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Hiding in plain sight: the Coptic Museum in the Egyptian cultural landscape-draft

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\textbf{ABSTRACT}
Museums have long been important tools of nation building and of helping nations deal with their increasing diversity. The Arab Spring of 2011 brought massive social upheaval and change to the Middle East. Egypt experienced particularly dramatic changes. Long-standing fissures around who qualifies as an Egyptian, which groups dominate in this secular or religious nation, and what it means to be an Egyptian today came to the fore. How did different groups fare within this negotiation and what role did cultural institutions play? We explore these struggles through the lens of the Coptic Museum and the experiences of the Coptic community. We argue that the Museum historicises Copticism, or depicts it as an historical, bounded period in Egyptian history. It also embraces a historical narrative that sees Copts as the direct descendants of the Pharaohs, and therefore the original Egyptians, although some later converted to Islam. By so doing, the Museum positions the community centrally but un challengingly within the ever-changing ‘master’ national narrative, whether in its more religious or secular form. By telling this particular story, the community saves itself and its materials, but it also constructs and perpetuates its paradoxically central, but marginal position in the nation.

\textbf{Introduction}

Nation building and museum building have long been intertwined. To grow strong and united, and to create citizens who embraced a shared set of traditions and values, countries put their most treasured objects and history on display. But these connections generally ended at the national border. Since the nation was defined in relation to who it was not, outsiders, including immigrants and people who were ethnic or religious minorities, were unlikely to see their own experiences represented in museums. Curators generally placed the majority’s narrative front and centre while other groups’ stories were marginalised and only quietly heard.

Today’s museums still do the work of nation-building and world claiming but they do so in the context of two important socio-demographic changes. The first is that we live in a world of heightened mobility. The professional and highly skilled move easily and the low skilled, less educated are forced to migrate because of the economically and politically precarious conditions they face in their countries of origin and destination. As a result, we also live in a world of heightened diversity. In many countries, earlier migration from a relatively small group of countries is then followed by large numbers of asylum seekers, international students, and labour and professional migrants coming from a wide range
of places, faiths, language groups and immigration statuses. If and how museums help contribute to the creation of successful diverse communities and, if and how they fill historical silences and make previously invisible groups visible, is the question of the day.

The Arab Spring of 2011 brought massive social upheaval and change to the Middle East. Egypt experienced particularly dramatic changes. Islamic, liberal, anti-capitalist, nationalist and feminist elements came together to overthrow the repressive government of long-time President Hosni Mubarak. The 2012 presidential election that followed put the Muslim Brotherhood and its candidate, Mohamed Morsi, in power for the first time. Secularists and members of the military quickly became disenchanted, leading to mass protests and Morsi’s eventual expulsion from office by a coup d’état in 2013. The military reclaimed power soon thereafter and General Abdel Fattah El-Sisi replaced Morsi in 2014.

These events revived long-standing fissures around who qualifies as an Egyptian, which groups dominate this secular or religious nation, and what it means to be an Egyptian today. The country’s many museums are just one of the sites where these tensions are negotiated. The Coptic community, with approximately four to eight million followers living in Egypt (about 10% of the population) and 1.2 living in the diaspora is the largest Christian (and non-Muslim) community in the Middle East. The Copts, whose socio-economic and political position has risen and fallen throughout the country’s varied political history, are once again struggling to find their place in the increasingly Islamicised national narrative.

We explore this struggle through the lens of the Coptic Museum. Research on how diversity gets represented in museums often describes the experiences of immigrant or autochthonous groups who were oppressed by colonisers who put their artefacts on display. This is not the case with the Coptic Museum. In contrast to the other museums established during the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century in Egypt, it was not created by imperial powers but by members of the community itself. The Museum is also not about a minority per se because many community members and the Egyptian Government actively reject that categorisation of their experience. The Coptic Museum is, therefore, exceptional in at least two ways: it was founded and directed by an Egyptian; and it was founded as a private institution, controlled by the Coptic leader or Patriarch, rather than the State.

We argue that that the Museum historicises Copticism, or depicts it as an historical, bounded period in Egyptian history. It also embraces a historical narrative that sees Copts as the direct descendants of the Pharaohs, and therefore the original Egyptians, although some later converted to Islam. By so doing, the Museum positions the community centrally but unchallengingly within the ever-changing ‘master’ national narrative, whether in its more religious or secular form. The Copts are presented as having the Pharaohs in their DNA and as being midwives to the later incorporation of Islam into the region. By telling this particular story, the community saves itself and its materials, but it also constructs and perpetuates its paradoxically central, but marginal position in the Egyptian nation.

**Literature review**

Some of the world’s greatest museums and what have been some of its most powerful nations were born, more or less, under the same sign. What got included in their collections and who created them sent clear messages about which groups belonged and what the country stood for (Macdonald 2003; McClellan 2003; Levitt 2015). Because the nation was defined in opposition to other nations and ethnic groups, people who were out of place – such as immigrants and racial, ethnic, and religious minorities – were often excluded from the national narrative.

Museums not only created nations, they also justified their imperialist projects. By displaying artefacts from other lands, imperial powers demonstrated their power to collect and control beyond their borders. These objects, often displayed in evolutionary sequences, placed the colonising nation on the highest rung of the ladder. Everything that followed behind was considered inferior and, therefore, in need of modernising and civilising (Mitchell 1992; Bennett 2010).

