



ESSEX EGYPTOLOGY GROUP - REVIEW

November 2021 Meeting

by Margaret Patterson

"Jewels of the Nile: Ancient Egyptian Treasures from the Collection of the Worcester Art Museum"

Dr Peter Lacovara

At the beginning of November 2021 Dr Peter Lacovara (<https://peterlacovara.com/>) talked to us via Zoom about an upcoming exhibition, Jewels of the Nile (<https://www.worcesterart.org/exhibitions/jewels-of-the-nile/>), which will be opening on 18th June 2022 at Worcester Art Museum (<https://www.worcesterart.org/>), MA and running until the end of January 2023. He began by giving us some background as to how he got involved with the collection at Worcester Art Museum (and subsequently the exhibition). When he moved from the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston in the late 1990s to the Michael C. Carlos Museum in Atlanta the latter museum had a small collection of Egyptian objects and his brief was to expand it. He got a grant from the Museum Loan Network Grant Collections to visit the museums in New England (which were the ones he knew best) to look at what they had in storage, and then have pieces conserved/repared and loaned to the Michael C. Carlos Museum. And so he ended up at the Worcester Art Museum looking at what they had in storage, and he said he was amazed by the collection of Egyptian jewellery that they had - more extensive and more genuine than in most small museums, even though a lot of it had been restrung by Boston jewellers to suit early 20th Century tastes! In the Q&A we came back to this issue of restringing, and Lacovara said that he thought none of the necklaces had been in their original stringing. They were careful to document how they had been strung, but then disassembled the pieces and restrung them using excavated pieces as models.

Most of the collection had been donated by a woman called Laura Norcross Marris in the early 20th Century. She was born Laura Norcross in 1845, the daughter of a mayor of Boston called Otis Norcross and she married a rich Bostonian called Kingsmill Marris. Her father owned a business importing porcelain and antiques from China, and her brother was a print collector. It's not a surprise, therefore, that she was interested in collecting both antiquities and prints, which was an interest she shared with her husband. They were both avid travellers and in the early years of the 20th Century they set off on a grand tour of the world, during which they visited in Egypt in 1908. They fell in love with the country! Lacovara showed us a photo from a comical photography studio that they posed for during their visit - one of those pictures with the faces of the subjects peering through the holes in the cardboard props, in this case a pair of Egyptian coffins.

In Luxor Laura and her husband met Howard Carter. He had originally been employed in Egypt based on his skill as an artist - he was the son of an animal painter called Samuel John Carter. Lacovara showed us a painting by Carter's father which was a self-portrait of himself on a horse accompanied by a young

Howard. Prior to his discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun Carter was famous for his paintings of Egyptian scenes (both in the sense of painting landscapes and in the sense of making copies of reliefs). Laura Norcross Marris also shared Howard Carter's love of the natural world. She became entranced with Carter's watercolours as an art collector – and in fact Worcester Art Museum has more Carter watercolours (from her bequest) than anywhere else. They corresponded after she returned from Egypt, and the topic of his art and the specific paintings are a significant part of this correspondence – including discussions of the things he painted for her, like scenes from Deir el-Bahri or Seti I's tomb. As well as writing to each other he also visited the Marris at their villa in Florence.

As well as collecting Carter's paintings Laura Norcross Marris also bought antiquities, which was legal at that time. Howard Carter provided advice to her about what to buy etc. She bought much from a man called Mohamed Mohassib, who had a shop in Luxor at that time. In addition to his advice Carter would also collect things for her, and write to her to tell her that he had such & such "reserved for her" to purchase. Laura didn't just collect jewellery, she also bought other sorts of Egyptian antiquities with Carter's advice. Lacovara said that much of this collection is very interesting (not just beautiful). For instance he showed us an obsidian fist from the collection – this was part of a composite statue dating to the reign of Amenhotep III found in the Karnak Cachette. There is also an obsidian face of Amenhotep III from the same excavation that's now in the Cairo Museum. The obsidian has been analysed and it comes from Ethiopia, which gives some idea of the trade networks at the time.

