A Mummified Child at the Kelsey

History, Display, and Reflection

By T. G. Wilfong

Visitors to the Kelsey Museum in recent months may have noticed a change in the Egyptian gallery: where there was once a window that looked into a display of a mummified child in a simulated burial context, there is now a panel with the following text (FIG. 1):

> The Kelsey Museum of Archaeology, as part of a crucial debate throughout the museum world, is reviewing its policies on the display of human remains in our galleries. In light of this review, we have decided to pause the display of a mummified child from the Ptolemaic period for the present time.

This brief text is followed by a QR code linking to a longer write-up about the history of the exhibit, the decision to pause it, and the ongoing conversations surrounding the display of human remains in museums—currently accessible on the Kelsey Museum website at **myumi.ch/y1dJy** and reproduced throughout this article.

Since the William E. Upjohn Exhibit Wing opened in 2009, the Kelsey Museum has displayed the mummified child from Egypt in a simulated burial context with period-appropriate grave goods. The purpose of the display has, from the beginning, been educational: to present an important and characteristic part of ancient Egyptian culture and religion—the preservation of the dead through the process known as mummification—while also addressing the lives and vulnerabilities of children in ancient Egypt. The display was developed with a view to a respectful and educational installation, in keeping with the museum's practices of treating human remains with dignity, the position

Figure 1. The paused display of the mummified child in the Kelsey Museum's Egyptian gallery.

of (modern) Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities and Museum Sector, and the ancient Egyptians' original intentions of a safe, quiet place for the preservation of their dead.

In recent years, however, it has become clear that there are increasing concerns about this display: concerns that visitors are not alerted of the display of human remains in advance; concerns about issues raised by the display about the deaths of children in ancient Egyptian (and modern) culture; and wider concerns about the display of human remains (albeit visible only as a wrapped body). Far from serving the museum's original educational purpose, this display has become an obstacle to many visitors' experience of the ancient Egyptian gallery in the museum.

As the curator who originally advocated for the display and came up with its basic concept, I was actively involved in the discussion that led to the pause and wrote—in collaboration with colleagues—the text that has taken its place. I'm aware that, while some visitors will be pleased that the mummified child is no longer on exhibit, some may be unhappy with the fact that they can no longer see this display, and others may feel that not enough has been done here altogether. As we consider the future of this display, I hope that some history behind it might be of use as we consider what to do next.

For many people, the concept of "mummies" serves as the basis for their interest in Egypt's history and culture. That was certainly the case for me: you could say that I am at the Kelsey Museum—as a curator, professor, and Egyptologist—because of a mummified person. Back in 1975, a 6th-grade class field trip to the Saint Louis Art Museum introduced me to Petemenekh, a mummified priest of the Ptolemaic period, displayed in his brightly decorated and inscribed coffin. Like many kids, I became obsessed with ancient Egypt, but I took my obsession to unusual lengths. I became a volunteer tour guide at the museum at the age of 12, undertaking an intensive self-taught study of ancient Egypt that ultimately led to more formal education.

Although I was certainly aware at age 12 that a dead human was underneath all the decorated bandages, that wasn't my primary interest, and I certainly had no awareness of any ethical issues with the display of Petemenekh. I first began to be aware that people had such concerns around 1990. My graduate program was housed in a museum that had several mummified humans on display, one of them unwrapped, about which people had started to voice concerns. I vividly remember being in the Egyptian gallery with my mentor, whose opinion I valued very much. He expressed his discomfort with the mummy display, and I unthinkingly dismissed his concerns. He turned to me and asked, "Would you feel like that if it was someone you knew lying there?"

This struck me. Although I had, of course, been aware that what we called "mummies" were dead human beings, embalmed and wrapped, I had never, until that moment, really thought of them as people. And after this conversation, it was something I could never forget—and something that changed my approach to thinking and learning about ancient Egypt.

When I first came to the Kelsey Museum in 1994, I was aware that there were two mummified children in the collection, both acquired legally by collectors in Egypt in the later 19th century and subsequently donated to the Kelsey Museum. One of these is badly damaged, and there was never any question of its display, but the other was in good condition—an intact, undecorated anonymous mummified child about 2,000 years old.

The display of the mummified child in the Kelsey Museum's previous galleries in Newberry Hall went through several different configurations, exacerbated by challenges such as temperature, humidity, and light control. At one point, it was displayed in a large case alongside some mummified animals to illustrate the various practices of mummification. This was a popular display, but it also garnered some complaints—that the child was being treated with disrespect by showing it with animals. This display also sometimes created a hectic and noisy atmosphere, partly because of the layout and acoustics of the room. When a tour group came in, especially a group of children, the feeling was not particularly respectful to the mummified child at the center, although I did occasionally observe momentary silences on such crowded occasions, as if the kids suddenly became aware that this was a dead child—that is, one of their own.

