# THE FASCINATION FOR EGYPT DURING THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

## HISTORY OF A »CONFIGURATION«

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The fact that the impact of ancient Egyptian life and culture on the early modern period should not be understood merely as a fashion for exotic forms is obvious. However, it is more difficult to identify the set of methods that will enable us to understand such a complex phenomenon.[1] Over the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, there developed an epistemological configuration in which references to Egypt proved important as a way of grasping the power of art objects. Any attempt to delineate this configuration is no mean feat. In this essay, I shall focus on new, secular representations of ancient Egypt, which developed independently of the traditional reference to the Bible, and particularly to the Old Testament. In reality, it is difficult to disentangle secular representations from biblical ones during that period. In a recent and superb volume, *Exodus*, Jan Assmann has shown that Egypt takes centre stage in the Old Testament, since the whole destiny of Israel is sealed when its leader, Moses, decides to lead his people outside Egypt and to desert Pharaoh's empire. This long process raises the greatest hopes; the Jews long for a better future, and their dream of a new land changes their vision of History.[2] That historical discourse is not satisfied with the vain inventory of Pharaonic dynasties, duly listed by the Pharaoh's scribes; it is a process and progress leading to a distant, but glorious aim. In a sense, the *philosophes*' vision of history as the progress of civilization, was a secular version of the Biblical, teleological representation of History.

One of the most potent components of this configuration is also one of its most straightforward elements; I shall therefore examine it before dealing with the ways in which Egyptian material was exploited by art historiography during the Enlightenment.

## DISPLACING RUINS AS AN INDEX OF PROGRESS

Paradoxically, Ancient Egypt was to become one of the most powerful tools that the moderns used in order to glorify their own times. This was achieved essentially by means of a powerful narrative of cultural progress in which technology played a decisive role.

In 1585, Pope Sixtus V entrusted the engineer Domenico Fontana with a challenging task – moving a 327-ton red granite Egyptian obelisk from its site south of the Vatican basilica to the piazza in front of the basilica. Nine hundred men and seventy-five horses were requisitioned; even so, the project required the best part of a year. The key to Fontana's success was the scaffolding erected around the obelisk, which allowed him to harness the power of the men and the horses to raise the obelisk, place it on a platform and then move the platform on rollers to the obelisk's new location.[3] Fontana published this technological triumph in his *Della trasportatione dell'obelisco vaticano* (Rome: Basa, 1590).

Another attempt was made to raise an obelisk which had been found in the Campo Marzio (plate 13). This proved unsuccessful, and it was not until two centuries later that the solution to the problem was found.[4] Nicola Zabaglia (1664–1750), an engineer and inventor, employed a special mechanical device to extract the monument's five blocks from the ground. The obelisk could then be restored; in 1792, it was placed on the piazza di Montecitorio at Pope Pius VI's behest. This symbol of technical power being used to retrieve, to displace or to rescue the remains of the ancient world was so powerful, that it still exerted fascination during the early decades of the 19th century. In the *Description de l'Egypte* (from 1809), chapters on modern technology and chapters on archaeology are afforded equal weight; this juxtaposition heightened the contrast between two stages of civilization.[5] It should be pointed out that during the same period Giovanni Belzoni, the great Italian archaeologist and mover of statues, settled in Egypt in 1812 – not in order to devote his time to antique monuments, but rather to interest the Egyptians in his invention of a pump that could be used to raise water. Spurned by the Pascha in spite of his talents as an engineer, he then turned his mind to Egyptian archaeology. He discovered important sites and started to engage in the business of transporting and selling some of the most important sculptures to the Western powers. He was the driving force behind the removal of the so-called Memnon colossus in granite, which was subsequently purchased by the British Government. Weighing more than seven tons, this monumental statue is still today the largest piece of sculpture in the British Museum.[6] Technology, if correctly employed, can replace the infinite resource of slave labour, characteristic of Ancient Egypt; technology seems to work, not with the help of human graft, but almost by magic, enabling a huge stone to move effortlessly. It may be said that this glorification of the magical, almost supernatural powers of technology was a powerful exercise in propaganda. Its advocates aimed to obscure the reality underlying the extensive use of new techniques during the Industrial Revolution, namely that they still relied to a very great extent on an intensive use of a human labour force. Marx rightly says in his *Kapital* (1867) that the famous *added value* is rendered invis-

