

Egyptomania By Bob Brier

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Review by Charlotte Booth

This book is a beautifully presented volume with a number of colour plates, black and white pictures and an extensive bibliography for each chapter. There were a couple of odd things about the presentation which is probably down to publisher choice rather than Brier himself; the first is the awkward break in the title on the cover 'Egypt-omania' over two lines, and the second is the non-chronological placement of plates. For example on the same page (page 3) colour plate 2 and 46 are referenced. Perhaps a personal preference but I find it easier if the plates are in the same order they are discussed in the text.

However, the book itself is an extremely well-written and engaging one written in a friendly conversational manner. Egyptomania is normally taken to be a discussion on the trends in the modern world inspired by Egypt, and whilst there is a certain amount of this in this book, Brier takes the word Egyptomania for the broader meaning of 'an interest in all things Egyptian'. This is very much the angle of the book, examining the history of the interest in Egypt rather than a focus on the products resulting from this interest.

The first chapter discusses Brier's own love of ancient Egypt and how this led to a vast collection of Egyptian inspired memorabilia. His collection includes a trunk of papers belonging to Lady Amhurst, Howard Carter's patron, papers belonging to Waynman Dixon (the man who discover the air shafts in the pyramid) sheet music, jewellery and household items, many of which are pictured throughout the book.

Brier also questions briefly what the fascination is with ancient Egypt and why people (adults and children) are drawn to Egypt more than ancient Greece for example. He also touches on this topic in the final chapter. He suggests this fascination is due to a combination of exoticism, other-worldliness and the fascination with mummies.

This fascination started with Herodotus (c.450 BCE), one of the most important chroniclers who provided our earliest record of mummification. The Greeks were intrigued by Egypt, and attributed many great skills with the Egyptian civilisation, including religion, legal code and writing. At the time of Herodotus the pyramids were already 2000 years old and therefore an ancient civilisation worthy of interest.

When Alexander the Great arrived in Egypt the ancient Egyptian influence resulted in the adoption of mummification in a desire to have eternal life, and Alexander's coronation as pharaoh which pronounced him a god on earth. This fascination with the religious beliefs and immortality of the rulers proved equally appealing to the Romans. Following Cleopatra's visit to Rome with Julius Caesar Egyptomania took off in Rome with many women adopting the cult of Isis, the mother

goddess, and a developing a love of obelisks. Rome currently has more obelisks than any other city, some genuine ancient Egyptian and some Roman copies. In the fourth century most of these obelisks were torn down as pagan in an ever-increasing Christian world, and left to languish under the sands.

Some beautiful Egyptomania statues are attributed to the Emperor Hadrian, who toured Egypt in 130-131. His lover Antonius drowned in the Nile on this trip, which resulted in the immortalisation of Antonius in the form of statues showing him as an Egyptian pharaoh.

After 394 when the last ever recorded Egyptian hieroglyph was written, the fascination slowly declined until by the Middle Ages there was no interest or knowledge of ancient Egyptian civilisation. It was only in the Renaissance that an interest was kick-started by the great engineering feat of Domenico Fontana in 1586. Brier explains in great detail how Fontana re-erected and moved the obelisk in St Peter's Square by the use of scaffolding, windlasses and hemp ropes. This work was viewed as a symbol of Christianity's triumph over Paganism. However as it was carved by Egyptians, and raised by the Romans they felt the need to exorcise the obelisk of ancient Pagan demons before they were happy with it as a Christian symbol.

This fascination with obelisks is further discussed in chapters 4, 5 and 7 as Brier describes the transportation of the obelisks to Paris, London and New York. When Mohammed Ali was in control of Egypt he tried to gain the support of Europe through offering, what were to him valueless, obelisks. Initially he offered Britain one, three times, but after evaluating the cost of transportation they failed to do anything about the offers until sometime later.

