

Audio Documentary: AUC Artifacts Uncovered by Reem Gehad Fathy

[Music Fade-in: “The Night Fatma was arrested” by Omar Khairat and Fade-out at 00.33]

[3 seconds into the music] Hidden under The American University of Cairo’s (AUC) Tahrir downtown campus is a collection of over 1600 artifacts.

Spanning across the eras, from Pharonic to Greco-roman to Coptic and Islamic times, these pieces have also carried a history of the university that remained unspoken of until early 2011.

On the 28th of March, *The Independent*, a student on-campus newspaper, uncovered that a number of artifacts were stolen from the university. For the first time, light was shed on this artifacts collection in the larger AUC community.

Current AUC President Lisa Anderson speaks on this.

ANDERSON: Well, we had stored underneath the Ewart Hall, in the Tahrir campus, a set of antiquities that had been collected by several faculty and one former president, in the anticipation ultimately of bringing them either to another site downtown or to the new campus for display. And in the confusion that attended the move, we sort of forgot about them, I think it’s fair to say. We were moving so many other things that we didn’t really have time to think about that. And then, it was discovered, actually not directly, but somebody reported to us that somebody was trying to sell property of the university [laughs] and it turned back – it turned out - that we worked back and realized that some of these antiquities, which were completely registered with the supreme council and so forth and so on, had been stolen. And that’s how we discovered the theft. (:66)

[Music fade-in: “The Night Fatma was arrested” by Omar Khairat at 0.45 of music]

A confidential source explains that one of the six accused had left the university in December 2010, but returned to his manager later with a CD containing pictures of artifacts. He claimed that he and five other men who worked at AUC stole these items from the basement located under Ewart Hall, but after he had a disagreement with them, he decided to report on the theft.

The university then started an internal investigation. Negotiations took place with a number of the men in question and the university tried to get them to return the stolen pieces, but without any success. The case was then referred to Egyptian authorities and the men were tried before the military courts due to military rule after the 25th of January Revolution. In May, five men received prison sentences. However, one of them was released recently. And the sixth man, who reported the incident, was innocent in the eyes of the law.

[Music fade-out at 2 seconds of the following sound bite]

ANDERSON: It was a... as thieves often are... a very complicated set of relationships as far as we could tell. We did do an internal investigation and concluded that although clearly people in charge of the downtown campus, in charge of inventory control, and in charge of security had been negligent, we did not ultimately conclude that they were criminally negligent if you will. So they were reprimanded, but

not.. we didn't go any further than that. Part of the reason for that was that the responsibility was so widespread, because it was a matter of security, it was a matter of facilities and it was a matter of inventory control, it was a – you know – lots and lots of people should have done things they didn't do and I think it was a useful lesson to them and I think our inventory control and lots of things are much better now than it was. (:58) [Fade out at “better now than it was”]

[Music Fade-in: “Don't Lose Your Mind” by Omar Khairat at 1.30 of music]

[2 seconds into music] After the theft, Zahi Hawass, former head of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, wrote to Anderson suggesting that it was safer for the AUC artifacts collection to be put in a storage place in Fustat in old Cairo.

ANDERSON: It is true, they did offer - the Supreme Council did offer, and we may actually, once we've done, not just an inventory of what's there, but actually had this arts property group go through the material, we would like to display some of it. [Music fade-out] It is part of the heritage of the university as well as the heritage of the country and so we would like to display it and we hope we'll be able to do that, at least in some ways, as early as February, because the president who is associated with collecting a lot of this, Richard Pedersen, recently died and we want to do a memorial service or a remembrance of him, and it will be nice to be able to display some of this collection at that time... It remains the question once we've decided what we want to display whether it would be better off for us to have the collection or for the supreme council to have control over it. We are perfectly happy to have them be the custodians of it once we've made that decision. And I think they perfectly happy to be in that position as well (:74)

A large number of the artifacts collection was acquired by President Richard Pedersen, who led AUC from 1977-1990.

Rowaida Saad El Din worked in the AUC presidential office [Music fade-in: “The Magical Perfumes” by Omar Khairat at 1.20 of music] from 1981 to 2010 and was there for most of Pedersen's time at AUC.

SAAD EL DIN: He is such a cosmopolitan person and he liked, and he had the fascination for history and literature and developing collections in general. (:14) [Music fade-out]

Professor Kent Weeks, an Egyptology professor at AUC, remembers how President Pederson purchased this collection.

WEEKS: He acquired all of it from licensed dealers in Khan El Khalili [Music fade-in: “Doulab Nahawund” by Zikrayat] in Cairo. And he acquired them by going to the various dealers' shops on Fridays and buying things that he saw and liked. (:24)

This was normal and legal practice back in the 70's and early 80's. There were several shops in Khan El Khalili, a shop at Midan Opera taht became known for selling historical textiles, and there was another famous dealer was off El Mosqui Street and he allegedly sold artifacts not just from Egypt, but from neighbouring countries like Syria.

Pedersen bought a variety of pieces.

SAAD EL DIN: statuettes, woodwork, Coptic cloth, Coptic pieces, shards – yaa'ni – broken pottery... everything that was Islamic, Coptic, Greco-roman, pharaonic.. at the time everything was available, and it was not illegal to buy. (:30) [Music fade-out]

In 1983 Law no. 117 was passed prohibiting the sale of artifacts and calling upon all owners of such pieces to register them with the Supreme Council of Antiquities. AUC followed suit.