Colonisers then went on to create museums in the countries they controlled. In such cases, and Egypt is one, the objects on display were meant to inspire loyalty to the empire and the colonies within it – to
create a national space that could easily co-exist with the larger imperial space it belonged to. Imperialist tutors ghost wrote and sanctioned the stories of national pride and history that were on display. They did this with much more limited resources and in social contexts in which western understandings of art, and its institutions of display, had not been part of everyday life (Guha-Thakurta 2004).

Egypt is a particularly interesting case. When Bonaparte conquered its territory in 1798, Europeans’ interest in its archaeological riches soared. Thus began a race between European powers to collect as much material as quickly as possible. The unearthed objects were ‘shared’, sometimes more equally than others, between local hosts and the Europeans or Americans who financed the excavations. Though many of these objects are now on display at prominent museums in the West, many of the materials that remained in Egypt became part of the Egyptian Museum’s collection which opened its doors to the public in its first home in Bulaq in 1863.

Egypt, therefore, has a long and varied museological history that is still evolving. There are now more than 34 museums throughout the country, including the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, the Museum of Islamic Art and the Coptic Museum in Cairo alone. Two new museums, the Grand Egyptian Museum (started in 2002, expected to be completed in 2018) and the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (which opened its first temporary exhibition in 2015) will retell the Egyptian national story and reposition the nation with respect to the rest of the world.

There is also a long history in the West of studying the cultural and intellectual production from this region. How these disciplines and their content have evolved in relation to each other strongly influences how the Coptic experience has been positioned in relationship to the broader Egypt over time. In the nineteenth century, Coptology became an independent scientific discipline, particularly in some German universities, but its focus was the study of language and literature. Egyptology, which developed at the same time, rapidly replaced it, treating the study of Copts as just one of its many branches (Krause 2002).

Heated debates over the categorisation and display of Coptic objects and artefacts in museums have also raged for decades. Often these materials were haphazardly hosted in Roman, Byzantine/Medieval or Egyptian departments (O’Connell 2014). When the Coptic Museum was created at the turn of the twentieth century, it raised the community’s profile and linked it to a specific, distinct historical period that was not simply another way-station along the road to Roman or Byzantine history (O’Connell 2014, 167). In 1976, Pahor Labib, then the director of the Coptic Museum, organised the first International Congress of Coptology, which was followed by the creation of the International Association for Coptic Studies. Each of these intellectual and institutional developments contributed to the eventual creation of an independent, important field but one that was somehow bounded and separate from the present. It occupies a central place in Greek, Roman and Pharaonic history but it is history – disconnected and set apart from the present.

These curatorial and management decisions are increasingly influenced by factors at work not only in but outside the Museum. First, museums in large metropolitan areas often function as part of a broader museum ecology or community of museums that explicitly or implicitly work in conversation with each other (Levitt 2015). They may know what their sister institutions are doing and change what they do in response to competition between them or they may get directives from the government about the unique role they are supposed to play. There is, therefore, a museological distribution of labour – that officially or unofficially one institution tells the national story while another puts the nation’s more diverse face on display. In Cairo, this tension plays out between the existing and soon-to-be-opened Grand Egyptian Museum and National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, which will tell the world about the nation and its central civilisational place, and smaller institutions like the Coptic Museum, which have voluntarily taken or been assigned the role of telling stories that are not centrally part of the national narrative.

The second external factor affecting museum practice is that, to varying degrees, museums operate within transnational social fields – multi-layered, unequal networks created by individuals, institutions and governance structures. More and more, the things on display, the museum professionals who put them there, the financial and administrative arrangements that make it all possible, the visitors who
enjoy the fruits of these labours, and the benefactors or ‘friends’ of the institution, are connected to people, objects and politics all over the world.

As a result, museum work shapes and is shaped by *global museum assemblages* – changing packages of ways to display, look, educate, programme and organise objects, and the people and technologies that create them, that circulate widely and get vernacularised selectively each time they come to ground (Levitt 2015). The Masters Degree in Fine Arts, Museum Education, or Curatorial Studies programmes being offered around the world form part of this assemblage. It inheres in the gift shops, gourmet restaurants and blockbuster exhibits museum visitors now expect. It seeps into the stone of iconic museum buildings, designed by a select group of ‘starchitects’ whose work features prominently on many continents. It is regulated by institutions of global governance, like the International Council of Museums. The biennales mounted throughout the global north and south, and the cadre of artists they anoint, inform it. And a transnational class of museum directors, administrators, curators and educators, some who circulate regionally, if not globally, are part of these assemblages but also carry pieces of it in their laptops, suitcases and portfolios with them when they move from post to post.

The different strategies and materials that art, ethnographic, constituency and cultural history museums bring to their work shape the kinds of assemblages they influence and are influenced by. Moreover, every cultural institution, and the country where it is located, occupies a different position in the *global cultural hierarchy*. Just as some nations are more powerful economically and politically on the world stage than others, so others occupy a more prominent cultural place. They influence and are influenced by global museum assemblages more than nations occupying more peripheral positions. As we will see, because of its role as a ‘cradle of civilization’, and the cultural importance of the materials it produced, Egypt figures more prominently in this hierarchy than many of its Middle Eastern neighbours. Within Egypt, the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, and the new museums that will complement it, are much more firmly embedded in this field than its Coptic counterpart, which is much less influenced by and influential in the global museum assemblage. At the same time, the Coptic community is itself transnational. With its estimated 10–20 million members worldwide (reliable numbers are almost impossible to come by), the fortunes of the Coptic community within Egypt, and the fortunes of the Museum, to a lesser degree, are strongly affected by forces at work beyond its borders.

