

# **The French Fascination with Egypt: Evolution in the Depiction of ancient Egypt**

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## **1. Introduction**

The allure of ancient Egypt has captivated minds for centuries, inspiring fascination with its rich traditions, remarkable architecture, and captivating art. The iconic symbol of this fascination, the Louvre Museum in Paris, stands as a testament to the enduring allure of ancient Egyptian civilization, its pyramid-shaped structure serving as a perpetual reminder of Egypt's ancient grandeur. While the allure of ancient Egypt is timeless, its depiction in Western art has evolved significantly over time, particularly within the realm of French paintings.

The campaign led by Napoleon Bonaparte to Egypt in the late 18th century marked a pivotal moment in Western engagement with ancient Egypt. Prior to Napoleon's campaign, European knowledge of Egypt was limited, often shrouded in myth and speculation. However, Napoleon's scientific quest to Egypt caused information about the ancient civilization to be more accessible, leading to a deeper exploration and understanding of ancient Egyptian culture, art, and architecture.

Against this backdrop, this thesis aims to explore the evolution of the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements in French paintings, both before and after Napoleon's campaign. By examining artworks created before Napoleon's campaign, we seek to uncover the extent of French knowledge and understanding of ancient Egypt during this period, as well as how ancient Egyptian elements were interpreted and represented in artistic portrayals. Subsequently, we will analyze paintings produced after Napoleon's campaign to discern the impact of newfound knowledge and firsthand experiences on the depiction of ancient Egyptian themes.

The central research question guiding this study is: "How has the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements in French paintings changed after Napoleon's campaign of Egypt?" Through an examination of artworks spanning different periods, themes, and artistic styles, this research seeks to elucidate the transformative influence of Napoleon's campaigns on the portrayal of ancient Egypt in French art.

## **2. Methods & Materials**

The research methodology begins with a comprehensive study of various ancient Egyptian elements, focusing on the most famous ancient Egyptian icons, such as the sphinx, pyramids, obelisks and Cleopatra. This phase involves thorough literature reviews and empirical studies utilizing academic journals, books, archaeological findings, museum collections, and online databases. By establishing a solid foundation of knowledge about ancient Egypt, this phase serves as a frame of reference for analyzing the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements in French paintings.

The thesis employs a case study approach to examine specific French painters and their artworks featuring ancient Egyptian elements. Each case study includes a brief overview of the painter's life, highlighting significant biographical details and artistic influences. Subsequently, selected paintings undergo detailed image analysis, focusing on composition, stylistic features, symbolism, and thematic elements. Interpretations from other scholars and art historians may also be incorporated to provide additional insights into the artworks.

Prior to the case studies, a literature review will be done on which sources on ancient Egypt were available before Napoleon's campaign to Egypt that could have influenced the perception of French painters during this period. Thereupon a literature review will be done on sources on ancient Egypt after Napoleon's campaign. This literature review serves to form a prediction on which sources might have been employed by the painters that will be researched in the case studies. During the case studies, new sources or ancient Egyptian elements might be found that are not mentioned in the literature reviews and will therefore be elaborated on in the case studies.

After conducting the image analysis, the thesis will carefully examine each depicted ancient Egyptian element within the context of the painter's time period. This involves evaluating the accuracy and authenticity of the portrayal based on available historical, archaeological, and scholarly sources. By examining the sources accessible to painters during their lifetimes, the thesis seeks to make clear what the influences and inspirations behind their depictions of ancient Egypt were.

### 3. Overview of ancient Egyptian elements

In order to have a frame of reference of ancient Egyptian elements to look out for in the case studies, a small overview of famous ancient Egyptian elements will be made through literature reviews. The ancient Egyptian elements that will be discussed are the sphinx, pyramids, obelisks and Cleopatra.

#### 3.1 The sphinx

The sphinx is a mythological creature with a body of a lion and a human head, prevalent in the mythologies of Egypt, Asia, and Greece (History.com Editors, 2018). In ancient Egypt, the sphinx held significant spiritual importance, often depicted as a male figure wearing a pharaoh's headdress, exemplified by the iconic Great Sphinx of Giza (History.com Editors, 2018). This colossal limestone statue, likely dating back to the reign of King Khafre (c. 2575–c. 2465 BCE), is a renowned symbol of Egypt, representing the intricate artistry of sphinx depictions (Tikkanen, 2024).



fig 1: *Great Sphinx of Giza (2008)*

Moreover, sphinxes were commonly incorporated into the architectural and religious landscapes of ancient Egypt (History.com Editors, 2018). An illustrative example is the Sphinx Alley in Upper Egypt, a two-mile avenue connecting the temples of Luxor and Karnak, adorned with statues of these mythical creatures. This avenue stands as a testament to the enduring significance and reverence for the sphinx in ancient Egyptian culture (History.com Editors, 2018).

#### 3.2 Pyramids

Pyramids, in general, are monumental structures characterized by a rectangular base and four sloping triangular sides that meet at an apex or are truncated to form a platform (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024a). Primarily funerary edifices, the pyramids of ancient Egypt served as tombs for pharaohs and were constructed over a span of 2,700 years, from the onset of the Old Kingdom to the conclusion of the Ptolemaic period (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2024a). These architectural marvels not only showcase the advanced construction techniques of ancient Egyptians but also serve as enduring symbols of their rich culture and belief systems.

The Great Pyramids of Giza are the most well-known Egyptian pyramids. They stand as an enduring testament to ancient Egyptian architectural prowess and are among the most renowned monuments in the world. Located on a plateau on the west bank of the Nile River, near modern-day Cairo, these pyramids are particularly notable for their grandeur and historical significance (History.com Editors, 2009).



fig 2: *Pyramids of the Giza Necropolis (2009)*

### 3.3 Obelisk

In the article “Egyptian Obelisk” from World History Encyclopedia, written by J. Mark & D. Jarvis (2024), an Egyptian obelisk is described as followed:

*“An obelisk is a stone rectangular pillar with a tapered top forming a pyramidion, set on a base, erected to commemorate an individual or event and honor the gods. The ancient Egyptians created the form at some point in the Early Dynastic Period (c. 3150-c. 2613 BCE) following their work in mud brick mastaba tombs and prior to the construction of the Step Pyramid of Djoser (c. 2670 BCE). It is thought that the earliest obelisks served as a kind of training for working in stone on monumental projects which was a necessary step toward pyramid building.”*



fig 3: Pyramids of the Giza Necropolis (2009)

### 3.4 Cleopatra

Cleopatra VII, the last pharaoh of Ancient Egypt, remains an enigmatic figure whose appearance has been the subject of much speculation and debate. Contemporary depictions of Cleopatra are exceedingly rare, largely due to the efforts of Octavian Augustus, the first Roman emperor, who ordered the destruction of all images of the queen following his victory over Cleopatra and her ally, Mark Antony, in 30 BC (Gale, 2024).

Despite these efforts to erase her image from history, several artifacts such as reliefs, statues, and busts have survived to provide glimpses into Cleopatra's appearance (Gale, 2024). One of the most prominent artifacts is the Berlin Cleopatra, a marble bust dating to the first century BCE, housed in the Old (Altes) Museum in Germany (Wallenfeldt, n.d.). This sculpture depicts Cleopatra with almond-shaped eyes, ringlets of curly hair, and a prominent, yet softly modulated, nose. Another marble bust, found in a villa on the Appian Way and now displayed at the Vatican's Gregoriano Profano Museum, similarly portrays Cleopatra with soft features and full lips, though her nose is missing (Wallenfeldt, n.d.).



fig. 4 Marble bust of Cleopatra VII of Egypt from ca. 40–30

Contemporary coins issued during Cleopatra's reign offer further insight into her appearance. These coins depict Cleopatra with an aquiline nose, full cheeks, and a small chin (Wallenfeldt, n.d.). However, coins minted by Mark Antony present a more dramatic portrayal of Cleopatra, with a hooked nose, broad forehead, pointy chin, and more masculine features (Gale, 2024) (Wallenfeldt, n.d.).



fig. 5 bronze coin of Cleopatra

In addition to these artifacts, a relief from the Dendera Temple in Egypt shows Cleopatra alongside her son Caesarion, providing another glimpse of her appearance during her lifetime (Jarus, 2023). Despite the limited number of surviving depictions, it is important to consider these descrip-



fig. 6 coin of Cleopatra by Mark Anthony

tions within their historical context, recognizing that Roman and Greek accounts of Cleopatra were often influenced by political rivalries and gender biases (Fraga, 2024). While some Roman sources portrayed Cleopatra as a manipulative temptress, these misogynistic depictions served to distract from her considerable political acumen and linguistic abilities, which continue to be downplayed to this day.

