Find as theme: re-uniting “expert” and “public” agendas in Egyptian collections

Stephen Quirke

The different audiences and users of archaeological collections are often reduced to the oppositional pairing expert/public, generally considered to be mutually exclusive, with different needs: researchers require detailed information at minutely atomised level, whereas school groups and other visitors require generic, thematic summaries. However, the expert/public opposition can easily be turned on its head. Researchers produce, and may then unconsciously consume, the bland and banal Ancient Egypt they claim to seek to investigate in detail. Conversely, Media Studies can show how mass-circulated imagery may involve complex visual and verbal construction-work, requiring greater sophistication than most expert research writing. Beyond expert-public oppositions, whether individual or structural, I consider a third option, that audiences across the varied and overlapping range of interests share questions and needs, but remain divided by social structure. In the public sphere of collections, documented find-groups become a touchstone for a new exchange between public reminders of the unanswered and research reminders of the complex. However, re-uniting find and theme requires a new social contract between knowledge-seekers, which neither “experts” nor “publics” might be willing to pursue.

Introduction: a standardised contrast.
Research Precision versus Public Cloud

In archaeological collections, London museum practice opposes the needs of specialist researchers and general public, with academic departments for the first, education departments for the second. According to now received wisdom, specialist researchers require detailed information at minutely atomised level, whereas school groups and other visitors need more general, thematic summaries. For the study of ancient Egypt, as for other countries and regions, time and space, chronology and geography underpin this opposition:

1. Departments of education in nationally-funded museums which have separate academic departments: Victoria and Albert Museum, Department of Learning, <http://www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/l/learning-department/>; British Museum, education divisions not identified as a department on the web-site learning page <http://www.britishmuseum.org/learning.aspx>; a quick introduction to late twentieth-century development of museum education in the English context is given by V. WOOLLARD, Identifying the rise of Museum Education Departments, 2008: jiscmail document on the British Museum website at <https://www.google.co.uk/#q=british+museum+education+department&start=10>.