
Leszek Zinkow
Kraków

„HOUSE IN COLOURS OF PYRAMIDS...”¹
EGYPTIAN REVIVAL STYLE
IN POLISH ARCHITECTURE:
„THE EGYPTIAN HOUSE” IN KRAKÓW

The impact of ancient Egypt on European architecture is usually discussed in a broader, multilayered context. Although the phenomenon of „Egyptomania” has only recently gained the status of an autonomous scientific field and has become quite popular in the last few decades, several monographs focusing on the architectural aspects of this issue have been published; such as J.-M.Humbert’s, *l’Égyptomanie dans l’art occidental*, Paris, 1989; J.S. Curl’s, *Egyptomania. The Egyptian Revival: a Recurring Theme in the History of Taste*, Manchester & New York 1994; and *Imhotep Today: Egyptianizing architecture*, ed. by J.-M.Humbert, C.Price, London 2003, unfortunately without any reference to Poland².

In Polish architecture obelisks and pyramids showed up before the nineteenth century. They constituted a common motif in baroque architecture, frequently adorning church facades, were used in a type of tombstone, and formed part of a funeral ceremony called *Pompa funebris* (an example of which is the ceremony organized in 1572 by the Polish cardinal Stanislas Hosius, in the San Lorenzo in Damaso church in Rome, for the soul of the deceased King

¹ Expression after St.[anisław] M.[róz], *List z Krakowa. Koniec krakowskiego Egiptu* [*Letter from Cracow. The end of the Cracow’s Egypt*], „Ilustrowany Kurjer Codzienny”, 248: 1930, p.2.

² In works by some Polish researchers the topic of „Egyptianism” in architecture was discussed e.g. J. Śliwa, *Egyptianizing Grave Monuments in London’s Brompton Cemetery* [in:] „*Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization*”, Cracow 1999, s. p. 11-21: *The Egyptian Hall and the Exhibition of Egyptian art in London, 1821-1822* [in:] *Melanges offerts a Edith Varga* (Bulletin du Musee Hongrois des Beaux Arts), Budapest 2001, p. 299-307.

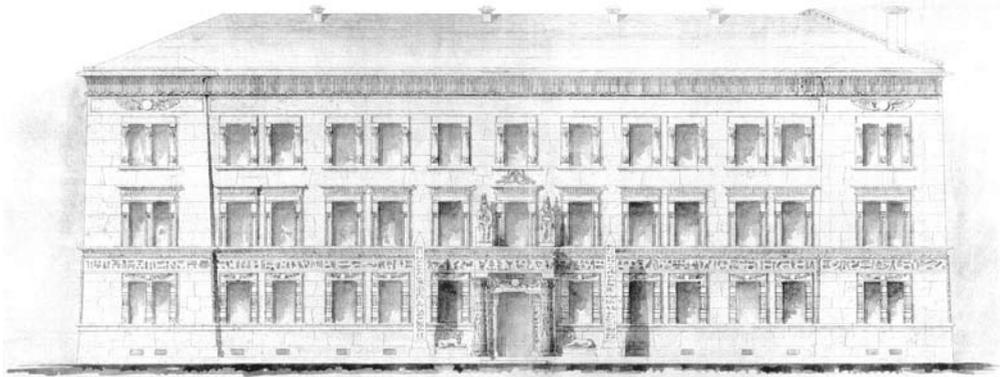


Fig. 1. Façade of the “Egyptian House”, 1893, the State Archives in Kraków

Sigismundus Augustus. Presiding over the so-called *Castrum Doloris* was a good-sized pyramid flanked by obelisks). Occasionally they also functioned as freestanding edifices, like that seen in a design for the Bonifratre Church in Warsaw (never built), drafted by the Polonized Dutch architect Tylman van Gameren (1632-1706). He was probably inspired by another foreigner, Titus Livius Buratini-Boratyński (who settled in Poland in 1641 and died in Warsaw in 1681), one of the foremost connoisseurs of Egypt in his time, having spent four years there (1637-1641). The afore-mentioned church was designed as a pyramid. It is outstanding in that it reflected the proportions of authentic Egyptian edifices much more accurately than those in popular representations inspired by the Roman pyramid of Cestius.

