

# A DIGITAL PRESENCE IN THE TIME OF COVID-19: REFLECTIONS ON PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE STRATEGIES USING DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES AT SWANSEA UNIVERSITY'S EGYPT CENTRE

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## Introduction

Located on the Singleton Campus of Swansea University, the Egypt Centre houses nearly 6,000 artefacts from the ancient world and is internationally recognised for innovation in inclusivity and education.<sup>1</sup> It plays an integral role in teaching, research and widening participation across Swansea University.<sup>2</sup> The museum attracts approximately 20,000 visitors each year and welcomes an average of four Key Stage 2–3 schools (ages 7–14) a week. March 2020–September 2021 was unprecedented for the Egypt Centre as a result of the global pandemic. The museum was forced to close, and this presented challenges not only for its curators and volunteers who manage its collections, but also to community stakeholders, schools, students and researchers.

The creation and maintenance of digital resources became even more of a priority to ensure quality and equality of access for the specialist and non-specialist local and global audiences who regularly engage with the museum. At the start of the pandemic, The Egypt Centre quickly transitioned to digital engagement whereas many of the larger museums were slow to follow. Perhaps this was a matter of necessity: unlike larger national institutions who received financial aid from their governments<sup>3</sup> the Egypt Centre desperately needed to generate income to offset the losses of the museum's closure.

Social media – including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok – played an important role in allowing museums to engage with their audiences during the pandemic.<sup>4</sup> The #MuseumsUnlocked hashtag trended on Twitter for several months during 2020 as museums from throughout the UK and further afield shared their content. Likewise, the #MuseumsFromHome hashtag encouraged Twitter users to engage with collections from their homes.<sup>5</sup> The Getty Museum was able to stay relevant during the early months of the pandemic by encouraging its online followers to recreate some of its famous artworks using items from their own homes.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For the history of the Egypt Centre, see Gill 2005; Graves-Brown 2004.

<sup>2</sup> Goodridge and Howells 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Kendall Adams 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Charr 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Tully 2020, 235.

<sup>6</sup> Porterfield 2020.

This article reflects upon the Egypt Centre's online activities over these 18 months, notably the swift transition from predominantly face-to-face interaction with visitors to online learning and engagement. Particular focus is paid to digital innovations to maintain engagement with the museum's audiences and to open the collection to new ones. The development and launch of the new online catalogue are key to this. Finally, the article considers the role of students as long-standing co-creators of resources, something that was limited due to restrictions imposed by the pandemic. The role and importance of students and object-centred learning in information sharing and the maintenance of online resources should not be underestimated.

### Part one: Surviving and thriving: Adapting to the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic

One of the most well-known texts from ancient Egypt is the *Admonitions of Ipuwer*, which relates to the events of the First Intermediate Period (circa 2181–2055 BCE).<sup>7</sup> In the text, Ipuwer complains that the world has been turned upside-down by political chaos, possibly as a result of several years of the Nile failing to flood.<sup>8</sup> While perhaps not quite on the same level, the events of the past 18 months make this description somewhat relatable. As was the case for the entire heritage sector, the Egypt Centre has faced a great many challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic, with the museum closed to the public from March 2020 onwards. The main sources of income (shop sales, school visits, and events) were significantly impacted during this time. These challenges, however, proved the impetus for the museum to diversify its methods of engagement, creating a broad range of digital resources, and dramatically increasing its online presence. This section will outline some of the activities that the Egypt Centre enacted during this time, from online courses to virtual tours, all of which helped the museum to survive and to thrive.

'Wonderful Things' Conference Moves Online

The proactive approach to adversity by the Egypt Centre led to a number of initiatives, catered to its diverse and ever-expanding audience. The museum had planned to host its second annual *Wonderful Things* conference at the end of May 2020. Rather than cancelling the event, it was decided to move it to a virtual format using Zoom. This event proved to be tremendously successful with 17 lectures – all of which revolved around the Egypt Centre collection – offered for free. The lectures highlighted the diversity of the collection, with many unique objects showcased. In total, 2,691 people attended the live sessions. All but one of the lectures were recorded and made available via the Egypt Centre's YouTube channel,<sup>9</sup> drawing an additional audience of 7,990 people. The reach of this virtual event was far greater than our physical conferences, which are normally limited to 60 people by the capacity of the venue. Virtual attendance at the conference also increased accessibility, with attendees from six continents making this a truly international event. This format also allowed those hindered

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<sup>7</sup> Enmarch 2005; 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Hassan 2007.

<sup>9</sup> <<https://www.youtube.com/user/EgyptCentreSwansea>> (accessed 17 October 2021).

by financial or physical limitations to attend. In addition, the availability of the lectures on YouTube ensured accessibility for those unable to attend because of time zone differences.

