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ENVISIONING EGYPT: AMERICAN ORIENTALISM IN TURN-OF-THE-  
CENTURY NEW YORK CITY, 1880-1920

By

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Susan Sidlauskas

And approved by

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Envisioning Egypt: American Orientalism in Turn of the Century New York City, 1880-  
1920

By JENEVIEVE DELOSSANTOS

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Susan Sidlauskas

Dominated by studies of French painting, considerations of Orientalism in the arts have largely overlooked American visual culture. This dissertation argues that the United States produced a distinct strain of Orientalist art between 1880 and 1920 that reflected the country's implicit imperialist desires. This dissertation thus explores the singular role of Egypt within the developing cultural capital of New York City. In four chapters that explore case studies across varied artistic media, I argue that images of both ancient and modern Egypt were collected, crafted and performed in spectacular ways to enact a unique type of cultural colonialism that helped both the metropolis of New York and the nation fashion itself in the image of its greatest European counterparts.

Chapter One explores the acquisition and installation of the ancient Egyptian obelisk *Cleopatra's Needle* in New York City. Exploring the elaborate removal, transport and installation process, as well as the fanatical journalistic coverage, this chapter argues that the monolith served as an American form of the imperial Roman practice of *spolia*, or the removal and appropriation of art from its original context and into another work of art for political or ideological purposes. Chapter Two explores the collecting practices of three of New York City's cultural institutions: Barnum's American Museum, The Abbot Collection of Egyptian Antiquities and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Examining their three distinct approaches to collecting and display, this chapter argues for an

implicit imperialist reading of the Metropolitan Museum's archeological excavations as part of the success of their Egyptian collection. Chapter Three shifts from authentic Egyptian objects to representations of Egypt in paintings and illustrations by American artists Frederick Arthur Bridgman and Maxfield Parish. Despite their disparate styles, both artists negotiate an image of Egypt that operates between reality and fantasy for middle class audiences. Finally, Chapter Four explores a series of spectacular performances of Egyptian subjects that includes Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida*, the Barnum and Bailey Circus's *Cleopatra Spectacle* and two silent filmic representations of *Cleopatra*, arguing that these spectacles produced an image of Egypt divorced from its authentic past to symbolize America's imperialist ambitions.

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## Introduction

*Wherein lies the mysterious attraction peculiar to the land of Egypt?" Why is it that name, its history, its natural peculiarities, and its monuments affect and interest us in a quite different manner from those of other nations of antiquity?*<sup>1</sup>

- Barnum & Bailey *Cleopatra* libretto,  
1912

A grand civilization, long buried under ages of sand: Egypt's mysterious history has fascinated people of all nations for centuries. Ancient even in antiquity, Egypt is unique in the sublime monumentality of its art, its macabre preoccupation with death and the afterlife, its cult of anthropomorphic deities, and its rich history, one that intersects with Biblical, Greek and Roman narratives. Although the appeal of ancient Egypt can be traced as far back as the writings of Herodotus and Pliny, the moment cited as the birth of a true "Egyptomania" was Napoleon's 1798 invasion of Egypt. The French colonizing mission resulted in the development of Egyptology, effectively creating an entire field of study indebted to its country's imperial ambitions. Simultaneously, out of the same desire to document the ancient history of its new colonial possession, French preoccupation with the modern Arab Egypt they now "possessed" resulted in Orientalist art works that filled Salon interiors and enticed French artists with a taste of the exotic. Scholars have discussed at length the French, and broader European, forms of Orientalism spurred on by Napoleon's campaign. What remains under-studied, however, is a peculiar fascination with Egypt in the younger, less culturally developed, and rhetorically anti-imperialist United States of America.

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<sup>1</sup> Barnum & Bailey Circus, *Cleopatra* Libretto, 1912. Courtesy of Circus World Museum Archives, Baraboo Wisconsin.

American art had its moments of “Egyptomania” throughout the early Nineteenth Century. Revival styles of the 1830s often used Egyptian motifs in funerary architecture and representations of Egypt as part of the Exodus narrative were popular amongst African American communities. Between the years of 1880 and 1920, however, there was a renewed fascination with Egypt that was distinct from both these earlier manifestations as well as the famous Art-Deco explosion of Egyptomania in the 1920s and 1930s. Beginning in 1880, the country began its own quest to collect ancient Egyptian artifacts, leading to a unique brand of American Orientalism that featured both authentic Egyptian objects and exoticized representations, which together reflected the country’s implicit imperialist and cosmopolitan desires. Fostered by the so-called “robber barons” of the Gilded-Age, the influx of all things Egyptian was part of a larger moment in American Art: the American Renaissance, a period of flourishing fine art activity, fueled in part by the American discovery of European Old Master art movements. With all of its weighty historical associations, Egypt became a crucial element of America’s cultural coming of age. Providing the nation with an image of the strong, storied, ancient history it lacked, Egypt became a cornerstone of the developing American art scene, symbolizing growing American power through its associations with ancient history.

However, Egypt, is a country that exists beyond its ancient heritage; with periods dominated by Christian (Coptic) and Islamic communities, its modern Arab identity stands in striking juxtaposition to the storied prominence of its ancestral origin. Moreover, the country’s contemporary identity was crucial in that it belonged to the two countries whose culture America sought to emulate most closely: France and England. With their ceaseless battles for colonial control of Egypt, France and England continually

reinforced their imperial might to a world audience. On the stage of Neo-Imperialism the key to power was ever-increasing territory, i.e. the development of an “empire,” as both the French and British had. As a nation built on a violent rejection of monarchical rule, America occupied a unique place as a former British colony turned independent nation with an increasing desire to assert itself as a source of international authority. Coming out of its own Civil War, the boom of American industry after Reconstruction positioned the young nation for greatness and finally supplied it with a new class of wealthy patrons eager to fund a competition with Europe through displays of cultural sophistication. Remaining for the most part rhetorically anti-imperialist, American desires for expansion were enacted through the annexation of the West, which spilled into the conflict of the Spanish American War and later made a brief but explicit appearance in the colonization of the Philippines. I argue that the role of Egypt, within an American consciousness of this period was not only to symbolize history but to metaphorically stand in for the colonial territory of France and England; as Europe physically colonized Egypt, America symbolically appropriated its culture, history and image, thus enacting an implicit desire to occupy an imperialist identity and the associations of power, culture and control that it embodied.

The topic of the specific relationship between America and Egypt was recently examined by literary scholar Scott Trafton. His book *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* is a probing examination of the historical development and theoretical underpinnings of an American fascination with Egypt.<sup>2</sup> As the first comprehensive analysis of the country’s unique relationship with Egyptomania, this work

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<sup>2</sup>Trafton, Scott, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

was a tremendous resource to the present study. As the first scholar to argue for a racialized reading of Egypt's representations in America, Trafton's analysis deeply explores the signifying power of Egypt to black and white audiences. I borrow from his work the idea that Egypt served as a powerful image of empire for a nascent United States. However, while Trafton's analysis covers the nineteenth century broadly and across the United States, this dissertation hones in on one particular moment, turn-of-the-century New York City, to examine with greater concentration the motivations behind, and the mechanisms at work, in the American appropriation of Egypt as a symbol of "empire." My analysis argues that the place of Egypt is decidedly different at the turn of twentieth century than it had been previously, and that it is *this* period that will set up the different trajectories that the conception of "Egypt" would take from the 1920s and beyond.

My analysis merges acute interest in Egypt with the larger idea of "Orientalism." For the most part, studies on the representation of Egypt have focused on representations of "Ancient Egypt" as a culture and civilization distinct from its modern Arab identity. Orientalism while certainly producing representations of exoticized Eastern history, nevertheless focused great attention on representations the exotic East of the present. This dissertation examines one facet of American Orientalism as it acquires, manipulates, and reproduces the image of both an ancient and modern Egypt in the centralized place of New York City. As the nation's cultural capital, the city was developing at a rapid rate. With an increasingly diverse population, and as home to the nation's wealthiest citizens, New York between 1880 and 1920 was a locus of Orientalist activity that relied upon the

image of Egypt to fashion its own culturally mature identity and to satisfy the nation's increasingly imperialist appetite on the stage of world politics.

The phenomenon of American Orientalism, as distinct from Egyptomania, remains understudied. In her exhibition and corresponding catalogue, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: American Orientalism*, Holly Edwards has laid the groundwork for a thorough, nuanced comprehension of the field.<sup>3</sup> Her overview of the development of American Orientalism was the first to demonstrate both the importance of the Middle East in turn-of-the-century American visual culture and the fluid ways in which an assortment of popular and artistic media intersected along the lines of Orientalism. Her work builds upon the first study of American Orientalism by Gerald Ackerman who, focusing his work on the premiere French Orientalist painter, Jean Leon Gérôme, wrote an informative biographical study on the canon of American painters who identified themselves as "Orientalists."<sup>4</sup> These two studies, although different, were groundbreaking in giving a place to this specific moment in American visual culture and they serve as the backbone of this present study. Their broad overviews, however, leave more to be done in unearthing how an Orientalist culture was not only produced but received by American audiences. Moreover, in considering such varied representations under one banner of "Orientalism," the polyvalent meanings behind distinct Orientalist subjects becomes difficult to distinguish. Representations of Egypt versus India, for example, with their distinct aesthetics and colonial histories, could not have resonated in the same fashion. The unusual popularity, or even obsession, with Egypt at the turn of the century merits its

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<sup>3</sup> Edwards, Holly, and Brian T. Allen, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Ackerman, Gerald M, *American Orientalists* (Courbevoie: ACR, 1994).

own examination as something tied to but distinct from a general American Orientalist visual culture.

Nonetheless, the importance of both Edwards' and Ackerman's studies cannot be overstated as the subject of Orientalism has logically been dominated by scholars of European painting and sculpture. Notable among those scholars is Linda Nochlin, who in her seminal article "The Imaginary Orient" was the first to apply the critical theory of scholar Edward Said to the realm of the visual arts.<sup>5</sup> Exploring the mechanisms at work in paintings by Gérôme and Delacroix, she exposes the damaging stereotypes at work in the images' carefully constructed compositions. Since then, Orientalism as it developed under French and British colonialism has gained the attention of numerous scholars of both fine art and visual culture. Roger Benjamin examined the Orientalist works of Renoir and Matisse, while exhibitions have delved further into topics like Delacroix's work in Morocco.<sup>6</sup> Reina Lewis has merged the field of Orientalism with gender studies as she explores the agency of Turkish harem women in *Re-Thinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem*,<sup>7</sup> while scholars like Zeynep Celik have considered the reciprocal effects of imperialism from both eastern and western perspectives, in works like *Empire, Architecture, and the City: French-Ottoman Encounters: 1830 – 1914*.<sup>8</sup> Celik's work in *Displaying the Orient* was likewise crucial to examining moments of exchange amidst a developing exhibition culture in the nineteenth

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<sup>5</sup> Nochlin, Linda "The Imaginary Orient" In Pinder, Kymberly N. *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History* (New York: Routledge, 2002). 69-86.

<sup>6</sup> Benjamin, Roger, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003); Delacroix, Eugène, and Maurice Sérullaz, *Delacroix in Morocco* (Paris: Institut du monde arabe, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Lewis, Reina, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

<sup>8</sup> Celik, Zeynep, *Empire, Architecture, and the City: French-ottoman Encounters, 1830-1914* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2008).

century.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the impact of Orientalism on film and popular culture has gained greater prominence in compendiums like *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film*, examining the wide variety of Orientalist subjects in films like *Casablanca*, *Aladdin*, and *Cleopatra*.<sup>10</sup>

All of this scholarship, the present study included, is indebted to the work of literary scholar and cultural critic Edward Said. His revolutionary text *Orientalism* changed the world of academia and in essence founded the entire field of postcolonial studies.<sup>11</sup> Arguing that the entire notion of the “East” was constructed by the “West” with the advent of European colonialism, he effectively exposed the inherent power imbalance within contemporary politics, Western history, and modern day academia. Said was the first to suggest that the impulse to acquire knowledge, study, and classify were tied up in a desire to assert authority over and thereby “possess” the subject. His work gave rise to some of the most important scholarship and criticism in the fields of identity politics and cultural analysis, such as the work of Homi K. Bhabha.<sup>12</sup>

The field of postcolonial studies has challenged Said’s thesis on numerous levels, and some of the objections are further fueled by his own heritage as a Palestinian, a resident of Egypt, and an Ivy-League scholar with a complex stance on Israeli-Palestinian politics. Perhaps the most damning is his denial of a complex, diverse “East” with its own agency as defined by his dichotomy of East and West. Said’s argument crafted a monolithic “Occident” that treats all the Middle East as one whole despite rich variations in literary traditions, cultures, religions, and colonial histories. Scholars such as Ernest

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<sup>9</sup>Çelik, Zeynep, *Displaying the Orient: Architecture of Islam at Nineteenth-Century World's Fairs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

<sup>10</sup> Bernstein, Matthew, and Gaylyn Studlar, *Visions of the East: Orientalism in Film* (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup>Said, Edward W., *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>12</sup>Bhabha, Homi K., *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

Gellner have specifically argued for the role of the Ottoman Empire as a major force that shaped the course of European politics and colonialism.<sup>13</sup> Moreover, a number of scholars have pointed out flaws in Said's characterization of Middle Eastern history, citing confusion over the sequence of the colonial occupations so crucial to his argument. Finally, the most famous of critiques, Ibn Warraq's *Defending the West: a Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* challenged Said's damnation of "European" culture, citing his failure to consider the variations in colonialist activity throughout the entire continent.<sup>14</sup> German, Austrian, or Italian Orientalisms, for example, cannot be characterized as being equal to the French and British representations, which were fueled by their comparatively far more expansive colonial holdings.

There is no denying that Said's ambitious work was inherently flawed, with a circular logic that branded him an Orientalist as well, writing about an East he theorized in the language of the Western education system. However, his work is crucial to the present study, precisely because his claims were centered on a type of imperialist ideology and colonialist activity that was enacted in the United States during its Gilded Age. One the largest flaws of Said's analysis is his denial of any American Orientalist impulse prior to 1945. In the very beginning of his text, he states, "Americans will not feel quite the same about the Orient, which for them is much more likely to be associated very differently with the Far East (China and Japan, mainly.)"<sup>15</sup> His close pairing of direct colonial activity and the development of Orientalist stereotypes is limiting, as the work of Holly Edwards, Gerald Ackerman, and Scott Trafton demonstrates. Despite

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<sup>13</sup> "The Mightier Pen: The Double Standards of Inside-Out Colonialism" *Times Literary Supplement*, February 19, 1993, 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Ibn, Warraq, *Defending the West: A Critique of Edward Said's Orientalism* (Amherst, N.Y: Prometheus Books, 2007).

<sup>15</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 1.

America's "adolescent" position in world politics throughout the long nineteenth century, there remained a strong fascination with the exotic Middle East, one that centered itself on representations of Ancient Egypt. Yet, the United States had no colonial claims to Egypt, no shared history, no major alliance, trade route or otherwise logical connection to explain this preoccupation.

Thus, the perennial question remains: was American Orientalism something distinct and intrinsic to the nascent country itself, or was it a phenomenon more representative of America's close adherence to European aesthetics? This dissertation argues for an interpretation that includes *both* formulations as they are connected and at times even enhance the other. The unique position of the United States in this period, growing in culture and power and more removed from the actual colonial campaigns in Egypt itself, makes the country's preoccupation singular. The focus on Egypt was in part a desire to emulate not only France's and England's collective aesthetic in visual art, but to follow their lead in representing "Western" culture in a position of imperial authority. An 1883 painting by French academic painter William Adolphe Bouguereau serves as a surprising illustration to the relationship I suggest: the work *The Motherland*, now in a private collection, represents a stoic mother who sits still as her numerous clamoring children vie for her attention (Figure 1). If France is personified as the maternal figure, the colonies who seek her resources are siblings. The United States, although no longer a literal colony, was still heir to the "motherland-like" cultural influences of Britain and France, so in a sense, Egypt's colonial state is a shared element of their history. Like sibling rivalry, the American representations of Egypt at the turn of the century are the actions of a growing child using its sibling to emulate the kind of authority and status that

the parental influence of the motherland holds. The role of the arts is crucial in this formulation as it was a primary means of enacting these desires culturally, and the diffusion of these messages in increasingly popular visual media suggests that the desire was more than a reflection of the wealthiest Americans, but instead part of a broad cultural consciousness.

Said's contention that knowledge is equal to oppression and results in the development of stereotypes and constructed realities is directly reflected in the type of cultural imperialism that this dissertation explores. The problems in his analysis surrounding reciprocal exchange and Eastern agency did not affect the Gilded Age population of New York City *en masse*. Instead, the city and the nation by extension were witnesses to the development of an imperial-style culture that included fine art, performance, film, advertisements, and exhibitions. This culture heavily relied on the "spectacle" of a mythical Egypt that was tangled in a complicated balance of constructed European influence, ancient history and Egyptian exoticism.

This period of the new nation's identity was dominated by constructed history as well as constructed images of *both* America and Egypt. For this reason I rely heavily on the concepts of spectacle and simulacra formulated by Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard respectively.<sup>16</sup> Although the work of each is tied to very specific moments in postmodern critical theory, both offer useful frameworks that highlight the ways in which the image of Egypt was manipulated by an American perspective. Inseparable from the rise of consumer culture, the spectacle as the notion of a body of monolithic, impenetrable images that reflect back a culture's desires for their own consumption is alive in each of

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<sup>16</sup>Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (New York: Zone Books, 1994).; Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

the instances of American Orientalism this dissertation explores. Taking different forms, the ways in which Egyptian artifacts were exhibited and how artists and performers represented both themselves and the Egyptian motifs they depicted were variations on the same idea. Egypt became a “spectacle” whose meaning had little to do with issues of historical accuracy or stylistic authenticity: it signified more about an American present than an Egyptian history.

At the same time, these spectacles produced an “Egypt” that was no longer authentic, no longer tied to its original signifier. Instead, the Egypt in this period was developed into a simulacrum, one that reflected the implicit Imperialist desires of the young American nation rather than Egypt’s actual historical and cultural origins. As Baudrillard defines it, the simulacrum is essentially a copy; that copy either *had* no original to begin with, or no longer had any tie to an original source. Egypt’s authentic history was never signified with any exacting “authenticity” to American audiences. Instead, what Americans experienced were constructed representations of a European take on Egypt – the result of archeology and Egyptology. More about consumption and reception, this analysis explores how America’s fascination with Egypt shaped a city’s, and a nation’s understanding of the ancient culture as it reflected their own. I unpack this dense period of flurried activity in American visual culture by examining four distinct but interrelated case studies across an assortment of media. Taking cues from Holly Edwards and following models such as Mari Yoshihara’s *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*, I frame a cross section of New York City’s Orientalist visual culture according to a particular moment of time, highlighting the commonalities between

various case studies and the ways in which they molded the image of Egypt into a malleable sign of American culture.<sup>17</sup>

Chapter One begins with an analysis of the spectacular arrival of *Cleopatra's Needle*, a granite obelisk, to New York City in 1881. As the pivotal moment when the city, and country, acquired its first authentic ancient relic, the negotiations, removal process, transport, arrival and installation were carefully orchestrated to produce an image of American ingenuity and political strength; claiming their “rightful” monument as both London and Paris had done before. In a move that echoes Roman empire-building strategies, the United States removed the obelisk from Alexandria as *spolia* –a work of art that was removed from its original source to be appropriated into a new context. With the advent of the City Beautiful Movement, New York was newly positioned as the cosmopolitan capital of the nation, and the obelisk as *spolia* became part of the overall artwork that was the city itself. The chapter argues that the obelisk became a spectacle by means of its sublime authenticity and the fanfare with which it was celebrated, a fact that was celebrated in local and national coverage and sanctioned by the city’s cultural authorities. Moreover, as it was rolled through both the streets of Alexandria and transported across the Atlantic to be similarly maneuvered through New York City, the obelisk was rendered doubly exotic by virtue of the fact that modern Egypt was no longer a suitable home for it. Having regressed from ancient Egypt’s former glory, modern Egypt was deemed as an unsuitable home for the obelisk in its exotic “primitive” and backwards state. Looking to studies like Todd Porterfield’s *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres and David* the chapter argues that the arrival and installation of *Cleopatra's*

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<sup>17</sup> Yoshihara, Mari, *Embracing the East: White Women and American Orientalism*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

*Needle* in New York City ushered in a new type of Egyptomania that reflected the country's desire to fashion itself as empire, and express its imperialist inclinations in a cultural acquisition that mirrored both French and British imperial history.<sup>18</sup>

Building on this desire to own authentic Egyptian objects, Chapter Two explores how the development of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Egyptian collection was motivated by an increasing desire to both canonize Egyptian objects as "art," rather than artifact, and to gain increasing knowledge about the culture in order to enact possession over it. Exploring Barnum's American Museum and the Henry Abbott Collection of Egyptian antiquities as comparative cases, this chapter examines their modes of exhibition experience to understand the other priorities and audiences that set the stage for the Metropolitan's exceptional success. Barnum's venture became wildly successful through his willingness to give viewers a theatrical experience based in the "curiosity" that impressed upon them a problematic and illogical view of Egyptian history and culture. While Barnum's techniques had little cohesiveness with an actual Egyptian context, the Abbott collection, in seeking to convey comprehensive knowledge, met with relative failure. Despite its cohesive display of actual Egyptian objects, the Abbott collection struggled to find an audience as its focus on factual, "authentic" culture required more interpretation than average viewers could access. The Abbott collection sought to elevate the Egyptian object to high culture, through the mark of its distinguished collector and its educational goals, but in taking the Egyptian objects out of a curiosity context, they isolated both Barnum's audience who sought out participatory spaces and more educated classes who found the objects to be macabre artifacts and not

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<sup>18</sup> Porterfield, Todd B, and Susan L. Siegfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David*, (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

quite art. The Metropolitan Museum thus stepped into this debate and attempted to combine the theatrical with the edifying in the name of its mission to present the city with a premier, encyclopedic art museum on the scale of the Louvre or the British Museum. By enacting a comprehensive acquisition program, including significant Egyptian expeditions funded by John Pierpont Morgan, the Metropolitan Museum ushered the image of Egypt into a new realm: as an aggressively sought after, American-excavated import of fine, rarified aesthetic quality belonging to a museum shaped by royal and imperial traditions of collecting.

In the remaining two chapters, the analysis shifts from the acquisition of authentic Egyptian artifacts to the American representation of Egypt in its graphic art and in a wide array of performed spectacles. Chapter Three looks to the work of two artists as they occupy different ends on the spectrum of American Orientalist imagery at the turn-of-the-century: painter Frederick Arthur Bridgman and commercial artist Maxfield Parrish. The former traveled at length throughout the Middle East and a number of his works portrayed both modern and ancient Egyptian subjects. With a particularly strong following in New York City, Frederick Arthur Bridgman was *the* premier Orientalist from the years of 1880 until he experienced a sharp decline at the start of the twentieth century. Parrish on the other hand, enjoyed a celebrity status as the country's premiere purveyor of fantasy imagery, fantasies that were particularly appealing to the country's growing middle class. Although Parrish's career was varied and steady, the pinnacle of his success came immediately following the production of his second most popular work *The Garden of Allah* which built upon a number of his other successful Orientalist subjects. The decline of Bridgman and his impressionistic paintings as Parrish rose to

stardom with his similarly exotic, albeit completely fantastical, images highlights a particular tension within American Orientalism. In examining their respective careers and the nature of the works they produced, Parrish's and Bridgman's works demonstrate how producing images of an exoticized East, and Egypt more specifically, required carefully walking the tightrope between fantasy and reality. The work of both men was indebted to European styles, and in the voracious consumption of their imagery by American audiences, their careers demonstrate how the image of Egypt (and the East more generally) was contingent upon a negotiated balance of truth and fiction for middle class American audiences.

In the final Chapter, I explore three distinct genres of performances that depict Egypt through the bodies of their female protagonists: opera, circus, and film. Both the figures of Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* and historical queen of Egypt, Cleopatra, demonstrated how the image of Egypt was manipulated to reinforce imperialist ideologies for American audiences. Through the early nineteenth-century performances of Verdi's great opera, the early twentieth century Barnum & Bailey Circus spectacles, and the 1912 and 1917 silent films of *Cleopatra*, Egypt was depicted as an opulent, audacious spectacle. The pageantry and scale of these productions helped to reinforce a spectatorial position that discouraged a participatory viewing experience; instead the magnitude of these performances and films rendered their audiences captive to the ideologies in their narratives. In *Aida*, both women, Aida and Amneris, are linked to complex love triangles with illicit love interests, representing a "Western" image of power. Family and nationalistic loyalties are pitted against unadulterated lust, only to result in the inevitable deaths of both the women leads and their male lovers. The subtext of military conflict in both *Aida*'s and *Cleopatra*'s

tales combined with the love triangle to produce a giant spectacle of imperial conflict and the dangers of being tempted by an exotic “East.” This chapter explores how the intrinsic qualities of each performative medium helped to shape a new representation both of Egypt and of the female protagonists as they represent the exotic “otherness” of Egypt through their sexualized bodies.

These spectacular presentations pushed Egypt to its furthest embodiment of simulacrum. All four chapters explore how the image of Egypt shifted from being celebrated as authentic into a total spectacle of lust, sin and danger. This process would change once it was confronted with the brutal realities of the world’s most horrific catastrophe of World War One. A moment when American audiences increasingly sought out escapist fantasies as well as when American political and military strength was recognized and utilized by European Allied powers, the war provided an entirely different context for Egyptian representations in the United States. The shifting representations of Egypt throughout this dissertation demonstrates the ways in which American audiences created changing meanings for the mysterious ancient civilization that suited their political and ideological needs.

## Chapter One: Bringing Empire to the Empire State

*“It would be absurd for the people of any great city to hope to be happy without an Egyptian Obelisk. Rome has had them this great while and so has Constantinople. Paris has one. London has one. If New York was without one, all those great sites might point the finger of scorn at us and intimate that we could never rise to any real moral grandeur until we had our obelisk.”*

- New York

Herald, 1881

On February 22, 1881, the Great Hall of the Metropolitan Museum of Art was filled to its capacity. An invitation only event, guests gathered to hear the speeches and prayers dedicated to the city’s most famous foreign import: the 69 foot tall, 8 foot wide and 220 ton monolith conventionally known as *Cleopatra’s Needle*<sup>1</sup> (Figure 1). In a meticulously documented, hotly debated, and politically delicate exchange, the United States of America joined the international community of prestigious countries lucky enough to own their own ancient Egyptian obelisk. More than overcoming the daunting task of transporting the massive structure across the seas, the world’s youngest nation was able to remove, transport and install an obelisk from the world’s oldest civilization in the impossibly brief time span of three years.

This chapter examines the impact of the 1881 acquisition and installation of *Cleopatra’s Needle* in Central Park as it shifted the American concept of “Egypt” from revival to signifier of both the storied antiquity that America lacked and of an exotic “other” of intoxicating mystery available for possession by European colonizing powers. As the first authentic Egyptian monument transplanted and displayed for public consumption in the United States, I argue that the obelisk functions as a form of

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<sup>1</sup> Dimensions as cited in: D’Alton, Martina, *The New York Obelisk, Or, How Cleopatra’s Needle Came to New York and What Happened When It Got Here*, (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Abrams, 1993), 16.

nineteenth-century *spolia*, an original art work removed from its context – often through violent measures – and set within a new space for political, aesthetic or ideological purposes. Through journalistic coverage and public fanfare, the obelisk as *spolia* became a spectacle based on the novelty of its legitimate antiquity. Distinct from earlier periods of Egyptian Revival, the American acquisition of the obelisk was more a reflection of a developing imperialist spirit, influenced by contemporary European colonialism. The obelisk functions as an appropriated artistic addition to its new home in the midst of the cosmopolitan masterpiece of Central Park, a meticulously planned space intended for public consumption.

A number of scholars have remarked upon the incredible technical feat behind the American removal and installation of *Cleopatra's Needle*, carefully noting the details of the process and recounting the numerous displays of public spectacle that surrounded its American debut. However, of the multiple resources devoted to the New York Obelisk, little has been done to examine the underlying motivations behind the quest for the ancient artifact, nor has there been great effort to examine the cultural impact of such a monumental artistic and archaeological endeavor. Through a reinterpretation of this obelisk as *spolia*, I will demonstrate how the monolith as a symbol of American power reflected the country's implicit imperialist ideologies; a mindset that complemented and enhanced the country's desire for increasing aesthetic sophistication during the rich period of the American Renaissance. My argument adds new layers of meaning to the complicated Orientalist motivations behind the ownership of an Egyptian monument on American soil. By extension, the symbolic meaning of the obelisk illuminates the meaning of "Egypt" more broadly as an ancient civilization and a modern Arab country

during a period that stands in great contrast to the prior moments of American, Egyptian Revival art production.

### **The Story of the Obelisk**

The interest in ancient Egypt and Egyptian forms was not a new phenomenon in America. Scott Trafton argues that, since the nation's very inception, ties to Egypt as a land of the Bible, a legendary seat of ancient knowledge and the birthplace of civilization have remained a part of the American consciousness.<sup>2</sup> For the better part of the earlier nineteenth century, Egyptian forms were manifest during periods of revival, a topic discussed in greater depth later in this chapter. What did not occur until the turn of the century was the appropriation not just of representations of Egypt but of original Egyptian objects – here, a monument of the size and scale of a monolithic obelisk. What follows is a brief synopsis of the manner in which the United States acquired and retrieved the obelisk, a topic that has been thoroughly covered by a number of authors and detailed by Henry Honeychurch Gorringe, the chief naval officer and mastermind behind the complicated removal process.<sup>3</sup>

The impetus for the acquisition of Cleopatra's needle seems to lie in the suggestions of William Henry Hurlbert, editor of *The New York World*.<sup>4</sup> In the 1882 publication *Egyptian Obelisks*, which chronicles the adventures of Henry Honeychurch Gorringe, the man behind the engineering and naval transport of the monolith, it was "His Highness, Ismail, the Khedive of Egypt, at the time of the opening of the Suez Canal"

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<sup>2</sup> Trafton, Scott, *Egypt Land: Race and Nineteenth-Century American Egyptomania*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 2.

<sup>3</sup> See D'Alton for more information on Gorringe, Henry H., *Egyptian Obelisks*, (London: John C. Nimmo, 1885).

<sup>4</sup> Curran, Brian A., *Obelisk: A History*, (Cambridge, Mass: Burndy Library, 2009).

who presented Hurlbert with the initial idea.<sup>5</sup> After the Khedive's building campaign and push to modernize the country, Egypt's economy was in decline and many Egyptians found themselves taxed out of their land and possessions. The sale of Egyptian antiquities had become a common method of raising capital and the possibility of an American financial ally was worth the risk of losing the Alexandrian obelisk.

The backdrop for this undertaking was the recent removal of similar obelisks from Egypt by both France and England. The French interest in obelisk removal is rumored to date to the end of the eighteenth century during the Napoleonic campaign in Egypt.<sup>6</sup> However, it was not until 1826 that France was given both of the obelisks that stood at the front of the Luxor temple by Muhammad Ali Pasha, to mitigate the turbulent political relations with France's colonizing ambitions. Only one obelisk was left for France, however; in 1833, it was placed at the Place de la Concorde. The other still remains at Luxor.<sup>7</sup>

London's obelisk was half of the pair originally from Heliopolis, built by the Pharaoh Tuthmosis III. They were later moved by Augustus to the front of the Caesarium, or temple to the deified Julius Caesar. Given to Great Britain in 1820 by Muhammad Ali Pasha, the obelisk was meant to commemorate the British victory over Napoleon's occupation army.<sup>8</sup> Due to the enormous expense of transport and the

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<sup>5</sup> D'Alton, 12.

<sup>6</sup> Dibner, Bern, *Moving the Obelisks: A Study in Engineering History in Which the Vatican Obelisk in Rome in 1586 Was Moved by Muscle Power, and a Study of More Recent Similar Moves*, (Norwalk, Conn, 19520, 55.

<sup>7</sup> Todd Porterfield has done excellent work in exploring how Egyptian obelisks factored into French imperialism. For more information see: Porterfield, Todd B., *The Allure of Empire: Art in the Service of French Imperialism, 1798-1836*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).; Porterfield, Todd B., "The Obelisk on the Place De La Concorde: Post-revolutionary Politics and Egyptian Culture." *Ägyptomanie / Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien. Wilfried Seipel (hg.).* (2000): 62-81.; Porterfield, Todd B, and Susan L. Siegfried, *Staging Empire: Napoleon, Ingres, and David*, (University Park, Pa: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006).

<sup>8</sup> D'Alton, 9.

inability to locate a financial backer, the obelisk remained in Egypt until after the French decided to retrieve their “gift.” With the support of the wealthy dermatologist Erasmus Wilson in 1877, London began plans to remove the obelisk, an ordeal that was budgeted at roughly £10,000.<sup>9</sup> In what would be a disastrous endeavor, the obelisk was transported in a cigar-like iron tube, manned with sailors and aptly named *Cleopatra*, and towed behind the English ship *Olga*. In the Bay of Biscay, between the coasts of France and Spain, the ship hit stormy seas. During the storm the transport device, *Cleopatra*, became uncontrollable and the *Olga* sent out a rescue ship that capsized, killing the rescue crew. The obelisk was reported as lost at sea, sunk in the storm. Luckily, it was later recovered by the Glasgow ship the *Fitzmaurice* and taken to Spain for repairs. After negotiations over a salvage fee, the obelisk was returned to the English and installed in 1878.

Given the embarrassing engineering mistakes and misfortunes of the English, as well as the lengthy retrieval times of both European powers, most Egyptians believed that the comparatively primitive, unrefined Americans would never be able to remove such an imposing “gift.” As Gorringer recounts, “The French waited about twenty-five years and the English nearly seventy-five before removing [the] obelisks... There was a feeling in Egypt that the Americans would certainly require a century to perfect their arrangements; and although it was well known that the obelisk had been given to the United States, no one, not even the Khedive, believed that it would be removed.”<sup>10</sup> This sentiment led to public protests in Egypt as it became evident that the Americans did indeed intend to take

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<sup>9</sup> Copeman, PW., “Cleopatra's Needle: Dermatology's Weightiest Achievement,” *British Medical Journal*. 1.6106 (1978): 154-5.

<sup>10</sup> D’Alton, 20.

advantage of the offer for the second Alexandrian obelisk that had been offered years earlier in 1879.<sup>11</sup>

Chronicled by American newspapers, the transport of obelisks from Egypt to the West had become a subject of common knowledge and popular fascination by the late 1870s. The removal and transport of the London Needle was frequently monitored by major New York newspapers including *The New York Times*, *The New York World* and *Harpers Weekly*. Americans seem to have been well aware of both the political and the engineering complexities involved in such an endeavor. Given the origin of the interest by *New York World* publisher Henry Hurlbert, the American acquisition could be understood as a monumental publicity stunt, capitalizing on the timeliness of “obelisks,” the exoticism and historical import of “Egypt,” and the audacity of Gorrington and the Americans for taking on such a herculean task.<sup>12</sup>

Plans for the removal and transport of the obelisk mobilized after 1877. While Hurlbert’s initial discussion with Ismail Pasha was a start, there was no financial backing or engineering mastermind to oversee the details. Gorrington, a former Union Soldier of the Mississippi Squadron and officer of the U.S. Navy was transferred to the Hydrographic Office in Washington D.C. He was later given command of the retired Confederate paddle-wheel blockade-runner the *Gettysburg* in 1876.<sup>13</sup> With the company of his fellow officer Lieutenant Seaton Schroeder, Gorrington headed off to the Mediterranean for a two-

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<sup>11</sup> Despite the official nature of the obelisk as a gift, the Egyptian public continued to petition for a stop to the removal process. A number of complications arose in the early part of the excavation, an Italian falsely claimed that the land on which the obelisk was erected was his and that he forbade the removal of the object. Protesters demonstrated and threatened acts of violence upon Gorrington and his team. These matters were never fully resolved, but they were softened when Gorrington threatened to notify the U.S. government that he had been forcibly removed and not supported by the Egyptian authorities.

<sup>12</sup> For more on this perspective see Curran who heavily suggests that the American acquisition was fueled by journalism’s obsessive coverage. See pages 271-279.

<sup>13</sup> Hydrographic Office is a government division dedicated to nautical charts.

year survey. When his ship broke down in Alexandria, he had his first glimpse of *Cleopatra's Needle*, solitary, after the removal of the English obelisk.<sup>14</sup>

In 1877, Henry Hurlbert contacted John Dixon, an English civil engineer who was working on moving the obelisk to London. He secured the financial backing of William Henry Vanderbilt, and won the political support of New York's commissioner of public parks, Henry G. Stebbins. However, while the Americans gained momentum, the Egyptian offer suddenly came into question. With growing feelings of nationalism, the Egyptian public rebelled against the idea of losing another national monument to a foreign and, in particular, western power.<sup>15</sup> Swiftly reacting to the change in sentiment, Elbert Farman, the American consul-general in Egypt, under orders from the Secretary of State, intervened and convinced the khedive to gift *Cleopatra's Needle* to America. In a letter dating May 18, 1879, the Khedive responded:

The Government of the Khedive having taken into consideration your representations, and the desire which you have expressed in the name of the Government of the United States of America, consent, in fact to make a gift to the city of New York of the obelisk known as *Cleopatra's Needle*, which is at Alexandria on the sea-shore.<sup>16</sup>

The confirmation of the gift was of crucial significance, as the power of Ismail Pasha was about to be extinguished by Ismail's son, Tawfiq Pasha, whose entry into his reign was characterized by growing Egyptian nationalism and a movement to preserve and protect the country's heritage in its ancient monuments. The general nationalist sentiment amongst the Egyptian public was evidenced by the formation of the new Young Egyptian Party, a member of which reported to the *New York Herald*, "We Egyptians are just

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<sup>14</sup> D'Alton, 11.

<sup>15</sup> See note five; Egyptian sentiment was strongly against the obelisk removal as Egypt was continually losing its ancient heritage to western imperialist powers.

<sup>16</sup> As quoted from D'Alton, 15.

beginning to appreciate our precious monuments and relics and think it a great pity that many of the most valuable ones have already been given away.”<sup>17</sup> In addition to the rise in nationalism, as R.A. Hayward also suggests, the Egyptian gift stems from the country’s precarious political state. As it dealt with war in Abyssinia and strife in Sudan, foreign debt, and weak harvest results, it was forced to allow French and British representatives in the Egyptian Cabinet. After an 1879 coup d’état, the European leaders were dismissed, and an extra layer of resistance toward the gift to the Americans was removed.<sup>18</sup>

While the political arrangement was sorted out, the plans for the physical removal process began. The size of the obelisk required an innovative plan with a generous budget; Gorringe himself served as the mastermind who won over both Vanderbilt and Hurlbert with this thorough plan.<sup>19</sup> In 1879 Gorringe’s naval knowledge met Hurlbert’s strategic planning and the quest for the obelisk was officially underway. Having studied earlier methods of obelisk removal and transport, Gorringe was able to craft a plan that accommodated both the journey and the installation; the first step was finding a ship that could hold the weight of the monolith on board. Accounting for the obelisk’s 220 tons of weight, Gorringe realized that its massive size needed to be held on board below the water line so as to offset its density and keep it afloat.<sup>20</sup> Despite many setbacks, Gorringe purchased the *Dessoug* in December of 1879 for £5,100 and left the repairs to second in

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<sup>17</sup> As quoted in D’Alton, 19.

<sup>18</sup> Hayward, R A., *Cleopatra's Needles*. (Buxton: Moorland Pub. Co, 1978). 94.

<sup>19</sup> For a further discussion of Gorringe’s innovative plan see D’Alton’s thorough summary. Gorringe was the only competitor who considered both the transport and the removal/installation complications. Perhaps influenced by this research on the methods of Papal obelisk movers in Rome, Gorringe’s plan was well thought out and exhaustive.

<sup>20</sup> Gorringe had great difficulty finding a ship for this purpose. Many boats were either too small or did not have the ability to be properly modified for the obelisk to put on board. Moreover, many ship owners were reluctant to sell him such a vessel, thinking it would destroy their merchandise. He was finally able to find the *Dessoug* in Alexandria, lying unused.

command, Lieutenant Schroeder, while he turned his attention to the project of removing, lifting and turning the massive obelisk.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps his most important contribution, Gorringe designed a structure to pivot the monolith that could be assembled on site in Alexandria and again back in New York. The device was the most efficient and gentle method of removal and installation to date – a mark of American technological ingenuity.<sup>22</sup> In addition to his device, Gorringe outfitted the obelisk in a special jacket and attached it to a pulley system that could shift the monolith's weight.

On December 3, the obelisk was lifted off its base, the whole 220 tons supported by the steel towers, supporting trunnions, ropes and pulleys. While the obelisk was lifted, Gorringe took note of its pedestal's Masonic symbols and decided to also excavate and remove the entire 50 ton base, the first time in history an obelisk was to be relocated with its original base.<sup>23</sup> On the morning of December 6, the needle inched downwards. Not without its complications, a snapped rope dramatically dropped the obelisk upon its supportive timber staging. Thankfully, the obelisk was unharmed, and according to Gorringe, the surrounding crowd cheered for the first time at the marvelous spectacle of the removal process.

Gorringe's original plan was to roll the obelisk through the streets on cannonballs, but protests from Alexandria's residents forced him to create a dry-dock where he could directly load the obelisk onboard.<sup>24</sup> It took ten days to successfully roll the obelisk on

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<sup>21</sup> Hayward, 101.

<sup>22</sup> Gorringe took great lengths to ensure a seamless transfer process. He excavated the base of the obelisk and constructed a stage that supported the workers as they packed the obelisk for safe transit. Steel towers were built around all sides of the obelisk as well.

<sup>23</sup> D'Alton, 27.

<sup>24</sup> Once the obelisk was lowered, the only way the weight could be moved was to be rolled. The residents of Alexandria protested so much that an alternate route had to be devised. Gorringe's final solution was to roll

board, after which it took ten more to repair the ship's frames and fully secure the obelisk so that it would not shift during the journey back to New York. The *Dessoug* set out on June 12, 1880, though it travelled illegally without the protection of a national flag. Because it was purchased in Alexandria but used for American purposes, the ship was neither American nor fully Egyptian, and using either flag would put the crew in danger of legal complications. Gorringe made the brave decision of leaving without the protection of a flag and, despite the risks, set out for sea. Luckily, the journey back to New York was met with little issue save for a stop in Gibraltar to replenish coal and a brief complication when the engines stopped due to a snapped crankshaft.<sup>25</sup> Despite the complications and periods of rough weather, the obelisk never shifted, and the ship's careful equilibrium of weight was maintained.

The final chapter in the story of *Cleopatra's Needle's* transport lies in its two-mile journey through the streets of Manhattan to its final resting place of Greywacke Knoll in Central Park. As will be discussed in greater detail later, Greywacke Knoll was chosen over Columbus Circle, Grand Army Plaza and Union Square due to its serene location, elevation and proximity to the new Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>26</sup> But, much like its first journey out of Alexandria and across the Atlantic, the process of moving the megalith through the streets of the crowded city was not met without complications.

There was only one suitable dry-dock on Ninety-Sixth Street along the Hudson River where he could remove the obelisk, but the owner, fearing damages, raised his

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the obelisk to a man-made dry-dock where he could board it directly aboard the ship. The dock was drained by Arab workmen and it delayed the removal process by some time.

<sup>25</sup> Hayward, 102-105.

<sup>26</sup> For more information see D'Alton's discussion of the obelisk's placement; contemporary journalism also covered the events in exacting detail. Most of my research was found in an unpublished scrapbook of obelisk related materials at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Many of the clippings did not include citation information, however, the topic was of such importance that *The New York Times*, *The World*, and *The Sun* all ran routine commentary from 1880 through 1881.

prices exorbitantly.<sup>27</sup> The obelisk was therefore held in a cradle that was powered by a pile driver engine along a course of rollers atop the newly constructed two-mile route marine railway.<sup>28</sup> Finally the obelisk was navigated up Ninety-Sixth Street, right onto West Boulevard, and left at Eighty-Sixth Street where it was to enter its new home: Central Park. Not surprisingly, progress was slower than anticipated. Rain and extreme cold prolonged the transport process and the first major move from Ninety-Sixth Street to West Boulevard (Broadway) lasted from September 30 through October 27. Even more troublesome was the process of moving the obelisk around a street corner. It took Goringe and his men six days and nights to turn the obelisk down West Boulevard with eleven small turns at varying degrees.

On November 25, the obelisk finally reached Central Park, but it was not until December 16 that it arrived at Fifth Avenue and started down toward Eighty Second Street. On December 22, *Cleopatra's Needle* began its last leg of the journey, reaching a specially made trestle to prepare for its eagerly awaited erection. With a major blizzard on December 28 and a deep cold spell, the monolith did not move further until January 5 1881, 112 days after it had initially arrived in New York City.

Throughout this long and complex journey, the American public was engaged in its own debate surrounding the obelisk. From the start, the endeavor was intimately connected with American journalism, and it continued with weekly updates on the monolith's travel and editorials on topics like the meaning of hieroglyphics and the mixed messages of erecting an obelisk, a symbol of dynastic power in a modern

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<sup>27</sup> With the dry dock fees no longer an option, Goringe designed a new plan utilizing marine railways or as Hayward explains, "a system by which a vessel that had been floated into a cradle could be hauled on rollers up and incline and out of the water." Pages 104-106 for more information.

<sup>28</sup> Marine railways were constructed because of New York's traffic issues. The initial travel route through Manhattan required traffic to be shut down for long periods of time. To avoid this special railway tracks were constructed to help guide the obelisk both more efficiently and in less hectic areas of the city.

democracy. The newspaper coverage mingled with advertisements, mass-produced obelisk souvenirs, commemorative medallions, celebratory speeches, parades and opening events to produce a moment when the foreign import dramatically changed the visual landscape of America's most cosmopolitan city. In order to grasp the full significance of this moment, it is necessary to consider the varied ways in which *Cleopatra's Needle* resonated as an example of authentic Egyptian art in the contemporary New York consciousness and, furthermore, amongst the landscape of its prized Central Park.

### **Receiving the Needle: American Obelisks and Egyptian Revival**

While the arrival of *Cleopatra's Needle* does represent the first time a major Egyptian monument was brought to the shores of the United States, it does not, however, represent the first time Americans, or New Yorkers more specifically, were exposed to Egyptianizing forms of art. As James Curl and Richard Carrott discuss at length, the early half of the nineteenth century was a period marked by an Egyptian Revival style that intermingled with Greek, Roman, Gothic and even Colonial Revival styles.<sup>29</sup> Carrott, the only scholar who has presented a monograph devoted entirely to the topic of Egyptian Revival in America, defines the phenomenon as, "that movement in nineteenth century architecture dependent upon motifs of form and detail from ancient Egypt, which produced some major structures in a wide geographical range of American cities within

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<sup>29</sup> Carrott, Richard G., *The Egyptian Revival: Its Sources, Monuments, and Meaning, 1808-1858*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978).; Curl, James S., *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival, a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1994).; Curl, James S., and James S. Curl, *The Egyptian Revival: Ancient Egypt As the Inspiration for Design Motifs in the West*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005).

the years of 1808-1858.”<sup>30</sup> As part of a larger nineteenth-century phenomenon of revival styles, the Egyptian Revival is uniquely situated in the divide between Neoclassical and Romantic or picturesque impulses due to its status as an ancient civilization and simultaneous air of mystery, exoticism and ties to Biblical history.<sup>31</sup> Scholars have cited the source of American Egyptian Revival as the second 1830 publication of the Napoleonic texts *Description de l’Egypte* by Vivant Denon and the 1822 decipherment of hieroglyphics by Champollion.<sup>32</sup> Despite the work of scholars like Curl and Carrott, the Egyptian Revival has been understudied and approached mainly as a form of decoration; scholars have primarily tracked motifs, analyzing their relationship to archaeological accuracy and at times, if relevant, suggesting their associational symbolic meanings.<sup>33</sup> In general, the American usage of Egyptian styles in the early nineteenth century can be categorized according to the following symbolic rationalizations: connotations of death and eternal life, associations with the wisdom of the ancients, references to the Old Testament and allusions to strength, power, and sublime, awesome permanence.<sup>34</sup> It is significant, however, to consider the tradition of the Egyptian Revival style both nationally and more locally in New York before considering the way in which the arrival of an original artifact resonated amidst a sea of revivalist emulations.

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<sup>30</sup> Carrott, 2.

<sup>31</sup> Lamia, Stephen, *Egypt, the Source and the Legacy: Ancient Egyptian and Egyptian Revival Objects*, (Bronxville, N.Y.: Sarah Lawrence College, 1989), 2.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Fazzini, Richard E. and March Kercher, “‘Egyptomania’ and American Architecture” In Humbert, Jean-Marcel, and C. A. Price, *Imhotep Today: Egyptianizing Architecture*, (London, U.K: UCL Press, Institute of Archaeology, 2003), 135-161.

<sup>34</sup> This list is based off the associational symbolism section of Fazzani’s and Kercher’s analysis of Egyptian Revival in the US based heavily off of Carrott’s monograph. I also have gleaned these ideas based off major themes in Carrott’s text, however, Carrot does not categorize these theories so explicitly and instead sticks to categories based chronologically and in relation to trends in the aesthetic appearance of each respective period of revival.

The discussion of Egyptian Revival has focused primarily on architectural forms and commemorative monumental structures. The major examples of American Egyptian Revival were public architectural projects, military or presidential monuments, and funerary architecture. In terms of non-architectural works, there is a significant lack of Egyptian themed sculptures prior to the Civil War. Painted examples of Egyptianizing themes are rare with the exception of Biblical allusions and works that explore the connections between the “New World” and the Ancient World with references to Ancient Egypt specifically.<sup>35</sup> Interestingly, painted images of the contemporary Middle East, Egypt or even romanticized images of Pharaonic Egyptian motifs, in other words more “Orientalizing” images, date for the most part to the end of the nineteenth century, more contemporary to the period surrounding the arrival of *Cleopatra’s Needle*.<sup>36</sup>

The obelisk, as an iconographic feature, was favored by early American audiences as a sign of permanence and strength, often functioning as a stand-in for Egypt itself. Obelisks continued to be commissioned and erected, for commemorative purposes. These were often hollow, with internal observation platforms constructed to mark military victories or the accomplishments of military commanders. Many featured bases reminiscent of temple architecture and even held documents related to the honoree. “American Obelisks” like these were not true to the Egyptian original purpose or monolithic design. Archaeological accuracy was not the goal in re-inventing these monuments. Their reinterpretation was a far cry from the original purpose of their

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<sup>35</sup> See John Davis on the topic of the Holy Land in American landscape painting: Davis, John, *The Landscape of Belief: Encountering the Holy Land in Nineteenth-Century American Art and Culture*. (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>36</sup> This topic merits much further research than the scope of this chapter and is tied to questions of Trans-Atlantic influence. As painters of the American Renaissance traveled abroad for their art education, it appears as though the vogue for French Orientalist subjects also traveled back to America. I would suggest that there is far more to uncover regarding the reception of these paintings in an American context and that it could be the basis of a study in itself.

hieroglyphic inscriptions that documented Pharaonic sources along the sides of a temple complex. Nevertheless, the American Egyptian Revival translated the shape, size and scale of the obelisk, focusing more on the general aesthetic rather than its original purpose.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the best known example of an “American obelisk” is the Washington Monument in Washington D.C.<sup>38</sup> Built between the years of 1848 and 1884 in two phases punctuated by the Civil War, the monument is an enormous 81,120 ton and 555’ 5-1/8” tall structure comprised of white marble blocks from Maryland and Massachusetts with Maryland blue gneiss and Maine granite. The push for constructing a monument to honor Washington’s military leadership during the American Revolution originated as early as 1783, when Congress proposed the erection of an equestrian monument in his honor. Finally, in 1847, a committee of supporters was able to raise enough money to support the endeavor and the design plan of Robert Mills was selected. In its original manifestation, the plan called for an elaborate Greco-Roman base with a colonnade and portico meant to house paintings and documents related to the president’s achievements. As described in the popular journal *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Newspaper*, “the obelisk was to lift its superb head six hundred feet into the sunshine and moonlight. Such was the

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<sup>37</sup> For a more thorough discussion of obelisks, their history, usage and more modern incarnation see all of Curran’s *Obelisk*. Although the chapter devoted to the American obelisk was most useful here, the entire book explores all aspects of obelisks throughout history. Their original usage, their manipulation in ancient Rome, by the Catholic Church and later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century are all discussed at length.

<sup>38</sup> It should be noted that there were a number of other major monumental obelisks planned and erected prior to the Washington Monument of D.C. For the purpose of this chapter I am highlighting only a select number of obelisks for mention. It is worth noting that prior to the erection and design of the Washington Monument in D.C. there was a similar proposal for a Washington monument in New York City designed in 1847 by Minard Lafever who suggested the form of an obelisk due to its massiveness and connotations of strength. It would have stood at 150 meters and would have been appropriately visible from afar. Fazzani discusses how the obelisk was based on earlier private grave monuments and Denon’s *Voyage*.

monument designed to portray to coming generations three elements of George Washington's character: majesty, simplicity and plainness."<sup>39</sup>

The choice of an obelisk for this monument of national importance was an interesting one. Robert Mills' original design blended Greco-Roman forms with Egyptian iconography but the final choice marks a purposeful embrace of the obelisk as national symbol. Richard Carrot suggests that the obelisk can be seen as evoking "Burkean sublime emotions associating the country's founding father with scale and power and ideas related to obelisks: phallus-father, unifying god, military victor and Masonic warrior for freedom."<sup>40</sup> Regardless of the exact implications, the choice of the obelisk was a major moment in American Egyptian Revival. In 1880, the Federal Government officially commissioned the Monument, after modifications to the original 1848 plan, and decided to complete it as a solitary obelisk without any additional adornment or base. Although the monument was conceived of before the gift of *Cleopatra's Needle*, the monument building occurred simultaneously with the fanfare surrounding New York's obelisk. The relationship between the two is worth further considering; for the present study, it raises the question of how *Cleopatra's Needle* was contextualized with existing Egyptian Revival monuments and, perhaps, how it dramatically differed.

Both contemporary writers and modern scholars have neglected to consider how the Egyptian artifact fits into any larger aesthetic phenomenon and how it may have compared to pre-existing American-made obelisks. While there was no paucity of commentary surrounding the pros and cons of this American acquisition, there was little

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<sup>39</sup> "The Famous Washington Monument," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, February 5, 1881, 383.

<sup>40</sup> Carrot, 138.

attention given to the object as it fit into an easily categorized “revival” style.<sup>41</sup> I argue, therefore that the acquisition of *Cleopatra’s Needle* was not an act associated with revival but instead belonged to a different category; related to the both aesthetic and morally justifying goals of the later period of the American Renaissance.

Significantly, some of the most major examples of Egyptian revival were located in New York City. In their examination of Egyptian revival architecture, Fazzani and McKercher cite the Croton Distributing Reservoir in Central Park as a key example. With its design based on historically accurate elements, it was one of the most massive Egyptianizing monuments constructed with a concern for archaeological details.<sup>42</sup> The choice of Egyptian Revival for the reservoir may have been a reference to an 1811 Albany reservoir or, Carrot suggests, may recall the annual Nile floods and Egyptian irrigation system.<sup>43</sup> The Reservoir, though popular with New Yorkers as a spot for leisurely walks, was torn down in the 1890s.

The most noteworthy example of Egyptian Revival in New York was the famous structure known popularly as “The Tombs” and formally as the New York City Halls of Justice and House of Detention (Figure 2). Built between the years of 1835 and 1838, it was intended as a prison based on contemporary theories of social reform. A number of styles, including Neo-Gothic and Neo-Greek revival styles, were originally suggested in a massive national design competition. The winning plan, however, was John Haviland’s unique Egyptianizing façade and interior design plan that included palm-leaved capitals, an ornamented architrave with serpent motifs, projecting pylon porches and reeded

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<sup>41</sup> This statement is based on the primary source coverage found in periodicals such as *The New York Times*, *The New York World*, *The Evening Telegram*, *The New York Herald*, *The Sun* and other periodicals like the ones listed.

<sup>42</sup> Fazzani and Kercher, 136.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

triglyphs. Carrott argues that the decision for an Egyptianizing style could lie in the association between Egypt and wisdom, serving as a symbol of reform over gloomy eternal punishment. Regardless of the implications or associations, “The Tombs” was significant as a major feature of the New York City landscape until 1902, when it was torn down and rebuilt to reflect newly changing theories in prison reform.<sup>44</sup>

Despite these examples, the Egyptian Revival of the early nineteenth century, as a style associated with New York City, still remains largely overlooked by contemporary scholars in the face of Neo-Classical or Neo-Gothic motifs. The output, while steady and popular, was minor compared to the aforementioned revival styles and the period of its production was comparatively limited. While it is undeniable that both the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have exhibited a marked period of “revival” characterized by their own archaeological and mythological concerns, it is too simplistic to assume that, in the years that actually brought the nation their own Egyptian obelisk, the appeal of Egypt and the sublime associations of her antiquity and connotations of permanence ceased to resonate with an American psyche.<sup>45</sup> Rather, I argue that the American interpretation of Egypt shifted. No longer just revival, the acquisition of *Cleopatra’s Needle* indicated an embrace of imperialist ideology, justifying its forcible removal from its original context as *spolia*.

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<sup>44</sup> Sutton, Charles, James B. Mix, and Samuel A. Mackeever, *The New York Tombs: Its Secrets and Its Mysteries. Being a History of Noted Criminals, with Narratives of Their Crimes*, (San Francisco: A. Roman & Co, 1874)

<sup>45</sup> By mythological I am alluding to the popular lore of mummies and curses that was heavily associated with the mysterious events following the excavation of King Tutankhamen’s tomb. These events, which would initiate the now common trope of associating Egypt with the genre of “horror” both in film and in literature was not common in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and while there might have been a more “mystical” appreciation of Egypt as the source of ancient wisdom and connections to the sun and their pantheon of anthropomorphic deities, it did not resemble the explosion of Egyptian “fads” that marked the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## The New York Obelisk as *Spolia*

Obelisks have a long history of being uprooted, transported and re-erected by some of the most significant figures in history. From Augustus Caesar through the Popes of the seventeenth century, and up through Napoleon Bonaparte, these massive and seemingly immovable monuments have become signposts of power, authority and strength, imbuing the new owner with an impressive new status that subsumed the power of the previous owner. This practice of forcible removals and elaborate installations in politically or spiritually significant locations is one of the most traditional forms of *spolia*. The practice was cited in its own time by ancient authors as a commonplace act of possession and authority. While scholars still debate the exact meaning behind despoliation, what is most relevant here is that with the removal and appropriation of the art object, its nationalistic, religious or imperial authenticity contrasts against the foreign context of its new location.<sup>46</sup> *Cleopatra's Needle* follows this model of despoliation; its authenticity was strategically emphasized through journalistic media coverage and elaborate public displays, elevating it into the realm of spectacle and setting it against the backdrop of the New World's most modern epicenter: New York City.

*Cleopatra's Needle* "arrived" on American shores far earlier than its physical transport. As early as 1869 William Henry Hurlbert took the opportunity to announce the object's availability to the United States and asserting *The World's* responsibility to

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<sup>46</sup> In characterizing *spolia* it is impossible to accurately represent every numerous instance throughout the course of history. Here I am referring more to acts of despoliation with purposeful ideological rationalizations that were intended to be evident by those who executed the acts. There are instances of subtle applications of reused materials that harmoniously blend into pre-existing surroundings. This concept of *spolia* is relevant to the consideration of *Cleopatra's Needle* as well and will be discussed at great length later in this chapter. In order to deal with the concept of *spolia* I have made a distinction between these two types of removal and reuse; I acknowledge that it is at times a generalization of a curious practice that numerous scholars have treated with subtlety and specificity. My hope here is that an examination of the general the nature of *spolia* will elucidate the complex motivations and the implications of the installation of the New York Obelisk.

accurately document every detail related to the unprecedented event. Initiating a near decade of newspaper coverage, Hurlbert's announcement signaled an important moment not only in American history, but in the American psyche; the United States was about to enter into another class of nations, one that was not only powerful, confident and capable, but one that had a place on an international stage. In this representation, America could rival the great powers of France and England as the owner of significant cultural artifacts. In fact, as marvelous and imposing as the 220 ton, 69 feet granite obelisk was, the real fascination for many was found in the elaborate spectacle surrounding every aspect of its anticipated journey to the New World. Not only, was its physical transport fascinating but also the political exchanges between not only America and Egypt, but among jealous European onlookers.

The excitement and near obsessive journalism suggests that America's newest foreign import was as significant as its monumental shape and size suggest. However the question remains as to how the United States, a country comparatively infantile in its political and imperial power, could claim ownership of such a significant ancient relic. It was well known to the American public that an obelisk was a sign of dynastic power, as indicated by a speech given by General Goringe himself, in which he stated that the obelisk was:

...unquestionably designed to stand before a temple; the proportions between its height and that of the wall or pylon against which it was seen projects were invariably such that from every point of view the pyramidon of the obelisk was seen above the temple.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Taken from the address delivered by Lieutenant General Goringe before the New York Association of the Advancement of Science and Art on January 11, 1881. Unpaginated and found in ["The Obelisk"]. A Scrapbook consisting of articles taken from American and English Newspaper and Periodicals and Other Memorabilia, 1879-1941. Thomas J. Watson Library Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

This acknowledgement combined with the 1822 deciphering of hieroglyphics allowed for a concrete understanding of the dynastic function of obelisks as “signposts” that memorialized the names and achievements of the Egyptian Pharaohs. Should the democratic nation acquire and erect a monument dedicated to despots of the past? And by extension, should the democratic nation emulate the actions of the great European imperial powers of the present by acquiring a similar artifact for its “national collection” of sorts?

The definition of *spolia* is polyvalent and must include consideration of both its modern usage and its original ancient intent. Today among art historians and archaeologists, *spolia* is meant to suggest the purposeful reuse of ancient art works or architectural features in the creation of new buildings. A practice that was most commonly associated with the periods of the Late Roman Empire and Early Christianity, its most common forms were found with the Christian refashioning of pagan temples and the famous example of Emperor Constantine’s pastiche of imperial sculptural programs on *The Arch of Constantine*. Scholars such as Krautheimer and Diechmann have suggested potential motivations for the act of spoliation, including the economic realities of the cost efficiency of reusing materials to the possible desire for a “renaissance of classical antiquity.”<sup>48</sup> The modern concept of the term has its origins in the fifteenth-century writings of Italian Renaissance art critic Giorgio Vasari, who described the use of *spoglie* as an undesirable practice marking the decline of artistic ingenuity: an important detail in terms of the nineteenth-century American art historical interests and awareness of the term.

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<sup>48</sup> Krautheimer as quoted in Beat Brenk’s “Spolia from Constantine to Charlemagne: Aesthetics Versus Ideology.” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* Vol. 41. Studies on art and Archaeology in Honor of Ernst Kitzinger on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday (1987), 103-109.

As Maria Fabricus Hansen and others make clear, the original meaning of the classical Latin term was to literally “skin” or forcibly remove the hide of an animal.<sup>49</sup> A more popular usage of the term developed in antiquity to imply the forcible and violent removal of an object or portions of architecture from a site for erection as a sign of military victory. Thus originating the concept of “the spoils of war,” the practice of removing and re-erecting was something of a commonplace procedure for the Emperors of the Roman world, and it set the precedent for a way to convey imperial power over colonized areas whose culture was of great value.<sup>50</sup>

Both these concepts of *spolia* have in common the reliance upon the authentic object – a desire to remove and refashion an original to suit a new purpose. Whether that purpose was economic, aesthetic, or symbolic is still unresolved given the lack of ancient texts that explain the motivations behind employing *spolia* in practice. Nevertheless, despoliation has become accepted as a commonplace reality in understanding the world of the ancient Mediterranean. As Beat Brenk has suggested, *spolia* needs to be considered as an ideological practice. It depended on a mindset that provided a deep justification for a practice that yielded, to many observers’ minds, aesthetically-confused pastiches of both visual styles and periods of time.<sup>51</sup> As such, the power of the obelisk depended upon both its original function and its new world political context.

### The “Spoils of Diplomacy”

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<sup>49</sup> Hansen, Maria F., *The Eloquence of Appropriation: Prolegomena to an Understanding of Spolia in Early Christian Rome*, (Rome: L’Erma di Bretschneider, 2003), 14.

<sup>50</sup> There are numerous examples of this in both the course of Roman history and Roman art. The depiction of the Roman raid of Jerusalem along the interior of the Arch of Titus, the pastiche of relief elements on the Arch of Constantine, the physical placement of Roman fora upon each other, and of course the erection of Egyptian obelisks by Augustus are all overt instances of Roman *spolia* that were tied up in military conquest and in the succession of imperial families.

<sup>51</sup> Brenk, 103.

The framing of the obelisk as *spolia* began as early as the 1879 excavations in Alexandria. During the turbulent and potentially violent period of protestations, Gorringer needed to find a way to demonstrate that America had acquired the Egyptian artifact. Gorringer's solution was to top the obelisk with an American flag while it still stood firmly in Egyptian soil (Figure 3). As *The New York Herald* reports, the act was effective, demonstrating to the Egyptian protestors a clear message of American authority.<sup>52</sup> Crowning the 69-foot obelisk with the flag literally added height to the monolith. Acting as an outgrowth, it symbolically fused the emblem of the New World with the ruins of an old one, implying that American forces were literally able to physically crown the massive structure with their nation's mark. The flag was a not so subtle reminder of both the agency that America acquired through their diplomatic relations with the Khedive as well as their superior technological capabilities that brought them to Alexandria so swiftly after said negotiations. This act not only emphasized the idea of possession but also constituted a creative method of manipulating the obelisk's "context." While the flag heightens the visual impact of the object's aesthetic nature it also provides a temporary foil to the object's pristine surroundings. Since the obelisk as *spolia* cannot be properly demonstrated while it remains on Arab lands, the flag functions as the "context of contrast" that the physical land of the New World would soon supply. The juxtaposition of the "Stars and Stripes" against the granite shaft produces an altogether new visual effect laden with symbolic meanings that could not yet be seen as long as it remained set against the backdrop of modern Alexandria.

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<sup>52</sup> "The Obelisk" in *The New York Herald* November 1, 1879 found as clipping in ["The Obelisk"] scrapbook cited above.

Although the push for the obelisk was surrounded by rhetoric of “possession” and capped with an American flag, American journalists and the figures involved were always careful to describe the American acquisition as a gift. Much of the celebration surrounding the obelisk was focused on the idea of the United States being at a level where international “gift-giving” took place. Hurlbert and Gorringe were lauded for their abilities to work with the Khedive in order to arrange a diplomatic exchange of goods, expressive of friendly international relations. While some might suggest that this careful choice indicates a sidestep around the notion of *spolia*, it is also possible that the reliance on this term overcompensates for an anxiety over the true nature of the exchange. Realizing that occupying the imperialist place of despoliation did not come without complications, the desire to distinguish the acquisition as the result of a generous gift between nations colors the exchange with a decidedly democratic aura.

Despite the careful efforts to characterize the obelisk as a diplomatic present, one cannot ignore the potential significance behind the role of the U.S. Navy and the quest for the obelisk. Lieutenant Commander Gorringe as the brains and might of the operation also held an important position as member of the United States Navy. Although every author who has dealt with the obelisk has referenced his position as a primary source of his seafaring training and his skill in leading the daunting task, no one has examined the implications involved in sending a member of the United States Naval Forces to forcibly remove an object from a foreign land within the context of a period of marked physical Imperialism and the soon-to-erupt Spanish American War.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> This is a topic worth much further study. The implications of the Spanish American War were certainly at work in the American public conscience. A future study that unpacks the rhetoric around Gorringe’s Naval training and contemporary discussion of warfare would further enrich the current understanding of the complexities around the American acquisition of the obelisk.

Although the obelisk was always intended to land on the shores of the biggest city on the country's smallest island, plans continually oscillated between both state and national levels of regulation. An endeavor of this scale had never been executed by the adolescent nation, and a precedent for funding and regulations had never been set. Hurlbert, a citizen and member of the public, originated the idea and took it up with Henry Stebbins, the New York City Commissioner of Parks. Working first on the state level, the scope of the project soon necessitated the aid of Elbert Farman, the American Consul General in Egypt. It was Farman who reasoned with the Khedive, demonstrating that the acquisition of the obelisk was not merely of interest to wealthy private citizens, like financial backer Vanderbilt, and enthusiasts, like Hurlbert. It was a matter of national significance.

This involvement at the national level was only emphasized by the presence of Gorringe as a celebrated Naval Officer. With growing imperialist interest in the Caribbean, the need for a strong Navy was high. Starting in the 1880s, there was a growing concern over Naval power and a push to invest in stronger, more modern ships with the growth of industrial production. It is doubtful that the role of naval power or any display of military authority could have been ignored in Egypt after its long series of occupations and ruthless naval attacks from its feuding colonizers of France and England. In fact, I would suggest that the use of Naval authority in the act of removing an ancient monument from a country who had been fought over by colonizing nations was an oblique, yet decidedly imperialist step for the young democratic nation with nascent dreams of annexation in the neighboring Caribbean and of eventually the distant Philippines.

The ties between the ancient concept of *spolia* and imperialism persist throughout history. In the ancient and seventeenth-century examples of obelisk despoliation, the imperialist ideology was glaringly evident. While America's imperial interests may have not been as obvious, national pride shaped the rhetoric surrounding the news coverage of the obelisk acquisition. New Yorkers and Americans, more broadly, were able to not only celebrate the arrival of an exciting ancient object, but could celebrate their ability to out-do with and eventually become victorious over the naval and engineering power of both France and England. If the young nation of the United States could not annex the North African landscape itself, they could annex the obelisk and by extension its ancient culture.

Meanwhile, as Gorringe and his crew framed the obelisk as an American "Spoil of Diplomacy" to the Egyptian public, the framing of the obelisk as "trophy" or *spolia* accelerated among the New York City residents who anxiously awaited their prize. As the flag remained constant atop the monument's point, the major image-making work was done by the journalists back home. While the topic of the American obelisk was frequently covered by nearly all local and even some national periodicals, the strongest voices on the topic were *The World*, *The Times*, *The Sun*, *The New York Herald*, and *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*.<sup>54</sup> Throughout the removal process each paper developed its own opinion, either falling squarely for or against the unprecedented event. From either vantage point, the collectively produced and sustained spectacle centered

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<sup>54</sup> This list is based upon my opinion from the materials which I was able to locate. The majority of newspaper material used here can be found in the impressive scrapbook held by the Watson Library of the Metropolitan Museum of Art which begins its coverage of the obelisk in 1879 and continues long into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The microfilm holdings at Princeton University and the New-York Historical Society also provided access to a great number of periodical materials including the vitally important coverage of *The World*.

around the object's history, cultural import, rightful location and cryptic meaning even before it reached U.S. shores.