However, when Mohammed Ali offered France an obelisk they accepted immediately and started building a boat, called *The Luxor*, which in 1830 was sent to Egypt to pick up the obelisk from Luxor temple. Mohammed Ali had agreed to let the French have three obelisks, one from Luxor and two from Alexandria. However, only one was ever picked up.

In 1831 Jean Baptiste Apollinaire Lebas travelled to Luxor and hired a number of men to free the obelisk from ten feet of debris. Then it took four months to build a slope from the temple to the river upon which the obelisk could be transported. They reached Alexandria with the obelisk in January 1833 and it was not until December 1833 that the obelisk arrived in Paris. In 1836 the obelisk was erected in La Place de la Concorde.

In 1872 the British decided they wanted the obelisk they had been offered and sent Wayman and John Dixon to Alexandria. They devised a plan comprising an iron cylinder to encase the obelisk so it could be dragged home by a steamer. The iron cylinder, called *Cleopatra* was made of 60 tons of iron, constructed around the obelisk in the form of six watertight bulkheads.

In September 1876 the obelisk within the iron tube was attached to the steamer *Olga* which was ready to set sail for England. Everything was going well on the journey until in October they reached the Bay of Biscay when they hit a storm. The *Cleopatra* was separated from the *Olga*, presumed sunk and the steamer left without it. As well as losing the *Cleopatra*, six sailors died in the storm.

However, the iron cylinder half-capsized and drifting was discovered by the *Fitzmaurice*. The captain recognised the cylinder and after salvaging it tried to make a claim for £5000 before handing it over to the Dixon brothers. After a court case, the captain received £2000, but the obelisk could now

continue its journey to the UK. The obelisk was finally put in place on the London Embankment in September 1878.

At the opening of the Suez Canal (1869), Egypt was financially bankrupt and offered the Americans an obelisk in the hope of winning financial and political backing against the Europeans. The Americans, like the British at first did nothing with this offer, but in 1878 they decided to accept. They were met with a great deal of opposition from the Europeans and Egyptologists in Egypt who believed the monument should stay there.

In 1879 Lieutenant–Commander Henry Honeychurch Goringe devised the plan for transporting the obelisk from Alexandria to New York. He decided to commission a self-powered ship big enough to house the obelisk. This he was able to obtain cheaply when the Egyptian government were selling the postal service ships. To move the obelisk across the land to the boat he decided to use ball bearings (made from cannon balls).

Throughout the entire process of moving the obelisk there were protestors demonstrating at the site and trying to obstruct the removal but the Americans persevered and managed to load the obelisk and the pedestal onto the boat. Although there were some initial problems with the crew and the boat administration, in July 1880 they set sail for New York, and although encountering a small storm, the journey went smoothly and they arrived without incident.

Whilst excavating the pedestal Goringe had discovered a perfectly smooth stone cube upon which was a trowel and a lead plumb bob. He took these to be Masonic symbols and felt they were an important message from the ancient Egyptian masons. This apparent connection with the masons saw a parade of 8500 masons in New York following the arrival of the obelisk. In front of 20,000 people the Grand Master performed a ritual as the foundation stone for the obelisk was laid and made a speech making it clear that the Masons did not originate in ancient Egypt and had nothing to do with the obelisk they were erecting. How this was received by the other masons is unknown.

Brier continues in great depth to describe how the obelisk was transported from the dock to Central Park and the exact procedure of erecting the obelisk. His research is impeccable with almost a day by day account of the process. The description is accompanied by photographs of the procession and the machinery used to transport and erect. The obelisk was finally in place in January 1881.

There is also a brief discussion on the obsession with obelisks which ensued in all three countries after their obelisks were erected, in the form of advertising campaigns (for example Cleopatra's needles and thread), and political cartoons.

The chapters are laid out chronologically breaking the narrative a little regarding the different techniques of moving obelisks but this is easily overcome by the reader. In chapter 3 Napoleon's campaign to Egypt is the focus with great details of the battles, successes and failures.