#### Online Courses

As the pandemic hit, I was in the middle of teaching a handling course on the Amarna Period, focusing on the collection at the museum. This course had to be suspended, and ultimately cancelled, as the lockdown extended from weeks into months. However, following the success of the virtual *Wonderful Things* conference, the decision was made to offer similar online courses via Zoom. These courses have proven very successful, helping to generate much needed income for the museum. The nine courses offered so far have attracted a combined audience of 1,189 people.

The Egypt Centre has been a strong proponent of object-centred learning, but this ‘hands on’ approach is more difficult to transfer to an online format.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, wherever possible, objects from the museum are used as examples of Egyptian material culture. Each course has a moderator, which allows for questions to be asked, and participants are encouraged to ask questions during the sessions using either their microphones or the chat function. This adds a level of interactivity rather than the audience just listening passively to a lecture. During these courses, blog posts are written by participants, thus offering quite different perspectives on the topics, and again encouraging them to engage and share their experiences of the material.<sup>11</sup> We have received copious positive feedback since the creation of these virtual courses. One participant wrote on Twitter that ‘one of the best things to come out of lockdown was learning more about the Egypt Centre’, and another that the courses have been ‘a silver lining of the dreadful pandemic year’!

#### Virtual Tours

In December 2020 the Egypt Centre delivered its first ever live virtual tour of the museum and storeroom. The event attracted over 300 registered guests who were treated to a three-hour tour of the collection. Using a combination of a static laptop and a mobile device – again with assistance from a virtual moderator – it was possible to lead the audience virtually through the galleries. Additionally, several highlights were specifically chosen for a live handling session, with carefully arranged lighting making it possible to see the objects in much greater detail than we had anticipated.

#### Egypt and its Neighbours

The Egypt Centre has a collection of approximately 200 ‘Classical’ objects, which had been largely overlooked until recently. The growing interest in these objects by students and researchers at Swansea University led to discussion as to whether the museum should have

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<sup>10</sup> For the benefits of object-based learning, see Chatterjee 2020; Durbin, Morris and Wilkinson 1990; Emeafor and Diminyi 2018; Lane and Wallace 2007; Latham 2009; Paine 2013; Paris 2002; Parton, Newton and Newton 2017; Pye 2007; Shuh 1999; Steier 2014; Wiley 2000.

<sup>11</sup> <<https://egyptcentrecollectionblog.blogspot.com/>> (accessed 17 October 2021).

a showcase dedicated to the non-Egyptian material. Current world events, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, provided the impetus to make this happen. Funding received from the Institute of Classical Studies (ICS) allowed for the creation of a new display under the theme *Egypt and its Neighbours*.<sup>12</sup> Preliminary input into this display had been sought from groups and individuals, such as the BME (Black and Minority Ethnic) Invest Project Co-ordinator, Deborah Cooze, in line with one of the museum's core aims of widening participation in inclusivity. Additionally, this display will allow the Egypt Centre to develop its educational programme, both in person and remotely, to include topics such as identity, diversity, racism, and xenophobia in the ancient world. As such, this design for creative lives will open up discussion about current issues in today's world.<sup>13</sup>

### Moving Forward

As we start to move out of the COVID-19 lockdown, the Egypt Centre staff are proud of all they have achieved over the past 18 months. Despite the challenges, the museum has been able to survive and thrive. We have risen to the challenges of a shift to online learning and engagement, despite limited resources and budgets. In terms of dedicated Egyptology museums and courses, the museum is emerging as a leader in providing online material with its courses, lectures and other events. We have also been able to reach a new and international audience, with a poll revealing that 44% of attendees on the virtual tour were unaware of the Egypt Centre pre-COVID (fig. 1). Just as in the

