



## *We the Museum*

### Episode 14

## The Ethics of Mummies in Museums (with Angela Stienne)

### EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Why are there mummies in your museum? Should they be there? What are visitors getting out of an encounter with ancient Egyptian remains? What happens when remains in museums become objectified and normalized to this extent? Is there an ethical way to display mummies? In this episode, I'm joined by Dr. Angela Stienne, a historian of museums and researcher in museum ethics based in Paris. You will never think about mummies in museums the same after this episode.

### EPISODE TRANSCRIPT

**Hannah Hethmon (Narration):** *Welcome back to We the Museum: a podcast for museum workers who want to form a more perfect institution.*

*I'm your host, Hannah Hethmon.*

**Hannah (Narration):** *Here's a question for you listeners. If you walked into a museum gallery and saw a mummy, would you be surprised? Probably not, right? That's because the presence of Egyptian mummified remains in museum of all sizes and shapes is so normalized. These bodies have become so objectified that we lose sight of their humanity and the very human stories they have to tell.*

*In this episode, we're going to ask some big—possibly unanswerable—questions about the presence of mummies in our museums. Should they be there? Is there a better way to facilitate encounters with these remains? And if we do keep them on display, how can they help us tell better stories about humanity instead of just endlessly detailing the science of mummification?*

*My guest on this episode is Dr. Angela Stienne. Angela is a historian of museums and a practice-based researcher in museum ethics. Her specialty is the history of Egyptology in museums. She is also the author of a great book called "Mummified: The stories behind Egyptian mummies in museums."*

*In this conversation, Angela and I are speaking specifically and exclusively about ancient Egyptian mummified remains. While the story of mummies does connect to larger conversations around human remains in museums, there are obviously very different legal and ethical imperatives when it comes to, for example, Native American remains in museums in the US. So, the ideas and questions and conversation in this episode is not meant to be applied outside the subject of ancient Egyptian mummified remains.*

*And one more thing before we get started, I do want to shout out our show sponsor, Landslide Creative. This podcast would not be happening without their support. Landslide Creative provides custom website design and development for museums who want to increase their engagement and connect with their visitors, donors, and volunteers. With a custom website designed for the unique needs of your museum, you can stop fighting with your website and focus on growing your impact. Head over to [LandslideCreative.com](https://LandslideCreative.com) to learn more.*

**Hannah Hethmon:** So, what and who are mummies, and is there a better word to describe them?

**Dr. Angela Stienne:** So that looks like a really easy question, but it's actually a really tricky one. And the reason is the more we're going to look into it. and the less it's going to look obvious. But at the very sort of basic level, an Egyptian mummy is the mummified—so the preserved—body of an ancient Egyptian. It's the body of someone that died and so that's a very important aspect. It is the preserved body of a dead person. So that's what an Egyptian mummy is and

that is what we need to keep in mind. And it is perhaps the aspect that we sort of lose sight of the most.

As for the term, Egyptian mummy, the word “mummy” itself is a construct. It's a word that has been translated from many different languages, from an origin that has a meaning in ancient Persian and in Arabic that is completely sort of disconnected from what a body is and what the ancient Egyptian body is today. And it is at the heart of many of the conversations in museum ethics today, should we really use the word mummy, should we say mummified body or mummified human remains instead? It doesn't change the essence of what an Egyptian mummified body is.

**Hannah Hethmon:** All right, so mummified Egyptian remains, Egyptian mummies, are most often displayed as objects, treasured objects if they're lucky, cabinet of curiosity entries if they aren't. So what questions do you wish museum workers were asking about these bodies in their galleries? What are the big questions that we need to be asking to kind of shake up the status quo?

**Angela Stienne:** I think the main question that we need to ask is why? Why, why, why? There are so many of our practices that would be transformed if we actually step back and ask why? Why were ancient Egyptian bodies collected? Why were they translocated? Why were they moved and removed from their context to be in a museum? Why are they still in the museum today? And why have we decided to put them on display? Why have we created an environment where the viewing of the ancient dead is not just a possibility but almost something expected in museums around the world today?

The Egyptian mummy—the mummified bodies of ancient Egyptians—is very peculiar in that sense, in that it is a body, a dead body, a corpse, a cadaver, that is expected to be seen in museums by many. So people come to Paris at the Louvre, where I live in Paris, where they expect to see an Egyptian mummified body. They're sometimes disappointed that they don't see more than one, for example.