Another interesting piece that Lacovara showed us is a fragment of a large glass vessel from the tomb of Amenhotep II – the bulk of the pieces are in the Cairo Museum. There is also a carnelian head of a Nubian, that is probably New Kingdom in date and probably from the Valley of the Kings – it looks a lot like the Nubian heads at the bottom of one of Tutankhamun's cosmetic vessels (click through for my photo of that vessel

<https://photos.talesfromthetwolands.org/picture.php?/625/>).

Lacovara also showed us a gold spacer piece from a collar with the name of Queen Tiye on, and a jasper “menat” amulet which had broken before carving was complete and discarded.

There are also several vessels in the collection, and Lacovara showed us a few alabaster ones dating to the New Kingdom. There is also a set of cosmetic vessels which date to the Middle Kingdom – they have only one parallel, which is now in the Louvre (I think he said). The set is made of anhydrite, which a grey blue colour and was only popular in the Middle Kingdom. Lacovara finished off this section of the talk with another couple of interesting items – an alabaster spatula and a bowl with a spout. The spatula is some sort of cosmetic implement, and there has been a recent discovery of others of this type in Nubia. The bowl dates to the Middle Kingdom and was used to crush things like flower petals.

Lacovara now moved on to discuss the jewellery in the collection – this was Laura Norcross Marris's passion and so most of the collection is jewellery. He began by reminding us that most Ancient Egyptian jewellery is amuletic in nature – it has specific functions with specific items being worn or placed in particular places. This is also important in funerary contexts and texts like the Book of the Dead detail where each amulet should be placed on the body in order to maximise their protective effects. For the remainder of the talk Lacovara showed us several very beautiful pieces of jewellery (which were all fantastically photographed).

One of the pieces was a lovely little golden fish amulet, which was in the shape of the Nile catfish – this fish swims upside down in the Nile catching flies and bugs that fall into the water, so it was seen as a protection against drowning. It would be worn hanging down from a lock of hair, and an amulet of this type features in the

story of Khufu and the magician – Khufu is bored and it's suggested he should get his concubines to row a boat up and down on the river for his enjoyment. While they are doing this one of the girls loses her fish amulet and is inconsolable – no other piece of jewellery will do, so Khufu asks the magician to retrieve it for her which he does by parting the waters to reveal the amulet on the river bed.

The collection has several carnelian heart amulets, as well as many heart scarabs in different materials. These are two different sorts of amulet – the heart scarabs are no longer shaped like a heart, instead they are an abstracted form of a scarab beetle. They are the ones that are placed over the heart in order to stop the heart speaking out against the deceased during the judgement, which Lacovara compared to the Fifth Amendment in the US! The collection has a very early example of this sort of amulet, in gold, and also lots of others in other materials. In the New Kingdom they particularly prized different coloured stones (such as carnelian, amethyst, rock crystal and so on), and then after that through to the Late Period faience was the material of choice. There are also several scarab amulets set into rings – this was a common thing to do in Ancient Egypt from the Middle Kingdom onward. So some of the rings in the collection are actual ancient rings, but many of them were re-set in modern times. The scarab rings include one that's got a human head instead of a beetle one, as well as others that are scarab-type but not shaped like beetles.

While Lacovara was showing us some of the beads in the collection he told us a bit about how they were made. There is a scene in the tomb of Sobekhotep (a New Kingdom official buried in TT63) which shows artisans drilling holes in beads for stringing as jewellery. The Egyptian artisans used a tool called a bow drill. The drill bit is in an arrow like stick which has a capstone where there would be feathers on an arrow. The string of the bow is wrapped around the arrow, and then moving the bow will turn the arrow and the user presses the bit down into the bead as it turns. With time, and skill, a hole will be drilled. The Ancient Egyptians didn't drill all the way through in one go, instead the craftsman would turn the bead over and drill another hole from the other side and the two would meet in the middle. This didn't always work out, and one of the beads that Lacovara showed us had almost been a failure – the two holes met sufficiently to string the bead but weren't very well lined up. This is actually one way to tell forgeries from genuine beads – has the hole been done in one go, or is it two holes?

