

## **Displaying Egypt: Archaeology, Spectacle, and the Museum in the Early Nineteenth Century**

**Sophie Thomas**

To capture something of how Egypt appeared to the early nineteenth century traveller, one could do worse than stand in the shoes of Giovanni Battista Belzoni when he caught his first sight of the ruins of Thebes. Faced with a "forest-like assemblage of ruins of temples, columns, obelisks, colossi, sphynxes, portals, and an endless number of other astonishing objects," Belzoni remarks that it is impossible to describe, and "absolutely impossible to imagine the scene displayed, without seeing it" (108). Belzoni's amazement reflected and in turn shaped a passionate interest in Egypt, or more particularly Egyptian antiquity, that became a prominent feature of early nineteenth century cultural life. The term 'Egyptomania' is frequently applied to that fascination, which found expression in a variety of ways: in increased activity around the excavation and collecting of antiquities, in the growing collections of the British Museum, in Egyptian-inspired architecture and design, in the work of writers and artists, and in the way Egypt featured in forms of popular visual spectacle, such as the theatre, the panoramas of Barker and Burford, and later, in moving panoramas that simulated the experience of travelling up the Nile.

To some extent, Egypt provided a fresh supply of scenes and objects for antiquarian and picturesque tastes largely inherited from the eighteenth century. As Jeffrey Richards has observed, Egypt appealed to the Romantic interest in the ruins of the past, particularly given the monumental nature of Egypt's physical remains, and also to an interest in the occult, fuelled by the exotic customs, cultural practices, and religious beliefs of ancient Egyptians (17).<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, there were new conditions in play and a key factor in the 'rediscovery' of Egypt was a practical one: as it became more open to foreign visitors, travel naturally heightened awareness of the 'far away,' and offered the means of bringing the distant into uneasy proximity with the near. In the 1840s, the overland route to India was established – through Egypt – which increased the number of its visitors, firmly associated Egypt with British Imperial ambitions, and provided a popular subject for the touring panoramas that featured highlights of the route (Connor 3-4). The revival of interest in the ancient world, while linked thus to the dynamic interactions of geography and politics, is at the same time a factor in the emergence of archaeology as a scientific discipline of considerable popular interest.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, we find a close connection between travel, public or commercial museums, and popular visual spectacles where Egyptian sites and artifacts were featured. The archaeological subject, as featured at a spectacle or an exhibition, makes a particularly fitting bridge between these domains, since the drama of discovery is front and centre: a drama involving unveiling and unearthing, and the lifting or opening of objects to sight.

This essay will explore the dialogue between archaeological activity in Egypt, the treatment in British museum collections of the objects it produced, and the use of visual spectacle in popular representations of Egypt and Egyptian artefacts, such as William Bullock's 1821 exhibition of Belzoni's finds from the tomb of Pharaoh Seti I. The focus is on the early nineteenth century, when the excitement about Egypt that followed Napoleon's military expedition of 1798-1801, coupled with the relatively accommodating nature of Egypt's rulers and escalating demand from European

collectors, led to largely unregulated exploration of key Egyptian sites. It was in this context that Belzoni, former strongman and engineer turned archaeologist-adventurer, undertook pioneering excavations at Abu Simbel, Giza and Thebes. Moreover, in this period before the emergence of Egyptology as a distinct field of study, and well before the establishment of a dedicated department at the British Museum for Egyptian and Oriental Antiquities in 1866, there is persistent uncertainty about the status of these marvellous curiosities from a lost civilization, and a tendency to regard them as primarily wondrous and sublime. At a time when the modern museum was finding its feet as an institution wary of the competing attractions of the entertainment industry, Egyptian artifacts shed light on the inevitable entanglements of science and sensation in modes of collection and display, and in the manner of their public presentation.

### **'Rediscovering' Egypt**

Traditionally, interest in Egypt drew from its importance in the bible and from classical associations. In the early nineteenth century, however, this interest was closely connected to Britain's relationship with France during and after the Napoleonic wars. For example, Nelson's victory over the French fleet in 1798, at the Battle of the Nile, provoked a patriotic vogue for decorative obelisks, sphinxes and crocodiles – as well as a panorama representing the event. Even though a number of British and European travellers had travelled considerable distances up the Nile in the eighteenth century, it has been argued that the real 'rediscovery' of the pharaonic monuments took place at the turn of the nineteenth century, as a consequence of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign (Belzoni 18).<sup>3</sup> These monuments became widely known from the extraordinary efforts of the team of scholars and artists accompanying Napoleon, who documented them for the *Description de l'Égypte* – an ambitious, multi-volume work, which took until the 1820s to complete. Dominique-Vivant Denon, a key figure in that enterprise, published his own account of his travels and discoveries, which proved highly influential, not least in popularizing a definitively Egyptian style that had a substantial impact on everything from interior design to theatre sets in Britain. Napoleon's expedition to Egypt also involved the acquisition of many significant objects that were promptly confiscated when the British Army defeated the French in 1801. The first Egyptian antiquities held by the British Museum, such as those deposited with the collections of Hans Sloane in the mid-eighteenth century, had consisted of small objects such as figures of gods, scarabs, and amulets (James, *The British Museum* 4). Now, the colossal statues and sarcophagi, with their broader public appeal, began to arrive in England and their massiveness was in itself a source of fascination, since it bodied forth a degree of power, of sheer physical might, that induced a feeling of "awe-stricken amazement" (Gidal 180).

