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Contesting the Lonely Queen

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Abstract

The bust of Nefertiti symbolizes the transformation of the Egyptian heritage where the West has become the rightful heir of Ancient Egypt through a system of knowledge production that controls the Egyptian cultural heritage in Western Museum collections. This article explores the intricacies of the entanglement of cultural property with heritage politics projected on the famous bust. It is the best example to discuss decolonization and its ethical implications on museum practice in the twenty-first century and Egyptology as an area study. The article discusses the legal and ethical framework of the bust of Nefertiti's discovery, export, and current exhibition and its complex receptions in Germany and Egypt.

Keywords: Nefertiti; Cultural Heritage; Ancient Egypt; repatriation; colonialism

Introduction: Cultural imperialism and Nefertiti

The bust of Nefertiti and its restitution is the best example to discuss decolonization and its ethical implications on museum practice in the twenty-first century and Egyptology as an area study. Reflected in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, heritage today is entangled with cultural appropriation and imperialism, and its academic training relates to how archaeologists and Egyptologists shy away from engaging with the politics of Egypt or the region and the politics of their nation-states and their museum's institutions.¹ Edward Said writes that “[p]rofessionalisation leads to the obedient figure of the academic or scholar who is ready to serve any power (always holding the highest of professional standards), but never questioning the agendas to which his or her work is put, nor the broader dynamic of power in which that work is inscribed.”² It is impossible to discuss the decolonization of Egyptian archaeology and its associated world museum collections without reflecting on the current politics between Egypt and Europe, how it still interacts in archaeology, and how it sets the agenda for restitution negotiations and repatriation. In this article, I take the chance to explore the intricacies of the entanglement of cultural property with heritage politics projected on the famous bust of Nefertiti. My first argument is the illegal and unethical export of the bust of Nefertiti according to the *de jure* legal terms of Egyptian law in 1913, the negotiations that continued until 1933, and how the veto for the restitution by Adolph Hitler was something that other Western powers were also in support of, albeit not officially. My second argument is that the refusal of the restitution of the bust of Nefertiti, which was

¹ Said 1995; Hamilakis 2012, 70.

² Said 1995, 104; Hamilakis 2005, 95–100.

found after World War II in Wiesbaden by the quadripartite army, was not because of legal official matters, as they responded officially to the Egyptian government, but, rather, because of an accumulation of Western fear that the repatriation of the Nefertiti bust would become a precedent that would pave the road for the return of many different objects taken under colonialism in the nineteenth century, regardless of the de-Nazification of the collections that the “Monuments Men” had claimed. My third argument is how the bust of Nefertiti and its restitution provide the legal and ethical implications of the cultural property laws and reparations for historical injustices that interact with museum ethics, the digital world, democratization, accessibility, and neocolonialism. My concluding argument is how and whether the repatriation of the bust of Nefertiti and other similar objects is the end goal or the beginning in restituting the agency for Egyptians to produce knowledge about their past.

The fox guarding the hen house: How did the bust of Nefertiti leave Egypt?

In April 1905, the German Ludwig Borchardt was appointed as part of the Egyptology Committee³ that managed the Antiquities Service in Egypt⁴ under the French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero.⁵ Having studied architecture in Berlin, Borchardt convinced the Jewish German James Simon – a cotton-rich trader and philanthropist – to fund his excavations in Egypt to acquire objects for the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft. While he was in Egypt, he also founded the Deutsches Archäologisches Insitute in Cairo. In December 1906, Borchardt got his first license to excavate in Tell Amarna,⁶ which was renewed annually until 1912, while keeping all these positions, a conflict of interest well noted by the French Pierre Lacau, the director of the Antiquities Service after Maspero.⁷ According to Egyptian law at that time, the excavation license provided the specific terms that regulated the relationship between the excavator and the Egyptian state: Articles 4 and 5 gave the government of Egypt the right to retain any objects they saw of value for the Museum in Egypt despite the partage agreements that were in exchange for paying the excavator the expenses he incurred.⁸ The de jure practice was in place from 1891 until the official law was put forward in 1912. The licenses approved by the minister of public works to be given to the excavators regulated how antiquities left Egypt and supported national interests in keeping the essential objects. The regulation of the excavation licenses de jure and de facto was well known to Borchardt

³ In Arabic, the Majlis al-Wzra' w al-Nwzar (Minister's Committee) found in the Dār al-Wathā'iq al-Qawmiyya (National Archives of Egypt) (DWQ).

⁴ The Egyptian Antiquities Service was created by Auguste Mariette, who convinced the Ottoman sovereign ruler of Egypt that he should head this organization in 1859, which he exploited chiefly by sending objects legally and illegally to the Louvre Museum to promote himself. The service was then put under the Ministry of Public Works and was moved to the Ministry of Public Instruction in 1929. After the military coup/revolution in 1952, Egyptians finally started to head the service, but the power structure that controlled Egyptian archaeology remained in Western institutions. As a result, Indigenous Egyptologists have struggled since its inception to enter the field and produce knowledge about their past for the details of such struggle. See Reid 1985, 233–46.

⁵ Gady 2006, 50.

⁶ Voss and Gertzen 2013, 40.

⁷ Letter by Pierre Lacau to the Prime Minister and Minister of Public Works. The German Archaeological Institute ‘Al-M’had al-Ālmany lel Āthar. In 1/123/1.1. 1925–1947: 0078–020310, ‘al-Khārgiyya (The Foreign Affairs), DWQ. Letter is written in French and translated in Arabic in the same box file. The footnote number 1 in the letter explains such conflict of interest clearly.

⁸ Egypt defaulted financially due to Khedive Ismail's overspending on vanity projects. So, Britain, to safeguard their financial investments in Egypt, conquered the nation in 1882, which resulted in a conflict. After winning, Britain created a “veiled protectorate” over Ottoman Egypt up until World War I, restoring the Khedival rule in Cairo. Egypt proclaimed independence in 1922 but never wholly withdrew its troops until 1956. For more, see Berque 1972.

because he had served as a member of the Egyptology Committee for seven years before the partage.⁹ The regulation was as follows:

Art 2.

Tous les objets trouvés dans les fouilles appartiennent de droit à l'état, et doivent être déposés au musée de Gizeh.

Art 3.

Toutefois, en considération des dépenses faits par le fouilleur, **le gouvernement lui cédera une partie des antiquités trouvées en se conformant aux règles suivantes**

Art 4.

L'administration du service des antiquités et le fouilleur procèdent ensemble au partage de ces objets en deux lots d'égale valeur. Les deux lots formes sous, tirés au soit par l'administration et le fouilleur, si coup-ci ne préfèrent une attribution a l'amiable.

Art 5.

Est réserve a l'administration le droit de racheter toute pièce du lot échu au fouilleur.

