

The Emperor's Cabinet

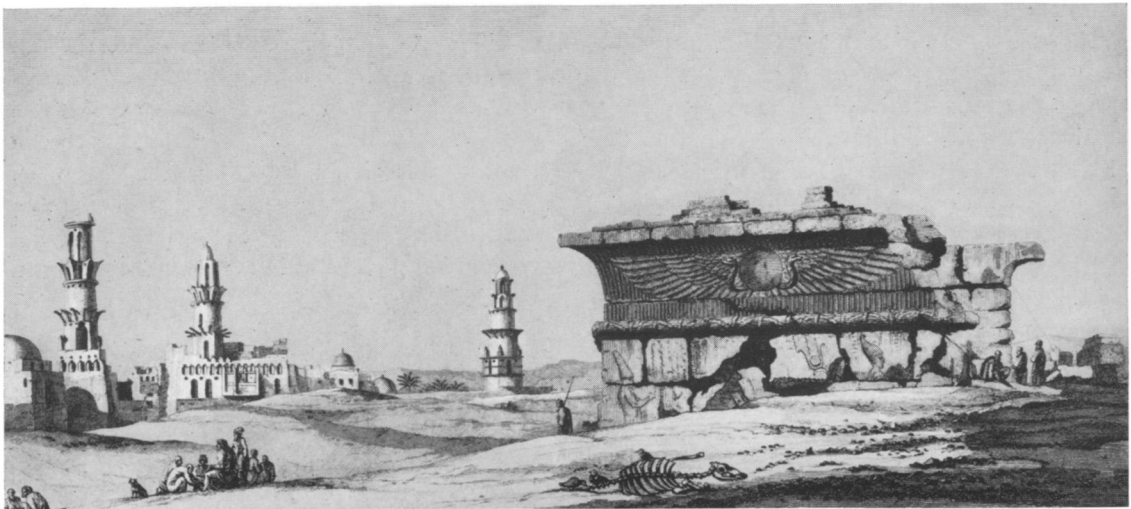
by CLARE EAMES, *Cataloguer*

Napoleon set out for Egypt in 1798 not only with an army of soldiers but with a retinue of scientists, writers, and artists whose researches were to confer a substantial credit on the expedition. Their purpose was to investigate the natural history, agriculture, art, and politics of Egypt and by so doing both to make the huge area known to Western Europe, and to bring European—by which Napoleon meant French—culture to the less sophisticated country. In the group that comprised the Institut d'Égypte was Dominique Vivant Denon (1747-1825). Denon was a “virtuoso” who had begun his career as a Gentleman of the Bedchamber to Louis XV, who had tried his hand at playwrighting and been Madame de Pompadour's drawing master. From these diversions he turned to diplomacy and filled posts at St. Petersburg, Stockholm, and Naples. It was during his tenure as ambassador to Naples from 1779 to 1785 that he developed an interest in ancient Greece and Rome, and when he left he was well known as an

antiquarian, collector, and dealer. Retiring from the diplomatic service Denon traveled in Italy and Switzerland until 1792, when he returned to Paris and was saved from arrest as a monarchist by the painter Jacques Louis David who testified to his republicanism. Denon spent the next years in Paris and when the Egyptian campaign was announced he was eager to join, even though Napoleon thought that at fifty he was too old for such a strenuous trip. Denon prevailed, however, and sailed in May 1798. He traveled in Egypt for eight months and filled his notebooks with hundreds of drawings. As an antiquarian he was fascinated by the exotic art forms of ancient Egypt; as a painter he was attracted by the present life of the country, and his sketches of ruins and deserts, of peasants, schoolchildren, and market scenes are lively reflections of his enthusiasm.

