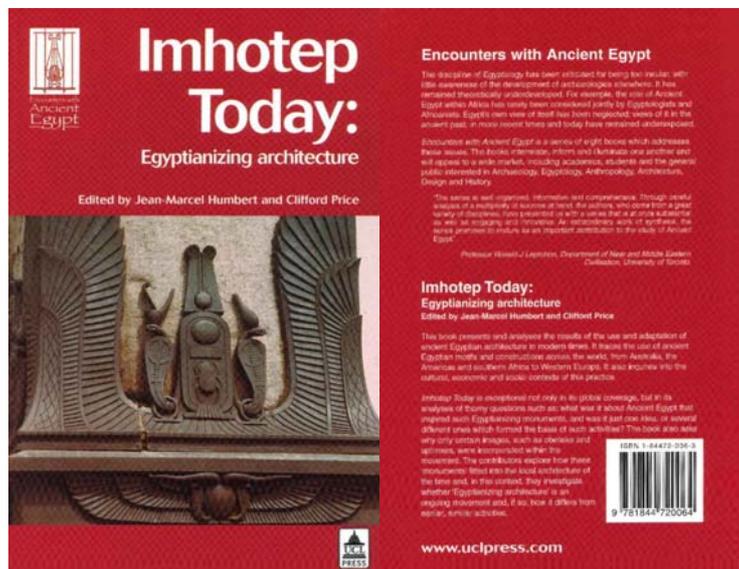


**Humbert, J.M. & C.A. Price. Eds. 2003. Imhotep today: Egyptianizing architecture. - London, UCL Press
(Encounters with ancient Egypt)**

Book review by S.M. van Roode



Recently, I wandered through Brussels with friends. On our way we passed the modern buildings of the European Parliament, huge constructions of steel and glass. In this futuristic architecture, one detail struck me in particular: above a doorway, a highly stylized cavetto ornament of stainless steel was placed. Although the motif was rendered in a minimalistic way, the ornament itself was clearly recognizable as an Egyptianizing element, even for my friends, neither of which is an Egyptologist. Why is an architectural element of over 5000 years of age still included in obviously modern buildings? The organic architecture it represents has lost its original function the moment it became stylized in stone for the first time, but its derivation is still being used even today. The book 'Imhotep Today: Egyptianizing architecture' discusses the use of Egyptianizing elements in architecture around the world. The book is a volume in the series 'Encounters with Ancient Egypt' and is edited by Jean-Marcel Humbert and Clifford Price.

In general, the various authors present Egyptianizing art and architecture dating from mainly the period between 1800-1940. In this period, adding Egyptian details to constructions or even modelling them upon ancient Egyptian examples, was both done to have the onlookers marvel at the exotic display, and at the same time to show one's own interest in this ancient culture and the wisdom it stood for. During the main period of Art Deco, ancient Egypt was quite fashionable and its stylized motifs fitted in very well in the decorative preferences of the time.

The symbol of ancient Egypt is the pyramid. The first author, Jean-Marcel Humbert, presents an essay about Egyptianizing pyramids from the 18th to the 20th century. Pointing out that the shape of the Egyptian pyramid is one of the most difficult shapes to faithfully imitate, he takes us past garden pyramids and funerary pyramids to pyramids that have been erected as a monument themselves. Next, Helen Whitehouse explores the relation between archaeology and art in 19th century painting. Faithful renderings of monuments and sites were produced by artists that actually visited the country, for example Vivant Denon in the trail of Napoleon's expedition. The exotic aura surrounding Egypt also saw the rise of Orientalistic paintings; starting from a certain archaeological knowledge that allowed them to include monuments or details of long-lost palaces, artists could include more eroticism in their works concerning the Orient than in their normal work. Whitehouse not only notes these obvious comments, but also explains how Egyptian art was seen in comparison with Greek art, and how the Egyptianizing paintings can be seen against, for example, a Biblical and theatrical background. The same author continues with the enjoyable chapter 'Egypt in the snow'. The chapter not only describes the Egyptianizing elements in St Petersburg, but also shows a photograph of a sphinx originally belonging to Amenophis III, now covered in snow. Alex Werner takes us to 19th century London to enjoy the private en public displays, after which Chris Elliott, Katherine Griffis-Greenberg and Richard Lunn show the reader entertainment and commerce in 20th century London. Together, these two chapters encompass nearly everything Egyptians brought to London and the way of displaying it, featuring Seth with a power drill and of course the history of Harrods. Then Marie-Stephanie Delamaire discussed the 19th century world exhibitions. The huge success of the exhibitions is illustrative for the rising interest in ancient Egypt and, according to the author, the birth of

American Egyptology took place in this period. Richard Fazzini and Mary McKercher continue with their chapter concerning Egyptomania and American architecture. They discuss associational symbolism and the symbolism of public monuments, and take the chapter to a higher level than just a catalogue of Egyptianizing elements in American architecture. Colin Hope then shifts the focus to Australia in his chapter on ancient Egypt in Melbourne and the State of Victoria. In this chapter it is explained how even this remote part of the world became influenced by Egyptianizing elements. Obviously, a book like this has to comprise Egyptianizing elements in Paris, of which there are many. Cathie Bryan sets these Egyptianizing elements against the historical background of the Napoleon expedition.

The masonic use of Egyptian culture is next. Notably, the use of Egypt-inspired architecture by masons is very well-known, yet had moved on by the time the tomb of Tutanchamun was discovered, when Egyptomania was fuelled even further in the rest of the world. Chapters on Neo-Egyptian garden ornaments in Florence and Egyptianizing motifs in art and architecture in Brazil and South Africa illustrate even more the worldwide influence that Egyptian culture had. The last chapter is dedicated to Egyptomania in Egypt: the new bibliotheca Alexandrina. This interesting article deals with the new library from several angles and is a fitting capstone on this collection of papers.

The book is far more than a catalogue of Egyptian influences throughout the world. The articles shed light on the political and cultural backgrounds, discusses the values attached to specific Egyptian symbols and elements and are in all a very enjoyable read. The illustrations are of varying quality; some are unclear and dark, others, such as the photograph of a staircase in a college building, are stunning.

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