

| The Egyptian Museum

by Wafaa El-Saddik

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The Egyptian Museum is like an open book on the history of ancient Egypt and a repository of the nation’s memory of that important historical period. The world’s largest collection of Pharaonic antiquities is housed in the wings of the museum, the idea of which was conceived at a time when interest in the ancient civilization of Egypt was increasing, particularly following Napoleon Bonaparte’s Egyptian campaign of 1798, which was accompanied by a group of scholars who painstakingly recorded Egypt’s antiquities and geographical and environmental landmarks in the famous book *Description de l’Egypte* between 1809 and 1828. This interest on the part of Europe coincided with that of the Governor of Egypt, Muḥammad ‘Alī Pāshā (1805–48), who enacted laws to prevent the removal of Egyptian antiquities from the country by foreign consulates, merchants and European collectors of works of art and antiquities, all of them rivalling to loot Egypt’s antiquities and to smuggle them abroad.

In 1828, Muḥammad ‘Alī Pāshā asked the French scholar Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832), who was called the father of

THE RESHAPING OF THE HERITAGE LANDSCAPE

Egyptology and renowned for his success in deciphering the hieroglyphs, to compile a book on Egypt's Pharaonic antiquities with a view to their preservation. Champollion accordingly produced his well-known work *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie*. Muḥammad 'Alī also decreed that objects of antiquity should be gathered together in a building in al-Azbakīya Gardens, located in central Cairo, that was to become Egypt's first antiquities museum. The premises of the Al-Azbakīya Museum were, however, unequipped to accommodate any more of the archaeological finds that were constantly being made, and its contents were moved to other premises in the Ṣalāḥ ad-Dīn Citadel. Then in 1855, when 'Abbās I was Governor of Egypt, the Austrian Duke Maximilian came to Egypt and visited the Citadel Museum. As a collector of antiquities and *objets d'art*, he asked the Governor for some of the ancient artefacts in the museum, and was presented with the entire collection, which became the mainstay of the Egyptian collection in Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum. By that time, the French archaeologist Auguste Mariette, a great lover of Egypt, had already begun preparations for the construction of a new museum at Būlāq, right on the bank of the Nile. Appointed Director of Antiquities by the then Governor of Egypt, Sa'īd Pāshā, Mariette drafted laws designed to halt the removal of antiquities from the country and also successfully uncovered numerous relics from different archaeological areas, in particular Saqqāra, in which he was particularly interested. He thus enriched the Būlāq Museum collection, but in 1878, the museum and its contents suffered immense damage as a consequence of a disastrous Nile flood. The antiquities were therefore temporarily moved to another museum, namely the Ismā'īl Pāshā Palace



8. View of Cairo and of the Egyptian Museum.

Museum in Gīza, where they remained until transferred to the current Museum in Taḥrīr Square in 1902.

The Taḥrīr Museum

The construction of a large museum to house the vast quantity of ancient artefacts resulting from the growing number of archaeological finds became crucial. The Ministry of Public Works consequently commissioned the French architect Marcel Dourgnon to design the museum, for which he won an award when it was erected in Taḥrīr Square in the centre of Cairo, under the supervision of Dourgnon's successor, the French scholar Gaston Maspero, whose various discoveries and key works enhanced the field of Egyptology. He was the first to keep a record of antiquities, doing so in a series of enormous registers.

The ground floor of the Egyptian Museum has an exhibition area of 5,400m² dedicated to the chronological display of Egyptian antiquities. The first floor is set aside for the display of ancient objects of Egyptian civilization, arranged by topic, and also holds

complete archaeological collections, all in an area covering 3,500m². The second floor is devoted to collections of sarcophagi from different eras and is reserved for scholars, although a plan is under way to open it to the general public. The museum also houses a library containing everything hitherto published on Egyptian antiquities since the nineteenth century.

Visitors climb up to the entrance in the centre of the façade of the museum, via a number of steps after walking through the garden of the museum. In the middle of the garden lies a beautiful pool, in and around which are papyrus and lotus plants. The garden also contains groups of important monuments made of solid stone.



9. Exterior (left) and interior (right) of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The foundation stone of the museum was laid in April 1897 by the Khedive 'Abbās Ḥilmī II, and the Museum was officially opened on 17 November 1902.

Architectural description of the museum

The museum was deliberately constructed in classical Roman style, its façades boasting magnificent curves and harmonious columns and cornices. In addition, they are decorated with statues, relief inscriptions, ornamentations and motifs intended to demonstrate the grandeur and power of the building and its importance to history, culture and civilization.

