

# DAHESH MUSEUM OF ART

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## **NAPOLEON ON THE NILE: SOLDIERS, ARTISTS, AND THE REDISCOVERY OF EGYPT**

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New York, New York --The Dahesh Museum of Art (56<sup>th</sup> and Madison Avenue) continues its revelatory investigation of 19<sup>th</sup>-century Europe's preoccupation with the Orient in its latest exhibition *Napoleon on the Nile*. Organized by Dahesh Museum's Associate Curator Lisa Small, *Napoleon on the Nile* brings together more than 80 large, exquisitely detailed, engraved plate illustrations from the massive, encyclopedic compendium known as *Description de l'Égypte* (1809-28), long considered the foundational work of modern Egyptology, along with vivid 19th-century Orientalist paintings that were influenced by them, and a selection of campaign letters and documents, to explore the artistic legacy of General Napoleon Bonaparte's brief occupation of Egypt, begun in 1798 and ending in 1801.

*Napoleon on the Nile* illuminates how French military ambitions and the quest for scientific knowledge (and political control) came to shape the West's enduring image of Egypt, inspiring generations of painters, photographers, architects, and decorative artists. While his military exploits ended poorly, he achieved what was to be perhaps his greatest legacy: the publication of the multi-volume *Description de l'Égypte*, widely acknowledged as the single most important European scholarly study of ancient and modern Egypt and the focus of this exhibition.

Initiated under the patronage of Napoleon and completed in 1829, during the reign of King Charles X, the *Description* was among the most significant, and certainly the most tangible, consequences of the French military's occupation of Egypt. Not only did it form the foundation for the modern discipline of Egyptology, but also its large and magnificent plate illustrations influenced the course of "Egyptomania" and "Orientalism" in western fine and decorative arts for two centuries.

The astonishing range and precision of the *Description* plates was captured by Napoleon's savants— a small army of scholars whose project was to systematically explore, describe, and document every aspect of the country – its ancient and modern buildings and monuments; its plants, animals and people; its topography; its commerce customs, and infrastructures. Supported by Napoleon and protected by the army, this select group of engineers, scientists,

mathematicians, naturalists, and artists served the political mission of the expedition by providing comprehensive information and skills an occupying force needed to govern and rebuild effectively. At the same time they advanced the expedition's ideological goals by rediscovering the wonders of Pharaonic Egyptian civilization, with which Napoleon, in his dual roles of liberator/conqueror, was happy to be associated.

The majority of works in the exhibition, including the unbound *Déscription* folios as well as bound volumes, were selected from the extensive collections of Professor Bob Brier, Ph.D., the renowned Egyptologist and host of The Learning Channel Series *The Great Egyptians*. The Museum is also indebted to Princeton University Art Museum, Fordham University Library, The David Markham Collection, and other generous public institutions and private collectors for their loans to the exhibition. The majority of Orientalist paintings were drawn from the permanent collection of the Dahesh Museum of Art.

*Napoleon on the Nile* is made possible, in part, by generous grants from the Samuel H. Kress Foundation and the Grand Marnier Foundation. Special thanks to The Napoleonic Alliance for its encouragement and to the Robert Mondavi Winery in California for its in-kind and promotional support.

### **Overview**

The exhibition is arranged in 5 sections: Napoleon and the Egyptian Campaign; The Savants and the *Institut de L'Égypte*; Ancient Egypt; Natural History; Modern Egypt. Richly detailed documentation is provided in extensive wall labels, including a timeline tracing the major events of the Egyptian Campaign.

### **Napoleon and the Egyptian Campaign**

In 1798, a 29-year old General Napoleon Bonaparte, fresh from recent victories in Italy, set out to invade and annex Egypt: France would strike a fatal blow to Britain's economy by seizing control of the land route to India, and thwart any future British expansion into the strategically important Nile Valley. Framing his purpose according to Enlightenment and Revolution ideologies; France was destined to rescue Egypt from what was considered tyranny of the barbaric Mameluke rulers, to improve the material and social conditions of its inhabitants, and to reveal the splendor of Egypt's ancient civilization,

In July 1798, Napoleon landed in Alexandria with 55,000 men and 400 ships. After securing Alexandria, he moved on to Cairo, where they faced an army of 6,000 mounted Mameluke warriors and 10,000 foot soldiers. The French army took control of Cairo after the fierce Battle of the Pyramids. One month later the entire French fleet was destroyed by Admiral Horatio Nelson in the Bay of Aboukir. A year later, in August of 1799, after suffering the effects of the plague in Jaffa and a brutal siege at Acre, Syria, Napoleon saw that a decimated and demoralized army was doomed, and he quietly left the campaign, returned to France, and left the troops in the hands of his generals, who finally capitulated to the British in September 1801.