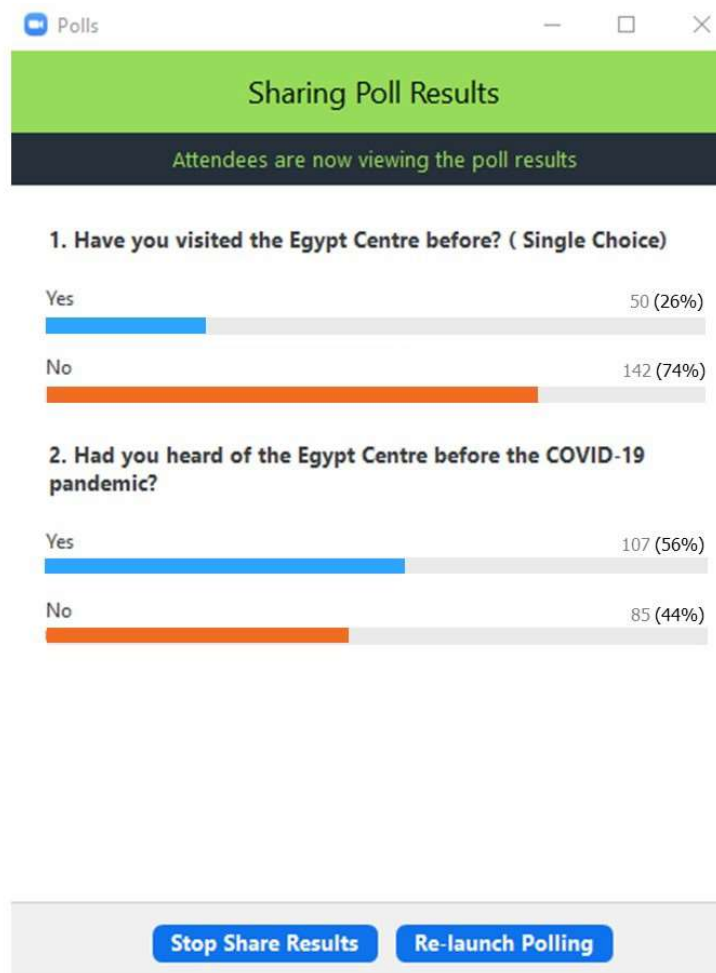


Figure 1: Results of the Egypt Centre's Christmas poll.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the project, see <<https://projects.swan.ac.uk/ancient-world/?p=1281>> (accessed 18 October 2021).

<sup>13</sup> For designing for creative lives, see MacLeod 2017; 2018; 2020. This practice is audience-centred: both inclusive of difference of diverse communities and respectful of different lives, cultures, and concerns.

*Admonitions of Ipuwer*, the current world upturned will eventually pass and normality will resume. Yet activities at the Egypt Centre will not quite return to pre-COVID ways. The increase in the Egypt Centre's online presence has proven so beneficial to both the museum and our new global audience that post-COVID our intention is to deliver in-person courses and events in parallel with a virtual format.

## Part two: The Egypt Centre online collection

The recent acceleration of information and communication technology combined with the potential of the internet is changing the requirements and expectations of an increasingly diverse public with regards to their relationship with museum collections, and the impact a museum makes.<sup>14</sup> The traditional context of museum databases serve a documentary function for physical material that exists within the galleries and storerooms.<sup>15</sup> It is now apparent that an emphasis on communication between museum, researcher and the general public is also fundamental.<sup>16</sup> As discussed throughout this section, the importance of encouraging both specialist and non-specialist audiences to get 'hands on' with ancient objects has always been a priority of the Egypt Centre. *The Egypt Centre Online Collection* was created as a direct response to my own experiences accessing this material and recognising the need to engage in as 'hands on' a way as possible, even in this virtual context.<sup>17</sup>

The entire collection of nearly 6,000 objects has been available as a searchable online catalogue since 2005 via the Egypt Centre website, but the interface was in need of modernisation, and a focus upon an easier and more engaging user experience was apparent. As an Egypt Centre volunteer and student at Swansea University since 2003, I have been fortunate to have experience working with the physical collection, the online catalogue and the museum's internal collections management software (MODES).<sup>18</sup>

As a user I had many frustrations with accessing the data available about the collection during my research; images were of poor resolution and the information was sparse within the online catalogue. Greater detail was available via the MODES database, but this could only be accessed within the museum on specific computers. This was limited by opening hours and availability. Additionally, discrepancies resulting from the cacophony of varying terminology used over the past twenty years in describing objects made searches for specific material culture particularly taxing. For example, I completed my Master's dissertation on a group of wooden funerary figures held within the Egypt Centre. Inconsistencies in results occurred as these objects can be referred to as 'models', 'figures', 'figurines', 'statues', and 'statuettes'. Each of these searches in both the online catalogue and the in-house database brought about

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<sup>14</sup> Jackson 2010, 153; van den Akker and Legêne 2017, 7.

<sup>15</sup> Beaulieu and de Rijcke 2017, 76.

<sup>16</sup> Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 151.

<sup>17</sup> <<https://egyptcentre.abasetcollections.com/>> (accessed 18 October 2021).

<sup>18</sup> Modes was developed by the Museum Documentation Association (MDA), which released the first version in 1987. <<https://www.modes.org.uk/>> (accessed 12 January 2021).

a varying number of objects without consistency, and it was impossible to ensure I had accessed every object until physically checking the galleries and stores.

