

Visions of Ancient Egypt

Review of the Exhibition at the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia (December 2022)

Susan Biddle

Introduction

After reading mixed reviews of this exhibition, I was in two minds whether to make the trip from London to Norwich to see it. I am very glad I did. Now on display until 29 April 2023 at the [Laing Art Gallery](#) in Newcastle, I recommend it.

A large exhibition, *Visions of Ancient Egypt* considers Egypt's enduring legacy and the ways in which images of ancient Egypt have been reused in art and design over the centuries. Often, that reuse has reflected imperial or colonial ambitions, from the Romans until the 20th century, and the exhibition explores this, but it also looks at Egypt's own vision and reuse of its past, and at contemporary use of familiar iconography in new ways and combinations.

The exhibition was arranged both chronologically and thematically and, like an archaeological excavation, each section was multi-layered. This emphasised that each generation's vision of ancient Egypt is filtered through the perceptions of its predecessors.

Cleopatra

The first room focused on Cleopatra and the Roman vision of Ancient Egypt. In Eastern tradition, Cleopatra was a protective ruler and a scholar, but for the Romans she was an extravagant seductress whom they demonised as the antithesis of "Roman values". The display looked not just at Roman depictions, but also at how subsequent artists have reused and reacted to the Roman vision. The broad scope of the exhibition was apparent from the start. The images of Cleopatra presented to the visitor ranged from Joshua Reynolds' painting of [Kitty Fisher as Cleopatra Dissolving the Pearl](#) (1759) to demonstrate her wealth to Mark Antony, Chris Ofili's [Cleopatra](#) showing her not as a pale erotic beauty but as a black African queen, and Agnes Pringle's orientalisising "*The Flight of Antony and Cleopatra from the Battle of Actium*" (1897) which included a bizarre mixture of Egyptian iconography from many eras.



[The Flight of Antony and Cleopatra from the Battle of Actium](#)

Agnes Pringle (1853-1934)

Laing Art Gallery

Studying this, I was particularly amused by the Hathor sundisk worn like a helmet plume, the Egyptian soldiers carrying Nome standards, Cleopatra reclining under a canopy of the type more often seen over a coffin, and Mark Antony's remarkably grumpy expression. Other panels looked at the 1973 Blaxploitation film *Cleopatra Jones* which reclaimed Cleopatra as a black beauty, with Elizabeth Taylor as Cleopatra, and some suggestions for the cosmetic surgery that would be required to make the Roman coin image of Cleopatra better correspond with our ideas of beauty.

Renaissance and Later Artists

The next section considered Egypt as seen by the first European artists during the Renaissance. Their experience of Egypt was filtered through Rome, in the form of the classical authors, the obelisks and sphinxes which had been looted from Egypt by the Roman emperors, and the Nilotic mosaics and ancient Roman objects which had adopted an Egyptian style and which, when first discovered, were misidentified as authentic ancient Egyptian artefacts. This section displayed various Roman-era sculptures reusing Egyptian iconography. It was followed by a display focused on travelogues by European visitors of the 17th century whose object was to see the sites of the Biblical stories. Often the illustrators to these travelogues had not been to Egypt themselves and so relied on the text and anecdotes, leading to some curious reconstructions. Other artists then relied on those illustrations for their own source material, perpetuating misconceptions.

By the 18th century, artists such as Piranesi and Wedgwood were viewing Egypt through the lens not just of Rome but also of the "classical tradition". Neither ever visited Egypt but both studied Egyptianising objects in Italy and earlier printed illustrations - which they in turn (mis)interpreted further in the "Egyptian" motifs they introduced as part of domestic decorative style. This section featured some Piranesi designs for chimney places which included, among other motifs, back-to-back sphinxes and baboons, two-headed human/cow busts, bulls whose flanks were ornamented with hieroglyphs, muscular Egyptians tying together upper and lower Egypt or acting as caryatids, and crocodiles: less was not more for Piranesi. Wedgwood was represented by a rather more restrained "canopic vase" and some teapots with crocodile finials.

