

THE EGYPTIAN CENTREPIECE OF THE SÈVRES MANUFACTORY

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(translated by Camille Joseph)

When Napoleon offered Tsar Alexander I the Egyptian centrepiece, expecting to turn him into an ally in his European wars, he did not make it an isolated diplomatic gift but added to it the centrepiece of the Olympic service.¹ Everything about the two objects was great: the dazzling technique, the time and cost of the manufacturing process, the unusual lavishness of the gift. Bringing together the two opposed themes of the East and the West was a symbolic gesture which must be understood as embedded in the complex relationship between the two monarchs, who had been nurturing rival ambitions for the Ottoman Empire since 1801. What role did Egypt play in this extraordinary gift? Was it only a reference to ancient Egypt as discovered by Bonaparte during his 1798 campaign and illustrated by Vivant Denon in his famous 1802 book? Or were there other intentions, more contemporary and hidden, behind it?

DEFINITION

The centrepiece is an object or group of objects placed in the middle of a table.² It consists of various elements, either functional (saltcellars, mustard jars, spice boxes, oil cruets, sugar bowls, etc.) or purely decorative: animals, human figures, plants, flowers, rocks, or even fountains and waterfalls. The most sophisticated pieces also include elaborate architectural elements.³ The first actual table centrepieces were both functional (to put spices within reach of the guests) and ornamental. However, during the 18th century, they lost their functionality and were exclusively used to decorate ceremonial tables. They are usually made of

precious materials (gold, silver, semi-precious stones, or porcelain) and often go with a table service of equal luxury. They thus create a central space with its own unity, separated from the rest of the table, and focus the attention of the subjugated guests on the splendour displayed before them. They generally represent hunting scenes or compositions including fruit, vegetables, meat, or fish acting as reminders of sumptuous dinners. But from the 1750s onwards, architectural centrepieces appeared particularly in the form of scaled-down reproductions of ancient ruins, which were extremely popular first in Rome and later in France in the wake of the passion of some collectors for architectural models, the most famous being Louis-François Cassas.⁴ The new table centrepieces representing ancient monuments probably found their origin in the collections of semi-precious stones that wealthy travellers would bring back from Rome. In his studio, Luigi Valadier specialised in these much sought-after objects and offered foreigners scaled-down versions of the great monuments of ancient Rome, including obelisks that could be a reference to either Rome or Egypt.⁵ The Sèvres manufactory had mainly produced centrepieces of antique, exclusively Graeco-Roman style, for example the piece made for the wedding of the future Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette at Versailles in 1769.⁶ It had never drawn inspiration from the monuments of ancient Egypt. However, the Berlin-based Werner und Mieth factory presented an Egyptian centrepiece in gilt bronze with patina at the wedding of Prince Wilhelm of Prussia and Maria Anna of Hesse-Homburg on 12 January 1804 which was greatly admired by all their guests.⁷ It is in this context that Sèvres started working on the Olympic and Egyptian centrepieces.⁸

THE EGYPTIAN CENTREPIECE (PLATE 34)

It all started with a letter from Bonaparte, First Consul (date uncertain, probably 1804), telling Denon of »a project to commission a beautiful porcelain service, the drawings of which would also include subjects related to the glory of the nation«. Denon answered: »The project for a porcelain service has been on my mind: out of love for my own work, I thought of painting on it the Egyptian views from my book. [...] If this idea seems analogous to your desires, Citizen Consul, I will commission reports on all the pieces of a service, will apportion the figures and will have the drawings made.«⁹ The views mentioned by Denon were collected during the 1798 Egyptian expedition which led to two publications: in 1802, Denon published *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte*, and in 1809, Napoleon ordered the publication of *Description de l'Égypte*.¹⁰ Work immediately began under the supervision of Alexandre Brongniart, director of the Sèvres manufactory since 1800. It was decided that the *surtout* would be included in a dessert service of 136 pieces (plates and other tableware), the whole set costing the exorbitant sum of 46,548.65 francs.¹¹

While the dessert service was achieved as early as June 1806, the fabrication of the centrepiece was delayed by important technical difficulties. Denon was well aware of such

problems when he asked Brongniart in 1805: »Tell me if you can make some pure architectural forms, if in the column shafts you can preserve nicely elongated lines? Wouldn't it be possible to advantageously mix bronze and biscuit in this type of ornament? With a guaranteed success in this part, we will create a monumental *surtout*.«¹² In 1808, Alexandre Brongniart was still complaining about some difficulties in making the piece: »This *surtout* requires so much work, its execution in porcelain is so extremely difficult because of all its square parts that, despite sustained work, it requires and will require still much more time than planned.«¹³ The technical challenge can be partly explained by the choice of material: by choosing white biscuit without any added colour, which was unusual for centrepieces, Brongniart ran the risk of making flaws particularly visible. It was thus necessary to have a few elements remade until a perfect result was obtained.

