
Designing Antiquity: Owen Jones, Ancient Egypt and the Crystal Palace examines the Egyptian Court at the second incarnation of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham (1854-1936). Written by Stephanie Moser, professor of archeology at the University of Southampton, this text offers a different perspective on Owen Jones (1809-1874) and British design reform. In addition to the Egyptian Court at the Crystal Palace, its art, design, and reception, those not familiar with Jones will find a good general overview of his work at the Great Exhibition and a concise Egypt-focused exploration of his text The Grammar of Ornament (1856). Color and its relation to ornament, a key principle in Jones’ theoretical approach to design, is a theme throughout the text and situated within the parameters of nineteenth-century knowledge of Egyptian aesthetics.

Moser reconstructs the appearance of the court and its reception, scholarly and popular, through contemporary sources. She chronicles the contribution that Jones and colleague Matthew Digby Wyatt (1820-1877) made to the mid-nineteenth-century view of ancient Egyptian art and culture. Rich in quotations portraying the British perception, Moser fails to critically analyze the relationship of design and cultural identity. Designing Antiquity does not examine the manner in which Jones’ depiction of Egyptian ornament altered design and decorative arts during the second half of the nineteenth century. The Egyptian plates in The Grammar of Ornament, Jones’ masterwork, are discussed briefly with attention to their influence on archeological publications. Moser’s analysis on the Egyptian Court’s legacy centers on the field of archeology.

Designing Antiquity presents impressive archival research supported with numerous illustrations, appropriately in color. The book is a sturdy publication, sensibly organized with a chronological progression to the chapters, nicely indexed, and containing a helpful bibliography. The wealth of information on the Egyptian Court and Moser’s approachable writing style make this work attractive to a wide range of readers. Her examination of the Egyptian Court will engage those interested in museum history. For historians of art and design this book offers a wealth of areas for further research and an excellent account of an important episode. It is a worthy addition to the existing literature on Owen Jones and design reform, curatorial studies, and Egyptology.

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