

The Restitution Fight Between Germany and Egypt For The Nefertiti Bust

In a bullet-proof box (Fig.1), in the dark Room 21.0 of the Neues Museum (RexPublica, 2024) (Fig.2), sits find number ÄM 21300. A painted bust 49cm high, 24.5cm wide and 35cm deep, made of limestone, stucco, quartz, and wax. It was found 6th December 1912 in the remains of house P 47 - 2, room 19 (Jung, 2013, p. 421), in Amarna, central Egypt. Found by a German team, funded by James Simon (1851-1932), led by Ludwig Borchardt (1863-1938) approved by the French led Egyptian Antiquities Department. Attributed to sculptor Thutmose, ca. 1351-1334 BC. (Berlin, 2013) it is generally acknowledged to represent the Great Wife of the Pharaoh Akhenaten, Neferneferuaten-Nefertiti; reigning with her husband in the Amarna Period. Her dark home, the antithesis of the Great Wife's life as icon of the Atenist religion of the sun disc's rays, and its life-giving light.



Figure 1. (left) The bust in situ in the Neues Museum, (right) the bust. (RexPublica, 2024)

Its German excavators were granted half of the artifacts found at the site, however, License Articles 4 and 5 (1891-1912) gave Egyptian Museums the right to retain objects of significant

value, despite such 'portage' agreements (Hanna, 2023, p. 2). During the division of finds in 1913, overseen by the Antiquities Service, the bust, unremarkably described as a 'painted royal princess', was retained by Borchardt, ostensibly with the approval of Lefebvre, the French Chief Antiquities Inspector and ratified by Maspero, the French Director of the Antiquities Service in Egypt. The excavation's sponsor loaned and ultimately gifted it to the Berlin Museum on condition if Egypt wanted it returned, it would be (Hanna, 2023, p. 4). Since the public exhibition 12 years after its discovery (Jung, 2013, p. 421), the bust has been acknowledged as one of the 'most exquisite captivating examples of naturalistic ancient Egyptian art' (Francis, 2024), and, its removal from Egypt has created a fierce repatriation debate for a century.

Historically the debate has pivoted on the legality of its exportation, shaped by two World Wars, poor Franco-German relations, British occupation of Egypt, an Egyptian Nationalist struggle for independence and military rule. The last 30 years has included other elements such as Egypt's colonisation and its implications for artifacts in museum collections and what many consider to be the West's appropriation (physically and culturally) of Egyptian heritage. An added complication for the Nefertiti bust is where the object has become entrenched in the psyche of the population of both host nation and their original home, resulting in 'the entanglement of cultural property with heritage politics' (Hanna, 2023, p. 1).

Regarding the original debate on the legality of its export, Lacau, the successor to Maspero as Director of the Antiquities Service, as early as 1924, privately recognised the division of finds allowing Borchardt to retain the bust was 'an error made by Lefebvre' (Voss, 2013, p. 464); legal but 'an egregious breach of trust' (Voss, 2013, p. 465) with Lacau accusing Borchardt of

a 'dirty trick' (Voss, 2013, p. 464) hiding a find that would have immediately triggered retention in Egypt. Indeed, Egypt's Royal Legation in Berlin agreed to its repatriation in 1933, with Hitler refusing to honour it. In 2012, Germany's Minister of State for Culture and the Media continued to give supremacy to this legal right to possession, confirming the bust is 'beyond a doubt the rightful possession of the Prussian Cultural Heritage Foundation...with comprehensive documentation to support this point' (Neues, 2012).



Figure 2. The bust at the Neues Museum (Dowson, 2024).

Hanna contends there are significant cultural arguments (Hanna, 2023) to repatriate the bust and even the legal basis for export is unfounded, relying on fraudulent representation of the find as insignificant. The legality argument, driven by the contemporary socio-political milieu, seems hollow a century later, and a more ethical approach would recognise the injustices of the past to shape Museum policy, driven by what seems ultimately 'right'. Yes, Germany may be, in the strictest sense, its legal owner, however the bust is more than an artifact. It is the cultural heritage of Egypt and Egyptians, and its continued captivity can be seen as a 'living 'token of neocolonialism' (Hanna, 2023, p. 15).

There is a sad irony in Borchardt's famous phrase 'description is useless, must be seen' (Berlin, 2013), acknowledging the immense power of the bust 'in person' and yet, in her current

location, this will never be seen first-hand by most of her home nation and forever emblematic of a time when treasures were taken from an Egypt vulnerable to Western occupation and manipulation. To Egyptians the bust is not simply an artifact, it, and its continued removal, interacts with the present and defines the future. In its current heterotopia it is placed and viewed through a cultural lens of Western ideals, a 'decontextualised thing' (Hanna, 2023, p. 8). Aside from its cultural properties, even its pigments may have a significance not immediately apparent to a Western eye. It contains yellow orpiment which interacts with the atmosphere and UV light (Strong, 2018, pp. 173-184) and the eye-physiology of people exposed to high UV light, over generations, such as the Egyptians, may alter the perception of the colour itself (Josserand, et al., 2021, p. 1). This is just one small tangible example of a specific lived experience that may be had in Egypt, likely not applicable to a Western viewer. However, I agree with Hanna, the intangible effects of its isolation far outweigh these physical elements. The Nefertiti bust is a 'social agent' (Hanna, 2023, p. 8), not an inert entity. Although undoubtedly important to the psyche of the German nation after 100 years, the importance of this bust to the Egyptian people, particularly modern Egyptian women, with its innate power, cannot be overstated. Despite the practical concerns regarding potential damage raised about its return, I agree with the argument that all efforts should be made to release it from captivity to be seen and experienced in its homeland.

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