Mummies are objects of wonder in museums worldwide, often made popular by films and books. Fascinated by the different perceptions of mummies in society, PhD student Angela Stienne investigates the multifaceted history of mummy collections, and their place in debates surrounding the exhibition of human remains in museums.

From medical dissections to public performances

In 1764, mathematician John Hadley and surgeon John Hunter dissected an Egyptian mummy in Hadley’s London house, in front of a small audience of medical practitioners. This produced the first detailed account of the dissection of an Egyptian mummy in a medical context. It raises the question: why did these individuals dissect mummies, and how did this affect the mediation and interpretation of the mummy?

One reason for dissections was an interest in the embalming techniques of the ancient Egyptians. Individuals attempted to reconstruct the mummification process: for example, Greek writer Herodotus (5th century BC) had attempted to recount the stages necessary to a successful mummification, and men of science used his account as a comparison. Guillaume-François Rouelle, a renowned French chemist who worked on the composition of salts, dissected mummies in order to apply his theories on salts to the use of natron, a substance used in the mummification process.

Egyptian mummies and racial theories

Mummification, however, was not the only interest of the intellectual community. Experts also hoped that mummies would
Performing the mummy: 19th century mummy unwrapping

In 1798, Napoleon led a French expedition to Egypt. This expedition, made up of a military force accompanied by a cultural enterprise of scholars and scientists searching Egyptian history, triggered the emergence of a more defined field of Egyptology that would eventually transform the reception of Egyptian material culture in the mid-19th century. French and British military, intellectual and collecting activity in the Middle East resulted in burgeoning public interest in ancient Egypt and the expansion of the Egyptian collection at the British Museum from 1801 and the creation of the first collection of Egyptian material culture at the Louvre in Paris in 1827. Egyptian mummies were to be found in these public collections but also entered the realm of popular entertainment with the introduction of the public unrolling and dissection of mummies.

In 1821, Giovanni Battista Belzoni, a circus strongman turned archaeologist, used the unrolling of a mummy to market his exhibition at the Egyptian Hall in London. For the first time, the opening of a mummy was treated as a public, rather than as a scientific, event. Thomas Joseph Pettigrew, a renowned surgeon and avid Egyptophile, inspired by his attendance at Belzoni’s event, took the practice of mummy unrolling to the next level offering much publicised and sought-after, ticketed events to a wider public audience. Interestingly, Pettigrew managed to combine a serious and intellectual or physical abilities.

The fascination with the ancient Egyptians did not fit developing theories which validated colonialism and inequality between racial categories. This contradiction to the racial stereotype exacerbated the physicality of the mummy as a body which supposedly contained scientific evidences of racial origins of humankind. If there was a clear desire to fit the Egyptian mummy within a racial category, there was no attempt to fit the mummy into a material category: the mummy was simultaneously a museum object, a medical corpse, a subject of fantasy – often dreamed of as a beautiful woman – and, all of these combined in unwrapping spectacles. My project seeks to re-orientate the research on human remains looking at one specific type of human remains, the Egyptian mummy. It demonstrates that Egyptian mummies were – and remain – multi-layered museum objects which remain to be explored in museum collections and displays.

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Understanding engagements with Egyptian mummies between 1754 and 1855

The reception of the Egyptian mummy was shaped and defined in the mid-18th to mid-19th century by groups of individuals in the medical and natural sciences who shared questions concerning the preservation of the body and the nature of race. The refocusing of Egyptian mummies within knowledge communities and disciplinary cultures which extended beyond collecting spaces in the 18th and 19th centuries reveals relationships between individuals, and groups of individuals, who interacted with, and shaped the reception of Egyptian mummies.

The engagement with Egyptian mummies as collected objects in exhibition spaces was challenged by investigations into the mummy as a medical specimen – a corpse – which fitted in developing epistemological discourses. In particular, the conceptual underpinning of racial differentiation exacerbated the physicality of the mummy as a body which supposedly contained scientific evidences of racial origins of humankind. If there was a clear desire to fit the Egyptian mummy within a racial category, there was however no attempt to fit the mummy into a material category: the mummy was simultaneously a museum object, a medical corpse, a subject of fantasy – often dreamed of as a beautiful woman – and, all of these combined in unwrapping spectacles. My project seeks to re-orientate the research on human remains looking at one specific type of human remains, the Egyptian mummy. It demonstrates that Egyptian mummies were – and remain – multi-layered museum objects which remain to be explored in museum collections and displays.

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Engraving from 1886 showcasing the impending unwrapping of an Egyptian mummy by French archaeologist Gaston Maspero – the unwrapping of Egyptian mummies in front of an audience became very popular in the mid-19th century, and demonstrates the transformation of engagements with mummies, from medical dissections to public performances.