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Carl Werner

*A Doorway leading from the Court of the Temple of Isis to the
small Temple called the Bed of the Pharaohs, Island of
Philae, Egypt, 1867*

C. Werner. f. 1867

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CARL WERNER

(Weimar 1808 – Leipzig 1894)

*A DOORWAY LEADING FROM THE COURT OF THE TEMPLE OF ISIS TO THE
SMALL TEMPLE CALLED THE BED OF THE PHARAOHS, ISLAND OF PHILAE,
EGYPT, 1867*

Signed and dated lower right: 'C. Werner. f. 1867.'

Pencil, watercolour and bodycolour on card
53.5 x 39 cm: 21 x 15 1/2 in.

Provenance

W. Edmund Sibeth Esq.; sale, Christie's, 29 March 1884, Lot.123 (71 gns. to Volker);
Volker Collection;
19th Century Continental Pictures, Watercolours and Drawings, Christie's London, November 1997,
Lot. 262.

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Werner signed and dated this sheet 1867, lower right, giving only a year, no place and no day. That is worth noting by contrast: his Karnak sheet of 1865 is inscribed with a place and a specific date, 'Carnak, 23 Febr 65', written in front of the object, and the same is true of a related Philae watercolour of 21 January 1865¹. This sheet carries neither. Werner's last documented journey to Egypt was in 1864, extending into the early months of 1865, and there is no record of a further visit in 1867; one dealer's account of his practice notes explicitly that he brought back "detailed sketches for his future compositions" from that journey, implying that later exhibited works were routinely built up in the studio rather than made on site.² The likeliest account of this sheet, then, is that it is a studio composition of 1867, worked up two years after Werner had left Egypt, from sketches made during the 1864–1865 journey rather than from a fresh sighting of the doorway itself.

The picture nonetheless carries a title precise enough to double as a set of directions: not simply a doorway at Philae, but the specific passage leading from the court of the Temple of Isis toward the small kiosk that local guides called the Bed of the Pharaohs, and which is generally known today, from the reliefs inside it, as the Kiosk of Trajan.

The Temple of Isis at Philae was among the last works of pharaonic religious architecture, begun under Nectanebo I in the fourth century BC and enlarged for close to seven centuries by Ptolemaic and then Roman rulers, down to a triumphal gate built under Diocletian around AD 298. Throughout, successive rulers continued to have themselves depicted in the temple's reliefs in the traditional guise of pharaoh making offerings to Isis, Osiris and Horus. Its first pylon, the grand gateway into the temple's outer court, carries a winged solar disk above the entrance and registers of relief showing Isis, Horus and Hathor receiving offerings from successive kings.³ Werner's doorway belongs to this same decorative language, though which specific gateway within the precinct he has painted, and which goddess appears in the relief visible at the left of the composition, would need checking against the sheet itself rather than assumed from the general iconography of the site.

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

²On Werner's practice of working up finished exhibition pieces from sketches made on his 1864 journey, see Darnley Fine Art, 'The Wailing Wall, Jerusalem' (darnleyfineart.com), which states that on his return from Egypt in 1864 he also visited Jaffa, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Hebron, Beirut and Damascus, 'taking detailed sketches for his future compositions'. This is a dealer's account rather than a scholarly source, and is cited here only to support the inference that this sheet is a studio composition rather than an on-site record; it should ideally be corroborated further.

³On the Temple of Isis at Philae, its Ptolemaic and Roman phases, and the iconography of its first pylon, see Arnold, Dieter, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*, Oxford University Press, 1999. Reliefs of Isis, Horus and Hathor together are a recurring feature of the temple's decoration, so the identification of a specific goddess relief in this watercolour, whether Isis or Hathor, would benefit from closer inspection of the sheet itself rather than reliance on general iconographic likelihood.

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The building the doorway looks toward, the Bed of the Pharaohs, is one of the more curious structures at Philae: a rectangular, roofless hall ringed by columns with richly carved floral capitals, begun under Augustus or Trajan and never finished, its screen walls between the columns carved on only two sides. Its function is generally thought to have been ceremonial, sheltering the barque of Isis at its landing stage on the riverbank, and its unfinished, half-carved state made it a favourite subject for nineteenth-century painters and photographers working at Philae, prized as much for its picturesque incompleteness as for its antiquity.⁴ Werner does not show the kiosk itself here; he shows the threshold that looks toward it, the approach rather than the destination.

The doorway is carved along both jambs and across the lintel, its relief work stacked in bands from the winged disk at the top down to ground level. A standing goddess figure, upright and crowned, is cut into the wall at the left, her outline still sharp where the surrounding stone has begun to wear more heavily. Looking through the opening, the passage narrows toward a further run of columns before the view gives out into a soft distance where a single palm is just visible against the haze. Werner has not tried to make every hieroglyph individually legible; at this distance and in this light the carving registers mostly as texture rather than as writing, brightness catching some sections of wall while leaving others in a duller, flatter shade, so that parts of the stone look freshly cut and others look considerably older than they are.

At the base of the doorway a small group of local figures rest in the shade the passage throws: a seated woman, two men, a bare-chested youth, a child close by. A single figure in pale robes has already gone through, walking away from the viewer down the passage, small against the scale of the masonry. None of them is doing anything in particular. They give the doorway a unit of scale and a sense of ordinary use, a threshold people actually pass through rather than a ruin held apart for looking at.

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 1851.⁵ 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. This composition evidently held his attention beyond a single sheet: a second version, dated 1873, was exhibited in London six years after this one

⁴On the Kiosk of Trajan, known locally as the Bed of the Pharaohs, its unfinished decoration and probable function sheltering the barque of Isis, see Arnold, *Temples of the Last Pharaohs*.

⁵On Werner's biography and the chronology of his Egyptian travels, see Werner, Karl or Carl Friedrich Heinrich, in *Benezit Dictionary of Artists*, Oxford University Press, published online 31 October 2011. As with the Karnak sheet, the frequently repeated claim that Werner studied under Julius Schnorr von Carolsfeld in Leipzig lacks independent corroboration and has been omitted.

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was painted⁶, evidence of a subject he returned to rather than one he painted once and set aside.

The doorway is a modest subject for a painter capable of the scale and drama of Abu Simbel or the sunlit distances of Karnak, and that is very much the point of it. It asks to be read as a passage rather than a monument, a place where the temple's carved authority and the ordinary business of sitting in the shade briefly share the same threshold.

⁶A second version of this composition, dated 1873, was exhibited in London at the Institute of Painters in Watercolours, 1873, no. 34, and is reproduced in de Meulenaere, Herman (text), compiled by Patrick and Viviane Berko, *Ancient Egypt in Nineteenth Century Painting*, Berko, Brussels, 1992, p. 70.

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