In the 19th century colonial aspirations transformed Europe's relations with Egypt, with Franco-British rivalry fuelling a fashion for Egyptian imagery and allusion in both countries. This rivalry was neatly illustrated by Gillray's cartoons of the French in Egypt, which reinforced the association of Egypt with pyramids and crocodiles (the latter associated with Egypt, as the exhibition pointed out, since Augustus' AEGYPTA CAPTA denarius of 28 BC).



[The Pursuit of Knowledge](#)

James Gillray

One of his cartoons of the French in Egypt

British Museum, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Napoleon's expedition was represented by part of the 72-piece [dinner service with designs from Denon](#) originally made for the Empress Josephine and by Volume I of the *Description de l'Égypte* open at Dendera.

Israel in Egypt

Turning a corner, I came face to face with a highlight of the exhibition, for me at least: Poynter's massive *Israel in Egypt* (1867) – on display at eye height so one could properly appreciate the wealth of detail.



[Israel in Egypt](#)

Edward Poynter, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Once again, no Egyptian motif is missing: it includes pyramids as well as pylons, rock cut tombs, obelisks and barque shrines, and of course the huge red lion (which looks to me like just-melting chocolate). For the first time I could make out that the pylons include not just battle and smiting scenes but also offering scenes. Displayed nearby were late 19th century photographs by Beato and Francis Frith, including Karnak with a hypostyle hall column at an alarming angle. The labels explained how mass reproduction of photographs led to a wider consumption of images of ancient Egypt.

More 19th century paintings followed, including Edwin Long's [The gods and their makers](#) (1878) showing a group of semi-clad girls in a workshop making statues of gods. The caption explained that Long copied the furniture from the objects which were then flooding into museums, contributing to the painting's curious mix of archaeological accuracy, exoticism and eroticism. Nearby were displayed objects of the type Long depicted to add authenticity to his fanciful scenes.

