

CHAPTER TWO

THE ELOQUENCE OF LINE THAT THE DUTCH SYMBOLISTS LEARNED FROM EGYPT

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“Most of all, I like Egyptian art,”ⁱ wrote the Dutch Symbolist Johan Thorn Prikker (1868-1932). He was not the only one. “Let us take examples from the Egyptians,”ⁱⁱ preached Jan Theodoor Toorop (1858-1928) for the sake of art.ⁱⁱⁱ This article explores the influences of Egyptian art on painting in the Netherlands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century: it follows the international trend of Egyptomania, in which popular Egyptian visual and stylistic elements were translated into the art and design of the day. Both Orientalism and Historicism borrowed avidly from the examples Egypt offered. Egyptian art informed and helped to shape Dutch Symbolism in three ways: First, Dutch Symbolists literally incorporated Egyptian objects into their work. Second, just as Japanese art had come to the aid of artists striving to create a new visual language, Egyptian art also offered premises for the development of a new direction in art. The fascination for Egyptian motifs and art gave rise to a new language; Dutch artists and designers opted to place an emphasis on linearity. Third, drawing on examples from Egypt also added depth and dimension to the content and meaning of Dutch art.

This article focuses on Toorop, a seminal figure in Dutch Symbolism, taking his drawing *The Sphinx* (Fig. 2-1) as an example in which all three of the above facets are present, and ends with an interpretation of this work.

Napoleon’s Expedition

The fascination with Egyptian art begins in the eighteenth century as the direct result of a French military expedition to Egypt. Wishing to establish a French presence in the Middle East, Napoleon arrived in

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Alexandria on July 2, 1798. The campaign was a military shambles, but it turned out to be a great scientific success: the staff of Dominique Vivant Denon (1747-1825) kept copious notes and made painstaking sketches of all that they saw. The results were published between 1809 and 1829 in the “Egypt-Bible” to be: the *Description de l’Égypte*. The plates, particularly those taken from the volumes on antiquity, were an enormous new source of material for artists. French designer Edme François Jomard (1777–1862), for example, made a bookcase to house several volumes of the *Description* as “a shrine of knowledge” in homage to the temple of Dendera. Meanwhile, Dutch architect Hendrik Petrus Berlage (1856-1934) designed an Egypt-inspired chair as a prototype of “Egyptomania,” a phenomenon Jean Marcel Humbert described as follows:

any modern Neo-Egyptian creation may partake of Egyptomania if it is reinterpreted and re-used in a way that gives it new meaning, as is the case in films or advertising.^{iv}

A vast number of explorers flocked to Egypt, following in Napoleon’s footsteps. There, painters reveled in the lambent light and shimmering colors of a world that time had apparently forgotten; it was reminiscent of the “world of Cato and Brutus,” as Delacroix once noticed. Such dazzling impressions resulted in a fascination for all things Egyptian, which is literally reflected in both Orientalism and Historicism. Working in a style that can largely be classed as Orientalism, Dutch painter Marius Bauer (1837-1932) painted diverse exotic scenes of Arab landscapes of his day, complete with Pharaonic ruins. In a school of painting I refer to as “neo-Egyptian art,” with a definite nod to Historicism, artists re-envisioned the ancient world.^v In the Netherlands, Lourens Alma Tadema (1836-1912)^{vi} is an example of an “amateur Egyptologist”^{vii} bent on recreating the world as it would have looked 3000 years ago with laborious accuracy, using authentic artifacts correctly arranged in the authentic period. And to intensify the Pharaonic spirit, he models his Joseph after royal sculptuary and actually includes a standing statuette in the niche.^{viii}

Egyptian Artifacts



Fig. 2-1¹ Jan Toorop, “The Sphinx,” 1892-97, black and colored chalk and pencil on canvas, 126 x 135 cm. inv. no. T1-X-1931. Gemeentemuseum, The Hague

In his work *The Sphinx* (Fig. 2-1), created between 1892 and 1897, Jan Toorop (1858-1923) also incorporates Egyptian statues in the background, but with a very different approach. With no interest in recalling Pharaonic pastimes or staging an Oriental world, Toorop casts elements of Egyptian art into a melting pot of devices and references from other cultures to forge a new style with a symbolic content of its own. This same occurs in *Les Rôdeurs* (1889-92), in which a sculpture is positioned between the shrubberies.^{ix} This adding of Egyptian artifacts in an illustrative way is an example of Toorop’s first stage in the usage of Egyptian art. I distinguish a further two stages of Egyptian influence.

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Fig. 2-22 "Maya and Merit," about 1300 B.C. limestone, height 158 cm., inv. no. AST 1-3. National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden. Photo by the author



In stage two, Toorop transforms Egyptian art into a new idiom. The third and final phase I have distinguished is the utilization of Egyptian content in pursuit of creating greater meaning, which is essential for Toorop. I will discuss these three stages, illustrated with Egyptian examples taken from the most comprehensive and interesting collection of Egyptian art in the Netherlands at the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden. The highlight of the collection is three sculptures presenting the seated "director of the Royal treasury," Maya and his wife Merit (Fig. 2-2).^x By 1891, the archeological museum's Egyptian collection was almost as complete as it is today, including this trio, and was visited by Toorop on at least four occasions between March 15, 1889 and August 22, 1892, as evidenced by his signatures in the guestbook.

