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All The Emperor's Savants Museums

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Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798 had all the earmarks of colonial expansionism. Under the guise of freeing the Egyptians from the oppressive Mamelukes, he aimed to bring the eastern Mediterranean into the French orbit and threaten Britain's trade routes to India.

One aspect of the expedition, however, reflected the nobler impulses of the Enlightenment: the 150 "savants" - mathematicians, engineers, architects, artists, natural scientists, Orientalists - brought along to record all they could of ancient and contemporary Egypt. Militarily, the expedition proved to be a disaster, but its legacy was the remarkable "Description de l'Egypte," an immense compendium of texts and engravings that sparked the beginnings of Egyptology and the European public's appetite for Egyptian-themed paintings and objets d'art.

The Dahesh Museum's exhibition "Napoleon on the Nile," which opens today, tells the story of the Egyptian campaign with more than 50 paintings, prints, original documents, and artifacts drawn mostly from the museum's collection. The stars of the show, however, are the savants, their work exemplified by nearly 80 engravings from the "Description de l'Egypte" on loan from a private collection. These encyclopedic studies of ancient monuments, contemporary Egyptian life, and its flora and fauna are a dazzling testament to scientific curiosity and industry.

The savants were France's best and brightest, their ranks filled with the likes of the inventor of the graphite pencil, Nicolas Jacques Conte; the zoologist Etienne-Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire, and the artist Dominique Vivant Denon, who later became the Louvre's first director. Their average age was only 25, a fortunate circumstance considering their horrendous working conditions, which included extreme heat, illness, skirmishes, and a scarcity of supplies. (Admiral Nelson destroyed the French fleet a month after their arrival, effectively stranding them in Egypt.)

In all, 34 savants died in Egypt. But they seem to have been as dauntless as Napoleon himself; one is reported to have dashed into a mosque that was under cannon fire to save an irreplaceable Koranic text. As the French were negotiating the terms of their surrender to the British in 1801, Saint-Hilaire declared that they would sooner burn their specimens and notes than hand them over.

Major archeological finds like the Rosetta Stone ended up in England, but the savants were eventually allowed to take their collections home. Napoleon promptly formed a commission to oversee the formidable task of sorting and publishing their work. It took 20 years to produce the first edition of "Description de l'Egypte," which consisted of 10 volumes of text and 13 of plates. The effort required 2,000 draftsmen and typographers, who used special printing machinery and paper for the extra large engravings.

The Dahesh's handsome installation roughly follows the book's division into sections on Antiquity, modern Egyptian life, and natural science. These prints are both huge and overwhelmingly meticulous. Some engravings of monuments are over a yard wide, but even in these, skillful crosshatchings convey both the massiveness of the ruins and their remarkably delicate details.

The savants' expertise in engineering and architecture shows in prints of the great gates at Dendera and Karnak, which loom magisterially above the horizon, their surfaces covered with precisely rendered hieroglyphic reliefs. The artists have restored the gates to their original pristine condition, carefully filling damaged surfaces with similar reliefs from other locations.

Other monuments, however, are depicted just as the savants found them: A view inside the half-buried temple at Edfu wonderfully captures the effect of massive columns rising in the gloom, with sand lapping almost up to their capitals. And some prints provide the sole record of sites that have since disappeared; those of Antinoopolis depict the ruins of a city that was destroyed to construct a sugar refinery.

No aspect of Egyptian life was too small or humble for the savants' attention. In a section of the installation devoted to flora and fauna, one print describes dozens of spiders with painstaking close-ups of body parts. Other prints depict crocodiles, vultures, rocks, shells, algae, and plants. Another section includes studies of contemporary methods of irrigation and fabric dyeing, as well as personal items like wardrobes, necklaces, and baskets. Though the savants' work was intended in part to facilitate the occupation of Egypt, the intensity and magnitude of their output makes it seem more like an indefatigable tribute.

Also on display at the Dahesh are dozens of artifacts - missals from Napoleon, medallions, a savant's ceremonial sword - that illuminate the competition between the British and French. A French medal depicts Napoleon as Mercury winging past the pyramids, while British cartoons show the occupiers fending off nipping crocodiles. A number of paintings, including works by Gerome and Alta Tadema, attest to the popular impact of "Description de l'Egypte": Scholarship begat a social craze. Karl Wilhelm Gentz's "A Snake Charmer" (1872), for example, turns the savants' rigorous inquiry into a celebration of the picturesque.

The limpid colors of Ernst Karl Eugen Koerner's canvas "The Temple of Karnak, The Great Hypostyle Hall" (1890) gives a luminous account of this monument's vast interior. (The temple's reconstructed state suggests it was based on a print, possibly the engraving hanging on the opposite wall.) Nearby, Charles-Louis-Fleury Panckoucke's "Monuments of Egypt" (c. 1821-24), a huge canvas picturing a fanciful but oddly static assemblage of real ruins and artifacts, became the frontispiece for the second edition of "Description de l'Egypte."

Though he died in exile a decade before its completion, Napoleon took immense pride in the first edition. Published "by the orders of his Majesty the Emperor Napoleon the Great," its frontispiece features a nude, spear-wielding charioteer subduing the Mamelukes, with a list of Napoleon's battles above an emblazoned "N." He would have been less pleased by the second edition, printed between 1821 and 1829. All references to the emperor are gone, replaced by a simple dedication to the king.

Until September 3 (580 Madison Avenue at 57th Street, 212-759-0606).

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