Interest in Egyptian antiquities, it has been argued, reached a peak in the years around 1820, which was largely due to the activities of Belzoni, whose "achievements in Egypt in the years 1815-19 caught the imagination of the British public to a degree unrivalled until the discovery of Tutankhamun's treasures a century later" (Conner 56). Under contract to the British Consul-General, Henry Salt, one of his first extraordinary feats was to remove the massive granite head of Rameses II from the Ramesseum at Thebes and transport it down the Nile to the port of Alexandria, from whence it travelled to England; it was installed in the British Museum in early 1819.<sup>4</sup> Reports of the discovery of the twelve-ton head and its imminent arrival were widely disseminated in the periodical press, an advance notice that famously inspired the

sonnet writing competition between Shelley and his friend Horace Smith that produced "Ozymandias."<sup>5</sup> The head was however a mysterious object. Known first as the 'Memnon Head,' it was received by the trustees of the British Museum without much initial enthusiasm, and only later would it become a central piece in the museum's Egyptian collections: Joseph Banks noted, in a letter to Salt, that it was explicitly not placed "among the works of *Fine Art*," by which he meant the collections of prized Greek and Roman antiquities in the Townley galleries (Moser 101). Elliott Colla has suggested that this reaction to, and treatment of, the Memnon Head may be seen as marking a transition between antiquarian discourses, in which such objects were known primarily as curiosities, and nascent archaeological discourses that would ultimately legitimise Egyptology as a scientific discipline (28, 60-63).

This sensational success however was only the beginning. In 1817, Belzoni located the entrance to the great temple at Abu Simbel. In the Valley of the Kings, near ancient Thebes, he discovered and entered six royal tombs, including the tomb of Seti I (1294-1279 BC), the entrance to which was buried six metres underground. The most magnificent of the royal tombs in the Valley, it was found to contain thirteen rooms, "almost all covered in superb wall paintings in painted relief in a state of pristine freshness" (Pearce 109-110). It was here, in the burial hall, that he discovered the magnificent alabaster sarcophagus that was purchased by the architect and collector John Soane (in whose London house, now a museum, it remains). Belzoni spent over a year making drawings and taking wax impressions of everything in the tomb. Later, in 1818, he located an entrance to the second pyramid at Giza, which was thought to be a solid structure. Belzoni was acting upon a hunch based on close observation of the features of the pyramid, followed by some exploratory digging. The entrance, once discovered, gave onto a passage leading to a burial chamber. After further remarkable discoveries at Thebes, Belzoni was engaged in the removal of an obelisk from the temple of Isis on the island of Philae.

Despite his implication in transactions that were viewed with some scepticism in London, not least because of uncertainty about the value of Egyptian antiquities, in both aesthetic and economic terms, Belzoni's activities captured the popular imagination. He was a colourful figure: exceptionally strong and energetic, of "colossal stature, shaped like Hercules" (Belzoni 29). As a professional strong-man known as the "Patagonian Samson," his most famous act at Sadler's Wells had been the "human pyramid," in which he lifted and carried as many as ten men around the stage (29). These super-human feats were also characteristic of his work in Egypt, with the excavation and collection of artifacts that were themselves gigantic. As Judith Pascoe has noted, the stupendous nature of his archaeological discoveries sat well with the Romantic privileging of the vast as a source of sublimity, an association long established by Burke and Kant – who used an Egyptian pyramid as an example of a structure evocative of the sublime – in the eighteenth century (Pascoe 114-38).

Throughout his *Narrative*, Belzoni uses the language of the sublime to convey what clearly cannot be conveyed to his readers; this is evident in his astonishment and wonder at the sight of Thebes, noted above, and in many other instances when he finds himself transported by the sights he encounters, with all attempts at description baffled. In a rare moment of solitude at Karnak, he finds himself inside the temple at sunrise: "I was lost in a mass of colossal objects, every one of which was more than sufficient of itself alone to attract my whole attention. How can I describe my sensations at that moment!" Belzoni presents these objects to his readers in turn: a "forest" of decorated columns; the gates, the walls, the pedestals, all adorned with

historic scenes of battle, triumph, sacrifice, feasting; the red granite sanctuary with its obelisks; "the high portals, seen at a distance from the openings to this vast labyrinth of edifices; the various groups of ruins of the other temples within sight; these altogether had such an effect on my soul, as to separate me in imagination from the rest of mortals, exalt me on high over all, and cause me to forget entirely the trifles and follies of life" (166-67). For a sense of this scene, Belzoni refers his readers to the accompanying plate (see Fig. 1) showing an overview of the ruins of Karnak, taken from the top of the pylon on the west side of the temple. Here, the shadows of the ruins lengthen over a sweeping expanse of rubble and sand:



**Fig.1.**

(*General View of the Ruins of the Great Temple of Carnac, discovered by G. Belzoni*).

© The Stapleton Collection / The Bridgeman Art Museum.

### Staging Egypt

The impact of fresh archaeological activity in Egypt in the early nineteenth century could be felt in many aspects of popular, visual culture. Numerous satiric prints captured the spirit of the political moment, and made liberal use of motifs such as pyramids, mummies and crocodiles; James Gillray in particular was a tireless caricaturist of the French cultural appropriation of Egypt under Napoleon, while Thomas Rowlandson's "The Antiquarians" and "Modern Antiquities" (1806) mocked the obsession with ancient Egypt that followed. A number of theatrical spectacles attempted to capitalise on British nationalist pride in their use of Egypt as both subject and setting, such as an operatic production featuring Egyptian scenes and costumes, *The Egyptian Festival*, that was performed at Drury Lane in 1800, and the simply named *Egypt* (1801), which launched the career of the brilliant scene painter J. H. Grieve (Conner 29). At the Lyceum in 1802, Mark Lonsdale's *Aegyptiana* was mounted: a spectacle in three parts, it consisted of "eighteen scenic pictures, upon a large scale, with explanatory readings" (Altick 199). The first part, from which the show took its name, featured commissioned paintings drawn from Denon's *Voyage*. As a handbill enthused, "this Part of the Evening's Entertainment, intended to give an amusing Turn to Information, and to exhibit Fact in its most picturesque Form, will be

relieved by a few Productions of Fancy, uniting the more sportive Efforts of Poetry, Painting and Spectacle" (199). In short, it was an ambitious attempt at a multi-media theatricalisation of Egypt that aimed to satisfy an "antiquarian fetish for the non-modern" (Ziter 33).