**A brief history of the Coptic community**

Egyptian Copts occupy a contested space in Egyptian society. They are the second largest religious group, after the Sunni Muslim majority. Because their presence in what is now Egypt dates back to before the Muslim conquest (639–642), they are considered by some to be the original Egyptians and, therefore, by no means a minority. They are Christians by faith and Egyptians by nationality and territory – both a religious and ethnic/national group. Historically, Copts spoke the Coptic language, which is now mostly a liturgical language. Today, most Egyptian Copts speak only Arabic.

Current estimates suggest that Copts represent between ten and fifteen per cent of the Egyptian population. But because the Egyptian census collects information about religious affiliation on a voluntary basis only, reflecting the official narrative of national unity, official and accurate data on the number of Copts in Egypt do not exist. According to the Church, the community is much larger than the census numbers suggest. Nevertheless, because Islam is the state religion, non-Muslims are marginalised. It is illegal to convert from Islam to Christianity, and while intermarriage is legal, there is relatively little intermarriage between the two communities.

Since the revolution of 1952, Copts started emigrating out of Egypt and a powerful Coptic Diaspora developed, located primarily in the United States and Canada. They left Egypt in response to their declining economic and political power. Under Nasser’s nationalisation programmes, Copts saw their property and businesses confiscated (Ayalon 1999, 55). Because they were poorly represented among the ranks of army officers, they enjoyed limited political power. Copts who had been once well represented in Egypt’s bureaucracy and in government leadership enjoyed minimal power under Nasser, despite his claims that the republic did not discriminate by religion. Pan-Arabism as a philosophy also
contributed to Copts' marginalisation because it linked citizenship and belonging to being Arab and Muslim. Finally, the 1952 revolution sidelined the Waf'd political movement and party in which Muslims and Copts worked to consolidate inter-religious cooperation (Nisan 2002, 144).

The community's increasing political and economic marginalisation led to its exile and to its increased reliance on the Patriarch for protection and representation in Egyptian politics. The Patriarch Cyril VI developed a 'millet partnership' with Nasser. He presented the concerns of the community directly to the President and promoted loyalty to the regime among the Copts. In return, Nasser ensured the security of the community and the status of the Patriarch as the Copts' legitimate representative and spokesperson (Sedra 225). This contributed to an increased sense of being a community rather than individual citizens with equal rights and representation like other Muslim Egyptian citizens.

Sadat's Infitah (Open Door) and Islamisation policies continued to marginalise Copts. In 1971, Sadat changed the Egyptian constitution from one in which Shari'a Law was one source of legislation to one in which Shari'a became the principle source of legislation, a shift that excluded non-Muslims from public participation (Ibrahim 2011, 6). While Nasser had promoted pan-Arabism, Sadat focused on pan-Islamism which further alienated Copts. The community increasingly saw itself as a persecuted minority and greater numbers emigrated. Copts also suffered economically under Sadat. While he privatised much of what has been nationalised under Nasser, he never returned properties that had been confiscated, thereby perpetuating Copts' declining power in the agricultural sector. No one knows how many Copts left Egypt since 1952, as the Egyptian state stopped officially collecting data on Egyptian emigration in 1971.

Under Mubarak, Copts participation in Egyptian society revolved primarily around the Church. The community also received support from its diaspora, particularly members living in the United States. After Mubarak's ouster, many Copts supported President Sisi because he opposed the Muslim Brotherhood, whom Copts feared would further their marginalisation. While there are now more Copts in the Parliament than ever before, their numbers are still low (36 out of 596 representatives). While freedom of religion is de jure granted in the Egyptian constitution, many Copts feel they are an increasingly persecuted religious community, subject to hate crimes and discriminations. In 2017 alone, there have been several attacks on Coptic churches leading to high death tolls and significant injuries.

**Egyptian nationalism and its changing face**

Egypt is witnessing a period of major social upheaval. Bitter tensions over what Egyptian nationalism means, where it is displayed, and what it consists of characterise public discourse. The Coptic community has always been part of this story, but its place in the narrative has waxed and waned. We look at where the Copt experience is currently represented, and at how that story is told, as a window into struggles over Egyptian nationalism. We ask whether, at this time of redefining the nation, during which many international eyes are on Egypt, a more inclusive portrait is being created, by whom, and whose interests it serves.

The British wrested control of Egypt from the Ottomans in 1882. The Empire took charge of its finances and foreign affairs but the rest remained nominally under Ottoman jurisdiction until Egypt became an official British protectorate in 1914. The 1919 Revolution soon followed and Egypt became officially independent in 1922. The country did not achieve full self-rule and independence, however, until 1952, after the 23 July Revolution, when the Free Officers, a group of military officials, finally succeeded at creating an Egyptian postcolonial state.

These officers established a 'republican military' authoritarian regime, which built upon rather than disassembled earlier institutions. At the time, the country's population consisted of a majority Muslim, Arabic speaking majority, a small Jewish community, and communities of Nubians and Arabs living outside the Nile Valley. Coptic Christians constituted an estimated 10% of its citizens. Newly independent Egypt faced major, unrelenting challenges including the 1956 Suez War, the disintegration of the United Arab Republic and the Egyptian-Syrian union, and the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel and peace treaty signed in 1979. In 1970, President Gamal Abdel Nasser died suddenly and Anwar Al-Sadat was assassinated in 1981. During the 30-years rule of Hosni Mubarak that followed, Islamic groups
challenged national stability, the welfare state weakened, and leaders opened the economy to greater international capital and investment. Taken together, these tumultuous events created a challenging backdrop against which to construct a national narrative of unity and identity, especially around issues of ethnicity, language, religion and region.

