

PREFACE: BEYOND EGYPTOMANIA

»NACHLEBEN«, MNEMOHISTORY AND THE AGENCY OF THINGS EGYPTIAN

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This book has many origins, both intellectual and institutional, but it was also inspired by two paradoxes. The first is that although the presence of Egyptian culture and its artefacts is probably the longest case of uninterrupted *Nachleben* in the West, the studies that aim to cover the entire lifespan of this presence are extremely rare. The second is that Aby Warburg never wrote about the *Nachleben* of Egypt. This absence is almost a negative of the main themes in his work. Egyptian art is static and devoid of stylistic development, at least according to the state of knowledge during his life, and therefore did not lend itself to the study of stylistic revivals he studied. Egyptian images do not express vivid emotions in gestures and attitudes that originate in the earliest stages of humanity, and resurface in moments of great crisis. They do not present the pathos formulas that populate *Mnemosyne*, the collective memory of mankind in the way Greek, Roman or Italian Renaissance art did. Nor did Egyptian art aim at the naturalistic representation of gesture, expression, or the human body, that characterises the classical tradition, and generated much of its stylistic development. And finally Egyptian imagery cannot be said to represent *Denkraum*, nor its making to function as such, because it lacks the conflicted nature of so much of the art that interested Warburg.

Yet at the same time his ideas provided much of the inspiration for the present volume. Although *Nachleben* and *Mnemosyne* do not appear to play a significant role in Egyptian visual culture, Warburg's identification of memory as a major factor shaping the development of art is fundamental to understand such a long-term process as the millenarian presence of Egypt in the West. Jan and Aleida Assmann's theory of cultural memory is a rethinking of Warburg's *Mnemosyne*. Where Warburg saw its origins in phobic reactions to the

events that terrified primitive man, the Assmanns see cultural memory as a conscious, rational creation of memories that helps societies to overcome crises in a newly found ritual coherence. In thus redefining cultural memory they also created a new discipline: mnemo-history, which is not the study of past things, persons, events, and institutions, but of their remembrance, over long stretches of time.

The ambition of this book is to give an overview of the presence of Egypt in Europe and the Middle East by means of a series of chapters all devoted to one artefact. This brings us to the second way in which Warburg provided the starting-point. He excavated *Bilderfahrzeuge*, the trajectories of images across time along what he called the *Wanderstraßen der Kultur*, leading from Persia and Israel to Hamburg, Amsterdam or the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico. Very fittingly it is also the name of the major Warburgian research project hosted at present at the Warburg Institute in London, which takes his research program outside Europe and beyond the classical tradition. This book looks instead at *Dingfahrzeuge*: at the routes of objects and object types across time, from Assyria to 19th century St Petersburg. It does not aim to write biographies of objects, because using that genre too often implies a coherence, autonomy and integrity between episodes that often applies to one person's life story, but masks the ruptures, contingencies and radical changes that take place for instance in the trajectory of an obelisk from Luxor to the Place de la Concorde in Paris.

By tracing such *Dingfahrzeuge* this book does not aim to provide a large-scale catalogue of Egyptian presences. As an exercise in mnemohistory it aims to reconstruct the constellations in which Egyptian artefacts, which in some case had been lying around unattended for centuries, create an interest, and become actors in processes of interpretation, appropriation and transformation. They become material testimonies to pedigrees and cultural traditions, signs of political or religious allegiance, or valuable tokens in cultural and political diplomacy, to name but a few of the contexts in which Egyptian objects acquire agency. Where Warburg studied the historical conditions that led to new episodes in the *Nachleben* of the classical tradition, this volume looks at the emergence of historical constellations in which Egyptian objects are endowed with the power to act on those involved with them, to speak to new generations, and to generate new styles.

Instead of regarding the survival of things Egyptian as an irrational phenomenon, this book finally considers the literally objective foundation for that survival. Every specialist on Egyptomania agrees that Egyptian material and visual culture is extremely well-defined and easy to recognize. The traditional explanation for this is that Egyptian culture did not evolve, and knew no stylistic development. The chapters in this book break away from this macro-historical perspective to ask of individual artefacts – coins, tables, dishes, statuettes, furniture – what features in their design and use of materials may be said to have played a role in their survival, and what role these aspects played in the constellations of their revival. In other words, this book investigates the relations between the survival of Egyptian artefacts, their style and their agency.