In these early decades of the nineteenth century, an inherently theatrical engagement with Egypt was also apparent in the domestic sphere: in furniture and interior design, in Egyptian themed rooms, and in the architectural features of buildings.<sup>6</sup> The potential public appeal of these developments was not lost on William Bullock, whose purpose built museum on the south side of Piccadilly, constructed in 1812, integrated Egyptian forms in several ways. The startling façade offered an eclectic imitation of a pylon gateway to an Egyptian temple, with the addition of large windows surrounded by mock hieroglyphs (see Fig. 2). On the basis of this exotic façade, the building became known as the 'Egyptian Hall,' and was a landmark in the popular entertainment industry right through the nineteenth century. Furthermore, in 1819, Bullock had one of the principle rooms remodelled in an Egyptian style: the supporting columns were decorated with bands of hieroglyphs, lotuses, and Hathor heads, and the ceiling with signs of the zodiac. The museum provided the perfect setting for Belzoni's exhibition in 1821 of his collection of Egyptian antiquities and drawings – an exhibition popularly known as "Belzoni's Tomb," since the central draw was a recreation, as an advertisement in *The Times* proclaimed, of "the beautiful tomb discovered by Mr Belzoni in Thebes"<sup>7</sup> (qtd. in Pearce 111).



**Fig. 2.**  
*The Entrance to Bullock's Museum.*  
© The British Library Board

Belzoni's exhibition opened to great acclaim in the spring of 1821, and was viewed by nearly two thousand on the first day alone. The exhibition featured a large number of Egyptian antiquities – indeed fourteen cases of them, which *The Times*

referred to as "a multitude of collateral curiosities," including two mummies, and many larger pieces such as the lion-headed statues of the goddess Sekhmet.<sup>8</sup> More memorably though, it replicated in full size two of the chambers of the tomb of Seti I: the Entrance Hall and the 'Hall of Beauties,' a room fourteen by twenty feet, covered with symbolic representations of the pharaoh and his associated gods. The rich colours of the tomb were carefully reproduced, and the whole presented under lamplight, so as to mimic the sensory conditions under which Belzoni had first entered it.<sup>9</sup> The exhibition also featured a scale model and drawings of the entire complex, complete with copies of the spectacular paintings that had been taken by Belzoni with the help of Alessandro Ricci. Also on display were scale models of the ruins of the temple of Erments, the great temples of Ysambul and of Rameses II at Abu Simbel, the portico in the temple of Isis at Philae, and of the second or Chephren's pyramid, along with a cross-section showing its internal passages and tunnels.

This popular exhibition staged as far as it could the experience of visiting the tombs recently excavated in the Valley of the Kings by situating the statues, sarcophagi and other objects on display, in a theatricalised recreation of the scene. As Gillen D'Arcy Wood has argued, it offered a sensational simulacrum of the putatively real, rather than the rationalised and disinterested display of artefacts, divorced from historical context and setting, that one might encounter at the nearby British Museum (4).<sup>10</sup> It offered the experience, in short, of being inside the tomb, not exactly as a corpse, but as a visitor to an 'underworld' that allowed one to imagine, if not recreate, the experience of the archaeologist-explorer in the act of first discovery. Belzoni's compelling narrative of his exploits, published in 1820, was available to readers before the exhibition opened, as was a companion volume of forty-five plates, many of which foreground the activity of discovery. Plates 9-12, for example, represent the finding of the burial chamber inside the Pyramid of Cephrene, and feature figure(s) with torches, clearly Belzoni and his assistants, at the very moment of entry; similar representations are offered for the interior of the temple at Ybsambul (see Fig. 3). Such scenes must by definition be 'restaged' after the fact, and aim to capture something of the excitement of crossing over into the previously unknown.

These, and other representations of the invisible or hidden Egypt – Egypt indoors – form an interesting counterpoint to the numerous plates of exterior scenes and views that the volume also includes. These often also contain figures, perhaps to provide a sense of scale or local atmosphere, though often they represent Belzoni and his guides as surveyors of the scene. In this way, acts of observation and discovery intersect. The spectators in Belzoni's plates pay close attention to Egypt's wonders, and foreground visual response in a way that cues that of a reader or museum visitor. Whether or not visitors to Bullock's Egyptian Hall were this attentive, the success of Belzoni's dramatic exhibition can be measured in the interest it spread in ancient Egypt as well as in archaeology among the general public (Altick 245). Through exhibitions such as Belzoni's, which presented Egypt as mysterious and spectacular, visitors at least felt they acquired access to the past. This access, with all its imaginary force, is clearly a product of the inventive interplay of artifacts and scenic – or theatrical – recreation.



**Fig. 3.**

Giovanni Belzoni. "View of the Interior of the Temple at Ybsambul [Abu Sumbul] in Nubia. Opened by G. Belzoni, 1818."

© The Stapleton Collection / The Bridgeman Art Museum.