#### **4. Historical context: Egyptology before Napoleon's campaign**

An important period in history before Napoleon's campaign to Egypt that revived the interest in the Ancients, was the Renaissance. The Renaissance was the dominating (cultural and) artistic movement between the 15th and early 17th century in France. This period primarily focussed on the revival of ancient Rome and ancient Greece. The history of both of these ancient civilizations, however, was also closely tied to the history of ancient Egypt - the relationship between Cleopatra and Julius Caesar (and Mark Anthony) being one of the most famous examples of this. Therefore, most of the knowledge on ancient Egypt at the time came from sources of ancient Rome and ancient Greece (Thompson, 2015).

Examples of such sources to which European scholars had access to during the Renaissance were classical texts of ancient Greek historians Herodotus, Strabo, Diodorus Siculus, and Plutarch. In Herodotus' work 'The Histories', for example, he discusses how the pyramids were built and the importance of the Nile River to Egypt. He also describes the different physical appearances of people in Egypt and mentions the country's natural environment. Herodotus also gives details on Egyptian culture, religious beliefs, customs, and their language, writing system, and hieroglyphs. Similar topics could be found in Diodorus Siculus' work 'Bibliotheca Historica' and Strabo's 'Geographica'. Works of Plutarch, on the other hand, gave insights on Cleopatra and her empire in his works 'Life of Caesar' and 'Life of Mark Anthony'. Though these works might not be entirely accurate since they are written from a Greek perspective, their works provided descriptions on different subjects regarding ancient Egypt and thus became one of the primary sources on ancient Egyptian civilization during the Renaissance.

In addition to the interest in the works of these Greek historians, interest in ancient Rome especially flourished among the many French painters that flocked to Rome in the seventeenth century in an attempt to expand their artistic career. Not only French painters but artists from all over Europe swarmed to Rome, "*attracted by the beauty of the Roman countryside and its classical ruins*" (Museum Wales, 2010). These artists were highly likely to have been exposed to ancient Egyptian elements in Rome, such as obelisks and other archeological artifacts. Some Egyptian deities, especially Isis, were worshiped in Rome and also had their own statues that might have given the French artists a small impression of ancient Egyptian culture (Thompson, 2015).

The French interest in ancient Egypt was still subtle during the Renaissance but started to expand during the early eighteenth century when campaigns to Egypt led by European explorers and scholars began to rise. These campaigns were designed to research and record Egypt's ancient monuments, artifacts, and locations, furthering the development of Egyptology as an academic field.

Furthermore, European scholars of the Renaissance and Enlightenment periods, such as Athanasius Kircher, contributed significantly to the understanding of Egyptian hieroglyphs and ancient history at the time. Athanasius Kircher wrote 'Oedipus Aegyptiacus' in which he attempted to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs, though his decipherments were quite inaccurate (Thompson, 2015).

## **5. Historical context: Egyptology after Napoleon's campaign**

After Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt in 1798, a transformative period known as Egyptology emerged, marked by a blend of scientific exploration and cultural fascination with ancient Egypt (Princeton University Art Museum, n.d.). Bonaparte's expedition, comprising 50,000 men, including 160 scientists, engineers, and artists, aimed not only at military conquest but also at comprehensive study and understanding of Egypt's rich heritage (Lefèvre et al., 2011).

In August 1798, Bonaparte established the Institute of Egypt, presided over by scientist Gaspar Monge, with the General himself serving as vice-president (Lefèvre et al., 2011). This institution comprised four sections dedicated to "mathematics," "physics," "political economy," and "arts and literature." Alongside this scientific endeavor, the newspaper *La Décade égyptienne* was launched to document the institute's proceedings and scientific discoveries (Lefèvre et al., 2011).

While the military campaign ended in failure, notably with the French fleet's defeat by British forces at the Battle of the Nile in 1800, the scientific mission yielded significant findings (Cheng, n.d.). Despite surrendering to the British and being forced to leave Egypt by 1801, the French scholars' discoveries, including the renowned Rosetta Stone, were seized by the British (Lefèvre et al., 2011). This pivotal artifact later aided French scholar Jean-François Champollion in deciphering ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs (Lefèvre et al., 2011).

One of the most enduring legacies of the expedition was the monumental work, *Description de l'Égypte*. Compiled between 1809 and 1828 in twenty volumes under Vivant Denon's guidance, this publication dispelled western misconceptions about Egypt and served as a comprehensive record of the country's culture, architecture, and geography at the dawn of the 19th century. It remains an invaluable resource for Egyptologists and scholars studying Egypt (Cheng, n.d.).

Despite the military setbacks, the scientific achievements of the Institut d'Égypte laid the foundation for Egyptology. This newfound interest in Egyptian culture, art, and architecture sparked a phenomenon known as Egyptomania across Europe (Sewell-Lasater, 2020). While this craze led to cultural appropriation and looting of Egyptian artifacts, it also fueled scholarly interest in Pharaonic history and language, contributing to the systematic study and development of Egyptology as a field (Sewell-Lasater, 2020).

## 6. Case studies

In this chapter, we delve into case studies of French painters who incorporated ancient Egyptian elements into their works. Paintings of Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) and Louis Gauffier (1762-1801) will be taken as reference for the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements before Napoleon's campaign. Paintings of Jean-Léon Gérôme's (1824-1904) will be taken as reference for the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements after Napoleon's campaign. The central focus lies in examining how these painters portrayed such elements, whether their depictions are historically accurate and finding out which sources they might have used.

A crucial aspect to consider first is the artists' personal experiences and backgrounds. Have they ever traveled to Egypt, thus gaining direct exposure to its cultural heritage? Were they situated in France or elsewhere when doing their research or making their paintings? This geographical context offers clues about the availability of resources.

We then need to ask: How did the painter depict ancient Egyptian elements in their painting(s)? This question serves as a foundation for understanding the visual language employed by these artists and the extent to which they immersed themselves in the aesthetics of ancient Egypt. This will firstly be done by a general image analysis of chosen paintings.

Following this, we investigate the accuracy of their portrayals. Have they depicted ancient Egyptian motifs, symbols, and scenes accurately? Accurate or not, the next question arises: Where did their knowledge originate from? Did they draw from scholarly sources, firsthand observation, or artistic imagination?

By addressing these questions and drawing conclusions from the case studies before and after Napoleon's campaign, the case studies aim to provide a comprehensive analysis of French painters' engagement with ancient Egyptian elements, offering valuable insights into the intersections of art, culture, and historical events.

## **6.1 Depiction of ancient Egyptian elements before Napoleon's campaign**

### **6.1.1 Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665)**

Far before Napoleon's campaign (1798-1801) to Egypt, the famous painter French Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) had painted around 19 works set in Egypt, many of them portraying a Biblical story. The most recurring stories set in Egypt that he painted were those of the Holy family and their flight or rest on the way to Egypt. Different parts of the story of Moses were often painted too. Poussin tried to depict Egypt in these paintings through different elements such as pyramids, obelisks and sphinxes. To find out whether Poussin depicted ancient Egyptian elements correctly or not, the paintings about Moses, found or exposed by the river Nile, will be analyzed. A general research on Poussin's life will be done first to have a frame of reference of his knowledge and time period that could later explain his interpretation or depiction of Egyptian elements.

#### 6.1.1a Nicolas Poussin's life

Nicolas Poussin, often described as the father of French Classicism, was born in 1594 in Normandy, France. As a French Classicist painter he mostly painted mythological themes from ancient Rome, though he also painted themes regarding the Bible multiple times - sometimes even combining the two. As Poussin spent most of his artistic career and life in Rome, the artistic and intellectual milieu of seventeenth-century Rome played a pivotal role in shaping his approach to these themes (Thompson, 1992).

Poussin's artistic development was shaped by his travels and encounters with renowned artists of his time. His Venetian visit exposed him to the coloristic richness of Venetian art, while his association with patrons like Cardinal Francesco Barberini provided opportunities for creative exploration (Thompson, 1992). Poussin's lifelong commitment to reworking motifs from classical sculpture and his close friendship with Claude Lorrain exemplified the depth of his artistic vision and intellectual engagement (Thompson, 1992).

Poussin's use of ancient Egyptian elements in his paintings represented a divergence from the artistic norms and traditions of his time. He daringly incorporated pyramids, obelisks, and other architectural features reminiscent of ancient Egypt into his compositions, reflecting his profound admiration for classical sculpture (Wine, 2001).

