

GIANT OF EGYPTOLOGY
NO. 40

JEAN CAPART

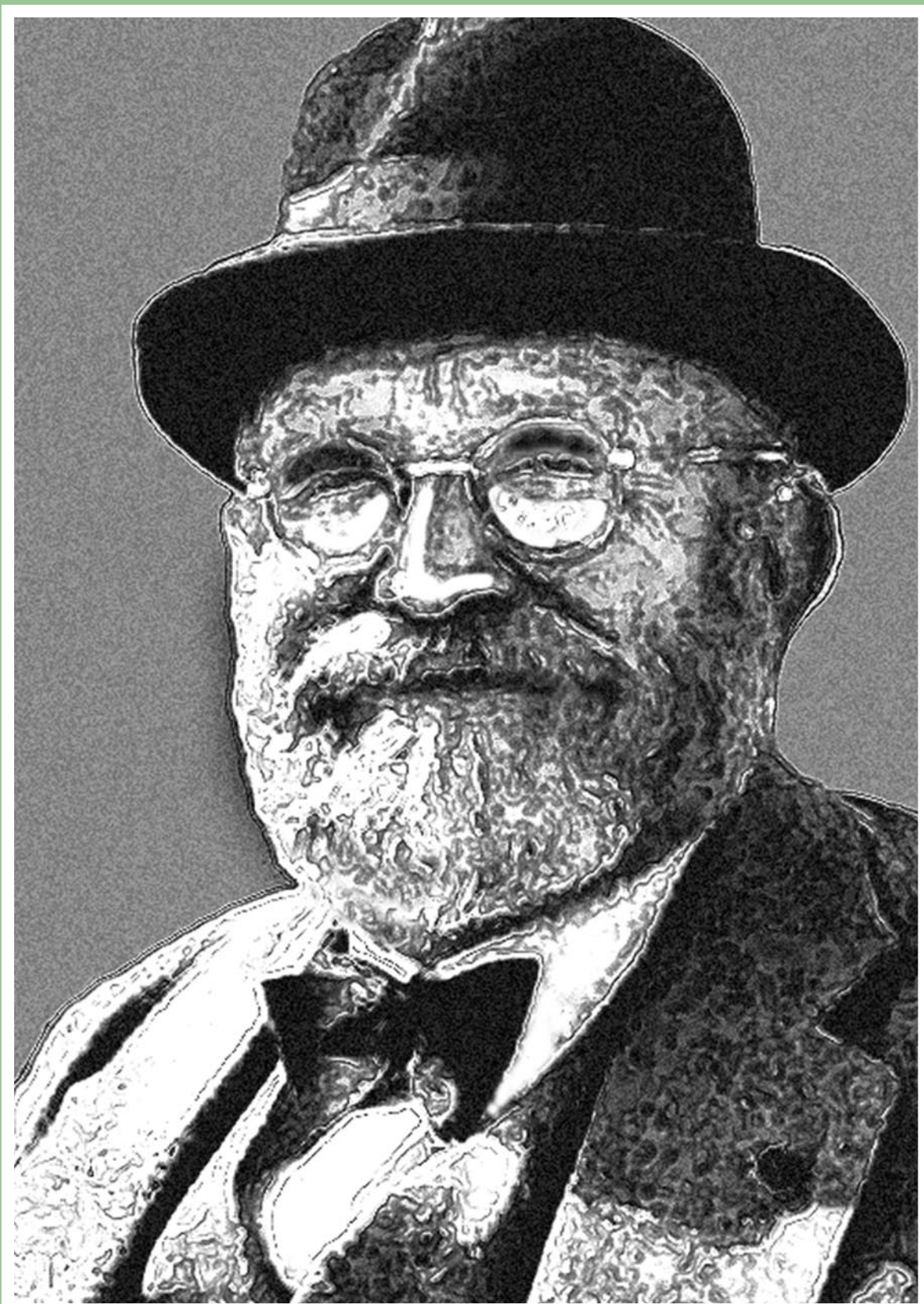
(1877 - 1947)

Born in Brussels on February 21, 1877, to highly respected medical doctor Alphonse Capart and his wife Alida Carbonnelle, Jean Capart was the second of nine children, eight of whom reached old age. His fascination with ancient Egypt began at age ten, when one of his mother's siblings returned from a trip to Egypt and gave Alphonse a scarab engraved with hieroglyphs, which the Dr. Capart had set in a ring.