Beside sculpture, there are more examples of visual elements that Toorop literally borrowed, as in *Song of the Times* (1893).^{xi} The costume of the figure on the right in this work is an Egyptian quotation: the leopard

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skin draped over one shoulder of the figure, the tail visible between the legs, is the typical garb of a priest. An example is the figure before the sled on the two upper lines in Pakerer's funeral procession of the Leiden-papyrus (Fig. 2-8).



Fig. 2-3 Postcard “CAIRO–Sphinx and Pyramids,” The Cairo postcard Trust, Cairo, series 629, 14.1 x 9.1cm. photo: between 1890 and 1900, Private collection

In the study for *La femme éternelle* (1891) on the never executed right hand side, we recognize the outlines of a pyramid against a lighter sky.^{xii} More prominent is the sphinx, the damaged headdress reminiscent of the famous Giza sphinx (Fig. 2-3). But unlike reality, an obelisk is shown just behind its head which, although it seems convincing and is even complete with hieroglyphs, hardly conforms to reality as this creature stands in front of pyramids. This is a fact Toorop must have known; the sphinx and the pyramids were a very popular item for photographers. When printed on postcards from the 1860s, their products reached the status of collector's item, especially those of Egyptian scenes, which were so successful that Osman speaks of “cartomania.”^{xiii}

It is evident that Toorop's narrative makes no attempt to offer a historical or current view of Egypt. Nor do the Egyptian elements comprise the narrative thrust in the case of *La femme éternelle*, as shown by the telephone-wires dissecting the picture plane at the level of the sphinx's chest and the tulips in the foreground. What we are looking at is hardly typical desert vegetation. The Egyptianizing elements have been

substituted and added to converge to a personal vision. And it is this new, non-academic, idiom that takes us to the second stage.

Born from Nature

Thorn Prikker, the Netherlands' second best-known Symbolist, also incorporates tulips into his work *The Bride* (1892-93)^{xiv} depicting them as pale heads bowing in the foreground, at the feet of a lady who is far from a woman of flesh and blood. The execution focuses on her garland of flowers that gradually metamorphoses into Christ's crown of thorns. There are no direct references to Egypt here, but the organic shapes summon up Prikker's explanation of his preference for Egyptian art: "it is born from nature and stylized by the artist."^{xv}

Without cultural precedents, Egypt developed its art and architecture directly from nature, which resulted into a pure and recognizable style. Papyrus and lotuses were not just copied, but transformed into patterns and columns. It was theorized in literature: the Austrian Alois Riegl, for example, explained in his influential book *Stilfragen* (1893) that Egyptian ornamental art was an example of how a decorative pattern evolved in the mind of an artist. It was the perfect validation for using these examples and approaches to develop a new language in reaction to the highly finished, naturalistic style of academic painting. It not only explains Thorn Prikker's use of floral forms, but it also resulted in an intentionally flat effect. Egyptian two-dimensional art, mural drawings and reliefs in particular, served as a perfect model to deny the illusion of depth.

As a painter of a later generation, active in the early twentieth century, Willem van Konijnenburg (1868-1943) also used Egyptian examples. A frieze-like background in his hunting scenes from 1912 transforms the work into a flat composition.

In his plaster relief *Lioba* (Fig. 2-4), Toorop not only created a work highly reminiscent of Egyptian art in his choice of medium, but also in his figures: presented in typical Egyptian convention, the head is shown in profile, shoulders facing forward. However, his placement of the hands is highly evocative of Egyptian figures in adoration as shown in the papyrus of Horemachbit (Fig. 2-5).^{xvi} This follows the Egyptian artistic principle of showing what you know, not what you see: in painting, you can easily turn a hand to show all five fingers, or you can extend the hindmost arm to see the complete second hand without overlap.^{xvii}

Furthermore, *Lioba* is flanked by figures in a type of composition that follows the Egyptian device of presenting a figure standing between two protecting figures.^{xviii} In the Leiden collection this three-figure

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constellation can be found in a vignette on the coffin of Djedmontefach (Fig. 2-6), where the goddesses Isis and Nephthys ritually pour water over the deceased. Toorop used this compositional device again in a poster for a play *Pandorra* (1919) (Fig. 2-7).

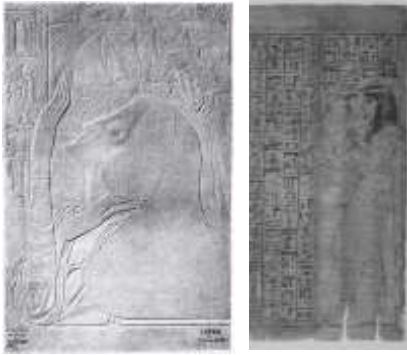


Fig. 2-4 Jan Toorop, *Lioba*, plaster, lost.

