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## **“Une géographie intérieure”: The Perpetual Presence of Egypt**

Miguel John Versluys

### **Introduction: “L’Égypte que je portais en moi”**

In 1975, the South-African artist William Kentridge, then 20 years old, visited Paris for the very first time. Among the many sketches he made in his travel notebook only three drawings document his visit to the Louvre; an encounter that nevertheless made a profound impression on the young student. From the Louvre collections, Kentridge chose to draw two Egyptian baboons from granite as well as “un gardien du musée se reposant sur la chaise”.<sup>1</sup>

In his fascinating *Carnets d’Égypte* from 2010, Kentridge wonders whether it was his familiarity with baboons from his childhood, during which time these animals were still a common sight in South Africa, that made him document exactly these two objects from the Louvre collections; or perhaps his interest in ethnography as a very necessary addition to the Art Historical canon. But the remainder of his text shows that something else was going on; as Kentridge himself is well aware. It is exactly for that reason that, 35 years later, he decided to compile his *Carnets d’Égypte*: an exhibition and an accompanying booklet documenting and exploring his relations to Egypt. These relations take a variety of forms. In his *Carnets*, Kentridge presents us, amongst other things, with drawings of Egyptian themes on old and used papers and books (thus evoking the inherent palimpsest character of things Egyptian?); self-portraits as a seated Old Kingdom scribe; a real “Isis tragedie” (“When does the tour start? I’d like to see the terracottas, the monuments, the marbles, the sarcophagi, the death masks the sar cophafa cophaf cophaf cophaf cophaf the sarcophagi [...]”); musical performances; and even films with wonderful installations like “Nubian landscape”, a pyramid landscape made up of metronomes amidst all kinds of drawings and illustrations referring to Egypt. After having worked on Mozart’s *Zauberflöte* and its Egyptian themes earlier, Kentridge is very specific about his reasons for undertaking this project and writes:

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<sup>1</sup> William Kentridge, *Carnets d’Égypte* (Paris: Éditions Dilecta, Musée du Louvre Éditions, 2010) 55: “Il y a aussi trois dessins que j’ai fait au Louvre. Deux d’entre eux représentent des babouins égyptiens en granit, le troisième un gardien du musée se reposant sur la chaise. [...] Après les babouins, je n’ai plus rien dessiné au Louvre”.

En renouant avec l'Égypte pour ce nouveau projet, j'avais une préoccupation centrale: je voulais explorer une géographie intérieure, mettre au jour l'Égypte que je portais en moi et plus particulièrement trouver le lien entre ce monde intérieur et les importantes collections de vestiges exposées au Louvre. Ces vestiges constituent à mes yeux un pont entre le monde historique et un monde mythologique [...].<sup>2</sup>

This fascinating statement by one of the leading artists of our time constitutes the ideal overture of this small essay dedicated to that great scholar, because talking about “une géographie intérieure” underlines to what extent Egypt is actually part of us and how Egypt is thus unavoidable, perpetual, and haunts us infinitely. Cultural manifestations, in this case the collections of the Louvre, can help us to arrive at and understand the Egypt we carry within ourselves – if we do not make the mistake of solely understanding these objects as historical sources. Indeed they also, as Kentridge phrases it intuitively, belong to the domain of mythology; forming a bridge between history and, perhaps in more appropriate and Assmannian terms, mnemohistory.

In this article I would like to briefly comment on and introduce a forthcoming book on the relations between history, mnemohistory and material culture with regard to Egypt. The edited volume, entitled *Beyond Egyptomania. Objects, Style and Agency* is dedicated to Jan Assmann for his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, as this article is – to honour him and to thank him for his outstanding contributions to also this field of the *Kulturwissenschaften*.<sup>3</sup>

### **History, mnemohistory and material culture**

The material and intellectual presence of Egypt is at the heart of Western culture, religion and art from Antiquity to the present. *Beyond Egyptomania* aims to provide a long-term and interdisciplinary perspective on Egypt and its impact, taking theories on objects and their agency as main points of departure. The central questions the book addresses are *why*, from the first millennium BC onwards, Egyptian things and concepts are to be found in such a great variety of places throughout European history and *how* we can account for their enduring impact over time. By exploring an object-oriented perspective on this question, the volume aims at contributing to both: recent discussions on the “reception” of

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<sup>2</sup> Kentridge, *Carnets d'Égypte*, 56.

