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► **To cite this version:**

Mercedes Volait. Surveying monuments in Egypt: the work of Emile Prisse d'Avennes (1807-1879). 2013. halshs-00923016

HAL Id: halshs-00923016

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00923016>

Preprint submitted on 1 Jan 2014

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Surveying monuments in Egypt: the work of Emile Prisse d'Avennes (1807-1879)

Lecture at the General Consulate of Egypt in Djeddah, 30 November 2013

The antiquarian work of the French orientalist Emile Prisse d'Avennes in Egypt can be, and has been, analysed through his notorious illustrated publications that have been continuously reprinted, in many languages, since their release in the 1870s (quite an achievement in itself!). It can be further explored through his private papers kept at the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, and with the help of some of his less-known writings.

A pioneer?

Emile Prisse d'Avennes is not the first “artist and antiquarian” – as he liked to describe himself – that devoted attention to the amazing historical monuments of the city of Cairo. As early as the turn of the 18th c., French artists and scientists were working at an encyclopaedic survey of Egypt, in the midst of the military occupation of the country by Bonaparte’s troops, producing drawings of houses and mosques in Cairo – and of many other things. Two decades later, French architect Pascal Coste embarked upon a detailed survey of religious architecture in Cairo, in order to acquire background knowledge for the design of a mosque to be built at the Citadel (that was in the end not erected according to his drawings but made possible a magnificent publication). Many amateurs followed, such as the aristocrat Adalbert de Beaumont or engraver Gabriel Toudouze. The invention of photography in 1839 was another major milestone, since the new medium attracted cohorts of photographers to Egypt, starting with Girault de Prangey who produced more than 800 daguerreotypes of Cairo buildings during a 2-year excursion.

By its depth and scope, Emile Prisse d'Avennes’s study of “Arab art” in Egypt is however quite different from these early surveys. One reason is the exceptional acquaintance with the country that he was able to gain through employment, friendship and family; a second is the striking amount of time, energy and personal resources that he devoted to the study of his topic.

My talk tonight will be accordingly divided in 2 parts. In a first part, I will present a brief biography of Prisse d'Avennes and in particular what we know of his time in Egypt. In the second part, I will address more specifically his survey of Egyptian "Arab art".

A brief biographical sketch

For a number of reasons (including the man's taste for secrecy), our knowledge of Prisse d'Avennes's life is still quite fragmentary. He was born in Northern France in 1807, and claimed to be of British ancestry. Little has surfaced of his early years, apart that he studied engineering at the Ecole des Arts et métiers de Châlons-en-Champagne from 1822 to 1825. Family tradition had it that he subsequently travelled to India, Greece and Palestine, but we have no evidence of this. He is known to have reached Egypt in 1827, where he was to spend the 9 following years working as an instructor in the military schools founded by the new governor of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, with the aim of establishing a modern army. In the process, Prisse became fluent in Arabic, wear Egyptian attire, adopted the name of Idriss-effendi and most probably established a household, as can be inferred from friends' observations and the fact that he fathered in 1842 a little girl, named Zohra hanem, whose mother appears in one source as Cherifa Soliman. He might have adopted Islam, as did at about the same time other Frenchmen in the service of the Pacha, among them the engineer Linant de Bellefonds or the soldier Soliman pacha al-Fransawi, but also some of the Saint-Simonian engineers who came to settle in Egypt in the 1830s in order to offer their technical skills to the development of the country. In the case of the latter, adopting and embodying Islam was seen as a "way to civilisation" ("*moyen de civilisation*"), as stated by one Saint-Simonian (Ismail Urbain), a close acquaintance of Prisse d'Avennes, in his diary for 1835. "Saint-Simonisme" was an ideology that advocated the fusion of East and West civilisations for the sake of the humanity's happiness.

Whatever the case for Prisse, his papers do contain documentation on Islam, on the prayers to be performed as well as on the pilgrimage to Mecca, taken from a variety of sources. They also show that Prisse was able to acquire prime knowledge of Egyptian society and culture. His notes recall conversations with cheikhs and officials, evoke magic sessions, contain copies of popular poetry or formulas against pain. Watercolours depict Egyptian interiors,

where one can notice the presence of Chinese ware. His first important publication, the *Oriental album*, released in London in 1848, offers ample testimony of Prisse's intimate knowledge of Egyptian customs, and one wonders if some of the plates actually depict his own household, rather than an anonymous one. Prisse was later to claim that adopting Egyptian mores was instrumental for his understanding of historical Arabic manners and customs.