Discussions began with museum staff in late 2018 on ways in which we could create a better experience for accessing information about the collection, and work commenced on creating a new bespoke online catalogue in 2019. It is well recognised that any virtual material needs to include the capability for the storage and retrieval of information, as well as the possibility of interaction with the material. Additionally, fields for description, date and provenance were also necessary at the very least. The Egypt Centre's collection required some more bespoke data fields.<sup>19</sup> The collection largely originates from collectors of the last century, and so required a way to incorporate data relating an object's more recent history within the new online catalogue.

Three main goals were identified for the online catalogue at its inception:

- Using look-up list fields for data whenever possible to ensure consistency;
- Using hierarchical drop-down categories to allow the user to 'drill down' into more specific data;
- Ensuring the user experience was as easy and accessible as possible for a diverse range of audiences.

The initial aim was to launch *The Egypt Centre Online Collection* in 2021. However, given the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, it was decided to make the collection available in October 2020. This is similar to other museums who brought forward their release date, including the major collections of the British Museum,<sup>20</sup> the Ashmolean<sup>21</sup> and the Victoria and Albert Museum,<sup>22</sup> as well as less known collections such as West Berkshire Museum<sup>23</sup> or the Whipple Museum of the History of Science.<sup>24</sup> Thus, even in its unfinished form, users could access the collection remotely while physical access remained impossible. As the information available is continuously updated, changes to the data now appear in real time. This means immediate access to the latest data for curators, researchers, students and the public alike from all over the world.<sup>25</sup>

The soft launch was announced as part of the British Egyptological Congress (BEC), which also moved online as a result of the pandemic. The impact of this launch was immediate. Along with positive feedback from users, within 24 hours of launch the Egypt Centre received enquiries from a leading expert regarding a Red Lustrous Wheel-Made (RLWM) spindle bottle

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<sup>19</sup> Davis 1994, 68; Galani and Chalmers 2010, 160.

<sup>20</sup> Noah 2020.

<sup>21</sup> <https://collections.ashmolean.org/collection/about-the-online-collection> (accessed 27 February 2022).

<sup>22</sup> McGivern 2021.

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.westberks.gov.uk/article/38885/Discover-the-Museum-Collection-Online> (accessed 27 February 2022).

<sup>24</sup> <https://www.whipplemuseum.cam.ac.uk/news/launch-online-collections-portal> (accessed 27 February 2022).

<sup>25</sup> Jackson 2010, 154.



(W2044C), which he had only been able to view as a result of it being easily accessible online (fig. 2).<sup>26</sup>



Figure 2: Impact of the online collection highlighted on social media.

### The Key Features of the Online Collection

*The Egypt Centre Online Collection* has been deliberately designed as mobile-first and is easily compatible with social media. Since launching, sharing hyperlinks to the *Online Collection* has proven very useful for engaging with the public via Facebook and Twitter as links to specific objects have launched discussions about an artefact of unknown origins, or in highlighting a new discovery within the collection. This ‘social experience’ of collaboration between the

<sup>26</sup> <<https://egyptcentre.abasetcollections.com/Objects/Details/2263>> (accessed 24 January 2021).

audience and museum proves invaluable as a way of engaging the public with the collection, allowing them to be a part of new discoveries.<sup>27</sup>

The bespoke nature of the software is a direct reflection of this unique collection, and close collaboration with the Collections Access Manager throughout development has meant that the end result is fit for purpose and intuitive for staff and visitors alike. Fields have been included for auction and lot information where applicable along with excavation details, deities, rulers and private individuals. All of these fields can be searched using drop-down lists. Specific fields relating to numismatics and inscriptional data also allow for more information than ever to be publicly available, with varying levels of access to users depending on the confidentiality of the material. For example, images of human remains are not included, but available on request.

