The Egyptian mummy poses something of a conundrum to researchers in museum studies. The mummy is not unfamiliar, it can be found in museums around the world (including here, in Leicester) and has been the subject of numerous television documentaries and publications. However, an in-depth cultural study of the Egyptian mummy is still missing. At a time when museums are reassessing the ethical implications of their human remains collections, and removing mummies from display, it is evident that now is the moment to form an understanding of what – or who – the Egyptian mummy in our museum collections is. How did it come to be a part of our collections? Who collected, studied, and dissected Egyptian mummies, for which purpose, and with what implications?

This thesis frames the cultures of participation with Egyptian mummies in London and Paris, between 1753 and 1855, which shaped the Egyptian mummy as a museum specimen. Drawing upon a wide range of written sources – mostly, published accounts – this study considers the contexts and frames of understanding within which the Egyptian mummy was located.

From the creation of the British Museum in 1753, to the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt of 1798-1801, and the Great Exhibitions of the mid-nineteenth century on, the Egyptian mummy has been collected and displayed in Paris and London in increasing numbers, in and out the museum. However, individual engagements with Egyptian mummies were not limited to collecting, and the Egyptian mummy became embedded in practices which fundamentally transformed its reception. In particular, this research looks at medical and racially-motivated dissections of Egyptian mummies, reappraises the unrolling of mummies (the public dissections of specimens) and reframes early-nineteenth century literature on the mummy, by placing these engagements – and encounters – in their historical contexts.

This research produces a cultural history of the Egyptian mummy: it treats mummies as cultural objects, framed by the research communities which formed around them. In addition, this thesis contributes a new history of the Egyptian mummy, by looking at a timeframe and a scope which have been largely overlooked in scholarship.

A cultural history of the Egyptian mummy in context is an ethical lens to look at the mummy as a complex, multi-faceted object which was fundamentally transformed between 1753 and 1855, and offers a new way to look at the Egyptian mummy as a museum specimen.

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