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Review Article

Truly Grand Egyptian Museum

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The conclusion first. The hype about the *Grand Egyptian Museum* (opened in November 2025) is true and deserved; it is worth the money and the abundant amount of time needed for a visit for anyone with an archaeological background that can drag along the rest of family, or for anybody else even vaguely interested in ancient Egypt. Using the words of a previous article in *Antiquity*, this is "one of the most important museological events of our century so far" (cited as an introduction to Plantzos 2011: 613), or, as stated by Egyptian colleagues: "a new version of the (Pharaonic) ancient Egyptian museum" (Eissa & el-Senussi 2020: 1195), see also (Zakaria 2024). Indeed, we might dare to consider it one of the most important museological events of our century because this is the largest museum globally dedicated to a single civilization, that of ancient Egypt. The main promise was to provide a sufficient space for the burial equipment of King Tutankhamun and, on this, the museum delivers impeccably, as well as on much more. This will be both its blessing and its bane, as I will try to exemplify below. But Egypt made its statement on heritage display clearly, and the world ought to listen.

The museum has been more than two decades in the making, with the announcement of the project as early as 1992 and construction beginning in 2005. Yet it was worth the wait. The winning architectural project of the international competition was the firm Heneghan Peng Architects, based in Dublin. Another significant international support came from Japan (Ezz Eldin Mahmoud 2025). The unusual form of the museum building is aligned with all three royal pyramids at Giza (Figure 1). The official opening was postponed multiple times, with a trial opening of some parts of the museum in autumn 2024. The *Grand Egyptian Museum* (below *GEM*) is in fact a complex of several buildings and areas, covering a 50ha plot of land, with the main venues for artefacts being the Grand Hall, Grand Stairs, Main Galleries, Tutankhamun Galleries and Khufu's boats museum. A Conservation Centre is located in a separate underground building nearby, including 19 laboratories and six storage rooms: before the official opening, the main task here was to prepare the finds from the tomb of Tutankhamun for the exhibition space. Some facts to start with: the collection includes 100 000 artefacts, with half of them on display and more than 5000 alone from Tutankhamun's tomb. The exhibition space covers 50 000 m^2, five times more than the 'old' museum, *The Egyptian Museum* on Tahrir Square.

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Figure 1. The museum set in the landscape with Giza pyramids (© Grand Egyptian Museum).

A walk through the *GEM*

There are potentially myriad ways to approach the *GEM*, I am opting for a brief introduction to each of the spaces, noting some personal favourites from the collection—it was a sheer joy to see so many artefacts that I knew only from literature. Some of the artefacts will be known to the readers of *Antiquity* as they have been discussed in its pages. The review concludes with a few general observations on the museum and the differences of discourse of ancient Egypt within academia and among the general public.

The entry ticket can be purchased online with generous time entry slots (to accommodate unpredictable Cairo traffic), facilities within the museum complex ensure that a visitor can spend a whole day here. Double-pricing for ticket costs for Egyptian and non-Egyptian visitors, is a long-standing practice in Egypt, and is enacted here as well. As for the ancient artefacts, the first on view is an obelisk of Ramesses II (museum no. GEM 21331), right in front of the entrance of the museum, and originally from Tanis (Figure 2). Some of the largest artefacts would fit only in the Grand Hall, and the first artefact inside is a colossal statue of Ramesses II (GEM 1); this was located since the 1950s in front of the Cairo Train Station, but now it is much better protected. Within the gated ticketed space, the visitor ascends the Grand Stairs alongside which 59 monumental stone artefacts, including statuary, sarcophagi and architectural elements are placed (Figure 3), to arrive at a gigantic window revealing a panorama of the Giza pyramids. It is worth mentioning that the entire space has barrier-free access.

