

This is Part Three of a developing 4-part series titled, "Digging in Storage," documenting the results of an independent study course, directed by Dr. Irene Bald Romano, fall 2013.

Lily S. Place—International Woman of Mystery

By Darlene F. Lizarraga

Sometimes, in the museum world, a good research project is about a person, not an object. About a donor, not an artist. About a life, not a collection.

Most of what we know about museum benefactor Miss Lily S. Place (b. 1857?) comes from her obituary, which reads, in part:

...we hear with keen regret of the death in London, on April 28, of Miss Lily S. Place, one of the Society's most gracious and liberal benefactors. Miss Place, formerly of Minneapolis, has resided for many years abroad, dividing her time between Cairo, Paris and London. During the past four years, she has presented to the Society of Fine Arts many objects of art, both ancient and modern, which have found an honored place in our permanent collections... Bulletin of the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, May 18, 1929.

And so, as with all good mysteries, we begin at the end.

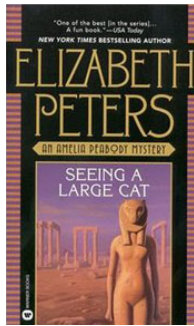
Characterized as "a prodigious shopper in the Suq," Miss Place had evidently shipped numerous cartons of Egyptian, Coptic, Mohammedan and other so-called Oriental handicrafts, textiles, and artifacts back to the United States, not only to the Minneapolis Institute of Art (MIA), but to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Met) in New York City, and the Arizona State Museum (ASM) in Tucson.

And this is pretty much all we know about one of ASM's early donors. Miss Place is responsible for the museum's collection of Egyptian amulets, beads, figurines, statuettes, lamps, mummy coffin cartonage, and miscellany—195 objects in all—which she donated in 1924.

Okay, so Minneapolis–New York City–Tucson? Not exactly three cities often referred to in the same sentence.

MIA archives tell us that the Place family moved from Minneapolis to New York City in 1873, then back again in 1885. Lily's mother died in 1903 in NYC; her father in 1909 in Italy, and that Lily and her sister inherited "a good deal of Minnesota real estate."

This explains the connection between two cities, but what of a connection to the third—



Tucson?

Interesting? Naturally. This could be the real-life stuff of movies and adventure novels.

A fictional character Miss Place evokes images of is that of the parasol-wielding Amelia Peabody, the protagonist of the historical mystery novel series by Elizabeth Peters (pseudonym for Barbara Mertz (1927-2013), author with a Ph.D. in Egyptology from the University of Chicago). Amelia is well-educated, saved late in life from spinsterhood by a hunky Egyptologist who whisks her off on archaeology-based adventures. A favorite expression of hers is, "Another shirt ruined..." because her husband regularly bursts out of his shirt, either in the course of an adventure or in the throes of passion.

Good stuff, right? What makes these characters even more enthralling is the fact that there are historical bases for them; our Miss Place surely being one of them.

In reality, the late 19th century and early 20th was a time rife with English and American adventurers travelling to foreign lands with romantic notions of the exotic and aspirations of finding and acquiring antiquities (see also Part Two of this series about Edgar J. Banks). Excitement about archaeology, or more accurately for the time—treasure hunting—was very much at the heart of this wanderlust.

Archaeology was still largely an amateur pastime, one which captured the imaginations of the independently wealthy, the well-bred, and the well-educated. This colonial period provided ample opportunity to “study” antiquities in exotic but friendly countries, and nascent (or non-existent) antiquities laws allowed for an astonishing amount of digging, collecting, buying, and selling of artifacts, not to mention wholesale “carting off” of major collections.

The Elgin Marbles had been in the British Museum for nearly a century by the end of the 1800s. British military officers such as August Pitt Rivers famously brought many artifacts back from overseas campaigns mid-century. Excavations at the site of ancient Troy, carried out by Heinrich Schliemann and colleagues, were ongoing since 1871. In Egypt, Flinders Petrie, the so-called "father of scientific excavation," started his work in 1880 with a survey of the Great Pyramid. In Greece, the work of Sir Arthur Evans at Knossos, begun 1900, was shedding light on the Minoan civilization. And, in 1922, Howard Carter discovered not just an unknown ancient Egyptian tomb, but that of King Tutankhamun, undisturbed for 3000 years.



"We can only imagine Lily Place's excitement when Tut's tomb was discovered in 1922 while she was living or wintering in Egypt," said Dr. Irene Bald Romano, ASM deputy director and classical archaeologist. "The world was engulfed in Egyptomania and Miss Place was at the center of it. She may have known Lord Carnarvon, amateur archaeologist, winter resident in Cairo (like she), and financial supporter of the Tut excavations, or archaeologist Howard Carter, the discoverer of Tut's tomb. Wouldn't it be wonderful to uncover Lily Place's diary from those years!"



Miss Place's donation of Egyptian objects to ASM came just two years later in 1924.

Such is the historical context of Lily S. Place—unmarried American expatriate, avid shopper, antiquities collector, and museum lover, living quite independently with her sister in Cairo (her address being 36 (or 44) Sharia El Falaki) and spending much time also in Paris and London. She could easily have been the protagonist of a mystery novel or a motion picture.

Nothing fictional about Miss Place, though. She was real and, one can't help but hope, every bit the adventurer, the explorer, the treasure-seeker, and, why not, the gunfighter, too. With a lack of real facts, it's easy to romanticize and imagine her eternally young atop a camel, sporting jodhpurs and knee-high boots, and with pith helmet and gauzy scarf to protect her from the Egyptian sun. A quirt certainly wouldn't be out of place. Admittedly, an image fed by the movies.

With so few details on the elusive Miss Place, questions abound. How did she come to know Tucson or be interested in the Arizona State Museum? Was she a friend of the famous and charming Byron Cummings, ASM's first director and nationally known archaeologist? Were her gifts solicited as part of a larger campaign to give Old World "street cred" to the burgeoning ASM (established 1893)? Did she have a home in Tucson? If so, why would she winter here when she had a home in Cairo? Is there a logical connection between museums in Minneapolis, New York City, and Tucson?

Nothing in the ASM archives to document correspondence or contract. No photo on file.



Now, there is another famous Place in Tucson history – Roy W. Place (1887-1950), architect of several local landmarks, including several on the University of Arizona campus. Most notably, the original University of Arizona library building, now ASM north (1924), and the original Arizona State Museum building (1935), now ASM south. Could he have been a relative? Seems plausible, given the uncommon name, the timeframe,

and the focus around the university. Frustratingly, we have no documentation.

Jessica Sue Wiles, a graduate student in classics, who has been conducting research on some of the objects Miss Place donated to ASM, asks the same questions.

Jessica has been focusing on four bronze votive statuettes and the use of those figures in Egyptian shrines. “My favorite of the four statuettes which I have been focusing on this semester is of the goddess Sekhmet,” she explained. “A lion-headed goddess related to warfare, pestilence, and healing, her statuette creates an intimidating presence despite its 12 inch stature. I have always found this goddess fascinating, at least partly due to my love of cats. And I am honored to be able to continue my research on this and other objects donated by Lily S. Place for my Master's thesis.”

“It is not a major collection of Egyptian antiquities,” explained Romano, “but it contains some important pieces that are especially useful for students to learn from and for researchers to do specialized studies.”

And so, in the case, we learn that a person can be just as, if not more, interesting than an object. That the details (or lack thereof) of a life can be more compelling than the details of a collection. And 90 years after her donation, we find ourselves enthralled, wanting to know more about Miss Lily S. Place, our international woman of mystery.

If anyone out there knows anything more about her, please let us know.

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