In 1836, the orientalist left the Egyptian civil service to devote himself fully to his passion for art and history. An important encounter in this respect was the British orientalist George Lloyd (1815-1843), with whom he travelled intensively along the Nile, recording plans of monuments, drawing wall paintings, excavating archaeological sites, but also collecting ethnographical information. Prisse returned to France in 1844, carrying a small chamber, known as the "Hall of Ancestors" that he had salvaged from the Temple of Amon at Karnak, with the excuse that his Prussian rival Richard Lepsius was planning to get hold of it for Berlin – not his smartest action, whatever the case! He also brought back an ancient Papyrus that he indeed offered to the French Royal Library.

Back in France, Prisse started sorting out his material and publishing his findings. Dozens of articles appeared in the following years, on a variety of topics ranging from Egyptology to Ethnography, with pieces on rural society in Egypt or desert tribes (Ababdehs and Bisharis). He also embarked upon various projects, such as an "Artistic Encyclopaedia of the East" (*Miroir de l'Orient*), that was short-lived. He collaborated to a book on Modern Egypt, published in 1848. But his main ambition was to find means to return to Egypt to collect more visual material. After several failed attempts, he eventually succeeded to secure an official mission and sailed back to Egypt in May 1858, accompanied by two young aides, the Dutch artist Willem de Famars Testas and the French photographer Edouard Jarrot, in order to carry out "archaeological researches".

The mission was a success: in June 1860, after 2 years of exhausting labour, the 3 men were back in France with dozens of photographs, hundreds of drawings on paper or tracing paper (used to record wall paintings on a 1:1 scale) and thousands of squeezes – a process that allowed, with the use of wet paper, to obtain an exact imprint of relief ornament. The use of photography as a scientific mean to record monuments is among the earliest known ones.

The surviving documentation of the mission, in the holdings of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, reveals furthermore a creative use of the several techniques employed to record monuments and ornaments in Cairo. Squeeze and pencil drawing were combined to outline more neatly the motifs recorded. Ink drawing and photography were combined to include figures in the prints obtained from the calotype negatives, at a time when the technique did not allow capturing moving people, because of long exposure times. Painting on photographic prints allowed suppressing undesired elements; in many instances, the final prints of the drawings made on site differed somehow. Finally, much attention was devoted to colour and to the record of polychromy in Cairene monuments.

During the following decade, Prisse worked hard to get his material published, mostly at his own expenses. Since he had high standards in mind regarding quality of engraving and of printing, the enterprise proved a Herculean task. It has been calculated that a total of 60 engravers worked on the plates he published. In the process he went bankrupt and had to sell part of his library to sustain the printing of his books. His two major achievements, *L'Art arabe d'après les monuments du Kaire depuis le VII^e siècle jusqu'à la fin du XVIII^e*, 1869-1877, and *Histoire de l'art égyptien d'après les monuments, depuis les temps les plus reculés jusqu'à la domination romaine*, 1858-1879, took years to be completed, the former about 8 years, the latter more than 20 years. Impoverished and exhausted, Prisse died in Paris on 10 January 1879. A month later, what was left from his library and part of his portfolios were auctioned in London. The remaining part was acquired in 1880 by the Bibliothèque nationale de France on the recommendation of Egyptologist Gaston Maspero.

A history of monumental Egypt

It took time for Prisse's editorial project(s) to acquire its/their definite shape. He seems to have envisioned different possibilities before seeing clearly the direction that he finally followed. Eventually, his work went along two separate tracks. One focused on what was known at the time as « histoire monumentale » or monumental topography (in a way the ancestor of what we call today "building archaeology"), in other words: the most precise record of monuments in order to reconstruct history through material remains. It ultimately led to his grand illustrated atlases of Egyptian monuments, both from Ancient and medieval

times. A second major concern of Prisse d'Avennes was a publication on manners and customs of Modern Egyptians that never materialized.