The main attraction for most visitors will be the Tutankhamun Galleries, yet I would suggest that the best place to start is with a visit to the immersive Main Galleries, on the highest floor open to the public. These are 12 large spaces, rather than rooms,

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Figure 2. 'Hanging' obelisk in front of the museum's entrance (© Grand Egyptian Museum).

organised in a grid: three of each are dedicated to specific periods, and each of the periods is divided into three main themes: society, kingship and beliefs. Therefore, one can either wander through the chronological overview or intersect the periods and compare their respective societies, presentation of kingship or their religious beliefs. The most space by far is dedicated to the Middle Kingdom (Figure 4) and Second Intermediate Period or in archaeological terminology the Middle Bronze Age (Galleries 04 to 06), and to the New Kingdom/Late Bronze Age (Galleries 07 to 09). These six galleries are true showcased textbooks of the material culture of these periods, including hundreds of artefacts that were never on display before or were not displayed properly. Some of the highlights include: the Cairo half of the Middle Kingdom Treasure of el-Tod with Aegean silver (Bisson de la Roque 1950); a selection of finds from Kom el-Hisn in the

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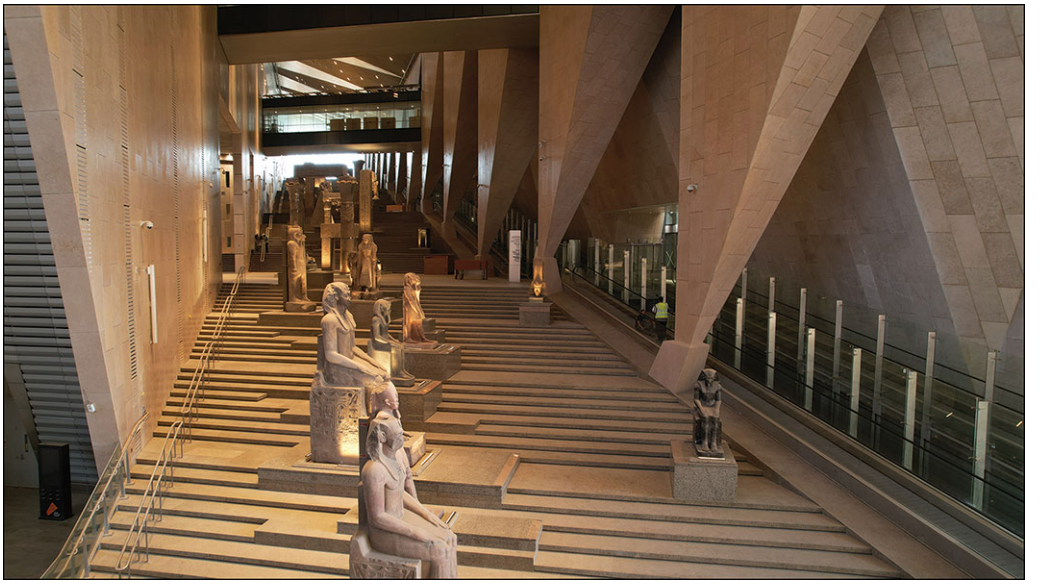


Figure 3. Grand Stairs (© Grand Egyptian Museum).

Western Delta, an early Middle Kingdom cemetery excavated, but only cursorily published (Hamada & Amir 1947); and *Antiquity*-published research on the reign and art of Queen Hatshepsut (Figure 5), which are also represented here (Stupko-Lubczyńska 2022; Wong 2025).

Perhaps a less enviable task was to compose the initial and final spaces. Galleries 01 to 03 had to fit everything in from the Prehistoric Period—including material from Fayum (Shirai 2016), the Predynastic Period, the Early Dynastic Period (with lithics from the tomb of King Khasekehmwy, see Angevin 2015), Old Kingdom, and First Intermediate Period (altogether from about 700 000–2034 BC). Old Kingdom artefacts are thus often found neighbouring much earlier pieces in the same exhibition cases (Figure 6). I have my doubts on how efficient this presentation is in rendering the origins of the ancient Egyptian civilisation in the desert and within the Nile Valley, due to the high number of artefacts from different eras eventually in a limited space. Nevertheless, Gallery 02 provides the almost complete, stunning burial equipment of Queen Hetepheres from the early Fourth Dynasty/Early Bronze Age (Münch 2000), alongside a large number of artefacts never before exhibited. The same observation is valid for Galleries 10 to 12, with the intentionally multicultural focus on the Third Intermediate Period, Late Period and Graeco-Roman Period, considering the foreign influences on the culture of Egypt. Similarly, these rooms cover a long period of time and therefore had to accommodate various types of contexts and diverse artefacts.

