In 1879, only five years before Aby Warburg began his study of art history, history and archaeology in Bonn, the French painter Luc-Olivier Merson (1846-1920) produced his most remarkable work *Le Repos pendant la fuite en Egypte* (Fig. 1). Warburg also followed lectures on religion, which illustrated the eclectic spirit of the age that also resonates throughout the content of Merson’s work.

![Fig. 1: Luc Olivier Merson. (1846–1920), Rest on the Flight into Egypt, 1879, oil on canvas, 71.8 x 128.3 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of George Golding Kennedy.](image)

This paper takes as its starting point the iconographic research method developed by Warburg and further expanded by Panofsky,
although Warburg and Panofsky specifically focused on the influences of classical culture in works of the Renaissance. Nineteenth-century painters also draw on these sources albeit giving them a contemporary twist: pagan sources tended to be far less controversial.

More characteristic of this period is an eclectic mixture of sources; research into the nature of Merson’s sources has not previously been conducted. A sphinx sculpture in the desert as Pharaonic décor gives an innovative flavour to the well-known Bible story. This is first contrasted with the traditional use of sphinxes in painting and for this Biblical episode in particular.¹

Merson’s use of the sphinx and the composition both contributed to the ‘extraordinary success’ of Merson’s concept;² the ‘immediate hit with the public’³ definitively established his reputation as a painter.⁴ In painting, however, as a new visual element, the theme did not prove particularly popular. Art historian Peltre may well have called the sphinx with the holy family a ‘specialised icon’, asserting that the group of figures went about ‘prompting interpretations as various as they were enigmatic’ although little evidence for this statement can be found in painting.⁵ The only other painter to follow Merson in integrating the sphinx motif was the obscure Polish artist Badowski (1857–1903).⁶ The sphinx as a place of slumber assumes

¹ With this content it is not an Orientalist work; the museum of Nice categorizes it as such in their museum text board: “The gallery enables to evoke […] orientalist painting including a Version of ‘Rest in Egypt’ [sic] (1880) by Olivier [sic] Merson”. Also literature presents the piece in this chapter: Jullian 1977, 67; Peltre 1998, 192; Lemaire 2000, 172–173. Yet, that Ribemont isolates it from all oriental (and mythical) paintings of the Salons from 1878 and 79 to explain that Le Repos demanded all views, is concluded from my point of view from a too pro-Merson attitude: Ribemont 2008, 10.
² M. Pantazzi, catalogue entry on Merson’s Rest on the Flight to Egypt, in: Humbert et al. 1994, 496.
³ Peltre 1998, 192.
⁴ Ribemont 2008, 11.
⁵ Peltre 1998, 192.
⁶ Adam Badowski, The Flight to Egypt, 1882, oil on panel, 23 x 31.5 cm, private collection; the much smaller sphinx sculpture now serves as a toy for baby Jesus. In the background Joseph sits near a convincing ruin of an Egyptian temple, with the grazing donkey next to him.
the guise of a profane love seat when a second artist Eugène Steinsberg places a sleeping cupid between the sphinx’s paws.\footnote{Eugène Steinsberg, \textit{Cupid asleep beneath the Sphinx}, 1889, oil on canvas, 183 x 130 cm; lot 246, Sale 7607, Sotheby’s, 5 April 2001 New York; Pantazzi also mentions a third painter that was influenced by Merson’s \textit{Le Repos}, a not specified work of the American Frederick Rape, \textit{The two eras}, exhibited at the Salon of the Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts: M. Pantazzi, catalogue entry on Merson’s \textit{Rest on the Flight to Egypt}, in: Humbert et al. 1994, 496.}

The “unusually widespread influence”\footnote{M. Pantazzi, catalogue entry on Merson’s \textit{Rest on the Flight to Egypt}, in: Humbert et al. 1994, 496.} particularly applies to popular culture, which embraced the sphinx with open arms. The influence of the painting can be seen in three different guises. First, in early American advertising. Soon after completion, Merson’s painting travelled to the United States where advertisers appropriated the contours of the sphinx. But what does it mean when a motif from the visual arts is used to sing the praises of a bicycle? The attempt was partly a bid to find an American face for the sphinx; as the article progresses, it will emerge that each country wanted a sphinx of its “own”. In the world of advertising, the sphinx of Giza finally turned out to be the most popular variant, due to its more universal facial features.

Secondly, Merson’s nocturnal mood was particularly successful and inspiring motif, often appearing in conjunction with poems in European printed materials ranging from magazine illustrations to fine art postcards. In a broader context, however, this setting is not a particularly unique novelty; Europeans favoured night scenes throughout the entire century.

The third and most unique element of the painting was the safety provided by the sphinx’s paws – a refuge for slumbering figures. This third element gained both a contemporary twist, and an Egyptian-flavoured interpretation. George Bernard Shaw’s play plays a vital part in the transmission of this pictorial device: in his play, he replaces Mary with Cleopatra, and the canonical throne for Egyptian sovereigns is made fact.
Introduction

Emptiness resounds throughout Luc Olivier Merson’s oil painting *Le Repos en Egypte*. A desert vastness stretches to the horizon; the night sky fills the immensity of the horizontal picture plane. Positioned not centrally but almost to the very left of the canvas, the sphinx amplifies the sense of desolation which is iterated by the sand-swamped pedestal on the stone plateau.\(^9\)

In the depths of the desert night, everyone is sleeping. Between the paws of the sphinx lies a veiled woman, a child nestling in her arms. At her feet is a man in slumber – wrapped in blankets, spread out on the sand. Even the smoke from the extinguished fire rises sleepily upwards like a final breath, while the donkey’s pose is one of languor – one hind leg is slightly bent, and his head is low.\(^10\) The saddle rests on the ground, and the long day’s journey is over. The Holy Family has found a place to rest on its journey into Egypt.

The painter transports us to Egypt, to the odyssey of Joseph and Mary. In Matthew (2:1–18) we hear of the angel who urges Joseph to take his young family and flee the tyranny of King Herod. The same bible verse says nothing of what happened on that journey, and certainly makes no mention of a sphinx.