The emperor and Denon grew more and more impatient at such slow progress, especially since the piece was meant to be presented to Tsar Alexander, as specified in a report to Brongniart: »This is what provoked Monsieur Denon's deep dissatisfaction about the time still needed to achieve the Egyptian temple. He fears the Emperor would be offended and that it would have very unpleasant consequences for everyone, considering His Majesty promised the temples to the Emperor of Russia at the battle of Austerlitz (the 2nd of December 1805), over a year ago. [...] Monsieur Denon would like to double the means so that they can be completed promptly.«¹⁴ The service and the centrepiece finally left for Russia on 2 October 1808, some five years after the work started and over a year after Napoleon decided to give it to the tsar: »Following an order by His Majesty, which I received last 18th of September [i.e., in 1807, a year earlier and right after the treaty of Tilsitt] from M. le Grand Maréchal du Palais, and which you are aware of, the service should be sent as a gift to Emperor Alexander, along with the Olympic service.«¹⁵ A van with a special suspension system was chartered to transport the forty-four boxes. It travelled through Erfurt where Napoleon and Alexander met, but the boxes remained unpacked because of the elaborate wrapping Brongniart had insisted on. Alexander was so fascinated by the gift that he had it exposed in Saint Petersburg where he would spend hours admiring it with his court.¹⁶

What is striking about the immaculately white centrepiece is its colossal nature. It comprises a series of architectural monuments which, as Jean-Marcel Humbert has shown, are all inspired from the preliminary plates prepared for the *Description de l'Égypte*.¹⁷ Denon asked Jean-Baptiste Lepère (or Le Peyre), the draughtsman in charge of the plates of the *Description*, to make the drawings for each plate of the dessert service from the views of *Voyage en Basse et Haute Égypte* and at Sèvres artists worked under his supervision.¹⁸

The centrepiece is organised around three temples. In the middle stands the Temple of Philae as represented in the *Description de l'Égypte* (plate 35).¹⁹ It is in fact Trajan's Kiosk.²⁰ In his *Voyage dans la Basse et Haute Égypte*, Denon is struck by the small temple he wishes he could bring back to France: »If ever we should be disposed to transport a temple from Africa to Europe, this I am speaking of should be selected for the purpose; for besides the practicability of such an operation, it would give a palpable proof of the noble simplicity of

Egyptian architecture, and would shew in a striking manner that it is character, and not extent alone, which gives majesty to an edifice.²¹ Around this central temple are four obelisks, each 1.26 centimetres high, with hieroglyphs written all over them. To one side of the obelisks is the temple of Denderah as represented in the *Description de l'Égypte*.²² To the other is the temple of Edfou, which is remarkably preserved as Denon points out: »The village of Edfou contains two edifices [...], both so remarkably preserved that it would give a wrong impression to call them ruins; since it would suffice to remove the debris crowding them to see almost intact monuments appear. [...] This monument, one of the biggest of the Thebaid, is the most complete and well preserved of all.«²³ A colonnade connects each temple to a pylon against which two colossi of Memnon are leaning. An avenue of nine ram-headed sphinxes extends the perspective.²⁴ Finally, four oversized Egyptians complete the centrepiece. About the latter, Denon specifies in a letter to Brongniart: »I have imagined a charming Egyptian group, of easy execution, to carry raw, glazed or dry fruit, and which would be part of the service [of the Views of Egypt] and the *surtout's* ornamentation at the same time.«²⁵ The total length of this remarkable ensemble is 6.50 metres, placed on a 6.64 metre long steel stand.²⁶

In addition to the *surtout* was an accompanying service of seventy-two dessert plates, designed in close collaboration between Brongniart senior, Alexandre Théodore Brongniart, and Denon (plate 36).²⁷ Each plate is decorated with views of contemporary Egypt painted by Swebach-Desfontaines which reproduce illustrations from Denon's *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte*.²⁸ The borders with a beau bleu ground bear a decorative frieze of fanciful hieroglyphs with a purely ornamental function.²⁹ The plates and other tableware are painted the same colour.

The Egyptian service and its *surtout* inspired the fabrication of others. A second service was made in 1810 at the behest of Joséphine. As compensation to their divorce, Napoleon had allocated the sum of 30,000 francs to the Empress, who then decided to commission an Egyptian service and a *surtout*. It differed from the first version because of some new plates, but the centrepiece remained identical. In 1812, as the whole set was being completed, Joséphine changed her mind and eventually refused to accept it, fearing it might be »d'un goût démodé«. The *surtout* was kept in the factory's inventory until 1815 when Louis XVIII gave it to Wellington. It is today held at Apsley House.³⁰ A third service was made between 1934 and 1938, when it was offered to the king of Egypt.³¹

THE OLYMPIC CENTREPIECE

When Denon suggested to Bonaparte the manufacturing of a centrepiece of Egyptian architecture, he must have been aware that, three years earlier, Sèvres had started working on an Olympic centrepiece designed by Théodore Brongniart while his son Alexandre was director of the factory.³² Until now, art historians have treated the Egyptian and the Olym-

pic centrepieces as two independent objects. It may be accurate as far as their conception is concerned, but such an approach is contradicted by Napoleon's later decisions. Several testimonies reveal that the two centrepieces have had closely intertwined stories. First of all, the Egyptian service and its centrepiece should have been presented at the 1806 Industrial Products Exhibition (*Exposition des produits de l'industrie*) along with the Olympic service.³³ As seen above, the delay was due to extreme difficulties in execution. Neither the Egyptian service nor the Olympic one would finally be exposed. Also, in 1806, Brongniart wrote to Daru suggesting that Napoleon wished to keep the two services for his personal use: »If the Emperor takes for his private use the services called Egyptian and Olympic, we will no longer have any beautiful service to offer as a gift.«³⁴ Eventually, as I have already mentioned, Napoleon decided to offer both services and the centrepieces to the tsar. The two services always seem to be associated one with another, making a joint study particularly accurate and significant.

