

North Carolina Museum of Art's Weinberg Lecture of Egyptology
Sunday, March 6, 2-4 pm

Talk Descriptions

From Esoteric Wisdom to Mundane Phonetics: The Rosetta Stone and Champollion's Breakthrough

Jackie Jay, Eastern Kentucky University

In 1655 the German Jesuit scholar Athanasius Kircher claimed to have cracked the secret of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Kircher's translations were, however, wildly wrong, for he (like many before him) quite reasonably assumed that the hieroglyphs represented true "picture writing," with the meaning of each sign lying in what it depicted.

In the early nineteenth century, the Swedish scholar Johan David Åkerblad began to correct this misconception with his recognition of the phonetic nature of the cursive "demotic" script (one of the three scripts on the Rosetta Stone). Both Thomas Young in England and Jean-Jacques Champollion in France depended heavily on Åkerblad's work in their own decipherment efforts. In 1822 Champollion presented to an audience of French intellectuals what we now know to be the truth about the hieroglyphs: they are a complex mix of different types of signs, some phonograms (phonetic signs) and some ideograms (meaning signs).

This talk traces the path of decipherment from Kircher to Champollion. It also places the Rosetta Stone in its original historical context as a priestly decree issued in the reign of Ptolemy V.

Uncovering New "Wonderful Things" — Reflecting on the Centennial of the Rediscovery of Tutankhamun and the Theory of the King's "Iconography of Disability"

Emily Smith-Sangster, Princeton University

The 1922 rediscovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun not only impacted the field of Egyptology but also changed the public's perception and intensified interest in the ancient culture and this king of the 18th Dynasty. This impact was primarily due to the mostly intact nature of the tomb, the proliferation of golden grave goods, and the presence of the boy king's preserved body.

Analyses of the body of the king, however, found that Tutankhamun may have been afflicted with a number of injuries and illnesses and possessed a leg-based disability—not fitting with many individuals' views of a powerful Pharaoh. This reading of the remains led many within and outside of the field of Egyptology to suggest that the king, depicted on many of the "wonderful things" Howard Carter excavated, was shown in a completely unique way, as a king very clearly possessing a disability.

This lecture reflects on the early discovery and analyses of the tomb and body of Tutankhamun and then explores this theory of a manufactured "iconography of disability" created by artists of the king. In doing so the presenter examines what influenced these early claims, how the theories developed over the past 100 years, and explores how the application of disability theory and art history can complicate these views. What will become clear is that even a century later, the tomb, body, and material of Tutankhamun still has quite a bit to tell us about the ancient past, especially when it comes to disability.