



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
SYDNEY

CHAU CHAK WING  
MUSEUM

# Guidelines

For The Care of Ancient Egyptian Mummified  
Human Remains

Version 1

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# Contents

1.0 About the collection.....	2
2.0 Historical approaches to their display.....	2
3.0 Community consultation and holistic research.....	3
4.0 Exhibition and display .....	4
4.1 Current philosophies .....	4
5.0 Collections care: storage, conservation and collections management.....	6
6.0 Access.....	6
6.1 Research access.....	6
6.2 Past research .....	6
6.3 Education and learning .....	7
6.3.1 K-12 .....	7
6.3.2 Tertiary.....	7
6.3.3 Public programs.....	7
7.0 Repatriation claims .....	7
Contact.....	8

# 1.0 About the collection

The earliest human remains to enter CCWM's collection come from Egypt. Acquired by Sir Charles Nicholson in 1856-1857, and donated by him to the Museum in 1860, these remains were collected as representative examples of Egyptian religious and funerary beliefs, mummification practices, and the afterlife, and include –

- The body of an unidentified woman suggested to date to the New Kingdom period (c. 1200 BC) based on radiocarbon dating of the linen wrappings housed in the Third Intermediate Period (c. 1000 BC) coffin of Meruah;
- The body of Mer-Neith-it-es from the Late Period (c. 650 BC), disturbed and disarticulated in her coffin;
- The body of a woman from the Roman period (c. 30 BC – 395 AD) found interred – erroneously – in the late Third Intermediate Period (c. 700 BC) coffin of Padiashakhet; and
- The body of a young boy named Horus (c. 100 AD), also from the Roman Period

The Museum also holds body parts, including a skull, embalmed head, hands and feet, a pair of infant's legs, bone fragments, teeth and locks of hair. These have come from various sources, including Sir Charles Nicholson, descendants of Grafton Eliot-Smith, an Australian physician working in Cairo who was responsible for the first X-rays on the royal mummies in the Cairo Museum and other private collectors and donors, including soldiers from the First and Second World Wars.

# 2.0 Historical approaches to their display

In November 2020, as part of the new Chau Chak Wing Museum, a new gallery dedicated to the display and interpretation of four ancient Egyptian individuals opened titled 'The Mummy Room'. This gallery displays the human remains of three of these individuals – the body of a woman inside the coffin of Meruah, the disturbed and disarticulated remains of Mer-Neith-it-es in her coffin and the wrapped body of the young boy Horus, along with the visualisations from their CT scans. Another showcase in the same gallery housed excavated remains and mummified body parts to tell two main stories: (1) that of the excavation and examination of Mer-Neith-it-es' jumbled human remains and examples of what was found inside her coffin; and (2) early attitudes (from the 16<sup>th</sup> century) towards ancient Egyptian mummified human remains and collecting practices (particularly during the Victorian era). The research undertaken for this gallery, and curatorial rationale are published in J. Fraser, C. Lord and J. Magnussen (eds), *Speak My Name: Investigating Egyptian mummies* (2023). A second long-term gallery, 'Pharaonic Obsessions: ancient Egypt, an Australian story', showcased two hands and a foot in an Arnott's biscuit tin as examples of human remains collected by Australians visiting Egypt during the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In April 2024, drawing on research findings (see 3.0 below), CCWM took the decision to remove all disarticulated mummified human remains from display. Remaining on display are the complete wrapped mummified remains of the bodies of Meruah and Horus, and their 3D visualisations generated from CT scan data, as well as the video reel of the CT scan data of Mer-Neith-it-es, and the biscuit tin container labelled 'mummified foot'.

