

The New Nubia Museum in Aswan

In the early 1960's, when Egypt built the High Dam at Aswan, Egyptologists and archaeologists the world over heeded UNESCO's appeal to salvage the monuments of Egyptian Nubia before the rising waters of Lake Nasser submerged them forever. More than sixty expeditions ultimately joined the "Nubian Rescue Campaign," which resulted in the excavation and recording of hundreds of sites, the recovery of thousands of objects, and the salvage and translocation of a number of important temples to higher ground. Due to the quantities of material recovered from tombs, temples and settlements, UNESCO was encouraged in the 1980's to appoint an executive committee to help plan a new Nubian museum in Aswan where the objects could be stored and exhibited. It was universally felt at the time that they should be kept as close as possible to their principal places of origin. It was also hoped that the proposed museum would be able to house all the finds - or most of them - as well as other Nubian material found prior to the 1960s. It would thus provide a single location to which scholars could come to study these important collections and to continue the reconstruction of our knowledge of Nubian history and civilization.

After twenty years of planning, the cornerstone was laid on February 4th, 1986, and nearly twelve years later, the Museum became a reality and opened its doors in November 1997. Since then it has been welcoming thousands of visitors every day.

The total area of the complex is 50,000 square meters: 7,000 allocated for the building, and 43,000 for the grounds. The architecture of the Museum and the enclosure walls are intended to evoke traditional Nubian village architecture, as it was along the Nubian Nile before the region was flooded by Lake Nasser. The building is set within a landscape, on graded levels, that includes a sequence of waterfalls. When the waterway reaches the lower part of the garden, it divides into 2 branches to surround an open-air stage and amphitheater where already many local and foreign groups have performed. The remaining 43,000 sq. m. have been planted with palm trees, flowers, and climbing plants, spread over natural rocks. An outdoor exhibit is planned for the garden, but at the moment only a small section is ready. The project is a beautiful resolution of a long-awaited dream.

The galleries highlight all the stages of Nubian history from prehistoric times to the present in a clear chronological sequence. Virtually all the objects on display were found in Egyptian Nubia with the exception of a few pieces that are included because they clearly relate to Nubia and help elucidate Nubian history and its environment.

The first section presents Nubian prehistory. It includes, for example, rock drawings of desert animals left by early hunters, ostrich eggshells used as water containers, fish- and ostrich-shaped schist palettes for grinding galena ores into powder for eye cosmetics, weapons such as arrowheads and a mace head, very early black-topped pottery and a collection of stone vessels.

From the late 4th millennium BC, the A-Group became dominant in the region, and the cases are filled with exquisite A-Group "eggshell ware" pottery, polished quartz cosmetic palettes, and a mica mirror, still retaining traces of galena powder.

Intensive Egyptian exploration of Nubia commenced during the Old Kingdom. Outstanding evidence of this is a diorite statue in the Museum of King Khafre, which was found in the valley temple of the king's

pyramid complex at Giza. The stone was quarried from outcrops in the desert west of Toshka - more than 1,000 km south of its final destination. Around this statue are examples of commemorative stelae and ex-votos bearing the names of kings carved by the workmen who were periodically sent to that remote Nubian quarry to bring diorite blocks for the statues and tombs of their kings.

Wooden models of Nubian archers, corresponding to the early phase of the C-group culture, about 2,000 BC, were found in a tomb in Middle Egypt. Such men were employed as mercenaries by the great monarchs of contemporary Egypt. These wooden figures provide clear evidence not only of the trust that the Egyptians placed in their Nubian neighbours but also of the cross-border assimilation of the two peoples that had begun at the time. Other objects exhibited in this section include an expressive Nubian clay female figurine, a shell bearing the name of King Sesostri I, and fine examples of C-Group and Kerma ceramics. The many objects bearing the names of Egyptian kings tell us much about the routine presence of Egyptians in Nubia during the Middle Kingdom, for they had established forts and settlements as far south as the upper end of Second Cataract.

Many graphics and models provide plans of the fortresses built by the Egyptians at that time in Nubia. Such forts, like that of Buhen, built by Sesostri III, ensured safe travel for boats and caravans from Egypt that went south for commercial exchanges to bring back such commodities as gold, incense needed for the daily temple rituals, ebony wood for furniture and statues, leopard skins to be worn by kings and certain priests during important ceremonies, and elephant tusks for ivory.

The New Kingdom, starting in the mid-16th century BC, shows the growth of Egyptian activities in Nubia and provides evidence that the Egyptians worked more closely with the Nubians to build magnificent temples and shrines, covered with superb relief that could only be created and achieved when people live in harmony. We believe that one can force people to build monuments but not such beautiful monuments as those left by the Egyptian kings of the New Kingdom in Nubia.

