

# THE NEW YORK REVIEW of ART

Volume I, Number 2

April 1994

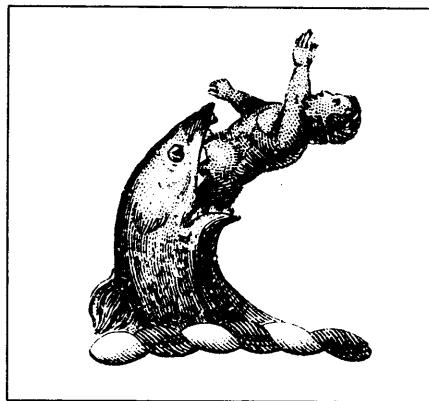
Two Dollars

All criticism should aspire to the condition of food reviews. In a recent Weekend section of the *New York Times*, the restaurant critic Ruth Reichl judged various steakhouses, and she wasn't always kind. "The charm of Ben Benson's eludes me.... The shrimp tasted as if somebody had magically extracted all the flavor, the house salad was mushy and the steaks were unimpressive." Of another she said, "Aside from the sheer luxury of Norton's, I can't think of any compelling reason to come back."

But whenever Reichl praised a restaurant, something extraordinary seemed to happen. "The single best steak I have had in New York was at Pietro's.... Eating this steak, I can imagine myself at a beefsteak, abandoned to the joy of meat lust." Of the Palm, she wrote, "Day in and day out the restaurant serves a terrific sirloin strip, crusty and caramelized on the outside, quivering with juice within." What was extraordinary, in reading these assessments, was the force that the praise acquired by emerging from a context of strenuous skepticism. One sensed that the restaurants had really earned her praise, and for that reason they merited our respect and possibly our patronage.

If Ruth Reichl's judgments are the state to which all criticism should aspire, it is a state that art critics at the *Times* and at most other venues usually fail to attain. In contrast to Ms. Reichl, the *Times's* gallery reviewers remind one of a solemn procession of herbivores. "I'm OK, You're OK" seems to be the *idée m re* of these polite, solicitous and totally well-intentioned people. True, they will attack an institution like the Whitney whenever the Biennial rolls into town. And sometimes when an artist gains a level of prestige beyond what is in their power to bestow, they may decide to take him down a notch. But for the most part, the art critics of the *Times* like to like and like to be liked.

Unlike the gallery reviewers in the main art periodicals, who often affect vanguardist hysterics, the *Times's* reviewers present themselves as centrists who nevertheless incarnate the appropriate attitudes of the day. In doing so, they have created a language all their own. One would think they had the copyright on Miraculous, Mysterious, Moving and Magical, so frequently do these words occur in their reviews. The tone of the reviews



## The Critic as Carnivore

is almost always one of eupeptical endorsement. Of the five reviews of art galleries in the 4 February Weekend section, for example, every show met with the approval of the *New York Times*: "In his smart new works, Paul Ramirez-Jones points to an earlier and more innocent technological time." "[These paintings] confirm Mr. Wiley's place among the mystic-eccentrics in which American art has always been rich." "[Peter Hutchinson's] delightfully unreal scenes have the seductive allure of a tourist brochure." "This is the English sculptor Tony Cragg's best New York show in some time." "The pairing of veteran Joan Snyder and the younger Jessica Stockholder, artists from different art-world spheres, is inspired."

Naturally the critics will point out in their own defense that there are some four hundred galleries in New York, of which only about fifteen are reviewed each month. Since most of these shows go unheeded anyway, why should the critic draw the reader's attention to what he would otherwise ignore, only to tell him that he needn't pay attention to it in the first place? And yet, the daily *Times* is often uncompromisingly harsh in its treatment of the three hundred books it chooses to review each year, out of fifty thousand published annually in this country. Ms. Reichl herself reviews less than one restaurant in two hundred, yet she sees no reason to spare the restaurants for that. The abundance of galleries is no excuse for suspending criticism.

Seen from another angle, however, a rather different reading becomes possible. It is common knowledge that the art world breathes and feeds upon publicity, good, bad or indifferent. And it is also well known that the art world is getting very miffed with the *Times* for seeming to cover fewer and fewer gallery exhibitions with each passing month. It may be that the critics of the *Times* have shrewdly recognized that the most damaging critique that they can give a show is not to review it at all. If this reading is correct, the magnitude of their disenchantment begins to be evident: every instance of their not reviewing a show is perhaps to be read as a negative review, in which case they have clearly gone overboard. Unfortunately for the critics of the *New York Times*, if their disenchantment grows and if art doesn't get conspicuously better, they may soon be working around the clock writing nothing at all.

