Hegel and Champollion: Understanding Egyptian Art through Aesthetics in the Early Nineteenth Century

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Abstract

This article examines Hegel's role in shaping early nineteenth-century understandings of ancient Egyptian art. By situating his reflections within their broader historical framework—not merely emerging in the nineteenth century but also defined by the debates of previous centuries—I argue that the two central pillars of his system, idealism and dialectics, constitute a response to the Enlightenment's complex and often ambivalent engagement with Egypt and its artistic traditions. As Hegel presents it in his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst*, Egyptian art was grounded in an elaborate intellectual system, which simultaneously allowed Egyptian artefacts to gain institutional recognition as artworks in the early nineteenth century. I seek to draw a parallel between the incorporation of Egyptian art into Hegel's philosophical system and its integration into the museum space, as exemplified by Jean-François Champollion's curatorial vision of the Musée Charles X at the Louvre.

Keywords

Philosophy of Art; Aesthetics; Hegel; Champollion; Musée Charles X; Quatremère de Quincy; Winckelmann; Raoul-Rochette.

In 1824, Désiré Raoul-Rochette, then serving as curator at the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris, publicly contested the acquisition of the Durand collection for the proposed Egyptian department at the Louvre—later to become the Musée Charles X—asserting that "art scarcely plays a part" within the Pharaonic visual corpus.[1] It must be noted that Raoul-Rochette had a vested interest in this assertion: by relegating Egyptian works to the status of mere artefacts, rather than recognising them as belonging to the realm of the *beaux-arts*, he implied that they could continue to serve primarily as objects of historical and philological study. Such a classification would ensure they remained under his jurisdiction at the Cabinet des Médailles.

However, this statement underscores a deeper issue: the Enlightenment's disqualification of Egyptian art, a view fervently promoted by certain thinkers of the time, often in overtly dismissive terms—Winckelmann being a case in point.

1 Letter to La Rochefoucauld. 1824. See Kanawaty, "Pharaon entre au Louvre", 152.

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In the early nineteenth century, a notable intellectual shift took place. Art history and the philosophy of art, which had both emerged in the mid-eighteenth century, began to acknowledge ancient Egypt and to integrate it into the narrative of human history—one that, at the time, was still a predominantly Western narrative. Although this approach may seem inadequate by today's standards, which understandably tend to reject teleological interpretations of history, it nonetheless had tangible and intellectual implications that this study seeks to examine.

"Wie eine große verödete Ebene": The Enlightenment's Dismissal of Ancient Egyptian Art. Winckelmann's *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764)

To fully appreciate the ultimate rehabilitation of ancient Egyptian art in the nineteenth century, one first needs to understand the intellectual and cultural currents that led to its earlier denigration. Johann Joachim Winckelmann is the best-known example of this tendency. In his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764), he dismissed Egyptian art on two main grounds: the formal flaws he identified in the depiction of figures and the perceived lack of significant stylistic evolution, which, in his view, characterised Egyptian art until the Ptolemaic period.

> Die Geschichte der Kunst der Aegypter ist, nach Art des Landes derselben; wie eine große verödete Ebene, welche man aber von zween oder drey hohen Thürmen übersehen kann. Der ganze Umfang der alten Aegyptischen Kunst hat zween Perioden, und aus beyden sind uns schöne Stücke übrig, von welchen wir mit Grund über die Kunst ihrer Zeit urtheilen können. Mit der Griechischen und Hetrurischen Kunst hingegen verhält es sich, wie mit ihrem Lande, welches voller Gebirge ist und also nicht kann übersehen werden.[2]

This is hardly surprising. Distinguishing himself from Vasari's *Le Vite*, Winckelmann sought to construct a history of art that did not centre on individual artists and works but instead identified overarching stylistic periods reflective of a people's spirit (*Geist*). From this perspective, the canonical art of Egypt—whose most

2 Winckelmann, *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, 63.

renowned stylistic variations, notably Amarna art, were still unknown—became an easy target for criticism.

Beyond the internal logic of his argumentation, Winckelmann's aim was to assert that Egyptian art had no influence whatsoever on classical Greek art, a tradition he had already praised in his *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke* (1755). It is important to remember that Winckelmann was a leading figure of the neo-classicism movement, which promoted the imitation of classical masters by modern artists.

The connection between this movement and the perception of Egyptian art allows us to identify the first ideological reason behind the disqualification of the latter. On the eve of the French Revolution, as the classical Greek democratic model was celebrated among European scholars, Pharaonic Egypt—regarded as the ultimate example of despotic, absolute rule—could not be praised in the same way. In turn, its art was criticised as an expression of this absolute power; we will consider this entanglement in the next part of this paper. This interpretation is all the more relevant as Winckelmann, in his critique, drew on the ethical and political writings of the founder of Western philosophy. The *topos* of Egyptian art as rigidly bound by archaic rules was indeed noted by Plato in his *Nómoi* (656d-657c). While for Plato this strictness underpinned praise of Egyptian civilisation, where the static nature of art, particularly music, served to uphold religious order, Winckelmann instead attributed the stagnation of the arts to the political constraints of the Pharaonic regime. Despite their apparent similarity, these two hypotheses serve different theoretical and disciplinary purposes and highlight the reciprocal projection of ancient Egypt onto its art and of Egyptian art onto Egypt.

