

JOURNAL
of the
American Research Center in Egypt

VOLUME 61

2025

Published by

THE AMERICAN RESEARCH CENTER IN EGYPT

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Richard A. Fazzini

December 8, 1942–May 9, 2025



*Richard Fazzini and the expedition's rais, Farouk, at Mut, 1986.
Photo: courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.*

Richard Fazzini was a New Yorker through and through. He was born in the Bronx, graduated from high school at sixteen and attended City College of New York where he received his BA in art. He then attended New York University's Institute of Fine Arts to study ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern art and archaeology. At the time, NYU was the training ground for some of the finest historians of Egyptian art (read: not just Egyptologists), including Christine Lilyquist, Biri Fay, Marianne Eaton (later Eaton-Krauss), Edna (Ann) Russman, James Romano, and Robert Bianchi, who all became acclaimed authorities on ancient Egyptian art.

Beginning in the 1960s, the Brooklyn Museum became Richard's second home. He did research in the Wilbour Library of Egyptology and while working on his degree, he interned in the Egyptian department that, at the time, was headed by the famed Egyptologist Bernard Bothmer who became a mentor to Richard (and who also supplied Richard with endless stories about working with the master). In 1969, Richard was appointed Assistant Curator of Egyptian art. He was promoted to Associate Curator in 1974, Curator in 1977, Curator-in-Charge of the Egyptian, Classical, and Ancient Middle Eastern art (ECAMEA) in 1983, and Chair of the

department in 1989. He was one of the last of his generation of academics who served in such positions without ever finalizing his PhD. He was that good—it simply did not matter.

Richard left a heavy imprint on the Brooklyn Museum. Early on, his core curatorial staff consisted of other Egyptian art historians, especially, for a number of years, James Romano, and Robert Bianchi. Quite a line up, and all of whom had Italian names and heavy beards—according to a probably apocryphal story—making them indistinguishable to some visitors. Headed by Richard, and soon joined by Edna (Ann) Russman and later, Ed Bleiberg, they were responsible for several seminal exhibitions and long-term gallery installations at Brooklyn. While still an Assistant Curator, Richard was charged with writing a booklet *Art from the Age of Akhenaton* (1973) that accompanied one of the first American Amarna exhibits. He served as the director for the important art historical exhibit *Cleopatra's Egypt* (1989), curated by Robert Bianchi. The show's catalog (to which Richard contributed entries) is still a basic reference to the subject. He was also involved with, or co-curated, other temporary exhibits including *Art of Ancient Egypt. A Selection from the Brooklyn Museum* (Hofstra University, 1971); *Images for Eternity: Egyptian Art from Berkeley and Brooklyn* (San Francisco, 1975), *Neferut Net Kemit: Egyptian Art from the Brooklyn Museum* (Tokyo, Osaka, Saga, Kagoshima, 1983–1984), and *Mistress of the House, Mistress of Heaven: Women in Ancient Egypt* (Cincinnati and Brooklyn, 1997), and he wrote innumerable entries for exhibit catalogues.

Among his more lasting impacts was his critically acclaimed Rubin Galleries of Egyptian art from the later Eighteenth dynasty to the Roman Period. He also curated *Temples, Tombs and the Egyptian Universe* that emphasized the then-unrecognized links between funerary and temple art. Both galleries, groundbreaking for their time, were light-filled and featured sleek modern casework, an uncluttered floorplan, and a minimum of graphics. As part of his curatorial duties, Richard also significantly added to the Egyptian collection through acquisitions and by facilitating the conservation of important objects held in the museum's storage.

His sometimes-gruff demeanor was paradoxical, considering his warmth, his tremendous sense of humor, and his great generosity in sharing his incredible recall of bibliographical references on ancient Egypt. Even in the field, an environment that can be very taxing, Richard was kind. As Robert Bianchi recalls, "Richard was quiet and reserved; I never, ever heard him curse; I never heard him raise his voice; he never expressed anger or outrage. He was generous to a fault. . . . At Mut, where the mission was working simultaneously at several different loci, Richard insured that every member of the team was informed about the mission's progress by routinely rotating the staff so that all of us worked each locus." He was a font of stories and a great raconteur, and he was never one to shy away from telling you what he really thought.

Richard was generous with his time. He served on the board of the American Research Center (1982–2001), then as Vice-President (1969) and President (1999–2001) while still fully engaged at the Brooklyn Museum.

He published many scholarly articles and reviews. In 1972, under the auspices of the American Research Center in Egypt, he undertook a study of the art of the Third Intermediate Period, resulting in the seminal publication *Egypt Dynasty XXI–XXV* (1988) that for many years, was the only survey of material not covered in Bothmer's 1960 *Egyptian Sculpture of the Late Period*.

Fazzini also had a strong interest in Egyptian archaeology. He was a member of the NYU-Brooklyn Museum Expedition to Mendes (1965, 1966, 1976). In 1975, he served as the field investigator for the Brooklyn Museum's study of the tomb of Ramesses II, and took part in the NYU-Metropolitan Museum excavations at el-Hiba (Lagash) in Iraq. In 1976, he initiated the Brooklyn Museum's archaeological expedition to the Precinct of the Goddess Mut in Karnak, for some years, co-directed by William Peck of the Detroit Institute of Arts, and since 2001, by Betsy Bryan of Johns Hopkins. It was this expedition that led to Richard meeting and marrying Mary McKercher, the photographer for the expedition in 1979. They were inseparable and mutually supportive, both in the field and out. Their work at the Mut precinct continued through 2023.

Another passion was Egyptomania, and over the years, Richard and Mary jammed their double apartment in Brooklyn with a dizzy array of candlesticks, clocks, posters, dishes—you name it—embellished with Egyptian motifs. They went high; to auction houses for vintage pieces, and low; to toy stores for wind-up spitting mummies.

The year 2001 presented the first of several major health challenges, lung cancer, and then a brain aneurism (2003). But Richard defied the odds and came back, largely due to the devotion and care of his wife Mary. As James Romano commented years before, "In a hundred million years, the only survivors left on earth will be

cockroaches and Richard Fazzini.” Indeed, against all odds, Richard returned to the museum and to several seasons at the Mut Temple. He was one tough guy.

Although Richard retired from the Brooklyn Museum in July 2006 as Curator Emeritus, he continued to keep regular office hours at the ECANEA department until 2023 when the passing of his beloved Mary and his own illness made it difficult for him to continue working. His spirits were buoyed by being honored as a Distinguished Alumni for his Post-Graduate Achievement by City College of New York in 2021.

Richard will be remembered for his many contributions to Egyptian art history, museum exhibits, and Richard and Mary will be fondly recalled among their wide circle of friends, many of whom enjoyed dinners in their apartment near the museum, with good food, lots of drink, and spirited conversation.

Yekaterina Barbash
The Brooklyn Museum

Emily Teeter
JARCE, Chicago