As Brand (2016) writes, national narratives are part of the tool kit leaders use to achieve legitimacy. These often follow similar arcs: a story of a mythic or ancient past, followed by a period of decline, followed by a modern movement of renewal and progress. Regimes often appeal to a broad notion of ‘the people’ by creating a capacious umbrella under which some level of diversity ‘naturally’ fits. In the Egyptian case, talking about a pharaonic past is a more inclusive narrative than talking about a nation that comes together on the basis of its shared Islamic heritage. But is the Coptic story included and, if so, how?

How did the new nation go about creating the idea of citizenship? Improving education was one of the six primary goals of the 1952 revolution (Brand 2016). Officials revised national textbooks to tell a new national story that emphasised particular aspects of Egyptian identity. While students learned that the history of Egypt went back thousands of years before Christ, there was no mention of Coptic Egypt as a significant period or culture. Rather, the narrative quickly transitioned to how Egypt was transformed into an Arab Islamic homeland, thus making Egyptians part of the larger family of Islamic Arab people.

During Nasser’s early years in power, citizens belonged to the nation on the basis of territory – a person was a son of the land. Nasser acknowledged Egypt’s pharaonic past and its continuing role in shaping Egyptian society. He told citizens that Egyptian identity consisted of three circles: Arab, African and Islamic in that order. According to Brand (2016, 66), ‘Although there were few references to Egypt’s Coptic identity, past or present, in the narrative throughout this period, there was no focus on Islam either. At no point did the narrative imply subnational bases of possible dissension from national unity’. When internal differences were acknowledged, it was on the basis of class and corrupt politicians.

Anwar Al-Sadat stressed the continuity between himself and Nasser, but relations with the Coptic Church became more tense during his rule. While he rejected claims of schisms to national unity arising from differences between Muslims and Copts, his public speeches and policy initiatives showed clear signs of Islamisation. In March 1980, several Coptic properties throughout the country were bombed. After President Sadat reformed the constitution, naming Shari’a as the primary source of legislation, Copts in the U.S. and Canada protested during his North American visits. Sadat accused Pope Shenouda III of agitating for the creation of a separatist Coptic state and later sent him into exile.

The Sadat regime also allowed and encouraged more religious references in sites of national identity creation. In 1988, Coptic leaders even went so far as to ask the Minister of Education Ahmed Fathi Surur, to limit the inclusion of Quranic verses to religious education rather than Arabic language classes. ‘That said’, writes Brand (2016, 101), ‘the language in these materials related to religion seems aimed at defusing socio-economic tensions, cultivating tolerance, and reinforcing the notion of national unity.’ In fact, Sadat justified signing the peace treaty with Israel by citing Egypt’s spiritual values and civilisation. By 1980, however, Sadat publically identified himself as the Muslim president of a Muslim state. The country’s identification with Islam superseded its Arab affinity. In sum, during this era, the struggle was not so much between the primacy of Egyptian vs. Arab identity but between the civic and religious bases of national belonging.

Relations between the Coptic Church and the state improved under Hosni Mubarak. He allowed Pope Shenouda III to return to Cairo from his exile to a monastery in Wadi al-Natrun and strove to ease strained relations with the Coptic community (Haddad and Donovan 2013, 216). This special relationship continued even into the final days of Mubarak’s presidency when Pope Shenouda III went on state television to express support for the President and, in the name of national unity, urged protesters to end their protests.

Following Mubarak’s deposition, the economic, social and political roots of the 1952 revolution had already lost much of their appeal. In this time of ‘contested succession’, many narratives competed for inclusion in the national story as it was being rewritten – frustrated revolutionaries, the anxious non-Islamic sectors of society, supporters of the previous regime and the increasingly powerful Islamists. This
period really consists of three distinct moments: the rule of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which governed during the transitional period leading to 2012 election; President Morsi's twelve months in office, and the post-Morsi transition.

The temporary constitution, introduced by referendum in 2011, included no big changes vis-a-vis national identity, although how history would be taught and what it included was hotly debated. But when President Morsi quoted Abu Bakr and the Quran in his inaugural speech, the message to non-Muslim Egyptians was clear. He used almost no language of citizenship, preferring instead to refer to ‘my people’, ‘my tribe’, ‘my sons’ or ‘my brothers’.

When the Morsi government began the process of revising the constitution once again, many non-Islamist members resigned from the Constituent Assembly in protest over what they saw as the over-representation of Islamist views on the drafting committee. The constitution that was ultimately ratified describes a nation constituted in the name of and with the help of God. Arab unity will integrate countries stretching from the Nile Valley to the Muslim world. It was the place of religion in the new Constitution, writes Brand (2016), that introduced elements aimed at modifying the traditional identity narrative. That Islam was the religion of the state and that Islamic Shari’a was the principle source of legislation was not a surprise. What was a surprise was the creation of an unequivocally Islamic religious rather than a civic state: Sunni doctrine formed the basis for the constitution of Shari’a. Article 3 states that the ‘The canon principles of Egyptian Christians and Jews are the main source of legislation for their personal status laws, religious affairs and the selection of their religious leaders’. While this was widely seen as a move to appease the Coptic community, it did not quiet the fears of those seeking a civil state.

**Copts, Muslims and Egyptians**

The Coptic Museum both contributes to and reflects how the Coptic community perceives itself in relation to the nation. According to Sedra (1999), two primary narratives characterise the community’s understanding of itself and how, at various times the government and its fellow citizens have characterised it.