In addition to the Main Galleries, four 'caves' are accessible through the stairs, dedicated to the Priestesses of Goddess Hathor and thus to the role of women in the early

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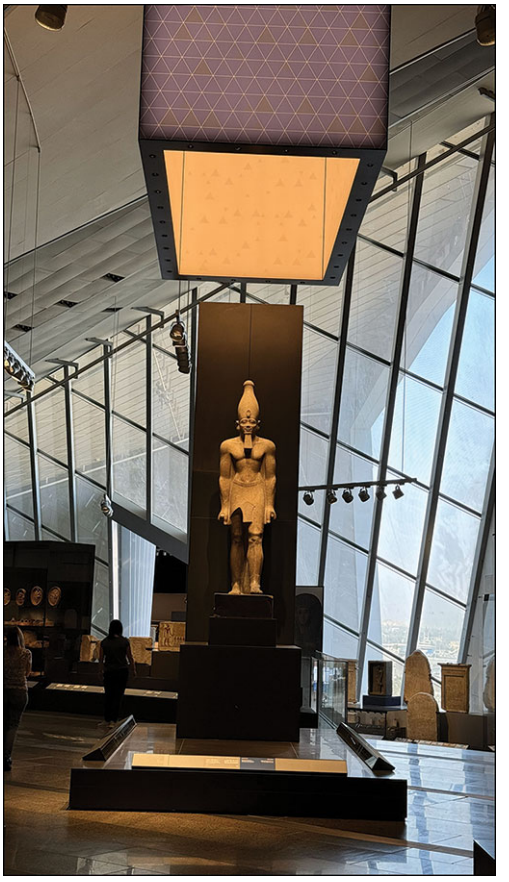


Figure 4. Colossal granite statue of King Senwosret I from Karnak (GEM 1706) within the Middle Kingdom galleries (© Grand Egyptian Museum).

Egyptian society; archaeology of the Valley of the Kings; Deir el-Medina as the best-known New Kingdom settlement, whose inhabitants produced the tombs of the Valley of the Kings and the documentation is in such detail that we know their names, lineages and personal characters (Davies 2018; Gabler 2018); and the last cave is for Graeco-Roman underwater cities.

Generally, all artefacts are well lit, with ample space provided for access, with mobile phone photography and cameras allowed, albeit with the usual tribulations caused by capturing images through glass cases. Some of the lights directed on the exhibits are most effective in the dusk, during the short days of winter (or towards the end of the extended hours of the museum on Saturdays and Wednesdays). Many of the artefacts that were moved from the collection of the 'old' Egyptian Museum have multiple sets of museum numbers, a new one is added in the *GEM*, this is understandable as they are now part of the new museum's collection. The new numbers are provided on the labels, although there was no space to include the old numbers, they are sometimes visible on the displayed artefacts. The precise identification of a museum number is sometimes made difficult in cases with many objects and a single label, but, hopefully, an online catalogue will solve this for future researchers.

The majority of visitors will no doubt head straight to the main celebrity in the house, to the Tutankhamun Galleries, with the finds from the famous 'boy king's' tomb on display (with some of the recent scholarship reviewed, for example, in Price 2024). These exhibition spaces are organised alongside five themes: identity (family and the actual health and death of the king); funeral (mummification and funerary rituals); rebirth (ancient Egyptian concept of the afterlife for a king); lifestyle (identified personal possessions, including wine jars, see Jané 2011); and the discovery of the tomb and what attention and research followed up to leading crowds to these rooms. The ('old') Egyptian Museum was opened in 1902; therefore, it could not have been prepared to exhibit the full extent of the artefacts found 20 years later in tomb KV 62. Seeing the