Published in “Die Kunst für Alle” reproduced in Marian Bizans-Prakken, *Toorop/Klimt*. Exhibition Catalogue (Gemeentemuseum) (The Hague: Waanders 2006), 174.

Fig. 2-5 “Horemachbit in adoration,” (detail) spell 125 from the Book of Death, about 1100 BC, (22nd Dynasty), black and red ink on papyrus, height 34 cm. National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden.



Fig. 2-6 “The goddesses Isis and Nephthys pouring holy water over the diseased Djedmontefach,” Thebes, about 1000 BC, (21st dynasty) detail of a coffin: wood with canvas and painted stucco, 187,5 x 50 x 30 cm. National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden.

Fig. 2-7 Jan Toorop, poster for Arthur van Schendel’s play “Pandorra,” 1919, lithography, 114 x 85 cm. © Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

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Fig. 2-8 “Funeral procession of Pakerer,” Sakkara, 19th-20st dynasty (ca. 1300-1100 BC), detail red and black ink on papyrus, h. ca. 20 cm. National Museum of Antiquities, Leiden.

The centrally placed Pandora can also be compared to the wailing women that accompany funeral processions, as in the Leiden papyrus of Pakerer (Fig. 2-8), which shows the women baring their breasts so they can berate themselves in a gesture of mourning. In their grief, they dash sand into their loose hair. The upraised arms of the apparently chaotically placed women clearly evoke the figures on the left-hand side in Toorop’s drawing *The Sphinx*. The female head, turned to face the sky, her neck extended, is another device Toorop uses repeatedly, as can be seen in *Lioba*.^{xix}

Eloquent Lines

From 1891 on, both Toorop and Prikker began experimenting with line,^{xx} assisted to some extent by scholars who also propagated the use of Egyptian art as an answer to the popular “Stilfragen.” In his “Grammaire des arts du dessin” (1867), Charles Blanc (1813-1882) recognized repetition as a sublime movement, like the stalks of papyrus bushes that serve as a background for a fisherman in the marshlands (Fig. 2-9), and which Toorop references in tree trunks ranged one in front of the other (Fig. 2-10). This device is used to even better effect in figures that are grouped in a rhythmic procession. Toorop transmutes them into a queue in *Fatalism* (1893); the bare breasts and ornamented garments have also been given a touch of the Egyptian.^{xxi} Blanc considered repetition the most characteristic means of expression in Egyptian art, while Theosophy explained it as the manifestation of the essential in nature.

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Fig. 2-9 “Hippopotamus hunt,” about 2400 BC (5th dynasty) detail of painted wall relief of lime stone in the mastaba of Ti, Sakkara. Photo by the author

Fig. 2-10 Jan Toorop, “Nirwana,” 1895, pencil heightened with white, 55.5 x 34 cm. Studio 2000 Art Gallery, Blaricum.

The works that are influenced by Egypt date primarily from Toorop’s Symbolist period, between 1891 and 1898. Prior to 1891, he largely experimented with techniques, while after 1898 his symbolic language is gradually replaced as he turns his attention to content of a more Catholic nature. But Toorop continued to reiterate the device of the overlapping silhouettes as late as the 1920s, aligning his profiles in the way of Egyptian figures, as in *Thoughtfulness*, *Meditation*, *Fire* (1923) (Fig. 2-

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11).^{xxii} In Egyptian art, this overlap must be read as figures standing next to each other. The headdresses with the headband and razor-sharp folds used by Toorop are also evocative of the royal *nemes*.



Fig. 2-11 Jan Toorop, “Thoughtful, Meditation, Fire,” 1923, pencil on paper (also as litho), 18.5 x 15 cm. Studio 2000 Art Gallery, Blaricum.

Fig. 2-12 “Ramose,” about 1411-1375 BC (18th dynasty) detail of a partly painted wall relief in the tomb of Ramose (TT55) in the Valley of the Nobles, Thebes, discovered in 1861. Photo by the author.

Toorop prefers three profiles to represent different ages or states of mind. It follows the symbolism of line that Dutch “scientist” Humbert de Superville (1770-1849) presented in his “Essai sur les signes inconditionnels dans l’art” (1828).^{xxiii} He argued that lines express an emotion of their own, with the human vertical position on Earth as a starting point. Upward strokes are associated with joy, while downward strokes are related to moods like sadness. The horizontal line is inactive and therefore associated with stability (Fig. 2-13). Artistically, this balanced direction was ideal for Humbert because it created the effect of harmony. Together with Blanc, he preferred Egyptian art to Greek and, more specifically, to Hellenistic sculpture with its chaotic axes.



