

Luiza Osorio G. Silva
AIA Elizabeth Bartman Museum Internship
Final Report

In the spring of 2021, and thanks to the Elizabeth Bartman Museum Internship grant, I had the opportunity to intern in the Art Institute of Chicago's Arts of Africa department. I worked specifically with their ancient Egyptian collection supervised by Ashley Arico, the Assistant Curator of Ancient Egyptian Art. I applied for the Elizabeth Bartman Museum Internship grant before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and so had planned for an in-person internship. That was unfortunately not possible, however, since I have been in Brazil since March 2020 and remained here through the duration of my internship. While I learned about and developed a considerable number of museum-related skills during my time at the AIC, discussed below, the ability to be flexible and adapt to unforeseen circumstances allowed me to make the most of my remote internship and has been one of my most important takeaways.

My main internship project consisted of researching an ancient Egyptian coffin fragment, specifically the face of an anthropomorphic coffin, that lacked secure information about provenance or date. There was really not much available about the object to start from, and the need to find comparanda was obvious. Since I did not have a library available to me at home in Brazil, I relied heavily on online museum collections, including object photographs and descriptions, as well as assistance from scholars not only at the AIC but also at the British Museum, the Egypt Centre in Swansea, the Saint Louis Art Museum, and the Smithsonian. Since not much work had been previously done on this coffin face, in order to find comparisons and accurately describe it I also needed to rely on close observation, which was of course difficult to do from Brazil. Fortunately, Ashley and I met virtually while she was in storage with the object, and I was able to ask questions while looking at the fragment closely and relied on her description of it to write detailed notes. This approach aligns with other methods of object-centered teaching and research developed and used during the pandemic, and it proved quite effective. By the end of my internship, I had pinpointed a very likely provenance and date for the coffin fragment, thus contributing to efforts to further define the objects in the AIC's ancient Egyptian collection.

Beyond the research skills developed during this project, which included working on an object that I and others knew very little about—quite different from the research I usually

conduct outside of museums—this work also allowed me to practice presenting objects to different audiences in both writing and oral presentations. I had the opportunity to work on different types of writing, including an online description and internal museum records, that I would not have been exposed to outside of a museum. This type of descriptive, objective writing is also, of course, relevant for work outside of museums, so I feel fortunate to have been able to further develop that skill. Additionally, I discussed this ancient Egyptian coffin fragment in talks to the local AIA Chicago chapter, the Arts of Africa and Arts of the Ancient Mediterranean and Byzantium departments at the AIC, and my intern cohort at the museum—which allowed me to think about how to best present the same piece to different audiences, including diverse levels of background and distinct types of information as appropriate.

I was fortunate to intern at the AIC at a time when a lot of work was being done on different aspects of the ancient Egyptian collection, which means that I was also able to contribute to other projects. These included a discussion about the display of human remains in museums (which built on previous work I had done at the Rhode Island School of Design Museum) and preliminary work on an audio guide. Both of these projects gave me the invaluable opportunity to think more deeply about the engagement of visitors with museum collections, and how to most respectfully convey different types of—sometimes quite sensitive—information. Working on a funerary object in the midst of a devastating pandemic also helped me to re-evaluate my approach to the study of the ancient world and the experiences of ancient people, a helpful reminder that will stay with me in my future work in this field.

The AIC's internship program is a fantastic initiative that seeks to connect interns from diverse departments with one another, as well as with other departments, to learn about the myriad activities that make up museums—something that might not be the case if an intern focuses solely on their own specific project. During my internship, I had the opportunity to talk to and listen from colleagues in departments as varied as Art Handling, Public Programs, and Marketing and Communications. We also took part in a label writing workshop, which was certainly useful for the writing I was doing during the internship itself, but which will be helpful in my future work—whether that be in other museums or in an academic context. Through all of these discussions and my work with the Arts of Africa department I also established connections with a wide array of museum professionals, and I feel confident that I can reach out to them in the future to ask for advice or collaborate in other projects.

One of the most significant outcomes from my time at the AIC, beyond all of the experiences mentioned above, is the realization that remote museum work can be very fruitful. Though it definitely does not replace the real experience of being in a museum—just like remote classes do not replace the experience of being in the classroom, as we have all found out in the past year—it can provide a very welcome alternative to students or early career scholars who are unable to work in museums in person but who have an interest in collaborating on a specific project related to a collection, or who perhaps would like to get an overview of the different facets of museum work. I am quite glad that I decided to do this remotely, rather than wait for a time when I might be able to be at the museum in person, because it allowed me to approach museum work differently than I had in the past. Ashley and I hope to further discuss our experience of working together remotely in the future, hopefully providing a useful case study for others who might wish or need to do the same.