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Carl Werner
At The Temple of Abu Simbel, c. 1860

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CARL WERNER

(Weimar 1808 – Leipzig 1894)

AT THE TEMPLE OF ABU SIMBEL, c. 1860

Signed lower left: 'Carl. Werner. f'

Oil on canvas

190 x 122 cm; 74 3/4 x 48 in.

Provenance

Antiques and Modern Sale, Kunstauktionshaus Schloss Ahlden GmbH, Ahlden, Germany, May 2000, Lot. 2213;
Private Collection, Spain.

Exhibitions

Royal Academy of Arts in London, in 1877, Dictionary of Contributors and their work from its foundation in 1769 to 1904, Vol. VIII, p. 211.

De Delacroix A Kandinsky, L'orientalisme En Europe:

Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique (15.10.2010 – 09.01.2011)

Kunsthalle der Hypo-Kulturstiftung München (28.01.2011 – 01.05.2011)

Musées des Beaux-Arts de Marseille (27.05.2011 – 28.08.2011)

(Réunion des Musées Nationaux de France, mm).

Publications

Du Maroc aux Indes Voyages en Orient aux XVIIIe et XIXe siècles, Lynne Thornton, Courbevoie, ACR Editions, 1998, p. 425.

Les orientalistes de l'école allemande et autrichienne, Martina Haja and Günther Wimmer, ACR Edition, 2000, p. 171.

De Delacroix à Kandinsky: L'orientalisme en Europe, Odile Cavalier, Hazan, 2010, p. 235.

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Abu Simbel is a monumental rock-carved temple complex built by Pharaoh Ramesses II (c. 1303–1213 B.C.) on the west bank of the Nile in southern Nubia, a declaration of pharaonic power at the southernmost boundary of the Egyptian empire. Its massive façade is decorated with four seated colossi of the Pharaoh, each measuring almost twenty meters. A smaller adjacent temple is dedicated to his wife, Nefertari (c. 1295–1255 B.C.), and to the goddess Hathor, deity of love, fertility and motherhood.

Werner's composition is strikingly foreshortened: the colossi of Ramesses II rise as an imposing mass, towering above both the diminutive human figures in the foreground and the viewer of the painting itself. Beside the immense statues is a portal surmounted by a niche containing a representation of the falcon-headed sun god Re-Horakhty. Below, at the base of the colossi, the human world asserts itself in miniature.

In the immediate foreground, fallen masonry, some of it elaborately decorated, speaks to the site's long abandonment before its nineteenth-century rediscovery. The human figures are difficult to discern at first, dwarfed by the monument's scale. Several wear the red-tasselled fez, suggesting local guides; one, positioned mid-ground, appears to exchange something with a figure stationed at the base of Ramesses' colossal foot. Two foreground figures accompanied by a dog engage with a guide in a scarlet tunic; their turbans with aigrettes give them an exotic air that makes their origin difficult to determine with certainty. They may be European travellers who have adopted local dress, or figures of Ottoman origin. At the portal of the temple, its stone frame carved with hieroglyphics, a white-clad figure holds a lamp, poised at the threshold between the blazing exterior and the darkness within.

Werner's handling of the stone is remarkable. The sandstone of the façade is warm and golden, yet degraded and bleached in places by centuries of exposure, the surfaces of the colossi are almost baked by the Egyptian sun. The compositional foreshortening is highly effective, emphasising the monument's immense scale while creating a strong sense of verticality. Only a small patch of blue sky is visible in the upper right corner of the canvas; one has to look very high up to see it, and its modest size underscores the monument's dominance. The effect borders on claustrophobia: the colossi do not merely fill the canvas; they overwhelm it.

The rediscovery of Abu Simbel is one of the most improbable stories in the history of archaeology. In 1813, the Swiss scholar and explorer Johann Ludwig Burckhardt (1784-1817), renowned for identifying the ancient city of Petra, was travelling south through Nubia when he noticed the tops of four colossal stone heads protruding from the sand on the west bank of the Nile.¹ Beneath these heads, unseen by Burckhardt,

¹ Ansorge, Catherine. "STUDY AND TRAVEL; JOHN LEWIS BURCKHARDT'S REMARKABLE JOURNEY TRACED THROUGH ARCHIVES AND MANUSCRIPTS IN CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY." *Transactions of the Cambridge Bibliographical Society* 16, no. 3 (2018): 455–86.
<https://www-jstor-org.lonlib.idm.oclc.org/stable/26806720>.