Fig. 2-13 Humbert de Superville’s scheme of Egyptian sculpture related to the Memnoncolossi

Fig. 2-14 Johannes van Vloten’s scheme of line symbolism related to Greek goddesses

The critic Johannes van Vloten (1818-1883) updated these theories in

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the Netherlands, despite an antipathy to Egyptian art, which he described as “oppressive and monotonous” or “cumbersome” and “stiff.”^{xxiv} Van Vloten also added a liberal sprinkling of moral interpretation in relation to the Greek goddesses (Fig. 2-14).^{xxv} As the wife of Zeus himself, Hera is the horizontal line, positive and stable. The joyful upward line, Aphrodite, could hardly be considered positive—after all, was not the goddess of love the bringer of lust and sin? And Athena, with her downward line, stood for wisdom. With this theory it is easy to see how, on numerous occasions, Toorop uses the line, like in self portraits where he depicts himself as “wise.”^{xxvi} But this symbolism is also visibly evident in the execution of the different types of women, especially their eyes. Take, for example, *The Three Brides* (1893):^{xxvii} the female on the right wears a pair of snakes on her forehead, her eyes sharp with malice, echoing the malevolent arc of the serpents’ bodies. The skulls strung about her neck and her witchlike stirring of a potion underline her evil intentions; Bisanz-Prakken dubs her “the bride of hell.”^{xxviii} The lines in the background issuing from the mouths of her sinister collaborator are aggressively angular, in contrast to the figure on the left, who is surrounded by rhythmic, smooth coils. This woman’s eyes are wide open, her gaze directed modestly downwards; she is a humble, enlightened bride of God, as is shown by her nun’s habit.

Van Konijnenburg developed Toorop’s lines into a 60° lattice pattern (Fig. 2-15 and 2-16): the grid is used as the basis for drawing a composition.^{xxix} In giving a work its final meaning, the natural figure is crucial for Van Konijnenburg. And when the contours of this figure (or being) follow the pattern of the grid, the meaning is intensified.

In this way, the use of the line was promoted in the Netherlands and deployed by the Symbolists as the key element in expressing the Ideal. It was not surprising that color began to go out of favor. Egypt supplied a plethora of examples for linear patterns: striped wigs on coffins suggest Toorop’s tufts of hair, while the pleated skirts offer almost endless permutations of parallel line patterning.

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Fig. 2-15 Grid recognized in Van Konijnenburg's work.

Fig. 2-16 Willem van Konijnenburg, "Diligence," 1917, oil on canvas, 151.5 x 106.5 cm. Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

Moreover, as Toorop explained in a letter, he was excited by the contour of Egyptian art, since these outlines "carried a form and that form is deliciously beautiful: real in being and character and pure in meaning."^{xxx}

Theological Messages

Let us return to *The Sphinx*, the huge drawing given over to pure line. In understanding the content of this piece, we come to Toorop's third stage, in which drawing on Egyptian influences afforded him spiritual meaning. Barely recognizable thanks to the use of brown tones, in the background we find a Buddha and the windows of a gothic cathedral flanking a double Egyptian sculpture.^{xxx} The combination of different religions^{xxxii} is described by Edouard Schuré (1841-1929): great initiates served as interpreters of God. His "Les grands initiés: Esquisse de l'histoire secrète des religions" (1889) not only influenced Toorop and the Dutch writer Frederik van Eeden (1860-1932), but also the French Symbolists of *Les Nabis*, who painted combinations of different religions as well.^{xxxiii} It is interesting to compare their Cloissonist use of fields of color to express a deeper meaning to the Dutch attempts to achieve the same effect by paring down color to express the eloquence of their lines.

Returning to the now bright white Egyptian statues of Maya and Merit, the masterpieces of the archaeological museum in Leiden, we see an extraordinary double statue of a seated couple, executed with supreme workmanship and artistry, beside the two single portraits. Toorop

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mentions the duo as: “those large bright sculptures of a man and a woman next to each other”^{xxxiv} and worked them into *The Sphinx*. It must have seemed the perfect embodiment of male and female, an aspect considered an essential sacred facet of Egyptian culture. In “Origine de tous les cultes ou religion universelle” (1794), Egypt was presented by Charles F. Dupuis (1742-1809) as the source of religious knowledge in which the myth of Isis and Osiris teaches about duality. The double sculpture represents the transcendent conjunction of male and female in an ancient echo of the couple presented supine on the globe in the centre. Toorop gives an explanation: “They rise higher and higher in their evolution, despite their attachment to the globe.”^{xxxv}

In my opinion they attain this in their search for harmony between male and female—a topic close to Toorop’s heart, given that his marriage of 1886 was proving far from successful.^{xxxvi} This view was also contested by Rosicrucian Sâr Peladan (1858-1918) whose comment on the status of artists is much quoted: “Artiste, tu es prêtre, tu es roi, tu es mage.”^{xxxvii} But, in this context, what is more pertinent is his conviction that ancient religion is a prerequisite for arriving at serious art: “Hors des religions il n’y a pas de grand art.”^{xxxviii} Small wonder that Jan Toorop actually became a Rosicrucian, as evidenced by the roses and crucifixes strewn throughout a variety of canvases, although he was unable to find the much-lauded “higher psychic expression,” so he used what he could use for his art and left after a year.