### Viewing Egypt

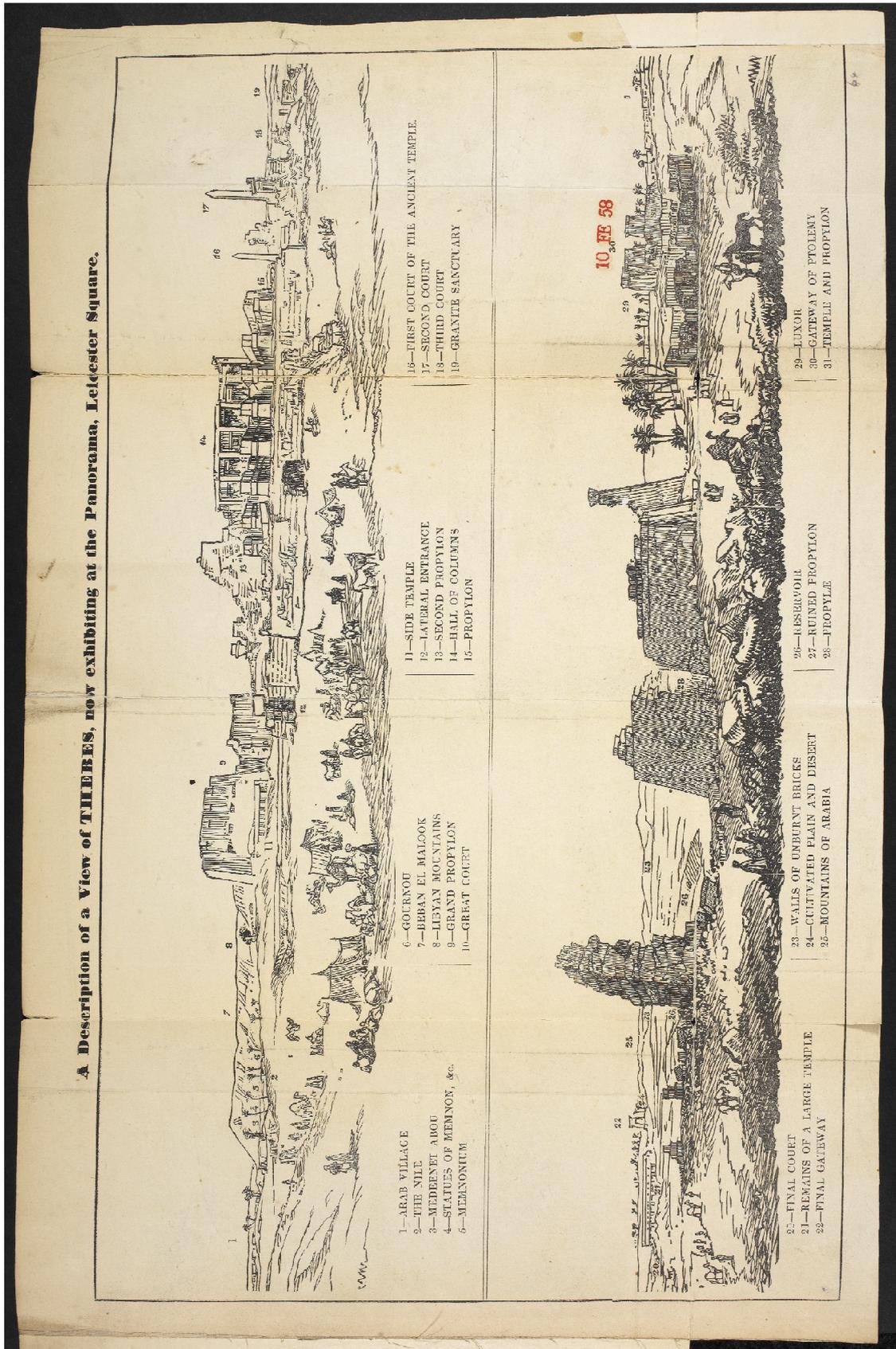
Patrick Conner, in his introduction to the exhibition catalogue *The Inspiration of Egypt*, observes that in the early nineteenth century – which was dominated by the archaeological activities of figures such as Belzoni – artistic representations of Egypt tended to focus on the monumental, and on outdoor scenes. This meant a preponderance of landscape views of temples and pyramids, for example, and the production of *capricci* that brought monuments into imagined proximity with one another. By mid-century however, he suggests, the domestic life of the Egyptians, as revealed in tomb paintings, was of increasing interest, and the Egyptian interior began to capture the imagination (Conner 3). Arguably, this is already evident in the popular success of 'Belzoni's Tomb,' and in the interest aroused by the objects piling up at the British Museum. A compelling addition, however, to the ways in which people at this time could encounter Egypt was provided by Robert Burford's London Panorama. While the nature of the medium lent itself best to broad, topographic views, and Egypt was in general approached in this way, it is noteworthy that panoramic paintings, displayed in their purpose-built rotundas, offer interior spectacles reminiscent of the tomb of Seti I – even though they are contrived to make their painted walls vanish into an illusion of the outdoors. Although Conner's suggestion is broadly accurate, it makes some sense to consider representations of ancient Egypt throughout this period as animated by a tension between the power of the interior, particularly but not only the temple or the tomb, and the desire to recreate the impressive monumentality of its antique sites from a more comprehensive vantage point.

The panorama featured, as the name coined in 1787 by its inventor, Robert Barker, indicates, a three hundred and sixty degree view of its subject that simulated

the experience of being on the very spot. This illusion was created not just through the immersion of the spectator in a complete visual field, and through sheer size and life-like scale, but also by a documentary faithfulness to the details of the scene. Panorama rotundas were in general lit from the top, with a central viewing area entered from below so to preserve the full impact of the illusion. The success of any given panorama was highly dependent on the innate suitability of its subject, which was invariably promoted as exemplary by the pamphlets that accompanied each show. Since so few of the actual canvases still exist, their historical recreation is largely dependent on reports, reviews, and on these pamphlets themselves, which contained a key-map or diagram cross-referenced to the descriptive text.