## INSIDE

Howard Stern's Whitney Retrospective • Lucian, Freud, and Lucian Freud  
Rubens Revised, and Much, Much More

# Egypt and the “Barbarians”

Roger Bagnall

The modern debate over the ethnic and cultural identity of the ancient Egyptians and the resulting tug-of-war between Afrocentrism and a Mediterranean-oriented cosmopolitanism would surely have puzzled the early inhabitants of the Nile valley. Like the Chinese, they had no doubt that their own land was the center of the universe and that everything else was the periphery. If they did not question their standing, that was only because they thought it perfectly obvious that the rest of the world had learnt everything it knew from them. Thus they would have found it wholly fitting that two recent events in New York—the reinstatement of the Egyptian collection at the Brooklyn Museum and the mounting of the Metropolitan’s “Gold of Meroe” exhibit—should make their culture once more the center of attention.

A tour through the new galleries of the Brooklyn Museum reveals both the curators’ understanding of the Egyptians’ world view and their own belief that Egyptian civilization remained largely untouched by outside influence. The extensive text accompanying the displays thus emphasizes not only Egyptocentrism in general but also the continuation of Egyptian culture, with unabated vitality and little dilution, up to the third century of our era. The Egyptians, we are told, “clung tenaciously to their culture. . . . Consequently, most late art is totally Egyptian in nature.” In accordance with this view, the Third Intermediate Period and the “Late Period”—in which Brooklyn’s collection is strong—are treated as wholly Egyptian in character, with Greek and Roman influence under the Ptolemies and the Caesars strategically minimized. This depiction is supported by such tactics as placing in the “Classical” gallery, along with the similarly banished Coptic stelae, Egyptian material of the Roman period which displays non-Egyptian influences.

What this conceals is the fact that during the Roman period, after three hundred years of Greek rule, the resistance to external influence that characterized the Egyptians for so long had eroded. Questions of ethnic, linguistic and cultural identity are far more complex than this separation of Egyptian and Classical would suggest. In the temples, for example, very conservative, pharaonic-style relief sculpture is created at the same time as Egyptians are being buried under grave stelae with inscriptions in Greek.

Though the first rooms of the Egyptian wing, covering the art from the Old Kingdom through the early New Kingdom (mid-third to mid-second millennium B.C.), have not yet been affected by restoration, they lead to a small, newly installed gallery devoted to the Amarna period (Akhenaten and his aftermath), followed by a long room containing art from the late New Kingdom through to the Roman period. An area now closed will eventually house a comprehensive display of art from Predynastic times to the New Kingdom, giving much greater coverage to the culture of the pre-Amarna period than is now possible.

Beyond the long gallery is a suite of three rooms with a strongly pedagogic bent devoted to temples and tombs, described as the main sources of surviving Egyptian art. Two images of a reconstructed painting of Thebes are accompanied by a text in which temples are puckishly compared to nuclear power plants—full of essential but disaster-prone activities needing massive protection. A third room continues the description and display of tombs. Altogether these informative rooms may somewhat mislead. True, most of the Egyptian art in museums comes from temples or tombs; this fact underlies the emphasis on undying cultural conservatism that marks this installation. The temples and funerary corporations were the stronghold of the priesthoods, which stuck tenaciously to the old ways and acted as if nothing had changed. But the priests of the Roman period who had hieroglyphic inscriptions put up on the walls actually operated their temples’ business mainly in Greek. If the collections on display had come from homes in Egyptian villages of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, they would make quite a different impression on the viewer, and the message might be quite different.

All the same, it must be said for the new galleries that the quality of the material exhibited is very high, the display is clean, clear and attractive, and the labeling and explanatory texts are of a high standard. It is hard not to notice above all the omnipresent light, mostly natural, but in part derived from track lighting. The effect is enhanced by a floor of unstained oak or polished granite and off-white walls, as well as display cases that are mostly glass on all sides, their mats off-white or beige. In style of display, these new galleries

offer a striking contrast to the Metropolitan Museum’s Egyptian wing.

No doubt the high proportion of limestone in the objects that were displayed encouraged and allowed this lavish use of light. The Amarna room, in fact, is little else than relief sculpture. But where, one wonders, is all the organic material? Though Egypt’s climate preserves wood, fabric and papyrus better than any other known to classical archaeology, and the Brooklyn Museum’s collections have their share of such material, the installation shows little more than the mummies of a cat, an ibis and a baby crocodile, together with a few papyrus. These things do not take kindly to light and thus assume a distant second place to stone sculpture. This, in turn, is highly fragmentary: it comes, after all, from the antiquities market, not from scientific excavations.

As I have tried to suggest, the Egyptians, for all their conservative Egyptocentricity, were immune neither to change nor to foreign influence. What cannot be denied, however, is that their ability to resist change was often prodigious. Though they had suffered foreign rulers, it was the conquerors who became converts to Egyptian culture, rather than the other way around. The Kushite kings (715–664) are a good example. Invading Egypt from the south, they were Egyptianized very



RING WITH THE GOD AMUN ENTHRONED

rapidly. The Brooklyn Museum has some wonderful statuettes of these rulers. They have the non-Egyptian physical features of the African outsiders clearly enough—broad nose, round head, cropped hair. And yet, all of their trappings are immediately recognized as Egyptian.

