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ARTICLE

The Mosaic of Knowledge in Museums

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Abstract

What visitors see in a museum display case is not just an object. It is the result of a long chain of invisible filters (what survived, what was collected, what a curator decided to show) that shape our picture of the past. This paper uses the image of a mosaic, missing many of its tiles, to explore how museums construct knowledge rather than simply presenting it, and asks what museums can do once they recognise this. Taking ancient Egypt as a case study (a field whose modern shape still carries the marks of nineteenth-century colonial collecting), this paper looks closely at one recent attempt to put these ideas into practice: the hall *Searching for Life* at the Museo Egizio in Turin, dedicated to the display of human remains, implemented after years of scientific study, public consultation, and internal ethical debate. The hall does not aim to resolve all the existing tensions: it offers instead a working example of how a museum can hold those tensions in view, rather than disguising them as settled. This paper argues that the way forward is to make these filters visible, turning the missing tiles of the mosaic into part of the story a museum tells.

Keywords: accessibility; archaeological museums; Egyptology; museum display

When a visitor stands in front of an object in an archaeological museum, time and space converge in that spot, distances disappear, and a connection is established between past and present. Walter Benjamin defined the fascination that comes from the unique, unrepeatable path of an object through history as its *aura*, a concept that has been adopted and adapted by the field of museum studies: in front of an original object, museum visitors feel a direct connection with the past that a copy would not trigger.[1] But this connection is not as direct as it may seem. Before a visitor meets an object in a display case, both of them have already been silently and invisibly shaped, filtered, and selected. This paper is about those invisible filters, and about how much they influence what we think we know of the past.

1. Theorising the mosaic of knowledge in museums

1.1. Invisible filters

The idea that museums construct knowledge rather than simply transmit it is not new. What I propose here is to bring the different stages of that construction into a single image: an

[1] Benjamin 2002, 101–33; Dudley 2010 (on the visitors' experience of authentic objects); Letourneau et al. 2025 (on the adoption of the aura concept within museum studies).

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incomplete mosaic whose surviving tiles have themselves been selected by a succession of filters. The filters determine which pieces reach us, and the mosaic describes what we do with those pieces. In this paper my concern, therefore, is not only how museum knowledge is constructed, but what museums can do once they acknowledge the gaps, biases, and uncertainties built into that construction.

These filters do not all act at the same moment, or from the same source. Some are ancient, decided long before an object was ever excavated; others are scholarly, imposed later by those who found and collected them; others still are properly museal, arising only once an object nears display.

On the side of the object, a first filter is pure chance: some objects survived to the present day, and others did not, for no reason connected to their importance. A second filter is material: organic materials survive better in a dry climate, so entire categories of ancient objects are better preserved than others simply because of the environment. A third filter goes back to antiquity itself: ancient people chose, deliberately, what to preserve and what to let go.[2] A fourth filter belongs to the collectors and later to the archaeologists: until relatively recently, excavators were often drawn to complete, intact, visually striking objects, and this attitude shaped which digs were funded, which sites, and which fragments were kept or discarded.[3] A fifth filter works on a larger, collective scale: societies remember selectively, keeping some symbols alive in public memory while letting others fade (the concept of *mnemohistory* discussed by Jan Assmann), and sometimes reinterpreting old symbols to serve new purposes.[4] Finally, even after all of this, the objects that actually reach a museum showcase have been chosen once more, this time by curators working within a particular vision or programme for their museum.[5]

On the side of the visitors, museums are not, in practice, equally open to everybody.[6] Some barriers are physical, such as a lack of step-free access, or exhibition text placed too high or too small to read: these are evident and relatively easy to address. Some are economic: museums can act directly on the cost of the entry ticket, but have less power over the travel expenses that are necessary to reach it.[7] Other barriers, historical and social, are more subtle: many museums were built for, and still implicitly speak to, a narrow audience, so visitors from other backgrounds may not feel the museum was made with them in mind.[8] Finally, some are psychological: a sense, often absorbed early in life, that museums are "not for people like me."[9] Each of these barriers quietly decides, before anyone even walks through the door, who is likely to have that encounter with an object at all.

