

When London and Paris Looked to the Nile For Inspiration

For centuries, in their designs for buildings, furniture and pyramidal tombs, Westerners have been borrowing forms and motifs from ancient Egypt. Each era's approach is different, but the Egyptian Revival styles of the 1700s and early 1800s in particular evince a deep fascination with the culture's decorative elements and themes.

"Thomas Hope: Regency Designer," an exhibition opening on Thursday at the Bard Graduate Center in Manhattan, has a few imaginative examples of Egyptian Revival furniture that Hope designed about 1802 for the Egyptian Room in his house (since dismantled) in London. Hope (1769-1831), heir to one of the wealthiest banking families in Europe, was a designer, patron, collector and novelist who lived in England.

Among the approximately 140 pieces lent to the show are a Regency settee and two armchairs in ebonized black beech and gold that Hope created to accommodate Egyptian bronzes he bought in Rome while on the Grand Tour. The shapes of the furniture are not Egyptian; the pieces are designated Egyptian Revival because Egyptian bronzes are affixed to them.

The arms of the settee are decorated with recumbent lionesses inspired by ancient examples. Below these are bronze appliqué of the Egyptian god Anubis, with a jackal head, and the god Horus, with a hawk head. On the chairs statues of crouching Egyptian priests support the armrests, while appliqué of the winged goddess Isis adorn the fronts.

"The appeal of ancient Egypt was more than just exoticism," said Philip Hewat-Jaboor, an art consultant and the editor, with David Watkin, a professor of architecture history at Cambridge University, of the 525-page Bard exhibition catalog. "It had to do with the mystery of hieroglyphs, the spookiness of tomb culture, the precious materials and impressive buildings. Nothing on the scale of ancient Egyptian pyramids was then known; they were like something from outer space."

Egypt proved alluring for centuries. "Egyptian civilization was so very ancient — it was pre-

Classical Greek," Mr. Hewat-Jaboor said. "People were curious: 'Who were these people?' It had a cumulative, extraordinary mystique without any comprehension of what it was all about."

In France Louis XIV's cabinet-makers were already experimenting with Egyptian motifs by the late 1600s. Dalva Brothers, a gallery specializing in French antiques, at 53 East 77th Street in Manhattan, has several antiques in the Egyptian Revival style. The earliest example is a pair of Louis XIV gilded-bronze andirons. Each depicts a sphinx on a sarcophagus-like base raised on lion paws. The gallery attributes them to André-Charles Boulle.

"We think it's possible they are by Boulle," said Leon J. Dalva Jr. "You often see sphinxes on Boulle clocks." Boulle was the most celebrated French cabinet-maker of the late 1600s, a craftsman who, unusually, was allowed by the crafts guilds to make bronzes as well as furniture in his Louvre workshops.

Always interested in symbols of power, Louis XIV was probably familiar with ancient Egyptian obelisks and sphinx scul-

tures that had been taken to Rome as booty, a practice that began after Rome conquered Egypt in 30 B.C. By the Renaissance, Europe had rediscovered Egypt. Among the revelations: two statues of Egyptian lions found in Rome in the 1430s, which were displayed on the porch of the Pantheon.

During the 18th-century reign of Louis XV, best known for the Rococo style, the French did not embrace Egyptian Revival, but the British did. Ronald Phillips Ltd., a London gallery specializing in English antiques, currently has an imposing George II carved giltwood side table with huge, seated, outward-facing sphinxes at each corner.

"The legend of the Sphinx excited classically educated Grand Tourists, who would have been familiar with her through Greek literature that portrayed her as a creature who destroyed those who failed to answer her riddle," wrote Jeremy Garfield-Davies, the director of Ronald Phillips, in an e-mail message. "Heaven lands with sophisticated but fallen great civilizations were the source of fascination, as travel in

the 18th century allowed visitors to learn about empires beyond those of ancient Greece and Rome. As members of a rising empire, the English were fascinated by empires that had fallen before them."

By the 1770s, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette were being attracted to all things Egyptian, probably because of the interest raised in the late 1740s by the discovery of Egyptian antiquities during excavations of ancient Pompeii and Herculaneum. Always at the forefront of fashion, Marie Antoinette commissioned for the Château de St. Cloud a suite of furniture by Jean-Baptiste-Claude Sené with carved Egyptian masks (now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art), among other Egyptian-inspired decorating projects.

Dalva Brothers in Manhattan has an exceptional suite of four late-Louis-XVI mahogany armchairs and a settee, all with winged sphinxes supporting the arms. The tops of the legs are carved in a lotus-leaf motif. The gallery is attributing the set to Georges Jacob, one of the leading chair makers in Paris by the 1780s and known to have incorporated carved sphinxes in his furniture.

"Egyptian Revival is rarer than chinoiserie," Mr. Dalva said. "We always love to find pieces with Egyptian motifs because, especially on early things, it is usually commissioned furniture and almost invariably of high quality."

Despite Marie Antoinette's flirtation with the Egyptian Revival style, it was Napoleon, of course, who caused full-blown Egyptomania with his military campaigns in Egypt, which began in 1798. He invited the artist and writer Dominique Vivant to record what he saw, and the 1802 book "Journey in Lower and Upper Egypt" is the result. Napoleon's court ordered Velay wallpapers and Sèvres porcelains on Egyptian themes. The decorators Charles Percier and Pierre Fontaine Egyptianized furniture and décors, while the silver- and bronzesmith Pierre-Philippe Thomire produced firedogs.

Nelson's defeat of the French fleet in the Battle of the Nile in 1798 reintroduced Egyptian Revival themes to Britain, which probably explains the nearly instant popularity of Thomas Hope's Egyptianized furniture in the first years of the 1800s.



DALVA BROTHERS

Egyptian Revival: A Louis XVI armchair decorated with winged sphinxes, at Dalva Brothers.