It is the distant successors of the Kushites who are the focus of the Metropolitan Museum's current "Gold of Meroe" exhibit. Meroe, which lies on the Nile between the fifth and sixth cataracts, is about 125 miles north of Khartoum in modern Sudan. It was the royal capital of the Kushite kingdom and then of its successor state. Along with palace and temple architecture, the city offers an extensive field of pyramids, obviously of Egyptian derivation but considerably steeper and topped with a flat platform. One of these, the pyramid of Queen Amanishakheto, was "excavated"—which is to say, partly demolished—in 1834 by an Italian named Giuseppe Ferlini, who came upon a dazzling treasure of jewelry in one of the upper chambers. This treasure, mostly dating from the end of the first century B.C., is the center and larger part of the current exhibit. It is so impressive that even those who, like this viewer, are accustomed to turn up their noses at the crass habit of titling exhibits "The Gold of (fill in the blank)" have to admit that for once the title is entirely appropriate.

Amanishakheto's jewelry was divided between the Bavarian and Prussian royal collections, and the present exhibit (previously shown in Berlin) marks a historic reunification of the material and an unprecedented trip abroad. The collection fits comfortably into a single gallery and is well worth a visit. The rich interplay of gold and fused glass in the bracelets and armlets is perhaps the most attractive part of the exhibition, though there are many fine pieces excellently illustrated and described in the catalogue by Karl-Heinz Priese (\$16.95).

It is interesting to compare the catalogue with the labels in the show. Where Priese tells the reader neutrally that "there is no way of knowing how accurately they [two reconstructed collar necklaces] reproduce the original designs," the label comments acidly that the reconstructions "reveal more about nineteenth-century European ideas of ancient Egyptian jewelry than they do about genuine Egyptian patterning."

Most of the nonjewelry in the show was added to the New York exhibition from North American collections. These pieces help to turn what at first glance is a very narrowly focused exhibit—the jewelry from a single find—into a broader look at Meroitic culture. Among the objects included are a fragmentary sandstone portrait of a royal head from Napata, the other main Meroitic site; a granite offering table from Meroe; sandstone blocks depicting a military triumph from the

pylon of Amanishakheto's pyramid; and a beautiful reddish bottle with winged cobras. Despite such additions, the show was not intended as a comprehensive overview of Meroitic civilization, but centered instead on Meroe at the end of one era and the beginning of another.

The Egyptian, rather than Classical character of this art is so striking that the casual viewer may be tempted to see the whole thing as so much derivative work. But both catalogue and labels warn against any such simplistic view. It is observed, for example, that Queen Amanishakheto is portrayed according to distinctively Meroitic canons of queenly beauty and power, with full hips and a large rump. The gods themselves, though extensively reproducing Egyptian iconography, are made to conform to Meroitic designs. In one signet ring Amun dispatches a kneeling enemy—"something the reserved and dignified Egyptian original would never have done."

Even more remarkable is a signet ring modeled on the statue of Zeus at Olympia: a "unity of Amun, Zeus, and Serapis" according to the catalogue, but featuring the native lion god Apedemak, perhaps syncretized with Serapis and portrayed, according to the label, as Zeus Olympios. The overall impression is manifestly Hellenistic. Other objects with Greek characteristics are certainly imports, but even here it is hard to be sure how far local production appropriated and reproduced a Mediterranean artistic vocabulary. For Priese, certain architectural features suggest that Greek and Roman craftsmen were living in Meroe.

At all events, the people of Meroe were entirely capable of picking and choosing from the culture of their richer and more advanced neighbors to the north. This is neatly evidenced by the fact that their writing system preserved the alphabetic elements of hieroglyphics while discarding most syllabic or ideographic elements. Generally speaking, the Meroites adapted their Egyptian borrowings to represent their own concerns, mythology, clothing and ornamentation. Far from being dependent or passive, they were the ones who, in late antiquity, kept the ancient cults alive south of Aswan, after Egypt had become Christian.

Over the past few decades, dramatic gains in our knowledge of Nubia have increasingly allowed us to see the distinctiveness of Meroitic civilization, and no doubt much more evidence is to come. Above all, they have forced us to see that the question of Egyptian identity and influence is far too complicated ever to be summed up in a single pat answer. Ω

"The Gold of Meroe," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, through April 3.

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# The Decorative Arts at Bard

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Alan Wintermute

When preparing her biography of madame de Pompadour, Nancy Mitford asked Evelyn Waugh what sort of reader she should target. Waugh replied: "Write for the sort of reader who knows Louis XV furniture when she sees it but thinks Louis XV was the son of Louis XIV and had his head cut off."

Like Mitford, Susan Weber Soros undoubtedly intends to educate those with a discriminating eye for the decorative arts in the finer points of history, though she is aiming higher than

the pedigreed "Louis-Louis" ladies who composed Mitford's audience. Rather than writing a book, Mrs. Soros has founded the new Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts. The Center's "mission statement" declares, among the goals of its two-year master's degree program, that it intends to "encourage new levels of scholarship in the decorative arts" and to explore "the history of the spiritual, pragmatic, intellectual, and aesthetic dialogue between the decorative arts and society." These are worthy aspirations indeed since, as