The circumstances of the creation of the Olympic service and its *surtout* remain unknown (plate 37). They first appear in archival documents in the year XI (1802–1803).³⁵ The dessert service comprises sixty-eight plates all painted with mythological scenes. It was presented at the annual exhibition of the production of the Sèvres manufactory in May 1806. The pieces were all sent to the inventory on 31 December 1806.³⁶ Alexandre Brongniart entrusted his father with designing the whole set – service and *surtout* –, as shown by several drawings signed by the latter.³⁷

The centrepiece is composed of sculptures alternating with plates and other tableware. In the middle, on a chariot drawn by two strong oxen, stands a throne with Ceres and Bacchus sitting side by side. Ceres is wearing a wheat crown and holding a large cornucopia filled with fruit; with a crown of vine leaves on his head, Bacchus is holding a thyrsus and embracing Ceres (fig. 1).³⁸ The chariot's platform is decorated with a frieze of putti; they are represented as labourers on Ceres's side, while on Bacchus's side, they are picking grapes. Behind the scene, an ancient sacrifice is represented. The two deities and the two oxen are made of pristine white biscuit, while their attributes, the chariot and the throne, are enhanced in gold.³⁹ Before and after the chariot stand two high columns (1.26 metre), one surmounted by Apollo, crowned with the sun and holding his lyre, the other by Diana with her bow and quiver and a moon crescent on her head. At the base of the columns is a frieze showing various figures on a red background.⁴⁰ Brongniart's drawing reveal that the piece originally included four antique altars with the medallion portraits of Flora, Ceres, Bacchus and Saturn, but they were not executed in the end. The altars would have alternated with large flower basins decorated with butterflies on »a red and sky blue ground«.⁴¹ All these elements are placed on a rectangular stand, whose borders present a series of ornamental vases of antique form with »dolphin handles ›beau-bleu‹ ground in four forms«.⁴² Finally, at each extremity of the table, three Graces in white biscuit are holding a fruit bowl »on a lapis-blue ground veined with gold«.⁴³ They are mounted on a circular stand with a border also made of small ornamental vases. Two cornucopias or rhytons in the shape of boars'



1 Model of the chariot of Bacchus

heads and decorated with putti performing various agricultural tasks were probably added to the original project and sent to the tsar.⁴⁴ Because the *surtout* was so difficult to arrange, Brongniart senior sent a mounting drawing to Saint Petersburg showing the disposition of the various pieces, here surrounded by a double row of plates and compote dishes (plate 38).

Before leaving Paris, the *service olympique* and its *surtout* were used on 23 August 1807 at the marriage of Napoleon's brother, Jérôme Bonaparte, to Catharina of Württemberg, first cousin to Tsar Alexander I. The wedding took place at the Tuileries, but the tsar did not attend because of disrupted diplomatic relations between France and Russia at the time.⁴⁵

At Napoleon's request, the service was sent to Russia in late September 1807, a year before the Egyptian service, in a van with special suspension and was delivered in perfect condition.

