

Essex Egyptology 01.08.21

Notes on talk about statues by Alison Woollard

The idea for the talk started with seeing a dramatic statue of Samson slaying a Philistine with the jaw bone of an ass at Wimpole Hall in Cambridgeshire. I wondered why someone would want to put something so violent and disturbing in a beautiful garden. I was also reading *Egyptian Art* by Bill Manley (Thames and Hudson Ltd 2017) which explored some really interesting ideas about the ways in which the ancient Egyptians created and thought about statues were very different from our own.

Suddenly news about statues was everywhere: statues being pulled down all over the world such as the statue of Edward Colston in Bristol and new statues being roundly criticised such as the ones of Princess Diana in Kensington gardens and the statue of Mary Wollstonecraft by Maggie Hambling. This even led to an article in the *Guardian* by Gary Younge where he wanted to banish all representational statues of historical figures.

I picked out three ideas from Bill Manley's book and thought about how our own ideas about statues might be similar or different:

- the statues and carvings are often concealed
- the statues show what is universal not individual
- the statues invite offerings

Many Egyptian statues or carvings were not made to be seen by the wider population. Statues or carvings were enclosed in tombs or in dark spaces where only a few priests might see them. Even the light of torches would only illuminate part of a carving. The making or existence of a statue had value in these cases rather than the viewing of it. This is very different from modern galleries, museums or open spaces where visitors or passers-by can gaze at statues in great detail. Statues are often put in places which highlight their visibility – for example, the fourth plinth in Trafalgar square on the statues of Christ put on the top of mountains.

The familiar conventions of Egyptian art such as stance, proportion, expression, clothing and regalia stress the similarities between people and focus on common qualities such as the calm power of kings which is meant to endure rather than be subject to change. We do not know if the statues actually represent what people looked like. This differs from modern attitudes where a statue attracts criticism if it does not resemble the viewer's idea of what the subject looked like or stood for, though there are examples of Egyptian statues or carvings, such as those of Hatshepsut or Akhenaten, being destroyed or defaced by later generations who disapproved of what they had done. Contemporary statues can represent an inner truth about people by being more abstract such as the memorial to the women of World

War II in Whitehall which shows their coats, hats and bags hanging on the side of the memorial or the Antony Gormley statue in Shoe Lane, off Fleet Street, which creates a human form out of rectangular boxes similar to a city skyline.

A large proportion of Egyptian statues or stelae were created to receive offerings and show the recipient in a perfected form after death. Cemeteries today still fulfil this function with flowers or other items being left on graves. The grave of Jim Morrison in Père Lachaise comes to mind or that of Sylvia Plath in Heptonstall. Churches can also be places of offering where candles are left in front of the statues of saints or masses were said for the souls of the dead in chantry chapels in medieval times.