Garstang Museum Tales From The Square Podcast Transcript

Gina Criscenzo Laycock

You're listening to Tales from the square with me, Gina Criscenzo Laycock and Charlotte Sargent here at the Garstang Museum of Archaeology.

I'm Gina Criscenzo Laycock. And I'm the curator of the Garstang Museum of Archaeology at the University of Liverpool and Abercrombie Square. The Garstang Museum has collections from around the world. Mostly we contain collections excavated by the archaeologist John Garstang, who actually founded the museum as the Institute of Archaeology in the early 1900s, and the majority of our objects come from Garstang's excavations. So this is why we are named in his honour.

We have five galleries, which all have different kind of theme. So the first gallery introduces the visitor to who John Garstang was, why we exist, why we're called the Garstang Museum, and really brings together some of the different cultures that we display.

The second gallery looks at a wide range of cultures from the ancient Near East through to the classical world to Greece, Rome, and also features a little bit of British pre-history.

Then the remainder of the museum is dedicated to Egypt and Sudan. So you have one small gallery where we have some of our more sculptural pieces, some stele heads of statues, things like that. Then we have a larger gallery, which contains a chronological run through of ancient Egypt and Sudan. So we start with our very earliest Egyptian material from the Pre-Dynastic period, sort of around 7000 years ago, and we run all the way through into the Coptic Christian period. So the early kind of Ads. That's in the Egyptian side, and then in the Nubian side, we look at again, the prehistoric Nubia round about the same time as the Egyptian predynastic, and running all the way through to Meroitic culture, which runs to about 400AD. And then finally, we have our thematic gallery, which is about the Egyptian concepts of the afterlife. And so this gallery contains our mummy, various coffins, and lots of objects that the Egyptians would have placed in their tombs in order to grant them a successful and happy afterlife.

Amongst the most exciting objects in the museum, for me, personally, is our Pre-Dynastic Egyptian and Nubian collections. Now, these come from a very early period of what I'd say Egyptian history, but it's actually Egyptian prehistory we're looking at before writing was developed. So some of our earliest objects date to around 7000 years ago, running up until about 5000 years ago. And I think one of the most exciting sections of our collection connected to this period is the tomb goods of Queen Neith-hotep. Neith-hotep was a member of the royal family at the point of unification. And we know she was the consort of King Narmer and mother of King Hor-Aha, both of whom have sometimes been described as the founder of Egypt. It's difficult to pinpoint exactly. But what makes Neith-hotep really fascinating is, first of all, she's the earliest historically attested woman in the world. We know women existed before her, but to have a named individual for whom we know family members we know when she lived is really quite remarkable. We have many of the objects from her tomb, and one of those objects hints at something even more special about Neith-hotep. It's an unremarkable piece of mud on the face of it. When you look at it in the right angles, you can see a stumped impression on it. And that impression has some hieroglyphs, and it's the name of Neith-hotep. But her name is written in the way a Pharaohs name is written, not the way a Queen's name is written. In the entire course of Egyptian history. There is not a single woman who didn't also serve as Pharaoh whose name was written that way. Now, we can't say for certain this meant she was, you know, Egypt's first Pharaoh, or one of Egypt's first Pharaoh s. It's very difficult at this very early stage. But she clearly held an influence beyond what would have been expected of a mere wife and mother, she had something even more critical. And it is frustrating not to be able to get at the details of this, but it is fascinating to really look into it and, and to encourage our visitors to think about this. We don't have a definitive answer, we're not going to tell you, she was definitely this. We encourage our visitors to think about the collections, think about how you interpret evidence, because that's an important skill for life. Do we interpret it this way because we want women to have a more prominent role in history does that impact our views of the past? So it's really interesting to where we can take these ancient objects and really inform modern debate and think about and I think that's an important aspect of archaeology is not just learning about the past, it helps us learn more about ourselves and our futures.

Also, in our collection, we have an ancient Egyptian mummy. Now, I wouldn't refer to him as an object in our collection, we think quite carefully about the appropriateness of displaying human remains and how you work with that. What we want to do is encourage people to see the human being who inhabited this body. And to that end, we make sure that when we display his remains, we are really fully keeping to his beliefs as much as we are able to. We're very lucky in the sense of ancient Egypt that we know so much about what people wanted about the afterlife, they wrote about it in great detail. So we know that the preservation of his body was very important. So we keep his body in a climate controlled case where it is absolutely monitored and looked after, and we make sure there is no degradation.

