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## **Nubia and Nubians: The 'Museumization' of a Culture**

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## CONCLUSIONS

This work has tried to assess the interpretative models of the display of Nubian collections worldwide. Its basis has been the first reconstructive and analytical 'tour' of the state of art of Nubian collections scattered around the world.

The creation of a topographical map of Nubian collections worldwide, to serve as a platform from which to analyze the whys and wherefores of their display or non-display as the case might be, has been not an easy task. Owing to their ambiguous origins, the classification of these objects is still very confused, making their location a real piece of detective work and meaning alas that this map is still necessarily incomplete. Therefore, although the goal of this research is not the inventorying of Nubian collections but an analysis of their display, I have tried to base it on the widest possible range of views. I hope that it also represents a solid foundation for the compilation of a more refined inventory and classification of such objects.

Notwithstanding the difficulties in locating Nubian artifacts, the analysis presented in this research certainly provides an initial understanding on how Nubia has been understood, 'created' and silenced in the context of museums worldwide.

Nubian collections kept in these museums are extraordinarily diverse, ranging from prehistory to modern times. Therefore, they testify to the fascinating history acted out in this area by people of different backgrounds and with divergent technical and political structures. People who have interacted with each other over millennia to form the tradition and the culture of Nubia.

The material objects serve as documents and historical records of the complex Nubian past and present. The manner of acquisition and the history of display policies and exhibitions support the argument that the traditional concept of Nubia is derived more from sociopolitical considerations, academic trends and contexts rather than from the historical evidence itself.

Archeologically speaking, the concept of Nubia has passed through three stages of evolution: that of Egyptology, that of Nubiology and, most recently, Sudanology. Inside each of these three developmental stages, a number of geographical, temporal and terminology variants have characterized the display of Nubian collections in museums. In the countries of origin, Egypt and Sudan, geopolitical motivations as well as different perceptions and approaches have strongly influenced the exhibition of these collections.

Egypt is the place where the evolution of the concept of Nubia in museums is most evident. The first Nubian exhibitions were a reflection of the time at which the cultural policies were determined by the visions of those, especially foreigners, early researchers who perceived Nubia to be just an appendix to and peripheral component of Egypt. A vision that is exemplified by the phrase 'Land of the Unknown'. Nubia was subsumed by the archeological rich material culture of Egypt.

In Egypt, it was probably an event more than an evolution in thought that has granted Nubian material cultural its own space in the Nubia Museum of Aswan, the crown on the world famous *International Campaign to Save the Monuments of Nubia* in the sixties. The Museum also fills a major gap that so glaringly characterized this Campaign: the Museum is not just a space that celebrates the glories of the past, it is also a place where, through dioramas, images have been recreated of the life of the Nubians today, thereby establishing that essential common thread between past and present.

In the Sudan, the situation is different, or rather the opposite. Here the archeology of Nubia has no (local) rivals to overshadow it. Nationally it is undoubtedly the best known and consequently the most important. It stands out in all its variety and richness among all the other

museums in the country. Other areas of the Sudan have a rich ethnographic heritage, expressions of the modern cultural diversity of the country of which Nubia is part. The Ethnographic Museum in Khartoum displays this variety of ethnographic material from all over the Sudan reflecting the concept of 'Unity in Diversity'.

Abroad, the policy of to display or not to display Nubian collections in museums is determined by the events that have characterized the discovery of Nubia and the various perceptions that have accompanied it, aided by the shift in the archeological research in the Sudan. Identity and social issues are still felt only marginally in the exhibition choices of these museums. In the meantime, the link established by on-going archeological activities between many of these museums and the countries of origin of the collections emphasizes the political factor. Here too, the mode of exposure of these collections is intermeshed in the three stages mentioned above. Initially Nubia was completely absorbed into the context of Egyptian galleries. Thanks to the Salvage Campaign of the sixties, curators became more aware that the singular historical strand of Nubian history had an independent trajectory and complexity although part of a cultural regional milieu. Therefore, the first Nubian galleries were set up and an increasing numbers of museums became interested in mounting exhibitions highlighting the history and culture of this civilization and area. Today, some of those institutions with on-going archeological activities in the area prefer to use the term Sudan rather than Nubia for their exhibitions.

The lack of ethnographic material from most of these Nubian exhibitions abroad prevents me making a meaningful analysis of their exhibitions. Nevertheless, it does allow me to include one important piece of evidence as a final result of this research: in museums abroad Nubian archeology has subsumed Nubian ethnography. Only five out of 101 Nubian collections that I found abroad included Nubian ethnographic materials. Three of them are in storage, one is almost unknown to the specialists, while the one on which I can say a few words is the exhibition at the Museum of Gdańsk: in its simplicity, it has tried to patch up the threads of this complex skein that is the cultural diversity in the Sudan of which the Nubia of yesterday and today is a part.

An alarming figure recorded in the analysis of these Nubian collections abroad is the massive relegation of many of them to storage depots. If once this attitude was determined by clearly biased curatorial choices, today what has been defined 'museum system restrictions' (limitation of space, touristic programs, lack of funds and so forth) has favored the exhibition of Egyptian collections and penalized the Nubian ones, shrugged off as peripheral and less appealing than the former. I wonder why, in spite of this sad reality, museums abroad continue to ask, on long-term loans, materials from the countries of origin instead of making their stored materials available for temporary or permanent exhibitions to be set up to benefit the knowledge of their local communities.

In conclusion: to display or not to display Nubian collections worldwide is a dilemma that testifies to the existence of a healthy dose of 'selective amnesia' and confusion about the meaning of Nubia: what Nubia is. Nubian territory, as interpreted from the historical records, stretched from the First to the Sixth Cataract for a specific and finite period of time. Such historical interpretations and perceptions contract and expand the time-span and the geographic extension of the millenarian history of this area. They are just that, interpretations, and, therefore, malleable, a real hindrance making consistent referencing problematical. This emphasizes the need to revisit the sense of the term 'Nubia', not only for its academic use in the context of museums and scientific publications but also on behalf of those who consider it to be the symbol of their identity.

Certainly, as my research demonstrates, the Salvage Campaign of the sixties did play an important role in highlighting the individuality of the cultural elements that developed in that area,

traditionally defined as Nubia. However, the significance of their contribution to our understanding of the development, on all levels, of human civilization requires a more vigorous effort to organize the pieces of the puzzle that has been presented in this thesis.

Furthermore, the research underscores that the emphasis on the archeology of Nubia has dominated scholarly research, obscuring other aspects of Nubian life and culture. The interactive exhibition of archeological materials and the present-day productions of the living communities in which the collections reside, offers more opportunities for rediscovery and for educational enrichment. Museums are no longer spaces limited to an elite and its visions. Nor can they be so strongly influenced by what we have called the 'museum system' that is no longer compatible with the social role that some museums are increasingly adopting that requires a greater interaction with the outside world.