

Reflective Essay

The purpose of this module is to gain work experience in a field I am interested in working in. In this particular case, that is work in museums. I am interested in creating and running exhibitions and have previously made one for the National Trust, and I am thinking of doing a masters in museology. Being able to partake in the setup of an exhibition as a “professional placement” has therefore been a good experience.

The exhibition, *Experiencing Ancient Egyptian Art: Artefacts from Cyfarthfa Castle Museum, Merthyr Tydfil*, was based on a previous module from earlier this academic year¹. It revolves around the merging of curricular research and extracurricular activities undertaken by Dr Katharina Zinn as part of her Cyfarthfa Castle project, which includes the *Museum of Lies*, that began in 2012². Being able to research objects, present them to others, and write a catalogue entry as required by the module has been useful, as these are things I might expect to be doing if I were working within a museum environment. Additionally, being able to see my scrapbook sometime after I created it where I documented my research process has been interesting. Though it was only eight months ago, the way I would have approached the process and the layout of the scrapbook has changed.

The purpose of the Art and Ancient Egypt module was to learn how the perception and definition of art differs between a modern, western audience, and an ancient Egyptian audience. Additionally, it was to gain experience researching objects that have little known information about them and learning how to present that information to others in a variety of formats. The objects come from a donated collection from Cyfarthfa Museum and Art Gallery, Merthyr Tydfil, and are unresearched and unpublished. This presents a unique challenge, especially being a student that does not have a lot of knowledge about ancient Egypt. The objects were a small human face, a large vessel, a smaller pot, a statue head, and a string of amulets. I chose the amulets (CCM 348.004) as I thought they would be the most interesting and was intrigued by the colour of what I now know to be a scarab.

For the Art and Ancient Egypt module, I created a presentation for the amulets, discussing each amulet. I included what the individual amulet might depict, its measurements, the material it is made out of, and what its use would have been. For example, the slides for the Papyrus Column start with its measurements (1.6cm x 1.1cm), its material (Glazed Composition), the physical characteristic that it has been broken, what it depicts

¹ HPAH5086/HPAH6086 Art and Ancient Egypt 4000BC to the 2020ies: Exhibiting artistic representations

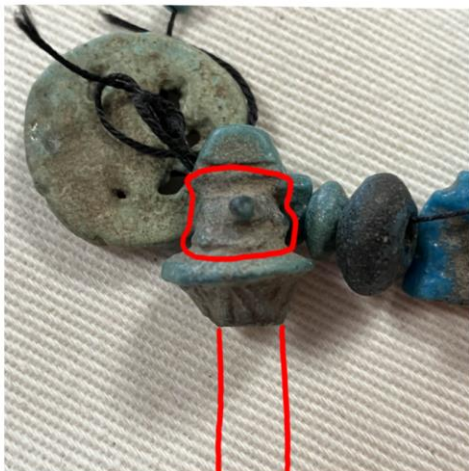
² (Zinn, 2019)

(potentially a bird), and what its use as an ancient Egyptian amulet was (protection, potentially patronage). I also included comparisons of the amulets to other amulets in the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Some of these comparisons were very similar amulets but were clearer in their presentation of what they were depicting and were used to make it easier for an audience to visualise what the amulets would have looked like or looked like in a better quality. I discussed some different materials amulets may have been made out of. All the amulets on CCM 348.004 are suspected to be made of faience and this is a common material for amulets to be made from for its affordability, but I wished to include a few other materials to show the diversity of amulets within ancient Egyptian art.



Papyrus Column

- 1.6cm x 1.1cm
 - 1.1cm at the widest point
- Glazed composition
- Broken at the bottom
- Likely depicts an animal on the top of the column



Papyrus Column

- Broken, originally would have been longer.
- Depicts an animal, likely a bird due to the overarching theme.
- Generally for protection, but might have a more specific purpose depending on the deity.