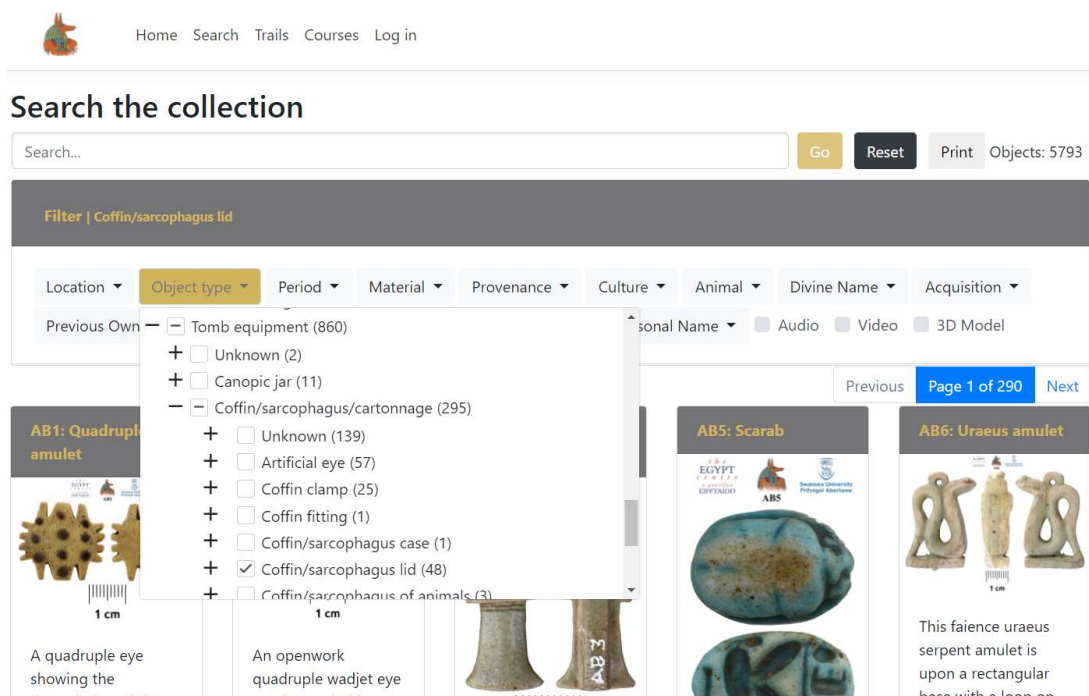


Figure 3: An example of using the dropdown fields in the Egypt Centre Online Collection.

The look-up list fields for data were determined using the *Multilingual Egyptological Thesaurus* as a starting point for the correct classifications and terminology to adopt, in conjunction with lengthy discussions with museum staff.<sup>28</sup> This means that the issue of spelling errors or inconsistent terminology no longer provides conflicting search results as wherever possible an option is chosen from a drop-down category rather than manually

<sup>27</sup> Galani and Chalmers 2010, 162–164; Mason, Robinson and Coffield 2018, 122.

<sup>28</sup> Van der Plas, 1996.



typing in a term (fig. 3). This greatly reduces the issue of differences in vocabulary dependent upon both the individual entering the data and the individual undertaking the search.

Each object entry can also include multimedia, such as numerous images from multiple angles, the inclusion of an audio description, or a video relating specifically to the object, all of which increase the accessibility of the object. The capability is also in place to allow the inclusion of 3D models of objects in the future.

Viewing objects in person can never be replaced with a virtual experience. In such unprecedented times as a global pandemic, it is necessary to provide an online supplement to the collection in order for research to continue whilst the museum cannot be visited in person. Even without such a pressing need for a virtual substitute, a digital presence and accessibility of information is essential to supplement the overall public offering. This is particularly the case for a fairly small museum such as the Egypt Centre, which was relatively unknown on a global scale prior to its most recent online presence. Put simply, if potential users are unaware of a collection, they will not visit or use its objects within research. In turn, additional geographical or physical restrictions may limit one's access to visiting a collection in person, which can be overcome to some extent in a virtual capacity.

#### Engagement and interaction through Trails

The 'trails' element of the *Online Collection* is a particularly exciting one with much potential for a range of engagement and interaction.<sup>29</sup> The ability to curate a thematic trail is used to present information aimed at a specific audience, providing a 'virtual tour'. The trails can be accessed both on mobile devices within the galleries as a written or audio tour or viewed remotely, relying on the images and videos rather than the physical objects. The ability to add specific commentary, audio and video for each trail means bespoke information can be presented depending on the needs of the audience. For example, specific trails have been curated to cater to children and to highlight the importance of students working with the collection (fig. 4); a version of the 'The Twelve Days of Christmas' song using the objects was even created. Whereas a traditional online catalogue is aimed at an academic audience, the ability to present the same objects with a specific commentary depending on the audience in question allows a much greater diversity of engagement for the collection.

Changes in levels of audience engagement have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, but the resulting re-evaluation of what information is made available to the public will have a long-standing impact on the production of knowledge.<sup>30</sup> The work on *The Egypt Centre Online Collection* is far from complete, with interactive maps, timelines, and additional fields planned for the future. What has become apparent during its creation is the importance of prioritizing the end user. The needs of the active user are highly diverse, ranging from schoolchildren to scholars, but a focus on engagement and accessibility means that virtual

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<sup>29</sup> For the Egypt Centre trails, see <<https://egyptcentre.abasetcollections.com/Trails>> (accessed 18 October 2021).