<sup>3</sup> Miguel John Versluis, ed., *Beyond Egyptomania. Objects, Style and Agency* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2019). This article is a slightly altered and adapted draft of the Introduction to that volume.

Egypt and how to move forward in this discipline, as well as current debates on the agency of artefacts across archaeology, anthropology, and art history.

This collection's point of departure is the hypothesis that the Egypt that is such an important and enduring part of Western culture is not only made up of cultural, religious or artistic concepts – routinely discussed under the heading of reception in one form or another<sup>4</sup> – but consists also, or perhaps even primarily, of objects that have oriented and shaped many processes and events throughout history. Those objects, it must immediately be added, do more than simply communicate those cultural, religious and artistic concepts.<sup>5</sup> Not only do they passively represent such human ideas, they are active agents in their relationship with people and history simultaneously.<sup>6</sup> Within this human-thing entanglement, their impact, or agency, does not seem to always solely depend on what they represent.<sup>7</sup> A quote from Gottfried Semper's lecture on primitive art, held in London in 1851, illustrates this well:

The granite & porphyry monuments of Aegypt exert an incredible power over every mind. Whence is this Charm? Partly perhaps, because they are the neutral Ground, where the hard and resisting material and the pliant hand of man have met. "So far shalt thou go and no farther" has been the silent l[a]nguage of these massive creations for centuries. Their majestic quietness, their sharp, flat, and angular lineaments, the economy of labor in the treatment of the stern material

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<sup>4</sup> For reception studies and Egypt see the article by Stephanie Moser, "Reconstructing Ancient Worlds: Reception Studies, Archaeological Representation and the Interpretation of Ancient Egypt", *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 22.4 (2015): 1263–1308 with its large bibliography.

<sup>5</sup> Already in a conference from 1986, published in 1990, Jan Assmann talked about how Egyptian *Bildproduktion* was *constitutive* of its context through its main two functions of monumentality and magic, also applying the concept of *Bildakt*; Jan Assmann, "Die Macht der Bilder. Rahmenbedingungen ikonischen Handelns im alten Ägypten", in *Genres in visual representations 7*, proceedings of a conference held in 1986 by invitation of the Werner-Reimers-Stiftung in Bad Homburg, ed. Theodorus P. van Baaren (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 1–20.

<sup>6</sup> See now also the recent article by Jan Assmann, "Die Aura der Dinge. Lektüren einer altägyptischen Fayence-Schale", in Hans Peter Hahn, ed., *Vom Eigensinn der Dinge. Für eine neue Perspektive auf die Welt des Materiellen* (Berlin: Neofelis, 2015), 101–126.

<sup>7</sup> For world history as human-thing entanglement see Caroline van Eck, Miguel John Versluys and Peter ter Keurs, "The biography of cultures: style, objects and agency. Proposal for an interdisciplinary approach", *Cahiers de l'École du Louvre. Recherches en histoire de l'art, histoire des civilisations, archéologie, anthropologie et muséologie* [En ligne] 7 (2015): 2–22, accessed June 22, 2018, URL <http://journals.openedition.org/cel/275>; DOI: 10.4000/cel.275.

and their whole appearance are beauties of Style, which to us, who can cut the hardest stone like Chalk are no longer prescribed by necessity.

For Semper the power of the porphyry and granite monuments from Egypt has nothing to do with their being Egyptian in the first place but depends on their materiality and, what he calls, “beauties of style”. Those specific characteristics will in turn play a major role in making cultural, religious or artistic concepts have an impact on history as being *Egyptian*.<sup>8</sup> The aim of *Beyond Egyptomania*, therefore, is to open up and investigate the fascinating intersections between history, mnemohistory, and material culture with regard to Egypt.