### 6.1.1b Image analysis



fig. 7 *Moses left by the river* (1624) by Nicolas Poussin

#### *Moses left by the river* (1624) by Nicolas Poussin

"Moses Left by the River" (1624) represents Poussin's initial exploration into depicting the biblical narrative of Moses being abandoned by the river. In this artwork, Poussin portrays what appear to be Egyptian pyramids in the background. Dominating the scene is a figure lying beside a large copernica, likely symbolizing the river Nile as a deity.



fig. 8 *Finding of Moses* (1638) by Nicolas Poussin

#### *Finding of Moses* (1638) by Nicolas Poussin

In the painting "Finding of Moses" (1638), the presence of the river Nile is more prominently depicted. Similar to other paintings of this theme, a river deity accompanies the people in the scene. A man emerges from the water while holding the basket containing Moses. In the background, a single

pyramid with a rounded peak is visible, alongside a bridge. The landscape is very serene, as the water from the river does not seem to be flowing. Poussin was known for this, as described by the Museum of Wales (2010); “*The French artists Claude Lorraine and Nicolas Poussin painted figures in serene landscape settings. They depicted nature as calm and idyllic, with every tree and rock carefully placed to create a balanced, idealized whole.*”



fig. 9 *Moses rescued from the water* (1647) by Nicolas Poussin

*Moses rescued from the water* (1647) by Nicolas Poussin

In Nicolas Poussin's painting "Moses Rescued from the Water" (1647), a noticeable expansion in the composition is observed, featuring a greater number of depicted figures. Notably, solely women appear to surround Moses in this portrayal. Positioned behind the group of women is a male figure engaged in some form of activity. The river Nile deity is once again depicted lying on the ground, this time alongside a sphinx. Next to the group of women, a musical instrument, likely a sistrum, can be seen.

Furthermore, the landscape depicted in the background exhibits a heightened level of detail compared to preceding paintings. Noteworthy elements include additional pyramids, the river Nile, a town, and an object suggestive of an obelisk. Poussin's meticulous attention to landscape detail in this rendition suggests a deliberate effort to enrich the visual narrative with contextual elements.

fig. 10 *Moses rescued from the water* (1651) by Nicolas Poussin



*Moses rescued from the water (1651) by Nicolas Poussin*

In Nicolas Poussin's painting "Moses Rescued from the Water" (1651), a shift in spatial arrangement can be noticed, particularly in relation to the proximity of the group of women to the urban environment. Unlike the composition of the 1647 depiction, the women in this painting appear to be positioned closer to the city or town. Once again, male figures are absent in their immediate vicinity, with only the presence of the Nile river deity (accompanied once again by a sphinx). Only one male figure, situated far in the background on the left, is depicted.

The urban setting itself is depicted with intricate detail, featuring an obelisk prominently situated within the town. Extending beyond the town, several pyramids can be seen in the distant landscape.



fig. 11 *Moses exposed by the river (1654)* by Nicolas Poussin

*Moses exposed by the river (1654) by Nicolas Poussin*

The composition of "Moses Exposed by the River" (1654) echoes the thematic essence of "Moses Left by the River" (1624), portraying the pivotal moment where Moses's parents, seeking to safeguard his life, entrust him to the currents of the river Nile. The river deity, accompanied by a sphinx, once again presides over the scene, similarly to the three paintings about Moses being found by the river. The sphinx has a very human-like head in comparison to the previous paintings that also included a sphinx.

Drawing from Tuschka's analysis (2021), the contextual backdrop of the painting unfolds along the banks of the Nile, where the imposing presence of the pharaoh's palace, reminiscent of the Castel Sant'Angelo in Rome, dominates the distant horizon.

### 6.1.1c Poussin's depictions of ancient Egyptian elements

In researching Nicolas Poussin's portrayal of ancient Egyptian elements and landscapes in his paintings, it is essential to explore the available sources and contextual factors of his time.

Poussin's engagement with literary sources is noteworthy. According to Malcolm Bull in his article 'Notes on Poussin's Egypt' for the Burlington Magazine (1999), Poussin often referred to Jacques Amyot's translation of Plutarch and Blaise de Vigenère's edition of Philostratus, which, while not primarily focused on Egypt, contained elements relevant to Egyptian culture. These texts may have served as Poussin's initial references for incorporating Egyptian details into his paintings

Additionally, Poussin likely drew inspiration from Roman collections and museums. During the Baroque period, Rome was home to several renowned institutions housing Egyptian artifacts, including the Vatican Museums, Capitoline Museums, Palazzo Barberini, and Palazzo Doria Pamphilj. These museums offered Poussin access to sculptures, inscriptions, and other relics that could have informed his artistic representations.

#### A. Pyramid

From the very first selected painting of 1624 until the painting of 1651, Poussin has depicted pyramids in the background of his paintings in an attempt to put the scene in the context of Egypt. Notably, the slope of the pyramids in Poussin's paintings are quite steep in comparison to the pyramids in Egypt.

Since Poussin never visited Egypt and spent most of his time in Rome, he most likely took reference to the pyramid in his vicinity: the Pyramid of Cestius. "(...) *Before the Napoleonic campaign and the publication of the careful renderings of the Description de l'Egypte it was the pyramid of Caius Cestius that informed most of the European images of what were believed to be ancient Egyptian pyramids*" (Lacovara, 2018).

The Pyramid of Caius Cestius, located in Rome, is a funerary structure constructed between 272 and 279 AD (Golubić et al., 2015). The inspiration behind the pyramid has sparked debates. While pyramids are commonly linked with Egypt, the Pyramid of Cestius bears a closer resemblance to the pyramids of the Kingdom of Meroe, a city in Sudan (Lacovara, 2018).

As for the placement of the pyramids, it differs in each painting that they are depicted. In the painting of Moses left by the river (1624), the two pyramids are hidden behind a mountain and are quite close to one another. The single pyramid in the painting of 'Finding of Moses' (1638) is partially hidden by a hill, not far from the Nile river, however, far from a town that can be seen in the distance. In the painting of 'Finding of Moses' (1647) two pyramids directly surround the town while another can be seen in the far distance. In addition, the middle pyramid featured has a "base" beneath the actual pyramid structure with what seems to be an entrance. This does not really resemble the



fig. 12 Pyramid of Cestius,  
Rome

Pyramid of Cestius thus might have been taken reference from another structure.

In the painting of 1651 Poussin painted the pyramids far outside the townscape. There seems to be three of them. The portrayal of these pyramids seem to be the most accurate out of all paintings, since almost all pyramids in Egypt do not directly border a town and are not close to the river. Additionally, there are three pyramids painted next to each other, which resemble the pyramids of Giza. This could either be coincidence or Poussin learned about the pyramids of Giza through a new source.

### B. Obelisk

Poussin frequently depicted obelisks in his paintings, often positioning them in the distant background, yet they remain distinct and recognizable elements of his compositions.

It is most probable that Poussin drew inspiration from the obelisks in Rome, particularly the Vatican Obelisk. Although Paris has its own obelisks, such as the renowned Luxor Obelisk at the Place de la Concorde, it was not transported there until 1838, nearly two centuries after Poussin's passing. Some of the obelisks found in Rome have graced the city since the days of the Roman Empire. Additionally, Poussin spent the majority of his artistic career in Rome, where these ancient monuments would have been prominent features of the urban landscape, influencing his artistic vision.

The obelisk painted in 'Finding of Moses' (1651) by Poussin seems to have a round object on its peak instead of a cross like the Vatican obelisk now has. This depiction resembles to a certain extent what the Vatican obelisk used to look like before being placed in Rome. Poussin probably has not seen the round object on top in real life since the round object was already replaced by a cross after its placement of the obelisk in 1586 - far before Poussin started working in Rome. Poussin might have seen from old drawings that the obelisk used to have this round object on top instead of a cross. A drawing he might have seen is of the print made by Natale di Bonifacio in 1586. "*This print presents in an extremely imaginative way Domenico Fontana's scheme for the moving of the Vatican obelisk in 1586*" (Bury, 2001). In this print, the original state of the obelisk is drawn and resembles the obelisk painted by Poussin in 'Finding of Moses' (1651). If these speculations are true, it shows how determined Poussin was to create a more accurate Egyptian feel to this painting.

Another source where Poussin might have gotten his inspiration from is the book "*Obeliscus Pamphilius: Hoc est, Interpretatio noua & hucusque intentata obelisci hieroglyphici, quem non ita pridem ex veteri hippodromo Alexandri Sextus V Pont. Max. Romae in Vaticanum atrium translatus e medio vrbs*", by Pierio Valeriano Bolzani which was published in Rome in 1589 (Curran, 2009).

