

The Egyptian Museum Registrar Training Project

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The Grand Hall of the Egyptian Museum, Cairo

Imagine a museum where any particular curatorial department is staffed by one person. He or she holds all the records for the objects. For anyone who needs any object information from that department, their only option is to go to that one person. No one else in the museum knows anything else about the department or its objects, nor would anyone else in the museum cross into that department to find the needed object information. This was the museum structure one might have found in 19th century Europe. It is also the museum structure one finds at the Egyptian

Museum in Cairo today.

The Egyptian Museum, established by the French in the 19th century, was modeled on a system not unlike contemporary museums created in Europe. During the time of the Egyptian Museum's inception, Egypt was colonized by both the French and British. In the simplest terms, the French oversaw and developed the cultural aspects of Egypt, and the British developed the economic aspects. With Egypt's increasing independence, the Egyptian Museum seems to have suffered from the nation's focus on

independent statehood. In many ways, the Egyptian Museum is in a time warp, as it has maintained the structure, casework, and record keeping it had when it began. Today, a visitor to the museum will read labels prepared on manual typewriters as early as the 1930s. The guidance that was there when the museum opened is there no longer. Ask any Egyptologist of their experiences with locating objects and information on the Egyptian Museum's collection and you likely will hear a range of stories lamenting the difficulties and frustrations of obtaining the requested information.

But now, Egypt and its premier museum are committed to rectifying these problems. With the help of the American Research Center in Egypt, the Egyptian Museum has embarked on a new program to establish Egypt's first museum registrar's department.

The American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) is a private non-profit organization that facilitates research by individuals and American institutions in Egypt. ARCE's scope of programs and activities support conservation, documentation, training in site management and training in archaeological field work. ARCE has recently expanded its training activities to include on-site training of museum personnel. One of ARCE's newest programs is a project to establish the first-ever registrar department at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and to train the registrarial staff. The project is funded by the United States Agency for International Development and is carried out in collaboration with the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities.

Currently, there is no centralized department at the Egyptian Museum whose responsibility it is to maintain records on acquisitions, accession and deaccession information, condition records, object movement logs, loan and exhibition history, and conservation treatment. Three major factors have contributed to the inefficiencies of the antiquated system within the Egyptian Museum, they are: a bureaucratic division of objects; a lack of training for its professional staff; and an inadequate system to accurately track its objects.

Most museums are organized around their departments and the Egyptian Museum is no different. Here however, rather than departments, the museum is divided into eight sections, each overseen by a Section Head. The sections are based primarily on the galleries in the museum, which are laid out generally by the specific time periods in pharaonic Egypt, as well as a catch-all section of objects stored in the basement. The division of objects does not encompass all of

ancient Egypt and it does not account for objects that are not clearly identified, therefore it allows for many objects to fall within the cracks and therefore not be managed, tracked, and cared for. Additionally, each section is held accountable not only for the care of their objects, but the creation and maintenance of related records. Each section has been responsible for objects in their own department and tracking of objects is done manually, through register books and on object cards. This system would be fine, provided, as with any system, that the information is recorded accurately, timely, and in an organized fashion. There is evidence that it is not, for any curatorial training has not included records management.

To add to the confusion of accountability and tracking of objects, the Egyptian Museum developed four different numbering systems over the years. The *Journal d'entrée* (JE) is the numbering system and accession log created by the French, which has been used most consistently throughout the Museum's his-

tory. It is a continuous, sequential numbering system. The *Catalogue general* (CG) is a series of scholarly publications, which groups objects by subject, and each object is given a new number. The Temporary Registers (TR) are a third numbering system by which objects were given a number if a curator is unsure whether that object had a JE number or if the curator does not want to give, for whatever reason, an object a JE number. And, finally, Special Register (SR) numbers were developed based on the division of sections within the museum. Each section is given a number (1-8) and objects within each section are sequentially numbered. All objects are numbered in the same sequential order - section numbers are used to differentiate each object. Confusion arises when a section's number is not attached to its sequential number. An object may have a JE number, CG number, TR number, SR number, or any combination of the above numbers.

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Registrar trainees Amina El Baroudi, Marwa Abd el-Razik, and Laniaa Mohammed listen to Rachel Mauldin during a training session.

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It is understandable that given the parameters of its antiquated system the Egyptian Museum would be in its present situation where confusion reigns and accountability is difficult to determine. However, there is hope that all is not lost and with the assistance of a registrarial department to aid the curators in the documentation of the collection, a modern museum system can be established.

