

# A GLANCE AT MYSTERIOUS EGYPT

By JULIEN TONDRIAU

ONE cannot understand ancient Egypt without paying a visit to the Museum of Egyptian Art in Cairo. It is one of the world's richest, and, in Egyptology, it is undoubtedly the most complete. However sumptuous the British museum, the Metropolitan or the Louvre may be in this domain, in comparison with the Cairo Museum, they suddenly appear impoverished. As the result of recent excavations it is growing larger incessantly.

One can visit the Museum in two hours, or in two months. There is always something new.

On the ground floor we find a reconstitution of Egypt's ancient history and a unique illustration of her art from the earliest days.

In the rotunda below the cupola are placed the objects coming from the most recent excavations or acquisitions. Then begins the bewitching fresco. Gropings of the Thinite Epoch, the serene and mighty simplicity of the Ancient Memphian Empire, the diorite statue of Kha-f-ra or Khephan, builder of the second pyramid, with his sphinx-like profile, unbelievably pure and unsurpassably precise. At his right, the crouching Scribe of Saggara in painted limestone whose disdainful mimicry already seems already to warrant the declaration of Diauf: "only the Scribe is Chief", a prelude to the triumph of the functionary . . . At his left, the wooden statue of Ka-aper, better known under the name of Cheikh-el-Badal or Mayor of the District.

The balanced idealism of the Middle Theban Empire would be dull and monotonous if it weren't for the pathetic gravity of certain faces. Stop a moment and admire the little wooden statue of Senousret I with its agile simplicity. Then gaze upon the sphinx of Tanis which has been the cause of so many disputes: Hyksos or not Hyksos?

Colossal vigor of the New Empire is reflected in the statue of Thutmoses III, glorious conqueror to Megiddo; the cow Hathor of Deir-el-Bahari, its divine protectress, Cretan style; painted reliefs of the queen Hatshepsout celebrating the voyage of her navy to the country of Pount . . .

Gallery eight, room three: Armanian interlude, sentimental familiarity, devotion to nature, the sun-cult of Akhnaton, misshapen visionary of El-Amarna. A long head, an emaciated face, a feminine pelvis. A gracefulness which is sometimes monstrous. There is, fortunately, the bust of Queen Nefertiti, unfinished (the Berlin bust is apparently in America) . . .

Effeminate grace of Ramsesan art, grandiose under Ramses II.

Libyan and Ethiopian epochs. The latest excavations at Karnak prove that one has hitherto underestimated the influence of the latter period on the Saitan Renaissance which reacted, conventionally enough, against Theban influence by a return to Memphian traditions.

Afterwards one finds the charms of Hellenistic art, delightfully decadent. In one corner of the north wall of the Graeco-Roman room, there is the greyish stone copy of the Rosetta Stone, the most celebrated inscription in the world . . .

A glance at the Meroitic antiquities (whose inscriptions, like their proto-Sinaitic neighbours, remain mysterious) and at the sarcophages, and from thence to the incomparable treasures on the floor above . . .

One forgets too often the beauty of the possessions of Queen Hetepheres, mother of Kheops; the elegant treasures of Tanis, beloved by Professor Montet; the room of Graeco-Roman jewels; Tod treasures dating from the Middle Empire. One hardly notices the boomerangs and the millenarian rubber wheels of a royal chariot for close by is the fabulous wealth of the tomb of Tut-Ankh-Amon. One can well imagine Howard Carter discovering them by the pale light of a torch and crying to Lord Carnarvon: "Marvels! Marvels!" Marvels which deserve, in themselves, a trip to Egypt . . . Unbelievable riches, exquisite finesse. How were so many objects placed in such a small tomb? Poor little king, surnamed "Powerful lord—endowed with eternal life" who died consumptive at the age of eighteen, in the supremely refined vanity of his gold . . . Blessed chance which preserved the pillars of his tiny tomb (where his mummy still remains) so that the ineffable and dazzling splendours might be delivered intact to the lovers of beauty . . .