Among the statues of different high officials sent to Nubia on special missions are a squatting statue of the Prince Amenmesse of the 18th dynasty, and a kneeling statue of Nehi, an Egyptian Viceroy of Kush of the reign of Thutmose III. A miniature cartonnage face from a large damaged wooden coffin lid illustrates a short-lived fashion replacing life-sized coffin faces. There are also models of the famous temples of Abu Simbel, built by Ramses II for himself and his beautiful wife Nefertari. These show the temples both before their dismantling and after their reconstruction on their new site to avoid the rising waters of Lake Nasser. Again, thanks to the UNESCO campaign, it was possible to cut these huge monuments from their original rock matrix, move them 60 meters higher and rebuild them on solid ground above the lake, while keeping the same orientation with respect to the sun. As originally planned, the statues on the back wall of the sanctuary, at the end of the Great temple, were illuminated by the rays of the rising sun twice per year, on the 22nd February and the 22nd of October. Today this phenomenon continues.

One of the most impressive statues in the Museum is a figure over 8 m high of Ramses II. The figure adorned his temple at Gerf Hussein, one of seven temples built by the king in Nubia.

In the mid-eighth century BC, Nubian kings of Kush invaded Egypt and established themselves as Egypt's 25th dynasty. They ruled the country for about 60 years, until expelled by the Assyrians in 661 BC. The kings spent much of their time in Thebes, present Luxor, far from their homeland. They represented themselves as pharaohs and wrote officially with hieroglyphic writing in the Egyptian language,

even though this was not their native speech. They fully embraced Egyptian religious traditions, were devoted to the Egyptian gods, built new temples throughout Egypt and Nubia and restored old ones, and they were particularly devoted to the Theban god Amun, whom they proclaimed as their own father. Thus they won the support of the strong Egyptian clergy and also of the people. It is not surprising therefore that the statues from this dynasty, now on display in the Nubia Museum, were all found at Thebes. One represents Amenirdis, the first Nubian princess to hold the important title of Divine Wife of Amun. This lady was actually married to the god, which gave her the status of a kind of living goddess. But it also imposed upon her the rule of chastity. Another statue is that of Harwa, the Great Steward of Amenirdis, a post of considerable importance. Two heads are those of statues of King Shabataqa, maybe a little bit stylized, and King Taharqa wearing the Kushite cap crown. The latter is a good example of the natural features specific to the Kushite style seen everywhere on reliefs: round face, high cheekbones, and thick lips.

Another contemporary statue is the quartzite standing statue of Prince Horemakhet, who was given the title of High Priest of Amun by his father Shabaqo, thus resuming an old Egyptian tradition. He is shown wearing the Egyptian garment but his face is typically Kushite. Most unusual is the statue of the Kushite official Iriketkana, who came to Thebes on a special mission yet undisclosed by the documents. He seems to have taken special delight in having his unusually fleshy body represented accurately. The Museum also has many faience and stone figurines, called *ushabti*, which were found in the royal tombs in the Sudan. These were placed by hundreds in the tombs as magical substitutes for the owner, in case he was asked by the gods to perform work in the Afterlife.

Taharqa, the penultimate king of the 25th Dynasty, was forced to flee Egypt in 667 BC and to return to Napata, his capital in the Sudan, when the Assyrian army from Asia invaded Egypt. His kingdom, however, survived in the south for another millennium. Around 590 BC, after a brief, disastrous war with the 26th Dynasty ruler of Egypt, Psammetichus II, the Kushite kings retreated further south, making Meroe their capital. At this time the Nubian kings turned their attention more to the southern part of their kingdom, which was very rich in gold, animal products, and especially iron ores, as suggested by the great amount of slag still seen in the area. Not only did the Nubians produce iron, they also, for the first time, started to write in their own language, called Meroitic, in an alphabet of their own invention. Unfortunately, the language remains almost entirely undeciphered. Among the most important pieces in the Museum from this period are a basalt statue of a Meroitic queen and a prince, who raises his right hand to support her tall crown. Another striking piece is a crouching baby lion fashioned in clay.

The Meroitic kingdom at times occupied much of Egyptian Nubia, and one of the most impressive sites is that of Karanog, in which was found the sandstone ba-statue, or soul-statue, of the Meroitic Viceroy Maloton. The statue takes the form of a human figure with bird wings and tail. This duplicates the ancient Egyptian symbol representing the soul. Another ba-statue from the same site depicts the deceased with only the wings of the bird. Other objects are bronze lamps in the shape of a foot and a camel. The Museum also houses a superb collection of decorated Meroitic ceramics, featuring many shapes and fine painted designs. Although some decorations still show influences of pharaonic patterns, the motifs are reproduced in a new style with mostly orange and brown colours. Since a trade route linked Meroe and Egypt, much fine Meroitic pottery and other Meroitic products were found in northern Nubia.

During the UNESCO campaign, the small temple of Dendur, dating to the Roman Period, had to be

removed from its site. It was presented to the United States for all its contributions during the Salvage, and the temple was rebuilt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In the Nubia Museum, however, a fine model represents the temple.

