remained a theoretical constant from very early on. Yet, insofar as the typical method of separation has historically entailed the wholesale appropriation of land and expulsion of local peasant communities by colonial authorities (and later by Egyptian state officials), by no means can one say that even the best Egyptological science has ever been nonpolitical. As the history of the southern
Egyptian village of Gurna indicates, for example, Egyptological interest and concern have long been (and continue to be) key mechanisms of regular and often violent state intervention in the lives of modern Egyptians.41

The recent engagement between scholars of Egyptology and science studies is welcome because it recharts the multiple and significant intersections linking archaeology and the European museum to the history of modern Egypt. In this way, it indicates how one might move beyond the history of ideas model that has tended to dominate the colonial and national enlightenment narratives of Egyptology. In this model, the relation between archaeological discovery and Egyptological knowledge is often portrayed as mechanical: discovery leads to breakthroughs in understanding, which are then applied in making new discoveries; this process repeats and improves upon itself, and thus knowledge accumulates. Accordingly, Egyptology’s development appears to move in a smooth upward fashion, without regard for (or serious disturbance by) the fact that most of the relevant events took place in, or in relation to, modern Egypt, a country whose experience of colonial modernity has been anything but smooth and uneventful. In contrast, science studies encourages Egyptologists to rethink how knowledge is actually produced by inquiring into the relation between Egyptology’s interior—its knowledge—and those factors it usually declares to be mere externalities. Inspired by this critique, this book asks a number of questions usually not considered to be relevant to Egyptology—questions about location and practice, object and representation. Briefly, I will argue that it matters that most of Egyptology’s work has taken place in modern Egypt; it matters that the practice of Egyptological inquiry has rested as much on political and legal arrangements (and experimentation based on local knowledge) as it has on scientific methods; it matters that Egyptologists, like other modern scientists and scholars, needed to invent the class of objects (artifacts) on which they would work and over which they would have unique authority; and it matters that Egyptological claims were not pure concepts, but representations that took place in and around long-standing traditions, not to mention emerging semantic fields. Finally, it matters that these practices, objects, and representations—themselves ambiguous—were the site where significant social and cultural conflicts found expression.

One of the first arguments of this book is that Egyptology’s object, the artifact, came into being somewhere between Egypt and London, and
that this ushered in a new form of power linking archaeology, Egyptology, print culture, literature, and the arts with colonial and national politics. It should not be startling to assume that innovations in the formation of agency might have first emerged in the colonies, since, as scholars have routinely observed, the colonies of Europe were often quite explicitly constructed as laboratories for developing social and political technologies that might be used in the metropole.⁴² And despite the Eurocentric focus that still predominates in Egyptology’s autobiography, it is difficult to imagine that the discipline’s center of gravity has ever been securely located in Europe. Indeed, the actual work of Egyptology has never strayed far from the Egyptian countryside. Egyptology has always been partly situated in Egypt, even if there has always been a sharp line drawn between the field and the museum.

There is nothing remarkably new in these observations. Yet much said here will be rebuffed by those for whom Egyptology seems nothing more than the scholarly, disinterested study of the ancient past of Egypt carried out by uniquely qualified experts. When Martin Bernal attempted, twenty years ago, to illustrate the ways in which European Egyptology was colored by its own traditions of racism and colonialism, his claims were rejected as nonsense by Egyptologists and classicists alike. Readers will note in the following chapters that, unlike Bernal, for the most part I remain agnostic about the veracity of the particular claims Egyptology makes about the ancient past. It is the relevance of Egyptology in modern Egypt, not what it says about ancient Egypt, that most concerns me. In this way, I will insist that Egyptology needs to be understood as a particular institution of colonial power and later nationalist power in Egypt.

Thus, this study begins with, and returns to, the simple idea that acquisitionists, Egyptologists, and curators have always been situated. They do not study ancient objects in a distanced and acontextual way but are actively engaged in remaking those objects, and remaking them within the horizons in which they labor. The objects they have made, artifacts, are more than mere instruments by which colonial knowledge and power are created. That is because artifacts are not just products of human agency but also constitutive of it. They are not merely inert or detachable from the kind of knowledge and power which comes into being through the interaction of scientists and their objects of study. To employ a useful,
oft-cited phrase, artifacts are “entangled” with the sciences that take them to be their objects.43

Likewise, Egyptologists work within contexts that are informed by disputes and conflicts. Though their scholarship may always be about the ancient past, their claims have always touched upon issues—Islam, peasants, nationalist claims to cultural patrimony—that are thoroughly modern. This is as true in today’s Egyptology as it was in that of the 1800s. Like other modern sciences, Egyptological study involves acts of intervention into the material composition of its objects even as it strives to observe them dispassionately. In this sense, it is always a productive, not merely a reflective, practice and has, since the 1810s, transformed the Egyptian countryside in radical ways. Likewise, the knowledge Egyptologists produce, like other orders of knowledge, has always articulated a form of power: sometimes it has been marshaled to justify explicitly colonial ends, other times it has served to contest colonial rule, and it has almost always been used to discipline the peasantry of Upper Egypt.