Panoramic representations of antiquity, of antique cities or scenes of particular archaeological interest, form a distinct strand with their own appeal (Thomas). Such panoramas were numerous in the early years of the nineteenth century, beginning with Barker's "Battle of the Nile" and "Constantinople" at the turn of the century, and continuing through the early decades of the century with scenes, some frequently repeated, of sites such as Rome, Athens, Pompeii, Thebes and the Great Temple of Karnak, Jerusalem, the Temples of Baalbec, and Cairo with the Nile and the Pyramids. To a considerable degree, the popularity of these scenes directly reflected the excitement that accompanied the archaeological discovery of Near Eastern and Classical antiquities over the same period (Altick 182). Like other countries with strong links to antiquity, Egypt was promoted on the basis of its historical and cultural importance, yet as the promoters of the 1835 panorama of "The Great Temple of Karnak and the Surrounding City of Thebes" claimed, "no other country presents to the observations of the curious so great a number of monuments of high antiquity, or so many vestiges of the earliest civilization of man" (*Description...Karnak*, 3).

The 1835 panorama of Thebes and Karnak was painted by Burford and his team of panorama painters on the basis of drawings of monuments undertaken by Frederick Catherwood during the 1830s. Egypt was particularly remarkable for its former magnificence, presenting as it did what had largely become a landscape of ruin – at least in the case of ancient sites in the area around Thebes (see Fig. 4). The scene depicts a variety of monuments, with the Temple of Karnak forming the foreground, in a broad view extending east across the desert towards the "immense and picturesque mountains of Arabia," and west across the Nile, as fertile corn-fields and plantations of palm give way to barren sands and finally to the "pointed mountains of the Libyan chain, by which the view is closed" (7). The temple, one of the oldest, most extensive, and best preserved, is taken as "a fair illustration of all these monuments of grandeur" (5). In front of the monumental ruins that punctuate the landscape, both near and far, the scene incorporates an element of contemporary human interest – a caravan of pilgrims travelling from Cairo to Mecca are preparing to camp for the night – and is depicted strategically at sunset, with the "magic hues of the setting sun" catching "the projecting masses of the temples, [. . .] the obelisks and the white rocks – touching them with the varied and glowing tints of the rainbow" (7). Both the human scene and the time of day are clearly chosen to emphasise transience and temporal contingency, particularly given that they are set amid these vast, ruined vestiges of the past.



**Fig. 4.**  
John Burford. Key Map from *Description of a View of the Great Temple of Karnak and the Surrounding City of Thebes*.  
© The British Library Board - Shelfmark 10349.t.15. (64.)

The booklet accompanying the panorama examines each element of the scene, setting out what is or can be known, relaying ancient and recent associations, historical and religious significance, and architectural and aesthetic detail. The informative, educative emphasis of the descriptions offsets the overall framing of the scene in the introductory pages, which (as is also typical of the panorama tracts) deploys the language of the sublime, and more particularly, the sublime of ruin. Speaking of the site as a whole, the tract notes that there is no one point from which "the eye can embrace the whole of these extraordinary remains at one time" (5) – even though this is precisely what the panorama as a form sets out to achieve. The response of viewers to the panorama is thus modelled by this characterization of the scene as one ideally calculated to induce astonishment and awe. The tract opens, to this end, with an extract from the third canto of Salt's rhapsodic poem, "Egypt" – a passage recounting the arrival at Karnak or "old Diospolis," whose ruins, in their mutilated grandeur, "cast / Ev'n still a vivid radiance o'er the past." The passage continues:

Columns, and temples, porticos sublime,  
O'erpower th' astonished senses with their vast  
And solid masses—unsubdued by time. (3)

The scene of ruin, as encountered by visitors and contemplated by the "learned and ingenious of later ages," is considered sublime because of the sheer magnitude of its remains: "it is difficult to describe, and impossible, without inspection, to form an adequate idea of the vast extent, ponderous massiveness, and gigantic appearance of these majestic ruins" (4). Still, the text persists in doing so, enumerating the relevant structures and objects that, though "shattered and detached," still forcibly convey their original brilliancy (4). The language of sublimity is elicited by these forms for other reasons too, not least because of the extraordinary exertions required to create and erect them, but also because of the pull of the unfathomable, which is implicit in the way so many of Egypt's archaeological wonders resist our attempt to unfold or decipher them. Thebes is, moreover, venerated particularly for its ancient or even *pre*-ancient pedigree, for "the date of its destruction was far anterior to the foundation of most other cities" (4); it is "doubly interesting" for being not simply associated with Greece and Rome, but a source for the "arts, sciences and learning" of those nations (7). The net effect on those who behold these ruins is apparently a kind of ecstatic seizure. The pamphlet cites for its authority not only Sonini's claim that he experienced "an ecstasy which suspended his faculties, [and] rendered him immovable with rapture," but also Denon's extraordinary declaration, in his *Voyage*, that "the whole French army, coming suddenly in sight of the ruins, with one accord stood in amazement, and clapped their hands with delight, as if the end and object of their glorious toil, and the complete conquest of Egypt were accomplished and secured, by taking possession of the splendid remains of this ancient metropolis" (4; Denon 1:117). This was precisely the kind of delight aimed for by the spectacular illusions created at the Panorama, and thus it is perhaps no accident that such a scene of response is staged, as it were, in the companion text.

The interest of such panoramas is highly dependent on the power of ruins – not just as visual spectacles that depict ancient scenes in their current forms, but also as imaginative spectacles that appeal to the capacity of the viewer to supply additional material from memory or fantasy. Yet even comparatively modern and metropolitan scenes could confound the visual and conceptual faculties in a way that blended familiar aesthetic discourses with new experiences. Another popular subject for

panoramic representation was the city of Cairo and its surrounding area, including the pyramids, which featured twice at the Panorama – first at Henry Aston Barker's Leicester Square Rotunda in 1809 (painted from drawings made by Salt), and later, under Burford's directorship, in 1847. The central feature in the foreground of these views was the city itself, which, with its numerous mosques, presented an exotic landscape of minarets and rooftops. The scene of the city is characterised in the 1847 booklet as "singularly confused" to the European eye – the "innumerable details" and the "fantastic forms" of its architecture present a chaotic landscape resistant to visual mastery (*Description...Cairo*, 3).