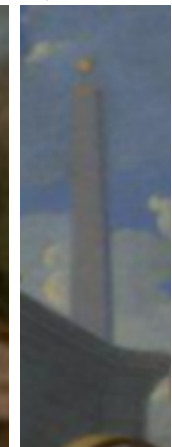
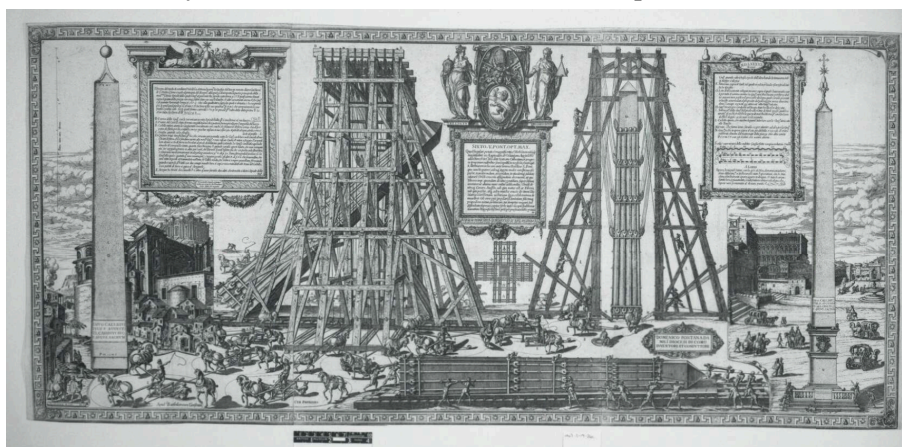


fig. 13 Print of moving of the St Peter's obelisk (1586) made by Natale Bonifacio da Sebenico

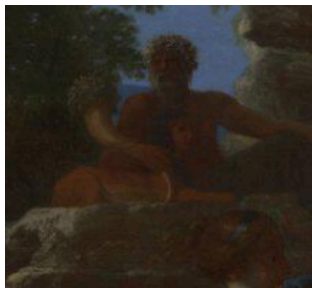
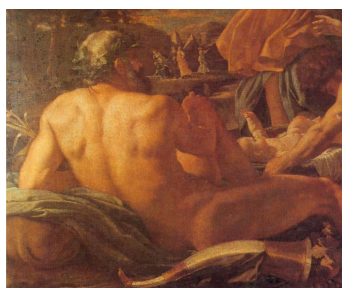
(1647)

(1651)

### C. Nile & Sphinx

Nicolas Poussin's artistic depiction of the sphinx in 1647 marks a notable departure from his previous works, raising questions about the evolution of his artistic style and influences. While he had already consistently portrayed rivers as deities before, the addition of the sphinx in his painting "Finding of Moses" suggests a shift in his artistic interpretation (Bull, 1999) or perhaps merely newly gained knowledge.

While some scholars, such as Loménie de Brienne, expressed puzzlement over Poussin's inclusion of the river deity in his paintings, it is evident that Poussin took pleasure in depicting river deities throughout his works (Bull, 1999). Poussin's depiction of the river deity in the analyzed paintings, believed to represent the Nile in Egypt, bears resemblance to the river deities of ancient Greece and Rome, known as the 'Potamoi'. These deities were often portrayed as reclining figures, holding a cornucopia and resting their arm on a symbol associated with the river's name or location. For the Nile, this symbol was a sphinx. Poussin likely drew inspiration from his surroundings in Rome, where he had been working since 1624 (Thompson, 1992). The discovery of a sculpture personifying the river Nile in Rome in 1513, later exhibited in the Vatican Museum, may have influenced Poussin's artistic portrayal (see image below). This speculation is further supported by Malcolm Bull's (1999) 'Notes on Poussin's Egypt'. According to Bull, Poussin seems to have followed Vigenère's description of the river Nile. Vigenère wrote: *'Le fleuve icy descript, ou plus tost depeint, est tout tel qu'on le voit... au jardin de Belvedere à Rome'* which roughly translates to *'The river here described, or earlier depicted, is just as we see it... in the garden of Belvedere in Rome'*. The Belvedere in Rome refers to the (now known as) Vatican Museum.



#### D. Sistrum

The depiction of the sistrum only occurs in the 1647 painting. A sistrum, originating from ancient Egypt, is a musical instrument commonly used as a rattle. However, the sistrum portrayed in Poussin's painting is a type typically observed outside of Egypt during the Roman period (Winlock 1921). This variant emerged within the Roman period in the context of the ancient cults devoted to the Egyptian goddess Isis, which were widespread around the Mediterranean (Winlock 1921).

The sistrum depicted by Poussin lacks the coins that traditionally produce the instrument's rattling sound. This exclusion could have been intentional or stemmed from a lack of knowledge. Given Poussin's frequent reference to archaeological artifacts and sculptures, he might have used a sistrum as a reference that did not include the 'rattling coins'. One such sistrum that Poussin could have encountered is depicted in the statue of Isis at the Capitoline Museums. The inclusion of the sistrum could have been intended to solely enhance the Egyptian ambiance that Poussin sought to create.

However, in a 1999 article published in the Burlington Magazine discussing Poussin and Egypt, author Malcolm Bull offers another interpretation of why Poussin included the sistrum in his painting. Bull suggests that it symbolizes the rise and fall of the river, as described by Philostratus and the commentary of Vigenere, who Bull claims Poussin often referenced. Bull states: "(...) So, although it is true that the sistrum was associated with Isis, its particular significance was as a symbol of the falling and rising of the Nile, and it is in this context that it appears in Vigenere's commentary. The possibility that the sistrum in the *Pointel Finding* (...) is an attribute of the Nile and refers to the recession and return of the waters rather than to the presence of Isis or her priestesses must therefore be given serious consideration" (1999).



fig. 15 Marble statue of Isis, the goddess holds a situla and sistrum, ritual implements used in her worship, from 117 until 138 AD, found at Hadrian's Villa (Pantanello), Palazzo Nuovo, Capitoline Museums



fig. 16 Sistrum in *Moses rescued from the water* (1647) by Nicolas Poussin

### 6.1.2 Louis Gauffier (1762-1801)

French painter Louis Gauffier (1762-1801) lived a short life as he passed away in 1801. His last years aligned with the years of Napoleon's campaign to Egypt (1798-1801). Analyzing Louis Gauffier's depiction of ancient Egyptian elements might therefore give a unique insight on what was known of ancient Egypt shortly before the Egyptomania caused by Napoleon's campaign.

Unfortunately only one painting of Louis Gauffier portrays many different ancient Egyptian elements; "*Cleopatra and Octavian*" (1787-1788). Another painting of Gauffier with few ancient Egyptian elements is called "*Rest on the flight into Egypt (1792)*", however, this case study will only focus on "*Cleopatra and Octavian*" (1787-1788). In this painting, Egyptian icon and queen Cleopatra, who is surrounded by all sorts of seemingly ancient Egyptian elements, plays the main character.

First, we'll conduct a general study of Gauffier's life to establish a context for his knowledge and the era in which he lived. This background will help us better understand his interpretation or representation of Egyptian elements.

#### 6.1.2a Louis Gauffier's life

Louis Gauffier (1762-1801), a student of the history painter Hugues Taraval (1729-1785), was a successful neoclassical painter who won the Prix de Rome in 1784 at the age of 22 (The National Gallery London, n.d.). This prestigious award provided him with a scholarship for three years of study at the French Academy in Rome. During his time in Rome, Gauffier continued his academic training, drawing inspiration from classical sculpture and casts, which became the foundation for his classical paintings (National Galleries of Scotland, n.d.).

While in Italy, Gauffier worked in the circle of the renowned Neoclassical artist Jacques-Louis David and remained in Italy for four years. However, his return to France was overshadowed by the outbreak of the French Revolution. With royalist sympathies, Gauffier faced difficulties in securing work in revolutionary France. As a result, he returned to Italy, where he spent most of his remaining years (National Gallery of Victoria, 2012).

In Italy, Gauffier settled in Florence and made a living by painting portraits of French military officers and international travelers, often incorporating landscape backgrounds into his works. Despite the political upheavals and challenges he faced during the French Revolution, Gauffier continued to receive commissions for landscapes and portraits of aristocrats and diplomats while in Italy (The National Gallery London, n.d.).