The best-known Polish obelisk appears in a print from Lazarus Andruszowicz’s (later Jan Januszowski) Renaissance printing company in Krakow. The print represents a huge structure built near Kraków in the XVI century, by Georgius Rheticus, an astronomer and a student of Nicholas Copernicus³.

In Grodzisk close to Ojców there is an obelisk that imitates the one in the Piazza della Minerva in Rome, by Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini, which is mounted on a stone elephant. Other mentions of “Egyptianizing” architectonic structures date back to the turn of XVIII and XIX century: they were located for example in the landscape gardens of the Polish aristocracy: such as “Arkadia” in Nieborów,⁴ or “Sofiówka” (near Humań, now part of Ukraine).

Even though interest in “Egyptian style” begins at the end of the XVII century, actual buildings (not just projects) in this style start to be built mainly in

³ See.: J. Miziołek, *Obeliski Rzymu i Krakowa w 2 połowie XVI w.*, „Barok. Historia – Literatura-Sztuka”, 1/2, 1994, p.153-176: summary in English. Obelisk has been destroyed in XVI century during religious unrest.

⁴ See: W. Piwkowski, *Arkadia of Helena Radziwiłł. A Historical Study* (also in Polish), Warszawa 1998.

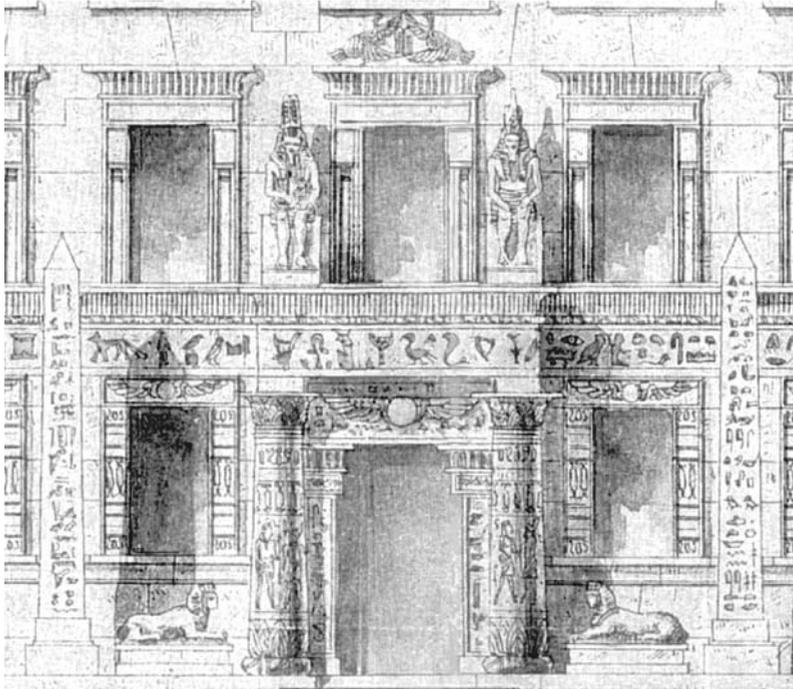


Fig. 2. Detail of the “Egyptian House”, 1893, the State Archives in Kraków

the second decade of the XIX century. They were the repercussion of the fascination with Egypt which gripped Europe after Napoleon’s 1789 campaign: hundreds of engravings in the monumental “Description de l’Egypte” served as inexhaustible source of inspiration, for architects among others.

Around 1822 Park Łazienkowski in Warsaw acquired an unusual addition to its numerous pavilions in the so-called “Egyptian Temple” (designed by Jakub Kubicki?) that featured Egyptianizing columns, niches stylized as pylons and characteristic cornices.

In the years 1825 – 1829, an architect of Italian descent, Francis Maria Lanci, designed and built in Końskie near Kielce an orangery in the Egyptian style for his patron Stanislas Małachowski, who was a member of a Masonic Lodge called the “Temple of Isis”. It featured pylons and pharaoh statues in niches.

The adoption of ancient Egyptian motifs and Egyptian architectural styles in building was discussed in Poland by such authors as Sebastian Sierakowski, Franciszek Ksawery Giżycki, Adam Idźkowski. They were rather skeptical, considering the Egyptian style inapplicable for housing as too “heavy and sepulchral”. In this context it is worth mentioning that “Egyptianism” was widely used in sepulchral architecture.



