

# Problems and challenges with exhibiting donated mummies

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## Abstract

*The story of the mummies of the University of Tartu Art Museum (Estonia) began in 1819 when the Baltic-German district magistrate Otto Magnus von Richter donated his son's collection of Egyptian antiquities to the University of Tartu. The article focuses on the respectful exhibiting of human and animal mummies. With the new exhibition, a context was created for ancient Egyptian mummies that enable an offer of educational activities to achieve different targets. Today, it is possible to narrate about ancient cultures and create connections with current themes via the Mummy Chamber.*

## Introduction

The University of Tartu Art Museum, at the oldest Estonian university (founded 1632), accommodates two Egyptian human mummies and mummies of a canine and an ibis. They were donated in 1819. For a long time, the mummies have been an integral part of the permanent exhibition space, but in 2015 planning started for a special exhibition on these unique items that were entrusted to the university for educational purposes. The idea and need emerged during the preparation works for the exhibition “A Journey to the Orient” to celebrate the anniversary of the orientalist Otto Friedrich von Richter (1791–1816).

One purpose of this paper is to address several questions the curators had during working with the idea of the Mummy Chamber, another is to outline how educational activities are woven into the exhibition aimed at different target groups.

## Museum as educator

Throughout the last century, the role of the museum in society has changed. The museum is no longer sacred and untouchable. University museums are undergoing similar changes to other museums. For a long time, university collections were only accessible to privileged people such as researchers and students. Earlier collections were mainly established by the ruling powers and powerful individuals of Europe. Collectors usually collected for their own personal pleasure or the aggrandizement of their families, not for personal or public usage. Many of the private collections became a part of public collections as a result of donations or sale transactions. Collections were put into national or municipal buildings for purposes of preservation and study. Putting them to wider usage was not originally under discussion (DANA 2004, 17).

In the case of university museums, the collections have had another focus – to be a part of the learning process. Collected and donated objects were preserved as valuable items but were also used in university education. The University of Tartu Art Museum was established a year after the re-opening of the University of Tartu (Kaiserliche Universität zu Dorpat) in 1802 by Alexander I of Russia (SIILIVASK 1985). Under the direction of Professor Johann Karl Simon Morgenstern (1770–1852), the museum acquired a multifaceted collection consisting of several types of artworks during the 19th century: prints, paintings, sculptures, antiquities, including Egyptian artifacts and mummies, casts of sculptures, gems and coins.

The collection of the museum has similarly been used for educational purposes since its inception in 1803 (ANDERSON 2015a). Nevertheless, the principles of utilizing collections have changed considerably over the centuries and decades since and some key points of the new paradigm have been taken into account during the development process of the new exhibition of the Mummy Chamber. The focus is now on the audience, being visitor-oriented, relevant and forward looking, having knowledge about the audience, and being welcoming (ANDERSON 2004, 2). Today, most museums are coded for educational purposes in one way or another. As a university museum and the only museum in Estonia dealing with ancient cultures, the University of Tartu Art Museum has a clear aspiration to fit in with the informal education landscape.

## The Otto Friedrich von Richter collection of Egyptian antiquities

The first owner of the university's Egyptian mummies and antiquities was Otto Friedrich von Richter (1792–1816), born in Vastse-Kuuste (*Neu-Kusthof*) manor in South-Estonia (*Livland*)<sup>1</sup>. He first found out about ancient cultures and languages from his home teacher, Gustav von Ewers (1781–1830)<sup>2</sup> and later continued his education at the University of Heidelberg and in Vienna. After improving his linguistic skills, scientific expeditions took him to Egypt, Asia Minor, Greece and Lower Nubia (STADNIKOV 2003, 125–161).

During the journey (about 1815–1816), he obtained a collection of more than 120 Egyptian antiquities, animal and human mummies. It is likely that he purchased the items from local people. In 1816, von Richter sent most of his collected manuscripts and antiquities to Sweden during a stop in Constantinople, these were later brought to Estonia to his father's manor in Väimela (*Waimel*). Von Richter's travels and a promising academic career ended shortly thereafter due to his sudden death on 13th August in 1816 in Izmir (Smyrna) in Asia Minor (JÜRJO & STADNIKOV 2013).

<sup>1</sup> Baltisches biographisches Lexikon digital - [www.bbl-digital.de](http://www.bbl-digital.de) (accessed November 21, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Rector of the University of Tartu in 1818–1830.

