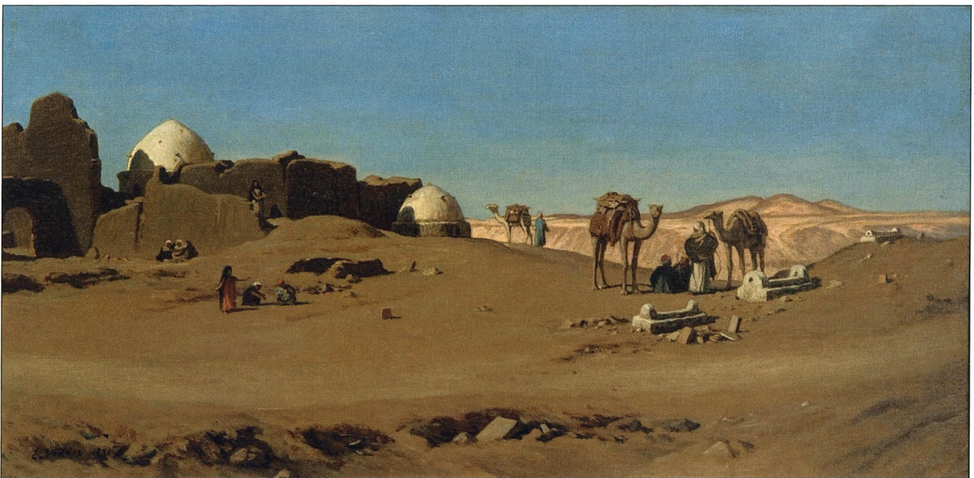
Vedder in Egypt

by Gail Leggio

Elihu Vedder (1836–1923) is one of the most intriguing American artists of his era. A lively presence among the bohemians of New York City, he traveled extensively and ended as an expatriate, living for fifty years in Rome. He painted enigmatic images that are routinely included in surveys of international Symbolism. His best-known work is his 1884 illustrated edition of Edward FitzGerald's magnificent version of the Persian *Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám*—with its poetic fatalism, one of the principal documents of the West's fascination with Eastern thought. He contributed to the American Renaissance with his allegorical decorative schemes: *Rome or the Art Idea* (1894) at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art, designed by McKim, Mead & White; murals and a striking mosaic, *Minerva* (1874), at the Library of Congress. His Italian landscapes show another aspect of his style. Based in Florence from 1857 through 1860, he worked alongside the Macchiaioli, plein air realists whose dappled paint and unassuming rural subjects have a modern feel. Vedder brought this same fresh and spontaneous approach to the Egyptian landscape during his Nile journey of 1889–90. "Elihu Vedder: Voyage on the Nile," now at the Hudson River Museum, focuses on that trip. It's a compact exhibition, with some forty works, but illuminating, opening a window on a previously neglected aspect of Vedder's career and into the phenomenon of Egyptomania in nineteenth-century America.

One of Vedder's first big successes, painted in New York City decades before he would actually visit Egypt, was *The Questioner of the Sphinx* (1863).