The ground plan of the Egyptian Museum is T-shaped and the façade is approximately 115 metres long and 22 metres high. There are identical openings on both sides of the entrance, as well as two other entrances on the far right and left, one for staff and the other leading to the library.

Lying on either side of the main entrance are a reception room for important visitors, a public relations room and various stands selling models, gifts and academic books. The visitor then arrives at the distribution and guidance room, which is covered by a semi-spherical dome containing apertures to let in natural light which

THE RESHAPING OF THE HERITAGE LANDSCAPE

supplement the artificial lighting. This dome is supported by four pillars which extend to the highest part of the museum, thus making a vertical connection between the ground and first floors. Reaching the full height of the museum, the mid-section of the ground floor is approximately $45 \times 16\text{m}^2$ and sits low on a number of steps leading up from the floor. The display in this section has been made to resemble ancient Egyptian temples, and consists of huge portals and statues, such as those of Amenhotep III and his wife Tiy. This part of the museum has a gabled ceiling covered by glass panels, which let in some of the soft light needed to create the awe-inspiring atmosphere of Egypt's ancient temples. This is the centre of the museum, with galleries and rooms on all sides; beginning to the left of the entrance, continuing round until again reaching the entrance in a historical sequence that starts with the pre- and early dynastic periods and continues on to the Old, Middle and Modern Kingdoms, and finally the late period.

On the ground floor, the height of some of the galleries and rooms ranges between 7 and 8 metres. It reaches 15 metres in various other rooms and a maximum of 22 metres in the main hall mentioned above, which contains objects of immense size. The museum has 107 rooms in all. Unlike the ground floor with its massive statues, the first floor houses statuettes, a collection of relics from Tutankhamun, jewellery and the Mummy Room. Another new room is currently being prepared to accommodate the remaining royal mummies. Most of the upper floor rooms overlook those below to afford visitors a detailed view of the upper parts of the huge statues, thus dynamizing the display. Below the ground floor,

the basement consists of a number of intersecting vaults supported by pillars and bearer walls designed to lessen the heavy load created by the huge objects above. The basement is the main storage room of the museum for major antiquities uncovered during archaeological digs, and contains tens of thousands of artefacts from various archaeological periods and areas.

In constructing the museum, attention was paid to ensuring ease of movement and smooth access between the various sections. Stairways were built in the four corners in order to facilitate access between the ground and upper floors. The museum also has three large and secured side doors through which large heavy objects can be brought in and out. These doors remain closed and are only opened when necessary.

Plans are afoot to build an extension on the western side of the museum in order to accommodate restoration workshops, information and service centres, a cafeteria and gift shops, as well as an education section and administrative offices. The Egyptian Museum is divided into seven sections: Relics of Tutankhamun; Antiquities from the Predynastic period, the Early Dynastic period and the Old Kingdom; Antiquities from the first intermediate period and Middle Kingdom; Antiquities from the New Kingdom; Antiquities from the Late and Graeco-Roman periods; Ancient coins and papyri; Sarcophagi and scarabs.

Generally speaking, the antiquities in the museum are displayed in the chronological order of ancient Egyptian history. Any one section, however, may contain various collections of

artefacts arranged by type rather than period. Such artefacts are displayed in glass cabinets labelled with descriptions of each object and details of its period, origin and the material used in its manufacture. Not displayed in glass cabinets are some of the large heavy objects, which are also labelled with explanations. In addition is the Centenary Room, which was fashioned out of part of the museum basement in order to stage a stunning exhibition entitled 'Hidden Treasures', commemorating, in 2002, the centenary anniversary of the construction of the Egyptian Museum.

As the museum is now crammed with antiquities which need adequate space to allow for the display of each piece, it has become necessary to think of building a new museum in Gīza, close to the hill of the Pyramids. This museum which is to be called the Grand Museum, is intended to alleviate the crowding in the Egyptian Museum in Taḥrīr Square.

An exhibition plan for this Grand Museum has been elaborated, including several main topics, first of all the land, geography and fundamental characteristics of Egypt, such as the Nile, water resources and the desert. The second topic covers kingship and state through the ruling dynasties, the various classes and wars, as well as architecture and construction. The third topic is society and work and will include administration, arts, crafts, homes and daily life, as well as sports, games and music. The fourth topic is focused on religion and its various elements in terms of funerary rites and worship, the sanctification of animals, places of worship, priests and various objects of worship. The fifth subject is knowledge and scribes in

ancient Egypt. A key part of this museum will be dedicated to exhibiting a collection of the relics of King Tutankhamun, all of which are in the Egyptian Museum.

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