But how must we read the reference to Egyptian religion, since it was—unlike Buddhism or Catholicism—a dead culture?

Similar to Freemasonry, Egypt was widely considered a well of deep insights and knowledge with a Hermetic slant. In a mural at a Freemasonry-related residence in Scheveningen, the Netherlands, Thorn Prikker united the material and the spiritual with the aid of Egyptian art. As the universal meaning and substance of all religions was centered on Egypt, the composition heavily referenced the lines of the pyramids.

The Riddle of the Sphinx

In addition to the pyramid, Egypt also provided the motif of the sphinx, as shown by a vignette by Dutch artist J.L.M. Lauweriks (1864-1932), which seemed to emblemize the meaning of Egypt in mystical movements.^{xxxix} It also plays a role in the Belgian “Société des Vingt,” a source of inspiration for Toorop, with a more modest symbolic language than their French colleagues. Fernand Khnopff (1858-1921) presented a lying sphinx in *Un ange* (1889);^{xl} the sphinx is depicted with her head nestling in the hands of a standing knight-like female. Toorop accurately reproduced this typical pose for the couple in the centre of *Song of the Times*. Also open to association with the Greek sphinx who engaged Oedipus in an intellectual battle with her riddle, the sphinx was the ideal motif for symbolizing wisdom.

We can also interpret the piece for its theosophical content, which was also extremely popular in the Netherlands at the turn of the century. Madame Blavatsky teaches that the cosmos is a regulated unity, the substance of which creates life in seven steps. Dutch Symbolist K.P.C. de Bazel (1869-1923) illustrates this in a woodcut (Fig. 2-17). It starts with the crystal in the hand of the figure. The next stage to evolve is the plant world, followed by the world of the animals. The fourth sphere marks the appearance of man, who holds the crystal. The spiritual world awakens with the fifth sphere, which Karel de Bazel depicts as the harmony of male and female, by giving the figure the attributes of both sexes; breasts and a moustache.



Fig. 2-17. K.P.C. de Bazel, “The natural development of mankind from the mineral, plant and animal world,” 1894, woodcut, 14 x 11.3 cm, Drents Museum, Assen.

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The exalted state achieved by the figures is accentuated by the costume: an Egyptian-style skirt and headdress. The sixth and seventh spheres are beyond human comprehension, and cannot be explained. Man is able, in addition to our human essence, to switch from the animal world, while a grasp of more enlightened concepts takes him to the spiritual realm.

It was a popular but inordinately complex theme to expand upon. The path, or narrative, of the Ideal, is told by the line. And it is precisely this line that had an afterlife leading in two different directions: Van Konijnenburg elaborated it into a lattice-like grid that, along with the figure, tells a neo-classical story.

While in pursuit of the Ideal, other artists stripped color and line back to the minimum, resulting in abstraction. And, like Toorop, in their search for the Ideal, they concluded that all religions are essentially the same:

Isn't Roman Catholicism originally the same as Theosophy? I agreed with Toorop on the main line and noticed that he really delves deeply and wants the spiritual."^{xi}

This is quoted from Piet Mondriaan (1872-1944), who illustrated three stages of human existence in his triptych "Evolution" (1910-11),^{xlii} a term and concept that is even more logical in light of Charles Darwin's relatively new theories. The effect of the use of color is accentuated by details in form, like the triangles and stars for the navel and nipples of the figure. However, this experiment was not a success, and Mondrian went on to develop his now signature style with a further reduction of color and line. But the message remained the same.

In essence, Toorop has an identical content in his *Sphinx*. On the right we see outstretched muscular arms that represent the theosophical animal-like world, the starting point for self knowledge. In the centre we see the quest for harmony, while the higher figures on the left depict the spiritual state with thin, attenuated arms that are no longer of our world. Between them we see a nun and an old, wise man. Toorop continued to be fascinated by the theme, also referring to it more literally in his Catholic works, as we can see in his *Evolution* of 1918 and *The Pilgrim* of 1921.^{xliii}

We can read the spiritual development quite clearly, going from right to left in a "pure" reading direction that Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) also used in *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (1897).^{xliv} But what is the role of the sphinx? It rests heavily on its pedestal of human caryatids. Toorop explains that "lower creatures are pushed downwards,"^{xlv} in an oppositional movement to the transcending couple. Thus Wells interprets Toorop's sphinx as follows: "For modern Theosophy the sphinx, especially if asleep, represents the lower, material world of

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illusion.”^{xlvi} Robert Siebelhoff joins this conclusion, commenting on a sphinx Toorop used in a different work:

Toorop regarded the sphinx, which appears in the foreground of the Study Sheet [study for *The Three Brides* lg], as a symbol of materialism just as he viewed the Cleopatra-like woman on the right side of *The Three Brides*.^{xlvii}