The most involved newspaper was unsurprisingly *The World* whose editor, Henry Hurlbert, remained constantly involved with the Obelisk project throughout all stages of its development. Featuring near-daily coverage of the monolith's status, the journal was sure to report on even the slightest change in its movement, location, or overall condition. Supplementing their coverage of the actual removal and transport process, *The World* was also sure to run a number of corresponding articles devoted to topics of corresponding interests such as deciphering hieroglyphics, discussions of the archaeological understanding of obelisk forms and analyses of ancient Egyptian building technologies.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the best example of *The World's* role in covering the major event can be found in their three-page spread published the day of the official installation, covering every detail of the obelisk from its four sides and the complex moving apparatuses it demanded (Figure 4). Such journalistic coverage is impossible to treat fully within the confines of this study. However, *The World's* overall purpose in covering the ancient relic so fastidiously was to create consistent public interest in the spectacle of the obelisk's arrival. With New York containing a population of avid readers and journalistic competition, *The World's* special coverage was distinct from the masses of newspaper ink spilled on the topic. Interviews with Gorringe described as "exclusive" and first-hand accounts from *World* correspondents shared with anxious readers colorful descriptions of the incoming foreign import, retelling its ancient history and "exoticizing" the artifact to the point of mythological lore. The obelisk was more than a relic of ancient

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<sup>55</sup> See weekly coverage throughout the whole year of 1881 in *The World*. One example is: "The Presentation of the Obelisk," *The World*, February, 17, 1881.

history; the mystery of ancient Egyptian life and culture was tied to modern Arab Egypt's Orientalist present, which produced a context of distinct "otherness" against New York as a modern city of the West.

Beyond the overwhelmingly celebratory tone of *The World*, there were a number of dissenting voices in competing journals who made it clear that they were aware of the underlying act of despoliation, as well as the larger problem of justifying such an act under an American banner of democracy. For example, as early as 1880, *Truth* ran a small interview with William H. Vanderbilt entitled "Vanderbilt the Vandal: How William H Assisted in Despoiling the Egyptians." The article examined the details of the funding sources for the elaborate and expensive project. In a lackluster tone, the interview did nothing more than explain how neither the city nor the government was expected to cover the cost of moving the obelisk. It was clear that it was all left up to Vanderbilt's financing offer. Nonetheless, while explaining the financial aspects of the arrangement, the text painted a fanciful picture of America's anticipated present:

But the United States had no money to expend in the luxury of an obelisk. Still the shaft was of almost incalculable value as a relic and souvenir of that dusky period of the past when Cleopatra was wont to astound the world with her extravagance. Every person in the United States who has studied geography has formed some idea, no matter how shapeless or poetic of *Cleopatra's Needle*, and to every such person a sight of the curiosity will be considered a great privilege. It now became a question of how to secure this prize of the United States in general for the city of New York in particular and for Central Park especially. It was clear that this object had to be obtained without any outlay or funds, national or municipal. The only way to overcome this difficulty was by private contributions.<sup>56</sup>

Terms such as "prize," "souvenir," "luxury," "relic," "incalculable value," and "privilege" demonstrate a concept of the obelisk as object. Moreover, as an object

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<sup>56</sup> "Vanderbilt The Vandal: How William H. Assisted in Despoiling the Egyptians," *TRUTH*, October 1880, unpaginated in found in ["The Obelisk"] scrapbook Metropolitan Museum of Art.

associated with an historicized land and culture, it would resonate with the greater American public, the residents of New York City and the patrons of Central Park more specifically. When considering the content of this excerpt against the politically-loaded implications of the article's title it seems evident that there is an underlying knowledge of the obelisk as a "spoliated" object taken from one culture and transported to another, only this time not by an emperor or a despot, but by a new ruling class of robber baron.

Although *Truth's* article went so far as to use the term "despoliated" in their title, there were a number of other ways in which contemporaries voiced their concerns about the American obelisk acquisition. In an article written in October of 1879, *The World* responded to the well-publicized criticisms of Mr. Edward C. Potter, a resident of Newport, Rhode Island, who quite vocally expressed his distaste on the matter. In a response to the petition he crafted, *The World* reprinted his original document, which reads:

Whereas no city could possess a more significant monument than Alexandria, the port by which the Romans entered the Eastern and Western World; Whereas the removal of this monument cannot compensate for the destruction of it as a whole; Whereas the site and time of its erection, no less than its obelisk, will form part of this monument as it now stands; and whereas by the gift of the Khedive of Egypt the monument is now become American property and the American flag waves over it; Whereas those who have obtained this gift have been actuated by a desire to add honor to the country; Whereas as now that the right of Americans to remove the obelisk is in dispute no act could so check rebound to the honor of America and Americans as the forbearing to exercise that right through reverence to antiquity; Whereas such an act of forbearance would mark an epoch of progress and a larger feeling for the humanities than has existed hitherto in the world; Therefore the undersigned respectfully petition that the monument be left understood where it now stand.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Potter, Edward C., "Mr. Potter's Prayer About the Obelisk," *The World*, November 7, 1879.

While its details were refuted by *The World* the petition calls attention to a number of interesting points.<sup>58</sup> Mr. Potter notes that the removal of the monument would constitute a form of “destruction” to Alexandria as a city. The word choice of “destruction” implies a level of violence involved in the removal of the obelisk. Furthermore, he makes a point of mentioning the position of the American flag on top of the obelisk as an indication of nationalistic possession. Finally, he closes his protest with a plea for the “reverence to antiquity” that would “mark an epoch of progress ... than has existed hitherto in the world,” thus implying that the removal of the monolith would demonstrate a disregard for the glory of the ancient world and a degree of regressive behavior antithetical to post-bellum American conceptions of enlightened, progressive modernity. Mr. Potter and his signatories seem to have picked up on the negative connotations involved in removing the obelisk, citing the flag, the obelisk’s natural home in Alexandria and the importance of antiquity, they have, without formally using the word, come down against the notion of “American *spolia*.”

Protestations such as the above were numerous. Typically coming from *The Times*, *the Tribune* and *The Sun*, they prompted such sarcastic retorts as:

Still our esteemed contemporaries need not despair. It is entirely possible that the obelisk may fall, kill the accomplished officer who has it in charge and dash itself into a thousand pieces. Or it may strain itself in the iron cradle constructed for it with so much pain by Lieutenant Commander Gorringe and the skillful machinists at Robeling Works at Trenton. Or the vessel which bears it may meet a cyclone and go down in the mid-Atlantic. There are a great many changes still that this attempt on the part of *The World* and of a reckless citizen of New York may be defeated either by the malice of man or the fury of the elements... Our esteemed contemporaries have no such rooted horror of obelisk in the abstract, their

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<sup>58</sup> In subsequent issues *The World* refuted these claims by suggesting the Mr. Potter’s understanding of the role of the obelisk in Alexandria is incorrect. They recall the role of Augustus and cite the existence of “Pompey’s Pillar” as evidence of prior reuse of the obelisk and other existing monuments of cultural importance. Most of all they argue that the didactic function of the obelisk for the American public outweighs any potential destruction of antiquity.

impassioned abuse of these venerable monuments of the most important civilization of antiquity may lead the unthinking to suppose.<sup>59</sup>

Although clearly operating in the realm of hyperbole, the article's sarcasm precisely highlights the contention over the acquisition of *Cleopatra's Needle*. If the nature of the acquisition was normative, if it did not mark something so decidedly different from the collecting of other Egyptian objects, the rhetoric would not need to be so incendiary. The debate over the merit of acquiring the object would only continue even after the obelisk's erection and official presentation to the City of New York.

Perhaps the most damning instance of expressed disgust over the obelisk was written a few years after the obelisk was transported and presented to the city. In 1886, *The North American Review* published an incendiary opinion piece written by Chas. Chaille Long entitled "Send Back the Obelisk!" Intended as a plea to return the decaying obelisk back to its native home and warmer climate, the article does more than remark on the ruined surface of the granite. Long goes so far as to question the political exchange behind the American acquisition, claiming that it was not, in fact, the friendly diplomatic arrangement that was portrayed to the public, but instead was the result of a deceptive coercion that forced Egypt to play to American desires for political stability.<sup>60</sup> Long continues to condemn the actions of the United States pointing to the obelisk's "meaningless and senseless" role within an American context. He suggests that, "Cleopatra's Needle upon our shores can never be other than a reproach," that it was

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<sup>59</sup> "Obelisks and Trotting Horses," *The New York Herald*, October 20, 1879 in [The Obelisk] scrapbook at Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>60</sup> Long, Chas. Chaille, "Send Back the Obelisk!" *North American Review* Vol. 143, No. 359 (Oct. 1886), 410-413.

“rudely torn from its base at the inspiration of some private and vulgar enterprise,” and is not “a gift to the nation.”<sup>61</sup>

As history has shown, Mr. Potter, Mr. Long and the chorus of other protesters clearly did not indicate the majority opinion, and the obelisk was indeed transported to New York City. The allusions to the object’s spoliated nature did not end, however, as the obelisk was removed, rolled aboard the *Dessoug* and brought to American shores. What continued the notion of *spolia* was the spectacle of the object itself. Skillfully established by the print media, the spectacle was now enhanced by elaborate displays of the obelisk’s authenticity, available for wide public consumption in the very streets of New York.

As discussed above, the obelisk arrived in July of 1880 and remained on board the *Dessoug* until early September due to complications in the disembarking process. As shown in the illustrations in *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Journal*, the public was allowed to visit the obelisk while it was on board, walking with lanterns below the deck to examine the foreign specimen (Figure 5). As reported in *The New York Times*, over 150 people visited the obelisk in the course of one day, using as, *The World* reports, row boat ferries to travel on board the docked vessel.<sup>62</sup> Once aboard, passengers were given a tour of the vessel led by an Arab guide named Hassan, who was described by *The World* as “an Arab of tender years whose eyes are as bright as buttons” with “soiled hands” and a “swarthy face.”<sup>63</sup> Hassan would gesture to the passengers, bringing them down to the darkest portion of the ship towards the forward hatch where they could gaze at the prostrate

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup>“ The Big Obelisk,” *The New York Times*, July 22, 1880. ; “Visitors to the *Dessoug*,” *The World*, July 22, 1880.

<sup>63</sup> “Visitors to the *Dessoug*,” *The World*, July 22, 1880.

monolith. Using only a single candle as a light source and cautiously carrying it around the enormous structure, the act of visiting the obelisk produced a new level of theatricality surrounding the first public interaction between New Yorkers and their Egyptian ancestor. This theatricality—the choice of an Arab guide in place of Commander Gorringe, the staged entrance of each passenger first by boat and then into a realm of darkness and shimmering candlelight—emphasizes not only the foreign exoticism of the obelisk as a curiosity to be examined that is entirely unlike anything produced on American soil or currently part of the New York City landscape. It also enhances an illusion of genuineness as the unknown relic was seemingly presented by its former Arab caretaker. Hassan here functions as a signifier of modern Egypt, the previous owner of the prize who, with his “soiled hands,” has given over the object to the public who now rightly owns it. The spectacle, therefore, lies precisely in the obelisk’s authenticity, heightened by the elaborate gestures of the *Dessoug’s* crew and the colorful reportage of *The World*. Such a process of unveiling heightened the anticipation of the erection of the obelisk in Central Park, removing the monolith from its cocoon of darkness and into the daylight of its new similarly enlightened, modern and democratic home—a suggestion not too unlike the imperial motivations of despoliation seen executed throughout antiquity.

A similar concept can be observed in the *Evening Telegram’s* elaborate full-page illustration depicting the manner in which *Cleopatra’s Needle* was given to and arrived at New York City’s shores (Figure 6). In the foreground of the image sits the ancient Egyptian queen, surrounded by her legions, she points in the direction of the city in the background, marked by the recognizable image of the Brooklyn Bridge. Separated by a

large body of water, the two cities are contrasted not only in terms of geography but also in terms of time. While Cleopatra resides over the land of Egypt, the New York City shoreline is inhabited by the major contemporary players involved in the current arrangement between Egypt and the United States. Effectively rendering modern Egypt useless, the obelisk remains a remnant transported to modernity from antiquity, here literally imagined as being pushed across the Atlantic Ocean by men in ancient Egyptian costuming and headdress. Antiquity, Cleopatra and her chorus of servants provide a symbolic reassurance of the actual antiquity of the American prize and suggest that its modern location was almost predestined at the time of the obelisk's original creation. The popularity of Cleopatra, as a figure easily recognized from both history and literature, ensured that the mass publication and distribution of this image referenced "Ancient Egypt" more broadly.

The magical spectacle of the obelisk's authenticity continued as it rolled out of the ship's lower deck and through the streets of Manhattan. It seems that, at every major milestone of the journey, the press was there to keep the public updated of its progress and to publish illustrations of the complicated moving process. Photographs were also sold as souvenirs of the history-making event. After the public ceremonies, photographs of the move taken by Edward Bierstadt, brother of the famed landscape painter, were available for sale. As *The World* reports, "a remarkable desire" had been "manifested for mementoes of the celebration."<sup>64</sup> The pictures produced by Bierstadt were advertised in local newspapers and included a series of four images: the bow of the *Dessoug*; the pedestal being lifted; the obelisk being pulled across West 96<sup>th</sup> street; and finally the scene of Central Park during the ceremonial laying of the cornerstone. Despite the

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<sup>64</sup> "Photographs of the Obelisk," *The World*, October 12, 1880.

complexity of the photographic medium, these images were collected as “documentary” souvenirs that tied the owner to the momentous event. In essence, replicating the national consumption of the obelisk itself, these photographs allowed civilians to “possess” an “authentic” souvenir associated directly with *Cleopatra’s Needle*. Both were “authentic:” one in its Egyptian home and the other as it was perceived as credible souvenir.<sup>65</sup>

The authenticity of the obelisk was further emphasized by the spectacular parades, ceremonies and formal presentations that were held in its honor. The first of these ceremonies was elaborately produced and attended by the Masons, who oversaw the crucial moment of the laying of the obelisk’s cornerstone. As the only obelisk to ever be removed, and re-erected upon its original ancient base, this “authentic” detail was honored by the members of the Ancient Masonic Fraternity. In this moment, they saw a crucial validation of their order’s antiquity as symbols inscribed upon the granite of the obelisk’s base. The Masons trace their order’s lineage to the antediluvian age, citing Abel as the first Mason on record and locating the origin in the family of Seth, dating as they claim to the time of “Creation.”<sup>66</sup> Lieutenant Gorringe, himself a member of the Masonic fraternity, reported back during the excavation process that there were curious emblems found inscribed in monolith’s pedestal. Egypt, as the most ancient of ancient cultures, was crucially important to the Masons, whose entire fraternal order and belief system was based upon the lineage of history and the handing-down of ageless traditions. The link

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<sup>65</sup> The nature of the souvenir is worthy of further study. A theoretical examination like that of Susan Stewart’s would help to elucidate the mechanisms at work in the desire to possess photographic records of the obelisk as souvenirs. For more information on the nature of the souvenir see: Stewart, Susan, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1993.)

<sup>66</sup> Weisse, John A, and Samuel Birch, *The Obelisk and Freemasonry According to the Discoveries of Belzoni and Commander Gorringe: Also, Egyptian Symbols Compared with Those Discovered in American Mounds* (New York: J.W. Bouton, 1880).

between the obelisk's antiquity and the Masonic emblems was for the order a cause for celebration and emphatic certainty.

Overseen by Jesse B. Anthony, Grandmaster of Masons in the State of New York, the ceremony took place on October 9, 1880 along Fifth Avenue up to the obelisk's location on Greywacke Knoll. As reported by *The World*, the day's events commenced at 1p.m., when the group of more than 9,000 masons from 250 local and neighboring Masonic Lodges formed a massive column formation and began their march through the streets of New York. Escorted by the Grand Commandery of the Knights of the Templar, the lodges formed in sections of 6 with their accompanying bands and began to form as *The World* reported "crosses, squares, triangles, the figure four, inner and outer wheels ... oblique lines and made a number of figures which each commandery has for a specialty; so that as they proceeded, their plumes and brilliant uniforms were constantly making intricate and beautiful kaleidoscopic pictures."<sup>67</sup> Accompanied by music, the formations and costumes drew huge crowds that filled neighboring windows, porches and sidewalks, even requiring police control at the final location of Central Park.

Once the procession had reached its conclusion, the ceremony began with an invocation reflecting Masonic traditions. As *The World* recounts, the Grandmaster began the ceremony by spreading cement on top of the stone and giving it three blows with the gavel to declare that the stone was, "plumb, level and square... well formed, true and trusty, and duly laid." What came next was the consecration of the stone with, "corn as a symbol of nourishment, wine as a symbol of refreshment and oil as a symbol of joy." With that closing sentiment, the invocation concluded and the floor was given to Grandmaster Anthony for his introductory speech.

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<sup>67</sup> "Today's Masonic Parade" *The World*, October 9 1880.

Anthony's address was lengthy and covered topics pertaining to the knowledge of ancient Egyptian craftsmen and the origins of Masonry as connected to ancient societies that functioned in "operative bands" working together to leave their mark in monumental building practices. Making sure to include the details pertaining to the acquisition of the New York Obelisk and briefly referencing the method by which England and France attained theirs, Anthony's focus was primarily devoted to the overall significance of "Egypt" as an entity. He claimed, "Egypt itself is a book of history – one of God's great monumental records, on the face of which he had written with his own hand many of the strange events of the past." He proclaims the obelisk to be "a venerable relic" and "a trophy" that "comes from the land the history of which was lost." As a relic, a trophy and a representation of history itself, the obelisk here serves as the ultimate signifier of authentic historical knowledge, a knowledge that is contrasted against the current, modern skill of contemporary Masonic practice. Anthony proclaims that as a Mason, in examining ancient Egypt, "What we are in search of is truth." A truth, he suggests, that lays the foundation for the very nature of Masonic tradition. Here the antiquity of the obelisk, of Egypt and of the Masonic order all work together to set a foundation of historical import. Anthony continues to suggest that historical truth justifies the existence of the present. The laying of the cornerstone ceremony was significant in that it enlivened the printed knowledge of the press through marches and fanfare; the obelisk's historical credibility became a spectacle now supported by the authority of Masonic knowledge.

Concluding the story of the obelisk's transport were two more ceremonies devoted to the obelisk's installation. The first of the two was a smaller and more serious endeavor that took place on the actual day when the obelisk was lifted upright into its

final erect position in Central Park. After troublesome winter weather, the obelisk was finally ready to be swung vertically into place on January 22, 1881. After steady newspaper coverage, it was public knowledge that the obelisk was to be officially erected after the long wait and that the process would be attended by Gorringe as well as Hurlbert and the Honorable Nathan Goff, Secretary of Navy. Crowds lined up to watch the precarious and delicate task of lifting the 220-ton stone observing what Gorringe described as an “unnatural silence.”<sup>68</sup> Once the obelisk was at a 45-degree angle, he paused the process to have Bierstadt take a photograph; an action that he claims snapped the crowd out of its hushed reverence and into a prolonged chorus of cheers. The upward movement continued, and the Marine Band played the national airs and the battalion presented arms as *Cleopatra’s Needle* finally stood fully erect in Central Park.<sup>69</sup>

The event prompted media coverage that emphasized the victorious, imperialist overtones of the January installation event. For example, *The Daily Graphic* recognized the practice of obelisk reuse, an unofficial reference to the practice of *spolia*, when it wrote the following justification:

When Alexander the Great founded Alexandria at the mouth of the Nile he did not stop to quarry and transport new obelisks to decorate his city, but he and his followers took as many as they wanted from the temples and palaces where they had been erected from one thousand to fifteen hundred years before by the Egyptian kings, put them on enormous boats constructed for the purpose and floated them down to Alexandria and re-erected them there. Afterwards the Romans following his example brought eleven of them down the Nile to Alexandria, and there re-embarked them in enormous ships especially constructed for the purpose and bore them across the Mediterranean to Italy, and used them to decorate the city of Rome...

...the erection in Central Park of so remarkable a work of art is no joke and the man who would in cold blood make a jest of it would show disrespect to the mummies of his ancestors, if he had any. It is profitable sometimes, perhaps to have the ends of history brought together like the polar wires of a battery, so as to

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<sup>68</sup> Gorringe, Henry H. *Egyptian Obelisks*, (New York: Published by author), 46-48.

<sup>69</sup> D’Alton, 62.

get a shock from a long circuit, and it is an experience worth having to look upon a product of the human hands that rocked the cradle of civilization – to see a veritable structure that before the Temple of the Sun had reflected the sunlight for 1,500 years before Cleopatra was a sprightly girl and Mark Antony a lad without dreams of love. But the honor is not all on one side. If we modern Americans are in any way to be congratulated upon having in our greatest city a shaft to which the Bunker Hill monument is a mere baby in point of age, surely the obelisk itself, if its stony heart be at all capable of sentiment, must appreciate the compliment of being permitted for the first time in its life to stand among a people blessed with the ballot box and a bigger river than the Nile, as well as a great illustrated daily paper like THE GRAPHIC, which can publish its picture and those of its numerous and interesting family.<sup>70</sup>

Loaded with strong sentiment, *The Daily Graphic* reveals one meaning behind the dramatic public display of the obelisk's installation. While the event was not as strategically spectacular as the pageantry found at the Masonic Corner Stone Laying Ceremony, the careful ordering of the morning's events, the dramatic pause at the 45-degree angle and the photographic document for posterity's sake created a theatrical conclusion that had been heavily anticipated. Celebrating the blatant nationalistic fare that accompanied the critical moment, *The Daily Graphic* cites the greatest imperial figure of Alexander the Great as a source of justification behind the display. If the United States is following the lead of great historical figures, surely there could be no cause for protest. Furthermore, the article highlights the very nature of *spolia* itself, calling attention to the contrast between the ancient monument and its new modern home: "It is profitable ... to have the ends of history brought together like the polar wires of a battery, so as to get a shock from a long circuit..."<sup>71</sup> It explains that *spolia* allows for a glimpse into history itself. One could, "look upon a product of the human hands that rocked the

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<sup>70</sup> "Out of the Depths of Time: The Obelisks of Egypt, Their Origin, Their Age, and Significance," *The Daily Graphic*, January 22, 1881 in [The Obelisk] scrapbook at Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

cradle of civilization.” Like the “polar wires” of the article the Old World and New World officially met on January 22, initiating a new age when America would be able to follow in the footsteps of great imperial precedents, yet mediated, as *The Daily Graphic* suggests, by the country’s progressive democratic principles.

While the obelisk was lifted officially in its place in January the work was not entirely complete. The complicated trunnion system and protective jacket were still in place and the obelisk could not yet be fully appreciated in the context of its new home. The final ceremony, referenced at the very start of this chapter, is perhaps the most significant as it marked the moment when *Cleopatra’s Needle* was finally fully incorporated into the city landscape. On February 22, 1881, a full month after the actual installation of the obelisk, an official dedication ceremony was held at the Great Hall of the neighboring Metropolitan Museum of Art. According to *The World*, an astounding 20,000 people were said to be in attendance, flooding Central Park, swarming the stairs of the museum and commanding the neighboring sidewalks. Although the event was by invitation only, it was framed as a major moment when the key figures who brought the obelisk were to meet and elucidate some of the more mysterious aspects of the foreign import’s history. A series of speeches, performances and ceremonies reaffirmed and celebrated the obelisk’s antiquity, highlighting all of the ancient knowledge and wisdom it embodied with an emphasis on how it fit into the new seat of modern wisdom and knowledge found in New York City.

The Great Hall of the museum was set up with a platform to host the events. The large stage could hold approximately 70 people, and it was the focal point of an entire display of pomp and circumstance. Joining the esteemed presence of Gorringe, Secretary

of State William Evarts, John Taylor Johnston, the president of the museum, and Mayor Grace, were “important ladies” who demonstrated an interest in the ancient relic and 100 “young school boys” plucked from public schools. The North Gallery of the museum was occupied by Theodore Thomas’s New York Chorus who would later pay homage to the monolith with especially dedicated hymns linking God’s timelessness to the antiquity of the obelisk itself. The ceremony began with an opening prayer, the singing of hymns, and the reading of a letter by Henry Stebbins, who, due to illness, was unable to attend the afternoon festivities. After the initial introduction, Secretary Evarts was given center stage and addressed the captivated audience. His lengthy speech captured the spirit of the day and the very nature of this historical moment; in a stroke of creative brilliance, Evarts animated the obelisk as a character, describing its long history and connecting it to the greatest of men. He declared, “the genius of the obelisk” is “this faculty of staying where it was put,” and then continues to describe the many coveted encounters the monolith was privy to as it stood in its stony silent observance. Linking the obelisk first to Moses, he set the stage, imbuing the obelisk with an air of ultimate biblical wisdom. Moving from Moses to none other than Jesus Christ, Evarts linked the obelisk’s connections with despotic authority to the new age of Christian authority, neutralizing the ancient practice through a metaphorical “literary christening” that distinguished the more modern obelisk admirers of the Christian era from the ancient pagan worshippers of dynastic power structures.

Finally, Evarts gave the obelisk its own taunting voice. Describing the way in which obelisks defy their human captors, he vividly imagined the obelisks of ancient Rome as they watched barbarians sack the mighty imperial seat of power. Evarts allowed

the obelisk to ask the New World if it dared to survive longer than its sublime granite form. Towering over the new seat of modern authority, would the obelisk outlive the glory of the New World; or would New York City and all of its industry, culture and power fall like the imperial capitals that came before it?

Of course, Evarts had already set the stage for an American triumph in the obelisk's challenge. Earlier in his speech he recounted the long tradition of obelisk removals but distinguished the American instance:

This is not the first obelisk that has left its home in Egypt to see new scenes; but never before perhaps has the transfer been as voluntary on the part of the Egyptians as now. Those obelisks, great and triumphant structures, having for their inscription nothing but the official pomp of their founders, mark a culmination of the power and glory of Egypt and every conqueror has seemed to think the final trophy of Egypt's subjection and the proud pre-eminence of his own nation could be shown only by taking an obelisks – the chief mark of Egyptian pomp and pride – to grace the capital of their conquering nation.<sup>72</sup>

An act that was voluntary on the part of the Egyptian government, the American acquisition of *Cleopatra's Needle* was then contrasted against his lengthy description of obelisk removal and transport. He credited the Assyrians with the first example and moved through the actions of the Romans, the Byzantines and finally approached the more modern endeavors of both France and England.

Simultaneously celebrating and admonishing Europe's powerful imperialist nations, Evarts lauded the countries as heirs to a lineage of great military power; yet he made a point by describing the eventual decline of their imperialist endeavors. In relation to France, Evarts described what the obelisk would have witnessed:

In its 50 years it has seen the monarchy followed by the empire, and that empire yield to the republic. But observe how little those forces of government – how

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<sup>72</sup> Evarts, William Maxwell and Sherman Evarts, *Arguments and Speeches of William Maxwell Evarts* (New York: The Macmillan Co.), 284-294.

little those great men of the earth – are in the action of modern civilization. How has France been humbled? The pride of domination and dynasty has fallen, but France – greater, richer, freer, more noble and prosperous than ever – stands the same, and this obelisk in the great place of Paris has seen only those littler perturbations upon the surface without one stone falling from another in the great structure of the French nation.<sup>73</sup>

Thus admitting to the imperialist motivations in the French obelisk removal, Evarts justified their obelisk's present position in celebrating the eventual triumph of republic over empire. In regards to England, Evarts is much more celebratory, linking the "mother country's" great power to their progeny's newfound greatness. He explained that the obelisk on England's soil had not yet had enough time to observe the world around it, citing only the more minor skirmishes with the Irish. While the imperial motivations and history of monarchical power could be avoided, the country's reliance upon the monopoly is outdated. Thus, similarly, the two most recent precedents for the American acquisition of the obelisk have been stripped of their imperial motivations. Distinctly characterized as "reformed empires," their obelisks would not see their countries sacked by the impoverished populations subsumed in empire building campaigns. By extension of course, neither would the New York Needle:

Our obelisk is here. It is here – and now Mr. Mayor, I have the honor to transfer to the keeping of the City of New York this great and ancient monument. May it stand upon its site a perpetual monument, an emblem of Egypt, a witness and teacher of that civilization most ancient to be cherished by this great modern city in the present and future as a pledge and as evidence of the constant friendship of the ex-Khedive Ismail, and his son Tewfiq Pasha and of the Egyptian Government to the Government and people of the United States.<sup>74</sup>

*Cleopatra's Needle* would add to its long history a new era of peace and diplomacy on the soil of the United States.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

In this carefully structured speech, Evarts found an ingenious way to navigate between the imperial connotations associated with the installation of the obelisk, painting the United States as both connected to a lineage of great historical authority yet distinct from their empire-building tactics. Instead of celebrating a monument to dynastic authorities, Evarts called upon the biblical history of Egypt to color the audience's interpretation. Rather than reflect upon the wanton actions of the exotic Cleopatra, Evarts explained how the American obelisk was brought to Alexandria by the "glory of the Romans" who conquered it. The antiquity of the obelisk, as it was officially presented to its new owners of New York City, was molded to the needs of its home's modernity. The installation created an entirely new meaning for its own history and its present-day role in the city's landscape. In other words, the obelisk finally fulfilled its role as *spolia*.

Evarts concluded his speech with a poetic rhetorical question, asking to his audience whether or not the obelisk would outlive the dynamic new culture of its New York City site. Would the obelisk bear witness to a declining American civilization or would the democratic principles of its new homeland last as long as its solid monolithic form had? What is perhaps most curious about the nature of the speeches and presentations of the obelisk dedication ceremony is the unspoken acknowledgment of the need to sustain a public interest in the obelisk, an appreciation of its history and its aesthetic form that would "inspire" generations of New Yorkers to value its presence in the New World, appreciating the cultural value of attaining such an important monument. One example of such a sentiment was the commemorative medallions cast by the Numismatic Society for the occasion (Figure 7). Two sets were commissioned, one in gold, and given only to Goringe and Vanderbilt, and another in bronze, given to the large

group of school boys who attended the ceremony at the special invitation of city officials. Presented with an elaborate speech by Mr. A.S. Sullivan, the gesture was intended to convey the importance of the Egyptian gift to New York and to encourage contemplation of the obelisk's importance for the greater good of the humanities and the future of New York City itself.<sup>75</sup> Minted with a careful program of symbolic imagery, these medallions were meant to be didactic tools. In their educational message they even further emphasize the antiquity of the obelisk and the progressive nature of the modern intervening powers of the United States, producing a coded suggestion of cultural hierarchy.

On the obverse side of the medallion is the obelisk with its recognizable hieroglyphics sandwiched between a large American bald Eagle and a stylized sun burst. Packed with state and national shields, the image illustrates the American mastery over Egypt and, by extension, over the past. Around the image is inscribed the Latin phrase "*Disciples est Prior Posterior Dies*," which the printed cardboard medallion case translates as "Let the Future Profit by Lessons of the Past." On the reverse the obelisk is imprinted with only text that reads from top to bottom: "Quarried at Syene and erected at Heliopolis by Thothmes III/ Re-Erected at Alexandria under Augustus/ Removed to New York through the liberality of W. H. Vanderbilt/ by the skill of L. Commander Gorringe of the U.N." Surrounding the column of text is inscribed: "Presented to the United States by Ismail Khedive of Egypt 1881."

In order to assure the instructive nature of the medallion, the surrounding case was printed with a thoughtful explanation of the medallion's program and an explanation of its intended function. It explains to its new owner that the medal is intended to "commemorate the erection of the Egyptian obelisk in the Central Park as having an

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<sup>75</sup> See speech as reprinted in: "The Obelisk Presented," *The World*, February 23, 1881.

educational meaning for the people, and to forecall [sic] to the present and future generations that the history of the Ancients may be studied to be a profitable account.”<sup>76</sup>

It continues to provide a translation to the aforementioned Latin inscription, and provides a key to the meaning of the symbolic program featured on the obverse side. In keeping with the goal of stressing the educational value of the obelisk, the accompanying text stresses the notion of the “gift” from Egypt, claiming that the two emblems of city and nation surrounded by laurel are linked as the lucky recipients of Egypt’s generosity. Furthermore, the lotus motif found encircling the obverse image was intended to signify “Egypt” as a whole and “appropriately suggest[ed] a souvenir of Egypt” found in the obelisk. Imagining the obelisk as a “souvenir” of Egypt mirrors the concept of minting a “souvenir” of the obelisk itself. All acts of possession, the medallion, despite its didacticism, participates in an imperialist ideology inherent in the day’s celebratory nature.

An ancient art form in itself, the casting of the medallions is an extension of the desire for the authentic – reproducing the obelisk image for private personal ownership – an act mimicking the national acquisition of the object. Functioning much like the souvenir photographs, these celebratory objects were prizes for 100 school boys; they could literally take part, on a personal level, in the national possession of the ancient monolith. The medallion’s detailed minting emphasized its credibility as a direct representation and the inscriptions recount the obelisk’s historical lineage, reasserting its “true” ancient Egyptian origins, and its subsequent western conquerors in Augustus and Vanderbilt and Gorringe. These commemorative medallions were not just intended for

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<sup>76</sup> Text from the case of the medallion as viewed at the Museum of the City of New York.

100 young school boys, they were, in essence, the gift of “ancient wisdom” to America’s future modern thinkers.

The final dedication ceremony, and the objects and speeches it spawned, indicated a triumphal acknowledgement of the great American achievement in providing New York with its elaborate ancient trophy. This trophy, however, contrasted starkly against the modernity of its new home, a contrast celebrated for the ways in which distinguished age contrasted against the New World, enriching it with “cultural capital.” These concepts, however, were not the only things indicated in the elaborate dedication ceremony: there was a steady acknowledgement of the obelisk as an object of art. A sign of ancient Egyptian craftsmanship, the obelisk was also an aesthetic object that would have a visual effect in its new home of Central Park – an area of the city that was carefully constructed along contemporary landscape aesthetics. This acknowledgement does not detract from the previous concept of *spolia* as “trophy,” but instead adds a layer of richness as it demonstrates the other most prominent ideology behind the ancient practice: reuse and aesthetic value.

### **The Obelisk and the “American Renaissance”: *Spolia* as Reuse**

Although not as overt as the more militaristic, political concept of spoliation that is tied up in notions of the object’s authenticity and spectacular reception, I would suggest that the obelisk functioned in a similar vein as the modern concept of *spolia* as reuse. As scholars like Kinney, Hansen and Brenk have clearly demonstrated, *spolia* also needs to be considered beyond the ideas of imperial displays of might and analyzed as a

practice that met aesthetic ends.<sup>77</sup> Hansen argues that, by amalgamating a varied array of visual materials into a new structure, the object is altered so that it conveys what she considers an anti-classical or heterogeneous aesthetic.<sup>78</sup> While the details of her analysis are suited primarily to Roman art of the Late Classical Period, her observations transfer well when considering the aesthetic effects of *Cleopatra's Needle*.

Greywacke Knoll was not always the favored location for *Cleopatra's Needle*. As early as 1877, there was debate over where the ancient relic should be placed. Initial suggestions include locations as varied as Columbus Circle, Grand Army Plaza and an indoor structure to shield the monolith from the elements. Each competing suggestion emphasized one element of the obelisk over another. One of the earliest references to this conundrum can be found in an 1877 *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* article that first announces the American receipt of the obelisk as gift.<sup>79</sup> While the impending details of acquisition and transport were yet unknown, the author makes a point to suggest that, although Central Park has been listed as a possible location, it would not suit the object properly due to its busy landscape cluttered with recent sculptural projects. Instead, the author advocates for an open square with unobstructed viewpoints that would enhance the public access of the object.<sup>80</sup> This suggestion was continually echoed in later discussions. In July of 1880, Mr. Phillips, member of the parks board, vied for a spot in Union Square. Another popular suggestion was to place the obelisk at the 5<sup>th</sup> avenue entryway into the park itself. Furthermore, in a letter to *The World*, Dwight H. Olmsted wrote in favor of

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<sup>77</sup> Brilliant, Richard, and Dale Kinney, *Reuse Value: Spolia and Appropriation in Art and Architecture, from Constantine to Sherrie Levine*, (Farnham, Surrey, UK, England: Ashgate, 2011); Kinney, Dale, "Spolia." *St. Peter's in the Vatican* / Ed. by William Tronzo, (2005): 16-47.

<sup>78</sup> Hansen, 13.

<sup>79</sup> "An Obelisk for New York," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, November 3, 1877, 134.

<sup>80</sup> "An Obelisk for New York," *Frank Leslie's Illustrated News Paper*, 134.

placing the obelisk at 5<sup>th</sup> avenue and 59<sup>th</sup> street.<sup>81</sup> Citing the convergence of many major avenues at this one point, Olmsted argued that the placement of the obelisk there would draw many viewers in the future as a central point of the New York cityscape. The placement of an obelisk in public areas like those described above conforms most closely to the idea of the obelisk as spoliated trophy. Had it been placed on display in a busy central area, the obelisk would have punctuated the city like an exclamation point, calling attention to the nation's diplomatic "conquest." Moreover, it would follow the great precedent of Rome, with its thirteen obelisks scattered through the cityscape.<sup>82</sup>

Perhaps the most unusual suggestion for the location of the foreign import was the placement of the obelisk indoors under a protective roof. Although the obelisk did eventually require major conservation, the majority frowned upon the idea of covering the 69 foot structure was frowned. Housed under a protective roof, the spectacle of the object's scale would be concealed and the striking visual effects of placing the block of antiquity against a modern landscape would be completely obscured. While the practice of placing ancient objects in collections was one thing, the obelisk was not viewed in a similar fashion. It was always to be displayed for the benefit of the public and against a backdrop that symbolized New York at its finest and most cosmopolitan.

The location that Gorringe himself favored was the spot where the obelisk now stands, Greywacke Knoll. As *The World* reports, he was not alone in his sentiment, as "gentlemen representing the citizen who has undertaken to defray the cost of bringing over and setting up the obelisk" also preferred the location's proximity to the

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<sup>81</sup> "Mr. Olmsted and the Park Commission," *The World*, January 13, 1878.

<sup>82</sup> Here I am referring to a number of other obelisks not mentioned in this present study. The obelisk placed in front of St. Peter's had a very specific ideological function that justified its location. The topic of the Roman reuse of Egyptian obelisks has been thoroughly treated by scholars who provide historical evidence for each respective instance of spoliation.

Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>83</sup> In a special meeting, members of the board of the Parks Commission gathered with the intention of ending the controversy over the obelisk's final location, putting the matter to vote. With dissenters remaining steadfast in their desire for a more public location, the vote resulted in a tie and necessitated the creation of a special "Executive Committee" to make the final decision. Consisting of Park Commissioners James F. Wenman, Samuel Conover, and Smith E. Lane, the committee traveled to Greywacke Knoll and sought the advice of both Lieutenant Gorringer and the famed landscape painter Frederick E. Church, who both agreed with the sentiment that the location would become "one of the most attractive and interesting portions of the park."<sup>84</sup> In a final resolution the site was officially selected, and Greywacke Knoll, preferred by all men associated with the obelisk's transport, would bear the weight of the 220-ton monument.

Despite the divided sentiments, Greywacke Knoll proved a favorable location for both pragmatic and more poetic reasons. One potentially straightforward reason for the selection was the ease of navigating the obelisk to the site according to Gorringer's transport plan. However, there are a number of other locations in Central Park that could have been reached during the transport process, and the choice of selecting an elevated area of land that required manual leveling before the erection seems curiously laborious. The knoll was also famous for its particular form of granite, a point made specifically in the July Park Commissioners meeting. The stone was unique to the natural knoll formation and would provide a suitably secure base for the structure after being cleared off and leveled. These reasons aside, perhaps the most significant rationale behind the

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<sup>83</sup> "Politics and the Parks," *The World*, January 15, 1878.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

selection of Greywacke Knoll was the location's proximity to the newly relocated Metropolitan Museum of Art.

The Museum, built in 1872 was originally located further downtown on Fifth Avenue. On March 30, 1880 it was moved to its present location at Eighty Second and Fifth Avenue, along the eastern side of Central Park. There were initial concerns that the museum's new location was too far removed from the central locus of culture in late nineteenth-century Manhattan and that the upper east side of the 1880s, dotted with the newly built mansions of their residents, would not attract great numbers of the public to the new structure. The concerns would prove to be for naught, and the addition of the spectacular Egyptian obelisk was only an asset for the burgeoning art collection. The relationship between the museum and the obelisk highlights an alternate understanding of the monolith's function in the city. As the museum was to serve as the locus of culture, placing the obelisk in such close proximity created a link between the house of art and history and the authentic ancient relic. In a symbiotic relationship, the museum infused the obelisk with an air of aesthetic prestige, while the ancient obelisk lent its cultural significance to the growing collections.

This concept was explicitly suggested during the dedication ceremony. In the letter Henry Stebbins read to the attendees, he highlighted the significance of the monument's proximity to the newly formed museum. He said:

This museum is designed to provide a permanent home to the trophies from all countries and all periods in which art has flourished and left its memorials...Liberality, enterprise, official aid and private assistance have added a graceful and suggestive monument to our outdoor gallery. I hope that the successful placing of this interesting monument in such a relation to the future national gallery of America will encourage our wealthy citizens to enlarge the Art

Museum and to fill it with all those treasures which so greatly increase the attractions of the Metropolis<sup>85</sup>

The museum was designed to be the home of artistic “trophies” here linked to the notion of victorious triumph embodied in the rhetoric surrounding the obelisk acquisition and installation. The museum would follow in the footsteps of its ancient neighbor, inspired by its weighty significance, and provide the citizens of New York with even more prizes for their viewing pleasure, a phenomenon that the following chapter will examine.

However, despite the triumphant phrasing, this was more than just an argument about “possession.” These trophies were now intended to be viewed specifically as “art” within the confines of an institution believed to become the “future national gallery of America.” *Cleopatra’s Needle*, through its association with the museum, was seen as something that could inspire the museum’s development and spur generous contributions, centered specifically on the goal of art appreciation.

The visual connection between the locations of the obelisk and the museum only strengthened this tie. A photograph dating to 1890 demonstrates that, when standing upon the elevated ground of the knoll, one could see the entire museum structure in intimate detail (Figure 8). Furthermore, as one had to walk slightly up hill and ascend the steps to the foot of the monolith’s base, not only would the anticipation of the growing stature of the obelisk increase, but with it the expanding view of the museum that provides the new backdrop. If, as I have suggested earlier, *spolia* is contingent upon a new form of context in order to supply a new meaning, the view of the Metropolitan Museum of Art can be seen to function as a portion of that new context. Likewise, if one were standing at the museum, one would be able to see the obelisk as a sort of amalgamated architectural

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<sup>85</sup> Stebbins as reproduced in *To the Members of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, May 1, 1881, 203-218.

form—a “limb” symbolically projecting from the museum’s body, the two forms working together to create a new “whole.”<sup>86</sup> Much like the practice of reusing ancient marbles or columns in new Christian contexts, the old merges with the new creating an aesthetic sense of cohesion that communicates a new ideological meaning.

This connection between the obelisk and the museum was only strengthened through the gift of the monolith’s original bronze crab supports to the museum’s collection. At this point the museum had little in the way of Egyptian objects and their holdings consisted mostly of Roman and Cypriot pieces from the collection of its first director General Luigi Palma di Cesnola. The bronze crabs, originally later additions to the obelisk form by Augustan era Romans, were not part of the original Egyptian obelisk. Striving for “accuracy,” Gorringer made sure to include the Roman additions in the removal process along with the original granite base. Due to the fragile nature of the bronze supports, re-installing them in New York was not an option, but gifting them suggests a spirit of calculated generosity in presenting the city with objects of antiquity rather than having them hidden away in private collections. Gorringer himself, as well as financial backer William Vanderbilt, were actively amassing their own art collections and the addition of these bronze crabs might have been a noteworthy acquisition. Instead, the museum, the monolith’s neighbor, held a literal part of its history and physical form, strengthening the idea the obelisk was an object of art like one of the museum’s current and future holdings.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Some dissenting opinions argued that there was no real connection between the two structures. For example, *The Daily Tribune* reports in an article arguing for an alternate placement of the obelisk that the connection between the structure and the obelisk is non-existent. According to the author, they are only neighboring entities.

<sup>87</sup> The Metropolitan Museum of Art does have ownership of the bronze obelisk supports but it does not in any way claim ownership to the obelisk itself. Although the dedication ceremony was held at the museum and the link between the institution and the monument was strong, the actual possession of the obelisk lies

The concept of the obelisk as “art” also manifests in the artfully designed landscape of Central Park. As Stebbins describes it, Central Park can be viewed as the city’s “outdoor gallery,” a natural space intended for visual appreciation. The subject of much debate in the earlier half of the century, the park was perhaps one of the most significant building projects executed in Manhattan’s history. Spearheaded by the genius of Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, the park was intended to be a public space suitable for all walks of life where visitors could escape the increasingly congested city existence through the quiet contemplation of a natural landscape. The original discussions of the park’s appearance were heavily tied to conceptions of landscape in painting, as ideas of the sublime and the picturesque shaped the debate. In the end, a man-made landscape turned the former marshland into an environment that closely mimicked the biomorphic forms of the natural world. Despite its goals of looking “accurately natural” in its rejection of heavily manicured English park formats, the park was still considered to be the city’s most important “work of art.”<sup>88</sup>

The modern concept of *spolia* suggests that the older object or structure can be incorporated into a new work of art. The obelisk can be seen as an addition to the park as a larger art work. Both Central Park’s nineteenth-century observers and modern scholars of today have discussed the city’s famous recreational landscape as a work of art in itself. For example, Sara Cedar Miller asserts that, “Central Park is the most important work of American art of the nineteenth century.” She continues, “In the visual arts, no single painting, sculpture, or structure can compare with this unique and long-recognized

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in the hand of the city itself and more specifically the Department of Parks is largely responsible for its upkeep today.

<sup>88</sup> For information on Central Park’s history see: Rosenzweig, Roy, and Elizabeth Blackmar, *The Park and the People: A History of Central Park*, (Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1992).

masterpiece of landscape architecture.”<sup>89</sup> Truly an example of landscape “architecture,” the Park is now recognized by Miller and other modern scholars as a fully constructed space and a work of art comparable to architectural masterpieces.

This same aesthetic emphasis was expressed in the earliest phases of the park’s design. An extensive design contest was initiated with Olmsted and Vaux’s *Greensward Plan* taking the prize, for its picturesque naturalistic organization and artistically focused goals. In describing his role in the park project, Olmsted calls the park “a gallery of mental pictures,” which would allow him to assume for himself “the title of artist and to add that no sculptor, painter or architect can have anything like the difficulty in sketching and conveying a knowledge of his design.”<sup>90</sup> Echoing these sentiments, the Board of Commissioners of Central Park emphasized the park’s visual function, stating that, “The Park has attractions to those that visit it merely as a picture... the eye is gratified at the picture that constantly changes with the movement of the observer.” Stressing the relationship of the viewer to the space, the statement highlights the intended function of the new landscape as a locus of visual, sensual beauty meant to enrich the experience of its visitors. The goal in Central Park was to provide a functional, edifying work of art for the good of the city’s public.<sup>91</sup> Even a decade later, Olmsted would enforce this aesthetic yet socially responsible reading of the park space: “The park throughout is a single work of art, and as subject to the primary law of every work of art, namely that it shall be framed upon a single, noble motive, to which the design of all its parts, in some more or

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<sup>89</sup> Miller, Sara C., *Central Park: An American Masterpiece*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams Publishers in association with the Central Park Conservancy, 2003, 8.

<sup>90</sup> Miller, 11.

<sup>91</sup> For more on the issue of the public nature of the park see Rosenzweig and Blackmor’s *The Park and the People*.

less subtle way, shall be confluent and helpful.”<sup>92</sup> Thus the idea was sustained throughout the greater part of the nineteenth century and through the time of the obelisk acquisition; Central Park was a gift to the people with a “noble motive” of providing an artful, aesthetic space of contemplation.<sup>93</sup>

The artistic nature of the park, as Miller argues, was intimately connected with the larger notions of American art more broadly. In the early 1800s, landscape painting and, in particular, the works of the Hudson River School exemplified the desire to produce a new thoroughly American art form. Painter Worthington Whittredge declared that their collective goal was to “distinguish it from the art of other nations and to enable us to pronounce without shame the oft repeated phrase ‘American Art.’”<sup>94</sup> Prior to the Civil War artists were seeking an art that would serve as a demonstration of uniquely American character that would be equal to the long tradition of European art production;

No longer did Americans have to feel ashamed that they did not possess the ancient monuments of Greece or Rome or the national treasures of England, France or Italy. A continent of vast mountains, deep canyons, and thundering cascades was deemed more venerable and majestic than anything made by Europeans. Even an Egyptian pyramid could not hold a candle to the nobility of Niagara Falls... the celebration of America’s natural history would far surpass Europe’s cultural history and take center stage as the new subject for American paintings.<sup>95</sup>

Central Park and Olmsted’s careful planning were an extension of this sentiment.<sup>96</sup>

Realizing the need for the parks that European cities were full of, the design responded to the free, uninhibited natural forms of the American wilderness. The belief that the

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<sup>92</sup> As quoted in *The Papers of Frederick Law Olmsted Vol. 1*.

<sup>93</sup> See Rosenzweig and Blackmoor for further discussion.

<sup>94</sup> Whittredge, Worthington as quoted in Miller, 11.

<sup>95</sup> Miller, 11

<sup>96</sup> Most historians of Central Park credit Olmsted with the majority of the design and planning for the park over Vaux who seemingly differed to his opinions on matters of aesthetics. Some have suggested that the plan was split between the two of them with Vaux chiefly in charge of architectural and engineering aspects and Olmsted overseeing the visual effects of the overall landscape design.

American landscape could outweigh the historical might of European culture and even the monumental buildings of the Egyptians themselves would not last forever, however. As an almost direct response to this changing tide Egypt's obelisk would merge its form with the uniquely American park design.

Although the majority of the discussion concerning the aesthetic merits of Olmstead's plan was limited to the first half of the nineteenth century, the concept of the park as a space of visual display remained evident in the multiple sculptural additions that occurred throughout the remainder of the century. With the concept of the park as "art" firmly established by Olmstead, the Park Commissioners and the reports in local newspapers, the push to adorn the park with additional works of art, both sculptural and architectural, was a source of heated contention. Many argued that the naturalistic landscape would only be marred by cluttered additions to its unobstructed landscape. Others capitalized on the opportunity for artistic commissions and for a merging of the aesthetic appreciation of the land with the visual pleasure of viewing new works of art. This is a topic thoroughly treated by park historians; the many sculptural additions to the park began early in its history and would continue far beyond the period when *Cleopatra's Needle* was set to arrive. The critical reaction to these sculptural additions indicates an emphatic interest in the aesthetic unity of the Park's landscape. For example, an article in *The Tribune* demonstrates the manner in which later additions affected the park:

There was a time when no part of central Park was safe from the intrusion of any "work of art" which a benevolent citizen might choose to present to the city. It was the practice in those days for the donor and the commissioners to walk through the park, and when they fell upon a fine open stretch of lawn confiscate it

for a site... But after a time the Park came under the control of men of taste, who were in sympathy with the views of the original designers...<sup>97</sup>

The author clearly indicates that the later additions are “intrusions” that detracted from the original aesthetic goals of Olmstead’s uncluttered landscape. This sentiment was echoed and applied more specifically to the issue of the obelisk’s placement.

A lengthy article in the *New York Daily Tribune* highlights the debate over the park’s adornment, expressing frustration that the park should be “allowed to be disfigured by anyone who is willing to pay for her vandalism.” The author continues by referencing the Scott and Morse Monuments, which he argues “were so placed as to destroy the meaning and mar the beauty of the essential features in the design of the park...” and thus were subsequently removed to more appropriate locations. Making a connection between the sculptures and the impending obelisk installation, the author continues to examine the issue of the obelisk’s placement: “No one has ventured to deny that it is an outrage against every canon of taste to set the monolith upon an eminence. The offence would perhaps be less flagrant if it were lifted upon some artificial mound of formal and exact construction, but nothing could be more discordant than the rigid austere expression of the stone and the flowing lines of the knoll from which it is expected to rise.” The complaints here are all aesthetic. In citing the way in which the linearity of the obelisk structure contrasts with the soft, undulating curves of the park, the author makes a case for the importance of the Park’s own artistic merit. The article continues with perhaps its most forceful discussion of the role of the Park Commissioner, the intended function of

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<sup>97</sup> “The Park and the Obelisk,” *The New York Daily Tribune*, July 20, 1880. In [The Obelisk] scrapbook at Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

the park itself and the importance of appreciating the park on its own terms without cluttering its surface with ill-fitting monuments:

... [The park commissioner] was created to protect the park from being ravaged by the hot pariahs of special ideas, and he is the one man in the city above all others who should stand in the attitude of respectful criticism at such a time as this... Now the park is not a trotting course, not a menagerie, nor a curiosity-shop. Attractions of this sort are well enough in their way, but they have no essential connection with the purposes of a park. On the contrary, they are at open war with them and it is the first duty of the commissioners to see that the park is not diverted from its ruling purpose nor degraded to alien uses...

It is to be regretted that the obelisk is to be set up on an open hill with grassy slopes, where its proportions will be dwarfed and its meaning lost. It is more to be deplored that the park is to be mutilated and its expression marred. Its guardians speak glibly of sacrificing a "natural knoll with rocks protruding here and there from the sod." But the knoll is more venerable than the obelisk, and there are single trees marked for slaughter which are worth more where they stand than a dozen obelisks. The most essential feature in the park is its broad stretches of greensward, which offer such refreshment and relief to the eye of person whose daily walk is on stony streets and between solid walls of masonry... The park commissioners are presumably men of intelligence and taste, and the people appeal to them to protect this beauty which is their from being devastated by the vandal hand of ignorance or vulgarity.<sup>98</sup>

Regardless of the specific calls for protest or cries of support, the overarching idea behind placing new objects within the park is centered on the power of the visual experience of the park as a work of art.

While the dissenting opinions above claim that the very nature of the obelisk itself does not fit with the overall look of the park, the supporters of the Greywacke Knoll location claimed just the opposite. Citing the knoll's elevation, they claimed that the extra height would only further emphasize the obelisk's strong verticality.<sup>99</sup> Furthermore, the openness of the area was seen as a complimentary backdrop for the obelisk that would

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<sup>98</sup> All of the above quotes were from *New York Daily Tribune*, "The Park and the Obelisk," July 20, 1880. In [The Obelisk] scrapbook at Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

allow for a degree of balanced visual harmony. These forms of reasoning, whether for or against, are similar to the experience of architectural space and the forethought required in the addition of architectural and sculptural *spolia* within a new structure that would be experienced visually and spatially. The installation of the needle physically altered the park's landscape; it changed the spatial arrangement and affected patron traffic patterns. New pathways were installed encircling the obelisk, trees were cleared and a metal railing placed around it within a few years after its installation. With a tradition of considering the beauty and artistic merits of the park design and the addition of new structures throughout it, it seems likely that *Cleopatra's Needle* would have been viewed as an actual addition to the park, a new structural element to a larger whole that created its own new meanings of neo-classical Egyptian History, exotic Eastern Orientalism and surging national pride in its acquisition history, and, by means of its fused artistic relationship to the park, a work of art in itself.

This aesthetic appreciation of the obelisk, however, was not only tied to notions of imperial triumph or to earlier phenomena of Egyptian revival, but linked to the growing concern with the culture and aesthetics found in the period called the American Renaissance. An historical term used today by literature scholars, the American Renaissance generally signifies a time when artists and their wealthy patrons discovered the period of the Italian Renaissance and its connotations of Greek Revivalism, humanism and cultural sophistication. Art, architecture and literature reflected these ideas and were imbued with the motivating spirit of nationalism found in the industrial innovations that distinguished the United States as a cutting-edge authority, art of this period reflected the unforeseen wealth of the Gilded Age economy. Following the 1876

Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, the country was filled with nationalistic pride, celebrated most prominently in the industrial displays of the nation's most innovative creations. Upon its hundredth anniversary, America could boast a successful emergence from the difficult period of Reconstruction and the emergence of a new class of countrymen who restructured its merchant and agrarian economy into one of powerful industrialists and their monopolizing businesses.

The city of New York was considered as the significant locus of American Renaissance activity. The idea is perhaps best expressed by *The World*:

The site which has been selected for it in the first city of the New World is meant to bring it into plain and eloquent relations with that new movement of artistic and scientific feeling which has already endowed New York with a Metropolitan Museum of Art with at least two great libraries capable of indefinite development, with a local school of painters—in short, with a thousand seeds and beginnings of a true metropolitan era in which it shall no longer be possible to dismiss the interests and the attractions of the greatest of American cities with the concise and contemptuous formula that “there is nothing in New York worth taking the trouble to see, and no way of getting at it if there were!”<sup>100</sup>

Home to many of the period's most significant wealthy families, the island's landscape was altered by their impressive building projects, new libraries, opera houses, museums and the facades of their “Medici Palaces.” New York City, already an important city for the growing world power, was becoming even more culturally sophisticated and internationally relevant due to the efforts of its wealthy generous benefactors. As Flaminia Gennari Santori suggests, it was this growing interest in “culture” and the recent interest in European cultural history that shaped patronage practice in direct emulation of

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<sup>100</sup> “The Arrival of the Obelisk,” *The World* in [The Obelisk] scrapbook at Watson Library, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Renaissance patrons, more specifically the Medici Princes.<sup>101</sup> This argument was reflected in much of the rhetoric surrounding the manner in which the obelisk itself was financed – through the generous contributions of an anonymous benefactor, William H. Vanderbilt.

In 1879, *The New York Herald* wrote in defense of the obelisk project, explaining that the financial burden taken on by Vanderbilt (at that point still anonymous) was a much more socially conscious action than the gambling expenditures of one critic:

Our own impression is that it is a good thing as a rule for men of wealth to spend their money on objects of general interest and to do what they can to adorn the cities in which they dwell and the necessity of restraining men of wealth as a class from over-indulgence in this direction. If we mistake not, the editor of our esteemed contemporary has within the last day or two invested quite a large sum of money in the purchase of a remarkable trotting horse. This appears to us to be a commendable thing, and undoubtedly for the money to be invested in the bringing to New York of the obelisk of Alexandria quite a caravan of fast trotting horses might be purchased and put upon the road. But does our esteemed contemporary really think that the net results at the end of a quarter of a century to the people of NY in general of an investment of 100,000 in fast trotting horses would be more valuable than the net result at the end of the same time of an investment of 1000 in a monument full of interest and instruction for every student?<sup>102</sup>

The author here makes clear that spending exorbitant amounts of money on the transfer of the Egyptian monument was something that should be lauded as socially responsible. Such an act of generosity was one that could forever influence the lives of the public, educating the youth who gaze upon it and enriching the lives of all citizens. Bringing the obelisk to the American public was a demonstration of both wealth and generosity. It also was an act quoted directly from an Egyptian past that was just recently discovered. Vanderbilt, through his generosity, was able to situate himself as a financial power and

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<sup>101</sup> Santori, Flaminia Gennari, “Renaissance Fin de Siècle: Models of Patronage and Patterns of Taste in American Press and Fiction” in Law, John E, and Lene Østermark-Johansen. *Victorian and Edwardian Responses to the Italian Renaissance* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate, 2005) 105-121.

<sup>102</sup> “Obelisks and Trotting Horses,” *The New York Herald*, October 1879.

cultural authority, part of a new position of court-like society found in the upper crust of the American Gilded Age. This interest in history, art and culture emulated of Renaissance humanism and thus expressed a desire for American cultural elevation in the hands of a new social class.

More than just an issue of Renaissance-style patronage, the interest in the obelisk as a veritable specimen of Egyptian art can also be tied to the period's interest in cosmopolitan eclecticism. As the class of wealthy industrialists accrued their fortunes, their interests and collections began to grow. The import of antiquities and curiosities from foreign lands increased with wealth and impacted both the interests of American artists and the visual appearance of the homes, art collections and fashions in wealthy circles. As American artistic production moved beyond the exploration of its natural landscape and its comparatively more "primitive" folk and itinerant art expressions, the influx of European objects and styles included both neo-classical works that celebrated antiquity and Orientalist motifs that showcased eastern exoticism.

The obelisk as a true relic of Egyptian antiquity would be a subject of great interest in such a context. Notions of its stoic form and austere geometry were well set from the writings and usage of the forms during the previous period of revival, but what the addition of the authentic object added was also an air of exoticism embodied in the very notion of Egypt itself. Antiquity merged with Orientalism in the obelisk. Its mysterious origins, association with the sun and with the pagan beliefs of its people were often invoked amidst an "archaeological" discussion of its original usage and accurate translation. On the one hand, the Arab guide Hassan performed an exoticized role that highlighted the object's foreign status and played into latent concepts of modern Egypt's

“primitive” Arab culture. On the other hand, celebrated scholars like Giovanni Belzoni and figures of authority such as the orders of the Masons vouched for its “true” historical place within antiquity. This object, and all of its connotations, intermingled and played with the very notion of an eclectic mixing of styles that was so prominent in the art of the late nineteenth century. Exoticism and Neo-Classicism merged in Orientalist paintings like Frederick Arthur Bridgman’s celebrated *Funeral of a Mummy* which seemed to “document” an exotic Egyptian ritual in rich pastel colors with an exacting attention to detail and a glass-like facture.<sup>103</sup> Like the obelisk itself, Bridgman’s painting merged ancient and modern, tapping his role as primary observer of Egypt through his travels with his knowledge of the ancient practice of mummification. The exoticness doubles here, helping to attain an elevated level of Francophone culture, but also in representing the modern Arab Egypt as colonized territory. The ancient and modern are linked through the European colonialism that the United States was emulating through cultural expression. The obelisk embodies this interest, suiting not just the political needs of a nation who desired important monuments but fulfilling a desire for a new national culture that could exist on the same plane as that of European tastes.

### **The Implications of *Spolia***

*Cleopatra’s Needle* serves as a signifier of imperial power, ancient history and cultured aesthetics that was brought to the country through the nationalistic pride of the industrial era. These notions are intimately connected in the concept of *spolia* and the practice of such as associated with the people of both antiquity and the newly discovered

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<sup>103</sup> See Linda Nochlin, “The Imaginary Orient,” in Pinder, Kymberly N. *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 69-87.

Italian Renaissance, and subsequently emulated by the Industrialist powers of the Gilded Age. These concepts can be connected around one central notion of “time.” Maria Fabricus Hansen’s text ‘The Eloquence of Appropriation’ provides a new structure of the understanding of *spolia*. She considers the ways in which these authentic objects produce the effect of a *translatio*, or transportation, of materials, meanings and time.<sup>104</sup> While all of these notions are at play throughout this analysis, the concept of transferring “time” is a perhaps the most significant aspect of the meaning behind this particular act of despoliation.

The American Renaissance blankets the period of increased nationalism that can be seen as the impetus for the budding imperialist notions highlighted above. The problem in justifying these desires was the country’s youth and its lack of a historical lineage of authority from which it could emulate. In fact, the country’s history as a former “colony” and as a nation based on principles of democratic equality only confused these seemingly hypocritical sentiments of the period. The defiant young nation had chosen to emulate the European precedents they fought against a century ago, both politically and aesthetically, and then, instead of forgoing these European precedents, the country realized a need for an antiquity more significant than their own and focused their imperialism not on annexing land, not even on culture, but on “time” itself.

In July of 1880, The *Illustrated Christian Weekly* reported:

We have little to boast of in the way of antiquity. To be sure, some four years ago the land was stirred from ocean to ocean and from the St. Lawrence to the Gulf in the commemoration of the nation’s passage of a birthday that so many stamped it as a venerable, but it had then only rounded the first century of its life. Dorchester and Boston and a few other ancient New England towns propose to celebrate this year the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of their settlement, far back in the early days. Even if the discovery of the Continent were to be honored by

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<sup>104</sup> Hansen, 117.

appropriate recognition of the great achievement of Christopher Columbus, it would only signalize an event that transpired less than four hundred years ago. How brief and short lived does our busy and bustling civilization appear when a visitor from our shores is pointed to families in England that date back to the conquest, or looks at moss –covered structures that were old when Columbus was born, or treads the pavement over which the conquering legions of Augustus entered the imperial city, or stands at Caesar’s bar where stood the great apostle of the Gentiles. And how even do those monuments of the old world shrink and dwarf before the still more ancient memorials of a far-distant antiquity upon which perhaps Abraham and Isaac and Jacob gazed, and which still stand firm and enduring under the dry and torrid skies of Egypt.

If then antiquity is not indigenous to our world it must be imported hither as a distinguishing mark on our civilization. And that we have already begun to do. Even now the Old Masters are hanging on the walls of many of our private galleries, mummies and sphinxes, and Assyrian bulls, and Etruscan ornaments and gems exhumed from Cyprus and Troy, worn by fashionable belles hundreds of years before the Christian Era, attract the curious in our Egyptian and Metropolitan museums. But these are for the select. We want something to remind the public as they stroll through our streets, that the machinery-making money-getting, office-seeking, rapid-transit nineteenth century is not the only age upon which the sun its revolution has looked down. London, which is bigger and busier than New York and Paris and Rome and Constantinople in their gay and crowded avenues have their obelisks. Why should we not link our rising, stirring, independent times with the days when despots could rear the pyramids or quarry the monoliths that have stood steadfast for centuries!<sup>105</sup>

Writing in defense of the obelisk acquisition, the article does more than make a case for its arrival in New York. The author here highlights an important American anxiety. The lack of an ancient culture was a significant deficit for a country that wished to celebrate its modernity and place itself on an international stage. As the last paragraph of the quote suggests, the United States in its “rushing, stirring, independent times” should be able to place itself on the same plane as the comparatively busier and obelisk-adorned cultures of London, Paris, Rome and Constantinople. In a paradoxical rationalization, the only way that the country could compete in its modernity was through the annexation of an

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<sup>105</sup> *Illustrated Christian Weekly*, July 10, 1880 in [The Obelisk] scrapbook at the Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art.

“antiquity” to claim a space in history that could be embodied in both the imposing permanence of the obelisk form and ties to the most ancient of classical cultures, Egypt.

In a similar vein, one of the most apparent ways in which the obelisk was linked with the issue of “time” was the curious ceremonial creation of a time capsule for burial under the monolith’s weight in Central Park. As part of the Masonic Ceremony outlined above, a number of lead boxes were created to fit under the steps created at the base of the monument. In each of the boxes were placed assorted items donated by both individuals and official departments in Washington. They included things such as the Bible, Webster’s Dictionary, an encyclopedia of mechanics and engineering and a guide to Egypt. The stated goal in doing this was a “common sense desire to perpetuate some examples of our civilization” for the civilizations which would inevitably follow. Thus, much like the tone of Evarts’s dedicatory speech, the obelisk serves as a kind of “Father Time” image representing all the past of antiquity and the subsequent periods it has witnessed, the important items that represent an early American past, a nineteenth-century present and the hopes of the future implied in the creation of a time capsule. This dramatic, ceremonial gesture indicates a strong desire to tie the country into the larger thread of history both in its comparably recent past, its modern and cosmopolitan present and in the future.

The issue of the obelisk’s history, although arguably of the most vital importance, was also one that experienced the most careful manipulation. As an idea, antiquity was too large and required the usage of specific signifiers to call upon the traditions of different civilizations, and historical lineages. One of the most curious aspects of *Cleopatra’s Needle’s* contemporary characterization was the way in which aspects of its

own dynastic Egyptian and Augustan Era Roman history were called upon interchangeably as varying signifiers of its own antiquity. It is and had been well-established that the obelisk's relationship to the famed Egyptian Queen was minimal at best, but the use of her as a signifier whose meaning could be doubly associated with "wanton Eastern exoticism" and as a major player associated with a tale of the power of the Roman Empire was far more popular than associating the obelisk with its rightful owner, Tuthmosis III, and dynastic Egypt.

While there was always an acknowledgement of the origins of the obelisk in dynastic Egypt, the significance of associating the relic with Cleopatra cannot be overlooked. By stressing the role of Cleopatra and the role of Augustus, the start of an entire lineage of imperial power is thus implied. In a similar vein, in discussions of the obelisk's history, references to the obelisk's likely association with Moses and the history of the Old Testament era were also employed. Perhaps "Christening" the obelisk with Christian sentiment and removing former Islamic ties, these historical allusions conjure up an image of an ancient history from which the United States was far removed. These variant images of "history," whether Biblical, Pharaonic, or Roman Imperial, function interchangeably to suit the needs of New World's most significant seat of power. As the country began its emergence as a significant force, the obelisk stood for a form of "history" itself, imbuing the young nation with its weighty historical import and, through its connotations of *spolia*, providing a model and a justification for imperialist activities.

The concept of *spolia* permeates the new nation with all of its polyvalent connotations – its nationalistic and imperial connotations of ownership, its cultural connotations of aesthetic sophistication, and its historical significance as an act associated

with the greatest cultures of antiquity. Thus, the United States has annexed for itself a symbol, a symbol of time, history and culture that provided a new image for country in transition. While I do not suggest that these motivations were outwardly conscious on the part of all American supporters, I do believe that part of the fascination of the object was precisely the uncharacteristic nature of its acquisition which was celebrated, marked with spectacles and forever etched into the landscape of the nation's most important economic and cultural capital city. It is under the shadow of this monument – a monument that simultaneously signifies awesome ancient and modern power – that these sentiments toward Egyptian culture would continue to grow into the collections of New York's major art museums.

## Chapter Two

### The Fair, the Wise, and the Powerful: Egyptian Antiquities in New York City Museums

*“For what you really collect is always yourself.”*  
-Jean Baudrillard

Sitting in its new home, along Fifth Avenue and Eighty-second-street, The Metropolitan Museum of Art opened its doors to fifteen hundred invited guests at 3 pm on March 30, 1880, its ten year anniversary. A live band played music in the Eastern Hall of the newly expanded museum, while a large number of onlookers crowded the museum’s exterior, anxiously awaiting the arrival of honored guest President Rutherford B. Hayes. To the tune of *Hail to the Chief*, Hayes entered the building escorted by the museum’s very own president John Taylor Johnston, and the opening ceremonies commenced.

President Johnston began the day’s speeches by introducing the crowd to the revamped institution. After accepting on behalf of the trustees the city’s generous “gift” of the “beautiful building”, he both indicated the intention to rapidly increase the museum’s collection from its current “nucleus” and promised to both the people and the city that “the trustees will spare no pains to make this museum worthy of the great City which it is intended to adorn.”<sup>1</sup> With the promise of growing collections and an expanding cultural significance, museum trustee Mr. Joseph H. Choate, took the stage.

Acknowledging New York and the United States government, in addition to the “people,” Choate opened with:

“The State, for almost the first time in its history, with liberal bounty has provided and equipped a suitable building as the permanent home of the museum.

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<sup>1</sup> “The New Museum Opened: President Hayes Dedicates it to the Public.” *The New York Times*, March 31, 1880, 8.

The presence of the honored president of the nation assures us of that general and popular sympathy without which no such institution can prosper, and this great company of the fair, the wise and the powerful, representing the best indulgences of the city, is itself a living guarantee of substantial encouragement and support.”<sup>2</sup> Choate continued, lecturing the crowd the merits of this infant American

institution versus its aged European counterparts, and pointing out the comparative lack of an American royal heritage, aristocratic patronage or governmental assistance:

He who returns to his native land with fresh memories of the Louvre and of Kensington, to compare those splendid results of time and of wealth with this our feeble embryo, may well regard it with concern and solicitude; but could he point to one of the grand ole museums of Europe that in its tenth year, without the aide of governmental subsidies or of royal bounty, could show such valuable results as those which are now and here exhibited? Indeed the Duke of Argyle, a high authority on such a subject, was pleased on his recent visit, to say to General Cesnola, that the British Museum, of which he is himself a trustee, had not in thirty years from its foundation accomplished so much.<sup>3</sup>

Choate reminded the crowd that what New York could be proud of was the slow and resilient

...work of a very small number of persons, who fully recognize the fact that a great and useful museum of art could not be created in one decade or one generation: that nothing is so hard as a beginning, and that it must be left to time and to a larger knowledge and a riper experience to improve and perfect it.<sup>4</sup>

Through all the pomp and circumstance, the message was clear: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in its tenth year and in its new home, was a matter of importance to the city, to the country and to the world. The museum’s president and trustees had foregrounded the goal of public education and emphasized their shared desire to create collections of unparalleled aesthetic excellence. Moreover, these new goals, to create taste and a cosmopolitan art historical scene, were to be protected by none other than the city’s cultural elite. Therefore, it was the taste of this new class of extreme wealth that

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<sup>2</sup> Cesnola, L.P. and Johnston, John Taylor, “Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art,” No. 10 (1880):167-179.