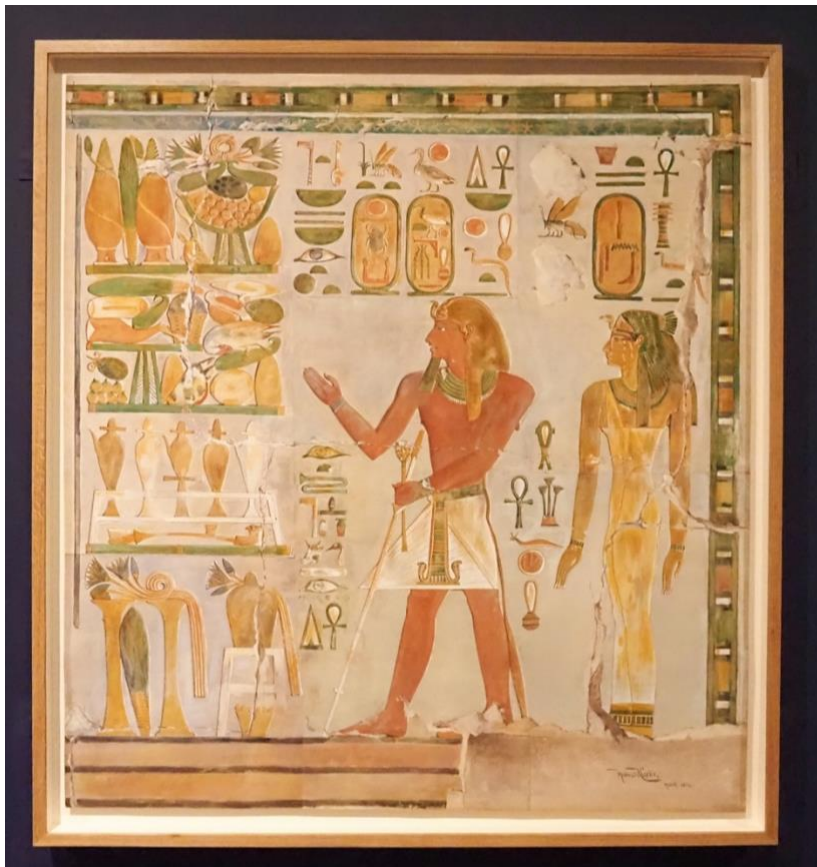
Empire and Exhibition

The "Empire and Exhibition" section showed how the Great Exhibition and other world fairs brought Egypt to the masses in three dimensions as well as in photographs. Egypt was linked with spectacle and scale, captured the public imagination, inspired designers, and was increasingly commoditised. This section included examples of furniture which adopted and abstracted various Egyptian elements and melded them with other cultural influences such as Japanese lacquer work. Alongside were copies of contemporary books on Egypt and design: Gardiner Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1854) and Christopher Dresser's *Principles of Decorative Design* (1873), open at pages showing stools and chairs respectively. The popularity of ancient Egypt was demonstrated by illustrated panels on subjects such as mummification which were made to order as visual aids for

Working Men Educational Union lectures. The ancient Egyptian motifs used in jewellery displayed at the 1867 Paris Expo Universelle were said to be prompted by the opening of the Suez Canal as well as by archaeological discoveries. Contemporary political events were also illustrated by a [Khedive's star and medal](#) from the Anglo-Egyptian war of 1882.

Howard Carter's Watercolours

Following the 1922 discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb, everything from fashion to film became Egyptian, subsumed into Art Deco. This section was for me the core of the exhibition – not because of Tutankhamun but for the superb display of Howard Carter's watercolours including the recently restored Tuthmosis I and his mother from Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el Bahri on loan from the Egypt Exploration Society. Other delights included Carter's *Cat in the Marshes* and his hoopoe from the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hassan, herders from the tomb of Djehutyhotep at Deir el Bersheh, Queen Ahmose, and an adorable baby hippo also from Beni Hassan. This section also included some of Harry Burton's photographs. The exhibition captions stressed that credit for the discovery belonged also to the unnamed Egyptian workers.



Tuthmosis I and his mother, Queen Senseneb

Howard Carter

Image courtesy of the Egypt
Exploration Society

The photograph is of the
conserved and reframed
painting as displayed in the
exhibition.

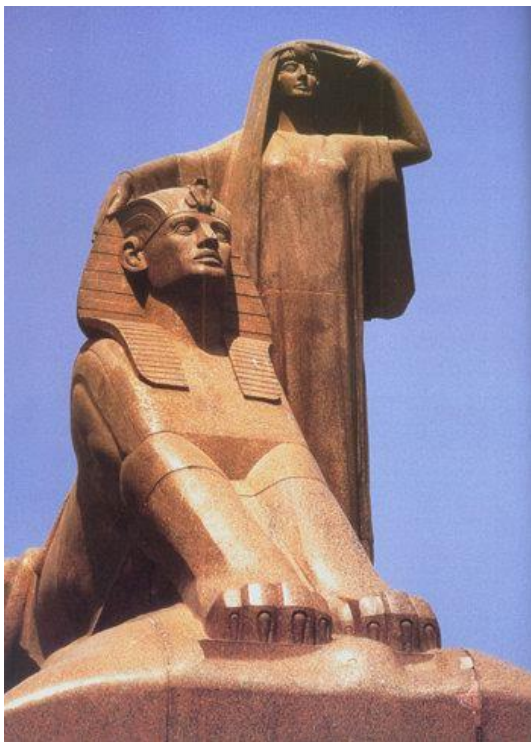
"Egyptomania"

The next section illustrated the "Egyptomania" which followed the discovery, with examples of women's fashion using motifs of cartouches, winged sundisks, birds, camels, pyramids and palm trees, flapper dresses made from fabrics embroidered in metal and imported from Assiut, a gold lamé dress decorated with glass beads whose belt was in the form of a serpent, and some very glittery Van Cleef & Arpels brooches and bracelet. This section also included a nod to the infamous curse: one of the items on display was a necklace of gold and ancient Egyptian beads given to the Victoria & Albert by Marie Corelli, the Gothic novelist who promoted the idea of the "mummy's curse". She apparently believed this necklace was itself cursed, claiming it brought her luck but refusing to wear it. This led

on neatly to a display of late 19th century fiction inspired by ancient Egypt, including copies of Conan Doyle's *Lot 249* (1892) and George Ebers' *An Egyptian Princess* (1864). The caption to this display explained that 19th century authors popularised tropes of ancient Egypt particularly in relation to the mummy which was both seen as a figure of horror and eroticised as a source of forbidden desire.

