



ANCIENT EGYPT ON THE RIVER PO TURIN'S MUSEO EGIZIO

by Lucy Gordon Rastelli

Photos courtesy of the Museum

Opposite, A centerpiece of the Museo Egizio collection is the magnificent black-granite statue of Rameses II found at the Temple of Mut, Karnak; Above, The Museum's Gallery 1 on the 2nd floor of Turin's Academy of Sciences.

Turin's first documentable connection to Egypt dates to 1537, a year after Emanuele Filiberto, Duke of Savoy, moved the capital of his kingdom from Chambéry in France to Torino, Italy. During excavations on the Citadel, the ancient Roman Campitoliun, the base of a statue with a dedication to the Egyptian goddess Isis was uncovered. This find might possibly confirm the legend that Turin was founded during Imperial Roman times, as a settlement sacred to that deity.

This discovery seems to have sparked the interest of the Savoy dynasty to collect what they believed to be Egyptian antiquities. In 1628 a singular object made its way into their possession: the Tabula Isiaca, or the Bembina Table, a bronze altar with bronze and copper detailings. Before the



Two of the early acquisitions of the Museo Egizio by Vitaliano Donati were: left, from Coptos, a large-scale black-granite statue of the goddess Isis with the facial features of Queen Tiye, consort of Amenhotep III; & right, from the Temple of Mut at Karnak, a well-preserved image of the lion-headed Sekhmet, dating also to the reign of the third Amenhotep.

Savoys the Tabula Isiaca — which turned up in Rome in 1527 — had belonged to the great humanist scholar Cardinal Pietro Bembo (1470-1547) and, after his death, to the Gonzagas, a noble family from Mantua. Considered authentic at the time, the typology of the altar's designs of ceremonies in honor of Isis and its hieroglyphs were carefully studied by both an Italian and a German scholar; later scholarly opinion was fairly certain that the object was not Egyptian, but rather Roman in origin. Another "Egyptian" object in the Savoy collection, a female head with inscriptions interpreted as hieroglyphs, attracted the attention of scholars in the second half of the Eighteenth Century; this, too, was judged to be a contemporary fake.

Despite the lack of "authenticity" of the above and other objects in their possession, the Savoys opened their collection to the public beginning in the late Eighteenth Century, thereby creating the very first museum devoted exclusively to Egyptology. Thus, although not yet officially designated a museum, the Savoy's collection housed in Turin is the oldest of all the world's great ancient Egyptian assemblages. Only slightly smaller than the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, the Museo Egizio of Turin is today arguably considered the most important Egyptian collection in the world after that of the Cairo institution, in terms of its vast variety of objects and especially because all periods of ancient Egypt — from 4,000 B.C. to c. 600 A.D. — are represented in the Turin holdings.

The first definitely Egyptian objects — the Museo Egizio's initial nucleus — arrived in Turin in 1753, sent to the University of Torino. King



Among the many diverse objects to arrive in Turin as part of King Carlo Felice's purchase of the Drovetti Collection were: Left, an over-life-size calcite image of the god Ptah, dating from the reign of Amenhotep III & bearing that ruler's facial features; Right, a small wooden cult statuette of the goddess Tawret, with the head of Amenhotep III's queen, Tiye, rather than the usual hippopotamus iconography; & Above, a painted-limestone ostrakon of New Kingdom date, depicting an acrobatic female dancer seen in profile.

Below, A sepia watercolor by M. Nicolosino showing the initial arrangement of the Drovetti Collection.



Carlo Emanuele III (1701-1773) had asked the University's botanist, Vitaliano Donati, a native of Padua, to travel to Egypt and the Near East to collect botanical, zoological and mineral specimens, as well as "some ancient object or rare manuscript or even one of the better preserved mummies, and a series of Syriac, Phoenician and Egyptian medals." From these the king hoped to learn about geography, history and culture of these far-off, exotic places. Before he died in 1762, Donati had sent to Turin magnificent statues of



the goddess Sekhmet and of King Ramesses II, collected at the Temple of Mut at Karnak, and a statue of the goddess Isis (with the facial features

of Tiye, spouse of Amenhotep III) from Coptos, as well as more than 300 smaller pieces, including "oil-lamps, among which some Christian ones with Greek characters, and various idols."