The significance of these dynamics extends beyond the reach of Egyptology. Indeed, the struggle over the administration of ancient Egyptian objects is central to understanding Egyptian nationalist culture during the colonial period. This is because, for one thing, the debate over the ownership of Pharaonic Egypt did not simply pit Egyptian nationalists against European colonial administrators. Just as colonial administrators routinely relied upon preservationist ideology to justify their expropriation of Pharaonic antiquities, so Egyptian elites found it useful for exerting new forms of control over rural populations. Thus concepts such as appreciation and preservation implied much more than a way of thinking aesthetically and historically about objects—they also had vast implications for developing new forms of political governance. Moreover, the appropriation of Pharaonic art and culture was controversial as the basis for a national imaginary within Egypt itself. In particular, cultural Pharaonism reflected the taste and ideology of a narrow elite and took little account of the Muslim culture that had prevailed in Egypt for more than twelve hundred years.

My argument here explores these various conflicts by situating expressive culture in the institutions of material culture. Textual representations of Egyptian antiquities and fictional narratives on Pharaonic themes were not simply posterior reflections of material practice. On the contrary, ar-
chaeology and museum culture anticipated, as much as they proceeded from, the cultural imaginary of Egyptomania and Pharaonism. Similarly, it is not the case that Egyptian and European travelers and writers encountered Egyptian antiquities unmediated. Indeed, even their most personal encounters were never purely individual. The experience of the Egyptian antique was shaped by the exhibitionary institutions that framed the experience of monuments abroad and museums at home, just as it was conditioned by books and images consumed before leaving. In this sense, even the most subjective aspects of material culture are socially constructed. But it is time to move beyond the now routine observation that cultural objects are constructed by human subjects to argue that antiquities were not merely passive objects in history. As nonhuman objects, they were entangled in the social life of human actors and played an active role in the formation of power relations, whether in the British Empire or in the Egyptian nation-state.44 This is to echo a fundamental precept of science studies: there is no sharp separation between material objects and the concepts and human capacities they enable.45 This is a call not to return to traditional materialism, but rather to notice that humans, Egyptian antiquities, and the representations of artifacts formed part of a sprawling network of agents and actants.46 One indicator of this fact is that even though the processes of artifaction and figuration attempted to construct antiquities as inert matter, the stuff itself often did not obey this command. The proliferation of mummy fictions in English and French literatures attests to the anxieties that attended this. Moreover, while Egyptian antiquities were an important “object site” for the articulation of struggles among human subjects, the ground of this site was itself in motion. The consequences of this thoroughly conditioned the various cultural formations that emanated from the science of Egyptology, from museums to tourism, from pop Egyptomania in Europe to literary and political Pharaonism in Egypt. The Egyptian Sculpture Room may not have been the origin of this process, but it was a crucial node in the network of artifacts—the assemblage of political and cultural agencements—which began to emerge in the 1810s and which remains to this day so powerful that its power is never noticed.

A brief word on the organization of this book. Chapter 1 fleshes out the process by which antiquities were excavated and transported from Egypt
and then received at their museum destination. The experiment pursued in this chapter is the tracing of a moment in a single object’s biography as recorded by travelers, collectors, diplomats, officers, curators, and so on. I sought to gather as many documents of its provenance as possible, and in so doing narrate the story of a thing as it was transformed into an object of travelers’ interest, and then into an artifact acquired and put on display in the British Museum. If I have erred in the way of length and detail in this account, it has been to stress one of the primary facts of the new mode of antiquities collecting—namely, that the transformation of thing into artifact would be unthinkable without this archive of descriptive claims. This process—the creation of an artifact—is of primary significance for the wider narratives of the book, since it laid the foundation for a new way of thinking about Egyptian antiquities that would soon have consequences well beyond Egyptology. Chapter 2 charts the emergence of a set of ideas about the governance of modern Egypt that was made possible by the new artifact discourse while also situating this emergence against older local and regional traditions of thinking about ancient Egyptian monuments. Chapter 3 traces one consequence that Egyptological knowledge would have for modern Egyptians, since it became the source of a new sense of individual and collective identity. This chapter explores how motifs, themes, and narratives of modern Egyptian interest in ancient Egypt resonated deeply with others from the Nahda, the Arab modernist project of the nineteenth century and early twentieth. Chapter 4 revisits the institutional practices of Egyptology by way of the example of the discovery of King Tutankhamen’s tomb in 1922. Here we find that the science of the discovery was hopelessly entangled with contemporary nationalist politics and literary culture, and that this entanglement cannot be dismissed as mere externality to the practice of archaeological science. Chapter 5 describes the limits of Pharaonism, the Egyptian literary and political school of the 1920s and 1930s that was based on interest in Egyptological discovery. This chapter presents readings in Naguib Mahfouz’s early Pharaonist literary works alongside readings in the work of the contemporary Islamists Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb. The resulting juxtaposition illuminates the degree to which literary Pharaonism was founded on assumptions that were always deeply contested.