Another key consideration lies in the legitimisation of philosophy itself. If one turns to the classical corpus of Herodotus, Plato, and other Greek and Roman authors, Egypt was consistently praised for its artistic traditions, its writing, and its sciences; additionally, they often willingly acknowledged the influence Egyptian culture had on the development of Greece and its philosophy.[3] Though remarkable and, in some sense, "miraculous", this development, according to them, was not entirely spontaneous. Taking Greek authors at their word would mean recognising the cradle of philosophical thought outside the West—assuming, of course, that one considers ancient Greece a Western culture, as was commonly believed in the eighteenth century. A significant example of this second aspect is Herodotus' reference to an Egyptian origin for the notion of the soul's immortal-

3 See Froidefond, *Le mirage égyptien*.

ity—an idea that ultimately led to a crucial conceptual distinction between body and soul, foundational to the emergence of philosophical thought.[4] Other scholars argued that Greek authors had vainly attempted to bestow intellectual depth upon Egyptian thought, asserting that this was a mistaken and retrospective interpretation.[5]

On the whole, Winckelmann's argument crystallised these two approaches, as he sought both to establish normative principles for the artists of his time and to trace the "origin" (*Ursprung*) of art as a formal manifestation of a people's stylistic and spiritual development. He dismissed the idea that Egypt influenced Greece, maintaining instead that Greece influenced Egypt in the later centuries of the Pharaonic period. A detailed examination of this demonstration would be sufficient to fill this paper—and has already been treated by many others.[6] Instead, we shall focus on how some of his contemporaries engaged with the same issues.

Beyond Art History, a Systematic Critique

Although not all of Winckelmann's contemporaries were as uncompromising as he was, their writings nonetheless reflected the widespread criticism of Egyptian art, based on the thesis that it had no influence on classical Greek art, or even on philosophical thought. As Ernst Cassirer aptly observed, eighteenth-century philosophy maintained, if not a "spirit of system", a "systematic spirit".[7] This observation is particularly relevant to the case at hand, as any argument concerning Egyptian art was at the time determined by the projection of other fields of knowledge, reflecting the universal histories of human progress in its many forms.

For example, under the pretext of tracing the earliest stages of the human spirit, Charles de Brosses, a contributor to Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, presented Egyptian religion as the earliest form of "fetishism"—a concept that, in his view, persisted in African thought (*Du culte des dieux fétiches*, 1760). In opposition to those he referred to as the "adorers of the Sphinx"—primarily academics who "took offence […] at the suggestion that sublime metaphysics was neither

4 See Herodotus, *Historiai*, II, 122.

5 See Brosses, *Du culte des dieux fétiches*, 283. Winckelmann adopts a similar stance, asserting at most an Oriental, rather than Egyptian, influence on Greek art (*Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, 8–9).

6 See Grimm, Schoske, *Winckelmann und Ägypten*; Décultot, "Winckelmann et le tableau des peuples antiques"; Blanc, "Winckelmann et l'invention de la Grèce".

7 "esprit de système" and "esprit systématique", Cassirer, *Die Philosophie der Aufklärung*, X.

timeless nor universal"—[8]Charles de Brosses attempted to demonstrate the persistence of fetishism in Pharaonic religion. In doing so, he endeavoured to deny it any claim to metaphysical thought, arguing that this form of religious practice endured in African cultures. Considering the ambivalent status of Egyptian artefacts that we aim to outline, the challenge for the first Egyptology sections of museums, as Caroline Van Eck formulated, was to answer the question of "how idols enter the museum"—an idol being distinct from a fetish yet posing a similar problem in terms of its classification as an artwork.[9]

Brosses's text did not go unnoticed by his peers.[10] After receiving the manuscript of *Du culte des dieux fétiches*, Diderot wrote to him, expressing his deep agreement.

> Voilà, Monsieur, votre manuscrit ; je ne saurais vous dire combien j'en suis satisfait. Vous avez raison. Le fétichisme a certainement été la religion première, générale et universelle. Les faits doivent nécessairement être d'accord avec la philosophie. Je ne suis pas surpris que vos gens de l'académie aient reniflé en plusieurs endroits. Vous avez complété la démonstration de L'histoire naturelle de la Religion [sic] par David Hume. Connaissez-vous ce morceau. Il est tout à fait dans vos principes.[11]

Diderot's statement, though coloured by the context of epistolary praise, remains valuable in identifying the historical approach under examination and assessing its limitations. From David Hume to Charles de Brosses, the Enlightenment's universal histories, in adopting philosophy as a framework for clarifying and deducing historical sequences, posed a major risk not only of scientific inaccuracy but also of flattening the criteria required to engage with the diversity of civilisations.

This is not merely a retrospective interpretation framed by our contemporary viewpoint. Other Enlightenment scholars, while largely adhering to Winckelmann's view of Egypt's influence—or lack thereof—on Greece, nonetheless under-

8 Brosses, draft of a Letter to Hume, 1764. See David, "Lettres inédites de Diderot et de Hume écrites de 1755 à 1763 au président de Brosses", 138.
9 See Van Eck, "How does an Idol enter a Museum?", 177; Van Eck, "Fetichism", 107.
10 See Van Eck, "Fetichism", 104–117; David, "Le président de Brosses, David Hume et Diderot", 146–160.
11 Diderot, Letter to Brosses, 1757. See David, "Lettres inédites de Diderot et de Hume écrites de 1755 à 1763 au président de Brosses", 143.

scored the need to develop interpretative models suited to Egyptian artistic and cultural productions. In his 1774 response to Voltaire, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, Johann Gottfried von Herder offered a strikingly modern standpoint regarding this discussion.

> Der beste Geschichtschreiber der Kunst des Alterthums, Winckelmann, hat über die Kunstwerke der Aegypter offenbar nur nach griechischem Maasstabe geurtheilt, sie also verneinend sehr gut, aber nach eigner Natur und Art so wenig geschildert, daß fast bey jedem seiner Sätze in diesem Hauptstück das offenbar Einseitige und Schielende vorleuchtet. So Webb, wenn er ihre Literatur der Griechischen entgegensetzt: so manche andre, die über ägyptische Sitten und Regierungsform gar mit europäischem Geist geschrieben haben.[12]

Distancing oneself from the "European spirit" when engaging with Egyptian representations was in Herder's demonstration a necessary step to avoid projecting a perspective that was both inappropriate and constrained to viewing them in purely negative terms.[13] The modernity of this assertion should not be underestimated, as Jean-François Champollion's writings would later echo this imperative, further reinforced by empirical evidence.[14]

In the field of art history, Quatremère de Quincy provided a particularly compelling example of a comparable approach, although his analysis ultimately led him to refute the hypothesis of the influence of Egyptian art on Greek art.[15] He articulated his conception in a *Dissertation* submitted in 1785 before the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, responding to the question: "What was the state of architecture among the Egyptians, and to what extent did the Greeks appear to have borrowed from it?" ("Quel fut l'état de l'Architecture chez les Égyptiens, et ce que les Grecs paraissent en avoir emprunté"). The explanation Quatremère put forward to distinguish between Egyptian and Greek art is nevertheless worth highlighting, both because of its contrast with Winckelmann's argument and its insightful relevance.