The most interesting aspect of this expedition, at least in relation to the book's subject matter is the group of savants including artists, engineers and architects, who accompanied Napoleon with the objective of recording all aspects of the Egyptian landscape. Napoleon himself was fascinated with Alexander the Great and relished the idea of conquering this country in the manner of his hero. Many of the savants were more interested in the history they were recording than the battles they should be fighting. These savants were able to produce one of the most interesting documents in

Egyptology, *Le Description de l’Egypte* a series of volumes displaying all the drawings, plans and records which had been made.

The first edition was so expensive no one could afford to buy it whereas the second edition was sold in instalments and then when complete the owner could get it bound in any way they preferred. Pancoucke, the publisher of the second edition offered a custom made bookcase upon which to display the volumes, based on the temple of Denderah – a true piece of Egyptomania furniture.

Once Napoleon returned to France the Sevres dinner service was made for Tsar Alexander I of Russia. This was then copied for Napoleon’s Josephine who changed her mind once it was delivered and returned it to the Sevres workshop. It was to end up at Apsley House, the possession of Lord Wellington, who defeated Napoleon at Waterloo. Whereas this dinner service was inspired by Napoleon, the British company, Wedgwood, also made a tea service. The lids of the teapot and sugar bowl were decorated with crocodiles and the bodies decorated with images of winded sun disks and altars. Both the British and the French dinner service combined traditional Egyptomania with political propaganda.

Chapter 6 moves onto the more familiar items in a book on Egyptomania, with discussions on the tobacco industry and their adoption of Egyptian motifs and names in their cigarette brands and advertising campaigns. As Brier explains the adoption of Egypt by the cigarette companies soon led to a desire for Egyptian smoking paraphernalia like cigarette holders and cases, and he describes and illustrates with some beautiful examples. This in turn leads to a brief introduction to the British jewellery trade and the popularity of winged scarabs, mummies and hawks.

The excavations and discoveries in Egypt have often led to renewed interest in all things Egyptian. This included the discovery of the royal cache at Deir el Bahri in 1881. This was a tomb containing numerous bodies of ancient Egyptian kings. It was only identified after a number of artefacts bearing royal names leaked onto the antiquities market. Maspero, the director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service went to Luxor to see if he could find out where these artefacts were coming from. He enlisted the help of an American student Charles Edwin Wilbour, who discovered the el Rassoul family from Qurna on the West Bank were the source of the royal artefacts. Maspero questioned Ahmed el Rassoul himself as well as sending two el Rassoul brothers, Ahmed and Hussein to Daud Pasha for questioning. They learned nothing regardless of the questioning methods employed.

Eventually the oldest brother Muhammed confessed to Daud Pasha and two days later he led Emile Brugsch, Maspero’s assistant, to the tomb. They arrived at Deir el Bahri and stopped at a shaft eight by ten feet and forty feet down. When they lowered themselves down into the shaft and into the tomb they were faced with numerous coffins housing the kings of the New Kingdom and the twenty-first dynasty.

In the twenty-first dynasty the economy of Egypt was in decline and most of the royal tombs had already been robbed and the mummies damaged. The twenty-first dynasty priests decided to gather the royal mummies, rewrap them, re-label them and store them together in safety from the robbers. They had remained in the tomb for 3000 years.

In order to prevent the tomb from being plundered any further by the Qurna residents it was emptied as quickly as possible and all forty of the mummies were put on a boat ready to sail to

Cairo. When the locals discovered who was on board, they lined the Nile with the women wailing in mourning, recreating an ancient funeral.

Over the next ten years, each of the royal mummies was unwrapped exposing the face of great kings like Thutmose III, Sety I and Ramses II. This saw a fresh burst of enthusiasm for all things Egyptian and in particular, mummies.

Brier demonstrates this enthusiasm with sheet music of songs about mummies dancing at balls, mummies as a love interest, or songs about Cleopatra. The chapter is accompanied by some of the lyrics of these popular songs and beautiful colour plates of the music itself (presumably from Brier's private collection).