The relation to Theosophy is as it should be, but Theosophists do not consider the sphinx to be the quintessence of earthly materialism. Had Toorop intended his sphinx to symbolize the temptations of materialism, he would have given it a more pernicious appearance, probably depicting the sphinx as female, with slanting eyes. Despite its cumbersome nature, Toorop’s sphinx is dignified, as is the sphinx’s more distinct task, “to invest the creature with a soul, striving for transcendence,” as Toorop says.^{xlviii} Indeed, Demisch associates the creature with sleep, because of its closed eyes. That state moves the soul to supernatural regions:

It seems to us that we have to think this scene, in which the Sphinx dominates, in the supernatural world. It could be Sleep, that carried the souls to this region, in which they rest, with closed eyes, still partly unaffected, while others find themselves praying and groping a way, and a third group raise their arms in a hymn for the Sphinx.

Uns scheint dass die Szene, in der die Sphinx dominiert, in der übersinnlichen Welt zu denken ist. Es könnte der Schlaf sein, der die Seelen in diese Region getragen hat, in der sie, mit geschlossenen Augen, zum Teil noch unbeweglich ruhend, zum anderen sich betend und tastend zurechtzufinden suchen, während eine dritte Gruppe die Arme zu einem Hymnus vor der Sphinx erhebt.^{xlix}

Although this may sound convincing, his explanation is, to my mind, just a little too easy: Toorop’s approach is extremely complex and many-layered, especially in his intricate Symbolist compositions. And if he had intended the sphinx to be a creature of slumbers and dreams, it would perhaps have made more sense to add wings to aid the beast’s passage to higher realms? I do, however, agree that the sphinx does aid one in experiencing a more exalted realm, one that can be accessed through meditation. Which is precisely what the sphinx is telling us: meditation takes effort and persistence; at first it may lead only to frustration until, with diligent practice, the fruits of insight are attained and, ultimately, transcendence. Just like the central figure in *Thoughtfulness, Meditation, Fire* (1923) (Fig. 2-11) who, with eyes closed, literally represents meditation. Here, again, we recognize the three stages of the human state.

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This work dates from Toorop's Catholic period, in which the message is clad in less profound language. With the symbolic sphinx, Toorop is following the fashion of the day. Consider the cover of the Theosophical magazine "Lotus", where a sphinx is presented as part of micro and macro cosmos, and can resolve nature and the fate of mankind (Fig. 2-18):

[The sphinx] meditates on the solution of the great problem of the construction of the Universe, on the nature and the destiny of man, and its thoughts take the form of that which is represented above itself, which is to say the Macrocosm and the Microcosm in their combined actions.¹



Fig. 2-18 "Magic: white and black" 1886 reproduced in *Le Lotus* 1887 as illustration of the article by Franz Hartmann.

Toorop sees opportunities: "With the sphinx, I try to show the eternal dualism in man, who, despite everything, aims for an ideal on earth."¹ⁱ And since the sphinx houses animal, human, and spiritual life as a lion with human head that is the keeper of knowledge, he, or she, can be a perfect coach in one's personal spiritual development. That the three aspects that belong to the human sphere can be combined in one creature makes it a Theosophical possibility par excellence.

With his symbolic works, specifically *The Sphinx*, Toorop produced a manifesto on spiritual development. To capture the essential, he took examples from the Egyptians in three different ways: first, he adds artifacts like the sculpture; secondly, the Egyptian idiom changed his personal language; and, at last, ancient Egypt is seen as the keeper of truth, housing the essential of religions and therefore recalls deeper meaning. It resulted in Toorop's typical style, which set the tone for Dutch Symbolists: the eloquence of line.

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- Johannes van Vloten, *Aesthetika of leer van den kunstsmaak, naar uit- en inheemsche bronnen, voor Nederlanders bewerkt*. (Deventer: Ter Gunne, Plantinga, 1871)
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- Toorop/Klimt: Toorop in Wenen: inspiratie voor Klimt*. Exhibition catalogue. (Gemeentemuseum) The Hague
- Symbolismus in den Niederlanden: von Toorop bis Mondriaan*. Exhibition catalogue. Kassel (Museum Fridericianum) 1991
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Notes

