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# **Egyptomania**

Written by Bob Brier

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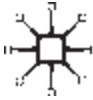
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# EGYPT- OMANIA

*Our Three-Thousand-Year Obsession  
with the Land of the Pharaohs*

**BOB BRIER**

palgrave  
macmillan



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# ONE

## *Birth of a Collection*

When I was a kid growing up in the East Bronx, I collected acorns. I'd gather them in the fall, sort them by size and color, and organize them in small compartments I made in a shoebox for the purpose. The collection stayed intact for a week or so until the worms came out and my mother threw away the box. Later it was baseball cards. I wasn't really interested in baseball or the players on the cards. It was order that interested me—a numbered set waiting to be completed. Then there were postage stamps. In the 1950s, every kid collected postage stamps. You got your relatives who received letters from foreign countries to save the stamps. If someone worked for a company that got regular shipments from abroad, you had duplicates to trade. You soaked the stamps off the envelopes, then—and here's the fun part—you organized them and put them in an album. This is how we learned about exotic countries like Turks and Caicos Islands. I vividly remember the triangular stamps for Tana Tuva and the very small stamps issued by San Marino. Stamps were wonderful things to collect.

When I became an Egyptologist, the obvious thing to collect was Egyptian antiquities, but there are problems. First, antiquities are

expensive. More important, collecting antiquities is off-limits to Egyptologists. We all work on excavation sites where artifacts are unearthed, and it would look suspicious if I had an apartment full of antiquities. So, no antiquities for me.

But there is a solution for those of us with the collecting gene—books! They satisfy the need to acquire, possess, and organize, and there is a rationalization for the collection—Egyptology books help my career. I *need* books to do research, publish, get tenure, and receive promotions.

I remember first seeing Thomas Pettigrew's 1834 *Egyptian Mummies*<sup>1</sup> 40 years ago in a dusty secondhand bookshop on New York's Fourth Avenue. The illustrations by George Cruikshank (Charles Dickens's illustrator) were highlighted with real gold to indicate gilt on the mummies' faces. It cost me a full week's salary at the time, but eating peanut butter and jelly sandwiches was a small price to pay for such a treasure. I didn't stop with Egyptology books. There were travel books; art books; books on Egypt from the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries with fabulous engravings. What about fiction set in Egypt? There are hundreds of novels out there, good and bad, that deal with mummies and pharaohs. They too could be hunted down, acquired, and cataloged. And this is where the real decision had to be made, one that separates the collectors from the merely interested. Do I collect the bad along with the good? Thomas Mann's *Joseph in Egypt* series is great literature, so I would definitely pick that up, but do I really need S. S. Van Dine's 1930 thriller *The Scarab Murder Case*? Of course I do. It sits on the shelf next to Ellery Queen's dreadful 1932 *The Egyptian Cross Mystery*.

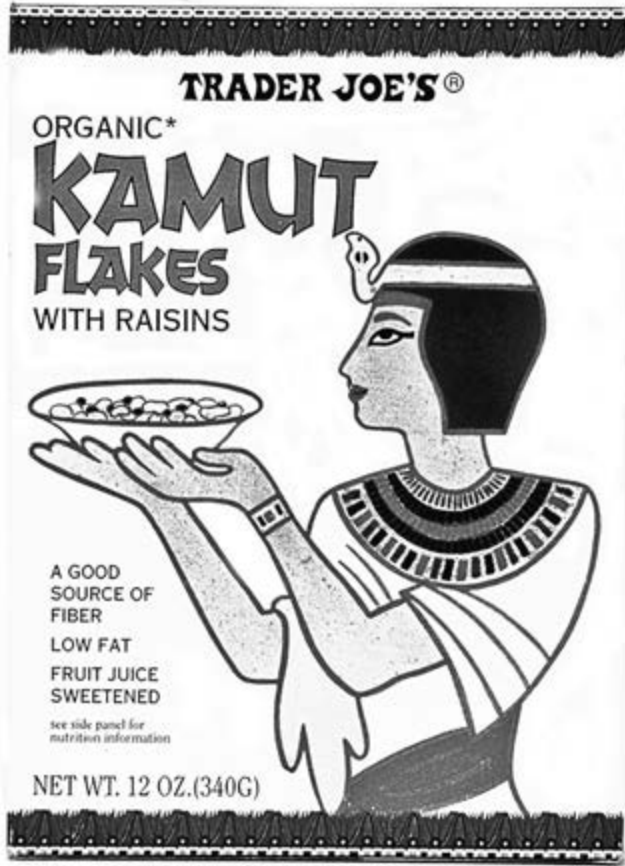
From books it was only a small step to prints, engravings, comics, watercolors, posters, and everything else that now fills my apartment. From two-dimensional prints it was easy to move to objects. And what