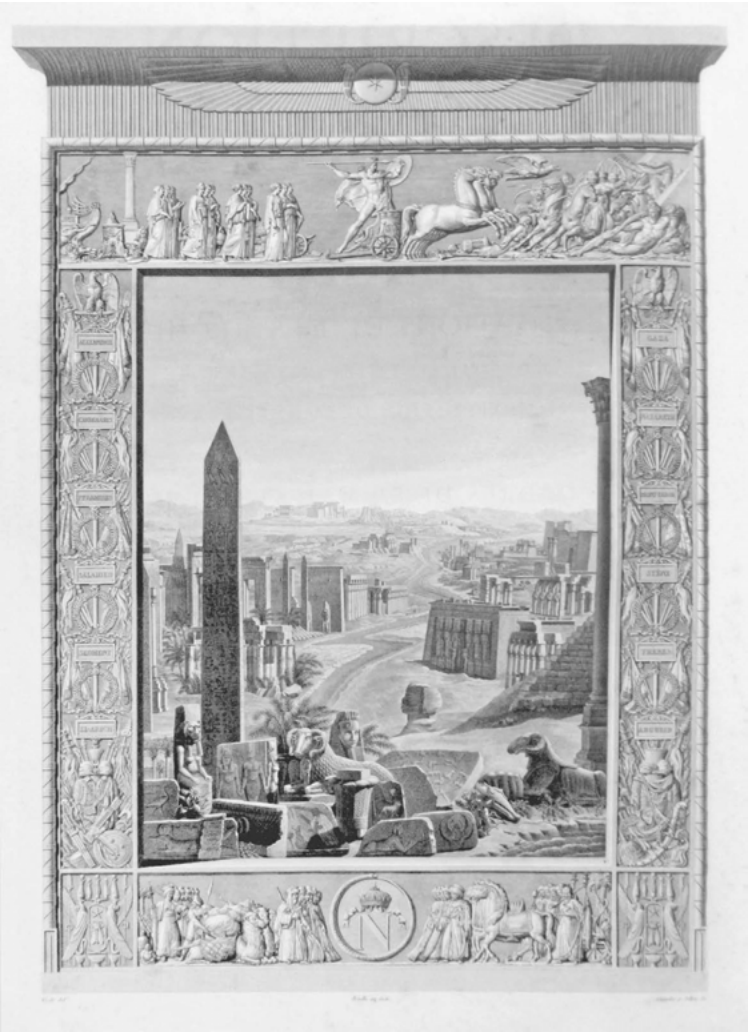
ible within the capitalist system. In 1869, when the Suez Canal – a masterpiece of modern technology – was finally completed, the countries that had sponsored the project planned to construct a modern pyramid of huge proportions, in order to celebrate this feat.[7]

Faithful to a tradition inherited from Ancient Rome, Enlightenment museum culture was keen to represent the grandeur of a civilization in two ways: through ambitious buildings, and through the display of prestigious monuments from past cultures, more especially from conquered territories. This strategy was not new in modern times. Ever since the Renaissance, Egyptian monuments had been used in Rome as allegories of eternity; they conferred this impression of timelessness, by metonymy, to the Roman supremacy. Several examples may be cited: the frontispiece to Dupérac's *Vestigi* (1606) (plate 14) is framed by two fragments of obelisks covered with fanciful hieroglyphics, true signs of the most ancient antiquity, and of the ancient Roman conquest of the world, which was in turn a preparation for the supremacy of the Christian religion. At the beginning of the 18th century, the famous *Roma triumphans* exhibited in the Capitoline museum, flanked with two slaves, highlighted the central position of the *caput mundi*; two Egyptianizing representations of Isis, one on each sides, framed this group, imparting a timeless quality to it.[8] At the end of the 18th century, Pius VI ordered that two Greek Egyptianizing figures should frame the main door to the Vatican museum. This was a very clear sign, and was only reinforced by the presence, in the immediate vicinity, of the sarcophagus of Costanza, signalling the apex of ancient art and history, the moment when emperor Constantine converted to Christianity, within a teleological vision of History. But with the great uprooting of monuments at the end of the 18th century for the sake of the great European museums, Egyptian art was gradually considered for its own sake, and not only as a symbolical material designed to highlight the Grandeur of the Roman Empire. Secondly, the symbolism connected with these objects was more powerful than all the Egyptian objects excavated in Italy, because they were aggressively collected directly in Egypt – they were not sediments of the Roman empire anymore. Their meaning could be reinvested directly by the new powers rivalling with the grandeur of ancient Rome. Thirdly, the size of the pieces transferred from Egypt to Western museums became so great by 1800 that their effect was meant to satisfy an aesthetic of the Sublime; more often than before, they were not restored. The Memnon fragment of the British Museum outlined a sublime idea of ancient Egyptian sculpture: it was a fragment, but this fragment enabled the viewers to present in their mind the near impossibility to fantasize the size of the original sculpture it came from. The symbolism connected with such practice had very deep roots: within the museum, a fragment which had been transported at great cost was deemed to remain immobile in his new setting, because its new purpose was to symbolize the almost eternal fate promised to the British or to the French empire. The curators of the British Museum were very keen that such message should get through; they had a new inscription in Roman characters carved into the original Rosetta stone, which was taken from the French by the British army, and granted to King George III by the treaty of Alexandria in 1802. This inscription reminded all visitors that

King George III was the first modern monarch to have conquered Africa in modern times; it reminded the proud British visitors that the stone was a spoil of war. In the Louvre, the same tactics applied: among the antiquities sold by Prince Camillo Borghese to Napoleon in 1806, were some Egyptian pieces. A heavily restored sphynx was thus carved with a false hieroglyphic including the design of a bee, one of the emblems of the new Emperor.[9] Such emblem was embroidered on the coronation robes of Napoleon; the same type of modern hieroglyphic graces the frontispiece of the *Description de l'Egypte* (fig. 1). The new Emperor was keen to appear as a modern pharaoh, at a time when his regime was heading towards absolutism. Thus, the Egyptian symbolism lent credibility to the Bonaparte dynasty, as it was associated with an ancient lineage of kings. Besides, the whole French historiography of the Egyptian Campaign had managed to turn a French defeat into a glorious adventure. Such objects enabled the museum to illustrate a legend in becoming. My third example is also French: in 1817, Belzoni received some antiquities from the British consul Henry Salt, with whom Belzoni made a huge traffic of antiques. Among the pieces which were negotiated was a statue of the goddess Sekhmet. It was purchased by count Auguste de Forbin, the director general of the Louvre museum after the Restoration. In memory of this superb purchase, Forbin had the stone engraved with his own name.[10] This gesture is extraordinary, inasmuch as it betrays the attempt, by a museum director, to attach his own memory to that of the monuments exhibited in the museum, so that he could be remembered forever for his deeds. Most of the intermediaries who undertook the transport of these antiquities embarked on a similar campaign in order to give monumental proportions to their actions. In the main chamber of the Khafre pyramid at Gizeh, Belzoni wrote in very big characters: »scoperta da G. Belzoni, 2. Mar[ch] 1818.« In 1816, he »signed« the Ramesseum with a monumental inscription carved by his men on a pillar.[11] Like Forbin, he had his name on statues which were sold to museums, like the basalt statue of Anemophis III found in the King's tomb at Thebes, and now in the British Museum.[12]