[2] Schiffer 1987.

[3] Bowden 2009 (on the history of collecting practices); Petrie 1904 (a first-hand account of period excavation priorities); Renfrew and Bahn 2016 (general archaeological context).

[4] Assmann 2011 (on mnemohistory as selective collective memory); Bonazzi 2025 (on the reinterpretation and reuse of inherited symbols); Eco 1988 (on selective memory).

[5] Moser 2010.

[6] Chynoweth et al. 2020 (on critical perspectives on inclusion); Janes and Sandell 2019 (on museum activism); Sandell and Nightingale 2012 (on museum equality).

[7] Kirchberg 1998.

[8] Bennett 1995 (on museums as disciplinary institutions built for a specific public); Bourdieu and Darbel 1991 (on cultural capital and class-based exclusion); Dodd and Sandell 2001 (on targeted inclusion practice); Duncan 1995 (on museums as ritual spaces); Simon 2010 (on participatory museum models).

[9] Dawson 2014; Eardley et al. 2022; Moore, Paquet, and Wittman 2022 (each addressing a different aspect of the internalised sense of exclusion from museums).

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A further filter belongs to the present moment specifically: being connected, or not, increasingly decides what a person can access. People with a good internet connection can search, find, and link museum information almost instantly, but people without access, and material that has never been digitised, remain outside this digital sphere.[10] Moreover, online databases are not necessarily neutral: comparative studies have found that the bias built into physical displays can simply carry over, or even worsen, online.[11]

Together, all these filters operate on both sides of the encounter between visitor and object. They do not just limit who sees what: they actively shape what we, collectively, come to know of the past.

1.2. Construction or reconstruction of the past?

Our knowledge of the past is built from fragments. To make sense of them, we group them into clusters that create slightly larger pictures. Some clusters fit together well and form images that are clear, even if incomplete, whilst others remain isolated and disconnected. We may picture this situation as a large mosaic with many of its tiles missing. What we understand of the whole picture depends on three things: how we arrange the surviving clusters of tiles, how we position them in relation to one another, and what we assume must be filling the gaps between them.

This is, in essence, a two-way relationship between the part and the whole: when we look at the past, we use the fragments that survive to build up an image, and then we use the image in the opposite direction, as a template against which every new fragment is measured and classified. It is tempting to think of this as a "reconstruction," as if the mosaic were a puzzle, and every fragment would bring us one step closer to the original picture to be eventually completed. In this case, the process appears to be linear: new details, when found, would fill in the existing gaps.

Reprising the reflections of István Szijártó on microhistory, the historiographic approach that studies the past through very small case studies, we may, however, stress that a mosaic is not a puzzle.[12] We know the final picture of a puzzle, but this is not the case in a mosaic. In this case the process of systematisation of our knowledge is not linear but circular: it depends on how we handle what we know and what we do not know. Whether the resulting picture feels coherent is a useful test for our interpretation, reliable up to a certain point, as a coherent picture can still be wrong. In this case, new evidence does not simply fill the gaps; it can also modify the relationship among the clusters and their interpretation. Because of this, our picture of the past is never fixed and keeps moving.

Archaeological museums make this process visible, since every display reflects the state of knowledge at the moment it was conceived.[13] In theory, displays should constantly evolve to incorporate new evidence and interpretations, but in practice this is not always possible due to economic constraints. At the same time, superseded displays are themselves historical records of earlier knowledge, and should be properly documented before being dismantled.

[10] Ateca-Amestoy and Prieto-Rodriguez 2024 (on unequal digital participation in culture); Haile 2024 (on the resourcing gap in heritage digitisation specifically); Mihelj, Leguina, and Downey 2019.

[11] Zhitomirsky-Geffet, Kizhner, and Minster 2023.

[12] Szijártó 2008.

[13] Pearce 1998.