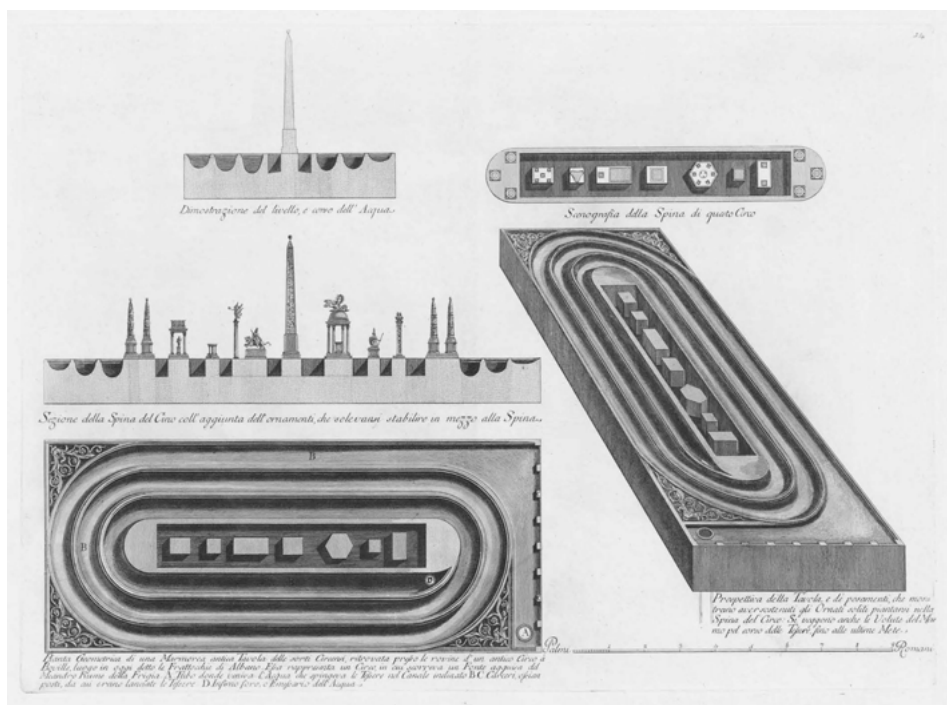
THE SURTOUT ÉGYPTIEN, MIRROR TO THE SURTOUT OLYMPIQUE

As seen above, both pieces were conceived independently of one another and yet, their histories are inextricably linked as much by the technical prowess required to manufacture them as by the emperor's decision to present them together in 1806, to keep them for

personal use and to finally have them sent to the tsar. There is probably no other example of a diplomatic gift including two centrepieces. Such has been the singular fate of these major masterpieces which have Egypt facing Rome, much like twins. Their complex interactions are worth examining if we are to discover what they meant to those who were able to see them together.

The emperor's liberalities were obviously political as he hoped to seek the tsar's favour to let him carry out his conquests. There was continuous competition between the two monarchs in the form of diplomatic gifts. Napoleon wanted to show the superiority of French luxury goods. He knew he could count as much on Brongniart's innovative creations as on the exceptional carefulness of execution of the manufactory's artists. He was well aware that the two centrepieces were not destined to be both used during the same ceremonial dinner and was therefore hoping they would be exposed together in Saint Petersburg and would call for the court's admiration of the sensational craftsmanship of the workers at Sèvres, whose production he always insisted should always stand as the most magnificent in Europe.⁴⁶ Beyond these strategic considerations, there are political symbols at the core of the centrepieces' manufacturing process. First, they both work as reminders of the successful military campaigns led by the young Bonaparte in 1798. For the emperor as well as for many others, there was a persistent parallel between Egypt and Italy, as expressed by Daru: »M. Denon, who is travelling through the battlefields of Italy to draw sketches and maps that will match his Egyptian atlas, will produce a work further emulating painters and engravers.«⁴⁷ It is not difficult to imagine that Napoleon wanted to preserve the memories of these campaigns by keeping the drawings for his personal use. In Denon's mind, the choice of Egypt was a perfect response to Napoleon's explicit demand for »subjects related to national glory«.⁴⁸ The goal was to immortalise the great cultural achievements of the expedition which, even though it was a military defeat, shed light on the important role of Egyptian civilisation as the founding stone of Graeco-Roman culture. Also, Egypt turned into a mythical objective as part of Napoleon's great »Oriental dream«: even though France lost the country to Britain in 1801 before regaining it in 1805, Egypt still represented a key challenge of the emperor's hesitant and contradictory policy towards the Ottoman empire as illustrated by treaties signed successively with the Porte and Russia, whose conflicting interests were well known. The objective was to win it back from the British and gain control over the most efficient trade routes with the Far East. There is implicit mention of such plan in the treaty of Tilsit when Napoleon and Alexander agreed on a possible partition of the Ottoman empire.⁴⁹ It was precisely during those events and negotiations that Napoleon decided to offer the *surtout égyptien* to the Tsar.

As for the *surtout olympique*, the memory of the campaigns of Italy were still very much alive when Brongniart started working on the piece: the manufacturing of the centrepiece began only two years after the Luneville peace treaty, and everyone still had in mind the triumphal procession accompanying the arrival of the Italian works of art brought back from the first campaign in July 1798. Napoleon's choice to have the precious French porcelain



2 Bovillae centrepiece by Gio Battista Piranesi, *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcofagi, tripodi, lucerne, ed ornamenti antichi disegnati ed incisi*, Vol. I, Rome, 1778–1780

transported by van to Saint Petersburg to display reproductions of famous Egyptian masterpieces perhaps echoed, if only implicitly, the coffers of antique works of art crossing the Alps, thus confirming that Paris was now the new Rome from which travelled immortal works. Besides, Brongniart may have had in mind the great revolutionary and consular celebrations with long parades, erections of columns or of antique temples. The celebrations took place at the Champs de Mars, the Circus Maximus of the era. Brongniart senior, who supported the new political regime, had participated in those popular ceremonies, described them enthusiastically and even designed projects for some.⁵⁰ The shape of the dinner table called for a comparison with Roman circuses, as shown by the mounting drawing made by Brongniart and sent along with the *surtout* to Saint Petersburg. The reference to the ceremonial places of ancient Rome was an all the more appropriate choice since it contributed to legitimate the Roman parentage claimed by the Napoleonic regime, which was clearly visible in all the decorative arts of the Consulat and the Empire.⁵¹ Brongniart was not alone in making this formal correspondence and may have drawn inspiration from many different sources. However, one cannot help but think of a particular plate published in