A few years later, in 1892, Jean's history teacher at the Collège Saint Boniface in Ixelles, the most upscale of Brussel's nineteen municipalities, Abbot Louis Carrière encouraged Jean's interest in ancient Egypt by lending him a copy of Gaston Maspero's *Les Lectures historiques*. After reading it over and over, Jean traced its illustrations with China ink onto glass plates, so he could project them during his first-ever lecture on ancient Egypt for his schoolmates. He also began building his own Egyptological library, for examples: *Voyage en Haute et Basse-Égypte* by Dominique Vivant Denon; *Grammaire égyptienne* by Jean-François Champollion; and *Denkmäler aus Aegypten und Aethiopen* by Karl-Richard Lepsius, which young Capart considered the most important book about Egyptian antiquities.

Since he was an excellent student and won many academic books as prizes, he sold those that didn't interest him to buy, in installments, books on Egyptology. Not to mention that, thanks to his excellent grades, he went home one day to find that his parents had wallpapered his room to look like the interior of an Egyptian tomb.

During his school years, Jean accompanied his father to medical congresses all over Europe. This gave him the opportunity to visit Egyptian collections in Cologne, Paris, London, Florence, Rome and Turin, where he met Ernesto Schiaparelli at the Museo Egizio. However, since as yet no Belgian university offered a degree in Egyptology, his parents were against sending him abroad to study for a, at best a poorly paid, teaching career in Belgium after graduation. So Capart reluctantly studied law, first at the Jesuit Collège Notre Dame de la Paix in Namur (1893-95) and then at the University of Brussels (1895-98), writing his doctoral thesis on the history of criminal law in ancient Egypt, for which he received high honors. In addition, he studied Coptic at the Catholic University of Louvain (1898). Moreover, while still a student, he spent so much time at the Royal Muse-

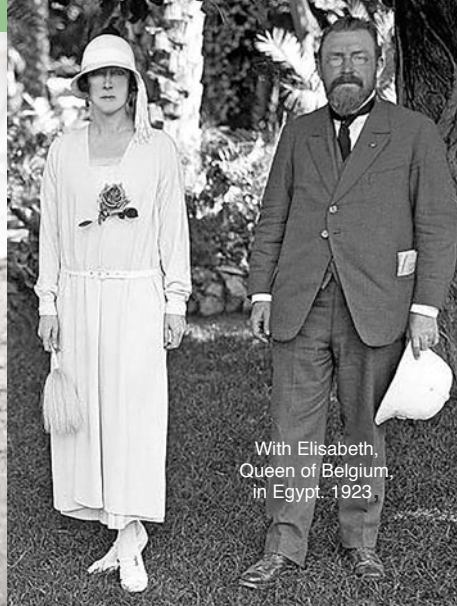


Jean Capart

D.C. Forbes.



At
Heliopolis,
1907



With Elisabeth,
Queen of Belgium,
in Egypt. 1923.



Internet images



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ums of Art and History, that Joseph Destree, its curator of antiquities, asked him in 1897 to organize the Museum's then-small Egyptian collection. Thanks to this experience, Capart first corresponded and then met Gaston Maspero, who soon became his mentor.

That same year he joined the bar association and won a university competition for young lawyers. Evermore determined the he would never practice "the profession of liars," he decided to use his prize money to travel around Europe, pursuing his studies in Egyptology. He was interested in many aspects of Egyptology: archeology, philology, history of religion, but especially in art and museology.

