

THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF VISUAL ARTS AND DANCE

THE GAZE OF THE BEHOLDER: HOW NATIONAL IDENTITY IN NINETEENTH-
CENTURY ENGLAND WAS REINFORCED BY THE COLLECTION AND
DISPLAY OF ANCIENT EGYPTIAN MATERIAL CULTURE

By

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For my family– Momma, Daddy, Camille and Danielle. You are my heart and my tribe.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how the British Museum, David Roberts and Francis Frith asserted English identity throughout first part of the nineteenth-century. I argue that they did this through the collection and display of ancient Egyptian imagery. For each example, I apply the concept of the gaze. The gaze, as an art historical term, defines the visual dialogue between the viewer and the subject.

I believe that emphasizing contrasts is the most effective way of defining national identity. In nineteenth-century England, the use of Egyptian imagery was particularly effective because of the popular idea that anything Eastern was “Other” or exotic. This thesis discusses how the British Museum, David Roberts, and Francis Frith exploited this otherness.

I chose my three examples because of their physical connection with the Egyptian material. Each translated immediacy into effective visual statements. I also chose them because they represent three distinct periods within the nineteenth-century. For each, I discuss how the images were collected and how they made these accessible to the public.

The British Museum opens the nineteenth-century. It had the strongest ties to institutional control of Egyptian imagery. It was not only an influential English institution in its own right, but was also supported by Parliament. The British Museum had an incredible level of control because it housed the actual objects for the public to come and view. Towards the middle of the century, the artist David Roberts traveled to Egypt to collect its imagery for paintings and lithographs to be completed upon his return. He joined the influential Royal Academy of Arts shortly after. The photographer Francis Frith closes the period under study. With Frith, we see the loosening of the institutional control of Egyptian imagery. He traveled to Egypt, on his own, to photograph the same range of subject matter that his predecessor sketched. Upon his return, he used his printing business to distribute the photos. Frith also represents how increased access to Egypt also diminished the sense of “otherness.”