The first gallery recounts the military details of the Egyptian campaign. Here we find various striking depictions of Napoleon, among them Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Napoleon in Egypt*, the

iconic painting of a resolute young general standing in front of a mosque in Cairo's City of the Dead, a photogravure of Napoleon astride a horse, surveying from a hilltop the land he seeks to control; and a print after one of the best-known and most propagandistic paintings to commemorate the Egyptian campaign, *Napoleon in the Plague House at Jaffa* by Antoine-Jean Gros (1771-1835), one of Napoleon's favorite history painters.

Archival letters, documents, and official bulletins signed by Napoleon and some of his most important generals, reveal both the grand sweep of the military endeavor as well as intriguing glimpses of the daily life and activities of the soldiers. Of particular interest are documents—countersigned by Napoleon—relating to the interaction between local Arab officials and the French occupying forces. One example represents the types of petitions Napoleon received from local leaders and how he acted upon them. Addressed to the “Emir of the Armies of the Great may God protect him,” asking for help in collecting taxes from Hussein el Khebairy, including Aga's intention to confiscate his gardens, and force him to pay his taxes, Napoleon replies, “Even if it is inconvenient, he (General Junot) is to confiscate his belongings. Or determine that that he is sleeping in one of these villages if possible”

#### *Medals*

Numerous bronze medals were struck in connection with Napoleon's adventure to commemorate major battles and characters of the campaign—The Conquest of Upper Egypt, the Death of General Kleber, the Defense of Acre. A master of propaganda, Napoleon was often portrayed as a triumphant Caesar. One medal depicts Napoleon's victorious return to France, when in fact the campaign was a dismal failure—his fleet was sunk and his army was destroyed by the plague. Yet the medal reads “Bonaparte, Liberator of Egypt.”

Subscribers to the second edition of the *Description de l'Égypte* also received a medal. On its face, this medal depicted a Gaul discovering a rather voluptuous Egypt and the reverse had the signs of the Egyptian zodiac and a place for the subscriber's name. The medal that represents the conquest of Upper Egypt shows a crocodile chained to a palm tree—Egypt captured.

#### *Gillray's Cartoons*

Bonaparte was the favorite target of the British literary satirist, James Gillray (1757-1815), who never tired of mocking the General's grandiose ambitions, and those of his savants. Perhaps the most famous shows French scientists trapped on top of Pompey's Pillar in Alexandria. Books, pamphlets, and pieces of scientific equipment fall from the column; on the ground a native has been knocked out by a book called *Fraternization Project with Bedouins*. A careful reading of the cartoon reveals that one savant, who resembles Napoleon, holds up a sign that reads “Long Live Mohammed who patronizes the sciences” and the other, clinging to the first, has a document near him *Project for Burning Mecca*. Another sketch shows the French Army suffering from every known disease, using the Plans of the Egyptian Campaign as toilet paper.

Napoleon's cultural appropriation of Egypt is given its perfect visual form in the frontispieces of the *Description*. The first edition was dedicated to Napoleon, and along the sides of the frame are listed all the important battles, won and lost. Within this “frame of conquest”, is a panoramic view of ancient Egyptian monuments, artifacts, and sites, including the Rosetta Stone, the Colossi of Memnon, temples of Luxor and Karnak, and the Sphinx.

One exits the first Gallery through a portal hung with two magnificent oversize engravings of the South Gate of Karnak and the North Gate of Dendera. These two sites, shown reconstructed in what the savants imagined to be its pristine state, while many of the sites they encountered were found amid rubble, partially in ruins. They serve here as introduction to, and example of, the colossal feat that was the *Déscription de l'Égypte*.

### **The Savants and the *Institut de l'Égypte***

Along with Napoleon's soldiers, came a small secondary army of more than 150 scientists, engineers, and artists, whose purpose was to study and describe every aspect of ancient and modern Egypt, which they did under extreme circumstances— searing heat, intense light, and battles. This second gallery is devoted to these men and their achievements.

Napoleon had a great interest in science and was himself a member of the mathematics section of the *Institut de France*, the country's most prestigious scholarly organization. Many of the scholars who traveled to Egypt were members of the *Institut*, such as the distinguished mathematician and chemist Gaspard Monge (1746-1818), who was a key figure in the development of descriptive geometry. Monge, along with chemist Claude-Louis Berthollet (1748-1822), and General Louis Caffarelli du Falga, commander of the Corps of Engineers (1756-1799), helped Napoleon assemble his team, which included biologists, mineralogists, cartographers, linguists, and mathematicians, most of whom were still in their early twenties or younger. Some of France's most talented minds were there: mathematician Jean Baptiste Joseph Fourier (1768-1830), botanical artist Henri Joseph Redouté (1766-1853), zoologist Étienne-Geoffroy Saint-Hilaire (1772-1844), inventor Nicolas Jacques Conté (1775-1805), and the artist Dominique Vivant Denon (1747- 1825), to name only a few.