**Hannah Hethmon:** Yeah, yeah, it really is assumed. I went recently to a medical history museum and I was like, oh, there was a sample of a human, just like an arm or something preserved, and I was like, wow. And I went to a medical museum, and I'm still shocked to see that. But if I went into a history museum and I saw a mummy, I'd be like, oh, a mummy, interesting. And then it just would not be shocking to see that in any space, even if it wasn't an Egyptian museum, which is funny. It is a strange phenomenon.

**Angela Stienne:** That's very interesting because as you said, if you go to a medical museum, you are expecting to see the body, the medical body. And the ways that it has been presented and preserved can be quite uncomfortable if you've never been to a medical museum for example.

But when you go to an archaeology museum or an ethnographic museum, or a local history museum in many countries, you will find an Egyptian mummified body and there is very little sort of environmental sort of warning or setting of the environment, of the atmosphere, to prepare you to see this.

And while the medical museum is also a very complex institution, in many ways that is what it is about. But when you go to an art museum, an archaeological, an ethnographic, or a local history museum—and the fact that you sometimes chance upon the dead body of someone and that somehow this is the most familiar way to see, you know, dead bodies—it's very incongruous because you should be able to go to an art museum and not necessarily be faced with death, you know? And yet, you know, sort of the roles are reversed. And that is very paradigmatic of the Egyptian mummy, you know, that we've just put in every place and assume that it's familiar to us and that it should remain that way.

**Hannah Hethmon:** Yeah. Just shifting the minds up there So before we start talking about the ethics of care and display for these remains that are just in the museums Sometimes very randomly. I do I'm doing like a check-in with this the question I think people are gonna ask is, checking in with Egypt. You know, I know Egypt is asking for some of its most notable artifacts back. They want the Rosetta stone back They wanted that gilded coffin from the Met that Kim Kardashian posed with and I think they got that one back. But when it comes to mummified remains—we don't have to go too much into this, but are they asking for them back? And is there a standard in Egypt that they have begun to set for the display of mummies? Like, what are they doing, just broadly?

**Angela Stienne:** So, Egypt today has very serious claims for restitutions that are mostly about specific artifacts that are in European museums. Among them is the Rosetta Stone or the Zodiac in Paris at the Louvre. And Nefertiti's Bust in Berlin. There are artifacts that are incredibly valuable because they have historical sort of meanings that have their roots in the way that they have been removed from the country during times of control from European countries but also because they are symbols of the great craftsmanship of the ancient Egyptians. So that is where the focus is very much.

At the moment, in terms of Egyptian mummified bodies—and I can only speak in terms of what I am aware of—there have been restitutions of mummified bodies from museums around the

world, not necessarily very recently, but in the past, and it was mostly Egyptian mummified bodies that had been identified as royal bodies, of royal lineage. And it is important to know today, and it's something that always sort of makes me smile when I go to the British Museum, "Oh Cleopatra!" It is not \*the\* Cleopatra on display, and mummified remains from royal lineage are all in Egypt as far as we are aware and that they've been identified.

There are no obvious claims or at least none that I am aware of for Egyptian mummified bodies in museums from Egypt. What is important is that it is not, and I have been told this, it does that mean that Egypt doesn't care about its ancestors. That is absolutely untrue. And there is a lot of incredible effort by some absolutely wonderful colleagues to have this sort of reclaiming of Egyptian heritage.

Realistically, there are so many Egyptian remains in museums around the world outside of Egypt. The number is outstanding. It is just so large because of the length and width of the excavations by non-Egyptian teams in Egypt during the 19th, 20th centuries and so on. While there are no claims, Egypt today is doing really important work in reframing the importance of or at least putting on the stage the importance of Egyptian heritage to Egyptians.

And in terms of displaying human remains in Egypt today, there is a new display in Cairo at a museum called the NMEC [National Museum of Egyptian Civilization] and there they have a special room about Egyptian mummified bodies. It's royal mummies only. The entrance, as far as I am aware, is different from the rest of the galleries and the strategy to create a respectful display is very interesting and very much in line with what museums are trying to do around the world.

**Hannah Hethmon:** That's really helpful context. So kind of coming to the situation we are in, which is that most mummies in the care of museums around the world, there is not a clear path to repatriation at the moment. So what then is the museum's goal, their purpose in having them in the collection and displaying them? Do we have standards of care and best practices for what you do with Egyptian mummies in your collection?