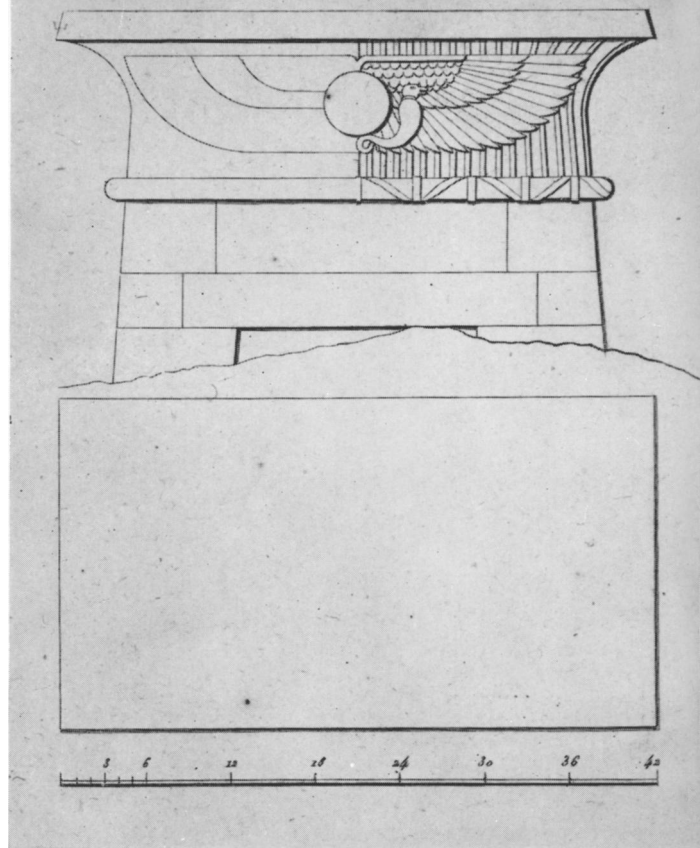
In 1802 Denon published his notes and drawings in a book that gave a direct impetus to the First Empire style of decoration. *Le Voyage dans*

The pylon at Ghoos as Denon saw it in 1798. From plate 80 of his book



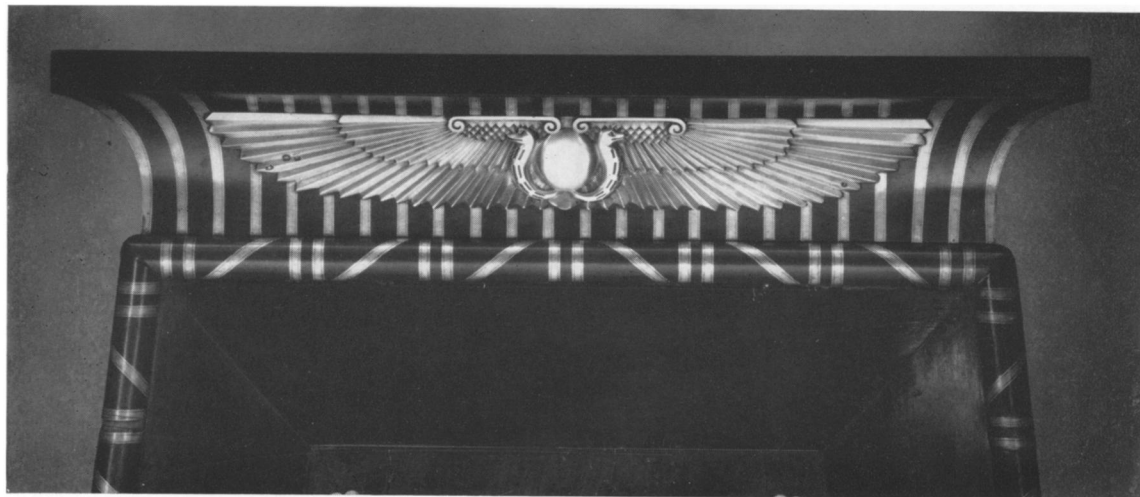
la basse et la haute Égypte was not the first book to appear on Egypt: Winckelmann, Caylus, Savary, and Volney are only a few of those whose writings had already sparked a curiosity about ancient civilizations that gave rise, in the 1780s, to a delightful, if superficial, mélange of classical and Egyptian decorative motifs. But with Denon the mood changed from one of fancy to one more deliberately archaeological. His volumes offered what the earlier, more descriptive writings had not: a detailed visual record of Egyptian art. Combined with this was the interest of an artist collecting material: Denon obviously considered his drawings of pylons and sphinxes and hieroglyphs both as records of the past and as patterns for future designers and he executed them with appropriate exactness. The result was a book which, because of its novelty and its association with Napoleon, to whom it was fulsomely dedicated, was an immediate success. It was perhaps the most influential factor in the popularity of Egyptian decoration that was earnestly and humorlessly adapted from Denon's excellent examples.