As we can see, in Great Britain as in France, the Egyptian spoils were seen as the paradigms of a new type of symbolical object in the age of museums: the colossal fragment as a mobile symbol of absolute immobility. It was made mobile by sheer force, uprooted and transferred to the capital of a new Empire, where it was placed in new temples, like eternal monuments, duly engraved with new and glorious inscriptions. In fact, these ancient objects were systematically grafted – even physically – with new contents. Having become again true models of immobility, they could receive new and monumental inscriptions, which enabled the viewer to put the oldest civilization and a modern empire on a par.[13] The museum became a major showplace for this staging of political power.

In effect, the Egyptian reference played a great role in defining the modern culture of the museum, at a time when the old idols entered into the museum.[14] One fine example bears witness to the role of the Egyptian material, in defining the very power of the object which is being musealized. In 1778, Prince Marcantonio Borghese ordered the architect Antonio Asprucci to redecorate one of the great rooms in his Villa.[15] In the center of this salon covered



1 Frontispiece from the *Description de l'Égypte,* after a design by François Charles Cecile

with paintings by Tommaso Conca, the visitors of this private museum could admire two modern statues, both carved by Antoine-Guillaume Grandjaquet: an Isis, and an Osiris. In her study of this program, Carole Paul seems to have missed the deep meaning of this iconography, which is connected with a Greek interpretation of Egyptian culture.[16] In his treatise *On Isis and Osiris*, Plutarch recalls the myth of the death of Osiris, whose body is hacked into fourteen pieces by his brother Seth; these body parts are buried in different parts of the Egyptian Empire. Isis manages to find each part, and to erect a monument upon each of them.

The only part which Isis fails to find is the sex of Osiris; she replaces this missing part with an *ersatz*, then makes love to Osiris. From that union, Harpocrates is born. Each city which boasts of the presence of a monument to Osiris believes that the whole body of the God was buried underneath.[17] In fact, this ancient narrative lays down a founding myth of the museum and of its magical powers. The purpose of a museum is to collect fragments, but these »body parts« are given a new life as a fictional, complete body fully reconstructed within the viewer's imagination; moreover, each object, even a fragment, becomes a self-contained entity within the walls of the museum. The major asset of the museum resides in its metonymic power: it can transform a part into a whole, and bring back to life what was a dead body part.[18]

## A CENTRAL PROBLEM OF AGENCY IN THE 18TH CENTURY: THE »PRESENT PRESENCE« OF THE ART WORK

I shall now tackle a very difficult question pertaining to the appropriation of Egyptian art during the 18th century. How did Egyptian art contribute to the construction of a new vision of art, where the almost magic powers of the object could become a central issue?

In order to explain this, I shall have first to make a detour. In an essay published in 1992, Alfred Gell is at pains to state that mimetic art is not all about copying nature, but about producing magic.[19] Talking about the Joconda by Leornardo, he says that this portrait, although it is made of wood and paint, produces a powerful effect almost through magic – he even uses the word transsubstantiation, which, for a British scholar, is quite significant. What is at stake here is the fear that the aesthetic of the mimesis should place the work of art in a state of inferiority as regards to the original it is copying. Seen in this way, it is merely making an absent present, as Leon Battista Alberti puts it in his *De Pictura* (1435). Maurice Godelier sums up this question very neatly:

> »to presentifying is not the same as representing, and it is what makes the difference between an incon which has been consecrated or an African statue »endowed« with the presence and with the power of a spirit, and the Joconda: [...] those who admire the latter know intuitively that this woman is at the same time present as an image but absent as a person, and that this absence renders her presence unreal. (Présentifier n'est donc pas représenter, et c'est ce qui fait la différence entre une icône consacrée ou une sculpture africaine »chargée« de la présence et de la puissance d'un esprit et le tableau de la Joconde: [...] ceux et celles qui l'admirent savent intuitivement que cette femme est à la fois présente comme image mais absente comme personne et que cette absence fait de sa présence une réalité irréelle.)«[20]

Unfortunately, Gell did not know that an art critic had, long before him, sensed the acute character of this problem: Roger de Piles, in his *Cours de peinture par principes* (1708)

betrays the same concern as Gell – he realized the pitfalls of the theory of the mimesis bequeathed by Classicism – hence his attempt to highlight very strongly the magical character of painting, which must be understood in this context.[21] During the 18th century, this question is the object of huge debates, but it is projected onto a historical framework. It takes the form of a discussion upon the origins of art.[22]