<sup>30</sup> Beaulieu and de Rijcke 2017, 81.

representation of the physical collection is a valuable asset in reaching new audiences as well as engaging with existing ones, maintaining the 'hands on' approach, albeit in a digital capacity.<sup>31</sup>

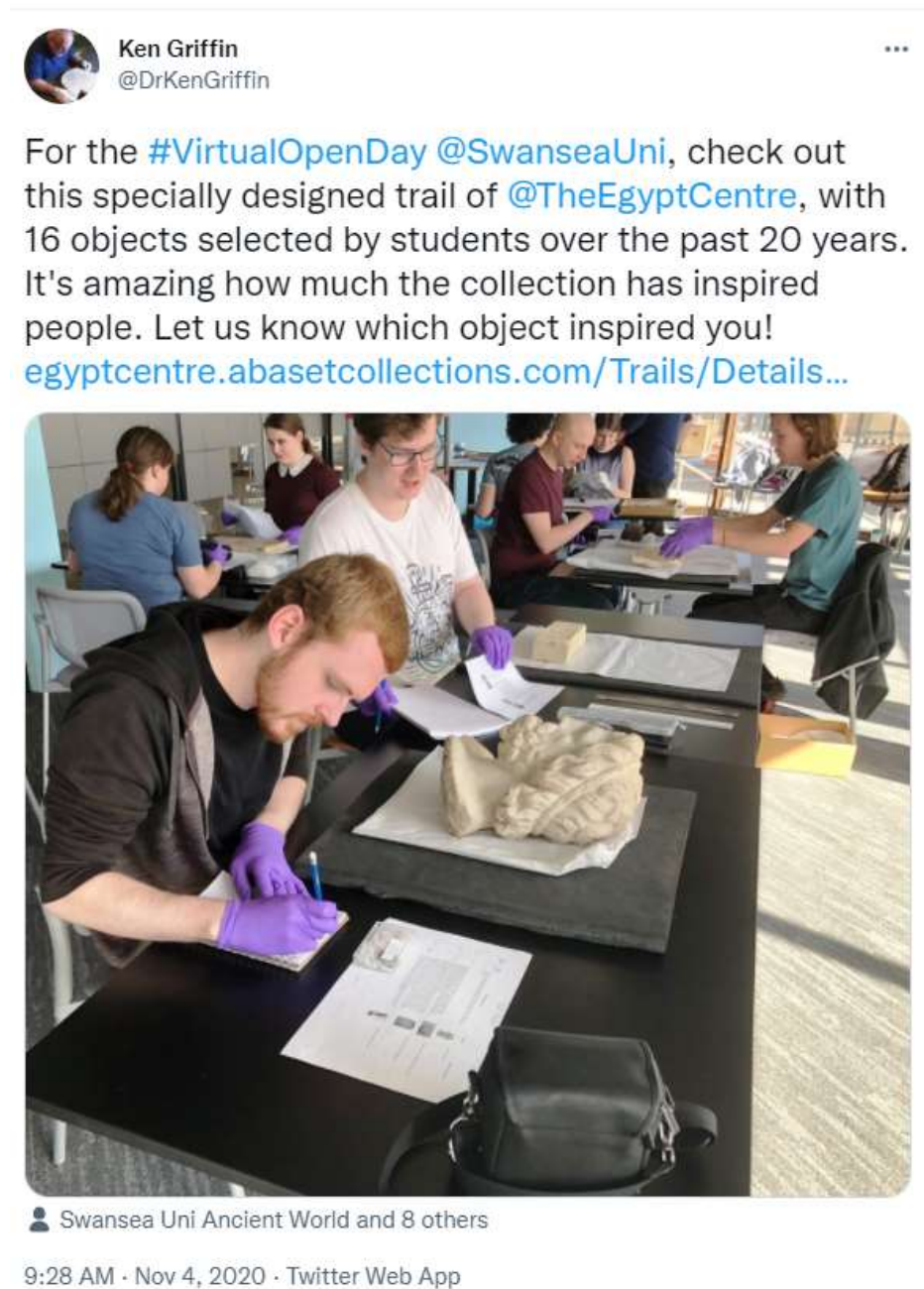


Figure 4: Twitter post launching a trail highlighting student research.

<sup>31</sup> Mason, Robinson and Coffield 2018, 191.

### Part three: Students as co-creators of digital resources

As noted above, encouraging different audiences to get ‘hands on’ with its collection lies at the heart of the Egypt Centre’s ethos and is encouraged by the museum’s curators and staff. Students enrolled at Swansea University have worked closely with the collection for many years and have played a crucial role in the co-creation of digital resources. Their research findings and personal responses to the museum’s collection through object-centred learning volunteer opportunities inform the development of new and existing digital content to engage specialists and non-specialists alike. Before reflecting on initiatives involving students that ran before being cut short by the pandemic, it is important to highlight the benefits of object-centred learning.<sup>32</sup> Not only does this motivate and enhance undergraduate and postgraduate learning experiences, it also bears relevance to ongoing discussion concerning the impact and role of digital technologies when engaging with the ancient world.