We also know that certain items would have been placed in an Egyptian tomb that were meant to be helpful in the afterlife, that these are things that you could draw upon in the afterlife, even though they're in the physical world. So he sits within a gallery that is full of this kind of material. In fact, you may well have more objects here than he had in his own tomb. And I say that because we don't actually know where he came from. We know very little about him, we know he's male. We know he was relatively young, when he died. early adulthood, he had very well-preserved teeth, which is very rare in Egypt, if you're at all older, because the sand gets into everything and really wears down people's enamel. But we don't have a name for, preserved, unfortunately. Which is, is very frustrating, because that is an important part of Egyptian belief is to have the name preserved. There's not much we can do about that.

But we also display him alongside a magical text, the offering formula, and this was widely used in Egypt. So initially, they tried to put as many objects as possible in the tomb. But I think thinking through the practicalities, you realise that no matter how much you put in the tomb, that's not going to last for eternity. So they started to come up with magical solutions. And one of these solutions was this offering formula, where if you read it out that magically provides for the person in the afterlife. So we have the offering formula prominently displayed in the gallery, where people can read it out if they would like to honour the beliefs of the individual who is displayed there. Because ultimately, I think it doesn't matter what our beliefs about death are our feelings about human remains, what I as curator of the museum and being responsible for his remains, what's most important to me is what he would have wanted and being respectful to that.

One of the things we've been doing a lot of in lockdown is creating digital 3D models of quite a few of our artefacts. And this is a great way of getting very close to our ancient artefacts without actually having to handle them and at a distance. So you can see these things on our Sketchfab pages and our museum websites. And we've been very fortunate to employ a member of staff, my colleague, Charlotte, who's actually been working specifically on getting as much of our collections digitised as possible.

Charlotte Sargent

My name is Charlotte Sargent, and I'm the photogrammetry technician at the Garstang Museum of Archaeology here at the University of Liverpool.

Today, we are training University of Liverpool staff and how exactly we photograph objects for photogrammetry. Photogrammetry is the creation of 3D models from many 2D photographs. We photograph an object from multiple angles using different cameras. And we use these 2D photographs to recreate the geometry of the object and create a digital version of the object which we can then use for public engagement, outreach, teaching and research and there are many, many uses to 3D models. But that's essentially what photogrammetry is.

We've got three cameras set up, we have the object on a turntable in the middle. And this is surrounded by two lightboxes, because we want to create as plain a background as possible. So it's all very white and bright except for the object in the middle. And what we do is we photograph the object as the turntable is moving around. We get as many pictures as we can from the different angles, and then we'll go away this afternoon and process the photographs using the software Agisoft Metashape to create a digital 3D version. So it all sounds very technical and complicated. But actually, the programme does a lot of the work for us. And we can change various settings and that sort of thing.

And you do, of course, have issues with certain objects. So for example, shiny objects are very, very difficult to do. Because as you're going round on the turntable, the light on the object is changing. And any photogrammetry programme will have a hard time with finding these tie points between the images. Because that changing colour, the contrast is changing, even the shadows might be changing on the objects. And that makes it very, very difficult. The types of objects, you know, with like handles in particular can be very difficult to get through in the handle, and really recreate that hole in the model. So the photography is actually one of the most important parts of the process, we try and make it as perfect as possible, you know, we try and capture as much information as we can provide to the programme. And then that makes it a lot easier in the final stage, you constantly have to be thinking how am I photographing this, am I getting this angle? Is this in focus at any one time, and it's quite disappointing to find objects online where the texture is quite blurry, and you can't quite get close up, you know, and virtually handle the object in the way you would want.

So we've actually developed code to measure the focal distance of the photographs, and we recreate the texture from only the focused areas of the photographs. And that's something that no one else is really doing, actually. So part of these workshops is to disseminate the research that we're doing into photogrammetry and how we're developing photogrammetry methods and, and you know, sharing these with other people within the University, but also other institutions out there and across the Northwest.

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Looking at Garstang's work now, we certainly wouldn't go about things this way, there is more than an undertone of colonial behaviour about this, but it was absolutely standard for the time. And what we really feel here is that we've got this material, and it was gained in this way that we wouldn't currently go about bringing material back from these places. So we have a responsibility to use it in a way to educate the public to make it as widely known as possible and to actually use it in a responsible way.

So at the moment, we're still close due to COVID restrictions, but we are in the process of opening up so very soon, people will be able to visit us on a Wednesday. And we're at the University of Liverpool near Abercrombie Square, big banners outside hopefully you can't miss us. And so we're really looking forward to seeing the public back in the galleries again. But for those people who can't come and see us, you know, if you're too far away, one thing you can do is look at our online presence. So we have blogs, often written by students in the Archaeology Department. We also have our online collections. If you go to our Sketchfab pages you go to our Garstang Museum website, you can find plenty of ways to interact with the Museum.

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