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- ⁱ In Brieven (Letters) (1897) July 1893, Visé, Hotel de Braband, 81.
- ⁱⁱ Jan Toorop in a lecture for the opening of the first exhibition of the “Moderne Kunstkring” in Amsterdam, October 1911. Quoted in William Rothuizen, ed., *Jan Toorop in zijn tijd* (Amsterdam: Studio 2000 Art Gallery with Publisher Boxhoorn, 1998), 78.
- ⁱⁱⁱ In this article, I focus on Egyptian influences, which are sometimes hard to isolate, since Toorop also quoted eclectically from numerous sources, including Japanese prints and woodcuts and Indonesian art. As a former Dutch colony, Indonesia influenced Dutch art. Toorop was born on Java and familiar with its visual culture, so batik patterns and the empty skirts of wayang-puppets are elements that can also be recognized in his symbolic work.
- ^{iv} Jean Marcel Humbert, “Egyptomania: A Current Concept from the Renaissance to Postmodernism,” in *Egyptomania: l’Egypte dans l’art occidental 1730-1930*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Musée du Louvre; Ottawa: Musée des Beaux-Arts du Canada; Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 1994), 21.
- ^v Liesbeth Grotenhuis, “Cleopatra's kattige karakter,” in *Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek Koninklijk Museum van Schone Kunsten* (Antwerp: Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, 1998), 419-439.
- ^{vi} After he went to England, he changed his name to “Lawrence.”
- ^{vii} Maarten J. Raven, “Alma Tadema als amateur-egyptoloog,” *Bulletin van het Rijksmuseum*, 28, no. 3 (1980): 103-117.
- ^{viii} Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836-1912), “Joseph, Overseer of the Pharaoh’s Granaries,” 1874, oil on panel, 33 x 43.2 cm, Dahesh Museum of Art, New York.
- ^{ix} Jan Toorop, “Les Rôdeurs,” 1889-92, chalk and pencil on paper, 65 x 76 cm. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.
- ^x They are not a royal couple, since the two are wearing wigs rather than *nemes*, the royal head cloth, as suggested in *Kunstenaren der Idee: symbolistische tendenzen in Nederland ca. 1880-1930*. Exhibition catalogue (The Hague: Gemeentemuseum, 1978), 93.
- ^{xi} Jan Toorop, “Song of the Times,” 1893, black and colored chalk, pencil, heightened with white on dark paper, 32 x 58.5 cm, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.
- ^{xii} Jan Toorop, Study for “La femme éternelle” or: “O thou, my spirits mate!,” ca. 1891, pencil and chalk on cardboard, 16.2 x 20.5 cm. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.
- ^{xiii} Colin Osman, *Egypt: Caught in Time*. (London: Garnet Publishing Limited, 1997), 110.
- ^{xiv} Johan Thorn-Prikker, “The Bride,” 1892–93, oil on canvas, 146 x 88 cm. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.
- ^{xv} In Brieven (Letters), no.1, 81.
- ^{xvi} Toorop referred literally to this act in his drawing “Dead Nun Mourned by

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Two Figures,” 1893, pen and ink with water color, 22.2 x 27.6 cm., Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.

^{xvii} Heinrich Schäfer, *Principles of Egyptian Art* (originally 1919), trans. and ed. by John Baines (Oxford: University Press, 1974).

^{xviii} Van Konijnenburg also uses this formula: a couple in the upper corners adores Queen Wilhelmina in his design for a series of stamps in 1923.

^{xix} The head of the female figure on the cover of Louis Couperus (1863-1923), *Metamorfoze* is also raised to face upwards, the neck taut. The linen that is wrapped around her skirts also recalls the strips of cloth used to mummify the dead. Jan Toorop, *Metamorfoze* 1897, book cover: stamp on linen on cardboard, 21.5 x 17 cm. Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

^{xx} Christiane Heiser, *Johan Thorn Prikker: vom Niederländischen Symbolismus zum Deutschen Werkbund. Das Werk zwischen 1890 und 1912* (PhD diss. Groningen University, 2008)

^{xxi} Jan Toorop, “Fatalism,” 1893, pencil, black and colored chalk, heightened with white, 60 x 75 cm. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.

^{xxii} Jan Toorop, “Thoughtfulness, Meditation, Fire,” 1923, pencil on paper, 18.5 x 15 cm. Studio 2000 Art Gallery, Blaricum. Here we must also consider Roman portraits on gems.

^{xxiii} It is an interesting fact that Humbert’s brother, Jean-Emile, collected Egyptian artifacts for the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden in Leiden, such as the Anastasi collection from 1829. Barbara Maria Stafford, *Symbol and Myth: Humbert de Superville’s Essay on Absolute Signs in Art* (Cranbury, NJ: Associated University Presses, 1979), 111.

^{xxiv} Johannes van Vloten, *Aesthetika of leer van den kunstsmaak, naar uit- en inheemsche bronnen, voor Nederlanders bewerkt* (Deventer: Ter Gunne, Plantinga, 1871), 178, 248, 256.

^{xxv} Ibid, 176, fig.8.

^{xxvi} Jan Toorop, “Self Portrait,” 1915, black chalk and charcoal on paper, 23.4 x 20.3 cm. Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

^{xxvii} Jan Toorop, “The Three Brides,” 1893, pencil, black and colored crayon, heightened with white, 78 x 98 cm. Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterlo.

^{xxviii} Marian Bisanz-Prakken, “Hoffnung I en Hoffnung II: levensallegorieën van de gouden stijl 1903-1907.” In *Toorop/Klimt: Toorop in Wenen: inspiratie voor Klimt*, exhibition catalogue (The Hague: Gemeentemuseum), 215.