Literary sources differ from paintings in the information they offer: in a text, where a scene may unfold within a particular timeframe, a painting presents a scene that represents the entire story in a single action. Where a writer uses words to bridge time, a painter is bound to a single moment. And where a writer can make do with the comment that Mary and Joseph entered Egypt with the Holy Child, an artist must show Egypt itself. Each era has its own way of resolving these dramatic questions and the nineteenth-century painter was expected to deliver an authentic Egyptian landscape, despite perhaps

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\(^9\) A comparable pinching emptiness in the center of the composition can be experienced in Giovanni Segantini’s *Le cattive Madre*, see: Grotenhuis 1994, 14–20. It is probably this emptiness that makes Regier (2005, 39) conclude (incorrectly): “Joseph lies apart, almost out of the picture.”

\(^10\) Wrongfully interpreted as grazing: Benedict n. d.
never having set foot there. Merson similarly reconstructs his version by drawing on stories and other sources: he places a sphinx sculpture in a desert landscape – a décor never previously seen. To examine the function and appearance of the sphinx, I will first place the episode in an art historical context: how had artists translated this Biblical tale up till then? And how did Merson’s predecessors add Egyptian references?

**From Conjuror of Exotic Moods to Designator of Classical Loci: The Sphinx in Egyptian Narratives**

Throughout the centuries of Egypt’s remoteness, when it was untraveled by western artists, archaeological accuracy was of scant importance. An exotic animal here, a turban there, was enough to add local colour to the scene. Furthermore, in 1520/1530, a follower of Patinir did not hesitate to add a typically Dutch windmill to the Holy Family’s landscape. An Italian landscape.¹¹

As time went on, this touch of couleur locale assumed a more (pseudo-) antique guise: Pharaonic monuments became hugely popular devices for identifying the story’s geographic location more precisely. This posed a problem for the artist; the scarcity of Pharaonic models. Rome, where Egypt had been a much-loved source of inspiration from the age of antiquity, offered an alternative. After Emperor Augustus’s conquest of Egypt, Pharaonic-inspired statues graced many a garden, and an actual Isis temple was constructed in Rome. Obelisks were erected; with their clear-cut and distinctive contours, the authentic stone “turnspits” – as the Greeks admiringly referred to them – made the perfect painterly addition to the decor.¹² As did their counterpart, the pyramid. Of which Rome boasted only one reconstruction, the memorial Caius Cestius erected to himself;¹³

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¹¹ Flemish follower of Joachim Patinir (1480–1524), The rest on the Flight to Egypt, ca. 1520/1530, oil on panel, 28 x 42 cm, Folkwang Museum, Essen.


¹³ Pyramid of Gaius Cestius Epulo(nius), 12 BC, brick coated with white marble, base 29.50 x 29.50 m, h. 36.50 m, Rome.
and which for centuries was considered the ultimate prototype. Nobody questioned the fact that the walls were now white, and far steeper than the Egyptian originals.\(^{14}\)

During this time, a new type of Egyptified monument was created: the Holy Family by Pierre Patel (1604–1676) rests on a fallen cannellated column in a lush landscape; in the background rises an object that is part-pyramid, part-obelisk. \(^{15}\) I propose dubbing this phenomenon \textit{piralisk}, defined as a column that refers to ancient Egypt, with a narrower angle than the Cestius Pyramid, but less sheer than the stylus-shaped obelisk and without the pyramidal apex.

Where is the sphinx in all this? As sculpture, the mythical creature appears less frequently than the obelisk and the pyramid. It has, moreover, such strong Pharaonic overtones that it rarely occurs outside a Pharaonic context in painting, and certainly not in pastoral scenes. \(^{16}\)

In his \textit{Rest on the Flight to Egypt}, Pier Francesco Mola (1612–1666) has Joseph recline at the foot of a steep of the Cestius pyramid, observed through the (Italian) shrubbery by the sculpture of an Egyptonesque sphinx on a high pedestal. \(^{17}\) Albeit sporadically, the sphinx was used as a place marker, although seems more appropriate in

\(^{14}\) The Roman pyramid of Cestius could also serve as the setting for un-Egyptian moments like the meeting of the Holy Family with John the Baptist: Adriaen van der Werff (1659–1722), \textit{The Holy Family}, 1709, oil on panel, ca. 70 x 50 cm, Schlossmuseum Sanssoucis, Potsdam. But it was also used to back up the story of Ariadne and Bacchus: Johan Georg Platzer (1704–1761), \textit{Ariadne and Bacchus}, oil on copper, ca. 40 x 59 cm, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister, Dresden. A more evasive but unusual depiction is the education of a seventeenth-century Madonna at the base of the pyramid: studio of Laurent de La Hyre (1606–1656), \textit{L’education de la Vierge}, seventeenth century, oil on canvas, 333 x 225 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen.

\(^{15}\) Pierre Patel (1604–1676), \textit{Le Repos pendant la fuite en Egypte}, 1673, oil on copper, 41 x 50 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

\(^{16}\) This is the matter for autonomous sphinx sculptures in painting, not the grotesques as wall decorations or design like the decorated legs of, for example, incense burners or furniture.

\(^{17}\) Pier Francesco Mola (1612–1666), \textit{Riposo durante la fuga in Egitto}, ca. 1655–60, oil on canvas, 73.5 x 98.5 cm, State Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg. There are several variations on the theme; this prototype – the only one with a sphinx – is spread widely as an engraving by Edmé Jeaurat (1688–1738).
scenes depicting Moses in the bulrushes. This pairing is probably inspired by the role played in this story by the river Nile. The Hellenist variant of the river god is typified by his armrest in the shape of a Pharaonic sphinx. Both this group of figures and the autonomous sphinx sculpture appear in compositions portraying the discovery of the infant Moses at the water’s edge by Pharaoh’s daughter.\(^\text{18}\)

