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Henry Roderick Newman
Abu Simbel, 1904

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HENRY RODERICK NEWMAN
(New York 1843 – Florence 1917)

ABU SIMBEL, 1904

Inscribed lower left: 'H.R. Newman, Abu Simbel, 1904'

Watercolour on paper
64.3 x 41.3 cm; 25.3 x 16.25 in.

Provenance

Private Collection, England.

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This sheet beautifully captures the interior of the Great Temple at Abu Simbel: the Osiride colossi of Ramesses the Second ranged along the hypostyle hall, seen from within, with the doorway open onto the sunlit river beyond. Newman's interior view is set deep in the hall, so that the columns of standing figures rise close to the foreground, their carved faces catching a little reflected light from the doorway while their lower bodies fall into shade. Overhead, the painted ceiling is faintly legible in outline. It is a picture built on contrast throughout, though not one of light against dark, since the hall itself reads as bright rather than dim: rather, the contrast is between the enclosed, carved stone of the interior and the open expanse of the Nile beyond the door, and between the closeness of the foreground pillar and the pale distance of the river.¹

Abu Simbel had been effectively invisible for most of the centuries before Newman arrived there. Sand had risen against the façade until only the heads of the colossi outside showed above it when the Swiss traveller Johann Ludwig Burckhardt passed in 1813, and it was not until 1817 that Giovanni Belzoni cleared the doorway and entered the temple that Newman would later paint from within. Indeed David Roberts (1796-1864) had painted the interior of the temple in 1849, following his journey to Egypt in 1838, from a different vantage point: Roberts stands near the entrance looking into the hall, so that his foreground is brightly lit and the space recedes into shadow, the reverse of Newman's arrangement, in which the doorway itself is the source of light, seen from within. By 1904, when this sheet is dated, the Great Temple had been open to travellers for the better part of a century; however, Newman's picture still carries something of the excavated building's character: a hall recovered from beneath the desert, its long burial and its buried scale still legible even after decades of visitors. His choice of viewpoint, within the hall and looking out rather than in from the entrance, gives the temple's own recovered depths equal weight with its famous colossi, so that the picture reads as much as a study of recovered interior space as a portrait of Ramesside sculpture.

¹Per the Yale Center for British Art's own gallery documentation, Roberts populates his brightly lit foreground with what the museum's label describes as 'a dozen Arab figures in colorful garments for scale and human interest.' Newman's sheet, by contrast, appears to contain no figures at all.

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David Roberts, R.A. 1796–1864, *The Hypostyle Hall of the Great Temple at Abu Simbel, Egypt*, 1849, Oil on panel, Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.534.

Newman studied medicine in New York in conformity with family tradition and turned to painting only after his father's death released him from it. He exhibited for the first time at the National Academy of Design in 1861, having spent six months painting landscapes at Stockbridge, Massachusetts, to prove to his mother that he could support himself by art, and in 1864 he was elected to the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art, the American society whose principles were drawn directly from the writings of John Ruskin.

In 1870 Newman went to France, where he studied under Jean-Léon Gérôme. On the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War that same year, he moved on to Italy, living first in Florence and thereafter in Venice. In 1883 he married the Englishwoman Mary Wills, and their house in Florence became a meeting point for British and American artists and writers on art.

From 1887 he began to spend winters in Egypt. Benezit records this Egyptian and Middle Eastern travel specifically for 1887 to 1892, but dated watercolours show him continuing to return well beyond that window: to Philae in 1893, 1894 and 1899, and to Abu Simbel and Philae again in 1904 and 1905, the two years bracketing the

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present sheet.² The full extent and regularity of his later visits has not been established here, but the surviving dated work points to a practice of recurring return across nearly two decades rather than a single early phase of Egyptian travel. In the 1890s he also travelled to Greece and Japan. His chief subjects, in this latter part of his career, were the buildings of Florence and its environs on the one hand and the ancient monuments of the Nile on the other, painted with the same close, unhurried attention in both settings.

