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# NAPOLEON ON THE NILE

By JAMES GARDNER

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August 11, 2006 -- THE subject of the newest show at the Dahesh - "Napoleon on the Nile: Soldiers, Artists, and the Rediscovery of Egypt" - may not seem an obvious one for an American museum. But it proves to be nothing less than fascinating and a model of the art of curating.

It tells the story of the Corsican's journey to Egypt, around 1800, together with one of the largest armies the world had ever seen. But he also brought with him another kind of army, containing hundreds of engineers, zoologists, botanists, archeologists, translators and artists. There is something marvelous and

tremendous about this tale of Europe, at the dawn of the Modern Age, confronting the most ancient of human cultures.

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Napoleon may have been an imperialistic and bellicose tyrant, but there was enough culture in the man to appreciate the value of the research that might be gained in Egypt. His campaign ended in failure, but it also resulted in Champollion's decipherment, 24 years later, of the hieroglyphics of the Rosetta Stone. From that one act, all of modern Egyptology was born.

The Dahesh Museum tells the story with displays, not only of the splendid volumes of engravings that Napoleon published on Egypt, but also of art by Gustave Dore and Alma-Tadema, as well as a wealth of documents and newspapers from that time.

Refined and informative as it is beautiful, this provides us with a sense of the tingling wonderment that Napoleon and his armies must have felt to stand, finally, in the presence of the oldest civilization in the world.

**NAPOLEON ON THE NILE:**

Dahesh Museum,  
580 Madison Ave.; (212) 521-8155.  
Through Dec. 31.

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