

JEAN-FRANÇOIS CHAMPOLLION IN EGYPT

ANDREW ROBINSON

Among the many examples of works of art catalogued in John Ruskin's Teaching Collection at Oxford, compiled in 1870 and today available in digital form from the Sackler Library, are ravishingly colourful paintings from ancient Egypt. The paintings were warmly recommended to his students by Ruskin, who declared: 'The more you can copy of these figures the better, always measuring with precision'.

The plates were taken from a pioneering Italian work, *Monumenti dell' Egitto e della Nubia* ('Monuments of Egypt and Nubia'), published in 1832 and compiled by Ippolito Rosellini. He accompanied a revolutionary expedition to Egypt in 1828–9 led by Jean-François Champollion. A French scholar from humble origins in provincial France, Champollion rose to become the world's first professor of Egyptology. He was appointed at the College of France in 1831.

Today Champollion is best known for his decipherment of the Egyptian hieroglyphs. He was assisted in the project, which was started in France in 1822 (exactly a century before the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb) by the British polymath Thomas Young and the Rosetta Stone. The endeavour continued up to Champollion's premature death in 1832 and was finally accepted as accurate by scholars after the 1860s. Less well known – despite a compelling BBC television dramatisation, 'The Secrets of the Hieroglyphs', screened in 2005 – are Champollion's adventures in Egypt, especially at Abu Simbel and at Thebes, where he coined the enduring name 'Valley of



Detail from a portrait of Jean-François Champollion by Léon Cogniet, 1832 (the year of Champollion's death) ▲

the Kings'. During this year-and-a-half-long visit, he became the first scholar to enter the tombs of the pharaohs who had the ability to interpret the hieroglyphs on their sculptures and murals. He brought the inscriptions back to life, after a tantalising silence of two millennia.



Expedition to Egypt at Thebes, 1829, led by Ippolito Rosellini (centre: standing in white shawl) and Jean-François Champollion (centre: seated with sword), painted by Giuseppe Angelelli, one of the expedition members, in 1834–36 ▲

Some idea of the passion and excitement Champollion felt emerges from a letter he wrote from Egypt to his brother, Jacques-Joseph (himself a scholar, who had supported Jean-François's research selflessly for many years) in Paris. In this letter, dated New Year's Day 1829, he observed:

The great temple of Ibsamboul [Abu Simbel] is worth the voyage to Nubia all by itself: it is a marvel that would stand out as wonderful even at Thebes. The labour that its excavation must have cost frightens the imagination. ... But it is a tough business to visit it. ... I undressed almost completely, down to my Arab shirt and long linen underpants, and pushed myself flat on my stomach through the small opening in

the doorway that, if cleared of sand, would be at least 25 feet in height. I thought I was entering the mouth of a furnace, and, when I had slid entirely into the temple, I found myself in an atmosphere heated to 52 degrees: we went through this astonishing excavation, Rosellini, Ricci [the artist responsible for several plates selected by Ruskin], I and one of the Arabs holding a candle in his hand. The first chamber is supported by eight pillars against which are backed as many colossal statues, each 30 feet tall, representing yet again Ramesses the Great. The walls of this vast chamber are dominated by a series of grand historical bas-reliefs relating to the conquests of the Pharaoh in Africa.

Another of Champollion's letters, written from Thebes in March 1829, jokes about the expedition's novel abode – inside a tomb in the Valley of the Kings:

It is King Ramesses (the fourth of the nineteenth dynasty) who has offered us hospitality, for we are all living in his magnificent tomb ... This hypogeum, in a remarkable state of preservation, receives enough air and enough light to accommodate us marvellously. We occupy the three first chambers, which cover a length of 65 paces; the walls, of 15 to 20 feet in height, and the ceilings, are totally covered with painted sculptures, the colours of which have kept almost all of their brilliance. It is truly the habitation of a prince, almost as convenient as a suite of rooms; the floor is entirely covered in mats and reeds.

An accompanying sketch map of this unparalleled dormitory shows the bed of each expedition member, plus the bed of 'the cat Kordofan' and 'the gazelle' – all watched over by the sarcophagus of the king in the tomb's great funerary hall.

Champollion was correct about the tomb's occupant being Rameses IV, but incorrect in identifying him with the nineteenth dynasty (the same as that of Rameses II, 'the Great'). Rameses IV is now allotted to the twentieth dynasty. Champollion also, inevitably, made various mistakes in reading the hieroglyphs. Even so, he is rightly regarded as the founder of a new science, and remains perhaps the most romantic figure in the modern rediscovery of ancient Egypt. ■

Andrew Robinson is the author of Cracking the Egyptian Code: The Revolutionary Life of Jean-François Champollion, now available in paperback.



Engraving of a portrait of Rameses III by Alessandro Ricci: plate from *Monumenti dell' Egitto e della Nubia* ('Monuments of Egypt and Nubia'), published by Ippolito Rosellini in 1832. It was included in 1870 in the 'Catalogue of Examples' of John Ruskin's Teaching Collection at Oxford. ▲