

June 16, 2006

ART REVIEW | 'NAPOLEON ON THE NILE'

When French Savants Were in Egypt's Land

By **ROBERTA SMITH**

Where Egypt was concerned, Napoleon came, saw and only briefly conquered. But he had there his first taste of totalitarian domination over a large nation, which did not bode well for Europe. More to the point of "Napoleon on the Nile: Soldiers, Artists and the Rediscovery of Egypt," an engrossing exhibition at the Dahesh Museum of Art, he set in motion one of the most ambitious fact-finding missions in modern history. It was carried out by 150 handpicked scientists, artists and engineers, known as the savants, who accompanied the 55,000 troops of the Armée de l'Orient to Egypt.

Landing at Alexandria on July 1, 1798, Napoleon intended to establish a colony, disrupt British trade with India, free the Egyptians from their Mameluke oppressors and impose liberty and equality on a benighted land. (The last goal sounds distressingly familiar.)

After he walked into Alexandria and forced the Mamelukes from Cairo, disaster struck on Aug. 1. The French had correctly faced the cannons on their 400 vessels out toward the sea in case of attack but incorrectly dropped anchor so far from shore that British ships, under Lord Nelson, easily intervened from the landward side and destroyed the French fleet.

After a period of what was basically a Mameluke insurgency aided and abetted by the British and the Ottoman Turks, Napoleon secretly fled to France on Oct. 11, 1799, leaving only a short note for his second in command, Jean Baptiste Kléber, a handwritten copy of which, by Kléber's chief of staff, is on display. Its first sentence (of only five) might have been that of a weekend houseguest called suddenly back to the city: "The news from Europe has caused me to decide to leave for France." He never returned.

It remained to the savants, stranded with the remnants of the French army, to preserve Napoleon's glory. Fixated on Egypt since adolescence, Napoleon had given the savants a vacant palace in Cairo and an academic organization to call their own, the Institute of Egypt. He also ordered them into the field to make copious notes, chart maps, record contemporary life, gather artifacts and natural specimens and, above all, document the ancient temples and monuments, one hieroglyph at a time it seemed.

Operating something like a hive-mind, the savants spectacularly succeeded, despite horrendous working conditions. Their efforts culminated in the encyclopedic "Description de l'Égypte," published in complete form

only in 1829, some 30 years after the Egyptian campaign began and almost a decade after Napoleon's death in exile.

The "Description" consisted of 23 outsize volumes, 13 entirely devoted to engravings. It laid the foundation of Egyptology, sparked the Egyptian Revival in design (and the long-lasting fad of Egyptomania) and helped start the colonialist ball of Orientalism rolling, you might say, toward our present predicament. In his groundbreaking 1978 book "Orientalism," the cultural critic Edward Said referred to the "Description" as "that great collective appropriation of one culture by another."

Nearly 90 engravings from the "Description," which sometimes unfold to 50 inches across, form the heart and soul of the Dahesh show. Scarily still and infused with palpable awe, they alternate between proto-photographs, made on the eve of the medium's invention, and carefully appended and reconstructed fantasies of a lost empire seen through eyes steeped in European and Greek art.

The savants, who sometimes appear in their own illustrations, working in top hats, soldiered on in Egypt until the formal capitulation of the French to the British in September 1801. The British wanted to confiscate their material but backed down after the savants threatened to destroy everything rather than give it up. The British made do with a few key finds, including the Rosetta Stone.

In a sense this exhibition catches the French red-handed, driven by an almost obsessive need to record, categorize and possess. The show includes ephemera concerning the French occupation and administration of Egypt: copies of American newspapers reporting on the Egyptian campaign, the excoriating cartoons of the British caricaturist James Gillray and, as part of the French effort to repackage defeat as triumph, several medals. One shows a Gaul awakening a slumbering Egyptian maenad; another, commemorating Napoleon's return to France, portrays him as Mercury flying above the pyramids.

There are also paintings reflecting the spread of Orientalism and the infatuation with the mysterious East. The best, "General Bonaparte in Egypt" by Jean-Léon Gérôme, is a small, silken, full-length portrait from the late 1860's, lent by [Princeton](#). Standing on a dusty road at sunset, his signature military uniform sashed with an exotic textile, Napoleon could almost be a lone tourist posing for a photograph.

The other paintings, all from the Dahesh collection, are no match for the tender severities of the engravings. An exception is a Joseph Farquharson's "Ruins of the Temple at Luxor," which depicts contemporary Egyptians sitting among fallen columns in a way that seems real. Charles-Louis-Fleury Panckoucke's florid, largely imagined "Monuments of Egypt" with its piles of Egyptian bounty also seems real enough, in its own way.

The savants seem to have recorded whatever stood in their path: a papyrus manuscript, lanterns, tools and fragments of reliefs, and wall paintings (several to a page, like a scrapbook, or the modern art of collage).

The great naturalist Étienne Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire provided exacting images of Egyptian turtles, mongooses and bats, while Jules-César Savigny produced ultra-fine renderings of worms and parts of worms with what a label aptly calls "near-maniacal gusto." Nicolas Conté, inventor of the graphite pencil, portrayed Egyptian workshops for weaving, dyeing and basket making. The especially productive André Dutertre made a grand view of the temple at Luxor that includes naked youths — fresh from a Greek vase, it seems — frolicking beside cows that Jacob van Ruisdael might have painted, but he also contributed meticulously creepy renderings of the heads of mummies. His view of the ruined temple of Ramses II at Thebes, with its colossal fragmented statue of the pharaoh, might have been part of the inspiration for Shelley's 1817 poem "Ozymandias."

The pull between past glories and present realities is palpable. At Edfu, François-Charles Cécile stuck to the facts, showing the temple interior half filled with sand and the Arabs living near its rafters. At Dendera, Edmé Jomard and Gaspard-Antoine Chabrol, both engineers, rendered an elevation of a monumental squared arch as it might have looked in its prime, with a vast Pharaonic army marching through it, straight toward us. As the soldiers pass through the arch and turn left, they become flat and overlapping, as in Egyptian reliefs.

Based on drawings (and measurements) from life, the engravings coincide with the growing practice of the plein-air oil sketch, but they veer toward exactitude, not liberated brushwork. They also seem like a lightning rod for a bundle of fading and coming styles: Neo-Classicism, Realism, Romanticism, even Surrealism.

The versatile Conté met the challenge of the images' imposing scale and fine detail by inventing an engraving machine that yielded a more subtle spectrum of grays relatively easily. A sample chart of its tones, achieved by adjusting the thickness and frequency of the lines, was included in the "Description." (It looks a little like a Sol LeWitt.)

Perhaps this facilitated the almost preternatural fusion of subject and medium that distinguishes these prints. The geometry of ancient Egyptian architecture, illuminated by harsh Egyptian light, could not have been better suited to the eerie formalities of the engraving technique and its miragelike effects.

"Napoleon on the Nile: Soldiers, Artists and the Rediscovery of Egypt" is at the Dahesh Museum of Art, 580 Madison Avenue, at 57th Street, through Sept. 3; (212) 759-0606.

Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company

[Privacy Policy](#) | [Search](#) | [Corrections](#) | [XML](#) | [Help](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [Work for Us](#) | [Site Map](#)