Let me concentrate here on the first track, since it is directly connected to the topic of the exhibition, but truly enough his ethnographical curiosities certainly loomed large in his acute and informed perception of Cairo's monuments. Prisse was convinced that "one should arabize, whatever one's talent, to study Arab art", and it is thanks to his command of Arabic, a rarity among European antiquarians, that he was able, for instance, to decipher Kufic panels or to learn how to date some of the buildings he surveyed.

Comparative analysis

We don't know with certainty when Prisse started studying Arab art in Egypt. One of his earliest (and shortest!) publications on the topic appeared in 1856. It addresses the re-use of ancient capitals in mosques at Cairo and Damiette (where he had lived in 1834-36). Continuity with ancient times is what must have cast his eye in this instance. The idea that series can offer a way to contribute to historical understanding is present in many of his later writings. A posterior comment on a ceramic panel in the mosque of Qus reads as follows:

"This decoration is remarkable mainly for its Kufic inscription of the bismillah: we have chosen the sacred verse that opens every chapter in the Quran, in order to be allowed to compare it to inscriptions of the same kind but that differ at each epoch".

Eventually, style of scripture could help locate historically undated buildings.

His second publication on "Arab art" appeared in an architectural encyclopaedia published in instalments between 1850 and 1858 by a French amateur-archaeologist, Jules Gailhabaud, under the title *L'Architecture du Ve au XVIIe siècle et les arts qui en dépendent: la sculpture, la peinture murale, la peinture sur verre, la mosaïque, la ferronnerie, etc.* Gide, Paris : 1858, in 4 volumes. All drawings representing the "Arab school" (according to the conventional art historical categories that classified works of art along "national" schools) in it bear Prisse's signature.

The "Arab school" is illustrated by a *mihrab* in Damietz, stone screens from the mosque of Sanjar al-Gawli in Cairo, and metal and stucco work from the mosques of Qus and al-Khanqa.

This is a remarkable presence of Islamic monuments in a publication that is otherwise purely European. Although the texts are unsigned, they most probably reflect Prisse's vision. The entry on the flat *mihrab* in Abu-Lata explains:

"In such a study, it is crucial to discover, through the elements and the character of the work of art, its date, nature and origin. ...In this instance, the form of the arc suggests a rather recent period in the history of art; the ceramic appears to be of 2 styles. Those of the niche itself, of the top, and of the inscription, seem older than the ones on the sides. And this difference in character suggests a work of the late 16th century."

The entry on the *Mihrâb* at Qus alludes to religious practice when dealing with religious architecture.

"We will not enter here into details related to the prayer, and the preparation to it – this is for a subsequent work" (that unfortunately never saw light).

A much earlier plate, prepared around 1852 but unpublished, by Adalbert de Beaumont, suggests that Prisse may have envisioned the possibility of using *mihrabs* as indexes to classify religious buildings.

The text accompanying the screens in the Sanjar al-Gawly mosque makes a plea for a "social and cultural history of art":

"All archaeologists should made active enquiries in order to fill the gaps in art history; they should indeed collect all possible evidence regarding another history, its inseparable sister, that no less important, of manners and customs."

A last statement, in connection with bronze work in the mosques of Qûs and al-Khanqa, concerns overinterpretation, and could again be easily attributed to Prisse.

"We would not, for fear of making important mistakes, embark upon a study for which dates are missing or for which we would be conducted, in matter of interpretation, to pure speculation, which is, to us, the worst thing. The hope of further discoveries and research impose the greatest cautiousness, and invite us to postpone the writing to a time when we will possess more numerous pieces of evidence".

The rejection of overinterpretation may explain why some important discoveries made by Prisse in Cairene monuments did not lend ultimately to some comprehensive analysis. This is

the case for example of the extraordinary iconography that he discovered on marble panels in the mosque of Sargatmitch (1356), instances of which are currently being studied by specialists in connection with *Andalusi* imagery. Prisse had squeezes made of a similar motif that he had identified in a Cairene house, which might suggest that we was looking for further material on the topic.

Another instance of discovered but not commented material is a sculpted element, most probably a *spolia*, inserted in the portal of the mosque of Sultan Hasan. Other antiquarians after Prisse took interest in this carved element, and it has been recently hypothesized, based on formal similarities to Cilician manuscript illumination, that the reused stones may have come from the portal of a church in Adana that the Mamluks had raided in 1360 and brought back as booty. However, to this day, both sculpted stones represent pieces that are opened to questioning.