One view grows out of the ‘national unity discourse’, and presents Copts as indistinguishable from Muslims. Pope Shenouda III affirmed that ‘Egyptians are the sons of a single homeland’ (Haddad and Donovan 2013, 215). They are the ‘sons of Pharaohs’, and all Egyptians are Copts even though some eventually converted to Islam – a later import but one to which Copticism is integrally connected. In fact, according to this view, Arab Muslim leaders treated Copts better than Byzantine Christians. At the turn of the twentieth century when the Coptic Museum was created, many Copts embraced this view. Marcus Simaika, the founder of the museum, is believed to have said that all Egyptians were descendants of Copts, although some were Muslim Copts and some were Christian Copts. The national unity narrative also emphasises Copts' loyalty to their homeland and their willingness to live and work peacefully alongside their Muslim neighbours.

The second narrative is one of persecution. It says that Copts differ from Muslims in culture, history, and race and they have suffered at the hands of Muslims. In Egypt and more intensely in the Diaspora, where this narrative tends to prevail (Haddad and Donovan 2013), there is a strong focus on Coptic suffering and the struggles that lie ahead to achieve true equality.

Those two narratives coexist in Egypt and, not surprisingly, strongly influence how Copts position themselves with respect to the nation. They affect whether individuals embrace a national identity as Egyptians or a sectarian identity as Copts. The narratives also affect the way residents understand Egyptian-ness in general, either as being anchored in Pharaonic and Coptic history with the subsequent integration of Arab-Muslim elements (Copts would therefore be situated at the core of that identity and although many later converted to Islam, they would still be considered descendants of Copts), or as being primarily rooted in Arabia and Islam (in which case Copts would be excluded from that identity). As we argue below, the Museum tells the Pharaonic story, thereby placing itself at the heart of Egyptian history in which Islam is a later, related outgrowth, but it does so by telling a neat, self-contained historical story that is rarely connected to present-day challenges.
These conflicting visions also impact how the community embraces or rejects the label ‘minority’. How different actors and institutions relate to that notion is crucial to understanding Egyptian identity politics and to understanding how the Coptic museum positions itself within the ensuing network of socio-political meanings. Historically, the Church has opposed the use of the term minority, arguing that Christians and Muslims are Egyptians and that the use of the paradigm minority/majority only serves to divide the country. National identification should suffice to characterise Egyptians.

The official discourse of the Mubarak era promoted a version of the national unity narrative. Copts could not be described as a religious ‘minority’, because they are symbolically, if not numerically, the majority, in the sense that they are the original Egyptians. Attempts to represent them as minorities, then, challenged the position of Copts as the only ‘true Egyptians’, relegating them instead to a minor role in the national story. Some argued that the concept ‘minority’ was a Western imperialistic import brought in to weaken the Egyptian nation. Furthermore, the term minority in Arabic (aqalliyya) can be interpreted as meaning lower status rather than numerically smaller – a social status rather than a demographic reality, a position many Copts actively reject.

Copts who embrace ‘the persecution narrative’ do not want to be called a minority either. They argue that ‘minority’ is a political construct and that their persecution is more spiritual than political. According to Pieterella van Doorn-Harder (2005, 53) ‘Copts regard adversities with which they must live as a blessing in disguise’. This spiritualisation of Coptic identity, that is almost outside of the realm of political preoccupations, resurged about fifty years ago. It reared its head through reforms in three main areas of Coptic life that shape followers’ experiences from cradle to grave: the pedagogical, the pastoral and the monastic (van Doorn-Harder 2005). ‘The pedagogical’, writes van Doorn-Harder (2005, 38), ‘appears in the Sunday school movement, the pastoral in the involvement in economic and social-development and the monastic revival resulted in an increased focus on spirituality’. While striving to accommodate themselves to the Egyptian context, Copts hold onto their true identity by anchoring it in the Coptic Church; the spiritual is constructed as a basis for Coptic identity.

The Coptic Museum: background and tour

Europeans played active roles in creating and running the Egyptian Antiquities Service (EAS) between 1858 and 1908. The EAS is now the Ministry of Antiquities and Heritage and it still controls many of the country’s museums, including the Egyptian Museum, which contains materials from the Pharaonic periods, the Greco-Roman Museum and the Museum of Arab Arts (which later became the Museum of Islamic Art). For many years the only formal exhibition of Coptic art and archaeological materials was displayed in a special ‘Coptic’ room at the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities which opened in 1863 in the area of Bulaq, and moved to its new, more prominent home on present-day Tahrir Square in 1902.

What explains why Europeans were so involved in the creation of Egypt’s other museums and not in the Coptic Museum? First, westerners were not particularly interested in the Coptic experience, fascinated instead by the country’s Pharaonic period. Christianity bored these foreigners, who were smitten by the Arab world, its desert, and the Orient in general. Coptic Christians were either not exotic enough or guilty of practicing a corrupted version of the true faith. According to Donald Malcolm Reid (2002, 2) ‘The Protestants and Catholics of the West had long denounced the Coptic church for heresy and for reflecting the presumed defects of its “Oriental” environment’.