A curious museum, Roman bulwarks, Oriental courts, built in the nineteenth century. A strange mixture surrounding the Coptic Museum, founded in 1910 by Moreos Smaika Pacha.

Christian Egypt, influenced by Alexandrian art and afterwards by the Byzantines, influences which still last today. A technique obsessed by ornamentation, strong colors. A sculpture affirming its mastership in its architectural finery, but whose primitive style, the Oxyrhynchos Bahnasa of Hellenistic inspiration becomes more and more austere. Disproportioned and little varied humans, but refined and graceful animals. Splendid incrustations in ivory and ebony. Surety of work in metals and textiles.

An important link in the history of Egypt which one neglects too often . . .

Do not forget a visit to the church of Abu Sarga. Tradition pretends that the Holy Family spent a month where the crypt is now found.

Conceived by Khedive Ismail in 1869, the creation of an Arabic Museum grouping the artistic treasures of the old mosques was not realized until 1881 under Kjedive Tewfik.

The most complete and precious collection which exists of the evolution of Mohammedan art, too little known by the Westerns. Enriched by excavations in the environs of Cairo.

Here again is a magnificent condensation of the history of Egypt, this time Mohammedan. Preliminary to the seventh and ninth centuries: Islam infiltrated under the Rachidites, Ommyades and Abbassides. Independence under Ibn Touloun who, smitten by ostentation, built the capital of Al-Kata'i and Dyami', its mosque-cathedral. Abbassidin and Ikehiddin interlude (tenth century), harbinger of the glorious Fatimidan flowering. Construction of the capital in the precincts of three famous doors which still exist: Bab-El Nasr, Bab-El-Foutouh and Bab-Zuweilah. The Fatimidans brought to Egypt an unbelievably sumptuous art, stamped with impressive and harmonious life; admirable jewels in rock crystal, in sculptured wood, in cloth decorated by inscriptions, in chiselled metal. Then, Sumnite reaction of the Ayyoubides, enemies of the Crusaders: balanced but severe art. Afterwards fabulous luxury of the Bahardian and Circassian Memeloukes: delicate incrustations in gold, ivory and silver. But the artistic Renaissance of the fourteenth century tolled the bell for the Memeloukes, ruined by the discovery of the route to the Indies, then conquered by the Ottomans in 1517. Three dull centuries waiting for the activity of Mohammed Ali . . .

First floor of the Arabic Museum. Founded in 1869 by Khedive Ismail. Nearly 150,000 volumes, among them num-

erous editions of the Koran and Persian manuscripts illuminated with miniatures. A unique collection of papyri, of manuscripts on parchment or paper, and Arabic ostraca dating from the eighth century.

In order to know this admirable literature more deeply, René Guénon, a well-known Sorbonne specialist, abandoned his profession, money and friends, telling no one. Only an extraordinary chance made it known that, under the name of Mohammed el Françaoui, he was living in old Cairo, studying at the University of El Ahzar. Having become a pupil, the master seemed to have found happiness in "casting off the old man" . . .

The Mouski, commercial artery of Cairo, and the astonishing bazaars or souks of Khan el Khalili . . . Startling show-cases, insidious vendors one cannot resist and who shout exorbitant prices so that they may bargain . . . Bargaining is the most subtle of the liberal arts! You will find everything: fried beans to chewing gum, Chinese porcelain made in Italy and Egyptian leather coming from India . . . Without mentioning the myriad antiques, authentically false; the best way to appear a *connoisseur* is to declare peremptorily while scrutinizing the object, "It's false!" An odd and colorful crowd . . . resounding cymbals . . . narghile, Turkish delights, coffee . . . strange and penetrating odours: spices or mouldiness? . . . "back sheesh" virtuosi, eighth plague of Egypt . . . gaping tourists with their blase facade; tourists all too rare because of the international situation, the Egyptians complain.

