The name of R.G. Gayer-Anderson is well known in the world of Egyptology as his bequests of Egyptian art form part of several museums' collections. However, few people know that Gayer-Anderson left a collection of Pharaonic objects in Cairo that are kept in his former house, the Gayer-Anderson Museum, and fewer still the history of the man. This article attempts to serve as an introduction to both.

The Collector: R.G. Gayer-Anderson

Although many collectors have wandered through Egypt, few have made it their home. One such unusual collector and self-proclaimed Orientalist was Robert Grenville Gayer-Anderson (1881-1945), known to his friends as “John,” a sobriquet he earned whilst a student at Guy’s Hospital in London, when the song “John Anderson my Jo” enjoyed a certain popularity. Unlike most other collectors, however, he contributed an entire museum, complete with its contents, to Egypt, as well as giving and selling objects to museums in Egypt, Europe, Australia, and the United States, as well as publishing on collecting and on particular objects.

Although he had a strong aesthetic sense from an early age, Gayer-Anderson came to collect Egyptian objects by chance (fig. 1.) He was born in Ireland to, as he put it, “gentle folk,” and was the elder of a set of identical twins by 25 minutes. Throughout his life, Gayer-Anderson had a preternatural rapport with his twin, Thomas, and frequently referred to their telepathic and psychic “twinness” in letters and his unfinished autobiography. He had a nomadic youth, spending time in Kansas, Tennessee, California, Illinois, and Canada, as well as Ireland and England, all of which encouraged his later wanderlust. Life was not easy for the family, and Gayer-Anderson claimed that all the “cheese paring” and economy that marked his early life made him seek comfort in the elegance and refinement of beautiful or unusual objects. His earliest memory of forming a collection of antiquities was during his sojourn in the United States, where, even at the tender age of eight, he and his brother collected Indian flint tools, a group of objects that continued to intrigue him when he went to Egypt and formed a part of his collection there. Indeed, the earliest Gayer-Anderson collections were of American Indian artifacts: baskets, clay vessels, and figures.

Surprisingly, given their later love of research and study, the Gayer-Anderson children had a very haphazard education. First they were subjected to a series of indifferent governesses and tutors, before being sent to school at a rather late date. “John” was educated at Tonbridge School in England. He writes: “It was at school that that Tom and I began our careers as collectors in a very modest way of course, not only of stamp, bird-eggs and butterflies like most schoolboys, but of beautiful old objects, classified under the
after finishing school, he went on to qualify as a doctor at Guy’s Hospital in London in 1903. Even during this time, he and his twin had an appreciation for fine art, and started collecting European antiques as well as anything exquisite that caught their eye. The collections were on a small scale, no doubt constrained by their incomes, but were definite precursors of things to come.

After graduating from Guy’s, “John” Gayer-Anderson went on to the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1904, and was initially stationed in Gibraltar. He was seconded to the Egyptian army in 1907, and his first posting was in the Sudan. His time in the Sudan gave him an appreciation for the minor arts as well as folk art, and he started to collect ethnographic objects, a habit that stayed with him and later permitted him to lavishly furnish his house in Egypt. His fascination with different aspects of Sudanese culture led him to publish articles dealing with medical anthropology as well as other ethnographic subjects, and resulted in his election to membership in the Royal Anthropological Institute. He eventually gave several of the objects that he collected during this time to the Pitt-Rivers Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology at Oxford.

Gayer-Anderson returned to Egypt and took up the post of Assistant Adjutant General for Recruiting in the army in 1914, when he was promoted to the rank of Major. This is when his love affair with Egypt, its history, and its people really began. Quite poignantly he writes in his autobiography, “This country of the Pharaohs has become more my own than is my native land—I more of its ‘teen wa tibr’ (sand and chaff), it more of my flesh and blood than is any other part of the earth’s surface.” Indeed, he spent most of his adult life in Egypt, apart from occasional visits to England to see his family, eventually quitting Egypt in 1943 due to ill health.

Much of Gayer-Anderson’s early Egyptian collecting was done between 1907 and 1914. His job as recruiting officer caused him to travel twice annually throughout the country, and he became known to antiquities dealers as well as the peasants, or indeed anyone who had objects to sell. This is when he made the bulk of his contacts with dealers, which was to stand him in good stead in the years to come. His later governmental positions helped cement his relationship with dealers and extend his contacts, which he maintained for the rest of his life. From 1930 to 1939, he made annual trips by boat from Cairo to Aswan and back, acquiring a variety of antiquities along the way, most of which were destined for the sale room. Gayer-Anderson rarely purchased very large-scale artifacts, focusing on smaller, easily portable items such as scarabs, pottery, jewelry, seals, figurines, ostraca, and statue and relief fragments. He also collected relatively modern objects not only from Egypt, but also from Persia, and joined his brother Thomas in acquiring things from as far afield as India.

Due to the First World War, Gayer-Anderson took a substantial part of his collection to Britain in 1917, and lodged it for safety as a loan at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford until 1925. A few baskets to medical implements and amulets, was donated to the Pitt-Rivers Museum in 1926.

4 Ibid., 327JA.
5 One of his most significant contributions was the article “Medical Practices and Superstitions Among the People of Kordofan,” Third Report of the Wellcome Research Laboratories at the Gordon Memorial College (Khartoum, 1908), 281-322. Much of his ethnographic collection from the Sudan, consisting of well over one hundred objects, ranging from...