



# COLNAGHI

Frederick Arthur Bridgman  
*The Ramesseum at Thebes,*  
*traditionally titled 'The Colossi of Memnon', 1874*

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FREDERICK ARTHUR BRIDGMAN

(Alabama 1847 – Lyons-la-Forêt, 1927 or 1928)

*THE RAMESSEUM AT THEBES, TRADITIONALLY TITLED 'THE COLOSSI  
OF MEMNON', 1874*

Signed and inscribed lower right: 'F.A. Bridgman / Memnon in Thebes'

Oil on canvas

30.5 x 43.2 cm; 12 x 17 in.

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Provenance

Private Collection, United States of America.

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LONDON

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The title this painting has carried since at least the twentieth century, 'The Colossi of Memnon', names a monument that is not, in the strict sense, in the picture at all. What Bridgman painted is a pair of standing, mummiform pillars<sup>1</sup> flanking a doorway, with a third of the same type visible through the opening beyond. This is the Osiride pillar, a distinct architectural type from the seated colossi the traditional title refers to, and the two should not be treated as interchangeable.

The confusion has a long history of its own. 'Memnon' was never an Egyptian name. It belonged to a hero of Greek myth, son of the dawn goddess Eos, killed at Troy by Achilles, and Greek and Roman travellers attached it to the seated statues of Amenhotep III (c. 1386-1349 B.C.) at Thebes after an earthquake in 27 B.C. left one of them emitting a sound at dawn, popularly taken for the hero greeting his mother.<sup>2</sup> By the nineteenth century, 'Memnon' had drifted from a name for two specific statues into a loose shorthand European travellers and dealers applied to Theban ruins in general, statues, temples and courtyards alike, largely regardless of which pharaoh or monument was actually involved.

The Ramesseum itself was caught up in the same confusion. Classical and early modern travellers called it the Memnonium, on the same loose logic, and it was Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832), decipherer of hieroglyphs, who first identified the ruins correctly as the mortuary temple of Ramesses II (c. 1279-1213 B.C.) and gave it the name it now carries.<sup>3</sup> The site's most famous monument underwent its own version of the same process in two separate stages. A giant fallen statue of Ramesses II, still lying in the temple, carried an inscription that the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus (1st century B.C.) transliterated as 'Ozymandias'; Napoleon's expedition recorded but failed to move it. Decades later, in 1816, the explorer Giovanni Belzoni (1778-1823) successfully removed the head and torso of a related colossal statue from the same site. This piece became known as the Younger Memnon, and it was news of this object's approaching arrival in London in 1818 that is generally credited with prompting Shelley (1792-1822) to write his sonnet. Three names, then, layered

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<sup>1</sup>Mummiform: shaped like a wrapped mummy, the arms crossed over the chest and the legs bound together as a single tapering form. It is the standard way Osiris himself is depicted, and Osiride pillars use the same convention to show the king in the god's image.

<sup>2</sup>On the naming of the Colossi of Memnon, the eighteenth-dynasty seated statues of Amenhotep III whose original mortuary temple has almost entirely vanished, see Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago, 'The Colossi of Amenhotep', which notes that Amenhotep III's throne name, Nebmaatra, was likely pronounced Nimmaria or Mimmarraria in later periods and became conflated with the Greek hero Memnon after an earthquake of 27 BC left one statue emitting sound at dawn.

<sup>3</sup>On the Ramesseum's own history as the 'Memnonium' before Champollion's identification, and on the Ozymandias colossus recorded by Napoleon's expedition, see Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures, University of Chicago, 'The Ozymandias Colossus at the Ramesseum'. On the separate removal of the Younger Memnon by Giovanni Belzoni in 1816 and its connection to Shelley, see British Museum, 'Ramesses II statue: everything you need to know' ([britishmuseum.org](http://britishmuseum.org)), and Mayes, Stanley, *The Great Belzoni*. The British Museum's own account credits news of the statue's approaching arrival in 1818, rather than the *Description de l'Égypte* record of the still-buried Ozymandias colossus, as the more direct prompt for Shelley's poem, a distinction worth keeping separate.

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onto two related but distinct fragments of the same temple: Memnon, Ozymandias, and the Ramesseum itself, none of them Egyptian, all of them stuck.

What Bridgman actually recorded is the second court of the Ramesseum, the mortuary temple Ramesses II built on the west bank at Thebes, where a colonnade of Osiride pillars, the king's own image carved as the mummiform god Osiris, once ran along both sides of the court.<sup>4</sup> By the time Bridgman painted it, much of that colonnade had fallen; the pillars still upright, doorway and lintel between them, would have stood out precisely because so much around them had not survived.

Bridgman has kept the composition close and unpretentious. The two nearest pillars command the foreground, their crossed arms and long mummiform bodies rendered in warm ochre stone against a clear blue sky; a third pillar, smaller with distance, is visible through the doorway, along with a suggestion of further ruin beyond. Loose blocks lie scattered at the pillars' bases, the ordinary debris of a site nobody has tidied. The palette is pale and even, sunlight rather than shadow, consistent with work done in front of the subject rather than composed afterwards from memory.

This small canvas belongs to Bridgman's most direct way of working. On his first journey through Egypt, he travelled with the American painter Charles Sprague Pearce (1851-1914), producing around three hundred sketches over the course of the trip; source material he would draw on for decades of larger studio compositions back in Paris. He also worked as a photographer and used his own photographs as an aid to memory once he was back at his easel, gradually assembling a personal collection of costumes and architectural fragments that turn up in his later, more theatrical harem and market scenes. Set against that later, composite practice, a small sketch like this one reads as closer to notation: made on the spot, without the embellishment of the studio pictures still to come.

Bridgman was born in Tuskegee, Alabama, in 1847 and moved to Paris in 1866 to study under Jean-Léon Gérôme (1824-1904), whose precise draughtsmanship and interest in the Near East shaped Bridgman's own practice closely enough that he became known as "the American Gérôme."<sup>5</sup> His first journey to North Africa and Egypt began in 1872; dealer sources place its end in 1874, taking him as far south as Abu Simbel, and this small canvas belongs to that first, formative encounter with Egypt rather than to his later, more elaborate studio compositions of harem and market scenes.

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<sup>4</sup>The identification of this composition as the second court of the Ramesseum, rather than the Colossi of Memnon proper, is independently confirmed by the Association pour la Sauvegarde du Ramesseum, a French heritage organisation dedicated to the site, whose own archive of historical depictions of the Ramesseum includes this image captioned 'Statues osiriaques de la seconde cour' (Osiride statues of the second court).

<sup>5</sup>Bridgman, Frederick Arthur, in Benezit Dictionary of Artists, Oxford University Press, published online 31 October 2011, consulted via the London Library. Benezit gives his death as 1927 or 1928, at Lyons-la-Forêt (Eure), rather than Rouen as given in other sources, and states he went to North Africa and Egypt in 1872 and remained there for five years, longer than the 1872 to 1874 range given in dealer sources. Neither discrepancy has been resolved; the biographical detail in the main text follows the more commonly repeated dealer chronology, but Benezit's dates should be treated as, if anything, the more authoritative.

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A small irony sits at the centre of this picture: a painter trained to observe with unusual precision, working directly in front of his subject, ended up with a title that misnames what he was looking at. The misnaming did not originate with Bridgman, and it says nothing about the accuracy of his eye. It says something instead about how loosely the word 'Memnon' travelled once it left the two statues it was coined for, attaching itself to whatever ruin at Thebes a traveller, or a dealer, needed a recognisable name for.

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