L'administration fera son offre. Si le fouiller la refuse, il indiquera son prix. L'administration aura alors la faculté soit de prendre l'objet au prix indique par le fouilleur, soit d'abandonner cet objet au fouilleur en recevant de lui le prix que l'administration avait offerts.

Dans tous les cas l'administration pourra s'approprier les objets qu'elle désire racheter en dédommageant le fouilleur par une somme qui ne pourra jamais dépasser les frais de fouille faits pour leur découverte.

In 1912, Borchardt found the bust of Nefertiti in Tell Amarna at the workshop of Tuthmosis, south of the temple of the Aten. Dubiously, he hid its value intentionally in the partage process. He did not accurately describe the bust in the division of finds report that was weighed against a tryptic; the division of finds report was signed by the French Egyptologist Gustave Lefebvre and rectified by Maspero in January 1913. He knew the regulation that had been in place since 1891 and the law in 1912; in later negotiations, Pierre Lacau, with Heinrich Schafer, insisted that what Borchardt did was an unintentional error.¹⁰ However, given Borchardt's position in the committee and his license of excavations, this could never have been an error but, rather, was an intentional breach of the de facto and the de jure law of antiquities; it was fraud, as later described by the Egyptian politicians working on the repatriation negotiations in 1946.

Borchardt described Nefertiti as "a painted royal princess" in the partage, knowing that the bust belonged to Queen Nefertiti. In contrast, he described her in his notebook as the most beautiful object ever found¹¹ with clear identification that it was a head of a queen and not a princess. According to the Egyptian law that Borchardt was a guardian of due to his position on the Egyptology Committee, a unique object such as the bust of Nefertiti should have never been part of the partage. Later, in 1913, Borchardt, trying to conceal his act to keep his concession in Tell Amarna, published a tiny article on the bust with a faint photograph¹² and succeeded in hiding the bust until the discovery of Tutankhamun. James Simon owned the bust of Nefertiti after the partage.¹³ When it arrived in Germany in

⁹ Majlis al-Wzra' w al-Nwzar (Ministers' Committee), DWQ.

¹⁰ Savoy 2011, 103–5.

¹¹ Kampp-Seyfried 2012, 182.

¹² Borchardt 1913, 51–54.

¹³ Siehr 2006, 117.

February 1913, it was displayed in his private residence, where Emperor Wilhelm II saw it.¹⁴ Simon further loaned the whole collection from the Tell Amarna excavation to the Egyptian Museum in Berlin in 1913, and, in 1920, he donated the complete collection to the museum as a gift on the condition that, if Egypt ever requested the bust of Nefertiti back, the German National Museums should repatriate it.¹⁵

With the Tutankhamun discovery in 1922, the Museum of Berlin felt the pressure of imperialistic jealousy toward the British and was compelled to put the bust on display. In 1923, Borchardt showed reproductions of Nefertiti's bust at a Leipzig conference and declared that it was Nefertiti rather than an Amarna princess.¹⁶ His international colleagues alerted the Egyptian antiquities service, and a series of negotiations began, headed by Pierre Lacau with the Egyptology Committee.¹⁷ The approval by the Ministry of Public Works placed an immediate ban on the renewal of Borchardt's excavation permit and ensured that the German Archaeological Institute would have a stronger position in the negotiations of the restitution of the bust going forward in 1925. The Egyptology Committee (half-British/half-French) gave the concession of Tell Amarna to the British Egypt Exploration Society, which still holds it today.

Borchardt protested many times over this decision and contested it by writing several official letters to the Egyptian foreign minister, blaming Lacau and his German French rivalries. By 1927, the negotiations between Lacau and Heinrich Schäfer from the Museum of Berlin began. Both the Egyptian and German sides feared this would escalate into a political struggle between both countries. In a letter dated 10 May 1927, SeifAllah Yusri Pasha, the head of the Egyptian Royal Legation in Berlin, and his successor Hassan Nashaat Pasha, in another letter dated 29 November 1929, both made it clear that there was an unspoken policy that the negotiations should remain within expert circles only for fear that this case could be used against the fragile government in Egypt and affect German-Egyptian relations.¹⁸

This truce was seriously ruffled by *al-Ahram*,¹⁹ which published a report in January 1928 that publicly accused Borchardt of stealing the bust, an accusation that the Germans thought Lacau was behind. Such disregard for Egyptian sentiments about the bust of Nefertiti characterized the negotiations, and both sides continuously tried to suppress any Egyptian voices in the negotiation process in the late 1920s. Lacau wrote the Egyptian prime minister and minister of public works to ban articles similar to the one in *al-Ahram* because Borchardt had threatened to sue and stop the Berlin museums from stopping negotiations.²⁰ This was not the case in Germany, for several articles against the restitution of the Nefertiti bust were allowed to be printed²¹ in order to maintain public opinion as a card against the restitution of the bust for fear of German national sentiments.²²

¹⁴ Schultz 2006, 17.

¹⁵ Iskin 2022, 70.

¹⁶ Attachment of Letter 18A of the Letter by Pierre Lacau and the Egyptology Committee to the director of the Berlin Museums, April 1930, reprinted in Savoy 2011, 195–97.

¹⁷ Henri Gauthier (French), Reginald Engelbach (British), and Battiscombe Gunn (British).

¹⁸ Letters by SeifAllah Yosri Pasha and Hassan Nashaat Pasha from the Royal Legation in Berlin to the head office of the Ministry in Cairo, 1927, 1929, 'al-Khārgiyya-a (Foreign Affairs), DWQ.

¹⁹ "Bust of Queen Nefertiti," *Al-Ahram*, 1928, front page.

²⁰ Letter to Minister of Public Works and Prime Minister from Pierre Lacau, 29 July 1928, 'al-Khārgiyya-a (Foreign Affairs), DWQ.

²¹ Articles that were chosen to be sent to Egypt as a representative of the public opinion in Germany by the Egyptian Royal Legation in Berlin were: Lucy Cornelsen, "Fine Little Queen," *Berlin Lokal Anzeiger*, 23 April 1930; Johannes Guthmann, "Regarding the Final Struggle for Nofertete: One Should Not Exchange," *Deutsche Allgemeine Exchange Zeitung*, 16 May 1930; and "Nofertete Reste a Berlin," *Gazette de Voss*, 22 June 1920.

²² Secret letter from Hassan Nashaat Pasha, the head of the Royal Egyptian Legation in Berlin to the acting Minister of Foreign Affairs, 16 July 1929, 'al-Khārgiyya-a (Foreign Affairs), DWQ.