Von Richter's Egyptian collection was donated to the University of Tartu in 1819 by his father, the Baltic-German district magistrate, Otto Magnus von Richter (MORGENSTERN 1821, 464–466). His purpose was to honor the memory of his son, the young orientalist, as well as to encourage future generations to undertake similar scientific endeavours (HINDIKAINEN et al. 2006, 26–27). According to the wish of O. M. von Richter, the antiquities were given to the University of Tartu Art Museum, the manuscripts and publications were given to the University of Tartu Library (STADNIKOV 1998, 286).

The collection of Egyptian mummies (two humans, a canine and an ibis) at the University of Tartu Art Museum enjoy a high public profile as do several other Egyptian collections elsewhere in the world. These mummies stayed in the University of Tartu Art Museum until 1862 (VERZEICHNISS 1809, 375). In 1858, the art museum's collecting policy was changed and a decision was made to collect only ancient art; therefore, non-art collections as well as the collection of paintings and prints were given to other university units<sup>3</sup> and the mummies were sent to the university's anatomical theatre as human bodies (ANDERSON 2015b, 128–130).

The mummies were preserved in the university's anatomical theatre for more than one hundred years and were eventually sent back to the university's art museum in 1980<sup>4</sup>. Meanwhile, the University of Tartu had lost the rest of the collection of Egyptian antiquities because, on the orders of the Russian Military Commander in Chief, valuable art objects of the University of Tartu were evacuated to the central part of Russia because of World War I (TAMUL 2010). The works of art and Egyptian antiquities were dispatched by train in 1915 (ANDERSON 2015b, 201–211). Only the mummies stayed in Tartu – the mummies of a child (KMM A 63), an adolescent (KMM A 64), an ibis (KMM A 71) and a dog (KMM A. 64: 1), they were exhibited as objects without any context in the same room as the permanent exhibition of plaster casts made from Greek and Roman sculptures, the walls framed with murals in Pompeian style, which remained a part of the museum's interior until the beginning of 2017.

### Ethical questions of exhibition

Before starting with the construction of the Mummy Chamber, the museum's staff had to answer several questions and consider different options, because handling human remains is a delicate issue. Ethical debates and disputes about the management and treatment of human remains are nothing new. Despite a long history of discussions about the controversies, exhibiting Egyptian mummies has continued globally. The debate about displaying Egyptian mummies is actually not about the museum, but about Western public values: the failure of our culture to educate people to look at bodies, living or dead. People need to understand art to envision the lives of the dead (DAY & JASMINE 2014, 41).

The Mummy Chamber of the University of Tartu Art Museum aims to teach people how to look at the body with respect and with positive intentions – to see, behind each body, a life, and their various customs, traditions and beliefs. Our museum is full of bodies, classical Greek beauty ideals as well as portrait figures with touches of personality and psychology. Although the culture of ancient Egyptians and Greeks is different from the culture of Estonians, we can still look for similarities and differences and thereby learn to understand the development of our own culture.

The problem is not that Egyptian mummies are on public display. The problem is that some members of the public can bring the wrong mindset to the encounter with them. The solution is a combination of public education about death, the body and cultural differences and rethinking issues to enable curators to produce displays that efficiently cultivate a sense of respect for ancient Egyptians in visitors (DAY & JASMINE 2014, 41). An exhibition of human remains is not inherently offensive, but can be regarded as such by visitors whose cultural background fails to prepare them for encounters with the dead. Displaying mummies constitutes a challenge in finding ways to respect the dead by facilitating encounters with them (DAY & JASMINE 2014, 29). It generates everything from a child's first awareness of death to an emotional connection with the ancient Egyptians, understanding Egyptian archaeology, history, religion and burial practices (DAY & JASMINE 2014, 32). The same principles can also apply to exhibiting human remains of local origin, but in this case the focus is on Egyptian mummies donated to the university.

<sup>3</sup> In the middle of the 19th century when several archaeological excavations began, a paradigm shift took place and collecting ancient art became popular.

<sup>4</sup> Archive of the University of Tartu 150-66-5.

We did not want a debate about whether the mummies should be shown or not. Removal of the mummies could create a sense that experts and the museum's staff are reserving the right to look at the mummies and denying this opportunity to visitors. This might become especially problematic in this situation as this is the only museum in Estonia that covers ancient cultures and has good pre-conditions for educational work.