Furthermore, Coptic heritage and language were never ‘re-discovered’ by Europeans. Copts did not have to wait for their Champollion or for European scholars to reinvigorate Coptic studies and discover their language as it never went out of use, at least as a liturgical language (Reid 2002, 284), although they did have to fight to differentiate themselves from the other strands of Egyptology. The Coptic community was also quite powerful at the beginning of the 1900s. ‘Copts were better educated, wealthier, and more in touch with the outside world than ever before … The transition from a tolerated minority to theoretically equal citizens of an Egyptian nation was well under way’ (Reid 2002, 285). While it was not the official stance of the Coptic church, many Copt intellectuals saw themselves as ‘sons of Pharaohs’. Many even embraced Pharaonism. They staked their claim to a central role in Ancient Egyptian history.
and culture, and they showcased these links in the title of the books and journals that they published, including Ramsis (1893), Firawn (1900), and Ayn Shams (which is the Egyptian word for Heliopolis).

During the late-nineteenth century, many Copts, supported by a few Europeans, argued that Coptic heritage needed to be preserved. For instance, in 1889, Max Herz of the Comité for Arab Monuments asked its Director to establish a Coptic Museum because he believed that the community’s contribution to Egyptian history deserved more attention. At about the same time, the person who would later become the real force behind the establishment of the Coptic Museum, Marcus Simaika (1864–1944) actively began the fight to protect Coptic monuments. In 1891 he asked the Earl of Cromer, the British colonial administrator, to put the old Coptic churches under the protection of the Comité in charge of preservation of Egypt’s heritage. Although Simaika was a secular Copt, not active in religious circles, he nonetheless needed the help of the Pope Cyril V to establish a Coptic Museum. Cyril V supported him by encouraging Copts to donate important objects, architectural elements, artefacts from monasteries and churches as well as objects from private collections. Cyril V also allocated a room in the Church of al-Mu’allaqa where Coptic objects could be preserved and displayed. In 1908, when the community received official permission to create a separate place for Coptic antiquities, Cyril V donated Church-owned land on which to build it. The very zealous Simaika raised most of the funds. When the Museum was inaugurated in 1910, he became the person in charge (although he was not initially the formal ‘Director of the Coptic Museum’) and he remained active in the Museum’s management until his death in 1944. Being on church ground, the Museum, from the time of its inauguration until 1931, remained in the hands of the Coptic Church and continued to be supported by private funds. The Coptic Museum became a symbol of the Egyptian rulers’ graciousness towards their Christian subjects, a message specifically directed to foreigners, including Theodore Roosevelt who began his visit to Cairo in 1910 with a tour.

The nationalisation of the museum came nonetheless in what Reid (2002, 358) calls ‘protracted manoeuvring’: in 1931, when the state offered to transfer several objects from the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities's Coptic Room to the Coptic Museum, it also used that opportunity, and apparent increased interest in the enrichment of the Coptic Museum collection, to take over the Museum and place it under the Ministry of Education. In this way, the museum became a symbol the government used to demonstrate Egypt’s tolerance towards its official religious minorities, be they Christian or Jewish. Even today, many tours of old Cairo, aimed at foreigners, include a visit to the Coptic Museum, the Hanging Church, and the Ben Ezra Synagogue.

Although the Museum came under the authority of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, thereby becoming one of several Egyptian national museums, the Church still retained some control over its management and administration. In 1949–1951, the government tried to install a Muslim as director, but the community strongly protested. Since then, there has been an implicit understanding that the director will be a member of the Coptic community, and it is, in fact, one of the most prestigious positions a Copt in Egypt can hold. This stands in contrast to events at the Nubian Museum where non-Nubian directors have been in charge from the outset. Until Gamal Abdel Nasser’s presidency, the Pope would suggest a name for the director and the king would approve. Nasser turned the process into a more ‘administrative affair’ decreasing the involvement of the Church in the selection process, but continuing to name a Copt. The museum’s curators, however, hail from a variety of religious backgrounds. About half are Muslims and some have been trained in Coptic studies.

But being placed under the direction of the Supreme Council of Antiquities undeniably resulted in some loss of autonomy as well. Nationalising the Museum made it a critical part of the nation, allegedly equal in status to the nation’s other museums, but also part of the past. In other words, just as the other museums tell an historical story, so the Coptic experience would be linked to the nation’s history. The Museum privileges the national unity narrative, clearly declaring that all Egyptians are Copts, which is why their history, rather than their contemporary story, predominates. By situating itself squarely and centrally in history, the community makes itself an integral part of the past at the same time that it is hard pressed to deal with the present. It makes itself non-threatening but, concomittantly, limits its contemporary profile and possibilities.
Take, for example, the following definition of ‘Coptic Culture’ that appears on the Museum’s website: ‘The term “Copt” refers to the Egyptian Christians who were evangelised by St. Mark the Apostle in the first century A.D. The word probably originates from the old Egyptian word Hwt-Ka-Ptah which means the “House of the God Ptah”. While the Greeks used the word Aigyptos for Egypt, the Copts used the Coptic term Kyptos’. Copt is defined historically but there is no mention of the present. It is as if Coptic civilisation no longer exists and that millions of Copts no longer reside in Egypt today.

In fact, little has changed in how the Museum’s collection is organised or displayed in quite some time. Since the Museum is controlled by the state, it operates under a ‘display and protect’ philosophy. That is, most museums in Egypt see their role as exhibiting historical objects that must be protected for the benefit of the rest of the world. Objects are perceived as static entities hidden in storerooms or trapped behind glass, materials that must be preserved for the benefit of subsequent generations. Until recently, when new museological approaches have been introduced at the new GME and NMEC, objects were not things that visitors should actively engage with.

This ethos pervades the Coptic Museum’s galleries. Many of the exhibits were designed in the 1980s by Coptologists Hasan Ibrahim and Gawdat Gabra and have not been changed since. That the story has remained the same, despite the nation and community’s changing political and economic fortunes, did not seem to concern the staff we spoke to.