At the end of the first month in Egypt, the *Institut de l'Égypte* was formalized and organized into four sections: Mathematics, Physics, Political Economy, and Literature and Art. Napoleon, who was vice president, posed practical problems to the savants like how to produce gunpowder, improve bread ovens, purify the Nile water, which the army was drinking and falling ill from, and improve the legal system. Other projects concerned selection, conservation, and transportation of ancient monuments to France.

After setting up workshops, laboratories, a library, gardens, aviaries, and a printing press, the savants set to work. They collected specimens of all sorts, drew everything they found, including the Rosetta Stone, which they discovered in 1799, and mapped the region accurately for the first time. The first Arabic and Latin printing presses had been brought from France. Their weekly newspaper, *Le Courirer d'Égypte*, presented the findings of the Institute. It was their materials, research and drawings that formed the basis of the *Description de l'Égypte*.

As part of the terms of the treaty with the victorious British, the collections of the scientists were to be handed over to the English. The savants resisted and took home to France their botanical and zoological collections. But the antiquities like the Rosetta Stone went to the British Museum, though the French made copies of it first. On September 14, 1801, the French army boarded ships for home, and the Napoleonic expedition was over.

### **The Description of Egypt**

In 1802, First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte issued a decree announcing the publication of the “results relative to science and art obtained during the course of the Expedition.” Napoleon himself ordered that funds be made available for publication of this massive body of research, drawn from many different sources and in many different forms. The task of organizing this into a coherent presentation was a huge undertaking. In its final form the colossal work included 10 volumes of explanatory texts, and 13 volumes of oversized engraved folio plates. The atlas, the finest work of Napoleon’s engineers and geographers, made Egypt the most thoroughly mapped region on the earth at that time.

The *Description* contained over 800 engravings, but 3,000 individual images. More than 50 scholars contributed articles and over 2,000 people were involved in the technical production, which required 5 different printers and 3,000 reams of special oversized papers. *One thousand copies of the entire set were printed.* Given editing, budgetary and other problems, it was not until 1809 that the first volume was published, and by the time of Napoleon’s fall in 1815 only half of the work was finished. Subscribers were sent individual folios, and when a volume was complete they could have it bound at their own expense, instead of waiting for the full work to be published. It took almost twenty years for the first edition to be completed.

No work had ever achieved the breadth, accuracy, or interdisciplinary approach of *Description*, which was one of the greatest printing and publishing feats in French history. Despite its significance, its high price made its general purchase prohibitive. Many copies were given away to libraries and government officials, and when a lower priced edition was published, any chance of commercial success for this first edition disappeared.

In 1820, even before the first edition was finished, a publisher named Charles-Louis-Fleury Panckoucke offered to bring out a second edition. He reprinted the text volumes in a smaller edition, and used the existing copper plates from the first edition, and except for the frontispiece, he eliminated the many color engravings, rendering them instead in black and white. This edition was not completed until 1829. Now the *Description* was dedicated to the King, and Napoleon was excised.

The monumental painting that served as the model for this color engraving, *Monuments of Egypt*, ca.1821-24, by Panckoucke differs from the print only slightly. The paintings theatricality and great size suggest it may have served as part of Pankoucke’s promotional campaign for his second edition

### **Ancient Egypt**

Five of the 13 volumes of illustrated plates were devoted to Ancient Egypt. The savants were fascinated by the remains of this complex civilization of the Pharaohs, from the tombs and temples to the fragments of sculptures and tiny amulets. Because so many of the artists were trained as architects, surveyors, and engineers, their drawings are so precise that they seem like blueprints.

Some of the most beautiful plates here are the highly detailed elevations and imaginative reconstructions of the ruined monuments they encountered. Majestic vistas of temples at

Dendera, Edfu, Karnak, Luxor, and Philae were used by 19<sup>th</sup> century artists like Alma-Tadema and Ernst Karl Eugen Koerner, whose paintings are exhibited nearby. In his poem, 72635, the English romantic poet Shelley may have been influenced by engravings of the mortuary temple of Ramesses II, depicting remnants of his 52 foot statue, the largest ever carved in Egypt, of the Egyptian ruler, also known by his ancient Egyptian name, User-Maat-Re.