(PowerPoint slides, Author, 2024)

The scrapbook I created for the module was for the purpose of documenting my research process and ideas behind what I was looking at. I began by discussing what art is and how the ancient Egyptians might have interpreted it, to the best of my ability as I am not an ancient Egyptian. Then, similarly to the PowerPoint, I discussed the types of materials amulets tended to be made of, where those materials come from, and what might be depicted. After, I included what we had originally thought the amulets present were. For example, the group thought one of the Wedjat eyes bared similarity to the iconography for a type of *Tree of Life*. Finally, I discussed what the amulets actually were, their size,

material, and usage. I did theorise about a running theme through the amulets, as many could potentially be related to Horus. Necklaces with a theme did occur in ancient Egypt but given that the amulets are strung with a cotton string, it is unlikely that they originate in this collection from ancient Egypt. The final assessment for the module, and one of the most important for my experience, was the catalogue entry. This was the most difficult for the amulet as each amulet could be considered its own, unique object, with its own catalogue entry. However, it was designated as one object, and I had to work with it as such. I struggled with the word count and getting all the information about each individual amulet in that I had wanted to include. I may have laid out the catalogue entry differently now than I chose to do then, and moved information from my opening paragraph elsewhere, which might have had a positive effect on the wordcount. I enjoyed the challenge, and this has prepared me for challenging objects in a museum environment.

For the Professional Placement module, a different, further museological approach was required for curating and setting up the exhibition than was required for the more academic Art and Ancient Egypt module. I was given the task of creating the labels for the objects. This meant having to become familiar with the objects that I had not researched as part of the module. I did this by reading the labels submitted by students for each object and by accessing information provided on the Moodle page. For the amulets, it was difficult to get the label to 50 words because of how much information could be said about them. I had the opposite problem with the rest of the objects and struggled to make 50 words as the amulets could be considered multiple objects within one object, which is not an issue with the other artefacts. For some objects, the usage is not as clear as with the amulets. For example, at the time of writing of the labels, the small human head was assumed to be for a canopic jar due to its size but could not be confirmed. The other objects were a bit more obvious, though specific details about them were not known. When writing the amulet label, I considered how I could condense information about the object down enough to fit into 50 words. The solution for the final label was to remove filler words:

“Amulets made of a glazed composition *known as faience*”³

“Amulets made of a glazed composition (faience)”⁴

In hindsight, I used filler words to make the reading experience of the viewer easier, but they are not necessary and can be cut out. I had begun to weigh my options with not discussing some of the filler beads but decided against this as each bead is on the amulet for a reason, whether it is impressive like the scarab or deity head, or a plain bead from a

³ (Author, 2025)

⁴(Zinn, 2025)

once larger piece. The space available for the labels within the cases lead to them functioning as a caption, as outlined by Serrell in *Exhibit Labels*, and does not require much interpretation from a visitor⁵.

