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Ill-fated invasion was gift to Egyptologists Napoleon's expedition produced 'Le Déscription' at Dahesh Museum

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BY DAN BISCHOFF
Star-Ledger Staff

ART

The West has never forgotten Napoleon's invasion of Egypt (1798-1801), a brief and violent occupation that ended with a French army, abandoned by the soon-to-be-emperor, surrendering in thirst and hunger to inferior British forces.

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The military part of the invasion had a lasting impact on the French. Napoleon kept a personal bodyguard of Egyptian Mamelukes with him for the rest of his career, sacrificing the last Muslim mercenary in that final charge up the hill at Waterloo. But that isn't what we remember.

The most lasting impact of the French expedition is actually a book, "Le Déscription de l'Égypte," probably the most successful failed publishing

venture ever printed.

The Dahesh Museum has a show devoted to "Le Déscription," "Napoleon on the Nile: Soldiers, Artists, and the Rediscovery of Egypt," that includes many engravings and two rare complete editions. The "Déscription" is a folio-sized series of 13 volumes of engravings, many of them beautifully color-printed, and 10 volumes of text assembled by 167 scientists, engineers, economists, mathematicians, botanists, zoologists, artists and scholars who accompanied the 40,000 or so French troops.

While the civilian savants were in Egypt, they kick-started the scientific study of ancient cultures, sort of inventing modern archeology -- not to mention finding the Rosetta Stone, thereby making the translation of hieroglyphics possible.

"Le Déscription" was their summation, not completed until 1829, when Napoleon was himself a memory. Along the way, it took 2,000 skilled draftsmen and typographers to finish the project, which exhaustively describes everything they found, from unicellular microbes to crocodiles to the vast hall at Karnak erected by Ramses II.

Although they meant nothing to the artists, the walls of hieroglyphics they copied were so perfectly rendered that later scholars are able to read them clearly. A good thing too, since so many of the wonders the French found have since been destroyed by other armies or simply by time itself.

The Dahesh does a nice job of touching on all aspects of this huge national science project. In addition to the two copies of "Le Déscription" on hand, it has medals struck by the French and the British for the campaigns, one of the swords made as a reward and measure of rank for the savants (the hilt has reliefs based on the Sphinx), copies of military orders and requisitions, even a letter written and signed by the Little Big Man himself.

The Dahesh's own reservoir of Orientalist paintings, mostly from the second half of the 19th century, have been used to illustrate how all those detailed and highly accurate plates, many of which featured reconstructions of the ancient buildings as the architects and artists believed they must have looked to pharaohs and their attendants, were used by painters to add verisimilitude to their work.

An Alma-Tadema canvas showing an Egyptian princess sitting against a wall of hieroglyphs with a maid is a good example: Academic art wedded to scientific accuracy. These books launched Orientalism, as well as the whole antiquarian fascination of the Victorian era. You can probably blame them for movies like "The Mummy," too, and the centuries-long tradition of Europeans digging in the sands and bringing what they find home with them.

They were carpetbagging kleptos, no doubt, but "Le Déscription de L'Égypte" sort of made up for it all. Napoleon's savants were among the best France had to offer. Famous botany painter P.J. Redoute's father went along to limn the foliage, for example. And Nicolas Conté also went along, to help with the plates. He's the guy who invented Conté crayons, still one of the most popular drawing chalks used by artists. Conté invented them because there was a shortage of graphite during Napoleon's wars.

"Le Déscription" never sold very well. It was expensive, and politicians were fond of giving it away, which undercut sales. But you can't underestimate its impact.



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