**Angela Stienne:** While there are guidelines on how to explore and how to study, how to curate, how to display human remains, There is nothing that applies specifically to the Egyptian mummified body, and especially to the Egyptian mummified body, in the context of a body being so popular and so looked after in museum and so objectified over time.

So today the sort of document that most museum professionals would look to, to look for guidance, is the "ICOM Code of Ethics." The most recent Code of Ethics that I'm aware of is

from 2017. And in it, it talks about sensitive materials, and in sensitive materials, we have human remains.

And really what it says is about the exhibition of sensitive material, it mentions that human remains and materials of sacred significance must be displayed in a manner consistent with professional standards and we're to take into account the interests and beliefs of members of the community, ethnic and religious groups. So the professional standards tells you to follow a professional standard, which is not the most helpful but it sort of keeps in mind that each country has its own guidelines. But there is this sentence that I think is really fascinating and equally unhelpful but a really great insight which is that they must be presented with great tact and respect for the feelings of human dignity held by all peoples.

And that is really interesting because what is great tact, and what is human dignity, and whose people are we thinking about? Do we think about the ancient people whose bodies we have removed and displaced from Egypt to other countries? Do we think about the people that are visiting the museum today and will sometimes as we've mentioned chance upon a mummified body and how... Do we think about their own experience? And do they actually want to see a dead body while they wander a museum? And then there is an added question, which is what about the people? And that applies to the United States, but also to a lot of countries in the world. What about the people whose land we are on and their own cultural beliefs regarding death? So one sentence to summarize how to sort the great question of the display of human remains in museums is really bringing up more questions and there has not been a guideline or at least a set of invitations of reflections that applies to Egyptian mummified bodies specifically.

**Hannah Hethmon:** I would have assumed that with the prevalence, especially in Europe, of mummified bodies in collections, there would be at least a paragraph dedicated to what you do with Egyptian mummies.

**Angela Stienne:** The fact that there isn't is really a result of the fact that there has been very little practical work. on Egyptian mummified bodies in museums, that the sector, the museum sector, has for a very long time just completely ignored Egyptian mummified bodies or—at the opposite of the spectrum—has used them because they are a great way to get people into museums still.

**Hannah Hethmon (Narration):** *We'll be right back to my conversation with Angela Stienne, but first it's time for a digital minute with Amanda Dyer, Creative Director at Landslide Creative.*

**Amanda Dyer:** Hi, I'm Amanda Dyer, creative Director at Landslide Creative, and I've got a quick tip you can use to improve your museum website. Most websites now see the majority of their traffic come from people on mobile devices, but if you're like me, you typically access your own website on your desktop computer while you're at work.

That means there could be issues on your mobile site that you haven't noticed, but your visitors will notice. Take some time to browse your website on your. Try doing common tasks like find your opening hours or current exhibitions, purchase a ticket, renew your membership. Find an upcoming event and register, fill out your contact form. If you encounter any barriers or moments of frustration while completing these tasks, you'll know where to focus your efforts. Any updates you make to your mobile site can dramatically improve the user experience for the majority of your visitors. Get more tips for optimizing your site at [landslidecreative.com/mobile](https://landslidecreative.com/mobile).

**Hannah Hethmon (Narration):** *And back to the episode.*

**Angela Stienne:** In a general sense, we've actually the museum sector been taking advantage of the great you know attractivity of Egyptian mummies without looking too much at who they are, what they are, how they got there and what questions we should ask.

And that is also a result of the great popularity of Egyptology. As a field and for a very long time without pressure from the public, Egyptology as a field of inquiry has really not interrogated its own practice. And so we're coming to it now with big questions around restitution, repatriation and all these claims for restitution, but also the realization of the intersection of Egyptology with race studies, with displacement, with a lot of big questions that are at the forefront today. almost not a professional choice, it is because it is now at the forefront that we're like oh god we have all these you know human remains what should we do and we've really we're really seeing now a sort of experimentation in how to catch up and for a long time the Egyptian mummified body was the least problematic human remains, or at least that is how it was framed. I like to think of it. as the most problematic human remaining museum because it has been objectified to such a level that somehow we're now thinking maybe there's something not quite right with them being here. How did they escape the entire you know some decades of conversations and debates that we've been we've been having about native human remains about you know extra from my perspective in Europe, from extra-European human remains that have been repatriated, how have they completely evaded these conversations? It's fascinating and it's also a big wake-up call for our field.