Amongst the examples of Egyptomania were some intriguing objects. A traditional Japanese cigarette box decorated with ancient Egyptian figures had been acquired in Egypt – its label raised the question of whether it had been sold in Japan and later taken to Egypt, or made for sale to tourists in Egypt. A Tutankhamun range of Carlton ware vases, produced in Stoke on Trent in the 1920s, echoed the Wedgwood pottery earlier in the exhibition. P&O's Christmas cruises in the 1930s included ports throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, but the images on their promotional posters were entirely Egyptian: pyramids, palm trees and camels. Tourist souvenirs on display included an applique panel showing Pharaoh in his chariot, which was produced by tent makers adapting to the tourist boom, and a rather less easily transportable scale model of the Great Pyramid in limestone.

This was juxtaposed with a section on Pharaonism, which used Tutankhamun as an icon of Egyptian independence, with the discovery a reminder of an earlier, sovereign, powerful and glorious Egypt. Egyptian artists referenced their ancient past in depictions of landscape and fellahin, thus bypassing 1200 years of Islamic culture. A photograph of *Nahdet Misr* ("Egypt's Awakening"), the colossal granite statue of a sphinx and a woman raising her veil which was set up outside Cairo's main railway station in 1928, was displayed alongside Mahmoud Moussa's 1960 sculpture of two figures embracing, titled *Egypt and Sudan*.



[Nahdet Misr / Egypt's Awakening](#)

Mahmoud Mokhtar

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From Modernism to the Present

The "Modernism and Ancient Egypt" section looked at how European and American modernist artists reinvented ancient Egyptian culture to reflect their own interests. The Sainsbury Centre's own collection, begun in 1929, echoes this modernist viewpoint. This was the only section which included ancient Egyptian artefacts. Some porphyry and dolerite vases from 3,600-3000 BC were displayed next

to a Stephen Cox abstract sculpture of Khafre, made from stone sourced from the same Nubian quarry. A Francis Bacon sketch of Lisa Sainsbury was compared with a photograph of Akhenaten in its heavy eyelids, hollow cheeks and sensual mouth. Two Henry Moore sculptures of small figures were displayed next to a striding figure in ebony, reported to be one of Moore's favourite objects in the British Museum.

The final section, "Into the Present" included a huge photograph of the view from above Deir el Bahri across to the Nile. The range of Egyptian motifs being reused still included the traditional ones such as camels and 5 point stars, but extended to fish and animal palettes too. Awol Erizku's 2018 neon *Nefertiti (Black Power)* combined black power, Chinese characters and the "Berlin Nefertiti"; its caption wondered about the future power of these cultural references as they become increasingly globalised.

The exhibition was not afraid of potential controversy. One of the last exhibits was a 3D print made from an illicit scan of the Berlin Nefertiti. The caption said that the original bust had been smuggled out of Egypt and suggested that the 3D version 'raises important questions about authenticity and ownership in the digital age'. (Inclusion in an exhibition of an object generated by a scan made in contravention of another museum's rules may also, perhaps, raise questions about compliance with museum rules, as well as the ethics of restricting reproduction.)

Overview

This is an extensive exhibition – I recommend a coffee or tea break to avoid sensory overload! – covering several thousand years of history with the aid of a wide variety of images and objects, and multiple perspectives. It provides an opportunity for close-up study of some wonderful (as well as some less wonderful) works of art. However, it also provokes further thought about changing perspectives of Egypt, how each generation's vision influences its successors, and how culture can be used and re-used for our own ends – and how important it is that we take account of this hinterland when considering our own visions of ancient Egypt.

Seeing the Exhibition

As noted by Susan, the exhibition is now open until 29 April at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle.

For further details, please see:

[Laing Gallery Visions of Ancient Egypt](#)