

Exhibition review: 'Beyond Beauty: Transforming the body in ancient Egypt' at Two Temple Place, London (30th January – 24th April 2016)

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Two Temple Place, once the offices of William Waldorf Astor and now managed by The Bulldog Trust, is only open to the public during its annual free exhibition, which has been running since 2011 and is specifically intended to bring together art and objects from regional collections across the UK; this year's exhibition – on how the ancient Egyptians perceived appearance and beauty in their lives and its significance for the afterlife – brings together pieces from Ipswich Museum, Bexhill Museum, Touchstones Rochdale, Bolton Museum, Bagshaw Museum (Kirklees Museum and Galleries), Royal Pavillion and Museums (Brighton and Hove) and Macclesfield Museums. The exhibition therefore showcases objects from collections which otherwise might be unseen by those who do not venture far beyond London and the enticements of the British Museum's Egyptian galleries (and to some extent, the lesser-known Petrie Museum). Of the seven partner collections, several specialise in specific areas of Egyptian antiquities relevant to this exhibition. For instance, Touchstones Rochdale has a particularly good collection of jewellery and Bolton Museum specialises in textiles (reflecting its own local industry).

I visited the exhibition on the same day as my first visit to the Sir John Soane's Museum, which is certainly also worth a trip for its eccentric architecture and impressive collection of paintings and antiquities, including the alabaster sarcophagus of Seti I. At Two Temple Place the building's wood panelling and Renaissance-style decoration, and the freely-structured exhibition allowing visitors to browse the cases in any order, gave the exhibition a similar 'cabinet of curiosities' feel, although certainly a much modernised version.

The exhibition was formed of three main sections. The first, on the ground floor, consisted primarily of small objects, grouped mostly by type (jewellery, textiles, cosmetic vessels, hair-related objects, stelae and so on), although some small burial assemblages were kept together. Although the majority of the objects displayed are of course from funerary contexts, the focus of the ground floor exhibits was on daily cosmetic routines, and the exhibits very effectively allowed visitors to compare the textiles and other objects used with the images seen in models and in reliefs; one area of this space was dedicated to an eye-catching display of stelae ranging in date from the First Intermediate Period until the Graeco-Roman Period.



[All images in this review are by the author]

The exhibition also encouraged visitors to think critically about the objects displayed – one case warned against using art as a reference for reality, since it is clear Egyptian art was for the most part heavily stylised, both in terms of its physical appearance (for instance, in the use of mixed perspective) and in terms of the ideas represented, such as an individual portraying themselves as they wished to appear in the afterlife, or in order to represent specific aspects of their character, as opposed to a more accurate representation of the individual as they appeared during life.

Also displayed were three examples of very convincing fake antiquities (two of which are still subject to dispute regarding their authenticity), and some archival pieces from the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries. The photo album of Dr Walter Amsden, who worked with Petrie at Lahun and Harageh (including a rather blurred photograph of Amsden with Hilda Petrie) and the watercolour book/diary of Marianne Brocklehurst, who travelled to Egypt with Mary Booth, open to her painting of the 1891 discovery of the Twenty-first Dynasty mummy cache at Deir el-Bahari. This annotated watercolour is the only visual record of this excavation, but is also a personal piece, with a note referring to a group of animals in the middle-distance – ‘our donkeys’.

Visitors to the exhibit between 23rd March and 24th April will notice the small blue figurines placed in the nooks of the walls and on mantelpieces, at first glance appearing Egyptian, but actually the work of Syrian ceramic sculptor and archaeologist Zahed Taj-Eddin. His ‘Nu’ Shabtis, for which he has recreated the artificial ceramic faience, are the charming result of what he envisages shabtis would do if they escaped from the tomb into the modern world – shopping, protesting, listening to music, graduating from university, and so on. I had the pleasure of meeting Mr Taj-Eddin at Current Research in Egyptology 2014 in London, and had been disappointed that I was unable to see his shabtis when they were at the Petrie Museum and the Victoria & Albert Museum; it was a pleasant surprise to see them at Two Temple Place. More information can be found about Mr Taj-Eddin’s work at www.zahedtajeddin.com.



The great majority of the ‘Nu’ Shabtis were grouped together in the second main area of the exhibition – the staircase hall and landing. The opulent staircase, decorated with literary figures (most prominently characters from *The Three Musketeers*, Astor’s favourite book) and Shakespearean friezes, led to several panels on the history of Egyptological collections in Britain and the figures involved in Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century excavations, such as W.M.F Petrie and Amelia Edwards. There was also information on the seven collections from which were drawn the objects in the exhibition, including references to their founders or contributors. For instance, Marianne Brocklehurst, whose watercolours were on display on the ground floor, was noted for her contributions to the Macclesfield Museums, and the Griffith brothers (Egyptologist Francis Llewellyn and solicitor and alderman Arthur) for Brighton’s collection. Visitors were thus reminded that we must not disassociate antiquities from their archaeological history.

It would have been especially pertinent at this point in the exhibition to consider how perceptions of beauty have affected excavation practices, museum display and research over time. The aesthetic appeal, according to modern standards, of objects in all archaeological fields has often affected how they were excavated and recorded or published, whether they were seen as worthy additions to a private collection, or how they have been displayed in museums (and indeed, it also affects their monetary value in the modern world). Taking into consideration the title of the exhibition, it would thus have been an effective addition to encourage visitors to look 'beyond beauty' and think of the importance of the more mundane and less attractive (often also fragmentary), but no less significant, objects. This was to some extent achieved through the objects of 'daily life' in the first part of the exhibition, but nevertheless perhaps more could have been done to stress the importance of looking beyond just the objects we consider to be pretty and viewing artefacts in terms of their educational potential.

The third main section of the exhibition was in the so-called Great Hall on the first floor, which was once Astor's office. The focus here, unlike downstairs, was on the afterlife: the majority of the objects were mummy coverings (sarcophagi and mummy paintings, for example). These were used to demonstrate how the Egyptians hoped to become divine in the afterlife. The highlight of this part of the exhibition, in my opinion, was the cartonnage mask of Titus Flavius Demetrius from Hawara (Ipswich Museum, R 1992-89.2). This is a gilded mask in an Egyptian style, with well-known Egyptian funerary imagery, including the *ba*-bird, and a jackal-headed deity tending to the body of the deceased lying on a bier. The modelling of the face somewhat betrays its Roman Period origins, but what really marks this mask as unique is that it bears with the name of a Roman citizen, in Greek, around the back of the head. This striking piece demonstrates that Egyptian ideas of beauty and especially divine beauty in a funerary context, as displayed throughout 'Beyond Beauty', were still relevant to at least some members of the Graeco-Roman culture. No doubt the array of colours and resplendent gilding also appealed to Titus Flavius Demetrius, as they have to the many visitors to Two Temple Place this year.



This was a well-curated exhibition, with informative yet concise labels, exploring the various aspects of appearance in ancient Egypt throughout its history using a wide variety of objects. I thoroughly recommend a visit if you are able to before it closes on the 24th April.