**Hannah Hethmon:** Yeah. That's fascinating. So I wanna then talk about display and questions and education and interpretation. What can we do? Assuming we are going to put these bodies

on display, what do we need to do? What are the questions we need to be asking? What are the directions that we need to be going? What is being done well? This is a huge question. I'm just going to throw it all at you.

**Angela Stienne:** When it comes to the question of what is the future of Egyptian mummies in museums, what as professionals we would love is a list of things to do that if we do them then we're fine. And if there is one thing that cannot be a ticking box exercise is the display of Egyptian mummified body, because at the essence of it, I think what we have to accept is there is never going to be a perfect display of Egyptian mummified bodies in museums because the perfect scenario is for them to not be in a museum in the first place.

And that doesn't sound like the most helpful practical idea and thought, but it is important to keep in mind that the scenario that is the one that we're in today it is in no way ideal. And it is humbling and it is something that we need to keep in mind. Because a lot of the changes in display that we've seen in recent years have been phrased around the line that if we display mummified bodies in the dark room, if we put their name on display, and we're going to go through all these ideas because they're still helpful, but the idea that if we do all of these things, then we're doing great.

At the end of the day, we cannot do great by the ancient Egyptians, because their idea of an afterlife, whether it is in the US, whether it is in Paris or in London, that's not it. That is not what they wanted and that has already been interrupted. We have interrupted their afterlife.

And realizing this is important because a lot of the time, when we do these new displays in museums and when we use new technologies and we can talk about the challenges of this, the question is are we simply realizing our own fantasies about Egyptian mummies in museums.? That doesn't mean that we do nothing, but it's important to realize that when we see a lot in the press, you know, we did this project because that's what the ancient Egyptians would have wanted, that it was their wish for the afterlife. That's not true. First, there's a lot of things that we do not know about the ancient Egyptians, but if there's one thing that we know, it's that in the worldview that they had, you know, being in a museum, even if it's in the museum that has been nicely redone recently, that's not it. And it's important because once we keep this in mind, then we kind of change the level of the scenario or the worldviews that we are trying to work with.

If we decide to keep them on display and to facilitate this encounter. How do we do that in a way that doesn't add to the spooky, strange creature that is the mummy that wakes up at night. And that's great for popular culture. Definitely I'm not against popular culture narrative



but how do we make sure that the museum offers an encounter human to human and not object to human that is emotional, that is respectful, that is ethical?

**Hannah Hethmon:** Hmm. I have gone to tombs in other countries, including in Egypt, when I was younger. And when you enter most of these spaces, it's well done. It's somber, it's a hushed experience. There's like a natural sense of respect, even Westminster Abbey, right? That's a tomb. You have this weight of like a hallowed space where someone has been laid to rest, you think about maybe grief or dying or ceremony, and I just think about how different those experiences are that naturally kind of hush you and create thought than in the museum, and is there anything we can do to, like you're saying, that encounter, make that encounter more meaningful. If we're encountering the ancient dead, can we connect to them as humans in a better way across time?

**Angela Stienne:** Absolutely. So the comparison with tombs and with religious buildings like churches, for example, is very relevant and it's where more practical approaches can be brought in. It's not about being prescriptive and saying, you should feel sad, you should feel scared, you should, you know, feel a certain way, but it's about how we create an environment, a narrative and a journey that allows you to have emotions.

And in many ways, I think if you go to tombs, for example in Egypt and if you go to religious buildings a lot of the time you are on this journey. You sort of walk by a threshold. If you go to a tomb you have to go through the stairs. If you go to a cathedral for example the environment is different, the temperature is different. So your body goes through a journey and the sort of the music, the atmosphere is different and it sets you on a path and then how you feel is going to be different from person to person.

Some museums have done great things and we can look at you know some examples but in general you don't really get a journey that's preparing you for you're about to meet a man that lived 3,000 years ago. And for a few minutes, you're going to have this interaction that the museum as a space is facilitating. And then you're going to go back in the real world. This experience is quite unique. It's quite exceptional.

And yet if you go to the museum today, most of what you will learn is how this poor man's brain was removed from their nose and the principles of mummification. It's interesting and yet it is the same information in every single display of Egyptian material culture and I have been to—and I have been to a lot because it is my job.

But if you're going to be standing in front of a 3000-year-old dead person, let us create an environment and a journey Where what you learn is about humanity more than it is about mummifications.