### Context as a storyteller

The documentation and context of the funerary history of the mummies of the University of Tartu Art Museum was incomplete. It is obvious that the context of the objects is the key to achieving greater relevance and providing a wider perspective on the culture, people, and natural and cultural history. We understood that a contextual display can help visitors understand an object, including its meaning and importance, in a clear and more obvious way (LORD & PIACENTE 2014, 125). Since the earlier history of the mummies is unknown, time and effort was directed towards creating a context similar to their original environment in Egypt. The goal of contextualization was better understanding the nature of the mummies and perceiving them as a part of ancient culture and the worldview of their society.

Knowledge about a great civilization like Egypt is largely acquired through the study of funerary architecture – the protective shell that bears valuable witness to the context in which the buried persons had lived. In the case of the University of Tartu Art Museum, many canonic elements and scenes from different Egyptian tombs were borrowed (fig. 1). However, the museum could not replicate the tomb even if it looked similar in some ways. The parents of these boys could hardly have imagined that the bodies of their children, mummified for afterlife, would eventually be preserved on public display somewhere far from Egypt.

What became the Mummy Chamber was a small room (10m<sup>2</sup>) with thick walls and without windows in the heart of the museum. It was previously used for depositing the university's employees' salary in cash during 19th century. The size and original appearance of the room became an essential precondition for the final design of the chamber. Yet, displaying is not just showing. It was challenging to turn a limited space into exhibition opportunities. Planning the display was considered with possibilities for contextualizing and redefining the physical space in which visitors could move and mapping out spaces for this (ROMALDI 2006, 82).

We hope our visitors will learn from the museum, even when that experience is modest in comparison with others. The personal, social and physical context of visitors shapes their learning experiences, but these three contexts overlap and interact (RENNIE & JOHNSTON 2007, 67). It is always a challenge for the museum's staff to provide education considering the broad context, a broader view of the visiting experience and the possible long-term impact on the visitor.



Fig. 1

Making murals at the Mummy Chamber

Photo: Andres Tennus, University of Tartu Art Museum

### **In the service of education**

Museums are visited by families, friends, children, teachers, or individually for different reasons such as leisure, enjoyment, experience or education. The University of Tartu Art Museum had one big aim in terms of opening the Mummy Chamber – educational work, formal and informal, guided and unguided visits. The museum plays an educational role and while preparing the exhibition there was potential to re-evaluate educational provision. Like Low (2004, 36) has stated about museum education, “purpose in educational field is in all its varied aspects from the most scholarly research to the simple arousing of curiosity”. Planning the exhibition involved not just the co-operation of designers and curators, but also the museum educator, artists, technicians, IT-specialist, translators etc. As we know from experience, groups of students tend to be perceived as a single entity during a museum visit. Today, the emphasis on looking at the learning processes of individual students has increased, as they often have clear views about learning and their personal interests and motivation, choice and social interactions and learning style (GRIFFIN 2007, 31). During the planning of the Mummy Chamber exhibition, it was considered that the result needed to be applicable for a range of educational purposes, it must offer different challenges, address different target groups, make the learning interesting, smooth and, at times, unnoticeable.

### **Educational programs for schools to support the national curriculum**

The museum had to consider that effective learning is dependent on the behaviors, attitudes, expectations and regulations. There are three main factors: the student, teacher and educator. On the whole, it is recognized that the parents and the curriculum, the attitudes of the school and the museum have an impact on the museum visit (GRIFFIN 2007, 31).

The museum with its Mummy Chamber provides educational programs to acquire and develop knowledge about the history and art of Ancient Egypt – this topic is dealt with in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade and on the high school level <sup>5</sup>. Students need some freedom to choose specific aspects of their learning. Although the structure of the educational program is based on the themes of the curriculum, the students themselves can direct a more precise focus. The educational curator is able to direct the course of the program after considering the more interesting issues that emerge from discussions with students. For example, the museum educator could focus on mummification, modern research on mummies, Egyptian religion, everyday life or art and culture. The exhibition room affects students in different ways and encourages them to ask questions.

The museum educator has also developed worksheets, but these are usually used at the end of the program at the museum or even at school to conclude the fieldtrip. Research show students who are given worksheets behave differently from those who are not, because the sheets tend to narrow the focus. Students try mechanically to collect answers and their own curiosity to explore the exhibition may remain unsatisfied (RANDOL 2004). However, we have integrated hands-on activities into the educational program in which students can use their creativity and also develop a dialogue with other students and the museum educator.

Our educational programs have been designed to develop the value competences, e.g. the ability to evaluate human relations; to sense and value one's ties with other people, nature, the cultural heritage of one's own country and nation and those of others, and events in contemporary culture; to value art and to shape the sense of aesthetics (Riigi Teataja - National curriculum for basic schools).