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was the temple built to honour Ramesses and on the same site was a smaller temple honouring the memory of Nefertari. The entrance to the temple was buried too deeply for him to clear alone, but he noted the finding and communicated it to a man far better suited to the physical challenge: Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778-1823).²



The Great Belzoni, 1824 by Jan Adam Jansz Kruseman (1804-1862)

Oil on canvas, 85 x 74.7 cm

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge Acc.no. P.D. 1-2019

² Mayes, Stanley, *The Great Belzoni: The Circus Strongman who Discovered Egypt's Treasures*, London: I.B. Tauris & Co., 2008.

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The incongruity of Belzoni is striking. Born in Padua in 1778 and trained as a hydraulic engineer, he had spent years in London performing feats of strength at Sadler's Wells theatre, a giant of a man, six feet seven inches tall, who had arrived in Egypt originally to sell an irrigation device to the Pasha. It did not work. What followed instead was one of the most extraordinary careers in the history of Egyptian exploration. On 1 August 1817, after clearing an immense quantity of sand from the entrance, Belzoni crossed the threshold of the Great Temple: almost certainly the first person to do so in a thousand years.

The sensation this produced in Europe was all the greater for coming in the shadow of Napoleon's Egyptian campaign of 1798–1801, that vast state-sponsored scientific endeavour. For all that institutional ambition, it was a Paduan strongman who had been performing on a London stage who first walked into the innermost sanctuary of Abu Simbel. The rediscovery of Abu Simbel unfolded within a broader cultural moment of intense European fascination with ancient Egypt. Napoleon's Egyptian campaign, and the monumental *Description de l'Égypte* published in its wake, had ignited an appetite for Egyptian art and culture that rapidly permeated architecture, the decorative arts, jewellery and painting across Europe. Belzoni was far from alone in recognising the opportunity: a generation of travellers and excavators assembled Egyptian collections for the great institutions of Europe: the Louvre, Museo Egizio in Turin and the British Museum among them, bringing obelisks, sarcophagi, papyri and sculpture within reach of artists and scholars who would never make the journey themselves. Many painters drew on these collections directly, conjuring an Egypt of the imagination from artefacts in European galleries. Werner belonged to a smaller and more serious company: those who travelled to Egypt itself, stood before the actual monuments, and painted what they saw.

An instructive comparison can be drawn between the approaches of David Roberts (1796–1864) and Carl Werner to the same site, one that reveals not only two distinct artistic temperaments but two different moments in the unearthing of Abu Simbel. When Roberts visited in 1838, the Great Temple was still a half-buried romantic ruin: only the upper torsos and heads of the colossi of Ramesses II emerged from the drifting sand, their lower portions consumed by the desert. By the time Werner arrived, some two decades later, systematic excavation had proceeded further, exposing more of the façade's architectural detail and permitting a compositional perspective that Roberts could not have attempted.

Yet the difference between the two painters is more than archaeological. Roberts, formed by years of travel in Spain and deeply responsive to the Islamic architecture of Andalusia, characteristically situates his subjects within their landscape. His view of Abu Simbel from the Nile, in which his own *dahabiya* appears in the foreground to provide a human sense of scale, places the temple within a broader natural context, making it one element among many in a legible world. His other views, whether of the exterior façade or the corridor-like interior spaces beyond the portal, share this quality of observation: composed, measured, the monument held at a considered distance.