Prior to the new Museum, when the Nicholson Collection was housed in its own dedicated Museum in the University's Quadrangle, there was a long history of displaying ancient Egyptian mummified human remains. Archival photographs, from as early as the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, show a mummified head in a bell jar and the wrapped human remains of Horus on display interspersed with artefacts from other parts of the ancient world. After the 1966 renovation and re-opening of the Nicholson Museum, under the curatorship of Professor Alexander Cambitoglou, the disarticulated human remains were not on public display. A written note on receipt of an Egyptian mummified hand in a tin by Professor Cambitoglou in 1968 articulates this position: 'Though we do not display this kind of material in the Museum, it will be useful for us for study purposes and will be kept safely in our store rooms'. The disarticulated remains were placed back on public display again in the early 1990s, and have featured in several exhibitions since.

## 3.0 Community consultation and holistic research

Since 2022, CCWM has undertaken rigorous research into the care, display and interpretation of its ancient Egyptian mummified human remains with descent Egyptian communities and CCWM visitors to help inform future museum practices in the context of current academic debate and what museums are doing elsewhere.

This includes:

- A survey completed by 200 visitors (including one control response) to the Museum between July-November 2022;
- Focus groups and surveys with the Egyptian diaspora in Australia; and
- A co-written discussion piece 'Remains of Ancient Egyptian People in Museums: Is There Such a Thing as Ethical Display?' for the online media platform 'Egyptian Streets'.

The above findings are published in M. Pitkin, J. Carruthers, A. Doubleday, R. Cecilia, and R. K. Power, 'Innovative approaches to caring for ancient Egyptian mummified human remains at the Chau Chak Wing Museum' in C. Richards and E. Minchin (eds), *Mediterranean Collections in Australia and Aotearoa: Perspectives from Afar*, (Routledge, May 2025), pp. 300-316.

This ongoing research informs the basis of these guidelines, and will continue to be shaped as more data is collected. From 4<sup>th</sup> April 2024, an in-gallery survey about the display of ancient Egyptian mummified human remains, including response to CCWM's removal of mummified body parts, was launched as a further measure of public opinion.

CCWM also employs an Egyptian staff member who provides cultural guidance and curatorial and conservation assistance to the Egyptian antiquities collection.

## 4.0 Exhibition and display

The findings from CCWM's survey conducted with 200 visitors between July–November 2022, shows that 79% (n=158/200) agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'Museums should be allowed to display human remains'. This finding is not surprising and is consistent with similar published visitor studies, including data from the 'Egyptian Mummies: Exploring Ancient Lives' exhibition (2016-2017), Jasmine Day's study (1995-1996), and data published in the UK's Department of Culture, Media and Sports guidelines to the display of human remains (2003).

However, it is recognised that there is an inherent bias in these findings, particularly in terms of the demographic of visitors who participated in the surveys (predominantly young, white, educated, females), and the societal expectations that museums have been responsible for creating even though museums are often blind to it (A. Stevenson, 'Human remains and communities of implication', unpublished manuscript, 2023). Descent communities are often absent from these surveys (H. Abd el-Gawad and A. Stevenson, 'Egyptian Mummified Remains' in T. Biers and K. Stringer Clary, *The Routledge Handbook of Museums, Heritage and Death*, London, 2023), as well as First Nations representatives whose Country these collections are held on.

CCWM takes a case-by-case approach to the decision to display, or not, human remains in its care informed by holistic methodologies applied one culture at a time. We are mindful of the biases of voices currently dominating the available audience surveys on this topic and are active in adapting survey methods to target both broader and more specific community groups. This is a long-term commitment of CCWM. It requires time and careful consideration and consultation with all relevant communities and is reviewed by CCWM's Director.

Central to this work is CCWM's commitment to educating and informing our audiences in open and honest ways by including sufficient supplementary information, as well as clear historical context.

### 4.1 Current philosophies

These philosophies will be reviewed by CCWM's Director on a quarterly basis in response to new audience feedback and CCWM's current strategic plan.