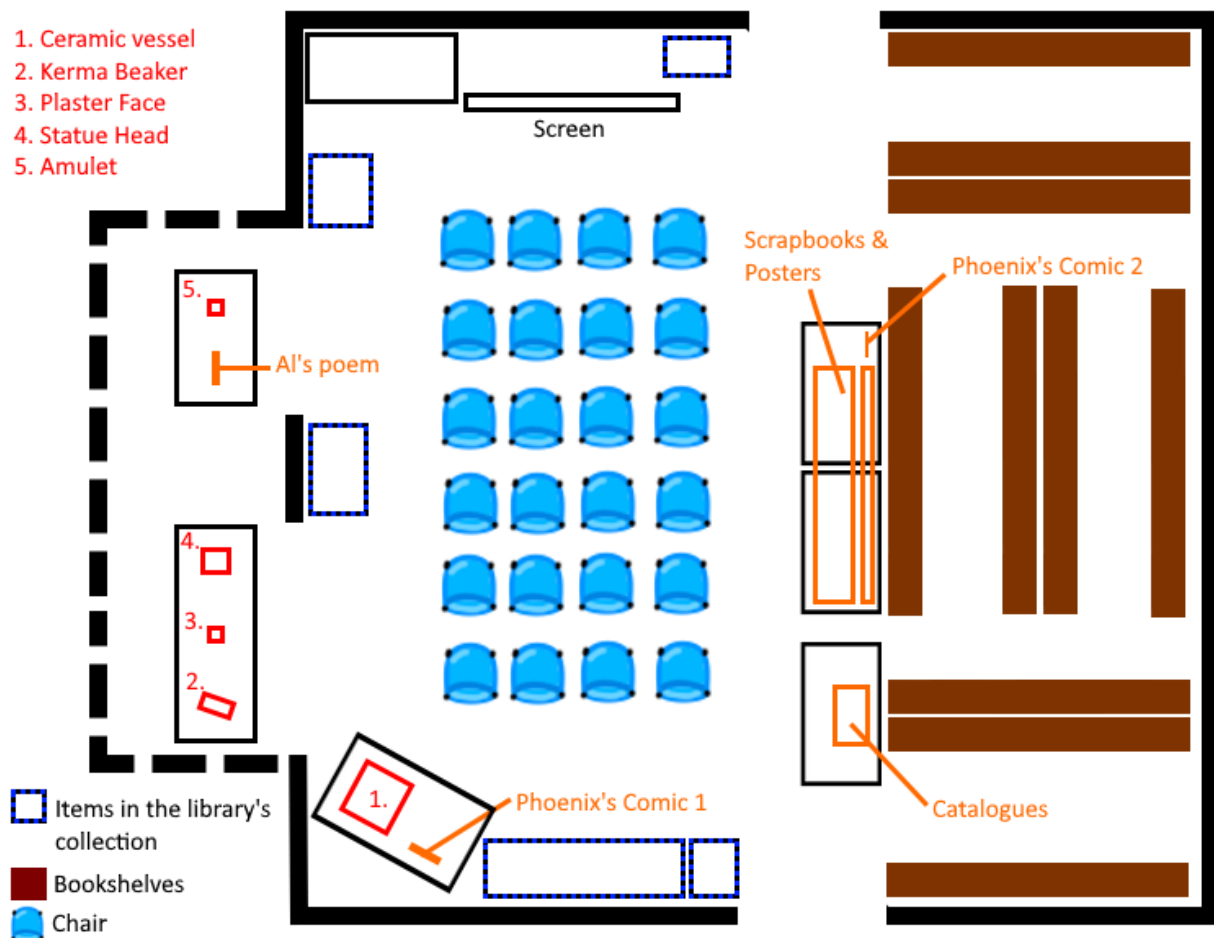
My other task for the exhibition was to give my presentation from the module to the visitors. I made some minor changes to the PowerPoint, such as correcting my mistake about my understanding of glazed composition. After being in the space where I would be giving the presentation and seeing the screen it would be on, I considered making the font in my PowerPoint bigger for those who may sit at the back of the room, but the font was already reasonably sized for its purpose. I did intend to discuss the types of amulets using the amulets we researched but that information was in my notebook which, due to the setup, was not easily accessible. I thought my presentation could have been better but was limited by the setup. Having to constantly turn around, away from the audience, to forward the PowerPoint is not ideal, and having no surface in front of me from my notes made me wary of using them, as turning around to look at my notes would make me appear unprepared. However, I felt I was clear with my speaking and saw visitors interacting with my presentation. I wasn't expecting to be asked any questions and was pleasantly surprised when I was, especially when it was a question I felt confident in answering. I was asked questions after the presentation about the amulets and felt confident in answering those as well. Unfortunately, questions about specifics of where and when the amulets come from were common and had to be answered honestly.

The modules, whilst dealing with the same objects and work, approached the topic in different ways. The Art and Ancient Egypt module viewed the objects far more academically. Our purpose was to research the objects and write what we had discovered for the usage of others. Within the Professional Placement module, the purpose was to present those objects and the information in a way that a general audience would understand and enjoy, whilst also maintaining as much academic integrity as possible. When moving between an entirely academic setting to a setting more appropriate for a general audience that has a range of knowledge and understanding, the ways in which information is presented and what information is presented changes. For example, giving a presentation to a general audience is likely to work well with the catalogues, as a presentation lends itself better to questions and explanations not appropriate for a catalogue. However, the catalogue is able to have far more information contained within it that can be processed by a visitor in a much faster time than a presentation discussing all

⁵ (Serrell, 2015, pp.36–39)

of the objects present in the exhibition. These things work well together to form a fully rounded experience at the exhibition.

To set up for the exhibition, the space, objects, and other resources needed to be prepared. The room, which was normally a study room for the library, had tables in a u-shape in the direction of a screen. The tables were moved to allow chairs in rows in front of the screen for the presentation. The objects were placed to the left of the door, and the catalogues on a table in front of the door. The scrapbooks and posters were placed on the opposite side of the room to the objects, with chairs in the middle facing the screen.



