



COLNAGHI

William John Palmer-Jones
The Colossi of Memnon at Dusk, 1912

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WILLIAM JOHN PALMER-JONES
(Hartford 1887 – London 1974)

THE COLOSSI OF MEMNON AT DUSK, 1912

Signed and dated lower left: 'Palmer-Jones 1912'

Watercolour on paper

Provenance

Private Collection, England.

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The sheet shows the two colossi of Amenhotep the Third on the west bank at Thebes, seen at dusk across the still floodwater that lay before them for part of the year. The more distant figure, at left, is smaller in the composition, with the pale moon hanging low beside it. The nearer figure, at right, is cropped by the top of the sheet at the shoulder, so that its head is never shown directly at all; it is, however, almost entirely visible in reflection, missing only the very crown of the head. Both statues are repeated in the water below, the moon doubled with them, and two faint diagonal lines cross the reflection, the only real disturbance in an otherwise motionless surface. Rather than a study of the ancient colossi, the painting is fundamentally an exploration of this sublime, near-perfect reflection.

These are the statues that antiquity knew as vocal. An earthquake in 27 BC, reported by the geographer Strabo, split the northern colossus and brought down its upper body; afterwards, visitors said, the broken figure sang at dawn, a brief note as the sun's first warmth passed through the cracked stone. The statue itself was no monument to Memnon at all, but to the Egyptian king Amenhotep the Third; Greeks and Romans nonetheless heard in its voice the cry of the Trojan hero Memnon, son of the dawn goddess Eos, greeting his divine mother as she rose each morning, a story almost too well fitted to a statue that spoke only at sunrise to resist. Pausanias compared the sound to a lyre string breaking. Roman travellers of rank went out of their way to hear it, among them the emperor Hadrian and his court in AD 130, and several left their own testimony carved directly into the statue's leg.¹

The legend long outlasted the empire that had prized it. The future Egyptologist Amelia Edwards, steaming past on the Nile in the 1870s, could still refer in passing to 'the morning-song of Memnon' as something her readers would recognise without explanation, decades before Palmer-Jones painted the statues on the same spot, not singing but silent, at dusk.²

Palmer-Jones was born William John Jones in Hartford, Huntingdonshire, and took the name Palmer-Jones by deed poll on his marriage in September 1911. He trained at the Architectural Association Schools in London from 1906 to 1908. From 1908 to 1912 he served as architect to the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Egyptian Expedition, based at Thebes, ancient Luxor. It was demanding, practical work rather than a traveller's diversion. In 1910 he was sent north to the Delta, to record the Coptic monasteries of the Wadi Natrun for a separate branch of the expedition, working in cooperation with Cairo's Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe; among his restorations at Thebes itself was work at the Temple of Hibis, the well-preserved Persian-period temple at Kharga Oasis. His most lasting contribution to

¹The account given here of the statue's cracking and its dawn sound follows Strabo, *Geography*, book 17, and Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, book 1; the repair under Septimius Severus is likewise reported in the ancient sources. Exact section numbers should be checked against a critical edition before publication, since they are given slightly differently across the secondary summaries consulted for this factsheet.

²Edwards, Amelia B., *A Thousand Miles up the Nile*, London, 1877 (revised edition 1888). The phrase quoted appears in a passage describing an engraving by Elihu Vedder of a different subject, a fellah listening to the Sphinx, not a description of the Colossi themselves, but it shows how familiar the legend still was to an educated Englishwoman touring Egypt a generation before Palmer-Jones.

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the expedition, however, still stands at Thebes itself: the Metropolitan House at Qurna, the expedition's own headquarters, funded by J. P. Morgan and designed by Palmer-Jones with domed roofs recalling the Coptic monasteries he had recently recorded, built in 1912, his final season with the expedition.³ The present watercolour belongs to that same last season, painted, in other words, not by a visitor passing through but by the architect who had spent four years designing for, and recording, this particular stretch of the Nile.

A pendant to this sheet exists, showing the same two colossi at dawn rather than dusk. It is not part of the present exhibition and is believed to remain in private hands, but an image of it is included here for comparison. Where the dusk sheet is built on stillness and near-symmetry, the dawn version is worked in pink and pale orange rather than blue and grey, and the hieroglyphs on the further statue's back pillar are rendered a little more distinctly; in both, the same two faint diagonal lines cross the reflected water. Whether Palmer-Jones intended the two as a pendant from the outset or brought them together only afterwards is not established here.

It is worth setting the dusk sheet, finally, against the oldest surviving account of what these statues were once thought to do. In AD 130 the Roman poet Julia Balbilla stood before the same northern colossus and heard it, she tells us, speak: 'I, Balbilla, heard from the stone when it spoke... the divine voice of Memnon.' Palmer-Jones's watercolour shows the same stone nearly eighteen centuries later, at the one hour of the day the legend never claimed for it, mute, moonlit, and reflected in water so still that the reflection itself becomes the picture's real subject. Where Balbilla came to hear a voice, Palmer-Jones, and we after him, have only the silence and the reflection, which may be the more lasting monument of the two.⁴

³The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 'The Egyptian Expedition, 1906–1936' (essay, metmuseum.org), records that the 1910 study of the Wadi Natrun monasteries was carried out by 'architect William J. Jones (later Palmer-Jones), in cooperation with the Comité de conservation des monuments de l'art arabe in Cairo.' The design and 1912 construction date of the Metropolitan House at Qurna, funded by J. P. Morgan, are recorded by the Theban Mapping Project (thebanmappingproject.com).

⁴Julia Balbilla, epigram inscribed on the left leg of the northern colossus, Thebes, AD 130, translation after Patricia A. Rosenmeyer, *The Language of Ruins: Greek and Latin Inscriptions on the Memnon Colossus*, Oxford University Press, 2018; see also Rosenmeyer, 'Greek Verse Inscriptions in Roman Egypt: Julia Balbilla's Sapphic Voice', *Classical Antiquity*, vol. 27, no. 2, 2008, pp. 334–58.

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William John Palmer-Jones, *Dawn: The Colossi of Memnon*, 1912
Watercolour on paper. Private collection.

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