The beads are made of many semi-precious stones some of which aren't quite in the forms that the names conjure up in the heads of modern audiences. The amethyst used in Ancient Egypt is generally quite pale in colour – the richer dark colour is rarer and only used in royal jewels. Garnet was a popular stone in the Middle Kingdom, but it wasn't the reddish colour we think of. Instead it was dark and almost black – in part this is because the beads are effectively pebbles of garnet that have been polished and drilled, rather than the faceted stones we are used to. Carnelian is a popular stone for necklaces in Ancient Egypt, and Lacovara showed us some examples from both the Middle Kingdom and the New Kingdom. The Middle Kingdom ones were anklets with claw shaped beads – there is some debate as to what the significance of these are, they may be intended to represent the dew claw of a bird or of a cat. Another popular design for carnelian beads, this time in the New Kingdom, is the poppy. The model is the corn poppy, but some scholars suggest that the intended resemblance is also to the opium poppy.

There are also necklaces in the collection with golden flies amongst the beads – these are similar in design to the famous ones from Ahhotep's tomb (which are now in the Luxor Museum). This design appears to have originated in Nubia and subsequently become a military award. And then in the New Kingdom flies became common as a jewellery element. There are also necklaces that are reminiscent in style to the gold of honour handed out by the king to prominent courtiers he wished

to reward – although some still have gold discs others are replicated in faience. Faience is also extensively used in another common form of necklace – the broad collar. In the New Kingdom the Egyptians discovered how to colour faience in more than just shades of blue, so faience broad collars mimicking floral garlands became more common (previous they would've been made with more expensive semi-precious stones).

Earrings were also popular items of jewellery and there are several in the collection. The ones Lacovara showed us were penannular ones (a ring with a bit of the circumference missing), which are first seen in depictions of Nubians in Ancient Egyptian reliefs. They became popular in the New Kingdom and have been found in tombs (on ears) in multiples – as Lacovara pointed out they are heavy pieces of jewellery and probably pinched a bit while being worn. There are also signet rings in the collection, particularly with cartouches of Amenhotep III and Tutankhamun. These would've been given out as favours to courtiers.

The price of jewellery was outside the range of most Egyptians. We've got an idea of prices during the Ramesside Period from the documents at Deir el Medina, and a carnelian necklace was worth about 5 deben. To put this in context Lacovara told us that a coffin would cost about 25 deben, and your coffin would likely be the most expensive thing you would ever buy. It's hard to translate into modern terms, however, as the records don't say what material it's a deben of (a deben is a unit of weight) – it could be copper, silver, or gold. But it's likely to be in the tens of thousands of dollars/pounds range for a single string carnelian necklace. In later periods jewellery got cheaper – Lacovara read us a bit of text of someone essentially complaining about this. Jewellery was a status indicator and the author of the text was complaining about milkmaids having necklaces that "should" only be worn by higher class people!

From the Roman Period glass got more plentiful and cheaper – in early times it was restricted to royalty – and the collection contains some glass pieces from this time. It's also only in the Roman Period that sapphire began to be used for beads – hard stones like that were too difficult to work with until the Romans brought new technology.

To close out his talk Lacovara also showed us a few other pieces that will be in the exhibition which are not from the Marrs bequest. These included a head of Montuhotep III which was found at Armant, a relief of Ay as a fan bearer (so prior to his becoming Pharaoh), and a plaque of a Meroitic prince smiting many many enemies. Lacovara noted that often Meroitic work is overlooked as the sandstone they used tends to be quite coarse, but this piece uses a much finer piece of stone and so looks more impressive.

The catalogue for the exhibition

[\(https://smile.amazon.co.uk/Jewels-Nile-Egyptian-Treasures-Worcester/dp/1911282794/\)](https://smile.amazon.co.uk/Jewels-Nile-Egyptian-Treasures-Worcester/dp/1911282794/)

is already out and in the Q&A one of our group members said she already had a copy and was recommending it particularly for the photographs of the collection. The exhibition itself got delayed by covid-19, but as Lacovara noted that means that it lines up with the centenary of Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun which feels appropriate given Carter's involvement in the acquisition of the collection.

My write up can't do justice to this talk – the photographs of the collection were very well done and let us appreciate the beauty of this collection, and really if you weren't there to see them then you've missed out! The exhibition sounds well worth a visit if you're likely to be near Worcester MA in the right time frame!