The organization of the book is historical, though not strictly so. Rather, each chapter develops its own thematic argument even as it presents a
discrete historical moment or series of moments. Moreover, while the order of the chapters is roughly chronological, starting in the 1810s and ending in the 1940s, the broader themes of the book are concerned with the emergence and development of colonial and nationalist cultures in modern Egypt.

While conducting my research, I was constantly reminded of the fact that ancient Egypt and its material culture have meant so many things to so many people over the years. Consider in this regard the following list of attitudes about, representations of, and claims on Pharaonic Egypt. For Neoplatonists, Rosicrucians, Freemasons (and in their way, new-age pagans), ancient Egypt has long been associated with Hermes Trismegistus and the origins of magic and alchemy, rationality and spiritualism. For Jews, the annual observance of Passover is a reminder that ancient Egypt was a place of bondage—and yet readers of the story of Joseph would not be mistaken to think that Egypt might also figure as a place of refuge. For rising empires, both ancient and modern, Egypt has always been a symbol of ancient sovereignty whose power might be grasped through the acquisition (or reproduction) of its monumental objects—hence the conspicuous placement of obelisks in Rome, London, Paris, New York, and Washington. During the first years of the French Revolution, ancient Egypt served as inspiration for a secular symbolic order designed to replace the church. For the nineteenth-century English surgeon-showman, Thomas “Mummy” Pettigrew, ancient Egypt was a fount of anatomical curiosity; for Joseph Smith, his contemporary in the United States, it was a source of divine revelation. Throughout the nineteenth century, Christian scholars studied ancient Egypt, looking for scientific evidence of the literal truth of Biblical narrative. In modern opera, to take one example of modern expressive culture, Egyptian themes figured centrally, as in Verdi’s *Aïda* and Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*. Later, the image of ancient Egypt would loom large in pulp genres of writing, from mystery to fantasy to science fiction. In Hollywood, Egyptian antiquities have always meant the adventure of discovery and the danger of the supernatural. In African American thought and culture, Egypt has appeared as a place of origin and proof of the sophistication and age of African civilization. We could add to this list the rich and diverse ways of thinking about ancient Egypt that appear within the textual tradition of orthodox Islam and the popular practices of Egyptian peasants—from the melancholic contemplation
of ancient ruins to the seeking of fertility totems within ancient temple sites, and from the use of mummy detritus as fertilizer to the pragmatic use of pyramids as rock quarries. Finally, Egypt’s Coptic community has long had an intimate, though fraught, relationship to their pre-Christian past—as both direct descendents and apostates from the ancient civilization, they have at times rejected their association with Pharaonic Egypt, and at others championed it.

The above is just a partial list of the possible topics one could study while exploring the modern image of ancient Egypt. The list also sheds light on a basic problem: the body of cultural representations of ancient Egypt is not just massive, it is also heterogeneous and contradictory. Admittedly, most of the items on this list are not given any consideration in this book. Instead I have chosen to focus on just a fraction of the modern cultural production inspired by the Pharaonic past, a sliver that until the present has not been sufficiently studied—the relationship between the ancient past and modern Egyptian culture during the colonial period, with a special emphasis on the ties between Egyptology and literary culture. Despite this narrow focus, I found no lack of heterogeneity, tension, and contradiction within and between the modern Egyptian traditions of representing the ancient past. These antagonisms and ambiguities are the underlying theme of this book, and I have attempted to leave them as they are rather than iron them out or fold them into a single, smooth story.

To accomplish this, I have arranged between each chapter brief contrapuntal readings that highlight the contested, conflicted, and ambiguous character of each text and cultural formation. For example, between chapters 3 and 4, I describe the way that the figure of Pharaoh re-emerges during the colonial period as writers like Ya’qub Sanu‘ and Ahmad Shawqi sought to critique the despotistic character of contemporary political rule. Importantly, their use of the figure of Pharaoh was not exactly the negative one received from the Bible or the Quran, nor the positive one derived from Egyptian Egyptology. Their figuration of Pharaoh speaks with and also against these other traditions, which are described in earlier chapters—and serves as a lucid example of what I mean by counterpoint. It made little sense to delete them from this study or to try to make them fit where they do not belong. The counterpoints in this book are arranged to indicate the degree to which the texts and themes of the preceding chapter become complicated or undermined when other representations enter the picture.
Part of my motivation for organizing these counterpoints is due to my conviction, following Edward Said’s powerful study *Culture and Imperialism*, that the analysis of colonial culture must be attuned to the dialogical character of colonial and anti-colonial power relations, which are themselves composed of back-and-forth movements between brutal violence and inspired creativity, bloody struggle and human conversation. I have attempted to signal this dynamic in the title of the book: the antiquities under discussion here are not only things over which (and because of which) conflicts have arisen, but their very matter is itself conflicted—that is, fraught, ambiguous, and wholly contested. Indeed, the cultural history charted here illustrates the degree to which the modern Egyptian consideration of ancient artifacts is composed (in an almost impossibly unified manner) of elements drawn from a long history of colonial dispossession, a longer tradition of classical Arabo-Islamic literary expression, the class chauvinism of enlightenment nationalist culture, and the revisionist critique of political Islamism.