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Imhotep Today: Egyptianizing Architecture (review)

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(Review)

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our imagination? Conversely, how did the ancient Egyptians view their own past, and how did they view foreign lands? These are some of the issues addressed in *Encounters with Ancient Egypt*, an ambitious series of eight books that covers the way different aspects of Egypt have been reconfigured over time, from antiquity to the present.

The *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* series had its genesis in an international conference held at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, in December 2000. Although the books also include papers commissioned separately, the fact that eight books came out of a single conference is testament to lively scholarly interest at the moment not only in the announced subject, but also, more broadly, in the shifting nature of history. The authors come from a variety of disciplines, offering multifaceted analysis and plentiful new information. An enormous undertaking, the project was worth the effort; the resulting books make an important contribution to the study of ancient Egypt and of its enduring role in the world.

Two of the books in the series are reviewed below. The authors and titles of all eight volumes are as follows:

Jean-Marcel Humbert and Clifford Price, eds. *Imhotep Today: Egyptianizing Architecture* (reviewed below).

David O'Connor and Andrew Reid, eds. *Ancient Egypt in Africa* (reviewed below).

John Tait, ed. *'Never Had the Like Occurred': Egypt's View of its Past*

David Jeffreys, ed. *Views of Ancient Egypt since Napoleon Bonaparte: Imperialism, Colonialism and Modern Appropriations*.

Roger Matthews and Cornelia Roemer, eds. *Ancient Perspectives on Egypt*.

Sally McDonald and Michael Rice, eds. *Consuming Ancient Egypt*.

David O'Connor and Stephen Quirke, eds. *Mysterious Lands*.

Peter Ucko and Timothy Champion, eds. *The Wisdom of Egypt: Changing Visions Through the Ages*.

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**Jean-Marcel Humbert and Clifford Price, eds. *Imhotep Today: Egyptianizing Architecture*. In *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* series.** London: UCL Press, 2003. Distributed by Cavendish Publishing, c/o International Specialized Book Services, 5824 NE Hassalo St., Portland, Ore. 97213-3444. xxii + 318 pages. Illustrations. Notes. Bibliography. Index. \$47.50. Paper.

Taking the monuments of ancient Egypt as a source of inspiration, architects living in the modern era have often incorporated forms derived from the pharaonic past into their own work. *Imhotep Today: Egyptianizing Archi-*

*tecture* investigates the phenomenon of such adaptations, probing the reasons for it and surveying examples around the world. This volume, with fifteen essays and nineteen contributors, focuses on works dating from the eighteenth century to the present. The title links Imhotep, architect of Egypt's first pyramid, with later builders who have come under ancient Egypt's spell. Imhotep himself would be astonished at some of the later manifestations of pharaonic forms throughout the world: mini-pyramids as garden ornaments and ice houses; suspension bridges hung between Egyptianizing pylons; cinemas fronted with floral columns; temple facades adapted for zoos, theme parks, factories, and stores; and obelisks erected in public squares.

Why Egypt? the book asks. Nostalgia for an imagined past comes into play. So do respect for a formidable tradition, admiration for the purity—or the exuberance—of ancient designs, a desire to add timeless overtones to freshly minted work, and an unquenchable interest in the exotic. These are just some of the many explanations the authors ponder. They also draw attention to the formation of a repertoire derived from a limited number of specific motifs from Egypt that have been favored to the exclusion of other elements. The authors consider the political, social, and commercial aspects of the various instances of adaptation, along with the significance of different uses, from high-minded to festive, for the appropriated forms. The geographic reach of Egypt's influence, as demonstrated in this volume, extends surprisingly far—as far as Russia, Brazil, South Africa, and Australia. The book provides a look at Egypt-inspired works in those disparate places as well as in England, France, Italy, and the United States. Egypt's response to its own past enters the picture, too, in an essay on the project for a new incarnation of the ancient library at Alexandria.

The theme of Egypt in Western architecture (and more broadly, in Western art) has been addressed in a number of previous studies, including works by Richard Carrott, J. S. Curl, and Jean-Marcel Humbert. The present volume is unusual in its global scope and probing approach. The introduction by Humbert and Price provides a useful summary of the issues surrounding the book's topic. One is struck in succeeding chapters by the multiple ways motifs adapted from Egypt take on new associations upon arrival in new surroundings. In nineteenth-century Australia, for example, as Colin Hope demonstrates, gilded obelisks became symbols of that country's mineral output and were linked with Australian national identity. Two specialists on Freemasonry provide (finally) a clear explanation of Egypt's convoluted influence on Masonic iconography. Other chapters are full of interesting historical details, and extensive illustrations and references increase the work's value. One is grateful for the inclusion of recent works, from I. M. Pei's Louvre pyramid to the Luxor Hotel and Casino at Las Vegas.

The subject matter of the volume requires minor repetition, as authors working on separate subjects confront seminal moments, such as the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt or the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb,

and as they deal with adaptations from the same body of works. This revisiting of themes might have become tedious, but instead one is continually surprised to learn how adaptable the Egyptian idiom has been for so many types of setting. This is an interesting and thought-provoking book for anyone curious about Egypt's legacy in the visual arts.

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**David O'Connor and Andrew Reid, eds. *Ancient Egypt in Africa*.** London: University College London Press, 2003. In *Encounters with Ancient Egypt* series. Distributed by Cavendish Publishing, c/o International Specialized Book Services, Inc., 5824 NE Hassalo St., Portland, Ore. 97213-3444. 245 pp. Figures. Notes. References. Index. \$47.50. Paper.

*Ancient Egypt in Africa* presents twelve probing essays addressing aspects of the question, "To what extent can ancient Egyptian civilization be characterized as 'African'?" In the traditional view, formulated by European and American scholars in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Egypt, despite being in Africa, was not of Africa. The racist/colonialist view that Africa and African peoples were incapable of high cultural attainment naturally resulted in the view that Egypt was a non-African country, more closely connected to the Near Eastern and Mediterranean worlds and populated by peoples more akin to "civilized" Europeans. To these scholars, inner Africa was perceived only as a source of raw materials and slaves. Such interpretations of ancient history were important in order to maintain European authority and power within Africa. In reaction, African and African American scholars, mostly in the latter twentieth century, adopted an opposite paradigm: that ancient Egypt was not only an African civilization, populated by "black" Africans, but also a civilization that imparted its culture to the rest of Africa as well as Europe.

O'Connor and Reid's introduction provides a fascinating overview of how current ideas about ancient Egypt and Africa have been shaped and distorted by modern ethnic, cultural, and religious bias. "For the most part," they write, "locating Ancient Egypt has been an exercise in ideological definition, serving less to understand Ancient Egypt itself and more to define the position of the commentator" (4). From this point they introduce the essays, which document the conflicting and changing views of ancient Egypt within Africa, and examine recent archaeological work in Africa that renders irrelevant race-based theory, creates a more sophisticated view of ancient African cultural diversity, and offers commonsense directions for future research.

Along with its fine introduction, the book contains eleven chapters by the following authors: Martin Bernal ("Afrocentrism and Historical Models