Object-centred learning is memorable because it is tactile in nature and it encourages critical thinking about material culture in creative ways. By examining physical objects and their records, students, volunteers, researchers and the wider public are able to interpret and communicate information about them in ways that bring new meaning and relevance to key debates that are important to the world in which we live – for example, the cultural legacy of colonialism as evidenced through early archaeological practices, the collecting habits and preferences of scholars, and the display and interpretation of ancient artefacts. The benefits of object-centred learning for developing research and interpersonal skills are also undeniable. Direct experience of handling artefacts can develop a number of competencies in participants of all ages in the following ways:<sup>33</sup>

- *Observation, curiosity and critical thinking*: Use of these skills is often encouraged by being asked to identify key, physical features and issues pertaining to the materiality of objects and their histories, and through constructing factual statements, expressing opinions, problem solving and composing questions that relate to these matters. Examples include completing record cards for archival purposes, drawing objects and participating in discussion.
- *Communication*: Writing, speaking, and listening skills can be developed through a range of ‘storytelling’ activities concerning objects and their histories. Examples include writing object biographies or essays, discussion and debate with peers, delivering presentations that make use of audio and visual cues, or creating media content such as blog posts, podcasts or short videos.
- *Values*: Emotive responses, such as tolerance and compassion, can be fostered through activities (noted in the aforementioned points). Discussion based around these can then feed into broader exploration of topics such as empire and excavation, imperial ideology (ancient and modern), cultural identity, object manufacture and materiality, the role of museums and the reception of the ancient world.

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<sup>32</sup> See fn. 10 above.

<sup>33</sup> This list, of course, is not exhaustive.

Ultimately, a learning experience that involves object handling opportunities has the potential to cultivate deeper and more memorable understandings of a given topic and its associated ideas and behaviours.<sup>34</sup>

Working with the Egypt Centre, the Department of History, Heritage, and Classics offers its students the opportunity to work closely with the museum's collection as part of their higher education. Some of the most recent examples of dynamic object-led teaching initiatives that achieve the aforementioned learning outcomes include workshops and handling sessions incorporated into – or offered as extensions of – the syllabi for the following optional undergraduate modules: *Beyond Mainland Greece* (module code: CLH268), *Set in Stone? Inscribing and Writing in Antiquity* (module code: CLH2005); *Ancient Cyprus* (module code: CLH3004); and the *Egyptian Collection Practicum* (module code: CLE327). Unlike the other modules which run for a term, the *Practicum* runs over four weeks and provides practical experience for students on site.

*[Every volunteering session] pushed me to really concentrate on the displays and ask questions that I might not have thought of prior to this experience ... This opportunity to meet new people and expand my historical knowledge has enhanced my university experience.*<sup>35</sup>

Students can also engage with the museum's collection outside of their studies, with numerous and varied opportunities to handle objects available. For instance, students can train as gallery assistants, educational assistants, or leaders. This programme can last as long as volunteers choose, and many have continued working in this capacity with the Egypt Centre after finishing their degrees. Many have gone on to work in museums afterwards.<sup>36</sup>

The museum also supervises a range of heritage placements. A recent placement involved the digitisation of around 25,000 slides and negatives of ancient sites.<sup>37</sup> Over the course of five months, student volunteers scanned the slides and negatives, converting them into digital copies for the museum's use. The digitisation of this important body of images immediately makes it more flexible to work with, thus transforming access and engagement with it as the images in their new format can be more readily shared and studied. Moreover, many landscapes recorded include places and sites that are no longer accessible or have been irreparably destroyed (for instance, heritage sites in Syria).

Workshops that supplement syllabi for undergraduate and postgraduate courses are also regularly organised for students. For example, a workshop for third year undergraduate

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<sup>34</sup> Parton, Newton and Newton 2017, 150.

<sup>35</sup> Quote taken from the following blog post written by a student volunteer:

<<https://egyptcentrecollectionblog.blogspot.com/2020/04/heritage-placements-at-egypt-centre.html>> (accessed 18 October 2021).

<sup>36</sup> See <<https://egyptcentrecollectionblog.blogspot.com/2019/09/so-intense-but-so-cool-journey-across.html>> (accessed 18 October 2021).