(Layout, Author, 2025)

This setup would normally encourage a clockwise movement around the room. Visitors can collect a catalogue at the beginning, if they choose, as they come in, then proceed around the objects before moving to the scrapbooks and posters. This setup could also encourage visitors to revisit the objects after gaining information from the scrapbooks and posters, as the objects are in view as they proceed towards the door. The catalogues are situated so that they can collect one as they exit, if they have not already collected one. A

unique challenge with this space was the already existing collection from the library (marked with blue and black dotted lines). These were pieces relevant to the library or donated to the library. Ultimately, the two cases by the door were covered. This was to prevent confusion for visitors as to whether they were involved in the exhibition, and to ensure attention was not drawn away from the objects. The amulet was given its own case due to its size. Having it in a case with other objects may have caused it to 'get lost' and having it in its own case also meant a mirror could be placed underneath the amulets to allow visitors to observe both sides. Additionally, Al's poem could go in the case with the amulet, which the poem was about. The scrapbooks and posters were placed together as a body of student work.

This setup could have been improved with a larger space. Having the chairs in the centre of the exhibition resulted in visitors not following the ideal path. After sitting in the chairs whilst the introductory talk and presentation were given, visitors happened to move to whatever was closest. Some visitors were drawn towards the amulets after having heard the presentation on them. Had the chairs been in a separate area to the exhibition itself, this might have been able to be avoided. However, it should not be expected for visitors to always follow the intended path.

The cases were against a window, and the blinds had to be closed to avoid sunlight reflecting off the glass of the cases and presenting visitors from seeing inside, as the reflection was, in this case, a hinderance⁶. Ideally, lights would have been able to be turned on above the cases to make seeing inside them easier, but those in the library did not work. This was gotten around by using ring lights on top of the cases. In hindsight, this might have been able to be improved with the use of LEDs inside the case, which would then not be at risk of being bumped into by visitors. Additionally, having more space around and behind the cases would have been ideal for visitors to get a full view of the objects. The showcase itself fulfilled three of the four purposes of museum showcases outlined by Ambrose and Paine in *Museum Basics*: "to protect the objects inside from theft and damage, to protect the objects inside from pollution, dust, and insects, and to provide a 'theatre stage' on which to exhibit and interpret objects."⁷ In this instance, it was not necessary to think about conditions such as humidity as the objects were considered stable. However, choosing to not use sunlight could have the added benefit of not exposing the objects to potentially harmful UV light.

Unfortunately, this exhibition did not entirely cater to a visitor group that might experience various disabilities. The venue itself, the library, contains a lift for those who may struggle

⁶ (Ambrose and Paine, 2018, pp. 41)

⁷ (Ambrose and Paine, 2018, pp. 93)

with stairs, and is well lit and sign posted for those with vision issues. However, in the exhibition itself we did not provide any tactile labels, due to a lack of being able to source them. Whilst we did not have an ideal exhibition focused on touch, visitors were able to interact with the scrapbooks made by students, though this serves non-visually impaired visitors best. However, as far as we were aware, there were no visitors with any particular needs in terms of disability. In the event that there was, a solution could have been to verbally describe the space the exhibition was taking place in, the objects that were there, and the scrapbooks and posters.

Another challenge with this particular exhibition is how far removed the objects are from their original context. As stated by Preziosi, objects in museums are “transformed”⁸ when removed from their context. The objects exhibited here were all from Ancient Egypt, but potentially from extremely different time periods and locations. The locations, which would have been helpful to finding more information on the objects when they were being researched, were not noted when the items were acquired (before they were donated to the museum). The amulets, for example, were comprised of many different time periods, and were not likely to have been originally found together and so were arranged for a non-Ancient Egyptian audience. Attempting to reinterpret these objects out of being for a non-Ancient Egyptian audience back into what an Ancient Egyptian audience might have expected for these objects, but in a context understandable for, still, a non-Ancient Egyptian audience was a challenge.

I received positive feedback for my presentation from fellow students and visitors, despite what I may have thought about it. I could be well understood, and general feedback implies that visitors did learn something from my presentation, as is the goal with any modern exhibition of a collection through an ‘informal’ education⁹. I was informed that the images I put on the presentation of the amulets that showed the amulets in greater detail and displayed their features was helpful. As previously stated, the labels were altered slightly in order to make the more similar wordcounts. The additional information of what the small plaster head was more likely to have been was added by sticking a page from an article feature the types of coffins it may have come from to the case. This experience has prepared me to be flexible if I am to find myself putting together exhibitions in future. I have gained confidence with writing catalogue entries through revisiting my own and being able to read other's interpretations of the objects. Additionally, I have learnt how to observe a space and discuss the best layout using what is available, making small tweaks that a visitor might not have considered (such as covering the library's objects).

⁸ (Preziosi, 2006, pp. 50)

⁹ (Hein and Firm, 1998, p.7)

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Labels

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