Early negotiations in 1927 for the restitution wanted to resort to international arbitration processes. The legal time for that had yet to pass, but Lacau convinced the minister of public works to supply two other statues in exchange: the statue of Ranofer of the Old Kingdom and Amenhotep, Son of Hapu, of the New Kingdom. Despite the historical imperialist jealousy between the British and the French, several letters between the British Museum's Egyptian Department and their British ambassador in Berlin shared the idea of stopping the restitution of the bust of Nefertiti at all costs because it would open the doors for the restitution of the Rosetta Stone and the Elgin Marbles.²³ After exceedingly long meetings and many attempts to reach an agreement, the "expert" negotiations failed in June 1930.²⁴ However, the negotiations afterwards, headed by Egypt's Royal Legation in Berlin in 1933, convinced the Prussian government to repatriate the bust.

The Prussian government owned the bust after Simon. Still, they never disclosed that it was Simon's wish that the bust would be repatriated if Egypt asked for it, and, at many times, they misled the Egyptians during the negotiations by saying they were trying to find the original benefactor to get his permission.²⁵ On 28 June 1930, Simon wrote the German minister of science, art and education in support of the restitution of the bust to the Egyptians, just as he had conditioned when he donated the bust: "On the other hand, even after giving away the colourful bust of Nefertiti, the Berlin Museum would still be far superior to all other collections, including that in Cairo, as regards the number and artistic value of the artworks from the Amarna period. And among our stock are many pieces that are of higher artistic rank than the elegant bust of the colourful queen."²⁶ The Royal Egyptian Legation, based on the efforts of the earlier committee of experts, had convinced the Prussian government to repatriate the bust to celebrate King Fuad I's birthday. However, at the last minute, Hitler's Reich government vetoed its repatriation in October 1933 because "Hitler was in love with Nefertiti."²⁷

The "Monuments Men," the Metropolitan Museum, and the quadripartite army

In March 1945, the bust was rediscovered with the rest of the looted Nazi art in a salt mine in Wiesbaden. Around February 1946, the Egyptology Committee, part of the Antiquities Service, which had now moved from the Ministry of Public Works to the Ministry of Public Instruction, issued an official letter to the prime minister, instructing the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to reconstitute the bust of Nefertiti back to Egypt.²⁸ On 10 February 1946, Mahmoud Fahmy al-Nokrashy Pasha, the Egyptian prime minister, wrote the US State Department an official letter based on the draft from the Ministry of Public Instruction, where he eloquently explained the discovery of the bust of Nefertiti:

²³ Minute by Stephen Gaselee, 8 December 1927, TNA: FO 371-123888, British National Archive.

²⁴ Letter by Deputy of Minister of Foreign Affairs to Deputy of Ministry of Public Works in Arabic, 10 June 1930, 'al-Khārgiyya-a (Foreign Affairs), DWQ (informing him that the Prussian government announced through Dr. Waetsoldt that any restitution of the bust of Nefertiti was impossible at the moment because the objects put forward from Egypt could not be compared to the bust of Nefertiti).

²⁵ Letter from Seifallah Yosri Pasha, the head of the Royal Legation of Egypt in Berlin to the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Egypt, 19 October 1927, 'al-Khārgiyya-a (Foreign Affairs), DWQ (discussing contestation of the ownership of the bust, whether it was for James Simon or the Prussian government on 19 October 1927).

²⁶ Von Paczensky and Ganslmayr 1984, 304–5.

²⁷ Palace of Abdin, "Ābdiyyin: Special Papers on the Restitution of the Bust of Nefertiti," 10 October 1933, Māhfaza 19, file 134, no. 0069-002953, DWQ.

²⁸ Meeting minutes and official letter from Antoun Younan Bey, Gaston Wiet, and Abdelrazek al-Sanoury, the minister of public instruction, to the Prime Minister, 12 February 1946, 'al-Khārgiyya-a (Foreign Affairs), DWQ.

Now that Hitler is no more and his will is no longer law, there is no obstacle to putting an end to a spoliation based on fraud and maintained by force. This masterpiece of ancient Egyptian art must return to Egypt, which it should never have left. It must be returned to the Cairo Museum, into its most appropriate setting, where it could be studied by scholars as are other masterpieces of the same period which are collected there. This will also repair an injustice; it will have a high moral significance for all and will be welcomed with joy, as much by the world of science and art as by the public opinion of all countries.²⁹

Other letters exchanged between personnel in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in the archival box that discuss the restitution and repatriation of the bust and how the United States, as an ally to Egypt that believed in freedom and justice, would have supported the restitution show a great naïveté for the Egyptian politicians on this matter.³⁰

In comparison to the Egyptian naïveté was the sentiment that lay within the inner circles of the “Monuments Men,”³¹ the National Gallery of Art, and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, where, in a letter exchange to Huntington Cairns, the executive officer of the National Gallery of Art, Lamont Moore, one of the heroes of the “Monuments Men,” wrote about the bust of Nefertiti:

The piece is to the Berlin Museum What the Winged Victory and Elgin Marbles are to their respective institutions. It has been associated for over a generation with the Berlin Museum by tourists and scholars and it would seem that its return to Egypt at this late date would be principally to satisfy the “*amour propre*” of the Egyptians in a Nationalist sense. To return this item to Egypt now would be to follow the Nazi principle of confiscating works of art by pretence or force to enlarge their own collections. From a personal point of view, I should like to follow your recommendation that we consider no immediate action and yet I feel that if the Egyptian authorities succeed in their plan, we might be faced with similar problem which might not be easily solved once the Nefertiti precedent has been established.³²

The Metropolitan Museum also wanted to have the bust of Nefertiti housed for two months by the “Monuments Men” until it was repatriated to Egypt, similar to other art rescued by the army that was to stay at the Metropolitan for some time before it was repatriated.³³ The State Department wrote back that Egypt should write to all the governments of the quadripartite army, out of which only the Soviet Union responded favorably for the repatriation of the bust of Nefertiti.³⁴ On 8 March 1947, Egypt received a telegram from the allied control authority for Germany stating:

²⁹ This letter is written in three languages: English, French, and Arabic and was circulated to the quadripartite army embassies. Copies are available at ‘al-Khārgiyya-a (Foreign Affairs), DWQ; the British National Archive; and the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA).

³⁰ A handwritten note in Arabic of an official at the Egyptian Royal Legation in Washington, DC, August 1946, ‘al-Khārgiyya-a (Foreign Affairs), DWQ.

³¹ The Monuments Men were an Allied unit within the army composed of curators, art historians and educators who worked to rescue and protect Cultural Heritage during World War II from the Nazi looting and destruction. They were responsible for saving millions of works of art as paintings, sculptures and architectural treasures.

³² Letter to Huntington Cairns from Lamont Moore, 14 February 1946, file 007, Digital Repository 165, NARA.

³³ Letter from Huntington Cairns of the National Gallery of Art and a member of the “Monuments Men,” to Francis Taylor, the director of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, 19 April 1946, file 007, Digital Repository RG 165, NARA.