12 Herder, *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*, 27.
13 See Sikka, *Herder on Humanity and Cultural Difference*.
14 See Champollion, *Lettre au duc de Blacas*, 9–10.
15 See Delli Castelli, *Ancient Egyptian Portraiture*, 51–56, 406–407; Van Eck, "How does an Idol enter a museum?", 186–194.

> Si la peinture et la sculpture ne furent en Égypte que des moyens d'écrire ; si les figures peintes ou sculptées ne firent jamais que l'office de lettres ou de caractères, on ne doit s'étonner ni du soin qu'on porta à leur perfection mécanique, ni de l'insouciance qu'on eût pour leur perfection imitative.[16]

Hence, this scriptural capacity ("Bildhaftigkeit") of Egyptian imagery—extensively examined in the twentieth century by German Egyptologists such as Jan Assmann and Erik Hornung, as well as Roland Tefnin and his successors in Brussels, and contemporary research on the Egyptian image—was acknowledged within art history as early as the late eighteenth century, merely a few decades after its disciplinary establishment by Winckelmann. Once again, the shadow of Plato looms large—but delving further into this would take us beyond the scope of the present paper.[17]

This critique of the seemingly visible mechanical flaws in Egyptian art must also be understood in relation to the theory of proportions (*Proportionslehre*), conceived as the pinnacle of mathematical knowledge. In other parts of his *Dissertation*, Quatremère distinguished between the anatomical knowledge of the ancient Egyptians and the theory of proportions, which involves mathematical relationships.[18] These relationships precisely enable the development of a "science"—in this case, a "science of symmetry." By denying the ancient Egyptians mastery of this theoretical framework, while emphasising that their disregard for it is a matter of artistic choice rather than an inherent limitation, Quatremère also adhered to the prevailing intellectual criticisms of Egyptian art.[19] A few decades before Quatremère's *Dissertation*, the Comte de Caylus already stated that "the Egyptians did not know the Orders, that is to say, they were not subjected to Proportions".[20]

16 Quatremère de Quincy, *De l'architecture égyptienne*, 55.

17 The author of this paper is currently preparing a PhD thesis on the intersections of art history and the philosophy of art in the development of an interpretative framework for Egyptian art, from the late-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century.

18 "La sculpture égyptienne laisse apercevoir quelques connaissances assez exactes des dimensions corporelles; on n'y trouve nulle trace de proportion." (Quatremère de Quincy, *De l'architecture égyptienne*, 52).

19 "On a peine à se défendre de l'idée qu'elle [cette absence de détails] fut en grande partie volontaire, c'est-à-dire, que l'artiste eût été capable de faire plus et de faire mieux ; mais qu'usant de formes consacrées, il n'eut ni la volonté de les améliorer, ni le droit de substituer son goût particulier à celui qui était reçu dans les inscriptions religieuses de son pays." (Quatremère de Quincy, *De l'architecture égyptienne*, 55).

20 "Les Égyptiens n'ont pas connu les Ordres, c'est-à-dire qu'ils n'ont pas été soumis à des proportions." (Caylus, *Recueil d'antiquités*, 3–4).

As a result, the formal limitations in Egyptian imitation were rightly attributed to their semiotic tendency or, at times even simultaneously, to a lack of theoretical knowledge, indispensable to the harmony of artistic compositions.

The crucial point is that the Enlightenment's ideological separation between Egyptian and Greek art was, in fact, embedded within a broader system of reciprocal entanglements, wherein any judgment on Egyptian art implicitly extended to Egyptian religion, writing, and science—essentially, the cultural system of ancient Egypt. The profound transformations soon to be ushered in by the nineteenth century must therefore be understood within this interconnected framework.

Art Through the Idea: Hegel's Idealistic System and Champollion's Didactic Program. Science, Arts and the Museum

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, three closely linked events reshaped the landscape of scholarly thought, altering the "configuration"[21] of ancient Egypt, as perceived by modern European scholars.

First was Napoléon Bonaparte's Campaign in Egypt (1798–1801) and the subsequent publication of the *Description de l'Égypte* beginning in 1809. This undertaking not only introduced a broader audience to newly documented monuments, iconographies, and landscapes, rendered with remarkable naturalistic precision, but also encompassed extensive descriptions whose scope—at least regarding Pharaonic Egypt—resonated with the encyclopædic aspirations of the previous century.

Second was Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs in 1822—an achievement that symbolically crowned a longstanding scholarly tradition and built upon recent contributions, particularly those of Thomas Young. By revisiting, refining and correcting the theory proposed by Joseph de Guignes in his *Mémoire dans lequel on prouve que les Chinois sont une colonie égyptienne* (1758), Champollion demonstrated the dual nature of hieroglyphs—phonetic and ideological.[22] In doing so, he gained recognition beyond French borders, supported, for instance, by the endorsement of Wilhelm von Humboldt in Prussia.[23]

21 Griener "The Fascination for Egypt During the Eighteenth Century. History of a 'Configuration'", 53.

22 See Farout, "De la Renaissance à la Restauration : quelques étapes du déchiffrement des hiéroglyphes", http://doi.org/10.4000/cel.433.

