

Antiquities wish list

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Date: **14 - 20 July 2005**

Publication: **AL-AHRAM Issue No. 751**

Egypt has submitted a request to UNESCO asking that five of its most prominent historic treasures -- including the Rosetta Stone -- be returned. Nevine El-Aref reports



The exquisite painted limestone bust of Nefertiti; and the famous Rosetta Stone on display at the British Museum

The summer heat notwithstanding, temperatures are rising in the international antiquities world following a call by Egypt for the return of five Ancient Egyptian pieces on display abroad.

In a speech at a meeting of the Intergovernmental Committee for Promoting the Return of Cultural Property to its Countries of Origin held at UNESCO in Paris, Zahi Hawass, secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), said Egypt had been deprived of five key items of Egypt's cultural heritage. "They should be handed over to us," Hawass said.

The objects in question are the Rosetta Stone, now in the British Museum in London, the bust of Nefertiti in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, the statue of Great

Pyramid architect Hemiunnu in the Roemer-Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim, the Dendara Temple Zodiac in the Louvre in Paris, and the bust of Kephren pyramid builder Ankhaf in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

Hawass urged other countries affected by similar issues to prepare a list of stolen artifacts considered unique and invaluable to their cultural identity that should be handed over for good, or on loan.

Many observers said Hawass was stirring up the past; some described the request as "wishy-washy", mere casual talk in the same manner that he brought the idea up two years ago in a speech at the British Museum to celebrate its 250th anniversary. At the time, Hawass suggested that the Rosetta Stone be loaned to Cairo's Egyptian Museum for three months.

Hawass later told reporters: "If the British want to restore their reputation, they should volunteer to return the Rosetta Stone because it is the icon of our Egyptian identity."

This time Hawass could not be more serious, nor his wording plainer. On Monday he delivered an official request to UNESCO, of which Al-Ahram Weekly has obtained a copy, asking the UN body to act as mediator between Egypt and the countries concerned in the return of these five items, as well as to help Egypt recover treasures plundered and smuggled out of the country since 1970.

"We must build up a strong national campaign to return these unique objects illegally smuggled out of the country during the 19th century," Hawass told the Weekly. He stressed that he was not requesting all the objects on display abroad, but was only asking for the return of items which played an essential part in Egyptian heritage, and others which were part of a shrine or tomb.

"I am not asking for the moon," Hawass said, adding that Italy had recently returned the 1,700-year-old Aksum obelisk to Ethiopia after 68 years since it had been taken to Italy illegally.

Hawass claimed that the Rosetta Stone -- which was discovered in 1799 in the Nile Delta town of Rashid (Rosetta) by soldiers belonging to Napoleon's expedition to Egypt -- was a similar case. In 1801, the French surrendered to Great Britain, and the stone fell into the hands of British officials who sent it to London. The following year, it was presented to the British Museum, where it is still the most visited exhibit. Dating from 196 BC, it is inscribed with a royal decree of Ptolemy V in three scripts -- hieroglyphic, demotic and ancient Greek -- and in 1822, this enabled French scholar Jean-François Champollion to make the breakthrough in deciphering the hieroglyphics. Two modern inscriptions on the stone now record key moments in its modern history: "Captured in Egypt by the British Army in 1801" and "Presented by King George III."

Nefertiti's bust in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, perhaps the best-known work of art from Ancient Egypt, was unearthed in 1912 by the German excavator Ludwig Borchardt. Hawass says that Borchardt, anxious to preserve the bust for Germany,

took advantage of the practice at the time of splitting the spoils of any new discovery between the Egyptian antiquities authority and the foreign mission concerned. Back then, the law required discoveries to be brought to what was called the "Antiquities Service", where a special committee supervised the distribution. Nadjia Tomoum, director of the SCA's foreign relations office, said Borchardt, who discovered the head at Tel Al-Amarna, either did not declare the bust, or hid it under less important objects. Either that, or the Egyptian authorities failed to recognise its beauty and importance. According to Borchardt himself, he did not clean the bust but left it covered in mud when he took it to the Egyptian Museum for the usual division of spoils. The service, on that occasion, took the limestone statues of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, and gave the head of Queen Nefertiti to the expedition because it was made of gypsum -- or so they thought.

