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A Harmonious Existence: The Past with the Present

The past is a part of the present. There are many awe-inspiring artifacts that have survived the passage of time into our present day. There is something quite remarkable in trying to understand the past and incorporate it into our time. The past is not something one finds irrelevant but has an appreciation for as one blends it with elements of today. My research is on exploring the ways this has been done and the benefits that have risen from these methods. The old blended with the new helps us understand and connect with the past. My paper will explore two cases, one from the perspective of artwork as a modern element that enhances the original form. The other case is from the perspective of looking at how forms of technology such as electronic devices and light and sound help viewers engage with the past. These two cases will center on how modern elements blended with the past increase appreciation and awareness of history, allowing engagement with the past in familiar and novel ways. Then, I will compare and contrast the two cases, mainly focusing on their similarities and how they achieve similar kinds of appreciation. I would like to acknowledge that there have been considerations surrounding privacy and the finality of a burial within a cultural context of the subject in the first case and technology being a distracting component in archaeological displays in the second, but my paper will support and focus on the perspective that techniques of the present enhance our process in understanding and appreciating the past. I argue that modern elements blended with the past are constructive and should be embraced.

Incorporation of recently made artwork into archaeological displays has a complementary



effect on the original forms, emphasizing important features or revealing the underlying essence. In the Ashmolean Museum, there is a mummified boy on display. Next to it is the artwork of Angela Palmer, who transcribed MRI and CT scans of the mummified child using ink on sheets of glass. The glass sheets create a new

coffin for the young Egyptian boy's body. The boy was about 18 months old, his body dating to the first or second century C.E. (Riggs). When approaching Palmer's piece, one encounters the

111 panes of glass with the life-size image of the mummified boy hand drawn in ink by Angela Palmer.
Source: angelaspalmer.com

mystery that evokes that of the young Egyptian boy. In "Angela Palmer's Child of Our Time," Michael Philo says that the artwork

is so detailed that "the visitor would be forgiven for thinking that they were looking at the soul of this tiny being, flitting in and out of vision." One can only see sheets of glass when looking straight on at the sides of the panels. Palmer describes her work: The image floats ethereally in its glass chamber, but can only be viewed from certain angles — from above and from the side the image vanishes and the viewer sees only a void (Gross). Her art emulates the mysterious nature and the unknown that comes with a concealed figure. In her book *Unwrapping Ancient*

Egypt, Christina Riggs describes Palmer's piece noting that "[t]echnology reveals what is beneath the skin, but it can only do so through an image" (213). There is no single image and the transcription of the child's body cannot be seen from all angles, inviting the viewer to move around the piece. Engagement in this manner with the artwork promotes understanding beyond a single perspective.

The viewer can view the body from multiple angles, through both the artwork and the original mummified boy himself as they are not displayed against a wall but as a pair in the center of the space. Moving around the two displays invites reflection from one to the other. Visual media "assists...in critical self-reflection, challenging, changing, and expanding our visions of the past" (Van Dyke). The audience begins to learn about the child through the corporal art piece, leading them to learn about his story. The artwork complements the mummified boy as a first step into understanding the past. Through Palmer's piece one can appreciate and really see the extent of and skill in preservation of the human body in Ancient Egypt. Philo argues that technology of the Egyptians is matched by the technology of today, forcing viewers to wonder what lies beneath the wrappings, beyond Palmer's work. He also points out that it "provides rare human insight



The space in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, England shows the two displays side by side. To the left is the mummified 18-month old boy from the 1st or 2nd century and to the right is Angela Palmer's piece.
Source: Ashmolean Museum - Instagram

into one particular story as opposed to the intertwined and complex history of pharaohs” (Philo). The mummified boy is humanized, seen beyond the surface level of which mummified bodies are typically viewed today (Day). Palmer’s glass piece has the audience engage with the mummified boy beyond the perspectives of media representation and commercialization of human bodies that have been mummified. Having the mummified child side-by-side with Palmer’s medical art joins two worlds, “creating something new for the present” (Philo). The 111 panes of glass provide much detail for the viewer to ponder and engage with, providing a platform to increase our understanding of the child’s story. Angela Palmer’s artwork thoughtfully parallels the original mummified child, evoking the hidden nature of the single, original display. Riggs claims that “[w]ith the inked image out of sight, concealed by glass edges and the spaces in between them, the coffin remains shut, the wrapping intact” (215). The body disappearing and appearing from different angles also serves as a reminder in respecting that the body itself is hidden. The glass display enhances and provides a novel way to approach the same concept. The layers upon layers of glass that are encoded with the past parallel the layers one is adding in the present. With the original mummified boy and the artwork of today, an extension of history into the present. It is a new way to engage with the past, increasing our understanding of it in the context of the present day.

Another display that incorporates modern elements is the London Mithraeum. Technological advances such as devices, lighting and sound aid us in understanding the past by helping us personally connect with it. They aid in reconstructing and imagining what existed, and they are means through which approaching archaeology becomes unique and personal.