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Museums are therefore custodians not only of objects, but of their own changing intellectual history.[14]

1.3. Visible and invisible tiles

Providing a comprehensible and coherent narrative to the visitors represents an important issue for a museum. As we saw in the previous paragraphs, what sits in a display case is never only an object. It carries its biography, the life that it had before and after it reached the museum, but also what Dan Hicks called its *necrography*, the trail of violence and death left behind by its transfer.[15] All of these layers are, in the end, invisible in the display case itself. But they are not without effect, and we stand directly in front of it.

This does not mean that we are powerless: we need to become aware of the mechanism, and act on the parts of it that we can actually control. Some things cannot be undone: an object that is lost remains lost, despite our efforts to imagine what it was. But how we choose to look at it is not fixed in the same way. Changing our point of view completely may not be possible, but becoming aware of how partial and situated it is already represents a meaningful step.[16]

It is a fact that the vast majority of archaeological museums in the West were born in the colonial period, and were therefore founded on the intellectual categories of their time.[17] Besides the "encyclopaedic" view that gathering objects from many cultures under one roof, accessible to all, serves a genuine cosmopolitan purpose, it is now widely acknowledged that today's more polyphonic society, in which the voices of the communities from which the objects come are also heard, offers a chance to (re)construct the past with more of its makers present in the room.[18]

The issue that here I wish to stress, however, lies at a deeper level: museums ought to be more transparent about the issue of the patchy nature of our knowledge. Museum displays should find a way to show not only what survived, but to gesture at what was lost; to state what is known, while admitting what is not; to mark what comes from the past itself, and what instead reflects the moment the display was built. The metaphor of the mosaic works well also to highlight this point: from a distance it presents a coherent image, while up close that coherence dissolves into separate tiles. Likewise, a display can offer visitors a comprehensible framework while revealing, on closer inspection, the separate and provisional choices from which it is constructed. Introducing doubt into the display is therefore one way of addressing the incomplete mosaic.

2. The mosaic of knowledge in action at the Museo Egizio

2.1. From theory to practice

Turning these ideas into practice is not straightforward. There is no single recipe that would work for every museum, in every context. Some general criteria can be stated with confidence:

[14] Thurner 2024.

[15] Hicks 2020.

[16] Haraway 1988 (on situated knowledge: the argument that acknowledging one's own partial, positioned perspective is itself a form of rigour, not a weakness).

[17] Bennett 1995.

[18] Cuno 2008 (in defence of the encyclopaedic museum); Schorch and McCarthy 2019 (on collaborative, multivocal curatorial practice as an alternative model).

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transparency about what is known and what is not, awareness of whose voices are represented and whose are missing, care in documenting a display's own history alongside the objects it contains. But beyond these broad principles, every museum faces its own specific set of constraints, and what works for one may simply not be possible for another.

A large, encyclopaedic museum with collections spanning many cultures and periods faces different pressures than a small, monothematic one focused on a single site, period, or theme. A well-resourced institution can invest in new research, new technology, and regularly updated displays in a way that a museum with a modest budget cannot. Different circumstances can impose radically different constraints: in the recent past, museums in Baghdad and Aleppo struggled to protect their collections and survive, while the Louvre faced severe overcrowding caused by exceptionally high numbers of visitors.[19]

Given this variety, no single case study can answer every question raised above, or stand in for every kind of museum, but a close look at one specific example can show what these invisible filters look like in practice, and what can realistically be done about them. The case explored here is drawn from Egyptology, a discipline where these questions are especially pressing, and where there is still significant work to be done to expose the layered histories of the objects on display in museums.

2.2. *The case of ancient Egypt*

Let us go back to the issue addressed above: how much of what we call a "reconstruction" is, in fact, a construction? For instance, what does "ancient Egypt" actually mean? Defining it through a list of iconic monuments is certainly possible, but the result sounds partial and generic, as the material culture that has survived tells a far more complicated story.[20] Defining it chronologically is itself conventional: its beginning is generally placed around 3000 BCE, with the emergence of the centralised state and writing, and its end around 400 CE, with the disappearance of the ancient Egyptian language. Neither boundary, however, represents a sudden rupture.[21]

Even if the language at some point ceased completely to be used, "ancient Egypt" did not simply disappear. By then, it had already been absorbed and transformed within the wider knowledge and imagination of the Graeco-Roman world.[22] It continued to occupy a central place in the cultural memory of Europe, and of Egypt itself, reimagined again and again across the subsequent centuries.[23] It is worth noting that the label "Egyptomania," often used to indicate the nineteenth century Western enthusiasm for Egypt, describes a relationship with it that has run more or less continuously since antiquity.[24] What the 1822 decipherment of the hieroglyphs by Jean-François Champollion changed was not whether Egypt was remembered, but how directly it could be read again in its own words.