It came as something of a relief when ongoing humidity issues led to the removal of the display. Visitors still asked

"Mummy" vs. "Mummified Person"

In recent years, there has been a move away from the use of the term "mummy" to separate it from associations that are not respectful of ancient Egyptian tradition. Mummies are often depicted as objects of terror in popular culture, which is entirely opposed to the ancient Egyptians' intention. Increasingly, there is a trend to refer instead to "mummified people" or similar terminology to emphasize these individuals' human origin and humanity. In this article, I use "mummy" generically but show preference to "mummified person/child" when talking about the treated bodies of specific individuals.

about the mummified child, and there was occasional discussion about the possibility of a return.

In 2003, the mummified child became a centerpiece of my exhibition, *Archaeologies of Childhood*, but only in absentia (FIG. 2). A year or two earlier, an undergraduate engineering student, Grant Martin, had pursued a research project to have a CT scan made of the mummified child. This involved complex preparations by the Kelsey Museum conservators and an equally logistically complex trip to the U-M Hospital (FIG. 3). My colleague Janet Richards and I accompanied the mummified child on the journey and stayed with it through the entire procedure. I remember feeling very protective of the child, anxious about its safety, and relieved when we returned safely to the museum.

I had been looking at artifacts relating to children in the museum's collection with the idea of doing an exhibition, and this experience with the mummified child gave me further impetus. I wanted to include the child in the exhibition, but we were still in Newberry Hall, and conditions were not ideal. Our exhibit designer, Scott Meier, came up with an elegant solution: we used a life-size, high-resolution image of the mummified child, set in a coffin-like case under glass. The wider exhibition used artifacts to show what the life of an ancient child might have been like and featured materials from the CT-scan project.

Archaeologies of Childhood was one of the last in the Kelsey Museum's old Newberry Hall galleries, as plans were already beginning for the construction of state-of-the-art exhibition and storage facilities, thanks to a major donation from Kelsey supporters Ed and Mary Meader. The curators were thrilled—the new Upjohn Exhibit Wing would bring over five times the space for the permanent galleries and a greatly expanded temporary exhibition area.

In spite of the improved facilities, due to space constraints, there was initially no plan to display the mummified child in the new wing. But I noticed on the preliminary plan an unused space in the Egyptian gallery, located under the stairs leading to the second floor. It was walled off because it wasn't high enough to accommodate a regular case. However, it *could* accommodate something that seemed an ideal solution to the old problems of displaying the mummified child—a simulated tomb space visible through a window that would not only create a respectful, quiet area but also approximate the original conditions of burial (FIG. 4).

There is a basic fact about mummified ancient Egyptians in museum displays and storage: they have been taken from their intended burials—specifically designed to help them in the afterlife—and placed in alien, decontextualized settings that do not necessarily have the same provisions for the dead. Although Egyptian burial practices varied widely over time and across socioeconomic levels, they usually had common elements: protected space for the dead body to ensure the survival of its spiritual elements, a means to provide food, drink, magical texts, and other symbolic offerings for sustenance in the afterlife, and a point of contact between the living and the dead. The ancient Egyptians were social, gregarious people; aloneness was seen as a bad thing in Egyptian culture, so such contact was essential.

The ideas for the display of the mummified child in the Upjohn Exhibit Wing sought to address these issues, along with necessary security and conservation protections. Since we did not know the exact circumstances of the original burial, the display created a nonspecific environment that evoked a rock-cut tomb, cave, or pit—all possible burial venues for our mummified child. Alongside the body, period-appropriate offering vessels from the collection were chosen as grave goods. These empty bowls and cups could, in themselves, evoke offerings for the dead, and an ancient lamp was included to provide light.

Figure 2. The entrance to *Archaeologies of Childhood*.

Figure 3. Grant Martin (left) and Terry Wilfong arriving at the U-M Hospital with the mummified child in its specially designed, protected box.