Cairo, bustling and indescribable, exotic and fascinating. El Qâhira, "the Victorious", which owes its name to the passing of the planet Mars or El Qâhir during the foundation of its walls in 969 by General Gawhar is also the city of a thousand minarets, of a thousand mosques. One must choose. We shall give him some advice, for we have seen them, an experience which, according to Albert Sarraut, allows us to be mistaken with more certitude . . . The Mosque of Amr, primitive Arabic style, the most ancient, with its twin columns through which only the Just may pass . . . if he is very slim! The Ibn Touloun Mosque, Moroccan style, the largest . . . The Mosque of Sultan Hassan imitating the tomb of the Prophet, Oriental style, *chef-d'oeuvre* which cost its architect his two arms "so that he could make nothing else like it." The Raffai Mosque, tomb of the royal family, Arabico-Egyptian style. The Mosque of Mohammed-Ali or of the Two Thousand Lights or the Citadel,

Byzantine style where the royal column will not turn under your efforts if "you are incapable of marrying" . . .

Unless you prefer the charming Mosque of Qait Bey in the Tombs of the Caliphs, bizarre necropolis crammed with the living . . .

We have heard of the Sphinx and the Pyramids since childhood. One feels already acquainted with them for they have been discussed so much. But never did anyone tell us what an unforgettable impression one feels on seeing the sun rise on the prodigious mutilated face of the Sphinx (happily the Memeloukes were poor shots) of the Harmakhis millenium.

On the other hand, many people laughed at Paul Brunton, the journalist who became a Buddhist, who spent a night alone in the Great Pyramid. Undoubtedly, this original fake had suspicious "apparitions" (to insure the success of his book "Secret Egypt"). But tell me, would you have this courage?

What tales hasn't one told about the pyramids since Herodotus' day, passing by the cycle of the golden number of Meton, the computations of Bonaparte's scholars, the phantasies of Proctor or de Persigny, the fraud of one of Piazzzi-Smith's disciples (caught by Sir Flinders Petrie in the act of planning the granite ledge of the royal antichamber to make it concord with his ideal measurements) or the "Science mysterieuse des Pharons" of the Abbé Moreux?

We believe we know them . . .

Badrashin, Mit-Rahinah, Saqqara, the domain of Soker, god of the dead . . . mastabas . . . pyramids (Dejser, sealed; Ouserkaf, Teti; Ounas, the first endowed with texts) . . . Subterranean sarapeum sheltering the gigantic sarcophages which lack their sacred bulls . . . Let us go to the South; Abydos to the mysterious half-submerged Osireion . . . the temple of Denderah which venerated Hathor-Cleopatra: let us go by donkey (as Bonaparte's general said before the battle, "donkeys and scholars together") to the villages filled with clay houses . . . Luxor and its obelisk. Karnak and its impressive hypostyle room which would swallow Notre Dame de Paris . . . the implacable pink of Deir-el-Bahari . . . Colossi of Memnon, the second one sings no more . . . Ramasseum and its broken giant . . . Medinet Habu, triumph of Ramses III . . . Ptolemaic grace of Deir el Medina . . . tombs of the Valley of the Queens and the unforgettable Valley of the Kings; astonishing paintings, a revelation, are they a day old or were they done thousands of years ago? . . . tombs of the

Valley of the Nobles: more familiar enchantment. All of that constitutes the Theban necropolis . . . neighbour of Luxor . . . temple of Edfu with its innumerable black bees . . . Kom-Ombo by car, "donkey back on rails," from the sugar-refinery . . . Elkab and Kôlah (another scaled pyramid but set, this time, by angles), sites of the Belgian excavation of the Foundation Elisabeth . . . Elephant Island and the Nilometre which evokes Strabo . . . hypogea of the hill . . . Aswan, the career of the obelisks, the first cataract, the primitive Busharins, the island of Philae almost under water . . . We believe we've seen everything, at least down to Sudan . . . But there is something new at each step . . .

"Can one discuss the history of Egypt and its monuments without having seen the country?" Professor Bikerman asked me in New York last year. It would be tempting to reply, unparadoxically, "Undoubtedly, but when one has seen them, would one dare to again?"