

Characteristically American: Memorial Architecture, National Identity, and the Egyptian Revival

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Review

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Giguere, Joy M. *Characteristically American: Memorial Architecture, National Identity, and the Egyptian Revival*. University of Tennessee Press, \$74.95 ISBN 9781621900399

Civil War Americans Commemorated in Egyptian Architectural Style

Joy M. Giguere's book is a welcome addition to the history of American architecture, particularly to the revival styles that were so popular in antebellum America. The last authoritative scholarly work on the Egyptian Revival was Richard Carrott's 1978 volume, *The Egyptian Revival: Its Sources, Monuments, and Meaning 1808—1858* (Berkeley: University of California Press), and Giguere's augmentation of that work represents a long-overdue consideration of the subject.

The Greek and Gothic revivals have received the lion's share of attention, largely because they were more easily adapted to building types and to the popular imagination. Yet, Americans turned to the Egyptian Revival in a surprising variety of instances, employing the style for prisons, firehouses, railroad depots, suspension bridges, courthouses, churches, and even synagogues. The style became ubiquitous enough that contemporaries spoke of "Egyptomania" sweeping the country. Although largely forgotten and derided by subsequent generations, the Egyptian Revival answered the needs of nineteenth-century Americans for sophistication and monumentality.

It was Napoleon's Egyptian Campaign of 1798 – 1801 that spurred Americans and Europeans alike to study ancient Egyptian art, architecture, and culture. For Americans, however, this rediscovery of ancient Egypt coincided with a need to find tangible expressions of a national identity that was being formed around abstract ideas of constitutional governance. Many Europeans traveling in the new republic during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries published harsh critiques of American society, noting specifically a lack of literary and artistic development. American elites were determined to prove to its

critics that the new nation had both the sophistication and the means to establish a rich expression of their cultural aspirations, and they sought most often sought to do so through architecture.

Giguere, an Assistant Professor of History at Penn State, York, is a cultural historian whose research focuses mainly on topics related to commemorative culture – cemeteries, gravestones, public monuments and memorials, the politics of memory (both public and private), and mourning customs and material culture. In this volume, she doesn't intend to make a comprehensive survey of Egyptian Revival, but rather examines major examples of the style over time as used within a larger commemorative landscape. Giguere builds a larger context that explains why urban elites and middle-class Americans found such profound satisfaction in the use of the Egyptian Revival. The preoccupation with mummies in popular literature and entertainment, as well as contemporary speculations about human origins and race theory, accompanied a fascination with Egyptian culture, especially the power of its funerary architecture and symbols to evoke continuity with and permanence of Western values.

Giguere discusses the several manifestations of the Egyptian Revival, beginning with the Rural Cemetery movement and its role in popularizing the Egyptian Revival. The gates to Mt. Auburn Cemetery (1831) in Boston, America's first rural cemetery, provoked debates over the appropriateness of using pagan symbols to commemorate sites of Christian burial, and it is in these debates that Giguere finds the significance of the style to Americans.

Obelisks are the most readily recognizable commemorative object to come from the Egyptian Revival and Giguere examines the four obelisks that were erected to commemorate the American Revolution, starting with the Bunker Hill Monument (1825—1842) in Charlestown, MA. These monuments set the precedent for the use of the Egyptian Revival as appropriate to national commemorations, the most important one being the Washington Monument (1848—1884). Famously left unfinished during the Civil War and Reconstruction, the Washington Monument became a national embarrassment, and the lack of will to complete the monument called into question the nation's values.

Perhaps the greatest contribution that Giguere makes is her close read of the language used for dedications of cemeteries and public monuments in the Egyptian style and finds that it is in this public discourse that rationales were

offered for its use. Dedicatory ceremonies were also events at which Americans linked themselves to the great civilizations of the past, not only Greece and Rome, but also Egypt. The Egyptian Revival was as much a discursive movement as it was an architectural movement, and Giguere's analysis of the discourse is insightful.

This book will be of interest to cultural historians and historians of art and architecture, and it will take its place as one of the most important works on the subject.

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