If we add to this what happened in the last 200 years (the mass transfer of Egyptian artefacts into European collections, the birth of Egyptology as a scholarly discipline, the age of the

[19] Bogdanos 2005 (on the looting of the Iraq Museum); Yoshimura et al. 2014 (on visitor overcrowding at the Louvre).

[20] Moreno García and Schneider 2018.

[21] Dijkstra 2008 (specifically on the gradual decline of hieroglyphic literacy and temple practice at Philae, continuing well past 400 CE).

[22] Greco and Tawfik 2024.

[23] Assmann 1997.

[24] Versluys 2020.

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"great discoveries," the introduction of scientific excavation methods, the recent opening of the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo, to mention only some notable events), perhaps the real question is not what "ancient Egypt" is, but *which* ancient Egypt we mean.

Over time, there have been many points of view and many different perceptions.[25] The Greek philosopher Plato, in the fourth century BCE, considered "ancient Egypt" as an old civilisation imbued with wisdom.[26] The Moroccan traveller Ibn Battuta, in the fourteenth century, was struck by the grandeur and scale of the monumental cities of Alexandria and Cairo, which he thought superior to all the others that he visited in his 29 years of travels.[27] For the French Consul-General Bernardino Drovetti, in the nineteenth century, the ancient remains represented valuable objects to be appropriated: during his tenure, he amassed three vast collections, which were sold to European museums.[28] The British archaeologist Howard Carter dedicated his entire life to the archaeological investigation of Egypt, which culminated in the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun in 1922.[29] Besides these well-known historical figures, there are also other points of view: that of the Egyptian workers who have physically dug these sites for generations, of the foreign tourists whose visits are a vital economic resource for the country today, of the diverse communities of modern Egypt that live alongside and engage with these remains, and of today's Egyptologists.[30]

A museum dedicated to ancient Egypt means something fundamentally different depending on where it stands. One located in modern Egypt carries a different meaning and serves a different function than one located in a country that was once a colonial power, or whose Egyptian collection was formed during the nineteenth or early twentieth century.[31] The needs and expectations that the Grand Egyptian Museum in Cairo now fulfils for the Egyptian public are not the same as those of visitors walking through the Egyptian galleries of an encyclopaedic Western museum.[32]

The need to decolonise the way we look at the past (and, in turn, how museums display what they hold) is gaining ground, driven by the combined efforts of institutions and individuals.[33] Within Egyptology, growing attention to decolonisation has highlighted the discipline's colonial origins.[34] These origins shaped fieldwork, expertise, and collection formation, and continue to influence competing national identities and how Egyptian antiquities are displayed today.[35]

In general, one of the most persistent misconceptions is the idea that the ancient Egyptians were more preoccupied with death than with life. This impression has several causes, not all grounded in colonialism. One is simple survival bias: ancient Egyptian towns and villages

[25] Ucko 2003 (an eight-volume survey of successive historical "encounters" with ancient Egypt across cultures and periods).

[26] Vasunia 2001.

[27] Dunn 1986.

[28] Ridley 1995.

[29] Reeves and Taylor 1992.

[30] Colla 2007 (on modern Egyptian engagement with ancient heritage); Quirke 2010 (on the erased labour of Egyptian excavation workers).

[31] Doyon 2025.

[32] Ibrahim 2025.

[33] Lemos 2023 (on the theoretical challenge of decolonising an ancient, rather than recently colonised, past); Matić 2023 (on postcolonial theory within Egyptology specifically).