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The Temple of Abu Simbel 1846-49, by David Roberts, R.A. (1796-1864)
Lithography by Louis Haghe (1806-85) and published by E.G. Moon, from *Views of the Holy Land*.
Colour lithograph.
Image ID 2006AU3961
V&A London

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Werner's formation was altogether different. Nearly twenty years spent in Italy, and above all in Rome, had attuned his eye to a different order of antiquity, the crushing weight of imperial monuments, the way Roman architecture asserts itself not in dialogue with its surroundings but in dominance over them. It is this sensibility, one might argue, that Werner brings to Abu Simbel.³ Where Roberts places the temple within nature, Werner allows it to overwhelm nature entirely. The architecture is not observed; it is experienced as an absolute force, indifferent to the landscape, the sky, and to the small human figures gathered at its feet. That Werner had also spent years in Rome, another cradle of civilisation, another empire that had built in stone to last for eternity, makes his response to Ramesses' monument feel less like a tourist's encounter and more like a reckoning between two worlds of comparable grandeur.

Born in Weimar in 1808 and trained at the Leipzig Academy,⁴ Werner received his Saxon travel grant in 1832 and set out for Italy, carrying with him, on a visit to his birthplace before departure, the blessing of none other than the poet Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832) himself, who reviewed his portfolio fourteen days before his death and declared: "Anyone who has such passports can confidently travel to Italy."⁵

Werner spent the greater part of nearly twenty years in Rome, where he became the first president of the German Artists' Association in 1835, producing studies of the city and its surroundings throughout the 1840s. In 1851, he moved to Venice, establishing a studio there before making connections in London, where he exhibited at the Royal Academy and became a member of the Institute of Painters in Watercolours. His Spanish travels of 1856–57, which included a precise study of the Alhambra, awakened in him a longing for the Orient. He visited Palestine and Egypt in 1862 and returned to Egypt in 1864, penetrating beyond the First Cataract into Nubia and visiting the great monuments of Upper Egypt, including Abu Simbel. It was almost certainly on this second journey that the present painting was made. Above all an architectural painter, Werner brought to each destination the same disciplined eye: always attentive to how civilisations build, how stone carries light, how architecture embodies power.

In 1817, the same year that Belzoni crossed the threshold of the Great Temple at Abu Simbel, news reached London of his removal of a colossal fragment of Ramesses II, the Younger Memnon, from the Ramesseum at Thebes. The atmosphere of intense

³ The idea that an artist's visual formation shapes not merely their compositional habits but their fundamental perception of a subject is explored in the field of neuroarthistory, associated particularly with the work of John Onians. See his *Neuroarthistory: From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki* (Yale University Press, 2007).

⁴ Werner, Karl or Carl Friedrich Heinrich." *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*. 31 Oct. 2011.

⁵ Hermann Arthur Lieber (1897). "[Werner, Karl Friedrich Heinrich](#)". *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (in German). Vol. 42. Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot. pp. 61–63.

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public excitement generated by Belzoni's Egyptian discoveries inspired the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) to write his celebrated sonnet *Ozymandias*, the Greek name for Ramesses II, published in January 1818. Shelley's poem is a meditation on the vanity of rulers and the inexorable power of time to humble even the greatest monuments of human ambition.⁶ Shelley's traveller, encountering "two vast and trunkless legs of stone" and "a half-sunk, shattered visage in the desert [sic] sand", might almost have been describing the scene at Abu Simbel itself, where Burckhardt had glimpsed the heads of the colossi protruding from the dunes in 1813, and Roberts had painted them still half-consumed in 1838. For Shelley, as for those early visitors, the lesson of Ramesses seemed clear: that time defeats all ambition, however monumental its declaration.

Werner's painting proposes a different conclusion entirely. By 1864, when he stood before the cleared façade and committed it to canvas, the sand had relinquished its hold, and what it revealed was not ruin but glory. The desert had not defeated the monument; it had preserved it, concealed it and held it in waiting. The colossi of Ramesses II, baked by the Egyptian sun and worn by three millennia of exposure, still rose with overwhelming force above the small human figures gathered at their feet, still reduced the sky to a shard of light at its apex, still did precisely what Ramesses had built them to do. Werner's painting is *Ozymandias* answered: the king who commanded the world to look on his works and despair was, it turned out, shielded and vindicated by nature itself.

⁶ The sonnet can be accessed in full with scholarly footnotes at Representative Poetry Online (RPO) <https://rpo.library.utoronto.ca/content/ozymandias-0>

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