The ‘display and protect approach’ is taken literally. When asked about the museum’s collection, Dean Shaker of the Institute of Coptic Studies explained that the role of the Museum was ‘to preserve and to present’. He added that protecting heritage was particularly important because the museum is the largest Coptic museum in the world, while most other museums have only a ‘Coptic corner’. Curators needed to collect as many items as possible because the museum was the only legitimate place to secure and showcase Coptic culture.

Two things are important to note about this conversation. The first is that while Egypt’s other museums are more purposefully telling a national story to nationals (as well as continuing to address foreign visitors), the Coptic museum has also always been serving its members abroad. It is about representing this part of Egyptian history but also about showing the world and, in particular, members of the Coptic diaspora, what an impressive, creative and productive community it has been. The museum operates within a transnational social field connecting Copts everywhere. Second, this sense of urgency to collect, preserve, and make sure that items are only used to tell certain stories leads to a conservatism in museum practice. The resulting narrative appears almost frozen in time and disconnected from present-day experience.

This inertia is not only evident in the perceived impossibility (and lack of desire) to update the collections, it is also palpable in the organisation of the collection itself. The objects in the museum are generally arranged by medium: the first floor includes carved stone, frescoes and woodwork; the second floor contains textiles, manuscripts, icons and metal work. Arrangements such as these reinforce the objects’ essence as materials, since they are classified according to what they are made of rather than according to their function or meaning. The description of objects is factual, discussing their material content. For example the lid of a wooden box is described as ‘this fragment of a wooden box is decorated with panels of bone engraved with birds and mythological figures’, without any explanation about the period in which it was made, its provenance, who might have made it, or how it was used.

That the same wall labels are repeated alongside each entrance to the gallery also gives visitors a sense of being frozen in space and time. It literally and figuratively narrows the space for alternative narratives and questions by endowing the text with permanence and authority and limiting the possibilities for change. Many objects are presented as ‘holy’. In several rooms, a single object, such as a manuscript, is displayed in an elegant box with sumptuous lighting – jewel-like and sanctified. That there are no interactive features, and that the objects are separated from the visitor by thick protective glass and cordoned-off spaces, also increases his or her distance from any possibility of a contextualised story. In fact, the holiness of the objects is itself contentious, because many of the objects that Church members considered sacred were treated and explained differently when they became part of the national collections.
Representing Copticism as a tangible historical period emphasises continuity but it is continuity between Pharaonic and Coptic Egypt not between past and present Coptic life. It grows out of Pharaonism, a theory and history that clearly differentiates, culturally and historically, Egyptians (Muslim and Copts) from their Arab neighbours and that claims they have a distinct identity, or even ethnicity and race. This discourse is essentialist in nature, creating a rigid, bounded identity. Pharaonism, as a political ideology, provided a discourse of national unity in the early twentieth century. It represented Egypt as an independent nation, with a relatively secular identity and a sense of historical superiority linked to its nation's glorious past. There is room for non-Muslims in this foundational narrative. Moreover, Pharaonism weakens Islamic claims to Egyptian identity by treating Islam as an import, a foreign and late addition to the essential and original (pure) Pharaonic core. The museum builds upon this foundation by presenting Copts as the Pharaohs' real heirs and as the forefathers of all Egyptians – central to the lineage of the present-day majority rather than a tangential minority.

This direct link between Pharaonic and Coptic times is clearly visible in the Museum's displays. Perhaps the most telling exhibit is one about the evolution from the ankh, the key of life, a crucial element in Ancient Egyptian symbolism, to the Coptic Cross whose shape it resembles closely. While the ankh was a hieroglyph meaning ‘life’ there are different explanations for its shape: for some, it represents the male triad and the female unit; for others, it looks like the belt buckle worn by the Goddess Isis; still other explanations see the circle as a woman's womb and the line/cross as a man's phallus which would explain why the ankh has also been associated with fertility. The ankh has also been understood as representing a thoracic vertebra (Schwabe, Joyce Adams, and Hodge 1982). Because the ankh also looks like a cross and the Coptic ankh is a hybrid (it looks like the Pharaonic ankh and it can be interpreted as a variation of the Christian cross with a circle on top of it), the Museum's display establishes a clear link between Pharaonic times and Coptic Christianity. When visitors encounter several limestone tombstones, where the monogram of Christ between two ankhs is visible, this view is reinforced. Once again, Pharaonic and Christian symbols and cultures are historically and materially connected.

This smooth, inevitable transition between the Pharaohs and the Copts is as easy as visitors crossing from one side of the exhibition to the other. In one room, tombstones from the fifth and sixth century, upon which the ankh is clearly displayed, give way to Christian symbols which slowly overpower the pharaonic ones. By the end of the display, the ‘ankh’ became the ‘crux ansata’, which is its Latin name, meaning cross-with-a-handle. The last piece in the room is a textile fragment with ‘crux ansata’, woven in. In the following rooms, references to Pharaonism give way to Christian symbols including the virgin, child and angels (although a depiction of Mary nursing Jesus alongside Joseph could also be interpreted as a replication of the triad of Isis, Osiris and infant Horus).

Therefore, the present is almost entirely absent in all of the Museum's galleries. The only place where a more contemporary, changing story is told is in the context of the Museum's educational programming. In fact, Director Atef Naguib described the ‘education museum’ as a new, updated part of its work – from the visitor's point of view, an add-on that is set physically apart and not always related to or put in service of the collections. This kind of ancillary programming can change because it is not threatening, politically or socially, while the placement and treatment of the museum’s collections cannot.