^{xxix} Mieke Rijnders, *Willem van Konijnenburg: Leonardo van de Lage Landen* (Zwolle: Waanders, 2008), 70.

^{xxx} Fragments from a letter from Jan Toorop to Mies Drabbe, August 30 1898, Royal Library, The Hague. Quoted by Inemie Gerards and Evert van Uitert, *Jan Toorop: Symbolisme in de kunst* (The Hague: Sdu Uitgevers, 1994), 23.

^{xxxi} Toorop uses and combines these religious figureheads and emblems more frequently: Buddha is added in “The Resurrection,” undated, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam and “The young generation,” 1892, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 110 cm,

Museum Boijmans-van Beuningen, Rotterdam. Church windows are related to Christianity and more specific Catholicism, but Toorop also uses also the statue from a cathedral in “Les Rôdeurs.”

^{xxxii} Bettina Polak, *Het fin-de-siècle in de Nederlandse schilderkunst: de symbolistische beweging 1890-1900* (Thesis University of Utrecht, The Hague, 1955), 117.

^{xxxiii} For example Paul Gauguin’s (1848-1903) “La belle Angèle,” 1889, oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm. Musée d’Orsay, Paris or Paul Ranson’s (1861-1909) “Christ and Buddha” (1890-92). See Robert P. Welsh, “Sacred geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction,” in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: County Museum of Art; Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; The Hague: Gemeentemuseum, 1987), 64.

^{xxxiv} Quoted in Robert Siebelhoff, “The three brides: A drawing by Jan Toorop,” *Nederlands kunsthistorisch jaarboek 27* (1976): 254.

^{xxxv} Victorine Hefting, *Jan Toorop: een kennismaking* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 1989), 82.

^{xxxvi} As can be seen in a drawing, “Pauvre diable” 1898, etching VIII/25, 18.6 x 19.7 cm, Studio 2000, Blaricum: behind the sorrowful self portrait floats his wife Annie, in her hand the dead child. Possibly as a result of Toorop’s syphilis, their daughter Mary Ann died in 1887, soon after her birth. The bare-breasted women behind Annie portray the lewd and amoral nature of woman. Peter van der Coelen and Karin van Lieverloo, *Jan Toorop, portrettist*. Exhibition catalogue (Het Valkhof) (Nijmegen: Waanders, 2003), 72-73.

^{xxxvii} This quote is taken from the catalogue of the First Salon de la Rose & Croix, 1892, 7-11

^{xxxviii} Quoted in *Kunstenaren der Idee*, 37, note 10.

^{xxxix} M. Lauweriks, “Egypte,” 1897, woodcut.

^{xl} Fernand Khnopff, “Avec Verhaeren. Un ange,” 1889, pencil on paper, heightened with white, 33.1 x 19.8 cm, Private collection, Brussels.

^{xli} Mondriaan in a letter to Kees Spoor, October 1910. Quoted in Carel Blotkamp, “Annunciation of the new mysticism: Dutch Symbolism and early abstraction,” *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, Exhibition catalogue (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art; The Hague: Gemeentemuseum), 98.

^{xlii} Piet Mondriaan, “Evolution,” 1910-11, oil on canvas, two outer panels 178 x 85 cm, middle panel 183 x 87.5 cm, Gemeentemuseum, The Hague.

^{xliii} Jan Toorop, “The evolution,” 1918, black chalk and pastel on paper, 67.5 x 62 cm, Galerie 2000, Blaricum; Jan Toorop, “The Pilgrim,” 1921, charcoal and chalk on paper 156 x 150 cm, Museum het Catharijneconvent, Utrecht. Here we recognize three pyramids in the background.

^{xliv} Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), “Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?,” 1897, oil on canvas, 139 x 375 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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^{xlv} Victorine Hefting, *Jan Toorop: een kennismaking*, 82.

^{xlvi} Robert P. Welsh, "Sacred geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction," 79.

^{xlvii} Robert Siebelhoff, "The three brides: A drawing by Jan Toorop," 222. Although the author suggests that this interpretation is a quote from Toorop himself, there is no source mentioned.

^{xlviii} Jan Toorop, in *Bouw-en Sierkunst*, 1898, quoted in Victorine Hefting, *Jan Toorop: 1858-1928* (The Hague: Haags Gemeentemuseum, 1989).

^{xlix} Heinz Demisch, *Die Sphinx: Geschichte ihrer Darstellung von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Stuttgart: Urachhaus, 1977), 196.

¹ Explanation of the text by Franz Hartmann, "Magic: White and Black", reproduced in *Le lotus* 1887, quoted and translated by Robert P. Welsh, "Sacred geometry: French Symbolism and Early Abstraction," 79.

ⁱⁱ In a letter to Miss Van Prooyen, date 27 February 1898, quoted in: Hefting, *Jan Toorop: een kennismaking* (no. 49), 69.