23 See Humboldt, "Ueber vier Aegyptische, löwenköpfige Bildsäulen", 134–157.

Third and finally was the incorporation of Egyptian antiquities into the realm of fine arts museums, exemplified *par excellence* by the opening of the Musée Charles X in the Louvre, in 1827.[24] This latter development, which met with the disapproval of Raoul-Rochette, raises broader issues about the productive or normative function of museums—a dynamic later theorised by André Malraux in *Le Musée imaginaire* (1947). As Malraux poetically suggested, the very act of placing objects within a museum imposes a metamorphosis upon them, transforming artefacts into artworks. Unlike the cabinet of curiosities model, art museums assemble artefacts not for their heterogeneity, but for a shared, artistic, characteristic: in the museum, artworks are included as part of a collective narrative, a genealogy of art, which visitors are expected to recognise. Even without fully subscribing to the idea of the museum as an absolute normative force, one must acknowledge that the entry of Egyptian antiquities into the museum space marked a crucial step in their classification as *art*. At the very least, their presence alongside recognised works—particularly paintings—lent them a new aesthetic legitimacy.

As a result of these events, at the crossroads of aesthetics and scientific knowledge, the status of Egyptian art shifted, gradually becoming more integrated into the Western narrative of its own history.

The Idea and the Artwork: Hegel's Perspective

Across the Rhine, a prominent philosophical figure of the time, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, also took an interest in Egyptian art.[25] Attuned to the evolving evaluation of this art, he incorporated it into his own philosophical framework, positioning his views in relation to the principles outlined above.

Hegel is well known—and often viewed with suspicion—by art historians due to the teleological conception of art history presented in the lectures he delivered at the universities of Berlin and Heidelberg between 1818 and 1830. It is, however, worth recalling that this was not always the prevailing interpretation of Hegel's legacy in aesthetics. His influence on the discipline of art history was profound—so much so that Ernst Gombrich famously referred to him as its "father".[26] Yet, it

24 See Hurley, "Pharaohs, Papyri and Hookahs", 197-201.

25 See Eschweiler, *Hegels Ägypten*, 119–150.

26 Gombrich, *Tributes: interpreters of our cultural tradition*, 51. To make but a passing reference, strong Hegelian influences can be observed in the works of Alois Riegl, Elie Faure, and the German tradition of art history—especially up to 1933.

is easy to understand why Hegel's remains unsettling for contemporary thought: by framing the development of art as a progression towards its ultimate fulfilment in philosophy, he inevitably established a hierarchy between complete and incomplete artistic forms.

However, a closer reading of these lectures (referred to as the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Kunst*)—preserved through several student transcripts and now published by Meiner Verlag—reveals that his perspective cannot be totally dismissed. Beyond its teleological scaffolding, Hegel's system offers a revealing insight into the intellectual contours of early nineteenth-century art historical thought—nowhere more so than in its treatment of Egyptian art.

The first aspect of this insight is rooted in the very foundation of the Hegelian system, as being idealistic—that is, positioning the Idea as the highest, supreme reality.[27] Across the various aspects of his philosophy, Hegel adopted a systematic approach, aiming to unify all human knowledge, productions, and experiences under the single principle of the development of the Idea. From Hegel's standpoint, the spirit unfolds through history, manifesting across the different stages of its self-consciousness. Over time, the spirit gradually becomes increasingly self-aware, ultimately teaching its culmination in philosophy, after passing through other domains. This culmination occurs at the final stage of the spirit's development, known as the cycle of the absolute spirit (*absoluter Geist*), which progresses through three phases: art, religion, and finally philosophy. In this progression, the spirit externalises itself by manifesting the idea or spiritual content into the sensible world, beginning with art. Therefore, according to the Hegelian system, an artwork is the sensory manifestation of the idea in form.

Hegel's aesthetics is, above all, structured by the primacy of the idea, which led him to establish a tripartite division of art: symbolic art (exemplified by India, Persia, and ancient Egypt), classical art (embodied by Greece in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE), and romantic art (Christian art). While his analysis included detailed historical descriptions of several works, these fit into the system only insofar as they indicate a particular stage in the relationship between idea and form. This relationship evolves through three stages: inadequacy in symbolic art, harmonious adequation—the true essence of beauty—in classical art, and sublation in romantic art.

As outlined above, the Enlightenment's critique of Egyptian art stemmed precisely from the perceived lack of intellectual depth that some leading European scholars attributed to it. Whether framed in terms of disproportion, fetishism, or

27 For an introduction to this terminology, see Gardner, "Hegel: Glossary".

stylistic stagnation, ancient Egypt was regarded as fundamentally distinct from Greece—particularly on the grounds that it could not be considered its spiritual precursor.

Nevertheless, by proposing a system guided by the development of the idea and positioning Egypt as the quintessential first stage of this process, Hegel established and advanced a new interpretative model. This model was intrinsically dependent on the transformations that took place in the early nineteenth century. A notable example of this mechanism is Hegel's consideration of the pyramids, which clearly illustrates the primacy of the idea over form.

Pyramids, Form, and the Soul

In 1807, Hegel first referred to the pyramid in his *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in the sections dedicated to natural religion. There, he characterised the abstract activity of the spirit as a *Werkmeister*, forming the initial configuration of the sensory world without yet endowing it with meaning.

> Der Geist erscheint also hier als der Werkmeister, und sein Tun, wodurch er sich selbst als Gegenstand hervorbringt, aber den Gedanken seiner noch nicht erfaßt hat, ist ein instinktartiges Arbeiten, wie die Bienen ihre Zellen bauen.
> Die erste Form, weil sie die unmittelbare ist, ist sie die abstrakte des Verstandes und das Werk noch nicht an ihm selbst vom Geiste erfüllt. Die Kristalle der Pyramiden und Obelisken, einfache Verbindungen gerader Linien mit ebnen Oberflächen und gleichen Verhältnissen der Teile, an denen die Inkommensurabilität des Runden vertilgt ist, sind die Arbeiten dieses Werkmeisters der strengen Form.[28]

Certain features of the pyramids anticipate the symbolic conception of art later developed in Hegel's Berlin *Vorlesungen*: the simplicity of compositional structures, the monumentality of mass, and the persistent presence of the natural world. However, in Hegelian thought, art as an effective reality (*Wirklichkeit*) must involve the mediation of idea and form. In the *Phänomenologie*, the pyramids still seem to belong strictly to the realm of form and are considered from the

28 Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, 448.

outside, as a production of spirit that has not yet been fully imbued with idea. Although they already fall within the sphere of human representation of the world—and thus, from the Hegelian system's perspective, constitute a more fully realised form of reality—the pyramids remain an abstract form of the understanding (*Verstand*), or, in other words, an "empty determination", scarcely surpassing natural formations.

