

INFLUENCES OF EGYPT

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Trans-Atlantic Egypt: Egyptian Revival Architecture in Britain & America

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Fig. 1—Print of Egyptian Hall from 1828. Photo by Wikimedia Commons



Egypt in England is available on Amazon.com. For more information, go to visitegyptinengland.co.uk.

The River Thames, as it flows through Oxford, is known as the Isis, and the Mississippi has been called The American Nile. True, the Thames is not the mighty Mississippi, which even has its own Cairo and Karnak around its confluence with the Ohio, in the area of southern Illinois known as Little Egypt, while further south are the American Memphis, in Tennessee, and the city of Belzoni in Mississippi, named after the pioneer Egyptologist, but both rivers suggest something

about the way that our countries have been influenced by ancient Egypt. Both countries also share a heritage of architecture inspired by Ancient Egypt, with much in common, but also significant differences.

Buildings in an Egyptian style are perhaps the most obvious indication of the influence that the civilisation of the pharaohs has had on our own, although it is not always easy to decide what qualifies as an 'Egyptian Style' or 'Egyptian Revival' building. Is every obelisk and pyramid Egyptian? Is an otherwise conventional building

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with Egyptian decoration 'Egyptian'? Are Art Deco buildings Egyptianising? Ultimately, this is a matter of judgment and personal opinion, but it is possible to point to certain elements which are typical of Ancient Egyptian architecture, and the more of these elements that are incorporated into a structure, the more 'Egyptian' it can be considered. From the architecture of temples come the overhanging cavetto cornice, the sloping or battered profile of buildings, pylon entrances, plant form pillars based on palm and papyrus, and decorative elements including half round or torus mouldings, winged solar disks and rearing cobras, engaged statues and hieroglyphic inscriptions. Pyramids and obelisks are quintessentially Egyptian, but obelisks without distinctively Egyptian features or associations are perhaps better considered as neo-Classical monuments.

Egyptian style architecture existed in Europe before the French invasion of Egypt in 1798, and the defeat of that expedition after British victories at the Battles of the Nile and Alexandria, but it was confined to building interiors and landscape architecture, particularly pyramids and obelisks associated with the landscaped English garden. This style of garden spread across Europe, and took its pyramids with it, but did not establish itself in America. The first Egyptian style building exterior in England seems to have been the offices of the Courier newspaper, built around 1804 with Egyptian detailing on the ground floor. The first fully Egyptian style building was the Egyptian Hall in London's Piccadilly, built in 1811-12 (Fig. 1). The earliest Egyptian style structure in America followed not long after, with the gateway of the appropriately named Westminster Cemetery (Piccadilly is in the Westminster area of London) in Baltimore, built in 1815.

Egyptian style buildings are functional structures, but the style in which they are built makes a cultural statement. The obvious question then becomes; what are they saying? One indication of this, and of what Egypt has meant to us, can be found in the types of buildings into

which the Egyptian style has been incorporated. Leaving aside building interiors, which are beyond the scope of this article, and allowing the term 'buildings' to include monuments and other built structures, there is an impressive variety of these, but also a tendency for many of them to fall into common categories. Both the British Isles and the United States have examples of pyramids and obelisks, and cemetery monuments. There are also cinemas and commercial buildings. Rarer, but still significant, are civil engineering structures, particularly those associated with reservoirs and waterworks; private residences; Masonic lodge buildings, and even religious buildings such as churches and synagogues.

Perhaps the greatest contrast between Britain and America in the use of the Egyptian style is in its application to public buildings. America has had prisons, including the original Tombs in New York City (Fig. 2), and Philadelphia County Prison; a police station and customs house in New Orleans and the Virginia

Fig. 2—Photo of The Tombs, New York City. Photo by Wikimedia Commons



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Fig. 3—Image of Sphinx sculpture at Mount Auburn Cemetery. Photo by Wikimedia Commons

Commonwealth Building. In England, apart from a municipal office interior on the Isle of Wight, there is a conspicuous absence of such buildings. Both countries have obelisk monuments to political leaders, but ironically, the Wellington Monument in Somerset, which is three sided rather than a true obelisk, had Egyptian features added to its base later, while the original design for an almost flat topped obelisk for the Washington Monument in Washington, DC, included Egyptian features which were discarded during its equally extended construction. Mount Auburn Cemetery (Fig. 3) has a Sphinx monument to the Union dead designed by Jacob Bigelow, but when an Egyptian style monument to First World War dead was proposed in London in 1920, it was quickly abandoned after a storm of criticism.



Fig. 4—First Presbyterian Church in Sag Harbor Photo Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, NY,52-SAGHA,4-7

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Information on design sources is often frustratingly sparse, but a number of buildings in England are known to have drawn on Vivant Denon's *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*. Sometimes, the similarities between Egyptian style buildings on both sides of the Atlantic are so close as to suggest a direct influence. For example, the Old Whaler's Church in Sag Harbor, NY, before the destruction of its steeple, had similarities to Alexander Thompson's St Vincent Street Free Church in Glasgow (Figs. 4, 5), with its eclectic mix of Indian, Classical and Egyptian elements, and the Landon mausoleum (Fig. 6) in Kensico Cemetery, NY and the Illingworth mausoleum (Fig. 7) in Undercliffe Cemetery in Bradford are both flanked by sphinxes in a highly distinctive Middle Kingdom style.