In this regard, the first argument for Merson’s sphinx actually dates back to the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: as an exotic landmark of the biblical scene. But with the addition of this specific monument, the sphinx sculpture, and the prominent placement in the desert – in contrast to the subordinate role of the foliage-concealed sphinxes that largely appear in the Moses stories – Merson follows the tradition of a more factual depiction, first seen around 1650 in work by Nicolas Poussin (1594–1662). During his trip to Rome in 1624, the French painter studied both Egyptian and Egyptianesque monuments, and also attempted to deepen his knowledge and more accurately render Egyptian culture. The Hellenic depictions of the Nile landscape were translated into evocative compositions, partly inspired by the Praeneste floor mosaic.\(^\text{19}\) Still in a decidedly Italian setting the Egyptianesque monuments are augmented by priests performing rituals in the white building that Poussin titles an Apis temple.\(^\text{20}\)

The sphinx sculptures that have accompanied the Holy Family up to now are more distant than Merson’s variant. Judging from the curvaceous shapes of the contemporary interpretation of the royal head-dress, the *nemes*, Thomas Blanchet (1614–1689) positions a colossal sphinx, modelled on Baroque garden prototypes, high on a staircase

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19 Alexandrian, Nile landscape, ca. 100 BC, floor mosaic, 585 x 431 cm, Archaeological Museum, Palestrina.

balustrade (Fig. 2). But this sphinx is presented in an explicitly dilapidated state: an admiration of antique cultures blossomed in the fifteenth century and merged with the seventeenth-century awareness of topicality that established the remoteness of the past. The gigantic body of the sphinx, broken in two, echoes past glories.

The bas relief of the Apis procession beneath recalls the significant scenes by Blanchet’s master Poussin. Mirroring the antique scene, Joseph and the donkey serve as a contemporary riposte.

Edwin Long (1829–1891) deploys a comparable parallel, when the infant Jesus, clasped in Mary’s arms, rides through an Egyptian city on a donkey (Fig. 3). The solemn Holy Family contrasts with an exuberant Pharaonic procession that has just passed: a procession in which a life-size golden statue of the Egyptian goddess Isis and her

Fig. 2: Thomas Blanchet (1614–1689), Le repos pendant la fuite en Egypte, oil on canvas, 57 x 48 cm. Lafon Castandet Sotheby’s, 11 December 1974.

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21 Makarius 2004, 22.
22 It makes this sphinx a serious precedent of the better-known sphinx by Hubert Robert (1733–1808), Jeune filles dansant autour d’un obélisque, 1798, oil on canvas, 120 x 99.3 cm, The Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, Montreal.
son Horus, is borne aloft. Compositionally, Isis is linked to Mary; their paths not only cross but collide in a symbolic confrontation. Seated on her throne with Horus on her lap, Isis is the iconographic predecessor of Mary. And as the ancient culture is on the brink of demise, the new Messiah is waiting in the wings in the foregrounded group of figures.

The two hundred years separating Blanchet and Long’s works is evident in the deeper knowledge of Egypt, a virtuosity that Long reveals, if not flaunts: in the background stands an authentic temple while the painted wall in the foreground on the right demonstrates Long’s detailed knowledge.

Ensuring the archaeological accuracy of backdrops and details was typical of the nineteenth century. Egyptian sources were accessible after Napoleon Bonaparte’s campaign between 1798 and 1801: Egyptian artefacts accompanied him to Europe, and monuments were meticulously recorded.

A comparison with Long reveals that Merson rendered a plausible interpretation of Egypt in correlation with the norms of the day, but was only moderately interested in Pharaonic accuracy. His œuvre affirms a preference for religious scenes with a signature style that inclined towards Realism: an almost workaday depiction of less sacred
moments. This is exemplified in Merson’s interpretation of *Hail Mary* with dusty streets and Breton houses where the mother and child are greeted by a passing farmer carrying a scythe on his shoulder. In *The Annunciation*, the angel hovers about a similar house while from the doorway Mary sees the lily, symbol of annunciation, laying on the sandy path before her. The deep calm of *Le Repos* is also atypical; traditionally, painters depicted this moment as a picnic. However, this element is of less importance, particularly in terms of reception.

Merson’s work generally quotes the sphinx, despite the fact that it is not an archaeological motif, as the art historian Stévenin rightly concludes. Merson carefully composed it from a variety of sources.

**Who Is the Sphinx? The Sources Available to Merson**

Reclining in such isolation in the desert, the sphinx sculpture immediately recalls the great sphinx of Giza; the iconic sphinx, immortalized in oils or on camera from an angle that certainly gives the impression that the sphinx inhabits a desolate waste. It was, and is, more popular to depict it from a slightly different vantage point, from an angle that also includes one of the seven wonders of the world.

With the pyramid as backdrop, we have the almost archetypical image with which Merson was equally familiar. In a sketch, diagonal lines to the right, behind the sphinx, can be read as a pyramid. Moreover, this sketch reveals that Merson originally envisaged working on a square canvas, with the sphinx placed more conventionally in the centre.

But, more importantly, an academic painter would never have executed the portrait of the well-known sphinx so inaccurately. In appearance, Merson’s sphinx is far less weathered than the heavily over-used prototype. Now, Merson can date the flight of the Holy Family

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23 Luc-Olivier Merson, *Je vous salue Marie*, ca. 1885, oil on canvas, 81 x 60 cm, High Museum of Art, Atlanta.
24 Luc-Olivier Merson, *L’Annonciation*, 1908, oil on canvas, 55 x 46.5 cm, Musée d’Art Thomas-Henry, Cherbourg.
to a little after the beginning of the common era, just as Edwin Long set the Holy Family in among a Pharaonic procession. The sphinx of Giza may have been a splendid sight at the time, but Merson could not be sure. And in any case, in Merson’s days, the sphinx was buried up to its neck in sand, as contemporary photos prove. In 1850, the French Egyptologist Auguste Mariëtte (1821–1881) “rediscovered” the Great Sphinx, but it was not to be fully excavated until 1925. Merson does not place his sphinx in or actually upon the sands of the desert but defines the massive stone sculpture more prominently as a sculpture by placing it high upon a plinth. The heaped sand firmly embeds the pedestal but defines the sphinx as an “independent object [...] organized predominantly around a centre of its own”.26 If Merson did not base his painting on the sphinx of Giza, where did he find his inspiration? What sphinxes did Paris have to offer as source material?