From monumental history to iconology

Besides his connection to Gailhabaud, we know that Prisse was also familiar with the work of Séroux d'Agincourt, a pioneer in matters of « monumental history »: the prospectus of his *Histoire de l'Art par les monumens depuis sa décadence au IVe siècle jusqu'à son renouvellement au XVIe siècle* (published 1823) is kept in Prisse papers, together with the first introductory pages of the book on architecture. Although isolated from academia, Prisse was well aware of developments in the field of “history through monuments”.

An explicit mention to his “*Studies of Arab art in Egypt*” (“*Etudes sur l'art arabe en Egypte*”) appears in Prisse's papers in 1865 – at the time, he thought that he would have been able to release the work for the Paris' Universal Exhibition of 1867. In a letter to a fellow Egyptologist in 1869, his volumes on *L'Art égyptien* and on *l'Art arabe* were depicted as belonging to a larger project in 2 parts, that of an “*Egypte monumentale*.”

According to specialists of this historiographical genre, illustrated monumental histories were mainly produced in France – from Daniel Ramée (1843) or Alexandre de Laborde (1830-1836) to Jules Gailhabaud or Louis Batissier – by cosmopolitan figures well connected to Anglo-saxon culture but located at the margins of the French system. By his Welsh origins

and his close friendship with the scholar George Lloyd, as well as by his marginal position in French Egyptology, Prisse quite well fit this model.

His later work does follow indeed a larger trend in monumental history: that of enlarging the investigation to objects as well as to issues related to iconography and heraldry. His papers refer to a manual on Islamic archaeology that was to follow *L'Art arabe* and where he had planned to include all that he had to say on the “representation of human and animal beings, on heraldry, on textiles”. To this end, Prisse started locating textiles bearing figurative representations in many private collections in Europe. The outcome would have been a book on Oriental textiles, tentatively entitled « *Les tissus et les broderies en Orient et Occident depuis l'Antiquité jusqu'au XV^e siècle classés par ordre chronologique avec texte explicatif, précédé d'un essai sur l'histoire de l'industrie textile dans l'antiquité* », on which he started to work in August 1873. It never came through, but at the urge of his publisher, he included some of the material prepared in *L'Art arabe*, which explains why the last plates of the book represent textiles of unknown provenance kept in European collections that bear no connection with monuments in Egypt.

Simultaneously, Prisse came to express embarrassment about how to properly understand and label the art he was interested in. After much thinking, he came to consider that “Islamic” art was a much more appropriate term than “Arab” or “Turkish” art. He proposed to see it as a generic term under which subgenres existed according to geographical and ethnic variations. Interestingly enough, the example he brings in support of his argument is European Renaissance, that is further qualified as Italian, French or Flemish according to national variations, but that still offers a general umbrella to the works of art of that period.

“Je suis arrivé à nier la dénomination d'art mauresque comme l'art turc et arabe pour ne croire qu'à l'art islamique, modifié par des influences climatériques ou ethnologiques comme la renaissance française, italienne, flamande.”

Conclusion

At close scrutiny, Prisse's work falls at the crossroad of many disciplines and can be seen somehow as unfinished. In his own words, art and history were the 2 main drivers of his

work, but his record as an ethnographer and chronicler of modern Egypt is no less significant. He certainly sensed what architecture could bring to historical understanding, but was not able to fully explore that path. He did not use the buildings he surveyed as sole historical sources for his writings – quite the opposite. His commitment to the study of Egyptian art was remarkable, but he was also utterly aware of the enormous gaps existing in the available knowledge related to them and of the uncertainties one was confronted with when studying such art.

His major legacy lays in the fact that he strived at keeping the record straight, at copying, with “scrupulous fidelity” (« fidélité scrupuleuse » in his own words), all what his sharp eye could see. Interestingly enough, he was strongly self-conscious of the validity and utility of such systematic approach, if we are to believe what he wrote in 1863 to an old acquaintance:

“My opinions may be criticized in the future, my mistakes might be noticed, people could reject my whole text, but the Atlas, that is the visual record, will stay whatever the progress of science and it will allow everyone to remake this history as he pleased”.

Truly enough, his plates continue to be used by scholars today, because in some instances they remain the sole record we have of what they depict.