Decorative Objects in *Retour d’Égypte* Style –
A Reflection of International Politics

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**ACQUISITIONS/DECORATIVE OBJECTS IN RETOUR D’ÉGYPTE STYLE**

Decorative Objects in *Retour d’Égypte* Style –
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*Director of Collections*

**Pyramids**, obelisks and sphinxes were hardly a novelty in late 18th-century European art and architecture. Since the Renaissance, Egypt had been seen as the land of wisdom and mystery. The fact that the code to hieroglyphic writing had yet to be cracked merely added to its enigmatic character. In landscape gardens especially, it became popular to build small pyramids and obelisks. It is a historical irony that Jean-Baptiste Kléber, later better known for his part in Napoleon’s Egyptian campaign, began his career as an architect designing, among other things, garden buildings of this kind for the park at Étupes, the Alsace estate of the Prince of Montbéliard, in 1787.

In stage design, Egyptianism also worked well in Mozart’s *Magic Flute*, where there is a particularly clear connection to Freemasonry and the contemporary craze for the occult. Egyptianising forms could also be used purely decoratively, with no thought whatsoever for their links to mysticism. During the age of Louis XVI, Egyptianising caryatides, sphinxes, lions and canopic heads frequently appeared on furniture and other works of applied art, details that were well suited to the decorative character of the Neoclassical style. Gian Battista Piranesi’s *Diversi Maniere d’adonare i cammini* (1769) was an important source. Piranesi’s feeling for the picturesque and the sublime also imparted an element of *bizzarria*.

This, then, was what Egyptomania looked like before General Napoleon Bonaparte embarked on his Egyptian

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expedition. The French attempt to conquer Egypt from May 1798 to August 1801 ended in military defeat, but left clear traces in the fine and applied arts. What prompted this reckless military enterprise was hardly scholarly interest in Egyptian ancient history and botany, but colonial ambitions pure and simple. In leading political circles there was a dream of restoring French colonial power, securing the route to India and accessing important raw materials such as sugar and wheat. An Egyptian campaign would, in addition, solve a dilemma in the power politics of the day: it would mean that, for a time, a growing threat to the governing Directory in Paris – Bonaparte and his victorious army, which had conquered large parts of the Italian peninsula – would be safely out of the way. Despite this, the general let himself be tempted by the idea of a campaign in Egypt, swayed perhaps by ambition, a desire to rival Alexander the Great and Caesar. At the same time, Bonaparte wanted to be seen as a cultivated general, and the expedition thus also took on the veneer of a civilising project, although the focus seems to have been on conquest and colonisation. Who inspired him to take scientists and artists along on the campaign is not entirely clear. It may have been Dominique-Vivant Denon, who from this point on became his right-hand man in the sphere of art and culture. The 32,000 men of the expeditionary force included a contingent of 150 scientists and artists. It was not entirely easy for them to engage in a study of ancient Egypt, with military action and constant danger on all sides. Despite this, their efforts resulted in the impressive Description de l’Égypte, published in 23 volumes between 1809 and 1829. This was a French triumph, even though British forces seized as spoils of war much of the archaeological and scientific material collected by the French expedition. The Rosetta Stone is of course the best-known example, but here, too, the French could claim the propaganda.

Fig. 2 Unknown designer and producer, Candlesticks, c. 1810, Bronze, gilt, 30.8 x 12.5 cm (h x diam). Purchase: the Axel Hirsch Fund. Nationalmuseum, NMK 267–268/2016.
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Fig. 3 Unknown designer and producer, Tabouret, 1800s. Mahogany, inlay, 50 x 42 x 41 cm (h x l x w). Purchase: the Anna and Ferdinand Boberg Foundation. Nationalmuseum, NMK 3/2017.
victory with Champollion’s achievement in deciphering the secret of hieroglyphics.

With the expedition ending in a major failure, it is something of a paradox that Napoleon nevertheless wanted to be linked to Egypt, but Egyptianism also had other associations with world conquest. It was thus well suited to the soon-to-be emperor’s ambitions for the future. That is why Egyptian forms are also to be found in the luxury production of bronzes, porcelain and furniture carried on in Paris throughout the Napoleonic era. Egyptomania became just as popular in the rest of Europe, with the consequence that it is not always easy to determine the geographical origins of different objects. This is true, for example, of two canopic jars (Fig. 1), inscribed with hieroglyphs and with covers bearing a human and a baboon head, respectively. In ancient times, these jars were designed to hold embalmed entrails, but around 1800 they were turned into decorative pieces for display on a mantelpiece or desk. That was the setting, too, for a pair of ormolu candlesticks in Retour d’Égypte style acquired by the Museum (Fig. 2). Sphinx heads and fantasy hieroglyphs are to be found on both Russian- and French-made items from this period, again making it difficult to establish their origins. The last in a series of recently acquired Egyptianising objects, a tabouret made in Denmark (Figs. 3–4), nevertheless shows how international this style of interior decoration was. It has legs with lotus-leaf decoration and inlaid hieroglyphs in the seat and rails. Egyptianism is also very much in evidence in the large pylon-framed doorways of one of the best-known Danish Golden Age landmarks, from the same period – the Thorvaldsen Museum in Copenhagen, designed by Michael Gottlieb Bindesbøll and built in 1839–48.

Notes:
1. A foundational article on the subject was published as early as 1956 by Nikolaus Pevsner and Susan Lang (“The Egyptian Revival”, Architectural Review, CXIX, May 1956, pp. 242–254).