- *We will prepare our visitors as best as possible for any encounters with human remains*

Before visiting CCWM, detailed information is available relating to the visitor experience and the possibility of encountering human remains in the galleries. These web pages include CCWM's cultural safety notice advising visitors of the display of ancient Egyptian mummified human remains in three different locations, indicated on a PDF map of the Museum.

At the Museum, our front of house staff are able to notify visitors of the presence of human remains, provide them with a physical map of the galleries, and can assist visitors to navigate the Museum without viewing these items.

'The Mummy Room', which contains the covered human remains of Meruah and Horus, their associated CT scans, and the CT scans of the disarticulated human remains of Mer-Neith-it-es, are displayed in a room that requires visitors to pass

through two entrance ways prior to viewing this material. The human remains are not in direct sight lines until you enter the room. To prepare visitors that they are entering a space with this material, a cultural safety notice is located immediately outside the entry to the exhibition space, which reads:

‘The Egyptian galleries contain the mummified remains of people who lived and died in Egypt over 2000 years ago. It also features digital images of beneath their linen bandages. Please do not enter this space if you feel uncomfortable viewing human remains or images of human remains. / In keeping with Gadigal protocols, these peoples’ remains have been given a smoking ceremony to cleanse and protect them and those who visit’.

The content and placement of this notice is currently under review.

- *We will not display exposed human remains*

Only fully wrapped/covered ancient Egyptian mummified human remains will be considered for display.

- *We will not display mummified body parts*

In our research to date, particularly among the Egyptian diaspora in Australia, many found the display of body parts to be offensive and unnecessary (see M. Pitkin, J. Carruthers, A. Doubleday, R. Cecilia, and R. K. Power, ‘Innovative approaches to caring for ancient Egyptian mummified human remains at the Chau Chak Wing Museum’ in C. Richards and E. Minchin (eds), *Mediterranean Collections in Australia and Aotearoa: Perspectives from Afar* (Routledge, May 2025), pp. 300–316. It was also not common mortuary practice in ancient Egypt to mummify specific body parts, rather it was the complete body which needed to be preserved for eternity.

All body parts in CCWM’s collection are currently being cared for in CCWM’s closely monitored storage facility and we are engaging in conversations locally and globally, including with relevant Egyptian authorities around enacting better practices in the management and potential repatriation of these remains.

- *We will use language which reflects that these human remains, no matter how many thousands of years old, are the bodies of once living people*

CCWM is mindful of recent shifts in the language used to describe the bodies of once living people from ancient Egypt. We are transitioning from the outright use of the word ‘mummy’ towards using ‘ancient Egyptian mummified human remains’, and ‘Egyptian mummified remains’ thereafter, wherever possible, on the basis that –

- This is a palpable reminder that we are in the presence of once living people(s);
- The extended wording removes popular culture associations;
- The extended wording is disruptive and creates a moment of reflection;
- ‘Mummy’ or ‘mummies’ is a colonial term, coming from the Arabic ‘mummiya’ which means ‘bitumen’ and was used by travellers and collectors from as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> Century based on the blackened, resinous appearance of mummified remains;
- There was no word used to describe the physical appearance of the mummified body in ancient Egypt.

We will also use the names of ancient Egyptian individuals wherever they are known. We will not apply ‘nicknames’ to the collection or support the use of shortened colloquial names.

All items are given a museum inventory number for their ongoing management. These numbers are used alongside the names of individuals where known to locate and identify individual items as part of our collection management processes.

- *We will equip our visitors with an understanding of the complexities museum professionals are faced with when caring for human remains*

The care and display of human remains elicits a diversity of views and emotions, and it is recognised that there will never be a consensus regarding museum decisions on these matters. Over 2024-2025, CCWM will be gradually re-framing the narrative presented in 'The Mummy Room' with the aim of empowering our visitors with an understanding of the complexities of the debate, both past and present. This will include perspectives from Egyptian descent communities; ancient Egyptian belief systems and practices, which were often incompatible; colonial collecting practices; the antiquities trade; historical displays and public expectations constructed by museums and popular culture; science and research.