After attending, at Maspero's invitation, the Congrès des Orientalistes in Paris, he took courses with Pieter Boeser at the University of Leiden (1898); with Alfred Wiedemann at the University of Bonn (1898-99); with William Flinders Petrie at University College, London (1899); and with Gaston Maspero at the École de Louvre in Paris (1899).

In 1900 he returned home and began his lifetime career at The Royal Museums of Art and History in Brussels: assistant curator of antiquities (1900), curator (1911), secretary of the Museums (1912) and director of the Museums from 1925 until his retirement in 1942, although he continued to serve on the Museum's Supervision Commission and as a member of its Society of Friends until his death in 1947.

The same year he joined the Museums' staff, at the invitation of Maspero, he made the first of his thirteen visits to Egypt (1900, 1905, 1907, 1909, 1923, 1925, 1927 (when he excavated at Tell Héou, where he uncovered a necropolis and a small temple dedicated to Thoth), 1929, 1930, 1937, 1938, 1945 and 1946). A year later, in 1901, he donated his personal library, by then some 1,000 volumes — as well as copies of twelve scholarly journals he'd been subscribing to — to the Museums, today the core collection of not only Belgium's, but one of the world's most important libraries of Egyptology and Papyrology. Two years later the University of Liège established for him the first Belgian academic chair in Egyptology, becoming a full professor in 1910 and honorary professor in 1929, when he resigned in favor of his disciple Baudouin van de Walle.

The University of Liège was Capart's first but not his only teaching position. Charismatic and an excellent public speaker, in 1904 he began offering courses in archaeology at the Cinquantenaire; and over the years taught at the Institut supérieur d'histoire d'art et d'archéologie de Bruxelles; the Institut supérieur de jeunes filles de Bruxelles; the Institut des hautes études de Belgique; at the École Saint-Luc de Molenbeek-San-Jean in Brussels; and the Université libre de Bruxelles.

Alongside his academic courses, he also gave lectures and interviews for the general public both in person and on the radio, which did much to stimulate interest in Egyptology, not only in Belgium, but in the many other countries he visited, always carrying his briefcase full of his glass slides: Copenhagen (1919 and 1938), Uppsala (1920), Leiden (1921), Lyons (1924), United States (1925), Harvard University (1928 and 1931), Rio de Janeiro, Sao Paulo and Buenos Aires (1936), The Brooklyn Museum in New York (1936), New Castle, Sheffield, Liverpool and London (1938), Paris (1939) and Rome, Naples and Palermo (1939).

He made his first of many trips to the United States in 1924, not as a lecturer but as a visiting professor, thanks to the Belgian-American Educational Foundation, the leading independent philanthropic organization fostering higher education for deserving Belgians and Americans through its exchange fellowship program. There he met future President Herbert Hoover, who had been the Head of the Commission for Relief in Belgium during World War I. From 1932 to 1938 he was part-time honorary curator of Egyptology at the Brooklyn Museum, during which time he redesigned the collection's displays and catalogue. From 1938 until his death he was honorary advisory curator at the Museum.

During his fifty-year museums career, he reorganized and considerably increased the size of the Cinquantenaire's Egyptian collection, from some 500 artifacts to several thousand. Just as there had been no university degree or professorship in Egyptology in Belgium at the start of Capart's studies, when he joined the Museums' staff, Belgium sponsored no excavations in Egypt, so the Cinquantenaire had no direct source of additional artifacts. Luckily Capart had three guardian angels. One was the Belgian engineer and amateur Egyptologist Édouard Empain, who worked extensively in Egypt, building new cities in the desert. He provided Capart with funds to head the first Belgian archeological excavation in Egypt during 1907 at Heliopolis. Sadly it produced no ancient artifacts. After this first disappointment, Capart advised Empain which Egyptian artifacts to buy at auction and then donate to the Museums.