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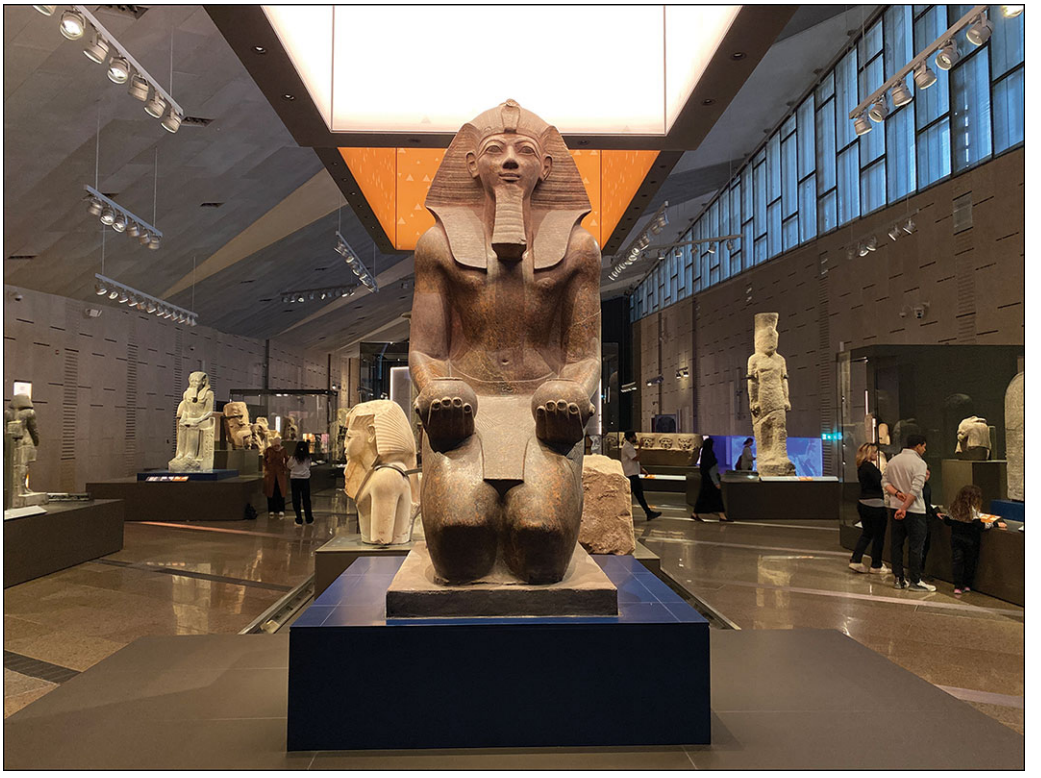


Figure 5. Statue of Queen Hatshepsut within the New Kingdom galleries (© Grand Egyptian Museum).

artefacts in the old museum, amid the crowds of visitors, was not always a pleasant experience, and prompted these new galleries: for the first time designed to display almost everything: apart from the body of the king, which remains in his tomb in the Valley of the Kings. Hopefully, with the full display of the tomb's contents, the long-overdue comprehensive publications of the finds will follow. As trivial as it sounds, but for instance, we do not understand how it was possible to amass such an amount of gold for a single royal burial. Just the iconic golden mask was scientifically investigated only recently (Broschat *et al.* 2023).

The 'Boats of King Khufu' are exhibited in a separate building. Two boat pits were unearthed at Khufu's pyramid; the first boat, made of Lebanese cedar, is an important artefact in the history of the independent Egyptian archaeology. It was the first major independent restoration project of a significant ancient Egyptian monument in the Arab Republic of Egypt (Nour *et al.* 1960). And as the museum's leaflet promises: "visitors can witness live the conservation and reassembly of the second boat." Commendably, colleagues in the museum are gradually publishing the results of their investigation of artefacts, e.g. (Abdel Moneim *et al.* 2024; Elshahawi 2025), and a first catalogue was published as well (Leitz *et al.* 2018).

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Figure 6. Gallery 01: from Palaeolithic to the Old Kingdom (© Grand Egyptian Museum).