With the decline of the Meroitic kingdom, around 350 AD, the northern part of Nubia seems to have served as a refuge for Meroites looking for more secure areas. This might have contributed to the appearance of the Ballana culture, which is the phase of Nubian culture most extensively represented in the Nubia Museum. The largest and richest tombs ever found in Nubia were those at Ballana and Qustul, on opposite sides of the Nile. These tombs were covered by large mounds, sometimes reaching 13 meters in height and more than 50 meters in diameter. They are dated between the 3rd and 6th / 7th centuries AD.

The objects from these tombs on display in the Nubia Museum were not only found in the burial rooms but also in the mounds covering the tombs. Aside from representing the indigenous art, they also reflect the styles and motifs of the other cultures that settled for differing periods of time in or adjacent to Lower Nubia: Egyptian, Greco-Roman, Coptic and, from the 6th century AD, Byzantine, when Christianity spread into Nubia and became the state religion.

Among the most impressive objects in the Museum from this period, there are silver diadems of a king and a queen with motifs derived from pharaonic and Byzantine art. There are gold jewels, heavy silver bracelets inlaid with semi precious stones, and stone necklaces of different colours. There is a wooden kohl-bottle in the form of a seated sphinx, showing Meroitic influences. Bearing Roman influences is a statuette of the god Mars and an oil lamp in the form of a male head, eyes inlaid with garnets. Also surely a Late Roman import is the wooden gaming board, a sort of backgammon, inlaid with ivory; with ebony and ivory pieces. More Byzantine in style is a bronze incense burner in the form of a lion. This object was designed so the smoke of the burning incense would issue from its open mouth, nose and ears. The tombs also bore much military equipment, such as spears with long iron blades, archers' thumb rings made of different stones and inlaid with gems of different colours, and a leather shield embossed with spiral patterns. There are two full-size model horses in the galleries modeling the well preserved silver trappings found on horse skeletons from the Qustul tombs.

With the introduction of Christianity into Nubia as the official religion, the iconography changed and art was largely confined to churches and monasteries. Burial goods ceased to exist, since under the new religion the people no longer included objects or offerings with the dead, except in the case of high-ranking church elders, who might have been buried in their robes or with their finger rings of office. Among the early Christian objects in the Museum are Byzantine-style frescoes from the church of Abdalla Nirqi, 10th century AD, 3 km north of Abu Simbel. The Museum also houses a reproduction of the tomb of Timothy, who was possibly the last bishop of Qasr Ibrim, in the late 14th century. The Museum has a fine collection, too, of Christian orangeware pottery with black painted geometric designs; its colour and style were inherited from the pottery of the Romans, after their brief occupation of Nubia.

In 641 AD, Islam arrived in Egypt and gradually spread into Nubia. Not until the 16th century, however, was it able to eclipse Christianity, which then became extinct in Nubia. The best-preserved early Islamic paraphernalia in the Museum come from Qasr Ibrim, where there has been virtually no rain in centuries. One is a very long parchment roll, bearing the terms of a treaty of peace between Egypt and the Nubian rulers. Other objects are magnificent silk shawls woven with different colours and inscribed with texts

woven in black. The Islamic Museum in Cairo has donated a precious glass lamp for the new Nubia Museum, knowing that glass lamps might have existed in important mosques in Nubia. They also presented a marble *kilga*, or jar-stand, which was a common article of the household, a green ceramic vase, which was a local imitation of the Celadon wares brought from China, and a glazed yellow ceramic bowl, inscribed with text on the inside.

The last section in the interior of the Museum - and the most popular among the old Nubian visitors - are the dioramas showing Nubian daily life as it was some decades ago, when the Nubians were still living along the Nile in their villages of origin. Here we see a woman teaching her daughter-in-law how to plait palm leaves to be used in basketry; there we see a water wheel and a *shaduf* with which the farmers lifted water from the river and canals and irrigated the cultivated land. Next we view an open-air Koran class, or we find ourselves present at the eve of a wedding. In this diorama, we see the bridegroom waiting for the bride to be ready, listening to the advice of his maternal uncle or of any old man in the village if he does not have any close relative, and watching the dancer while the musicians are playing. We next see the bride, still indoors, being helped by the relatives and friends to fix her hair and cosmetics. This scene is used to help show the interior of a normal Nubian house and how it was furnished. Close to the diorama, there are gold copies of traditional Nubian jewelry, each piece having a specific name so that the jeweler could easily find out what his client needed.

The dioramas and the rest of the museum are always crowded by Nubians coming with all their family, young and old. It is very moving to watch the old people trying to read all the labels in the interior display, also hoping to find some old artifacts coming from their native area, or explaining to their grandchildren the details of daily life that are now so rapidly changing. The message has reached its target: the museum is there as a reminder for all of them, and most importantly to help the young generation remember their inherited past and never to let it die.

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