### 6.1.2b General image analysis



fig. 17 "Cleopatra and Octavian" (1787-1788) by Louis Gauffier (1762-1801)

The painting "Cleopatra and Octavian" (1787-1788) portrays Cleopatra and Octavian engaged in a conversation while being surrounded by all sorts of objects that are reminiscent of ancient Egypt and Rome. The chair on which Octavian is seated, a winged creature wearing an Egyptian headdress is depicted. The golden sofa on which Cleopatra sits bears hieroglyphs and an ancient Egyptian figure on the armrest. Three small statues representing Egyptian deities can be seen in the background behind the statue of who might be Octavian himself or perhaps his adoptive father Julius Caesar. The statue on the left seems to depict a woman with an animal on her arm. The statue in the middle is a man wearing an ancient Egyptian headdress. The statue on the right seems to depict a woman with the head of a cow.

According to the National Galleries of Scotland, where the painting is exhibited, the subject of the painting is based on the book *'Life of Mark Anthony'* written by ancient Greek philosopher Plutarch. The scene details Octavian's encounter with the Egyptian queen Cleopatra following his triumph over Mark Antony at the Battle of Actium in 31 BC. According to the National Galleries of Scotland, where the painting is exhibited, the subject of the painting is based on the book *'Life of Mark Anthony'* written by ancient Greek philosopher Plutarch. The painting most likely refers to the following scene:

*“83. A few days later Octavius paid a visit to talk to Cleopatra and try to reassure her. She had abandoned her luxurious style of living, and was lying on a pallet bed dressed only in a tunic, but, as he entered, she sprang up and threw herself at his feet. Her hair was unkempt and her expression wild, while her eyes were sunken and her voice trembled uncontrollably: her breasts bore the marks of the cruel blows she had inflicted on herself, and in a word her body seemed to have suffered no less anguish than her spirit. And yet her charm and a certain reckless confidence in her beauty were still by no means extinguished, and despite her sorry appearance they shone forth from within and revealed themselves in the play of her features. At any rate after Octavius had urged her to lie down and seated himself close to her, she tried at first to justify her part in the war, making out that her actions had been forced upon her by necessity and through her fear of Antony. But as Octavius contradicted her on every point and demolished her excuses, she quickly changed her manner and began to appeal to his pity with prayers and entreaties, as if she still clung above all else to the hope of saving her life. Finally, she handed to him a paper, which was supposed to be a complete inventory of her treasures, but when Seleucus, one of her stewards, made it clear that she was concealing and making away with a number of her possessions, she leaped to her feet seized him by the hair, and pummelled his face. Octavius smiled at this episode and at last restrained her, whereupon she said. 'But is it not outrageous.'”*

- From Plutarch's "The Life of Mark Anthony", as translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert

Despite Cleopatra's attempts to persuade Octavian of her innocence, he remains skeptical. The National Galleries of Scotland describe the painting by saying that Cleopatra's pleas eventually shift to flattery as she draws comparisons between Octavian and his illustrious great-uncle, Julius Caesar. The bust on the right is most likely there to highlight that she is making this comparison to Julius Caesar. Though the statue in between them might also be Julius Caesar to further highlight the greatness of Julius Caesar that she compares Octavian with.

Interestingly, in the scene written by Plutarch there seems to be no mention of Cleopatra comparing Octavius to Julius Caesar. Translations other than the one from Ian Scott-Kilvert, also do not seem to mention Cleopatra comparing Octavian to Julius Caesar. Gauffier could have made his own rendition to the scene or interpreted the text differently. Though when looking for other paintings that depict the very same scene, only one other painting seems to portray Cleopatra comparing Octavian to Julius Caesar. This painting is then also specifically called "*Cleopatra Showing Octavius the Bust of Julius Caesar*", made in the 18th century by Italian painter Pompeo Batoni (1708-1787). Though the specific date of when this painting was completed is not known, Pompeo Batoni died before Gauffier's art career in Italy truly took off. Therefore there is a chance that Gauffier might have seen this painting and made his own version of it. It is, however, notable that Gauffier actually tried to incorporate Egyptian elements into his version in comparison to Batoni's painting.

### 6.1.2c Gauffier's depictions of ancient Egyptian elements

In the painting 'Cleopatra and Octavian' by Louis Gauffier (1787-1788), Gauffier explores different elements of ancient Egyptian culture and history. This chapter aims to analyze the various ancient Egyptian elements depicted in Gauffier's painting, offering insights into his artistic choices and the sources of his inspiration.

The painting features a sphinx on the chair of Octavian, alongside sculptures of different Egyptian deities in the background. One of the primary questions we seek to answer is the identity of these deities: which ancient Egyptian gods or goddesses do they represent? Additionally, we will examine the accuracy of Gauffier's portrayal of these deities and the sphinx and explore the potential sources from which he derived this information.

Another intriguing aspect of Gauffier's painting is his depiction of Cleopatra, the historical figure central to the scene derived from Plutarch's *'Life of Mark Anthony'*. We will examine whether Gauffier's portrayal of Cleopatra aligns with contemporary artifacts, Plutarch's descriptions of her, or if he offers an entirely unique interpretation of the queen.

Drawing parallels with the artistic practices of his predecessor, Nicolas Poussin, Gauffier is known to have drawn inspiration from classical sculptures and casts in Rome. Therefore, sculptures housed in various museums in Rome during Gauffier's time will be researched, investigating potential references and influences that shaped his artistic choices.

#### A. Sphinx

In Louis Gauffier's depiction of the Sphinx within the painting 'Cleopatra and Octavian,' a unique blend of cultural elements emerges. The Sphinx is portrayed with a human head, the body of a lion, an ancient Egyptian headdress, and notably, wings and udders. This representation deviates from the traditional Egyptian Sphinx, which typically lacks wings and udders.

The Sphinx as depicted by Gauffier bears a closer resemblance to the Greek Sphinx from the myth of Oedipus. The primary distinction lies in the addition of an ancient Egyptian headdress, perhaps an attempt to imbue the creature with Egyptian identity. Interestingly, a comparable depiction of an 'Egyptian sphinx' can be found on the frontispiece of Athanasius Kircher's book *'Oedipus Aegypticus'*, where the Sphinx, adorned with an ancient Egyptian headdress, symbolizes Egyptian hieroglyphs while Oedipus represents Kircher solving the riddle that are the Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Considering these parallels, one might speculate on Gauffier's intentions behind his portrayal. If Gauffier was unaware of Kircher's work, however, the inclusion of the Sphinx with a Greek-like form and an Egyptian headdress could be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, it could be a deliberate representation reflecting the cultural fusion of ancient Rome and Egypt. On the other hand, it might be an unintentional deviation stemming from Gauffier's potential unfamiliarity with the traditional appearance of an Egyptian Sphinx, leading him to merge the Greek and Egyptian elements he was familiar with - a Greek sphinx with an ancient Egyptian headdress.

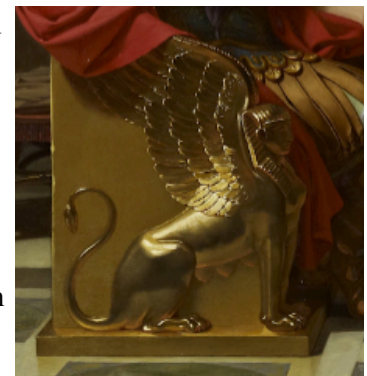


fig. 18 Sphinx in "Cleopatra and Octavian" (1787-1788) by Louis Gauffier (1762-1801)



fig. 19 Sphinx in "Oedipus Aegyptiacus" (1652-1654) by Athanasius Kircher

### B. Egyptian deities

In Louis Gauffier's painting 'Cleopatra and Octavian,' the background features three statues that most likely represent ancient Egyptian deities.

The central statue, a human with an Egyptian headdress, bears a huge resemblance to a sculpture housed in the Vatican Museum, which according to the description of the Vatican Museum represents Osiris-Antinous (see fig. 20). This statue was unearthed in 1740 at the Casino Michili and was later donated to Pope Benedict XIV (Musei Vaticani, n.d.). Initially displayed at the Capitoline Museum in 1742, it was transferred to the Vatican's Egyptian Museum in 1838. While the inclusion of the Osiris-Antinous statue in Gauffier's scene might not be entirely accurate, given that Antinous lived approximately 140 years after Cleopatra's death, its presence suggests that Gauffier at least tried to evoke an ancient Egyptian feeling to the painting.