### **Beyond Egyptomania?**

The case of Egypt is particularly compelling because hardly any other culture produced a repertoire of objects, forms and styles that is so recognizable and that had such a long afterlife, or *Nachleben*, to use Aby Warburg’s term.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, the cultural memory of Egypt is enormous and seems perpetual, as most prominently Jan Assmann has shown throughout his work.<sup>10</sup> This storehouse of memory is stocked with concepts but also with objects, each with their own unmistakable aesthetics that we call Egyptian. As the cultural, religious or artistic concepts that were framed as Egyptian, these objects were substantially influential to the societies they entered. What’s more, often these Aegyptiaca seem to function as

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<sup>8</sup> Semper developed this observation on the porphyry and granite monuments from Egypt into a more general theory on the *Eigensinn* of materials in his opus magnum: Gottfried Semper, *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder praktische Ästhetik: ein Handbuch für Techniker, Künstler und Kunstfreunde* (vol. II): *Keramik, Tektonik, Stereotomie, Metallotechnik für sich betrachtet und in Beziehung zur Baukunst* (München: Bruckmann, 1863; repr. Mittenwald: Mäander, edition Friedrich Piel, 1977), 256: “[I]st die Herrschaft über den Stoff nicht intelligenter und eben so mächtig, wenn man in ihm auch seinen Eigensinn respektiert, ihn sich seiner Natur gemäß ohne Zwang dienstbar macht?” See, also for this idea more in general, Monika Wagner, *Vom ‘Eigensinn’ des Materials: Edward Munchs ‘Holzstil’, in Hahn, Vom Eigensinn der Dinge*, 81–100.

<sup>9</sup> For how this worked in Egypt itself see Todd Gillen, ed., *(Re)productive Traditions in Ancient Egypt. Proceedings of the conference held at the University of Liège, 6<sup>th</sup>–8<sup>th</sup> February 2013* (Liège: Presses Universitaires, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> See in particular Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997) (idem, *Moses der Ägypter. Entzifferung einer Gedächtnisspur* (München: Fischer, 1998)); idem, *L’Égypte ancienne entre mémoire et science*, La Chaire du Louvre (Paris: Hazan et. al., 2009) and idem, *Religio Duplex: How the Enlightenment reinvented Egyptian religion* (New York: John Wiley, 2014) (idem, *Religio duplex. Ägyptische Mysterien und europäische Aufklärung* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2017)). Note also Aleida Assmann and Jan Assmann eds., *Hieroglyphen. Stationen einer anderen abendländischen Grammatologie* (München: Fink, 2003).

catalysts that “get things going”.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, the enduring persistence of both Egyptian objects and concepts is most often described as a process of revival and reception, in which they only play a passive role, awaiting their rediscovery in later ages. From this historical perspective, the endurance of Egypt tends to be a history of episodes of reception and revival. Often these episodes are studied in chronological isolation and not infrequently are they then labelled as manifestations of *Egyptomania*, with all of that term’s negative connotations of fashion, obsession or even irrationality. The recent monograph by Ronald R. Fritze, characterizing Egyptomania as a history of *fascination*, *obsession* and *fantasy*, is only one of many more variants and examples.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, especially the distinction between Egypto-logy (*logos*) and Egypto-mania (*mania*) has done much harm to our pursuit of a proper understanding of the phenomena indicated by the latter term. *Beyond Egyptomania* aims to rewrite the history of “the Egyptian preference” from the perspective of mnemohistory and its *Wirkungsgeschichte*, namely, the active role of Egyptian objects and especially the interaction between both. Is it possible that ultimately the particular materiality and style of Egyptian artefacts constitute one of the main backbones of Egypt’s *Nachleben*?

The title *Beyond Egyptomania*, is, of course, explicitly and purposefully programmatic. It is simply meant to say that we should take the impact of Egypt seriously. I think this is hampered by our use of the word Egyptomania itself, because of the associations inherent to it, and moreover by the lack of a clear definition.<sup>13</sup> The word Egyptomania came into being around 1800 and implied some sort of irrationality from these beginnings onwards.<sup>14</sup> It has been used indiscriminately for a very wide variety of phenomena since. When concerning

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<sup>11</sup> Miguel John Versluys, “Exploring Aegyptiaca and their material agency throughout global history”, in Tamar Hodos et. al., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Archaeology and Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2017), 74–89, published in *Aegyptiaca. Journal of the History of Reception of Ancient Egypt*, 1 (2017): 122–144, accessed June 2018, URL: <http://journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/aegypt/article/viewFile/40167/33826>.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald R. Fritze, *Egyptomania: a history of fascination, obsession and fantasy* (London: Reaction Books 2016). Books like Bob Brier, *Egyptomania. Our Three Thousand Year Obsession with the Land of the Pharaohs* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2015) fall within the same categorie.