Giovanni Battista Piranesi's famous *Vasi, candelabri, cippi, sarcophagi* (fig. 2).⁵² As a cultured architect with an interest in his contemporaries' works, Brongniart senior must have known about Piranesi's book, especially since another plate represents rhytons that are quite similar to the ones he designed for the *surtout olympique*.⁵³ The plate's caption is particularly interesting: »Geometric plan of an antique relief in marble representing drawing lots at the circus, found near the vestiges of an ancient circus at Bovillae, today known as the Frattocchie di Albano. It represents a circus in which flowed a spring like that of the Meander, river of Phrygia. A: Tube with water to drive tokens down along sloping canal; B C: Enclosures, that is, places to throw the tokens from; D: Tiny hole, or water emissary.«⁵⁴ Bovillae is no coincidence: this small town located on the Via Appia south of Rome was said to be the original place of the gens Julia, the family that Augustus descended from. Three years after Augustus's death, Tiberius decided to celebrate his illustrious predecessor by building a sanctuary dedicated to the gens Julia, together with a theatre and, more importantly, a circus, one of the largest in the Roman empire, where ceremonial games in Augustus's honour, the *Ludi Augustales*, took place.⁵⁵ The place quickly sank into oblivion but probably haunted memories until the early 19th century because of its Augustinian symbolic power.⁵⁶ Brongniart may have been particularly interested in the Roman reference in the caption accompanying Piranesi's engraving. When Bonaparte self-proclaimed himself as emperor in 1804, he claimed an Augustinian heritage and presented himself as the political and cultural heir to the Roman emperor. The regime's official architects, Charles Percier and Pierre François Léonard Fontaine, who were close to Brongniart, were put in charge of creating architectural environments and interiors to remind people of that divine descent and would constantly design decorations and ornaments of palaces and buildings referring to Rome's grandeur. Brongniart's choice of the circus theme could not have been more political.

Even more so, Piranesi's engraving put forward a major theme in the conception of centrepieces: the island. Placed in the middle of the table, the centrepiece structurally creates a separate, slightly higher space, closed in on itself. There are three successive circles unfolding from this central island: first, the plates and other tableware (various dishes, sugar bowls, etc.), slightly lower than those of the centrepiece, then the plate service, and finally the guests themselves, who are an integral part of the scene and establish a boundary with the rest of the world, to which they are turning their backs. They ensure insularity, their eyes converging at the *surtout* whose dimensions do not allow for conversation with the people sitting on the other side. Piranesi's centrepiece is an island structured by a water circuit originating at a fountain fed by the Meander, a river often celebrated by ancient writers for its sinuous course.⁵⁷ In Graeco-Roman culture, the island of Delos provides a mythical origin to the theme of insularity as the safe haven where Leto gave birth to the twins Dionysus/Apollo and Artemis/Diana. During the Enlightenment, the island was the place where philosophers would go to reflect; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, for example, compares it to a paradise in his *Fifth Walk of the Reveries of the Solitary Walker*, even though he eventually asked to be buried at the island of Poplars in Ermenonville.⁵⁸ In Rome, the mysterious

»maritime theatre« at Hadrian's villa, with its annular canal, is another legendary example of a retreat away from the world where the emperor and his closest friends would go to spend idyllic days.⁵⁹ Since the mid-18th century, many different forms of insularity have been used to arrange and design homes, the most architectural manifestation being the panoramic wallpapers which appeared in France around 1800; the papers would turn the room into an island surrounded by an idyllic wall-covering landscape.⁶⁰ It is therefore no surprise that the two centrepieces would reflect that new fashion. The presence of Apollo and Diana at the top of the *surtout olympique*'s columns and of their mythical parents, Ceres and Bacchus, on the central chariot in the middle of a *Circus Maximus*, was an implicit reference to the island of Delos. In fact, many ancient writers considered it to be a floating island that could move. It was not unique: the island of Chemmis, located on the Nile, had also been described by Herodotus as a floating island and compared to Delos, as it was there that Apollo took refuge thanks to Isis's care.⁶¹ It is possible that Brongniart knew about Larche's important translation of Herodotus's *Histories* in which one can read this peculiar passage. It refers to transportation, a theme already present in the Egyptian monuments which were brought back to adorn the main squares of European capitals. Finally, the theme of the island is also developed in the Egyptian centrepiece: the great Philae temple was built in the centre of the island bearing its name and which Denon describes as »an enchanting island«.⁶²

I am not suggesting that there was an explicit intention to transform the movable centrepieces into obvious references to insularity and floating islands. But while there is no testimony supporting this hypothesis, one cannot entirely discard the fact that late 18th century mentalities were quite ready to make comparisons and analogies and could have therefore established implicit correlations between the islands and the centrepieces, as suggested by Piranesi.