There are still possibilities for the development of educational work, especially in terms of co-operation. Nevertheless, we have started discussions with teachers and are introducing the museum and education programs via special school visits. In the case of the Mummy Chamber, we invited teachers to a special opening ceremony where the exhibition and education programs were introduced and their expectations and needs mapped. Museums and schools have different roles but similar goals and they need to form a closer alliance.

<sup>5</sup> The University of Tartu Art Museum has experience in the modern museum education field from the year 2000 when traditional excursions were replaced with special education programs of ancient art and culture for schoolchildren.



### Encouraging family visits

The museum has the capacity to stimulate meaningful learning in their visitors, linking new information with existing concepts. Each visitor will experience the museum differently because there are different ways in which people acquire, retain and use knowledge (MUNLEY 2004, 245). Each person looks at the exhibition from their personal perspective and has their own motivation, expectations and prior knowledge and beliefs. Studies have identified families as unique learning groups of mixed ages and backgrounds bound together by a complex shared system of past experiences, beliefs and values. Families have certain ways in which members interact and learn together and bring an extensive array of personal and co-operative learning strategies to their experiences in museums. Therefore, families function like learning institutions that utilize the learning resources to build their individual and collective identity (ELLENBOGEN et al. 2007, 17–26).

Exhibition curators have ideas, visions and experience of how to educate and engage visitors. However, the exact behavior of a visitor in a museum is unpredictable. Investigations have shown that via integrating the settings that foster discussion, challenge the learner and make connections with the interest of the learners, it is possible to increase the number of visitors who learn something. At the same time, these measures lengthen the average duration of the museum visit (GRIFFIN 2007, 39).

In the Mummy Chamber, non-formal groups with educational purposes can take a guided or unguided visit. They can choose which medium to acquire information. Possibilities are available for combining information: models, visualization techniques with interactive multi-touch tables, audio-guides, literature room in addition to more specific information shared by the museum guide. For families, there are also special events like the Museum Night, Researchers' Night, workshops, and meetings with curators (fig. 2).



Fig. 2

Researchers' Night 2017 in the  
Mummy Chamber

Photo: Andres Tennus, University of  
Tartu Art Museum

### Co-operation with the university

As a university museum, we cannot forget the university audience. The museum provides several traineeship programs for undergraduate students, most often used by the Faculty of Arts and Humanities. Our scientific collections, including mummies, are a good base for research and interdisciplinary work.

In this field, a co-operative project investigating mummies was started with a number of young researchers and doctoral students of archaeology, chemistry, pathology and genetics. The goal is to gather as much information as possible about the mummies and to use all the modern methods, technologies and laboratories available at the university. In addition to getting the research results and scientific publications, the researchers gain a co-operative experience with other scientists, the opportunity to popularize their activities and specialty via the museum's environment and to get communication experience with the public. The museum can use the research results in educational activities and in complementing the exhibition.

Visualization has the potential to narrow the gap between the general public and the research, as it allows scientists and curators to share methods used to interpret and analyze the collections with visitors. Bringing the original research data to the public and providing tools enabling learning and exploration is an exciting and challenging scientific adventure both for researchers and museum visitors (YNNERMAN et al. 2016, 72-81).

### Conclusion

The curators of the museum spent almost a year in the working group to work out how to exhibit human and animal mummies respectfully and to enrich the educational activities. Despite the various past controversies, exhibiting Egyptian mummies is a common practice. As a result of discussions about how to exhibit mummies in a respectful manner, the planning shifted from choosing a form similar to the actual ancient Egyptian tombs to one that is full of ancient culture and information about the life the people lived back then. It is known that contextual displaying and storytelling can help visitors understand an object, including its meaning and importance. It will expand the possibilities for making education more meaningful and diverse.

The University of Tartu Art Museum has created a meaningful context that offers diverse educational activities to schoolchildren. Integrating various topics and subjects in this exhibition has been a great challenge, but we have found ways to speak about the Egyptian culture along with contemporary themes that touch a chord with people. Mummies and their new contextual exhibition have given us a neutral platform to deal with the important and often sensitive issues of the present. The museum also began a new dialogue with teachers because the two different places, the museum and school, work for one purpose – so that the student would find learning pleasant.

As a university museum, the University of Tartu Art Museum has the potential for contributing to research with its historical and scientific collections. The research project on mummies conducted by the university's researchers and doctoral students includes the popularizing of results and implementing new knowledge in exhibiting and educational activities. Thus, both parties benefit and acquire new knowledge at the same time.

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### Keywords

Mummy – Ethics – Museum education