In his amazing book – *A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* (2010) – Guy Stroumsa shows that from the 17th century onwards, the question of the study of religion took a new form.[23] It involved a thorough inquiry into the human origins of religion. At first, the Bible served as a major reference for this quest, but very soon, the comparative study of ancient pagan religions took the lead. The *Cérémonies religieuses* by Bernard Picart and Jean-Frédéric Bernard (1723–43, 9 vols) – one of the most explosive publications of the Enlightenment – singles out the two major origins of all religions: pantheism, and materialism.[24] In this history, the role of the priests is nearly always shown in negative terms – it is presented as a caste which seeks to dominate over the faithful; their aim is to cloud religion in mystery, in order to keep a position of power over the people. Catholic religion is studied, not as a religion singled out by Revelation, but as a faith comparable to any other faith, and considered from an anthropological perspective, as a cultural phenomenon with clear political implications. This interpretation of religion as *Religio duplex* was not new, and Egypt was the model most commonly used in order to expand it.[25]

These two trends became extremely powerful by the time of the French Revolution. First, the *Religio duplex* was used by some major art theorists of the late 18th century in order to give a political legitimacy. In 1805, Quatremère de Quincy put forward the idea that the origin of Greek art could be found in the Egytian hieroglyphics.[26] The design of those sacred signs was under the control of the priests. The Greek artists managed to free themselves only partially from the constraints of a coded style of representation, since allegorical art remained of great importance in Greek culture. Quatremère, through this theory, was trying to define a model of Art in which art theorists like himself would have full authority over all artists; he wanted to play a major role, and preside of the social, political purpose of the arts in modern times, at least in France. All his life, he endeavored to keep a spiritual lead over all artists in France. In effect, at the Academy of Fine Arts, in a country where the State plays a major role in the art world, he remained a powerful presence almost all his life; the young artists of the Romantic period quickly realized that he was their worst enemy, but being born in 1755, he only died in 1849…[27]

As for the second trend, it pertains to the overall secular, political interpretation of the impact of ancient religion on the arts. In 1795, Charles François Dupuis published a book whose printing was sponsored by the French Convention nationale: *L'Origine de tous les Cultes*.[28] Dupuis put forward the idea that every religion, including the Christian faith, find its origin in the primitive cult of Nature, and especially the cult of stars, sabeism. This theory was based upon a comparative study of ancient religions, but from an atheistic point of view. In 1798, an Egyptian *bassorilievo* representing the Zodiac was discovered in Denderah

by the French expedition. It was quickly dated to 15000 years BCE by Dupuis and his friends.[29] Such a date threatened the Christian vision of History, since the Catholic Church defended the belief that the world had been created by God 4000 years before Christ. Besides, Dupuis believed that the Zodiac of Denderah seemed to support his sabeist theory. It took the great classical scholar Ennio Quirino Visconti, and later Jean-Baptiste Biot, to reject this whole interpretation; they could demonstrate that the Zodiac was not a very ancient monument, but that it dated to the second century CE, when Egypt was a Roman territory. After the first Empire, Egypt ceased to be used by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment as a weapon against the Catholic Church. However, an anthropological history of religion, and particularly a new history of Idolatry played a major role in the establishment of the history of ancient art during the Enlightenment. To illustrate this point, I shall first compare a book by Pierre Monier, and one by the chevalier de Mehegan, both on the history of art. Pierre Monier relied heavily upon Plinius in order to explain the development of art in antiquity.[30] Above all, it is a technical history, which traces the progress of artistic techniques, from the first use of skiagraphia in painting to the discovery of colours etc. Fifty-seven years later, Mehegan opted for a totally new type of narrative: he considered that it was impossible to understand the development of the arts without inquiring into the mind of the primitive inhabitants of the earth, from the earliest antiquity onwards; the destiny of art, in antiquity, could not be distinguished from that of pagan idolatry.

Such an approach clashed with a very prevalent mode of explanation in philosophical circles at the time, and which made extensive use of what is called today »conjectural history« – a heuristic fiction which was used to imagine in a totally abstract and analytical fashion, the first stages of civilization from the first gatherings of individuals to the most refined forms of society. Such an approach had nothing to do with proper history. At the beginning of the *Discours sur l'origine des inégalités* (1755) Rousseau boasts about it: »écartons tous les faits.«[31] For Antoine-Yves Goguet, the author of *De l'origine des loix, des arts, et des sciences, et de leurs progrès chez les anciens peoples* (1758), this heuristic fiction had no value, because it turned the first humans into rational beings, who could decide on the foundations of society.[32] Historians like Goguet privileged what we would call today an anthropological outlook on art and on culture in general. Thus, Goguet says:

> »Tout annonce d'ailleurs l'ancienneté de la sculpture dans l'Asie & dans l'Egypte: sans parler des témoignages que les Historiens profanes pourraient nous fournir. […] je pourrais encore parler du veau d'or élevé d'après les modèles que les Israélites en avaient vu en Egypte: mais je crois en avoir dit assez pour établir que l'origine & l'usage de la sculpture remonte aux temps les plus reculés.
> Cette partie des arts aura été fort grossière dans les premiers temps. […] On peut cependant s'en former une idée d'après ce que les anciens nous disent des premiers essais de la sculpture chez les Grecs, art que ces peuples avaient appris des Egyptiens. Leurs statues n'étaient originairement que des masses informes & quarrées qui se terminaient en

gaines. Longtemps encore après, leurs connaissances se bornaient à faire des figures dont les bras étaient pendans et collant sur le corps.«[33]