With artist and art critic Charles Olivier Merson as his father, Merson was part of the Parisian art world from an early age. This takes the quest for sources first to the Louvre where, as an academician, Merson saw and studied the displayed art.27 At the time, the Louvre presented its own Great Sphinx, as the most outstanding specimen in Europe, and authors accordingly refer to it as one of the most striking objects in the collection.28 It naturally went on prominent display in the museum gallery, but achieved greater notoriety for its appearance in painting and in illustrations accompanying magazine articles (Fig. 4).29

27 Already on 12 August 1862 Merson registers as a copyist at the Louvre for the first time: Ribemont – Stévenin 2008, 17.
28 Musée Égyptien, cour du Louvre, Magasin Pittoresque, 28 (July 1851) 218; in the article all monumental sphinxes in the collection are summed up: “Les monuments qui, les premiers, méritent notre attention sont les statues, sphinx. [...] Un beau sphinx en granit rose, aux nobles traits malheureusement [sic] mutilés, représente un grand roi [...] Ramsès II”.
29 Guillaume Larrue (1851–1935), Salle Égyptienne du Louvre, devant le grand sphinx, 1875–1900, oil on canvas, 69 x 88 cm. Musée du Louvre, Paris.
This French answer to the sphinx of Giza also featured in commercials, singing the praises of an “authentic” French perfume, *Secret de Ramsès* (Fig. 5), mirroring the features of the Parisian sphinx. The advertisers nevertheless provided the French sphinx with the Egyptian pyramids of Giza as backdrop, albeit on a tiny scale. Lying on a rocky base, with the yet undamaged head graced by the royal headgear, the nemes, this Ramses sphinx is a more serviceable model for Merson in terms of overall appearance. Although the huge expanse of chest could have proved an excellent example, the damage to the royal beard says otherwise: this is not Merson’s source.

If, on his quest for a fitting decor for the flight into Egypt, Merson continued to roam among the Louvre sphinxes he would invariably have encountered a second granite sphinx from Tanis, of similarly

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30 It is remarkable that despite the size, the plinth and the facial features, still the Giza sphinx is “recognized”: Schnitzler 2009, 165.
monumental proportions (fig. 6). The longer beard and the more severe damage both present similarities. And especially the narrower face, placed high on the shoulders and slightly recessed, bears a closer resemblance. Merson combines the barrel chest of the great sphinx with the less weighty, erect upper portion of the second.

Fig. 6 (left): Sphinx 13th dynasty pink granite, originally from Tanis, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
Fig. 7 (middle): Henri Alfred Jacquemart (1824–1896) after the design of Gabriel Jean Antoine Davioud (1823–1881), Sphinx, 1855–1858, base for fountain, Place de Châtelet, Paris.
Fig. 8 (right): Sphinx, 1625–1630, Hôtel de Sully, Paris.

Despite this, there are two vital differences – details that cannot be explained by Egyptian examples. In the first place, the paws are very different from those of standard Egyptian sphinxes. The great sphinx of Paris reveals a prototype: the rounded toes have claws engraved into them in the shape of an inverse droplet. Merson gave his sphinx more decorative toes with which, in relief, the diagonally running claws form a triangle on the tip. We see a similar rendering on the four sphinxes at the base of the Fontaine du Palmier at the Place de Châtelet. The column by François Jean Bralle (1750–1832), modelled after Egyptian palm columns, was made between 1806 and 1808, to pay tribute to various victories of Napoleon Bonaparte, including the
Egyptian Battle of the Pyramids.\textsuperscript{31} When the fountain was relocated between 1855 and 1858, a base was added with the four water-spouting Egyptian-style sphinxes – a specific reference to Napoleon’s victory in Egypt (Fig. 7). Architect Gabriel Jean Antoine Davioud (1823–1881) designed the four sphinxes which were then sculpted by Henri Alfred Jacquemart (1824–1896).\textsuperscript{32} They are based on the sphinxes of Luxor, although the claws have been given this contemporary decorative enhancement in the now-familiar triangular pattern.

Secondly, Merson’s sphinx is out of character in that its head is raised heavenwards. All Egyptian sphinxes gaze straight ahead. Not seventeenth-century versions, though; from the late middle ages, western variants evolved into an entity very different from their Egyptian counterparts. They underwent feminization. During the baroque era in particular, these voluptuous sphinxes with alluring décolletés appeared in monumental pairs, often in grand parks such as Versailles.

An elegant pair can still be found in Paris. In the first courtyard of Hôtel de Sully, a striking duo flanks the entrance of the first court. The first “sphinx-biographer” Demisch dates the pair at around 1600, although it is unclear whether he based his conclusion on the construction date of the Hôtel de Sully (1624–1630) or the iconographic features of the sphinxes.\textsuperscript{33} They did not arrive at this location until 1856, when the owner at the time, Madame Radu, refurbished the building as a school for girls.\textsuperscript{34} In 1862, the hotel was listed as a historical building, a status of importance to Merson. The documentary photographer Eugène Atget (1857–1927) photographed the building, and its sphinxes, on numerous occasions in 1899. The bodies are pressed flat onto the base, emphasizing the raised heads on slender necks. Merson could very well have got the idea for the upwards-gazing heads from these sphinxes.

\textsuperscript{31} Humbert et al. 1994, 272.
\textsuperscript{32} Humbert 1989, 221.
\textsuperscript{33} Demisch 1977, 177.
\textsuperscript{34} Gady, 2008, 29.
In summary, Merson drew on different sources when composing his sphinx. His sculpture is based primarily on the Egyptian prototype, which was largely derived from the “second granite sphinx” from Tanis in the Louvre. But the pedestal and eyes raised skywards reach back to the seventeenth-century Sully sphinxes, and the triangular nails to the contemporary sphinxes of the Châtelet fountain. The sphinx proved a success in America.