The next mummy to whet the appetite once more was Tutankhamun. Egyptomania hit a high in the 1920s following the discovery of the almost intact tomb of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings, by English archaeologist, Howard Carter. This chapter outlines the discovery starting with Carter's career at Amarna under Flinders Petrie to his excavations in the Valley of the Kings under the patronage of Lord Carnarvon. This well-known story is narrated well, and leads to the Tutmania which was to follow and was to continue throughout the Western world for the ten years it took to complete the excavation of the tomb.

Brier, however, rather cleverly sticks to his discussion of Egyptomania music inspired by Tutankhamun and the discovery. It is interesting that many musical scores were published before the body of Tutankhamun was discovered, before he was known to be a young boy, and therefore he was presented as being an elderly king. The musical scores held such entertaining titles as "Old King Tut was a wise old nut".

The narrative leads to other Tutankhamun inspired items such as perfume, and Palmolive advertising campaigns using the Egyptian imagery of luxury. The ultimate accolade to the Tutmania and Mummymania phenomena was the movie *The Mummy* (1932) with Boris Karloff. The movie was completed in 23 days and only a 'backgrounds' film crew went to Egypt. Everyone else filmed in LA and stood in front of a screen projecting the Egyptian landscape images. Because it took so long to apply Boris Karloff's make-up, they only did it once and he therefore only appears in one scene.

In Chapter 10 mummies in movies is discussed further starting with the three sequels to *The Mummy*; *The Mummy's Hand* (1940), *The Mummy's Tomb* (1942), *The Mummy's Ghost* (1944) and *The Mummy's Curse* (1944). Brier outlines the plots as well as the archaeological failings of these movies. The mummy in the original movie was based on the mummy of Sety I, the later movies had adopted the face of Ramses III instead.

The British were not to be left behind in the mummy movie genre and in 1959 *The Mummy* was made, followed by *The Curse of the Mummy's Tomb* (1964), *The Mummy's Shroud* (1967) and *The Blood from the Mummy's Tomb* (1971). The original mummy was played by Christopher Lee. Most of these mummy movies followed a similar plot of the mummy returning in order to rekindle a love affair with a reincarnated 'old flame'.

A chapter on movies would not be complete without a section on Cleopatra with a quick run-through of the different forms and personalities Cleopatra has had in movies from the 1917 version played by Theda Bara, of which no copies of the movie are in existence, to the 1963 epic with

Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. This movie was originally six hours long, and was reluctantly cut to three hours and cost \$44m to make.

The final chapter is a summary of the history of Egyptomania and how that could continue into the future. Using the discovery of Tutankhamun as an example Brier explains that even 90 years after its discovery Tutankhamun is still interesting. He discusses the phenomenal success of the Tutankhamun exhibition in the 1960s and 1970s in the US, Canada and UK, and how it drew millions of people to look at what was a relatively small display. This interest had not waned by 2004 when the Tutankhamun treasures went on tour again with people queuing once more to see them.

Brier uses this to emphasise that should another major discovery be made, such as the tomb of Cleopatra or Imhotep the builder of the step pyramid, then it is likely that Egyptomania would once more become popular.

The only unusual aspect of this chapter was Brier's theory that Tutankhamun was murdered, and tying it in with the now famous letter of Ankhnesenamun. This theory is an extremely old one and one that has been debunked in recent years through CT scans of the body of Tutankhamun. I can only assume this out-dated theory was included to lead up to mention that his book on this theory is possibly going to be made into a movie.

Brier concludes that our continued fascination with the ancient Egyptians is due to being able to relate to them, and this is probably true;

“ancient Egyptians are close enough culturally that we can identify with them but far enough away in time that we can fantasize about them” (p.201)

This book was an interesting read and one that would be an asset to any Egyptophile's bookshelf, providing a well-written history of our fascination with Egypt and an inspiration for any collectors of Egyptomania items.