There were those who said that Borchardt had disguised the head, covering it with a layer of gypsum to ensure that the committee would not see its beauty, and realise that it was actually made of beautiful painted limestone. Whatever happened, Tomoum said, the antiquities authorities did not know about the bust until it was put on show in Berlin's Egyptian Museum in 1923, and had certainly never expressly agreed that this piece should be included in the German share of the Tel Al-Amarna finds.

The principle, since the earliest days of cultural property legislation, has been that the country of origin must expressly permit every single national cultural treasure export. With respect to the bust of Nefertiti, the Egyptian authorities did not give that permission. The Egyptian government later made an attempt to have the bust returned, but Hitler, who had fallen in love with it, refused. He announced that she was his beloved possession, and would remain in Germany forever.

The exquisite painted limestone bust has been on display in solitary, stunningly dramatic surroundings at the museum ever since. Two years ago, however, in a highly curious curatorial decision, two Hungarian artists were allowed to fuse the ancient bust onto a contemporary bronze-cast body for a few hours in an attempt to visualise how Nefertiti's body might have looked like.

As for the Zodiac in the Louvre, this is one of the most famous cases of looting in Egypt. Its loss is felt not only for its artistic value, but also because it demonstrates what the science of astrology owed to the Egyptians. When General Desaix, a member of Napoleon's expedition, set eyes on it he was so enchanted that he commissioned the artist Denon to draw it for the *Déscription de L'Égypte*. When French collector Sebastien Saulnier saw the Zodiac, he decided that such a remarkable piece should belong to France. Because he did not want others to hear of his plan, he announced that he was excavating at Thebes, where he bought some mummies and antiquities to cover his tracks. At that time some English visitors were sketching at Dendara, and only after they left did Saulnier return. He and his French agent then set about removing the ceiling of the temple. The Zodiac arrived in Paris and was sold to King Louis XVIII for 150,000 francs.

The statue of Hemiunnu, architect of Cheops' Great Pyramid, in the Roemer-Pelizaeus Museum in Hildesheim, Germany, is another example of illicit trade.

Hemiunnu, Cheops' nephew, served his uncle as vizier. His statue was discovered in 1912 in his tomb in the shadow of the Great Pyramid at Giza, and was transported to the Roemer-Pelizaeus Museum, which belonged to a wealthy German citizen, Pelizaeus, a collector who backed scientific excavations at Giza.

The bust of the Kephren pyramid builder, Ankhaf, now in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, is another unique piece of Egyptian heritage. American Egyptologist George A Reisner found it in Ankhaf's tomb at Giza. Tomoum said that although Ankhaf's statue was the only one of the five objects named by Hawass that left Egypt legally, the SCA was still asking for its return because it is a unique and valuable object.

As the Weekly went to press, the museums had failed to respond to telephone calls and e-mails regarding the issue, saying curators were on summer vacation. The only response was from the Berlin Egyptian Museum's director, Dietrich Wildung, who in a telephone interview told the Weekly that he had not received any such request, and had only learnt of it from the Weekly's reporter. Wildung said this was not a matter to be discussed on a museum level. "It is something that needs an intergovernmental dialogue and discussions," he said.

Mounir Bouchenaki, UNESCO's assistant-director general for culture, was unavailable for comment, but a UNESCO spokesperson who requested anonymity told the Weekly that UNESCO had not yet received a request from Egypt. Hawass might be expressing a personal wish, she said. However, in the event of receiving such a request, "the matter will be taken into consideration".

Insisting that an official request was on its way to UNESCO, Hawass said: "We are the best keeper of these objects because they are part of our cultural heritage."