The Great American Sphinx: The Reception of Merson’s Sphinx in American Adverts

During the Salon of 1879 critic Earl Shinn described Merson’s work as “a true poem; it held crowds in irresistible and unaccustomed fascination.” 35 Critic Henry Bacon wrote that it “touches the heart”, 36 and, not long after, the painting’s allure drew it to America. 37 Furthermore, a second version was commissioned by the New York collector Samuel Putnam Avery. 38 Merson made note of that fact by publishing a sketch of the sphinx he probably created for Avery in The Century Magazine. He added the rather nostalgic caption: “Adieu, mon vieux Sphinx.” (Adieu – literally To God - my old Sphinx)

This interest yielded results: according to a company stamp, Arabol Manufacturing Co. of New York had already appropriated the sphinx by 1879, immediately after Merson’s work became known in the United States. The broken beard but, most of all, the narrow head, are immediately familiar and, besides the icon on the envelope or invoices, the sphinx also featured in early adverts. Without the Holy Mother and Son, all religious content was absent and the term “trademark” printed on the base also emphasised the sphinx’s new mission.

35 Shinn 1879, 51; Beeny 2008, 199.
36 Bacon 1883, 26–33.
37 According to a letter dating 5 February 1881; S. A. Coale Jr. probably bought the picture during his tour through Europe in 1881; reproduced in Leavitt 1894; M. Pantazzi, catalogue entry on Merson’s Rest on the Flight to Egypt, in: Humbert et al. 1994, 497–498.
38 The order is already noted in Avery’s diary on 23 June 1878 (Beaufort et al. 1979).
Fig. 9: Luc-Olivier Merson, *Adieu, mon vieux Sphinx*, 23 June 1879, print of sketch with text in: W. A. Coffin, *Souvenirs of a veteran collector*. The Century Magazine.

Fig. 10: *The Arabol Mfg. Co.*, Company stamp on an envelope, 1897, 9 x 16 cm (stamp: 6.1 x 4.3 cm).

*Arabol* is typical of a rapidly growing industry which replaced small workshops where products had previously been manually produced.
It developed materials to treat textiles; the sphinx could well have been used as a reference to the superior quality of Egyptian cotton, with the use of Arabol's products, could American cotton rival that of Egypt? The textile industry undoubtedly underwent huge changes prompted by the Civil War; the manufacture of army uniforms forced the industry to grow and progress. Around the year 1879 the United States encouraged the national distribution of magazines by considerably reducing postage costs. This not only facilitated general advertising practises, but increased their circulation numbers.

Fig. 11: After ages of silence, ca. 1897, full page black-white add for Monarch cycle MFG Co., 24 x 18.3 cm. In Bicycle advertisement section of a Chicago magazine.

40 The war industry for example increased the use of canned food, also for citizens; for more effects, see: Sivulka 2012, 24–26.
41 Sivulka 2012, 21.
Sphinxes and bicycles appear evenly matched. The prosperity that flourishes after the Civil War encourages all manner of new leisure pursuits. Companies such as Waltham Mfg. Co exploit this market with bicycles. Exotic elements are introduced to build the product’s identity such as the launch of the new line Orient Bicycles, a year before Merson’s sphinxes reach American shores. In the accompanying catalogue, drawings of Egyptian motifs such as lotuses praise the specific quality of the bicycle, “genius in steel”. The cover shows how photography was used in advertising, with the Giza sphinx up to its neck in sand: decidedly exotic, yet not American.

In an era in which Egyptian artefacts fill museums, but fail to inspire the emergence of a clearly American sphinx, the Monarch Bike Company seizes the opportunity Merson presents, featuring his sphinx in an advertisement campaign. The lion had featured in early Monarch adverts as signifier – *King of bicycles* – which now takes on an antique turn with the sphinx. Above its head is written “After Ages of Silence” indeed, while a second caption in the sand dune around the base reads: “the first words uttered by the Sphinx were: ride a Monarch and keep in front”. After centuries of silence, this bicycle rouses the sphinx to speak again. Thereby assigning him the role of keeper of ancient wisdom able to offer sage advice even on the most contemporary of matters.

In contrast to *Arabol*, the Monarch sphinx is reproduced in Merson’s naturalistic habitat, complete with starry skies and desert although here it occupies a more central position, and the only trace of the vanished Mary and infant is a somewhat lighter area. The scene is set off by an ornamental frame with Pharaonic architectural detailing; a framing device is created by the hollow cornice with the winged solar disc (serving as a tondo in which the original Monarch lion is portrayed) on two papyrus columns. Exaggerating the “Egyptian-ness” of the original followed the mania for all things Egyptian, like the same pictorial elements grace the niche of a statuette of a goddess extolling the praises of *Egyptian Deities* cigarettes (1902).
Improved printing techniques made information more widely accessible. Wealth generated by industrial advances in tandem with better education fostered “an insatiable appetite for news about […] travel”, and tours sprang up, many of which were also affordable for the common man. Egypt’s sun provides the lure for cruises to Egypt, touted as a “premier winter rendezvous”, with the sphinx of Giza cast in the role of golden window dressing. Photographs of the familiar statue featured routinely as the ornamentation on cigarette tins, to allow a viewer to see “directly into the distant land of origin”. In new advertisements, the sphinx now invites us to join him at home. Among the numerous Egyptian images, Merson’s sphinx is also recruited by the White Star Line to sell cruises from New York and Boston to the Mediterranean (Fig. 12). Mirrored around the shining star, the antithetic sphinxes become a heraldic

42 Sivulka 2012, 19.
43 Ciarlo 2011, 151–152.
motif, the triangular toe tips now giving a hint of movement in the inwards paws.

The sole motif of Merson’s composition to appear in American adverts is the sphinx. In fact, towering imposingly above the horizon, the sphinx is the most noticeable pictorial element. However, this re-envisioning strips the monumental sculpture of its function as refuge for the Holy Family. And in Europe, it is precisely this motif that prevails. After all, it is a contemporary variant of the feline throne which has a rich tradition. It is an exposition.

### The Sphinx as Contemporary Throne

Merson gives his sphinx a specific function as a chaise longue; a precarious role if we consider that the sphinx is widely considered a pagan image of pre-Christian origins. Apocryphal books speak of such artefacts during the flight of the Holy Family to Egypt. When the family pauses to enter a temple in the Egyptian city of Sotinen, 355 pagan images spontaneously fall – or, better said, collapse – from their pedestals. Merson’s sphinx may look slightly weathered, but is certainly no expression of a crumbling culture. The composition shows the sphinx to be a stable monument that even assumes the role of protector. By placing Mary and the infant Jesus between the sphinx’s front paws, the creature becomes a great throne, a phenomenon familiar to western art history.