<sup>3</sup> Cesnola, 172.

<sup>4</sup> Cesnola, 173.

shaped the development of a national treasure in the Metropolitan; this taste, although varied, focused peculiarly on the collecting and display of ancient Egyptian objects.

This chapter explores the way in which Egyptian objects stood in for America's colonialist ambitions, became symbols of rarified aesthetic goals, and represented the Metropolitan Museum's ownership of "time" through their antiquity. These objects, as they were excavated by the museum itself, anchored the newly formed museum with a new air of increased cultural significance. Throughout the crucial years of its formation, the museum fostered a rapidly expanding fascination with Egyptian art for both staff and New York's public, fueled through its own expeditions and funded by its wealthiest benefactors. Though the collection initially built upon a small donation, the museum would by 1916 increase their holdings to completely fill fourteen rooms, arranged chronologically and chronicled meticulously in their accompanying *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* publications. In an institution devoted to the preservation of the entirety of art production, throughout history and across the globe, the concentrated effort on acquiring and displaying Egyptian art is curious. Why was so much money, time, and museum space devoted to the display of ancient Egyptian artifacts, over those of the Greco-Roman, Etruscan or Assyrian cultures? In other words, what did Egyptian objects signify to turn-of-the-century New Yorkers, Americans and curious international audiences?

I argue that in the period of the Egyptian collection's most rapid development, the collection synechdochically represented Egypt itself. In doing so, the museum's Egyptian collection reflected the imperial ideology of the period. The years of excavations and the emphasis on dramatic curatorial display produced an image of

Egyptian art that reinforced a rhetoric of American possession through its acquisition and presentation. The Metropolitan Museum in its mission for an encyclopedic collection, created a heterotopia of history as constructed by its wealthy benefactors, archeologists and curators. Producing a spectacle of Egypt through its display, the museum created a virtual tour through history starting in the prehistoric, through the dynastic, and into Roman conquest while frequently illustrating the importance of New York's agency in acquiring these priceless treasures. Using a Linnaean classification system, the curatorial arrangement stressed historical order and a legible narrative while simultaneously contextualizing the place of Egypt within "Art History" as part of the museum's edifying mission.<sup>5</sup>

Central to my argument is Baudrillard's notion that the collecting of "antiquities" is in essence the collecting of time itself.<sup>6</sup> To the New York City public, curators and museum benefactors, Egypt was an image of a weighty historical past to which American had no prior access. To the relatively youthful United States, Egypt signified the ultimate in antiquity, far more ancient than even the Greek and Roman cultures so lauded in post-Renaissance western culture. This mode of antiquity lent a layer of historical import both to the nascent museum and nation—both of which lacked not only a tradition of ancient civilization but indigenous artistic traditions.

But "time" alone does not explain the fascination with Egypt as an ancient source, when objects of Greco-Roman descent remained underrepresented in New York City collections. France, England and the United States formed a transatlantic triangle deeply

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<sup>5</sup> Utilizing the theoretical arguments of scholars such as Jean Baudrillard, Michel Foucault and Susan Pearce, I argue that the museum functioned as a heterotopia, a simultaneously real and unreal space that reconstructed history and culture according to the design of its implementers or collectors.

<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, Jean, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 1996), 73.

rooted in both politics and culture, and as Choate's opening address reflected, Americans had long studied and employed European museological models. However, with that pattern of simulation came the overwhelming desire to supplant these old models by setting powerful new precedents that reflected growing American cultural authority. This relationship of competitive cultural mimicry reflects an inherent desire within turn-of-the-century American society to participate in the types of imperialist activity in which its European counterparts had been engaging for years. The colonizing battle between France and England over Egyptian territory continued to rage, and these invaders increasingly uncovered, claimed, and relocated the spoils of that country's famous bounty. Because American Egyptology developed much later than the French and British schools, it faced an intense race to excavate, and time was of the essence. However, the country's complex position as rhetorically anti-Imperialist, a former British colony at its origin, and a growing power desirous of increasing world significance, positioned the United States in a singular space. The acquisition of Egyptian objects was a way to enact a metaphorical possession of Egyptian culture without explicit colonial intervention. The excavations and the museum display of Egyptian objects functioned as a double fantasy of both historical nostalgia for time past and a reclamation of colonial power through a fetishistic perversion of objects that would replace the desire for an unattainable geographic territory.

Furthermore, as Carol Duncan argues, the development of such national collections with an encyclopedic scope and the mission of public education can only occur when the country has attained political stability and a certain level of economic

luxury.<sup>7</sup> As demonstrated through the re-framing of the Louvre after the French Revolution and the development of the National Gallery in London from wealthy benefactors, the evolution of many major institutions went hand in hand with the transformation of princely collections into public institutions for the middle class. With the future of the Metropolitan lying in the hands of “the fair, the wise and the powerful,” New York and, by extension, America were following suit.<sup>8</sup> The very fact that the major collecting initiative of Egyptian objects placed within the context of a museum devoted to the “fine arts” indicates a maturation of cultural authority that allows for an edifying yet recreational understanding of objects. In other words, as Baudrillard explains, the emphasis on objects had shifted from functional “use value” to the formal and aesthetic and the serial and systematic nature of collecting renders the original use of objects irrelevant.<sup>9</sup> This shift from function to form necessarily supported the very nature of an institution such as the Metropolitan, and must remain a factor in considering how it reframed the Egyptian objects it contained as “art” and catered to the taste of wealthy benefactors. Not only could the museum-going public “own” a piece of Egypt as it was contained within the neatly arranged glass cabinets, but they could also experience the collecting hobbies of the country’s newest social class of princely elite as their own cultural possession.

Within the walls of the museum and within the imagination of the collector, “Egypt” could be molded and constructed to reflect any narrative of choice. And indeed, the Metropolitan Museum had its own American precedents to build from in conjunction

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<sup>7</sup> Duncan, Carol, “From the Princely Gallery to the Public Art Museum: The Louvre Museum and the National Gallery London,” in Preziosi, Donald, and Claire J. Farago, *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum*, (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate Pub, 2004), 250-282.

<sup>8</sup> Choate speech as printed in “The Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art May,” May 1880, 172-178.

<sup>9</sup> Baudrillard, 75-78.

with European models. Before the Metropolitan's Egyptian collection ever existed, there were two major instances where Egyptian objects were manipulated by their respective museum contexts to reflect inherent national desires. The earliest was Barnum's American Museum which relied upon a theatrical mode of participatory visitor experience to construct its own heterotopic display of the time and Egypt as a curiosity. Always a showman, P.T. Barnum crafted a museum that relied upon illogical juxtapositions of objects that required the audience to question the veracity of his displays. Amid the context of theatrical performances, menagerie and aquarium exhibits, and falsified "Freak Show" displays, Barnum's museum arrangement folded Egypt into a larger narrative of spectacle and macabre anomaly.

On the opposite end of the spectrum was an idiosyncratic collection of Egyptian antiquities by Henry Abbott. The Abbott Collection of Egyptian Antiquities had two homes, first at the Stuyvesant Institute and second at the New-York Historical Society. Consisting solely of Egyptian material, his enormous collection was exhibited as a monolithic whole; at both locations it took prominence as an impressive body of archaic objects. Despite the singular quality of the collection, it was met with relative failure amongst the New York City public. Abbott's objects were still "curiosities" only without Barnum's participatory mode of display, the audience was isolated and split in their response. Educated members of the public celebrated the sublime antiquity, Biblical resonance and bizarre nature of Abbott's objects as they were displayed in one cohesive exhibit, while less educated members of the public were bored with the empirical presentation. Abbott's role as wealthy English benefactor, and the anthropological approach to displaying the objects, highlights the ways in which the Metropolitan

Museum was able to shift the focus of Egyptian objects to valued, historical, “art” and not morose “artifact.”

The Metropolitan’s shift in focus was tied up in post-enlightenment collecting strategies. As Susan Stewart explains, after the Enlightenment, the collector “replaces history with classification.”<sup>10</sup> This chapter will examine in detail the classification of the Egyptian objects within the Metropolitan’s space and the ways in which that classification both diverges from and builds upon the popular displays that preceded it. Central to this idea is Susan Pearce’s suggestion that the museum exhibition reflects the modern world around it and that “organized material is knowledge and knowledge is organized material.”<sup>11</sup> Here, I take as fact that the museum displays that I analyze constructed a knowledge of Egypt for their audiences and that this knowledge was carefully organized as a reflection of the museum’s, city’s and nation’s desires to own Egypt as it symbolized “art,” “time,” and colonial “space.”

### **Egypt as Curiosity: Barnum’s American Museum**

Early nineteenth-century New York City had no paucity of museums. Split between various museum models, the city’s offerings were plentiful and ever increasing. As Winifred Howe outlines in her magisterial text on the history of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City had a large number of what she deems as “serious” museum institutions,<sup>12</sup> including: the Tammany Society, founded in 1787 with the “purpose of collecting and preserving everything relating to the history of America,

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<sup>10</sup> Stewart, Susan, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C: Duke University Press, 1993), 153.

<sup>11</sup> Pearce, Susan M., *On Collecting: An Investigation into Collecting in the European Tradition* (London: Routledge, 1995), 111.

<sup>12</sup> Howe, Winifred E, and Henry W. Kent, *A History of the Metropolitan Museum of Art: With a Chapter on the Early Institutions of Art in New York*, (New York: Printed at the Gilliss Press, 1913), 3-6.

likewise every American production of nature or art”; the American Academy of Fine Arts<sup>13</sup>; the New-York Historical Society, which contained a number of portraits, an important set of Nineveh sculptures that represented winged and eagled headed human figures in relief, as well as the Dr. Henry Abbott’s larger Egyptian collection that was formerly exhibited at Stuyvesant Institute on Bleeker Street; the National Academy of Design that formed in 1826 after merging with the New York Drawing Association; the Apollo Association; New York Gallery of Fine Arts; and the Cooper Union.<sup>14</sup> However, with the notable exception of the New-York Historical Society, which will be discussed at length below, the serious “art” institute did not engage in the preservation and display of Egyptian objects. Instead, attention was given more seriously to the collection of Old Master paintings, casts of classical Greco-Roman sculptures, and examples of “modern” nineteenth-century American and European painting.

That is not to say that nineteenth century New York City residents were unaware of Egyptian culture. According to Scott Trafton, the American awareness of ancient Egypt dates to the inception of the Republic and manifests in cities named Memphis and the celebration of the Mississippi river as the American Nile.<sup>15</sup> As discussed in the previous chapter, Neo-Egyptian revival iconography was popular and was scattered throughout the nation and quite significantly in New York. Mixed among period revival styles was a smattering of real, Egyptian objects on public display not yet in the more elite collections listed above, but rather held under the more popular, diversionary

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<sup>13</sup> The Academy of Fine Arts did have in its collection a selection of casts and a bust rumored to be of Cleopatra VII, however this was not the center of the collection. It certainly merits further research as to how these objects were contextualized and interpreted by both artists and museum goers but does not warrant further mention in the context of my present project.

<sup>14</sup> Howe, 6. See also all of Howe’s description of early New York institutions from pages 6-75 in her text.

<sup>15</sup> Trafton, 1-39.

category of the “dime museum.” New York had over thirty-seven dime museums with diverse agendas, collections and missions. The most famous and successful was the American Museum under the ownership of showman *par excellence* Phineas Taylor Barnum. Barnum had “mastered the rhetoric of moral elevation, scientific instruction and cultural refinement in presenting attractions,” and continued to draw more and more bodies through the doors of his expanding museum complex.<sup>16</sup> It was here that Egypt received its first institutional treatment, placed not within a uniquely Egyptian narrative, but integrated into a mix of curious anomalies, compiled and arranged by Barnum that reconstructed a narrative of both “time” and curious wonder. As depicted in Barnum’s interactive cosmorama display and as represented by his famous mummy, the image of Egypt presented by Barnum’s museum was the city’s earliest glimpse at a nationalistic desire to own and display “time” and “power” via the allusion to Egypt’s lurid antiquity.

The dime museum was “a distinctly American form of popular entertainment” that “emerged as a novel form of recreation that could divert a heterogeneous audience while supporting the new industrial morality of hard work, temperance and perseverance.”<sup>17</sup> With the changing New York City audience of mixed social classes, the dime museum was the answer to Winifred Howe’s list of “serious” institutions. Typically containing a mixed array of “curiosities,” the dime museum presented a unique variation on the European model of the cabinet of curiosities, constantly caught between a civic duty to be a “college for America’s culturally neglected everyman” while also necessarily requiring economic success and by extension mass audience patronage.<sup>18</sup> The result was

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<sup>16</sup> Dennett, Andrea S., *Weird and Wonderful: The Dime Museum in America* (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Dennett, 5.

<sup>18</sup> Dennet, 22.

the rise of the amusement museum that blended together Linnaean classificatory displays with wax figurines, cosmoramas, freak shows, theatrical performances, aquaria and menageries.

The American Museum's history stretched back to the earliest New York City cultural institutions. It began as the "Tammany Society," originally to honor the Indian Chief Tamened who welcomed William Penn. By 1795, its collection had grown to include Native American, Chinese and African objects amid its taxidermied animals and "freakish curiosities." Originally more exclusive, it changed its policy to include open days of attendance with twenty-five cent admission. After a long stretch of economic difficulties and changes in ownership,<sup>19</sup> the museum eventually came to own 150,000 curiosities until its size forced an 1830 move to Broadway and Ann Street, where it remained until Barnum stepped in to purchase it in 1841.<sup>20</sup>

Now famous for his legendary traveling circus and the accompanying elaborate "freak-show" acts, P.T. Barnum's foray into the museum industry shared an approach with his circus enterprise. He sought to turn a profit for himself, rather than to advance any didactic agenda. Describing his thought processes in taking over management of Scudder's museum Barnum recounts in his memoir *Struggles and Triumphs*:

In looking over the immense collection, the accumulation of so many years, I saw that it was only necessary to properly present its merits to the public, to make it the most attractive and popular place of resort and entertainment in the United

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<sup>19</sup>As the collection continued to diversify, its original backer, John Pitard, took issue with the museum's more inclusive direction and the collection would remain in turmoil until 1798, when William I. Waldron purchased the museum and attempted to break the collection up at auction. Edward Savage, a historical painter and showman, eventually took possession of it and transformed it into the Columbian Gallery on Greenwich Street, while divesting the natural history collections to John Scudder, a taxidermist and naturalist. Thus, it was Scudder's American Museum, opened in 1810, that Barnum would ultimately acquire. Through the war of 1812, the museum moved rent-free to City Hall Park, and Scudder's staff rearranged the collection according to a Linnaean system of classification that intermingled with periodic live performances.

<sup>20</sup> Dennett, 14-22.

States. Valuable as the collection was when I bought it, it was only the beginning of the American museum as I made it. In my long proprietorship I considerably more than doubled the permanent attractions and curiosities of the establishment.<sup>21</sup>

Later purchasing the foundational collections of Charles Wilson Peale's museum in Philadelphia and supplementing these objects with assorted findings from both Europe and America, Barnum would amass an enormous collection he describes as including:

Industrious fleas, educated dogs, jugglers, boys, giants, dwarfs, rope-dancers, caricatures of phrenology, and 'live Yankees' pantomime, instrumental music, singing and dancing in great variety, (including Ethiopians,) etc. Dioramas, panoramas, models of Dublin, Paris, Niagara, Jerusalem, etc. mechanical figures, fancy glass blowing, knitting machines and other triumphs in the mechanical arts, dissolving views, American Indians, including their warlike and religious ceremonies enacted on the stage, etc. etc.<sup>22</sup>

Thus it was within this context of curious objects, natural wonders, and freaks of nature that Barnum's mass audiences experienced representations of Egypt, both in the cosmorama displays and in the attention-grabbing, authentic mummy sarcophagus that was folded into the larger hodgepodge of material that Barnum had gathered into his American Museum.

This intermingling of variant types of objects recalls the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century desire to recreate the whole of the natural world through a collection of disparate objects. Known interchangeably as *wunderkammer*, cabinet of curiosities, *kunstkammer*, or *studiolo*, this type of collection merged botanical, medicinal, and geological objects with religious relics and works of art to create a universe of its own. The curatorial arrangement of *wunderkammers* followed an internal logic centered on the idea that the juxtaposition of objects created a narrative meaning that reflected a type of

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<sup>21</sup> Barnum, P. T., *Struggles and Triumphs of P.T. Barnum* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1967), 118-119.

<sup>22</sup> Reiss, Benjamin, *The Showman and the Slave: Race, Death, and Memory in Barnum's America* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2001), 184.

underlying unity of everything in nature.<sup>23</sup> Barnum's American Museum follows suit in this logic, however, unlike the tradition of the *wunderkammer*, his collection is vast, varied and not contained within a private residence. The key element of distinction is the participatory viewing process involved in mentally processing works of such variant contexts is here overemphasized. The mental rationalizing of the individual invents the relationship between the displayed pieces, and Barnum's agenda of amusement over education deliberately encourages these imaginings.

Little information remains about the curatorial arrangement of the museum interior; the key primary source is the undated catalogue to The American Museum that likely dates to the 1860s.<sup>24</sup> This text describes a museum that has reached maturity after several years in Barnum's care—it benefited handily from his entrepreneurial management and large-scale collecting tactics of all materials that might assist in turning a respectable profit. Nonetheless, the catalogue does provide a meticulous record of all objects on display, with explanatory passages punctuating the long tally. Arranged according to the numerical sequencing of the museum's galleries, or "saloons," the text at least gives us a sense of the museum experience.

Barnum's American Museum consisted of Seven Saloons, most of which contained numerous displays of natural history materials, an unprecedented aquarium and a newly built Lecture Room where visitors could attend regular performances included with general admission. The museum-goer would enter through the First Saloon or the Cosmorama Department that contained a series of peek-a-boo, window-like boxes with

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<sup>23</sup> For further information about different models of collecting see: McClellan, Andrew, *The Art Museum from Boullée to Bilbao*, (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 2008).

<sup>24</sup> *Catalogue or Guide Book of Barnum's American Museum, New York: Containing Descriptions and Illustrations of the Various Wonders and Curiosities of This Immense Establishment Which Have Been Collected During the Last Half Century from Every Quarter of the Globe* (New York: publisher not identified, 1860).

looking glasses along the edges. The cosmorama, as the first element of the museum is a crucial component to Barnum's creation of a participatory and theatrical museum experience. Depicting scenes from around the world and from different periods in history, the cosmorama introduced his patrons to an environment where the boundaries of history and space were torn down and reconstructed for their viewing pleasure. An interactive space, as the catalogue's engraving shows (Figure 1), Barnum's patrons could file into the room and walk along the sides of the wall where several rows of displays were lined up in orderly rectangular shapes. Like the gentleman on the far left of image, one could lean over and peer into the glasses to glimpse the scene within. Benches lined the perimeter of the room and a large open space in the center allowed for groups to gather. A space filled with family units and patrons old and young alike, the first gallery is presented as a participatory environment that invited both men and women of all ages to physically engage within the space of the museum, peeking, peering and actively looking into small snapshots of the world.

Fortunately the catalogue does include a thorough, if not definitive, listing of the typical cosmorama subjects and demonstrates how Barnum used them to take his patrons on a tour through time and space.<sup>25</sup> At the time of publication, this catalogue lists one hundred and ninety-four separate cosmorama displays, each depicting a distinct scene from the last. These scenes included: major international locations across both Western and Eastern Europe, as well as the Middle and Far East; historical battles and recreations of important historical moments; religious sites and scenes from the Bible; and views of

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<sup>25</sup> Page seven of the catalogue includes the disclaimer "The Cosmoramas are frequently changed, to insure interest and variety. A portion of the following extensive collection will be found on exhibition from time to time." Thus it is difficult to be fully certain of the museum's cosmorama lineup, however the catalogue does give a fair sense of the nature of the displays and the overall subjects they tend to represent.

architectural interest or exotic public monuments. The countries represented included Italy, Germany, Austria, Russia, Denmark, Spain, Switzerland, Jerusalem, Greece, The Netherlands, Portugal, Turkey, China, with an additional emphasis on France and England. However, few images of Egypt figured into this virtual “grand tour.” If viewers looked through the exhibits in numerical order, they would not encounter an image from Egypt until display number 107, which represented the *Pyramids of Giza*. Next, image 108 illustrated *Grand Cairo as it was inundated by the Nile*, and display 109 followed with an image of *Fire Works at Paris*. Egypt then disappeared until displays 178 and 179, depicting the *Great Square at Alexandria* and the *Port of Alexandria*, respectively, and then 180 presented an image of the *Burning Turkish Fleet at Navarin*. The final image of Egypt appeared in the second to last cosmorama window, image 193, with the *Battle of Napoleon at the Pyramids, Egypt*. Out of the almost two hundred cosmorama windows, a striking total of thirty nine images were devoted to subjects pertaining directly to France and England, with French military victories, like Napoleon’s Egyptian victory, and cosmopolitan locales totaling twenty four displays and British subjects amounting to fifteen. In a museum devoted to the exotic, the curious and the unusual, how is it that Egypt both ancient and modern was only depicted a total of four times, one of which framed by the French colonial intervention of its land?

The function of this first Saloon proves difficult to situate within theories of collecting precisely because it does not represent a collection of fixed, physical objects. An English tradition, cosmoramas were optical illusions that used magnifying glasses to focus and present a highly realistic rendering of a particular scene, typically locales far from the exhibiting country. Unlike paintings or sculptures, the cosmoramas depended

entirely on how they were set up—the inclusion of magnifying glasses, the proper form of illumination, and placement at an appropriate viewing height for museum patrons. Cosmoramas did, however, present an opportunity for the New York City public to immerse themselves in what appeared to be a “first hand” experience, while at the same time containing, in a sequence of neat boxes, events and significant moments in cultures far and removed from the American cultural zeitgeist of the 1860s. The context of the museum space and the power of the exhibition rhetoric render the illogical, physically impossible process of jumping in and out of historical periods, vast geographic areas and religious frameworks visually possible.<sup>26</sup> It is therefore crucial to understand how Barnum’s four images of Egypt as landmark, major city and colonized authority crafted a specific image of Egypt’s ability to signify a deeper nationalistic desire; in other words how these displays functioned as a “mirror” signifying foreign otherness and yet reflecting the national self.

The famous Pyramids of Giza served as Egypt’s first appearance in the Salon. Immediately following an image of the Hippodrome in Rome, the pyramids provided an instantly recognizable sign of Egypt’s long dead ancient civilization that was reinforced in its historical ties with an illusion to a familiar image of Roman antiquity. Through their close pairing the two displays reinforce a historical narrative, from most ancient to more recent and also suggest the eventual Roman occupation of ancient Egyptian culture. The displays allow the viewer to step back in time, not to travel to Egypt in its present

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<sup>26</sup> As Foucault suggests, like a mirror, the museum represents a utopian, idealized image that is real in the sense that it is concretely “present,” it does indeed exist, however it is completely unreal in the impossibility of ever fully inhabiting the vision; i.e. one can never step through the looking glass into the reflected image of a mirror. For more on Foucault’s heterotopia see: Foucault, Michel, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971.)

day. Both images are also depictions of a type of monumental antiquity that has no precedent on American soil.

Cosmorama display 108 builds from this message, depicting *Grand Cairo as it was inundated by the Nile*. Though the display's details must remain a matter of conjecture, an image of the Nile would have irrefutably recalled the long-standing American parallel between the Mississippi River and Egypt's great River. Cairo, as opposed to the pairing of Giza and Rome, invokes modern Egypt, as a post-Islam, Arabic city.<sup>27</sup> However, rather than representing that bustling city, the display invoked its destruction and the sensation of the powerless in the face of the unavoidable rise of Nile. This representation of a weakened Egypt in the modern world was only further strengthened by the subsequent image of *Fire Works at Paris*. While Cairo is flooded and powerless, Parisians set off celebratory fireworks. The powerless are juxtaposed to the most powerful, a pairing that reinforces a colonial narrative, one that reflects contemporary French imperialist motivations.

Displays 178 and 179, featured two images of Alexandria with the city's Great Square and its Port. Both of these landmarks had ties to imperialist narratives, as Alexandria, the original home of the British version of Cleopatra's Needle, carried significant connotations of ancient power in Alexander the Great's Ptolemaic legacy. The image of Alexandria's port, described in the catalogue as depicting "fleets at anchor,"<sup>28</sup> further suggests a modern Egyptian city, engaged in commercial trading, or,

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<sup>27</sup> Since most major ancient Egyptian structures were necropolis, they are located typically outside centralized city areas. In studying Egyptian archaeology there are comparatively little findings directly in Cairo as opposed to the areas like Giza just outside the city. This is not to say that there is not rich archaeological interest in the city center and its history, however in the early 19<sup>th</sup> excavations of ancient Egypt focused on more prominently ancient locations and Cairo remained the largest city center of the Arab world.

<sup>28</sup> Catalogue Barnum's American Museum, 11.

more likely, military fleets rendered inactive and static. The idea of an impotent military proves more meaningful in conjunction with the following image, which depicted the *Burning Turkish Fleet at Navarin*, which referred to a defeated Ottoman fleet that had burned during the Battle of Navarino off the Peloponnesus in 1827. A memorable event by any standard, the battle had been a significant loss for the Ottoman Empire during the Greek War for Independence. Egyptian fleets, in addition to imperial Ottoman war vessels, were present and of course, conquered by the allied forces of Britain, France, and Russia, and this victory would lead to the eventual cessation of Ottoman hostilities toward Greek revolts against their imperial reign. Thus, Egypt fits once more into the same narrative structure: once thriving and rich with significance in its antiquity, it suffers in the present and would only prove to fall under the weighty power of Western imperial forces.

Thus the cosmorama, the very first room in the American Museum complex, was a virtual scene of time travel that reconstructed history for its paying public. The interactive space encouraged conversation, group observation and literal, physical movement as viewers peered, voyeuristically into the scenes. Barnum's space of leisure and recreational activity, produced a narrative that reconstructed history with Egypt as a symbol of great ancient authority, long removed by its colonizers. The act of looking from this voyeuristic perspective, was an early way for American viewers to consume these imperialist overtones and symbolically act possession over the Egyptian subject.

While the rhetoric of the cosmorama places strong emphasis on ideals of rarified western culture and the unfolding of Western history, the museum itself has always been tinged by tales of "humbuggery," purposeful forgeries, falsifications, inauthentic, man-

made objects displayed seemingly at random amidst an enormous world of ethnological and natural history objects. Despite the different character of the cosmorama display and what would follow in the subsequent object cabinets, there is an underlying common denominator of an active, participatory museum patron experience that links the variant modes of display and produces the amusement-like atmosphere for which the museum was so famous. For example, Barnum's infamous controversy over the "Fee-Jee mermaid," the man-made conglomeration of a monkey's torso and the tail of a fish, incited a type of active participatory viewership distinct from typical passive methods of audience engagement.<sup>29</sup> Capitalizing on the media fueled controversy of his "mermaid," as well as similar controversial "freak shows" like the notorious "What is it?" display of an African American man suggested as the "missing evolutionary link" between man and ape, Barnum purposely pushed his audience to come and poke, prod and judge for themselves if what they saw before them was indeed "humbug" or authentic natural wonder.

This aspect of Barnum's museum, the active, participatory place of the patron amid the objects and specimens presented before them, breaks precedent with earlier museum missions and recalls traditions of Vaudevillian entertainment. This amusing, entertaining tone colored the interpretation of all objects housed in The American Museum, including a significant representation of "Egypt" literally embodied in the remains of ancient mummy. Considering this method of active, skeptical spectatorship and what I will describe as an arrangement of objects according to illogical juxtapositions of historical context, geographical materials, and natural versus cultural relevance, the

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<sup>29</sup> See Dennet-Stulman for a thorough discussion of dime museum spectator environments. For more information on Barnum's infamous hoaxes see Benjamin Reiss as cited above.

role of the Egyptian artifact becomes subsumed into a larger *wunderkammer* of curiosities. It reconstructs, in an effort to be encyclopedic, the entirety of the representable world, yet does so through disorder that privileges wonder, fun and fantasy over learned, didactic empirical data. The disorder, however, still painted a comparative picture of Egypt as morose curiosity tied to colonial narratives as it pitted Egyptian objects against other exemplars of rarified western culture.

Barnum's catalogue lists, in intimate detail, an impressive 885 specimens on display that were further subdivided into individual elements per display case. Like the cosmoramas, the number of Egyptian objects is surprisingly limited, considering both precedents for mummies and artifacts in important collections like the Peale Museum in Philadelphia and Barnum's active efforts to collect and market objects that were ancient, exotic and often utterly bizarre.<sup>30</sup> The museum patron encountered this variety by proceeding through the cosmoramas and up the main staircase to Saloon Two, which provided an impressive introduction to Barnum's collection. As illustrated in an accompanying engraving (Figure 2), the gallery space was bright and open with tall ceilings; chandeliers punctuated the space and a series of windows helped to illuminate the displays. After walking up the central staircase, visitors could enter to the left or right, where they would be confronted with a wall of paintings, engravings and drawings hung salon-style, as well as a number of glass cases of varied sizes containing the types of unusual objects that Barnum hoped his audience would excitedly anticipate. It was in this

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<sup>30</sup> For an in depth look at the place of mummies in nineteenth-century America see: Wolfe, S J, and Robert Singerman, *Mummies in Nineteenth Century America: Ancient Egyptians As Artifacts* (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 2009).

regal space and through the following third, fourth, fifth, sixth and finally seventh saloons that Barnum located his object displays (Figures 3-7).<sup>31</sup>

The most famous Egyptian object in Barnum's collection was his prized mummy sarcophagus located in the Sixth Saloon, case 803. The catalogue entry claims it to be an "Egyptian Mummy from Thebes, three thousand years old, enclosed in case of sycamore wood," and then swiftly moves on to other objects in the case, which included a Russian soldier's Cap and Helmet from Sebastopol, a Musket and "Scotch Clayore" [sic] from Balaklava. On either side of the mummy's case, 804 presents a selection of coral from all over the world, and 802 mixed ethnological objects including "Fee-jee" Island Fish-hooks, a model of a South Sea Canoe, a Deer's Horn "with a likeness to a human hand," "wooden idols" an elephant's tusk, and a porcelain model of the Tower of Nankin in China, with an assorted variety of native American artifacts including tomahawks and jewelry.<sup>32</sup> Notably, there were no other Egyptian objects contextualizing the mummy's display. No objects that echoed it formally, geographically or functionally.

The catalogue illustrates both Saloon Six and the mummy itself, depicting an upright sarcophagus which prominently reveals its mysterious mummified contents. Through delicate cross-hatched lines, one can see the suggestion of the exposed head and upper torso of the mummy that sharply transitions into an intricate x-shaped wrapping pattern from upper torso down to the toes (Figure 8). Interestingly, this sarcophagus features an unusual square crown, a distinct feature that distinguishes Barnum's acquisition from the typical round shape of others in noteworthy collections around the

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<sup>31</sup>Although these engravings cannot be taken as completely accurate representations of Barnum's building, they do provide an overview of the general spatial arrangement and many of the objects represented in the image correspond to the case and room number listed in the catalogue.

<sup>32</sup> Catalogue Barnum's American Museum, 94.

country. The catalogue labels the image simply as “Mummy,” a detail that sharply contrasts with two other objects that were reproduced and labeled in close proximity in the catalogue. Unlike this very general labeling of Barnum’s “Mummy”, an African War Horn from Case 802 is labeled as “The African War Horn” and reproduced in careful detail, while an image of a ceremonial mask from the Sandwich Islands, labeled “The Mask,” meticulously represents its decorative patterning and sharp geometric facial forms (Figures 9). The lack of article in the mummy’s title suggests no degree of specificity in its selection or display—Barnum’s “mummy” is labeled as if it is an exemplar of all mummies, not a specific specimen but a stand in for the larger knowledge of mummies in general, and even as “Egypt” itself.

Beyond the grammatical framework of the catalogue’s object label, the listing of surrounding objects and their images frames the mummy and, through extension, “Egypt” within a discourse of other ethnological artifacts. In the same room as exotic wooden idol statuettes, African masks and hunting implements and Oceanic objects, the Egyptian mummy is re-contextualized into the realm of non-western, exotic and primitive cultures. Moreover, in the same case, the museum directly links the Egyptian mummy with two artifacts from noteworthy Crimean War battles, which, like the cosmorama frames Egypt in a narrative of conflict and power struggle motivated by imperialist inclinations. All the objects are tied to the battle that would render the Ottoman powers defeated; Egypt’s place as ally reinforces the rhetoric of East versus West. Showing artifacts of the vanquished losers of the war links the mummy to a framework of colonial possession, enhanced by display of numerous primitive and exotic objects that compose the displays Saloon Six.

The display and study of mummies was not a new practice by the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and in addition to a number of specimens held in prominent institutions of rival cities, a number of traveling lectures toured mummies from city to city and unwrapped them before crowds of curious onlookers. Having a mummy at the American Museum participated within this larger cultural knowledge of mummies as sublime, macabre, artifact suitable for public consumption. Barnum may indeed have had as many as three mummies at once.<sup>33</sup> After Barnum's devastating 1865 fire, a vitriolic *New York Times* article references a total of three mummies that were lost to the flames. The author rhapsodizes: "Who can forget, be he man or boy, the startling effect produced upon him by the three men of Egypt, whose blackened skulls and grinning, ghastly faces stuck offensively out from the top of funeral wrappings?"<sup>34</sup> Specifically citing three mummies, this lengthy testament contradicts both the catalogue's illustrations and its object listings, and yet, due to the 1865 fire, no inventory record or other evidence survives to help to definitively reconstruct the space.<sup>35</sup>

Indeed, the catalogue illustration of Saloon Six depicts, on the far left of the composition, a solitary mummy standing in its sarcophagus behind glass in a tall unit of cases that run around the entire length of the wall (Figure 6). As difficult to read as the engraving is, its arrangement and inclusion of roaming museum-goers illustrates the vital role the mummy played for Barnum's audience and within the overall narrative of his enormous collection. While the catalogue highlights the gallery's holdings in primitive

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<sup>33</sup>For further discussion see Wolfe as cited above.

<sup>34</sup> "Disastrous Fire: Total Destruction of Barnum's American Museum," *New York Times*, July 14, 1865, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Despite a great deal of searching I found it difficult to locate much mention of Barnum's mummies in contemporary periodicals as well. This warrants further consideration as the absence of mention could also indicate a growing cultural acceptance of the appropriateness of mummies within the museum complex. It seems the shock and awe of the mummy as grotesque remnant of a totally foreign culture has withered away with the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century fascination.

objects through its selective choice in illustrations, the larger engraving of the space illustrates a display that mixes these ethnological pieces with a large number of natural history and biological specimens. Significantly, the sarcophagus of this mummy has a rounded top that here frames what resembles its face. Beneath the mummy's bust, a few lines suggest the wrapping pattern of bandages, and a pair of museum patrons stares intently through the glass perhaps at the mummy's outer coffin, attempting to decipher its hieroglyphic decoration. Nearly impossible to identify in detail, the surrounding objects appear to include a vegetal, biomorphic display to the left, perhaps the coral referenced in case 804. The room's other glass cases form a tighter grid of square shapes and seem to contain a neat, ordered arrangement of similarly shaped objects. The back wall of the gallery, contains two curios topped with taxidermied specimens. In the center of the room are a series of rectangular cases which seem to contain small, sculptural forms, perhaps the wooden idols or other tribal artifacts reference in the catalogue listing. In the right foreground, a family of three approach a curio display, while their young child looks away, holding the hand of her father and gestures directly across the image leading straight back to the display of ancient Egyptian mummy. Based on the display as depicted in the engraving, the place of Barnum's mummy was squarely within a discourse of ethnology and anthropology. Not a work of art, nor an object worthy of aesthetic contemplation, the mummy was tied more closely to exotic "oddities" that remained outside the cannon of Western culture.

Barnum's display of a Roman sarcophagus installed nearby in case 751 highlights this curatorial disparity. The catalogue describes its use as "preserving the ashes of the dead after the bodies are burned," and further declares that "lovers of antiquity, and those

who are curious in the customs of other countries, will be delighted with the roman urns for the preservation of the ashes of the dead; both in their manufacture and their elaboration they evince a high state of art.”<sup>36</sup> The description of Barnum’s life-size Venus statue, displayed in Saloon Two, adopts a similarly laudatory tone, noting: “this Venus is celebrated in all parts of the world, where art is appreciated, and, by some critics has been pronounced superior to that of the Medici.”<sup>37</sup> The catalogue also reproduces her image in striking clarity both in an object illustration and in the engraving of Saloon Two. Unlike the mummy’s schematic portrayal, Venus receives a classical profile, idealized proportions, clear nuances like a tiny cupid sitting atop the base, and her own free-standing case. Singled out and shrouded behind glass, the goddess is encased by a salon-style hanging of paintings, prints and graphic imagery depicting historical individuals and important New York City scenes. While the exterior entrance to the museum is at ground-level, with no distinguished façade, a visitor can ascend immediately after entering to her literally elevated gallery of “high” art and culture via the “Grand Stair Case.” Considering the colonialist rhetoric of the cosmorama’s walk through history, as the museum-goer ascended the stairs their walk through Western Civilization would be greeted by a display of Greco-Roman “art” embodied by the statue of Venus. The Egyptian sarcophagus, despite its antiquity is separated by four galleries from Barnum’s Venus statue. The arrangement sends a distinct message: Greco-Roman antiquities were on the same level as painting, drawing and art more generally, while Egyptian objects were lurid ethnological curiosities.

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<sup>36</sup> Catalogue Barnum’s American Museum, 91.

<sup>37</sup> Catalogue Barnum’s American Museum, 55.

While Barnum presented Venus as the culmination of high culture, Egyptian culture and artifacts received a much less elevated treatment. Beyond the vastly varied contents of the Mummy's Saloon Six, a patron would travel there through rooms of life size taxidermied wild animals, wax figures of historical personages, displays of birds, butterflies, weaponry, and inexplicable curiosities—all of which would be capped by his live freak-show displays and rotating programs in his newly furnished Lecture Room. Thus, within this aforementioned context of primitive, ethnological, and biological displays, Egypt, embodied by the mummy, remains unstable. The mummy is neither elevated Western art, nor firmly a primitive object, nor a fully medical specimen of a preserved Egyptian man, but instead, framed by all of the above, it is relegated belongs in the realm of the “curiosity.”

Barnum's distinction might be explained by considering Baudrillard's argument that the collection and interest in antiques is a desire to own time itself, contingent upon a cultural acknowledgement of what constitutes a veritable “antique.” Venus, the Roman Urn and the sarcophagus, garner more attention as images of time immemorial, praised for their rarity and signifying power as symbols of ancient greatness, whereas the comparatively antediluvian Egyptian object is re-contextualized in a new narrative that jumps between objects with little logical relationship to one another. This method of arrangement prevents a degree of seriality typically anticipated in post-Linnaean collecting practices where repetition reinforces the image of accumulation and a narrative of powerful possession. The cosmoramas, the humbug fakes, and the live freak show exhibits invited participants to foreground their skepticism or belief in their experience of the museum space, forcing viewers to produce an individualized narrative, contrasting

museums that would systematize and construct the narrative of experience in order to educate their viewers. While the *wunderkammer* format betrayed Enlightenment desires to rationalize the natural world, Barnum's unique twist on the museum signaled the start of the collection as product of consumption.

Consequently, after the 1865 fire, Barnum's method of museology was destined to fade out of popularity. As Bluford Adams suggests, Barnum's formation of the American Museum was part of a Reconstruction desire to modernize American cultural capital and develop a museum devoted to issues of nationalism. While this period would see the earliest formations of The American Museum of Natural History and the inception of the idea for the Metropolitan Museum of Art, it was Barnum's museum that first attempted to manipulate objects into a reconstructed historical narrative that reinforced national desires of cultural superiority and symbolic imperialist actions. In a war-ravaged country facing human losses too devastating to fathom, the role of the arts and the development of culture seemed a frivolous concern and one that required more financial capital than was readily available. The American Museum sat at the crossroads of this cultural shift, carrying with it the weight of creating a collection for the American people that represented the interests of an increasingly diverse and difficult to define audience. Its natural history displays, its seemingly limitless supply of birds, bugs and butterflies, echoes an early nineteenth century celebration of American natural resources found in the museums of Charles Wilson Peale and his progeny, while the introduction of exotic oddities, foreign imports and ancient relics complicated this museum display with new narratives that reflect an increasingly global world view. The American Museum amassed and presented to the public an accumulation of wonder and amazement that

bridged the gap between a nationalistic pride in America's natural bounty and desire to own and understand the world at large, reinforcing ideas of Western superiority that the developing country hoped to emulate in the coming half of the century. The next half of the century, however, brought with it new territories of knowledge and an emphasis on seemingly objective museum displays that sharply contrasted with Barnum's theatrical model. The position of Egypt would continue to play a key role; no longer simply folded into a larger reconstruction of history, no longer a symbol only of ancient "time," nor as a truly rare foreign import. Instead, the development of entire collections devoted to a variety of Egyptian objects built off of Barnum's implicit connections to Egypt's sublime age and present status as desirable territorial possession.

### **The Englishman's Egypt: The Abbot Collection of Egyptian Antiquities**

Even during the most celebrated periods of Barnum's American Museum, voices of dissent clamored for an institution that would serve as an erudite citadel of culture. An 1853 letter to the *New York Times* cites a passionate plea from a group of civic-minded New Yorkers. The letter opens explaining, "In view of the fact that there exist among us, no national institutions, such as have long been established in the principal cities of other civilized lands, for the permanent deposit and conservation of works of Art, Antiquity and Natural History," they call the public's attention to "a collection of Egyptian Antiquities of great rarity, unrivalled completeness and permanent value," value that they believe presents an unprecedented "opportunity" to "to secure for this metropolis... a nucleus... for a Museum of Arts and Sciences."<sup>38</sup> The collection was the enormous holdings of Dr. Henry Abbott, an English doctor who worked in Cairo for

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<sup>38</sup> "Egyptian Antiquities – To the Public," *New York Daily Times*, Oct. 24, 1853, 2.

twenty years and was able to transport hundreds of objects out of the country before increasing exportation restrictions. In an unprecedented move, The Abbott Collection of Egyptian Antiquities would be shipped across the Atlantic Ocean, and installed in its entirety for the New York City public.

These spirited men further urged the public to support what they believed was a long overdue cultural venture – the acquisition and display of a serious collection of antiquities for artistic, scientific and historical knowledge – that would serve as the basis of a National Museum for both the country and the city at large:

We believe that the time has now arrived when an appeal to the public spirit of our wealthy and successful citizens, on behalf of an institution to preserve trophies of art, specimens of natural history, antiquities and all objects adapted to a National Museum, would meet with a hearty response. It is believed that if such an institution was sustained and enriched, it would prove a permanent attraction to visitors, a great and much needed resource to scholars, and a worthy evidence of the Metropolitan intelligence, such as would add grace and significance to our material prosperity. It is also believed that if such an institution was sustained and enriched, it would prove a permanent attraction to visitors, a great and much needed resource to scholars, and a worthy evidence of Metropolitan intelligence, such as would add grace and significance to our material prosperity. It is also believed that if such an institution existed, numerous legacies would accrue, and that our travelers, from time to time, add to its treasures... for the nucleus of such a Museum Doctor ABBOTT'S collection of Egyptian Antiquities, is the most important...<sup>39</sup>

Despite Barnum's success the dime museum model and his emphasis on theatrical, interactive museum experiences did not answer the cries of the city's elite who sought an elevated presentation of "Egypt" based in knowledge. A significant portion of New Yorkers wanted to celebrate and foster "Metropolitan intelligence" as a signpost of the city's increasing sophistication. Abbott's Collection of Egyptian Antiquities came to the country at a crucial moment in its cultural maturation; split between the broad public desire for showmanship and a growing population interested in science and knowledge,

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

the collection's Egyptian objects were reframed as a curiosity more attuned to Enlightenment scientific ideals rather than Barnum's constructed world of fantasy. Abbott's Egyptian objects occupied an unstable place in the context of mid-nineteenth century American museum collections that reflected the city and country's similarly unstable cultural status. Examining the changing place of Abbott's collection highlights how crucial the museological context was to the public interpretation; with the success of the Metropolitan Museum's similarly authentic Egyptian collection, the comparative failure of Abbott demonstrates the vital role of the museum as a theoretical framework for the objects themselves.

The desire to acquire of such an enormous amount of Egyptian material reflects a change in the way elite New Yorkers saw themselves and their city. The growing significance of authentic Egyptian materials made them less "Barnum-like" inexplicable curiosities and more a remnant of sublime antiquity worth owning. In hoping to increase the city's cultural status and the country's historical weight, Abbott's collection was an opportune moment to acquire the "time" and "power" the city desired. However, this case of cultural self-fashioning is complicated by the way in which Abbott's collection would be framed in a series of different exhibition venues and, most notably, by its relative failure as a museum destination for a broad audience. In a period when museums occupied a growing place in the New York City leisure, it is nothing short of astonishing that an unparalleled collection of unquestionably authentic Egyptian artifacts did not draw in Barnum-worthy crowds. It failed at both the Stuyvesant Institute and the New-York Historical Society before eventually finding its home within the Brooklyn Museum, and though the collection shifted numerous times to fit its contextual framework and

physical display space, it never separated its pieces for sale or to distribute them to other museums. The Abbott Collection's general lack of fanfare rests in the larger cultural reception of Egypt, art, museums and collectors—while Abbott viewed his objects as rarified souvenirs of his time spent in Egypt the American public response was divided. Without the designation of Egyptian works as “art” Abbott's objects were seen as dry, ethnological artifact too foreign and confusing to be of interest without Barnum's theatrical framework. Educated audiences, on the other hand, were split between a fascination with the collection's awesome historical resonances with the Bible and distaste for the objects' lurid associations with death. In essence, Abbott's collection was one tied to closely to his place as wealthy English collector, presenting anthropological curiosities as his own spoils of English imperialism, the exhibition of his objects in New York city simply did not translate as either scientifically or aesthetically edifying.

Much of this disjunction can be attributed to Dr. Henry Abbott as the titular framework of the collection; indeed, he remains indexically present as a specter of a wealthy English collector overlooking *his* possessions. Abbott was a native of England who, like many wealth Englishmen, traveled extensively and took temporary residence in the budding metropolis of New York City. Working as a doctor for the Egyptian army, Abbott had spent twenty years between 1832 and 1852 working in Cairo where he began his leisurely hobby of collecting Egyptian artifacts, which would eventually become a monumental collection of over two thousand artifacts. For the majority of his residence in Egypt, the large collection adorned his living quarters where it attracted the attention of numerous antiquarians and western travelers abroad who publicly praised its noteworthy value. However, in 1852, Abbott decided to offer his extensive collection for

\$100,000 to buyers in Europe and the United States, but he preferred his collection to be received in its entirety by a public institution to prevent the possibility of breaking up the objects amidst collectors.<sup>40</sup> Yet, despite a generally well received evaluation of the antiquities, Abbott received no offers on the whole collection and resorted to another profitable avenue: setting up the objects as an independent museum display for an audience that had not yet attained access to large collections of ancient artifacts, the citizens of New York City.

While Abbott still clung to hopes of selling his collection to a major museum institution, even approaching an unreceptive British Museum, his New York acquaintances convinced him to temporarily place his collection in a small museum institution on Broadway, The Stuyvesant Institute. Though Abbott hoped that the city would purchase his collection, asking \$60,000, this desire would not be realized until after his death, when the New-York Historical Society fundraised and acquired the collection in 1860. Thus, my discussion of Abbott's objects will explore how the collection was redistributed between divergent museum contexts and how it was then presented in museum guides and catalogues. In examining these materials, as well as contemporary audience reactions, advertisements, and the few remaining photographs of the installation, the split response of laudatory praise and scandalized disgust highlights the complexity of positioning Egyptian objects before the American Renaissance's influence.

Located on 659 Broadway, the Stuyvesant Institute occupied an important position in the city's development of cultural institutions. As early as 1836, the institute

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<sup>40</sup> "Death of Dr. Henry Abbott in Egypt," *New York Observer and Chronicle*, May 12, 1859, 37; "Death of Dr. Henry Abbott Collector of the Egyptian Museum," *Little's Living Age*, June 4, 1859, 784-592.

was developed “for the diffusion of useful knowledge” disseminated to the public through popular lectures, with a library, a reading room and “a museum or cabinet of natural history.”<sup>41</sup> Over time the institute included a medical university and hosted numerous lectures multiple times a week on topics as varied as religion, current politics, history, science and the natural world, but it could never be considered an art museum. The display of Egyptian objects within this context then symbolizes a distinct interpretation of these artifacts as not aesthetic, but instead as a matter of general knowledge, curiosity or as the bylaws state: “a cabinet of natural history.” In a sharp distinction to Barnum, the Stuyvesant’s emphasis on science and empiricism renders Egyptian objects as curiosities of a different type. Neither bizarre, nor potential hoaxes, Abbott’s curiosities were those of an educated, post-Enlightenment collector, who acquired the objects in the quest to accumulate knowledge. The Stuyvesant’s emphasis on science and knowledge reflected Abbott’s erudite collecting goals.

In an address given at the institute’s dedication ceremony, Samuel Ward a leading member of the institute reminded the audience that they have assembled with a specific purpose in mind, to “dedicate these Halls to Science.” The ceremony, he told the crowd, was an event that should fill them with pride in the “voluntary offerings of its [the city’s] prosperous inhabitants,” who have designed and erected “another edifice destined to combine the materials with the opportunities of human enlightenment.”<sup>42</sup> Ward continues lauding the new institute of scientific knowledge by framing the history of great western

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<sup>41</sup> Stuyvesant Institute, *Charter and By-Laws of the Stuyvesant Institute of the City of New York*, (New York: J. Narine Printer, 1837).

<sup>42</sup> Samuel Ward dedication ceremony speech as printed in Stuyvesant Institute. *Address Delivered at the Opening of the Stuyvesant Institute* (New York: J. Narine Printer 1837), 51.

cultural production, almost prophetically referencing the role that antiquity would play within the context of the Stuyvesant:

From the earliest ages, conscious of a perishable existence, man has striven to perpetuate in marble or on canvas the remembrance of great events. It was easier to impress the images of these upon the material world, than to immortalize them in song or story. The temple and the triumphal arch once erected, -- a statue was placed in the niche of the one, and a name, the deed and the day, were inscribed upon the face of the other. Then, a thousand lyres sang poeans [sic] to the god, and deified the hero. Centuries pass on, and history rebuilds the temple, and substitutes itself for the monument.<sup>43</sup>

He continues, even referring to the Egyptian culture that would eventually occupy an entire branch of the museum:

The old world is filled with such memorials of by-gone grandeur, -- from the Colossal enigmas of the land of the Ptolemies to the classic models of a later day; from the unrivalled temples of ancient Greece, to the cloud-capt cathedrals of the middle ages, where the richly embroidered exterior, and the paintings that tapestry the inner walls, testify to the fervor of a piety that in our day has assumed a new and less ostentatious form; and from the triumphal arch of Trajan at Rome, to that stupendous structure commemorative of modern pride, which, recently completed by acclamation in the capitol of France, seems only the funeral pyre of the armies whose victories it records.<sup>44</sup>

In essence, Ward baptizes this new American initiative, linking it to the great cultural productions of eras and cultures passed. Framing the Stuyvesant Institute with the “Ptolemaic enigmas” of ancient history, Ward relies on a familiar trope of sanctioning the cultural endeavors of the “New World” by citing the laudatory accomplishments of important historical eras, still foreign to the infantile nation.

However, Ward’s speech did not rest on celebrating the past, but turned toward prophesying the future intellectual prowess of the United States, declaring that “intellectual greatness requires no material mementos of its power, which is rather of

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<sup>43</sup> Ward, 2.

<sup>44</sup> Ward, 3.

tomorrow than of yesterday” and “for this purpose we need build neither pyramid nor triumphal arch.” He continued:

We are the children of but one generation, - of a generation, which having laid, in the broad principles of human liberty, the foundations of our political edifice, has bequeathed to its posterity the grateful task of crowning the work so begun, with a superstructure of social virtues, cemented, fortified and absorbed by justice, by science, and by art... If science and letters are indispensable to the moral grandeur of a nation, (and that they are who can doubt?) it is the duty of the enlightened, not only to hail their advent, but to prepare the way for their reception.<sup>45</sup>

Thus, Ward makes clear that, in the context of growing American ingenuity and economic, political and cultural success, it is empirical knowledge and science that will lead the country forward in cooperation with the arts. Abbott’s Egyptian artifacts embraced this larger context of science, knowledge and empiricism, and to a crowd that had only experienced actual Egyptian objects in venues such as Barnum’s, the Abbott collection was simultaneously welcomed and isolating along class lines.

The distinct audience responses are most evident in the collection’s corresponding visual ephemera. Highlighting how the Abbott collection fit into the Stuyvesant enterprise, a contemporary poster for the museum represents the collection now titled simply as “Egyptian Museum” with a mix of bold fonts and selective illustrations (Figure 10). Forming an arc at the top of the composition, the word “Egyptian” is printed in a bold black font with angular features, reminiscent of a rudimentary, hand-carved motif. The word museum is prominently featured twice in embossed, but traditional westernized fonts. Subtly juxtaposing primitive and modern the text indicates the need for the distinction as it explains that what the museum really demonstrated was: “Egypt – The Land of the Bible/ Illustrated by its Antiquities at Dr. Abbott’s/ Museum/ ‘The Greatest Attraction in the City.’” Images of two identical mummy coffins of indeterminate sex,

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<sup>45</sup> Ward, 4-5.

covered in hieroglyphics and wearing an elaborate headdress and tiered ankh necklace, complemented the text. One of Abbot's most infamous pieces, a large, mummified bull, one of many in his collection, also features prominently, while a fragment of a mural, a statue of Horus and a small gold signet ring appear on the same scale in the next row of imagery. A figurative spoon carved in the image of a "Nubian Woman," occupies the lower row of the poster; nude and swimming, this figure holds her head high while her outstretched arms appear as if she's presenting an offering. Surrounded by a frame of pseudo-hieroglyphics the poster's text directly links the recognizable elements of Abbott's collection not to Egyptian history but to Christian history. Thus the imagery, the text, the existence of the collection at all was conceived of as a way to study religion and to gain an empirical and spiritual knowledge about a culture defined not by history but by the Bible.

Another poster of less elaborate design presents the collection in a different light (Figure 11). Resembling a broadside, it introduces the collection in plain bold type, with its address and the description as "Dr. Abbott's/celebrated collection of /Egyptian Antiquities/Numbering upwards of 2000 objects!!" Contrasting with the previous example, it emphasizes the collector and the number of objects. Immediately next to the only accompanying illustration, just one of the double mummy coffins, a sentence suggests the authentic value of the collection presented by providing intellectual verification in the names of reverends, doctors, knights, lawyers, and, of particular note, Professor Felton of Harvard University, who, as the poster explains, declared the gallery "'full of antiquities, rarer and more curious than those in any European Museum.'"<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> The sentence reads: "The following Authors may be referred to for Opinions of the value and importance of this Collection, viz: Rt. Rev. Bishop Wainwright, Rev. Dr. Hawks, Prof. J.V.C. Smith, Sir Gardner

Furthermore, at the bottom of the page the poster reads: “This wonderful collection is now the daily resort of the *elite*, and is patronized by all persons of literary taste and refinement. It is decidedly the most popular, the most attractive, and the most instructive Exhibition in the City.” Thus, this poster lauds the museum not as an educational repository of Biblical history, but instead as a beacon of culture for most elite New York society deserving in its merit due to its scholarly authentication and the prominence of the collector, Dr. Henry Abbott himself.

These two modes of advertising, one capitalizing on class mobility and one approaching the collection from fantastical visions of a romanticized ancient past sum up the dilemma posed by Abbott’s collection. In order to survive, it required the patronage of audiences with two very different perspectives on Egypt. On the one hand, Egypt was to be studied, authenticated and valued by the “elite” by persons of “literary taste and refinement.” On the other hand it was to be viewed as an exciting “attraction” used to illustrate and inform the ill-educated spectator. This division is further emphasized by the sharp distinction in illustrations and fonts, with the poster intended for wider audiences covered with a number of labeled, captioned illustrations to entice the viewer didactically. The second example employs only one image of an object that is not part of Abbott’s collection to represent the collection as a whole, allowing it to function as a fictive mascot. Rather than relying upon explanatory imagery to entice patrons, this poster summons both the gravity of scholarship and the pull of class elitism to motivate attendance.

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Wilkinson, Bayle St. John Esq. Stewardt, Poole Esq., M. Prisse, M. Ampere, Dr. G. Seyffarth, Dr. J. W. Francis, W.C. Prime, Esq.” Felton’s quote came from a paper he had presented at the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

How this division played out through the displays is difficult to corroborate without visual evidence, but written descriptions exist of the public's response. A noteworthy example comes from the poet Walt Whitman, who once left a comment in the museum's ledger books noting that he had visited the Stuyvesant museum over twenty times. In 1855, he also wrote an article for *Life Illustrated* singing the praises of Abbott's collection and describing his own occasional meetings with Dr. Abbott himself, sometimes adorned in "full Turkish attire," who kindly guided him through the collection and assisted him in his study of ancient Egyptian culture.<sup>47</sup> Whitman describes walls lined with "slabs of limestone, some... very large, each containing its spread of chiseled hieroglyphics" amidst mummy cases sometimes with the lids off, displaying their contents, and "mummied [sic], cats, lizards, ibises, and crocodiles." Despite his high degree of interest, Whitman admits that the museum "is not the kind of an exhibition that would attract crowds," instead it would only appeal to "a thoughtful and inquiring person."<sup>48</sup> He continues to paint a more vivid picture of the museum's typical patronage:

You enter the corridor leading to the Egyptian museum from the gayest and most crowded part of Broadway and ascending a flight of stairs to the second story pass into a suite of three large halls, with back windows halls with great contents... dim, dreary, silent, eloquent. Two or three visitors stalk about without noise for this is not a popular or vulgar attractive exhibition... perhaps you even find yourself the solitary gazer amid these wonderful relics...

Whitman's quote highlights the issues with Abbott's collection; "dreary" but not "vulgar" the collection was full of curious "relics" for those of his educated stature and preconceived interest, yet it was not accessible in a broad popular vein.

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<sup>47</sup> Taken from the website of the Brooklyn Museum  
<http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/features/whitman/egypt.php>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

When he died in 1859, Abbott used his obituary to make a case for his collection's purchase by the New-York Historical Society before English competitors could swoop up the treasures that were now part of his larger estate. The obituary claims that the collection "contains a highly varied assortment of Egyptian antiquities, from the huge mummied [sic] bulls ...the ornaments worn by Egyptian ladies ... when the sphinx was young," "rare old papyri ...stiff statues of grim old Egyptians who may have held office under kings with preposterous names like Thothmes and Menepthah," as well as "the toilet apparatus of Egyptian belles, the implements of Egyptian industry, and the rings and easels of Egyptian pride."<sup>49</sup> By choosing these objects and describing them in such mellifluous language, even Abbott's obituary caters to the parts of Egypt that the public could celebrate—mummies, jewelry, hieroglyphics and figurative statues. These noteworthy holdings recalled Egyptian conceptions of the afterlife through mummification, despotic leaders in the Pharaohs and mysterious and exotic adornments that would have been worn by the long deceased race of people.

Comments found in the Stuyvesant's ledger book, now held at the archives of the New-York Historical Society, also provide information on the arrangement of Abbott's collection, though they reflect a split in opinion. A number of comments by excited patrons claim that the exhibition was "invaluable as an aid to historical inquiries," "a collection the city of New York should never let depart," "a great chance to study the progress of man's progress," and even "the most perfect collection of all I have seen in

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<sup>49</sup> Henry Abbot Obituary as cited above.

my travels through Europe and America.”<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, comments such as, “I wish I had my quarters back,” “Wish I had gone to Barnum’s,” “grand, gloomy and peculiar,” “The Egyptians were ‘old fogies’,” and “an Egyptian god is not our god” interrupted the praise.<sup>51</sup> Amid the mixed reviews, a few comments indicate more specifically some details of the installation. One comment even suggests that New York’s modern position of power and intelligence should improve upon the display: “if we had the translation [of the hieroglyphic inscriptions] it would be ten times more interesting. Let us hope that the empire city will have this done.”<sup>52</sup> Similarly, other comments proclaim the collection better suited for “the educated but not for the ignorant,” while another suggests that Abbott’s museum is “a collection which needs to be studied to be duly appreciated.” Without explanatory wall texts, translations, or other museum guides, the objects would be left to speak for themselves and define their relationships to one another within the space of the Stuyvesant Institute. Perhaps this lack of enforced viewer framework led to this telling comment: “it should be better patronized than it is.”<sup>53</sup>

The only tool crafted to assist museum goers with their visit was a catalogue of the collection, published first in 1853, again in 1854 and then later in 1903 as part of the catalogue to the New-York Historical Society. Although the layout of the title page varies slightly among the three versions, the listing of the objects and choice in illustrations is constant in all three. The catalogue most widely distributed and utilized at the Stuyvesant was the version published in 1854, and it begins with an elaborately-illustrated title page that repeats the same motif of the standing mummy sarcophagi from the advertisements

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<sup>50</sup> Leger Book of the Abbott Collection of Egyptian Antiquities, Courtesy of the Patricia D. Klingenstein Library at the New-York Historical Society

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

discussed above (Figure 12). Here, the two flank an introductory text that labels the following contents as “Dr. Abbott’s Collection of Egyptian Antiquities” and emphasizes the word antiquities with a larger font. Above the text sits a large, dramatic “Eye of Horus” that stares out at the reader, while a winged solar disk motif supports the text and imagery from below.

From the title page the reader turns to a preface written by Abbott himself, who explains to the reader that he does not “profess to be a savant, or a decipherer of hieroglyphics, but merely an amateur collector of such objects of antiquity as appeared to me illustrative of the religious and other customs of and the Ancient Egyptians.”<sup>54</sup> Emphasizing both the pleasure in collecting and the authenticity provided to his collection by his twenty years of residence in Egypt, Abbott explains that he “found it agreeable.. to dive into the tombs of the ancients and rescues from the hands of the many pilferers such objects as appeared to [him] worthy of notice.” He asserts that “every article in this collection is of undoubted antiquity.” To help in explaining the numerous objects he has, himself, collected Abbott tells the reader that he has included what he deemed to be an appropriate level of description for each object included, but makes sure to direct the reader to serious “savants” or Egyptologists for further information.<sup>55</sup>

In the 1854 version, a five page spread of an Introduction and excerpts from popular magazines follow invokes both the “authenticity” and the Biblical overtones of Abbott’s collection. It reiterates Abbott’s time in Cairo and boasts that a series of important scholars of Egyptian history have all vouched for the value of the collection “in

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<sup>54</sup> Stuyvesant Institute, *Catalogue of A Collection of Egyptian Antiquities, the Property of Henry Abbott M.D. now exhibited at The Stuyvesant Institute No. 659 Broadway, New York* (New York: A.W. Watson, 1854. ) preface, unpaginated.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

the highest possible authority.”<sup>56</sup> The text then explains that the objects were often found in tombs, and that there is “probably no similar museum in the world more valuable to the Student, the Antiquarian, and the Divine.” Furthermore it asserts that, at the museum, “the ocular and palpable evidence of the authenticity of the Bible is presented in the most interesting form.” The viewer, it suggests is made “contemporary with Abraham, with the Israelites in Egypt, with Shishak, with Zerah, by witnessing specimens of rare arts made in their times.” It goes on to list a number of objects on display that have particular Biblical resonance and then, further attempting to pitch the collection to two distinct audiences, changes tone to suggest that the “Antiquarian,” or the educated audience members, will take special note of jewelry collection and Pharaonic references, all authenticated by the most learned scholars.<sup>57</sup>

The catalogue of objects opens with Abbott’s name and then proceeds into a numerical listing of each piece or groups of pieces, sometimes with additional explanatory passages and illustrations. A total of 1,118 entries are listed, with textiles largely located at the beginning of the exhibition; sculptures, vases and other small objects in the middle; then a section of mummified animals and humans; and finally jewelry and other Pharaonic artifacts.

Though no visual evidence of these displays exist, we can be sure that select elements of the collection were deemed of greater merit, or great enough complexity to warrant an illustration. Of the thousand entries, only twenty-four are illustrated, a strikingly small amount considering Barnum’s elaborately illustrated catalogue. Of the twenty-four illustrations, the largest and most impressive is the delicately detailed image

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

of one of the three mummified bulls in Abbott's collection (Figure 13). The bull is celebrated in a number of sources on the collection as a true rarity that is missing from almost every other major Egyptian collection outside of Egypt, especially the British Museum. Other significant illustrations include a full-page image of a necklace and earrings made of gold leaf and attributed to Menes, the first Pharaoh of Egypt (Figure 14). The images found on the advertisement poster reoccur: a gold signet ring with hieroglyphics; a large representation of a bronze figure of Har-Oeri, son of Osiris and Hathor; and a painted fragment of a wall mural with an anthropomorphic lion and fox as king and priestess. Other, more minor illustrations include, vases, battle axe, dagger, curved stick, and a drawer filled with tiny porcelains. The images selected for emphasis were chosen because of their rarity and historical weight within the context of the larger collection. Unlike Barnum's selective manipulation of the image of Egypt within a narrative of colonialism, Abbott's collection was structured by the taste of the educated collector with an access to Egyptian culture that stems directly from his English identity. The highlights of Abbott's collection did not resonate with American audiences because they reflected issues unrelated to the contemporary concept of Egypt as a symbol of history or power as it pertains to an American identity.

However, this guide and its limited explanations were clearly not enough to assist uneducated museum visitors in learning more about Egyptian objects or understanding the layout of the collection. Unlike Barnum's American Museum, which relied upon elements of shock, surprise, and disbelief, the objects within Abbott's collection were too similar and conceptually, rather than historically, linked, discouraging the kind of engaging museum experience that allowed the American Museum to thrive. The veracity

and importance of the objects had been certified by Abbot and by a number of scholars and important New Yorkers, and so any aspect of doubt or “humbuggery” was deemed out of the question. Thus, without these elements found in other dime museums, the rhetoric of didactic, seemingly objective museum pedagogy was lost on an audience who had not yet learned how to interpret a foreign culture like Egypt within this context.

Despite the marginal place of the Abbott collection, wealthy New Yorkers were desperate to keep the Egyptian objects in their budding metropolis. As a matter of “city pride,” an excerpt from the 1854 catalogue introduction paints a vivid picture of their perspective:

For what is a metropolis? It is the head of the State, the fountain of learning, art, and intellectual influence....And what to-day makes London, Paris, Rome, and Vienna, each a metropolis?.... It is the devotion of money to humane and permanent purposes—to the endowing of libraries, galleries, and institutions of every kind, for the intellectual benefit of the population...Will you then explain how it is that this country is so slow to recognize the necessity of teaching people something more than reading and writing and ciphering? Those branches ought to be as natural and common as breathing, and never referred to except as matters of course...<sup>58</sup>

Linking New York to Rome, Paris and Vienna, the author forcefully argues the case for a certain degree of cultural development in order to produce a proper “metropolis.” Despite the significance of the working class, the position of a powerful, international city was contingent upon a development in cultural expression, and so antiquities and repositories that celebrated ancient history were crucial to creating this cultural shift.

Wealthy New Yorkers also looked closer to home for a great city, and its representative historical society The New-York Historical Society represents a collection in flux, caught in the middle of this changing tide in American museums. With a

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

competitive spirit, the distinction between Boston and New York was once again emphasized, around the issue of “provincialism”:

We, New-Yorkers, have a complacent way of smiling at Boston and other cities, and patronizingly hinting that they are ‘provincial.’ But does a city cease to be provincial because it is large? New York is, after all, nothing but a great trading port.... What is the difference between New-York and Boston, for instance? It is size only. It is melancholy, if you choose but it is equally true, that in the great essentials of a metropolis Boston is, if not superior, certainly not inferior to this great and glorious counting-house called New-York. When a flourishing and opulent city so far scorns universal interests, and is so destitute of true pride that, it cannot see how often the best investment is that which produces no net pecuniary result, it may well claim to be a sharp, shrewd trader; but it shows nothing of the man.<sup>59</sup>

This degree of competition, both in terms of cities and nations that finally led to the purchase of the collection by the New-York Historical Society in 1860. In 1862 they published a new guidebook that included the Abbott Collection and folded its objects into their larger goal of developing a sophisticated art gallery for the city. The Historical Society had already acquired an important collection of ancient Assyrian sculptures from Nineveh presented to the society by James Lenox. The collector Luman Reed had also given significant Italian Old Master paintings as well as more contemporary pieces from the New York Gallery of Fine Arts that included the *Course of Empire* series by Thomas Cole. At the historical society, the Abbott collection was subsumed into its larger gallery of the fine arts and was no longer exhibited as an independent, continuous exhibit.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> The newly published versions of the catalogue do not help reconstruct the arrangement of the Abbott Collection in its new home. In both the 1862 and 1903 versions the catalogue simply reprints the entire Stuyvesant Institute Abbott catalogue after a brief notice that explains its new place within the larger museum mission. It explains that the Abbott collection in conjunction with the Lenox Collection of Nineveh Sculptures was intended to form the basis of a “Department of Antiquities” which when supplemented with more objects in American holdings will “bear comparison with the collections of Europe.” Occupying the first seventy-two pages of the catalogue, Abbott’s collection is given prominence in the text; however, it is improbable that the arrangement of objects would have remained in identical order as they moved to such different locations. A few images from the Historical Society’s archives do indicate the placement of some pieces from Abbott’s collection and illustrate how these objects were no

It has proven difficult to find contemporary commentary on the public's reaction to the collection's new space. Surviving photographs suggest that a few of his key pieces appear to have been displayed on the mezzanine levels of the Society's library reading room (Figure 15). In the first photograph, in between two neat rows of stately portraits, a mummy sarcophagus seems to float above the tops of the bottom row's frames. Shown in profile, the decorative patterning is a sharp contrast to the severe black suits of the portrait sitters. Faintly visible behind the coffin in the middle-ground are rows of pottery, vases and jars that, while indistinguishable with any degree of certainty, resemble the type of ancient pottery that Abbott's collection featured in large numbers. An image of the same installation from a different angle (Figure 16) indicates how the series of portraits wrapped around the entire perimeter of the room, double hung on the top tier and even lining the support columns on the second level mezzanine. A photograph from the other end of the room echoes this same arrangement (Figure 17). Occupying the mezzanine display opposite the mummy coffin are large, wrapped objects, whose scale indicates those of Abbot's famed mummified bulls. These bulls, which were prominently advertised and commented on while the collection was at the Stuyvesant would have certainly drawn in numerous viewers and demanded a large exhibition space.

When the museum relocated to its current space in 1908, the New-York Historical Society merged their art holdings into a mixed display of objects that did not attempt to illustrate the development of one isolated culture and one historical context at a time.<sup>61</sup>

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longer isolated into a display that only dealt with Egypt, but instead were merged with a larger context of "fine art."

