



Whose coffins? Mummy photography, performance, and appropriation in the late 19th – early 20th century

Marion Devigne | marion.devigne@outlook.com | @marionka

Introduction

Development of tourism and photography

This research explores a souvenir trend which was popular at the turn of the 20th century, known as “mummy photography”. This phenomenon coincided with a period of Western fascination with ancient Egypt, commonly referred as *Egyptomania*.

At the time, Egypt witnessed a surge in tourism, becoming a very popular destination for the Western middle and upper classes. Drawn by the growing number of visitors and potential clientele, expatriate photographers established studios in key locations such as Cairo, Alexandria, and Luxor, targeting their products to a foreign audience eager to bring photographs home as souvenirs.

While images depicting ancient monuments and modern streets of Cairo are well-known, mummy photography has never been extensively studied.



Postcard posted to France in 1906. Studio Lékégian, Cairo. Private collection, accessed on Luminous-Lint

“

The picture is taken in this way: The subject steps into the case, which is placed on end, and the lid is then closed, leaving an opening just large enough for the face. It is a gruesome idea, but a popular one. The mummy pictures are considered graceful and appropriate souvenirs of a trip to Egypt to present on returning to the friends at home” (1898).

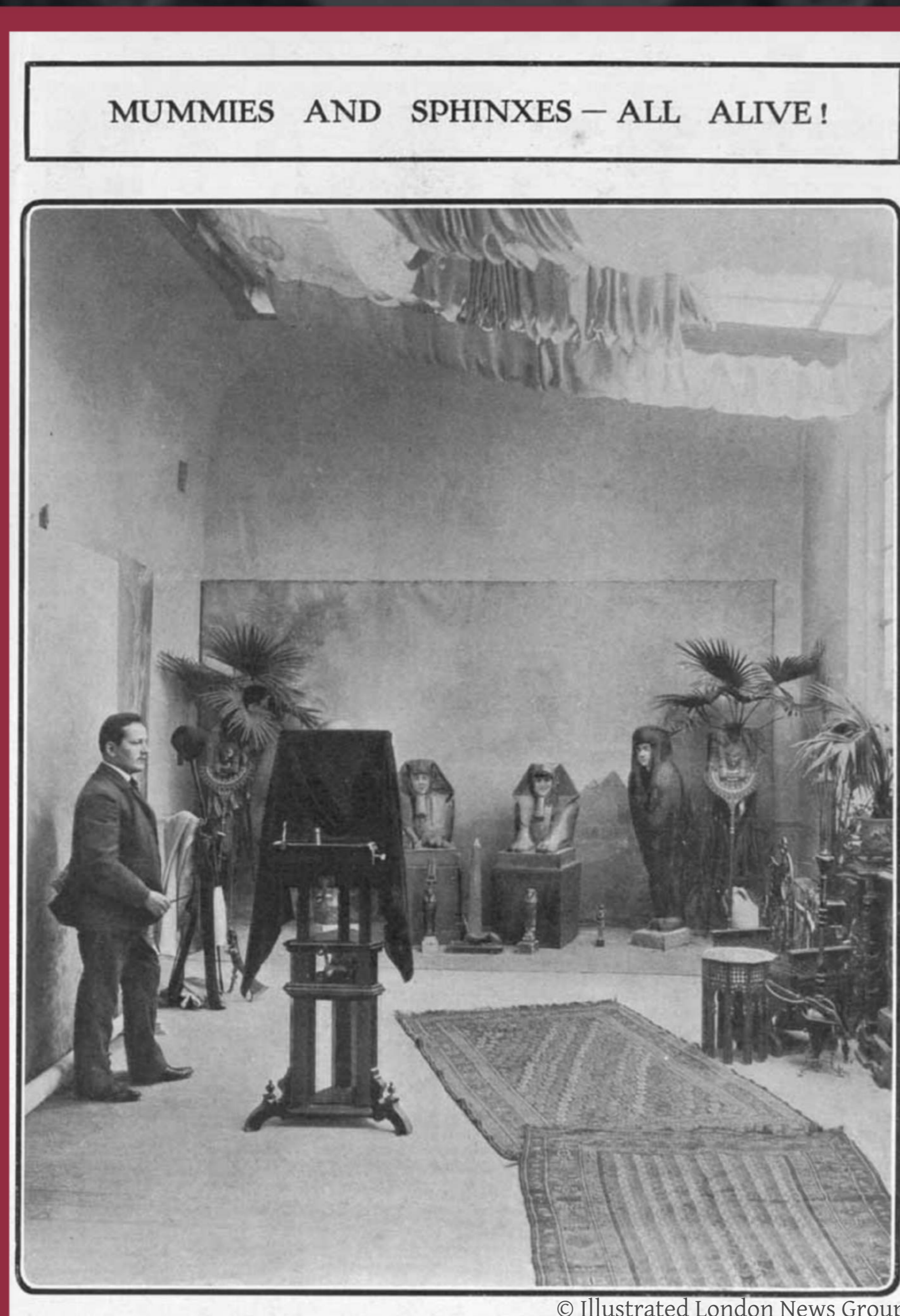


Illustration depicting tourists posing inside coffins and sphinx cardboard in Egypt. *The Sketch* (1908).

The studio meticulously recreates an ancient Egyptian *mise-en-scène* gathering antique statuettes, palm trees, and a backdrop of the Great Pyramids.

Note the neglected Oriental props on the right side. The studio becomes a performative space in which to control and recreate a Western ideal and stereotypical image of Egypt devoid of modernity.

Results

A visual assertion of Egypt’s heritage?

Political figures also engaged in this photographic trend, as depicted here with the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria.

Presenting himself as one of the glorious ancient Egyptian kings, the Archduke creates his own visual narrative by assuming an ancient Egyptian identity.

These colonial-era souvenirs, facilitated by Western colonial authority in Egypt, underscore how the European upper class and ruling figures benefited from the Western dominance of Egypt, including control over the acquisition of archaeological material culture.