Ruskin's doctrine of truth to nature: the literal and painstaking imitation of what stands in front of the artist, shaped Newman's earliest landscape and flower studies and never thereafter left his practice. Newman's own letters to the American Pre-Raphaelite painter Thomas Charles Farrer describe a mentorship not unlike the one Ruskin himself provided to the English landscape painter John Brett; it is this inherited discipline that gives Newman's Egyptian watercolours their particular character: a refusal to soften or generalise stone that most travelling painters would have treated as a picturesque mass.³ This Ruskinian discipline found personal validation when Newman and Ruskin later met in Italy, most notably in Florence in October 1882, where Newman introduced Ruskin to the artist Francesca Alexander.⁴

Newman treated Abu Simbel across many seasons rather than in a single visit, so that this sheet belongs to a sustained body of work built up over years of return rather than to the impression of a single traveller passing through.⁵

²Dated Egyptian watercolours attributed to these years include *Among the Ruins of Philae* (signed and dated 19 January 1893, with provenance to Theodore Davis from 1893, sold Christie's New York, 8 September 2017); *Philae from the Island of Biggeh* (dated 1894, Betty Krulik Fine Art); and *Venus of Philae*, described by its current dealer as painted during Newman's 1899 winter in Egypt (M. S. Rau). These are gallery and auction-house attributions of the artist's own inscribed dates.

³Newman's connection to Ruskin is well attested, and can now be dated precisely. Benezit states only that Newman belonged to the Association for the Advancement of Truth in Art, a group whose principles derived from Ruskin's writings, without asserting personal acquaintance. Kent Ahrens's 1976 article names Newman a friend of Ruskin in its title, and the American National Biography records that Newman's surviving letters to Thomas Charles Farrer suggest a mentor-pupil relationship comparable to Ruskin's own guidance of the British painter John Brett. The two men are independently confirmed to have met in Florence in October 1882 (see following note).

⁴Newman introduced Ruskin to Lucia and Francesca Alexander in Florence in October 1882, during what proved to be Ruskin's last visit to Italy; a friendship and correspondence of some three hundred letters followed until Ruskin's death in 1900, documented in the finding aid to the John Ruskin correspondence with Lucia and Francesca Alexander, Boston Public Library, Archives and Special Collections, and drawn on in Lucia Gray Swett, *John Ruskin's Letters to Francesca and Memoirs of the Alexanders*, Boston, 1931. Ruskin's own regard for Newman's work is separately on record: he described Newman's drawings of Florence as 'quite the most valuable records yet existing of the old city and her duomo' (Works, ed. Cook and Wedderburn, Library Edition, vol. 30, p. 73).

⁵Newman is often said to have wintered aboard a boat moored on the Nile during his Egyptian seasons, in the manner of several expatriate artists of the period, and the further claim is sometimes made that his boat was moored opposite Abu Simbel itself. This is plausible given his repeated return to the subject but has not been confirmed in the sources consulted for this factsheet, and is offered here with that caveat rather than as established fact. A pale, tapering shape above the tree

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Two further Egyptian watercolours by Newman, held respectively in Boston and New York, set the present sheet within a wider group of temple subjects to which he returned across his career.⁶

Set beside Newman's paintings of Florence, this Abu Simbel is unmistakably the work of the same hand: the same patient, even description of surface, applied here to sandstone and shadow rather than to stucco and stone tracery. What changes is the light. In Florence, Newman's subjects are generally lit evenly by the diffused daylight of a northern city; here the whole picture is organised around a single aperture, the temple's own doorway, through which the Egyptian sun enters. Even the darkest part of the hall retains a legible stone structure rather than dissolving into an indistinguishable shadow.

By the time Newman entered the hall, the camera had already been at Abu Simbel for half a century, and travellers no longer needed a painter to tell them what the temple looked like. What a watercolour like this one still offered was not information but duration: the sense of a single, patient eye returning to the same stone across many winters, describing it with a slowness no photographic exposure could match. Newman's Abu Simbel belongs, in this sense, to the last generation of painters for whom that patience still seemed a natural way of knowing a monument, painting the temple from within, by the light that falls through its own door.

line on the far bank, roughly opposite the doorway, is consistent with the sail of a moored boat, though this cannot be confirmed as Newman's own vessel from the sheet alone.

⁶A watercolour by Newman of the same subject, *The Temple of Abu Simbel*, is recorded by Benezit among the holdings of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. A further Egyptian subject, *East Entrance, Room of Tiberius, Temple of Isis, Philae*, dated 1905, is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Morris K. Jesup Fund, 1990, object number 1990.48). Together with the present sheet, these attest to Newman's sustained practice of returning to the same Egyptian monuments across several winters.

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