<sup>61</sup>A series of later images taken in the 1930's when the museum was relocated to its current space, support the idea that the Abbott objects were not isolated but merged with the rest of the art objects in the collection. Documented in a series of photographs of the new installation the Society's art collection now occupies large, barrel vaulted galleries. The paintings that occupy the balconies of the mezzanines in the

Instead, in a fashion not unlike the European princely model of collecting, their displays presented artistic “wonders” and bounty with the goal of impressing spectators. In presenting Abbott’s magnificent mummified bulls amidst Old Master paintings, the Egyptian artifacts were contextualized within a larger discussion of the power, taste, skill and connoisseurship of the Society itself the power force that amassed the collection. These princely collections, which reached their peak in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, were intended to “dazzle and overwhelm” all visitors and thus legitimize the rule of the sovereign who was able to bring together such an impressive and elaborate display.<sup>62</sup> While New York City had no literal monarchs, the turn of the century, had ushered in an era that emulated this earlier European model of collecting and display through the philanthropic work of its new class of wealthy benefactors.

However, it also exposed the tensions that governed the push and pull of public desires and private wealthy citizens. The case of the New-York Historical Society demonstrates this through its desire to push to the forefront extraordinary objects rather than conveying an agenda shaped by pedagogy of the public. Without labels or wall texts, yet with a catalogue that primarily lists objects and with a more aesthetic context of old

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reading room are now hung salon style on the neoclassical walls, while cases of silver and other objects are lined up in neat rows in the gallery space. The aforementioned mummified bulls were photographed from multiple angles illustrating their new home in low glass cases set not among other Egyptian objects but instead against walls lined in fine paintings.

<sup>62</sup>Duncan, 251. One of the key ways this princely model was demonstrated in the nineteenth century Historical Society installation was in the arrangement of their collection of paintings. As Carol Duncan describes, prior to the era of the public, state funded museum, the major museological model was the princely collections of the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. She explains that these collections were held in “impressive halls or galleries built especially for them” that often served as meeting and reception rooms that provided according to Duncan “sumptuous settings for official ceremonies and framing of the figure of the prince.” Duncan suggests that by the eighteenth century these lavish collections and elaborate halls were common place and a standard trope intended to “dazzle and overwhelm” all visitors and thus legitimize the rule of the sovereign who was able to bring together such an impressive and elaborate display. It was in the nineteenth century, she argues, that the waves of revolution and changing shape of the European world that these collections would be turned over to public institutions for an increasingly equalized society.

master paintings and decorative arts, Abbott's objects transition by way of their shifting location and context from the well-curated *wunderkammer* of the Stuyvesant Institute to a dazzling tableau of "fine art" representative of New York's intellectual might.

Aside from the common aspects of curatorial display, the Historical Society's collection shared another key concept with the princely model of art collecting: the extraordinarily wealthy benefactor. At the end of Reconstruction, with the changing economy and the rise of the robber baron, America began to see the formation of its own "princely class." The full manifestation of this was still to come at the Metropolitan Museum, but the Historical Society of the 1860's indicates the start of exactly this collecting practice. Barnum's enterprise made him wealthy, but he remained firmly attuned to the needs of the working class. The benefactors for the Historical Society, in contrast, included culturally prominent Americans such as James J. Jarves, the arbiter of all art historical tastes and the respected art aficionado James Lenox, Esq. who donated major collections of old master paintings and fine ancient sculptures respectively. In the museum's catalogues, both names were conspicuously identified as the donors of their respective collections, thus framing the objects with their identity as wealthy, educated collectors. The role of the collector, the place of his or her name in relation to the objects was a key component to the visitor experience of the objects themselves. Unlike Barnum's museum, the Historical Society's Collection, including the Abbott collection, was a conglomeration of generous donations from society members of elevated status, and the objects were reframed by the prominence of the collector's identities.

Abbott's 1,118-object collection has always been known first and foremost by the name of the Englishman who compiled it. While on loan at the Stuyvesant, it was only

ever referred to as Abbott's personal collection, and this branding continued through its integration into the Historical Society's budding art collection. Like Lenox and Jarves, Abbott's name takes a prominent place in the catalogue, however, his role is emphasized by the inclusion of his personal preface and introduction. Thus Abbott is always indexically referenced through the objects and the museum display; Abbott's collection is certainly about Egypt but it also, at all times, about him as the collector, traveler and connoisseur.

Abbott's place of prominence was most significantly asserted in the inclusion of his portrait at the Historical Society, visible in the photographs of the museum's library. Now in the collection at the Brooklyn Museum, American painter Thomas Hick's *Portrait of Henry Abbott* (Figure 18) depicts the collector reclining against an Egyptian landscape. Less Englishman and more Oriental Sultan, Abbott reclines against a luxurious crimson fabric highlighted with glittering gold embroidery. Adorned in a rich green robe and ivory tunic, Abbott's exotic dress is as rich and luxurious as the objects he collects. Occupying the majority of the foreground, he gazes dreamily out into the distance while exhaling a cloud of smoke from the hookah pipe he holds. Below his left hand the golden handle of a sword peeks out from the drapery of his robe, rendering him prepared for the potentially dangerous work of his Egyptian adventures. Significantly, behind Abbott and his plush setting travels a seemingly infinite caravan of men on camels approaching the Pyramid complex. Miniscule in comparison to Abbott's imposing presence, the famous Egyptian monuments and the figures traveling to them are rendered like small objects, collectibles, that Abbott could attain and the direction of their travels leads the eye back up to Abbott as the controlling force of all exploration and activity that

is about to transpire. As he looks out into the far off distance, his gaze indicates his forward thinking intention to expand and continue his collecting agenda.

Hick portrays Abbott as an exotic and wealthy Oriental prince, and his portrait consequently stands out in from its monotonous neighboring portraits. Coupled with the prominence of his name in accompanying print material, the emphasis on his role as the wealthy owner of the huge collection is heavy handed, as if to compensate for Abbott's English heritage. In spite of the impressive nature of his wealth and skill in amassing the numerous antiquities, Abbott's collection could never be celebrated as something of national pride. Not the doing of an industrious American citizen, the collection instead reinforced the continuing cultural inequity between wealthy British and American citizens. As much of the rhetoric around the purchase of the collection suggests, Abbott's collection rivals the Egyptian holdings at the British Museum itself. Its acquisition could be seen as an attempt to place American museum collections on par with her European counterparts, and yet enacting such an effort required accepting the generosity and praising the intrepid work of Abbott, a quintessentially English collector. The trajectory of Abbott's collection only reinforced the very idea of American cultural inferiority; America might be able to raise their cultural capital through museum displays and important object acquisitions, but only through the intercessory power of a wealthy Englishman. Somewhere between Barnum's collection of curiosities and the development of true fine art institutions like the Metropolitan, Abbott's collection occupied a transitory place in the development of a national appreciation of Egyptian objects as "art." Because of its evolving contextualization as scientific artifacts worth critical study, to ancient art objects, and always as the spoils of a wealthy Englishman, this collection never found

great success in nineteenth century New York. The broad public was unable to firmly ground the Abbott collection amongst the shifting meaning of Egypt as an ancient culture that had a developing meaning. Although the contents of its objects always remained the same, the respective museum contexts at the Stuyvesant Institute and the New-York Historical Society could never match public expectations for the signification of Egyptian objects, which had split along widening class lines. In 1937, after ceasing efforts to integrate the collection into the Historical Society, they opted to transfer it to the Brooklyn Museum, where by that time it merged with the museum's now widely celebrated devotion to the fine arts.

### **An Empire of Egyptian Art: The Metropolitan Museum's Egyptian Department**

What transpired during the years between the mid-nineteenth century arrival of the Abbott Collection and its later twentieth-century transfer to Brooklyn was the development of a new class of museum in New York City—one that would formulate the idea of “fine art” for a broad public of mixed social classes through the generosity of a new class of American “princes” – the Metropolitan Museum of Art. When the Abbott Collection began to fail as a draw for visitors, it would be Metropolitan Museum of Art's Egyptian curator Caroline Ransom Williams who stepped in to assist, answering the request for aid in producing a “serious” and scholarly catalogue of the Abbot Collection.<sup>63</sup> Thus, their attempts to generate interest took on a new form: not an advertisement or cry for public patronage, but instead the reinterpretation of these pieces

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<sup>63</sup> From personal correspondence found in the Caroline Ransom Williams Correspondence File at archives of the Egyptian department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

through the lens of scholarly Egyptological expertise, sanctioned by the cultural authority now represented by the Metropolitan Museum of Art.<sup>64</sup>

The Metropolitan Museum of Art would come into being as a response to this statewide and national need for a major American cultural institution that could define the parameters of art appreciation for its audience through the industrious and scholarly work of learned American specialists and wealthy American benefactors. Sprung from the minds of the city's wealthiest men, it developed as early as 1869 the model of an art museum that could be the American Louvre, a public pantheon of the arts that could educate generations of citizens as well as celebrate the developing cultural maturity of the world's youngest nation. In contrast to the few, yet popular Egyptian objects and images in Barnum's American Museum and the innumerable yet under-patronized Abbott Collection, the Metropolitan Museum recreated a historical narrative of art history with Egypt as the crucial basis as it was excavated and "discovered" by the museum's very own scholars. The Metropolitan's didactic mission and universal scope marked the beginnings of what would become a focused and dedicated endeavor to collect, display and own for the nation's sake premier specimens of Egyptian antiquities as a reflection of the city's and nation's increasing cultural significance, growing political power and increasing imperialist desires. While the New-York Historical Society had tried to overcome the separation between art and artifact by juxtaposing the mummified bulls with Old Master paintings, it would be the Metropolitan Museum that would ultimately transform New York's idea of Egyptian artifact into Egyptian art.

Starting in 1906, the Museum initiated and funded its own expedition in Egypt, excavating in a number of different sites including Lisht, Thebes, and Kharga and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

bringing back to the museum an impressive number of archaeological findings. This profitable venture marks the first time a museum of “art” undertook such an expensive and involved venture to secure its *own* holdings and develop its *own* collection, and the expedition’s bounty constituted what would become the majority of the museum’s ever-expanding collection as it merged with purchased and gifted pieces in the collection.<sup>65</sup>

With a mission to educate the public and illustrate the entire development of Western art as it progressed through time, the museum’s significant emphasis on Egyptian objects proves unusual in comparison to the precedents set by Barnum and Abbott. No longer Barnum’s macabre curiosities or Abbott’s rarified, anthropological artifacts, these Egyptian objects were placed into a new narrative: a narrative of high culture, a narrative of Western History, a narrative of the linear development of the world’s most beautiful manifestations of “genius” crystallized into non-functional *objets d’art*.

When placed within a carefully curated chronological and didactic museum display, these objects produced a heterotopia of “time” itself, time embodied by the acquisition of objects now squarely regarded as antiques and displayed in a clearly evolutionary order for the museum patron. The museum’s mission and its thematic, organized curatorial display produced a virtual tour through Western history as demonstrated through newly acquired, rarified works of art. As patrons toured the galleries they were able to metaphorically walk through both time and space that had been brought to them by the purchasing power of the city’s “New Medici Princes.” Through their generosity, the museum’s wealthy benefactors gave both the city and country a kind of direct ownership over categories of history that were previously only

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<sup>65</sup> The Museum of Fine Art in Boston also had prominent excavations but they were undertaken in tandem with those of Harvard University.

available as mediated European representations or collected objects. What constituted the museum's ability to display a narrative of "time" was their success in canonizing Egyptian objects as "art" and not "artifact" through their direct acquisition of objects from their own funded excavations and major purchases.

The transition from artifact to art was a direct result of the museum's forceful and persistent display of their archeological endeavors in both the galleries and monthly museum bulletins. A matter of broad public knowledge, the museum's Egyptian excavations were enthusiastically received as they were proudly put on display amid the objects themselves. Exercising a kind of colonial force that had been enacted by European colonial powers for years, the Metropolitan's Egyptian expeditions helped the museum to amass a collection that rivaled the Louvre and British Museum and simultaneously colored the place of Egyptian objects as worth the same level of cultural merit. Egyptian objects could now be viewed as worthy of the classification of "art" because the nation had, by then, gained enough power, both financially and physically through excavation to forcibly take remnants of the culture for itself. Their display thus functioned as a metaphorical expression of repressed colonial desires toward the Egyptian lands themselves. Possessing time and culture, the Metropolitan Museum of Art not only became the standard of excellence for art museum practice, but moreover became a celebratory model of a developing American cultural superiority embodied in an imperial scale of art collecting. Their narrative arrangement of objects displayed this imperial scale and reinforced the culmination of western civilization in the capable hands of American wealth and power; Egypt was the foundation, and Egyptian art served as a

fertile foundation in which the nation's imperial desires could be enacted without literal embroilment in the never ending European turf-war in North Africa.

### **The Development of the Collection:**

In its earliest stages the Metropolitan Museum's collection had no particular focus on Egyptian objects. In its first home, The Dodworth Building on 681 Fifth Avenue, the small collection consisted of loaned pieces, including fine silvers and selected paintings of old master works, many of which were on loan, as well as "modern" American pieces painted in the nineteenth century. Once the museum officially relocated to its new home on Fifth Avenue and Eighty-second Street (Figure 19) in 1880, a more developed collecting strategy emerged. Its position along Central Park fulfilled the museum's long standing desire to have a public museum connected with the recreational space, and it seemed that, by 1880, the city's needs were met with the divided institutions of the Metropolitan on one side of the city, taking care of a budding interest in the fine arts, and the American Museum of Natural History on the opposite side tending to the continued American interest in displays of biological and anthropological materials.<sup>66</sup>

As early as 1881, the museum received some of its first authentic Egyptian pieces. Donations by Mr. S.L.M. Bolow of ancient pottery and of course the bronze crabs from the neighboring obelisk discussed in the previous chapter were donated by Lieutenant Gorrington in the same year.<sup>67</sup> These acquisitions were quickly followed up with the purchase of the collection of Reverend C.W. King of Trinity College in Cambridge

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<sup>66</sup> Talks of converting the New-York Historical Society into a museum that could accomplish this began during the 1860s.

<sup>67</sup> Johnston, John Taylor and L.P. Di Cesnola, "To the Members of The Metropolitan Museum of Art," in *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* No. 12 (1881), 216.

England that included a number of Egyptian pieces and important engraved stones from Joseph W. Drexel.<sup>68</sup> The number of donations and museum purchases in Egyptian art continued to increase between 1881 and 1906, and as the museum's holdings steadily grew, the pieces acquired became increasingly more significant within the museum's collection.<sup>69</sup> In 1885 the Douglass, Barringer and Farmon collection of Egyptian objects, said to include an "extremely variable collection of Egyptian antiquities second to none" was proposed as a purchase; a gift of the famous Vivant Denon's *Description* was also given to the library.<sup>70</sup> In 1888, the annual report notes a significant addition of Egyptian and Assyrian casts that would produce, "a continuous and unbroken history of the art of sculpture from the earliest ages, down to and through the first Greek period..." it continues to explain that, "the few and scattered examples of ancient Egyptian art which we have heretofore exhibited have now taken their places in proper order in the very extensive Egyptian collection which we have recently acquired."<sup>71</sup>

Beginning in 1888, the museum sought to place Egyptian art within a larger context of encyclopedic art history, serving as the strong base of a major collection in formation. It is also important to note that the Douglass collection was not acquired by any collector but instead by Professor Gaston Maspero, the famed French Egyptologist who headed the *Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale* and would go on to found the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid. This burst in Egyptian acquisitions, I argue, is not coincidentally linked to the official installation of *Cleopatra's Needle* but reflects a new interest in Egyptian objects that American ingenuity and financial power were able to acquire, transport and install for public consumption. This unprecedented event of despoliation, as I previously suggested, mimics a colonialist impulse that I believe the Metropolitan's aggressive collection expansion systematizes in the name of Egyptology and formalizes and aestheticizes in its didactic, chronological and empirical display.

<sup>69</sup> All of this is available in greater detail in the *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* and for present purposes I will not be including a yearly run down of objects acquired, but instead characterizing the overall department development.

<sup>70</sup> Johnston, John Taylor and L.P. Di Cesnola, "To the Members of The Metropolitan Museum of Art," in *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 16 (1885), 317.

<sup>71</sup> Johnston, John Taylor and L.P. Di Cesnola, "To the Members of The Metropolitan Museum of Art," in *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* No. 19 (1888), 410.

Cairo Museum and publish numerous texts on Egyptian archeology and ancient life. The acquisition of any objects from a source of such authority is significant in demonstrating the growing import of the institution and the respective collection, as well as lending enormous credence and scholarly weight to the ancient Egyptian holdings.

Throughout the 1890s, the quality, size and significance of the objects attained continued to grow. In 1890, James Douglass Jr. donated 310 objects of early Egyptian Art, while the popular Willard Collection of architectural models, donated in 1891, included a model of the Temple of Karnak, a gesture that embedded Egyptian history within the larger context of important architectural works of art.<sup>72</sup> By the late 1890s, the museum took a major step in the development of their budding collection as they joined England's Egypt Exploration Fund. Through paying dues, the museum acquired numerous significant objects from the fund's archaeological excavations overseen by the famed English Egyptologist, Flinders Petrie. In 1897, the fund sent the museum 114 objects from their work in Behnesa, followed by 19 cases of antiquities from Denderah in 1898 and 150 assorted Egyptian antiquities in 1899. Like Maspero's collection, the objects received from the fund came with their authenticity guaranteed by Petrie and the scholars he employed, which included responsible excavation under Petrie's scientific method. Through its connection to scholarly sources on Egyptian art, the museum divorced itself from earlier concerns over forgeries and instead produced what many could safely say was a truly authentic, educational and rare collection of ancient Egyptian objects.

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<sup>72</sup> Johnston, John Taylor and L.P. Di Cesnola "To the Members of The Metropolitan Museum of Art" in *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* No. 21 (1890); Johnston, John Taylor and L.P. Di Cesnola "To the Members of The Metropolitan Museum of Art" in *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* No. 22 (1891).

However, at this point, though the museum had cultivated private donations and pursued purchases of Egyptian objects, European authority remained the source of the museum's scholarly guarantee. In this sense, it retained the same foreignness of Abbott's collection. This was to change, however as the museum fell under new leadership, and America's greatest collector turned his sights to Egyptian art. In 1904, as the collection continued to swell, John Pierpont Morgan, who had served as a trustee since 1888, became the museum's President. Morgan's ferocious collecting practices—particularly in Renaissance art—are now common knowledge, but his deep passion for Egypt and the mystery of archeological excavations has received considerably less attention. Jean Strouse, the main source on Morgan's life and collecting practices, paints a vivid picture of the impresario's reach: "like Napoleon, who swept through Italy and Egypt taking cartloads of ancient art for France, Morgan set out to acquire as much as he could for America in a relatively short time, often buying entire collections *en bloc*. He once told a business colleague that his strength lay more in the consolidation of existing projects rather than in the promotion of new ones – an observation that also held true in the arts."<sup>73</sup> Much as Western powers assumed territories into their empire, Morgan used his preference for consolidating projects in favor of the most important development for Egyptian art at the museum: the founding of a distinct and fully staffed Egyptian Department and an ongoing, museum-funded, Egyptian expedition in 1906.

Conditions in Egypt were favorable to foreign archaeologists in 1905.<sup>74</sup> Through a fifty-fifty sharing arrangement, French, British, German, American and Italian excavations were active throughout the country. Prior to the museum's expedition, the

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<sup>73</sup> Strouse, Jean, *Morgan: American Financier* (New York: Random House, 1999), 378.

<sup>74</sup> Tomkins, Calvin, *Merchants and Masterpieces: The Story of the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970) 136.

most prominent American team was the Harvard University-Museum of the Fine Arts expedition headed by George Andrew Reisner, and executed in conjunction with the University of California, the Pennsylvania Museum and the University Museum of Chicago.<sup>75</sup> With such a growing number of American digs, and perhaps coupled by his own collecting desires, it is not surprising that Morgan wanted the Metropolitan's holdings in Egyptian art to "rank permanently as the best in America."<sup>76</sup>

Many voiced concerns that the flurry of excavations would leave Egypt barren of any fruitful sites, and the rush to dig sped Morgan's efforts to develop a superior Egyptian department. First, he secured the curator of Egyptian Antiquities, stealing Albert Lythgoe from the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where, among his many honors, he had served as field director of the expedition at the pyramids of Giza from 1905-1906.<sup>77</sup> Though Lythgoe's resignation would take some time to sort out, he kept in steady communication with Dr. Edward Robinson, then Assistant Director of the Met, sending images and reports of his ongoing findings. It was in this correspondence that Lythgoe wrote of this first conception of a designated gallery design for the collection that was about to grow exponentially through his fieldwork.

In a letter to Dr. Robinson in February of 1906, Lythgoe urged the museum to action in acquiring objects for their fledgling collection. Citing international competition and the favorable laws allowing for the exportation of antiquities, he argued: "We have then, in Egypt itself, every opportunity for acquiring a great Egyptian collection. If we

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<sup>75</sup> Tomkins, 136.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> BULL, Ludlow, *Publications of the Department of Egyptian Art. Vol. 2, Etc.* (New York, 1932), 211. Albert Lythgoe was the Metropolitan's new curator of Egyptian Art in 1906. Lythgoe earned his BA and MA from Harvard in Egyptology and worked in the field from 1899 to 1904 for the University of California. He then became the curator of Egyptian Art for the Museum of the Fine Arts and an instructor of Egyptology at Harvard.

are to have such a collection the work should be undertaken now, and in carrying on the work we should cover as broad and comprehensive a scope as the conditions warrant.”<sup>78</sup> He continues to outline the “broad” and “comprehensive” collection, suggesting that it “should be built up on lines which would ensure eventually, both in the nature of the material exhibited and in the manner of its arrangement, the representation of the various sides of Egyptian art in the straight order of their development.”<sup>79</sup> Moreover, this chronological collection, acquired mostly through direct excavation, would be buoyed by photographic and complete records of the excavation process. Lythgoe’s end goal was to “have ultimately a collection backed by a record and publication of facts and established necessarily on the soundest and most scientific basis.”<sup>80</sup> Lythgoe also produced a series of regularly published works that recorded the results of excavation progress that he believed would “establish the nature and character of the work and would stand... to the credit of the Museum.”<sup>81</sup> Lythgoe’s proposal represents a new approach to ancient Egyptian material that built off of both Barnum and Abbott’s earlier approaches. Lythgoe and the Metropolitan Museum as an institution shifted the focus from curiosity and relic to work of art but kept the ties to colonialism and nationalism inherent in earlier museum displays. The excavation and subsequent scientific study of Egyptian objects was the answer to Barnum’s interactive display; where visitors were left to construct the place of Egypt amid illogical object juxtapositions, the Metropolitan’s scholarly authority filled in those gaps with a literal tale of American prominence over Egyptian soil through successful excavations. Abbott’s positioning of Egyptian objects as ethnological object of

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<sup>78</sup> Personal correspondence, Lythgoe to Robinson from the Archives of the Department of Egyptian Art, Metropolitan Museum of Art. (Folder Lythgoe to Robinson 1905-1911).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

exclusive study in one unified collection was the basis for this kind of singular focus on the development of such an extensive Egyptian collection. Finally out-doing the leisurely collecting pursuits of Abbot, the museum's endeavor was on an imperial scale, and built a new place for Egyptian objects as a metaphorical "spoil" of their powerful wealthy, technical prowess and scholarly knowledge.

Lythgoe's lengthy letter continues to outline his ideas about the scope of the excavation work citing that the first and foremost emphasis should rest on the "sites and cemeteries of the ancient Egyptian period, carried through consistently and covering the whole field, from the prehistoric down to the end of the dynastic period."<sup>82</sup> Any further excavation should be devoted to Ptolemaic and Coptic sites since he argued that these fields lacked any "systematic" attention and that they should produce fine embroideries and examples of the glass, pottery, stone and wood sculpture, which he deems the "minor arts."<sup>83</sup> Lythgoe also emphasized the need for color-reproductions and thorough copying of objects, noting: "I would urge the copying and publication of a selected number of the best painted tombs of the old, middle and new empires at Sakkara, Thebes, and elsewhere to be published as a part of the work of the expedition." Significantly, he believed the recordings and copies would lend the museum "the results of a work of the highest scientific value."<sup>84</sup> Under Morgan's leadership the desire for an imperial scale of collecting was focused explicitly on Egyptian objects and his choice in Lythgoe as a dedicated Egyptologist, experienced in excavation and equipped with the skills to physically attain objects for the museum allowed him to bring the museum to the forefront of the fertile Egyptian soil.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

Excavations began in January of 1907 at the Pyramid of Lisht, thirty-five miles south of Cairo. With a seasoned staff that included Oxford scholar Arthur C. Mace and skilled copyists Norman and Nina de Garis Davies, amongst other draughtsman and photographers, Lythgoe's excavation was productive and easily expanded into the oasis of Kharga in 1908, and finally into Luxor, the site of ancient Thebes in 1910.<sup>85</sup> At Luxor, Morgan himself visited the site and supported the endeavor by building The Metropolitan House for the expedition team. Modeled on a Coptic church, it had a dining room and sleeping quarters with bottled drinking water and views into the Necropolis of ancient Thebes and the Valley of the Kings.<sup>86</sup> Morgan's interest in Egypt and his financial support therefore clearly shaped the earliest museum's endeavors in Egyptology. However, after his death in 1913, financial support continued further as long-time trustee Edward Harkness took on the role of department sponsor, contributing over \$377,893, travelling to Luxor, and singlehandedly footing the bill for the excavation and transport of the Old Kingdom Tomb of Per-neb.<sup>87</sup>

Under the influence of the rich and powerful benefactors and with the thoughtful guidance of Lythgoe's well-trained experience, the museum's Egyptian collection expanded from scattered selections into a fully formed, continually expanding, and well-funded department. Letters exchanged between the museum staff and Lythgoe while on location recall the struggle to catalogue and prepare for public display the number of objects yielded from each dig annually.<sup>88</sup> As Calvin Tomkins explains in his history of the museum "when the museum had moved up from 14<sup>th</sup> street to central park in 1880 the

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<sup>85</sup> Tomkins, 137.

<sup>86</sup> Tomkins, 138.

<sup>87</sup> Tomkins, 139-140.

<sup>88</sup> Private correspondence Caroline Ransom Williams, Department of Egyptian Art Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Egyptian collection could be carried in one small envelope; in 1911 it filled ten new galleries.”<sup>89</sup> While objects traveled back from Lythgoe’s digs at a steady rate, additional pieces were gifted and purchased. In 1910, the collection received the famous Murch Collection, which the museum claimed was the “most important single gift in any department,” and which included 3370 objects, some of which were rare scarabs, seal cylinders and other Egyptian objects.<sup>90</sup> This was supplemented by additional purchases from the Egyptian Department, as well as gifts of papyrus, Ptolemaic earrings and a limestone lintel.

Meanwhile, while the collection expanded, ongoing work rearranged ten rooms in wings D and E of the original Egyptian galleries.<sup>91</sup> In 1911, a new wing was opened to great excitement, but the object accumulation kept growing. The year 1912 saw the acquisition of plaster casts from the Ashmolean, statuette groups, wooden coffins, vases, painted limestone stela, relief sculptures and canopic jars.<sup>92</sup> The following year brought the department’s biggest acquisition, the Tomb of Perneb, which would be removed, transported and installed by 1916. In that same year, accompanying the celebrated installation of the mastaba tomb, a new gallery plan was unveiled expanding the recent ten-room reinstallation into a full fourteen rooms of Egyptian objects. It was here that the New York public was able to experience, to walk through – room by room – all of ancient Egypt as it was found, removed, and transported by American Egyptologists and presented in the nation’s premier institute of the arts.

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<sup>89</sup> Tomkins, 140.

<sup>90</sup> Morgan, J. Pierpont and Robert W. DeForest, *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 41 (1910), 19-42.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Morgan, J. Pierpont and Robert W. DeForest, *Annual Report of the Trustees of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, No. 43 (1912), 64.

### **The Arrangement and Display:**

Discussion of the museum's work in Egypt is vital to understanding the ways in which the collection resonated with its public. The role of Egyptology is not only important in providing the museum with a seemingly never-ending supply of objects, but its presence as an active agent and American representative in Egypt itself served as a crucial element of the museum experience back in New York. In this section I will parse through the narrative of Egyptian art and culture created by the museum, with special attention to the role that the museum's expeditions played in audience reception especially with the reorganizations of their Egyptian displays in 1911 and 1916. These changes demonstrate a dramatic transition in collecting and display that ultimately suppresses the role of the individual collector in favor of the role of a scholarly and scientific institution. As such, the museum resituates ancient Egypt as a revered historical era and elevates it to the canon of fine arts. Instead, museum sanctioned archaeological inquiry defined and displayed an Egypt heretofore experienced on New York soil – Egypt as represented by “art.”

In the earliest period of the collection's development Egyptian objects did not have their own distinct space, but instead were incorporated into displays of the numismatic collection and a larger ancient statuary gallery. As an 1888 floor-plan indicates, museum patrons could encounter Egyptian objects almost immediately after entering (Figure 20). To their left (on the right of the plan), section C housed a Hall of Ancient sculpture and Egyptian antiquities that flowed directly into a room of ancient terra cotta. On the opposite side of the building, a symmetrical gallery arrangement housed a hall of glass, lace and ancient pottery that flowed into a room of carved wood

and musical instruments. An 1880 engraving from Harpers Weekly (Figure 21) provides some insight as to how these galleries might have appeared to the viewer, The objects depicted are recognizably Greek and Cypriot, shrouded in togate attire, ladies with heads covered and males wearing laurel wreathes.

The museum's accompanying guidebook provides more detail. It opens on page three explaining that the "Principal Entrance" to the museum opens directly into the "Hall of Casts and Ancient Sculpture." The hall contained a mixture of ancient Assyrian and Greek works including portions from the frieze course of the temple of Apollo at Bassae that ran entirely around the perimeter of the space. Ancient sculptures from Nineveh were just west of the main museum entrance; Asiatic Greek friezes occupied the north and south walls of the space. The floor was filled with busts of ancient sculpture, including a portion of the frieze from the temple of Wingless Victory at Athens. After the north end pier and a display of photographs of Lucca della Robbia works, an alcove of wrought iron medieval and renaissance pieces were opposite the elevators. The whole space opened directly up into the Hall of Ancient Sculpture and Egyptian Antiquities.

The hall of Ancient Sculpture and Egyptian antiquities, according to the 1898 handbook, opened up with sarcophagi, mummies and other objects largely from Gaston Maspero's discovery at the tomb of Gorument in 1886. The sarcophagi continued through a room of terra cotta and spilled into the hall of ancient statuary and bronzes and led to cases that contained the large collection of Egyptian antiquities of diverse periods. The center of the space contained standards, embroideries, and other textiles among recent pieces from the Egyptian Fayum.

A more selective book written by Reverend Charles Ripley Gillett in 1896 and reissued in 1898 provides a full listing of all the Egyptian pieces held by the museum at that time. All 2,206 objects are described; some filling pages while others warranting just brief mentions. A glossary fills the first ten pages and follows up on asterisked selections with extensive explanations of deities, images, symbols or recurring names.<sup>93</sup> Gillet characterizes the collection as including “many of the kings of Egypt” represented in the museum’s scarabs, in relief hieroglyphs, in cartouches, and in granite portraiture. He emphasizes the collection’s ties to great Egyptian leaders but notes that the “manners and customs of the people receive illustration” as well, particularly through the numerous mummies from varied periods in Egyptian history.<sup>94</sup>

The Metropolitan’s guidebooks demonstrate a marked change from those produced by Barnum and Abbott. While all the books listed the objects, opened with personalized introductions and emphasized key pieces, the Metropolitan publications transfer emphasis from an individual figure, in Barnum and Abbot, into a more scientific and objective institutional context. The specters of Barnum and Abbott loom over any following information as they open and close the book’s content and lend their name to the larger collection as a whole. As an institution and not just a collection compiled by a singular identity, the Metropolitan Museum published texts that describe their collection as one assembled from a multitude of generous benefactors and ongoing expedition work. The result was that the “Egypt” presented was framed by the image of an objective, scientific institution and not by either the connoisseurship or wondrous curiosity of an individual collector. Instead the Metropolitan was able to declare Egyptian objects as

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<sup>93</sup> Gillett, Charles R., *Catalogue of the Egyptian Antiquities in Hal Iii*, (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of art, 1896), vii – xvii.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

“art” by removing an overt issue of individual taste in favor of a different lens of learned, Egyptological accuracy compiled by a team of scholarly museum staff with the goal of exploration, learning and collection building for public benefit.

A key example of this new context, a lens of archaeological accuracy, is seen when Gillet points out that, despite the easily explained mythological subject matter and ritual function of many of the Egyptian pieces, it was an unfortunate fact that the museum was unable to attain the record of “the exact spot whence many of the objects came.” In earlier displays of Egyptian objects, including Barnum, Abbot, traveling shows of mummy wrappings, and even Charles Wilson Peale's select mummy displays, little attention was given to the “exact” origin or original function of the pieces, or to crafting a display or guidebook that could thoroughly contextualize each piece within its original historical surroundings. In the case of Abbott, his weighty role as informed and enthusiastic collector answers any question about authenticity, while Barnum's mummy's original context completely irrelevant and situates it as forever a curiosity intentionally unavailable for exacting explanation. While the Metropolitan does acknowledge individual donors, their presence diminishes in light of increasing attention to the archaeological record and the didactic nature of the museum’s mission. The Ripley guidebook is case in point; the explanatory passages and glossary replaced the rhetoric of the curiosity with that of informed empiricism.

This newfound objectivism also promoted a growing fascination with Ancient Egyptian artifacts as objects that belong within the context of “antiquity” more broadly. While Egyptian objects were not isolated within their own context, the linking of the objects to Assyrian and Greek styles served to create a gallery of “antiquity” itself, and

this space, occupying a large and prominent portion of the first floor, implied that the role of antiquity was to form the entire basis of the museum's collection and mission. With the goal of promoting and in effect – defining – the visual arts to both New Yorkers and Americans more broadly, placing this emphasis on the role of Egyptian objects as fine art re-contextualized these objects from Barnum's curiosities and Abbott's personal artifacts into revered aesthetic objects. Indeed, the paintings grew steadily in size and prominence during the same years, with Old Master paintings and even more “contemporary” American painters, like Hudson River School masters, represented in the new acquisition rooms and in most special exhibitions until the 1930s. The paintings and more modern pieces were all located on the top floor, effectively creating an ascending hierarchy, with antiquity literally supporting the weight of the later artistic masterpieces, hung salon-style, and frequently visited by museum patrons.

This new aesthetic treatment only evolved as the intermingling of Egyptian objects amidst other forms of antiquity gradually transitioned into the development of a separate Egyptian department and Egyptian gallery space. The museum reinstalled the display of their growing Egyptian collection twice to great acclaim; in 1911, the museum expanded the Egyptian galleries to a full ten rooms. These rooms occupied an extended portion of the first floor, located directly to the side of the main entrance, thus the Egyptian objects kept their original destination as the support and basis of the museum's more contemporary treasures. Now removed from the context of Cypriot, Assyrian and Asiatic-Greek art works, the Egyptian objects were arranged chronologically from room one, starting in the pre-dynastic periods and all the way through the Ptolemaic and Coptic pieces in the final room. Moving from early to late and examining the objects in-between,

viewers in effect walked through a chapter in a history book - the objects arranged by an invisible source of knowledge and power known only as the trusted guidance of the "museum" in an abstract sense. This active learning, walking through history and walking through time, would help to cement the place of Egyptian objects both as art and as the "spoils" of an imperial-scaled collecting campaign executed by means of the generously funded Egyptian expedition.

Upon entering the galleries in the 1911 installation the patron would first enter into the Tenth Egyptian Room. Breaking just shortly with the chronological flow the first objects available to the viewer would not be flint tools and vases but instead included mummy cases and other collection highlights dating from the later periods of Egyptian art. The 1911 catalogue published one image of the room looking down from the main entrance that illustrates the overall arrangement of space<sup>95</sup> (Figure 22). A number of exemplary mummy casings are lined up evenly in rows under low glass cases creating an organized and repetitive gallery space, an important distinction when many wooden mummy cases were exhibited standing upright, confrontationally gazing out and even down upon the museum spectator.<sup>96</sup> The horizontality of these objects not only reinforces their original function, but it also allows for a careful and detailed contemplation of each object from the perspective of a viewer looking down on a specimen under glass. Placing such similar objects next to each other in low glass cases allowed viewers to compare and contrast the aesthetic appearance of these objects against each other and create an active museum space along the lines of visual analysis. A photograph of the room from the

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<sup>95</sup> *A Handbook of the Egyptian Rooms*, (New York: The Gilliss Press, 1911), 162.

<sup>96</sup> The Metropolitan did vary their display arrangement of their mummy coffin collection, however this is a notable choice on their part for the entrance gallery and proves to be the most common method of display choice even as the collection would grow.

opposite angle, illustrates a similar arrangement (Figure 23). Punctuating the space between the entrance piers, rectangular glass cases hold coffins this time in tiers with the top coffin cover suspended above the bottom base on a separate shelf. In the center is an enormous monolithic stone coffin displayed perpetually open with a series of blocks supporting the enormous lid. Two mummies are shown in their wrappings, and a complete mummy and coffin set is divided upon three shelves. The display is didactic, demonstrative of Egyptian funeral practice, yet chronologically out of place. The decision to begin with a display of Egyptian funerary art objects would be echoed in the 1916 reinstallation, albeit in a different fashion, and the implications will be addressed below.

Proceeding from the Tenth Room, museum visitors began their walk through ancient history. Room One and Two featured Pre -Dynastic objects arranged systematically according to type. As can be seen in 1911 photograph of Room One's installation, large glass cases lined the perimeter of the room, while others occupied two vertical rows in the center (Figure 24). Two cases are clearly visible; they contain similar objects arranged by type and placed with a large amount of space between each object. Clear and organized with each object available for aesthetic contemplation, the museum's display here is the anti-Barnum, linking like objects to like objects and approaching them as many examples of one whole rather than shockingly disparate objects of wonder. Although they are not visible in this picture, the galleries would have contained explanatory labels in addition to wall text that numbered the galleries and titled them by their historical subject, adding further to the legibility of the space and contextualizing the ancient history of the objects displayed.

The Third Room contained Old Kingdom and what they described as "Pre-Middle Kingdom" objects and prominently featured a large monolithic red granite column from the pyramid-temple of King Sahura, second king of the V Dynasty, amid a number of symmetrically arranged relief fragments. Installed in neat groups, wall relief fragments were affixed on projecting false walls with equidistant spacing between each segment (Figure 25). With its dark walls, the third gallery created a striking space that operated again in terms of symmetry, balance and structured organization. Low cases contained similar objects, including toilet vases for cosmetics and ointments, and terracotta models of houses found in the rock-cut tombs of the XI Dynasty. This aesthetic arrangement was carried over into the Fourth and Fifth Middle Kingdom Rooms. The Fourth Room with lighter walls contained low wooden cases of jewelry, wooden coffin cases and stoneware, vases and canonic jars (Figure 26). The Fifth Room returns to the third's color scheme and geometric, sparse display. More false walls protrude from the room's perimeter with neatly organized relief sculptures, while the large open space is dotted with low displays of stone altars (Figure 27).

The Sixth and Seventh Rooms held the museum's objects from the Empire Period. An image of The Sixth Room indicates that it contained mostly glass cases with stoneware vases, jewelry and other small objects (Figure 28). A large case with a vertical element in the center stands in the middle of the room allowing visitors to both bend over and look down on smaller objects while also gaze at eye-level at large pieces that warrant less detailed inspection. With all objects, especially the small and decorative, spaced out evenly, clearly labeled and thematically grouped, the display promotes prolonged examination and detailed observation.

Room Eight is devoted to the Late Dynastic Period and contains a wide variety of objects. Clearly seen in an installation shot, a large column occupies a prominent place in the gallery space, installed high enough to give the sense of its intended function, while dark cases display small light colored objects in a neat, symmetrical arrangement and relief sculptures line the walls (Figure 29). A low case contains a papyrus fragment or textile and its long horizontal linearity echoes the painted relief figures directly above it. This image demonstrates not only an attention to chronology but an attention to aesthetics and design. Placing the light colored objects in a dark case creates a strong visual contrast, and pairing vertical elements like the column with largely horizontally focused elements like narrative papyri and wall reliefs creates visual interest. The curators here contextualized pieces according to their place in the development of Egyptian history and culture, but they also do so with a strong consideration of the visual experience of the museum patron. Enhancing the objects' visible beauty through selective display strategies makes their new museum context as "art" all the more logical.

The Ninth and Tenth Rooms round out the collection of 1911 and display the museum's rich holdings in Roman and Ptolemaic Egypt with elements of Coptic pieces mingling with Fayum portraits, textiles and architectural fragments. The Ninth Room contained a mix of objects and thus necessitated varied display methods (Figure 30). Painted architectural motifs were installed high above the gallery cases and echoed a running molding on the gallery wall. The cases replaced protruding false walls and displayed some of the museum's prized textile collection, under glass for preservation. Along the back wall were cases for smaller objects, seen most strikingly here is the case containing sculpted mummy masks, arranged neatly in rows of five. On the opposite side

of the room one can see an encaustic Fayum mummy portrait displayed on a protruding wooden surface. The center of the room is lined with an implied row of cases, most notably is the one closest to the foreground of the photograph containing a whole specimen of an Egyptian mummy encased in a fully painted tomb complete with painted portrait mask. Ending the walk through Egyptian history in a room devoted to some supreme examples of Egyptian burial customs both echoes and again anticipates the display of the Tenth Room, as both the entrance and the exit to the galleries.

Concluding their walk through the galleries, the viewers have come full circle. Having started their exploration of Egyptian objects by marveling at the large number of complete mummy coffins lined up each next to the other, under glass for observation, the viewers were first confronted by a familiar mascot of ancient Egypt. Conforming to preconceived notions about Egyptian art, the sublime spectacle of the mummy frames the entire collection. Naturally the selection for the entry gallery had to consider the pieces most likely to bait an audience, however the effects of this selection on museum patrons needs to be considered beyond the point. Once museum goers move beyond the initial display of objects surrounded with death and mystery, the galleries present carefully curated displays that described and explained objects grouped together in repetitious arrangements, highlighted by strategic color contrasts, and installed in efforts to mimic their original function. Thus upon returning to the mummies after traveling through Egyptian time, these objects have a new place - still serving as a symbol of all of Egyptian art and culture, yet now existing as part of a larger narrative or history, culture and art as opposed to merely one of fantasy. This tension between the mystery of Egyptian culture, so specifically tied up in their death rituals, and the increasingly

specialized body of knowledge produced by museum staff and serious scholars of Egyptian archaeology, is at the heart of the Metropolitan's Egyptian department success: viewers may enter mystified but leave informed and even indoctrinated with the museum's educational, albeit archaeologically constructed, narrative of Egyptian art.

The 1911 expanded gallery was one of the first single department designated gallery spaces of the larger museum layout. Removed from a gallery of "antiquity" more generally these Egyptian objects are given their own independent narrative; a narrative with more institutional backing than one of ancient Greek, Roman or Assyrian history. In the 1890s it seems clear that Egyptian art required the support of other designations of antiquity to warrant attention, but with the development of an expedition, the museum justified the field's own worth and set up a self-fulfilling prophecy of success. Brining its own objects to fill in the new space, the galleries were to be expanded only just a few years later.

### **The 1916 Egyptian Gallery:**

In 1916 the Egyptian galleries would be further spread into fourteen rooms. Keeping the same general arrangement the rooms flowed in order from pre-dynastic in the first to Roman and Early Christian in the fourteenth. The physical gallery space had been enlarged and extended; a floor-plan with the reissued guidebook illustrates the key differences (Figure 31). The tenth room as the entry way has now been replaced by a grander entry hall (Figure 32). As the plan indicates the space still contained the sarcophagi but is now labeled solely as an entrance as opposed to a numerical room that was part of the logical flow of the narrative space. Approaching the galleries from the

main entrance viewers now had a much grander introduction to the expanding collection. Sarcophagi punctuate the open space created by the columns behind them, keeping and even reinforcing the effect of the Tenth Room display from the 1911 plan. Behind the room of columns, the horizontal mummy cases are now replaced by standing examples, arranged vertically against each supporting piers. Their verticality enhances the architecture of the space, and now instead of promoting inspection, these pieces merge to suggest a kind of heraldic embellishment to the physical museum building. This new arrangement is more dramatic, confrontational and less contemplative. And all of it was due to the dramatic reinstallation of The Second Room, visible through the layers of columns and piers in the entranceway.

The Second Room, was dedicated to Old Kingdom materials and most significantly included the recent acquisition of an entire mastaba tomb, the Tomb of Perneb (Figure 33). From here visitors could elect to follow the chronological order and travel through each gallery in numerical order to the right, or move backwards into Room Fourteen on the left. Essentially arranged in a u-shape, the visitors could progress from room to room on either side, and cross the space only in the large central space of gallery five or at the very end through the Hall of Armor. One notable addition is the Egyptian Study room, accessible from a stairwell between the Seventh and Tenth rooms. The new distribution of rooms essentially allowed for greater specificity in stylistic and historical breakdown and object arrangement; Old Kingdom materials now occupied all of rooms Two through Four, Middle and Intermediate filled Five through Eight, rooms Ten through Twelve were now holding Empire and Bubasite objects, while room Thirteen was solely given to Ptolemaic and Fourteen to Roman and Early Christian periods. The

breakdown here reflects the expedition work in both Middle Kingdom and later periods, which allowed curators to remove less significant smaller objects in favor of a more dramatic and specific display of select periods. Herbert Winlock wrote for the Bulletin that the Fourth and Twelfth rooms were now able to be reinstalled to consist "entirely of burial furniture from tombs" creating a seamless treatment of important Egyptian customs as they relate to significant expedition sites.

The greatest impetus for this reinstallation plan was the major acquisition and transport of the Tomb of Perneb. Found in 1907 during excavations in Saqqara, the tomb was in poor shape. In 1913, Trustee Edward Harkness generously offered to fund the entire operation around the removal and purchase of the tomb and the museum began its plan to produce an appropriate space for the important acquisition. The tomb is a small Old Kingdom mastaba tomb for Perneb a royal family member of the Fifth Dynasty. The large tomb was painstakingly taken apart block, by block in Egypt - each piece photographed and recorded by Lythgoe's team. After recording, the expedition team boxed the blocks and transported them by camel and train to the Cairo museum where they awaited transatlantic transfer through the Suez Canal. Once at the museum, the space was selected because of its strategic location next to a gallery that could be opened enough to house the space and widened enough to allow visitors to physically enter into the tomb in its new home. Although the dimensions of the tomb were changed and a few select pieces were placed along the top to strategically hide missing fragments, the tomb's arrival and installation marked a triumphant moment for the department's claims of veracity and exhaustiveness. Not only could one marvel at the ritual objects, the coffins, the jewelry and papyri but they could now literally step into history and experience the

architectural space of the long dead civilization. The event was so momentous that it was chronicled in the museum's bulletin regularly, eliciting a special issue devoted totally to its arrival in New York in addition to its own supplemental guidebook published by the museum and authored by Lythgoe and assistant curator Caroline Ransom who wrote a selective analysis concerning the pictorial dimension of the tomb's decorative scheme.<sup>97</sup>

In essence, the display techniques and the principles that guided them in the 1911 galleries were maintained in the new galleries. The notable exclusion was the impressive entrance and Second Room with Perneb (Figure 34). Not only do these reinstallations reflect the sheer amount and impressive quality of the new acquisitions from the museum's excavations, but the entrance changed from glass cases to heraldic standing sculptures that rang with an air of triumphant display. Like a dramatic stage set, viewers work through layers of objects set up to impress rather than educate as they approach a literal tomb, almost as if they are transported through the space into another land – another time. Entering through the tomb and into a modified architectural space functioned more in the vein of a period room set up to reconstruct a historical era for show and not for a breakdown of individual objects. The period room, here taken shape as the actual tomb, is possessed by the museum, city and country at large. Coming full circle, the Metropolitan's theatricality by 1916 gave life to the early nineteenth-century representations of Egypt in Barnum's cosmorama display. No longer just voyeuristically peering into representations to which they had no claim, American museum-goers could physically step into "time" and "space" as it was forcibly removed and reconstructed by the power of the museum as an American agent of cultural authority.

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<sup>97</sup> See *Met Bulletins* from 1915 through 1916 for regular coverage plus special sections on the expedition field work.

With Perneb acquired and installed, fourteen galleries brimming with exemplary masterpieces and a slew of publications, by 1916, the Egyptian galleries had hit an unprecedented zenith of exhaustive, pedantic and celebratory coverage. The role of the Metropolitan as a trustworthy repository of the fine art and distinguished archaeological practice was set and publicly lauded. But why was the museum as a source of information viewed as so unquestionably reliable? It was not that much earlier in the museum's own past that the controversy over their first director's Cypriot "antiquities" was outwardly challenged by skeptical patrons wielding chisels and scratching, chipping and clawing away at the objects for themselves.<sup>98</sup> By the early twentieth century the museum was able to prominently display new acquisitions with pride to an anticipating audience and the Egyptian collection stood at the forefront of such public acceptance. This symbiotic support of the Egyptian collection found the museum's continuous funding and excavation efforts steadily matched by public interest. A 1908 article in "The New York Times" references the display of new Egyptian objects as an exciting "exhibition."<sup>99</sup> Only briefly mentioning the objects themselves at the end of the article, the thrust of coverage was devoted to curator Lythgoe's excavation work and progress.

Perhaps nothing better demonstrates this phenomenon than one major element of the museum's curatorial display; interspersed between the cases and free standing objects, curators installed select images of the excavation work in the physical gallery space.

Caroline Ransom Williams wrote at length in a small pamphlet about the rational for

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<sup>98</sup> Cesnola's collection was widely believed to contain a number of forgeries. In order to satisfy an incensed public, the museum actually allowed patrons examine the pieces in question physically. The result was a number of patrons using chisels and chipping away at the actual pieces in the gallery.

<sup>99</sup> "Egyptian Antiques at Metropolitan: Part of the Material Obtained in Museum's Excavations Put on View," *New York Times*, Dec 11, 1908, 6.

including these images amid other objects.<sup>100</sup> Addressed to curators and educators her pamphlet suggests that the museum's goal was in educating its public and that the inclusion of select photographic imagery, or transparencies as she calls them, helped to fill in gaps for the viewers and demonstrate the "authentic" conditions of the objects' original respective home. A clear example of this can be seen next to the installation of the Tomb of Ramekai, a smaller and much more fragmentary tomb reconstructed in the Third Room (Figure 35). Directly next to the tomb entrance are five photographs framed and labeled that depict the original excavation site where the tomb was found and worked on. The accompanying text in the guidebook frequently refers the reader to photographs within the gallery display and often directs the viewers' attention back to the images in order to contextualize and explain the physical objects in the collection as directly stemming from the museum's ongoing fieldwork.

Literally represented in the galleries, written about in the handbooks and in specially designated editions of the *Met Bulletin*, the museum's expedition did more than provide the museum with the majority of its now internationally competitive collection of Egyptian objects, it cemented the very concept of true, verifiably authentic art objects as guaranteed by their visibly documented origins from Egyptian soil. Taking out the middleman, no dealer or collector brought the most major pieces to the museum, instead the museum played the role of active agent in removing them directly from their original context. The power of the expedition as a source of finding, attaining and transporting authentic and undoubtedly original objects meant that the museum could not claim to have anything "curious" like Barnum or Abbott. Rather these Egyptian objects could

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<sup>100</sup> Williams, Caroline Ransom, "The Use of Transparencies in the Gallery," New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1912.

now be contextualized, analyzed, explained, and then consumed by American scholars, for American institutions and by American audiences as clearly identifiable and thoroughly explained examples of Egyptian art. Moreover, this newfound certainty in the "authentic" was further synthesized into a systematic display that centered on the clear organizational patterns emphasizing legibility for all museum goers. What was legible was not only a newly understood narrative of Egyptian objects as fine art objects, but also a new narrative about an American role in the much desired Egyptian territory, not as an outright colonial power but as a culturally colonialist authority engaged in the act of forcibly removing and then effectively claiming Egyptian objects -- Egyptian culture -- for the good of the American public. Egyptian history was claimed in the name of American recreation.

Carol Duncan has suggested that in their transition from private to public, the Louvre and the National Gallery developed new sets of ceremonial ritual.<sup>101</sup> Specifically, the Louvre, she argues, set the model for the transition from princely collection to public space and that this necessitated an evolutionary installation style that reenacted the development of artist genius ceremonially for all museum visitors, every time they attended participated in the museum narrative. Her model of aristocratic to democratic museum evolution can be applied to the case of Egyptian objects within the context of Metropolitan's collection. As indicated at the very opening of this chapter, the museum was always, even in its earliest incarnations, intended to follow in the footsteps of preexisting European museum models. In order to rival the Louvre the Metropolitan would need to enact a fierce collecting scale, that was clear, however the history of the respective institutions are so markedly different that the similarity of the end results

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<sup>101</sup> Duncan, 250-283.

should be called into question. Without an imperial history, a class of royal subjects or a set of aristocratic collections, the Metropolitan had no collection to build upon, no tradition to overturn. The ceremonial usage of the princely gallery as embodying and enlivening the genius of the collector was thus truly experienced in the dime museum format, split between lauding the individual collector like Abbott, or celebrating an impresario museum-man like Barnum. In order to produce a museum that rivaled the formerly royal collections of Europe, America needed its own form of royalty. The philanthropic robber barons of the Gilded Age would provide this need, fashioning themselves after Medici princes and embarking on a collecting campaign from their own wealth, only this time for the good of the public. Within an American context, the development of a fine public museum institution and a new princely social class happened roughly at the same time, thus in essence although wealthy these “fair, wise, and powerful” men were still part of the American “people” the collecting and the museum building were done not only for the people but “by” the people.

If the context of America’s new premier encyclopedic institution was so different than that of its Parisian counterpart, what then were the ceremonial rituals enacted within its walls? Since the museum’s origins one was able to walk through history – the heterotopia here reconstructing the evolution of art throughout time and place. However, in the early twentieth century, the two installations of the galleries allowed for more than a reenactment of art history, it allowed for a symbolic re-enactment of colonialist activity embodied through the possession of objects and the forcible removal of them directly from the colony’s soil. If, as Duncan suggests, modern, public museums in Europe allow the state to idealize itself for its public, the Metropolitan has presented not the state but its

class of ruling patricians, its trustees and benefactors; curators and archaeologists, as agents in the acquisition of colonial territory represented by the synecdoche of Egyptian art objects standing in for physical Egyptian land.

The final evolution of Egyptian object into Egyptian art cemented this symbolism. As Baudrillard suggests, the “antique” is an object that exists as a perpetual oddity.<sup>102</sup> It is removed of its initial use function, and can only be possessed once it exists solely as a “sign” on to which a number of meanings can be projected. His assertion is that the antique represents time itself and when taken together with his other assertion that an object only acquired desirability in its absence, one can ascertain that the Egyptian object evolved in the American conscious from mysterious curiosity to sought after “antique” as a signifier transferred from mystery to history, a concept notoriously missing from American cultural consciousness. The agents who first assigned this value were the wealthiest Americans, those with a vested interest in crafting a visible demonstration of history and culture within the walls of a hallowed museum space. It could only work, however, once a discourse was developed that explained and justified the terms of acquisition: the discourse of Egyptology visualized through images of excavation. Working in a symbiotic fashion, the designation of Egyptian objects as “art” assigned to them a value that justified their expensive and forcible removal from Egypt, while at the very same time the extraordinary terms of their removal and arrival helped solidify their place as valuable, rarified art objects. Part of this circular equation of course is the simple truth that Egyptology provided sufficient knowledge of the ancient objects so that they could be categorized, systematized and effectively contextualized into a developing American definition of what constituted the very idea of “fine art.” Knowing is a form of

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<sup>102</sup> Baudrillard, 73.

owning – the knowledge provided through Egyptology allowed the museum to display their possession of Egyptian objects as art – Barnum could display the unknowable as interchangeable enigma, however the designation of “art” required a high degree of education cultured knowledge.

This colonialist fantasy, a literal form of cultural colonialism, strikes an interesting resonance with America’s own history. As Baudrillard suggests the possession of fascination with the ancient is really a reflection of desiring one’s own origin, or as he puts it, one’s own birth.<sup>103</sup> The birth of this young country, of course, was from its “mother”-land of England, and stems directly from the aftermath of her legacy of colonialism. As America matures and develops into a major economic and political power, its collecting takes on the role of “narcissistic projection” reflecting its own desires to self fashion after maternal influence. Unable to literally participate in imperial activity, objects step in as signifiers of repressed desires and museums develop to construct new celebratory narratives, ceremonially practiced by American visitors. Signifying “Egypt” the objects in the Metropolitan’s collection allowed for the display of imperial fantasies and mirrored the transition from princely to public in European contexts; signifying “art” the same objects simultaneously elevated both Egyptian and American culture, erasing any functional use value of the objects and allowing them to stand in for “time” itself embodied in the finest examples of ancient masterpieces and masterfully attained and contained by American cultural might.

## **Conclusion:**

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<sup>103</sup> Baudrillard, 74-76.

Mieke Bal has argued the action of collecting in and of itself is a type of narrative construction with a beginning, middle and end. As Choate stated in christening the new Metropolitan, “nothing is so hard as a beginning.”<sup>104</sup> The beginning of a collection is hidden; a collection needs to start with one, solitary object, that while still alone cannot constitute a series of object gathered together to form a collection.<sup>105</sup> The collection itself rests in the grouping together of objects along some commonality, some system of logic designed by the agency of the collector. Within the context of the American collecting of Egyptian art objects, this beginning phase of collecting is represented by the Egyptian objects in Barnum’s American museum. They are part of another narrative about the American mastery of “wonder” and the ability to possess and tame the indefinable.<sup>106</sup> The Abbott collection represented the collecting in *media res*—a larger amount of objects, systematized into something that constitutes a whole, yet with a that is not ready to be received by a new collector. It is Abbott’s story or rather, England’s story, and too indexically linked to the individual to legible beyond his stamp. The story of Egypt to the American public of the 1850s and 1860s was one of Biblical history and one of *European* colonial conquest – not American – there was no existent narrative in which to place Egyptian objects within the context of an encyclopedic institution, never mind one focused on the collecting of not just objects but “art” objects. This was to change, however in the 1880s, as the economic climate shifted and the need for new narratives

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<sup>104</sup> Choate, “Annual Report of the Trustees,” 172.

<sup>105</sup> Bal, Mieke, “Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting” in Preziosi, Donald, and Claire J. Farago, *Grasping the World: The Idea of the Museum* (Aldershot, Hants, England: Ashgate Pub, 2004) , 84-99.

<sup>106</sup> Here I am echoing much of James Delbourgo’s discussion of the curiosity as a different form of “triumph” in possession – mastery in compiling the collection. See: Delbourgo, James, “Triumph of the Strange” *The Chronicle Review* (Dec. 13, 2013): B6-B9.

emerged; narratives that not only produced an image of “Egypt” but an image of the new cosmopolitan place of America as embodied through New York City.

Although the role of death rituals and this development can be compared to the formation of the encyclopedic museum from the cabinet of curiosities, when taken with a specific consideration to the place of Egyptian objects these case studies present something more deliberate in its application. The cabinet of curiosities was a collecting impulse concerned with reconstructing all of the universe in microcosm, contained within the confines of a single collector's cabinet, disparate objects are linked to create a narrative of the entire world. What is so markedly different in these case studies, is the role of the collector from solitary source of control to a less individualized, more seemingly subjective institution. The cabinet of curiosities as compiled by and owned by a private citizen can never be removed from his or her agency as crafter of the larger narrative. The break that the institution provides is crucial for my analysis in that it is doubled up by the lens of scientific exploration in archaeology and physically displayed as a tangible part of the museum display. The place of Egyptian objects in New York was changed not solely through the museum's encyclopedic scope but through the Metropolitan's well crafted displays that linked Egyptian art to the scholarship of a team of learned Americans all employed under the agency of an institution and not a singular figure.

The transformation of Egyptian objects into Egyptian art accompanied the shift from interpreting ancient Egypt as a mysterious Biblical entity to embracing its firm historical basis in art history as celebrated in the most significant art museum on American soil. Much in the same vein as Napoleon's employment of Vivant Denon,

whose *Description of Egypt* changed French narratives around newly acquired objects from colonial conquest, the Metropolitan museum's expedition and curatorial display created a place for Egypt as newly possessed "prize" in public consciousness. The former excitement of mystery replaced by museum contextualization could be replaced by the fantasy of colonial possession, not only of land but of "time" – of history itself. This change in signification, accompanied by the museum's post-1916 educational arm-chair Orientalism, set the stage for the more stereotypical over-representations that would characterize American Orientalist imagery. With the American possession of "Egypt" enacted through the Metropolitan's excavations and expanding collection, the place of American authority over Egypt's image was secured and codified. The result was shifting need for authenticity as it informed the representation of Egypt in a different vein represented by American artists as different as painter Frederick Arthur Bridgman and commercial illustrator Maxfield Parrish.

### **Chapter Three: Painted Possessions: American Orientalism**

Two images, two artists, one subject: the infamous Queen Cleopatra set amid typically lush surroundings and attended to by members of her court. In the first image, *Cleopatra on the Terraces of Philae* she stands near the ledge of her palace terrace, casting off a diaphanous shawl to her attending maid. Garbed in thin white fabric, she dreamily stares out at the horizon looking out into the sea as indicated by the ships below. Lit by the sun she seems to shimmer against the surrounding background cityscape complete with lotus columns and painted hieroglyphics (Figure 1). The second image presents the same Egyptian Queen only here reclining on what is presumably the legendary perfumed barge that led her to her star-crossed mate, Mark Antony. In a languid pose she gazes out in a similarly dreamy way. Her body is framed with luxurious flowers as her scantily clad servants toil away at delivering this vision of Egyptian splendor to "her" Roman conquest. Predominated by intense blue tones, the scenes are rich, decadent, and recognizable as the moment just before the banquet spectacle that would change the course of history (Figure 2). Although they share subjects and a similar treatment of Cleopatra's legendary beauty, there is a crucial distinction between these works. The first was painted by noteworthy nineteenth-century American painter, Frederick Arthur Bridgman, in 1897 after years of successful training under French master academician Jean-Léon Gérôme. The second, is not an oil painting at all, but instead is a mass-produced lithographic reproduction of an original painting commissioned and used to adorn the decadently styled boxes of the Crane Chocolate company's products in 1916. Designed and painted by the equally well-known American

illustrator Maxfield Parrish, this image is one of the most frequently reproduced of his many Orientalizing subjects. The illustration is couched in an extravagant palette of jewel tones that were orchestrated to conjure his characteristically hyper-real image of pure fantasy. One painting, observed in New York City in the gallery of the National Academy of Design, and one advertisement available for wide public consumption with distribution centers in New York, among other places: both images attest to the steadily growing popularity of Orientalist imagery within the United States.

This chapter examines the artistic productions of Bridgman and Parrish as models of how Orientalist imagery was received, purchased and collected in an American context. Rather than convey an authentic East, they both constructed carefully balanced, inventive scenes of Egypt that existed between the illusion of reality and escapist fantasy. Both of these artists, while serving different markets, produced large bodies of popular works that were much admired by American audiences, written about in popular periodicals, displayed in major galleries and often reproduced. These works, however, do more than illustrate their respective makers' fascination with Eastern subject matter; through the lens of their reception, they also indicate a significant shift in the American art world from the collecting of authentic eastern, largely Egyptian, objects by the wealthiest classes as discussed in Chapter One and Two of the present study, into the new ability enjoyed by the middle classes to collect and thus possess the "East" as encapsulated in the objects they acquired for their domestic consumption. By owning these fantasies of the East, American audiences could enact the Imperialist attitude of possession. Dreams of ownership replaced the lack of literal colonization through

metaphorical ownership of the people, history, and mythology of the exotic—and still mysterious—Arab Middle East.

Thus, my analysis directly engages the growing body of literature on the state of American Orientalism. As Edward Said noted in his field-defining book, *Orientalism*, prior to 1945, America did not participate in, nor did they have any colonialist reason to participate, in the same type of Orientalist appropriation produced by European, predominantly French, artists and writers of the nineteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Despite Said's claim, a number of American artists traveled throughout the Middle East between 1880 and 1920, and subsequently produced a rich variety of works. Bridgman was, perhaps, the most celebrated, but the group also included John Singer Sargent, Edwin Lord Weeks, William Merritt Chase, Henry Siddons Mowbray, Elihu Vedder, not to mention Frederick Church who fashioned his entire Hudson River Valley home, Olana, in the style of Middle Eastern architecture. Holly Edwards has been the most recent art historical voice to challenge the long ignored role of American Orientalist visual culture, following the initial 1994 study executed by Gerald Ackerman.<sup>2</sup> Her exhibition catalogue *Noble Dreams Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* remains the best source on the American preoccupation with Middle Eastern subject matter at the turn of the twentieth century and seeks to develop a working rationale behind this period of Orientalist art production. One contribution, by the Islamicist Oleg Grabar, cites four distinct impeti for American Orientalism: the "protestant search for the space of Biblical revelation;" "European aristocratic taste;" "popular culture as in freemasonry and other fraternal

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<sup>1</sup> Said, Edward W., *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1.

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, Holly, and Brian T. Allen, *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press in association with the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2000).

organizations;" and the "spirit of skeptical curiosity and adventure."<sup>3</sup> Edwards herself also posits that there are various motivations depending on the period and type of visual culture in question. She cites a desire for didactic imagery, expressed as a documentary travel aesthetic, as one motivating impulse as well as a desire to depict "the crack between nostalgia and aspiration, a vacation from modernity as well as a smug return to it."<sup>4</sup> She continues to characterize American Orientalist output by stating that it does not "render the indolent native or the decrepit orient;" rather its focus is "on its art and industry; they depict what Americans respect, mourn or seek to exceed, not simply what they denigrate."<sup>5</sup> These desires, she suggests, reflect the growing American penchant for commodity fetishism and the desire to possess and own as "opportunities of creating the self."<sup>6</sup>

While both Grabar and Edwards rightly acknowledge the impossibility of defining one core motivating factor for this period of Orientalist imagery, their definitions share a desire to focus on how an increasingly powerful American nation engaged in self-fashioning and identity-construction. Even so, they both deny how the lack of physical imperialism in the desirable European colonial territories was manifest in American Orientalist visual culture. The consumption of various Orientalist subjects was a form of cultural colonialism, enacted metaphorically through consumption of the object or image rather than literally. Though Bridgman represents a style rooted in cosmopolitan European training and Parrish illustration and commercial success, they both created distinctly American idioms of Orientalism that differ from European veins .The

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<sup>3</sup>Grabar, Oleg in Edwards, Holly, and Brian T. Allen., *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930.*, 3-9.

<sup>4</sup> Edwards, 28.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

American middle classes' desire for an Orient of their own was reinforced by the public institutions and models of possession created during the American Renaissance; the productions of both these artists, while different, both fulfilled this middle class need to enact superiority over the East through possession of Orientalist subjects.

However, this image of an Orient that could be owned by middle class Americans and used to adorn their parlors is not as benign as some have suggested. Prior scholarship has read Bridgman's domestic scenes as favorable, sympathetic genre scenes set in Eastern garb. Likewise, Parrish's dreamlike Eastern imagery is regarded as exemplary of his trademark fantasy genre, which was associated with his role as an illustrator. The narrow treatment of Bridgman largely ignores the earlier works done in strong emulation of his French master, which were eagerly collected by American audiences. These same audiences admired his archeological studies as well as the rare salacious subjects he executed in his late career. Similarly, in the literature on Parrish, little discussion is given to the life his images had in tandem with the objects they advertised.<sup>7</sup> The work of each artist resonates differently when viewed together through the lens of reception, rather than their respective experiences or intentions.

In this chapter, then, I necessarily broaden my scope to consider works by Bridgman and Parrish that represent Middle Eastern subjects other than Egypt.<sup>8</sup> I argue

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<sup>7</sup> The two best accounts on Maxfield Parrish are Coy Ludwig's older monograph that traces the artist's biography and major periods of his work and Sylvia Yount's major essay in a catalogue of his work. Yount's discussion is the most thorough and probing piece on his work to date. She explores the impact of his whimsical imagery and considers its resonance within a broader social context. See Yount, Sylvia, and Maxfield Parrish, *Maxfield Parrish, 1870-1966* (New York: Harry N. Abrams in association with the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, 1999); Ludwig, Coy L., *Maxfield Parrish* (New York, NY: Watson-Guption Publications, 1973).

<sup>8</sup> Although Egyptian subjects are represented in both Bridgman's and Parrish's respective *oeuvres* their Orientalist output is not limited to or explicitly connected only to Egypt. In the case of Bridgman he did travel to Egypt but later became more specifically tied to his time in Algeria. His interests were in capturing the life of the modern Arab world and the perception of it could flow between geographical locations. It is

here that the representation of the "East" in the works of Bridgman and Parrish developed naturally from the national fascination and appreciation of ancient Egyptian art objects. The representation of the Middle East was often set in a generalized "exotic" space. Bridgman's works were more closely tied to his specific travels in Egypt and Algeria, yet they also depicted scenes of an unspecified "East" that operated in stereotypical fantasies. For Parrish his most effective Orientalist works operated in a timeless and unidentifiable space that similarly could move between literal geographic boundaries. These fantasized evocations of eastern imagery, in turn, then colored the reception of the artifacts—the vision of Egypt thus shapes the entire discursive construction of the Middle East. My approach consequently highlights the fluid boundaries of the art world at the turn of the twentieth century. The development of art collections, the establishment of archeological schools, the cosmopolitan European training of American artists, and the development of a thriving American art market were all interconnected in the period of the American Renaissance.

**Frederick Arthur Bridgman:**

Bridgman, wildly successful student of French master academician Jean Leon Gérôme, was not only a prolific, academically-trained painter and a popular, highly respected artist amongst Parisians and the expatriate American community; he was also the most prominent producer of Orientalist imagery for American audiences crafted by an American hand. What was the particular resonance of these images: scenes of exotic locales in far-off eastern places, executed by an American who was trained by a

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for that reason that in considering Orientalism more broadly there is an implicit connection to the role of Egypt in how it was perceived by American audiences.

Frenchman? These paintings of varying subjects, historical themes and geographic locations garnered Bridgman an international following that was strongest in New York City, and echoed in London and in his adopted home of Paris. The popularity of Bridgman's paintings in New York, and the United States more broadly, exemplifies the type of Orientalism favored by the young nation: an image of the East that was exotic yet available for American consumption, through its obvious allusions to French Orientalist painting. This triad of American, French, and "Eastern" associations gave shape to the imperialist desires of an America still preoccupied with Egyptian artifacts, which could continue in the patronage of the country's very own star painter, Bridgman. In examining the artist's life abroad, his critical success and his later obsolescence, this chapter demonstrates how Bridgman's internationalism simultaneously served both the upper crust's voracious appetite for French culture and the imperial desires of a middle class who preferred images mediated through the lens of an American observer. This Franco-American lens allows Bridgman's work to perform a type of cultural-cross dressing and a desire for knowledge and possession not only of the mysterious east but of France as colonizer.<sup>9</sup> Through his French acculturation, Bridgman's vision of the East was doubly exotic and desirable to American audiences who sought exposure to both foreign cultures. Beyond simply a reflection of trends in a seemingly conservative American art market, Bridgman's personal and artistic cosmopolitanism invoked a rhetoric of power that used the American need for consuming knowledge as a replacement for colonies. In a respected place amongst the international art scene, Bridgman was an extension of the nation's ever growing international reach; his ties to France as both the locus of culture

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<sup>9</sup> I am borrowing this term from Reina Lewis. See Lewis, Reina, *Rethinking Orientalism: Women, Travel and the Ottoman Harem* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004).

and colonial activity helped aid his success amongst American patrons. This paragraph needs clarification. As long as Bridgman's French lineage was obvious, he was particularly desirable?