On the right, the statue in Gauffier's painting closely resembles the Egyptian deity Hathor, who is often depicted as a cow or a woman with a cow's head, adorned with cow horns and a sun disk. However, a similar statue of the god Apis can be found in the Vatican Museum (see fig. 21) which the museum acquired in 1779. "The statue depicts the god Apis with a human body and a bull's head. The arms, the lower part of the body and the legs are missing; however, the god was probably depicted in a standing position holding his right arm in front of him, holding the sceptre or was, symbol of power, conserved in the upper part, and with his left arm by his side" (Musei Vaticani, n.d.). The statue painted by Gauffier does not have any arms either, further suggesting that he painted the statue of Apis in the Vatican Museum. Furthermore, given that Louis Gauffier is known to have drawn inspiration from classical sculptures and casts in Rome, it is highly likely that he used the statue of Apis, like the statue of Osiris-Antinous, as reference.

The statue on the left presents a more challenging identification task. The statue appears to be anthropomorphic, suggesting it could represent a deity such as Horus, Anubis, Seth, or Thoth. The absence of a definitive match in museum collections leaves room for speculation regarding its specific identity.

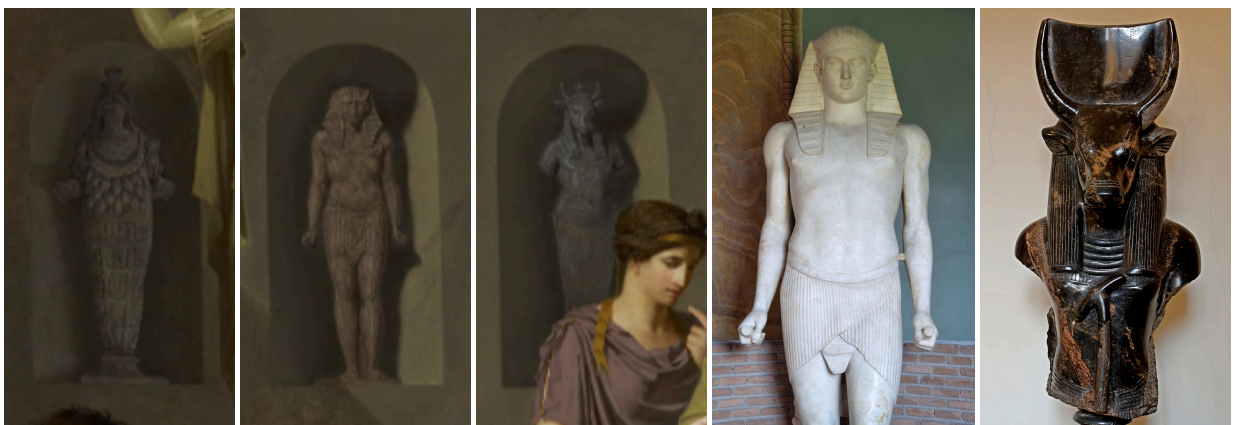


fig. 19 Statues of Egyptian deities in *Cleopatra and Octavian* (1787-1788) by Louis Gauffier

fig 20. *Statue of Osiris-Antinous* in the Vatican Museum

fig 21. anthropomorphic statue of the god Apis in the Vatican Museum

### C. Cleopatra

Cleopatra's portrayal in "Cleopatra and Octavian (1787-1788) diverges from the few existing contemporary artifacts that offer glimpses of her appearance. These artifacts, such as coins and a marble bust (see fig 4), typically depict Cleopatra with her hair styled in a low bun, big eyes, and a prominent hooked nose (though the nose on the marble bust has broken off). Gauffier's depiction, which lacks these distinctive features, might suggest that he drew inspiration from Plutarch's written description of Cleopatra rather than contemporary visual representations.

Plutarch, although not a contemporary of Cleopatra, offers a vivid portrayal of her in the scene in particular. He describes her in her meeting with Octavian as followed:

*"Her hair was unkempt and her expression wild, while her eyes were sunken and her voice trembled uncontrollably: her breasts bore the marks of the cruel blows she had inflicted on herself, and in a word her body seemed to have suffered no less anguish than her spirit. And yet her charm and a certain reckless confidence in her beauty were still by no means extinguished, and despite her sorry appearance they shone forth from within and revealed themselves in the play of her features."*

- From Plutarch's "The Life of Mark Anthony", as translated by Ian Scott-Kilvert

While Gauffier's painting does not fully capture all the details from Plutarch's description, such as the visible signs of self-harm and the sunken eyes, he does incorporate several elements that align with Plutarch's characterization of Cleopatra. For instance, compared to the servants depicted behind her, Cleopatra's hair appears unkempt, and her facial expression exudes confidence and charm.

This confidence is further accentuated by the painting's lighting, which casts Octavian's face in shadows while illuminating Cleopatra, dressed in white, to create a radiant presence. Despite her distressed appearance, Plutarch emphasizes Cleopatra's enduring charm and resilience.

In terms of attire and posture, Gauffier likely turned to Roman sculptures for inspiration. Octavian's pose, for instance, bears a striking resemblance to a statue found in the Vatican Museum (referenced in fig. 24), suggesting that Gauffier may have used this as a reference. However, identifying the specific statue(s) that influenced Gauffier's portrayal of Cleopatra remains difficult.

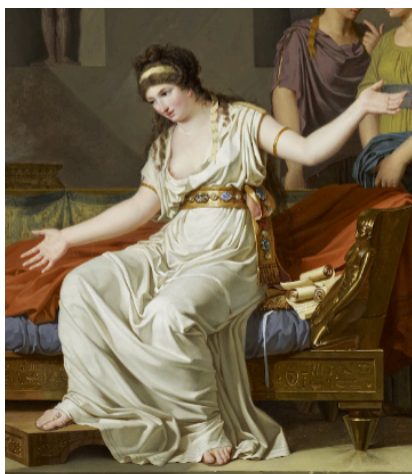


fig. 22 Cleopatra in *Cleopatra and Octavian* (1787-1788) by Louis Gauffier



fig. 23 Octavian in *Cleopatra and Octavian* (1787-1788) by Louis Gauffier



fig. 24 Statue of a seated figure, the so-called Menander. Rome

### **6.1.3 Conclusion on the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements *before* Napoleon's campaign**

Louis Gauffier and Nicolas Poussin, both renowned artists of their respective eras, offer intriguing explorations of ancient Egyptian culture through their paintings. Gauffier's "Cleopatra and Octavian" (1787-1788) demonstrates a neoclassical approach influenced by his exposure to classical sculptures in Rome and literary sources like Plutarch's descriptions of Cleopatra. The painting features a distinctive Sphinx, which (possibly out of ignorance) blends Greek and Egyptian elements, alongside statues representing Egyptian deities like Osiris-Antinous and Hathor. Gauffier's meticulous attention to these details suggests a deliberate attempt to infuse the painting with an authentic Egyptian ambiance, despite some misplaced elements.

Similarly, Poussin's engagement with Egyptian motifs is heavily influenced by his time in Rome, enriched by literary references from Jacques Amyot's translation of Plutarch's works and Blaise de Vigenère's edition of Philostratus. The presence of Egyptian artifacts in Roman collections further informed his artistic representations. Notably, Poussin's inclusion of the sphinx, the Nile river deity, and the sistrum in his paintings reflects his attempt to create an Egyptian ambiance, albeit with some variations that deviate from authentic Egyptian forms.

Thus both Nicolas Poussin and Louis Gauffier mostly drew references of ancient Egyptian elements from the sources closely available to them, such as sculptures and literary sources from ancient Rome or ancient Greece. Both have used Plutarch and sculptures for their source on ancient Egypt. Gauffier, however, has had the opportunity to draw reference from newly exhibited statues of ancient Egyptian deities that were not around yet during Poussin's time. Nevertheless, Poussin's evolving portrayal of Egyptian elements throughout his career reflects his continuous exploration and adaptation of Egyptian motifs and symbolism. Both Poussin's and Gauffier's works offer fascinating windows into the era's understanding of ancient Egypt, blending artistic interpretation with historical, literary, and visual references. These artists' works not only resonate with the artistic trends of their times but also provide unique insights into the limited knowledge of ancient Egyptian culture they had during their respective times before Napoleon's campaign to Egypt.

## **6.2 Depiction of ancient Egyptian elements after Napoleon's campaign**

### **6.2.1 Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904)**

Jean-Léon Gérôme is the selected painter and sculptor for the case study on the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements after Napoleon's campaign in Egypt. The paintings that will be analyzed are "Bonaparte in front of the Sphinx" (1868) and "Cleopatra and Caesar" (1866). Gérôme has made more paintings related to Egypt, however, the selected paintings focus the most on ancient Egyptian elements and will therefore be used for the case study. Since these paintings are made more than 60 years after Napoleon's campaign, they might give a unique insight on how Egypt was perceived or accurately portrayed by French artists. Jean-Léon Gérôme's life and affinity with Egypt will first be discussed before exploring the perception and accuracy of the portrayal of Egyptian elements).