**Hannah Hethmon:** I'm sure by age 10 or 11, I could have told you the basics of mummification. And yet, and like you said, I haven't really, I've been to a lot of museums, a lot of places. I've seen a lot of mummies and I really haven't learned that much more. I remember one of the last. I think maybe it was a British museum or something walking around and just all the labels were about what period it was and what kingdom and I was like this isn't going to stick in my head. I'm not an Egyptologist so what

**Angela Stienne:** I don't remember most of the periods. So it's very interesting. A lot of it, they have different datation in every place as well. So it's not the greatest learning tool.

**Hannah Hethmon:** No, so I guess my last question is... You write in your book, *Mummified*, about the afterlife of these mummies, their physical journeys out of Egypt, around the world, what has happened to them. And I wonder if that journey and the mere existence of the mummy in each museum, with each its own journey, can be, if we acknowledge that and talk about that, not just how the mummy existed before we took it away from Egypt, if that could lead us on a better journey of thinking about humanity and thinking not only about these ancient people, but about all the people between them and us that handled this and that had thoughts and ideas, some very problematic.

**Angela Stienne:** Absolutely. I think that if there's one place to start, if we want to read your display or to change a label or you know to have bigger conversations in museum in a practical way, the place to begin is telling those stories. Because what we have right now is ancient Egypt as a narrative and then the collections are here. And there's like, there's 2000 years that are missing.

And in those 2000 years, a lot has happened. A lot of it is about exploration. Some of it is about medical history. Some of it is really quite curious. But a lot of it is about power. It's about control. It's about the environment and the political tools that have a load for displacements of objects, of bodies, a lot of it has to do with the thinking and the organization of the world. It's about race studies, it's about the place of Egypt in Africa, the place of Egypt in Europe and how a lot of countries have been playing around with this, trying to frame narratives. It's about how they went from one museum to another.

There are great stories of how it went from one room of a museum, to another room, to another room, and the narrative changed every time. There are so many stories, and there are stories about Egyptology, there are stories about colonialism, there are stories about race studies, there are stories about the creation of the museum, because a lot of these bodies did not arrive in the museum they are at today. It's about how we go from cabinets of curiosities to private collection, to the museum as a sort of in-between private/public institution it's about the museum wanting to talk to more people today. We need to tell these stories because they are important because they are the actual stories of these bodies.

They have had two afterlives, they had one in their tombs and they have been forced to have another one. Let's talk about this because some of them... Some of those stories are really quite strange, are really quite curious. If we want to attract people by telling stories that are inviting, that are curious, that are strange, let us change from the mummy, the body, the mummified corpse, being strange, being curious, being other, and let us talk about those stories. Because this is where actually the strangeness, the curiosity, the oddity of our human interaction lies in. the Egyptian mummy is not strange. It is a dead body. The strangeness is how it ended up, you know, in your local museum, in my local museum, on the other side of the world. This is where the interesting storyline is.

This is where we get people to get interested in our collections. But this is also where we reconnect to a human story, and this is also where we do the necessary work of acknowledging displacements. They also come from complicated, from contested histories. We can no longer pretend that they do not exist because people will find out, because people will start to ask those why's and those questions, and they will suddenly think, well, actually. This is a very curious place for a mummified body to be in today. It's really quite far from the her country. This is where we start making threads. And this is where we start adding to those threads conversations about life, death, museums, displacement, humanity.

**Hannah Hethmon:** And there's so much more we could talk about so many more questions to ask. People can read your book *Mummified: The stories behind Egyptian mummies in museums*. I'm partway through and is a really interesting. You also have a project on your website called Mummy Stories which invites people to share stories about these remains and question them and write essays about them. And I'm also gonna link to an episode of the History Extra podcast that you were on in September 2022, which I found really interesting and really dug into a lot of more questions about ethics and technology. And I purposely tried not to duplicate some of that information. So I'm going to link to that so people who want to just really get into this even more can listen to that episode. But thank you so much for being on the podcast and sharing all these really good questions.

**Angela Stienne:** Well, thank you so much for the invitation and I really look forward to seeing how things develop.

**Hannah Hethmon (Narration):** *Thanks for listening to We the Museum. You've been listening to my conversation with historian and researcher, Dr. Angela Stienne.*

*If you want to learn more about this her work, check out the show notes page for this episode at [Wethemuseum.com](http://Wethemuseum.com), where I'll leave some links as well as a transcript of the episode. You can also visit her website, [angelastienne.com](http://angelastienne.com), where you'll find entries in the Mummy Stories project.*

*Mummified: The stories behind Egyptian mummies in museums is available on [bookshop.org](http://bookshop.org), Amazon, and other major book retails.*

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