HAUNTED BY EGYPT

A LONG-TERM PERSPECTIVE ON HISTORY, MNEMOHISTORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

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> »The granite & porphyr monuments of Aegypt exert an incredible power over every mind. Whence is this Charm? Partly perhaps, because they are the neutral Ground, where the hard and resisting material and the pliant hand of man have met. ›So far shalt thou go and no farther‹ has been the silent l[a]nguage of these massive creations for centuries. Their majestic quietness, their sharp, flat, and angular lineaments, the economy of labor in the treatement of the stern material and their whole appearance are beauties of Style, which to us, who can cut the hardest stone like Chalk are no longer prescribed by necessity.«[1]
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> Gottfried Semper, lecture on primitive art, London 1851

In 1975, the South-African artist William Kentridge, then 20 years old, visited Paris for the very first time. Among the many sketches he made in his travel-notebook only three drawings document his visit to the Louvre; an encounter that nevertheless made a profound impression on the young student. From the Louvre collections, Kentridge chose to draw two Egyptian baboons from granite as well as »un gardien du musée se reposant sur la chaise«.[2] In his fascinating *Carnets d'Egypte* from 2010, Kentridge wonders whether it was his familiarity with baboons from his childhood, during which time these animals were still a common sight in South Africa, that made him document exactly these two objects from the Louvre collections; or perhaps his interest in ethnography as what he considered a very necessary addition to the Art Historical canon. But the remainder of his text shows that something else was going on; as Kentridge himself is very well aware. It is exactly for that reason that, 35 years later, he decided to compile his *Carnets d'Egypte*: an exhibition and an accompanying booklet documenting and exploring his relations to Egypt. These relations take a variety of forms. In his *Carnets*, Kentridge presents us, amongst other things, with drawings of Egyptian themes on old and used papers and books (thus evoking the inherent palimpsest character of things Egyptian?); self-portraits as a seated Old Kingdom scribe; a real »Isis tragédie« (»When does the tour start? I'd like to see the terracottas, the monuments, the marbles, the sarcophagi, the death masks the sar cophafa copha copha copha copha the sarcophagi [. . .]«); musical performances; and even films with wonderful installations like »Nubian landscape«, a pyramid landscape made up of metronomes amidst all kinds of drawings and illustrations referring to Egypt. After having worked on Mozart's *Zauberflöte* and its Egyptian themes earlier, Kentridge is very specific about his reasons for undertaking this project and writes:

»En renouant avec l'Égypte pour ce nouveau projet, j'avais une préoccupation centrale: je voulais explorer une géographie intérieure, mettre au jour l'Égypte que je portais en moi et plus particulièrement trouver le lien entre ce monde intérieur et les important collection de vestiges exposées au Louvre. Ces vestiges constituent à mes yeux un pont entre le monde historique et un monde mythologique [...].«[3]

This fascinating statement by one of the leading artists of our time constitutes the ideal overture of this essay and of the collection of papers in this book, for various reasons. In the first place, because it concerns an inner geography with regard to Egypt (»l'Égypte que je portais en moi«, as Kentridge phrases it); an inner geography that Kentridge has acted on and made explicit through his *Carnets d'Egypte*. Talking about »une géographie intérieure« underlines to what extent Egypt is actually part of us and how Egypt is thus unavoidable, perpetual, and haunting us infinitively. In the second place, because it shows how important objects, in this case the collections of the Louvre, are to arrive at and understand the Egypt we carry within ourselves. And in the third place, because it makes clear that those objects should not be solely understood as historical sources but that they also, as Kentridge phrases it intuitively, belong to the domain of mythology; forming a bridge between history and mnemohistory, as I would call it.[4]

HISTORY, MNEMOHISTORY AND MATERIAL CULTURE

The material and intellectual presence of Egypt is at the heart of Western culture, religion and art from Antiquity to the present. This volume aims to provide a long-term and interdisciplinary perspective on Egypt and its impact, taking theories on objects and their agency as main points of departure. The central questions this book addresses are *why*, from the first millennium BC onwards, Egyptian things and concepts are to be found in such a great variety of places throughout European history and *how* we can account for their enduring impact over time. By exploring an object-oriented perspective on this question, this volume aims at contributing to both: recent discussions on the »reception« of Egypt and how to move forward in this discipline, as well as current debates on the agency of artefacts across archaeology, anthropology, and art history.[5]