Administrators and curators understand the‘education museum’ as very literally teaching: the direct transfer of knowledge, or acquisition of useful skills, that are somehow related to Coptic traditions and cultural production. For instance, a series of activities for school children includes teaching them to make icons or play historical musical instruments. They also paint textiles and ‘weave according to the ancient ways’ (textiles are seen as an important Coptic cultural contribution). Staff also organised a series of lectures on music through the ages (Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic and Islamic), again, an educational activity mainly targeted at children. Other workshops revive ancient crafts, particularly in leather, so that low-income participants might be able to master these skills and then start businesses of their own. That strong social agenda also drives programmes that seemingly have little to do with Coptic history but that address contemporary issues. For example, a programme on sexual harassment uses skits and puppets to sensitise young girls to this issue.
Thus, the portrait of the community that emerges from the Coptic Museum is, on the one hand, characterised by a static narrative and display of the community's enduring centrality to Egypt and Islam that is strongly linked to the past but not to the present. On the other hand, its educational programming addresses general social issues affecting Egypt, like unemployment and women's rights, rather than addressing topics central to Copticism. The mission of the Museum, staff summarised, involves two concomitant goals: One is about old Egyptian and Coptic history and civilisation – that the Copts are essential to the Egyptian narrative. The other is directed at the Copts, reinforcing traditions that span the past to the present. The goals of displaying history, civilisation and tradition, and addressing the ‘now’ are distinct, physically and ideologically: the former is embodied in the collections and the latter in the classroom.

Interestingly, this museological approach stands in sharp contrast to the narratives and strategies planned for the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization and the Grand Egyptian Museum. Museum professionals working on these projects say that they will actively promote greater interaction between visitors and their collections, appeal to visitors’ emotions, and provide leisure opportunities including shopping at adjacent malls which, planners hope, will attract more locals and their families. According to Tarek Tawfik, the Director of the GEM, the museum had to embrace an approach extending beyond the simple preservation of heritage. He and his team opted for the concepts of kingship and eternity because, they believe, these will further their goal of encouraging belonging to and continuity with the nation (Presentation at the American University in Cairo, 4 May 2016). Contemporary Egypt will be an integral part of the continuous historical arc stretching from Pharaonic times to the present. The NMEC will also stress a homogeneous and unified Egyptian identity that grew out of its various cultural imports, no one being ‘purer’ than the other.

The current plan is to move a few Coptic artefacts from the Coptic Museum to the NMEC. No single gallery will be devoted to the Coptic community’s contributions to the nation. Rather, the objects will be integrated into the thematic rooms that focus either on Egyptian arts and crafts or on Egyptian ceremonies and festivals to further assimilate all groups into a unified national whole. Therefore, in this new and expanded museum ecology, with its implicit institutional distribution of labour, the primary task of telling the Coptic story and locating it squarely within the national narrative, will still be the responsibility of the Coptic Museum.

Conclusion

Since its founding, the Coptic Museum in Egypt has done the work of inserting its community squarely in the historical narrative such that it is central but non-threatening at the same time. By positioning the community as descendants of the Pharaohs, and the true Egyptians, the Copts are depicted as sowing the seeds of modern Egyptian history to which Islam is a later import. They are, therefore, both an integral part of the original national DNA and an important link to its subsequent national religious or secular periods. At the same time, by stressing the bounded, historical aspects of their experience, or by historicising Copticism, the community is depicted as somehow marginal to today. The Copts’ historical importance is not connected to its current position. In this way, the community survives as the nation waxes and wanes between its more fundamentalist and pluralistic articulations but at the cost of having its wings clipped and its voice muted. Since internal diversity is not an accepted part of the current national narrative, being different in the past – a historicised discrete period that is long over – is a safer bet. It has allowed the community to survive and, at times thrive, in this ever tumultuous and contested nation.

There are many Copts, inside Egypt but even more outside, who disagree with this self-presentation. They believe that Copts are a unique community that differs fundamentally from its Muslim and Arab neighbours and which has suffered mightily under their rule. They have not given up on full equality and would want the museum to play a more active role in achieving it. For now, at least, it is a tool for the contrary.
The Coptic Museum experience suggests that the answer to how museums rewrite history, excavate forgotten memories, and make visible the invisible is, not surprisingly, a nuanced one. One answer is that it is not simple – that there is a trade-off between obtaining a more central role in the story and the anger and repression that might evoke in the subsequently displaced groups. Rather than a simple, straightforward rewriting of history, in Egypt, we are likely to see more quiet, partial, strategic retellings that strike a balance between greater visibility displayed subtly enough that it does not blind, anger, or scare away the audiences for which it is intended.

We write at a time of great national institutional change. With the addition of two new important museums into the cultural ecology, and the redistribution of objects between different institutions so that different stories can be told, the Coptic Museum may become even more isolated. At the same time, Coptic materials will be integrated into more comprehensive narratives about the nation as a whole. Again, another set of trade-offs comes into view.

Notes

1. Some Copts were involved in the upheaval despite Pope Shenouda III's support of Mubarak.
2. Or any other religion, see https://www.state.gov/documents/organization/238664.pdf
3. Egyptian Nationalist party of the first part of the twentieth century.
4. French scholar who deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphics.
6. Gawdat Gabra served as director of the Museum in the mid-80s and he is still a very active Coptologist, author and editor of numerous books about Coptology and the Coptic Museum’s collections.

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