<sup>13</sup> See already the important note by Helen Whitehouse, “Egyptomanias”, *American Journal of Archaeology* 101/1 (1997): 158–161, now with the article by Moser, “Reconstructing Ancient worlds”.

<sup>14</sup> Noreen Doyle, “The Earliest known uses of ‘L’Égyptomanie’ / ‘Egyptomania’ in French and English”, *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 8 (2016): 122–125, accessed August? 2018, URL: <http://jaei.library.arizona.edu> .

concepts and ideas, these often are associated with fashion, obsession or irrationality; when material culture is the focus of attention, it often concerns popular material culture – or Tutankhamen. In both respects Egyptomania is something audiences tend to mildly smile upon or laugh about; Egyptomania makes Egypt harmless. The book is called *Beyond Egyptomania* because I believe that such an approach is not helpful to use when aiming to better understand why Egypt is everybody’s past. It is important to underline, however, that I do not wish to suggest that previous or future research by scholars using the term is unsound or should be discarded, at all.<sup>15</sup>

### **Investigating the *longue durée***

Much work has already been done on chronologically and/or contextually isolated responses to Egypt. Usual suspects include Cleopatra; Hadrian and Egypt; the Borgia apartments; Sixtus V and the Vatican obelisk; Napoleon and Egypt; Tutankhamen, et cetera. However, all kinds of boundaries – between disciplinary specialisations (history, philosophy, religious studies, art history, archaeology, etc.), on the one hand, and period specialisations (Classical studies, Egyptology, Renaissance studies, Modern history, etc.), on the other – stand in the way of a clear, overall view of the persistence of Egypt in Western culture. As a result, the study of the reception of Egypt has so far remained rather antiquarian.<sup>16</sup> Scholarly attempts to arrive at interpretative overviews, like the 1969 book by Siegfried Morenz entitled *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten* or the series *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* edited by Peter Ucko, are very few.<sup>17</sup> *Beyond Egyptomania* certainly does not provide such an overview, but aims to investigate the coherence, if any, between all these individual examples distributed over time and across space, and proposes to combine history,

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<sup>15</sup> Especially the foundational work by Jean-Marcel Humbert et. al., *Egyptomania. L’Égypte dans l’art occidental 1730–1930* (Paris: Réunion des Musées Nationaux et al., 1994) should be mentioned in this respect. Also the thought-provoking book by Elliott Colla, *Conflicted antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian modernity* (Durham, NC et. al.: Duke Univ. Press, 2008), for instance, carries “Egyptomania” in its title – and there are many more notable exceptions, like Wilfried Seipel, ed., *Ägyptomanie. Europäische Ägyptenimagination von der Antike bis heute* (Wien: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1994).

<sup>16</sup> Also here there are notable exceptions, for instance the important work by Brian A. Curran, *The Egyptian Renaissance. The Afterlife of Ancient Egypt in Early Modern Italy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) and Brian A. Curran, Anthony Grafton, Pamela O. Long and Benjamin Weiss, *Obelisk. A history* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>17</sup> Siegfried Morenz, *Die Begegnung Europas mit Ägypten* (Zürich, Stuttgart: Artemis, 1969) and Peter Ucko, ed., *Encounters with ancient Egypt* 8 vols. (London: UCL Press, 2003).

mnemohistory, and material culture as a compelling research instrument to do so.<sup>18</sup>