Born in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1847, Bridgman's early life showed little indication of his future career. His father, a physician also named Frederick Bridgman, passed away when the artist was only three. His mother Lavinia was forced to raise all three of her children on a salary earned from teaching music lessons. Moving first from Alabama to Tennessee, Lavinia Bridgman would eventually leave the increasingly tense South, taking her children back to her home state of Massachusetts in 1860. Here, Frederick continued his schooling until he left for Brooklyn, New York, where his brother had relocated.

In Brooklyn, the artist began his foray into the world of image-making as an apprentice for the American Bank Note Company. As Ilene Fort has suggested, this experience is a significant one. Because there were very few American art schools, the engraving training necessary to produce bank notes, bonds, stamps and securities, provided artists with both drafting and printmaking skills, which demanded fine attention to detail and the periodic production of figural, narrative and allegorical scenes.<sup>10</sup> Bridgman also attended classes at the Brooklyn Art Association, where he learned the basics of the fine arts and he continued to study at the antique life classes held by the National Academy of Design. It was during this time that Bridgman exhibited his first oil paintings, *David Bringing the Head of Goliath*, *Evening Prayer*, and *Christ and the Two Disciples at Emmaus*, at the exhibitions held by the Brooklyn Art Association in

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<sup>10</sup>Fort, Ilene S., "Frederick Arthur Bridgman and the American Fascination with the Exotic Near East." (PhD diss, City University of New York, 1990).

1865 and 1866. It was these early experiences that would allow Bridgman the means to pursue his artistic career at full force; after displaying his paintings the artist secured financial assistance through a group of Brooklyn gentlemen to secure his proper training in Paris.<sup>11</sup> Breaking his contract with the American Bank Note Company, the artist left for Paris in 1866, marking the end of his residence in the United States and the start of what would become an internationally acclaimed career.

In Paris, Bridgman commenced his study at the Académie Suisse, one of the few schools then open to American students. But his true art training began in 1867 in the atelier of Jean Leon Gérôme at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. By the 1860s, Gérôme's career was thriving with a reputation for "ethnographic and Neo-Grec" paintings that proved successful in the Salon and were exhibited widely. As Fort mentions, Bridgman, whether he intended to study with Gérôme upon his arrival or only later took advantage of the opportunity, would have had ample access to the master's works while they were on view in New York.<sup>12</sup> A number of his Orientalist scenes, specifically, were exhibited at Goupil's Gallery and at the 1864 Metropolitan Sanitary Fair.<sup>13</sup> Gérôme's successful career transitioned into one of teaching; Bridgman entered his studio as part of his first class of American pupils, a move forcefully initiated by American painter Thomas Eakins.<sup>14</sup>

Yet Gérôme's teaching style changed over time. While in the later years he was praised for having a fluid approach to critique and allowing student experimentation, his earlier years were marked with an emphasis on precision, fine draftsmanship, and a strict

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<sup>11</sup> Fort, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Fort, 25.

<sup>14</sup> See Weinberg, H B., *The Lure of Paris: Nineteenth-century American Painters and Their French Teachers* (New York: Abbeville Press Publishers, 1991).

adherence to historical detail.<sup>15</sup> Bridgman's time in Gérôme's studio fell into the latter category; the young artist was encouraged to study the old masters, to draw from both casts and live models, and to develop an appreciation for absolute accuracy in painted details. To do this, Bridgman, following the lead of the master, took to visiting museums and building a repertoire of props that could aid him in the production of historical narratives. The push for history painting was still a strong one in the Ecole and Gérôme was a proponent of using ancient subject matter, which notably included both Egyptian and Assyrian narratives.

Bridgman did not attend Gérôme's studio consistently during his two-year period of study with the master; instead he spent the greater portion of his first five years in France painting with the artists' colony located within the unspoiled, deeply religious, anachronistic community at Brittany.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps he was spurred to this not only by a fascination with the "primitive" subjects he found there, but also due to the fact that Gérôme himself was not in residence as often, taking trips to the exotic Near East with his artist colleagues.<sup>17</sup> Bridgman's early production would include some Orientalist subjects, but would focus more on scenes of Breton peasants and contemporary Parisians. These works did earn him positive reviews with the French and also with American critics, who saw them on view at the Brooklyn Art Association in the late 1860s and early 1870s. However, his most noteworthy success would not arrive until the artist almost fully inhabited his master's shoes with the critical Salon success of *Funeral of the Mummy* painted in 1877 (Figure 3).

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<sup>15</sup> Fort, 25-32.

<sup>16</sup> Fort, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Primitive in this sense refers to the Breton community whose spirituality and antiquated culture was in sharp contrast to modern day Paris. The subject was a popular one with Post-Impressionist painters.

The success of *Funeral of the Mummy* illuminates the problematic nature of both more recent art historical scholarship and nineteenth-century concern over Bridgman's working method. Many have read his visual style as slavish emulation of his master's facture, detailed precision and choice in historical subject matter.<sup>18</sup> This assumption, however, is undermined by the artist's distinct affinity for the evocative and lush landscape of the Nile, a marked contrast from Gérôme's staged and icy studio works. Moreover, Bridgman's mature style would exhibit a decidedly looser handling of the paint and focus primarily on scenes of contemporary Arab life, rather than the historical narratives of his Salon *machines*. Modern scholars have tended to link the artist's fascination with maternal imagery and his penchant for genre scenes to his American roots and Protestant upbringing. Rather than finding the explanation behind Bridgman's distinctive form of Orientalism in his academic training and the need to suit the tastes of Puritanical American patrons, I argue that his works are deceptively complex because they exemplify the idiosyncratic brand of Orientalism developing in the United States, and particularly in New York of the late 1870s and 1880s. This variant of Orientalism filled the need for a cultural possession not only of the "East" but of "France." As a nation with a rich academic tradition, an heir to both great collections of art and budding modernist trends, France was a desirable model for the aspiring American art world that stretched beyond the robber barons to upper middle class Americans who could be proud of their native hero's success as a truly cosmopolitan painter.

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<sup>18</sup> Frederick Arthur Bridgman still remains a fairly understudied artist. Those who have considered him include Gerald Ackerman, Ilene Fort, Holly Edwards and Brian T. Allen. In general the consideration of his work often returns to his fascination with genre scenes and how his work either emulated or rejected that of his teacher Gérôme. The proliferation of maternal imagery has prompted many to consider Bridgman's Orientalist works as a sympathetic portrayal of humanizing interaction. Although there is certainly an element of this at play, and undoubtedly there were patrons who appreciated the sentimental subjects, however I find this reading a bit too limiting. See Allen in Edwards, pages 59-77.

Despite having previously exhibited biblical scenes, portraits and genre scenes since 1868, Bridgman's earliest critical success would arrive with the execution of large-scale academic history paintings, initiated by the *Funeral of the Mummy*.<sup>19</sup> Exhibited in the Paris Salon of 1877, the painting was so highly regarded that it would win the artist a third place medal there, his first form of wide, critical acceptance from French audiences. Drawing a constant crowd of admirers, the large painting captured the somber, mystical funeral procession of an unidentified, mummified corpse. Floating down the Nile on its way to the ancient necropolis, the deceased is accompanied by an entourage in two boats; the first seemingly carries the body in its rectangular coffin, carefully covered by a small protective awning, and also conveys a flock of young, semi-nude, grieving women as well as a togaed priest and fellow mourners. The second boat trails behind carrying oarsmen and a number of standing figures in the rear of the boat. The subject here is quite literally cloaked in a dark veil of mystery; almost in silhouette, the processional figures produce a sharp contrast to the warmly lit sky and reflective calm waters of the Nile. Gérôme's influence is evident in the archeological detail and emphasis on attaining authenticity in the intricate decorative elements of the first barge and the hieroglyphic adornment of the second white sail. In Paris, the student's emulation of Gérôme's style was lauded, and the historical weight of his chosen subject celebrated. Art critic Albert Wolff wrote in *Le Figaro* that "*Les funérailles d'une momie* by M. Bridgman, is able to be signed by the master Gérôme."<sup>20</sup>

However, proposing *Funeral of the Mummy* as a model of Bridgman's work provides a cross-section of the components through which the artist's large, international

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<sup>19</sup> Fort, 36.

<sup>20</sup> Wolff, Albert, "*Le Salon de 1877*," *Le Figaro* (1877) as quoted in Fort, 143.

appeal would develop. In Paris, the work aligned with academic tastes, emulating Gérôme and presenting an image of Egypt that they had become quite accustomed to not only seeing, but physically and ideologically owning. Bridgman's work could fit seamlessly into a long lineage of romanticized yet accurately researched and articulated depictions of the ancient Egyptian life of which they were now the colonizers. However, upon seeing this work, both the British and American critics noted its worth not on the basis of its subject or historical accuracy but rather praised the artist's exquisite rendering of the Nile landscape; a display of technical facility that they claimed also outshone his master.<sup>21</sup> As American artist turned critic Earl Shinn (otherwise known as Edward Strahan) stated:

“In the *Burial of a mummy* our compatriot completely distances Gérôme by placing behind his carefully calculated scheme of figures a landscape of almost divine purity and beauty, completely impossible for the older artist. Looked at simply for the scenery, this picture is a masterpiece; and where else, since archaeology-painting has come up, can we find an archaeology-picture with a masterpiece of landscape.”<sup>22</sup>

In fact, so masterful was Bridgman's rendering of the Nile that, upon visiting the artist's studio, famed Egyptologist Gaston Maspero remarked upon the painting's beauty and uncanny characterization of the Egyptian landscape.<sup>23</sup> Thus, *Funeral of the Mummy* presents a paradox, and raises the question of whether this painting was so successful because of its capturing of historically accurate detail, or in the picturesque treatment of its exotic, historical, locale?

Understanding the role of archeology contributes significantly to understanding its success. Under Gerome's tutelage, Bridgman had learned how to mine sources for

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<sup>21</sup> Based on reviews and sources as quoted in Fort, 135 -136.

<sup>22</sup> Shinn, Earl or Edward Strahan, “Frederick A. Bridgman,” *Art Amateur* Vol.4, no. 4, (1881): 71; as quoted in Fort, 145.

<sup>23</sup> Fort, 166.

accurate period details. Published books, as well as the collections of the British Museum and the Louvre, were growing sources of both inspiration and information. However, the crucial component to Bridgman's success lay in his earlier trip to the Maghreb and Egypt in the early 1870s. From 1872-1873, Bridgman along with fellow American Orientalist painter Charles Sprague Pearce, left the Breton school and ventured into the Middle East. Starting first in Algeria and moving on to Egypt, they sailed down the Nile and studied famous archeological sites as well as modern day life in Cairo. These trips were life-changing for the artist, who would later recount that the light quality and landscape of the East would forever draw him to the area and become a principle subject for his paintings.<sup>24</sup> With these trips as inspiration, Gerome's training, and a natural talent for both landscape painting and academic style, Bridgman would go on to build his early career through constructing imagery that, like *Funeral of the Mummy*, combined all of these elements.

News of Bridgman's travels had circulated throughout both the United States and France before he ever set foot in the East. Americans back home who saw him as a local hero read of his plans to pursue new subjects more exotic than his Breton peasants just as they exhibited growing desires to learn more of the exotic Middle East. American fascination with Egypt had only grown stronger as the nation solidified both its place on the world stage and in the competitive art world. An 1871 quote crystallizes this very idea:

A new and interesting field of art-study is the delineation of the ruins and present abodes of the semi-barbarous nations of Northern Africa, their mosques... and the manner and customs of the inhabitants... This study, which has not yet been

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<sup>24</sup> Fort, 96-135.

attempted but by a few painters, is novel and of the most picturesque character. It embraces all the country lying on the Mediterranean from Morocco to Palestine.<sup>25</sup>

Bridgman's travels filled this void in the American art world. They were still a rarity worth noting in an American context, though his trip also surely resonated in the Parisian circles to which he was so connected. His new work, in addition to exhibiting his allegiance to the teachings of Gérôme was also a direct reflection of his observation of Egypt, exemplified through the magical beauty of the his landscape settings.

Linda Nochlin suggests that the phenomenon of nineteenth-century Orientalist painting was contingent upon a documentary lens, a detailed and precise glass-like facture and attention to surface detail. Exemplified in works by Gérôme, among others, this style of painting eradicated the mediating hand of the artist and highlighted a purposeful sense of direct observation that translated observed reality directly onto the canvas.<sup>26</sup> Bridgman's early success fits within this paradigm not only due to his style, but also due to his newfound knowledge as literal observer. The glass-like perfection of the painted surface and the intricate handling of historical details indicated to his audience that he was an artist of superior education, knowledge and direct observation of Egyptian antiquity.

Of course, this painting is also a scene of an imagined past, a mysterious ritual and glimpse of ancient life that he could not possibly have witnessed. It thus belongs in a hybrid realm of Orientalism and academic history painting, existing in a kind of limbo between real and imaginary, observed and fantasized that allowed both Parisians and Americans to see in its forms what they respectively required. Parisians could see a vivid

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<sup>25</sup> "Africa as a field for Art-Study," *Evening Post* (1872): 2; as quoted in Fort, 102.

<sup>26</sup> Nochlin, Linda, "The Imaginary Orient" in Pinder, Kymberly N., *Race-ing Art History: Critical Readings in Race and Art History*, (New York: Routledge, 2002), 69-87.

and accurate representation of their colonial possessions that upheld their academic artistic traditions, whereas, for American audiences, *Funeral of the Mummy* was the mark of a truly developed American artist who not only mimicked but ultimately *surpassed* his French master. For Americans Bridgman's mastery is manifested directly through his direct observation of French colonized territories through his newsworthy travels

Though *Funeral of the Mummy* had earned its acclaim in Paris, the work found a new home in the private collection of James Gordon Bennett, owner of the New York Herald, who paid a then massive price of five thousand dollars for the work. This, however, was not the first time Bridgman had been patronized and acknowledged by American audiences. As early as 1875, Bridgman had been elected an associate to the American National Academy of Design, predating by a few years his election as a chevalier of the Order of the Legion of Honor in France.<sup>27</sup> He had sustained American appreciation of his works by continuing to submit to the shows at the Brooklyn Art Association, and his laudatory place in his New York hometown would only grow in the wake of his international success. After the 1877 Salon, Bridgman was then honored with a special installation of twenty-four paintings at his former Lafayette Avenue Presbyterian Church, organized by the Young People's Association. Exhibited together in their own specially designated "Bridgman Gallery," the works varied widely, no doubt in an effort to demonstrate his versatility as an artist.<sup>28</sup> Among these works were a noteworthy amount of Orientalist scenes, including *Prayer in a Mosque*, *Rameses II*, *Fete in the Palace of Rameses*, *View of the Upper Nile* and the more ethnological *Woman of Kabzla*.

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<sup>27</sup> Fort, 19-21.

<sup>28</sup> Fort, 20.

The works submitted for the Bridgman Gallery were executed after and inspired by Bridgman's recent travels. Merging his knowledge of ancient history with his lived experiences, Bridgman took to producing an ever-increasing number of works set in the East and, during this period, especially Ancient Egypt. Reviewing the loan show and praising Bridgman's developing career, *The Art Journal* described the success of the exhibition, proclaiming the "Bridgman Gallery" to be a particular highlight. It included a full page illustration of one of Bridgman's key works, yet one not included in the show: the very famous *Funeral of the Mummy*.<sup>29</sup> The painting, as the article indicates, was then on view in the 1878 American Exhibition at the Exposition Universelle in Paris where it continued to receive wide public praise. However, its symbolic role in illustrating Bridgman's special installation testifies to its continued resonance with the American public and its ability to advertise the artist's new pieces. The works on view were discussed, again, in terms of their reflection of Gérôme's guiding influence. In describing Bridgman's *Fete in the Palace of Rameses* the author links it directly to Gérôme's *Cleopatre et Cesar*<sup>30</sup> (Figures 4-5). However, the very next sentence acknowledges this American emulation of French painting trends: "But a similar remark might be made concerning four-fifths of the contributions to that exhibition, and in general concerning nearly all of the first productions of American artists who have studied in the ateliers of Europe."<sup>31</sup>

It is clear that, in this early phase of his career, Bridgman's success was equally as connected to his travels as to his French training. However, the issue of Bridgman's

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<sup>29</sup> "American Painters. Winslow Homer and F.A. Bridgman," *The Art Journal*, (New Series, Vol. 4, 1878), 225-229.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

reception is not quite as simple as being tied to Gérôme's legacy, and his works of the late 1870s were not only of large, historical narratives. Dotted among his annual Salon machines were a number of widely exhibited Orientalizing genre scenes that take for their subject modern Arab life in both Egypt and Algeria. Current scholarship on Bridgman, including Fort and Brian T. Allen, have found in these works a more idiosyncratic, distinctive form of Orientalism which they believe marks a break with his adulation of Gerome's academicism. They suggest a turn to a more "American" style of genre painting that would be popular with his audiences for their sympathetic portrayals of the Middle East—far more sanitized than those of his French colleagues.<sup>32</sup> They particularly emphasize the proliferation of mother and child imagery in the artist's scenes of the *harem*, the area of the Arab home reserved for the wives of the male patriarch, Sultan or otherwise. But suggesting that Bridgman's works function as Islamicized genre scenes in the vein of Lily Martin Spencer (Figure 6) overlooks the gendered and racialized complexity in white having a male artist document and therefore "penetrate" the interior world of the *harem*.

For example, Bridgman's 1879 painting *The Siesta* depicts a young woman reclining in layers of apricot and melon-colored clothing across a brilliant orange and gold-threaded chaise (Figure 7). With one arm stretched over her head, she rests with her eyes closed and lips parted, clearly, as the title indicates, in the middle of her afternoon nap. As if her slumber came upon her suddenly, a platter with untouched coffee sits directly in front of her, perched on an ornate table, while, mirroring the angle of her upward stretched arm, a diagonally placed hookah pipe rests on a dish. Above the sleeping woman sits a small monkey that looks to have entered the enclosed space from

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<sup>32</sup> See Fort and Brian T. Allen in Edwards, 59-77.

the verdant landscape on the other side. The small animal also denies the viewer's gaze, either looking down at his own feet or directly at the unsuspecting woman.<sup>33</sup> Scholars have cited images like this as chaste relative to similar works by Gérôme, such as his bathing scenes or *The Slave Market* (Figure 8).<sup>34</sup> Gérôme's Oriental women are nude, beautiful objects to be owned, sold, and used. They titillate the male spectator through an exoticism, so depraved and distinct from refined European femininity. Bridgman's representation certainly differs from Gérôme's tactics. His female figure is clothed, alone, and not part of an ensemble that sets her up as a slave or a prize. She looks peaceful, instead violent or hyper-sexualized—a conservative Orientalism for American audiences.

And yet this comparative reading denies Bridgman's own intrinsic Orientalist messages by ignoring the likely preoccupation of its viewers with the myth of the harem because *The Siesta* is nothing if not an image of voyeurism. Secluded safety in the restrictive harem space, the young Arab woman is unaware and completely vulnerable. Lost in a mid-afternoon slumber, she cannot acknowledge the viewer's presence, much like she remains unaware of the intruding monkey. Moreover, the compositional arrangement of the space highlights the tension between inside and outside, the key component to a Western understanding of harem life. She is both inside and outside: unavailable in her unconscious state yet presented openly for the penetrating gaze of the viewer. While this image may not be as overtly salacious as Gérôme's fleshy fantasies, it nonetheless argues a similar point: the oriental woman is an inactive, potentially "lazy,"

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<sup>33</sup> Holly Edwards also discussed this work in her treatment on American Orientalism, however, the analysis does not consider how this image might have resonated with contemporary viewers and their prior knowledge of harem imagery.

<sup>34</sup> See Allen, Fort and Ackerman as cited above for further discussion.

non-contributing member of society, content to exist in the realm of her dreams.

Available but unattainable, she thus embodies the myth of the Orient defined in French Orientalist imagery, but *The Siesta* was instead executed by an American and exhibited at the Society of American Artists in New York in 1879.

A great number of Bridgman's images, especially those with mothers, babies or older children, demand this consideration of their subtler layers, whether they do or do not include overtly sexual overtones. An earlier painting exhibited at the 1875 Salon, *The Nubian Storyteller* takes the harem interior as its subject but fills it with a number of Arab women seated on the floor around an animated Nubian woman, who uses theatrical gestures to entertain the group with her stories (Figure 9). This work demonstrates an interest in genre scenes that predates his rejection of historical paintings in the 1880s, and he would not gain direct access to the domestic lives of modern Arab women until his later trips back to North Africa in 1879. While scholars have made a case for images like this as sympathetic to the place of Arab women, it again comes from a comparison against the Gérôme "norm" and neglects Bridgman's own context. Here, Bridgman includes mothers and their babies, but also paints a picture of racial hierarchy and servitude, in addition to proliferating the continued narrative of Arab laziness as these women lounge about midday locked away in the harem. One should note the careful inclusion to the left of a woman engaged in needlework; while this may engage in the subtle symbolism of the genre scene to indicate labor, the story teller, the embroiderer, or the mother, Bridgman is still representing a forbidden scene in a voyeuristic manner. The

sensuality of these images was not completely undercut by images of domesticity, as contemporary commentary on similar subjects suggests.<sup>35</sup>

For example, *The Flower of the Harem* appeared, as a large engraving, as the frontispiece to an 1878 issue of *The Aldine* (Figure 10). This image features a frontally facing female figure, with heavy lidded eyes staring straight out while her delicate fingers support the pipe of a hookah that is hidden from the viewer. The woman is enveloped in luxurious fabrics that frame her face like delicate petals, emphasizing her role as the titular flower. Set against a black background, this image erases the direct spatial representation of the harem, implying her location only through the title and assumptions by the painting's onlookers. Though the work was exhibited at the 1876 Centennial exhibition in Philadelphia and purchased by Mr. H.E. Nesmith of New York City, *The Aldine's* discussion of it pretty much ends there. For the next two paragraphs, its author neither addresses the artist's talent nor the woman the painting depicts, but instead discusses the absent figure of the Sultan. The Sultan, as the article suggests, returns from a busy, productive day of politics directly to his *harem* or "home" where, after a eunuch introduces him, he is "received by the directress of the place" who then announces him before he "rests but fifteen minutes, talking with his *femmes* and favorite slaves, adjusting their little disputes of the day, signing the bills of purchase of jewelry."<sup>36</sup> "After dinner," the article continues, "he returns to the harem around eleven pm, where he retires with his wives and wakes up in the morning to be served by his female slaves." Only in the very last small paragraph of the article does the author actually address the painting, stating:

Really we have spoken more of the man than of the 'flower of his harem,' which is only a poetic name for one who passes her days in childish

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<sup>35</sup> Allen in Fort, 71-74.

<sup>36</sup> "The Flower of the Harem" *The Aldine*, Vol. 9. No. 5 (1878), 145-146.

follies, being generally uneducated, and entirely unfit for being a light to any one, not even herself; but who robed in luxury and surrounded by all the unscrupulously begotten means can furnish, passes idly the days, and affords his lordship the means to while away a few heavily dragging hours.<sup>37</sup>

Thus, this image of a single, Arab woman brought with it an entire, diatribe on the imagined role of all female life within a sultan's harem. Regardless of Bridgman's intent, the image is made to participate in a pre-existing American relationship with Middle Eastern culture.

The mischaracterization of Bridgman's scenes as saccharine has been applied to a number of his subjects despite these responses that are deeply entrenched in racialized Orientalist stereotypes. Another article in *The Aldine* presented an even more dramatic example, reviewing the artist's *In the Harem* and again reproducing it as an engraving (Figure 11). The article describes its subject as "a common scene in the interior of a harem, where two favorite odalisques are seated at the lattice, chatting, and peeping shyly out, in the hope, perhaps, of catching some glimpse of the outer world, of which the poor women see so little."<sup>38</sup> The author continues to assure the readers that they need not feel sympathy for these eastern beauties: "it is a mistake to compare them with the women of Europe or America, since they are not fitted by education or habit for a higher life than the one they have; and so long as their physical wants are supplied, they are not conscious of any great lack in their lives, and we think Mr. Bridgman has very well expressed this in panting his two odalisques simply as beautiful animals."<sup>39</sup> The engraving actually presents two fully-clothed female figures seated in an elaborate harem space; one is veiled and rests her hand above a drum, the other peers out an open window through

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> "In the Harem," *The Aldine, the Art Journal of America*, (May 1, 1878), 100.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

the intricate screen. A large hookah sits before them, erect with its apex positioned near the peering odalisque's curvaceous hip. This is a scene of a decadent interior with two inactive females, yet the article goes so far as to equate them with animals.

The article continues by shifting to the topic of female slavery, explaining how women are bought and sold and arranged into polygamous marriages before concluding with a paragraph that again addresses the painting directly. It acknowledges that the artist could not show all of the plight of the oriental woman in one painting but that he has “therefore done quite right in giving us the more rose-colored and picturesque side of harem life, in which undertaking he has succeeded most admirably.”<sup>40</sup> It continues:

Nothing could be more picturesque or more in accordance with the ideas we have all imbibed from the “Arabian Nights” and other similar stories of eastern life, than the scene which is here depicted. The lesson figure and the careless, indolent attitudes of the odalisques; the rich, soft cushions of the divan on which they are reclining’ the bright-hued carpet, and all the little accessories, the whole seen by the subdued light which streams through the lattice, help to make up a picture over which one may dream and fancy himself in Constantinople, or, better yet in Bagdad, away back in the days of the Caliph Haroun al Rashci, who so delighted in circulating among his people. The painting is also an excellent exponent of the poetic and sympathetic qualities which Mr. Bridgman possesses in a high degree.<sup>41</sup>

Thus, in the 1870s, it seems that despite any differences between Bridgman's treatment of his odalisque subjects and the salacious nudes of the French school, contemporary readings united them. Nude or not, these women represented “beautiful animals,” linked directly with the myths of *The Arabian Nights*.

Not all of Bridgman's early genre paintings concerned the harem. *The Aldine* deemed his *Allah, Allah, Achbar* “one of the most important pictures at the exhibition of

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

the Brooklyn Art Association” during its display in the spring of 1879<sup>42</sup>(Figure 12). Though it includes a particularly well-executed full-page frontispiece engraving, the article takes a markedly different stance than those referenced above. Citing the painting’s current value of a then quite expensive two thousand dollars, the article focuses most closely on the formal elements of its appearance, noting its “glowing color” in addition praising its perspective and “masterly technique.”<sup>43</sup> The image itself features an older Arab man at prayer, whose upturned head is seemingly lit by the glory of the God to which he is praying. Behind him is, as the article says, a “swarthy and powerfully built man” half bent at the waist in mid-prayer whose comparatively poorer attire functions as a “well-chosen foil” that “heightens the contrast and makes the picture very effective.”<sup>44</sup> As Fort rightly explains, the title of the work refers to the Muslim prayer “God is Great,” yet the article does not mention this except to describe the rich blues, golds and silvers it uses and the way in which the luxury of these details points out a class distinction.<sup>45</sup> It seems to the author that Bridgman should be most praised for his attention to detail and mastery of technique. Therefore, this image was not valued as a romanticized, “Arabian Nights” style scene, but instead, as a Noehlin-esque mode of Orientalism, for Bridgman’s masterful skills in observation and translating his observations into an academic idiom.

Perhaps most interesting, though, is how Bridgman likely translated his master’s treatment of the very same theme. The image of the Arab in prayer was a popular and successful scene that received attention in the broader context of a renewed interest in

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<sup>42</sup> “Allah, Allah, Achbar!,” *The Aldine*, Vol. 9 No. 10 (1879), 305-306.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Fort, 206.

religious imagery.<sup>46</sup> Gérôme executed a number of images devoted to Muslim religious scenes, including filled hypostyle mosque interiors, muezzins calling for prayer, and poetic images of individual worshippers. Bridgman, here, directly emulates his teacher, yet the article at its very conclusion expresses a markedly different opinion: “Mr. Bridgman possessed the power to treat a theme with independence, without a trace of copyism [sic]. It has been said of him that his art is more nearly allied to that of Rembrandt than to that of Gérôme.”<sup>47</sup> To the critic, Bridgman’s mastery was over more than contemporary French academic trends, but over all the Great Masters, and all of their greatest skills.<sup>48</sup>

By the late 1870s, Bridgman had come to a turning point in his career in America, one that was about to rocket him to a new level of success in the 1880s. He was prized for his exotic subject matter and respected for his French training, yet particularly celebrated for his divergence from Gérôme in a way that marked his abilities as a unique, distinct painter. Moreover, he was an American painter whose travels and training could reflect back upon the success of the American art world through extension. Like the article above, American audiences would look to Bridgman as a model for becoming an artist who could transcend his American upbringing and, with proper preparation, become heir to a profound art historical lineage back to Rembrandt.

It is worth noting that the connection to Rembrandt might be more than just a boastful display of wishful thinking. While *Funeral of the Mummy* and his other history paintings remained closely aligned to Gérôme’s glass-like facture, Bridgman’s domestic

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<sup>46</sup> Fort, 203.

<sup>47</sup> “Allah, Allah, Achbar!,” *The Aldine*, Vol. No. 10 (1879), 305-306.

<sup>48</sup> Rembrandt is a particularly interesting comparison because it points to Bridgman’s handling of light and color.

scenes of everyday Arab life did not. The facture of these paintings exhibited a looser, almost impressionistic surface, glittering with gestural paint strokes that diverge markedly from the control of Gérôme's tight paint-handling. This rule does not apply universally, as the aforementioned *Nubian Storyteller*, an earlier work, is still tightly painted, but as his work developed and continued to explore genre scenes, the looseness of the paint handling seems to increase. Surprisingly, given his increasingly loose treatment of the painted surface, Bridgman, spoke out openly against the style of Impressionism. In his "*L'Anarchie dans l'Art*" Bridgman came out strongly against radical art movements that leaned toward abstraction, or those that placed process over the end result of conveying a specific subject.<sup>49</sup> However, the change in Bridgman's working style coincides with the change in his public reception. As the 1880s rolled in the artist would experience the apex of his painting career.

### **The 1880s:**

Building from the works executed at the end of the preceding decade, Bridgman was given his first one-man exhibition at the American Art Gallery in New York City in February of 1881. The show was comprised of over three hundred paintings, ten of which were major Orientalist works already owned by private collectors. These included *Funeral of the Mummy*, *Allah Allah*, *Achbar* and *The Siesta*. As Fort describes the exhibition, the majority of the works were of Orientalist subjects, although the artist did select a number of French peasant scenes, landscapes, and animal studies to include in the

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<sup>49</sup> Bridgman penned an impassioned treatise against modern movements in the late nineteenth century called "*L'Anarchie dans l'Art*." He remained convinced that the goal of fine art should be realism in an academic vein.

display.<sup>50</sup> A successful and profitable show, Bridgman earned about \$14,000 despite the fact that many of his works were at that time not for sale. The artist was commissioned to complete eight more works; not surprisingly it was his Orientalist figure scenes that took in the highest prices, his *Lady of Cairo* going \$1350, *Jewess and Arab of Constantine* for \$900 and a *Nile View* going for \$500. As Fort states, *The Art Interchange* mentioned the exhibition and associated activities subsequently for eight weeks. The show was regarded a “revelation” as with its breadth and scope it demonstrated to an eager American public that one of their very own had become an artist of “originality, industry and diversity.”<sup>51</sup> The *Art Journal* praised Bridgman’s working method specifically, highlighting the breadth of research and exacting finish of many of his paintings and *The Studio and Music Review* noted that his work was exemplary of “an artist of rare industry and ambition.”<sup>52</sup> Such a large solo show was still a rarity for a living American artist, and the National Academy of Design recognized his extreme prestige by electing him as the only artist to be voted to the level of academician that May.

The exhibition would also inspire two lengthy and important articles devoted to the artist’s work and life. The first was by noted American art critic Mariana van Rensselaer, who found the exhibition to be, “the most complete and remarkable ever held by a young American painter for the display of his own creations,” and the other by artist, art critic and friend of Bridgman, Earl Shinn. Shinn’s article told the story of a young American male of a serious nature with a determination to master his chosen craft. A

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<sup>50</sup> Fort, 294.

<sup>51</sup> “Mr. Bridgeman’s [sic] Pictures and Studies,” *The Art Journal* (1881): 62; quoted in Fort, 296.

<sup>52</sup> These are all re-cited from Fort, 296.

talented violinist and industrious student, Bridgman, according to Shinn, was a model American in Paris.<sup>53</sup>

What both of these articles note is the outstanding quality of Bridgman's sketches amongst his more finished works. Shinn (Strahan) notes: "the first studies, the impressions direct from nature, are the really invaluable parts of the display which Mr. Bridgman... now spreads before the public." His historical and archeological paintings, Shinn claims, are "less filled and penetrated with the real spirit of art" but are nonetheless "necessary to catch the attention of the public." "The painter's hardest task," Shinn continues to explain, "is to get the color, the vivacity, the directness of the first sketch into the more ambitious and deliberate finished pictures."<sup>54</sup>

Van Rensselaer is even more emphatic about the role of Bridgman's sketches within the larger three-hundred work display:

I may as well say, in the beginning, that, in spite of the many excellences to be found in even the least spontaneous of the pictures shown in his recent exhibition, it was Mr. Bridgman's studies, and not his more careful creations, that were most striking and most delightful. They revealed, moreover, an entirely new and unpredicted aspect of his talent. Even critics who had most carefully studied all the pictures he had previously sent us, and who felt quite sure that they had formed there from a just estimate of his ability, were forced by the first glance at these studies to reconsider the whole matter and to remake their estimate.<sup>55</sup>

In a lengthy review that skirts the line between complimentary and overtly critical, Van Rensselaer takes great lengths to explain her perspective on Bridgman's *oeuvre*. She indeed takes note of his successful salon paintings but notes that in a large number of smaller pieces one was surprised to find "not repetitions of them on a smaller scale, but canvases of very different kinds," including most prominently Oriental genre

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Strahan, Edward. "Frederick Arthur Bridgman" *The Art Amateur*. Vol. 4 No. 4 (1881), 70-71.

<sup>55</sup> M.G. Van Rensselaer, "Frederick Arthur Bridgman," *The American Art Review*, Vol. 2, No. 8 (Jun., 1881), 49-56.

subjects.<sup>56</sup> Again comparing the artist to his master, she notes that Bridgman remains weaker than Gérôme in terms of the expressive qualities of his canvases. Whereas, as the author suggests, he tends to produce theatrical tableaux with a forceful expressiveness, Bridgman's works of "dainty oriental beauties" function more as a "clever imitation of the real thing, than as direct transcripts from reality." She continues to assure the reader that she certainly realizes that all art need not be "an actual record of things actually seen and noted," but suggests instead that it "should instantly impress upon us as though it had been."<sup>57</sup> Bridgman's more finished works and, ironically, the works that afforded him international acclaim and his first American patrons suggested to Van Rensselaer that they were "planned and studies, and not quite spontaneously felt... in spite of their invariable cleverness and their frequent beauty."<sup>58</sup>

*Study Head* and *Nude Study*, both reproduced in engraving for the article, demonstrated for Van Rensselaer a virtuosic translation of an immediate observation into a fresh, expressive and emotive work of art (Figures 13-14). Waxing poetic she explains to the reader that:

Here were vigor and earnestness that were not deliberation. Here was a frank enthusiasm that showed these studies to have been the offspring of a catholic, artistic sensitiveness, - studies undertaken not only with a scholar's view to improvement, or a scientific desire to tabulate facts, but also with an artist's wish to fix forever the fleeting aspect that had charmed him. One found everything in these delightful memoranda, -- landscapes in profusion, both African and European, architectural motives from many countries, and animals of every sort, - lions and camels, goats and kittens and donkeys, and the most incomparable horses. There were portraits of civilized babies with their nurses, and of uncivilized babies huddled in forlorn little groups... there were, in a word, all possible things, from the records of long-mummied existence to a

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

splendid “impressionist” study of the *Gare St. Lazare*, with a locomotive wreathed in smoke... Nothing could have been fresher, more true to nature, and more enchanting as art, than many of his Egyptian sketches, -- as for example this one with sailors tracking a boat, -- and nothing could have been better felt and rendered than some sketchy interiors of *cafes* and bazaars. ... One is tempted to linger as long over the memory of this host of striking studies as one used to linger in the room where they were on view, wondering every moment more and more at the raciness, the dash, the freshness of an artist who had sometimes been called too cold, too cautious, and – almost – too artificial.<sup>59</sup>

These studies, varying in subject, captured for her what was missing in the vein of much French academic painting: spontaneity as expressed through impressionistic facture. As Van Rensselaer concludes her review, she answers the question of why Bridgman’s more expressive impasto works remained secondary to his technical archeological paintings:

Why, I have heard it asked more than once, does not Mr. Bridgman paint his larger pictures more in the manner of his studies, - with and ?assured touches and the strong effects that are the delight of artists and of connoisseurs? Why does he sacrifice so large a proportion of these things to the lesser interests of detail, and complicated subject, and “high finish”? The first and most obvious answer to all such questions is that the public best likes his most studies [sic]works, preferring above all others the vivid and elaborate bits of Oriental genre.<sup>60</sup>

Thus, both Van Rensselaer and Shinn conclude that in the dazzling show of Bridgman’s works the standout stars are his numerous sketches as well as his ability to display those sketches against his more polished works.

However, the response to his studies was split; both authors suggest that “the public” continues to be more attracted to Bridgman’s now famous, celebrated history and archeological paintings. Yet Shinn and Van Rensselaer represent new voices of an American art world in the process of defining a canon of fine art appreciation for a culturally adolescent country. Fort suggests that the positive reception of Bridgman’s

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

sketches was a reflection of a change in American tastes toward what Albert Boime has theorized as the “rough and incomplete” “generative sketch.”<sup>61</sup> Indeed, both contemporary critics suggested these art works exhibiting the sketch aesthetic were thought to convey the “first thoughts and impressions of an artist.”<sup>62</sup> A reaction against the highly detailed naturalism that reigned in Salons and French academies, the later nineteenth-century move toward impasto paint handling created “more personal, subjective expressions, referred to as Impressionist.”<sup>63</sup> According to Shinn, Bridgman had succeeded in “liberating his realistic style from the artificiality of Gérôme” and this success was a direct result of the atmospheric conditions of North Africa.<sup>64</sup> It should be noted, however, that the date of this 1880 show slightly predates the 1882 initiation of “Impressionism” as a distinct movement in the United States. However, the Impressionists were not the first to experiment with the use of impasto to depict atmospheric effects—the *juste-milieu* artists, such as eminent teachers of American artists, Charles Gleyre and Thomas Couture, had also been interested in exploring the effects of light.<sup>65</sup>

Moreover, although this monumental exhibition of his works took place in 1880, and initiated the apex of his artistic career, the vast majority of the works displayed had been created in the 1870s, slightly predating the 1874 Impressionist movement that Fort cites and about which Shinn and Van Rensselaer’s commentary reflects. For example, *The Siesta* was an oriental genre scene executed in a looser palette, but created in Bridgman’s studio. It does not exhibit any particular emphasis on the quality of light, but

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<sup>61</sup> Boime, Albert, *The Academy and French Painting in the Nineteenth Century*, as referenced by Fort, 325.

<sup>62</sup> See both Strahan, 71 and Van Rensselaer, 54.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Strahan, 70-71.

<sup>65</sup> Fort, 332; see also pages 338-339 on Impressionism and Bridgman.

rather employs an evocative handling of paint that emphasizes the luxuriousness of the sleeping subject's surroundings. The tactility of the painted surface encourages a similar desire to touch the silken fabrics that surround her, as well as the flesh that lies beneath them. The critics' emphasis on the impressionistic qualities of Bridgman's works is anachronistic and seems out of place within the context of the American art world. Moreover, with Bridgman's future admonishment of Impressionism as a meaning, his adoption of an impasto facture is odd.

In the 1870s and in the early 1880s, Bridgman seemed to switch modes of painting depending on the subject in question. The historical or archeological still called for a Gérôme-like approach, but Oriental genre scenes and smaller subjects, like nudes, heads, animals, landscapes, called for this pseudo-Impressionist style. Bridgman's works by 1887 would completely change from his teacher's tightly painted influence, a change typically attributed to his second North African trip that will be further discussed later. However, it seems that at the time of this major, solo show, Bridgman's works existed in a paradoxical, hybrid place – his salon machines having both popular support and bringing in a steady stream of American buyers, yet his experimental sketches garnering a more cultured appreciation. His approach to history emulated his master, but his fascination with the present, contemporary Arab world, looked quite different. Reflecting the trajectory of American Orientalist visual culture, Bridgman's works were split along the lines of refined, academic historical subjects that echoed imperial ideologies, while the modern Arab subjects were more sensual, loosely painted and evocative of foreign exoticness. The suggestion of immediacy in the gestural brushstrokes was a kind of “arm-

chair Orientalism” that reminded viewers of his direct access to the exotic subjects they consumed in the painting.

The 1887 Fine Art Society Exhibition in London, a year after his return from Algeria, emphasized the peculiarly split American reaction to Bridgman’s works. Entitled “A Glimpse of the East,” it proved exceptional, as the gallery had only had five other displays of Orientalist art in its past shows. With over two hundred works of art, the artist followed the same pattern as his successful New York exhibition by including mostly sketches and studies of the East and a few Breton scenes. He did decrease Egyptian scenes in favor of new Algerian works from 1885 and onwards. However, unlike Shinn and Van Rensselaer, British critics met the sketches with lukewarm response. *The Athenaeum* described his works as “as a number of rough and rather coarse sketches in bright, but neither choice nor refined colours, nor illustrations of art of a refined kind.”<sup>66</sup> The *Illustrated London News* used adjectives such as “bright and attractive” to describe the sketches, but desired in the paintings something “more exacting” and more finished.”<sup>67</sup>

Thus Bridgman’s sketchy aesthetic seemed to fascinate primarily American art critics, who viewed these loosely painted sketches as fulfilling the same need that Nochlin’s study highlights in Gérôme’s precise documentary recording. These sketches were interpreted as the direct impressions of an American artist who had immediate contact and seemingly impassioned access to the exotic Middle East. In the context of New York in the 1880s, Bridgman’s landmark solo show happened at the same crucial moment as the monumental shift in American collecting practices in New York that the

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<sup>66</sup> “Minor Exhibitions,” *The Athenaeum*, 1880, 423; as quoted in Fort, 312.

<sup>67</sup> “Art Exhibitions,” *Illustrated London News*, 1880, 395; as quoted in Fort, 311-312.

previous two chapters of this dissertation discussed. Bridgman's sketches proved another way of enacting this process of American observation and in a sense "possessing" the exotic Middle East. While such great spectacle surrounded the arrival of ancient Egyptian art to New York City's budding metropolis, Bridgman's loosely painted, sketches provided small, first-hand glimpses of the "modern" Middle East. By providing a peek into the harem, at the beauty of Oriental women and the mystery of Islamic religion, his works provided a more intimate, relatable perspective of Arab life that did not require the same interpretation as Ancient Egyptian artifacts. The paintings' brush strokes indexically reference Bridgman himself as creator and mediator of the subject they present. The authenticity of the subject was buoyed by the impressionistic features' reminder of his first hand experience to the Orient.

Bridgman's works thus provided access to a world primarily known through myth and legend—*The Arabian Nights* and Barnum-esque entertainment—and not the archeological, intellectual artifacts sought by New York's cultural authorities. By producing the illusion of direct observation through impasto handling, the sketchy finish of his works paradoxically functioned in the vein of empiricism and allowed American spectators to step into the exotic, Eastern world he presents. This contrast in sketch versus finished facture further coincides with Bridgman's subjects and the general treatment of Egypt as a source of weighty ancient history seems to require the gravity of an appropriately refined academic style.

Yet, the success of his refined, historical and archeological painting is also a reflection of the increasingly complex modern American art world. While *Cleopatra's Needle* and the collections of the Metropolitan Museum of Art were funded directly by

eminent figures like William H. Vanderbilt and John Pierpont Morgan, Bridgman's earliest patrons, the ones who purchased works like *Funeral of the Mummy* and *Procession of the Sacred Bull Apis*, came from a secondary class of wealthy Americans—not robber barons, but members of a growing wealthy, upper middle class. With Obelisks and other authentic monuments out of their price range, the highly finished, well researched, and European-sanctioned representation of antiquity proved the best option for demonstrating how their own values with the city's most elite and privileged classes. Though these paintings presented “visions” of Bridgman's interpretations of the ancient past, they also represented another level of possessing an “authentic” view of an exotic past. To the Americans who collected them, they united ancient and modern empires—simultaneously proving that a young American, middle-class artist could access, come to know, and ultimately conquer.

But Bridgman's success drew from more than his works and reputation. Though contemporary criticism certainly emphasized these elements, Van Rensselaer and Shinn also highlighted the role of his “American-ness” in the current climate of the 1880s art world. Van Rensselaer opens her article by stating:

Twenty years ago there was scarcely an American artist who could have been fairly judged without constant reference to the fact of his nationality. Our art was then to a great extent an isolated development, with rather arbitrary standards of its own. We were proud of our painters and of the peculiar sort of success they had achieved; but in estimating their ability we appealed to little beyond home competition and home approval. Of late years, however, our art has grown to mature stature, and is now amenable to the severest tests of merit. A whole generation of young American painters believe in the necessity of scientific training, and appeal to European criticism and to cosmopolitan standards of success. Mr. Bridgman may well stand as typical of this generation.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Van Rensselaer, 49.

Van Rensselaer recalls how earlier American art had been relegated as provincial, despite the merit of its attempts, and uses Bridgman's achievements to frame the changing and maturing state of the American art scene. That maturation, she says in essence, derives directly from both "scientific training" and an "appeal to European criticism" that one found most specifically by training in France.<sup>69</sup> The "cosmopolitan standards of success" she references is a direct allusion to the traditions of European institutions—the Salon, the *Ecole*, the Royal Academy—which represented a necessary break from the indigenous development of the "primitive" American art from the first half of the century. Bridgman's works, regardless of their subject matter, stand in for this entire phenomenon; they signify an American art world newly participating within and even championing the long-held practices of the European fine arts.

Shinn takes the issue of Bridgman's American heritage to another level by describing Bridgman's physical appearance. He describes him as having a "boyish air, a business-like gravity, and a direct way of looking you in the eyes."<sup>70</sup> Yet he curiously states that Bridgman had "one of those comely, dark faces that do not reveal nationality."<sup>71</sup> This significant detail allowed for tales of mistaken identity, with Shinn noting: "None made doubt that he was a French youth..." and that only his "imperfect" French clued in Bridgman's classmates to his American heritage, a heritage still at that time "rare and popular." The article later returns to Bridgman's American heritage by recalling his rejection of a French romantic tryst because his "American patriotic feeling prevailed" and led him to select an American wife.<sup>72</sup> To Shinn, Bridgman himself, not

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Strahan, 70.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

only as an artist but as a physical person, represents a hybrid identity between French and American. Defying clear ethnographic identification, Shinn's Bridgman has the ability to blend in and acclimate to any number of surroundings, perhaps even granting him access to the private spaces, populated by people with darker skin, portrayed in his Oriental genre scenes. He could assimilate in France, as long as he engaged in observation over conversation, but he could also easily play "investigative journalist" in his art. Put simply, Bridgman could inhabit both French and Algerian identities.

However, Shinn significantly reminds the reader that the artist never forgets his home; in school, his patriotic loyalty garnered him popularity and in life it brought him a dutiful wife. Bridgman's sketches thus reflected the documentary aspect of his travels and his ability to penetrate aspects of Eastern life still closed off to those artists too "Western" in their comportment. His history paintings a reflection of his French acculturation—but all of this was produced, specifically, for American education, refinement, and consumption. Bridgman enacts the American fantasy of imperialist power by becoming one with but outdoing the French. He then infiltrates, documents, and produces commodity images of the exotic lands under French colonial control. However, he remains always, explicitly, American.

Bridgman himself sought to capitalize on this reputation when, in 1890, he published his first book, *Winters in Algeria*. Written retrospectively, the book contains an amalgamation of the artist's experiences across multiple trips to the Middle East. Published serially in *Harper's* in 1888 and later as an independent book, *Winters in Algeria* came at a critical moment in the artist's career when, as Fort has suggested, his

popularity and success began to wane.<sup>73</sup> Bridgman's text includes a wide variety of information embedded within the adventurous narrative he unfolds for the reader. Its publication was noted by the press; one New York periodical characterized Bridgman's feat: "Skill with both pen and pencil has enabled Mr. Bridgman to give us a book which is satisfying in every respect." This article continued to claim that his "descriptions of life and incident" in Algeria, in addition to the more than fifty included illustrations, have "never been surpassed."<sup>74</sup>

The multiple chapters of *Winters in Algeria* were organized roughly thematically regarding Arab life in Algeria. The text reads as a personal account of his lived observations and interactions. Taken in correlation with his paintings, the book only strengthens the documentary lens of his Oriental genre scenes. Much of his text is devoted to describing the visual elements of the Algerian world, particularly the peculiar draped dress of the Arab woman and its mysterious but unfortunate effect of revealing only the eyes. By suggesting that the consequence of this mystery can lead to the disappointment of those allowed to see the women under the veils, Bridgman's texts adopt the same approaches his harem images that provided American access into areas only typically reserved for the Arab male. Exceptions to this documentary tone are the instances where Bridgman alludes to the more mythical legends of the Middle East. For example, recalling an interaction with a "little chap" who would always recite the tale of *Aladdin* from *The Arabian Nights* pronouncing "In a town" as "Na town," Bridgman claims that he links the "poor tailor" with the "old Arabian story of the 'Wonderful Lamp' and anecdotes and legends of the people in the midst of whom I have spent a good

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<sup>73</sup> Fort, 360-379.

<sup>74</sup> "New Books" *New York Herald*, 1890.

deal of time.”<sup>75</sup> Yet again, later in the text, the artist references a young woman to whom he gave the name of Aladdin’s princess Badroulboudour, a “charming and timid girl” who, by means of his imagination, could “impersonate Aladdin’s Princess.”<sup>76</sup> The artist illustrates her twice in the text, once as a portrait and again as a figure in the sketch of a garden at El-Biar. The allusion to “*The Arabian Nights*” references another mode of Orientalism, one of sheer fantasy and timeless exotic mythology. The story of Aladdin is of particular interest here as it tells the tale of an impoverished young man who finds a magic lamp and, with the aid of the *djinn* it contains, is able to marry a princess, defeat the evil royal vizier, and succeed the sultan in power and wealth. The literal rags-to-riches story mirrors a Cinderella fable that Bridgman’s own career as an artist reflects.

The whimsical allusions to a mythological “East” can be extended to Bridgman’s description of harem life. Describing the white marble colonnades and screens of woodwork that “were intended to seclude the women of the harem” he paints an evocative image of life on the inside:

What pictures of ease and luxury one can imagine; of beautiful young women, lounging and dozing on divans, watching the birds in the gardens luxuriant with orange and lime trees, mimosa, palms, and flowers, sipping their coffee and smoking the *narghileh*, the smoke curling lazily through the *mousharabieh* and climbing-honeysuckle and jasmine towards the dark blue sky.<sup>77</sup>

Images such as *An Oriental Beauty* directly correlate to Bridgman’s descriptions, depicting the harem girl wearing tones of white and gold. The effect of the textual mix of fantasy and with his carefully-observed descriptions offers incontrovertible proof of the veracity of his images.

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<sup>75</sup> Bridgman, Frederick A., *Winters in Algeria* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1890), 8.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

However, the text, unlike Bridgman's paintings, provides a more overt reminder of the artist's role as participant in the scenes he depicts and describes. Where Nochlin suggests that part of the effect of Gérôme's Orientalism is the apparent absence of the western hand as a mediating influence in the painted image,<sup>78</sup> Bridgman's text instead emphasizes his role as an agent in disseminating the information about the East that his readers encounter. The reciprocal relationship of the text and the images, both painted and engraved, speak to an American need for an artist who could deliver the perfect mix of academic realism and exotic fantasy presented as truth. It spoke to a public need for an "authentic" Orientalism that was directly observed and transcribed in legible, refined art objects in the same vein as the period's influx of authentic Egyptian and Assyrian objects.

Bridgman's first major book does more than function as a documentary record of his travels. As the article notes, the physicality of the book itself was striking: "even the cover is a thing of beauty, with its great golden palm branch crossed by a broad inscription in Arabic."<sup>79</sup> Recalling a gilded, medieval manuscript, the author suggests that *Winters in Algeria* is a book that one "would rather buy than borrow."<sup>80</sup> Building upon Bridgman's widely known success as a painter, the proliferation of his images through engravings and the illustrated publication of his accounts packaged in an exotic, attractive exterior, allows for a democratization of the artist's patronage beyond those who had been actively purchasing his paintings. Now all of the middle class could purchase and own a work by Bridgman – authenticated through his own words and accompanied by images engraved after his own hand.

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<sup>78</sup> Nochlin in Pinder, 69-86.

<sup>79</sup> "New Books" *New York Herald*, 1890.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

Despite the publication of his book, the 1890s were otherwise not as successful for the artist. Orientalism, it seems, fell out of favor amongst the collectors who had long been supporting Bridgman's works both abroad and more specifically in the United States. His genre scenes began to take in less and less money at auction and resulted in an increase in the number of works offered in both New York and across America more widely.<sup>81</sup>

This decrease in New York patronage likely encouraged the artist to take his works further out into the Mid-West, and in 1890, Bridgman contributed three hundred and four images to The Art Institute of Chicago with a significant percentage available for purchase. A show initiated by the Institute itself, it was of little critical importance except in bringing a large number of his works to a broader audience, but its placement, in two galleries on the fourth floor above several galleries of ancient art, and its catalogue indicated how views of the artist had shifted. The catalogue's introduction presented a narrative that, unlike more recent praise for his Impressionist facture, focused its attention on his academic history paintings: "In 1873 he made a trip to Cairo, going up the Nile as far as the second cataract. There he found such subjects as *The Burial of a Mummy* and *The Procession of the Bull Apis*."<sup>82</sup> A contemporary review confirmed this preference for his earliest Salon success, stating that the show includes "important salon canvases" as well as "hasty studies."<sup>83</sup> The same article further diminished his value claiming that his "most ambitious efforts fall just a degree or two below the measure of greatness."<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> Fort, 379-437.

<sup>82</sup> *The Art Institute of Chicago: Catalogue of Pictures and Studies of F.A. Bridgman. Exhibited in Rooms XIII and XVII, May 5 to June 2, 1890.* (Chicago: S.W. Cor. Michigan Ave and Van Buren St.)

<sup>83</sup> "Notable Art Collections," *The Daily Inter Ocean*, May 6, 1890, 5.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

His choice to extend his efforts beyond New York was also due in part to the less than positive reception his experimental work *The Pirate of Love* received when exhibited at the 1889 Exposition Universelle in Paris (Figure 15). The work depicted a young Arab woman who, in fighting off an attacker, stabs herself with his knife, preferring suicide to the shame of rape. Bridgman's work, a triptych, represented a sharp change in his typical subject matter. The image of carnal violence recalls Delacroix's form of Orientalist Romanticism, one that linked the exotic splendor of the East with passionate and baser instincts. While his French spectators unsurprisingly found the salacious subject more tolerable, Bridgman's American audiences loathed the piece.<sup>85</sup> This reaction has led scholars to believe that Bridgman's penchant for maternal imagery and more fully-dressed odalisques played directly to the tamer tastes of his American audiences, but while this may be partially the case, Bridgman's entire career suggests much more than the timidity of a crowd pleasing artist. Whether early Salon machines or his genre scenes of the 1880s, Bridgman's works still participated in and proliferated myths of an impenetrable harem life triumphantly entered by a white American male; of mystified, even primitive, Islamic practice; and of a Middle East that seemed to operate in a timeless zone, so anti-modern were its ways. The stark nudity of Gérôme's bathers and slaves was not the only way to convey the decadence of the Middle East. Bridgman's paintings represented both male fantasies of penetrating the harem, and the nation's fantasy of cultural superiority through the rhetoric of realism as demonstrated both by his interchangeable academic realism or impressionist study.

For Bridgman, the works of the 1890s and early twentieth century would present a conglomeration of his earlier subjects, mixed with new forays into portrait painting and

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<sup>85</sup> Fort, 341-342.

allegorical, sometimes neo-grec works. He revisited the subjects that had dominated his production in the 1880s, as in 1923's *Market Place*, yet he adopted an even more impressionistic working method and pastel color palette (Figure 16). Another late work, *Crossing an Oasis with the Atlas Mountains in the Distance, Morocco* from 1919, is completely pastel in its tone and so loosely painted that it is hard to believe it was executed by the same artist who produced the 1874 *Abu Simbel* painting with such exacting detail (Figure 17).

Rather than look to changes in the artist's work and life for an explanation of his declining fortunes, it is worth considering how Orientalism as a phenomenon resonated differently in the 1880s versus the two decades that would follow. Around 1880, New York was electrified by news from the art world that particularly emphasized the acquisition, excavation, and collection-building of Egyptian objects as representative of an ancient culture of the East. American cultural institutions could now own a piece of the history to which they previously had no claim; moreover they could participate in a competitive, imperialist race to remove and own material artifacts of colonial lands. By the 1890s, however, institutions like the Metropolitan Museum of Art had been established for over a decade. Though they continued to expand their collections and acquire new objects, the urgency and spirit of art had shifted elsewhere in the broader consciousness as the American Renaissance saw the discovery of Italian, Old Masters among other earlier movements.

During the American Renaissance, Bridgman's popularity declined. Perhaps a sign of the period's changing aesthetics, Bridgman shifted the focus of his work to compete with trends and returned to history paintings like the *Pharaoh's Army Engulfed*

*by the Red Sea* (Figure 18). The period experienced a boom in American artistic output that was distinctly characterized by a collective desire to emulate European standards. Almost prophetically, Bridgman reflected these trends before they took over the art world and consequently failed to stand out amongst the new tide of prolific American artists.

More than just coinciding with the American Renaissance, however, Bridgman's fall into obsolescence is tied up in the nation's need for images of an East that they knew increasingly more about. The need for genre scenes, as well as Bridgman's glimpses into contemporary Algerian life, grew less popular just as the position of American cultural authority increased. Once Egypt's exotic past could be owned and American artists could surpass their French instructors, the need to "know" the Oriental "other" through images such as Bridgman's decreased. This is not to say that Orientalism itself had decreased in popularity, but rather that its manifestation changed shape. With *Winters in Algeria* and his academic training under Gérôme, Bridgman's works were conceived of as part of an older tradition. While still a "fantasy," and a construction of Bridgman's vision of the East, these images had been desired instead for their ability to perform as reality. As the need for the "real" decreased the desire for a realistic fantasy increased. Bridgman's images were always delicately balanced between the illusion of real, observed, subjects and the imagined stereotypical glimpses of an exotic culture that American audiences so desired. The veracity of Bridgman's at once curious, informative, and voyeuristic gaze into the lives of the "others" and the supposedly tame narratives of possession it upheld had become passé as audiences embraced new sets of Eastern stereotypes. With Bridgman's fall from fashion, fascination with the East took another form, a form much more closely aligned with an air of mystery, legend and myth.

The turn of the century would also give rise to America's actual conquest of the Philippines. In 1899, the outbreak of the Philippine-American war signaled a full immersion into colonialist activities that had begun with American participation in the Spanish-American War in 1898. The 1870s and 1880s were a period of foundational experimentation for the United States, filled with the growing pains of a country that sought increasing power in an international climate characterized by competitive conquests. The United States hoped to expand through less explicitly, yet nonetheless deliberately imperialist activity in Latin America, the American West, Mexico and Alaska. I argue, then, that the art world absorbed this ambitious philosophy in its collecting endeavors and celebration of figures like Bridgman, whose personal success and exotic images satiated two growing needs: to know and to conquer.

In the end, Bridgman's legacy says as much about America as it does the Middle Eastern countries with which he was so enraptured. As Fort, Edwards, and Allen have all rightly suggested, Bridgman was genuinely at home in Algeria and sincerely admired of the country's culture, but that should not lead to the suggestion that his maternal scenes and relatively tame Oriental imagery served only documentary purposes. Bridgman's Orientalist works launched and sustained his career in America and, most specifically, in New York at a time when the role of the arts was actively linked to the state of nationalistic pride in the young country's cultural status. His richly painted canvases brought the Oriental woman and her forbidden lair into the homes of upper middle class Americans, allowing them to expand their imperialistic fantasies of "knowing" and "possessing." The illusion of the documentary lens functioned doubly in Bridgman's work, his sketches highlighting his "impressions" as recorded while in Algeria; his more

finished works recording the mastery of French academic traditions while presenting a lens of accuracy in detail as they “document” the East. Through Bridgman’s images the American upper middle class was able to participate in the competitive fantasies of cultural superiority, embodied in Bridgman’s true cosmopolitan nature. Bridgman fulfilled both the desire to document an East that the United States had no physical claim to and the desire to enact a European-style colonial position of authority. His works were balanced in between rhetorics of fantasy and reality for upper middle class patrons who modeled the imperial-scaled collecting habits of New York in the Gilded Age.

### **Fantasy Orient, Commercial Reality: Maxfield Parrish**

In considering the artistic legacy of Maxfield Parrish, Orientalism might not be the first designation that comes to mind. A brilliant painter whose works were widely exhibited, as well as a prolific commercial artist whose images captured the hearts of the American middle class, Parrish was and still remains a master of producing images of sheer fantasy and dream-like delight. Referred to condescendingly in the wake of mid-twentieth century American Modernism as the painter of “girls on rocks,” Parrish’s unmistakable ability to conjure up countless variations of whimsical realms intersects with the tail end of the imperialistic wave of American Orientalism I have defined.

Although not immediately associated with his *oeuvre*, images of an exotic East constitute a modest, but significant component of the artist’s work. First delving into the subject as an illustrator for the newly re-published *The Arabian Nights* in 1909 and then expanding into ubiquitous advertisements for Crane’s Chocolate Co., Parrish’s Orientalist output does not “document” the East or seek archeological accuracy in its settings. His penchant

for producing imaginary scenes with an academically trained, high degree of naturalism allowed him to produce an almost surreal variant of hyper-realism: a super-saturated, over-pigmented contrast of rich jewel tones against glowing flesh. This startling effect encouraged broad consumption of his Orientalist fantasies, and this popularity quite literally brought a new very specific, image of the East into the living rooms of the American masses.

Two scholars remain as most influential voices on Parrish's work. Sylvia Yount most recently reconsidered the artist's work in her essay accompanying the 1999-2000 exhibition of his work,<sup>86</sup> while Coy Ludwig presented the first major examination into the life and work of Parrish in 1973.<sup>87</sup> Both works are significant to my study; I rely on Ludwig's careful biography and Yount's conceptual considerations, but neither author explicitly explores the Orientalist input that I argue played a significant role in forming his career. Few other scholars have examined Parrish, consigning him to the category of illustrator or commercial artist. A turn-of-the-century Thomas Kinkade, Parrish's once wildly popular images, with some exceptions, have fallen into art historical obscurity, relegated to the realm of ephemeral visual culture.

Born Frederick Parrish on July 25, 1870, Maxfield Parrish, as he later renamed himself after his maternal grandmother, had a rich and cultured upbringing. His ancestors included the English sea captain Edward Parrish, who brought the family to the United States and settled them in Baltimore. The family also had strong Quaker roots in the famous author Caleb Pusey, who worked with William Penn on the colonization of

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<sup>86</sup>Yount, Sylvia, *Maxfield Parrish: 1870- 1966*. Her work is the first in a long time to critically examine both Parrish's fine and commercial art endeavors as well as examine the social impact of his most widely popular pieces.

<sup>87</sup>Ludwig, Coy, *Maxfield Parrish*, is largely biographical and full of major details that chronicle the development of Parrish's career from its earliest stages until his death.

Pennsylvania. Ancestrally reaching back to the origin of the country, the Parrishes were a thoroughly American family that wanted to raise their son in a cultured environment. Stephen Parrish transmitted his love of making art to his young son; both parents exposed Maxfield to fine art, literature and music. As Coy Ludwig recounts, even at the young age of three years old, Maxfield was given a sketchbook, embossed with "Fred Parrish – Christmas – 1873" and filled with his father's "elaborate and humorous drawings of monkeys and other animals for the amusement and instruction of the young boy."<sup>88</sup> In order to escape from the austerity of Quaker living, Stephen Parrish fostered a lifetime hobby of drawing that would shape the output of his son, who would become America's premier illustrator of fantasy subjects.

The senior Parrish, then owner of a stationery shop in Philadelphia, gave his son his earliest art lessons. The two reviewed basic exercises and favored observation of objects in nature. The young Parrish's skills deepened through a formative two-year-long family trip to England, France and Italy in 1884, when the artist was fourteen. Personal correspondence between the young artist and his beloved grandmother, whose maiden name of Maxfield he would take as his own, indicates that the family kept a lively schedule filled with opera performances, museum visits and tours of cathedrals, ruins and important cultural sites. In one letter Parrish indicates his father's passion for painting: "Mama and I are writing and Papa is painting." In another, Maxfield describes a trip to the Louvre: "This morning Papa and I took a walk through the long picture gallery at the Louvre, and I enjoy the pictures more and more each time I see them."<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Ludwig, 11.

<sup>89</sup> Ludwig, 12.

In 1888 with the two-year tour of Europe behind him, Parrish enrolled in Haverford College with the aspiration of becoming an architect. The artist later remembered how the college itself served as a magical place of learning and inspiration. In a whimsical tenor that reflects his art and indicates his idiosyncratic worldview, he recalled:

There may have been precious little art around, but there was surely a wealth of material for making it. For all there was Haverford, and the sheer beauty of the place was an influence and an education hard to equal... Lying under those copper beeches, when we should have been doing something else, looking into the cathedral windows above did a lot more for us than contemplation of the Roman Colosseum.<sup>90</sup>

By 1892, however, Parrish had abandoned architecture and enrolled as a student at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, studying under Robert Vonnoh and Thomas P. Anschutz. Despite the high level of training, Parrish would still count his father as his most influential instructor and for two years father and son shared a summer studio in Massachusetts. It was in this period, the early 1890s that the younger Parrish began to see popular success. His first commission came in 1894 for the *Old King Cole* mural at the Mask and Wig Club of the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia. With that success he set up a studio in Philadelphia where he worked until 1898, when he famously moved up to his custom-made residence, “The Oaks” with his then-wife, Lydia.

Prior to relocating from Philadelphia and just shortly after his marriage, Parrish went abroad for a summer tour of Europe. Despite the relatively short length, the impact was even greater on his mature and educated eyes than his childhood trip had been. Correspondence between the artist and his wife recall the vivid details of his impressions of the modern European art world of the 1890s:

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<sup>90</sup> Ludwig, 13.

Here I am in Paris at last! And what a Paris it is: there seems a very magic in the name! How often it is that places we have visited in childhood seemed so grand and vast, and when seen again in later years have seemed so contracted as though something were missing -- but not so with Paris. Never has anything appeared to me so vast, so magnificent... I could not have come upon all of this at a time when my appreciation was more keen and my eyes more open to let nothing escape them. I feel that I am seeing so much more than other people here: that they are missing half of it.<sup>91</sup>

However, Parrish did not enjoy the exhibitions of more modern art both in Paris and in London. After visiting the salons on the Champs de Mars he said: "The old salon is simply shocking. Of the Avenues and Avenues of pictures there is not one good thing: not one." He did however, relish the number of Old Master paintings on view at the Louvre, among other places. After visiting the Louvre he said: "One had but to turn and there were Titians, Rembrandts, Botticellis, Correggios, van Eycks, all together, in one glorious mosaic of richness."<sup>92</sup>

Parrish left Europe with a renewed view of the art world: a refreshing encounter with the mastery of the great European artists, a chance to experience the beauty of European cities, and, crucially, a taste of the modernism it was now producing. After exploring the current production of artists in London, Parrish made a telling, almost prophetic remark about the place of American art in the environment he just observed: "I firmly believe now that America will in time have modern exhibitions to show that will outclass any on this side of the water; it will take a long time to be sure, but she has not as much to contend against as have England and France, though she has much more to learn. I trust I have deposited my last shilling on modern exhibitions here..."<sup>93</sup> Thus, despite the thriving current production of European artists, Parrish believed that the tide of European,

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<sup>91</sup> Parrish correspondence as quoted in Ludwig, 15.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

and specifically French and English, dominance of the art world would soon pass. The ever-expanding American art scene was the future and it would build upon the work done in the transatlantic nations that continued to serve as both influences and competitors, according to his comment. This perspective is uncannily telling; it strikes at the heart of the place of American art during the 1890s, but also speaks to the niche that Parrish's unique brand of art could fill. The works he would produce from the 1890s on would occupy a place of nostalgic fantasy, a celebration of the glory and beauty of European-influenced art, architecture and landscapes. Yet he coded that nostalgia in a distinctly American vocabulary of mass-produced commercial output, tied to American products and available in American stores.

After 1896, with the critical success of his painting *The Sandman*, Parrish continued to enjoy a steady stream of financial and critical success. In 1898 he finally moved up to his beloved New Hampshire and joined the vibrant Cornish Colony of artists who, following the lead of sculptor Augustus St. Gaudens, met frequently, put on plays, and enjoyed a lively atmosphere of artistic collaboration. As Ludwig claims, Parrish's main interest in relocating was to work in an environment that provided a quiet, private atmosphere.<sup>94</sup> Moving away from city life allowed Parrish to be surrounded by the rich landscape of northern New England; nature had been a constant source of inspiration throughout his artistic career. Parrish would move a few times more, traveling to Arizona after a tuberculosis diagnosis and again to Italy in 1903 for the commission of illustrating Edith Wharton's *Italian Villas and Their Gardens*, but his permanent residence would remain at The Oaks until his death in 1966.

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

Thus, it was a mixture of these varied experiences that constituted the singular appeal of Maxfield Parrish. He grew up with a mixture of self- or family-taught fine art skills, a firmly American background but meaningful and thorough exposure to European culture, a place in the city of Philadelphia and a love of the rural peace of New Hampshire. He encompasses all that was relevant about the hybrid place that constituted young American art world - competitive yet connected to its unique indigenous qualities. Parrish was abroad at crucial moments; without knowing it, he must have seen works by Gérôme and even Bridgman. His knowledge of American expatriate artists and probable communication with them must have been strong. Yet, despite this knowledge he continued to work primarily in the vein of illustration and commercial commissions. It begs the question: was there something about Parrish's worldview, his artistic mission and irreplaceable style that were particularly suited for his chosen media?

One of Parrish's earliest and most successful ventures was his work in book illustration: *Mother Goose in Prose*, written by L. Frank Baum, the author of *The Wizard of Oz*. Parrish's fourteen black and white illustrations were so well-received that the text received several editions and early versions became sought after collector's items. This success would lead him to a number of commissions including *Knickerbocker's History of New York*, *The Golden Age*, *Dream Days*, *Poems of Childhood*, *Italian Villas and the Gardens*, and finally *The Arabian Nights* in 1909. At the same time as his book illustration projects, Parrish was under exclusive contract with *Collier's* magazine, where he produced a number of magazine covers in addition to his illustrations. Between 1904 and 1910 Parrish produced two of his most magnificent series, *The Arabian Nights* and *Greek Mythology*.