Capart's second guardian angel was his professor, Flinders Petrie, who encouraged him to participate in the English excavations at Abydos, Amarna, Luxor and Karnak — under the auspices of the Egyptian Exploration Society — which Capart did from 1905 to 1940, first becoming the EES's honorary Belgian representative and then its honorary vice-president in 1935. Since these excavations were partly funded by the Cinquantenaire, the artifact-finds were divided between Egypt, England and Belgium, so the provenance and dates of all are documented.

Thanks to Empain in 1905 the Egyptian government awarded Capart the Sakkara Mastaba of Neferirtenuf, a high-level functionary of the Fifth Dynasty. Among the most memorable of Capart's many other acquisitions are the Eighteenth Dynasty limestone relief of Queen Tiye, from the Tomb of Userhat, which Empain bought at auction and donated to Capart in 1905; the limestone stela of May of the Nineteenth Dynasty from Abydos, depicting Seti I worshipping Osiris, Isis and Horus; and the top-half of the papyrus called *Leopold II* from the Twentieth Dynasty, which records plundering of royal tombs and the trial of the tomb robbers. Capart found it rolled up inside an insignificant statue from the Nineteenth Dynasty and translated its text with the English Egyptologist Alan Gardiner. Its bottom half belongs to the J.P. Morgan Library and Museum.

Capart's third guardian angel entered his life two decades after Empain and Petrie. On February 18, 1923, at her invitation, he accompanied Queen Elisabeth of Belgium and her son, the fu-

ture King Leopold III, as their guide to see Tutankhamen's tomb, being among its first visitors. The occasion inspired Elisabeth's ever-after interest in Egyptology and support for Capart. Together in 1925 they founded the Egyptian Foundation Queen Elisabeth (renamed the Queen Elisabeth Egyptology Association in 2004), still housed at the Cinquantenaire, to stimulate research about ancient Egypt in Belgium, still its aim today. Its main project has been to publish the journal *Chronique d'Égypte*. Capart accompanied the queen on other trips to Egypt, showing her both famous and lesser-known sites.

Finally in 1937 Capart obtained the concession for Belgium's first official excavation at Elkab, the ancient religious capital of Upper Egypt dedicated to the Goddess Nekhbet, some fifty miles south of Luxor. Although in a very dilapidated state, it is a huge site with remains from the earliest period of Egyptian history to Graeco-Roman era. Thanks to the generosity of his friend Marius de Zayas — a Mexican artist, writer and art gallery owner in New York City — Capart directed three Elkab campaigns in 1937, 1938 and 1945-46; and Belgian Egyptologists continue to excavate there today.

In addition to his fieldwork, public lectures and Museums directorship, Capart was the prolific author or editor of some 800 publications about ancient Egypt, from children's stories to scholarly tomes, his favorite subject being art. His most famous books include: *Les Débuts de l'Art en Égypte* (1903-4); *L'art égyptien* (1909-11), two volumes; *L'Art égyptien: études et histoire* (1924-48), three volumes; *Thèbes: La gloire d'un Grand Passé* (1925); *Documents pour servir à l'étude de l'Art égyptien* (1927-1932); *Memphis à l'ombre des pyramides* (1930); *Le Mesage de la vieille Égypte* (1944); and *Je lis les hiéroglyphes* (1946). Jean Capart once said: "My purpose is to teach others what I have had the joy to know."

Before the end of 2022, the Museums will publish on their website an inventory of Capart's archives and some of his writings. For further information about the father of Belgian Egyptology, consult the numerous articles published by the Belgian Egyptologist Jean-Michel Bruffaerts, scientific collaborator of the Museums, and co-ordinator of the Project Jean Capart to restore, preserve, and digitalize Capart's vast correspondence, manuscripts, excavation reports, drawings, photographs and more. Bruffaerts's biography of Capart will be published in 2023. Capart had ten children by two wives. His oldest grandson, Dominique, is founding president of the Project's Fund, set up in 2016.

Lucy Gordan-Rastelli