This collection's point of departure is the hypothesis that the Egypt that is such an important and enduring part of Western culture is not only made up of cultural, religious or artistic concepts – routinely discussed under the heading of reception in one form or another[6] – but consists also, or perhaps even primarily, of objects that have oriented and shaped many processes and events throughout history. Those objects, it must immediately be added, do more than simply communicate those cultural, religious and artistic concepts.[7] Not only do they passively represent such human ideas, they are active agents in their relationship with people and history simultaneously.[8] Within this human-thing entangle-

ment, their impact, or agency, does not seem to always solely depend on what they represent.[9] The quote of Gottfried Semper's lecture on primitive art, held in London in 1851 and used as the device for this essay, illustrates this well. For Semper the power of the porphyry and granite monuments from Egypt has nothing to do with their being Egyptian in the first place but depends on their materiality and, what he calls, »beauties of style«. As the essays in this volume show, those specific characteristics will in turn play a major role in making cultural, religious or artistic concepts have an impact on history as being *Egyptian*.[10] It is the aim of this book to open up and investigate the fascinating intersections between history, mnemohistory, and material culture with regard to Egypt.

BEYOND EGYPTOMANIA

The case of Egypt is particularly compelling because hardly any other culture produced a repertoire of objects, forms and styles that is so recognizable and that had such a long afterlife, or *Nachleben*, to use Aby Warburg's term.[11] Indeed, the cultural memory of Egypt is enormous and seems perpetual, as most prominently Jan Assmann has shown throughout his ground-breaking work – often using the word *Resonanz* where Warburg, I think, would have put *Nachleben*.[12] This storehouse of memory is stocked with concepts but also with objects, each with their own unmistakeable aesthetics that we call Egyptian. As the cultural, religious or artistic concepts that were framed as Egyptian, these objects were substantially influential to the societies they entered. What's more, often these »Aegyptiaca« seem to function as catalysts that ›get things going'.[13] Nevertheless, the enduring persistence of both Egyptian objects and concepts is most often described as a process of revival and reception, in which they only play a passive role, awaiting their rediscovery in later ages. From this historical perspective, the endurance of Egypt tends to be a history of episodes of reception and revival. Often these episodes are studied in chronological isolation (see below) and not infrequently are they then labelled as manifestations of *Egyptomania*, with all of that term's negative connotations of fashion, obsession or even irrationality. The recent monograph by Ronald R. Fritze, characterizing Egyptomania as a history of *fascination*, *obsession* and *fantasy*, is only one out of many more variants and examples.[14] In this respect, especially the distinction between Egypto-logy (*logos*) and Egypto-mania (*mania*) has done much harm to our pursuit of a proper understanding of the phenomena indicated by the latter term. This book aims to formulate a paradigm that goes *beyond Egyptomania* by attempting to rewrite the history of ›the Egyptian preference' from the perspective of mnemohistory and its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, namely, the active role of Egyptian objects and especially the interaction between both. Is it possible that ultimately the particular materiality and style of Egyptian artefacts constitute one of the main backbones of Egypt's *Nachleben*?

The title *Beyond Egyptomania*, is, of course, explicitly and purposefully programmatic. It is simply meant to say that we should take the »survival« of ancient Egyptian cultural

forms and the impact of Egypt seriously. I think this is hampered by our use of the word Egyptomania itself, because of the associations inherent to it, and moreover by the lack of a clear definition.[15] The word Egyptomania came into being around 1800 and implied some sort of irrationality from these beginnings onwards.[16] It has been used indiscrimenantly for a very wide variety of phenomena since. When concerning concepts and ideas, these often are associated with fashion, obsession or irrationality; when material culture is the focus of attention, it often concerns popular material culture – or Tutankhamen. In both respects Egyptomania is something audiences tend to mildly smile upon or laugh about; *Egyptomania makes Egypt harmless*. This book is called *Beyond Egyptomania* because I believe that such an approach is not helpful to use when aiming to better understand why Egypt is everybody's past. It is important to underline that I do not wish to suggest that previous or future research by scholars using the term is unsound or should be discarded.[17] Especially the foundational work by Jean-Marcel Humbert on Egyptomania should be mentioned in this respect.[18]