objects there are! In 1808 the famous English Wedgwood porcelain factory produced an extraordinary Egyptian tea service to commemorate Admiral Nelson defeating Napoleon Bonaparte at the Battle of the Nile. The teapot lids sport crocodiles, and ersatz hieroglyphs wind around the plates and cups. It's fabulous, but Josiah Wedgwood's Egyptian set (Color Plate 2) is no more wonderful than my cheap World War II-era made-in-Japan tea service with hand-painted pyramids, palm trees, and camels. Both sets are displayed in close proximity to Barbie of the Nile and the King Tut Cologne bottle with a stopper vaguely resembling the boy king's gold mask (Color Plate 46). We all know that something can be so bad that it's good. The true collector has no shame.

Almost every aspect of my life has been touched by the lure of Egypt. There is the Kamut Flakes cereal (Fig. 1.1) that claims its origins in Egypt. At Halloween we give out Yummy Mummies (Fig. 1.2) and the like, and Cleopatra soap, complete with a beautiful portrait of Cleo, is sold in most convenience stores in Greece. Old magazines are a wonderful source of additions to my collections. There are loads of magazine ads with Egyptian themes, some done by the best artists of the time. Remember "I dreamt I was Cleopatra sailing down the Nile in my Maidenform bra"? Magazines of the 1920s are packed with beautiful art deco and art nouveau Egyptian-themed ads for perfumes, soaps, and even car tires.

To compound the danger of unbridled enthusiasm, my wife, Pat, also an Egyptologist, is as bad as I am when it comes to Egyptomania. There are no checks and balances in our house. When we are on the hunt, there is no one to say, "I don't think so, better to pay the rent this month."

Once we heard that a small auction house in Devon, England, was selling the letters and papers of Waynman Dixon, a young British engineer sent to Egypt in 1872 to build bridges over the Nile.



*Fig. 1.1 Kamut Flakes are supposedly grown from 36 original kernels of wheat found in an Egyptian tomb at Dahshur.*

The Egyptian red tape and slow pace of doing business were driving him mad, so he decided to explore the ancient monuments. Inside the Great Pyramid he saw a crack in the wall of the Queen's Chamber and took a sledgehammer to it to see what was behind. These were the Wild West days of Egyptology, when one didn't automatically think of asking for permission. Dixon discovered two mysterious passages called "the Air Shafts." Recently one was explored by robotic cameras, which were not able to reach the end of the passage. The air shafts' purpose remains a mystery. Dixon also visited Alexandria, where he



*Fig. 1.2 Yummy Mummies candy made no claims of any connection to ancient Egypt but they were shaped like mummies.*

saw the obelisk known as Cleopatra's Needle that had been previously offered to England languishing in the sand because money hadn't been provided to transport it. He vowed to bring it back to London.

After his brother raised the funds, Dixon designed an iron caisson, very much like a cigar tube, into which the obelisk would be slid, sealed, and then towed to England by steamer. The voyage was dramatic. The ship hit a gale in the Bay of Biscay, six brave seamen lost their lives, and the obelisk was temporarily lost at sea but remained afloat and subsequently was recovered by another ship. The obelisk coming to London was a major Egyptological event. For the first time in more than a century, a monumental Egyptian antiquity left

Egyptian soil. The story was chronicled in the *Illustrated London News* of the day. A few years ago when Dixon's papers came on the auction block, Pat and I had a chance to own a unique piece of the history of Egyptology. Perhaps we would discover some unknown aspects of the obelisk's journey to the Thames Embankment. But could we afford it?