Wall reliefs, tomb paintings, and papyrus manuscripts with hieroglyphic inscriptions were faithfully copied by the savants, even though it was years before they would be deciphered. In this section, we see many such engravings, in rich color, and one especially complex one from the Book of the Dead. The savants also depicted two mummified human heads, other body parts, as well as mummified animals. On view here is an actual mummified arm, probably belonging to a young woman of modest means, who couldn't afford a bracelet, so one was painted on her wrist.

### **Natural History**

Three volumes of the *Description de l'Égypte* depicted the flora and fauna of Egypt. These plates rank among the most beautiful botanical and zoological plates ever produced – from full-scale portraits of birds and mammals, to painstakingly detailed partial anatomical views. Faithful documentation meant that some species were represented by 100 individual images. In addition, there are highly detailed representations of shells, minerals, and petrified wood, as well as examples of the minerals depicted.

One of the many pleasures of this exhibition is discovering the work of Jules-Cesar Savigny, whose mongoose and rabbit, arachnids, sponges, crustaceans, polyps, algae and worms are magnificent in their specificity. Savigny was 21 years old when he was recommended to Napoleon for the Egyptian expedition. He was responsible for cataloging the invertebrates, which he did with a passion bordering on obsession. He is said to have drawn the mouth of a particular worm thousands of times. His *Egyptian Vulture*, both in color and black and white must have surely inspired Audubon.

Etienne Geoffroy Sainte-Hilaire worked with Henri-Joseph Redouté to draw the *Anatomy of the Mormyrus*, a fish considered sacred to Egyptians. Sainte-Hilaire's *Bat skeleton and skulls* are among the most appealing images in this section.

### **Modern Egypt**

Two volumes of the *Description de l'Égypte* were devoted to the Modern State: the savants considered a record of contemporary Egypt and its inhabitants as important as the ancient ruins. In this last gallery of the exhibition, there are lyrical views of Cairo and the port of Alexandria. Outstanding in this section, are two Venetian-like views of Cairo's *Ezbekiya Square* during the annual inundation of the Nile by Andre Dutertre (1753-1842). Cairo's notables were said to relax in the evening on illuminated barges in the watery square near their palaces on shore. Striking also are his *View of the City of the Dead*, a cemetery for Cairo's elite, which contained some of Egypt's finest Islamic architecture, and the *Mosque of Joseph*, the largest building within the Citadel of Cairo and similar to Egypt's Coptic churches, which was to contain, two decades later, the mosque and palace of the Egyptian ruler, Mohammed Ali.

People and their occupations were also recorded. We see here portraits of a poet and astronomer and other social types in typical dress, details of machines for irrigation, and objects of daily life such as vases, baskets, lanterns and pipes, and men at work making mats, ropes, baskets, and a dye works. Such images may have become a valuable visual reference for artists later in the century, as these engravings were Europe's first glimpse of an accurately represent the Orient. This influence can be seen in a variety of portraits of Arab men from the Dahesh Museum's permanent collection, including the Austrian Orientalist Rudolf Ernst's *Metal Workers*, the Danish painter Peder Mork Monsted's *Portrait of a Nubian*, and Horace Vernet's *Portrait of an Oriental*. While these works have been on view in other exhibitions, they take on a new resonance here juxtaposed to images by the savants.

It didn't take long for Napoleon's Egyptian expedition to penetrate European aesthetic consciousness. The exhibition closes with representative decorative objects that bear this out. From snuffboxes commemorating Napoleon's success at the Battle of the Pyramids and Nelson's victory at the Battle of the Nile, to the use of ancient Egyptian motifs on a British Wedgwood teapot and plates, the images of a rediscovered Egypt were mined by artists, craftsmen, decorators, and designers of every stripe for inspiration. The diffusion of Egyptian symbols like the crocodile, palm tree, and of course, the Sphinx on furniture and architecture, and long standing interest in all things Egyptian, is a direct outcome of brief, productive active French adventure in Egypt. If the Egyptian campaign ended as a military failure for France, it proved beyond doubt to be a cultural triumph for the world.

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The Museum has organized a number of public programs to complement the exhibition. Professor Bob Brier, Ph.D. documentary film *Napoleon's Obsession: Quest for Egypt*, will be shown **Thursday, July 6**, at 6:30 on the Museum's popular *free* evening on the first Thursday of each month, when the Museum welcomes visitors 6 – 9 pm. Professor Brier will present a formal talk, *Napoleon in Egypt*, where he reviews some of the little know details of the Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, **Thursday, August 3**, 6:30 pm. For detailed information on this summer's educational offerings and family programs, and those that will debut in the fall, please visit [daheshmuseum.org](http://daheshmuseum.org).