SAAD EL DIN: He had the brilliant idea of contacting the Antiquities authority and asking them to check all the collection and register the collection so it was all reregistered and I worked with a group of historians from the authority, the antiquities authority, and we catalogued, we registered, we took photos of every single piece that we had,

Pedersen ultimately intended to create an artifacts museum for AUC.

[Music Fade-in: "Taqaseem 6" by Le Trio Joubran at the very start of music]

WEEKS: I believe that President Pederson's idea was to obtain material, archaeological material that could be displayed in a small museum at AUC. And in fact, if I remember correctly, one of the reasons why AUC acquired what later became the Rare Books Library was because they wanted to use that building, or at least part of that building, as an archaeological museum. (:31)

SAAD EL DIN: He had great hopes, great dreams, he wanted to have a museum, like many universities in the States and Europe, he wanted to have a museum at the university, and he wanted this museum to be accessible to the students for their studies, and to the professors for their classes and to outsiders to see what we have. (:23) [Music fade-out]

WEEKS: The problem with that, to my way of thinking, was that President Pederson acquired this material without consulting anyone. He did not talk to an Islamic archaeologist, although he got some Islamic objects. He did not talk to an Egyptologist, although he acquired a number of ancient Egyptian pieces. They were exclusively his own purchases, he bought them, he arranged for their payment, he bought them to the university and that's all basically anyone at the time knew about the collection (:40)

Weeks had seen some of the collection purchased by President Pederson.

[Music fade-in: "Taqaseem 6" by Le Trio Joubran at where it stopped last]

WEEKS: The objects were all pieces, what the archaeologist calls minor arts and crafts. In other words, there were no big fancy pieces of statuary. There were no rare metal, nothing made of gold, or jewels, or anything like that. These were small pieces, fragmentary pieces, there were pieces of Islamic woodwork, there was Islamic pottery, I believe there were fragments of Islamic glass. There may have been some inscribed material in early Arabic texts. (:38)

SAAD EL DIN: I cannot say they are of little value, but what I can say is that they are not unique, meaning that there are so many copies of Egypt of these pieces. That does not mean that they are of little value. They are valuable, if you look at them in isolation, but they are not unique in the sense that it's one cop out of thousands in Egypt. (:25)

Saad El Din said she couldn't remember why Pedersen never established the museum but she guessed that it was a matter of space and funds.

SAAD EL DIN: First of all, in the beginning, when we were still confined to the campus in town, there was no space, we were in dire need of space, and then when we moved to the new campus, I'm not sure why did they not think of – maybe they thought of it, but maybe financial restrictions, financial constraints, they were unable to create a museum [music fade-out] and a museum is not just a room with secure windows. It has to be well ventilated and temperature is in control, I mean controlled by some device. I mean it's a complicated and very expensive endeavour, very expensive. (:23)

The AUC artifacts, however, are not just made up of Pedersen's collection. Professor of Islamic art George Scanlon found a number of artifacts from his excavations at Fustat.

WEEKS: They were a collection that Dr Scanlon had obtained of broken pieces of pottery, with the permission of the Egyptian antiquities organization and the museum of Islamic art. At the site of Fustat, I would, just s a guess, I would imagine that even though today although much of Fustat has been destroyed and many buildings have been put up there, I would bet that there are probably 200 million pieces of potery in Fustat, lying around in the ground. Dr Scanlon's teaching collection, which he used in his classes on Islamic pottery, I'm guessing that it would have included a few dozen pieces of pottery. (:50)

Scanlon refused to speak about his excavations and findings saying that “it is not worth talking about.”

SAAD EL DIN: He had his collection bylaw. Again, by then he was entitled according to he rules and regulations of the antiquities authority, since he was involved in the excavation he was allowed to keep some of the pieces. These pieces were in his custody. I do not think that they were included with the register that we had for Dr Pedersen's collection. I have no idea what he did with them. (:33)

The AUC Collection doesn't sit alone in the basement under Ewart Hall. Another collection lies there, attributed to its initial owners Gene and Karma Pippin.

SAAD EL DIN: Karma Pippin is a professor, I mean is the wife of professor Pippin who was a professor of literature, English literature at my time at AUC, and she's also the owner of a collection that she donated to AUC. Or she did not really donate to AUC, I think, she entrusted to AUC. (:17)

Gene Pippin taught in the English and Comparative Literature department at AUC and lived with his wife Karma Pippin in Egypt for 15 years. Before they left, Karma Pippin, apparently left the collection at AUC.

SAAD EL DIN: She said this is the collection that my husband accumulated throughout the years and I would like to keep them with AUC for display. I hope you could display them. (:16)

Neither this collection, or AUC's own collection, was ever displayed.

[Music fade-in: "The Night Fatma was arrested" by Omar Khairat at 5.40]

However, a recently established Arts Properties Committee is working on these artifacts, examining whether they could be used for teaching or exhibition purposes.

And yet, Refaei Fattouh, the custodian of the artifacts, refused to speak about Pippin's collection and many others decline to speak like Scanlon. The story of AUC's artifacts is yet to be completed.

[Music stops]