Given how much of our knowledge of Ancient Egypt has come from its funerary practices it is not surprising that it should be associated with the architecture of monuments, memorials and cemeteries. What is perhaps surprising is that it should be used for such purposes in two countries whose dominant religious culture is Christian. In England, there was certainly criticism in some quarters of the use of architectural styles derived from pagan cultures, including Greece and Rome as well as Egypt, and the influential architectural critic Augustus Welby Pugin championed the Pointed or Gothic style as the most appropriate for a Christian country. However, although Pugin may have been the most articulate and passionate exponent of these views, as well as being highly influential, by the time his *An Apology for the Revival of Christian Architecture in England* appeared in 1843, cemetery buildings in an Egyptian style (in Exeter and Sheffield, and at Highgate and Abney Park [Fig. 8] Cemeteries in London) had already been built, and Egyptian style tombs and mausoleums continued to be erected until elaborate funerary monuments went out of style after the First World War. In America, Egyptian style entrances were constructed for Mount Auburn Cemetery (Fig. 9) in 1831, and between then and 1850



Fig. 5—St. Vincent Street Free Church, Glasgow. Photo by Chris Elliott.



Fig. 6—Landon mausoleum, Kensico Cemetery, NY. Photo by Wikimedia Commons

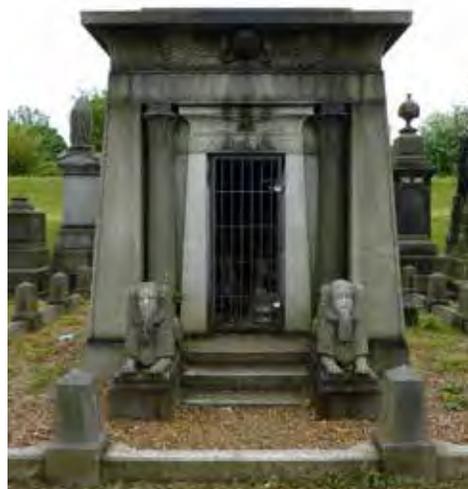


Fig. 7—Illingworth mausoleum, Undercliffe Cemetery, Bradford, UK. Photo by Chris Elliott

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Fig. 8—Abney Park Cemetery, London. Photo by Chris Elliott



Fig. 9—Mount Auburn Cemetery Entrance gate. Photo by Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 10—Carlton Cinema, Essex Road, London. Photo by Chris Elliott

Egyptian style entrances were either designed or built for eleven other cemeteries. Within these and other cemeteries were Egyptian style monuments, including pyramidal ones.

Apart from funerary monuments and cemetery buildings, the most popular application of the Egyptian style has probably been for commercial buildings, including entertainment venues. In England, only a handful of cinemas, of hundreds built between the two world wars, were in the Egyptian style, the finest surviving being the Carlton in Essex Road, London (Fig. 10). In America many more were built, and it has been estimated that at one point there may have been up to one hundred, including the iconic Grauman's Egyptian Theatre in Hollywood and the Egyptian Theatre in DeKalb Illinois (Fig. 11), although only a few now survive. In

Fig. 11—DeKalb Egyptian Theatre. Photo by Andy McMurray, Wikimedia Commons

England there were early examples of Egyptian style façades being added to retail buildings such as the Egyptian House in Penzance, and in 1928 the purpose built Arcadia Works of the cigarette manufacturers Carreras Rothman opened in London, with imposing Egyptian features (Fig. 12), while five years before, in 1923, the Reebie Storage Warehouse (Fig. 13), with its elaborate Egyptian decoration, had been built in Chicago. Use of the Egyptian style continued in England with the 1988 Egyptian style exterior of the Homebase DIY superstore in Warwick Road, London, and in America it has continued with structures such as the 1991 Memphis Pyramid Arena and the 1993 Luxor Hotel in Las Vegas.



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The sheer variety of buildings in an Egyptian style shows how many different associations it can evoke, from the wealth and pomp suggested by cinemas to the centuries defying longevity of pyramids and obelisks and the preservation of the flesh and resurrection of the spirit by Egyptian mummies evoked in monuments and mausoleums. Modern democratic states in particular may feel uneasy about associating themselves with the absolute monarchy of the pharaohs, but in a previous century of empire and expansion, Britain and America had no problem emulating the Caesars, and importing trophy obelisks to grace their cities, and so it is that the twin Needles of Cleopatra have pride of place either side of the Atlantic (Figs. 14, 15), authentic expressions of the Egyptian style in architecture.



Fig. 12—Former Carraras Cigarette Factory London. Photo by Chris Elliott

Fig. 14—Cleopatra's Needle in New York. Photo by Andrea Vladova

Fig. 13—Reebie Storage Warehouse Building, Chicago. Photo by Wikimedia Commons

Fig. 15—Cleopatra's Needle London. Photo by Chris Elliott