

Think you know mummies? Think again: Mummy stories

Angela Stienne is a third year PhD student at the School of Museum Studies researching engagements with Egyptian mummies in Paris and London between 1753 and 1855. Angela has worked at the Musée du Louvre in Paris and volunteered at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology in London. Throughout her academic career, she has been involved in a variety of public engagement projects.

In 2014, I started my PhD at the School of Museum Studies on a cultural history of Egyptian mummies. This study was the natural outcome of years of academic research into Egyptian human remains in museums. What struck me was that most studies – and virtually every museum – seemed to corroborate this idea: *Everyone loves mummies!*

The project

In 2016, I launched Mummy Stories, a website to share the stories I had collected during my research. Rapidly, it became evident that it would be difficult to share data without compromising my doctoral research, as I was still in the writing up stage. More importantly, I wanted to give a voice to others. In short, I wanted to find out if everyone really loves mummies, and if everyone loves mummies the same way. This led to *(Your) Mummy Stories*, a participative project which invites individuals from any background, interest and opinion to share their story of encounters with Egyptian mummies.

‘Every mummy has a story to tell, and so do you’ is the leitmotif of this project. I invite individuals to share the most fascinating story of mummies they have heard of, their feelings when viewing a mummy in their local museum, their passion, fear, curiosity, disgust or love for mummified specimens, and opinions on mummies in collections, museums, ethics, and other questionings. Any story works, as long as it’s their story.

“Every mummy has a story to tell, and so do you”

These stories are shared once a week, on #MummyMonday, a hashtag that has been popular with museums. The stories are shared simultaneously on social media (Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn) and on the website (www.mummystories.com/yourmummystories). The rules for entrants are very simple: they can send a message of any length, from a few lines to a few paragraphs, with a picture (optional), and a line or two about themselves (ideally, their location).



The response

What started as a small project very soon became a phenomenon. Individuals contacted me from across the world to share their story. What is most exciting in terms of this project, is the scope of opinions and the background of individuals. Our storytellers come from all ages, countries, knowledge background and communities, but they all have a thing in common: they have an opinion on mummies in museums. From studying human remains, to reading cartoons on mummies, engaging with ethical questions, or visiting local museums holding Egyptian human remains, individuals have different stories of encounters with Egyptian mummies. All the stories are fabulous, and incredibly enlightening, but three caught the public’s interest.

A young boy from Thailand named Bloom, aged 6, wrote that he liked mummies in comics, but when he came to visit the New Walk Museum in Leicester and saw the mummies, he found them terrifying and never wants to see them again! Another story, that received over 30 000 views online, was written by a woman who had set up a plan for a temporary exhibition of a mummy at Cairo Museum in Egypt, in collaboration with children. Her *honest* account of her encounter



'Mummy Stories, Unwrapping History, a project by Angela Stienne', coffin of Penamunnebnestaw, EA6676, original photograph © British Museum.

with a mummy, her 'handsome prince', really caught the public interest. Finally, the former minister of antiquities in Egypt, Dr Zahi Hawass, heard of the project and sent his story of the identification of the mummy of Hatshepsut at the Cairo Museum. These three stories celebrate the diversity of backgrounds and involvements with Egyptian mummies; importantly, they give a voice to the specialist and non-specialist alike.

The outcome

The project, which now counts over thirty stories, is an example of why public engagement is incredibly valuable to a PhD researcher. There are three main outcomes from *(Your) Mummy Stories*.

1. The diversity of stories, dependent on personal interest, geography, and many other factors, brings to light the multiplicity of definitions of what 'the mummy' means to us. Simply, it reveals that not everyone loves mummies, and those who do like seeing mummies in museums do not share the same reasons, interests and reactions. There is a diversity of engagements with Egyptian mummies which has not been considered by museums. This realisation has been useful in looking at the timeframe I am working on in my research.
2. The public needs a voice, and the public wants a voice. Participative projects which invite individuals from around the world to share their ideas about a topic that might usually be shaped by academic communities are incredibly important. The field of Egyptology and museums have been surrounded with an aura of intellectual superiority throughout history: Egyptologists seemingly hold the keys to lost knowledge, while museums would be restricted to the art erudite. These ideas are now outdated, the visiting public of museums deserves to have its opinion heard. I have learnt a lot from the community of storytellers around the world that has been taking part in this project.
3. From a doctoral perspective, online projects are a fantastic opportunity to develop skills and networks, expand your knowledge of the field, and at the same time to reach beyond what has been done: to make an original contribution.

What's next?

This project – combined with my own research – has allowed me to deepen my understanding of my field of interest, and to present myself to the outside world as someone who is committed to changing the ways we look at Egyptian mummies in museums, while reshaping current knowledge in this field. *(Your) Mummy Stories* has been so popular this year, that next January I am opening the project to every category of human remains without geographical limitation, in order to explore more stories in museums worldwide. There is good hope that *Mummy Stories* will continue running far beyond my doctoral years in Leicester.



'Every mummy has a story to tell...and so do you!'. Mummy of Cleopatra EA6707, original photograph © British Museum.

Website: www.mummystories.com
 (Your) Mummy Stories: www.mummystories.com/yourmummystories
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