This new type of approach was based upon two types of literature: that devoted to the different people of the earth, and that dealing with past cultures, especially in antiquity. As well as in the theological field, the Bible played a major role in this type of discourse; but it was articulated to a brand new science, which has been studied in great detail by Fernando Vidal in recent years: Psychology. Vidal has shown that especially in Germany, biblical hermeneutics drew extensively upon psychology to explain the most difficult events narrated in the Old Testament; it involved the attempt to imagine the functioning of a mind, in a distant past.[34] The most outstanding example of such a method in the French speaking world is given by Nicolas-Antoine Boulanger and his *Antiquité dévoilée*.[35] Basing his inquiry almost exclusively on the Bible, Boulanger puts forward the idea that all religions and rites of the world may be explained by a single original cause: the Flood as it is depicted in the Genesis (7.1–24). At that stage in the history of mankind, the tragedy of the flood struck the mind of all those who had survived thanks to Noah's ark. In order to exorcize their terror of this ordeal, and to overcome their primitive trauma, several generations of humans developed complex sets of beliefs and rituals; slowly, the latter enabled them to free themselves from the fears of their ancestors. Such visions of history may seem fanciful today, but they were revolutionary, because they singled out collective psychology as a principle of explanation in history and as such, they were incredibly modern. Over the 18th century, the Bible no longer enjoyed this primacy as a primary document for modern historians, and it was gradually replaced by a more secular models: above all, that of Ancient Egypt. This civilization became the more secularized cultural space where a full reflection on the history of mankind was constructed. Thus the problem took a new form: what was at stake, was to understand the power of ancient religious sculpture at a time when ancient statues of Gods were contemplated by modern viewers. These viewers no longer shared the beliefs of the ancients on religion, for whom these statues were powerful evocations of the gods.[36] In other words, the anthropological outlook on sculpture led to a problematic related to the agency of ancient sculpture, but it was achieved through a paradoxical bias: that of the disenchantment of ancient art works in modern times.[37]

I should like now to analyze how the Egyptian material was constructed within the narrative of the history of art, in a century when Winckelmann wrote and published his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764). This question obliges me to deal first with an important question of method. Normally, the study of Egypt within the historiography of art privileges the thematic approach. Scholars examine the qualities granted to Egyptian sculpture and architecture over the period in the European literature devoted to art. I do not agree with that method. In order to explain why, I should like to make another detour through linguistics and through narratology. Two important texts, *The dialogic principle* by Mikhaïl Bakhtin, and the *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, by Emile Benvéniste, take issue

with Ferdinand de Saussure's only concern with a structural approach of language, seen as the only scientific object for the linguist, as opposed to speech.[38] For Bakhtin, language is a purely theoretical concept, and it sums up a dead reality. What is real and alive, is the dialogue between two human beings – therefore, speech is the right phenomenon that the linguist should study. Each new enunciation of a single content changes its meaning. This is why Language is to be studied in motion. Two other inputs seem to me of great importance: that of Joseph Mali, and of his book *Mythistory* (2003), and that given by *Platon, les mots et les mythes* written by Luc Brisson.[39] Brisson analyzes how Plato opposes philosophical discourse to mythical discourse – and how this distinction lays officially the foundations of Greek philosophy. Yet Brisson remarks that very often, Plato resorts to Myth in order to explain a notion, or to develop an argument; thus myth plays a cardinal role in a discourse from which Myth is apparently rejected on principles. This distinction is by far not as clear and easy as Plato wants it to be. For Joseph Mali, the modern era may be defined by the recognition that there is no opposition between myth and a pseudo-neutral historical discourse. The Myth »imparts meaning to history«, »the primal 'order' in human life and history«.[40] This leads to the recognition of the »narrative construction of reality«.[41]

As a consequence, I shall try to study Egyptian art in motion, as it moves within the different discourses where art historians, philosophers attempt to place Ancient Egypt in the history of cultures. This place is shifting all the time, sometimes even within the same text by the same author. I hope that by studying these movements, we may see which deep preoccupations are absorbing art historians and philosophers, as regards our problem. This problem is almost always dealt with at the intersection between Greece and Egypt; different narratives, which one could call mythistorical narratives, try to grapple with that problem and with its consequences.[42]

