

A New Voice for the “Old and the Dead”

Egyptologist Kara Cooney combines a scholar’s approach to research with zeal for bringing her work to contemporary audiences.

By Meg Sullivan

When Kara Cooney was serving as one of three curators of the 2005 exhibition “Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, she gave a guided tour to a guest whose name she didn’t recognize.

The following day, Craig Ferguson’s producer was on the phone, wondering whether the Egyptologist would appear on his late night talk show. Cooney has since appeared as a guest four times on CBS’s “Late, Late Show with Craig Ferguson,” most recently to discuss her 2007 scholarly book, *The Cost of Death: The Social and Economic Value of Ancient Egyptian Funerary Art in the Ramesside Period*.

Over the course of the seven-minute interview, Cooney managed to provide a brief history of ancient Egypt, describe the culture’s burial traditions and class structure, and give Ferguson a brief lesson in hieroglyphics—an exercise that left the audience in stitches.

For fellow Egyptologists, the incident perfectly illustrates the strengths of this scholar who recently joined the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures and the Cotsen Institute of Archaeology.

Whether it’s an appearance on late night television, undergraduate courses in Egyptian art and architecture, special Saturday courses on ancient Egypt at UCLA Extension, or television documentary projects of her own creation (see the related story on page 11), Cooney brings humor and accessibility to the 3000-year history of ancient Egypt, say her colleagues.

“Kara has the rare blend of scholarly knowledge and understanding of how to interpret a complex ancient culture for a contemporary audience,” said Nancy Thomas, the deputy director of the Los Angeles County

Museum of Art and a 1980 UCLA graduate. “Kara is able to be both engaging and appropriately scholarly.”

Said Willeke Wendrich, an associate professor in Egyptology at UCLA, “Kara makes a really complicated subject approachable without dumbing it down.”

Cooney’s scholarship centers on funerary arts and the anthropology of funerary rituals and beliefs from ancient Egypt’s New Kingdom—a period between the 16th and 11th centuries BCE. Her research is expected to bridge the work of Wendrich, an archaeologist who specializes in the empire’s first 1000 years, and fellow Egyptologist Jacco Dieleman, a philologist who specializes in literary and religious texts from the empire’s final 1000 years.

“This hire is the next step that we needed,” Wendrich said.

Fascinated ever since childhood with what she describes as “the old and the dead,” Cooney is an authority on Deir el Medina, a 16th-12th century BCE village on the west bank of the Nile River near Luxor. The village—which is the subject of a UCLA graduate seminar that she teaches—was inhabited by artisans who constructed, painted, and decorated the royal tombs in the nearby Valley of the Kings. Cooney studies funerary objects for insights into the life and times of the original users—an approach she has found to be surprisingly revealing.

“The analogy I often use to the ancient Egyptian coffin is an American wedding dress,” Cooney said. “It’s on display for one day or one evening but every detail is carefully selected because it says so much about your socioeconomic standing in the world.”

Able to read hieroglyphics and hieratic—an Egyptian form of cursive writing, Cooney also looks for clues in ostraca—the writings of an ephemeral nature such as messages, notes and receipts in ink on pottery shards and limestone flakes that miraculously survive to this day. In *The Cost of Death*, for instance, she was able to pin down prices paid for specific elements of a traditional burial, demonstrating that the rite would have been within the reach of only the top five percent of society. Previously, many authorities assumed most ancient Egyptians received elaborate burials.

“I’m interested in personal motivations in the ancient world, in the humanity,” she said. “I always try to use that as the hook: these are people with motivations just like us.”



“Out of Egypt” Comes to the Discovery Channel

A new television series hosted by UCLA scholar Kara Cooney explores the extraordinary—yet logical—similarities between cultures that have never been in contact.

In 2560 BCE, the Ancient Egyptians built the Giza Pyramid. Nearly 2,700 years later, the ancient Aztecs erected a similarly imposing pyramid some 7,697 miles away.

A coincidence? The result of still-unknown contact between the two cultures? Evidence, perhaps, of the intervention of aliens?

The real reason for such similarities is more logical, argues Kara Cooney, a UCLA assistant professor in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures, in a new six-part series scheduled to air in August on the Discovery Channel (*for air dates, visit www.discovery.com*).

“When faced with the same materials, the same biological matter and laws of physics, and similar societies based on inequality and the need to demonstrate dominance and power, people will come up with very similar strategies independently of one other,” Cooney explains in the series, “Out of Egypt.”

“Humanity seems to create the same patterns again and again.”

Pyramids, for instance, typically are designed to serve as a physical manifestation of a ruler’s claims to have the ability to connect heaven and earth, Cooney explains in the series. The form is also the result of limitations on construction technology in civilizations that have yet to discover the wonders of steel.

“If you’re building something high that can be seen across the landscape, it doesn’t matter if you’re in Mesoamerica, Egypt, or Sri Lanka, you need to build wide at the base and narrow at the top because if you don’t have steel reinforcement you can’t build straight up.”

In addition to the theme of the proliferating pyramids, “Out of Egypt” explores similarities in traditions and behavior among cultures with no documented contact. In all, the series traces six themes and variations of traditions across 12 cultures and 10 countries: the birth of the devil, intermixing of religion and violence, disposal of the dead, use of religious relics, and the social repercussions of city life.

The series was created by Cooney and her husband, screenwriter Neil Crawford—their first jointly produced project. In “Out of Egypt,” Cooney serves as the host, lead researcher and writer.

Each episode begins in Egypt, cradle of the first documented case of the specific tradition being explored. In Egypt, Cooney, a specialist on the New Kingdom (1550 to 1069 B.C.), serves as the episode’s authority. But once Cooney leaves the Nile Valley, she queries 40 authorities, ranging from esteemed academics to humble caretakers at cemeteries.

“I’m not expected to be the expert and that’s very liberating,” Cooney said. “I love asking stupid questions and I love being surprised. That for me is the joy of learning.”