Furthermore, architectural theories may have influenced the comparison drawn between the two centrepieces. Their architectural and urban features are reminiscent of the collections of architectural models which became extremely fashionable in the second half of the 18th century, in particular that of Louis-François Cassas. His collection, which he started assembling in 1794, comprised about 80 plaster models and was exposed rue de Seine, Paris, in 1806, before it was acquired by the State in 1813.⁶³ The considerable enthusiasm for those collections reflects the heated debates among learned society about the origins of architecture to decide who, the Egyptians or the Greeks, had been the most creative. It is in this context that the two centrepieces were paired. Quatremère de Quincy was one of the major protagonists in the discussion on the superiority of Egyptian or Greek architecture. In his famous work, *On Egyptian Architecture (De l'architecture égyptienne)*, published in 1803, a year after Denon's *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte*, he defended the superiority of the latter.⁶⁴ Quatremère acknowledges that the Egyptians invented architecture, but he considers the repetitive and systematic forms of their buildings to be simplistic, which he links to the dark cave and underground nature which was then associated with Egyptian art. On the contrary, Greece had elaborated a complex architecture ruled

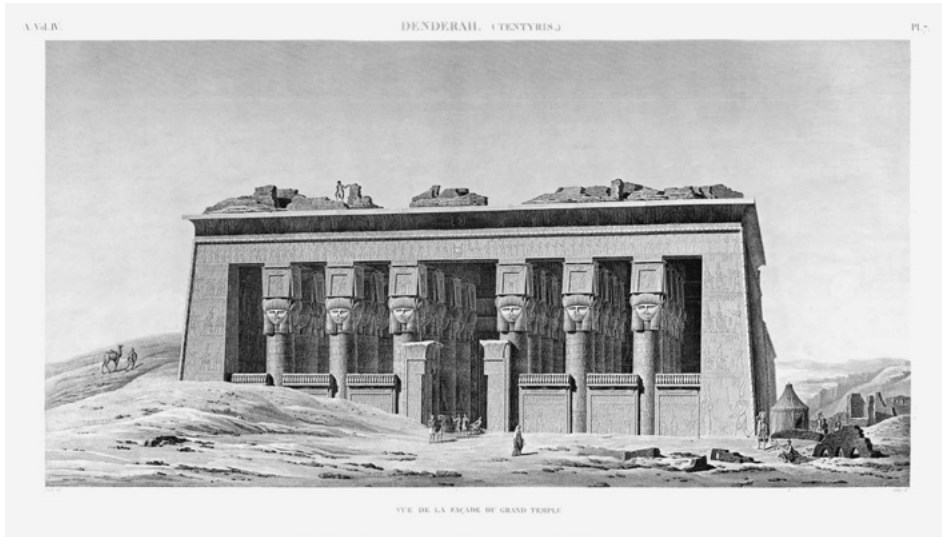
by precise aesthetic canons flourishing in full light. As for Denon, who was still very much impressed by the discoveries he had made during his trip, he argued for the supremacy of Egyptian architecture and claimed that »the Greeks have never devised nor executed anything in a grander style«. ⁶⁵ He believed that Egypt had to be rehabilitated as the mother of arts since it accounted for all the constructive inventions that Greece merely built on and developed without any true creative genius. The two men aimed to demonstrate the simplicity of each culture's architecture, Denon taking most singular and unusual liberties to do so in his descriptions.

To convince his contemporaries of the superior nature of Egyptian architecture, Denon could play on two aspects of the piece: the *surtout*'s height and its whiteness. Let us start with the height of the pieces. Two oversized, 54-centimetre-high Egyptians are standing between the *surtout* and the dessert service (plate 39). They are dominating the two temples and seem to break the rules of verisimilitude; but Denon provides an explanation as to their unrealistic dimensions when he describes the emotion he felt as he discovered Denderah: »In the ruins of Tentyra, the Egyptians appeared to me giants.« ⁶⁶ With their fixed poses of Egyptian figures, they seem to belong to ancient history. But they are also turning their backs to the temples and offering an abundance of fresh fruit to the guests of the present time. They might metaphorically express the grandeur and prosperity of Egyptian culture. Let us now examine the issue of the whiteness of the pieces. The power of the *surtout égyptien* lies as much in the simplicity of the forms as in its solar and radiating whiteness. Whether in the 19th century or today, it allows us to feel the physical and spiritual shock experienced by Denon. By speaking to the senses, the simple forms and surreal white of the paste go against Quatremère's theories of the dark cave associated with the Egyptians. ⁶⁷ The Egyptian centrepiece may have thus been a way for Denon to rectify the injustice of attributing to the Greeks what was in fact due to the Egyptians. To finish convincing his contemporaries of the value of Egyptian architecture, Denon chose the most prestigious buildings and those that looked »new«. His notes reveal the shock he felt in their presence: the temple of Denderah is described as »the most magnificent monument of Egyptian architecture« (*»monument le plus magnifique de l'architecture égyptienne«*) ⁶⁸ and the temple of Edfou is »the most complete and well preserved« (*»le plus complet et le mieux préservé«*) of all the Thebaid's monuments. ⁶⁹ Denon goes as far as to suggest »transporting a temple from Africa to Europe«, that of Philae: »Besides the practicability of such an operation afforded by its small dimensions, it would give a palpable proof of the noble simplicity of Egyptian architecture, and would shew, in a striking manner, that it is character and not extent alone, which gives dignity to an edifice.« ⁷⁰ On the Egyptian centrepiece, the temples show absolutely no sign of deterioration, no trace which could either suggest they are vestiges or lessen their eternal nature. Not only did Denon choose to represent them as if they had just been erected, but he also made sure to avoid giving them their original sand colour. At the time, the bright white paste, which was difficult to obtain, was the main object of competition between porcelain manufactories, Sèvres claiming superiority over Meissen. At Sèvres, the