Concluding thoughts

The blessing and the main attraction of the museum is Tutankhamun; a problem is maybe that this will be for many the only destination, despite hundreds of other 'star' artefacts present under the same roof. The general public often cares most about a photograph with a celebrity, here it is the golden mask of Tutankhamun—and the museum provides a 20-minutes path exactly there. Ancient Egypt offers much more, the *GEM* exhibits this richness of material culture and art, focusing on its aesthetically pleasing presentation. But, and this is also valid for the *GEM*, "(a) major challenge for museum staff is to exploit interest in ancient Egypt while attempting to engage with misconceptions in order to correct them", as was remarked by Campbell Price (2020: 1179). The tension arises because museums have to appeal to a much broader audience than only academic specialists, and the general public does not care that much about the professional research.

Academic Egyptology has become increasingly irrelevant to the general public and what is, indeed, now the media and social media landscape of their information on ancient Egypt. Egyptologists may achieve great research and publish it, even in for them expensive open access formats, yet the eyeballs are gazing elsewhere. A number of visitors of the *GEM* may have very curious opinions on the artefacts themselves and their

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Figure 7. Third-Dynasty stone vessels from the pyramid complex of King Djoser Netjerykhet at Saqqara, with his unfinished statue GEM 45832 in the background (© Grand Egyptian Museum).

historical interpretation, just because the internet, with readily available unchecked facts and opinions, irreversibly changed the information sources on human history. The current obsession online is the scanning and precision measurements of Predynastic and Early Dynastic stone vessels, as if they were produced by some totally unknown technologies (Figure 7). These were investigated also in *Antiquity* (Stocks 1999, 2001).

Egyptian authorities are much more media-savvy than western academia gives them credit for and this was reflected in the online presentation of the *GEM*. The people who were allowed to visit the museum before its opening and present it to the world were YouTubers rather than professional Egyptologists. The most useful information on what is actually exhibited and what are the research contexts is to be found right now on social media of visiting professional researchers. If my Egyptological colleagues are not worried by the fact that the museum exhibition is being introduced by YouTubers, then it feels like the modern media and social media landscape is lost to academia. Our publications may be available in open access, attracting a few thousand readers at best, while YouTube videos being mystified by the scans of stone vessels gather hundreds of thousands of views. But I will not increase the reach of those by citing them here.

The arts and crafts of ancient Egypt are almost impeccably exhibited in the *GEM*. A difficult challenge is how to present, as Egyptologists and regardless of our background, what we know about the worlds of ancient Egyptians without sounding patronising, and meeting the interested general public, Egyptian or non-Egyptian, where they are. The myriad ways of how to perceive what is inside the *GEM* are by no means limited to what academic research puts forward. Academic audiences tend to be much more critical in choices taken and not taken in a particular museum display. Any museum of this size and importance will elicit controversies, as was the case with the Acropolis Museum, opened in 2009, and the heated discussion surrounding it (e.g. James 2009; Hamilakis 2011; Plantzos 2011; Snodgrass 2011). For a critical Egyptian journalistic view of the *GEM* see Mohamed Elshahed (2025) and شهاب طارق Shahab Tariq (2026).

The global public took notice of the museum's opening in November 2025, and it dominated the news outlets that weekend. Something that was not communicated

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clearly is that the 'old' museum on Tahrir Square, *The Egyptian Museum*, is still open and the moving of the Tutankhamun and Hetepheres corpus to the *GEM* freed a lot of space to exhibit more artefacts from its storage. The third major museum in Cairo is *The National Museum of Egyptian Civilization*, which holds the mummies of the New Kingdom pharaohs as well as a multicultural collection of the cultures of Egypt from the earliest times until present day, with a significant presentation of Egypt's prehistory. All three museums are located in different parts of Cairo, but each has a particular strength and is worth visiting by anybody with a serious interest in ancient Egypt.

The *Grand Egyptian Museum* is now completed (including children's museum, conference centre, auditorium and spaces for temporary exhibitions) and is fully opened, but some parts of the surrounding infrastructure are still under construction or in planning, for instance a walkway directly from the museum to the Giza plateau and a metro station. Recently, the Sphinx International Airport near Giza was opened. Once the full plan is finished, Egypt will have an admirable and enviable infrastructure connecting the Old Kingdom pyramid field at Giza with the latest museum. The *GEM* stands to serve as the best gateway for understanding the ancient Egyptian civilization to future visitors and researchers.

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