The Egyptian Museum Registrars Training Project began in January 2007, after completing a five-month planning phase. It is headed by the Project Director, Dr. Janice Kamrin, an Egyptologist who works with Dr. Zahi Hawass, the Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities in Cairo. The Assistant Project Director is Ms. Stephanie Boucher and I am the Principal Project Consultant. During the planning phase, the project team mapped out goals for the project, developed a schedule of quarterly seminars, created job descriptions, and recommended, for hire by the Egyptian Museum, four registrars to participate in the training project.

The goal of the Egyptian Museum Registrar Training Project is twofold – 1) to teach a select group of newly hired registrars the policies, practices and skills needed to manage the Museum’s collections, moving from the overarching concept of the role of the registrar to topics related to the day-to-day activities of acquisition, cataloging, tracking object movement and location, condition reporting, object handling, inventory, preventive care, loans, and appropriate documentation. And, 2) to develop and maintain a computerized collections management system in order to effectively track the Museum’s collection. As the Principal Project Consultant my role



The Egyptian Museum, Cairo

is to assist in training the registrarial staff through quarterly seminars on specific registrarial duties and responsibilities.

Three seminar sessions have been completed to date. The first session focused on the Role of the Registrar. Additionally, the first session included a discussion on ethics, a review and understanding of the Museum’s four numbering systems, and a focus on how the new department will be integrated into the Museum’s existing system. Integrating the department has been an on-going topic.

The second and third seminar sessions focused on documentation for loans, creating manual files, accessioning, and condition reporting. In fact, because the Egyptian Museum actively lends its objects, much of the registrar training has focused on loans and loan management. General administrative duties of maintaining the department have been discussed and processes are being established. This focus became urgent with a turnover in staff (two of the initially

hired registrars have left), and, with an influx of volunteers.

Upcoming sessions will focus on cataloging, inventorying, preventive care, and transitioning the Egyptian Museum registrars into leaders for the department. As the project is now half over, much of the remaining training will focus on administrative and management skills for the registrars. The project team will give guidance for working diplomatically with the curatorial staff.

The training project is using Rebecca Buck and Jean Gillmore’s *The New Registration Methods* as the textbook, and ARCE has provided a copy to each of the Registrars. Basic registrarial tools have been supplied to the registrarial staff. And, a small reference library is being established to provide additional resources for the registrars. Throughout the project a Registration Manual is being compiled which will include the Museum’s policies and database protocols, the job descriptions, condition report terms, copies of forms, and guidelines for object handling, preventive care and

inventory.

In addition to the training sessions on registrarial duties, the project also includes the creation of a computerized collections management system. Currently, the system is a File-Maker home-grown database, developed by Dr. Kamrin. It is being populated by a group of volunteers who enter the information from the Museum's register books - the *Journal d'entrée*, the *Catalogues generaux*, and the Temporary Registers, which are all being linked. The collection is thought to consist of approximately 250,000 objects, and about half of the collection has been entered into the database thus far. Much of the registrars' day-to-day training, provided by Dr. Kamrin and Ms. Boucher, is focused on management of the database – learning how to update information; cross-check the information; scan and link images; retrieve the information as needed; and to develop computer protocols for the database. The project budget includes new computers for the registrarial department, as well as a scanner, printer, copier, and server.

Last year, ARCE received a planning grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation for Dr. Kamrin and a team to visit several museums in the U.S. and Europe to research and recommend a collections management system for the Egyptian Museum. We are hopeful that additional grants will come through to purchase a software system, which the Egyptian Museum will need to support and maintain. In the meantime, much work has been done and will continue with the FileMaker system.

The Egyptian Museum Registrar Training Project will end December 2008. The challenge now in the final year of training is how to reinforce, at the Egyptian Museum, the standard registrarial practices that have been developed and



Janice Kamrin conducts a seminar in the gallery with registrar trainees (Amina El Baroudi, Mennet el-Dorry, Marwa Abd e-Razik, Laniann Mohammed, and Doha Fathy).



Volunteers transcribe information from the Egyptian Museum's register books.

accepted by museums around the world. Ultimately, it is through museums working with museums, and specifically, registrars from one museum working with those of another museum that practices and processes are established, improved, and reinforced. It is hoped that as the Egyptian Museum embarks on its second century it will have a better understanding of its collection; it will be able to provide accurate information to outside researchers; and it will be able to successfully track its objects as they move from museum to museum within Egypt, and around the world.