The key objects of archaeological interest however were the pyramids, mysterious and vast, "stupendous works," which have evoked "unbounded admiration and interest": "These enigmatical structures, four in number, which antiquity extolled amongst its wonders, and which for size, sublime unity of design, solidity of construction, and the severe simplicity of their once sacred forms, which renders them everlasting [. . .] are the most mighty monuments of power and pride ever raised by man" (7). These and other works of the pharaohs have become of special interest because of the Herculean efforts of a more contemporary set of men: because of the "indefatigable and toilsome researches, and valuable discoveries of Salt, Belzoni, Caviglia, Howard Vyse, and others". Belzoni's remarkable discovery of an apartment containing a sarcophagus in one of the pyramids is noted (7). So while the interest of Cairo is itself framed in terms that are broadly similar to other foreign cities, which were popular subjects for the panorama (Constantinople, Lisbon, Damascus, and Athens were other cities featured in the 1840s), the archaeological details are nevertheless foregrounded very particularly as a source of interest, and in a way that resorts to the language of the sublime, even as a way of capturing experience in and of the present.

The spectacular displays of faraway objects and places at the panorama required the collaboration of many, not least a whole team of painters working on the immense canvases. The panoramas of Thebes, Karnak and Cairo depended on the work of artists travelling abroad who gathered the necessary visual material: Frederick Catherwood in the case of Thebes, and David Roberts in the case of Cairo. Catherwood, who also prepared material for Burford's panoramas of Jerusalem and Baalbek, and lectured about them, was a gifted documentary artist with a taste for travel. Similarly, David Roberts, a distinguished scene painter and later member of the Royal Academy, prepared drawings specifically for Burford's panorama of Cairo. Perhaps inevitably, then, many pioneering Egyptologists were also travellers and artists – such as Salt, John Lewis Burckhardt, or William John Bankes. Some, such as Catherwood, also became involved directly in the production of panoramas. Visual documentation was thus a prominent feature of their relationship to sites of archaeological interest and activity. Indeed, the emerging practices and assumptions of archaeology are clearly, in the first part of the nineteenth century, embedded in practices of looking and observation (one might recall here that it was Belzoni's capacity to 'read,' after close study, the features of the second pyramid that enabled him to deduce the existence of the buried entrance) – practices that are closely associated with the visual culture industry at 'home,' from Royal Academy exhibitions to Leicester Square panoramas.

### **Animating Egypt**

Visual spectacles, inspired directly by increased access to countries such as Egypt, became increasingly sophisticated as their creators reached for more effective ways to

replicate the experience of foreign travel. The development of the 'moving' panorama offered an improvement upon the inherently static panoramic image, by not simply reproducing the experience of being in a particular place, such as an ancient archaeological site, but of moving through it. In contrast to the freedom of movement on the viewing platforms at the Panorama, the audience now sat facing a large continuous canvas unfurling across a set of rollers, which in thus passing before its viewers aimed for a comprehensive experience of totality that incorporated a simulation of mobility. The 1849 moving panorama of the Nile, an enormous popular success, took its viewers on a journey up the river from Cairo and back again. The accompanying booklet describes the route in detail: travelling up river, the viewer faces the west bank and takes in such important sites as the "once celebrated city of Memphis; the pyramids of Dashour, [...]; Girgeh, formerly the capital of Upper Egypt; the temple of Dendera, commenced by Cleopatra; the Memnonium, or temple of Ramses II, with its gigantic or sitting statues; Edfou, the Apollinopolis Magna of the Romans, one of the largest temples in Egypt; the 'Throne of Pharaoh,' as the remarkable group of rocks, near the Island of Philae, is termed by the Arabs" (Gliddon 9). By now the viewer has ascended 800 miles to the second cataract at the border dividing Nubia from Ethiopia, and will "turn" and descend, this time facing the eastern bank. The key sights on the return to Cairo are "Derr, the capital of Nubia; a portion of Thebes; Karnak; the tombs of Beni Hassan; the Lybian Desert; the Pyramids; and the Sphynx" (9). These scenes were presented as a succession of visually rich tableaux, with the first depicted at sunrise, and the last at sunset. While certain scenes were especially admired, contemporary reviews noted that it was the relations between particular sites that the panorama so effectively allowed the viewer to grasp.<sup>11</sup>

Since so many important archaeological landmarks were located close to the Nile, the wonders of Egypt lent themselves to a spectacle of this kind. The *Literary Gazette* claimed that "this panorama may be safely pronounced one of the most interesting and instructive exhibitions that ever sought the patronage of the public". Typically, the review extolled its excellence 'as a work of art, independently of the information it conveys' (qtd. in Gliddon 10), but the framing of the spectacle as an educational one cannot be overlooked, since the accompanying booklet offers an extended survey, a snapshot, of Egyptological knowledge at mid-century. The producers of the 'Moving Panorama of the Nile,' including James Bonomi whose own drawings had been used in its production, sold the panorama to George Gliddon, a noted Egyptologist, to use during a lecture tour in the US; they created a duplicate so the popular show could go on at the Egyptian Hall. For its American tour, Gliddon inserted five additional pages of introductory material to support his lectures; the second half of the booklet had already been devoted to a set of appendices, on geology, geography, philology and a historical chronology. Moreover, it also supplemented the antiquities by offering a full portrait of what the viewer sees *now* – with descriptions of villages, animals, vegetation, and the local inhabitants of the present day.

The activities of replication, information and supplementation performed and celebrated by the moving panorama of Egypt are presented in response to the very difficulty of those tasks, a theme repeated in the review extracts from the London press that fill the first eight pages of the booklet. The *Art Journal* for September, 1849, for example, emphasises the efforts of modern researchers to tap into Egypt's mysteries, and stresses its resistance to this kind of revelation: it is impossible, the review suggests, to reconcile the past, and its legendary status, with the present.