³⁴ Communication verbal between Egypt and the Soviet Union was documented for their approval on the restitution, April 1946, ‘al-Khārgiyya-a (Foreign Affairs), DWQ.

Insofar as restitution is concerned, it has acted only in regard to the restitution of art looted by the Germans looted during the war, in accordance with the United Nations Declaration of 5 January 1943, or as trustee for artistic property in the possession of the Germans at the beginning of the war. The Allied Control Authority appreciates the wishes of the Egyptian Government, but feels obliged, after careful consideration, to state that the present quadripartite Military Government for Germany necessarily an agent concerned with specific objectives growing out of the total defeat of Germany, does not appear to be the appropriate authority dealing with cases of disputed transfers of cultural objects which antedate the war.³⁵

Nefertiti: Time, materials, and affect

The normalization of past imperialist and colonialist crimes is rooted in the Western discourse of museum collections. This can be attested in the many statements by the current Berlin Museum director(s)³⁶ that the ordinary place for the bust of Nefertiti is a museum in Berlin, and any discussion of repatriation is just nationalist propaganda.³⁷ In other words, as Said observed, the firm rejection of repatriation or creating a negotiation space is entangled in the manipulation of the culture of the Indigenous communities or the *subaltern* favoring imperial cultural hegemony.³⁸ A critical inquiry of Egyptian archaeology and museology needs to be developed that is politically conscious of the interrelations of time, materials, and affect to counter the effects of the apolitical pseudo-objective writing of a specially selected past that is only ancient and Western.³⁹ An adequate critically sensitive account of the past must include the sensoriality of the bust of Nefertiti, where interactions between materiality and temporality need to be written where it would become the social history of the object.⁴⁰ An approach to the sensoriality of the bust of Nefertiti needs to go beyond the linear biographical narrative as a tool for the resistance against Western cultural hegemony.⁴¹

The digital Nefertiti and “democracy”

Since its discovery and its forced displacement to Berlin, the bust of Nefertiti has become a fetish; its reception in Western circles made the statue at once an icon featured in magazines and beauty salons. This is in opposition to how the bust first arrived in Berlin; the bust of Nefertiti was initially hidden after its “discovery” in 1913 because Borchardt was worried that Egypt would stop his excavation in Amarna if the bust went on display. Similarly, its three-dimensional (3D) data was later concealed from the public.⁴² Historical artifacts in museums gain their identities from contemporary artistic expression and the dangerous or unethical circumstances of their excavation and export outside their countries.⁴³

³⁵ ‘Al-M’had al-Ālmany lel Āthar (the Problem of the Bust of Nefertiti, Māsa’alat Ra’s Nefertiti). In 1\123\10. 1945–1947: 0078-020311, The German Archaeological Institute, ‘al-Khārgiyya (The Foreign Affairs), DWQ.

³⁶ Hanna 2022, 87–101.

³⁷ Cf. Letter to Huntington Cairns from Lamont Moore, 14 February 1946, file 007, Digital Repository RG 165, NARA.

³⁸ Said 1989, 207.

³⁹ Hamilakis and Theou 2013, 183.

⁴⁰ Papadopoulos et al. 2019, 7.

⁴¹ Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 13.

⁴² Stewart 1993, 163; Waxman 2008, 49.

⁴³ Brodie et al. 2008, 314.

Nora al-Badri and Jan Nikolai have focused on recreating a new sensorial and affective experience for the bust of Nefertiti by leaking its 3D scanning data.⁴⁴ They smuggled a small 3D scanner into the Neues Museum and scanned the bust. They then spread the data on the Internet and printed a second bust that they hid in the sand to pretend that the original bust was no longer a unique object. It was a response to the Ägyptisches Museum and Papyrussammlung's rejection of releasing the data of their 3D scan to the public, citing commercial rights.⁴⁵ By imagining that other copies of the bust were found and inspiring different reactions to the other busts that render the one in Berlin less unique, the project tried to create a multi-dimensional persona to the bust, making it more accessible and less impressive.

Many Western scholars audaciously express how Ancient and Modern Egypt are two hermetically sealed entities,⁴⁶ where the modern does not identify with the ancient. The museum ought to strive for authenticity and representativeness in the space and temporality of the object's context,⁴⁷ yet none of these are part of the bust display today. The reality of imperialistic museums is that they permanently store decontextualized things of one culture in a museum of another⁴⁸ without clear links between both.⁴⁹ The experience of the bust of Nefertiti has always been limited to those who could visit her in her confinement in Berlin, decontextualized from the materiality of her background of discovery in the mudbrick workshop of Tuthmosis, the sculptor at Amarna,⁵⁰ and disconnected from the sensoriality of her Indigenous community. The Neues Museum today is what Michel Foucault defined as "heterotopias" of space, expressing a single individual interpretation of the past through the Western cultural lens of the world.⁵¹

The heterotopia of the display space of the museums in Berlin restricts the experience of Nefertiti's bust. The bust does not only relate to the past but also to how it interacts with contemporary understandings of the past, which is sometimes defined as "heritage" – how the past relates to the present and affects the future.⁵² The bust also represents how the decontextualized objects are recontextualized with contested narratives in museums, limiting the object's social agency in its Indigenous communities or *subaltern*.⁵³ Museum entities, such as Nefertiti, are social agents that represent human action and negotiate phenomenological meaning relating to human interaction with ideas inspired by the past.⁵⁴

Some cultural rights are more equal than others

In 2002, as part of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (Preußischer Kulturbesitz), the Neues Museum signed the Declaration on the Importance and Value of Universal Museums. The nineteen museums involved are institutions of previous imperialist and colonialist powers, without a single source country.⁵⁵ Magnus Fiskesjö justly wrote that this declaration is a "rich-club defence of holding onto objects amassed on the principle that colonial and

⁴⁴ Grimm and Bakr 2019, 100.

⁴⁵ Katyal 2017, 1113.

⁴⁶ Culbertson 2012, 61–66; Tyldesley 2018, 157–70.

⁴⁷ Stewart 1993, 161.

⁴⁸ Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 26.

⁴⁹ By contrast: why would the display of the bust of Nefertiti be any different from displaying Albrecht Dürer's self-portrait at the age of 28 painting in the Mahmoud Khalil Museum in Giza, for example?

⁵⁰ Kemp 2014, 244, 281, 294–95.

⁵¹ Foucault and Miskowiec 1986, 26.

⁵² Foucault and Miskowiec 1986.

⁵³ Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 10.

⁵⁴ Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 13.