#### **6.2.1a Jean-Léon Gérôme's life**

Jean-Léon Gérôme, born in 1824 and passing away in 1904, was a French artist and sculptor. He played a significant role in the 19th-century Academic art movement, gaining recognition for his precise and carefully crafted pieces (World History Edu, 2023b). Gérôme's artworks frequently explored themes from history, mythology, and Orientalism, highlighting his exceptional technical skill and meticulous attention to detail (World History Edu, 2023b).

Jean-Léon Gérôme had fostered a deep affinity for Egypt, his first voyage to the Middle East and Egypt marking in 1856 (Meyer, 2024). On this journey, he traversed the Holy Land, explored Damascus and Jerusalem, crossed the Sinai Peninsula, and journeyed along the Nile River (Gurney, n.d.). This campaign profoundly influenced his earliest Orientalist paintings, as he was captivated by the North African landscapes and people (Meyer, 2024).

From 1855 onwards, Gérôme made numerous return trips to Egypt (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.). The memories of these travels, coupled with the artifacts he brought back to Paris, served as inspiration for what could now be seen as historical fictions (Gurney, 2020). An example of such historical fiction was when after a twelve-week expedition to the Near East in 1868, Gérôme crafted the painting "Bashi-Bazouk" using garments and accessories he had collected during his travels to adorn a model in his studio (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2009).

Gérôme's firsthand experiences empowered Gérôme to infuse his work with unparalleled authenticity and intricate detail. This commitment to realism not only enthralled audiences but also solidified his stature as a pivotal figure in the Orientalist art movement (Gurney, 2020). His paintings, characterized by their meticulous depiction of life in Egypt and the Middle East, set new standards for realism and detail during his era (The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.).

### 6.2.1b General image analysis



fig. 25 *Bonaparte in front of the Sphinx* (1868) by Jean-Léon Gérôme

#### Bonaparte in front of the Sphinx (1868)

“Bonaparte in front of the Sphinx” (1868) depicts Napoleon Bonaparte standing in front of the great Sphinx of Giza. This painting supposedly represents Napoleon’s campaign to Egypt in 1798 until 1801. Napoleon took 50,000 men and eight hundred horses with him (Lefèvre et al., 2011), which are depicted by Gérôme in the far distance of the painting. The distant desert troops are supposedly depicted to be preparing for the notable battle on 21 July 1798, when the French army clashed with Murad-bey's Mamluks (La Fondation Napoléon, n.d.).

Gérôme was deeply fond of this painting and first showcased it at the Salon of 1886, under the title "Oedipus" (La Fondation Napoléon, n.d.). This indicated that Gérôme drew a parallel between the classical myth of Oedipus meeting and solving the riddle of the sphinx and Napoleon viewing the Great Sphinx of Giza and “conquering” Egypt.

La Fondation Napoléon describes the painting to be mostly served as a pretext to paint Gérôme’s fascination for the Orient, as the Sphinx occupies half of the composition, dominating a Bonaparte on his horse. Napoleon has his fist on his hip, as he is in no way impressed by the ancient colossal sphinx. In alignment with La Fondation Napoléon's description of Jean-Léon Gérôme's work, the framing gives meaning to the composition. Deliberately excluding the pyramids from the Giza plateau accentuates the confrontation between the monumental figures.

### Cleopatra and Caesar (1866)

Jean-Léon Gérôme's painting "Cleopatra and Caesar" captures a pivotal historical moment, depicting the meeting between Cleopatra VII, the last ruler of Egypt's Ptolemaic Kingdom, and Julius Caesar, the formidable Roman general and statesman (World History Edu, 2023). This artwork illuminates the complex political alliance and relationship between Ptolemaic Egypt and Rome during this period (World History Edu, 2023).

Central to the composition is Cleopatra's magnetic allure and confidence. She is portrayed emerging gracefully from an intricately designed carpet, while at her feet, Apollodorus, her loyal servant, is depicted in a bent posture (World History Edu, 2023). This positioning references the historical work by the Greek historian Plutarch in his "Life of Caesar," where Apollodorus assisted Cleopatra in a unique way to enter Alexandria's palace in 48 BC. Despite being written about a century after the event, the scene in particular from Plutarch's "Life of Caesar" has become legendary. The scene is described as followed in Plutarch's work:

*"49. So Cleopatra, taking only Apollodorus the Sicilian from among her friends, embarked in a little skiff and landed at the palace when it was already getting dark; and as it was impossible to escape notice otherwise, she stretched herself at full length inside a bed-sack, while Apollodorus tied the bedsack up with a cord and carried it indoors to Caesar. [2] It was by this device of Cleopatra's, it is said, that Caesar was first captivated, for she showed herself to be a bold coquette, and succumbing to the charm of further intercourse with her, he reconciled her to her brother on the basis of a joint share with him in the royal power."*

- From Plutarch's "Life of Caesar", as translated by Bernadotte Perrin (1919)

A notable historical inaccuracy can be found in Gérôme's portrayal in Cleopatra's mode of entry. Plutarch described her being smuggled into the palace in a bed-sack, though a discrepancy arose from John Langhorne's translation of Plutarch's work, where he used the word "carpet".

At the time the word "carpet" could mean a type of thick fabric but due to a semantic shift in the term "carpet" over time, Gérôme depicted Cleopatra emerging from a rug instead (World History Edu, 2023).

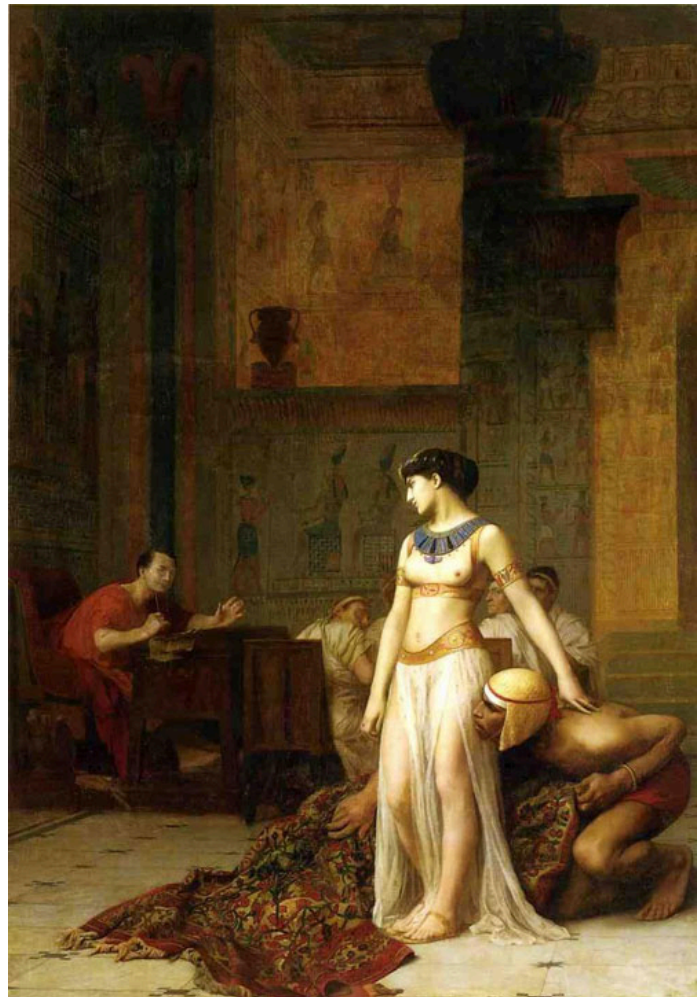


fig. 26 Cleopatra and Caesar (1866) by Jean-Léon Gérôme

## 6.2.1c Gérôme's depictions of ancient Egyptian elements

### A. The Sphinx of Giza

Though Jean-Léon Gérôme travelled to Egypt himself, he was not born yet when Bonaparte made his campaign to Egypt. Therefore, the depicted scene of Napoleon in front of the Great Sphinx of Giza is merely imaginative and not based on reality. However, the depiction of the Sphinx is very accurate to reality. Gérôme most probably painted the scene while he was in Egypt, as the painting was made in 1868 - the same year Gérôme toured Egypt and Asia Minor from January 1 to April 13 (The Met Museum, 2014). Unlike what it looks like now, the Great Sphinx of Giza was very worn down due to erosion and other natural and human-caused damage. It was also not yet fully unearthed as can be seen in an illustration from *Description de l'Égypte* (see fig. 28). Gérôme's painting therefore gives an interesting insight on what the sphinx most likely looked like in his time with a picture-like accuracy.



fig. 27 The Great Sphinx of Giza as depicted by Jean-Léon Gérôme



fig. 28 The Great Sphinx of Giza as depicted in *Description de l'Égypte*

### B. Cleopatra

The few existing artifacts that offer glimpses of Cleopatra's appearance, depict Cleopatra with her hair styled in a low bun, big eyes, and a prominent hooked nose. Though Cleopatra's face can not be entirely seen in Gérôme's painting, she does wear her hair in some kind of low bun and has a prominent nose.

