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Sculpted Glyphs: Egypt and the Musée Charles X: Primary Sources

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Abstract:

This article proposes that the linguist Jean-François Champollion posited a new theory of Egyptian art in the mid-1820s and takes his theory as a means for interpreting France's first museum of Egyptian antiquities, the Musée Charles X, of which he was curator. This interpretation is made possible through the unprecedented use of digital tools to visualize a historic museum display. In addition to a scholarly essay and downloadable primary source material, this article invites readers to explore a fully-navigable, three-dimensional model of the Musée Charles X.

Digital Humanities and Art History

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Sculpted Glyphs: Egypt and the Musée Charles X: Primary Sources by Elizabeth Buhe

Archival Inventories

The primary source material for the 3D model of the Musée Charles X consists of inventories of three Egyptian collections acquired by the Louvre between 1824 and 1827 (fig. 1).

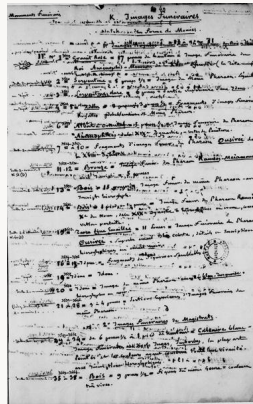


Fig. 1, Jean-François Champollion, inventory of the Salt collection (1826), page 49, showing Egyptian objects reproduced in the 3D model. Archives des musées nationaux, 7DD*4. [\[larger image\]](#)

Annotations on the inventories precisely indicate Champollion’s placement of Egyptian artifacts within each cabinet of the Musée Charles X’s four galleries. Specifically, the marginalia of draughtsman Jean-Léon-Joseph Dubois (1780–1846), who became curator of the museum after Champollion’s death in 1832, provide location references for each object.

Because some objects, mostly jewelry, were stolen during the July Revolution and are accompanied by the note “enlevé le 29 juillet 1830,” we know that Dubois’s annotations were made (probably shortly) after that date. The three-dimensional model therefore represents the appearance of the Musée Charles X at that time rather than upon its opening on December 15, 1827. For this reason, objects from the Drovetti collection, which arrived in Paris in the spring of 1828, are included in the model even though they would not have been on display for the museum’s inauguration. Champollion maintained control of the museum throughout this period, so it is reasonable to conclude that the story told by the inventories and therefore the model is representative of his curatorial vision.

A note on the second funerary room (current room 29): in several instances Dubois noted that mummies were displayed, with and without coffins, “on the table.” However, because no documentation exists from that time to suggest what such a table may have looked like, no table has been included in the model. It may have been located in the center of the gallery, as shown in the first known visual record of the Musée Charles X, which dates to 1863 (fig. 2). In other cases, Dubois’s notes indicate that various parts of a single coffin were divided between rooms, or his notes contradict each other, suggesting that an item (or components of it) was both on display and in storage. Given this lack of specificity, we have rendered one mummy in three-dimensions and placed it in the third cabinet of room 3 to suggest the presence of the mummies and coffins in this gallery.^[1]



Fig. 2, A. Régis, *Salle funéraire du musée Charles X*, engraving published in Adolphe Joanne, *Paris illustré, nouveau guide de l'étranger et du Parisien* (Paris: Bonaventure et Ducessois, 1863). [\[larger image\]](#)

The inventories are housed in the Archives des musées nationaux at the Louvre and enumerate the Egyptian antiquities in the collections purchased from Edmé-Antoine Durand in 1824 (7DD*2), Henry Salt in 1826 (7DD*4), and Bernardino Drovetti in 1827 (7DD*8).

Below are my transcriptions of the archival inventories, in which I group objects by room and cabinet. I did not transcribe those objects indicated by Dubois as in storage (“au dépôt”). Using Sylvie Guichard’s new illustrated edition of Champollion’s *Notice descriptive*, I cross-referenced Champollion’s original object numbers with the Louvre’s contemporary accession numbers and included those that were available.^[2]

I hope that making these inventory transcriptions available will enable further scholarship beyond this article.



[[link to PDF file online](#)]

Texts by Jean-François Champollion

The primary texts written by Champollion and cited in the article are freely available online:

Lettres à M. le duc de Blacas d'Aulps, relatives au Musée royal égyptien de Turin. 2 vols. Paris: Firmin Didot, 1824–1826.

