

The Questioner of the Sphinx

You might recognize the Great Sphinx of Giza in this painting. The sphinx is an ancient figure who guards temples and cities. Mythological stories describe the sphinx as half-human and half lion. There are many mysteries surrounding the origins of the Great Sphinx; why, when, and for whom was it built?

The site of the Great Sphinx has been excavated several times over the centuries only to be covered over again by sand storms.

Once, around 1400 BCE, Egyptian Prince Thutmose IV restored the monument and erected a stone plaque telling a tale about his dream. He claimed that the Great Sphinx was choking from all of the sand and the sphinx promised that if the prince cleared away the sand, he could rule Upper and Lower Egypt.

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The title of this painting is *Questioner of the Sphinx*.

What do you think the traveler in this painting might be asking the Sphinx?

If you could ask only one question of the Sphinx, what would it be?



Elihu Vedder, *The Questioner of the Sphinx*, 1863, oil on canvas, 36 x 42 in., Bequest of Mrs. Martin Brimmer, 06.2430 Courtesy, Museum Fine Arts, Boston Reproduced with permission. © 2019 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. All rights reserved

In 1798, French military leader, Napoleon Bonaparte led a campaign into Egypt. Along with the army, Napoleon took an expedition of approximately 160 scientists, mathematicians, artists and engineers. Their discoveries were documented in a series of books called the *Description de l'Égypte*. Soon people longed to have objects in their home that made connections with ancient Egypt, the pyramids, and especially the Sphinx. This style of decorative arts became known as Egyptian Revival.



Mantel garniture, maker unknown, 1875-1885, slate, marble, bronze, brass, wood, and glass. Clock: 18 ½ x 7 ¾ in., obelisks: 20 ½ x 7 ¾ x 5 ⅛ in.,
Museum Purchase, 2000.21.1-4



Chair, maker unknown, c. 1870, wood, upholstery, 30 ¼ x 22 x 21 in.,
Museum Purchase, 2005.6