Cleopatra is very much portrayed as a temptress in Gérôme's painting, rather than someone who was known to be a great ruler of a huge empire. This is not necessarily Gérôme's fault, as Cleopatra has always been described as a temptress by the Romans and Greeks of her own time. Though her clothes seem to be romanticized in accordance to Gérôme's Orientalist fantasies rather than on historical accuracy. Her clothes also contrast the Roman attire of Caesar and the other men in the painting to further accentuate her trying to seduce Caesar as a woman from another "exotic" empire. The accessories she wears seem to be most accurate to real ancient Egyptian accessories worn by ancient Egyptians of regal status (World History Edu, 2023).

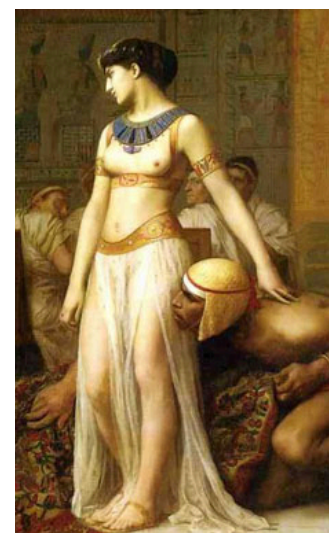


fig. 29 Cleopatra in *Cleopatra and Caesar* (1866)

### C. Temple

Gérôme's meticulous attention to detail is evident in his incorporation of authentic Egyptian elements. Following his visit to Egypt in 1857, he meticulously collected local colors and observed precise details, basing the background of the painting on a temple at Deir el-Medina as described in the "*Description de l'Égypte*" (Gurney, 2020). The painting encapsulates the 19th-century fascination with Egypt, known as Egyptomania, encapsulating themes of decadence, nudity, slavery, and sex (Gurney, 2020).

#### **6.2.2 Conclusion on the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements *after* Napoleon's campaign**

The post-Napoleonic era witnessed a notable surge in French paintings that incorporated ancient Egyptian elements, reflecting a blend of historical accuracy and Orientalist imagination. Jean-Léon Gérôme stands out as a pivotal figure in this movement, fueled by his profound affinity for Egypt, nurtured through multiple visits to the region. His paintings, "*Bonaparte in front of the Sphinx*" and "*Cleopatra and Caesar*," serve as intriguing case studies that exemplify this trend.

Gérôme's meticulous attention to detail and commitment to authenticity are evident in both paintings. While "*Bonaparte in front of the Sphinx*" showcases the artist's accurate portrayal of the Great Sphinx of Giza, his depiction of Napoleon's encounter with the Sphinx is imaginative, drawing parallels with classical myths like Oedipus and highlighting Gérôme's fascination with the Orient. On the other hand, "*Cleopatra and Caesar*" captures a pivotal historical moment with a blend of historical accuracy and artistic license. Despite a notable inaccuracy in Cleopatra's mode of entry from the scene of Plutarch's work "Life of Caesar" and one's own interpretation of Cleopatra's appearance and clothes, Gérôme's painting is rich in authentic Egyptian elements, from Cleopatra's accessories to the background based on the temple at Deir el-Medina.

The artistic period after Napoleon's campaign to Egypt therefore signifies a more accurate depiction of ancient Egyptian elements, though with fantasized interventions because of the newfound Orientalism at the time.

## 7. Conclusion

The exploration of French paintings depicting ancient Egyptian elements before and after Napoleon's campaign has unveiled a fascinating evolution in artistic interpretation and representation. Through meticulous analysis of artworks by painters such as Nicolas Poussin, Louis Gauffier, and Jean-Léon Gérôme, we have gained valuable insights into the shifting perceptions of ancient Egypt within the French artistic landscape.

Addressing the central research question, "How has the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements in French paintings changed after Napoleon's campaign to Egypt?" reveals a nuanced transformation in artistic portrayal and understanding.

In the pre-Napoleonic era, artists like Nicolas Poussin and Louis Gauffier, depicted ancient Egyptian motifs through a lens shaped largely by classical texts and available artifacts. Their works, though imbued with a sense of mystery and exoticism, was often based on speculation and therefore lacked detailed accuracy. This was of course due to limited sources on ancient Egypt available to them.

Despite these limitations, Nicolas Poussin demonstrated a fascination with ancient Egypt through his paintings of "The finding of Moses" or "Moses exposed by the river". Poussin's depictions of pyramids, obelisks, and sphinxes in these paintings reflected his imaginative interpretation and growing knowledge of Egyptian elements. While certain elements may have lacked complete accuracy, Poussin's skill in portraying ancient Egyptian elements with a degree of authenticity, despite never having visited Egypt himself, is proof of his research and creative use of imagination within the constraints of his available resources as he connected ancient Egyptian's history with the Roman Empire.

The same can be said for Louis Gauffier, as he mostly relied on classical sculptures. In comparison to Poussin, however, he painted statues of Egyptian deities in "*Cleopatra and Octavian*", suggesting that he truly tried to evoke an ancient Egyptian ambiance to the painting. Though he sometimes had to speculate what they originally might have looked like. The statues of these Egyptian deities were not yet found and exhibited during Poussin's time, which reflects the time period wherein interest in Egypt might have started to grow.

The turn of the 19th century, marked by Napoleon's campaign in Egypt, ignited a renewed interest and exploration in ancient Egypt among French artists. The campaign, while driven by political and strategic motives, inadvertently opened up Egypt to European exploration and study, laying the groundwork for a more informed and nuanced artistic representation of ancient Egyptian elements.

Post-Napoleon artists, like Jean-Léon Gérôme, emerged as pivotal figures in this artistic evolution. Gérôme's deep affinity for Egypt, nurtured through multiple visits to the region and meticulous observation of local culture, enabled him to infuse his works with a certain degree of authenticity and intricate detail which was unique at the time. Though he often blended these authentic and detailed works with his own imaginative scenes and elements, which became characteristic to Orientalist painters. His paintings, such as "*Bonaparte in front of the Sphinx*" and "*Cleopatra and Caesar*," exemplify this blending of historical accuracy with Orientalist imagination. While Gérôme's works may not align perfectly with historical facts or contemporary understandings of ancient Egyptian

culture, they offer valuable insights into the European fascination with Egypt and their perception of it during this transformative period.

Comparing the periods before and after Napoleon's campaign, it seems that the works of the Greek historian Plutarch remain an important source on Ancient Egypt for artists even after more accurate sources became available. Both Louis Gauffier and Gérôme have used Plutarch's works to paint a scene depicting Cleopatra, while Poussin has also been mentioned to have used Poussin's work for inspiration. Plutarch's works are, however, not very reliable as most of the biographies he wrote were long after the person had passed away and were often written from a biased perspective. So although there were more and perhaps better sources available Post-Napoleon, artists were more focussed on creating paintings with almost authentic and visually pleasing Egyptian elements even if the depicted scene was historically inaccurate. In a way it could be said that they romanticize ancient Egypt in their paintings, which was characteristic of Orientalist painters.

In conclusion, after Napoleon's campaign, the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements in French paintings became more nuanced, detailed, and informed. As it was mostly based on or through classical Roman and Greek artifacts before, French artists now had more accurate sources available and did not have to rely on their imagination and speculations anymore. Post-Napoleonic artists began to incorporate authentic Egyptian cultural and historical references, however, they fused them with their own artistic interpretations and imagination. Thus despite the availability of accurate sources, French artists still infused their own perception of ancient Egypt into their paintings which were often romanticized due to Orientalism. The shift in the depiction of ancient Egyptian elements underscores the impact of Napoleon's campaign and European exploration on the French artistic perception and representation of ancient Egypt, marking a notable departure from earlier, which were more speculative depictions.

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