

# Mummy unwrapping brought Egyptology to the public

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Mummies have been objects of horror in popular culture since the early 1800s—more than a century before Boris Karloff portrayed an ancient Egyptian searching for his lost love in the 1932 film "The Mummy." Public "unwrappings" of real mummified human remains performed by both showmen and scientists heightened the fascination, but also helped develop the growing science of Egyptology, says a Missouri University of Science and Technology historian.

Dr. Kathleen Sheppard, an expert in the [history of science](#), particularly [archaeology](#) and Egyptology, and an assistant professor of history and political science at Missouri S&T, says that while mummy unwrappings served as public spectacles that objectified exotic artifacts, they were also scientific investigations that sought to reveal medical and historical information about ancient life.

Sheppard wrote about this intersection between science and showmanship in an article titled "Between Spectacle and Science: Margaret Murray and the Tomb of the Two Brothers." It will be published in the December issue of the journal *Science in Context*.

Sheppard says 20th century Egyptologist Margaret Murray, the first woman to publicly unwrap a [mummy](#), sought to unravel the mysteries of ancient Egypt by exposing mummified [human remains](#). She says Murray's work is culturally significant because it is "poised between spectacle and science, drawing morbid public interest while also producing ground-breaking scientific work that continues to this day."

Public spectacles that displayed mummified remains as objects of curiosity date back to the 16th century, Sheppard says. "These types of spectacles were highly engaging shows in which people were, to a certain degree, educated about different aspects of science both by showmen and scientists."

Many Egyptologists drew a distinction between "Egyptomania," the fascination with all things Egypt, and "[Egyptology](#)," the scientific study of Egyptian life, Sheppard says, but Murray had a different goal - involving the public in scientific inquiry with a goal of correcting popular misconceptions.

"Murray tried to get the public to see that mummies weren't magical, they were just preserved human remains to be studied and learned from," Sheppard says. "In other words, rather than trying to separate the 'mania' from the 'ology,' she wanted to bring reason and understanding to the mania."

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