⁵⁵ Curtis 2006, 121.

imperial might is right.”⁵⁶ The declaration entailed that resituating objects would narrow the collections of Western museums. It also claimed that this would be a “disservice to all visitors,” disregarding the inequality of world travel; Indigenous communities cannot fly to the Schengen area because they cannot obtain a visa or simply cannot afford it.⁵⁷

The outcome of the declaration is that Western hegemony over cultural heritage must continue to be an unfair privilege, where “the West” continues to see itself as the protector of cultures whose history it exhibits. Yet, at the same time, “the global north” represents the future in the twenty-first century.⁵⁸ This declaration is an example of how Eurocentric modernity clashes with the idea of the universality of heritage, where Europe is always seen as the center of the world with cultural hegemony.⁵⁹ Almost 18 years after the declaration, French President Emmanuel Macron publicly advocated for the restitution of African heritage to align with post-modernist ethics of museums and cultural heritage; however, the results are still intangible.⁶⁰ The position of many museum curators in the Neues Museum or the British Museum⁶¹ has not changed from those found in the archives a century ago; they all fear that if the bust of Nefertiti is repatriated, it will be a precedent for much more of their museum loot to be restituted.

The reception of Nefertiti’s bust in Egypt

In my senior year as an Egyptology student, I had a fascinating conversation with my grandmother Amira. She was born in Beni Suef and lived most of her adult life between Heliopolis in Cairo and Matai in Minya. During the encounter, she showed me an old photograph of my mother during her university years and asked me: “Who does your mother look like?” I gazed at my mother’s long neck and chiseled chin and shouted: “Nefertiti!” My grandmother replied: “Yes, she does, and you, too, look a little like your mother.” My grandmother, who was never interested in archaeology, realized that Nefertiti stands for our benchmark of beauty as Egyptian women. No other figure is more of an “icon of Egyptian Beauty” to any Egyptian layperson.⁶² Despite attempts at separating Ancient from Modern Egypt, Nefertiti in Egypt is a huge icon. In the 1980s, the Egyptian national carrier EgyptAir even used Nefertiti’s bust as their symbol.

In the movie *Isha’at Hub (A Rumour of Love, 1960)* by Fatin Abdelwahab and starring ‘Omar Sharif and Su’ad Hosny, the protagonist Hussein shops for images of women to pretend that he has a relationship with one of them and allure the young Samiha. In a moment of high comedy, Hussein returns to his father-in-law, his ally in the plot, with three photographs: Queen Elizabeth II, the bust of Nefertiti, and the famous cinema star Hind Rustom. The choice of the screenwriter ‘Ali al-Zurkany to put Nefertiti as the greatest image of Egyptian femininity, despite her being dead for more than 3,000 years, shows the relationship between the ancient Egyptian queen and the Egyptians, who would recognize her at once, 48 years after her bust had left Egypt with Borchartd. In the film *al-Harb al-‘Alamiya al-Thaltha (World War Three, 2014)*,⁶³ a comedy directed by Ahmed al-Gindy, statues in an imaginary Egyptian wax museum interact. The statues are animated only from 5 p.m. to 5 a.m. and are ruled by the unexperienced Tutankhamun, helped by Mehmet ‘Ali Pasha, after

⁵⁶ Fiskesjö 2010, 303.

⁵⁷ Fiskesjö 2010, 304.

⁵⁸ Fiskesjö 2010, 304–5.

⁵⁹ Dussel, Krauel, and Tuma 2000, 471.

⁶⁰ Macron 2017.

⁶¹ See more on the policies of the British Museum, see Hicks 2021.

⁶² Tyldesley 2005, 5; Dodson 2014, 139.

⁶³ *World War III: Egypt*, directed by A.E. Guindi, 2014.

the corrupt museum curator Huwaida, aided by a wax statue of Hitler, melted the statue of Nefertiti and ended her reign. The Egyptian queen is never seen in the movie, effectively symbolizing the lost bust, without whom the museum is at a loss for meaning. The villains in the film, besides Huwaida and Hitler, are wax statues of Napoleon, Richard the Lionheart, and Hulagu Khan. It shows how, in the popular account, Egyptians view Napoleon as a villain rather than a hero. In contrast, the West perpetuates a different history of his Egyptian campaign (1798–1801), especially about antiquities and the discovery of Ancient Egypt. Despite Egyptian popularity at the time, it is significant that the main villain in the movie is Hitler, surely the archetypal worldwide contemporary scoundrel, but, here specifically, the enemy of Nefertiti and her dynasty. The public might not have overlooked the subtle reference to Nefertiti's captivity in Berlin. Heritage becomes sensible when it is entrenched in the narrative linking identities to the senses.⁶⁴ In both films, Nefertiti, a bust and a persona, is central to the identity discourse of modern Egyptian women.

The famous novel by Nobel laureate Naguib Mahfouz, *Al-'aish fil-Haqiqa (Akhenaten, Dweller in Truth)*, (1985), shows Nefertiti as a strong, powerful woman within Akhenaten's royal circle.⁶⁵ She was also recently the subject of numerous art paintings by Egyptian artist Hossam Dirar.⁶⁶ Recently, through a visit to the community of Amarna, the reception of the bust among the different women was engaging. Many of these villages have formed a campaign for restitution, which they announced through a video in English and German (Figure 1).⁶⁷

The reception of Nefertiti's bust in the West

Shortly after the French Revolution and the fall of the *ancien régime* throughout Europe, the concept of "royalty" started to migrate from the political realm to the imaginary.⁶⁸ This imaginary realm was affected by gender and ethnicity, and much of it was shaped by ethnography, archaeology, and even Egyptology.⁶⁹ This further developed into the ideas of "retro Orient" and "modern West." The former started in the nineteenth century to focus on the myths and marvels of biblical Egypt and, with the advancement of Egyptology, produced complicated knowledge about a distant past that was not Eurocentric; in fact, the late nineteenth-century excavation by the Egypt Exploration Fund (now Egypt Exploration Society) was centered on biblical narratives of Egypt.⁷⁰

The influence of Egyptology had a complex effect on the concept of European modernity.⁷¹ Egypt was then envisioned as part of the "Orient," which was easily appropriated and colonized culturally, politically, and figuratively. European colonialism has always taken a patriarchal tendency, constantly feminizing others' cultures. The Androcentrism,⁷² coupled with imperialist hegemony, failed miserably with Egyptian material culture, particularly the iconography of female rulers.⁷³ This reflection on gender and colonialism relates to what Foucault has tried to address in his *Archeologie de Savoir* – namely, how fragmentary evidence

⁶⁴ Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 8.

⁶⁵ Haikal 2012, 129; Mahfouz 2008.

⁶⁶ H. Dirar, "Dirar," 2019, <https://www.hossamdirar.com> (accessed 2 December 2019).

⁶⁷ Facebook, Megraya on Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/megrayagroup/videos/1510652496093292/>, Accessed on February 1st, 2023.

⁶⁸ Lowenthal 2015, 44.