## 5.0 Collections care: storage, conservation and collections management

All CCWM collections are cared to museum best practice standards. See [Collection Guideline, 2023](#). The CCWM's Collection Management staff are actively engaged with descent communities to improve culturally responsive access, handling and storage practices.

## 6.0 Access

### 6.1 Research access

Research of, and access to, ancient Egyptian mummified human remains will be considered on a case-by-case basis and follows CCWM's standard 'Research Request' form and internal approval processes. An outline of past research (invasive and non-invasive) conducted on the Egyptian mummified remains is listed in 6.2.

### 6.2 Past research

The ancient Egyptian mummified human remains have been the most studied human remains in the Museum's care to date, and includes the following:

- Meruah: XRF on carapace (2018), CT scanning (2017), X-ray (2006), Radiocarbon dating (2006), DNA testing (2006), linen bandages analysis by ANSTO (2006), X-ray (1999), sampling of bone fragment (1999), CT scanning (1998), X-ray (1998), sampling of skull matter (1998).
- Roman period body inside the coffin of Padiashakhet: CT scanning (2017), Radiocarbon dating (2006), linen bandages analysis by ANSTO (2006), CT

- scanning (1999), sampling of toe bones (1999), CT scanning (1998), X-ray (1998), endoscopic analysis (1998)
- Mer-Neith-it-es: Proteomic analysis (2019), Radiocarbon dating of linen bandages (2019), CT scanning (2017), Resin sampling by ANSTO (2006).
- Horus: CT scanning (2017), CT scanning (2009), X-ray (2009), X-ray (1998), CT scanning (1998), Endoscopic analysis (1998),
- Embalmed head: CT scanning (2017), Radiocarbon dating (2007), Radiocarbon dating (2006), hair analysis (1991)
- Mummified hands: X-ray (1977)

## 6.3 Education and learning

### 6.3.1 K-12

CCWM education officers, volunteers and guides are trained by the Head of Public Engagement in close consultation with curators around the language, sensitivities and complexities of communicating ancient Egyptian mummified human remains to different age groups. Current philosophies, currently under review, and which is adapted in its level of sophistication to different age groups, include –

- Where possible, sitting groups in the space and using lowered voices;
- Using ‘mummified human remains’ as opposed to ‘mummies’ and providing context and rationale to this reasoning. Use of individual ancient names, where known, is also encouraged but framed within the problematic context of dealing with legacy material;
- Situating the discussion within different historical and scientific contexts, ancient and modern, and providing different lenses through which behaviours towards the treatment and display of ancient Egyptian mummified human remains have been variously justified;
- Contextualising the care of ancient Egyptian mummified human remains on Country, and explaining the Welcome to Country and smoking ceremony process previously undertaken;
- Discussing nuances, such as restitution, ownership and consent and how it applies uniquely to ancient Egyptian mummified human remains, in contrast to other human and material remains from other cultures.

### 6.3.2 Tertiary

CCWM’s academic engagement and OBL programme for tertiary students and staff engage with ancient Egyptian mummified human remains in CCWM learning spaces, on a case-by-case basis after review by relevant curators in consultation with CCWM’s Human Remains Advisory Group. This includes the discussion of mummification methods, archaeological and scientific analysis of human remains and medical imaging technology, and the discussion of the ethics of display.

### 6.3.3 Public programs

Talks, lectures, panel discussions, seminars and other public programs periodically deal with the topic of ancient Egyptian mummified human remains, and are reviewed by CCWM’s Human Remains Advisory Group.

## 7.0 Repatriation claims

CCWM openly and seriously considers requests for the return of ancient Egyptian mummified human remains in its care. With regard to consultation, CCWM will liaise with the Consul General for the Arab Republic of Egypt in Sydney and the Embassy



in Canberra who will facilitate official discussions with the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities in Egypt.

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