Reconstruction of the London Mithraeum heavily involved making the atmosphere authentic. *Local*



Projects, a New York-based design company won the mini competition for designing the London Mithraeum display because of their idea

to

Parts 3 and 4 of the four-part sequence create sensory atmospheres by using light and sound in the displays - Above is Part 3, or the mezzanine level, with interactive displays among the dark walls showing changing and fading images.

Below is Part 4 which shows the actual ruins of the Mithraeum. Light recreates the walls in the space, aiding viewers in imagining structures that are no longer present as they walk around the site. Sources: *Society for Experiential Graphic Design* and *CNN*

“put all didactic content in the spaces that visitors see before coming into the temple display, and then to create an atmosphere that gives visitors space to use their imagination”

(Krakowka). Scholars thought that dramatic lighting was involved in mithraic rituals so it became the key element of the display. Mithras was also sometimes associated with the sun god (Krakowka). Light is a fitting medium as it relates to the temple and its dynamic usage allows the creation of an authentic atmosphere. The team worked with a design artist to create walls and columns of light that fade in and out to a soundtrack that gives a sense of what may have occurred in the temple. Sound was a little more difficult to incorporate as mithraic rituals are a mystery. The designers were aided by Roman scholars to create a soundtrack of religious rituals and initiations, including the feasting and drinking that were a part of them. The soundtrack also incorporates the writings on the walls of a mithraeum beneath a church in Rome (Krakowka). The thoughtfulness in reconstructing the Mithraeum for visitors, including the experience leading up to the temple display, shows how modern elements can promote appreciation and a better understanding of the past. The Mithraeum itself is the last of a four-part sequence. The first part on ground level is a contemporary art gallery that changes periodically to showcase contemporary takes and viewpoints of the historical area of Roman London. Then the space leads to a case of artifacts found during excavation. The viewer can pick up an electronic tablet next to the display case to learn more about each artifact. The original form and digital information format “need not compete with each other” but “result in greater levels of engagement” (Frost). In this part, the electronic tablet is incorporated into the small space that



Parts 1 and 2 of the four-part sequence of the London Mithraeum

Above is Part 1 which shows the entrance at ground level where contemporary art is displayed and changed periodically. Pictured is the artwork of Daniel Silver titled *Human Activity*. This was the artwork displayed at the time when visiting the London Mithraeum and when this paper was written (Fall 2019). Below is Part 2 with the interactive electronic tablets on the left wall for visitors to learn more about the artefacts in the display case.

Sources: *Goppion Technology* and mfa.london.gov.uk

consists of what is a solo display case of many artifacts. The viewer can see the original artifact but then also gather and select what he or she would like to learn about in depth. The electronic tablet does not replace the actual artifact, but enhances and takes into consideration the amount of space in which users are obtaining information. It also allows them to selectively focus on artifacts they choose to further explore, personalizing the experience for each visitor which increases engagement. A staircase then leads to a mezzanine level that sets the atmosphere for the Mithraeum. There are interactive informational displays and the dark walls occasionally display information and figures associated with the Mithraeum (Krakowka, "London Mithraeum"). The use of technology to display information at certain points in time for specific periods of time allows visitors to take in the information and then reflect as they prepare to see the Mithraeum. The use of technology allows different ways to interact with the information, from the electronic table stands that allow the visitor to choose what he or she would like to learn more about to the fleeting sounds and words on the walls in the dark room. The atmosphere of the room, which uses dim lighting and the sounds, prepares the visitors for the Mithraeum. The room focuses on the visitor's agency in approaching the underground temple. He or she can choose what he or she wants to learn more about and/or sit on the benches in the darkness of the other side of the room, reflecting within the preparatory atmosphere. When one enters the Mithraeum, it is dark, but then the mystery within the darkness slowly becomes uncovered through the gradual use of light. Visitors can walk around the temple or sit as the light and sound display takes place, with the walls made of light, being a slight barrier, as a reminder that it is a sacred space. The use of "special lighting to draw out details obscured by age, use, and environmental damage; imaging that makes use of specialized photographic intermediates; or imaging of such high resolution that the study of artifactual characteristics is possible" (Conway) aids the viewer in understanding how the temple may have been used. The columns of light appearing and disappearing not only give a sense of the structure of the Mithraeum but also allow viewers to use their imagination. In *Making Histories in Museums*, Gaynor Kavanagh claims that "[w]hether the messages are constructed in the mind of the curator and articulated through the design strategy of an exhibit, or in the imagination of the visitor and explored through memory and conversation, the impressions made can be long lasting and deeply