The sphinx throne is closely related to other feline-themed thrones, the earliest of which hails from 6000–5800 BCE: a votive terracotta statue shows a goddess giving birth, seated on a chair with two standing felines as arm rests. As the centuries pass, the lion arm rests are interchangeable with the panther and the sphinx.

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44 Paragraph 22–23, compare Jesaja 19, 1.
45 Mother goddess, ca. 6000 BCE, terracotta, h. 20 cm (12 cm.), Archaeological Museum, Ankara.
46 Jairazbhoy 1965, 252.
comes to be more associated more with male deities as the lion’s mane is analogous to the corona of the sun.\textsuperscript{47}

In this context it is interesting to note that sphinx thrones also occur even in Christian culture: Demisch detects the first on the throne of the Archbishop of Canosa (1078–1089).\textsuperscript{48} In Christian culture, sphinxes carry a positive connotation: the three-dimensionally-rendered sphinx in the ivory tip of the staff of Yves de Chartres (between 1091 and 1100) stresses the power of religion as a protective sphinx.\textsuperscript{49} This contrasts even more greatly with the throne of Satan, embellished with serpents or dragons that devour sinners during the Last Judgement.\textsuperscript{50}

When Donatello (1386–1466) also grants the Virgin Mary and Child a sphinx throne in 1440,\textsuperscript{51} this prototype returns in Mankiewicz’s epic film \textit{Cleopatra} (1963), when Liz Taylor stands between two Pharaonic bastet cats in a similar manner. But in painting, too, artists such as Ludovico Mazzolino (1480 – ca. 1528)\textsuperscript{52} frequently add sphinxes to the throne of the Madonna. The motif of the monkey above which a frontal sphinx serves as ornamentation, probably illustrates the contemporary discussion about God’s creatures, primarily based on the traditions of mythical beasts by Pliny the Elder (23–79 CE). In his zoology, Conrad Gessner groups the sphinxes, along with cynocephali and satyrs, under the apes.\textsuperscript{53} Wittkower refers to

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{47} Kemp 2007, 39.
\item \textsuperscript{48} Canosathrone, 1078–1089, marble, San Sabino Cathedral, Canosa di Puglia. Demish may consider it unique, the pictorial program, however, is part of the regular repertory of eleventh century episcopal lion thrones. There are more examples to be found in Monte Sant’Angelo (1023–1050) or Puglia, Siponto (ca. 1040): G. Zarnecki 1990, 35.
\item \textsuperscript{49} Sceptre from Yves de Chartres, 1091–1100, ivory, 18 x 11.5 cm, Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.
\item \textsuperscript{50} Master of Torcello, \textit{The last judgement}, twelfth century, basilica-mosaic, Santa Maria Assunta, Torcello.
\item \textsuperscript{51} Donatello (ca. 1386–1466), \textit{Madonna e Bambino tra San Francesco e San Antonio}, 1448, bronze, Basilica di San Antonio, Padua: Jason (1957, 158) recognizes Egyptian sources; Stefaniak 2005, 89.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Ludovico Mazzolino (1480 – ca. 1528), \textit{La sainte famille et la sainte trinité. L’enfant Jésus présente a un singe, symbole du mal, raisins de la passion que lui tend Saint Joseph}, 1500/1525, oil on panel, 34 x 28 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris.
\end{itemize}
Ethiopian monkeys that were known as sphinxes in antiquity and quotes: “Some authors would describe monkeys and sphinxes as races of men and be proud of their ingenuity if we did not happen to know that they must be animals”.54

But it is the last pharaoh of Egypt in western art who claims the sphinx throne more structurally. Like when Cleopatra plays a starring role in “the most classic history painting produced in Venice since the sixteenth century”,55 the Banquet of Cleopatra (ca. 1740–1750) by Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770).56 In conjunction with the sphinx as designator of place, the work demonstrates the emerging awareness of history: beneath the arm of Cleopatra a miniscule sphinx can be seen, the arm rest of her throne, to “set the scene of the painting in Egypt”.57 That the historical reference becomes more accurate is apparent from a second sphinx on the repoussé in the form of a shell-bearing fountain, as well as the sphinxes that support the fruit bowl on the table, although these more closely resemble grotesques.

Louis Gauffier (1762–1801) further develops these visuals in Cleopatra and Octavian (1788), in which the two rivals sit facing each other in a far more historicizing context.58 Octavian slumps a little on a gleaming throne, which has arm rests decorated with a seated female sphinx with raised wings and swollen udders, whereby the nemes give the scene an Egyptian flavour. Pantazzi identifies Gauffier’s model as the throne ornamented with Greek sphinxes, originally from Rome and in the collection of the Louvre.59

The influence of Gauffier’s painting as the most “historic Egyptian composition to date”, influenced later neo-Egyptian works such as those of Edwin Long. Gauffier was probably on view in Paris in

54 Wittkower 1977, 49; McDermott 1938, 67. 84.
55 Scipione Maffei, quoted in: Knox 1955, 33.
56 Giovanni Battista Tiepolo (1696–1770), Banchetto di Antonio e Cleopatra, 1743/1744, oil on canvas, 249 x 346 cm, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne.
58 Louis Gauffier (1762–1801), Entrevue d’Octavian et Cléopâtre, 1787/1788, oil on canvas, 83.8 x 112.5 cm, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.
1788. The following year, the Prix de Rome selected *Joseph recognized by his brothers* as its central theme; the competing artists explored the more recent historical period with Egyptianesque sphinx thrones.

Interestingly, the sphinx throne, which originates from the near east, now becomes more exclusively associated with ancient Egypt. It is curious given that prototypes such as these bear no relation to authentic examples: pharaonic beds and chairs are richly embellished with lion’s paws but there are no “true” sphinx thrones or even lion thrones, as envisioned by the Neo-classicists.