Egyptian Landscape, 1891
PHOENIX ART MUSEUM

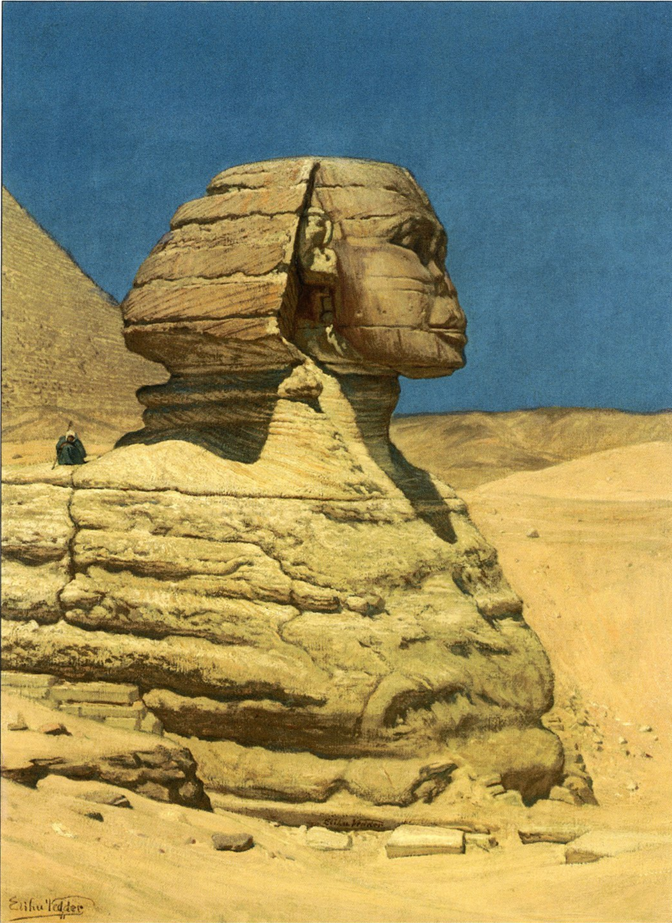
It caused a sensation when it was first exhibited at the National Academy of Design, and Vedder produced a number of versions, including one from 1875 that is the starting point of this exhibition. *The Questioner of the Sphinx* was perfectly in tune with the Egyptian craze, and the authors of the excellent catalogue essays—Linda Ferber, Senior Art Historian and Museum Director Emerita, New-York Historical Society, Egyptologist Floyd Lattin and Laura Vookles, Chief Curator of the Hudson River Museum—describe a number of other significant manifestations of this trend.[1] Vedder probably drew on the limestone royal portraits, quite different from the Giza monument, in the collection of Dr. Henry Abbott, which was on exhibit at various venues in New York City beginning in 1853, including the New-York Historical Society. Among other examples of Gotham's Egyptian taste were the original New York City Halls of Justice and House of Detention (still familiarly known as "The Tombs"), from 1836–38, and the Croton Reservoir (1837–1900). Brooklyn's Green-Wood Cemetery featured mausoleums that reflected the notion that Neo-Egyptian was the appropriate style for funerary structures, the way Gothic was suited to churches and colleges, and classical temples and basilicas were favored for government edifices.

Egyptian Revival, based on the most ancient sources of any of the historicist styles then in vogue, also came with a long tradition of esoteric lore. Vedder's painting combines archaeological interest and arcane imagination. The artist takes a number of liberties with the famous monument. His Sphinx is less eroded than the Giza statue, with most of its elaborate headdress intact. He shows it half-buried in sand, although excavations had already freed the figure from the encroaching dunes. At least one contemporary critic objected to the scale, since Vedder's figure seems considerably smaller than the Giza one. Still, as Joshua Taylor remarks in an important 1979 essay, it "is large enough to create a contrast that transforms an otherwise literal work into a nagging and evocative image."[2] Many artists conflated the royal monument in Egypt with the classical legend of Oedipus, who dared to answer the riddle of the Sphinx. Vedder replaces Oedipus with the more archaeologically familiar figure of an Arab. A few discreet bones and a half-buried skull allude to the traditional fate of humans unlucky enough to challenge the Sphinx and then fail to answer her question. The Sphinx of legend is a beautiful female monster, steeped in wisdom. In Vedder's picture, the old, emaciated Arab has become the questioner, but his desire to understand the secret of antiquity goes unsatisfied. The Sphinx's power—to enlighten or devour—seems to have waned with time. Vedder pulls off a neat balancing act, retaining an atmosphere of ancient mystery while making the scene true enough to contemporary reality that his friend, the intrepid traveler Amelia Edwards, felt comfortable including an engraving of the work in her guide *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* (1877). A second edition of the book (1890) appears in the exhibition.

Fin-de-siècle writers and artists were obsessed with the legendary aspect

of the creature, hymned by Oscar Wilde in his poem "The Sphinx" for her "curved archaic smile"—in the mode of Walter Pater's paean to the *Mona Lisa*—and "monstrous miracles." Gustave Moreau painted a number of versions—all glamorous, bejeweled and very feminine sphinxes, often amorously entangled with Oedipus. Fernand Khnopff's *The Sphinx* (also known as *Art* or *The Caresses*, 1896), with its elegant leopard-bodied enchantress, is drenched in eroticism. One of the most ambitious iterations is Jan Toorop's bizarre, epic-scale drawing *The Sphinx* (1892–97), which was recently on view in the exhibition "Vienna 1900: Style and Identity," at New York City's Neue Galerie (February 24–August 8, 2011). Toorop's highly choreographed multi-figure composition includes, among other elements, swans, a vulture, keening maidens like Egyptian tomb mourners and an emaciated dead poet still clutching his lyre. Vedder, in his Symbolist mode, painted a predatory femme fatale in *The Sphinx of the Seashore* (1879–80). In that painting, the Sphinx is a living feline-human hybrid, reclining in lurid sunset light on a beach littered with the debris of civilization. Vedder based the image on a plate from the *Rubáiyát*, entitled "The Inevitable Fate," which he glossed this way: "The all-devouring Sphinx typifies Nature, the Destroyer, eminent above the broken forms of life….in time even man himself must disappear from the face of the earth."[3]