This is hardly surprising, given the state of knowledge in 1807 regarding the Egyptian pyramids, for at least two reasons. First, Western representations of pyramids were shaped by an interpretative tradition that emphasised their connection to the natural world—ranging from Pliny's association of obelisks with solar rays to the depiction of Joseph's Granaries in the Basilica of San Marco in Venice. Such a tradition often favoured an overly vertical depiction of pyramids, more reminiscent of the Meroe pyramids than those of Memphis.[29]

Secondly, in the first years of the nineteenth century, it was not yet established that pyramids necessarily functioned as tombs—that is, that they were invariably endowed with a spiritual significance. Consequently, philosophical interest initially focused on its monumental form rather than its specific function. For instance, in Kant's *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (1790), the pyramid was introduced as an example of the mathematical sublime, still closely associated with nature—an idea that resonates with certain passages of the *Description de l'Égypte*.

> Daraus läßt sich erklären, was Savary in seinen Nachrichten von Ägypten anmerkt, daß man den Pyramiden nicht sehr nahe kommen, ebensowenig als zu weit davon entfernt sein müsse, um die ganze Rührung von ihrer Größe zu bekommen. Denn ist das letztere, so sind die Teile, die aufgefaßt werden (die Steine derselben übereinander), nur dunkel vorgestellt, und ihre Vorstellung tut keine Wirkung auf das ästhetische Urteil des Subjekts. Ist aber das erstere, so bedarf das Auge einige Zeit, um die Auffassung von der Grundfläche bis zur Spitze zu vollenden; in dieser aber erlöschen immer zum Teil die ersteren, ehe die Einbildungskraft die letzteren aufgenommen hat, und die Zusammenfassung ist nie vollständig.[30]

29 See Charrak, "Le pays du symbole. Hegel et la pyramide égyptienne", *L'Égypte dure longtemps*, 101–121.
30 Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, 96.

At the close of the eighteenth century, the pyramid was less an object of aesthetic beauty than a subject of almost vital admiration for its "strict form." In other words, its main feature was its overwhelming and abstract materiality, in the face of which, to borrow Kantian terminology, one's representation is haunted by a desire for totality while simultaneously eluding the conditions required for its presentation in the imagination. Essentially, its content became secondary.

In light of the Hegelian system outlined above, this warrants further consideration. One might assume that the pyramid, as a purely formal mass devoid of meaning, would not fit within Hegel's definitional framework of an artwork, as it appears to lack one of the two constitutive poles of the system's duality. However, the pyramid is one of the most frequently cited examples in his *Vorlesungen*, illustrating the relationship between an interior (spiritual content) and an exterior (sensible form)—that is, a work of symbolic art.

> So ist also bei dem Aegyptischen überhaupt äussere Gestaltung die ein Inneres in sich schließt und sogleich selbst darauf hindeutet, daß sie ein Anderes in sich verbirgt, es ist darum im Aegyptischen alles Symbol, es ist eine abgeschiedene, selbstständige Innerlichkeit, sie ist aber noch nicht dazu gekommen, noch nicht soweit gediehen die ihr wahrhaft angemessene Gestalt zu haben, aber sie hat doch eine Gestalt die eine wesentliche Bezüglichkeit auf das Innere ist, eine Gestalt die ein Gemachtes, ein Werk der Kunst ist.[31]

In light of the historical context of Hegel's argument, it is crucial to reconsider the transformation in the status of the Egyptian pyramids during the early nineteenth century. It was in this period that pyramids began to be recognised predominantly as funerary monuments, thus incorporating the notion of spiritual preservation into their very form. Although this idea had been briefly mentioned by both Herodotus and Diodorus Siculus, it gained further prominence in the writings of Arab and Western authors, including Savary, who referred to the Great Pyramid of Khufu, which had been opened in the ninth century under the orders of Caliph Al-Ma'mūn.[32] Nevertheless, the funerary function of the pyramids was not yet widely accepted by the European public. For instance, Edme-François Jomard, in his contribution to the *Description de l'Égypte*, refrained from definitively attribut-

31 Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (28.2), 671.

32 See Herodotus, *Historiai*, II, 124–127; Diodorus Siculus, *Bibliotheca historica*, LXIV, 5–6; Ibn 'Abd al-Hakam, mentioned in Greaves's *Pyramidographia*, 44; Savary, *Lettres sur l'Égypte*, 240.

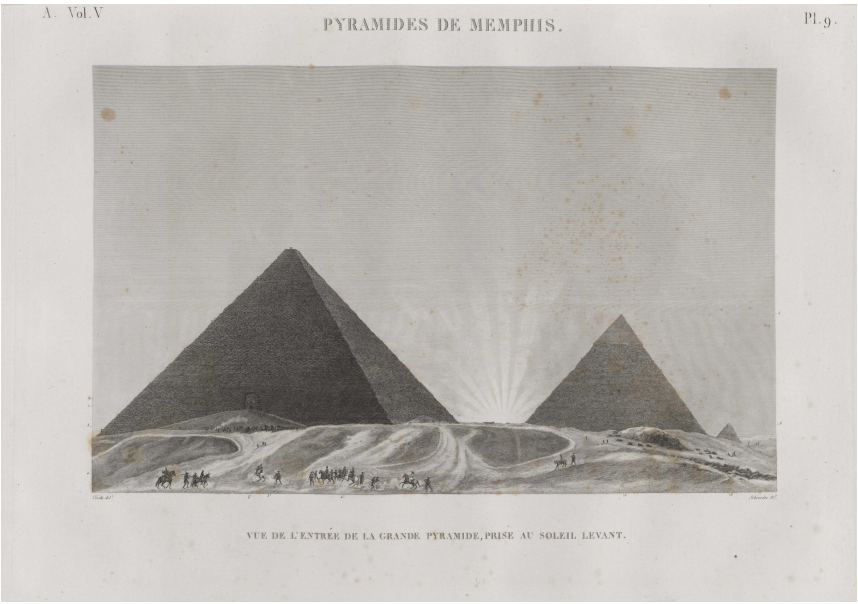

Fig. 1: Edme-François Jomard: "Pyramide de Memphis. Vue de l'entrée de la Grande Pyramide, prise au soleil levant", 1822, *Description de l'Égypte, ou Recueil des observations et des recherches qui ont été faites en Égypte pendant l'expédition de l'armée française, Antiquités*, V, 1822, pl. 9.