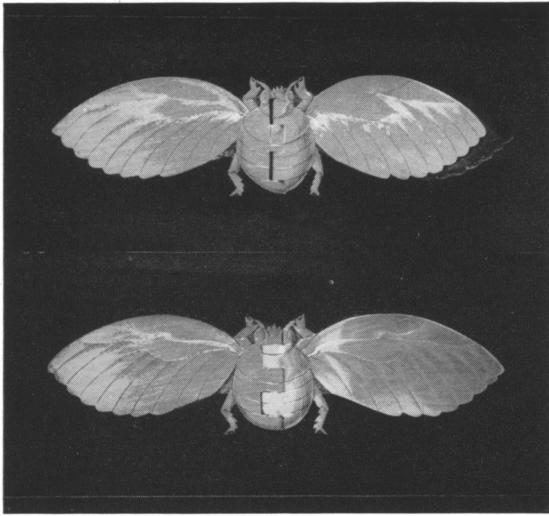
Some years ago in an article in this *Bulletin* the late Preston Remington discussed a coin cabinet in the Museum's collection which he attributed to Martin Guillaume Biennais (1764-1843) and which he suggested might have been inspired by Denon. The piece is actually based in part on plate 80 of Denon's book, representing the pylon at Ghoos in Upper Egypt. As all but



*Denon's design adapted from the pylon at Ghoos. Also from plate 80 of *Le Voyage dans la basse et la haute Égypte*. Rogers Fund, 1906*