The question of *Nachleben* thus constitutes this book's central research problem. For that reason, the eight case studies that form the core of the volume start in the Iron Age and subsequently deal with the Greek-Hellenistic world, the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the eighteenth century, the early nineteenth century, and the long nineteenth century, while in each case departing from a specific object or context and trying to answer a similar set of questions regarding Egypt. This structure puts difficult questions about transmission into sharp focus. A sceptical reader might well ask whether we can actually talk about comparable phenomena here and whether we can really speak about transmission through time, as from the case studies it becomes perfectly clear that Egypt can mean and do myriad different things in myriad different contexts. The mnemohistory of Egypt is therefore not a coherent discussion about a coherent topic because Egypt has been used to make a very wide variety of arguments, to borrow a formulation by Jan Assmann.<sup>19</sup> The aim of the book is therefore not to simply construct or position a vertical line of transmission, but rather to investigate the *Nachleben* of Egypt throughout time and space seriously and in particular from the perspective of material agency.

Outlining such an overview is important for various reasons. It makes clear that Egypt has always played an important role in processes of cultural innovation, be it as cultural foundation or as quintessential Other. In many historical contexts, Egyptian civilisation was considered to be an important testator. But unlike Classical Antiquity, which has always been seen as place of origin and therefore an integral part of the Western world, Egypt was not only the deeper past, but also the Other simultaneously. Hence, Egypt was often strange and familiar at the same time, and this liminal position will prove to be important for our understanding of the impact of Egypt and things Egyptian. The *longue durée* thus redirects our attention from the many individual historical contexts that for one reason or another appropriate Egypt towards the cultural and material forms that constitute Egypt and, as such, enables us to study these two perspectives in relation to each other beyond passive reception. Moreover, Egypt is not an

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<sup>18</sup> See Versluys, "Exploring Aegyptiaca" for more (theoretical) background and an attempt to at least picture what this *longue durée* might look like (79–82) and how we should account for it (84–86).

<sup>19</sup> Jan Assmann, "Ägypten als Argument. Rekonstruktion der Vergangenheit und Religionskritik im 17. und 18. Jahrhundert", *Historische Zeitschrift* 264 (1997): 561–585.

isolated case. The discussions and insights provided by *Beyond Egyptomania* can serve as an inspiration to study the *longue-durée* (material) agency of, for instance, “the Greek”, “the Chinese” or “the Celtic”.<sup>20</sup>

Objects are fundamental to investigating the long-term for many reasons, as has been outlined above. Cultural responses to Egypt cannot be understood without taking into account the tangible form of Egyptian objects, their style, and materiality. By addressing the *longue et vaste durée* of the dissemination of Egyptian objects, forms and motifs across the Mediterranean basin and subsequently the entire Western world and by showing the complexity of the relations between *being* Egyptian, *doing* Egyptian, and *looking* Egyptian, *Beyond Egyptomania* also hopes to incite reconsideration of the problem of style, which for too long has been rejected from archaeology, anthropology, art history and Egyptology – and which is fundamental to understanding Egypt.<sup>21</sup> There is, however, also an important methodological reason why adding objects so prominently to Jan Assmann’s mnemohistory project concerning Egypt matters: it adds another historical layer. In the Bronze Age, Egyptian stylistic features were an important constituent of an international *koine*.<sup>22</sup> In the Iron Age Near East and Mediterranean, Aegyptiaca were everywhere and have been usefully described as the most popular global commodity of that world.<sup>23</sup> It is important to realise that cultural responses to Egypt therefore started much earlier than with Herodotos – and we need objects in order to document that prehistory of Egypt’s mnemohistory.

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<sup>20</sup> See now Caroline Vout, *Classical Art. A life history from Antiquity to the present* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> As already underlined by Jan Assmann in what still is an important article from 1986: Jan Assmann, “Viel Stil am Nil? Altägypten und das Problem des Kulturstils”, in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer, eds., *Stil: Geschichten und Funktionen eines kulturwissenschaftlichen Diskurselements* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986) 513–597.

<sup>22</sup> See the overview provided by part 1 (The Bronze Age, 2000–1100 BC) of the splendid exhibition catalogue: Jeffrey Spier, Timothy Potts, Sara E. Cole, eds., *Beyond the Nile. Egypt and the Classical world* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum 2018), 8–69.

<sup>23</sup> Joan Aruz et. al., eds., *Assyria to Iberia: at the dawn of the Classical Age* (New Haven et. al.: Yale Univ. Press, 2014).