ing a funerary purpose to the pyramids at Giza. Instead, he referred to them as "pyramidal masses", drawing a contrast with the "excavated hypogea" of Thebes.[33] (Fig. 1)

In 1818, Giovanni Battista Belzoni excavated the Pyramid of Khafre and subsequently published his findings in 1820 under the title *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries Within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia*. Translated into French the following year, the work gained widespread recognition in Europe and provided empirical evidence for the funerary function of the pyramids of Khufu and Khafre. (Fig. 2) It was presumably through Belzoni's account that Hegel subscribed to the assertion that pyramids were conceived as monuments specifically designed to house the physical remains of the deceased—and their soul.

33 "Quiconque vient ici payer un tribut de curiosité à ces monuments […] s'abstient de prononcer avec Bossuet, que ces ouvrages ne sont rien que des tombeaux, parce qu'il sent que ce grand écrivain a voulu surtout faire sortir de son sujet une grande pensée morale, sans songer à l'histoire des arts chez les Égyptiens et à leur progrès dans les sciences, chose qu'il n'a pu connaître." (Jomard, "Description générale de Memphis", 60)

Fig. 2: Charles Joseph Hullmandel: "Forced Passage to the Second Pyramid of Ghizeh. Discovered by G. Belzoni, 1818. Great Chamber in the Second Pyramid of Ghizeh. Discovered by G. Belzoni, 1818", 1821, *Plates illustrative of the Researches and Operations of G. Belzoni in Egypt and Nubia*, Londres, John Murray, 1821, pl. 10-11.

> The circumstance of having chambers and a sarcophagus (which undoubtedly contained the remains of some great personage), so uniform with those in the other pyramid, I think leaves very little question that they were erected as sepulchres; and I really wonder that any doubt has ever existed, considering what could be learned from the first pyramid, which has been open for so long. This contains a spacious chamber with a sarcophagus; the passages are of such dimensions as to admit nothing larger than the sarcophagus. They had been closely shut up by large blocks of granite from within, evidently to prevent the removal of that relic.[34]

The recognition of this funerary function was crucial, as it marked the first step in legitimising Herodotus' thesis in the *Historiai* concerning the Egyptian origins

34 Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries Within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia*, 277.

of the doctrine of the soul's immortality—a thesis also revisited by Hegel.[35] By infusing the interior of the form with an initial spiritual content—the body of the deceased and the belief in the survival of the soul—the pyramid came to embody what it had lacked in the *Phänomenologie*.

> Hierher gehören also jene Koenigsgraeber deren Schönheit und ungeheure Größe alles übertrifft, und von denen das größte Belzoni entdeckte. Hier thut sich der Uebergang hervor vom Symbolischen zur eigentlichen Architektur. Die unterirrdischen Graeber haben die Bestimmung daß der abgeschiedene Geist, daß seine Hülle für sich aufbewahrt werde, die Bauwerke sind hier ein umschliessendes Haus, der Todte ist der wesentliche Gegenstand, er ist der Inhalt und hier ist die Seite wo die Bedeutung für sich selbst hinwegfällt. Die Bedeutung verläßt das Architektonische das seinen Zweck nicht an ihm selbst sondern an einem Andern hat.[36]

In Hegel's system, the pyramid then enclosed the body of the deceased, not merely as a symbolic representation of the divine but as the preservation of a tangible corporeality imbued with meaning. In doing so, pyramids began to differentiate between two functions—the enclosure of space, characteristic of architecture, and the expression of the human figure, associated with sculpture--necessary to the progression of the system. At this stage, the pyramidal structure remained characterised by an abstract regularity: while it testified to an initial manifestation of spirit, this manifestation was not yet fully determined in form.[37] However, one cannot overlook the reference to beauty (*Schönheit*) and the designation of the pyramids as royal tombs (*Koenigsgraeber*).[38] Although the pyramid's form was not yet *fully* suffused with a determinate spiritual content, Hegel nonetheless implied a coherence between these two aspects, initiating the first stage in the emergence of beauty.

35 Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (28.2), 670.
36 Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (28.2), 780.
37 From an Egyptological standpoint, Hegel's conclusion is erroneous, as the pyramid's form represents the *benben*, the primordial mound—the first creation of the demiurge—with which the deceased king is identified. See Monnier, *L'ère des géants*, 236–237.
38 Hegel still conceives the pyramid as a visible superstructure above a tomb, which lies beneath the ground—presumably in the labyrinth. This implies an even greater separation between its tangible form and the meaning behind its creation. See Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (28.1), 69.

The example of the pyramid highlights the value of *Quellenforschung* in approaching Hegelian theory—and, conversely, the relevance of Hegelian theory in studying the reception of Egypt in the early nineteenth century.[39] Hegel's demonstration illustrates how Egyptian artefacts came to be regarded as artworks during this period: this transformation was not initially driven by aesthetic observation but instead emerged primarily on the level of knowledge.

Similarly, it was through the recognition of an intellectual significance that Egyptian artefacts ultimately secured their place in the museum. Entrusted with the organisation of the Charles X Museum at the Louvre, Champollion sought to break from the tradition of the cabinet of curiosities—he described Raoul-Rochette's Cabinet des Médailles as a "Noah's Ark".[40] While artworks traditionally exhibited in museums were arranged according to aesthetic coherence and proportional harmony ("on consulte l'œil et toutes les convenances de proportion"),[41] Egyptian artefacts, he argued in 1826, necessitate a systematically coordinated approach based on a "distinct framework" ("sur un plan différent").