Figure: The Archduke as the king 'Amenhotep XXIII', c.1895, Studio J. Heyman & Co. Accessed on Luminous-Lint.com. Adding another layer of humour, the caption provide a comical yet descriptive legend of the image (the origin of the caption is unknown).

Primary sources

Online archival research

- **Photographic archives:** using photographs as *objects* of study, to challenge the prevalent assumption that photographs are merely illustrative, advocating for a closer examination of how they were used and why (Edwards 2021).

- **Written sources:** including contemporary newspapers articles, illustrations, travel handbooks and published travel diaries.

Results

Brief Timeline – Photographs and postcards

Mummy photography was likely invented in Cairo when Egypt was under British occupation. This unusual style of photography was quickly advertised in Western newspapers, leading commercial studios to introduce mummy photography abroad, for example in Paris and New York.

Although a short-lived fad at the end of the 19th century, mummy photography regained popularity two decades later, presented once more as “the newest thing in freak photography” (1908). During this revival, photographers likely introduced an innovative approach by selling the photographs as postcards, providing a convenient means for tourists to send them home.

Conclusion

Me as a pharaoh: between performance and appropriation

This study highlights the potential of using photographic evidence to complement written sources in Egyptological research. Mummy photography represents an entertaining yet problematic imaginative journey, serving as a case study to illustrate the Western re-use and appropriation of Egyptian antiquities within a colonial context.

Whether using modern or authentic coffins, photographers created an illusion of authenticity. This trend highlights how colonial practices facilitated the portrayal of a Western ideal of ancient Egypt. While it is impossible to determine whether the people photographed supported colonial power and the Western acquisition of archaeological material culture, their active participation suggests an engagement with what was considered a perfectly “appropriate souvenir” (1898) during a time of colonial authority, without which mummy photography would likely not have been possible.

References

Edwards, Elizabeth (2021). *Photographs and the Practice of History*. Bloomsbury Publishing, p.97.

“Mummy and Sphinxes – all alive!” (1908). In: *The Sketch* 781 (61). 15 January, p.21.

“Mummy Pictures” (1898). In: *Weekly Register-Call*, Colorado 37 (25). 25 November p.6.