⁶⁹ Breger 2006, 281.

⁷⁰ Gange 2013, 182.

⁷¹ Breger 2006, 282.

⁷² Hanna 2021, 13–22.

⁷³ Breger 2006, 282.



Figure 1. Children of Tell el-Amarna villages with the 3D print of the bust of Nefertiti. Credit: Ruth Vandewalle.

is used to construct and deconstruct identities.⁷⁴ Archaeology in the past 200 years has added to the imperialist and colonialist narrative more than it has added to Indigenous identity construction. Western cultural institutions have appropriated the metonymic past of the different countries⁷⁵ and played on the belief that the religions of modern nations (that is, Christianity and Islam) in the Middle East add to the gap with their past.

When King Fouad visited Germany in 1929, the fear that he would ask for the return of the bust to Egypt engulfed the nation. A famous cartoon featured him exclaiming “Kommen Sie doch wieder mit nach Ägypten, schöne Nefretete, ich mache Sie zu meiner Lieblingsfrau im Harem!” and the response “Ausgeschlossen, Fuadchen, lieber in Berlin im Glaskasten, als in Kairo. Schein-königin von Englands Gnaden.”⁷⁶ This metonymic assimilation of the gendered colored image of Nefertiti continues until today in most of the writing of Egyptologists and art historians who highly sexualize her as an act of imperialistic androcentrism. For example, Jan Assmann writes that Nefertiti is a “love poem in stone” and that her “very refined sensuousness and almost erotic grace and radiance” represent the art of the Amarna Period.⁷⁷ Claudia Breger has also criticized Assmann’s work as explicitly appropriating imperialist fantasies.⁷⁸ This echoes Gustave Flaubert’s description of his encounter with Kuchuk Hanem, a gipsy belly dancer from Esna, celebrated from a Western patriarchal

⁷⁴ Foucault and Sheridan 1972, 64–77.

⁷⁵ Breger 2006, 283.

⁷⁶ Garven 1929; Reid 2015, 91–92.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Breger 2005, 139.

⁷⁸ Breger 2005, 139.

perspective, stereotyping all other Egyptian women.⁷⁹ Flaubert and Assman replicated their fictional image of women from the Nile Valley, albeit thousands of years apart, in a sexist androcentric discourse.

Europe was, in the course of identity formation, engaged in the process of understanding the concept of the “foreign” and the “past”; objects such as the bust of Nefertiti have contributed to this notion of identity construction as well as “imperialist fantasies.”⁸⁰ Europeans have also created a valuation of objects through the significance of acquisition as a form of sociality.⁸¹ These “imperialist fantasies,” as Claudia Breger describes them, are the paradigms of the imperialist ideology toward non-Western cultures, putting the “other or the subaltern” under Western hegemony, both politically and culturally, to shape the Western sense of imperialistic identity.⁸² The Western invention of a primitive traditional society helped Europeans define and validate their “enlightened modernity.”⁸³ Again, it has not stopped today, albeit attempts to establish an Indigenous Egyptology.⁸⁴ Western scholars defend their imperialistic discourse with the argument that the scholarship they built on is why the world knows ancient Egypt, claiming that they have the authority to identify with it.⁸⁵ The Western narrative of “ancient” Egypt continues today through the objects housed in Western museums, saved from oblivion and feeding their self-righteous narrative and “imperialistic fantasies”⁸⁶ with the perfect example relating to the bust of Nefertiti. Medieval Arabic writings on ancient Egypt, such as al-Baghdadi, al-Maqrizi, al-Idrisi, al-Muqadasi, and al-Mas’udi, are left out of the writing of Ancient Egyptian history because of Western scholars’ imperial gaze or, perhaps, their inability to read the Arabic language.

The appropriation of the image of Nefertiti through her bust started even before World War II when she was received as a star – a symbol of success in the “women world” of the 1920s – for German women to identify with,⁸⁷ and she still is as such in Berlin. The bust was used to form the post-imperial German national identity after the 1918–19 German Revolution, assimilating the museum to an analogue of the Prussian-German state, and the bust of Nefertiti was used as a symbol of national identity to substitute for the lost monarchy.⁸⁸ In the 1920s and 1930s, Nefertiti was featured in many fashion magazines and assimilated as a “Western” beauty; those were the roaring years of Art Deco aesthetics, and many women dressed to imitate her.⁸⁹ The Nazi appropriation of the bust, relating Nefertiti to her “Aryan” linkage, brought Nefertiti and Akhenaten to the heart of European Fascism before World War II.⁹⁰ The Western appropriation of the bust puts Nefertiti in the halo of a sublime universal image of the “other” woman that the West appreciates. Nefertiti stands alone in this big decontextualized room designed to inspire awe, and magic, to be seen as an entity of a modern cult⁹¹ in a bulletproof case in the disembodied dead space of the Neues Museum with a contested social biography.⁹²

⁷⁹ Quoted in Said 1995, 11.

⁸⁰ Breger 2006, 283.

⁸¹ Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 15.

⁸² Breger 2005; 2006, 283.

⁸³ Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 15.

⁸⁴ Reid 1985, 233–44.

⁸⁵ Reid 2003, 2–10.

⁸⁶ Reid 1992, 60.

⁸⁷ Breger 2006, 289.

⁸⁸ Breger 2006, 291.

⁸⁹ Tyldesley 2018, 110.

⁹⁰ Breger 2006, 293.

⁹¹ Breger 2006.

⁹² Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 13.

Nefertiti: The inspiration to modern women

Nefertiti is not only the symbol of Egyptian feminine beauty but also that of power. Despite her non-royal lineage, Akhenaten welcomed her as the Great Royal Wife, the equivalent of “queen” in a language that did not have a word for this title and where a king could marry more than a woman. In several instances, toward the end of his reign, he had her portrayed holding a more prominent position.⁹³ This is not unusual after the power of her predecessors Ahhotep,⁹⁴ Ahmose Nefertari,⁹⁵ and Tiye.⁹⁶ Early in her husband’s reign, Nefertiti is featured on the *talatat* blocks recovered from Akhenaten’s constructions at Karnak. In some edifices, her image appears more often than the king himself.⁹⁷ She sometimes performs ritual offerings to the Aten disk on her own. Scholars have argued about Nefertiti’s exact role beside Akhenaten as she constantly accompanied him in his solar liturgies and court appearances.