surtout égyptien was the first piece to be ever made in such a dazzling monochromy, the goal of which was to suggest the universal and atemporal nature of the original architectures, i.e. that they were neither historically nor spatially situated. They belong to the *hic et nunc*, whether in antiquity or in the present time, in Paris or in Saint Petersburg. As for the *surtout olympique*, it balances out this sublime vision of Egypt: it is coloured, except for Ceres's chariot, which is made in white biscuit. A comparison between the small-sized obelisks of the Egyptian centrepiece (0.685 metre, i.e. about 1.40 metre above the ground when set on the table) and the two impressive columns of Apollo and Diana (1.26 metres high and 2 metres above the ground when set on the table) reveals that height was indeed a sign of superiority. But is it an expression of the superiority of the Graeco-Roman world over Egypt? Was it Brongniart senior's way to take revenge on Denon?

One may ask about the presence of Gods in the centrepieces. A decorative centrepiece is not to be touched but contemplated by the guests, whose bodies remain at a distance, in contrast with the other pieces of the service, which are made to be handled.⁷¹ The whole piece is therefore very solemn, almost sacred, and participates in reinforcing the liturgical nature of any ceremonial dinner.

The monumental piece of the *surtout égyptien* is silent, there is no narrative to give it life, so much so that even the characters represented on the plates of the *Description*, who served as inspiration for the piece, have been systematically left out (fig. 3). The plates of the dessert service are made alive with familiar pictures of contemporary daily life. The two gigantic Egyptians are positioned in such a way that they establish a link between the centrepiece and the service; they symbolically act as intermediaries between Egyptian antiquity and the present time, providing access to the idealised world of ancient civilisations. On the contrary, the Olympic centrepiece tells a story and shows movement: on the central chariot, Bacchus has his arms tenderly wrapped around Ceres's shoulders, while on the top of the two columns, Diana is dancing and holding her bow towards Apollo, who is pointing at her. At the bottom, some mythological characters are parading. The altars which were initially included in Brongniart senior's project are decorated with various deities. The project for the centrepiece explicitly stages dialogues between all these characters (plate 37). The service plates represent variations on lively, mythological stories. Therefore, the service and the centrepiece offer a glimpse on an assembly of characters, with a reference to the banquet of the gods of Olympus which the guests of the ceremonial dinner attend symbolically. The special connection between humans and gods and the luxurious execution of the piece may explain why Napoleon, who was deeply committed to symbols, chose this service to celebrate the marriage of his brother Jérôme to Catharina of Württemberg and to express the gods' blessing before sending it to the tsar. All the enlightened minds of the second half of the 18th century and early 19th century dreamed of being transported to this mythical world.⁷² Denon's approach is similar to that of Percier and Fontaine drawing the interiors and objects that would enable their contemporaries to actually live in Augustinian Rome, and not just pretend to do so. The deities evolving in the interior decorations de-



3 Temple de Denderah, *Description de l'Égypte*, Edition Panckoucke, Paris, 1809–1828, vol. IV, pl. 7

signed by the two men during the Empire have a complex status: they are more than just copies of ancient iconography, they are actually present and well alive in the ancient atmosphere thus re-created, like dramatic actors who embody and infuse their characters with life.⁷³

Despite the absence of narrative in the Egyptian centrepiece, the gods are present but quite differently. The Egyptian centrepiece does not show any deity, perhaps because Egyptian gods looked too sinister or even inhuman with their bizarre animal masks. However, at a symbolic level, the temples of Philae and Denderah are home to Isis, whom they are dedicated to, while that of Edfou is dedicated to Horus, son of Isis.⁷⁴ In the Olympic centrepiece, Ceres, Bacchus, Diana and Apollo were chosen to celebrate the pleasures of the ceremonial dinner. According to the *interpretatio graeca* initiated by Herodotus, which the learned men and women of the 18th century were well aware of, Isis is assimilated to Ceres and Horus to Apollo.⁷⁵ Furthermore, the four obelisks around Philae temple deserve consideration since they take up an aberrant position and should have been in front of each pylon. They are more reminiscent of the Iseum on the Campius Martius in Rome, as it was thought to be in the late 18th century, rather than of the temple on the island of Philae, where there was no obelisk.⁷⁶ Emphasis is thus put on Isis/Ceres. Throughout the French revolutionary and imperial period, the goddess of fertility had been assimilated to the goddess of Reason. Decorated with garlands of flowers and wheat sheaves, her statue was paraded during popular processions and became the object of a secular cult at the same time as that of the Supreme Being.⁷⁷ In the 18th century, numerous treaties mentioned the unique

place that the cult of Isis had in French history and dated it back from early Gaul.⁷⁸ Under the Empire, when Napoleon decided to grant cities the privilege of obtaining coats of arms, which the revolutionaries had done away with, the city of Paris explicitly chose to refer to Isis, as testified by the memoir written by the Commission in charge of justifying the new coat of arms: »The arms of Paris are in relation with the cult of Isis, which was once universally common in the Gauls.« As for the decree allowing for the creation of the arms, it specified: »*De gueules, au vaisseau antique, la proue chargée d'une figure d'Isis, assise, d'argent soutenu d'une mer de même, et adextré en chef d'une étoile aussi d'argent.*«⁷⁹