> [...] Il fallait, de toute nécessité, avoir égard à la fois, soit au sujet même de chaque monument, soit à sa destination spéciale, et que la connaissance rigoureuse de l'un et de l'autre déterminât la place et le rang qu'il devait occuper. Il fallait enfin les disposer de manière à présenter, aussi complète que possible, la série des divinités, celle des monumens [*sic*] qui rappellent les noms des souverains de l'Égypte, depuis les époques primitives jusqu'aux Romains, et classer dans un ordre méthodique les objets qui se rapportent à la vie publique et privée des anciens Égyptiens. On aura donc ainsi la réunion systématique des monumens relatifs à la religion, à l'histoire des rois, et aux usages civils des Égyptiens.[42]

39 Among philosophers who have examined Hegel's treatment of ancient Egypt, Jon Stewart's approach is particularly noteworthy. Drawing on the works cataloged in Hegel's library, he has identified various sources that may have informed Hegel's research on Egypt. See Stewart, "Hegel and the Egyptian Religion", 127-134. Art historians and Egyptologists have also taken an interest in Hegel's demonstration, either by simply mentioning their relevance (Assmann, *Ägypten. Eine Sinngeschichte*) or by testing his arguments against their own discipline's (on the subject of ancient Egyptian art, see for instance Davis, "The Absolute in the mirror").

40 Champollion, *Lettres écrites d'Italie*, 279.

41 Champollion, *Notice*, ij.

42 Champollion, *Notice*, ij.

Champollion's vision for the museography of the new department was, as he himself stated, made possible by recent discoveries, to which he contributed perhaps more than any other scholar. His method, therefore, rested on a didactic principle: Egyptian artefacts were integrated into the museum through scientific classification, valued for the insight they provided into ancient Egyptian thought.[43]

This marks the first parallel that we intend to draw between Hegel's method and that of Champollion, despite their differing objectives. Both incorporated Egypt into the system of art through the realm of ideas, apparently relegating visual perception and aesthetic experience to the background—although one cannot overlook Champollion's deep admiration for the formal execution of Egyptian works. However, another important similarity can be identified, which we shall now explore.

The Retrospective Reconciliation of Ancient Egypt and Classical Greece: Hegel's Dialectical Approach. Egypt, Greece, and the Problem of Invention

The second parallel lies in the fact that Hegel, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty wrote in 1956, "sublated the Orient by understanding it".[44] In other words, although he rightly sought to establish criteria specific to the study of different *Kunstformen*, Hegel ultimately situated this entire framework within a dialectical structure, wherein Egypt could only be understood from the perspective of the *Aufhebung* imposed upon it by Greece. However, this limitation should not overshadow another fundamental implication of the dialectical approach: the intrinsic dependence of "sophisticated" artistic forms on the earliest artistic expressions—and, in this case, of Greece on Egypt.

It is worth recalling the structure of Hegelian dialectics in the field of art. Symbolic art (and thus Egyptian art) represents the thesis—that is, the initial inadequacy between idea and form, stemming from the spirit's still overly intimate connection with nature. Classical art (Greek art) negates this thesis by reconciling

43 One might also consider the debates surrounding the dating of the "Zodiac of Dendera", briefly exhibited at the Louvre before being transferred to the Bibliothèque Royale in 1823. Such debates, involving Champollion, raised the question of whether the ancient Egyptians indeed possessed astronomical knowledge that could conceivably predate that of the Greeks. See Versluys, "Exploring Aegyptiaca and their Material Agency throughout Global History", 130–131.

44 Merleau-Ponty, "L'Orient et la philosophie", 219.

between idea and form, thereby achieving harmony and true beauty. Finally, in Romantic art, the idea progressively frees itself from the necessity of material mediation, as it draws closer to self-consciousness.

In this framework, each stage exists in a dynamic relationship with the others, finding its place within the system—within the sphere of human development—through its dialectical necessity. A stage is defined by the dialogue it sustains with what precedes and what follows, shaping an ongoing process of transformation. This brings us to a crucial point: unlike Winckelmann, Hegel suggested that the relationship between Greece and Egypt, particularly in the artistic domain, was not merely historical or aesthetic but, more importantly, governed by an inherent dialectical logic.

> L'idéal comme figure intellectuelle ne peut pas être sans négation de l'existence naturelle. L'idée comme existence naturelle est l'art symbolique : celui-ci est donc la supposition (*Voraussetzung*) de l'art classique, qui, comme subjectivité, ne peut être qu'en niant cette supposition ; ce qu'il nie n'est pas la nature, mais la première identité de l'esprit et de la nature. L'opinion que les Grecs ont reçu leur religion et art de l'Orient n'est donc pas moins vraie que l'autre, qu'elle leur appartient comme leur invention.[45]

Victor Cousin's notebook from the 1823 Berlin *Vorlesungen* provides a valuable perspective, particularly through its use of the term "invention". In the eighteenth-century debates surrounding the relationship between classical Greek art and ancient Egyptian art, the central issue, as previously emphasised, was whether the so-called "Greek miracle"[46] had emerged autonomously or derived from external influences.

Hegel offered a particularly astute and nuanced resolution to this question. He maintained that Greece, as the negation of Egypt, was both a product of its Egyptian antecedent and, simultaneously, a source of unprecedented creative power through this very act of negation. The ideal, which defines classical art as the harmonious unity of idea and form, can only come into being by negating a prior imperfection—here, the "natural existence" represented by Egypt. At the same time, however, Greece undoubtedly inherited from Egypt its "religion" and its "art".

45 Hegel, *Cahier de notes inédit de Victor Cousin*, 88.
46 As Ernest Renan famously put it in 1883 (*Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse*, 59).

