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Carl Werner
Temple of Amun, Karnak, 1865

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CARL WERNER

(Weimar 1808 – Leipzig 1894)

TEMPLE OF AMUN, KARNAK, 1865

Signed and dated lower left: 'C. Werner. f. 1865.'

Pencil, watercolour and gouache on paper
14.5 x 25 cm; 5 3/4 x 9 3/4 in.

Provenance

Private collection, England.

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Werner has written twice on this sheet, once at each lower corner: to the left, 'C. Werner f. 1865', in ink; to the right, 'Carnak d. 23 Febr. 1865', in pencil. The pencil inscription fixes the watercolour to a single day, made during the second, longer of his two Egyptian journeys, begun in 1864 and, on this evidence, still under way in the opening months of the following year. A watercolour of the Temple of Isis at Philae, also by Werner, is dated 21 January 1865.¹ If the two sheets belong to the same journey, they suggest movement north along the Nile through January and February, from Philae and the First Cataract to Thebes within roughly a month. What Werner recorded at Karnak that day was not the temple itself but its edge: two sphinxes at rest on open ground before the pylon, the temple proper held back in the middle distance.



Carl Werner, *View of the Temple of Isis at Philae, 1865*,
National Museum, Warsaw (Rys.Nm.XIX 1628). © Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie.

¹ This watercolour of the Temple of Isis at Philae, also by Werner, is dated by inscription 21 January 1865 (signed 'C. Werner. Philae. 21 Jan. 1865', lower left) and held in the National Museum, Warsaw, accession number Rys.Nm.XIX 1628. Formerly in the Silesian Museum of Fine Arts, Wrocław, it was transferred to Warsaw in 1946 from the repository at Kamieniec Ząbkowicki. Source: National Museum in Warsaw, via Wikimedia Commons.

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Amun's cult at Karnak had stood at the centre of Theban religious life since the Middle Kingdom, its precinct enlarged by successive pharaohs until it became one of the largest religious complexes ever built. The approach to its first pylon was lined with an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes, criosphinxes, a term taken from the Greek, known in Egyptian as the Way of the Rams. Historically, each sphinx along this avenue sheltered a standing figure of the king between its forelegs, identified elsewhere by cartouche as Ramesses II, so that the same monument carried both the god's protection and the pharaoh's legitimacy.² This is a fact about the avenue as an archaeological ensemble rather than a detail visible in Werner's watercolour: on the second sphinx here, no such figure is legible between the forelegs, whether through erosion, damage, or simply the wear of centuries by the time Werner sat before it. The avenue itself was already well over a thousand years old by 1865, a span roughly equal to the distance between the Roman Empire and the present day.

That avenue was built for a procession, not for display alone. Once a year, during the Opet Festival, the cult images of Amun, his consort Mut and their son Khonsu left the innermost sanctuary at Karnak, normally closed to all but priests and the king, and travelled to Luxor Temple in ceremonial barques, carried by priests along the processional way or rowed on the river according to the period. The festival lasted around eleven days under Hatshepsut and Thutmose III and grew to nearly a month by the Ramesside period, and it was one of the rare occasions when ordinary Thebans could gather to see the god pass, seek oracular judgement from the moving barque, and witness the king's authority publicly renewed through his presence beside Amun.³ The sphinxes before the first pylon belonged to this same ritual landscape: not ornament, but architecture built to be passed by a god once a year and watched by the crowds who gathered for it.

Werner has set his two sphinxes in the foreground of the sheet, close to the viewer. The nearer is the criosphinx, its ram's horns curled tight against a heavy, weathered head, the stone mottled in browns and ochres making it challenging, at a glance, to separate carved surface from the ground beneath it. Behind and slightly apart sits the second figure, human-headed and crowned with the royal nemes, paler in colour and more upright in bearing. Around them Werner scatters the ordinary matter of the site: loose blocks, a low dark stone near the lower edge of the sheet, grass pushing up through sand. Further back, low ruins sit half-sunk into rising ground on the left, and on the right a single figure leads an animal across the plain toward pale hills. None of it is arranged for effect. It reads as if Werner sat there for an hour or two and set down what he found.

²On the avenue of criosphinxes at Karnak and its dedication to Amun, see Blyth, *Karnak: Evolution of a Temple*. The identification of the royal figure sheltered between the sphinxes' forelegs as Ramesses II, by cartouche, refers to the avenue as an archaeological ensemble and is not a detail legible in this particular watercolour.

³On the Opet Festival and the processional route between Karnak and Luxor Temple, see Bell, 'The New Kingdom Divine Temple: The Example of Luxor', pp. 127–184.

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The sheet is worked in pencil, watercolour and gouache, a combination that suits the subject. Pencil underdrawing gives the sphinxes their contour and the ruins their architecture; watercolour carries the broad washes of sand and sky; gouache, opaque where the transparent medium alone would not hold, picks out the paler stone of the human-headed sphinx and the small figures in the middle distance, giving them just enough solidity to register against the surrounding wash. It is a working method suited to speed as much as finish, consistent with a sheet made in a single sitting rather than reworked later in the studio.

The watercolour sits at some distance from Werner's large oil of Abu Simbel, painted the previous year, where the colossi of Ramesses rise in steep foreshortening and the sky is reduced to a shard of light above them. At Karnak there is no single climax to organise the view around. The sphinxes are worn rather than commanding, their outlines softened by weathering until they read almost as part of the terrain, and the temple recedes rather than dominates.

Werner was born in Weimar in 1808 and trained at the Leipzig Academy, receiving a Saxon travel grant in 1832 that took him to Italy, where he remained for nearly two decades, chiefly in Rome, before settling in Venice in 1851.⁴ Travels through Spain in 1856 and 1857 turned his attention further east, and he visited Palestine and Egypt in 1862, returning in 1864 for the longer journey that carried him beyond the First Cataract into Nubia and, as this sheet shows, back down the Nile into the early weeks of 1865.

Karnak was never buried in the way Abu Simbel was. Napoleon's scholars had already measured and drawn its ruins for the *Description de l'Égypte* decades before Werner arrived. The site was a fixture of the Nile itinerary by the 1860s, visited and sketched by a steady influx of travellers even as Nubia's temples lay largely under sand. Werner's sheet belongs to that longer, quieter history of looking: not a discovery, but a return, made on an ordinary morning to a place that had never entirely gone away.

⁴The frequently repeated claim that Werner studied under Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld in Leipzig lacks independent corroboration and has been omitted here.

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