In 1832 Donati's finds were united with the Museum's second nucleus of objects and housed in the Academy of Sciences, where the Museo Egizio — officially founded on January 23, 1824 — is still housed today. In

the previous year, 1823, King Carlo Felice (1765-1831), who aimed to transform Turin from a provincial cap-

ital into a European one — advised by rector of the University Prospero Balbo, the Marquis of Saluzzo and writer-explorer Carlo Vidua — purchased for the then-astronomical sum of 400,000 lire this second group of objects. The seller was the Piedmont-born French consul general in Egypt, Bernardino Drovetti (1776-1852).

During his long stays in Egypt (1803-1814 and 1821-1829), Drovetti managed to assemble a vast collection of antiquities — some 8,000 objects — mostly dating from the New Kingdom and Late Period, when Waset (Thebes) was capital of Egypt and its most important religious center. From 1816 on he offered his holdings for sale to both Piedmont and France. When France turned down Drovetti's 1823 selection of objects, King Carlo Felice became their owner.

In 1833 Guiseppe Sossio's collection of over 1,200 Egyptian pieces was added to Donati's and Drovetti's objects. Then, from the beginning of the Twentieth Century, for over the next twenty years, the Museum's director, Piedmontese Ernesto Schiaparelli (1856-1928), not only bought objects on the antiquities market, but headed the Museo Egizio's own many excavations in Egypt, thereby enriching the institution's holdings in all periods, from Prehistoric to Coptic times. Thanks to Schiaparelli's indefatigability, and that of his successor, Giulio Farina, the Museum collection tripled in size and today conserves some 30,000 objects, many one of a kind.

Inarguably, the most unique of all the Museo Egizio's holdings are the entire contents (save for a single object retained for Cairo) of the Eighteenth Dynasty burial of the architect Kha and his wife, Merit (see sidebar, following two pages). This undisturbed burial was found in 1906 by Schiaparelli during his excavations in the necropolis at Deir el Medina.

Another one-of-a-kind Turin piece is the aforementioned black-granite statue of Rameses II, which



Schiaparelli's extensive excavations in the tomb-makers' village & necropolis at Deir el Medina produced numerous objects which were rewarded to Turin by Egypt, including, Above, the 18th Dynasty painted funerary chapel of the Maya; & Below, the 19th Dynasty limestone pair-statue of the craftsman Pendua & his wife, Neferti.





Schiaparelli's 1910-1911 excavations at Gebelein produced several additions to the Museo Egizio collection, including: Above, The wrapped mummy of an unknown man of the 5th Dynasty; & Left, Wall paintings (tempera on plaster) such as this butchering scene from the 2nd Intermediate Period Tomb of Iti. Farina's 1930 work at the same site revealed a unique fragmentary Predynastic (3,500 BC) painted-linen textile, the earliest known example of decorated fabric.



came to the Museum thanks to Donati. It was once described by pioneering French Egyptologist Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832) as "the Egyptian Apollo Belvedere."

A third unique part of the Museo Egizio collection is the Temple of Ellesiya, from Nubia, dating back 3,500 years to ca. 1430 B.C. This was a gift to Italy from the Egyptian government in 1965, as thanks for the help of the Italian Archaeological Mission in the removal of monuments and temples from the area destined to be flooded by the creation of Lake Nasser following completion of the Aswan High Dam in 1968. So it could be transported to Italy, it was taken apart and then reconstructed in the Turin

Two other objects from the tomb-makers' village at Deir el Medina in the Turin collection are: Opposite, A 20th Dynasty painted-limestone statue depicting the craftsman Penmerenab presenting an offering to the god Amen; Below, a wooden statuette with pigment & gilding of Queen Ahmes-Nefertari, deified patroness of the village, along with her son, Amenhotep I, seen at right in a painted-limestone cult statue of New Kingdom date, also from the Luxor area.