However, the panorama appears to fill a certain gap. While it cannot collapse or bridge historical time, it can nevertheless act as a supplement to the objects of archaeological interest that do remain, including those already residing in museums:

It may readily be supposed that [Egypt] offers peculiar points of interest to a nation who, like ourselves, possess so many fragmentary portions of its ancient grandeur as we have stored up in the halls of the British Museum, where they are regarded with wonder by the thousands who, year by year, visit that establishment; and it will as readily be presumed that these thousands would desire to see somewhat more of the land whence these fragments have been conveyed. Let such then pay a visit to the 'Moving Panoramic Picture of the Nile' now open at the Egyptian Hall, which gives as perfect a representation of the various localities as can be effected by any pictorial display. (9)

In what might seem a surprising symbiotic gesture, coming as it were from the other direction, visitors to the British Museum collections were treated to an exclusive offer, a "Ticket of Favour," that granted two people admission to the "Panorama of the Nile" at half-price (see Fig. 5).<sup>12</sup> The suggestion that a visit to a moving panorama would offer a suitable supplement to an inspection of objects in the British Museum implies that such objects could be profitably encountered in the broader environment from which they came, even if that can only be simulated. Implicit here is an approach to museum space that reflects changes taking place on the nineteenth century stage, where there was a recognition that "meaning did not naturally emerge from the presented object but was instead generated in the relation of the object to its display or acting environment" (Ziter 4). This particular example, though, unlike the staging of 'Belzoni's Tomb' at the Egyptian Hall nearly thirty years previously, refers the public to an environment beyond the museum's walls.



**Fig. 5.**  
Ticket of Favour for Admission to the Panorama of the Nile (c.1850).  
© The British Library Board – Shelfmark 1309.1.14.(130.)

Stephanie Moser notes that by mid-century a more contextual approach to presenting Egyptian antiquities had been adopted at other European museums, but it would seem that the British Museum was more comfortable supporting such efforts elsewhere (184-85). The Museum was, for example, involved in the creation of the Egyptian Court at the Chrystal Palace at Sydenham, which from 1854 until it burned down in 1936, offered a very compelling blend of spectacle and public education (Richards 18). Like Belzoni's Tomb, its reconstruction of immense monuments lavishly recreated the impression of immediate experience, and aimed to transport the visitor back in time (Moser 200-201). While the British Museum, where the Egyptian antiquities were – and remain – a central draw, resisted any temptation to theatricalise the context in which the objects were displayed, a conversation nevertheless emerges between its approaches and those of the entertainment industry. In the case of Egyptian artifacts, whose increasing numbers necessitated several major renovations in (and additions to) exhibition space in the first half of the nineteenth century, it is possible that the museum's promotion of the moving panorama in 1849 and its involvement in the Chrystal Palace reflects a lingering view of those objects as curiosities whose place in the museum's dominant aesthetic and scientific paradigms remained unclear. Their strangeness, which links them to the unfathomability proper to the discourse of the sublime, is in fact still celebrated as a provocative source of wonder (James, *The British Museum* 3).

While Egypt was undeniably a site of growing archaeological awareness, much of its power over the nineteenth-century was thus as spectacle. An older Thomas De Quincey, reflecting back upon his first encounter with the bust of Rameses II at the British Museum, remembers it as "simply the sublimest sight which in this sight-seeing world I had seen" (Leask 110). A tendency to represent Egypt not just as an exhibition but as though it *were* an exhibition becomes if anything more pronounced at the world's fairs later in the century, and reflects a connection between processes of colonisation and an emergent, modernist, metaphysics of "world-as-exhibition" explored by Timothy Mitchell (xiii). What this paper has called 'archaeology' is certainly, in the early nineteenth century, some distance away from the systematic exploration and documentation of a total site that the discipline would come to involve: at this stage, more energy was spent on removing choice objects to the cultural institutions of western European capitals. In spite of this, the urge to locate these objects in a broader environmental context is present in all the instances examined here. Archaeology, as a discipline finding its feet in the first half of the nineteenth century, clearly emerges from a set of adjacent cultural practices, in the activities of travel, observation, and reproduction that also secured Egypt's place in early nineteenth century visual culture.

## Notes

1. John Gardner Wilkinson's *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* (1836) is thought to have largely consolidated this taste.

2. I use the term, accordingly, rather loosely, and recognise the proximity between 'archaeology' and 'antiquarianism' in the nineteenth century. For a good historical discussion of these terms, see Robin Boast, "The Formative Century, 1860-1960" in Cunliffe et al. 47-56.

3. On the details of Napoleon's campaign, its key figures, and its impact, see also James, "Napoleon and Egyptology" 149-157.

4. See Belzoni's vivid descriptions of this enterprise: 31-2, 102-4, 110-15, 168. Good overviews of Belzoni's activities and discoveries can be found in Starkey and Starkey, and in Sattin.

5. There were a series of such articles published in the *Quarterly Review* between 1817 and 1819; and in 1819, the *Annals of the Fine Arts* published at least two articles on Egyptian antiquities. "Ozymandias" which takes as its title the Greek name for Rameses II, was first published in *The Examiner* on 11 January, 1818.

6. On Egyptomania in architecture and design, see Carrott, Curl, and Humbert et al. (esp. 253-56).

7. The original notice appeared in *The Times* 31 March 1820.

8. 30 April, 1821. See the "Description of the Egyptian Tomb Discovered by Giovanni Battista Belzoni" (London, 1822), reproduced as an appendix in Pearce, 119-20.

9. The various sources I am drawing from here include the 1822 Description, and information in Pearce 112, Conner 68, and Altick 245. Pearce helpfully includes a number of the plates and plans for the exhibition.