<https://archive.org/details/lettresmleducd01cham>

Notice descriptive des monuments égyptiens du Musée Charles X. Paris: Imprimerie de Crapelet, 1827.

<https://archive.org/details/noticedescripti00unkngoog>

Précis du système hiéroglyphique des anciens égyptiens ou recherches sur les élémens premiers de cette écriture sacrée, sur leurs diverses combinaisons, et sur les rapports de ce système avec les autres méthodes graphiques égyptiennes. Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1824. Reprinted with a foreword by Champollion and his *Lettre à M. Dacier*. Paris: Imprimerie royale, 1828. Page references are to the 1828 edition.

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k117252f>

Elizabeth Buhe is a Ph.D. candidate in art history at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, where she studies nineteenth-century French and twentieth-century American art. She received a Fulbright grant to conduct the research from which this article results.

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Notes

[1] The note accompanying this mummy is “le corps, salle supérieure,” interpreted here as room 3, where the majority of coffins were displayed. This is the only object shown in the 3D model for which definitive information about its cabinet location is not known. Jean-François Champollion, “Inventaire de la collection Salt, 1826,” Archives des musées nationaux, 7DD*4, 42.

[2] Sylvie Guichard, *Jean-François Champollion: Notice descriptive des monuments égyptiens du Musée Charles X* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2013).

Illustrations

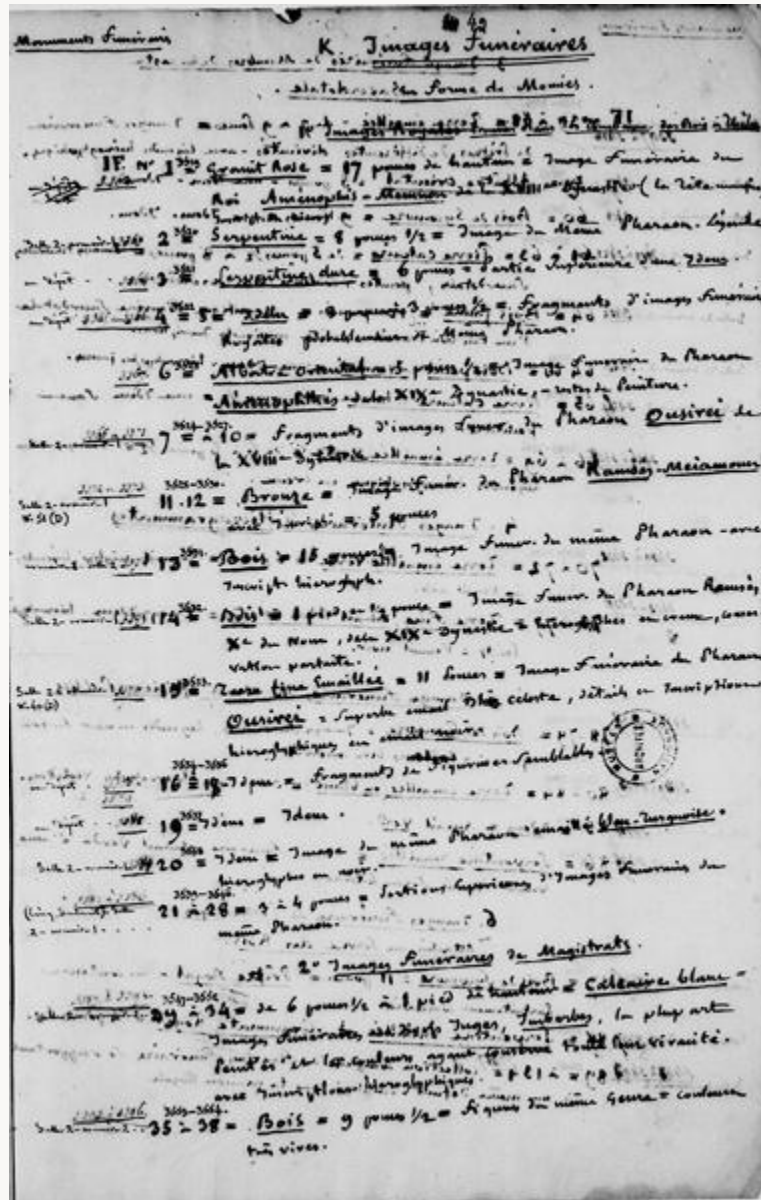


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