[34] Langer 2017 (on the discipline's colonial structure); Matić 2018 (on the scientific racism underpinning it).

[35] Reid 2002, 2015 (on museums and competing national identities); Riggs 2014; Stevenson 2022 (on how these legacies continue to shape display today).

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have almost entirely vanished. Sited on ground safely above the annual Nile flood, they were built over and now lie buried under later construction. What lay exposed was quarried away by local farmers and spread on the field as fertiliser.[36]

Ancient Egyptian burial practices tell a different story. The dead were buried away from settled, cultivated land, out on the desert plateau. The ancient Egyptians themselves called their tombs "houses for eternity" and built them to last. This was not, however, a sign that they valued death over life. It was the opposite: they built such durable tombs because they hoped that their existence would continue afterward.[37] Most ancient Egyptian objects surviving today come from exactly these funerary contexts, and this skews the public perception of what ancient Egypt was.[38] Looking past our own modern discomfort with the subject of death, to see how the ancient Egyptians actually approached it on their own terms remains a genuinely difficult task.[39]

The ancient Egyptian funerary objects that we meet in museums have therefore passed through several of the filters that we discussed at the beginning of this paper: differential preservation, ancient choices of self-representation, antiquarian and archaeological selection, separation from their original contexts and dispersal across collections, and finally curatorial selection for display. The question for museum practice is therefore not how to remove these filters retrospectively (most cannot be removed) but how to prevent them from disappearing behind the apparent coherence of the finished display. The following case study explores one attempt to make some of those filters, and some of the missing tiles they have produced, visible to visitors.

2.3. The hall *Searching for Life* at Museo Egizio

In 2021, Museo Egizio opened a new space dedicated to the human remains hosted in its premises. This event was the result of a long and complex process that lasted over five years, and included several interconnected activities designed to address some of the filters discussed above.

On the scientific side, the Museum staff carried out a thorough study of the human remains in collaboration with a network of external consultants, whose results were published in two catalogues, available to the scientific community and the wider public.[40] This included a dedicated conservation project, treating each fragile body much as a conservator would treat a damaged tile: assessing its condition, stabilising it, and ensuring it remains legible for future study and display.[41]

On the ethical side, the Museum worked on four fronts. In 2019, it co-organised and co-hosted, with the Archaeological Park of Pompeii, the workshop *Human Remains. Ethics, Conservation, Display*, which saw the participation of specialists from universities and research centres.[42] In the same year, the Museum commissioned an external agency to carry out a survey investigating the views and opinions of its visitors on the issue of the

[36] Bailey 1999; Quickel and Williams 2016.
[37] Taylor 2001.
[38] Stevenson 2019.
[39] Nyord 2025.
[40] Fiore Marochetti 2019; Facchetti, Paladin, and Turina 2026.
[41] Samadelli et al. 2019.
[42] Museo Egizio 2019.

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display of human remains. At the same time, it introduced along the visitors' path clear visual signage alerting them to their presence. Finally, the museum established an internal ethical committee, tasked with weighing these questions on an ongoing basis rather than resolving them once and moving on.

The hall, titled *Alla ricerca della vita. Cosa raccontano i resti umani?* ("Searching for Life. What do human remains tell us?"), represented the result of all these actions. Located on the museum's first floor, it consists of a C-shaped path that departs from the main linear visitors' itinerary: entry into that space cannot happen by chance and must be the result of a voluntary act.

This hall contains almost all the human remains housed in the Museum. Only a few bodies remain distributed along the visitors' path: this decision was taken because in this way they remain surrounded either by their grave goods or by objects that create a meaningful context around them. All the other 91 were moved in a closed, climatised space that is accessible only to the Museum staff, around which the visitors' path unfolds. The outer side of this central, invisible magazine is endowed with six cases divided horizontally into sections, designed to contain and display six bodies together with a selection of their burial goods.

Currently, each case holds a single body chosen to stand for an entire stage of life, from an unborn foetus to a middle-aged woman: six tiles arranged into a continuous narrative. On closer inspection, though, the six individuals turn out to come from different tombs, periods, and circumstances, with no original connection to one another.