10. Edward Ziter argues that the effect was to offer "the ancient as a generalised essence rather than a network of specific practices, objects, and architecture" (148).

11. For example, *The Spectator* 4 August 1849.

12. The copy in the British Library is undated but thought to date from early 1850.

## Works Cited

- Altick, Richard. *The Shows of London*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Belknap/Harvard UP, 1978.
- Belzoni, Giovanni. *Belzoni's Travels: Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries in Egypt and Nubia*. Ed. Alberto Siliotti. Verona: Geodia; London: British Museum Press, 2001.
- . "View of the Interior of the Temple at Ybsambul in Nubia. Opened by G. Belzoni, 1818." Plate 43. *Plates Illustrative of Researches and Operations of G. Belzoni in Egypt and Nubia*. London: Murray, 1820. Engraved by Charles Hullmandel, 1820, after Giovanni Battista Belzoni. Lithograph. The Stapleton Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library.
- . "General View of the Ruins of the Great Temple of Carnac, discovered by G. Belzoni." Plate 24. *Plates Illustrative of the Researches in Egypt and Nubia*. Engraved by Charles Hullmandel. London: Murray, 1820. Engraved by Augustine Aglio, 1820-22 after Giovanni Battista Belzoni. Lithograph. The Stapleton Collection / The Bridgeman Art Library.
- Burford, John. *Description of a view of the City of Cairo and the surrounding country...* (London, 1847). *Leicester Square Tracts*. Shelfmark 10349.t.15. (19.). British Library, London.
- . *Description of a view of the great temple of Karnak and the surrounding city of Thebes...* (London, 1835). *Leicester Square Tracts*. Shelfmark 10349.t.15. (64.). British Library, London.
- Carrott, Richard G. *The Egyptian Revival: Its Sources, Monuments, and Meaning 1808 – 1858*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: U of California P, 1978.
- Colla, Elliott. *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity*. Durham and London: Duke UP, 2007.
- Curl, James Stevens. *Egyptomania: The Egyptian Revival: A Recurring Theme in the History of Taste*. Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1994.
- Conner, Patrick, ed. *The Inspiration of Egypt: Its Influence on British Artists, Travellers and Designers, 1700-1900*. Brighton: Brighton Borough Council, 1983.
- Cunliffe, Barry, Chris Gosden and Rosemary A. Joyce, eds. *The Oxford Handbook of Archaeology*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009.
- Denon, Dominique Vivant. *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte, pendant les campagnes du général Bonaparte*, 2 vols. Paris: n.p., 1802.
- Gidal, Eric. *Poetic Exhibitions: Romantic Aesthetics and the Pleasures of the British Museum*. Lewisburg: Bucknell UP; London: Associated UP, 2001.
- Gliddon, George. *Hand-book to the American Panorama of the Nile, Purchased from its Painters and Proprietors, Messrs. H. Warren, J. Bonomi, and J. Fahey*. London: James Madden, 1849.
- Hullmandel, Charles. *General View of the Ruins of the Great Temple of Carnac, discovered by G. Belzoni*. 1820. Colour Lithograph. Private Collection; The Stapleton Collection; The Bridgeman Art Library.
- Humbert, Jean-Marcel, Michael Pantazzi and Christiane Ziegler. *Egyptomania: Egypt in Western Art, 1730-1930*. Paris: Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux; Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1994.
- James, T. G. H. *The British Museum and Ancient Egypt*. London: British Museum Publications, 1981.

- . 'Napoleon and Egyptology.' *Enlightening the British: Knowledge, Discovery and the Museum in the Eighteenth Century*. Ed. R. G. W. Anderson, Marjorie L. Caygill, A.G. MacGregor and L. Syson. London: British Museum Press, 2003.
- Leask, Nigel. *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing 1770-1840: 'From an Antique Land.'* Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002.
- Mitchell, Timothy. *Colonising Egypt*. Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: U of California P, 1991.
- Moser, Stephanie. *Wondrous Curiosities: Ancient Egypt at the British Museum*. Chicago and London: U of Chicago P, 2006.
- Pascoe, Judith. *The Hummingbird Cabinet: A Rare and Curious History of Romantic Collectors*. Ithaca and London: Cornell UP, 2006.
- Pearce, Susan M. "Giovanni Battista Belzoni's exhibition of the reconstructed tomb of Pharaoh Seti I in 1821." *Journal of the History of Collections* 12:1 (2000), 109-125.
- Richards, Jeffrey. *The Ancient World on the Victorian and Edwardian Stage*. Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- Sattin, Anthony. *Lifting the Veil: Two Centuries of Travellers, Traders and Tourists in Egypt*. London: Tauris Parke, 2011.
- Starkey, Paul, and Janet Starkey, ed. *Travellers in Egypt*. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998.
- "The Entrance to Bullock's Museum." *The Repository of Arts, Literature, Commerce, Manufactures, Fashions, and Politics*. London: Printed for R. Ackermann, by L. Harrison, 1809-15. The British Library, London.
- The Times* 30 April 1821: 3.
- Ticket of Favour for Admission to the Panorama of the Nile (c.1850). Shelf mark 1309.1.14. (130). The British Library, London.
- Thomas, Sophie. "The Location of Vacancy: Pompeii and the Panorama." *Romantic Localities: Europe Writes Place*. Ed. Christoph Bode and Jacqueline M. Labbe. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2010. 169-84.
- Thompson, Jason and Angela T. Thompson, "Between Two Lost Worlds: Frederick Catherwood." *Travellers in Egypt*. P. Starkey and J. Starkey Ed. London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 1998. 130-39.
- Wood, Gillen D'Arcy. *The Shock of the Real: Romanticism and Visual Culture, 1760-1860*. New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001.
- Ziter, Edward. *The Orient on the Victorian Stage*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003.