*The Arabian Nights* consisted of twelve images originally published serially in Colliers. In 1904, Charles Scribner purchased the rights to the images and presented them, along with a new cover and title page design, as part of the 1909 newly revised version for a childhood audience. Each of Parrish's twelve illustrations depicts a key moment in their respective narratives. The revised book selected only a few of the many legendary tales, and its introduction even acknowledged the artist's role in its inspiration: "Of the two hundred and sixty-four bewildering, unparalleled stories, the true lover can hardly spare one... We have chosen some of the most delightful... Some too that chanced to appeal particularly to the artist."<sup>95</sup> Stylistically, these images are characterized by the artist's typical palette of rich and vibrant hues. Most feature solitary or small groups of figures set amongst either natural or architectural settings. So successful were Parrish's illustrations that the book soon became a coveted collector's item amongst adult audiences.

But why were these particular images so significant? What powerful effect did Parrish's imaginative renderings bring to the legendary tales? Taking one of the more spectacular works as an example, *Prince Agib* represents the overall hybrid nature of Parrish's illustrations: at once pure fantasy yet rendered in a carefully constructed mode of hyperrealism (Figure 19). In this image Agib occupies the center of the composition. Looking off to the left out of the picture plane, he steps with his opposite leg toward a perfect circular pond. Framed by two roughly symmetrical arrangements of flowering bushes and human-scaled vases, the Prince is perfectly emphasized to dramatic effect. The orange glow of sunset in the background provides the image with exceptional

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<sup>95</sup>Wiggin, Kate D. S, Nora A. Smith, and Maxfield Parrish, *The Arabian Nights: Their Best-Known Tales*, (New York: Scribner's, 1993), v.

warmth, and the diagonal tree trunk that slices the sunlit sky suggests verdant surroundings. Parrish creates a lush, Eden-like setting that is impossibly ideal, but made believable by the inclusion of minute details that suggest direct observation. A hallmark of his work, Parrish made sure to cast the shadow of foliage on the proper vases; similarly the pool's reflection ripples in warm tones of orange except where it cools into a dark blue shadow of the prince. *Aladdin and the Genie* features a similar attention to the perfect glass-like rendering of water, and *The Landing of the Brazen Boatman* depicts a stunningly beautiful pattern of light glistening through the imaginary surrounding foliage on larger than life columns (Figures 20, 21). Parrish's details, although recreated carefully through staged tableaux in his studio, provide the illusion of direct observation. Operating in a vein quite similar to Nochlin's description of French Orientalist paintings, especially her discussion of Gérôme's impossibly perfect calligraphic tiles, Parrish's images convey a sense of timelessness, and a lush and foreign exoticism that still suppresses the visibility of the artist's hand.<sup>96</sup> Moreover, the artist's glass-like facture was made even flatter by the printing process. The mechanical printing process effectively replaced any physical indication of the artist's mediating hand. The image then, is not framed by the reference to its manufacture, instead it is more closely connected to its narrative context. Viewers had direct access to the immaculately rendered image, part of the *Arabian Nights* but "real" in its denial of constructed artifice.

However, the subject of these scenes from legend and myth seems at odds with the illusionistic feat of Parrish's carefully constructed images. The dichotomy between real and fantasy is more complicated than it seems. The book's introduction problematizes this tension when it tells its readers:

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<sup>96</sup> Nochlin in Pinder, 69-87.

When a child has once read of Prince Agib, of Gulnare or Periezade, Sinbad or Codadad, in this or any other volume of its kind, the magic will have been instilled into the blood, for the Oriental flavor in the Arab tales is like nothing so much as magic. True enough they are a vast storehouse of information concerning the manners and customs, the spirit and life of the Moslem East... but beyond and above the knowledge of history and geography thus gained, there comes something finer and subtler as well as something more vital. The scene is Indian, Egyptian, Arabian, Persian but Baghdad and Balsora, Grand Cairo, the Silver Tigris, and the blooming gardens of Damascus though they can be found indeed on the map, live much more truly in that enchanted realm that rises o'er "the foam of perilous seas in faery lands forlorn."<sup>97</sup>

Thus, before ever seeing an image of Parrish's "real-yet-fantasy world," the reader is told that the contents of the book provide a more vivid and even more accurate picture of Middle Eastern lands than a physical, rhetorically empirical, map. Parrish's seemingly observed realities present utopian, constructed worlds in which the reader could not only vividly imagine the legend but project him or herself into the time and space of the scene. The book's popularity and commodity status seems only natural: in owning the book one was able to possess the legend and images of, "all the glamour of the unknown," as the original European translator Sir Richard Burton called it.<sup>98</sup>

As Coy Ludwig rightly suggests, books are inherently different objects than magazines.<sup>99</sup> Magazines, even if finely printed, were ephemeral and meant to be discarded. Books could be treasured, collected and even passed-down, as Bridgman had intended with *Winters in Algeria*. Owning a copy of *The Arabian Nights* allowed a large middle-class audience to possess an actual object – a physical keepsake – that much like the "cave of wonders" it describes, could unlock the exotic mystery and other-worldly beauty of the Middle East. For a class of patrons who could not afford paintings by

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<sup>97</sup> Wiggin, *Arabian Nights*, vi.

<sup>98</sup> Burton quoted in the introduction to *Arabian Nights*, vi.

<sup>99</sup> Ludwig, 53.

Gérôme or perhaps even Bridgman, Parrish's printed imagery produced the illusion of smooth, academic forms reproduced in brilliant detail. Although not physical paintings, their close compositional affinities and denial of painted texture allowed them to function as suitable replacements.

From the success of his book illustration, Parrish continued on to produce a number of advertisement designs, the most successful and important being his three-year collaboration with Clarence Crane. The Ohio candy manufacturer and inventor of the "Life Saver" initially contacted Parrish in 1915 to see if he could design a logo for the company, but the success of his elegant design led to a commission for a series of special Christmas chocolates that were to be housed in elegant wooden boxes with illustrations along the external, top lid. Crane selected the subjects; he desired explicitly "exotic" scenes and his first choice was the Persian philosopher and mathematician Omar Khayyam. Parrish agreed to the deal and went on to produce the first image, taking the title from Khayyam's literary work of poetry *Rubaiyat* (Figure 22).

The collaboration marks an important moment in both Parrish's development as an artist and his popular reception amongst the American middle class. From preliminary correspondence, Parrish seemed to initially conceive of *Rubaiyat* as an advertisement; he describes his vision of a scene with "late afternoon golden light" and asks explicitly if he should include a box of Crane's Chocolates within the imagined setting.<sup>100</sup> The final result took a surprising turn however, and included no chocolates, no reference to Crane, nor any lettering at all. Crane decided instead to include the product details on a separate sheet located inside the lid of the box. Left uninterrupted, Parrish's image was located along the top wooden structure and framed by wood on all four sides of the lid. Parrish

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<sup>100</sup> Parrish correspondence as cited in Ludwig, 133.

emphasized the rectangular form of the box and placed Khayyam on one end, cross-legged and reciting his lyric poetry to a beautiful young woman who sits directly across. The two figures serve as bookends to a dramatic landscape background; a verdant tree sits above Khayyam, as his famous poem describes, and a mountainous landscape is revealed at the back. Idyllic and sunlight, the scene presents a utopian, Eastern-ized pastoral scene. Although Parrish was unhappy with the end result, as he believed the printing process had altered the color scheme's saturation, Crane prophetically anticipated the image's popular success and ordered two-thousand prints of the original-sized painting that could be available for purchase by customers who bought his specialty confections.

Crane chose the next two themes as well. The second subject, following suit, was none other than *Cleopatra*, referred to at the opening of this chapter. The third and final subject would be *The Garden of Allah*, which would prove to be Parrish's second most successful artistic production of his entire career (Figure 23). When Crane informed Parrish of his second choice, the artist was still pleased by his selection and their working arrangement. He responded to Crane saying: "Cleopatra is welcome here, or any lady of history of undoubted charm. She was not particularly good looking, they tell me, but had a 'way with her'... all I care about is something that can hold color and be made effective."<sup>101</sup> And what Parrish would devise was an unusual representation of the Egyptian queen that as Ludwig receptively points out resembled "silent-film exotica" rather than his typical fairy-tale codified subjects.<sup>102</sup> The boxes became increasingly ornate; the 1917 edition would feature a cloth of imported French gold paper on the side

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<sup>101</sup> Parrish correspondence as quoted in Ludwig, 134.

<sup>102</sup> Ludwig, 134.

panels, adding a luxurious interior fit for Parrish's seductive queen as she herself adorned the top lid. The chocolates would top out at a price of five dollars per pound, but the Parrish collaboration was so successful that Crane hoped to lock him into several more years of designs.

In the end, however, Parrish would execute only his last design, *The Garden of Allah*, citing his growing frustration with depicting historical or legendary subjects and a greater desire to explore thematic, anti-narrative scenes. In a letter to Crane he explains:

To tell you the truth I am not very strong on subject pictures, historical affairs, like Cleopatra or Omar, I would much rather do things like ideal gardens, spring, autumn, youth, the spirit of the sea, the joy of living (if there is such a thing) and what is more I think the vast public likes them better when the artist can get his idea 'across' to borrow from Wordsworth..they are the hardest things in the world to do and consequently the most interesting...<sup>103</sup>

*The Garden of Allah* already reflects Parrish's new direction. The subject comes from a widely-read 1904 novel by Robert Hitchens that had also been made into a successful play and silent film in 1916. This typical tale of love found among the wild, mysterious and unbridled passion of the Middle East reflected a different kind of exotic Orientalism than the previous two subjects he had represented, one that drew more directly from historical sources and represented both education and political power. Ironically, it is this work that is the least exotic of the three Crane designs; with no bare-chested rowers, seductive Egyptian queens, or overtly Orientalist settings, the scene's Eastern subject is indicated only by the women's headdresses. Instead, a group of young maidens sits idyllically in front of a perfectly still reflecting pool. Its glass-like surface echoes the triangular shape of the women, which bears a strong resemblance to the Parthenon's "Three Graces." As two of the three converse, the third woman reclines and gazes at her

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<sup>103</sup> Parrish correspondence to Crane as published in Ludwig, 133-134.

own reflection; all three seem to be dwarfed and enclosed by the artist's characteristic, life-sized amphora vases and a dense background of dizzying foliage reflecting a bright yellow light.

While Ludwig rightly points out the image's less Orientalist appearance, it seems too simple to suggest that, in the mind of middle class viewers, these women would not be read as Eastern.<sup>104</sup> The image of the women, although outside, but grouped together with only a female audience, in a setting so overwhelmingly filled with foliage that it provides no room for escape, suggests that the heritage of the harem cannot be far removed. Considering the American preoccupation with myths of the harem, as demonstrated by the popularity of Bridgman's *Flower of the Harem*, an image of a group of only women in even the vaguest of Eastern themes would resonate with these preexisting discussions of harem life in the East. Moreover, an image like Gérôme's *After the Bath*, which would have been known through engraved reproductions, carries with it the same idyllic setting of an all female space that allowed for a display of flesh and, by extension, physical vulnerability (Figure 24). *The Garden of Allah*, despite its literary ties, promotes the continuing myth of a timeless, peaceful, female-inhabited space. Like Gérôme's painting, the classically proportioned bodies, the attention to light and the reflecting water in Parrish's illustration create a "real" space in that despite its idealization it is believably inhabitable. However in *The Garden of Allah*, the title does not set this "real" scene within any specific geographic context; the image of the harem and of the exotic East is only implied. Parrish comes closest here to his anti-narrative desire, producing a veritable moment frozen in time. As he predicted, the public would respond positively to it.

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<sup>104</sup> Ludwig, 138-141.

Again, Parrish found the reproductions inadequate, but the public did not agree. To accommodate the extraordinary public demand, Crane outsourced the production to the House of Art, a New York City fine arts publishing and distributing firm. This crucial moment in Parrish's career demonstrated to the artist that he could successfully make a career out of selling art prints without the anchor of a commercial product or commodity to push it. Prior to this collaboration, Parrish's commercial imagery was always tied to a product. With the success of his collaboration of Crane, Parrish created an audience large enough to sustain the sale of his imagery as art prints independent of a larger commercial purpose. Through *The Garden of Allah*, *Cleopatra* and *Rubaiyat*, Parrish produced such a public demand for his imagery that he could take his career down an uncharted course of artistic freedom.

But what was so special about *The Garden of Allah* or any of the works he produced for Crane? Aesthetically, all three images share similarities with his *Arabian Nights* illustrations. All images were hyper-real, super-saturated, and intimately detailed. Yet the Crane chocolate designs were uniquely different because these images of fantasy, mystery and exotic beauty were tied to a product that could physically satiate a sense of desire and longing. Chocolates, if not exotic, are decadent and indulgent, and their adorned commemorative boxes only enhanced their appearance of decadence. This collaboration presents a direct correlation between the pleasure of literally consuming the contents of the box and the pleasure of visually consuming the exotic subjects of Parrish's designs. The same visual effects of Parrish's *Arabian Nights*, the illusion of direct observation translated onto an idyllic world that was only too real, was taken to a new dimension by the interactive process of a literal, physical satiation of desire through

the process of eating. Parrish's images looked so "real" in their believable worlds that they produce a viable fantasy in which the product seems to come directly from exotic locales represented and is specially presented to consumers for their own pleasure.

No matter its level of Orientalism, *The Garden of Allah* must be considered the pivotal work that would allow the artist to produce his most well-known critical success of *Daybreak* in 1922 (Figure 25). I argue that Parrish's particular brand of eastern exoticism produced a popular demand for his fantasy imagery. His Orientalism is the truly commercial commodification of academic painting strategies into indulgent functional, if not indulgent, middle-class objects.<sup>105</sup> The vocabulary of desire and the interest in the "East" as an unattainable "other" had been set in motion by the robber barons and even the upper middle class patrons of the Gilded Age, but at the beginning of the twentieth-century, Parrish's illustrations brought the phenomenon to a comparatively enormous and more diverse audience.

The phenomenon of Orientalism served as a turning point in the art, archaeology, women's rights and political worlds that characterized the Orient in a different fashion. Although my interest in this phenomenon is focused on events prior to the 1920s, it is important to note that Parrish did not abandon Orientalist subjects after the critical success of his "women on rock" images in the early twenties or with his eventual turn to landscape imagery at the close of his career.<sup>106</sup> As part of a several year collaboration

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<sup>105</sup> Coy Ludwig also makes a point to compare Parrish's style to academic painting. His discussion, however, simply posits the compositional similarity and does not unpack the implications of the stylistic similarities.

<sup>106</sup> The idea of Parrish being the painter of "women on rocks" was actually started by him. He famously admitted that he was tired of the subject and that he could if he so desired continue to create these wildly popular images and rake in the financial benefits. The phrase would be used again during the revival of Parrish's work in the 1960s; it is both intended as a reference to his subjects as pure and nostalgic and simultaneously derivative and repetitive. This would lead to his eventual turn to landscape imagery towards the end of his life.

with the Edison Mazda Lamp Division of General Electric, Parrish produced some of his most popular imagery for their company calendars. Starting in 1918 with *Dawn*, the high quality reproductions were avidly removed from their original settings and framed in houses across America. This collaboration allowed Parrish to continue benefitting financially from the success of the commercial endeavor, while still exploring subjects thematically without a dictated narrative or historical subject. The popularity of these images was staggering; sold in three different sizes the smallest calendar image sales started at 400,000 copies in 1919 and rose to 1,500,000 copies in 1925 – Parrish truly became a household name.<sup>107</sup>

Starting in 1920, the calendar images were based around the idea of the history of light. After making an image of Prometheus with fire as a light source in *Primitive Man*, Parrish was asked to produce another representation of *Cleopatra* that would demonstrate the archaic state of Egyptian lighting. The end result was his 1921 calendar image simply called *Egypt* (Figure 26). Utilizing a number of his typical tropes, the image features a Cleopatra-like, Pharaonic female figure in the background gazing in strict profile into the distance. In front of her is Parrish's reoccurring androgynous, preadolescent figure, gazing at his or her own reflection while a semi-nude attendant plays an oversized and stylized harp. All three figures sit under a row of artificial lights that cast off a dim glow, while winged Egyptian deities flank the Edison Mazda logo to the right and left. The image recalls an earlier 1903 illustration the artist did for the children's periodical "St. Nicholas" that was also titled *Egypt*; this image illustrated the tale "The Three Caskets" and depicted an Egyptian male artisan in a moment of reverie as he looks at his ongoing relief sculpture (Figure 27). The figure's severity, in its profile and through its adoption of

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<sup>107</sup> Statistics as quoted in Ludwig, 126.

the typical position of Egyptian sculpture, is echoed in both the later figures for Edison Mazda and his Crane's chocolate *Cleopatra*. The 1903 *Egypt* also features an androgynous young nude, yet reverses the youth's position, and suggests an almost Praxiteliean pose with the serpentine curve of the elongated spine—in doing so, the image invokes Greek sculptural forms in addition to its Egyptian sculpture references.

In his 1903 *Egypt*, Parrish thus depicts an Egypt free of decadent exoticism and instead places the subject within the realm of art history affirmed by overt allusions to modes of sculptural representation. Clearly tinged with a greater degree of exoticism, Parrish's subsequent 1921 *Egypt* for the Edison Mazda Company reverses the nude figure so viewers no longer contemplate the form of her body but instead catch a glimpse of a presumably female, adolescent nude gazing upon her own beauty. Still providing for the viewer a scene filled with exotic details, the bodies and composition are solid and linear, less whimsical and imagined. It seems that when faced with a strict adherence to history, a canon of art objects he had visited in person and studied, the artist was more limited in the creation of an evocative, imagined space. Resorting to a canon of tropes and a severity of line and form, his images of "Egypt" recall a tension familiar in the American perception of Egyptian motifs – the culture could be exotic, yet solid. It seems permanent and representative of a concrete, authentic piece of time, and earlier archaeological findings made Egyptian cultural activities seem familiar enough to American audiences. Consequently, it seems Parrish was less enthusiastic; his brand of "true" Orientalism rather than a type of Neo-Classicism was a much more exoticized fantasy that was freed from the constraints of any overtly empirical, archaeological or historical knowledge. This distinction is important to note because it reflects the tastes of the broad American

public in the early twentieth century who avidly consumed *his* idiosyncratic brand of eastern fantasy.

In one more Orientalist effort, Parrish would follow his 1921 calendar with his *Lamp Seller of Baghdad* in 1923, (Figure 28) a subject based only loosely on any kind of text. Here, Parrish was able to create a lively image of a beautiful young woman inspecting the lamp of a crouching merchant in shadow. A number of turbaned male figures stand in the back in front of a glistening white city. Filled with his vibrant hues and characteristically blue sky, the image appears to fit more naturally into Parrish's comfort zone. The figures in the foreground assume more natural stances, while the female customer who inspects the lamp adopts an almost lyric contrapposto pose, her outstretched hand placing the small, golden lamp in the foreground. Undoubtedly this image recalls the whimsy and the success of his *Arabian Nights* illustrations, most obviously the allusion to a lamp that could be "magic." In a brilliant advertising gesture, the potential for magic and fantasy in that lamp becomes directly connected to, and compositionally echoed in, the true magic of American ingenuity in Edison's light bulb located immediately above. Removed from any allusions to rarified historical subject matter, this last major Orientalist subject embodies Parrish's whimsical approach to images loaded with symbolic content. Baghdad, Egypt, or any other Eastern location was a mysterious place that reinforced contemporary views on American superiority and Eastern inferiority, here expressed in the language of fantasy with the appearance of viable, realism.

Thinking about Parrish's success as a producer of Orientalist imagery in the same vein as academic Orientalism elucidates the success of *Daybreak*. Sylvia Yount does

excellent work examining the multifaceted appeal of the image amongst its broad audience.<sup>108</sup> With particular attention to the avid female collectors, the role of the liberated New Woman of the 1920s and its ties to Parrish's young female nude subjects has been rightly suggested and thoroughly proven. However, the striking compositional similarities between *Daybreak* and *The Garden of Allah* seem too close to ignore. As suggested above and by others, *The Garden of Allah* is much less overtly Orientalist than his other Crane illustrations but also recalls images of the harem now deeply ingrained in American culture. While *Daybreak* also features two female figures, one nude and androgynous, the other clothed and suggestively outstretched, the dramatic setting is markedly different than *The Garden of Allah*. The two female figures placed safely within the solid linear columns, have seemingly limitless, open blue space to explore.

The image is simultaneously full and completely empty; with no names, no narrative, no time, location, space, history, or myth, the image acts as a mirror in which anyone can see whatever they project into it reflected back.<sup>109</sup> This is the mastery of Maxfield Parrish; his supernatural ability to produce a universally legible vocabulary of fantasy, yet a fantasy that has its roots in something that is believable, something that viewers could imagine inhabiting. *The Garden of Allah* is the image whose popularity is second only to *Daybreak*'s empty mirror effect. The images share many properties, but remain distinct because *Daybreak* is an image free of explicit signification with no names, titles, specific geography or mythology beyond the book or film that many might

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<sup>108</sup>Yount, 100-108.

<sup>109</sup> I am not the first person to point out the vapid quality of this image. Sylvia Yount's analysis of *Daybreak* still reigns as the best and most thorough as she examines the complex signifying power that the image had as well as considers the overwhelming popularity of the image for female audiences. At present I do not wish to consider the image further as it belongs to a time period where I believe a change in the perception of the Orient as well as a perception of Modernism colored the reception of Parrish's images. This is related but a slightly different conversation, for a different study.

have only heard about, it depends upon the preexisting fantasy of harem-life as a potential foil—either for the lives of free-thinking modern Americans, or a nostalgic voyeuristic gaze into the projected fiction of a forbidden, inaccessible place.

One might argue that the nature of his Orientalist subjects is simply a hallmark of Parrish's aesthetic style. However, even if this artist only produces images of fantasy, the stylistic similarities between the commercial imagery and mass-produced prints he made and the canon of fine Orientalist art are undeniable—whether or not he intended them to be. The motivations of each form are different yet the end results are the same. Academic Orientalist painters produced convincing fantasies of an unknown they claimed access to, that had the appearance of being real. While Parrish had no claim of knowing his subjects, his facture implied that knowledge, and the sheer attainability of these commercial images and objects promoted their enthusiastic consumption. For example, the works of not only Gérôme, but also Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema serve as an apt comparison. Tadema's *Cleopatra and Antony* actually represents the famous queen in a nearly identical composition to Parrish's (Figure 29). She reclines on her barge with a similar layer of flowers, and the only key differences are the inclusion of Antony and the placement of Cleopatra's attendant. Moreover, Alma-Tadema's canvas is filled with attention to intimate details; the spots on her cheetah skinned throw, the sheen of her draped canopy, and the delicate throws of her diaphanous dress are all reminiscent of Parrish's detailed handling of surface detail. The same can be said for any number of academic works, including Gérôme's bath scenes with their glass-like pools of water that reflect his subjects and even Bridgman's early attention to the vibrant sky of the Orient

and detailed handling of Oriental dress. Parrish operates in this vein, and so his perfect surfaces reinforce the veracity of the scene.

Furthermore, when looking to the artist's earlier commercial endeavors and illustrations his style was decidedly different from his later works. For example his *Reluctant Dragon*, an illustration from "Dream Days," is as detailed as one might expect from the artist, but is decidedly more decorative (Figure 30). The serpentine curve of the intellectual dragon's neck and tail are stylized to the point of whimsy, and the faded, muted tones of his young companion comparatively flat and decorative. An even more pronounced example of his ornamental quality can be seen in his earliest illustrations for "Mother Goose in Prose." *The Man in the Moon* and *Humpty Dumpty* were both executed in black and white and demonstrate a two-dimensional, graphic quality that contrasts sharply to the style of the more illusionistic *Arabian Nights*, the Crane's Chocolates commissions, and the Edison Mazda images (Figures 31, 32). No less successful, Parrish's earlier images functioned well in this different mode of illustration because the desire to inhabit and own the fairy-tale subjects they depicted was less of a political, racial or imperialistic issue. When documenting the exoticism of eastern myth, lore, locations and people, the graphic and two-dimensional was replaced by a hyper-realist lens that explicitly elicited the fantastical projections of thousands of Americans alike.

### **Orientalist Realities/Orientalist Fantasies: Bridgman and Parrish**

Frederick Arthur Bridgman and Maxfield Parrish represent two ends on the spectrum of American Orientalist pictorial arts. Bridgman was the most significant nineteenth-century painter who explicitly defined himself as an Orientalist, and found

great success at the height of the 1880s, but experienced declining popularity as the century drew to a close. Whereas Parrish, who never explicitly identified his work with Orientalism nor limited his subject matter so specifically, experienced a great public celebration of his Orientalizing works as Bridgman's career petered out. So why did these two artists and their two modes of producing images of an exotic Eastern Orient elicit such varied responses at different points so close to the turn-of-the century?

Both of these artists have more in common than it might first seem. Both were educated in the tradition of European art, both had traveled extensively, both received fine art instruction, both were even trained to work in print making and painting techniques, and both had book projects associated with their respective legacies. The largest difference between them would be the way they defined themselves and consequently their respective audiences along the lines of "fine" and "commercial" art. Bridgman the painter and Parrish the illustrator had different careers and produced different, although no less fantasized, images of Oriental subjects. The crucial point that divides the two rests in the way their respective images depict an Orient that lies decidedly in between the realms of fantasy and reality. Both artists had to manipulate the illusion of realism, realism as something that lent veracity to their exotic subjects. Bridgman's realism is about an authentic perspective and lived experience. His impasto communicated this kind of immediacy and also provided an additional sumptuous layer to his scenes of Arab life. Parrish on the other hand, was able to produce images of total fantasy with no claim to an "authentic" East precisely because of the traditional academic realism of his works.

Bridgman's one man show in 1880 demonstrated a crucial turn in the perception of his art; in celebrating his sketches over his refined history paintings, American critics responded most to witnessing the artist's hand indexically referenced through his loose brushwork. These studies and sketches of varied subjects suggested a directly observed, immediacy that implied a near-documentary approach to his subject. Although there was still public appreciation for his more academic history paintings and a special acknowledgement of the detailed archeological details, Bridgman's career blossomed as he left behind the severity of Gérôme and moved toward a more "Impressionistic" approach. Of course this reading of the immediate, documentary sketch was only enhanced by the publication of *Winters in Algeria*, which emphasized Bridgman's lived experiences in the exotic lands of the Middle East.

Parrish's Orientalist output took a literally different shape. Bound as a book in *The Arabian Nights* and stretched out across Crane's Chocolates, his images of the East never claimed to be more than fantasy. However, the fantasy of the image was made legible and even inhabitable through his almost miniaturist attention to depicted surface detail, as well as balanced compositional arrangements of landscape and architectural space. As printed, lithographic works, the indexical reference to the artist's gesture was not necessary for their success. The images were recognizable as Parrish illustrations simply by their stylistic similarities and vision of impossibly beautiful, utopian worlds glowing with exotic splendor. The naturalism of his images produced a kind of realism that allowed for the projection of viewer fantasies that were immediately satiated by the pleasure of possessing the image as a commodity item or, in the case of Crane's Chocolates, as a physical, consumable product. Desire to know and own here is stoked

and then satisfied through Parrish's delicate balance of legible, recognizable settings that counter intuitively depict an impossible fantasy.

Of course the issue with both of these artists is that they absolutely do not produce a "true," "empirical," or "accurate" image of the Middle East. However, through their respective approaches to their Orientalist subjects they produce something that functions as such. The difference is that, while Bridgman's images seem to be producing a "real" glimpse into the harem, the mind of the 1880s and 1890s viewer projected their fantasies upon them. As the contemporary reviews indicate above, Bridgman's images were by no means divorced from pre-existing stereotypes or desirous fantasies; rather, the images were successful because these preconceived notions played into them. They allowed audiences to make most successful the Orientalist works depicting Egyptian and Moroccan scenes reconstructed in Bridgman's elaborate studio space.<sup>110</sup> Pinpointing which Bridgman works were executed in Paris versus Algeria did not preoccupy viewers because the veracity of the image mattered little if it "appeared" to be real enough for the projection of fantasies. Parrish does just the opposite by producing images of total fantasy, save for the two historical subjects referenced above, but does so in a vocabulary of detailed realism.

Thus, it seems that, as the American art world and political climate moved into the twentieth century, one mode trumped the other. These two artists' careers overlapped, yet they reached their stride at very different periods. Bridgman's brand of Orientalism fell out of fashion as early as the late 1890s, even though he continued to paint into the 1920s. Parrish's works of the late 1880s and 1890s remained more graphic, two-

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<sup>110</sup> Newman, Benjamin Tupper, "Two Americans in Paris: 1885," *Archives of American Art Journal*, Vol.12, No. 4 (1972), 23-24.

dimensional and muted in tonalities. Bridgman's story as an American with a French education and Salon recognition and as a worldly traveler with access to forbidden realms of harem life was representative of a growing desire to emulate and surpass the traditions of great European cultural authority. Manifest in the founding of cultural institutions, of growing museum collections and the attention of the robber baron classes; the race to create a cosmopolitan American metropolis seemed to have a perfect expression in Bridgman's simultaneous mastery of his eastern subjects and French training.

Parrish's images of fantasy are significant because they are representative of a turning point in American Orientalism - one that finds its greatest manifestation not in the pictorial arts but in the realm of popular entertainment. The desire for "accurate" representations of the East gave way as the country became less reliant upon the image of the East or Egypt, more specifically, as a touchstone of historical weight and authority. In a type of trickle-down effect, once American and New York cultural authorities had claimed adequate ownership of their own history, the images of the East could exist in a realm of fantasy for a broad, public audience.

Bridgman's subject matter, despite the downturn of cultural interest in it, was much more than just artistically astute. In the 1880s, while America had debated their imperialist political stance, engaged with the Philippines, and watched Europe continue their never-ending turf-war, Bridgman's images and career carried a greater weight. As the century ended and World War I began, the place of both the art world and the political sphere had changed. Parrish's greatest success came after his work with Crane in 1916, when the Lusitania had been sunk, and war seemed increasingly inevitable. America's place on the world stage was no longer a desire or projection but a reality. As a

vital support to the Allied Forces of France, England and Russia, politically and militarily, the United States moved closer to joining the ranks of their trans-Atlantic cultural and imperial competitors. Bridgman's hat-trick of proving American cultural superiority was no longer needed and consequently his form of Orientalism followed suit. Instead, with increasing cultural, political, and military power, American desires for power found an outlet in the possessable commodity image of Eastern exotic mystery that Parrish produced. These desires would not only be satisfied through the consumption of graphic arts. Rather, the metaphorical possession of the "East" was further enacted through the engrossing, performed spectacles that represented Egypt in an even more fantastic vein: through the body of their hyper sexualized female protagonists, Aida and Cleopatra.

**Chapter Four:**  
**“The Oldest Theatre upon which the drama of Mankind was Played”:**  
**Egypt as Spectacle**

New York City, at the turn of the twentieth century, was brimming with a plethora of leisure activities. From opera to the circus, theatre, concerts and films, the local papers chronicled weekly events as New Yorkers spent their increasing leisure time amidst growing forms of entertainment. It is within this context, too, that the representation of Egypt cast its spell over the city's inhabitants. Taking the shape of spectacular displays, "Egypt" was routinely embodied through public performances, including dramatic opera sets, circus spectacles and in perhaps its most famous manifestation: on the silver screen. These varied performances, although diverse in their media and audiences, all succeeded in cementing a new image of "Egypt" as divorced from any authentic, historical truth and into a fantasy, an empty vessel that was able to absorb the desires and reflect implicit ideologies of the captive spectators.

The resulting image was inscribed on the bodies of two famous female protagonists: Aida and Cleopatra. Centering on these women, the series of performances embraced spectacle and presented a succession of dazzling images; audiences were engrossed by an overwhelming display of extravagance, which included the bodies of these eastern women. In this chapter, I will explore how three instances of Cleopatra and Aida spectacles produced images of Egypt that operated as simulacra.<sup>1</sup> Through the construction of a voyeuristic gaze, the viewers of these performances experienced not an image of authentic Egyptian history, but a fictional, rhetorically historical, representation that, in actuality, echoed American imperialistic ideology. Inscribed on the hyper-sexualized bodies of the two female protagonists, Aida and Cleopatra, the image of

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<sup>1</sup>Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra and Simulation*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994).

"Egypt" itself became synonymous with wanton lust, forbidden love and unbridled sexuality. The intimate love triangles of each narrative were routinely set at odds against the bombastic staging, set design, costumes and music of each performance. An "authentic" "Egypt" was suggested. However, these performances produced instead, an imposing cautionary tale of nationalistic pride and militaristic honor. The deuteragonists of each tale, Radames, the Egyptian military victor, and Marc Antony, famous Roman general and triumvir, both represent a "Western" authority weakened by the power of the exotic, eastern bodies of their respective female love interests. Their downfalls serve as the fulcrum of each plot, propelling their demise and the destruction of their female lovers' hyper-sexualized eastern bodies. The popularity of these narratives and the frequency with which they were performed in an American context need to be considered as a crucial component to the development of an American fascination both with ancient Egypt and an exoticized brand of Orientalism.

The audiences for the opera, the circus and the movies, however, do not constitute one homogenous whole. The opera, although initially brought to the United States by Italian immigrants, rose swiftly up the ranks to serving the loftiest of social classes. Opera houses were built, culminating in the celebrated Metropolitan Opera House in 1883, which allowed the city's *nouveau riche* exclusive boxes for their viewing pleasure. In a transatlantic dance that emulated the types of cultural exchange explored in the previous chapters, American aficionados sought to produce a rarified operatic scene that incorporated the finest European operas into a developing American cultural consciousness. It was this desire that would bring Giuseppe Verdi's *Aida* to New York in 1873, where it would continue to be frequently performed for over a century.

One might assume that the circus, with its comedic subjects, its low-brow, vaudeville-style components, and its wide public accessibility, could not be further from the lofty ambitions of American's early opera. Although the cast of characters was radically different, the growing emphasis on a peculiar kind of "spectacle," literally referred to as the "Circus Spectacle," had much in common with the monumental scale of opera scenography. Taking as its subject historical or mythological themes, the circus spectacle was performed at center ring before the main event, retelling history in pantomime with huge casts in glitzy costumes. Looking to the 1912 and 1913 New York City Barnum and Bailey Circus *Cleopatra* spectacles, this chapter explores the ways in which American audiences of mixed social classes gained increasing exposure to the Cleopatra narrative and to the message of imperialism it embodies.

In a similar contrast to the opera, film, with its democratic accessibility, low cost and wide availability, seems more akin to the viewing experience that the circus afforded. However, the viewing conditions - the dark interior, the projector lights, the live music and intertitles - elicit a unique spectatorial space. As Antonia Lant has explored, the film industry's fascination with Egyptian themes is not coincidental.<sup>2</sup> Likening the viewing experience to the idea of unearthing an Egyptian tomb, it was no coincidence that theatre houses began to take Neo-Egyptian form across the country. In this chapter, I examine two portrayals of *Cleopatra* from 1912 and 1917 with the goal of exploring the imperialist nature of the productions during this period, which preceded the "Egyptomania" phenomena of the 1920s and thereafter. Moreover, with the growing popularity of a "cinematic Egypt" in the period just before the discovery of King

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<sup>2</sup>Lant, Antonia "The Curse of the Pharaoh, or How Cinema Contracted Egyptomania" *October*, Vol. 59 (Winter, 1992), 86-112.

Tutankhamen, the preoccupation with the figure of Cleopatra marks a distinct push to link Egypt with the sexualized body of an exotic female protagonist, emphasizing the rhetoric of colonial possession through observation of her objectified body.

Each of these modes of popular entertainment presented a distinct portrayal of Egypt due, in part, to the intrinsic qualities of their respective media. However, despite their differences, what they shared was a "spectacular" quality that forced the spectator to observe, watch, learn and listen rather than participate, invade, read, talk or think. Part of this is due to the narrative capabilities of each medium; part of this is also due to the numerous graphic art works that accompanied each performances - posters, lobby cards, advertisements. This chapter examines three moments when the image of Egypt was constructed, performed and advertised in ways that captured the imagination of New York City audiences through an implicit appeal to their collective imperialist ideology.

### **“In the Time of the Pharaohs”: Giuseppe Verdi’s *Aida* in New York City**

1873 brought an impressive victory to New York City. Before London and Paris, New York staged one of the newest, grandest, and most exciting operas in its Academy of Music. Based on a tale written by French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette and set to music by impresario Giuseppe Verdi, *Aida* made its debut at the city’s newest opera house to an eager crowd. The intimate story of a love triangle complicated by family loyalties, set against the all-encompassing backdrop of an archeologically-detailed scene of Pharaonic Egypt, was so popular among American audiences that, approximately fifteen years after its initial premier in Cairo, the 1886 premiere at the city’s three-year-old Metropolitan Opera House inaugurated a lengthy American obsession with the spectacular Egyptian opera. With drama, love, and pyramids set against the Nile, its

popularity is understandable, and yet its resonance with American audiences, divorced from the opera's Egyptian origins, the Italian love of Verdi, or a French colonial perspective, is distinct and curious. Within the context of Gilded Age New York City, Verdi's *Aida* became a powerful spectacle of imperial conquest that reinforced the power dynamic of Western colonialism over Eastern, exotic territories by means of both the physical bodies and romantic entanglements of its principal characters, as well as the "spectacular" nature of its idiosyncratic staging and design.

Opera was an art form of increasing importance to late nineteenth-century New York City. As Andrew H. Drummond has explained, Americans had developed an initial appreciation of the ballad opera as early as the eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> European operas set the stage, literally, and borrowings from English, French and later Italian and German operas were of increasing popularity. In 1825, the grand opera was brought to New York City, primarily by Italian immigrants, culminating in the building of the Italian Opera house in 1833 and frequent operatic performances in Italian restaurants and playhouses across the city. French opera was introduced to the city in 1843 by traveling troupes from New Orleans, and German opera made its presence in the 1840s and 1850s at places like the Old Broadway Theatre, helping to firmly establish the tradition of foreign language opera in New York. Due to the success of these earlier performances, Astor Palace was built in 1847 as the city's first opera house. The successes and failures of Astor Palace eventually led to the 1852 charter and 1854 inauguration of the Academy of Music, which was only to be superseded in 1883 with the establishment of grand opera's New York cathedral: The Metropolitan Opera.

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<sup>3</sup> Drummond, Andrew H., *American Opera Librettos*, (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1973), 9-39.

The place of opera within the hierarchy of cultured, leisure activities varied widely over time and in connection with surrounding political climates. As many scholars have explored, the popularity of operas performed in either their original or translated tongues waned in correlation to current events.<sup>4</sup> Numerous Italian, German and French operas were originally performed in English to upper class audiences. American critics were attentive to linguistic differences and closely chronicled the training of current opera singers in various European styles.

It is within this lively, expanding context that *Aida* would make its mark on eager New York City audiences. Verdi's *Aida*, with its unforgettable score and staging, quickly became a popular addition to the city's opera repertoire. As Clyde T. McCants muses in his own book devoted to Verdi's masterpiece, *Aida* is "a work of musical beauty and dramatic power" with a "strong visual appeal." He continues, "...with *Aida* there is almost always something interesting to look at even for new comers to opera... it is a big, splashy, spectacular feast to the eyes."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, *Aida*'s appeal to audiences of all types is largely due to its narrative that allows for, as McCants rightly cites, the opera's victory parade; backdrop of archeological sites; moon-lit Nile scenery; dramatic split-stage tomb set; enormous, elaborately costumed cast; its three distinct ballets; cast of Moorish slaves and, often times, live animals.

Further adding to the opera's idiosyncratic appeal: *Aida* has a complicated history. Verdi, well respected and noted for his numerous successes, which included *Rigoletto*, *Trovatore*, *La Traviata*, and *Ernani*, was personally commissioned to complete *Aida* by

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<sup>4</sup> Dizikes, John, *Opera in America: A Cultural History*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Sonneck, O G., *Early Opera in America*, (New York: B. Blom, 1963); Ahlquist, Karen, *Democracy at the Opera: Music, Theater, and Culture in New York City, 1815-60*, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997).

<sup>5</sup>McCants, Clyde T., *Verdi's Aida: A Record of the Life of the Opera on and Off the Stage*, (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland, 2006), 52.

the Egyptian Khedive Ismail Pasha. Ismail Pasha was the son of a Turkish nobleman; he was Paris educated and had served as a commander in the Sudan, and rose to power in 1863 after the death of his uncle Said Pasha, then Viceroy of Egypt.<sup>6</sup> Continuing the goals of Muhammad Ali Pasha, Ismail Pasha pushed Egypt even further into European-influenced advancements. “My country is no longer in Africa,” Ismail Pasha was noted as saying, “I have made it part of Europe.”<sup>7</sup> Despite the eventual financial downfall that would lead to deeply entrenched debts with British and French loans and, by extension, their financial and political control, the years between 1869 and 1871 were marked with great developments, most notably in the arts, and with the opening of the new Cairo Opera House in 1871.

Verdi, whose critical and popular success was due in part to his involvement in the Italian *Risorgimento*, was initially reluctant to take on such a task. Citing a general disinterest in the Egyptian subject, Verdi required a series of negotiations by his friend and French librettist Camille DuLocle and a persistent Ismail Pasha to complete the deal.<sup>8</sup> In the end, Verdi was allowed the artistic freedom to select his own Italian librettist and cast of singers from the Cairo Opera House. He was never required to travel to Cairo, but could send his own agent to direct in his place, and was guaranteed a then exorbitant sum of 150,000 francs paid in gold as well as special permission to debut the Opera in European cities if the intended Cairo opening was delayed beyond six months. Moreover, despite being required to turn over the libretto and score to the Egyptian authorities for

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<sup>6</sup>McCants, 9.

<sup>7</sup>McCants, 9 as quoted in Busch, Hans, and Giuseppe Verdi., *Verdi's Aida: The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1978), 6.

<sup>8</sup>Camile DuLocle was a friend of Verdi's for many years. They met through circles in the contemporary opera scene and would work together before ever collaborating on *Aida*. For further information see McCants, 13-28.

Egyptian ownership, Verdi was granted all rights to the opera outside of Egypt reaping the financial benefits.<sup>9</sup> The contract was signed in August of 1870; the Opera would be first performed in January 1871 at the Vice-Royal Theatre in Cairo.

However, despite Ismail Pasha's enthusiasm and Verdi's genius guiding the score and direction, the story of *Aida* is in large part owed to another key player, French Egyptologist August Mariette. Mariette, whose interest in Egypt led him to learn how to decipher hieroglyphics, found himself sent to Egypt as an employee of the Louvre in 1850. Originally commissioned to locate Coptic manuscripts for the French national collection, Mariette was unsuccessful and turned to earlier periods of Egyptology. He traveled to Saqqara where he would go on to discover the avenue of Sphinxes, step pyramids, and hundreds of other Egyptian treasures for the French national collection.<sup>10</sup> After troublesome accusations of illegal archeological practices, the Louvre instructed Mariette to continue excavations, sending 50% of the findings back to France and leaving the remainder for Egyptian authorities; for one year he returned to France only to be deeply bored by academic research. Quickly returning to his new adopted country of Egypt, Mariette would continue to complete important archeological findings in Tanis, Edgu, Abydos and Karnak. In 1858, Ismail Pasha created the position of Director of Egyptian Monuments especially for him. His collaboration with Egyptian authorities would result in the development of the institution that would become the Cairo Egyptian Museum, where he would eventually be buried upon his death in 1881.

Mariette, a respected authority on Egyptian history, archeology and hieroglyphics, was the ideal source for the missing narrative to Ismail Pasha's desired opera. Claiming

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<sup>9</sup> See McCants, 15.

<sup>10</sup> For more information on Mariette's storied archeological career see: Busch, *Verdi's Aida: The History of an Opera in Letters and Documents*.

to have crafted the narrative from an ancient mythological source, Mariette based *Aida* in a love triangle set in an unspecified period of ancient Egypt during one of its Ethiopian campaigns. Although there is some controversy over the veracity of Mariette's claim to ownership, Mariette's brother, Edouard, claimed to have written a similar synopsis for a proposed novel, *La Fiancée du Nil*. It is commonly accepted, however, that Mariette relied largely upon his knowledge of Egypt and his own imagination in putting together the loosely-based historical tragedy.<sup>11</sup>

It is not difficult to see how Verdi was finally won over by Mariette's inventive narrative. The story is set in a romanticized "timeless" period of history, said only to be "in the time of the pharaohs."<sup>12</sup> It is a story of love, betrayal, familial bonds, military might and colonial conquest that provided limitless possibilities for grand staging against the Nile and in the shadow of the Great Pyramids. It also possessed a dramatic conclusion that required an unprecedented split stage design that directly appealed to the showy Verdi, who was not only concerned with the score but sought out "good elements for the performance" for the "orchestral and choral masses, the costumes, the scenery, the props, the stage movement, and the subtlety of coloration."<sup>13</sup> Mariette's story closely resembles the finalized sequence of the opera itself, which will be explored at greater length below. He opened his tale with the first scene of Act 1 in a Memphis palace set amongst the pyramids. Radames, Aida and Amneris are the principal players; Radames has fallen deeply in love with Aida, the Egyptian princess's slave girl and, unbeknownst to all of them, an Ethiopian princess. Amneris, however, loves Radames, and this creates the principal love triangle that lasts until, as in the final opera, the messenger appears

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<sup>11</sup> See McCants pages 18-20 for more information on possible sources.

<sup>12</sup> McCants, 19.

<sup>13</sup> Verdi as quoted in McCants, 53.

with the news of Ethiopia's victory over Egypt, leading to Radames' promotion to general of the Egyptian troops. Aida, upon hearing this news, reflects on her conflicted emotions over her love of Radames and the love of her motherland; this scene will become Aida's famous aria "Ritorna Vincitor" in Verdi's finished product. Mariette transitioned from the scene of Aida's torment into the second scene of Act 1, the consecration ceremony, with a chorus of priests and priestesses in the distance as Radames is sanctified for his new military position.

The second act as written by Mariette is set in the entrance to the city of Thebes where Amneris leads Aida into disclosing her love for Radames in front of the city people as they await the arrival of the Egyptian king and the return of triumphant Radames. Verdi, with the advice of his friend Du Locle, would eventually transfer this scene into the setting of Amneris' boudoir, where the revelation of the love triangle would be set amongst a more intimate environment. Mariette's narrative continued, however, to provide Verdi with what would become the opera's most famous scene: the triumphal victory parade of Act 2. Mariette provided Verdi with the scene of the return of Radames, which was set against a large ballet and a hoard of Ethiopian captives. This becomes the site of the dramatic revelation of Aida's true identity when she recognizes her now enslaved father Amonasro, the King of Ethiopia.

Act 3 was the one, as McCants explains, that required the most revision by Verdi, Du Locle and then the Italian librettist Antonio Ghislanzoni. The opera revises Mariette's original scenario in this act to reveal the narrative's pivotal turning point. Mariette has Amonasro, Radames and Aida outside, set against the Nile at night. Amonasro convinces Aida to betray Radames by revealing the location of the Egyptian military

forces; despite Aida's love for Radames, she is easily moved by her father's reminder of their beautiful homeland. According to McCants, the opera complicates this scene by making Aida hesitant, more resistant and complex than Mariette's original narrative allows.<sup>14</sup> Another key element of the opera's plot is laid out in Mariette's scheme; Amneris appears, albeit without logical provocation, but learns of Radames' mistaken military reveal and betrayal to the Egyptian state. This configuration of characters with their diverse, crossed loyalties and tragic betrayals serves as the narrative crux of the opera, providing Verdi with impetus to create the famous aria "O' Patria Mia" that Aida would sing of her homeland.

Though Verdi makes only minor changes to the first three acts, the final act in Mariette's version differs considerably from the composer's finalized creation, Mariette fills the act with plot exposition as recounted by members of the Egyptian royal court. Amonasro dies, Aida escapes and Radames is sentenced to death. In contrast, Verdi's version unfolds in live action as opposed to third party narration. Mariette's dramatic conclusion in Scene Two, Act 4, hinted at the drama that Verdi would embrace in his staging of the tragic fate of Aida and Radames. In Verdi's version, Radames is brought to the tomb in which he was sentenced to be buried alive, and he finds Aida awaiting his arrival so that she may join him in death. The scene was not explicitly written for split staging, as it would manifest in the opera itself, but was suggested by the allusion to priestesses located in the temple of the consecration scene in Act 1. Verdi and Du Locle would emphasize the emotive potential of the scene of the lovers' joint deaths with the addition of Amneris's final prayers and regrets taking place on stage directly above the burial.

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<sup>14</sup> McCants, 21.

Mariette's *Aida* provided Verdi with a rich, multi-layered tale of families, lovers and nations that, when combined, resulted in an inevitably tragic finale. This base narrative was the seed that produced the unfathomably lavish spectacle. Moreover, it is crucial to understand one of the key concepts of the opera's complexity – its origin from the mind of a French, and not Egyptian, author. It is precisely with this rich history that the question of *Aida* as an Orientalist, colonialist or imperialist opera have been hotly debated. In "The Imperial Spectacle," Edward Said argues that *Aida* functions as an Orientalist and imperialist narrative, due in large part to the origins of its production. Citing the modernization efforts of Ismail Pasha, Said contextualizes *Aida* within this larger Egyptian effort to Europeanize the African nation. The opera, he suggests, is a direct byproduct of this form of cultural colonization: the direct result of European influence forcefully placed upon the country through imperial occupation.<sup>15</sup> Mariette's role as central author, a French author in particular, heavily feeds into Said's contention. Others, however, have taken issue with Said. Musicologist Paul Robinson counters Said's analysis arguing that the specific subject of the opera suggests otherwise. Painting the Ancient Egyptians as victors over a weaker Ethiopian subject inverts the type of imperialist message Said suggests, Robinson claims.<sup>16</sup> Robinson continues to examine the musical structure and finally concludes with the assertion that *Aida* is better contextualized within the politics of the Italian *Risorgimento*, placing it instead in the same realm as Verdi's *Nabucco*.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Said, Edward. "The Imperial Spectacle" *Grand Street*. Vol. 6, No. 2 (Winter, 1987), 82-104.

<sup>16</sup> Robinson, Paul, "Is 'Aida' an Orientalist Opera?" *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (Jul. 1993):133-140.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

The problem with placing *Aida* within one specified set of ideological concerns, however, is due to the multiple layers of race, nation and history at work both within its construction and in its staged narrative performance. Although paid for and desired by Egyptian authority, the actual artists behind the opera's existence were French and Italian. Although a story explicitly about racial hierarchy, slavery, forbidden love, exoticism, and militaristic colonial campaigns, *Aida* plants the power onto Egypt, the location that would theoretically be the colonial subject of the artist's own European culture. Further complicating this power struggle is the fact that, in the end, the Egyptians will be defeated by the Ethiopians after the foolish actions of Radames, the image of militaristic power. Thus, throughout the opera, imperial power shifts. However, what is most problematic about theorizing an ideology for *Aida* is that varied audiences, within particular national and political contexts, viewed the same spectacle from within their own countries. The *Aida* viewed in Cairo in 1871 cannot be theorized as delivering the same message as the *Aida* that premiered in Milan the next year.

The consideration of the audience became even more complicated with the removal of *Aida* from its commissioning country as it traveled across the ocean to New York audiences. Audiences were just beginning to celebrate a tradition of "Grand Opera" in the European vein, as part of the cosmopolitanism of the American Gilded Age. With its 1873 debut at the Academy of Music *Aida* was performed in New York before it ever reached either English or French audiences, and only shortly after the opera's premier to non-Egyptian audiences in Milan. This raises the question: why was *Aida* brought to the nascent American opera scene well before it was performed in the very European cities that were considered New York's powerful rivals? What was it about this opera, this

specific narrative and dramatic display that attracted American opera enthusiasts—not only in 1873, but for years to follow?

The desire to bring *Aida* to New York was tied up in the city's desire for a cosmopolitan art and leisure scene that rivaled European precedents. The very fact that New York was privy to the opera before its European competitors was attractive to audience members and critics alike. *Aida's* exclusivity for American audiences was akin to an exciting archeological find; direct from Egypt itself, the opera's New York premiere was a nod to American ingenuity in retrieving the opera before the likes of its competitors. The overwhelming spectacle of *Aida's* staging likewise colored New York's opera scene as one with enough sophistication to handle such a technically complicated feat.

More importantly, however, was the success of the opera once it was performed, which I argue is due specifically to its idiosyncratic spectacular nature. *Aida*, with its sets, costumes, enormous casts, militaristic marches, ballets, slaves and victory parades, functions as a monolithic, non-participatory, dazzling attraction that unfolds for the pleasure of the viewer. Unlike vaudeville, or Barnum, or even other operas like *Nabucco*, that elicited audience participation, sing-a-longs, or direct response, the enormity of *Aida* and the cohesion of its visual and audio components function as one whole entity that, through its impenetrability, reflected back on its audience the implicit imperialist ideals of their own nation. As Guy Debord originally defines it: "The spectacle is not a collection of images, but a social relation among people, mediated by images."<sup>18</sup> *Aida's* dramatic display serves up a European-constructed view of Ancient Egypt that was desired by contemporary New York audiences to reflect America's cosmopolitan and

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<sup>18</sup> Debord, Guy, *The Society of the Spectacle*, (New York: Zone Books, 1994), 5.

imperialist desires. The message of the opera, of course, is multivalent: *Aida*'s visual beauty presents an enlivened Egypt to a country whose knowledge of it was mediated only through European, mostly French, archeological and art historical findings. However, *Aida*'s tragic plot reinforced the cautionary tale of putting love before matters of the state, and Radames' inevitable death forever cements the place of Aida as an exotic temptress whose body was able to bring both a man and his civilization to their defeat.

Unfortunately the majority of ephemeral material related to the early New York City productions of *Aida* does not survive.<sup>19</sup> It is only possible to extrapolate the staging effects from contemporary reviews and from European visual material of the same time. McCants characterized nineteenth-century sets of *Aida* as "cluttered and crowded." Stage designs of the period, he describes, were made of canvas flats that, for *Aida*, were filled with "too many sphinxes and columns and palm trees."<sup>20</sup> Stages were filled with lines of people in bulky period costumes designed according to contemporary fashions. He specifically cites a 1908 production of the opera at the Metropolitan Opera House, as "typical of that era" filled with overwhelming Egyptian imagery.<sup>21</sup> The visual effect of watching the opera unfold live on stage, however, would have certainly been a different experience than viewing the black and white, harshly-lit glimpses that survive today.

Christian Metz has argued that the spectatorial relationship between the audience and the performer in staged productions is characterized by an exhibitionist and

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<sup>19</sup> In consultation with the archivists of the Metropolitan Opera Archives, the New York Public Library Performing Arts Division and the Museum of the City of New York – it appears as though the set designs, advertisements and costumes of the *Aida* performances of the 1870s and 1880s were discarded or now lost. Further research at La Scala in Milan might prove more profitable, but was unable to be completed for this present project.

<sup>20</sup> McCants, 57.

<sup>21</sup> McCants, 58.

voyeuristic exchange.<sup>22</sup> The theater-goer, unlike the film-goer, is acutely aware of the performer as someone purposefully on view – someone who can exchange a gaze with the viewer. However, the spectacular nature of *Aida*'s overall production complicates the level of exchange between actor and viewers because its extravagant visual elements subsume even the most intimate of moments within the larger plot. It is with this formulation of viewing that I consider the function of *Aida* as an apparatus; the negotiations between audience as a collective whole and a performer set amongst the elaborateness of the production are the basis of my analysis. For that reason, I rely heavily on the closest glimpse that remains into the spectator experience of the opera: contemporary reviews. Furthermore, I will consider how these reviews reflect intricacies of the plot and echo the larger imperial themes of American politics.

The American debut of *Aida* was predictably lauded by the contemporary press. A dramatic *New York Times* advertisement opened with an emphatic: “Aida!Aida!Aida!”and continued to paint a picture of the opera’s opulence, Egyptian origins, European sophistication and, most of all, its exclusive American premiere:

Messrs. M.&M. STRAKOSCH, in announcing the first production of the chef d’oeuvre of the greatest of modern Italian composers, feel pride in being able to present it to the American people previous to its performance in London, Paris, or St. Petersburg.

Written at the command of the Khedive of Egypt, whose Opera-house at Cairo was lavishly supplied with everything requisite for immense scenic effects, gorgeous costumes, and processions, orchestral and choral combinations, it is but natural that Signor Verdi and Signor Ghislanzoni should have availed themselves to the utmost of such a glorious opportunity. Messrs. Starkosch, recognizing the grandeur and overwhelming success of the work, at once entered into negotiations with the distinguished maestro, and it must be a matter of congratulation to the public of

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<sup>22</sup> Metz as discussed and cited in Hansen, Miriam, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 35-39.

America and to themselves to know that their efforts have been crowned with success.

Having secured the SOLE RIGHT OF PERFORMANCE OF AIDA IN AMERICA, Messrs. Strakosch determined to spare no pains or expense to reproduce it exactly as it was given on the memorable night of its first representation in Cairo and afterward in Italy. The scenery, costumes, properties and appointments, and even the musical instruments for the band, have been expressly ordered from Italy. The outlay has entailed upon the management an expense of over \$30,000, an amount hitherto unknown in America in the production of a single opera. The rehearsals and the selection of artists for the principal roles have for months past enlisted the earnest attention of the distinguished pupil and friend of Verdi, Signor Muzio.

The opera will be presented with entirely New Scenery by Prof. Magani of the royal theatre, Parma. Dresses entirely new, by M. Ascoli, of the Venice Theatre Venice.

Jewelry by Mr. Granger, from Paris.

Models of Machinery by Mr. Mastellari, from La Scala, Milan, and made by Mr. Dornbach, of the Academy of Music, New-York.<sup>23</sup>

As the first production of *Aida* in New York City, the advertisement makes a considerable pitch. The informative text entices its reader with flashy details; most important among them are the exotic, authentic Egyptian origins of the opera, which had come directly from the Egyptian Khedive and was then enhanced by America's success in acquiring the exclusive rights to view it before most of Europe. Europe's influence here is twofold. The literal source of many of *Aida's* artistic components, it was still a competitive counterpart that highlighted New York's singular status in hosting the Egyptian spectacle. With French jewelry and Italian scenery and costuming, *Aida* itself is here lauded as a veritable feast of cosmopolitan influences brought as "a matter of congratulation to the public of America."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "Aida!Aida!Aida! Classified Ad – No Title" *The New York Times*, Nov. 23, 1873, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

As an Egyptian export filled with “scenic effects, gorgeous costumes, and processions...” outfitted by European craftsmen, *Aida* occupied a singular place in the trajectory of American opera in the late nineteenth century and was explicitly advertised as such a novelty. *Aida*’s hybrid nature as Egyptian in origin and subject, but European in style, art form and craftsmanship, echoes Said’s argument for an imperialist reading of the opera’s narrative and staging. However, this peculiar duality also has profound resonance when considering the American consumption of the opera. American influence was not initially part of *Aida*’s equation. Yet, the opera was enthusiastically received. Considering the diverse roster of Italian operas that New York could access, many of which contained Orientalist subjects or at least dramatic staging, *Aida*’s success points to more than just a desire for cosmopolitanism or an appetite for an exotic subject matter. The opera’s success lay specifically in its unprecedented level of “spectacle” hinted at in the advertisement above and reflected in almost every contemporary review of the opera from its initial premier throughout the entirety of its turn-of-the-century runs.

Reviews of the 1873 premier suggest that the opera lived up to the bold claims of its advertising. *The New York Times* writes: “we must also record that the stage-setting of the opera was among the most striking of the entertainment.”<sup>25</sup> The opera’s visual presentation received more attention than the vocals, music or performers themselves; the review gushes that they could “not recall any representation of Italian opera upon such a wealth of scenery and dresses has been lavished. Every scene in *Aida* has been painted abroad, and there are six... of exceptional elaborateness.”<sup>26</sup> Moreover, they specifically cite the fine artistic merit of the canvas backdrop painted with representations of

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<sup>25</sup> “Amusements: Musical ‘Aida at the Academy,’” *The New York Times*, Nov. 27, 1873, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

Egyptian temples exclaiming that “from a spectacular stand-point nothing could be presented in the way of animated brilliant tableaux that would outdo the tableaux in *Aida*.”<sup>27</sup> Although not a direct representation of this production’s scenery, an 1871 French sketch gives a sense of the general staging that so impressed the reviewer. (Figure 1) The architectural drawing includes three figures; two of which, closest to the viewer in the foreground, appear male, and one in the distance could either be a robed priest or a female character. Independent of the narrative moment this image was intended to depict, the sketch illustrates the detailed depiction of Egyptian architecture executed on a grand scale that nearly dwarfed the figures themselves. The long line of lotus columns covered in Egyptian hieroglyphics are arranged to produce the illusion of perspective in a large temple setting.

Moreover a review of the 1873 production at the Academy of Music claims that the visual elements of *Aida* were nothing short of “a stroke of enterprise and its exposition with scenery and costumes purchased expressly for display in the United States denoted a most laudable desire to fully satisfy the public to the merits of a composition particularly exacting in the matter of pictorial illustration.”<sup>28</sup> They continue, emphasizing again that “in setting *Aida* with scenery and dresses of unparalleled magnificence,” the production had achieved more grandeur than any opera ever staged in New York.<sup>29</sup> The productions that would follow continued in this vein. An 1884 production was cited as “familiar but still popular” with an “enraptured” audience,<sup>30</sup> while

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> “Amusements: Musical. The Italian Opera,” *New York Times*, Dec. 6, 1873, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> “Musical: Opera at the Academy,” *New York Times*, Dec. 23, 1884, 5.

an 1887 review boasted that the opera prompted all boxes to be filled and enjoyed “several curtain calls.”<sup>31</sup>

In 1886, the then three-year-old Metropolitan Opera added *Aida* to a roster that was otherwise dominated by German opera at the time. Despite the detrimental conversion of the opera into German, the reviewer was careful to praise the spectacular visual display: “the excellence and strength of the chorus and band are not in themselves potent enough ... to draw large audiences... the scenic attire of the opera, unaided, might be relied upon to do so...nothing to brilliant and complete has ever been beheld upon the operatic stage in this country, nor is there reason to believe that the latest *mise en scene* of Verdi’s work has ever been surpassed elsewhere.”<sup>32</sup> Another review of the same production at the Metropolitan specifically references the beauty of select scenes: “the spectacle presented by the temple in the first act, the pageant incidental to the return of the victorious host in the second, and the view of the moonlit Nile in act the third” suggesting that they “offered a succession of pictures which for gorgeousness and fidelity to nature and tradition have never been paralleled in this city, and are not likely to be surpassed in the future.”<sup>33</sup> Despite the unfortunate shortcomings in the productions’ musicality, due to the German translation, the review praises the merit of the production precisely for its visual effectiveness. Moreover, the same review suggests a reason for the popularity of Verdi’s *Aida* with New York audiences, saying that it is “familiar to almost everybody” and that this popularity is due precisely to awareness of the “spectacular requirements...and their importance to the general effect of the opera.”<sup>34</sup> The

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<sup>31</sup> “Amusements: The American Opera,” *New York Times* Mar. 10, 1887, 5.

<sup>32</sup> “Amusements: Metropolitan Opera House,” *New York Times* Nov. 16, 1886, 4.

<sup>33</sup> “Amusements,” *The New York Times*, Feb. 24, 1874, 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

Metropolitan Opera's decision to place *Aida* within its growing repertoire is here lauded first and foremost for the "stage costume" and not for its score, orchestra or narrative.

It is worth noting that Auguste Mariette's role in the opera was not limited to the original base story, but also extended to much of the stage and costume design. Although it is impossible to know if his designs were emulated in great detail by the American productions referenced above, it seems likely that these early productions shared their concept and overall spirit. Without photographic evidence to compare, an intricate visual analysis is impossible to conduct. However, the few remaining engravings of similar nineteenth- and early twentieth-century productions of *Aida* illustrate some commonalities that likely also featured in the American productions.<sup>35</sup>

More than just scenery, the spectacular elements of *Aida* were due in part to the massive scale of the production as a whole. The 1873 production included "an augmented orchestra, a complete brass band, a small *corps de ballet*, ...a force of Ethiopian juveniles, some trumpeters of old who have not yet control of the unwieldy but appropriate instruments, and brand new dresses for every performer of the two hundred human beings, who, in the second act, are gathered at once upon the stage..."<sup>36</sup> While the painted canvas backdrops provided an exquisite setting, the visual effect of *Aida*'s enormous ensemble helped to produce its dramatic impact, especially in scenes like the famous Act 2, Scene 2 Victory Parade.

Scene Two is jam-packed with narrative events: the jealous Amneris tricks Aida into thinking that Radames has died in the Ethiopian campaign. After Aida discloses her feelings in Amneris's boudoir, the queen's jealous cruelty is interrupted by the return of

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<sup>35</sup> For further information on Auguste Mariette's role in the original staging of *Aida* see the discussion in McCants and Busch as cited above. McCants, 14-37.

<sup>36</sup> "Amusements: Musical. "Aida:" at the Academy," *The New York Times*, Nov. 27, 1873, 4.

the victorious Radames, thus ushering in the opera's most audacious, bombastic display of unadulterated spectacle. A nineteenth-century French engraving gives a sense of the staging, but it should be noted that this scene, in particular, allowed for numerous variations in its pageantry (Figure 2 ). The engraving, however, suggests the type of background that would have been utilized; upon hearing the news of Radames' return the action moves to the outside of the temple complex. Two enormous seated Egyptian rulers sit against the stoic palace entrance; in the background are large gateways for the procession of figures. Palm trees fill the space, and an ornate canopy frames the entire live action. The dramatic Egyptian cityscape was only outdone by the number of live performers that would occupy the stage during this act. The engraving only hints at this by including a large cluster of ballerinas in Egyptian-ized costume to the left, a group of robed priests to the right, and a cluster of Ethiopian captives with their noticeably darker skin in the foreground. At the center of the action are three figures, two male and one female with long black hair—they likely depict the moment when Aida recognizes her now-enslaved father among the crowd of her countrymen. Behind the foreground figures, a seemingly unending mass of bodies crowds to celebrate the Egyptian victory. Effectively a parade, the scene would become synonymous with the opera itself. As Steven Huebner has suggested, the martial march of the victory scene is the most westernized piece of music in the entire score and was reminiscent of Verdi's other works associated with the *Risorgimento*.<sup>37</sup> Including a ballet interlude and a moving procession of glittering spoils and enslaved figures, this scene alone speaks to the American reviewer's near obsession with *Aida*'s visual effects.

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<sup>37</sup>Huebner, Steven. "'O patria mia': Patriotism, Dream, Death" *Cambridge Opera Journal*, Vol. 14 No. 1.2, Primal Scenes: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the University of California, Berkeley, 30 November-2 December, 2001 (Mar., 2002), 161-175.

And yet the greatest staging feat of the opera rests in its final act. Verdi was particularly intrigued by the staging possibilities of Mariette's dramatic conclusion and devised the opera's famous split staging design in order to simultaneously showcase the mournful Amneris as she prays in the temple above the tomb that holds the dying male and female protagonists. An 1872 Italian advertisement for the *La Scala* premiere prominently features this set design, which is dramatically divided by a bar of text that identifies the scene as the finale (Figure 3). A row of priests pray in the center between a series of columns as dancers mourn to their right and left. Below is a central stairway that ends with two collapsed bodies, Radames weeping over the deceased Aida. A French 1871 engraving echoes the design of the advertisement (Figure 4). Amid a columned space and below a large cult statue of Vulcan, priests and priestesses pray while Amneris grieves in the foreground. Below the crowded action, Radames and Aida lie in their dark secluded tomb. The engraving shows an Aida perched like an odalisque as she waits for Radames who exclaims in shock at her suicidal decision.

Suggesting the symbolic strength of the split stage, the major elements of the scene are echoed again in a later British engraving after its performance at the Royal Theatre (Figure 5). Unlike the previous two examples, this image focuses less on the scale of the whole staging in favor of closer glimpses of the characters and their emotive states. Here Amneris appears as a penitent Magdalene, covered and lit dramatically from above. She looks downward as she mourns the tragic deaths of Radames and Aida below. Aida dressed in Egyptian costuming lay dead along the bottom of the foreground as Radames breathes his last breath, perched along the stairwell and holding his lifeless lover's hand. All three images point to similarities in set design that were characteristic of

the opera itself: the split stage that not only separated life and death but starkly created a visual display of crowded, colored spectacle along the top and dramatic, black emptiness at the stairwell that occupied the lower plane. The feat of this staging was spectacle enough to set *Aida* apart from its counterparts, however, its position at the tragic climax of the opera's action, with the soaring mournful cry of Amneris's and Aida and Radames' emotive yet breathless final duet, launched the opera into a sphere of unparalleled spectacle.

Contemporary audiences were first and foremost dazzled by the visual feast of *Aida*. The parade of Egyptian images in succession presented audiences with images that were, in actuality, divorced from an authentic Egyptian origin and replaced with representations that adopted the perspective of European interpretations. *Aida*'s singular place in Verdi's cannon is indebted to this particular aspect of its production—its meaningful intersection of Egyptian with European art and musical styles that could resonate as rhetorically “Egyptian” to American audiences. However, opera operates on multiple levels of signification, and while the visual elements of *Aida* often trumped its other components, Verdi's score and Mariette's narrative necessitate consideration. Though the present study must forgo discussion of the opera's musicology, I focus instead on how the progression of the narrative created its resonance with an American audience as a politicized whole. Though score and the narrative itself were often secondary to the dramatic visual presence that *Aida*, an impenetrable visual presentation served as a mirror to American audiences, reflecting back their own ideology that entailed a politicized view of Egypt as a culture and land ripe for a colonialist taking.

The story of *Aida* conveys a complicated message regarding the place of Egypt within Western history. Mariette's tale and Verdi's finalized version negotiate between being celebratory and damning the actions of the characters. In one sense, Aida and Radames are victims of Amneris' jealousy; yet on the other, they are representations of an illicit love that betrays nationalist loyalties. The story sends a subversive message when taken in the context of a politicized American, or more broadly, a Western audience. More about Radames than Aida, the opera is not a tragic story of love but instead is a cautionary tale that warns of the dangers of miscegenation through the eventual punishment of the star-crossed lovers.

Despite the scenes of the mass pageantry, at its core the opera is focused upon the action of its three protagonists. As the titular figure, Aida is designated as principal star, and indeed, her actions drive the plot. She begins as a sympathetic victim enslaved to Amneris and separated from her homeland. Kept from her love of Radames, she immediately elicits the audience's sympathy. Second, Radames exposes his vulnerability in "Celeste Aida" as he declares his love for the Egyptian princess's slave girl. When Radames is called off to war, he becomes more than just a love interest, however. He becomes the symbol of militaristic authority. Aida and Radames occupy opposite ends of the spectrum of power: slave and general; exotic, eastern "other" and western, militaristic authority. A standard trope of binary oppositions, the power imbalance also drives the plot, and yet the revelation that the slave Aida is, in fact, a princess of Ethiopia complicates this binary considerably. The revelation of Aida's identity theoretically makes her equal to Amneris and reveals the true composition of the plot's love triangle as

two princesses and one general. And yet the Ethiopian princess cannot succeed because of her “otherness.”