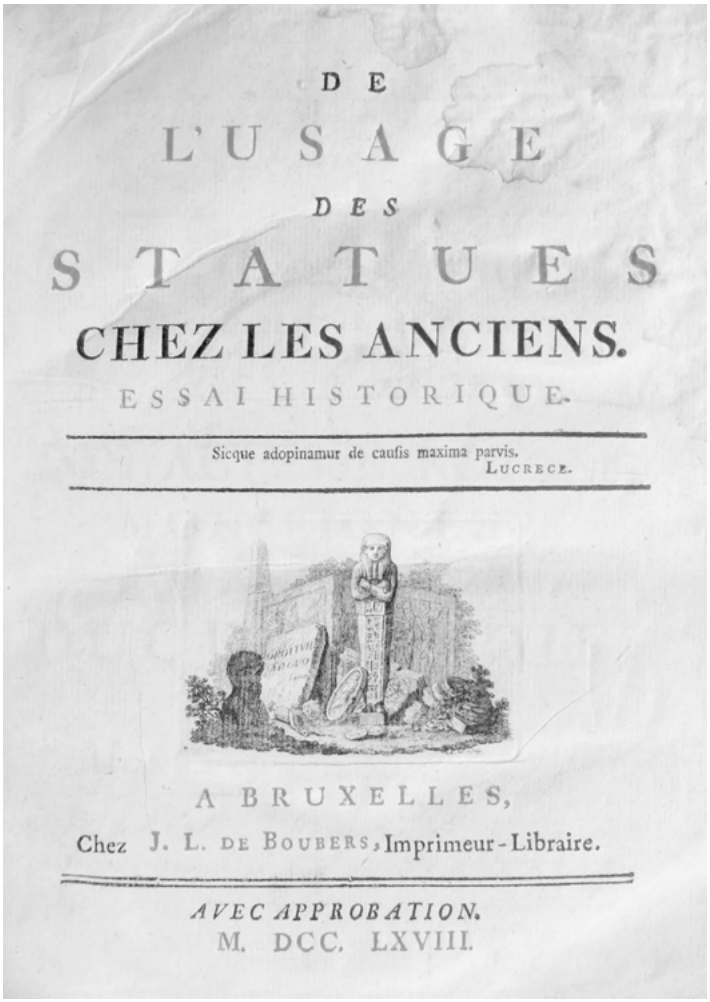
Let us start with one of the most famous art historians of the time: in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764), Johann Joachim Winckelmann rejected the view that Greek art had anything to do with Egypt ; within a construction based upon the aesthetic supremacy of Greek art – the chapter on Greek art starts with a long development on the essence of art – the Greeks are shown as the only people who succeed in discovering this essence; they owe their excellence to a kind of one-off, almost divine revelation; therefore, they cannot borrow their art theory from any another culture.[43] Winckelmann opposes Greek art and Egyptian art, for aesthetic but also for political reasons. Egyptian artists were despised as simple craftsmen, while Greek artist enjoyed fame and fortune. In Egypt, the cast of the priests enjoyed an absolute power over all artists, while in Greece, the latter took an active part in the shaping of the imagination of all the worshippers, because they created new forms for the representation of the gods. In Egypt, the artistic imagination was self-contained within strict and immutable limits; representations are static symbols, hiding powerful meanings.[44] This immutability causes a deep melancholy in the Egyptian mind.[45] Greek artists built up their imagination in close relationship with the study of nature, of the external world. Egyptian art had no history, because it was totally immobile.[46] Greek art was

optimistic, and keen to progress. For Winckelmann, the hero of ancient Greek art is Daedalus, the Greek technician, the first artist who managed to separate the legs and feet in his human-shaped statues, to lend much more life to the representation of the Gods. Winckelmann is incapable of accepting that the Egyptians were remarkable technicians; for him, this ability could mark any progress like in Greece. This vision of the different antique civilizations as separate entities was quite widespread at the time. The Rotunda of Mars – the entrance to the collection of antiques in the Louvre around 1802 is decorated with a central painting – a glorification of Greek art and of Prometheus, the great technician surrounded by four medallions, allegories of Egyptian art, Greek art, Roman art and Florentine art – each of them as separate entities so to speak, with their relevant principles and characteristics.[47] In a way, Winckelmann did not apply the right tools to his analysis of the powers of ancient sculpture. Unlike most of his contemporaries, he had little interest in anthropology. The best proof of his failure is his last great publication, and intellectually his most ambitious one: the now forgotten *Versuch einer Allegorie* published in 1766.[48] In this book, Winckelmann tries to imagine a new social and moral function for the arts in modern times, and it is based upon his utopian view of Greek Polis at the time of Pericles. In order to fulfill its social role, a sculpture should convey lofty moral contents. These contents should be encoded thanks to a new type of allegorism, suitable to the modern world. This allegorism is devoided of all magic, and is reduced to so-called »natural« signs – that is, made with mimetic or metaphorical images – that is, a purely *rational* system of signs. This theory reduced the work of art to a mere translation of textual contents into images; once they have been deciphered, they seem almost irrelevant. Here, Winckelmann betrays his kinship with Rousseau, and with his vision of human beings as rational subjects; he was a great admirer of the philosopher from Geneva. As we can see, Winckelmann was faced with a difficult task, namely imagining the enchantment of art in modern times, from his historical viewing point. In another and recent publication, I have shown that in his description of the Apollo Belvedere, Winckelmann outlines a model of aesthetic contemplation which relies upon the creation of an effect of magic presence of the neo-platonic form; The text of the description is performative, it allows the reader to feel the ideal form pulsing under the skin of the Apollo Belvedere; in turn, this effect of presentification of the pure form in the material of sculpture is immediately exploited by Winckelmann, who projects the viewer in Antiquity, and makes him worship the God as a ancient Roman or Greek citizen would have done it – thus bypassing, with the help of a kind of historical empathy, the problem faced by the moderns while contemplating statues which are remnants of dead religions.[49] According to Winckelmann, this solution provided the modern viewer with an ersatz of antique worship, without the need to believe in the ancient gods. All it requires from the viewer is a psychological experience, and a dignified attitude towards those old luminaries of the ancient world. As we know, the word numen comes from *nuere*, to nod with the head as a sign of approval.[50] What connects here between the ancient numen and the new, is a position of the head. In his print *Kunst Kenntnis*, Daniel Chodowiecki opposes two types of aesthetic perception:

that of overly enthusiasts, who are ridiculously mannered, and the dignified, poised attitude of two young men who ponder the effects of an antique sculpture upon their inner being; one of the two nods towards the statue, as a mark of respect for the art work.

