

# EGYPTOMANIA

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Photograph: Joan Jones



Photograph: George Fakhry

Does Ancient Egypt fascinate you? The land of the Pharaohs has drawn tourists to Egypt for the past 2000 years. The Romans visited the pyramids at Giza, took a Nile cruise, and explored Luxor – and the Giza and Saqqara pyramids were already over 2000 years old and ancient then.



Photograph: Joan Jones

PASSAGE DU CAIRE

According to a 15th century legend, the Egyptian goddess Isis came to Paris in a boat – thus the name Pa-Isis. So when the Dendera Zodiac and other artifacts were brought back after Napoleon's Egypt expedition in 1789, there was already a very receptive interested audience in France.

In 1802, Vivant Denon published his illustrated 'Voyage dans la basse et la haute Egypte'. It quickly became a best-seller in Europe and The Americas – modern Egyptomania was born.

Egyptomania is defined as 'an excessively intense enthusiasm, interest, or desire; a craze' in all aspects of pharaonic Egypt. It has inspired art, literature, objets d'arts and architecture from Roman times to the present day.

Hieroglyphs were not understood to be a language, and the ancient Egyptians were credited with knowledge of the future. In the 18th century Tarot cards with Egyptian symbols and themes became instantly popular.

Pharaonic motifs became fashionable on objets d'arts and 'Empire' furniture began to be made with ancient Egyptian characteristics. In later years, this style was known as 'Retour d'Egypte', or Return to Egypt, furniture. Excellent examples of these can be seen on page \_\_\_\_\_ in this magazine.

Pyramids, sphinx and obelisks spread like a rash over France, Russia, Sweden and The Americas. Napoleon himself commissioned public works with pharaonic themes symbolizing the link between the empire of Alexander the Great and the French one he was establishing.

**Right:** Palmiers (Palm tree) Fountain, Place du Chatelet, Paris. There are many fountains with Sphinx in Paris but this is perhaps the most famous. It was erected in 1808 to a design by Gabriel Davious with sculptures by Jacquemart.

Four statues hold hands around the bronze column on which a gold-plated Nike or Victory holding two laurel crowns stands. The rings represent famous battles of the time.

The four sphinx, representing the four cardinal virtues: Prudence, Justice, Temperance and Fortitude, allude to the structure of Paradiso, from the third book of Dante's 14th century allegory. They were added in 1858.

**Below right:** The passage du Caire, 2nd arr., Paris was built by public subscription to a design by Tretelle in 1798. The sculptures are by Petrel. It was not known then that hieroglyphs were a language, so the inscriptions here have no meaning. They were though supposed to allude to the victories of Napoleon.

**Opposite:** The wonderful façade du 2 de la Place du Caire above The Passage du Caire, was obviously inspired by ancient Egyptian artifacts. It clearly shows two heads of Hathor, the cow goddess associated with love and birth, lotus columns and a frieze which again have no meaning. The building was designed by Tretelle in 1798. The sculptures are also by Petrel.



Photograph: Joan Jones





Photograph: Alan Whitely

**Above :** The Temple Works, Leeds. This magnificent building was designed by Joseph Bonomi the Younger and built by John Marshall between 1836 and 1840. It is an excellent example of the new realism in pharaonic inspired buildings.

The design was based on the Egyptian Edfu Temple of Horus which celebrates the triumph of Horus over Seth to become God of the living. The three sets of wings are Winged Solar Disks, the battle form of Horus. Around the disc are uraeus snakes. Six lotus columns stand at the front of the building.

In 1822, Jean Francois Champollion published his translation of the Rosetta Stone. Those hieroglyphs apparently foretelling the future were actually titles of Pharaohs, funerary rites and such!

Whilst this was a death blow to the fortune tellers, scientists and amateur archaeologists began a serious study of Egypt. News came back of amazing temples beside the Nile by intrepid travelers. The re-discovery of Abu Simbel in 1813 and excavation were followed avidly. The 1838 David Roberts prints (see examples on page ) of the temples were enthusiastically received with Queen Victoria being the first subscriber. Travelers, painters, writers

poured into Egypt, especially when travel became easier in 1854 when the first railway in Africa, and second in the world after Britain, opened in Egypt. Paintings like the wonderful Nile scene by 'Retour d'Egypte' painter, Auguste Louis Veillon, (see page.....) is a good example of interest in this time. Ancient Egypt inspired many composers, perhaps the most famous of which was Verdi's Aida written in 1871.

Buildings inspired by the great temples near Luxor and Aswan, drawing strongly on *Pylon* style of tapering towers surmounted by a cornice, were in fashion. Out were the allegorical and symbolic allusions.

Nefertiti's painted limestone head, discovered in 1912, and hot on its heels, the 1922 discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb prompted renewed enthusiasm in all things Egyptian.

In the Western World, Tut's spectacular treasures spawned a whole new genre in art, literature and films such as 'The Mummy' starring Boris Karloff in 1932, 'Cleopatra' starring Richard Buron and Elizabeth Taylor in 1963, and Agatha Christie's 1936 novel 'Death on the Nile'.

In buildings and *objets d'art*, Art Deco incorporated the strong geometric lines of pharaonic design and the brilliant faience colors.

Right: 169 Essex Road, London. Architect George Coles, Built in 1930 in Art Deco style in inverted *Pylon* style with a tapering tower and decorated with lotus columns, buds and faience tiles.

Below right: The iconic Hoover building in West London, built 1931-38 by architects Wallis Gilbert & Partners, was just one of several spectacular Art Deco factory buildings that lined Western Avenue. The main factory building's Egyptian overtones were inspired by Tutankhamen's funerary objects, especially the brightly colored faience (glazed ceramic) inspired by ancient Egypt.

Below: A private house in Richmond street, Islington, London.

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Photograph: Iain Munro



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**Above:** The pyramids at the Louvre were completed in 1989 amidst much controversy but have become a much loved landmark. They were commissioned by President Mitterrand and designed by I.M.Pei. The biggest pyramid's glass structure is 20.6m high with 603 rhombus-shaped and 70 triangular glass segments and acts as the main entry to the Louvre museum.

Egyptomania is still alive and well in Europe and America. Millions of people queued to view the artifacts of Tutankhamen on tour in European and American major cities. Apart from the noteworthy I M Pei Pyramid at The Louvre, Paris, and the Neues Museum, Berlin, buildings tend towards the kitsch like the Luxor Hotel Las Vegas with its Pharaoh's Pheast Buffet and its 30-storey black pyramid and two stepped-pyramid hotel towers.

These days, the fascination with ancient Egypt is more Hollywood or Disney and displayed in films, books and popular music. Once again this focus on fantasy or the occult in films such as 'Raiders of the Lost Ark' (1981), 'Stargate' (1994), or the remake of 'The Mummy' in 1999. Ω

**Left:** The Carreras Building built in 1926 to designs by M.E. & O.H. Collins shows an advanced stage in Egyptomania! Since The Carreras Tobacco Company logo was a black cat, the owner commissioned his headquarters with images of Bastet, the cat goddess, the giver of blessings to the good and deliverer of war to the evil. The ancient Egyptian theme was continued with lotus columns and other pharaonic images.