affecting.” The London Mithraeum makes use of both careful design and the imagination of the visitors moved by it. The use of light and sound technologies brings the past to the present. Design leader Jake Barton quoted Christopher Woodward as an inspiration: A ruin is an incomplete dialogue between an incomplete reality and the imagination of the spectator (Krakowka). The modern elements bring the past together with the context of today, which includes the interaction and imagination of its visitors. The old blending with the new allows visitors to experience Roman London. The various elements in a museum display from lighting to sculptural media make visual communication complex. Integration is key for a dynamic experience. The visitor becomes an active participant rather than a passive spectator when considering the visitor’s movement through the space (Huhtamo). These mediums encourage engagement with history and thought rather than distraction from the space. Their addition is purposeful. Respecting an artifact involves the process of trying, whether consciously or subconsciously, to understand the significance of its time. Thoughtful construction of the museum using light and sound creates a space that helps the audience understand as much as possible and even experience what is a mystery. Visitors do not just see Roman London, but take part in it through these technologies.

The mirrored artwork with the mummified child in the Ashmolean Museum and the London Mithraeum exemplify thoughtful detail in incorporating the new with the old. Both displays highlight the use of techniques from the present to learn more about the past. While both displays are artistically designed, my paper centers on the Ashmolean Museum’s glass sheet display as a direct piece of artwork. The London Mithraeum incorporates electronic devices, light, and sound to create an overall artistic flow through the museum. The “new” is structured in a way that flows and has a process of leading the audience to a deeper meaning. Content should be structured in a way that encourages visitors to view the exhibit from a specific placement in the room (Heath). In the Ashmolean Museum, the display is a pair in a shared space. Individuals can move around both in the same manner. The encouragement of looking at both in similar ways has the audience contemplate the relationship between them, finding what artwork reveals about the original form. The wrappings are unraveled through the connections made. The Mithraeum also carefully incorporates the new in a thoughtful and gradual manner that makes

use of the space, guiding the senses to approach the Mithraeum in a similar way as those in Londinium did. One first enters seeing contemporary art. This serves as an introduction to the Mithraeum while the artwork in the Ashmolean is directly next to the mummified boy and mirrors it, even to the detail of the likeness between the glass surrounding the child and the glass sheets of the artwork creating a similar coffin structure. The contemporary art in the Mithraeum and Palmer's work serve as introductions, with Palmer's work particularly involved from beginning to end in the display. A unique feature of the Mithraeum is the use of electronic tablets. Individual technology should be mindfully added, depending on the space, to ensure that people are focused on the artifact itself (Heath). The tablets serve as an aid. One can still see the actual artifact, but gather information in a more personalized way that makes use of the space well. The virtual application gives control to the visitors who can find their personal interest within the exhibit (Bandelli). Electronic tablets minimize crowding compared to a physical description on the display case. Visitors have the chance to see the original artifacts then pick up a tablet to learn more about them from wherever they see fit to stand around the case. Then as one walks down the stairs like that of the actual Mithraeum, the senses are prepared for the final section of the museum, the Mithraeum itself. The details within the dim room come from light and sound, similar to the display of the actual Mithraeum. The details of the Ashmolean display come from the delicate outlines on each panel of glass. Together the collective image appears then disappears similar to lights and sounds of the Mithraeum. The displays similarly call the viewer to use his or her imagination. With the Ashmolean display, what lies beneath is given in ink. In the Mithraeum, the structures that no longer exist are given through light. Both implore the use of fleeting images and encourage imagination or further thought. The past has left its "traces on [its] modern counterparts.... Awareness of the historical roots of archaeological representation is thus necessary because it demonstrates how closely connected the early and current reconstructions of the past are" (Goshen, et al.). A deeper discovery of the past through the modern elements increases appreciation of the past and its connection to the present. Through these methods, some mystery is uncovered. Blending the old with the new promotes interaction, which is "an inherent property of any [medium] that promises physical and sensory, in addition to mental, activity and response" (Roussou). Blending the past with present encourages finding

the associations between them. Both cases encourage a response, with an emphasis on the senses in the London Mithraeum. Institutions are recognizing that exhibitions can “support experiences in more flexible, creative and empowering ways” and are “tuning their modes of delivery and audience engagement to the emerging channels of our evolving digital society” (Parry). One’s interactions with the past allow it to continue its existence into the present. It can be done in novel ways that make the past more relatable. In a sense, how one engages with it becomes a part of its history.

The past and present coexist and complement each other, seen in the exploration of two different, but actually rather similar cases. Blending the past with the present increases awareness, engagement with, and appreciation of historical details. The resources of today can help us understand the past more. Media one has access to now support one’s endeavors in engaging and approaching the artifacts in a respectful way by guiding the process. One’s interactions with the past allow it to continue its existence into the present. One’s imagination and thoughts enable this. Modern elements can definitely be blended effectively with archaeology. They promote associations between ideas and inner thoughts that may not come out otherwise. It is momentous when one can connect the past with the present and appreciate what one has and where one is today through mindful use of the available means and ultimately, reflection.

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