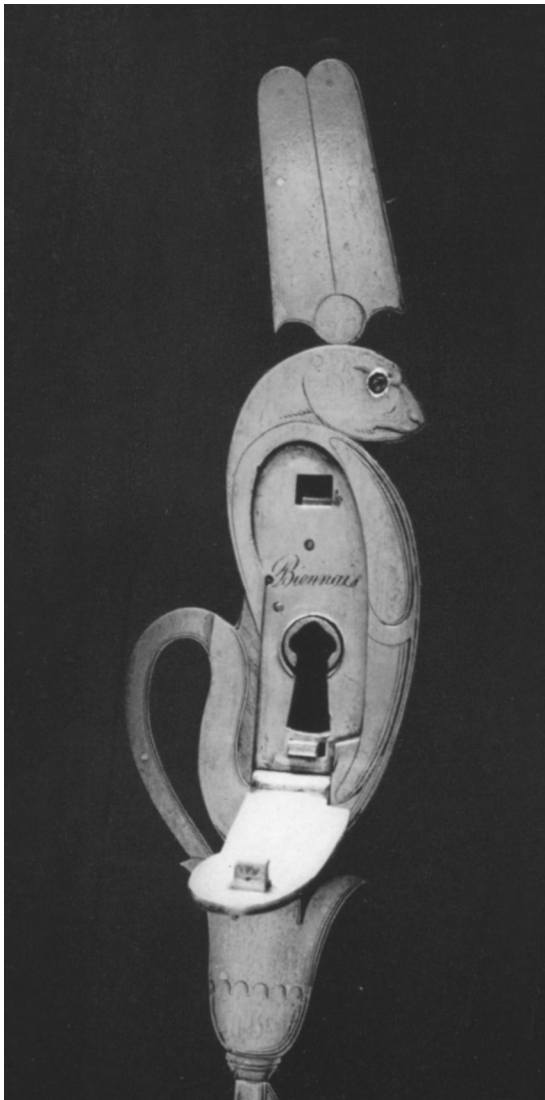
The frieze of the coin cabinet





Detail of the coin drawers

Detail from the back of the cabinet



the top of the pylon was in ruins in 1798 some improvisation was necessary to complete the cabinet. But as can be seen from the accompanying illustrations the upper part, with its curved silver-striped frieze, rounded inlaid borders, and applied winged disks, is a literal translation from architecture to furniture of the corresponding element of the pylon. The front and back panels are inlaid with a scarab between uraei on lotus stalks. Behind its rather austere façade the cabinet is ingeniously constructed: when a catch in the eye of each uraeus on the back panel is pushed, the hinged bodies fall forward, revealing two keyholes each with Biennais' neat script signature above. The keys unlock doors on the sides of the cabinet which conceal twenty-two coin drawers of graduated size. Each drawer is mounted with a silver bee with a hinged wing that serves as a pull; on the top edge a small silver plaque is engraved with the number of the drawer.

From the source of its design the cabinet could be dated about 1802, when Denon's book was published. But it presents an unexpected difficulty. The winged disks on the frieze are each stamped with four marks: Biennais' mark, a mark for the years 1793-1794, and two for the period 1809-1819. The mark for 1793-1794 was an unofficial one. After the abolition of their guild at the time of the Revolution goldsmiths were no longer permitted to use the mark that for centuries had testified that their metal was of the prescribed standard. In self-protection the craftsmen introduced a new, unofficial mark of quality of their own. In 1794 this mark, a head of Apollo with the letter P, was replaced by two others, also unofficial, for the same purpose, and these were used until, in 1797, new laws created official standard marks. Superficially it would appear, then, that the winged disks, which are the only applied element on the cabinet, must have been made in 1793-1794. This is an implausible explanation. Although Biennais is known to have kept a stock of pieces in his shop for several years before he completed their decoration it is highly doubtful that he would have made these four silver mounts without some plan for their use. That plan, as I have shown, was based on Denon's drawing, which was not published until 1802.



Coin cabinet by Biennais after a design by Denon. Height 35 ½ inches. Bequest of Collis P. Huntington, 1926

However, it is possible that Biennais could have seen the drawing before it was published, since he and Denon were probably closely associated during the years immediately following the latter's return from Egypt. As a maker of chessboards and jewel cases Biennais owed his fortune largely to Napoleon, for whom he had made a traveling case on credit just before the Egyptian campaign. Napoleon's appreciation

showed itself, when he returned to Paris, in an increasing number of commissions for Biennais, who soon found himself at the head of a large shop turning out silver, furniture, and jewelry, as well as chessboards and traveling cases, much of it ordered by Napoleon for his own use or for gifts. At this same period Denon was becoming Napoleon's cultural mentor, advising him in matters of taste, recommending artists to fulfill

But in any case, Biennais could not have seen the drawing of the pylon at Ghoos before Denon's return from Egypt in 1799, and by that time a new official mark had replaced the Apollo's head found on our cabinet. As a rule, old marks were collected and broken when new ones were issued, but there were probably occasional errors, and we can only assume that this is one instance when a mark remained in use for several years after its stated period.

begun about 1799, the two Paris marks of 1809-1819 make it clear that the piece was not immediately completed. One shows that the disks were assayed and found to be of the required standard of silver, the other that the tax on them was paid: they would have been struck on the disks when Biennais was ready to mount them.

The origin of its design, the presence of Napoleon's familiar bees, and the evidence of the marks suggest that this coin cabinet was made for Napoleon and must have been finished no later than 1814, when the First Empire came to an end.



A trade card of Biennais. Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris