

IV

The Museums of Egypt after the 2011 Revolution

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Abstract

Not only are Egyptians museums an asset to develop the country's economy, but they also play a pivotal social role in developing community-based activities, and fostering dialogue.

This pivotal social role was acquired after the 2011 revolution. Although the museums in Egypt faced several threats and challenges during and after the revolution, much was gained thanks to social change. Museums encounter many opportunities whereby their relation with the Egyptian communities can be restored and strengthened altogether. This paper describes and documents the changes happening in the museums of Egypt. A forum in which social matters can be discussed, museums play a foremost part in the promotion of social change and development. This is particularly true of museums in countries that have seen the rise and fall of great ancient civilisations, such as Egypt.

For two centuries, museums in Egypt were based on the conventional model of the institution *per se*, housing antiquities and exclusively exhibiting them for the enjoyment

of the foreigners. Colonial and postcolonial governments neglected the local inhabitants of the colonial provinces, politically as well as socially. In the first half of the 20th century, museums were destined to entertain foreigners; post-colonial Egyptian rulers maintained museums as government entities, which were used as assets for economic development. And so, seldom were the concerns of the Egyptian people addressed (see Rashed 2005a). Yet, times have changed: cultural and social revolution has come from the streets. The people who have kindled political change in the streets were also able to start the social and cultural change.

During that critical period, museums were only progressively involved in the process of change. Increasingly, they served as platforms that brought about much needed dialogue, urging the Egyptian people to join the debate. These initiatives stirred further awareness and commitment to heritage issues. In the early days of the Egyptian revolution, museums were actively participating in change, even if they suffered, at times, collateral damage or were the direct target of street violence, for instance, the break in of Mallawi Museum on 2014. Also, the partly damaging of the Museum of Islamic Art, as a victim of a vicious terrorist attack in January of 2014, which had targeted the Cairo Police Headquarters that stands across the street. Or at the very beginning, the break-in in the Egyptian Museum of Cairo on January 28th 2011 (El-Dorry, 2011).

The museum, then at the very heart of the Tahrir square events, bore witness to the entire revolution. Unsurprisingly, a special bond was forged in *Medan el Tahrir* between the museum and the protestors. This relation was born and grown up during the sequential waves of the revolution from January 2011 until June 2013. Tahrir Square, having the Egyptian Museum at its heart, became an Icon and gathering point for protestors, whenever they gathered the tension is given to the museum having in mind the sad memory of its looting. Even such attention was a reason enough to encourage them to visit museums exploring its collections and knew about their heritage inside.

In 2011, with the gathering crowds of protestors, the Egyptian Museum appeared under threat. Young Egyptians formed a human shield in front of the museum to protect it from violence and looting (Jenkins, 2012). This demonstrated the commitment of a new generation of Egyptians to their unique heritage (Rashed 2015b). Colonial and post-colonial era had made the past inaccessible; but that distance between the Egyptian people, their ancestors and their heritage, was annihilated in that single, willful gesture.

A bridge between the past and the present, between ancient and contemporary Egyptians, was built. Since then,

the Egyptian heritage, museums, and collections became the object of particular attention for the Egyptian people. From that new relation to heritage, widespread concern for museums and [the preservation of] archaeological sites was broadly manifested throughout the country.

Perhaps, these difficult times, that some of the museums and sites faced since the revolution, evaluate the difference in the degree of the citizens concern and involvement in the protection of museums. After the looting of the Egyptian Museum on January 28th, Seventy percent of the looted artifacts have been recovered by citizens. Being aware of their social responsibility, Individuals started social awareness initiatives sharing lists and pictures of all the looted artifacts from Mallawi Museum, and using all social networks to spread the awareness and to exchange must-have experience and steps to avoid repeating such accidents.

The emotional tension to museums first took place in the daily dialogue among the Egyptian protestors in the *Medan* 'Tahrir Square'. Then, it reached everywhere throughout the country. Later street protestors would be replaced by native [and foreign] visitors exploring and enjoying their museums and heritage – one first step towards change for Egyptian museums that continues to this very day.

Are museums sufficiently committed to reaching out to the Egyptian people, or are more efforts required to foster awareness in fundamental issues related to museums? In recent years, change has brought about the opportunity for museum professionals to adapt museums to today's society, by engaging in and encouraging social dialogue. Individuals, local communities and professionals working in a number of museums around the country have indeed done so. Several activities, workshops, and open discussions were held at the Egyptian museum, Ismailia museum, the National museum of Alexandria, among others.

At the same time, the public was invited to attend these museums, and, occasionally, to participate directly in the meetings. Soon, Egyptians from all walks of life attended – a visible result of the local communities' determination to make museums accessible, and their work intelligible to all. In time, their understanding of the museum institution, as well as the values and vocation of museums have changed.

While government institutions, including museums, were taken aback before the unsustainable circumstances after revolution of such political changes, insecurity, and financial crisis; but the individuals and communities' initiatives were gradually taking steps to address and engage their surrounding communities. Workshops, activities and visits to museums, were arranged and made possible to engage

communities to museums and archaeological sites, running by individual and non institutional initiatives.

At present, most of the provincial museums, which used to be empty before 2011, were brought back to life as visitors came in growing numbers. In many occasions, they run the social events and programmes organised by society and local communities. Even if the numbers increase slowly, but it indicates the positive change. With the support of the Patrons, Friends of Museums' etc., museums would succeed to engage their local communities.

The Ismailia, Suez Museum, and National Museum of Alexandria, among several other provincial museums used to hold activities and programs for communities during weekends, holidays, and public festivities. Social networks having played a crucial role during the revolution, the visibility of museums on social networks such as Facebook and Twitter was increased, in order to reach out to communities and disseminate their missions, spread the word on activities and special events.

One of the most successful events among these community programs and workshops was 'the costume festival', held in the Egyptian museum of Cairo as well as other provincial museums. For this occasion, Egyptian volunteers and participants were invited to dress up and try

different Egyptian traditional costumes which represent diverse traditions in ancient, historical and contemporary Egypt. They enjoyed dressing up and participating in open discussions about traditional costumes and other inherited traditions. Several programs and special tours are running to appeal to everyone; as for instance, children, and those with 'special needs'. By dressing up traditional costumes, children learn about these costumes, their historical contexts, and they even participate in plays embodying those personae and their relevant traditional culture.

The number of temporary exhibitions has clearly increased, with twice as many exhibitions in 2014-2015. many museums hosted temporary exhibitions. In other cases, exhibitions resulted from cooperation and sharing among several museums.

In March 2014, for instance, the Coptic Museum presented an exhibition which reflected an inherited Egyptian culture. The exhibition, entitled '*Halawt Zaman* (the sweets of the past)', aimed to revive a tradition, which goes back thousands of years but which, nowadays, is also at risk . The purpose of the exhibition was not only to revive sweet memories and traditions from the past – thus bringing people together through the past – but it also aimed to pay tribute to the Egyptian spirit of joyful resilience in times of trouble . On the other hand, it aimed to address new visitors'

groups, upon up to all Egyptians, and not only tourists and those akin to Coptic heritage.

Worldwide, Museums have transformed from a temple of knowledge to an engaging platform of culture that highlights civic values, such as social inclusion. Therefore, Museums became not exclusive to their collections' scope, but inclusively appeal to sustain wider cultural scope up to contemporary society, including all visitors' groups and their interests. Consequentially, '*Halawt Zaman*' exhibition aimed to present a tradition that is usually perceived as Islamic – and quite wrongly so – as it actually rooted in ancient Egyptian culture. While the response of some specialists may have occasionally been negative, the positive impact on local communities was most noticeable.

Curators and educators at the National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation have been consistently working with local communities on their interactive programmes prior to the museum's opening date (still pending at this stage). Several workshops were held, and on-site visits to 'craft' - mastered by artisans and communities in the surrounding area made, to understand their expectations from the museum. Series of temporary exhibitions were held at the museum, historical and public places, as, for instance, the exhibition and workshops on '*Fanous of Ramaḍān*', presented during the holy month of Ramadan. [*Fanous* or

Ramadan Lantern is an Islamic traditional lantern that was used to be use in lighting up during night. Later, it is converted into a traditional child-play during the nights of Ramadan].

To revive this tradition and educate in matters of recycling and environment preservation, children were invited to make models of *Fanuos* from recycled material at workshops. improve values such as recycling, and keeping their environment clean.

Another thrilling exhibition is the exhibition entitled 'My Possessions are my Identity'. The idea was to invite ordinary people to present possessions and memories related to these personal objects. Thus, this exhibition aimed to raise the awareness of the heritage and museums. They can create their own emotional connections with the artifacts and artworks in museums.

This exhibition succeeded in bringing to light the real meaning and function of museums as defined by ICOM (ICOM's definition of Museum, 2007; and Code of Ethics, 2013:6.7), as it not only sought to illustrate the role of museums in the preservation of artworks and artifacts, but also highlighted that these objects once served all purposes in everyday life, as well as lifetime events. heritage is presented on both a singular and collective scale. Its aim was also to create exhibitions and folk galleries in museum, consisting of public and personal possessions. Enabling

communities, to play an active role in the creation of the exhibition by presenting their possessions in public clubs, gardens, schools, and universities, and thus share their memories, and evaluate their meaningful values.

On the other hand, some museums succeeded in renovating their permanent displays. The Museum of Islamic Art was reinstalled in 2012, before it was attacked in 2014. Hopefully it will reopened early 2016, presenting its collections in chronological and geographical order instead of typological ones. The Egyptian Museum showed its permanent display anew, by refurbishing four galleries of Tutankhamun in December 2014. The new display presents the unique collection thematically illustrating the story-life of the famous king, where the objects are the storyteller, (Gamal 2015).

It should be stated that museums in Egypt do not merely act as platforms fostering dialogue, but also allow the participation of communities through different participatory activities, programs and exhibitions, e.g. the exhibition of 'My Possessions are my Identity'. Even if financial difficulties and bureaucratic management proved something of an impediment, museums eventually succeeded in fulfilling their roles as generators of new educational and social programmes, increasing the awareness of the importance of heritage preservation among Egyptian [Such role which the Nubian Museum in Aswan is acting perfectly (see Abdel

Meguid 2015)]. Thus, they became stewards of Egyptian culture and heritage acting against looting of archaeological sites, museums and illicit trafficking of antiquities. For instance, the communities' role in recovering the looted objects from the Mallawi Museum in Menia; or protecting the newly discovered tombs in Aswan, 2015.

This brought about another serious challenge as to capacity building in museums. Museums, which were used to be running traditionally in conventional way for decades - based on housing antiquities and open their doors for tourists without considering museums' social roles, are in high demand of professionally trained staff, who should be well trained and their creative skills such as leadership, inspiration, and creativity should be highly improved.

It may be that current changes in many provincial museums, i.e. their increased interactivity with the nearby communities, together with the numerous current museum projects under construction, create excellent opportunities to improve the skills required of young curators, educators, etc., to establish new engaging platforms with the society, thus building generations of museum professionals who can lead, sustain and run our museums. That was a necessary step to enable young professionals to take part in all management processes so as to essentially build up confident and independent future leaders. The ongoing process of developing permanent and temporary exhibitions,

programmes for interpretation, education, workshops, as well as community programs etc., on current and new museums projects, paves the way for the training of future leaders, experts and teams of professionals. Such occasions are also a welcome opportunity to gain international experience.

One positive step in the museum sector was the decision, taken in 2015, to establish a new Education, Research, Exhibition, Marketing, and Communities departments in museums, and put young, determined and competent museum professionals at the head of these departments. The creation of these new departments should enable museums to play more effective roles relying on a professional structure system where responsibilities are distributed among specialists rather than being all gathered under the control of one head/hand. Likewise, my suggestion to hold an annual museum study day, where all museum professionals meet to present, discuss, and exchange their experience, knowledge, and even problems was accepted.

It can be stated that understanding the current status and challenges of museums is the straightforward start for any anticipated steps to identify and increase the opportunities, prioritising and implementing plans. Creating a platform to evaluate and judge any future plans or changes based on understanding our status, capability and actual needs to avoid any unwise steps. Museums in Egypt are finally

changing their approach, policies, and contextualisation of their collections, in order to link past heritage and present-day culture. This essential step toward a more successful future for museums, must be taken seriously.

Illustrative of the impending challenge for Egyptian museums are the following examples. Projects, in particular the forthcoming the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM)^{1,2} in 2020, which is planned for displaying Pharaonic antiquities (Rashed 2015a, b); and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC), which has been planned to tell the entire story of Egyptian culture and civilisations (Rashed 2015a). Those projects should create more opportunities, not only as new spaces with more appropriate display, but they are likely to help by engaging the nearby communities through activities and programs for children, students, adults, specialists and people with special needs.² Their permanent displays and temporary exhibitions must focus on addressing the concerns of Egyptians, and contribute in eliciting a strong bond with their heritage.

Critical challenges and difficulties came out of new museum projects. Perhaps more relevant to the unwise decisions of assigning directors and committees for these museums without sufficient backgrounds about museums, their missions and concepts causing either misleading in identifying concepts and in duplicating in selecting artifacts between several museums, when museum experts are not

involved on the level of management and decisions making. At the top of these serious challenges came the disconnecting of the unity of collections, which may be divided unwisely among several museums; and which is utterly against the ICOM Codes of ethics.

Lastly, museums are essential touristic attractions, which contribute to the national income. This said, their investments need to reach local communities and individuals as well. Community-based ecotourism can bring local communities numerous socio-economic benefits, but it also requires a multidisciplinary approach and planning to guarantee sustainable operations. Private businesses and local communities have vital roles to play in collaboration with government and its institutions (Abdel Meguid 2009). The government should build such platform for collaboration. To implement sustainable development solutions in the surrounding communities while taking into account the socio-economic benefits for individuals and communities and community-based ecotourism, is indeed a delicate objective to attain. Local communities and individuals need to obtain visible benefits from their museums and heritage. If not, asking them to share the responsibility of protecting the museums and archaeological sites would only be unfair. This objective is yet to be attained, insofar as effective measures to guarantee local communities also obtain benefits have not yet been carried out. This said, it should be pointed out that steps in that

direction have been taken by private businesses, as well as individuals.

Conclusion

To sum up, the museums of Egypt are influenced by the social changes that happened through and after the 2011 Revolution. They may have faced numerous challenges, yet they proved successful in reaching out to local communities and playing their roles towards society through exhibitions as engaging platform, activities and other programs destined to local communities and groups. Doubtless, one of sector's strengths is its young professionals, who were willing to redefine the profile and role of their museums. There would be more such opportunities should these young professionals be allowed to take a major role in decision-making and supervise the new museums projects (GEM, NMEC, and the new provincial Museums), to prepare the museums of the future.

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V

The Museums of Egypt Speak for Whom?

BY MOHAMED GAMAL RASHED

Introduction

Introduction Museums are platforms for engagement and social inclusion, focussing on knowledge sharing and knowledge production in relevant and qualified settings for today's citizens, with a view to ensuring that museums are transformed into central players in the development of societies.

In the 1972 Declaration of Santiago de Chile, ICOM encouraged member states to support the social role of museums, and museums are increasingly viewed in most countries as playing a key role in society, and as a factor in social integration and cohesion. In this sense, they can help communities to face profound changes in society, including those leading to a rise in inequality and the breakdown of social ties. Thus, museums that became the voice of societies should encourage and facilitate dialogue, and the building of relationships between societies and museums,

and between different communities. Global and major museums may have numerous roles to carry out, while small, local and regional museums should be more dedicated to and responding to their host communities as platforms for social inclusion.

In Egypt, our museums are stepping stones for a new progressive era. The museums of Egypt are not only increasing in number but also in their roles, social activities, and performance; however, there is more to achieve in order to fulfil the social roles of the museum. The social changes that occurred during and after the 2011 revolution are reflected in museums and types of visitors they attract.

Although museums have recently demonstrated positive changes, these need to be adjusted to fulfil the diverse roles of museums reflected in international standards and guidelines. Thus, analysis of the needs, interests and expectations of Egyptian society must be carried out in order for museums to respond to their social roles. This should be reflected in their programs, activities and events as well. On the other hand, identifying the historical and current perspective and directions of the museums in Egypt is a vital

issue to recognize the realistic gaps in museums' roles, as well as the needs and expectations of society.

This article highlights the historical concept and perspective of museums in Egypt since their first appearance, and investigates why current museums are not effectively performing their social roles. It also discusses the needs and expectations of Egyptians regarding museums, especially in view of ongoing social changes. Also, what can our museums do to change their current image for Egyptians? And how they can engage with them to indeed act as the voice of their communities? It also evaluates the role of museums in the development of Egyptian society.

How can a museum play a proactive role in social changes inside the society? And how can it assist society in its development? What types of museums are required to meet Egyptian expectations? Do these types of museums exist in Egypt? In what capacity they are serving and reaching Egyptian society? Finally, what should

we do as museum professionals, educators, curators, and planners?

The History of Museums in Egypt Although the history of museums dates to the beginning of the fifth century BC, today's museum as a public institution with a collection held in "public trust" dates from 1683, when the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford University was founded. It was followed by the Capitoline Museum in Rome in 1734, and the British Museum in 1759. In Egypt, the birth of museums goes back the nineteenth century, the market for Egyptian antiquities, and the clear vision of Governor Mohamed Ali Pasha.

The 1798 French expedition to Egypt brought attention to ancient Egyptian heritage. Quickly, the western markets for Egyptian antiquities became very active supporting digging in Egypt, following the western madness with pharaonic Egypt. Travellers, excavators, and diggers transferred thousands of objects to western markets and museums.

In 1835, Mohamed Ali Pasha issued the first decree regulating the excavation of archaeological sites. His decree