

Rediscovering the Past | Inspired by the past | Imagining the past

Archaeological discoveries stimulated the European imagination, inspiring dreams of the ancient past.

The 19th century brought liberation from the old paradigm of ancient Greece and Rome as the epitome of taste, all else dismissed as primitive or degenerate. The senses were stimulated by an intoxicating flow of exciting new ideas. Everyone wanted to show how up to date their knowledge was regarding the new discoveries. Fashionable jewellery and other artistic works with oriental motifs made desirable conversation starters. Artists carefully researched the latest finds to depict scenes from famous stories full of authentic details. In theatre, audiences witnessed Josephin Peladan's Semiramis, rich with Middle Eastern names and costumes. In opera, Giuseppe Verdi entertained sell-out crowds with his Nabucco (short for Nabuchodonosor, king of ancient Babylon). With mass production and the growth of product branding, companies selling chocolate, cigarettes and other popular goods put attractive collecting cards in their packets. Among the images used were ancient kings or famous artefacts.



Working Number: UK 029

Name: Egyptianising plate

Holding Museum: The British Museum

Date: 1804–5

Materials: -

Curator Justification: This Sèvres plate was part of an Egyptian service, with strong Egyptianising motifs and decorated with a copy of a drawing by Dominique Vivant Denon, *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Égypte*, pendant les campagnes du Général Bonaparte (1802). It is said the plate was thrown out of the windows of the Tuileries in Paris during the French Revolution of 1848.



Working Number: TN 090

Name: Chateaubriand at the ruins of Carthage

Holding Museum: Institut Supérieur d'Histoire Contemporaine de la Tunisie

Date: 19th century

Materials: -

Curator Justification: The French poet François René Chateaubriand was fascinated by the city of Dido and its glorious ancient past. He visited Carthage in January 1807. This engraving shows him on a hill facing the sea, surrounded by the ruins. His impressions were recorded in his 1811 book *Journey from Paris to Jerusalem and from Jerusalem to Paris going by Greece, returning by Egypt*.



Working Number: UK 098

Name: Semiramis

Holding Museum: Private collection

Date: 1905

Materials: -

Curator Justification: In 1904, a lavish outdoor performance of Josephin Peladan's Semiramis was staged. The massive set recreated features of the Assyrian palaces discovered by Paul Émile Botta at Khorsabad. The costumes were a mix of Assyrian, Egyptian and fantasy elements.



Working Number: UK 049

Name: Assyrianising pendant

Holding Museum: The British Museum

Date: 1865–1870

Materials: Gold, glass, mosaic

Curator Justification: The winged bulls that once protected the doorways of Assyrian palaces became well-known images in 19th-century Europe. This gold pendant, made in Rome, draws on this popular motif to create a style of jewellery fusing contemporary tastes with fashionable ancient motifs.



Working Number: UK 050

Name: Egyptianising vase

Holding Museum: The British Museum

Date: 1906–1910

Materials: -

Curator Justification: Artisans of the 19th century drew inspiration from their ancient forebears. This elegant glass vase, with stylised lotus leaves and buds decoration, was inspired by an Egyptian faience lotus cup at the British Museum.



Working Number: UK 040

Name: Egyptianising necklace

Holding Museum: The British Museum

Date: c. 1880

Materials: -

Curator Justification: This gold necklace, in the form of cast alternating lotus flowers and buds, illustrates the influence of Egyptian motifs on 19th-century French jewellery. As was typical, this necklace is not derived from an original, but is a more free creation based on pattern books.



Working Number: UK 031

Name: The Babylonian Marriage Market

Holding Museum: The British Museum

Date: 1889

Materials: -

Curator Edwin Long's famous grand painting The Babylonian Marriage Market encapsulates the Victorian fascination with the ancient Near East. It is very well informed by archaeological discoveries, but is also based on a story in Herodotus of Mesopotamian life, laced with Orientalist fantasies.



Working Number: IT2 006

Name: The Virgin at the Nile

Holding Museum: National Gallery of Modern Art (GNAM)

Date: 1865

Materials: Oil on canvas

Curator Federico Faruffini's The Virgin at the Nile shows a scene of sacrifice. In the painting, the artist proposes the integration of two separate contexts through a different pictorial rendering: on the brighter upper part, he sets the historical character and in the lower zone, the more narrative, of obvious academic inspiration. The artist had researched well the customs, traditions and architecture of ancient Egypt.



Working Number: SP 049

Name: Egyptian Landscape

Holding Museum: National Museum of Romanticism

Date: 1883

Materials: Oil on canvas

Curator Carlos de Haes painted this work without ever having visited Egypt. The main theme is based closely on print publications of the Temple of Kom Ombo on the east bank of the Nile Valley. The palm trees and other details were supplied from this imagination.



Working Number: TR2 043

Name: Orient Express Poster

Holding Museum: Ömer M. Koç Collection

Date: 1898

Materials: -

Curator The railways provided easy access for European tourists to visit cities in the Ottoman Empire, and the many archaeological sites. Tourist income became increasingly important to local economies.