Yet Vedder, unlike some of the more hierophantic European Symbolists, was never completely absorbed into the labyrinth of otherworldly arcana. In his rambling book of autobiographical musings, *Digressions of V* (1910), he explained that he "was not a mystic, or very learned in occult matters," although he liked to "take short flights or wade into the sea of mystery…. it delights me to tamper and potter with the unknowable."[4] Vedder's multi-faceted personality encompassed a variety of styles. When he finally visited Egypt, he went not as an aspiring initiate but as a landscapist, an artist responding to the visual possibilities immediately in front of him. From December 1889 to April 1890, he journeyed up the Nile, mostly on a traditional Egyptian houseboat called a dahabeya, as the guest of businessman George Corliss. He made over 160 drawings and several paintings on the trip and recorded his impressions in a detailed commentary. He may have considered turning this material into a book at some point but never carried through with the idea. With Egypt firmly ensconced in the Grand Tour itinerary by the latter part of the nineteenth century, there were a great many guides and compilations of images already available, including David Roberts's majestic six-volume set of 247 lithographs, *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia, Egypt and Nubia* (1842–49), and the documentary photographs of talented cameramen such as Francis Frith. The tourist camera, too, was on the cusp of dominance. Laura Vookles laments: "This change in travelers' habits led to the demise of the sketchbook as an essential travel accessory." As striking as many of the nineteenth-century photographs are, it is regrettable that amateurs now rarely use drawings as a way to interpret what they see.



The Sphinx, Egypt, 1890
PENNSYLVANIA ACADEMY OF THE FINE ARTS, PHILADELPHIA

For an artist like Vedder, the aim of his Egyptian picture-making was not primarily documentary, as it was for Roberts and Frith. Vedder's images are more personal than public, not souvenir vedute but aesthetic impressions. They suggest James McNeill Whistler's shadow-play etchings of Venice, rather than Canaletto's panoramas of the city. Vedder purposely put off visiting the Sphinx at Giza until the end of his trip. In describing his first sight of the monument, he basks in the sensuous qualities of the scene as much as its aura of legend and antiquity: "I was simply struck dumb….words are vain but the grandeur the strength the ineffable softness and richness of the color tempt one to try to describe that which could only be represented in painting and even that but faintly." The exhibition features a number of Sphinx images that Vedder made in Egypt or finished after returning to Rome, including a profile perdu drawing dated April 18, 1890, and two oils. *The Sphinx* (n.d., Speed Art Museum) shows the colossus rising from behind a sloping foreground dune, with a dark stone half-wall in front of the figure. The artist's vantage point in

The Sphinx, Egypt (1890, Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts) is closer. As in many photographs, a tiny human form—here an Arab crouching on the beast's back—underlines its majestic scale. In both paintings, the viewer is struck by the vivid color contrast: the golden tones of the sand and the monument are electric against the deep azure of the sky, a dynamic intensified by the bold silhouette of the head against the heavens.

Vedder was intoxicated with the Egyptain palette, and his description captures the vibrancy, the clarity and even the temperature of the "bright yellow sand of the Golden Libyan desert streaming down from the heated plateau to the cool of the glimpse of that intensely blue, cloudless far of African Sky." Vedder found the magic of that palette everywhere, even in relatively nondescript clusters of small buildings or scraggly patches of desert scrub. *Aswan, Egyptian Tomb at Moonlight* (oil, 1890), an almost-square canvas, balances dark blue sky against dusty gold earth in near-equal color blocks. The weathered old tomb on the horizon, jutting into the sky, is no more impressive than the massive boulders rearing up out of the sand. A small jackal emerges from the shadow of an imposing rock, establishing scale as neatly as a human figure posed in front of a gargantuan monument.

The artist finds timelessness and an unsettling alien quality everywhere he looks. In *Old Tree on the Way to Tel El Amarna* (oil, 1890–91), the way he handles the paint creates well-worn textures for the sand, the cloud-streaked, hazy sky and the modest structures on the horizon—a tomb and some low walls. At the center of the composition is the wizened yet eloquent form of the tree, with its trunk nearly parallel to the ground and its branches splayed up and out in a bony arabesque. It's a reminder of the strong graphic skills Vedder brought to his work as a decorator and an illustrator. He responded intuitively to what he called the "wonderful flowing lines" of Egyptian scenery. This linear dynamic can be attributed, in part, to his situation: many of the drawings he made on the trip were sketches executed from the deck of the dahabeya. His travelogue, Vookles writes, "was a moving panorama." The exhibition includes a batch of quick sketches of picturesque sailboats (called feluccas), bluffs and palm-tree-lined shores.