Yet, Christian tolerance of the sphinx, in combination with a more profound connection with Pharaonic Egypt from neo-classicism, made the sphinx’s lion paws the perfect resting place for mother and child. By seating Mary on the sphinx, Merson references Mary as Super Petram, and is now defining Egyptian culture as the cradle of the Christian one.

The light enhances this distinction further: the sphinx gazes straight into the pale silvery moonlight; the cool illumination contrasts with the warm golden glow that emanates from the child. The Infant itself is light, betraying His divine origin, which contrasts with the dark tones of the painting. Mary, with Jesus and the sphinx, are elevated above the horizon, but the holy mother has turned her head downwards. With their eyes uplifted to heaven, Jesus and the sphinx become earthly embodiments of the divine. Before exploring the role of the throne in more detail, we first examine the meaning of the night.

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60 M. Pantazzi, catalogue entry for Gauffier’s *Cleopatra*, in: Humbert et al. 1994, 572.
62 Fleming – Honour 1974, 82: “When Mary is seated or enthroned above a stone or rock (super petram) the image signifies that she is founded on Christ – like the church itself, at the same time supporting Christ and being founded upon him.”
63 The Gospels note that the divine light dulls that of the earth, like in John (1:5): “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” In visual arts the Christ Child brightens up literally from the fifteenth century, as a literal depiction of Brigitta of Sweden’s visions. Divine appearances are already related to light from Greek mythology, like the dazzling effect of Dionysus birth.
Nocturnal Scene

Diderot expresses an essential argument for Merson’s decision to use a weather-beaten sphinx in a desert night: “[Antique ruins are] noble and grand [...]. The ruins are more beautiful in the light of the setting sun than in the morning; morning is the moment of the world’s awakening noise and tumult; evening is the moment in which it falls silent and becomes calm… So it would seem I’ve raised the difficult question of analogies between ideas and feelings, analogies that secretly guide the artist in choosing his accessories.”

Merson was not the first to develop the nocturnal scene as accessory. Among the painters to have done so before him are Rembrandt – never averse to chiaroscuro effects – and particularly Elsheimer, who pictures the Holy Family resting at night, although not asleep.

And even in Merson’s time, the sphinx was known to appear in nocturnal scenes, especially as the backdrop created by Schinkel for the Zaubermotze which features a moonlit sphinx sculpture. In addition to the other function, the plinth serves to provide access to another, mystical meaning.

The atmospheric effects of the desert at night generally appear in Oriental painting, specifically particular in the work of artists such as Narcisse Berchère (1819–1891), who proclaimed himself a “desert painter” after only one trip to Egypt, in 1849/1850. During his later trip to Suez he describes wanting to paint a herd of sheep protected by sphinxes as night falls. He indeed completed such a painting and submitted it to the Salon of 1864. The work drew attention,

64 Diderot 1995, 67
65 Rembrandt van Rijn (1606–1669), The Rest of the Flight into Egypt, 1647, oil on panel, 34 x 48 cm, National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; Adam Elsheimer (1578–1610), Flucht nach Ägypten, 1609, oil on copper, 31 x 41 cm, Alte Pinakothek, Munich.
67 Thornton 1994, 30; when Berchère finally is recognized with his first official award during the World Exhibition of 1855, he starts making engravings after his paintings.
68 Berchère 1863, 139.
69 With the title: Crépuscule. Nubie inférieure, 100 x 143 cm, in: Notice des peintures, sculptures et dessins de l’École Moderne de France, exposés dans les galeries du Musée Impérial du Luxembourg, Catalogue (Paris 1866) 54 no. 245.
prompting Théophile Gautier to admiringly describe the colossal sphinxes as a “rêve d'éternité”, a dream of eternity.\footnote{Gautier 1991, 392.}

With such accolades under its belt, the work was reproduced in engravings, spreading its reputation even further. In \emph{Magasin Pittoresque} it illustrates an article about these sphinxes as “the sole remains” of a ruinous city along the lines of Herculaneum.\footnote{The sphinxes, neither the city are existing; they are – due to the added “title” – also presented in another magazine as “Sphinxes of Medinet Abou” (not specified magazine, on e-bay). That these sphinxes, although located in the far south, are identified as granite sphinxes representing Ramses the Great, relates to the Tanis-sphinxes (from the north) of the Louvre-collection.} The painting’s evocative hues of twilight entrenched it in the imagination. Even German Orientalism,\footnote{Rhein 2003, 144.} which usually favoured more restrained pictorial devices, adopted the sphinx duo; artist Friedrich Perlberg substituted shepherds for Berchère’s herd of sheep. That is to say, they surround a from a book reciting explorer sitting on a chair in front of the fire.

\emph{Magasin Pittoresque} erroneously declares the sphinxes the only surviving monuments of a long-lost temple. This is a parallel with the Memnon colossi which, hardly surprisingly, leads Perlberg to repeat

\begin{figure}
\begin{center}
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{image1}
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{image2}
\end{center}
\caption{Fig. 13: Narcisse Berchère (1819–1891), Crêpuscule dans la Nubie inférieure, illustration by: Les Sphinx de Séboua. Magasin Pittoresque.}
\caption{Fig. 14: Friedrich Perlberg (1848–1921), Neujahrsnacht in der Wüste, 1905, printed litho after an aquarel, 17 x 24 cm. Die Neue Gartenlaube 43.}
\end{figure}
the composition for these Ramses sculptures, as an engraved magazine illustration. In evoking atmosphere, the interchangeability of the monuments is similarly evident from his postcard *Moonlight* where what is unmistakably Merson’s sphinx – its forepaws empty, a cartouche as its pendant – appears as the guardian of the now-familiar Bedouin group resting on the sand ground. The inhabited desert, the bright fire and the moon – now visible in the picture plane – erode Merson’s quiet mystery.

Fig. 15: Friedrich Perlberg, *Moonlight*, P & C.M. Serie 124, 9 x 14 cm.

In this new medium painted originals were printed as postcards with native views based on a pre-existing repertoire of romanticized landscape. It was an appealing alternative for the black-and-white magazine reproductions: the full-colour scenes that rapidly gain the status of a mini artwork and were highly appreciated as collector’s items. Also Perlberg evolves into a “postcard painter”, quoting both Bechère as Merson.