Unlike Winckelmann, other thinkers were not inhibited by their aesthetic creed, and they managed to postulate a kind of circulation between Egyptian and Greek art, so to speak. According to their theoretical convictions, they opened or closed at will the barriers between these two civilizations, to great effect. One of the most efficient opponents of Winckelmann was count Ottaviano di Guasco, whose *De l'Usage des Statues chez les Anciens*, published in 1768, is a masterpiece (fig. 2).[51] Guasco disliked Winckelmann, and with him, those historians who have »la tête pleine des idées et du système mythologique des Grecs«.[52] The vignette printed on the title page proudly shows an Egyptian sculpture, next to the following inscription: »Orditur ab Ovo«.[53] Using an organicist vision of history which had been built up by his friend Montesquieu, Guasco observes the development of sculpture as a whole, taking into account the circulation between civilizations, both ancient and modern, without any regard for aesthetic considerations. Guasco's history IS a »mythistory«, but a critical one: for example, in order to underline the debt of Greek sculptors to Egyptian art, he dismisses outright the importance of Daedalus as a first realistic sculptor, as he reminds his reader that the oldest sculptures in Greece were shapeless pieces of wood or of stone.[54] But Guasco goes even further, and shows that originally, the magic presence of a sculpture has little to do with artistry. He reminds his reader that even at the end of the Roman empire, when sculpture knew no bounds in sophistication, people still worshipped rough stones or shapeless pieces of wood in a great deal of temples, because these objects had been invested of special powers by tradition. By doing so, Guasco showed that the allegorical, iconographic dimension of art works were very secondary features, compared with their magic power, and this power was opaque; it remained intrinsic to the art work, and remains consubstantial with it, even when it is deciphered by a worshipper or by a modern viewer. The most fascinating Egyptian god for this generation of scholars was Harpocrates, the god Horus, but also the patron saint of Silence. This new vision of the symbolical construction of the work of art as an entity where form and meaning are indistinguishable, developed before Goethe theorized his famous distinction between allegory and symbol: »Die Symbolik verwandelt die Erscheinung in Idee, die Idee in ein Bild, und so, dass die Idee im Bild immer unendlich wirksam und unerreichbar bleibt und, selbst in allen Sprachen ausgesprochen, doch unaussprechlich bliebe.«[55]

The second writer who, after Guasco, bears witness to a total change of vision on Egypt is Johann Gottfried Herder. In his book, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* Herder takes a position which is totally opposite to that of Winckelmann.[56] For him, a given civilization may not be judged according to universal standards, but only according to the standards and values of the civilization which is being analyzed by us. Such ideas made the full rehabilitation of Egypt possible, and Herder accomplished this task. He also underlined that every civilization is a totality whose components form a closed-up structure.




2 Title page, with vignette »Orditur ab ovo« from Guasco, *de l'usage des statues chez les Anciens*. 1768

However, he did not succumb to the temptation of closing the barriers between Egyptian and Greek culture. Thanks to a complex theory, Herder assigns the role of intermediary to very specific civilizations, especially those which were highly proficient in commerce – like the Phoenicians: those people took over the role of intermediaries between Greek and Egyptian cultures. The Phoenicians knew how to simplify the components of a given culture, more efficiently than that this culture itself; thus it could appropriate, transform these components, and make them ready to be assimilated by another culture.[57]

I hope to have shown that if we study the artistic literature of the Enlightenment in motion, we may understand that »mythistory« plays a vital role in exploring new conceptions of the agency of the art object, outside the box – I mean, outside boundaries defined by all the systems of value – aesthetic, political ones – which were still preeminent during the Enlightenment period, and which favored greatly Ancient Greece as well as Ancient Rome. This practice of »mythistory« involves the closing or the opening of different doors between different ancient cultures, and to reflect freely on the consequences of such experiments.