The archive was divided into eighteen individual lots. Some were letters, some were photographs, and some were Dixon's watercolors of Egypt. *Lot 476 A Collection of Twenty-Two Watercolors* was estimated to sell for £1,000 to £2,000. Less than \$100 each for rather nice paintings by Waynman Dixon seemed quite reasonable. *Lot 477 Collection of Twenty-Seven Detailed Manuscript Letters from Waynman Dixon while in Egypt* was expected to sell for £1,500 to £2,000. This was a bargain considering that they dealt with important events like the discovery of the Air Shafts in the Queen's Chamber and the loss of the obelisk at sea. We were hoping that the material would go for the low end of the estimates. After all, this was a minor auction house selling possessions of a relatively obscure figure. We calculated that we should be able to get it all for about \$15,000, just about all we had in the bank.

We couldn't go to England to bid on the lots so I called the auction house to make sure we could do it over the phone—not nearly as much fun as being there, but still we were in the game. The auction house gave me a time to be by the phone, and someone would call me when the lots came up. Pat and I recalculated and confirmed that it would take everything we had in the bank to get it all, but we were game. The call came.

The first lot was *A Large Collection of Loose Photographs Mainly Related to Waynman Dixon's Travels in Egypt*. Estimate: £400 to £800. We bid £400, then £500, and kept on going. When the lot reached the high estimate, we were still in and wondering who was bidding against us. At £1,000 we dropped out. It was just too high; we had to save our

cash for the other lots. The next few lots were also photographs and we went high, even higher than we planned, but we were still outbid. Was it the same buyer? When the letters came up we were ready to go very high, well above the high estimate. We started at £1,500, quickly passed the high estimate, and then it kept on going right up to £3,000. I told the young lady on the other end of the phone that we were out, but Pat urged me to “Go for it.” I put in one more bid, but again we were outbid. Someone out there was a Waynman Dixon fan. The bidding for the other lots went pretty much the same. I bid beyond the high estimate, and the unidentified villain outbid me. In the end we were able to buy only one lot of the watercolors and an architectural drawing of the obelisk. Who could have wanted Waynman Dixon’s papers so much? Was it someone we knew?

A year later we found out. I was looking through a current Sotheby’s auction catalog of books and prints, and there was the Waynman Dixon material, back up for auction! Well, not exactly. The photographs were not there. It seemed as if a dealer of antique photographs had outbid us, decided he didn’t want the rest of the material after all, and now it was one big lot in a Sotheby’s auction. The finances were still the same—we could just barely afford it, if—big if—we could get it for the low estimate. The photography dealer had probably been the only one who outbid us in the first place, so we had high hopes. We were right. We got it.

My favorite letter is the one in which Dixon tells his family that his name will be “immortalized” because of his discovery of the air shafts (the mysterious small tunnels) in the pyramid. (He was right, but only among Egyptologists.) He even tells how Auguste Mariette, the Director of the Service des Antiquities, called him on the carpet for not asking permission to take a sledgehammer to the pyramid. The lost-and-found saga of the Dixon Papers was a high point of building

our Egyptomania collection. We were broke but happy. Within a few months the hunt was on again.

At some point, I realized I wasn't the only one who thought this was neat stuff. When friends came over to the house, they were fascinated by our Egyptomania. They weren't just being polite. They asked questions, wanted to know the history of each piece, where I found the Victorian thermometer in the shape of an obelisk or the Singer Sewing Machine with Egyptian decorations. The musically inclined were drawn to the hundreds of 1920s sheet music pieces with their art deco covers and titles such as "Old King Tut Was a Wise Old Nut" or "Cleopatra Had a Jazz Band." I loved the sheet music because of the wonderful factual errors they contained. "Old King Tut" was written when Tutankhamen's tomb was first discovered in 1922. The excavators hadn't gotten to the burial chamber yet to discover that Tut was a boy king, so he appears on the sheet music as an old man with a cigar! Writers frequently confused mummies with fossils: "Now that you've turned to stone. . . ." Or sometimes the lyrics got the era wrong: "A million years ago. . . ." I have spent hundreds of hours at flea markets, searching through stacks of sheet music for Egyptian titles. Now it was all worth it. I have a collection.

When our art-loving friends visit, they gravitate toward the art on the walls, the engraving of Napoleon at the Sphinx, or the detailed epic scene of the Holy Family in Egypt. Military buffs love the documents from Napoleon's Egyptian campaign along with the medals, letters, and swords embellished with pharaohs' heads.