As the plot thickens, the subversion continues. Aida’s character becomes even more complex when she is further humanized by the appearance of her father. The audience is privy to a rare glimpse into a female protagonist’s complicated psyche, and Aida’s emotive “O Patria Mia” allows viewers to experience her pain, her longing for home and her true love of Radames. Yet her decision to betray her romantic love in allegiance to love of family and nation, which could be honorable to American audiences, is undercut by its decidedly sexualized tone. The dramatic apex of Aida’s narrative action is built upon her ability to seduce Radames with her sensuous song, vivid images of a pastoral paradise in Ethiopia and by means of her physical body. Radames responds not through love, but by a lust that spurs the defeat of his country and his own demise. As the image of authority, Radames is brought down by the only power Aida can claim possession of – the power of her body.

These power distinctions proved significant to American audiences because, as a personification of the more Westernized image of power within the opera, Radames is actually more crucial to the plot than Aida herself. Egypt is civilized, unified, traditional and religious, powerful and beautiful with its sophisticated art and architecture and military might. Egypt, becomes the symbolic link to America, an America that wanted to claim ownership of Egypt’s ancient history in an effort to bolster its own historical weight. Radames embodies these themes, and his importance to American audiences was not lost on contemporary reviewers.

In an 1874 review, the figure of Aida is given a mere two sentences of attention. The focus is on Radamaes; played by Italo Campanini, the review gushes: “his personation [sic] of Radames was vocally and histrionically impressive as ever...” Moreover, he continues to praise Campanini’s more “authentic” portrayal of the Egyptian general: “we are, for our part, exceedingly glad that Signor Campanini has not sought to clothe a modern dandy in the garb of the Egyptians and that something of rough vigor informs his portrayal of Aida’s lover.”<sup>38</sup> He continues to forgive Radames of “the little romance in the first act” as “his single chance to be sentimental” and concludes by celebrating Campanini’s singing and acting as “full of fire and force.”<sup>39</sup> Citing the action of Act Three, he describes the audience’s enthusiastic response to Radames and Aida’s duet in which “the grief aroused in the Egyptian at the thought of exile ...” elicited “the fervor of the lover’s vows ... in which the resolve of Radames and Aida to fly is expressed with the happiest appreciation of climax,” inspiring “applause as loud and as prolonged as has ever resounded with the walls of the academy.”<sup>40</sup>

A 1908 poster of *Aida* produced by the Ohio Opera Troupe, the Hippodrome Opera, although later than the above review, echoes the celebratory American response to Radames’ military authority (Figure 6). The busy composition centers on the elevated figure of Radames, as he is carried into Act 2, Scene 2 by a troupe of shirtless Ethiopian slaves. Standing, clad in brilliant white, directly in front of a tall obelisk, it is Radames in all his masculine authority who provides the center of action. Aida and Amneris both flank Radames’ procession. Fully covered and gesturing in a dramatic swoon, Amneris stands to the right next to the Egyptian High Priest. To the left is Aida, shown here in a

<sup>38</sup> “Amusements: The Italian Opera,” *New York Times*, Feb 24, 1874, 5.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

revealing variant on her Egyptian costume; topless save for a necklace, she gazes up to Radames and stands with her father in a tribal motif. Further suggesting a binary division of male and female, Aida's side of the composition is filled with female onlookers, likely priestesses, while crowds of Ethiopian captives holding standards of war stand behind Amneris. Radames is positioned deliberate between these poles of sexualized power: Aida, with her exotic, Ethiopian identity, and Amneris, who represents Egyptian government and stabilized authority. To American audiences, Radames, rather than Aida, serves as the center of attention and the figure on whom they may project their own national identity. Radames' desire for Aida metaphorically invokes a desire for all things exotic, foreign and potentially dangerous. Though it may seem natural, desire that crosses national loyalties becomes a punishable act.

When Aida merited discussion, contemporary reviews reinforced the character's exotic identity instead of her complexity. One review characterized her as: "sufficiently beautiful to enable the spectator to sympathize with Radames in his love for the Nubian girl...and in the lithe movements, the stealthy but graceful tread and the occasional glimpses it affords of a tigress-like spirit hidden beneath the veil of despondent docility it satisfies the idea of the oriental princess born to hate the Egyptian and living under the curse of bondage."<sup>41</sup> Like an animal, Aida is a force of wild, exotic attraction, enslaved and only "sufficiently beautiful" to allow Radames as a non-other to be sexually attracted to her.

The whole narrative operates in binaries: male and female, Egyptian and Ethiopian, strong and weak, private moments and large public displays. The binaries within the performance continue as the music shifts between an "Oriental" flute and

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<sup>41</sup> "Record of Amusements: Musical and Dramatic," *The New York Times*, Mar 9, 1880, 5.

westernized march tempos. The result is a work that both musically and visually produces two distinct realms: the exotic, Ethiopian realm belonging to the body of Aida's body, and the realm of normalized Egyptian authority. The oscillation between these modes results in the demise of the figures who challenge the division between them. Aida could inhabit her otherness, but, once it threatened the normative power of Radames, she was destined to fail. Radames, likewise, could love the poor slave girl, but not at the expense of his nationalistic duties.

Thus, Said's reading of *Aida's* place as an Orientalizing opera, through overbearing European influence on Egyptian culture as a product of its colonial occupation, carries weight when examining the opera's context in an American context. My analysis, however, examines the visual components of *Aida*, suggesting that its binary structure and emphasis on the sexualized body of Aida is not only Orientalist but reflective of an American imperialist spirit. The opera provided American audiences with a cautionary tale that punished its protagonists not just for forbidden lust, but for crossing the boundaries of geographic and racial desires. Aida's sexualized body provides the locus of all the opera's exoticism; her royal status or political agency is removed and replaced by the sexual prowess that leads to her tragic death.

Moreover, Aida's Ethiopian ancestry is subsumed into the popular characterization of *Aida* as an "Egyptian" opera. The opera's title emphasizes the key role of Aida as the fulcrum of the plot, yet any agency that her heritage and royalty might hold is swept away by the spectacle of the overall production's portrayal of Egypt. The seductive qualities inherent in her character mirror the seduction by the opera's visual extravagance. Although Egypt serves the image of military authority, religion and

tradition, the country will be defeated in the end by the unforeseen threat of exotic, foreign and primitive Ethiopian power. A metaphor for the dangers of neglecting one's nation for the temptations of an "other," *Aida*'s politics reflect the conflicted emotions of desire versus duty in the rhetorically anti-imperialist United States.

The spectacular nature of *Aida*'s production was responsible for its enormous impact. The opera's unprecedented staging and artistry produced a spectacle of massive proportions that forced the viewer into a state of full absorption. Unlike *Nabucco* whose chorus elicited the chanting of engaged audiences, or earlier operas in New York that occupied small venues and allowed for exchange between performer and spectator, *Aida* was a monolithic work that quickly unfolded for the audience's voyeuristic gaze. Reflecting back the implicit imperialist desires of Gilded Age America and the growing interest in cosmopolitan art and leisure *Aida* masked the intimate moments of love and betrayal with glitter and glitz, parades and processions, complicated sets and vibrantly painted backdrops.

But what of the place of Egypt as it is presented in the opera? After Radames is tricked into betraying his country, the defeat of Egypt is implied. That Egypt's power eventually ceases is a narrative that corresponds well to the contemporary interest in its history. Following in the footsteps of European Egyptology, the might of Egypt was lauded and collected, displayed and owned as it represented an ancient authority. That ancient authority, however, was lost eventually to the might of the ultimate Western authority of Rome. Thus, representations of ancient Egypt, served almost as spoils of a centuries-old war. Favorable representations of Egyptian power served only to paint a picture of a formidable foe – a Noble Savage – over which westerners could boast

superiority. This mythical representation of Egypt, however, was and still is a work of fiction, created in the minds of French and Italian artists. Yet one other Egyptian woman pushed the representation of Egypt into full-on extravagant spectacle, and did so by means of her hyper-sexualized, exotic identity. That woman, of course, is Cleopatra.

### **Cleopatra**

The spectacle of *Aida* delivered to its New York audiences a tale of an imbalanced power system. Pitting military authority against the power of Aida's sexualized body, the plot reflected an American desire to watch the image of Western culture enact possession over exotic others. One Egyptian woman, however, carries even more historical weight, legend, exoticism and popular fascination: Queen Cleopatra VII, the last pharaoh of Egypt. Cleopatra's American popularity is tied, in part, to an unending Western fascination with her lore and legacy; however, in the realm of turn of the century popular entertainment, Cleopatra's popularity was brought to new heights. Always represented in as exotic, the Gilded Age Cleopatra was also informed by greater attention to exaggerated, sexualized "Eastern" tropes that were immediately juxtaposed with images of Roman militarized authority. Her infamous characterization as femme fatale would become codified through spectacular narrative performances of her demise as a way of expressing and reinforcing contemporary imperialistic ideologies.

Of course, unlike the character of Aida, Cleopatra was an actual historical figure. A woman with unprecedented power, she reigned as the last true Pharaoh of Egypt before its fall to the Roman Empire. She fought battles, waged war within her own family and was heir to the legacy of Alexander the Great. However, the woman known to us now, as in the nineteenth century, is as fictional as the invented character of Aida. Both female

figures are constructs of Westernized fantasies, serving a larger narrative purpose in stories crafted by the victors of their respective colonial struggles. After the Battle of Actium, Cleopatra's suicide and inevitable surrender to Rome, it was the Romans, Plutarch in particular, who would write most frequently of her life and times. Plutarch, writing directly under Augustus, was not kind, calling attention to her large nose and pointing out her unusual intoxicating attractiveness. His work represented the educated queen as a cunning, manipulative temptress that powerfully lured not one but two Roman legions, Julius Caesar and Mark Antony, to their eventual deaths.<sup>42</sup>

The dramatic events and demise of Cleopatra's life—her serpentine suicide, her lust-filled love life, her ruthless overthrow of her brother and sister—would enrapture the writers and artists of centuries to come. In part, this was due to the paucity of empirical evidence from any Egyptian source that might have provided a naturalistic portrait or objective account. As the British Museum explored in 2001, the face of Cleopatra remains known only through the stylized profiles of her numismatic portraits. The few marble portraits that survive are conventionally Hellenized, appearing naturalistic but idealized, and difficult to distinguish as her authentic likeness and not one of a female follower.<sup>43</sup> Thus, much like the mystery of the thinly veiled visage of the contemporary Arab woman, Cleopatra, in spite of her fame, remained a teasing mystery of erotic, Eastern femininity to Western audiences. The desire to see Cleopatra would continue in medieval manuscripts where she would become synonymous with female sin, lumped with the seductresses Eve and Salome. In the Italian Renaissance, she was a frequent choice for historiated portraiture, with her asp serving as an iconographic attribute that

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<sup>42</sup> See Plutarch "Life of Antony" (XXVII.2-3).

<sup>43</sup> For further discussion see Walker, Susan, and Peter Higgs. *Cleopatra of Egypt: From History to Myth*, (Princeton: Princeton University, 2001).

wealthy sitters appropriated.<sup>44</sup> Michelangelo would take her as a subject, and her dramatic life also proved well suited to the Italian Baroque's taste for theatricality.

Centuries of artistic representations informed the phenomena of this chapter. Beyond the noteworthy arrival of her namesake obelisk, New York City was privy to a number of Cleopatra-themed performances at the turn of the twentieth century. This chapter focuses on two major moments when Cleopatra seized prominence in the leisure life of New York City in the early twentieth century. Both serve as foils to *Aida*'s highbrow stature, yet they differ dramatically in presentation, medium and their respective advertising. The "Cleopatra Spectacle" of the Barnum and Bailey Circus was performed to great acclaim not once but twice in the seasons of 1912 and 1913. In a different, more sensationalist vein, the 1913 and 1917 silent films titled *Cleopatra* reached more audiences and caused an even greater stir, virtually crafting a new image of the Egyptian Queen that would inform her legacy for years to come. The love affair between the figure of Cleopatra and the silver screen is topic worthy of its own separate study, but this chapter will contextualize it within the larger framework of the long nineteenth century's distinct form of Orientalist Egyptomania and explore these films as spectacles whose scopophilic viewing pleasure further cemented an image of Cleopatra as an Orientalist body—the seductive embodiment of an imperialist narrative.

### **"Grand Opera for the masses": Cleopatra and the Circus spectacle**

The circus spectacle, or the "spec," as it was conventionally called, was a type of performance that reached its epoch in the late nineteenth century golden age of the American circus. Spectacles, as the name suggests, were large, opulent and dramatic

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

pantomimed performances that took historical and mythological topics for their subjects. Jennifer Lemer Posey of the Ringling Museum has written on an understudied element of circus history—the development of the circus spectacle through the course of the nineteenth century. She builds on the two main works devoted to the topic: Fred D. Pfenning’s “Spec-ology of the Circus”, which was in turn inspired by A. Morton Smith’s 1943 initial study of the same name.<sup>45</sup> While all three of these studies provide an informative discussion of the development and eventual decline of the American circus spectacle, they do not consider at length the potential signifying power of the spectacle performance for American audiences. A peculiar type of performance, the spectacle was viewed by diverse audiences of mixed social classes and occupied a hybrid space between weighty content with refined, dramatic staging and popular circus entertainment. The place of Cleopatra within this type of entertainment is significant. After a period of decline in popularity, John Ringling, who had become the owner of Barnum and Bailey’s Circus through a merger, sought to revive popular interest in the “spec” with *Cleopatra*, “The biggest picture ever seen in New York.”<sup>46</sup> With a generous budget, dramatic stage setting and enormous cast, *Cleopatra* was to be a spectacle in every sense of the word. Opening the 1912 and 1913 seasons of the circus at Madison Square Garden, the Egyptian Queen and her legendary life held court over New York City and, like *Aida*, told an Orientalist tale of Western domination over Eastern exoticism.

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<sup>45</sup> Jennifer Lemer Posey, “Magnificent Entrees: The Role of the Spectacle During the Golden Age of the Circus,” *The Amazing Circus Poster: Strobbridge Lithographing Company* (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, 2011), 68-74. ; Fred D. Pfenning, Jr., “Spec-ology of the Circus,” *Bandwagon*, (Nov.-Dec. 2003), 4; A. Morton Smith, “Spec-ology of the Circus,” *The Billboard*, July 31, 1943, 51-55.

<sup>46</sup> Ringling, from personal correspondence 1912; Archives of the Circus World Museum, Baraboo Wisconsin.

As Fred D. Pfening suggests, the circus spectacle's origins are contemporary to the earliest circus performances in America.<sup>47</sup> As early as colonial times, audiences were captivated by large scale performances of "The Grand Historical Pantomime" which amid performances of equestrian acts and acrobatics, re-enacted important historical moments. The spectacle's place within the larger circus show evolved over time. Initially placed at the end of the entire production as a grand finale, it was eventually moved to the start of the main show as a precursor to the circus events as a whole. Performed at the hippodrome track, the "spec" portion of the performance was likewise linked to the circus' larger preoccupation with its roots in ancient Rome. Many elements of the conventional circus lineup were borrowed from antiquity—chariots and horse races overtly linked the circus to ancient Roman predecessors, and the spectacles were initially fashioned along similar themes. Epic Roman productions resulting, including the most famous, *Nero*, which was produced by world-renowned impresario, Imre Kiralfy. By the time of the 1912 and 1913 productions discussed here, the spectacle had experienced its peak in the 1880s only to require a revival in the early twentieth century. Its transfer from finale to opening marked a distinct change in the place of the "spec" amongst other circus performances, re-contextualizing the following circus acts with its dramatic presentation.

The circus itself occupies a unique place within American leisure activity. Much like the Barnum Museum discussed in Chapter Two, the circus simultaneously provided sheer spectacle and a source of educational, nationalistic pride. Although the audience for the circus certainly included both lower and middle classes, the entertainment was still reviewed after each year's show. Most tellingly, in 1880, P.T. Barnum took the cause of the American circus to a new height as he went off to "conquer Europe" on a grand

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<sup>47</sup>Pfening, Fred D. Jr. "Spec-ology of the Circus," 4.

international tour. Although comparatively low-brow, the circus was nonetheless intimately tied up in the period's cosmopolitanism and yearnings to compete with European cultural centers. The desires to "conquer" audiences were perhaps most fully executed in the imperialist rhetoric of the *Cleopatra* spectacle.

The *Cleopatra* spectacle was not the first instance of Egyptian themes or Orientalist narratives in the circus more broadly. One of the major elements of Barnum's European tour lineup was a "World Menagerie" that incorporated elaborate wood-carved wagons of different continents and countries. Africa had its own wagon that was outfitted in Egyptian motif (Figure 7). Stuart Thayer has written on the Egyptian influence on the American circus and cites a long-held interest linked to the arrival of camels in the circus menagerie.<sup>48</sup> The exotic animals ushered in a wider exploration of Egyptian themes that dovetailed with larger trends in revival styles. In 1903, the Barnum and Bailey Circus featured Cleopatra specifically on a tableaux wagon designed for Barnum's European homecoming. Egypt had its own float in 1901, and a number of caged floats for the menagerie featured Egyptian motifs.

The American circus's interest in Egypt dovetailed with its generally exotic aesthetic and its interest in mysterious far-off lands. The 1912 and 1913 *Cleopatra* specs, however, functioned as more than elaborate displays of exotic motif, they were different vehicles that were able to transmit complex political meanings. They marked a shift toward the interest in her historical narrative, which was cast as a retelling of Roman history, rather than as simply Egyptian. Like *Aida*, Cleopatra's story is one of binary oppositions: male and female, Roman and Egyptian, East and West. In the end, Egypt's role in this story is one of decadence and temptation; this is a story of Roman triumph

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<sup>48</sup> Thayer, Stuart, "The Egyptian Influence on the American Circus," *Bandwagon* (Jan-Feb, 1972): 18-21.

and the victorious possession of tempting colonial territory. Accompanying the actual performance were a number of elaborate posters and a fully illustrated libretto available for purchase at every show. The posters were lithographs made by The Strobridge Lithographing Company, who were the primary printers for both Barnum and Bailey and Ringling Brothers circus's posters. As Kristin L. Spangenberg has described, circus posters could vary dramatically in scale.<sup>49</sup> The lithographs ranged from one-sheet posters of 42 x 28 inches to groups of up to twelve one-sheet posters (twelve-sheet 42x28 feet) that would be affixed to walls and windows throughout the city when the circus came to town. The *Cleopatra* posters that still survive are all one-sheets, but these include four different scenes that were printed both on their own and in a larger composite poster for the 1913 circus itself. As Jennifer Lemer Posey has rightly pointed out, the posters were intended to entice viewers with the scale and elaborate artistry of the spectacle itself. Based on photographic evidence it seems the poster imagery was not a close emulation of actual stage and costume design.<sup>50</sup> Taking artistic liberties, the lithographs were designed to create the greatest visual impact, relying on illusionism to represent the Egyptian sets in ways that the physical circus setting could not. Moreover, costume choices and colors in the lithographs share similarities with Cleopatra images from earlier nineteenth-century paintings, perhaps in an effort to make her easily recognizable to the broadest possible audience.

Although no receipt survives to verify the number of posters ordered for the 1912 and 1913 seasons, the five one sheet lithographs that exist suggest an elaborate

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<sup>49</sup> For more information on the design and printing of circus posters see: Spangenberg, Kristin L., "Strobridge Pictorial Posters: Design, Printing, and Posting," in *The Amazing American Circus Poster: The Strobridge Lithographing Company*, 85-91.

<sup>50</sup> Lemmer-Posey, Jennifer. "Magnificent Entrees: The Role of the Spectacle During the Golden Age of the Circus" in *The Amazing American Circus Poster: The Strobridge Lithographing Company*, 68-74.

advertising campaign for Barnum & Bailey's newest spectacle. Four of the posters consist of single moments in the spectacle's plot, while one poster is a composite of three of the individual posters set in smaller frames amidst a larger advertisement for the circus overall. The posters and their respective scene selections reinforce the binaries inherent in the Cleopatra narrative itself. Split between images of opulent, exotic pageantry and allusions to imperial Roman imagery, the posters predict the tension between erotic love and nationalistic loyalty in *Cleopatra* the "spectacle."

The poster most commonly associated with the spectacle depicts the moment when the Egyptian Queen first spots Antony's approach from the right background of the composition (Figure 8). With the Great Pyramids in the distance separated by the Nile, Antony's numerous legions form a large mass that proceeds to the figure of a lounging Cleopatra surrounded by attendants. Shown in a strict profile that recalls an Egyptian relief sculpture, the Queen is adorned in gold and white, wearing an elaborate polychrome headdress and holding the crook associated with ancient Egyptian royal sarcophagi. Slaves of darker complexions kneel below her noticeably whiter body, and framing the image from below is a textual caption identifying the image's subject: "Cleopatra Egypt's Beautiful Queen. Watching The Approach of the Roman Conqueror Mark Antony As Actually Shown In This Tremendous New 1250 Character Spectacle." With a composition reminiscent both of Orientalist odalisques attended to by slaves and historical subjects with multiple figures and a high degree of detail, the poster boasts an enormous spectacle that stages not only "Egypt's Beautiful Queen" in all her oriental splendor, but "Roman Conqueror Mark Antony" and the rest of his Roman legions.

Another poster inverts this division, however, and proudly displays a promise of

total Oriental pageantry (Figure 9). An enormous crowd of fair-skinned, female figures occupy the entire foreground as they twirl and kick in formation facing the viewer. A group of brunette dancers holding palm fronds encircle a tall, male Egyptian staff bearer garbed in brilliant colors. The center of the foreground features a parade of blond dancers garbed in brilliant gold dresses parading out of the image in a Broadway-style kick-line to the sides of a circle of auburn beauties holding Egyptian standards and processional staffs. In the immediate foreground two black haired women kneel with fans in their hands, framing a singular blond beauty in an elaborate gold costume. All of this choreography takes place on a bright red ground that extends into the background towards a comparatively small throne containing the Queen Cleopatra, seated with an adoring Antony. Cleopatra wears a golden gown that matches the attire of the exotic ballerinas, while Antony wears Imperial purple and a noticeably green wreath of laurel; both are clearly identified with their respective roles in the Egypt versus Roman and East versus West binaries. The image occupies the entirety of the poster with a smaller inset frame of text reading “A Ballet of 300 Entrancingly Beautiful Dancing Girls In the Magnificent Court of Cleopatra, A Bewitching Picture of Oriental Splendor.” In addition to reinforcing hierarchies of beauty according to hair and skin color, the poster is an image of total opulence, emphasizing the role of Egypt as the source of such exotic visual marvel.<sup>51</sup>

The third image depicts an equally impressive tableau of figures, while echoing again the binary divisions within the narrative (Figure 10). Cleopatra and Antony are shown in the center middle ground in front of the temple façade, surrounded by members

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<sup>51</sup> For a thorough discussion of whiteness and the signifying power of white skin tones see: Dyer, Richard. *White*. (London: Routledge, 1997).

of the Egyptian court and Roman legions respectively. A gold and white-clad Cleopatra crowns a kneeling Antony with half of the Egyptian crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. In a unique element of this spectacle's plot, Cleopatra offers Antony joint rule of Egypt if he would abandon his Roman allegiances. Behind Antony, a Roman figure raises his hand in protest directly under the "SPQR" Roman flag, which identifies him as a member of the *Senatus Populusque Romanus*. In the foreground, two approaching chariots converge at the central row of Egyptian trumpeters. The caption identifies the scene: "The Grandeur and Opulence of Cleopatra's Court, Showing the Queen Dividing With Antony In Superb Ceremonial Splendor, The Double Crown of Upper and Lower Egypt." A scene mixed with Egyptian splendor staged deliberately against Roman stoicism, this turning point acts as a sign for the entire production.

All three images represent climactic moments and presented the lithographer with ample opportunity to dazzle the viewer with bright colors and vivid details of antiquity come to life. All three are indeed spectacles in and of themselves, but perhaps the most "spectacular" in the traditional sense, as Debord suggests, is the fourth poster (Figure 11). The poster is filled with numerous figures clothed in Egyptian costumes, as the others were. Lions, horses and camels parade along with Queen Cleopatra and Antony as they are seated beside one another in her dramatic throne. Parading along the backdrop of Egyptian architecture, the caravan carries behind the couple a large obelisk that extends upward underneath the bright red lettering of the queen's name. Captioned only as "A Dazzling World Story Tremendously Told by 1250 Characters On A Stage Space Bigger than 100 Theaters," the text here indicates nothing of the presentation's narrative. Indeed the image presented could never have been staged within the confines of the Hippodrome

track. The illustration presents an imagined moment of Egyptian splendor rather than a moment from Cleopatra's narrative, an emphasis made expressly for the American audience. The barge-like float that carries Antony and Cleopatra is reminiscent of the brightly colored polychrome wood wagons associated with the actual circus parade that accompanied the arrival of the circus at each stop. The Cleopatra Float from 1903 may have been inspiration for this very scene. As a photograph illustrates, the curved shapes at the front of the 1903 wagon echo the kneeling harpists at the foot of the royal entourage (Figure 12).

Most of all, the inclusion of the large obelisk seems to be a direct reference to New York's very own "Cleopatra's Needle." Since the spectacle was conceived for a New York premiere, it seems likely that the inclusion of the city's direct tie to the Egyptian Queen was deemed an important addition. *Cleopatra's Needle* is featured again in the spectacle's accompanying libretto, with its own illustration (Figure 13). Less about the narrative of Cleopatra, the spectacle is about the American "possession" of Egypt itself as enacted through both the actual obelisk in Central Park *and* in the spectacle about to take place in an American circus. This rhetoric of possession is implicitly echoed in the demise of Cleopatra and Antony in the narrative of the plot itself. Roman possession of Egypt becomes a reflection of American desires to colonize Egyptian culture and history for themselves.

The last of these posters is even grander and speaks to a key issue in considering the nature of the circus "spec" itself: its larger place within the extended circus performance (Figure 14). The poster links the large display of the oriental ballet with the two main scenes of historical weight, Antony's arrival and the division of the crown. The

title “Cleopatra” appears directly under central portraits of both Barnum and Bailey, and the “spec” imagery occupies the entire lower half of the poster. Along the top are two inset rectangles of imagery depicting the free circus street parade that includes an elephant and a dark-skinned turbaned man, amongst others; the other image depicts circus feats such as strong men and wrestling. Surrounding the two inset images are illustrations of circus animals, the menagerie and the trained acts. The amount of space that the *Cleopatra* spectacle receives affirms its importance to the entire presentation. However, the compositional similarities between the Cleopatra scenes and the other circus imagery demonstrate a continuity that links the show to the rest of the circus. By starting the circus with the historical narrative of Cleopatra, the spectacle transformed the mode of spectatorship into absorption. The pantomimed narrative retold history for its captive audience in a manner distinct from participatory modes of theatricality. This refashioning is also reflected in corresponding circus acts; the finale to the 1912 show is listed as “An Imperial Army” of acrobatic trapeze artists.<sup>52</sup> Mimicking the overt imperialist themes of the Roman elements in the Cleopatra narrative, the closing act suggests that Barnum & Bailey took efforts to link the “spec” with the circus as a whole, producing a symbiotic relationship that increased the entertainment value, magic and wonder for the historical narrative while simultaneously imbuing the circus with the weight of the spectacle’s grand manner staging and level of serious artistry.

The exact staging of the spectacle is difficult to reconstruct, although a few photographs of the entire production do still exist. The posters provide a sense of the overall emphasis on impressive pageantry; however, the photographs of both the stage set

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<sup>52</sup> As described in Barnum and Bailey Circus, *Cleopatra* Libretto 1912. Courtesy of the Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

and the individual performers suggest distinct differences in the finalized presentation. One contemporary photograph provides the best view of the spectacle as it was staged along the hippodrome in Madison Square Garden. At the edge of the track are rows of circus performers on horseback filling the width of the track. Behind them is a staircase flanked by an enormous cast of figures holding tall staffs and clothed in Egyptian garb. At the top of the sphinx-lined staircase, one can faintly make out the painted canvas backdrop of the pyramids in the distance just to the left of an impressive temple front with larger than life seated Egyptian figures. To the far left of the stage (Figure 15) is another over-life-size seated Egyptian figure that sits above the hidden entry tunnel for the chariots. While this gives no sense of the color or the atmospheric effects of the setting, the photograph does convey a sense of the size of the cast. While certainly not 1250 people, it was nonetheless imposing. The photograph also provides an accurate sense of the scale of the wood and canvas set elements. The larger than life size Pharaonic architecture, with its oversized sculptural elements, dwarfed the performers and provided all the trappings of a proper “Egyptian” scene with pyramids, temple fronts, sphinxes and palm trees. The effect is another awe-inspiring, massive image of an Egypt divorced from any semblance of authentic reality and instead explicitly created for the gaze of American audiences.

While only these few photographs remain of the actual production, there are a number of staged tableaux photographs featuring the star of the 1912 show, Jennie Silbon, posing with her leading man. Through these dramatic reenactments, the photos allude to the exaggerated posturing required in expressing the events of the plot through pantomime (Figure 16). While the score to the production was proudly produced by

Egyptian composer Falkis Effendi, the bandmaster of the Khedive of Egypt, and the overall production by William E. Garman and ballet Master Ottokar Bartik of the Metropolitan Opera Company, the absence of any amplification system required the narrative to be expressed simply by means of dance, gesture, props and a total of three forcefully delivered lines. These photographs, most certainly the product of a studio photographer executed at the circus grounds, were probably in commemoration of the spectacle and in emulation of actors and actresses like Sarah Bernhardt who were often photographed in character. Five photos now held by the Circus World Museum clearly show Jennie Silbon as Cleopatra. There is one group photograph, two of her with Antony and two portraits of her alone in costume. The group portrait (Figure 17) places Silbon in the center with her arms raised and her head in profile looking upward. Four women in long dresses and two men in a kind of garb that suggests Arab dress frame the queen in adulation. The white background has been scratched from the negative by the photographer, as indicated by the grass below the figures and the absence of any background imagery, perhaps in an effort to remove the distracting context of the American circus from the period subject matter. Taken while the circus was in progress, these photos are the best indication of the actual spectacle costuming.

The photos of Cleopatra and Antony echo the same use of dramatic gesture. In one, they link hands as Antony looks to the sky and Cleopatra gazes out to the viewer; in the other, more theatrical photograph, Antony bends gallantly to kiss his Queen's hand, as Cleopatra extends her other hand skyward. As expected, Antony wears Roman military costume with a breastplate, skirt and gladiator sandals. Perhaps best seen in the portraits of Silbon alone, Cleopatra's costume is surprising. She was clothed in a short dress,

probably a leotard, with bands of embellishment across the bodice and a long cape attached asymmetrically along her back on one shoulder. With thick, jeweled wrist cuffs and a squared headdress, her costume is more Byzantine than Egyptian. No doubt due to Silbon's quick costume changes as an acrobatic performer, her costume effectively removed the character of Cleopatra from the illusion of any historical authenticity. Yet what she wore appeared sufficiently exotic to be perceived as "Egyptian" by American audiences.

The photographs suggest a spectacle of monumental scale that presented a succession of exotic, recognizable Egyptian imagery sutured together in a pantomimed performance of a legendary historical tale. However, from the remaining visual evidence, a surprising number of elements remain absent. Unlike the majority of Cleopatra imagery, neither the posters nor the staged photographs suggest the lovers' famed suicides. The asp imagery and swooning poses, the typical iconographic tropes of Cleopatra on the cusp of death, are missing from the illustrative and photographic record. Moreover, none of the posters suggest any elaborate *femme fatale* gesture; in fact both the actual circus costumes and the illustrative imagery leave Cleopatra modestly clothed. In a departure from the tradition of Cleopatra imagery after the Renaissance, Barnum and Bailey's Cleopatra is regal and fully clothed; her exoticism is indicated by the spectacular nature of her elaborate surroundings.

In fact, the other prominent nineteenth-century Cleopatra was William Wetmore Story's *Cleopatra* sculpture. Although shown in her throne, the Egyptian queen was also displayed half-topless and on the cusp of death with asp in hand (Figure 18). More often than not, the seductive and salacious qualities of Cleopatra's life were communicated

through her exotic, Egyptian otherness, as Story indicates with her full lips and exposed breast.<sup>53</sup> The puritanical American resistance to excessive displays of flesh could be mitigated by appropriately exotic expressions of such scandalous subjects;<sup>54</sup> the circus certainly afforded ample opportunities for such, with its suggestive freak show displays amid representations of the female body fueled by stereotypes.<sup>55</sup> While still fulfilling her role as temptress of Antony and suicidal mourning queen, this Cleopatra was not explicitly defined in those terms. Where other representations of her sexuality embraced the hyperbolic, the spec underplayed perceptions of sexuality through her modest costume and the lacunae of the narrative while simultaneously embracing exaggeration in the overall spectacle. Cleopatra is thus elevated into a symbol of Egypt itself, with Antony's desire for her transformed into an expression of Rome's yearning for Egypt. Much like the figure of Radames, Antony becomes a cipher for Western, American motivations—as he yearns for Cleopatra, the United States hoped to emulate ancient Rome at the height of its imperial undertakings.

This imperialist reading of the Cleopatra narrative was more than visually suggested; it was explicitly written in the text of the accompanying libretto that was available for purchase. Discussing the libretto is complicated; the exact format, illustrations and advertisements varied from city to city as copies were run for each respective performance. The libretto's cover page seems to have remained constant from

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<sup>53</sup> Trafton, Scott, *Egypt land: race and nineteenth-century American Egyptomania* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 165-168.

<sup>54</sup> In this line of reasoning, my argument is informed by Joy Kasson's discussion of Hiram Powers' *Greek Slave*. See: Kasson, Joy S, *Marble Queens and Captives: Women in Nineteenth-Century American Sculpture*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>55</sup> Perhaps the best known examples of this is the case of Saartjie Baartman known as the "Hottentot Venus" who was sold to London and was subsequently exhibited due to her voluptuous figure. Characterized as a hyper-sexualized "freak" her body was even dissected after her death. This kind of racist stereotyping of the bodies of non-Western "others" was a common thread of circus and exhibition culture in the nineteenth century.

the few remaining in the Circus World and Ringling Museum archives, and it features the first poster described, with Cleopatra reclining as Antony arrived. Accompanying illustrations did not appear until 1913, when the success of the 1912 run buoyed financial support for the spectacle, resulting in a more aggressive advertising and illustrative campaign. Some of the illustrations included in the 1913 libretto were direct copies of the lithograph posters discussed earlier, raising the question about whether they had been designed in 1912 and were included in the later libretto because they were already familiar or whether they were invented in 1913 after the spectacle's popular success. Regardless of the year, the text included remained consistent in all runs and was only enhanced by select image pairings.

The 1912 libretto opens up with advertisements and first includes a breakdown of all the circus acts in sequential order by display. As the opening act, the *Cleopatra* spectacle received top billing and included an abstract that briefly recounted its plot. The short paragraph is telling; it opens with the name of Marc Antony describing his arrival in Alexandra to "take possession of the Egyptian capital." The text continues by describing Cleopatra's desperate pleas for Antony's mercy and her offer to split the kingdom of Egypt. Antony refuses, because of Rome's "lust for expansion" that would "accept no compromise." It is only then that Cleopatra resorted to her "wiles," staging the feast that would end in "the undoing of Antony and the betrayal of Rome." As Antony "abandons himself to a life of ease and extravagance in the Egyptian court," Caesar, marches on Egypt and surrounds Antony, who falls on his sword in defeat. As Antony dies in her arms, Cleopatra grabs the infamous asp and falls dead over Antony's lifeless body.<sup>56</sup> The

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<sup>56</sup> All text cited from the Barnum and Bailey Circus, *Cleopatra* Libretto 1912. Courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

small synopsis reveals the narrative's consistent emphasis on the power of Rome and a sympathetic characterization of Cleopatra. Although it acknowledges both her sexual and manipulative powers, as well as Egypt's opulence and decadent lifestyle, it emphasizes her diplomatic efforts to spare her people from inevitable full Roman occupation.

The libretto text included a full description of the narrative to assist readers in following the intricacies of the pantomimed performance, opening with a more poetic review of "Egypt" itself. Titled simply "Egypt," the text proceeds with a bold subtitle that reminds readers that the country was indeed: "The oldest theatre upon which the drama of mankind was played."<sup>57</sup> Linking the present theatrical display with Egyptian history in such stark terms, the opening functioned both to romanticize history and to merge it with the present. The text continues, calling attention to the particular American fascination with Egypt: "Wherein lies the mysterious attraction peculiar to the land of Egypt? Why is it that its name, its history, its natural peculiarities, and its monuments affect and interest us in quite a different manner from those of other nations of antiquity?"<sup>58</sup> Citing its legendary history and Biblical ties, the text provides its own answers:

Every child knows the names of the good and wicked pharaohs, and has heard of the Nile, by whose reedy shore the infant Moses was found in his cradle of rushes. Who has not known from his earliest youth the beautiful narrative which preserves its charm for every age, of the virtuous and prudent Joseph? Who has not heard of the scene of that story – Egypt – where the Virgin in her flight with the Holy Child found a rescue from His persecutors?<sup>59</sup>

Switching gears, the text then links the present performance with this storied past, explaining to viewers how the spectacle does nothing short of bringing the dead Egyptian civilization to life before their eyes, defying the laws of time:

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<sup>57</sup> Barnum and Bailey Circus, *Cleopatra* Libretto 1912.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

Through the medium of this mighty spectacle the laureates of past ages speak from forgotten tombs. The walls of time fall down. The audience looks into the streets of Alexandria in the days of B.C. 47, throbbing with its strange cosmopolitan life and ringing with the laughter and song of extravagant revelry. The pyramids look down upon the scene from long centuries ago- the Egypt of the Greek, Roman and the Ptolemy, heavy with the legends of antiquity and the memory of lost honors, and rich with the reflected glory and splendor of its unbridled revelry. The audience makes the acquaintance of Cleopatra, whose great beauty shapes the destiny of empires.<sup>60</sup>

Moreover, what the text describes is an ancient world that directly reflects contemporary New York in its “strange cosmopolitan life.” The concluding thought of Cleopatra’s role in shaping the “destiny of empires” indeed invokes the American removal and installation of the similarly titled “Cleopatra’s Needle” in 1881. Like the portrayal of Egypt in *Aida*, painting the colonized entity in an aggrandized, celebratory manner only imbues the future colonizer with greater weight in conquering a more formidable foe. Alexandria, as the next paragraph explained, was a breeding ground of knowledge both cultural and scientific and heir to the tradition of Greek thought. The association between the American acquisition of the obelisk and a thriving Alexandria in the libretto only heightens the nationalism reflected in the American desire to “own” Egypt.

The text also curiously excuses Cleopatra for her sinful ways. Acknowledging her “many critics,” it suggests that they had not considered the fact that “Christianity had cast no light across the wilderness of the sands of Egypt,” which thus still “struggled in spiritual darkness.” As if necessary for enjoyment of the biographical spectacle, the libretto characterizes her “love affairs” as “diplomatic alliances resorted to when argument and depleted military force were of no avail.” Barnum and Bailey’s Cleopatra was no femme fatale, but instead a sympathetic, albeit exotic, figure whose seductiveness reflected Egypt’s legendary allure.

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Finally, the text quickly mentions Cleopatra's previous love interest of Julius Caesar and her infamous introduction to him by means of the carpet ruse that would lead to her "conquest" of the great man.<sup>61</sup> But, despite these important events, the spectacle takes as its subject Cleopatra's next Roman lover and depicts their "sensational meeting" as well as the "period of revelry and abandonment" that inevitably led to the "undoing of Marc Antony and the betrayal of Rome." These events, of course would only end, as the spectacle will depict, in Antony's heroic suicide and "the sensational death of Cleopatra."<sup>62</sup>

After including a full cast line up, the "Argument" describes every element of the spectacle's plot. In sum, it elucidates a "decadent Egypt," shown at sunrise filled with figures as Antony arrives driven by his slave in a chariot carrying "trophies of war and ... captives."<sup>63</sup> Literally staged on the Hippodrome Track, Antony here links the contemporary circus displays to the historical content of the spectacle. It is his dramatic arrival that urges Cleopatra to appear on the terrace of her temple to plead for Alexandria's freedom from Roman colonization; Antony's failure to succumb prompts her to "resort to strategy" and invite him to "revelry and feast" amidst the dazzling "brilliancy of her court." "Pageantry... music and song... animal captors and wild beasts... dancing girls and harpers" are all part of her strategy to sway Antony away from Rome's "lust for expansion." And as the curtain falls on the "festal scene," the text explains that it rises a full ten years later as Antony has forsaken Rome in alignment with

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<sup>61</sup> Cleopatra at that time was embroiled in a battle for control of the throne and was forbidden by her brother from seeing Julius Caesar. In order to gain audience with him she allegedly rolled herself up in a carpet and was carried in by an African slave. Once delivered in Caesar's chambers the rug was unrolled to reveal the young Cleopatra.

<sup>62</sup> Barnum and Bailey Circus, *Cleopatra* Libretto 1912. Courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

Cleopatra—a fateful betrayal. Thus, the last act presents another opulent scene of Cleopatra’s court as it is finally surrounded by an attacking Rome and raises Cleopatra’s suggestion that Antony would go “forth to fight his own countrymen – for Cleopatra and for Egypt.” Despite the battle, Cleopatra’s “festivities” continue until a defeated Antony is brought in, fallen on his sword. The dramatic finale arrives as Cleopatra in a “frenzy of grief” attacks a “dwarf sorcerer” and, from a basket of snakes he carries, she pulls an asp, holds it to her breast and falls “dead over the body of Antony.”

The general narrative, as described by the libretto, emphasizes the binary oppositions at work in the poster imagery, even if there are differences in the overall aesthetics. The production emphasizes scenes of revelry and bacchanalian festivity whenever it is set in relation to Cleopatra’s court. These scenes of excess are emphasized to paint a vivid picture of an extravagantly decadent Egypt capable of seducing the stoic Antony. The uncompromising imperial force of Rome is dramatically contrasted to Egypt’s festive presentation, softening the political element of Egypt’s anti-colonial stance to the point of Cleopatra’s immediate willingness to divide her land to be half ruled by Rome.

The 1913 libretto further enhanced the effectiveness of the text with the inclusion of numerous illustrations that depict both Cleopatra specifically as well as images of Egypt itself. Beyond the repetition of poster imagery, there are representations of Cleopatra as she was rolled up inside the carpet to see Caesar, as she awaited Antony on her perfumed barge, and upon her death as she recoils in front of a group of male figures (Figures 19-20). One engraving after Jean Leon Gerome’s *Cleopatra Testing Poisons* is also included despite its incongruity with the spectacle’s narrative. In addition to

illustrative framing elements of hieroglyphic motifs, the 1913 libretto also includes two noteworthy images of Egypt itself. The first is the black and white engraving of *Cleopatra's Needle* in its former home of Alexandria; the second is an invented scene of Egyptian figures moving both a sphinx and a large obelisk along wheeled wagons through the streets of an Egyptian cityscape (Figures 22-23). The occurrence of the first illustration coincides with the point in the narrative text when Antony and Cleopatra meet for the first time upon his arrival in Alexandria. The latter is linked to the large spectacle of Cleopatra's festival and the spectacle's large ballet. Linking Antony's place in the story to the image of the obelisk that now stands in New York City deliberately ties the imperial entity of Rome to the image of the obelisk as an icon of Egyptian power, one that was transported as a spoil of imperial conquest. The second image demonstrates how such movement could occur. As Chapter One explained, it would have been common knowledge to New York audiences that the obelisk could be rolled through *both* Alexandria's and New York City's narrow streets. The association also makes an implicit connection to the course of history that allowed New York to inherit Roman-style victory through the downfall of Egypt's over-indulgent culture.

The libretto, illustrations, posters and photographs certainly suggest an epic, spectacular performance and contemporary reviews confirm these suggestions as well as the argument for a binary reading of its plot. Theorizing the role of the circus spectator, however, proves difficult considering the wide array of social classes who patronized the accessible entertainment source. Moreover, the pantomimed aspect of the spectacle positions the circus "spec" somewhere between the book ends of this chapter: operatic performance and silent film. The plot unfolds by use of gesture, accompanying music and

corresponding text, in many ways similar to silent film's overtures to spectatorship.

However, unlike in film, the performance is not dictated by the camera lens, but instead is live and bounded only by the confines of the theatrical space. Like *Aida*, the scale, elaborate staging, ornate costumes, animals, and dramatic theatrics, in conjunction with the supporting graphic materials, render the *Cleopatra Spectacle* a similarly monolithic spectacular performance, prompting viewers to marvel at a progression of imagery as it unfolds and seeing themselves rather than an authentic Egypt.

For example, a 1912 New York Times review opens with the title "CIRCUS OPENS IN GORGEOUS COLORS – Great Spectacle of Mark Antony and His Legions a Feature of the Big Show."<sup>64</sup> The title, in focusing on Antony and not Cleopatra, echoes the libretto and poster imagery's emphasis on the figure of Roman imperial importance. Furthermore, this emphasis continues in the article's very first sentence: "Mark Antony, leading his uniformed legions, inaugurated the Barnum & Bailey Circus season... the ancient Roman came in at the head of about 800 appropriately costumed young women and a score of gorgeously robed elephants."<sup>65</sup> To the author of the review the strongest impression was made first by Antony and was followed immediately by reference to the exaggerated scale of the cast and exotic animals. Cleopatra, in this review, is never even mentioned. Nonetheless, it suggests enthusiasm for the spectacle's display of Roman history and elaborate revelry: "the great gathering that filled every nook and corner of the Garden showed by its applause that they it appreciated the picture."<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> "Circus Opens in Gorgeous Colors: Great Spectacle of Mark Antony and His Legions a Feature of the Big Show," *The New York Times*, Mar. 22, 1912, 9.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Admittedly the omission of Cleopatra's agency is uncommon, yet indicative of the spectacle's implicit emphasis on Antony and the narrative's western component. A review from the same year in *Billboard Magazine* is more judicious, but begins by reinforcing the division between the lovers in describing the subject as "the love story of the noble Roman and the Serpent of the Old Nile."<sup>67</sup> Moving quickly to discussing the scale of the production it cites "over a thousand men and women in gorgeous *Roman* and Egyptian costumes (emphasis mine)," and "hundreds of horses in glittering and gaudy trappings." Moreover, the emphasis on the visual spectacle continues with a description of the stage setting as "so remarkable in perspective and so full of atmosphere that it is an artistic treat and alone worth the price of admission to the whole show."<sup>68</sup> Thus, the emphasis here is neither on the performance, nor the narrative specifically but on the impressive spectacle of *Cleopatra's* visual appearance.

Barnum & Bailey's *Cleopatra* produced for its audience an ancient Egyptian mirror that reflected back the imperialist ideologies of its politicized audience through symbolic reference to its western origins as constructed history. The story of a queen whose intelligence and military strength led her into complex relationships with great Roman leaders had been lost, buried under metaphorical desert sand in eyes of American viewers. As part of the circus pageantry, this Cleopatra served the purpose of subsuming all the exoticism, beauty and eroticism associated with her country and manifesting it, instead, in her body that was taken in lust by the hedonistic Antony. But this Cleopatra, still sympathetic and royal, is chaste in comparison to the manipulation of her image in the hands of the new media of narrative, feature-length silent films.

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<sup>67</sup>"Barnum and Bailey Show Opens," *Billboard*, March 29, 1912, 57.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

### **Serpent of the Silver Screen: Cleopatra on Film**

Between the years of 1908 and 1918 there were no fewer than five major, full-length productions of *Cleopatra* on film. Although the embryonic film industry certainly modeled itself after theatrical traditions, borrowing styles of acting and weighty historical subject matter, the preoccupation with Cleopatra as a subject for the new medium of narrative cinema is singular. Antonia Lant, in her investigation of Egyptomania in early cinema, examines film's idiosyncratic fascination with Egyptian culture due to its associations with death, magic, imperialism, contemporary colonialism and ancient history.<sup>69</sup> Citing Andre Bazin's "mummy complex," she argues that the intimate connection between film and Egypt is forged through the human preoccupation with resisting death through representing life. With Egypt's mummification process acting as the archetypical expression of this desire, film had the power to reanimate people, whether historical, fictional or real. In addition, Lant cites the development of nineteenth-century European imperialism and the British incorporation of Egyptian themes within exhibition culture. While elements of her argument are surely at work in the continued pull of Cleopatra on the film industry, the distinct fascination with Cleopatra over other potential narratives of Biblical Egypt, Nefertiti, Hatshepsut or the other nearly infinite possibilities deserves further consideration.

I argue that the emphasis on Cleopatra is inseparable from in the spectacle that she herself had become by the early twentieth century. Even more important were the intrinsic possibilities that the cinematic medium possessed to render an Egyptian Queen

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<sup>69</sup> Lant, Antonia, "The Curse of the Pharaoh, or How Cinema Contracted Egyptomania," *October*. Vol. 59 (Winter, 1992 ): 86-112.

as a complete spectacle so divorced from any authentic historical reality that she effectively became a full simulacrum. Reflecting American ideological concerns and its imperialist and Orientalist desires, the “Cleopatra” of American silent film echoed Barnum & Bailey’s *Cleopatra* and Verdi’s *Aida* in her dramatic place within the binary of imperialist and Orientalist narratives. Her cinematic character differed, however, through a fetishistic, scopophilic presentation by the camera that merged with the developing “Star system.” These “Cleopatras” were not defined simply by their characters, but a hybrid identity fusing the identity of the actress to the character. While a greater study of all five productions of *Cleopatra* would be a worthy endeavor, this analysis focuses on the 1912 Helen Gardner Picture Players film, also starring Helen Gardner, and the 1917 William H. Fox production, starring Theda Bara, as exemplary of the American fascination with the “Serpent of the Nile” on the silver screen. Since the Fox “Cleopatra” sadly shares the fate of many of the period’s great films, lost in a studio fire, the 1912 Helen Gardner production compensates for the unfortunate lack. The latter has recently been restored and was available for viewing at the George Eastman House. Merging consideration of the physical 1912 film itself with the plethora of advertising imagery, reviews and media coverage from the Fox film will clearly establish the signifying power of “Cleopatra” on film within this period of American Orientalism.

Tom Gunning theorizes the spectator’s response to early cinema as it was incorporated into the Vaudeville performance.<sup>70</sup> With direct address to the viewer, the type of cinematic experience in the earliest incarnations of American film was not characterized by the type of escapist absorption that takes the viewers away, but instead

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<sup>70</sup>Gunning, Tom, “The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and The Avant-Garde,” in *The Film Studies Reader* edited by Joanne Hollows et al. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 161-165.

was dominated by a sense of audience curiosity for the performed “attraction.” Narrative film, however, diverges from this mode of spectatorship, denying the actor the exhibitionist quality of directly acknowledging the position of the spectator in the movie audience. Instead, the cast of characters performs the narrative in an unknowing position as the object of a voyeuristic gaze.

Laura Mulvey has further examined the unbalanced power positions of the voyeuristic gaze in narrative cinema. A feminist approach that relies heavily on Lacanian psychoanalysis, she argues that the apparatus of classical Hollywood film places the audience, despite their actual gender or sexual preference, in the position of a masculine gaze. Objectifying the female body, the camera, she argues, renders the body of the actress as object of a fetishistic gaze. While Mulvey’s argument would certainly resonate with the scandalous figure of Cleopatra as the camera captures her, I diverge from her adherence to the feminist implications. Instead, I want to consider how the same power imbalance that forces the audience into the position of male spectator can operate in a politicized fashion, refiguring a wide audience as the colonizing voyeur. The spectacular nature of these films and their fixation on a historical Egypt and its scantily clad queen draws the audience into an absorptive state and produces a cinematic experience that insists on American possession of all the grandeur, glory, history and exotic Orientalism inherent in Cleopatra’s life, love, death and body.

New York City, predictably, was a center for early cinematic activity. Before the advent of Hollywood, film companies had their home bases in New York and New Jersey. In fact the two films discussed here reflect the impending change in the American film industry; Helen Gardner Picture Players was located and shot in New Jersey, while

Fox's *Cleopatra* was one of the first films to move its shooting to California's more temperate weather. This period of seeming "Cleopatra-mania" coincided with the development of an American film industry located in Hollywood, which began to compete seriously with traditional forms of entertainment.

This change in the stature of film was in part due to the increasing acceptance of cinema by members of the middle and upper middle class. As part of the Vaudeville circuit, early, non-narrative film was seen mostly by the poor audiences of New York's broad demographic. The boom of nickelodeons, with their affordable price of admission, was largely caused by lower to lower-middle class viewers, who were less afraid of the scandalous mixing of genders among audiences who sat in silent dark theatres.<sup>71</sup> As the import of narrative film developed, so did formal theaters that could draw in higher social classes. By the time of the 1917 *Cleopatra* premiere, the film would be heavily publicized with an elaborate opening and a traveling theatre campaign, patronized by society's finest.

The gentrification of the cinema's audiences has been studied at length, and yet the question of social class in theorizing the audience's response can still be examined. Miriam Hansen, in her groundbreaking study on spectatorship in American cinema, suggests that the situation is both "Babel and Babylon." The former provides an element of a universal, ideological reading for the audience as a whole, while the latter suggests a multivalent reaction due to the spectatorial freedom of film as an escapist fantasy.<sup>72</sup> While it is true that the cinema's distinct conventions of silent observation, with its all encompassing absorption, does complicate the ability to theorize a collective audience

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<sup>71</sup> Hansen, Miriam, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1991), 1-19.

<sup>72</sup> Hansen, 1-19.

response, the oppressive control of the camera's framing forces the narrative flow of the film to only show so much. It can only represent what is within the narrow frame, as the periphery is subsumed in the darkness of the theatre space. Following a narrative requires the viewer to conjure background landscapes and sets that theoretically continue beyond the frame, and in considering the Egyptian setting of *Cleopatra*, it seems appropriate to contextualize the collective audience response within the larger place of Egypt in turn of the century New York. What lies beyond the frame is not the Cleopatra of Egypt's history, but instead is the Queen and the country of an American present.

Both the Helen Garner and Fox *Cleopatra* films were based on a hybrid of Shakespeare's and Victorien Sardou's versions of the Egyptian Queen's life. Sardou's five act play had been performed throughout Europe and in New York City by Sarah Bernhardt, and it was likely familiar to many viewers. Due to its availability, the 1912 production serves as the basis for the discussion of the narrative specifics. From existing reviews, it seems the distinct changes in Fox's later production were mostly on the level of visual scale, opulence and exoticism. The 1912 film contains all the same trappings of the Barnum & Bailey spectacle, with a few noteworthy distinctions. The completely invented scene of the splitting of Egypt's upper and lower crowns was omitted; while an entire subplot of love interests was added. The characters of Pharon and Iras as the respective slave of wealthy Egyptian Diomedes and attendant to Cleopatra open the 1912 film. They were also included in the 1917 film but to what extent is unknown.

Iras loves Pharon, who would be a suitable match, if not for Pharon's undying love to Cleopatra. When the Queen learns of his love she strikes a bargain with him, allowing him to stay in her company, in ways that the film leaves to the imagination, if in

ten days he agrees to end his life. In his adulation, he readily agrees, only to be swiftly given an antidote to Cleopatra's poison by a meddling Iras. At the same time, Cleopatra is interrupted by a Roman messenger who calls her to Tarsus where she will stand before Antony accused of crimes against Rome. Pharon escapes and Iras pleads with him to go into exile, but he refuses and follows his beloved Queen as she sets out to address her accusers. Once in Tarsus the plot returns to its historical basis, the veiled queen arrives on an elaborate barge, and unveils her identity to Antony, who sits in judgment. She declares her hatred for Octavius, Antony's foe, and he quickly takes her side. Years pass, and Antony is called back to Rome where, for the sake of peace, he is forced into marrying his enemy's sister, Octavia. Cleopatra is devastated and had also been deceived by a falsified note declaring Antony's rejection of her and new love for his wife. Outraged, she is about to leave for Rome when Pharon appears, terrifying Cleopatra who believed him dead, and he explains the treachery behind the false letter.

Moreover, Cleopatra receives word that Antony wants her naval assistance in what will become the Battle of Actium. Cleopatra assembles troops and meets Antony; they both confront the treacherous Diomedes who falsified the letter to Cleopatra of Antony's true allegiance, and when found guilty, he is killed. Despite Octavia's plea for peace, Antony and Cleopatra set out to attack Octavius, and the Battle of Actium ensues. Cleopatra, however, not convinced of Antony's true intention backs out of their battle plans and leaves Antony no choice but to retreat, thus losing the battle and losing Alexandria to Octavius: to Rome. An enraged Antony confronts the queen who begs for his forgiveness; they reconcile only for Antony to learn that they are surrounded. Before taking the field, he forces his second in command to promise that if defeated, he would

kill Antony with his own sword. Alexandria is in ruin, bodies line the streets and smoke fills the air amid rubble; Antony learns of his inevitable defeat and watches his friend commit suicide rather than turn on him. In despair, Antony plunges his sword into his own heart but remains alive long enough for Pharon the slave to move his body and help hoist it up by rope to Cleopatra as she hides in her own tomb. Realizing that she is trapped, Cleopatra makes a plan with a male servant that, when Octavius arrives, she will cue him to stab the Roman general, but before the slave could do this, an apparently lifeless Antony miraculously bounds up to try and kill Octavius first. His weakened state prevents his success and he falls to the ground as Octavius storms out, ordering Roman guards to watch the Queen for suicide or escape. Pharon disguises himself and convinces the Roman guard at the tomb door to let him in with a basket of fruit that has been blessed by a priest. Once inside he reveals his identity to Cleopatra and shows her the hidden snake inside. Seeing no other way out, she climbs on top of the dead Antony and places the snake on her chest. In the film's last scene she collapses backwards with her arms overhead and leg outstretched across Antony's body.

The film allowed for more exposition and set changes than a live performance ever could. A comparison between the movie plot and the original Sardou text indicate distinct changes and an emphasis on the role of Pharon, the slave. The circus spectacle was necessarily shorter and more selective in its plot, simplifying the focus to only Antony and Cleopatra. Nonetheless the basic element of Roman victory over Cleopatra and over Egypt remain the true point of the story. Antony and Cleopatra's deaths remain justified through the folly of their lusty actions.

The introduction of Pharon and Iras complicates the plot further with an element of class distinction. The illicit love between a queen and a slave was something that was punishable by Pharon's death. The likely savior for him was a slave of his own social standing, Iras. Pharon's unending love for Cleopatra allows him to survive throughout the plot, although he is never actually with her. Inevitably, it is Cleopatra who is punished for her betrayal of both national and class boundaries with her respective lovers.

Class and nationalistic boundaries within *Cleopatra* are visually reinforced by the sequence of scenes and the spectacle of the entire production. There is a paucity of ephemeral material surrounding the film's release, but the trade magazine *The Moving Picture World* ran numerous features for entrepreneurs about the marketing and availability of the production. One full-page advertisement speaks to the general character of the production; it cites the "New York Mirror" review calling "Helen Gardner in Cleopatra... Probably the most stupendous and beautiful picture ever produced."<sup>73</sup> The review specifically cites the visual power of the production, praising its "pictorial loveliness" and the "rhythmic beauty" of its "scenic effects... wholly in character."<sup>74</sup>

An early scene in the film suggests just the scenic qualities the review praises (Figure 24). Cleopatra lies upon a heavily draped chaise, looking down on the kneeling figure of Pharon as two female attendants observe. The interior setting is filled with hieroglyphic murals and includes an arched window that opens up to a hanging oriental rug. The space is filled with objects and motifs from both ancient Egyptian and modern Arab styles; merging into an overall anachronistic image. Nonetheless the visual power

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<sup>73</sup> "Helen Gardner in 'Cleopatra,'" *The Moving Picture World*, Nov. 30, 1912, 859.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

of the inaccurate set was so effective that one review suggests that the film “is like not only seeing but hearing a great stage performance.”<sup>75</sup> The power of *Cleopatra*, a silent film, to outdo a stage performance with live audio components is telling. Although the film included a variety of frequent intertitles that either provided dialogue or plot exposition, the review suggests that the film, which is, in essence, a progression of visual images projected in narrative sequence, could not only equal but surpass the narrative power of live theatre. In other words, the images were all the viewers needed to understand and be impressed by the film.

This is all the more significant in considering the film scenes’ ideological messages. The image of Cleopatra’s court is fully Orientalist. Secluded in an interior, it carries associations with the oriental harem; her lounging position on the draped chaise is reminiscent of the odalisque. The “hodge-podge” of ancient and Arab props reads as sufficiently “exotic” even if its ties to archeological accuracy are broken. The image is one that places Cleopatra within the larger canon of Orientalist imagery and, in particular, within the American perception of these images.

The overtly Orientalist context is only strengthened by a completely unnecessary dance number that takes place in the Queen’s palace with Antony in attendance. Well into their love affair, Antony has taken full occupancy in Alexandria and the scene becomes even more opulent in its Orientalist subtext. Cleopatra herself is the primary dancer. In a dress with a sheer torso and arms, she wears an anachronistic costume more akin to the belly dancing costume of modern Arab performers. Covered in excess – necklaces, an elaborate headdress, numerous bangles – she writhes and spins using a dish as a prop to perform for male and female members of her court. Although comparatively

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

chaste in relation to the costumes that Theda Bara would wear in 1917, the ensemble in this sequence was the most revealing of all her costumes throughout the film. The visual effect pointedly emphasizes her body as it moves for both the court and for the camera. While the camera remains straight and refrains from fetishistic framing devices, like close ups or fragmented views of her body, the dance number presents the body of the Queen for the visual pleasure of the audience, allowing their imagined possession of her body and, by extension, her history and her country.

This power structure, reminiscent of Laura Mulvey's analysis, is reinforced by the sequence that immediately follows. Breaking up the dance, word of Rome's issues with Antony interrupts the scene and the tone abruptly changes. Antony is called back and they agree he will leave for Rome, due to the increasing issues with Octavius. The immediate cut to Rome is a convenient reminder of Western authority and the ability of Rome's imperial authority to dispose of comparatively powerless and vapid Orientalist scenes like this.

One of the key elements of the film is the juxtaposition of Rome's authoritative power with Egypt's wanton, opulent, abuse of power, a comparison executed in a variety of ways. One of the more complicated examples is Cleopatra's attire as she leaves the palace to join Antony at Actium. In a strange turn, Cleopatra's ornate, heavily adorned gown in a generalized Egyptian style is replaced by a light-colored veil that covers everything but her eyes for the sake of modesty (Figure 25). In another anachronistic moment, Cleopatra is adorned in the dress of a modern Arab woman. The scene following her costume change is the moment when Queen Cleopatra accidentally runs into Antony's new Roman wife, Octavia. This image of ideal Roman womanhood—white and

western—Octavia is adorned in a recognizably classicizing toga-styled dress with hair in a curled coiffure. In a narrative sequence that puts both of Antony's loves in close comparison, Cleopatra's Eastern identity needed to be fully contextualized as "other," and therefore illicit, completely unlike his relationship to his true and legal wife of Octavia.

Moreover, the veil plays an interesting role how Cleopatra's body is presented. While Octavia's draped confection actually bares more skin, Cleopatra's attire resonates with images of modern Arab women, like those in the paintings of Frederick Arthur Bridgman. The pull to unveil the woman hidden beneath is a familiar trope of nineteenth century Orientalism, but the film uniquely inverts this by placing this scene after the full display of her body in the dance number. This scene is one in which Cleopatra is finally able to demonstrate her royal power and her political agency. As the commander of fleets and royal ruler of Egypt, she, for the first time in the film's narrative, explicitly carries with her the ability to execute military authority. As if this notion could not be compatible with her other power – the power of seduction – the body of Cleopatra could not displayed in the same scene that the intellect of Cleopatra was being demonstrated. The veiling of the queen inhibits the voyeuristic gaze from consuming her form, yet simultaneously codifies her as "other" and "Eastern."

The image of "classical" Western history continues in its most obvious manifestation: the Battle of Actium. Cleopatra removes her veiling when Antony's devotion to her is again proven. Antony's rejection of Octavia's plea for peace is finalized and her image of ideal western womanhood is permanently removed from the film. The battle however, reinforces the elements at work in the militaristic subplot of the

Cleopatra story. An ambitious film sequence, the battle is the only time in the film where the camera relies on tight close-ups and special effects. In quick succession, the frames move from Cleopatra to Antony and back again. Antony's face is shown, amidst encircling fog, in a total profile (Figure 26). Wearing the familiar image of Hellenizing armor and carrying a round shield he looks like an image taken from a Roman coin: stoic, brave, and militaristic. East and West are literally at war here, reinforcing the principal binary of the plot: Antony and Cleopatra were always on two different sides, and will remain so. Her impending treachery here proves the implied division to be all the more correct.

Finally, the very last scene demonstrates the resolution of these oppositions (Figure 27). In another odd costume choice, Cleopatra falls backward with her neck exposed and arm fallen lifeless as her patterned garment hugs her curves and the anachronistic pearl strands dangle, reiterating her lifeless pose. Below her body lies a perfectly straight Antony who looks as if he has just silently passed in his sleep. In a perfect horizontal line his face looks calm and points upward, one arm on his chest calls attention to his military armor. The image is powerful; both lay dead, punished for their illicit behavior. However, their deaths and their shared fates, belie the division inherent in their western and eastern identities. The image presents an Antony who looks regal, like a military hero and a Cleopatra in physical agony, but still available to the spectator's voyeuristic gaze. She denies the gaze, exposing just her neck and one arm, with her closed eyes trained opposite the camera. The visual consumption of Cleopatra echoes the subtext of the dramatic finale: the Roman colonization of Egypt through the victory of Octavius.

Visually, the film replaces dialogue with spectacular images of Oriental decadence, Roman imperial power and an exotic body displayed for the sake of the spectator. Part of the effectiveness of these scenes is the American desire for highly realistic cinema. Unlike European filmmakers like Méliès, American films were dominated by realistic, representational subjects that reflected the viewer's desire to trust in the veracity in the projected image. *Cleopatra* and all its inauthentic, anachronistic, spectacular imagery exist within this more elastic context of realism. In this case, it also functions to enliven history and reanimate the past. This is perhaps the most deceptive element of the cinematic *Cleopatra*: the ability to render elements that reinforce ideological binaries through the interpretive lens of history as realistic, while also offering interpretation, manipulation and sometimes even fiction.

There is, however, one element to American narrative film in this period that confronts the illusion of full narrative absorption and realism: the development of the cult of celebrity and the Hollywood "Star System." Even in 1912, Helen Gardner was part of this, although its fullest realization would occur in the figure of Theda Bara. In another issue of *Motion Picture World*, Gardner is described as: "The beautiful and talented leading woman" who has "created more than a hundred important parts... and is not only a consistent and intelligent actress but makes a powerful visual appeal by virtue of her natural loveliness and her intense personality."<sup>76</sup> The attention on Gardner results directly in ideas like this: "I hardly know whether I am talking of *Cleopatra* or of Helen Gardner – they are one and indivisible in this rare production."<sup>77</sup> The public perception of Helen Gardner as a capable, beautiful actress directly influences the reading of the figure of

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<sup>76</sup> "Helen Gardner to Have a Company of Her Own," *Moving Picture World*, June 8, 1912, 917.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

Cleopatra: removing her historical identity and replacing it with the role of the actress herself.

By 1917, however, this phenomenon would reach its pinnacle in Theda Bara, who not only manipulated the image of the Egyptian Queen, but was reciprocally refashioned by the screen characters she would create. Born Theodosia Goodman of Cincinnati, Ohio, “Theda Bara” was a complete construct of the film industry, one that made her persona in and of itself a spectacle. Theda Bara was an empty image that reflected a culture’s desire to see the exotic, erotic and outrageous actions of the “Vamp” performed on screen for their consumption. The notion of the “Vamp” originated with Pre-Raphaelite artist Philip Burne-Jones’s simply titled painting “The Vampire.” The painting’s vampire leans over the lifeless, unconscious body of her male conquest and the suggestiveness of the image influenced Rudyard Kipling to pen the poem “A FOOL there Was.” Burne-Jones produced the image of a dark, dangerous, beautiful seductress that would dominate film subjects for decades. Theda Bara, however, was the first to interpret the famous female trope on the stage and silver screen.

Theodosia Goodman had a mediocre acting career in New York. After adopting her mother’s maiden name of De Coppel, she worked on Broadway, and was featured in New York Yiddish theater. Moving on to New Jersey movie studios, she met with Cecil B. DeMille, who overlooked her potential. But William H. Fox, the up and coming film producer and studio head, was seeking to diversify his typically saccharine Mary Pickford productions, and had acquired the rights to the new play, “A Fool there Was.” Theda Bara would inhabit her infamous “vamp” persona in this play based upon the Kipling poem. The film centered around an American diplomat who, after being sent to

Europe, becomes prey to the villainous vamp who sought revenge on his wife by destroying their marriage and then him. A studio photograph of a scantily clad Bara with wild black hair above a human skeleton was shot directly in relation to the film; cementing her *femme fatale* persona (Figure 28). Already cast in the stage version, Fox had the vision to sign the actress saying, “She will not make the part; the part will make her.”<sup>78</sup> As Ronald Genini recounts in his biography of the silent star, Theda’s success was due in part to the manipulation of her image; when Fox asked her where she was from, she responded, “It wouldn’t be exciting to say Cincinnati, would it? Suppose we say the Sahara Desert?”<sup>79</sup> William H. Fox would later recount in an interview with Upton Sinclair: “One day it was conceived in our publicity department that we had had every type of Woman on the screen except an Arabian; our publicity director felt that the public would like an Arabian. He conceived the story that this Miss Goodman was born in Arabia – her father was an Arab and her mother a French woman who had played the theatres in Paris.”<sup>80</sup>

Both French and Arabian, Theda Bara’s earliest invented persona was a direct reflection of the contemporary preoccupation with Europeanized Orientalism. She could not be *solely* Arab, but she could be a direct product of French colonization, now available for the gaze of American audiences. The manipulation of her image did not stop there; Fox continued to explain that they cemented her image by replacing Goodman with “Arab” spelt backwards as “Bara.” They also shortened Theodosia to Theda and then invited newspapers to view their new creation. Naturally, she was dressed in “regular

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<sup>78</sup> Fox as quoted in Genini, 21. For the most thorough discussion of Theda Bara’s life and work and the source of my research on her see: Genini, Ronald, *Theda Bara: A Biography of the Silent Screen Vamp, with a Filmography*. (Jefferson, N.C: McFarland & Co, 1996).

<sup>79</sup> Genini, 16.

<sup>80</sup> Genini, 16-19.

Arabian costume” and “surrounded... with the proper atmosphere” as she sat in silence not knowing “a word of English.” The result: “The newspaper men left that day and said that the Fox Film Corporation had discovered the greatest living actress in the world.”<sup>81</sup>

Publicity stunts continued. In a 1915 press visit to Chicago, the actress was accompanied by “Nubian Footmen” as she was dropped off at the press conference in a white limousine. According to then-journalist, Louella Parsons:

The day was hotter than the proverbial hinges of the proverbial hot spot. We dripped little beads of perspiration in anticipation as we waited in an anteroom in Theda’s hotel suite... Mr. Hollander had just voiced the opinion that it was so hot The Vamp had probably melted into her own eyelash goo when the press agent appeared in our midst and said: “Miss Bara will be a moment longer. She is not acclimated to his Northern weather!... No more were the words out of his mouth than the door of an adjoining room began to open noiselessly and seemingly without the aid of human hands – and there, exposed in unbelievable splendor sat the Queen of Sirens, draped to the teeth in magnificent furs. “Miss Bara,” declaimed the press agent in the manner of a circus barker, “was born in the shadow of the Sphinx, you know. It is very, very hot there, and she is cold!”<sup>82</sup>

In a room full of “tuberose and incense” Bara’s image was cemented. Said to be the physical incarnation of “the most evil women of the past,” Bara was quoted as remembering her own Egyptian life, “crossing the Nile in barges to Karnak and Luxor.”<sup>83</sup> After much gossip and public confusion, Theda crafted her final identity in cooperation with Fox. Theodosia Goodman was replaced with Theda Bara, born in the Sahara Desert in 1890 to a French actress Theda De Coppet and now an Italian painter and sculptor Giuseppe Bara. Columnist Archie Bell wrote in November 1915, “amid the sand dunes, the waving palms and the flashing steels in the belts of barbarous men, Theda Bara opened her eyes to the world – she believes that she has not lived since her death as ArMiiz, the gypsy smuggler of Cordova and Gibraltar... Weaned on serpent’s blood, ‘a

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<sup>81</sup> William H. Fox as quoted by Upton Sinclair in Genini, 16.