The room is mainly dark. The darkness works like the neutral infill that conservators use to fill the gaps in a damaged mosaic: not an attempt to reconstruct what is missing, but a plain, unifying backdrop against which the surviving tiles can stand out. Each case is accompanied by a backlit panel explaining what is known (and unknown) about the individual, their provenance, and how and why they reached the Museum. During the presentation, made of short texts, maps, and images, the remains become visible in dim light, before both panel and case darken again (Figure 1).

On one wall along the outer perimeter of the room, a long backlit panel shows the evolution of burial practices across ancient Egyptian history. The labels are in three languages: Italian, English, and Arabic, to deal with the national and international visitors, with special attention to the Egyptian community. From this room, it is possible to take a detour and reach a luminous and calm space on the roof, where a video illustrates the mummification process and its religious and symbolic meanings. On the terrace, next to this room, there is a reconstruction of an ancient Egyptian funerary garden, of the type that was built near the tomb and maintained by the family of the deceased, containing plant species known from ancient sources. The garden is another tile of the same display, one step removed: it rests directly on top of the space where the human remains are kept, to reiterate their mutual connection and offer a quiet form of recontextualisation in its own right.

3. Addressing the tensions with transparency

How does this display answer the questions raised earlier in this paper? It does so on two fronts: the past and the present. Recontextualising the past means reconstructing, as far as possible, the identity and the original context of the human remains: who they were, where

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Figure 1. View of the hall *Searching for Life* at Museo Egizio (photograph by Museo Egizio, 2021).

and how they were originally buried, as well as why and how they were displaced. Recontextualising the present means being equally attentive to the museum's own visitors and their reactions. Public opinion and feeling were treated as a real input into the display's design, not an afterthought.

The hall is also explicit about the limits of its own knowledge. Rather than presenting a single settled account of who these individuals were, it distinguishes clearly between what can be stated with confidence and what remains uncertain or unknown, treating that uncertainty as part of the story worth telling, rather than something to be smoothed over.

Finally, the display is built to change. Because the magazine holds far more human remains than are currently shown, and because the interpretive panels can be updated independently of the physical remains themselves, the hall can be reconfigured to tell different stories over time, without the high costs of a full re-display.

This case study cannot offer general answers to every museum, every collection, or every contested object. The problem is not a single solvable puzzle but a set of competing demands between research, public sensitivity, conservation, accessibility, individual identity, and the need for displays to remain open to revision.

What this hall at Museo Egizio offers instead is not a resolution to these tensions, but a working demonstration that they can be held in the same room without being disguised as resolved. In this sense, the museum becomes something close to what James Clifford called a contact zone: a space where different voices and expectations meet, sometimes in agreement and sometimes in friction, and where that friction is left visible rather than

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smoothed away.[43] Read against the concept of the mosaic that has run throughout this paper, the lesson may be this: the point is not to hide the missing tiles or to create a false impression of completeness. It is to let the shape of the whole depend as much on what is missing, uncertain, or contested as on what survives. What museums owe their visitors, in the end, may be less a settled account of the past than an honest invitation to keep looking closely at it.

Christian Greco has served as Director of the Museo Egizio, Turin, since 2014, overseeing the museum's redevelopment projects (2014–15 and 2023–25), its legal, financial, and scientific activities, and an extensive programme of exhibitions, conferences, and social inclusion initiatives, alongside national and international collaborations. He holds a degree in Classics from Pavia, a degree in Egyptology from Leiden, and a PhD in Egyptology from Pisa. He previously curated the Egyptian collection at the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, Leiden, and worked with the Epigraphic Survey of the Oriental Institute, University of Chicago, in Luxor. Since 2011 he has co-directed the Italian-Dutch archaeological mission at Saqqara, Egypt. Between 2019 and 2022 he led the EU-funded consortium "Transforming the Egyptian Museum of Cairo," bringing together the Museo Egizio, the Louvre, the British Museum, the Neues Museum, and the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden. He is the author of over one hundred scientific publications and teaches Egyptology and Museology internationally.

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