Two more elaborate drawings, in oil chalk on blue paper, show his spontaneity in more thoughtfully composed views. *Nile Journey, Sketch #14*, dated March 6, 1890, has a notation pointing to the "Colossus of Memnon and Its Companion" in the distance. The monuments stand with their backs to us, small figures far off on the horizon, less prominent than the clusters of rocks and palm trees in the middle distance. Flowing layers of green, blue and grey create an elemental landscape. The drawing is a respectable exercise by an artist keeping his hand in. *Nile Journey, Kom Ombo, Sketch #27*, dated February 23, 1890, is much stronger: the ruins on the opposite riverbank are crisply outlined, the cloud-streaked sky and reflective water seem fluid and alive, and the reds, blues and tawney greys he employs are persuasively atmospheric. Vedder's on-

Mosque—Cairo
c. 1890
WILLIAM BENTON MUSEUM OF ART, UNIVERSITY OF CONNECTICUT, STORRS

the-fly impression is personal and immediate, very different from traditional vedute such as David Roberts's *Ruins of the Temples of Kom Ombo*, a straight-on, close-up view of massive lotus columns and remnants of painted decoration, jutting up out of the sand in a broken jumble.

Nineteenth-century visitors to Egypt had expectations of encountering two disparate, if geographically consonant, cultures: the ancient world, shaped by the ideas of historians, mythographers and archaeologists, and the contemporary Arab world, which had been thoroughly exoticized by painters such

as Jean-Léon Gérôme. Gérôme's *The Slave Market* (1867) was a touchstone of Orientalist taste, and there were many artists turning out provocative nudes amid the arched spaces of filigreed, blue-tiled interiors. None of this interested Vedder on this trip, although he used nude figures and exotic design motifs freely and eloquently in his other projects, particularly in the *Rubáiyát.* For one reason, Vedder seems to have responded to Egypt by rediscovering his appetite for landscape painting. The human component serves mainly as staffage in his pictures from the journey. His *Egyptian Landscape* (oil, 1891) depicts dark, eroding walls being reclaimed by the desert, with two white domed structures, on the left, picking up the light. Small figures of Bedouins with their camels balance the composition by providing interesting shapes on the right. Vedder's handsome, matter-of-fact view avoids both sensationalism and the kind of ethnographic curiosity that inspired many artists—especially those, like James Tissot, working on Biblical subjects—to travel to the Middle East. But Vedder was undeniably beguiled by the shapes of Islamic architecture. In *Sidi Mahad,* an undated drawing in blue, black and white chalk, he relishes the minaret-and-dome silhouette of the building, and he brings the same elegance to the more ambitious *Mosque—Cairo* (oil, c. 1890). Vedder exploits the formal possibilities to the hilt in this vertical composition, going beyond the picturesque details of striped walls, hanging lamps and turbaned figure. He deftly frames the sun-baked wall and blue sky visible beyond the elaborate screen of arches and skillfully manipulates patterns of light and shadow.

Elihu Vedder's eclectic taste and exuberant mix of styles may make him a difficult artist to pigeonhole, but his skill and originality offer a wealth of pleasures. This appealing show and catalogue, sponsored by the Mr. and Mrs. Raymond J. Horowitz Foundation for the Arts, Inc., reveal yet another aspect of his formidable talent. "Elihu Vedder: Voyage on the Nile" is on view September 24, 2011–January 8, 2012, at the Hudson River Museum, 511 Warburton Avenue, Yonkers, New York 10701. Telephone (914) 963-4550. On the web at www.hrm.org

NOTES

1. Linda Ferber, Floyd Lattin and Laura Vookles, *Elihu Vedder: Voyage on the Nile* (Yonkers, New York: Hudson River Museum, 2011). All citations to this text unless otherwise noted.
2. Joshua Taylor, Jane Dillenberger, Richard Murray, *Perceptions and Evocations: The Art of Elihu Vedder* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1979), p. 60.
3. Cited, *Perceptions*, p. 146.
4. Cited, Abraham A. Davidson, *The Eccentrics and Other American Visionary Painters* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1978), p. 65.