Egypt excites people in ways no other country can. Ask any museum curator what the two biggest attractions are—Egypt and dinosaurs. Why the fascination with ancient Egypt? I have been trying to answer that question for 30 years. Part of it is escapism. Egypt is a land far, far away and long, long ago. It's exotic; the hieroglyphs seem

indecipherable, the pyramids appear unbuildable, the art is unsurpassable, it's thousands of years old, and it's still here.

For decades I taught a Wednesday night course on Egyptian hieroglyphs at the New School for Social Research in New York. Sometimes there were more than 100 people in the class. Why? It certainly wasn't going to help them get a job or earn more money. For the most part, the students already had careers, and most were professionals—physicians, lawyers, opera singers, artists, and computer nerds. The course lasted four terms—two years—and many of the students repeated the sequence several times! Something drew them in. What was it? For some, drawing the hieroglyphic birds, plants, and feet was a therapeutic release from present-day concerns. For others, the hieroglyphs were the door to ancient Egypt, an entry into a mysterious distant civilization. Part of it is escapism, but that's not the whole story of why people are drawn to ancient Egypt.

What about all those little kids begging to be taken to the Egyptian section of the museum? They never want to see the Greek vases. What is it that Egypt has that Greece doesn't? One thing is mummies. Mummies give us a chance to confront death in a nonthreatening way. Where else can a child—or adult—stare at a dead body? Usually a dead body is a sign that someone has been lost—been hit by a car, died of cancer, or simply aged. With a mummy, we are not looking at a loser; we have a winner, someone who is 3,000 years old and isn't just dust or a pile of bones in a coffin. We are looking at a recognizable human being who was walking and talking just like us, but 30 centuries ago. Perhaps when we look at a mummy there is a bit of envy. It's almost like the person succeeded in beating the Grim Reaper. In a way, they are immortal, and we all would like a piece of that. So we're hooked; for whatever reason, we buy into ancient Egypt, learn the hieroglyphs,

read the books, visit the museum collections, and look at the art. The next step is going to mummy movies, buying sheets and pillowcases with pharaohs and lotus flowers on them, watching the same *How They Built the Pyramids* documentary on the History Channel four times. Before you know it, you are buying obelisk salt and pepper shakers and searching for Egyptian-themed tchotchkes wherever you go.

In 1990, Long Island University asked me to mount an exhibition of Egyptomania at their Hillwood Art Museum. The museum is quite large, so there was plenty of room to show my treasures. There were engravings from the Napoleonic *Description de l'Égypte* beside *The Living Mummy* comic book and Palmolive soap ads evoking Cleopatra's beauty secrets.

Dave Jason, the Music Department's resident expert on ragtime and jazz, played and sang from vintage sheet music. Children at the opening were given Yummy Mummy candies as souvenirs. By museum standards, the opening was an incredible success. We expected a few hundred people; 1,500 came. Student interns made frantic trips to the grocery store for more food and drink. The *New York Times* praised it.

Writing the exhibition catalog forced me to think about Egyptomania in new ways. I began to realize that interest in ancient Egypt peaked after certain events. When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, he brought artists and scientists ("savants") to study Egypt. When they returned to France, their publication, *Description de l'Égypte*, sparked a giant wave of Egyptomania. Other peaks occurred when massive obelisks were brought from Egypt to Paris, London, and New York in the nineteenth century, igniting the mass production of Egyptomania-related objects. I have spent many pleasant days in search of the silver obelisk-shaped mechanical lead pencils that Victorian ladies wore around their necks. Once at a postcard fair, I was looking through a dealer's Egypt box and spotted an ordinary view of the New York

Obelisk. When I turned it over to see the message, there was a printed invitation from the Secretary of the Navy to the installation of the obelisk in Central Park in 1881.

Perhaps the biggest explosion of interest in ancient Egypt came with the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb in 1922. The world went wild for all things Egyptian. Ladies wore Egyptian-styled dresses and Egyptian perfume. One of my favorite Tut items is a bronze cigarette box imitating a wood chest found in the tomb. The antique dealer selling it insisted it was Victorian, even after he was told that it couldn't be since the chest wasn't discovered until 1922! Half a century after the tomb's discovery, there was a second revival of the Tut frenzy when the Tutankhamen exhibition toured the United States and Europe. Since then Tutankhamen items have been ubiquitous.