In the absence of representations of Isis in the Egyptian centrepiece, the three temples become suffused with a mysterious aura, reinforcing the abstract image of Egyptian religion which had been particularly valued by freemasons since the 18th century. One cannot dismiss a clear reference to freemasonry in addition to the others already mentioned. In fact, all the influential men of the Consulate and Empire times were freemasons or at least close to them. Also, Napoleon, who was suspicious towards freemasonry, finally waived a ban on it because too many members of the Egyptian expedition had rallied the various lodges which had been spreading tremendously, especially since 1804.⁸⁰ As for Tsar Alexander I, who may have been initiated by chamberlain Rodion Kochelev, reintroduced freemasonry in Russia in 1802 and surrounded himself with freemasonic ministers.⁸¹ Therefore, the Egyptian centrepiece with clear reference to freemasonry could only consolidate the tsar's philosophical convictions.

The two centrepieces allow for a constant back and forth movement between Rome and Egypt. But it has nothing to do with the mere wandering of the mind finding pleasure in going from one ideal civilisation to another, like a traveller with a particular taste for culture. If the centrepiece had been the anecdotic description of a picturesque country, for example Egypt which had been so recently discovered, it would have included a pyramid in the middle of the temples. Can such an absence only be explained by technical motives? It is all the more unlikely as the centrepieces were already so difficult to make that adding a pyramid would not have been an obstacle. However, in Western mentalities, pyramids were considered as royal tombs and it is therefore more likely that putting a grave at the centre of a ceremonial table seemed quite impossible.⁸²

THE AFTERLIFE OF THE SURTOUT ÉGYPTIEN

There has been a final twist to the story of the Egyptian centrepiece. In 1978, artists Anne and Patrick Poirier created a table centrepiece at the Sèvres manufactory. Entitled *Ruines d'Égypte* (*Ruins of Egypt*), it was inspired by Denon's Egyptian centrepiece (plate 40).⁸³ After studying at the Ecole nationale supérieure des arts décoratifs in Paris, they were both fellows at the Villa Medici (1967–1972). While in Rome, they visited the ancient ruins and were struck by their evocative power which became a major element in their work. They

have developed an architectural, photographic, and archaeological approach focusing on traces and fragments as »memories« expressing the vacuums left by absence and at the same time opening new perspectives for a subliminal future, also bound to disappear. One series of works opens with a dreamlike evocation of Rome harbour, *Ostia Antica*: this terracotta model of the city is an allegorical vision of destruction and represents the absence of life. They then tackled the issue of reconstruction in *Domus Aurea*, which they chose because it was the impressive palace built by Nero after he burnt down Rome. In this context, Anne and Patrick Poirier began collaborating with Sèvres for the creation of the *Ruines d'Égypte*. They drew upon Denon's Egyptian centrepiece and even used some of its moulds. It is therefore not surprising that their work had a meaningful resonance with the *surtout*. The spirit of ancient architectural models in long succession, the prominent, immaculate whiteness of the structure, (yet subtly enhanced in gold and its pools discreetly painted in blue), the evocation of an empty world, whose humanity is only visible in the traces left by sublime monuments: all of these are signs of such correspondence. Denon selected the temples according to their documentary value, saw them as »new« and wished they could be transported to Europe as living witnesses of Egyptian culture. On the contrary, Anne and Patrick Poirier design architectures which are not identifiable and are anonymous, symbolic ruins of the decay at work in the world. The mood radiating from *Ruines d'Égypte* arises from a deep meditation on Time and provides us with a vertiginous glimpse not into a future sustained by the antique ideal, but of the destruction of a world doomed at inception. The traces left serve to awaken memory before disappearing entirely and ensure another kind of survival, a symbolic one. As a matter of fact, a few years later, Anne and Patrick Poirier worked on the central theme of Mnemosyne. In the poetics of *Ruines d'Égypte*, the artists introduced two pyramids, or immemorial tombs, each one in the middle of the two halves of the centrepiece. The whole piece is strewn with scattered fragments from mutilated statues, toppled or truncated columns, thus creating an atmosphere of inescapable annihilation. What is left of the now deformed temples is no longer dedicated to a deity, not even to Isis, who is frequently evoked by Denon. The Poiriers radically depart from him. They present a world forsaken by men and gods alike. In a way, the process of secularisation has run its course: no mythical past of any kind, whether divine or heroic, has left trace of its existence. Only stones remain. From Denon to Anne and Patrick Poirier, the *surtout* has spanned history, leaving Egypt at the origin as well as at the end of time.

At a symbolic level, Napoleon offered Tsar Alexander I his own conception of the development of Western civilisation: not only was it heir to the Graeco-Roman tradition, it held an inheritance from ancient Egypt, which was seen as both the earliest manifestation of culture and a complex nation passing through the ages on the tightrope between the East and the West. With the magnificent gift of the Egyptian and Olympic centrepieces, Napoleon maintained a continuum, a kind of lineage from which he was descended, his conquests legitimating his position of sole heir. The tsar was left with no choice but to agree with such a view which did not offer any other alternative.