In other words, Hegel proposed to position Greece as fundamentally dependent on the Orient—specifically, Egypt—while acknowledging the necessity of two other conditions. One the one hand, Egypt itself had to be understood as reciprocally dependent on Greece, insofar as it prefigured what Greece was to become. On the other hand, Greek art had to be recognised as an invention in its own right, one that ultimately realised the progression of absolute spirit—namely, the emergence of subjectivity—within the broader teleological movement towards the ultimate aim of the system: philosophy.

Unveiling Isis's Mysteries

To describe the transition from Egypt to Greece, Hegel evoked a particular figure: the Sphinx, both in its visual Egyptian form and in its role in the myth of Oedipus, where it transformed into the feminine Sphinge.

> Hierher kann man denn auch den Mythos von Oedippus ziehen, der den Uebergang vom Aegyptischen zum Griechischen macht. Die Griechen sind es die das aegyptische Räthsel gelöst haben, daß das Innere das Menschliche, das Geistige ist, das an und für sich bedeutet, den Geist zu wählen, zu erkennen. Jene berühmte Inschrift am Tempel zu Saïs war 'Meinen Schleier hat kein Sterblicher gelüftet, der Sohn den ich gebar ist die Sonne.' Die Griechen aber haben den Schleier aufgehoben, sie sprachen aus was sich unter ihm befand, den sich selbst wissenden Geist.[47]

From a formal approach, although the iconography of the Sphinx evolved slightly from ancient Egypt to classical Greece, it did not indicate a more perfect correspondence between idea and form in the Hegelian sense. The Sphinx remained a hybrid creature, combining an animal body with a human head—a characteristic of the *symbolische Kunstform*, in that it represents an incomplete understanding of the human mind.[48] Once again, we must seek the explanation elsewhere—in the enigma itself.

47 Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (28.2), 674-675.

48 See Charrak, Farout, "Hybridation, intertexualité et intericonicité: la réception grecque de l'Égypte", *L'Égypte dure longtemps*, 44.

The enigma serves as a metaphor for Egypt throughout Hegel's *Vorlesungen*, appearing at various points in his lectures. The enigma is explicitly articulated by the Sphinx and provides a narrative illustration of the dialectical movement at work in human history, as developed by Hegel. To begin with, the Sphinx's enigma is posed by Egypt and answered by Greece, reflecting the development of the Idea in its teleological progression. Additionally, the nature of the answer itself is significant: in Egypt, the focal point was nature—this is especially true from an Egyptological perspective, as the Egyptian Sphinx was associated with a solar image[49]—whereas in Greece, the focus shifted to the human being; that is, to human subjectivity and, ultimately, to philosophy.

Once again, this rhetorical situation of ancient Egypt echoes Champollion's vision for the new department at the Louvre. During his mission to Egypt, from 1828 to 1829, he made his position on this topic unmistakably clear.

> Je le répète encore l'art égyptien ne doit qu'à lui-même tout ce qu'il a produit de grand, de pur et de beau ; et n'en déplaise aux savants qui se font une religion de croire fermement à la génération spontanée déserts en Grèce, il est évident pour moi, comme pour tous ceux qui ont bien vu l'Égypte, ou qui ont une connaissance réelle des monuments égyptiens existants en Europe, que les arts ont commencé en Grèce par une imitation servile des arts de l'Égypte, […]. La vieille Égypte enseigna les arts à la Grèce, celle-ci leur donna le développement le plus sublime : mais sans l'Égypte, la Grèce ne serait probablement point devenue la terre classique des beaux-arts.[50]

In essence, Champollion proposed a resolution akin to Hegel's: he recognised that Greece had elevated art to "its most sublime development", establishing itself as the "classical land of the *beaux-arts*". However, he also attributed this achievement to an Egyptian influence—one that, in his view, stemmed solely from Egypt itself.

At that very moment, a painting adorned the newly established Musée Charles X, encapsulating this logical conclusion: *L'Étude et le Génie dévoilant l'antique Égypte à la Grèce*, by François Picot (1827) (Fig. 3).[51] This painting revisits the

49 Farout, "Images de dialogues, dialogues d'images", 39.
50 Champollion, *Lettres d'Égypte et de Nubie*, 250-251.
51 See Lhoyer, "*L'Étude et le Génie dévoilant l'antique Égypte à la Grèce*", 97-98.

Fig. 3: François Picot: *L'Étude et le Génie dévoilant l'antique Égypte à la Grèce*, 1827, Oil on plaster (4,87 x 38,65 m) © 2013 Musée du Louvre, Dist. GrandPalaisRmn / Etienne Revault / Olivier Cabon.

theme of the Veil of Isis, also referenced in Hegel's *Vorlesungen*.[52] A true literary and philosophical *topos*, the inscription from the temple of Sais is mentioned by Novalis in *Die Lehrlinge zu Sais* (written in 1792 and published in 1802), by Kant in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, as well as in Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*.[53] One should here keep in mind the importance of the Egyptian "mysteries" and the cultural history of Freemasonry, which have been thoroughly discussed[54]—yet, our aesthetic inquiry invites us to slightly displace our gaze.

In Hegel's work, the unveiling of Egypt is indeed at stake; and this unveiling is intellectual. In the same way that "L'Étude" and "Le Génie" reveal Egypt to Greece—and, by extension, to all of Western civilisation—so too does the idea in the Hegelian system.

Whether through Hegel's philosophical lens or Champollion's art-historical and philological approach, understanding Egypt was essential to ensuring its

52 For implications of this reference on Hegel's views on religion, see Speight, "The Sphinx and the Veil of Isis".

53 See *Encyclopédie*, "Isis (Mythologie & Littérature)", 914.

54 See Assmann, *Religio duplex*; Assmann, Ebeling, *Ägyptische Mysterien*; Hondt, *Hegel secret*.

rightful place, both in the museum and in the theoretical framework of aesthetics. This required resolving a profound modern dispute, which simultaneously concerned the origins of both Western art and philosophy. Once this place was secured, Egypt attained recognition within the realm of art history, while its philosophical status remained less certain. Though largely shaped by reconstructions and retrospective projections, the intellectual reception of Egypt was poised to enter a new era—one in which Egyptology would become an irreplaceable cornerstone.

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