

# **Ancient Nubian Art: Mysterious and Contested Cultural Masterpieces**

**By: Chloe Lyons**

# My Research



- 1** My interest in African Art and culture (specifically North and East Africa) + Dr. Flora's expertise in medieval art
- 2** The Africa and Byzantium Exhibition at the MET, Dr. Andrea Achi, and the New York Trip
- 3** The Nubian metal crowns, Nubian/ Sudanese art and culture, and questions of museum ethics
- 4** Tour of NOMA African Art collection with Dr. Amanda Maples

# The Object of my Research: The Two Nubian Metal Crowns

While walking around the Africa and Byzantium Exhibition, these two 5-6th Century Nubian silver and gemstone-encrusted crowns caught my attention with how intricate the carvings were and how unusual they were; I had never seen anything like them. Once I learned they were Nubian, I was hooked, as I have always had a interest in the mysterious nature of Nubian archaeology and the region's absence of material culture still preserved today.



# To Historically Posit The Crowns: The History of Nubia and Its Relationship to Egypt



Egypt and Nubia have a long and complicated history with each other, both acting as each other's conquerors and being conquered by the other at different times throughout history. While there was significant cultural overlap (Nubians even married into the Pharonic family), Nubia and Egypt remain separate people and cultures. In the Nubia region, there are an abundance of natural resources (metal, silver, precious stones, etc) which were often exploited by the Egyptians, while the Nubians excelled in metallurgy and trading these works. However, in 712 BCE, the Nubians fully conquered the Egyptians, which led to further cultural mixing and Egyptian-Nubian relationships. Additionally, around the 5th century, the Romans came to Nubia and Christianity began spread, later followed by Islam a few centuries later.

# The Metal Crowns And Their Origin



According to Andrea Achi's research in the Africa and Byzantium exhibition book, the crowns were found in Nubian tombs in the burial sites of Qustul and Ballana by Egyptian archaeologist Walter B. Emery in 1929-1934. The dig was funded by the Egyptian government, and the crowns now hold permanent residence at the Egyptian Museum Cairo. In the Africa and Byzantium exhibition, they were labeled as "Nubian (Egyptian)" which caught my eye as both cultures remain different from each other. Additionally, in the Africa and Byzantium exhibition book, the crown on the left was pictured still on the skull of a partially-buried skeleton, yet there is no information on who that person was.



**“...some archaeologists of the era [19th and 20th century] subtly or explicitly dismissed the notion that black Africans were capable of creating art, technology, and metropolises like those from Egypt or Rome,” (Maxmen).**

# Issues Surrounding Museum Ethics

Historically, many objects and works of art have been stolen and transported abroad, or given as gifts to people in other countries. However, museums used to be only used as spaces of aesthetic beauty, "cabinets of curiosities" where wealthy people would impress their wealthy friends with their unique collections. This was the status quo up until the late 20th century, when organizations like the UN began enforcing museum acquisitions. Before, antiquities looting was rampant, and museum curators often bought looted art, knowingly or unknowingly through an arts dealer, many of which operated out of Switzerland. Many well-known museums like the Getty, the MET, and the British Museum were asked to return many priceless items. Now, many items are being repatriated, being called to be repatriated, or are being researched further for provenance issues.

The Nubian metal crowns enter this debate in the sense that while their provenance is not much of an issue, their origin and labeling are mixed. For example, the crowns were labeled as "Nubian (Egyptian)" at the Africa and Byzantium exhibition, perhaps leading those who didn't know to believe that Nubia was a city in Egypt. Additionally, while the crowns were excavated by government-sponsored archaeologists, little is known about them, and the tombs and surrounding area they were excavated at are now entirely flooded by Lake Nasser. Further, the crowns are currently housed at the Egyptian Museum Cairo, presumably displayed as Egyptian, despite the fact that they are uniquely Nubian, and unique even within Nubian arts production itself.

**Thank you!!!**

**And a huge thank you to Professor Flora for always being so accommodating, helpful, and amazing! I had the best time working with you!**