Nefertiti is also seen in the Nubian wig, mostly male attire, creating more speculation on her progressive role. This was traditionally an item of clothing for Nubian soldiers, and Nefertiti’s appropriation of the male wig must have caused a stir in the society in Ancient Egypt.⁹⁸ Perhaps Nefertiti was trying to create a new image for Egyptian women who had a more prominent role next to their male counterparts. Nefertiti also followed her predecessor Tiye in wearing the *khat* head cloth, a round-sack headdress usually worn by men or the female goddesses Nephthys and Isis.⁹⁹ A further example of Nefertiti’s position of power, as shown in iconography, is that she is seen wearing the *khat* head cloth and an *atef* crown in the tomb of Panehesy in Amarna.¹⁰⁰ Furthermore, the most significant substantiation for Nefertiti’s role comes from a group of blocks showing the decoration of the cabin of a royal barge, where she is performing the ritual smiting of the enemies, an activity solely attributed to kings since the Narmer palette.¹⁰¹ These scenes confirm her possible, solid political role in the governance of Egypt. In his *Ancient Egypt: A Very Short Introduction*, Ian Shaw quotes Camille Paglia in that Nefertiti’s bust gives an impression of “a vampire of political will.”¹⁰² The quotation tells of (un)conscious sexism in Western thought; when a woman rules, she must be bloodthirsty for power.

Her extraordinary power, mixed with unmatched beauty and grace, encouraged women to employ Nefertiti as a patron figure for feminist movements. For example, in the 1999 election campaign in Berlin, the bust of Nefertiti was used for a poster by the Greens/Bundnis 90 to propagate an image of strong, powerful women. The Greens/Bundnis 90 movement used the slogan “Strong women for Berlin!”¹⁰³ Similarly, in the post-2011 Egyptian uprising, women who were sexually harassed and attacked by mobs in Cairo used the image of Nefertiti wearing a gas mask as a response. The iconic bust represented feminism and women’s rights against radicalism and gender bullying. Not only was the

⁹³ Tyldesley 2005, 41–45.

⁹⁴ The mother of Ahmose I, who founded the 18th Dynasty, was awarded the military flies of valor for her military achievements in expelling the Hyksos.

⁹⁵ Ahmose Nefertari had a temple that was never found and a huge cult in Deir el-Medina while she ruled as an oracle for other women. Sweeney 2009, 7.

⁹⁶ Tiye had a temple dedicated specially for her cult at Sedeinga in Nubia, around 100 kilometers north of the Third Cataract and was known to have semi-divine powers but was never revered as a full goddess in Egypt. Morkot 1986, 2–5.

⁹⁷ Dodson 2014, 95.

⁹⁸ Tyldesley 2005, 50–52.

⁹⁹ Eaton-Krauss 1977; Tyldesley 2005, 142.

¹⁰⁰ Arnold, Green, and Allen 1996, 85–95; Abram 2007, 3–16.

¹⁰¹ Dodson 2009, 116; Tyldesley 2018, 38.

¹⁰² Shaw 2004, 152.

¹⁰³ Breger 2006, 292.

graffiti sprayed on Cairo's streets and some other cities, but posters featuring it were made in Berlin. Advocates of women's rights in Germany joined the protests in front of the Egyptian embassy in solidarity with their Egyptian counterparts.¹⁰⁴ As a historic Egyptian woman, Nefertiti's role did not stop in the year 16 of Akhenaten's reign. Instead, it continued to inspire her contemporary descendants of how a woman of power ought to be.

Why can the most beautiful immigrant in Berlin not go home?

"Nefertiti is the ambassador of Egypt in Berlin," was the radical political translation of why the bust should stay in Berlin.¹⁰⁵ There must be a diplomatic exchange to have an ambassador in a country. With the negotiations of sending royal insignia in exchange for the bust, no German object has ever arrived in Cairo or Amarna. Nefertiti's bust has become the symbol of the transformation of Egyptian heritage where the "Empire" as a symbol of Western imperialism has turned a historical ruler into a controlled ambassador in an imperial capital.¹⁰⁶ Questioning the ethical repercussions of colonially acquired heritage is far from these museum discourses. Colonialism has been entrenched in materiality, where imperial centers have been linked to museum objects that were sensorially delimited and defined.¹⁰⁷

The conflict over the right to have a say in curating and representing Egyptian culture was evident in "The Body of Nefertiti" in 2002, where Polish artists called Little Warsaw curated a display for the Hungarian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale, putting the bust on a bronze nude figure with the blessing of the then director of the Altes Museum Dietrich Wildung. The Egyptians felt their queen humiliated and her cultural context disrespected. Farouk Hosni, then minister of culture, protested publicly at the German Museum, not because the bust was part of an art installation but, rather, because it was considered insensitive to the cultural history of Egypt. A queen in Ancient Egypt would never be shown naked; rather, she could be shown wearing a transparent garment. The Egyptian public also expressed their discontent at what was perceived as an act of insensitivity by the artists and the denial of any cultural rights by the museum management. Proponents of keeping the bust in Berlin cite this incident: if the bust was returned, such artistic insensitive expressions would no longer be possible.¹⁰⁸

Nefertiti's bust, with its imperialist, nationalist identities, is also a symbol of the social disease of nostalgia and longing widespread today in Egypt and Germany. The nationalists in Egypt long for the glorious past of Ancient Egypt, and the Western neo-imperialists long for the time when it was possible to populate museums with objects of other cultures. The keeping of the bust of Nefertiti, regardless of all Egyptian attempts at repatriation since it was put on display, shows how German imperialism has attempted to relive its own lost victory over the culture of other nations.¹⁰⁹ Jean Baudrillard explains how modern is "cold," while the ancient is usually "warm" because things in the museum allow the visitor to usurp and thereby "tame the cultural other."¹¹⁰ With the controlled keeping of the bust and the refusal to even loan it to Egypt,¹¹¹ the Neues Museum has kept the "cultural other" –

¹⁰⁴ *Deutschland Funkkultur*, Frust junger Männer entlädt sich in sexueller Gewalt, https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/aegypten-frust-junger-maenner-entlaedt-sich-in-sexueller.1008.de.html?dram:article_id=342325 (accessed 25 April 2023).

¹⁰⁵ Urice 2006, 154.

¹⁰⁶ Breger 2005, 136.

¹⁰⁷ Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 2.

¹⁰⁸ Urice 2006, 154.

¹⁰⁹ Stewart 1993, 42; Lydon and Rizvi 2016, 305.

¹¹⁰ Baudrillard 1981, 68; see also Stewart 1993, 146.