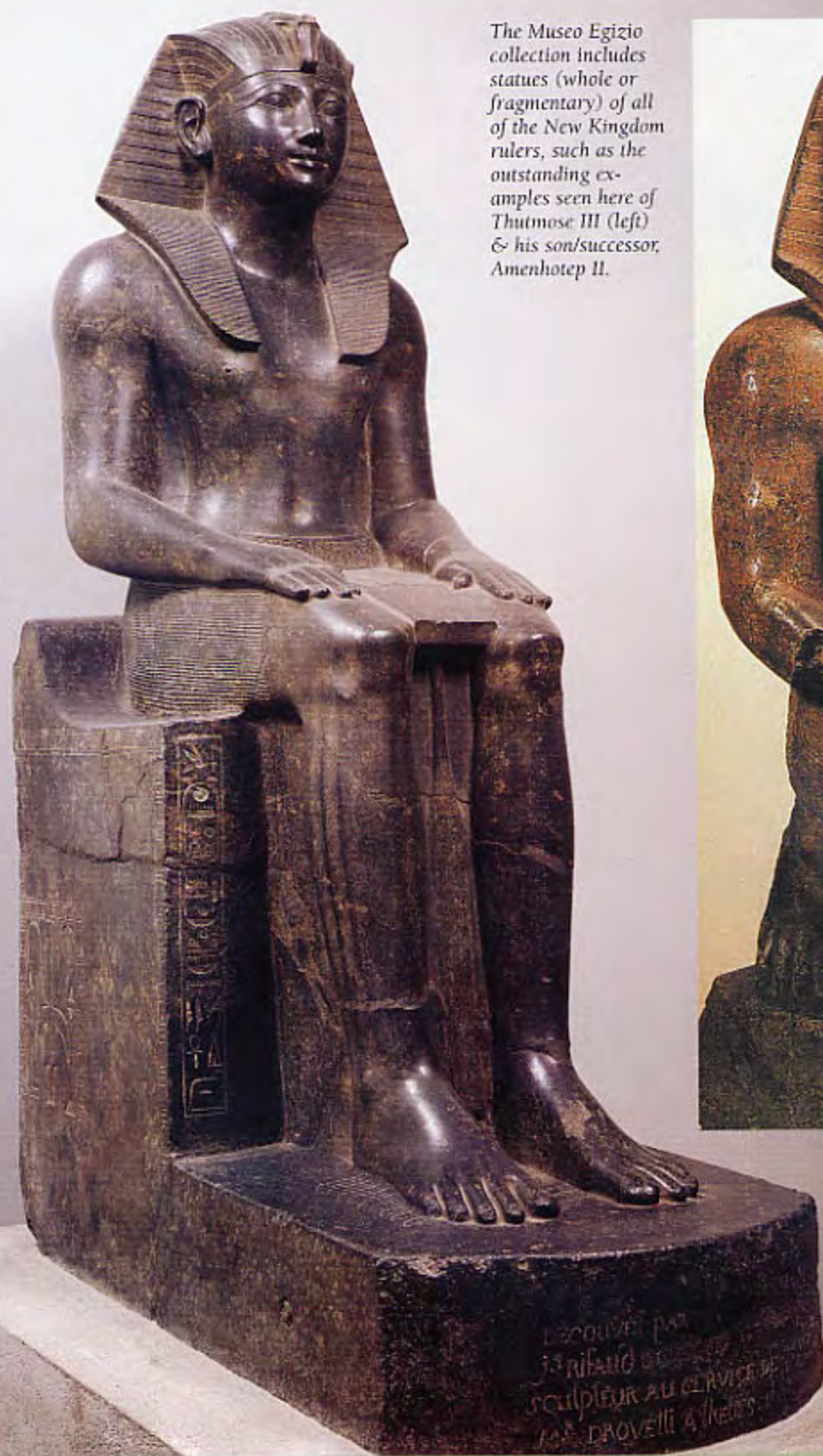


museum. Its inner chapel is decorated with reliefs of Thutmose III. In the same space are exhibited many objects collected from the area of Nubia where the temple originally stood, illustrating the extent of Egyptian cul-

ture outside its own borders.

Other highlights of the Turin collection include:
-The Egyptianizing Roman

The Museo Egizio collection includes statues (whole or fragmentary) of all of the New Kingdom rulers, such as the outstanding examples seen here of Thutmose III (left) & his son/successor, Amenhotep II.



ceased on a last pilgrimage to Abydos, site of the sanctuary of Osiris, as well as hunting and ritual funerary dances; it is the oldest-known painting in the world.