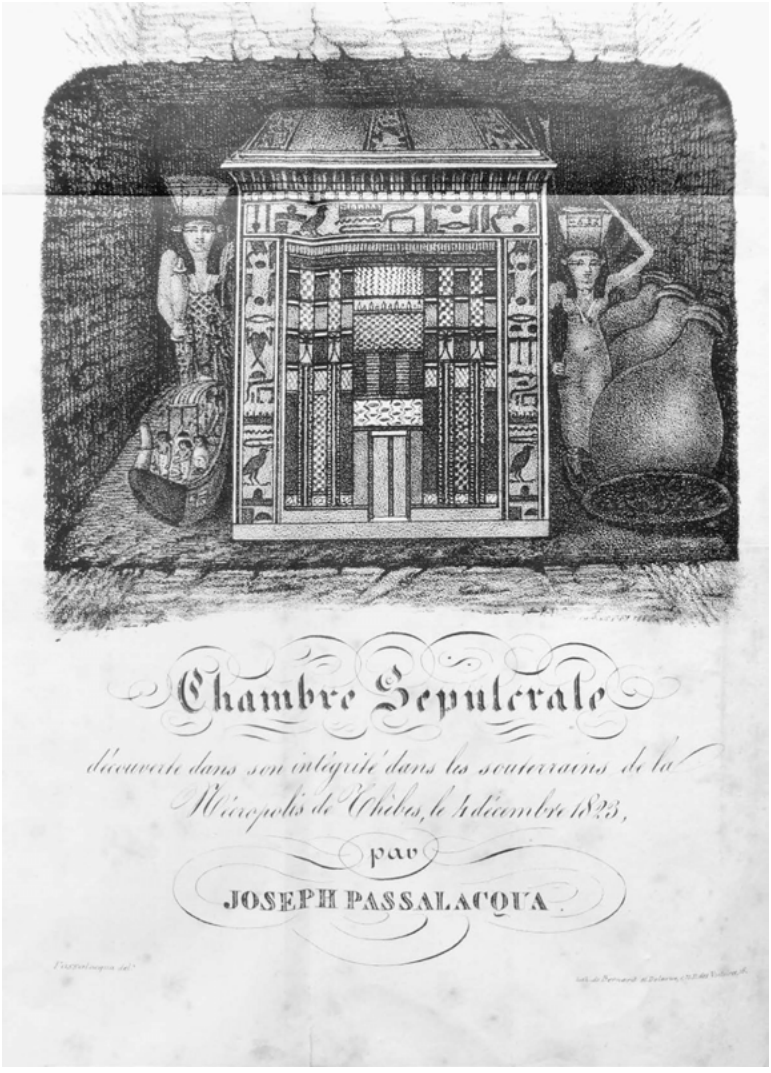
This liberty was essential in order to imagine a type of art where the materiality of an art object, its form and its symbolical dimensions formed a whole that no amount of discourse could sum up or interpret exhaustively. Secondly, such exercises betray several preoccupations: for example, Time, Progress are often criticized as a damaging factor in the history of art – Herder thought that his time was a period of excessive refinement and ultimately, of decadence ; Egypt could offer a counter-image, a culture where Time remained still, where a stable system could function at infinitum.[58] Egypt was the culture where an aesthetic of the Sublime was at work, while Greece seemed to focus on the Beautiful in art. Egypt enabled the moderns to imagine a society entirely regulated by superior and hopefully reasonable powers, while Greek culture nurtured democratic dreams. More importantly, the chiasm between Greece and Egypt enabled philosophers of the Enlightenment to understand, within a culture steeped in mystery, how art works could receive their deep meaning in ancient Egypt, a meaning that no modern hermeneutics could ever exhaust.

In his famous book *Arbeit am Mythos*, Hans Blumenberg remarks that »only work *on* Myth, even if it is the fact of finally reducing it, makes the work *of* myth manifest«.[59]

We have seen that the analysis of the powers of ancient sculpture, made by the moderns – that is outsiders to the ancient creeds – was extremely refined. They first made good use of the tools provided by anthropology, but they also tried to cross the barrier between the Ancient times and the times of disenchantment with the help of psychology, and with a splendid reflection of the powers of the imagination to achieve the production of Presence in Art. Two major tools were used:

1. a thorough analysis of the mythical and magical dimension consubstantial to the art work in Antiquity, – an analysis on Myth which made Myth manifest, present for the moderns.
2. A systematic use of visual, dramatic devices, in order metaphorize the new vision of ancient Egypt.

At the end of the 18th century, new visual metaphors emerge, which express the Egyptian numen in a new way. First of all, the presentation of the Sacred became much more spatial. The interior of St Peter, by Desprez, is a good example of it: the space is huge, and very dark; in the dim light radiating from a cross, one feels the Divine Presence. Such effects




3 *Frontispiece* from Passalacqua, Catalogue raisonné, »Chambre épulcrale«, mausoleum discovered in december 1823

became commonplace in the first Egyptian exhibitions. In 1826, Giuseppe Passalacqua organized a very successful show of his Egyptian collection in a »Passage«, 52 Vivienne street (fig. 3). In a typical fashion, one exhibit evoked the atmosphere surrounding a funeral monument from Ancient Egypt, steeped in darkness. What is depicted here is what Warburg called a *Denkraum*, or may be, because of its deep irrational component, one could call it a

*Fühlraum* if I may craft this neologism.[60] Egyptian architecture was often shown in the same light, especially because of its colossal dimensions: one of the best examples is the temple at Denderah, as engraved for the *Description de l'Egypte*. In this temple, statues and worshippers are hardly visible between the colossal columns of the temple. The mysterious interior is bathed in a supernatural light. Above all, Egyptian architecture became associated with the subterranean world. The most famous attempt to associate Egyptian architecture with the subterranean world is the work of Antoine Chrysostome Quatremère de Quincy. His dissertation *De l'Architecture égyptienne* was written in 1785 but published only in 1803 in a modified form. Faithful to the topoi of Enlightenment architectural theory, Quatremère establishes three theoretical models: the hut, the tent, the grotto, – the latter is exemplified by Egypt, a chtonian architecture par excellence.[61] Louis Jean Desprez used the same metaphor when he placed Egyptian monuments in crypts; such rethoric has been so powerful that it been casting a long shadow over modern museography, even today. In 2016, the visitors of the Louvre have to go down to a crypt to admire the Sphinx of Tanis, the embodiment of all Egyptian mysteries about the passage from *Life to the Afterlife*. A second crypt, called the crypt of Osiris, contains a famous sarcophagus. Such dispositions are totally false and anachronistic as regards the Sphinx and its original function, but this disposition still pays tribute to an old topos of the late Enlightenment. Over the 19th century, the staging of Egyptian culture in the Museum adopted this Chtonian metaphor.[62] It became the most perfect theatre set where, amidst mummies, the visitors could experience a paradigmatic experience of the past: the catabasis. As Carlo Ginzburg says it in his essay *Ecstasies. Deciphering the Witch's Sabbath*: »The attempt to obtain knowledge of the past is also a journey into the world of the dead.«[63]