<sup>37</sup> See <<https://egyptcentrecollectionblog.blogspot.com/2020/04/heritage-placements-at-egypt-centre.html>> (accessed 18 October 2021).

students – developed as an extension of the module *Ancient Cyprus* – ran during the second term of the 2019–20 academic year. Its aims were manifold and included offering students the opportunity to handle ancient artefacts, to develop research skills in observing, describing, measuring artefacts, and to improve interpersonal skills such as communication and teamwork. This workshop involved student volunteers cross-referencing the notes they made about the artefacts they studied with existing archival records and the current catalogue. They then wrote new entries for the objects studied and matched archival records of artefacts that were missing labels.

*...my two-month placement was a real treasure hunt. It not only transformed my perception of museums from theory to practice, but also broadened my understanding of Egyptian culture.*<sup>38</sup>

Whether part of the established curriculum or an extracurricular activity, students working directly with the Egypt Centre's artefacts and their accompanying records inform and enhance the museum's creation of content about its collection that is then communicated to other students, researchers and the wider public. Through their engagement students become co-creators of the resources that the curators and staff based at the university routinely develop.<sup>39</sup> For example, student reports about artefacts they have studied and their learning experiences that are featured on the Egypt Centre collections blog increase awareness of the collection. Work undertaken by students in workshops or handling sessions can also lead to the revision of information in the museum's catalogue. Artefacts that are important, popular, and well-researched can feature in resources such as the museum's object highlights booklet or in new displays. Furthermore, as noted above, the digitisation of records by student volunteers enhances the museum's ability to share information with different audiences seeking information about collectors, artefacts, or the history of the Egypt Centre. For example, the aforementioned slides will be utilised in undergraduate teaching (as in the module *Ancient Cyprus* to demonstrate the development of heritage sites as tourist destinations across the island) and it is our hope that the images will be digitally available to the public in the future.

Relating the materiality of objects and their accompanying records in the Egypt Centre's collection remains at the forefront of planning when developing digital resources. While handling ancient artefacts is a unique and treasured experience, engaging with them digitally can be equally memorable and inspiring. For example, preparations for the launch of the new catalogue included the systematic rephotographing of objects studied by students from multiple angles. These new images now populate the website and online catalogue and provide crisp and vivid visual aids, thus capturing the essence and materiality of objects in ways that had not been achieved before. The co-creation of further visual and audio resources with students (such as 3D images of artefacts, audio recordings and podcasts making use of

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<sup>38</sup> Quote taken from the following blog post written by a student volunteer:  
<<https://egyptcentrecollectionblog.blogspot.com/2019/09/an-unforgettable-experience-my-two.html>>  
(accessed 28 October 21).

<sup>39</sup> MacLeod 2017; 2018; 2020.

the collection) has the potential to further enhance the museum's website and online catalogue. Many of the aforementioned volunteer opportunities were cut short because of the COVID-19 pandemic, but plans remain in place to continue developing resources with students now that face-to-face teaching and training opportunities are possible again.

## Conclusion

In summary, the COVID-19 pandemic has both helped and hindered the development of the Egypt Centre's online offerings. The benefits of object-centred learning, even in a digital capacity, have been abundantly clear; being 'hands on' with the ancient objects clearly benefits the user, allowing both engagement and accessibility through a digital platform on a much broader scale. Although the student handling sessions were hampered by the closure of the museum, a need to continue to engage with the public drove the acceleration of the launch of *The Egypt Centre Online Collection* and the development of a plethora of online lectures, talks and activities.

Even without being able to physically interact with the artefacts, an object-centred approach remains paramount, with students, the public and researchers all engaging with the collection, be it through discussing an object from the online collection on social media, a student researching an object, or an attendee of a course writing a blog post providing their own viewpoint on the subject matter. Such involvement with the collection, as seen in the examples given, promotes critical thinking and enhances the learning experience. This two-way interaction between museum and its audience clearly continues to enhance learning even when occurring in a digital capacity with engagement clearly thriving despite the museum itself being closed to the public. The involvement of students at Swansea University in co-creating digital resources, such as blog posts, and digitising archives through the Egypt Centre's volunteer schemes has not only allowed for these projects to be undertaken quickly, but has also provided the students with experience of working in a museum context. In turn, this engagement with the collection fosters a sense of ownership and leads to volunteers often choosing to research Egypt Centre objects.<sup>40</sup>

The global reach of both the online collection and events in 2020–21 has far surpassed expectations, and the intention is to continue to maintain a digital presence even once the museum opens again. The Egypt Centre has set a shining example of how a proactive approach to adversity, and embracing the possibilities of a digital presence, can both broaden the variety of engagements with a collection, and increase the accessibility of material and knowledge, widening the audience.

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<sup>40</sup> See <[https://egyptcentre.abasetcollections.com/Trails/Details/5?trail=Student\\_Research](https://egyptcentre.abasetcollections.com/Trails/Details/5?trail=Student_Research)> (accessed 31 January 2021).



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