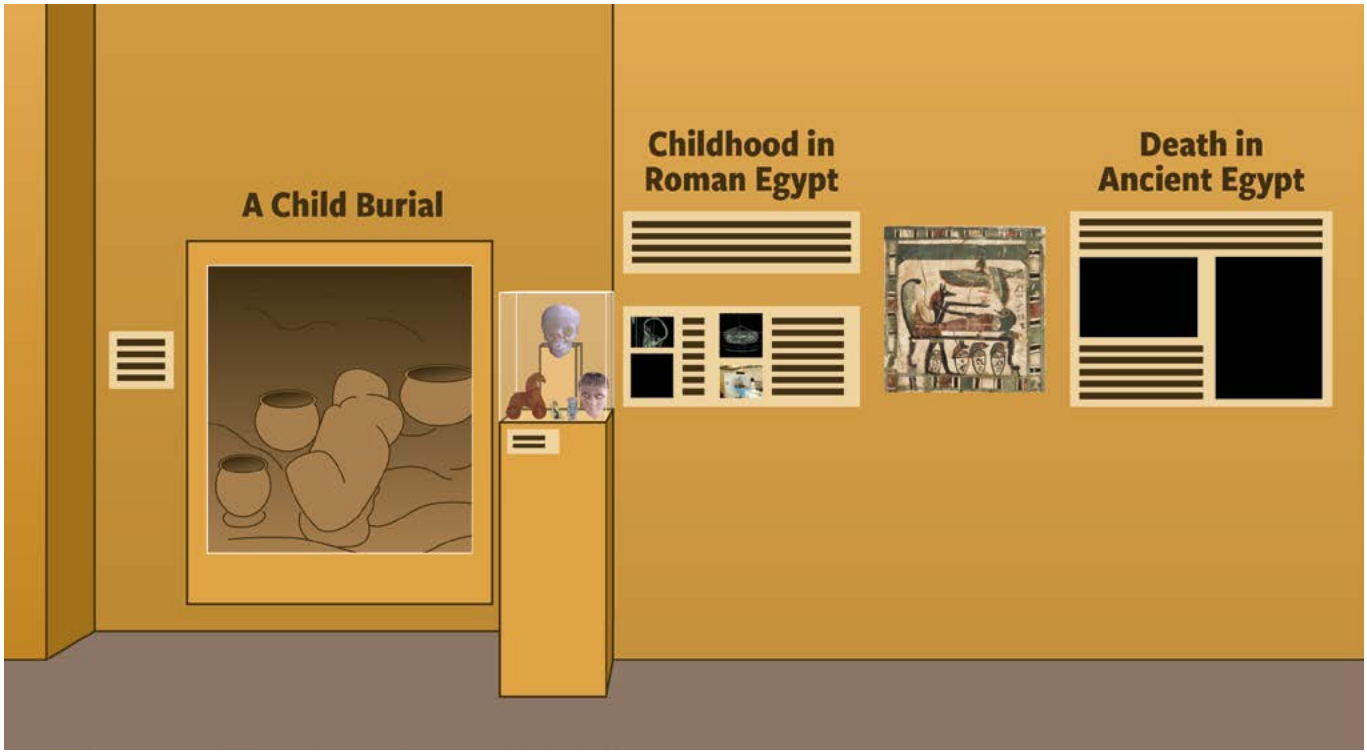

Figure 4. A graphic of the planned display of the mummified child in the Kelsey Museum's Upjohn Exhibit Wing based on the original mock-ups. Illustration: Bruce Worden.

To further address the issue of offerings, a neighboring case included funerary inscriptions that could help provide food and drink for the dead, as well as other items found in a burial intended to assist the deceased. In Egyptian tradition, even the nearby presence of such items could be useful to the dead, while museum visitors silently reading the provided translations of funerary inscriptions could provide further support.

Directly outside the environment, I included a case of artifacts specifically related to children—toys, amulets, and representations of children—that could potentially provide further protection and even entertainment for a dead child. Finally, the plexiglass window protecting the burial environment provided a point of contact between the living and the dead that might have appealed to the socially minded ancient Egyptians. The Egyptians had no taboos against living people seeing the mummified dead—indeed, mummies were designed for display in the context of funeral activities—and it is possible that they would have used a similar strategy to allow for viewing if they had access to the same secure, clear materials. The relatively low light required for conservation and the positioning of the case in the wider gallery also contributed to a quieter and more respectful space than in the older displays in Newberry Hall.

When the galleries of the Upjohn Exhibit Wing opened in 2009, the display of the mummified child was received with enthusiasm but little comment, as part of the larger whole of the open-plan first-floor gallery. However, in recent years, this situation has changed considerably, with the concerns I mentioned previously interfering with many visitors' experience of the museum.

As the Kelsey Museum pauses the display of the mummified child and continues its period of reflection, we will discuss whether this installation can be modified to address the concerns visitors have expressed while still allowing them to experience this simulated ancient Egyptian burial context with its occupant, accompanied by provisions for the afterlife, or whether the display must ultimately be discontinued. We plan to make these decisions not only through internal discussion and consultation but also through discussion with our constituents, our communities, and our public. In doing so, we hope to make the process and ultimate decisions as transparent as possible. This will allow us all to reflect on the presence of the mummified child in Ann Arbor and the complex journey that came before. All the while, we must take into account the ancient Egyptians' original intentions behind the practice of mummification and how we can best respect and honor those traditions.

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