INVESTIGATING THE »LONGUE DURÉE«

Much work has already been done on chronologically and/or contextually isolated responses to Egypt. Usual suspects include Cleopatra; Hadrian and Egypt; the Borgia apartments; Sixtus V and the Vatican obelisk; Napoleon and Egypt; Tutankhamen, et cetera. However, all kinds of boundaries – between disciplinary specialisations (history, philosophy, religious studies, art history, archaeology, etc.), on the one hand, and period specialisations (Classical studies, Egyptology, Renaissance studies, Modern history, etc.), on the other – stand in the way of a clear, overall view of the persistence of Egypt in Western culture. As a result, the study of the reception of Egypt has so far remained rather ›antiquarian‹.[19] Scholarly attempts to arrive at interpretative overviews, like the 1969 book by Siegfried Morenz entitled *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten* or the series *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* edited by Peter Ucko, are very few.[20] This book does certainly not provide such an overview, but aims to investigate the coherence, if any, between all these individual examples distributed over time and across space, and proposes to combine history, mnemohistory, and material culture as a compelling research instrument to do so.[21]

The question of *Nachleben* thus constitutes this book's central research problem. For that reason, the eight case studies that form the core of the volume start in the Iron Age and subsequently deal with the Greek-Hellenistic world, the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the 16th and 17th centuries, the 18th century, the early 19th century, and the long 19th century, while in each case departing from a specific object or context and trying to answer a similar set of questions regarding Egypt.[22] This structure puts difficult questions about transmission and *Resonanz* into sharp focus. A sceptical reader might well ask whether we can actually talk about comparable phenomena here and whether we can really speak about

transmission through time, as from the case studies it becomes perfectly clear that Egypt can mean and do myriad different things in myriad different contexts, and that certainly »l'Égypte des uns n'est pas toujours l'Égypt des autres« as Laurent Bricault puts it. The mnemohistory of Egypt is therefore not a coherent discussion about a coherent topic, as Jan Assmann and Florian Ebeling write, because Egypt has been used to make a very wide variety of arguments.[23] These are indeed important questions and observations. The aim of this book is therefore not to simply construct or position a vertical line of transmission, but rather to investigate the *Nachleben* of Egypt throughout time and space seriously and in particular from the perspective of material agency.[24]

Outlining such an overview is important for different reasons. It makes clear that Egypt has always played an important role in processes of cultural innovation, be it as cultural foundation or as quintessential Other. In many historical contexts, Egyptian civilisation was considered to be an important testator. But unlike Classical Antiquity, which has always been seen as place of origin and therefore an integral part of the Western world, Egypt was not only the deeper past, but also the Other simultaneously. Hence, Egypt was often strange and familiar at the same time, and this liminal position will prove to be important for our understanding of the impact of Egypt and things Egyptian. The *longue durée* thus redirects our attention from the many individual historical contexts that for one reason or another appropriate Egypt towards the cultural and material forms that constitute Egypt and, as such, enables us to study these two perspectives in relation to each other beyond passive reception. Moreover, Egypt is not an isolated case. The discussions and insights provided by this book can serve as an inspiration to study the *longue durée* (material) agency of, for instance, ›the Greek‹, ›the Chinese‹ or ›the Celtic‹.[25]

Objects are fundamental to investigating the long-term for many reasons, as has been outlined above. Cultural responses to Egypt cannot be understood without taking into account the tangible form of Egyptian objects, their style, and materiality.[26] By addressing the *longue et vaste durée* of the dissemination of Egyptian objects, forms, and motifs across the Mediterranean basin and subsequently the entire Western world and by showing the complexity of the relations between *being* Egyptian, *doing* Egyptian, and *looking* Egyptian, this book also hopes to incite reconsideration of the problem of style, which for too long has been rejected from archaeology, anthropology, and art history – and which is fundamental to understanding Egypt. There is, however, also an important methodological reason why adding objects so prominently and, one might say, independently to Assmann's mnemohistory project concerning Egypt matters: it adds another historical layer. In the Bronze Age, Egyptian stylistic features are an important constituent of an international *koine*.[27] In the Iron Age Near East and Mediterranean, »Aegyptiaca« were everywhere and have been usefully described as the most popular global commodity of that world.[28] It is important to realise that cultural responses to Egypt therefore started much earlier than with Herodotos – and we need objects in order to document that ›prehistory‹ of Egypt's mnemohistory.