<sup>82</sup> As quoted in Genini, 17.

<sup>83</sup> Bara as quoted in Genini, 18.

crystal-gazing seeress of profoundly occult powers,' she came to films via stardom on the Paris stage, and spent her spare time driving men mad with love."<sup>84</sup> Two years before *Cleopatra*, it was inevitable that America's most exotic import would take the screen to inhabit one of the most ancient "vamps."

Her image was vehemently protected by Fox Studios, and in 1916 she agreed to an 8 provision contract:

1. You cannot marry within three years;
2. You must be heavily veiled while in public;
3. You cannot take public transportation;
4. You cannot appear in the theatre;
5. You cannot attend Turkish baths;
6. You cannot pose for snapshots;
7. You cannot close the curtains on the windows of your limousine;
8. You can only go out at night.

It seems as though Fox's contract helped to secure his investment; the public itself was clamoring for their vamp to take on the role of Cleopatra. The 1917 film would prove to be as over the top as her inventive persona would suggest.

*Cleopatra* was the longest of her feature films, and it cost half a million dollars and included an enormous cast of 30,000 figures. Although the film no longer survives, numerous publicity photographs provide a sense of the production's scale and opulence. The plot unfolded amid sets of the Roman Forum, Alexandria, the desert, pyramids, the Sphinx, the sea battle of Actium and the battle of Alexandria.<sup>85</sup> Bara alone had over thirty costume changes; those costumes incited much debate from city censors. Upon its opening, 77,000 people saw it in New York alone, where it played for a full eleven weeks. At first a traveling production, the picture was taken on the road with a live orchestra of locals organized at every city. Moreover, it is highly likely that each theatre

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<sup>84</sup> Genini, 19.

<sup>85</sup> Genini, 37- 43.

was appropriately decorated to welcome the production. A 1918 “Moving Picture World” spread on the 1912 *Cleopatra* suggests that theatre owners fill their establishments with palm trees, sphinxes, pyramids, and assorted Egyptian props.<sup>86</sup> Marking a noteworthy change from the 1912 publicity, the shift to more exaggerated, all-encompassing spectacle was more than likely the direct result of the outrageous success of Fox’s version. In *Cleopatra*, the myth of Theda Bara compounded the grand arrival of her production in each city, producing its own spectacle capable of matching the procession of dazzling images projected on screen. The result was a spectacle of Egypt produced by two individual spectacles of both star and subject that reinforced the narrative’s message of Roman superiority over dangerous Egyptian opulence.

The staged publicity photographs of the production are plentiful in number, and while they were, much like film stills, certainly staged to compress narrative element for dramatic effect, they give a sense of the film’s aesthetic. Ironically, for a lost film, the amount of photographic evidence that remains is staggering. A more thorough discussion of the imagery is more than the present study can undertake; I will only discuss the few that highlight the overall spectacle of the production and the spectacular image of Theda Bara as Cleopatra.

Photographs of the various set designs employed in the film suggest that it was much grander in scale than the 1912 version. The battle of Actium was literally shot on water and included fog and pyrotechnics (Figure 29). In part due to the move from East to West coast, a move Theda Bara detested, the space, natural lighting and climate of

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<sup>86</sup> “‘Cleopatra.’ The Helen Gardner Film. Co. Presents Helen Gardner in a New and Vastly More Spectacular Version of a Play in Which She Already Won Renown,” *Moving Picture World*, March 2, 1918), unpaginated. Found at The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Margaret Herrick Library.

California allowed for more dramatic possibilities. Elaborate sets of the austere Roman Forum and decadent Egyptian court, were able to be constructed in newly acquired ample studio spaces (Figure 30). The images suggest that the characteristic binary divisions between Roman and Egyptian, East and West were again repeated and made even more prominent. Cleopatra's court was shot in a large hall with a staircase that leads up to the ornate throne. The room is filled with rugs and an almost oppressive amount of visual details: hieroglyphics, sphinxes, and the bodies of her crowded court (Figure 31). The forum, on the other hand, is a simple interior with two male statues in marble, a few engaged columns and an absence of additional décor. Moreover, a shot of Julius Caesar and Fulvia shows how that division was also enacted in makeup and costuming (Figure 32). Caesar's deep wrinkles and aquiline nose are emphasized and Fulvia wears a classicizing, conservative gown that is in striking opposition to any of Cleopatra's thirty costume changes.

Images of Bara as Cleopatra reveal such a variety of costume styles that it becomes difficult to summarize their overall effect. They share a flare for exotic detailing, snake motifs, animal prints, beading and sequins, and a capacity to expose a great deal of the actress' skin. Two photographs demonstrate the representation of Bara's Cleopatra as a true odalisque; reclining on a heavily carpeted chaise, she exposes her bare arms and legs and peers out of heavily lidded eyes at the viewers (Figure 33-34). It is impossible to know if these direct gazes to the audience were part of the film itself or solely an aspect of the heavily staged photographs, but they function as a direct and seductive address to the viewer's gaze. Regardless of their role on film, a few of her most attention-grabbing outfits are noteworthy for the spectacle that they make of Bara's body.

In one promotional image, Theda Bara wears a completely see-through gown that resembles the belly dancer costume called “Isis-wings.” Attached to bands on the wrist and upper arms, a beaded shift drapes across her body leaving only her most intimate parts to imagination. Covering both breasts and her genitalia are stylized star burst patterns that, while relatively modest, highlight her anatomy (Figure 35). A similar use of sheer fabric accompanies another confection that leaves the actress essentially topless (Figure 36). Again, her breasts are fully exposed, save for a spiraling pattern that both covers and emphasizes them.

Neither of these, however, top the most outrageous costume of them all: Cleopatra’s snake bra. Shown here in a promotional shot, Bara’s body language highlights the bra itself; with her arms outstretched to fill the frame, her breasts are completely separated and lifted, emphasizing the actress’s lack of clothing (Figure 37). Her lower half is covered in layers of diaphanous metallic fabric with a high slit that exposes one leg as it peeks forward. Her body here is on full display. A complete rejection of the period’s chaste fashion, Bara’s costumes were acceptable only because of the actress’s perceived vampiric nature and the familiarity of Cleopatra’s as a femme fatale. Unlike Helen Gardner’s costuming which, even if anachronistic, took some of its cues from confused Orientalist motifs, these imaginative creations took little from history, art or fashion. While many were stylized as Egyptian influenced, the revealing ensembles were instead based in the audience’s desire to consume the bodies of both the actress and the character.

The spectacle of Theda Bara and Cleopatra combined is clearly evident in the whimsical public persona that was constructed for her to perform. The production,

however, took even greater lengths to conflate the actress' identity with the historical figure. Implicit in this very same image is one of the key tactics employed in both the film and the marketing; in the mural, Cleopatra's head is substituted for that of the sphinx. Literally replacing the Sphinx's face, Cleopatra/Theda Bara stands to receive the adulation of the kneeling Egyptian who presents an offering. The conflation of the Sphinx with Cleopatra and then with Theda Bara was actually written into the movie's opening sequence. As quoted in Genini's biography, reviewer Alice Brown of the *Columbus Journal* described the film's opening sequence as the desert "stretching out illimitably, with the sphinx in the distance... we come closer to the sphinx until at last there is a close up of the enigmatic lady, and lo! Her face is that of Theda Bara, who opens her eyes twists her mouth and raises one brow in the manner familiar to film fans."<sup>87</sup> A publicity photograph shows Bara standing next to a large-scale replica Sphinx that was erected in the California desert for the opening shot (Figure 38). Thus, the film's carefully constructed opening sequence explicitly links Cleopatra to Egypt by linking the actress with the Sphinx. Moreover, it does so in a totally non-narrative, non-realist fashion that is more akin to the marvel and curiosity of Gunning's "cinema of attractions." The scene supports Bara's own claim to her Egyptian heritage and was manipulated at length by the production team. In an official statement to the press, an alleged inscription was located "on a stone wall in a tomb near Thebes" that predicted the arrival of Theda Bara some 2,500 years in the future. It read "I, Rhames, priest of Set, tell you this: She shall seem a snake to most men; she shall lead them to sin, and to their destruction. Yet she shall not seem so to most men. For she shall not be that which she appears. She shall be called Θ,"

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<sup>87</sup> Genini, 40.

the Greek letter for “theta.”<sup>88</sup> Theda Bara, moreover, feigned knowledge of Egyptian hieroglyphics, claiming that an Egyptian card she could translate was an attribute of one of Cleopatra’s reincarnated servants. She declared herself Cleopatra in a former life, apparently dining only on raw beef and lettuce with the image of Amen Ra by her plate, and she wore a ring that she claimed was given to her by a 100-year-old Sheik.<sup>89</sup> Despite her deep suspicion of reincarnation, she publicly performed a hybrid identity: “I felt the blood of the Ptolemy’s [sic] coursing through my veins... I know that I am a reincarnation of Cleopatra. It is no mere theory in my mind. I have positive knowledge that such is the case. I live Cleopatra, I breathe Cleopatra, I AM Cleopatra!”<sup>90</sup>

Perhaps no better image of the entire production that was both Theda Bara and Fox’s *Cleopatra* is a staged shot taken at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Figure 39). Before leaving her beloved city and adopted home, a departure that would draw hundreds of sad fans to the station to see her off, she was compelled to contact the museum’s curators of Egyptology for lessons in all things ancient Egyptian. Posing for a publicity shot, she stands above a mummy coffin as it sits in its glass case. Gazing at the painted mummy portrait, she holds her hands to her cheeks and looks downward in contemplation; she would claim that this very mummy was in fact her own. In this moment, Theda Bara tied herself not only to Cleopatra and Egypt, but to the very particular “Egypt” brought to America through the cultural institutions of New York City.

Similarly, the most popular poster image of the film features a solitary Cleopatra in brightly colored clothing, with arms crossed like a genie, standing directly in front of

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<sup>88</sup> Genini, 18.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Genini, 18.

two obelisks (Figure 40). No doubt more than an appropriate quotation of Egyptian motif, the inclusion of the obelisks echoes the directly related American possession of *Cleopatra's Needle* in the same way that the Barnum & Bailey Libretto illustrations did. Authenticity, realism and history are all buried in layers of spectacular images that reflect the period's consumption of Theda Bara as a cult figure, one whose own claim to Egyptian heritage would seem to substantiate America's existing claim to Egyptian objects. American film production brought this claim to life in funneling Egypt through the complete fantasy of a seductive, available, dangerous femme fatale in Queen Cleopatra. The effect was a distinct change from the position of Verdi's *Aida* and the circus *Cleopatra*; with film, Cleopatra would be fully liberated into total simulacra: an empty image that could signify the needs of whatever audience desired to consume her. The place of Cleopatra and Theda Bara in the larger narrative unfolds in an almost deceptively simple way, supplanting binaries of right and wrong, Rome and Egypt, West and East with the camera's ability to present the body as spectacle for visual consumption. The audience, like Mulvey suggests, is not only masculinized in their spectatorial position, but is also politicized as an imperialist entity that is able to consume all of Cleopatra's Orientalist glory from a position of voyeuristic power.

### **The "Body" of Egypt: Simulacra**

Vivien Leigh, Claudette Colbert, and of course, Elizabeth Taylor: these are the women that would follow in Helen Gardner and Theda Bara's footsteps as inhabiting increasingly spectacular images of Queen Cleopatra. The development of Cleopatra's image throughout the twentieth century and beyond was reliant upon the development of

Egypt itself as no longer an authentic signifier, but a completely constructed simulacrum with only superficial relationships to veritable Egyptian history. This simulacrum took a hyper-sexualized, female form, and came not from the 1920s or after, but in the period just before. The mechanisms of these spectacular performances, these decadent displays of excess and visual extravagance, allowed for spectators to consume their implicit narratives of imperialistic cultural superiority in their respective images of Westernized authority. The voyeuristic glimpses at the female protagonists stood in for the longing desire to gaze upon the colonial subject itself. By means of the spectacle, Cleopatra and Aida became fully disconnected from any authentic historical tie to an Egyptian (or Ethiopian) identity. The product of European influence and imagination, they are manipulations of history that were fabricated to reflect the self-image of turn-of-the-century New York City. Images of a desire to own the “East,” their stories tell of the risk and ultimate danger involved in losing sight of nationalistic allegiance in the face of alluring Eastern temptations. The image of these women as symbols of Egypt itself is all the more important considering the explosion of Egyptomania that would come in America’s next decade. With the infamous discovery of King Tutankhamen in 1922, the place of Egypt would be tinged with new layers of fiction: mummies, curses, and new trends in fashion, kitsch, decorations. However, the performed spectacle of Egypt at the turn-of-the-century in the country’s urban and cultural center, New York City, helped to present an image of Egypt that cemented the American cultural conquest of all its beauty, mystery and history. Once “colonized” and performed as such, the image of Egypt was ripe for the picking, ready to conform to the wills of its American colonizers.

## Conclusion

Roughly a century after the subject of this dissertation, Fred Wilson produced the visual equivalent of what I argue throughout this text. In his 1994 sculpture *Diana/Bast*, this contemporary artist explored the place of Egypt within a canon both of art history and western civilization (Figure 1). Violently breaking through a white classical sculpture, the shiny black feline form of Bast, the Egyptian goddess of war, replaces the decapitated head of Diana, Roman goddess of the hunt and virginity. A work that revolves around binary oppositions, it is black and white, naturalistic and abstracted, Egyptian and Roman, Eastern and Western. The eruption of the dark feline shape from the white body communicates both the shared antiquity of Egyptian and Western history, and nonetheless the deep-seated difference between them. Both ancient, but always different, the image of Egypt is deeply entwined in the course of Western history. Its place within the canon of classical “antiquities,” made “different” by means of Egypt’s foreign exoticism, is marked by Wilson’s black and white sculpture. The sculpture, made of plaster, further distills this dissertation’s themes; both Wilson’s image of Roman and Egyptian art forms are copies, in other words, they are “fakes.” Echoing the historical nineteenth century practice of producing plaster copies of ancient originals for study purposes, Wilson’s work is a poignant reminder of the artificiality of both Roman and Egyptian history as it has been manipulated by the western culture of the nineteenth century and beyond.

America’s very own form of “Egyptomania” was one subset of a larger American Orientalism. Through an examination of four case studies, I have argued that this often overlooked period of Egyptomania was tangled up in the imperialist inclinations of America as a young nation. In drawing together the acquisition of *Cleopatra’s Needle*,

the development of the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Egyptian collections, the paintings and advertisements of Frederick Arthur Bridgman and Maxfield Parrish, and the lavish spectacles of Verdi's *Aida*, Barnum & Bailey's *Cleopatra* and the two silent films of the same name, this dissertation has not only traced the developing American reception of "Egypt" as a spectacular image for its consumption, but has brought together disparate elements of visual culture in an effort to demonstrate the fluid exchange of aesthetic and ideological elements across their respective media. Finally, in examining each of these moments in which American audiences gained exposure to a constructed concept of "Egypt," this dissertation concludes that the period between 1880 and 1920 resulted in the complete assimilation of Egypt as simulacrum. By the 1920s, the idea of Egypt was so disconnected from its origins that it reflected far more about America than anything about its own history.

What was about to occur in 1922 would change the shape of "Egyptomania"—not only in America but worldwide. Howard Carter's discovery of King Tutankhamen showed the world a glittering, golden realm of dangerous mystery and launched Egyptology to a new level of exotic, glamorous fame. The unearthing of the teenage pharaoh and his intact hoard of treasures was a bright spot in the dark days of World War One. No doubt partly fueled by a world in need of distraction, "Tut Fever" reshaped the fashion, furniture, film, music, jewelry and even hairstyles of the Twenties and Thirties. Moreover, by 1930 the many deaths surrounding Carter's excavation reinforced the superstitious myths of Egypt's dark mysticism. The image of "Egypt" would never be the same: Carter did not just excavate a mummy, he excavated a "star." The period that preceded this pivotal discovery was vital in supplying an audience primed for such

complete cultural obsession. From the real Egyptian obelisk to Theda Bara's vampy Cleopatra, Egypt needed to be acquired, possessed, codified into knowledge and then represented as fantasy and spectacle before it became the huge phenomenon that was King Tutankhamen's cultural reincarnation.

My dissertation offers a new approach to the field of American Orientalism. By focusing my analysis on Egypt and not one monolithic concept of the "Middle East" I have taken a more exacting look at the mechanisms at work in the public reception of Orientalist works. Building upon the very small body of scholarship that explores the biographies of Orientalist American artists, their travels and or their market success, this dissertation shifts the focus to the socio-historical implications of an American Orientalism in a country with a complex relationship to colonialism.

This dissertation also makes a case for an overlooked moment in the American appropriation of Egyptian imagery. While turn-of-the-century American art has been heavily studied for its contributions to a cosmopolitan culture, the layers of complex and even competing influences at work deserve greater attention. The place of Egypt both as something classicizing and exotic was a crucial component to the leaps and bounds made in collecting and developing an American art world in this period of the American Renaissance. Similarly, this dissertation has contributed to the scholarship on the period by considering not just fine art and the institutions that promoted it, but instead a more holistic picture of the varied realms of visual culture to which New York audiences were exposed.

Future studies would benefit from an expanded discussion of class variations in spectatorship. It was beyond the realm of this study to parse out exact audience

demographics for each of the selected case studies. In many cases, the statistics are simply unavailable. I am, however, hopeful that future work will expand on the application of reception theory to American Orientalism. There also remains room for much more work to be done in the space between these chapters; the performances by Sarah Bernhardt, the lavish Egyptian themed parties of Louis Comfort Tiffany, the multiple circus quotations of Egypt throughout the whole of the century, and the numerous manifestations of Egyptian themes in early narrative cinema, all bear further consideration.

The topic of Egypt in American visual culture could also be expanded to engage with its future in the early decades of the twentieth century and beyond. The trajectory of Egyptian art and imagery gets split in two: the elevated fine art domain and the realm of popular kitsch. An expanded study that considers the popular response to the historical developments leading up to America's entry into the war in April of 1917 would help to even further theorize the symbolic, politicized power of Egyptian imagery in an American context. Future research could include a study of Egypt's appropriation by artists of the Harlem Renaissance, for example, in order to unpack the racialized usage of the Egyptian imagery appropriated by a number of African American artists of the twentieth century. Such a study would provide a counterpoint to the formalist considerations of the Egyptian motifs in the Art Deco design elements of the Twenties and Thirties, and illuminate the political elements at work in these stylistic developments.

Finally, the most ostentatious instances of Egyptomania on the silver screen have already garnered great attention but could certainly benefit from continued consideration. In the "violet eyes" of Elizabeth Taylor, Egypt was again made into a full spectacle that

displayed 1960s fashion, standards of beauty, and through its juxtapositions of pale and dark skin colors and recreated harem interiors, belied the decade's racial anxieties. The ability of Egypt to serve as a mirror continued, as it continues today. The 2015 release of *Night of the Museum Three* was centered on the core narrative of a failing Egyptian curse that animates the wax figurines of New York's American Museum of Natural History. Opening on a 1930s American excavation, the 2015 film relies on the impact of the early twentieth century's Egyptomania to fuel the magical elements of its whimsical plot. It seems that despite the changing context of terrorism, Islamic extremism, and the flourishing Egyptian culture in the Arab Spring, the "magic of film" can still call upon the "mysteries of Egypt" for popular entertainment.

But what of the "real" Egypt? The place of Egypt's history from a non-Orientalist perspective remains a hotly debated topic. Artists like Fred Wilson explore the problematic segregation of Egypt from its African history through his artistic creations, while authors like Martin Bernal, writing in *Black Athena: The Afro-Asiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*<sup>1</sup> have argued for the importance of acknowledging African and Egyptian agency in the course of world history. The examination of the American fascination with Egyptian art and imagery highlights how this kind of disconnect was produced and proliferated. Egypt's "African-ness" was never part of the equation in its turn-of-the-century representations. Even within *Aida*, Egypt was characterized as distinct from the Ethiopian players who were presented as comparatively primitive. The course of events which took place at the time of this dissertation's completion attest to Egypt's role as a locus of activity for new developments in modern Arab art and

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<sup>1</sup> Bernal, Martin, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization*, (New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press), 1987.

literature. The relationship between Egypt and its westernized representations continues to change, but unearthing the historical circumstances that fueled the construction of its identity from a Western viewpoint remains a crucial field of study that enlightens art history, world history and contemporary culture alike.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Introduction:



**Figure One**

William-Adolphe Bouguereau

*Alma Parens (L'âme parentale / The Motherland)*

1883

oil on canvas

230.51 × 139.7 cm (90.8 × 55 in) Private collection

Chapter One:



**Figure One**

*Cleopatra's Needle*

Photograph as set in Central Park

Granite 69'x8'; 220 tons

Reproduced in Martina D'Alton, *How the Obelisk Came to New York*



**Figure Two**

"The Tombs" or The New York City Halls of Justice and House of Detention

Photograph



**Figure Three**

Photograph of *Cleopatra's Needle* during removal excavation 1879  
From Archives of New-York Historical Society



**Figure Four**

Engraving of the Obelisk lowered into place

*The World*, 1881

From [The Obelisk} scrapbook , Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Five**

“Touring the Dessoug,” *Frank Leslie’s Illustrated Journal*, July 1880

Engraving

[The Obelisk] Scrapbook, Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Six**

“Egypt’s Gift to America”

Engraving in *The Evening Telegram* 1880



**Figure Seven**  
Commemorative Medallion for *Cleopatra's Needle*  
Courtesy of Museum of City of New York



**Figure Eight**  
Photograph of *Cleopatra's Needle* circa, 1890  
Reproduced in Martina D'Alton, *How the Obelisk Came to New York*

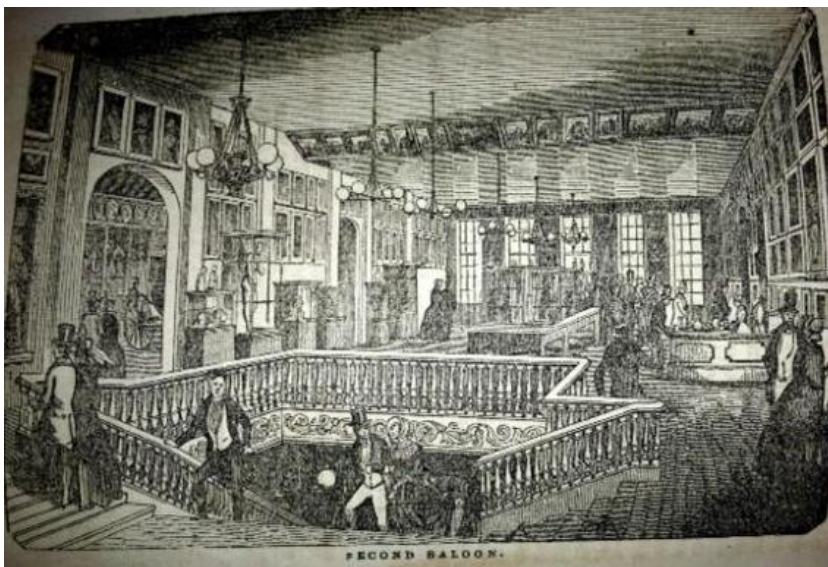
Chapter Two:



**Figure One**

*Cosmorama Saloon One*

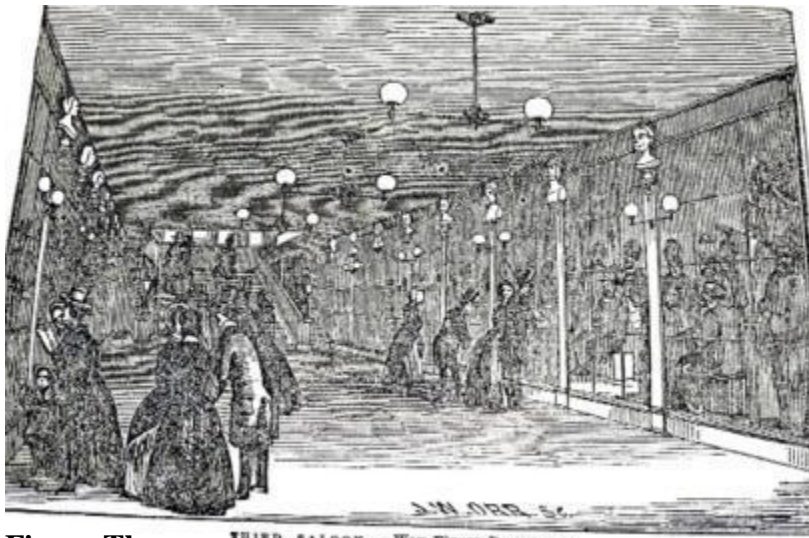
Engraving from Catalogue of Barnum American Museum  
Circa 1854



**Figure Two**

*Second Saloon*

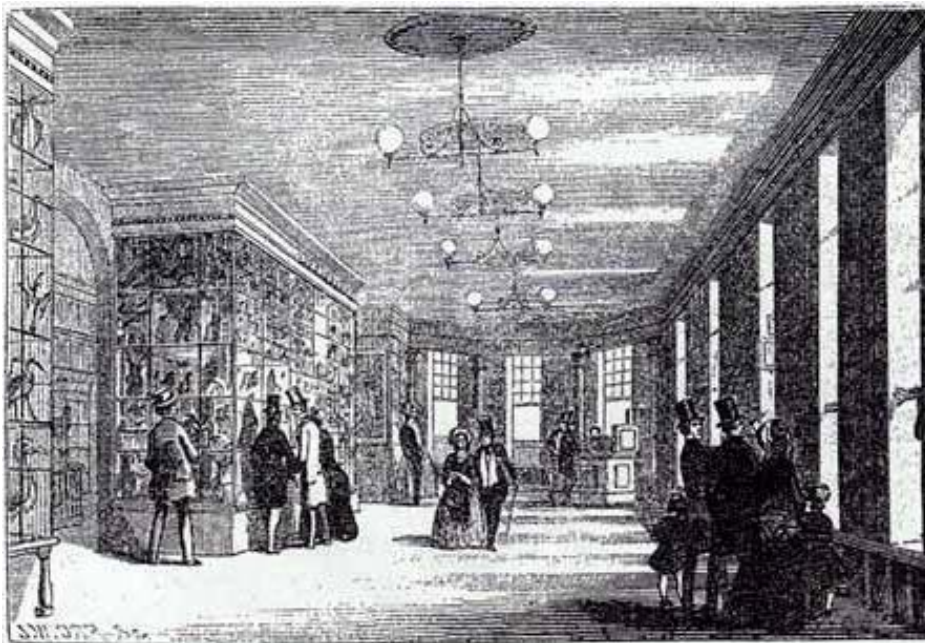
Engraving in catalogue Barnum's American Museum  
Circa 1854



**Figure Three**

*Saloon Three*

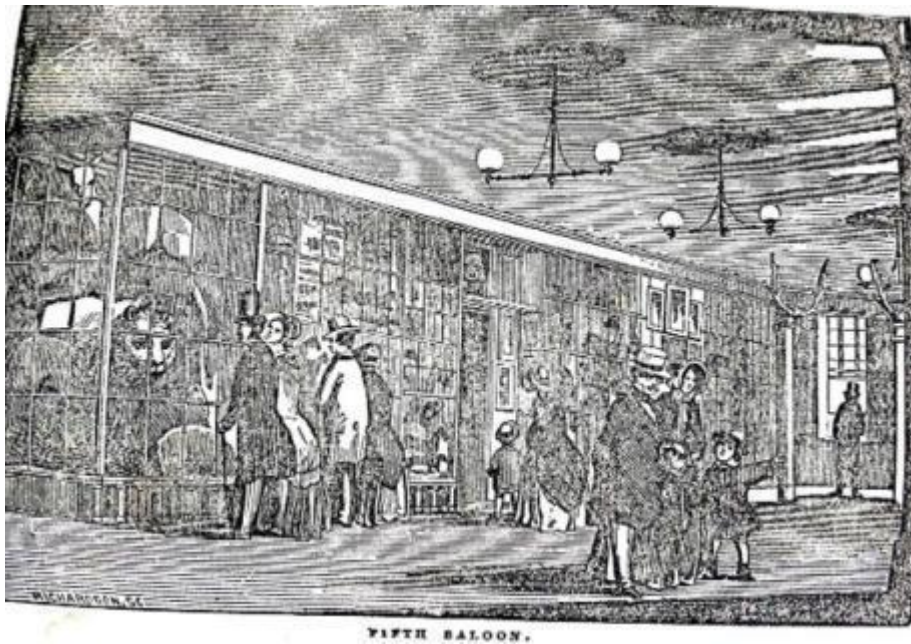
Engraving in catalogue Barnum's American Museum  
Circa 1854



**Figure Four**

*Saloon Four*

Engraving in catalogue Barnum's American Museum  
Circa 1854



**Figure Five**

*Saloon Five*

Engraving in catalogue Barnum's American Museum  
Circa 1854



**Figure Six**

*Saloon Six*

Engraving in catalogue Barnum's American Museum  
Circa 1854



**Figure Seven**

*Saloon Seven*

Engraving in catalogue Barnum's American Museum  
Circa 1854



**Figure Eight**

*Mummy*

Engraving in catalogue Barnum's American Museum  
Circa 1854



**Figure Nine**

*The Mask*

Engraving in catalogue Barnum's American Museum  
Circa 1854



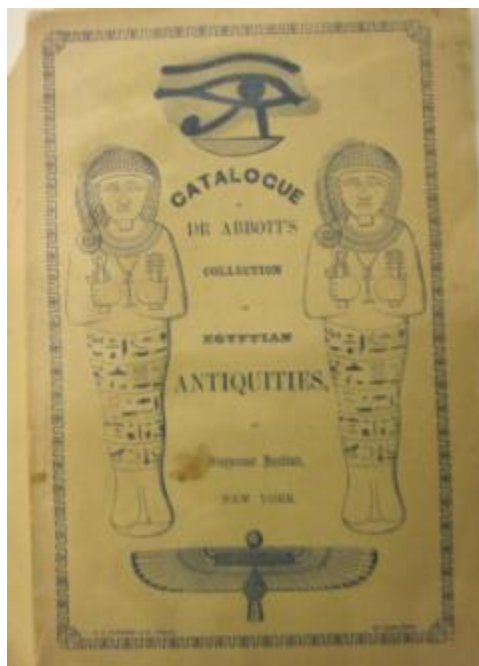
**Figure Ten**

*Poster for Abbott Collection of Egyptian Antiquities at The Stuyvesant Institute*  
Circa 1854



**Figure Eleven**

*Poster for Abbott Collection of Egyptian Antiquities, Circa 1854*



**Figure Twelve**

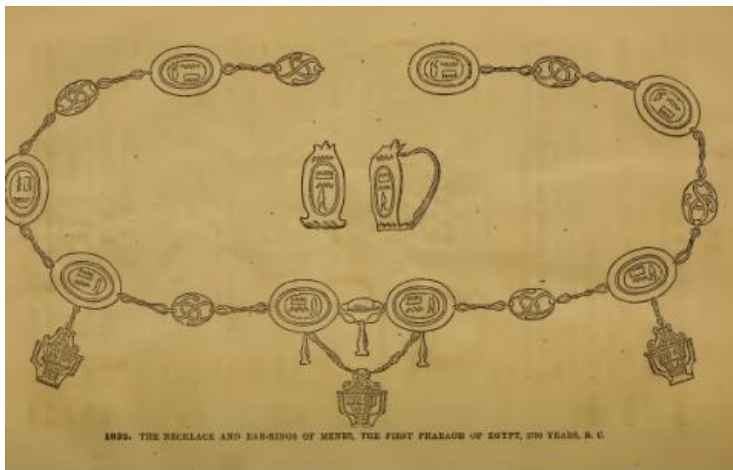
*"Title Page" Catalogue of Abbot Collection Stuyvesant, 1854  
Courtesy of New-York Historical Society*



**Figure Thirteen**

*Mummied Bull*

Engraving from Catalogue of Abbot Collection Stuyvesant 1854  
 Courtesy of New-York Historical Society



**Figure Fourteen**

*Necklace and Earrings made of Gold Leaf*

Catalogue of Abbot Collection Stuyvesant 1854  
 Courtesy of New-York Historical Society



**Figure Fifteen**

Mezzanine of New-York Historical Society Library with view of Abbott Collection Circa 1857-1904, Courtesy of New-York Historical Society.



**Figure Sixteen**

Mezzanine New-York Historical Society with view of Abbott Collection Circa 1857-1904, Courtesy of New-York Historical Society.



**Figure Seventeen**

View of two Mezzanines in New-York Historical Society with view of Abbott Collection  
Circa 1857-1904, Courtesy of New-York Historical Society



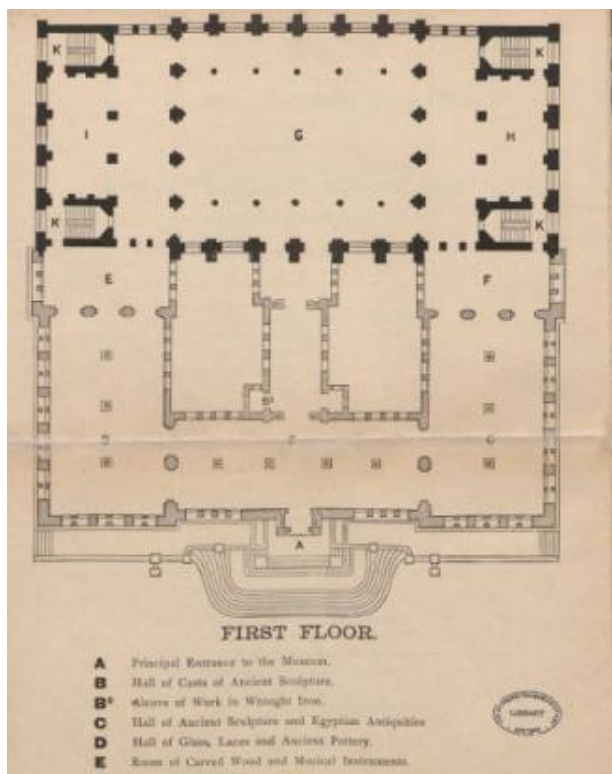
**Figure Eighteen**

Thomas Hicks (1823-1890)

*Portrait of Henry Abbott*, 1861, oil on canvas, Brooklyn Museum



**Figure Nineteen**  
 Photograph of the Metropolitan Museum of Art  
 Circa 1880



**Figure Twenty**  
 Floorplan of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Handbook*, 1888



**Figure Twenty-One**

Engraving of Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Harpers Weekly* 1880

Image Redacted

**Figure Twenty-Two**

View of Main Gallery Metropolitan Museum of Art 1911



**Figure Twenty-Three**

Tenth Egyptian Room 1911

From Handbook to the Egyptian Galleries Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Twenty-Four**

First Egyptian Room 1911

From Handbook to the Egyptian Galleries Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Twenty-Five**

The Third Egyptian Room 1911

From Handbook to the Egyptian Galleries Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Twenty- Six**

Fourth Egyptian Room 1911

From Handbook to the Egyptian Galleries Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Twenty-Seven**

Fifth Egyptian Room 1911

From Handbook to the Egyptian Galleries Metropolitan Museum of Art



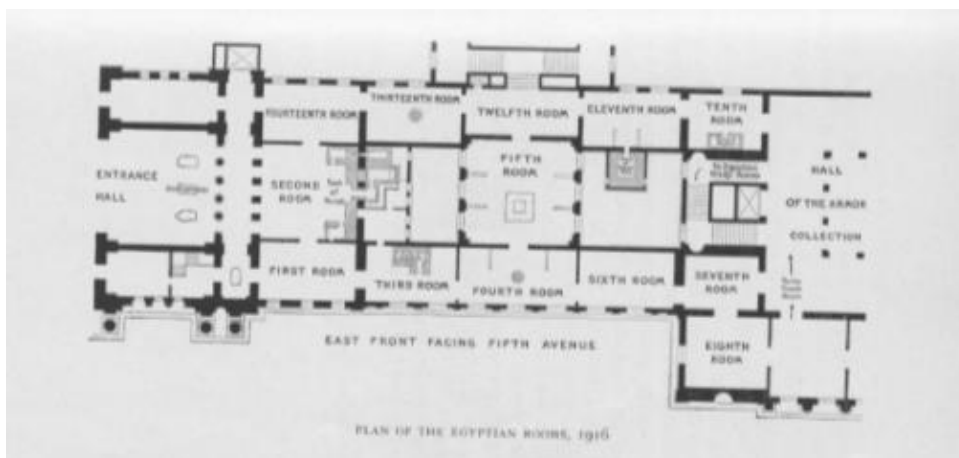
**Figure Twenty-Eight**  
Sixth Egyptian Room 1911  
From Handbook to the Egyptian Galleries Metropolitan Museum of Art



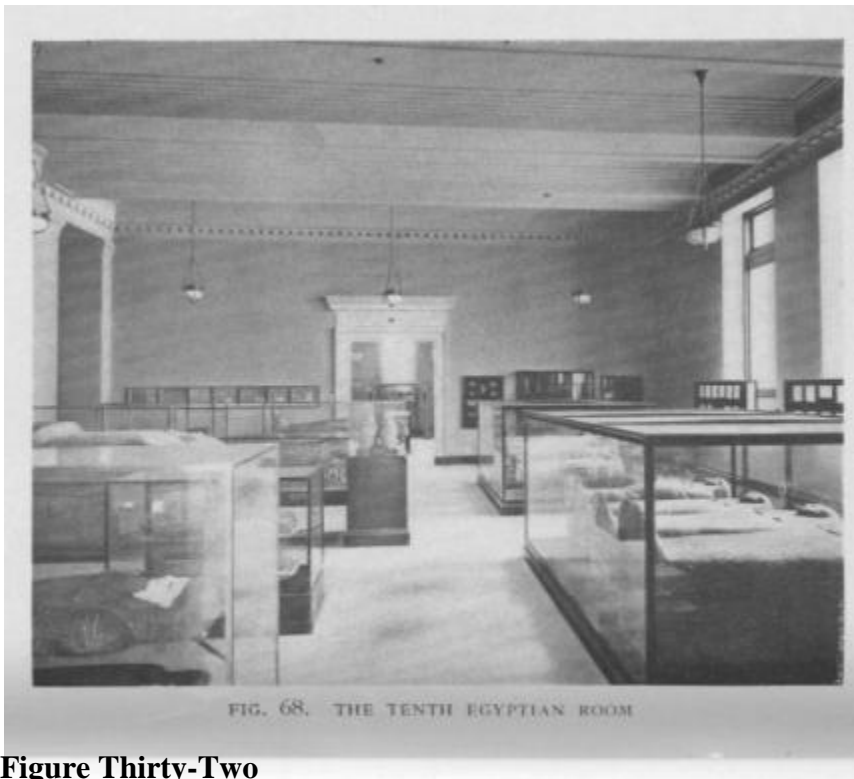
**Figure Twenty-Nine**  
Eight Egyptian Room 1911  
From Handbook to the Egyptian Galleries Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Thirty**  
Ninth Egyptian Room 1911  
From Handbook to the Egyptian Galleries Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Thirty-One**  
Floor Plan of Egyptian Galleries 1916  
From the Handbook of the Egyptian Galleries



**Figure Thirty-Two**

Tenth Room 1916

From Handbook to the Egyptian Galleries Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Thirty-Three**

Tomb of Perneb in Second Room 1916, Courtesy of Egyptian Department, Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Thirty- Four**

View of Second Room Entrance with Perneb 1916

Courtesy of Egyptian Department, Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Thirty-Five**

View of Fragmentary Tomb Ramekai 1916

Courtesy of Egyptian Department, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Chapter Three:



**Figure One**

Frederick Arthur Bridgman

*Cleopatra on the Terraces of Philae*, 1897, oil on canvas, Dahesh Museum



**Figure Two**

Maxfield Parrish

*Cleopatra*, 1917, lithograph after painting



**Figure Three**  
Frederick Arthur Bridgman,  
*Funeral of the Mummy*, 1877 oil on canvas



**Figure Four**  
Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
*Fete in the Palace of Rameses*, circa 1880, oil on canvas



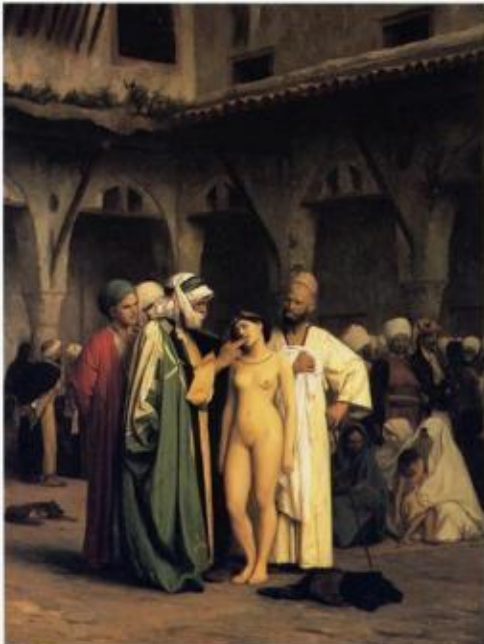
**Figure Five**  
 Jean-Léon Gérôme  
*Cleopatre et Cesar*, 1866, oil on canvas



**Figure Six**  
 Lily Martin Spencer  
*Kiss me and You'll Kiss the Lasses*, 1855, oil on canvas



**Figure Seven**  
 Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
*The Siesta*, 1879, oil on canvas



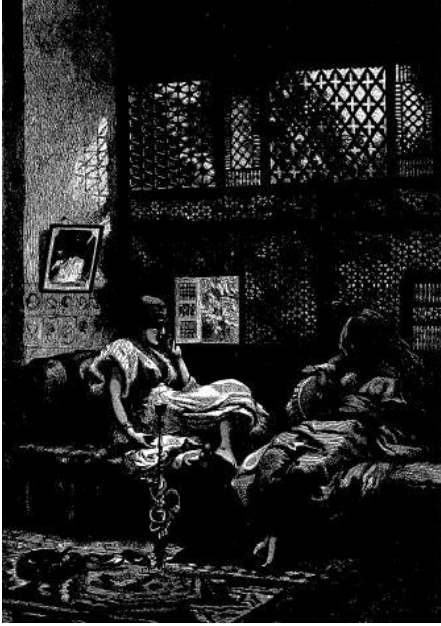
**Figure Eight**  
 Jean-Léon Gérôme  
*The Slave Market*, 1866, oil on canvas



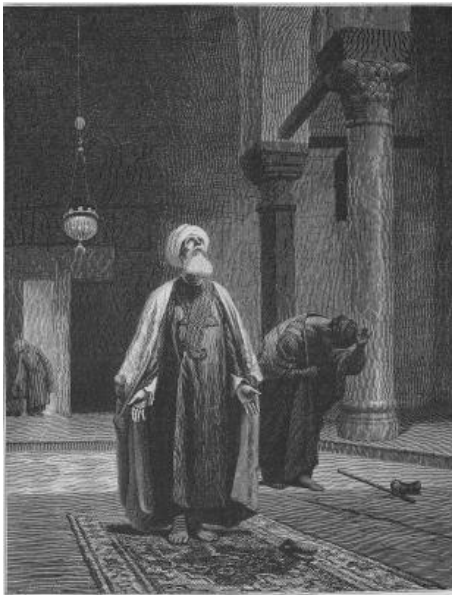
**Figure Nine**  
 Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
*The Nubian Storyteller*, oil on canvas, 1875



**Figure Ten**  
 Engraving after *The Flower of the Harem*  
 Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
 From 1878 *The Aldine*



**Figure Eleven**  
 Engraving after *In the Harem*  
 Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
 From 1878 *The Aldine*

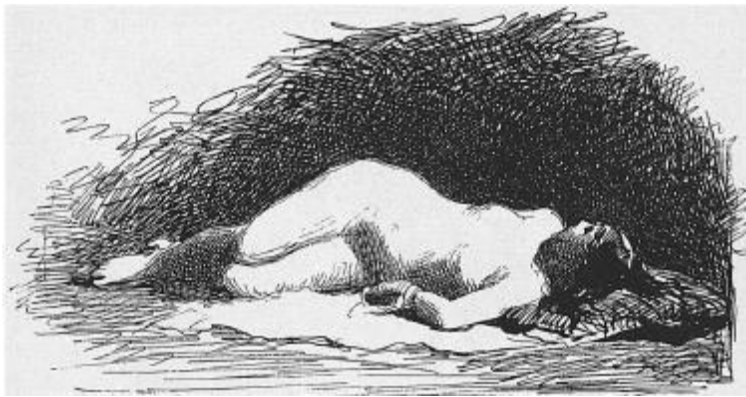


**Figure Twelve**  
 Engraving after *Allah Allah, Achbar*  
 Frederick Arthur Bridgman, from 1878 *The Aldine*



**Figure Thirteen**

Engraving of Study after Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
From Van Rensselaer, *The American Art Review*, 1881



**Figure Fourteen**

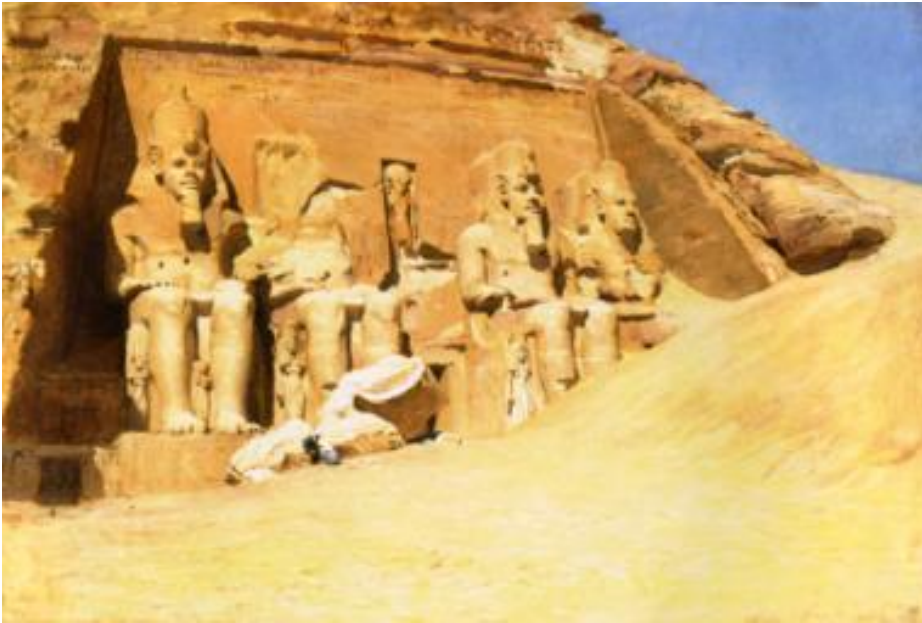
Engraving Nude Study after Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
From Van Rensselaer, *The American Art Review*, 1881



**Figure Fifteen**  
Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
*Pirate of Love*, 1889, oil on canvas



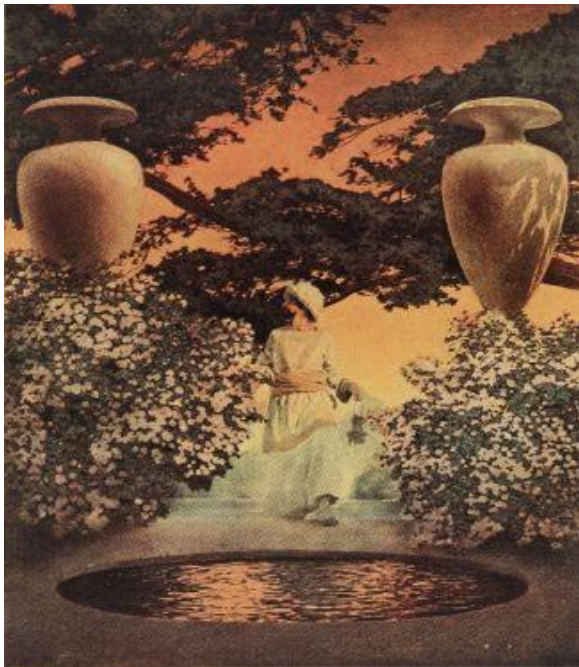
**Figure Sixteen**  
Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
*Market Place* 1923, oil on canvas



**Figure Seventeen**  
Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
*Abu Simbel* 1874, oil on canvas



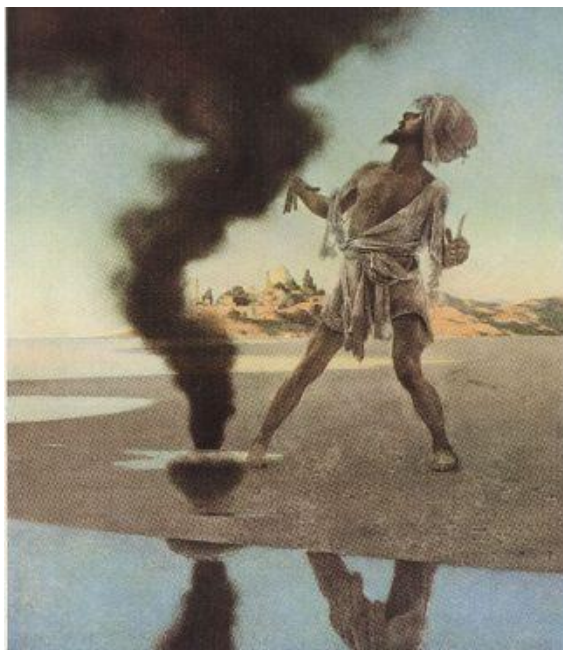
**Figure Eighteen**  
Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
*Pharaoh's Army Engulfed by the Red Sea*, 1890s, oil on canvas



**Figure Nineteen**

Maxfield Parrish

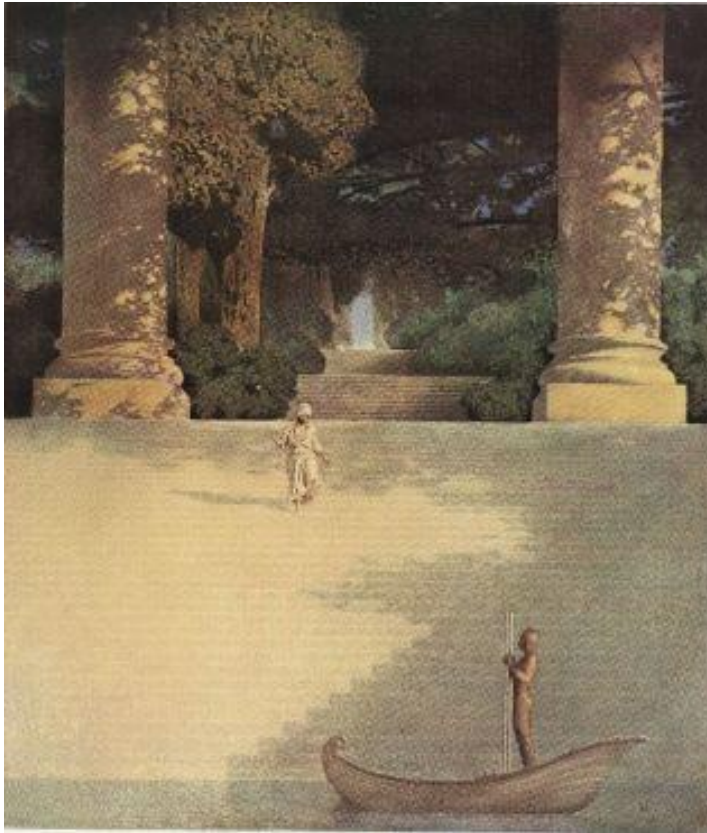
*Prince Agib from Arabian Nights* lithograph, 1909



**Figure Twenty**

Maxfield Parrish

*Aladdin and the Genie from Arabian Nights* 1909



**Figure Twenty-One**

Maxfield Parrish

*The Landing of the Brazen Boatman from the Arabian Nights, 1909*



**Figure Twenty-Two**

Maxfield Parrish

*Rubaiyat, lithograph, 1917*



**Figure Twenty-Three**  
Maxfield Parrish  
*The Garden of Allah*  
Lithograph 1918



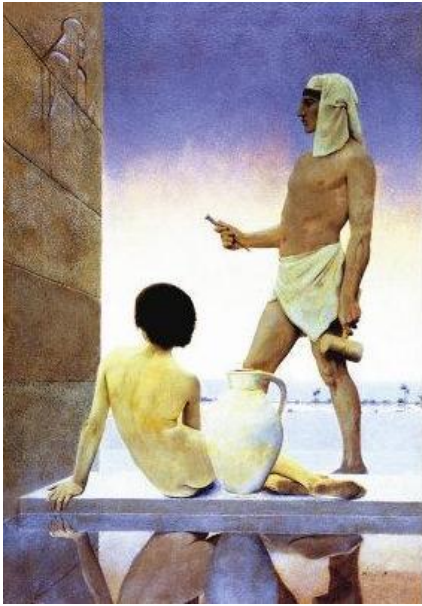
**Figure Twenty-Four**  
Jean-Léon Gérôme  
*After the Bath*, Oil on canvas, 1874



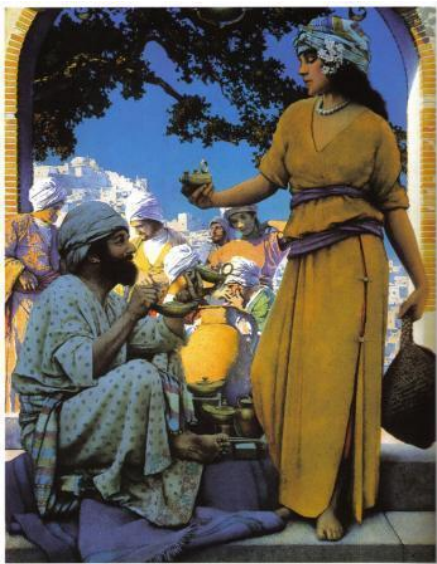
**Figure Twenty-Five**  
 Maxfield Parrish  
*Day Break*, 1922  
 Lithograph



**Figure Twenty-Six**  
 Maxfield Parrish  
*Egypt* calendar illustration for Edison Mazda, 1921



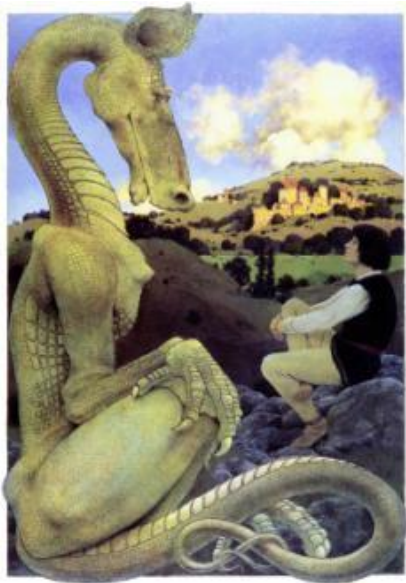
**Figure Twenty- Seven**  
 Maxfield Parrish  
*Egypt*, 1903 from “The Three Caskets”



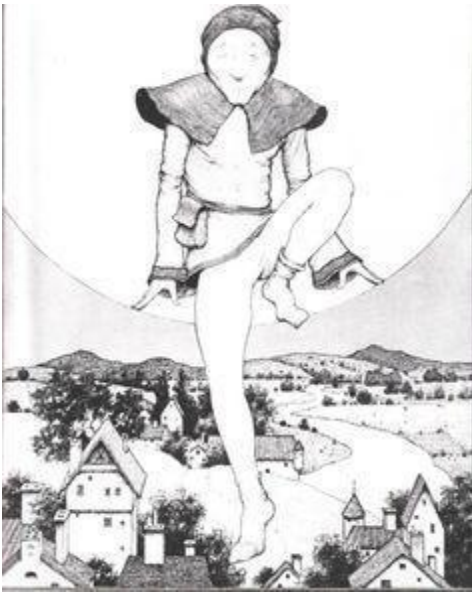
**Figure Twenty-Eight**  
 Maxfield Parrish  
*The Lamp Seller of Baghdad* calendar illustration Edison Mazda, 1923



**Figure Twenty-Nine**  
 Lawrence Alma-Tadema  
*Cleopatra and Antony*, 1883, oil on canvas



**Figure Thirty**  
 Maxfield Parrish  
*The Reluctant Dragon* illustration from *Dream Days*, 1900



**Figure Thirty-One**

Maxfield Parrish

*The Man in the Moon*, Illustration for “Mother Goose in Prose”

Ink, lithographic crayon and collage on Rossboard.



**Figure Thirty-Two**

Maxfield Parrish

*Humpty Dumpty* Illustration for “Mother Goose in Prose”

Ink, lithographic crayon and collage on Rossboard

Chapter Four:



**Figure One**  
 Act One, Scene One sketch *Aida*  
 French, 1871  
 Pen and ink on paper



**Figure Two**  
 Act Two, Scene Two, Engraving of Victory Parade  
 French, 19<sup>th</sup> century



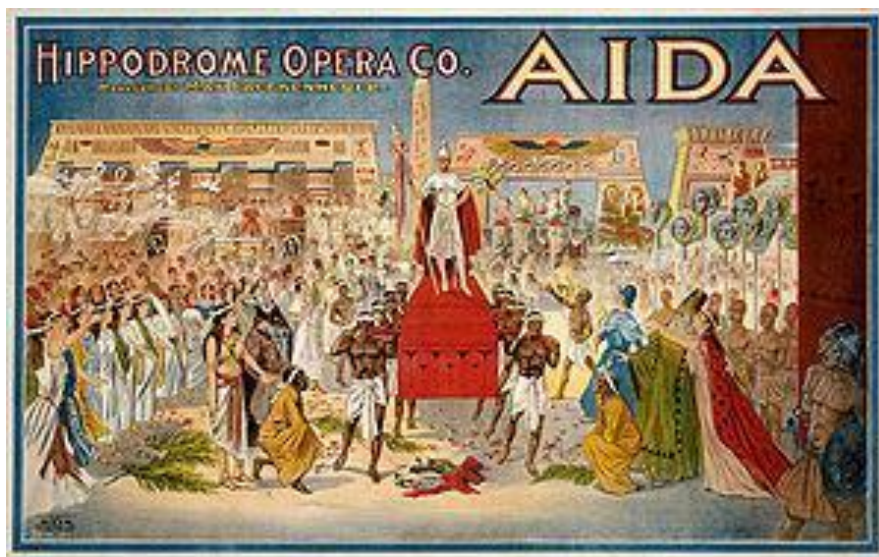
**Figure Three**  
*Aida* Advertisement  
*La Scala*, Milan, 1872



**Figure Four**  
 Finale Scene,  
 1871 French Engraving



**Figure Five**  
Finale Scene  
Royal Theatre, London , 1912 engraving



**Figure Six**  
*Aida* Poster for Ohio Opera Troupe, Hippodrome Opera, lithograph, 1908



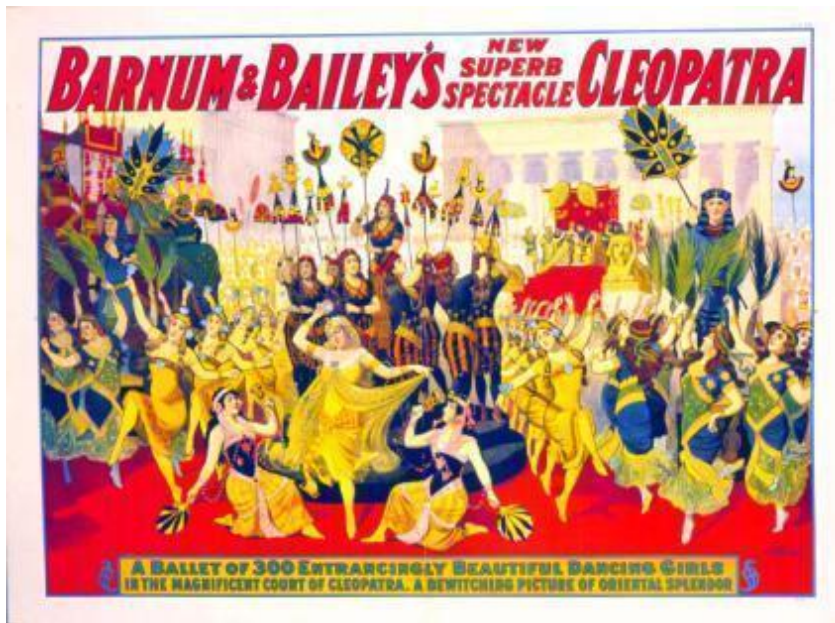
**Figure Seven**

Photograph of “Africa Wagon” Barnum and Bailey Circus, circa 1903.  
Courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin



**Figure Eight**

*Cleopatra Spectacle*, Barnum and Bailey's Circus, 1912 Lithograph Strobridge Lithographing Company. Courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.



**Figure Nine**

*Cleopatra Spectacle*, Barnum and Bailey's Circus, 1912, Lithograph, Strobridge Lithographing Company. Courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin



**Figure Ten**

*Cleopatra Spectacle*, Barnum and Bailey's Circus, 1912Lithograph, Strobridge Lithographing Company. Courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.



**Figure Eleven**

*Cleopatra Spectacle*, Barnum and Bailey's Circus 1912

Lithograph, Strobridge Lithographing Company

Courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin



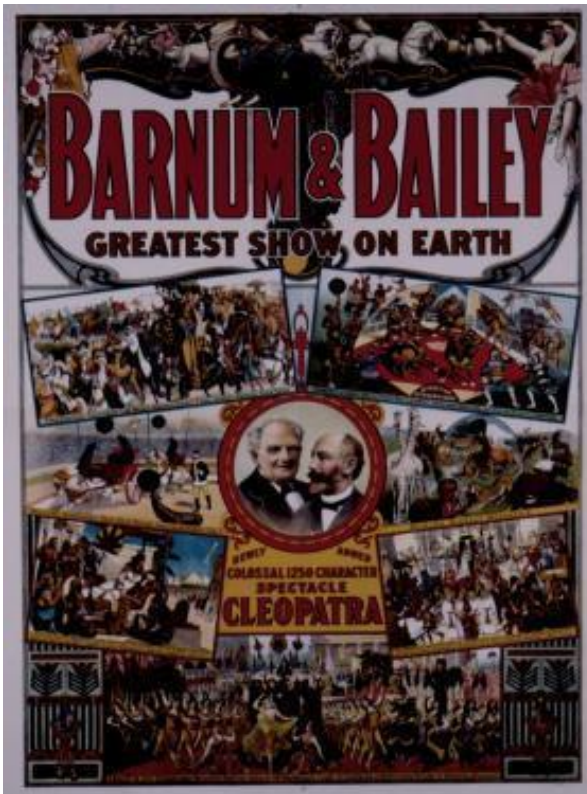
**Figure Twelve**

"Egypt" wagon, Barnum and Bailey Circus, 1903, photograph

Courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin



**Figure Thirteen**  
 Libretto *Cleopatra's Needle* illustration



**Figure Fourteen**  
*Cleopatra* Poster composite poster 1912 lithograph,  
 Courtesy of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.



**Figure Fifteen**

Photograph of stage set for *Cleopatra* at Madison Square Garden  
Archives of Circus World Museum, Baraboo Wisconsin



**Figure Sixteen**

Photograph of Jennie Silbon with costar as Antony 1912  
Archives of Circus World Museum, Baraboo Wisconsin



**Figure Seventeen**

Photograph of Jennie Silbon with group of actors on circus grounds 1912 Archives of Circus World Museum, Baraboo Wisconsin



**Figure Eighteen**

William Wetmore Story *Cleopatra*, 1863, Marble  
Metropolitan Museum of Art



**Figure Nineteen**

Engraving of "Cleopatra in Carpet for Caesar"

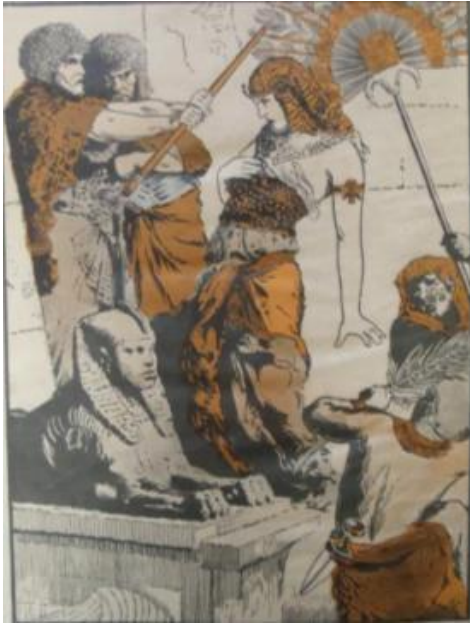
From *Cleopatra Libretto*, Barnum and Bailey Circus, 1912



**Figure Twenty**

Engraving *Cleopatra on her barge*"

From *Cleopatra Libretto*, Barnum and Bailey Circus, 1912



**Figure Twenty-One**

*Cleopatra's Death*

From *Cleopatra* Libretto, Barnum and Bailey Circus, 1912



**Figure Twenty-Two**

“Cleopatra's Needle in Alexandria”

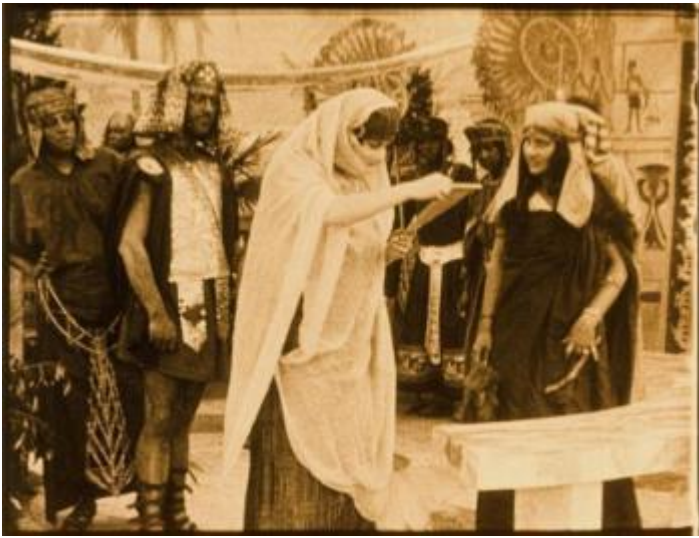
From *Cleopatra* Libretto, Barnum and Bailey Circus, 1912



**Figure Twenty-Three**  
 Engraving "Moving the Obelisk"  
 From *Cleopatra* Libretto, Barnum and Bailey Circus, 1912



**Figure Twenty-Four**  
 Film clip (Cleopatra and Pharon)  
*Cleopatra*, 1912  
 Helen Gardner Picture Players, Courtesy of the George Eastman House.



**Figure Twenty-Five**

Film clip (Cleopatra at Actium)

*Cleopatra*, 1912

Helen Gardner Picture Players, Courtesy of the George Eastman House.



**Figure Twenty-Six**

Film clip (Antony at Actium)

*Cleopatra*, 1912

Helen Gardner Picture Players, Courtesy of the George Eastman House.



**Figure Twenty-Seven**

Film clip (Final Scene, Cleopatra and Antony dead)

*Cleopatra* , 1912

Helen Gardner Picture Players, Courtesy of the George Eastman House



**Figure Twenty-Eight**

Theda Bara as the Vamp

Promotional Studio Photograph

Fox Studios, circa 1910



**Figure Twenty- Nine**

Still from Battle of Actium

*Cleopatra 1917*

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



**Figure Thirty**

Set of Roman Forum

*Cleopatra 1917*

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



**Figure Thirty-One**

Set Cleopatra's Egyptian Court

*Cleopatra 1917*

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



**Figure Thirty-Two**

Still of Julius Caesar and Fulvia

*Cleopatra 1917*

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



**Figure Thirty-Three**

Still Theda Bara as Cleopatra

*Cleopatra 1917*

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



**Figure Thirty-Four**

Still Theda Bara as Cleopatra

*Cleopatra 1917*

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



**Figure Thirty-Five**  
Promotional Image of Theda Bara as Cleopatra  
*Cleopatra 1917*  
William H. Fox Studios



**Figure Thirty-Six**  
Promotional Image of Theda Bara as Cleopatra  
*Cleopatra 1917*  
William H. Fox Studios



**Figure Thirty-Seven**

Promotional Image of Theda Bara as Cleopatra

*Cleopatra 1917*

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.



**Figure Thirty-Eight**

Promotional Photo of Theda Bara by Sphinx Set *Cleopatra 1917*,

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

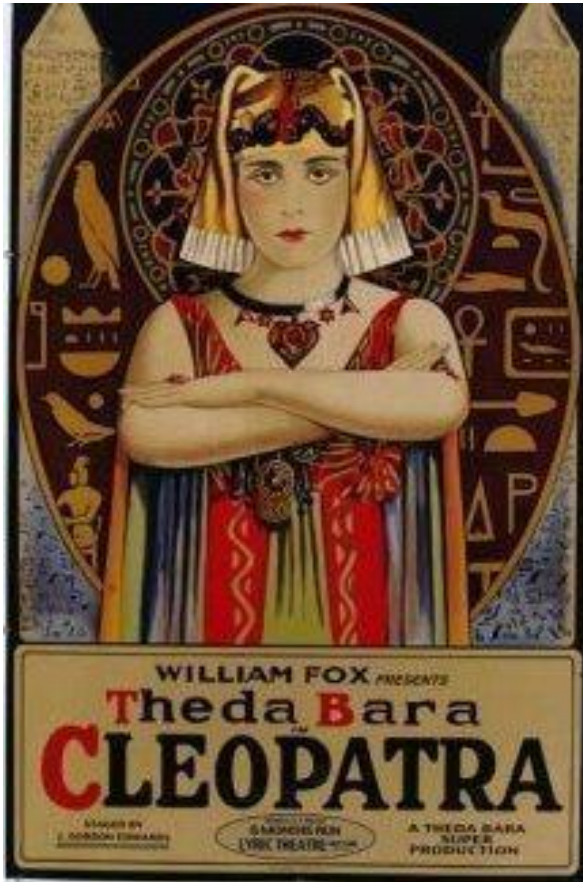


**Figure Thirty-Nine**

Promotional Image of Theda Bara at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

*Cleopatra 1917*

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences



**Figure Forty**

Poster for *Cleopatra* 1917

William H. Fox Studios, Courtesy of The Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

Conclusion:



**Figure One**  
Fred Wilson  
*Diana/Bast*  
1994 Plaster

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Baraboo, Wisconsin. Circus World Museum. Barnum and Bailey Spectacle Folders; Posters and paper ephemera; Photograph collection, spectacles and parades; Correspondence Files Barnum and Bailey.

Rochester. Eastman House. *Cleopatra* Helen Gardner 1912 film; film stills and production imagery *Cleopatra* 1917 Fox.

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[The Obelisk] Scrapbook of newspaper and ephemera clippings at the Watson Library, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York.

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