Where Perlberg illustrates Merson’s sphinx is a commutable evoker of mood, the sphinx’s protective paws prove the real find. Egyptian sculptures excelled at offering protection: at Karnak, for example, the pharaoh stands between the front paws of the God Amon in the form of a ram-headed sphinx. Merson translated the static sculpture into a more vivid, contemporary variant.

**Protective Sphinx Paws**

Innovative printing techniques such as machine-punched edges and gilded page edges offered additional distribution channels. The prayer print logically accentuated the religious aspect of the scene (Fig. 15). In these new media, artists developed Merson’s composition, one more successful than the other. Like Karl Mühlmeister (1876 until ca. 1942), who placed his postcard Holy Family in front of the now more popular Giza sphinx (Fig. 16).

![Fig. 16 (left): Maison Bouasse-Lebel, *Die heilige Familie in der Wüste: Die göttliche Vorsehung wacht über die, welche sich ihr anvertrauen*, ca. 1910/15, Andachtsbild, 11 x 6,2 cm.](image1)

![Fig. 17 (right): Karl Mühlmeister (1876–1942), *Ruhe auf der Flucht*, postcard 14 x 9 cm.](image2)
The magazine *The Graphic* employs the new modes of illustration to compete with the popular *The illustrated London News*. Georges Scott (1873–1943) publishes an illustration inspired by Realism, with Merson’s iconography – a contemporary mother, dressed in ragged garb, complete with a straw hat, slides down the pedestal to the street beneath. Sheltered by the Sphinx, she fell asleep, together with her child, wrapped in blankets; the figures are accentuated by the yellow ink, which contrasts with the nocturnal shade of blue. Moreover, Scott transplanted the scene into his native British environment, on the banks of the Thames. And London, too, was able to boast a sphinx of its very own.

![Fig. 18: Georges Bertin Scott (1873–1943), Sheltered by the Sphinx: a night scene on the Thames Embankment, 1899-1900, supplement to the Graphic.](image-url)
The fame of Merson’s composition soon spreads in Europe as well and, embraced by popular culture, develops further. This speed foreshadows the role played by today’s advertising and video clips, which serve as a better cultural thermometer than fine art: “Fine Art speaks with the voice of a single individual, at most backed up by the ideology or the movement they are part of. […] Advertising Art […] is supported by other institutions in the culture […] having the power to create a new consciousness”. However, this is offset by art’s staying power, illustrated by the literature that was influenced by Merson’s painting. Even in the year of its completion, the painting inspired poet Albert Samain (1858–1900) to write Le Repos en Egypte. The only work apparently capable of giving the picture a serious nuance, such that it became a trendsetting image itself, was Bernard Shaw’s Caesar and Cleopatra (1898). Julius Caesar surprises Cleopatra while slumbering between the forepaws of a sphinx, pedestalled in the desert (Fig. 19). Shaw explains the origin of the motif in a letter: “The Sphinx scene was suggested by a French picture of the Flight into Egypt. I never can remember the painter’s name; but the engraving, which I saw in a shop window when I was a boy […] remained in the rummage basket of my memory for thirty years before I took it out…”. It actually was Luc Olivier Merson.

What Shaw actually does here, is restore the feline throne to its queen. In a contemporary variant, the Egyptian ruler has once more usurped the throne and with this immediately created a canon in the world of movies. The poster of the The Ten Commandments (1923) depicts the pharaoh seated on a sphinx throne. But it is Cleopatra who more frequently occupies the throne. When Liz Taylor enters Rome in the 1963 film Cleopatra, the throne she rides upon is a massively oversized sphinx. Like Merson’s Mary, she also has her son, Caesarion, at her side.

The London sphinx was used as prototype for the Liz Taylor throne, possibly due to its undamaged features and popularity. However, an intriguing press photo reveals a different angle. In 1953 (published in 1957), Sophia Loren is seated between two British claws, the year she plays the starring role in *Two Nights with Cleopatra*, and after her breakthrough as Aïda (Fig. 21). In 1955, the tap dancer and actress Ann Miller posed before the sphinx of Giza to promote the film *Hit*
the Deck in Cairo (Fig. 20): the Giza sphinx offers a clearly less dimensionally stable back-drop and, without a base, does not translate logically into a moveable throne.

Finally, the constellation “Cleopatra on the Sphinx” was so successful it was embraced by the world of advertising. An advertisement for Bols reveals how, from 1930, serious American adverts directed at rational human beings attempted to elicit an emotional response (Fig. 22). As though in a scene from a dream, Bols presents a magical moment when the lover carves a heart in the monumental breast of the sphinx, immortalizing eternal love. The advertisers hope that, by virtue of sympathetic magic, it will incite a similar response in us – with this glass of “parfait amour” your heart will beat with a passion to equal Cleopatra’s. The anticipated result is the antithesis of fine art’s supposed effect – to invite contemplation.

Fig. 20: United Press Associations, Wonder what the sphinx thinks?, New York 1955 Sun Times. Fig. 21: UP, Wow! Said the sphinx, 1957.

This clarifies the reception of Merson’s motif – it impacted the rapidly communicating popular culture. The more fleeting images of popular culture contribute nothing to the painting’s meaning – we approach the advertisement from the perspective of Merson’s painting, not vice versa. If the painting had succeeded in claiming a more prominent role in the art historical canon, it would not have remained in such obscurity. From Merson’s standpoint, with his penchant for trying out different modes of narrativity, it is understandable. It is clear that Merson also considered this lucky shot quite a
discovery; after the two sphinxes had left for America, he repeated
the composition twice. This time, the works remained in France.

But, thanks to Shaw’s literary translation of the image, Merson’s
Le Repos eventually became embedded in a cultural context. The con-
temporary sphinx throne defines a canon for the last Egyptian queen:
in which guise will it appear in the anticipated Cleopatra movie star-
ring Angelina Jolie?

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Wild women: 19th century painting as inspiration for the image of women in contemporary

‘Background of Evil: Symbolism in France, Belgium-the Netherlands and Germany’, Gro-

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