THE CONTENT OF THE BOOK

The first Part of this book contains four Introductions. Its main aim is to discuss the many concepts that are used to describe and analyse ›the Egyptian preference‹ critically and in relation to each other. In his contribution, Pascal Griener rightly states: »That the impact of Egypt on the early modern period should not be understood merely as a fashion for exotic forms, is obvious. However, it is more difficult to find the right set of methods suitable to understanding such a complex phenomenon.« Taken together, the articles in Part I explore this set of methods and do so in critical discussion. The present essay has paid attention to objects and their (material) agency in particular and asked what this perspective could add to ideas about the mnemohistory of Egypt. These are presented by Jan Assmann himself and Florian Ebeling in the next article; their contribution also entails a much-needed overview and examination of earlier approaches towards the reception of Egypt and their discontents, especially with regard to the question of mnemohistory. To better conceptualise the eternal return of Egypt as well as its haunting character, they draw on Gadamer's concept of *Wirkungsgeschichte*. The great advantage of *Wirkungsgeschichte* over *Rezeptionsgeschichte* is that it locates agency with the concept (and the object) itself, thus accounting for its haunting character and its development over time. In his personal and passionate essay, Jean-Marcel Humbert holds a plea for *retaining* Egyptomania as a concept. Very usefully dissecting the many uses and abuses of the concept over the last two centuries, he underlines how important it is to be aware of the specific domain that one is in (the arts, literature, philosophy, popular culture, etc.) and to realise the very different character (and understanding) of Egyptomania in various national research traditions. His case study of the uses of Egypt in 20th century publicity is an important addition to the long-term overview that Part II of this book provides. In the essay by Pascal Griener, lastly, all the (sometimes) conflicting ideas on history, mnemohistory, and material culture of the first three essays come together wonderfully. Focussing on the 18th century, a very specific and defining moment in Egypt's *Nachleben*, Griener first analyses how the displacement of Egyptian fragments and ruins serves as an index of progress. He then shifts his focus to another argument made through Egypt and shows how Egyptian objects contributed to the construction of a new vision on art and the agency of objects. This is a very important idea. It is well known that scholars like Johann Joachim Winckelmann had great difficulties understanding »Aegyptiaca« and wrote Egypt largely out of the development of Classical civilisation as a result.[29] »Ihr Denken ging das natürliche vorbei und beschäftigte sich mit dem Geheimnissvollen«, Winckelmann writes on Egyptian civilisation, trying to pin down the difference between Greek art and Egyptian art.[30] We now know that Egypt and »Aegyptiaca« were crucial constituents of what we call Greco-Roman Antiquity, although in a rather different way than Classical (material) culture was.[31] The same seems to be true for European civilisation and its reception of that Classical culture.

In eight specifically selected case studies, the second Part of the book presents a long-term overview of Egypt's *Nachleben*. This overview is, of course, extremely selective and

limited to very specific goals, as explained above. The »colonne vertébrale« presented in Part II, if indeed it is that, ranges from the Iron Age Mediterranean and Near East (Gunter), via the Hellenistic (Bricault) and Roman (Swetnam-Burland) periods as well as the Middle Ages (Laboury & Lekane), to the early modern period (Mason and Haslund Hansen) and the 19th century (Nouvel-Kammerer and Hurley). All essays take their cue from a specific object (or set of objects) called Egyptian and subsequently explore how these »Aegyptiaca« reshaped their surroundings and historical contexts.

In order to return to the central research questions and problems formulated in this essay and likewise explored in Part I, the third part of the book contains four discussions from four different disciplinary perspectives. These concluding discussions elaborate on the central concepts of the volume (objects, style and agency) only briefly introduced here, evaluate the various contributions in relation to each other and will therefore help the reader to explore the many interferences between the eight individual case studies in part II and the coherence of the volume as a whole. David Fontijn addresses the issue of material agency from an archaeological and anthropological perspective; Stijn Bussels and Bram van Oostveldt discuss Egyptian style and/as agency from the perspective of Art History; Stephanie Moser revisits Reception Studies by looking at the magic of the material and Stephen Quirke, lastly, investigates what the perspectives brought forward in this book might bring to Egyptology (and vice versa) and how a focus on »Ancient Egypt beyond itself«, as he calls it, might even have much wider and deeper resonances in space and time.