- The Assembla dei Rei ("Kings' Assembly"), a collection of ninety-eight statues representing all of the pharaohs of the New Kingdom.

- Many sarcophagi and mummies of both humans and sacred animals: ibis and baboons (Thoth), crocodiles (Sobek), bulls (Hapi), fish (Neith) and cats (Bastet).

- And many examples of the *Book of the Dead* and other papyri originally

Tabula Isiaca.

- A very rare statue of the Third Dynasty (ca. 2800 BC), depicting a royal woman named Redit, which is the oldest sculpture in the Museum.

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- Fragments of a unique Predynastic (3500 BC) painted-linen funerary shroud, discovered by Farina in 1931 at Gebelein south of Luxor. Depicting boats on the Nile transporting the de-



Of Turin's many important papyri acquired from Drovetti is this unique one with the plan of the Tomb of Rameses IV in the Valley of the Kings.

part of the Drovetti collection, which arrived in Turin from Egypt in trunks. Eagerly awaiting to open the latter was Champollion, who only three years earlier had succeeded in deciphering the hieroglyphs of the Rosetta Stone. It was only in Turin that the future director of the Egyptian Department of the Musée du Louvre and professor of the Collège de France had access to such a vast number of papyri, probably the most important set of ancient Egyptian written documents in the world. Champollion is said to have claimed more than once: "For me, the road to Memphis and Thebes is via Turin."

Yet, for all of his genius and enthusiasm, the French scholar was a bit too full of himself. Confronted with the dreadful condition of many of the Turin papyri, he hyperventilated: "I've seen the names of years completely forgotten by history and gods who haven't had altars in more than 15 centuries pass through my hands, and I've painstakingly, hardly breathing for fear of reducing it to powder, picked up a fragment of papyrus, the last and only refuge of the memory of a king who while he was on earth probably felt cramped by the immense palace of Karnak."

Today's scholars and museum curators would cringe in disbelief, but for easier handling of the papyri Cham-

pollion had wanted to cut more-or-less intact rolls into pages and glue them onto cardboard. Luckily his nemesis-boss and first curator of the Museo Egizio, Giulio Cordero di San Quintino, refused to give him permission to do so. Nonetheless, Champollion lost no time (June 1824-February 1825) in organizing these hundreds of bits and pieces into a history of Egypt — which he subsequently published in the two-volumed *Lettres à Mr. Blacas* — and in editing the Museum's first catalogue.

Certainly the most important of the Museo Egizio papyri is the so-called "Papyrus of Kings" or "Turin Canon," which — although in fragments with many lacunae — lists in chronological order the names of the rulers of Egypt from the time of the mythological gods down through the Second Intermediate Period. Others of significance are: the "Justice Papyrus," detailing the charges against and the trial of those who participated in the "Harem Conspiracy" to murder King Ramesses III; the "Papyrus of the Mines," with a map of the gold mines of Wadi Hammamat; the "Papyrus of the Tomb of Rameses IV," showing the layout of that pharaoh's tomb in the Valley of the Kings; and the "Satiric Papyrus" (or the "World-Turned-Upside-down Papyrus"), with animals impersonating humans on one side and explicitly

erotic scenes on the other.

Continuing until May 30 at the Museo Egizio is a special exhibition from the Museum's collections, "Clothing and Cosmetics in Ancient Egypt." Displayed in chronological order, its many sections cover beauty products, combs and jewelry; sandals for the long journey to the Afterlife; tattoos from before the Pyramid Age; court attire; clothing and cosmetics from Nubia and the provinces; the history of linen production in Egypt; fashion changes during the New Kingdom, influenced by Egypt's military and trade expansions; cosmetics at the time of Kha and Merit; fashion changes during the Graeco-Roman eras; the preparation of the corpse for the Afterlife; the use of cosmetics for preventative medicine, cures and seduction; and how fabric production changed during the centuries, and the influence of Coptic Christianity on this pagan tradition.

The Museo Egizio, or Turin's Egyptian Museum, is located on the Via delle Scienze in Turin. It is open to the public Tuesday through Saturday, 8:30 AM-7:30 PM, and closed on Sunday and Monday. Phone is 011-39-011-561-7776; web-site is <http://museoegizio.org> (undergoing revamping).

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