¹¹¹ Ikram 2010, 148.

metonymically Egypt – under German control as a token of neocolonialism today. This might also relate to why the Altes Museum agreed to the artistic display by Little Warsaw as part of German diplomacy toward the occupation of Poland during World War II. Controlling power using the past is an everyday political play, whether by national agendas, governments, or museums.¹¹² The past has usually been created by white supremacism that tries to dominate the future of the “Other’s” history.¹¹³

The bust of Nefertiti is at the heart of how Germany, Poland, and other countries gathered under the West’s attempt to continue the domination of the memories of the present by riding the waves of globalization through the “universal” museums.¹¹⁴ Offering training and scholarship for the young inspectors of the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities (MoTA) through the Deutsches Archäologisches Institut in Egypt that Borchardt created, German Egyptology has tried to provide a niche for itself in the neocolonialist discourse of providing cultural and political assistance to the once culturally colonized states to ensure that no new claims to the stolen heritage would be made. There is still a politically motivated imagination that the West is the benchmark for creativity and innovation, making the “Other” invisibly feed on the visibility of Western cultural identity.¹¹⁵ The “scholarly” publications on the history of collecting Egyptian “objects” that radically deny the social history of the objects and their archaeological context show how the museums are still locked in imperial fantasies or the colonialist perception of material culture.¹¹⁶ Unfortunately, how archaeological research has been shaped and controlled concomitates how particular nation-states interact economically, culturally, and politically.¹¹⁷ Both Germany and Egypt have turned to archaeology to imagine national confidence in which Nefertiti’s bust continues to play a fundamental role.¹¹⁸ Imperialist archaeology has always been at work, making Indigenous communities or the subaltern invisible only to appropriate their pasts. The West has hence become the rightful heir of Ancient Egypt through a system of knowledge production that controls Egyptian heritage.¹¹⁹

The books about the Egyptian past are usually written in European languages and seldom translated into other languages, also causing a radical barrier of accessibility between the communities and the knowledge produced about their cultural heritage. This lack of access to knowledge is the case with Egyptian archaeology and Egyptians. Modern Egyptians are ridiculed for their lack of interest (or inability to access the knowledge written in a foreign language) in archaeology that is then translated to justify why Western museums should not repatriate Egyptian heritage, basing their dubious rationale on the discontinuity pretext.¹²⁰ The campaign to repatriate objects led by Mubarak’s regime before it was toppled in 2011 was silenced.¹²¹ Western voices used looting and illicit digging in Egypt to produce Egypt as a risk zone, unable to keep its museums and archaeological sites safe.¹²² In the 1980s, several critics in Germany felt that the bust belonged to Egypt and should be repatriated. A movement under the title “Nefertiti Wants to Go Home” was started by Herbert Ganslmayr and Gerd von Paczensky.¹²³ When Egypt has asked for the repatriation of the bust or its loan

¹¹² Hamilakis and Yalouri 1996, 119–24.

¹¹³ Hamilakis 2018, 520.

¹¹⁴ Fiskesjö 2010, 305.

¹¹⁵ Lydon and Rizvi 2016, 305.

¹¹⁶ Appadurai 1988.

¹¹⁷ Trigger 1984, 356.

¹¹⁸ Trigger 1984, 358.

¹¹⁹ Trigger 1984, 365; Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 124, 199.

¹²⁰ Urice 2006, 154–56; Culbertson 2012, 61–66; Tyldesley 2018, 157–77; Hanna 2022, 87–101.

¹²¹ Waxman 2008, 60.

¹²² Culbertson 2012, 61–66.

¹²³ Tyldesley 2018, 157–77.

in the past decade, Dietrich Wildung has cited that the bust was too fragile to travel. Yet it was fit enough for the artistic experiment by Little Warsaw, and claims that the bust is safer in Berlin than anywhere else become unsubstantiated with the recent heist of Saxon royal jewelry,¹²⁴ the fire in the Berlin Science Museum,¹²⁵ the theft of the “Big Maple Leaf” gold coin,¹²⁶ and the looting of the medals at the Stasi museum.¹²⁷ Even the Neues Museum was also a victim of attacks in 2020.¹²⁸ Conservation and preservation of material culture is primarily a Western notion that is highly problematized when examined closely. It usually masks an exercise of power and political domination that serves cultural hegemony under the pretext of “stewardship of the record.”¹²⁹

Finally, the contested heritage represented in Nefertiti’s bust is not entirely legal or a matter of restitution only. The bust of Nefertiti is an example of how the West has usurped and appropriated the past of other cultures and is forcing through neocolonialist endeavors the acceptance not only of the status quo but also of the Western stance as a noble, selfless act of salvaging these objects from uneducated and unappreciative people. The role of archaeologists and heritage specialists is evolving from producers of publications for academic consumption to facilitators whose responsibility is to enable local stakeholders.¹³⁰ This should be extended to museum curators of contested objects, who must start questioning the ethical position of their collections. It is contemptuous to see how Western governments call for repatriating refugees who risk their lives and families as asylum seekers in Europe. Still, they never call for the repatriation of the objects associated with these peoples’ cultural histories or heritage.

The bust of Nefertiti’s restitution should not be the end goal but, rather, the beginning of the reparation of the cultural violence produced by Borchardt through the fraud he committed in 1913, further supported by Hitler and the Nazi regime and endorsed additionally by other Western institutions such as the British Museum and the “Monuments Men.” The restitution of the bust is also an invitation to reposition the universalist museum institutions to help them move from the nineteenth century to the twenty-first century – from institutions that house loot and stories of violence to institutions that promote democracy and equality. Nefertiti’s bust has proved to be a social agent both in Germany and Egypt; she has finished her “diplomatic term” in Berlin’s society and should be safely repatriated to al-Minya, where its donator James Simon had conditioned in 1920 and argued for her return in 1930. The reparation of more than 100 years of cultural colonialism lies not only in the repatriation of objects symbolic of power but also in restituting the agency of producing knowledge about the Egyptian past through repatriated objects. Perhaps “the most beautiful immigrant” in Berlin could get a chance to come home.¹³¹

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¹²⁴ NBC News, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/germany-jewelry-heist-art-experts-fear-stolen-treasures-will-be-n1091326?fbclid=IwAR3h2fjlrL0mzGikANI3Gs6buf4ARglQ6A_EdQUsbX3rehkT5g-Kg7Oz728 (accessed 25 April 2023).

¹²⁵ *The Art Newspaper*, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/fire-consumes-depot-at-deutsches-museum> (accessed 25 April 2023).

¹²⁶ *The Guardian*, 10 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jan/10/four-men-to-go-on-trial-for-giant-gold-coin-heist-from-berlin-museum> (accessed 25 April 2023).

¹²⁷ *The Guardian*, 2 December 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/dec/02/thieves-take-medals-and-jewellery-from-berlin-stasi-museum> (accessed 25 April 2023).

¹²⁸ BBC News, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54626632> (accessed 25 April 2023).

¹²⁹ Hamilakis 2005, 100; Edwards, Gosden, and Phillips 2006, 19–20.

¹³⁰ Meskell 2010, 855.

¹³¹ She was called Berlin’s most beautiful immigrant (‘*Berlin ist, wenn die schönste Bewohnerin Migrationshintergrund hat*’) by the *Berliner Morgenpost*’s advertisement campaign in 2015.

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