Fig. 3. Photograph of the façade of the “Egyptian House”, about 1917, author unknown

In the first decades of the XIX to the XX century Egyptian motifs were widely applied in European architecture. In this context it is hard to explain why the “Egyptian House”, which was built in Kraków in close proximity to the Wawel Castle and not far from the Main Square, on the corner of Retoryka and Smoleńsk streets has been omitted from historical accounts, since it is exceptional in Poland and outstanding even in a broader, European perspective. This house still exists, but the reconstruction that took place in the twenties and thirties of the twentieth century deprived it of its characteristic wall decorations both in the interior and exterior of the building.

The original project of 1893 that clearly depicts the unusual architectural concept is still available at the State Archives in Kraków (Fig. 1, 2). The design is meticulous and done with artistic gift. The main façade is flanked with pylon style corners or rather double pylons, one atop the other as suggested by the cornice on the of the first floor. The proportions of the façade in this building do not resemble the proportions of typical fronts of Egyptian temples. It is too wide in relation to the height, so that the pylons do not flank the portal directly, but are separated by a set of windows at each side. A very characteristic element of Egyptianism is expressed in the use of the cavetto cornice, applied to the ground floor and the whole building, as well as in the lintel of the first floor windows.

The portico at the entrance, slightly protruding from the face of the building, with its glut of all possible Egyptianizing motifs, is the central point of the symmetrical façade. It is supported by two papyrus type columns with

unfolded umbels and supports a protruding cornice on which, symmetrically mounted, are two life size seated pharaoh statues. Close to the portico on two socles one can see two seated sphinxes, and further to the side – two obelisks. The windows of the ground floor as well as the main entrance are adorned with winged sun disks, the bigger sun disks forming the head of the pylons. Under the first floor cornice, all along facade of the house, we find (pseudo) hieroglyphic inscriptions. The portico columns and obelisks are covered with inscriptions as well. Window jambs on the first floor resemble narrow interstices of false door, and the central window between the pharaohs above the cornice, is ornamented by two symmetrically positioned stylized birds protecting a cartouche. Window posts on the top floor are stylized as lotus columns.

Equally interesting is the design for decorating the interior, which can be seen in the cross-section of the entrance. The architect seems to suggest decorating entire walls in the entrance hall and second floor corridor with motifs like that of a triumphant ruler riding down his enemies, or a lion with the head of a king (on the ground floor), or finally, a king that kills his enemy with a club. The entrance hall features another grand spectacle: a winged goddess kneeling down on a hieroglyph (a kind of a flat basket or basin) supporting a sun disk over her head.

The design for decorating the interior is just an outline, a draft, a kind of suggestion. We cannot be certain whether this fragment of the general project was ever realized or what was its final shape would have been.

It is unclear who originated the concept of “The Egyptian House”. Four names emerge in this context: an architect – K. Lachnik, an investor – Józef Kulesza, a master-builder – Benjamin Torbe, and its eventual owner – Joel Bauminger. It is likely that Joel Bauminger came to own the building towards the end of its construction; therefore he can be responsible only for a few details of the overall design. As far as architect Lachnik is concerned we know even less. We don’t even know his first name; he is not mentioned in any of Polish, Czech, Austrian or German biographic or technical dictionaries. All we know for certain is that he designed just this one building in Krakow. Józef Kulesza was the owner of the Stonework & Monuments atelier in the proximity of Rakowicki Cemetery, but the tombstones or monuments attributed to his workshop bear no Egyptian traits, except for one (nota bene of 1893), which has a shape of obelisk. However we cannot rule out that he was familiar with Egyptianized sepulchral architecture.

We can only guess as to the flow of inspiration: it could have been Kulesza who ordered Lachnik to develop his own “Egyptian” project or on the other hand Lachnik could have proposed his design to Kulesza. We don’t know



Fig. 4. The pharaoh statues removed from the portals of the “Egyptian House”.

Phot. L. Zinkow

what other interests in “Egyptology” they may have had. We can’t even assume that, as a resource of architectural ideas, they referenced contemporaneous scientific works, since a knowledge of lithographs from the Brockhaus Encyclopaedia or Meyer’s Lexicon then widely circulated in Central and Eastern Europe would have sufficed. In addition to depicting entire monuments and scenes these prints presented a multitude of details: columns, cornices, capitals, pillars, decorative motifs and even representations of gods and kings.

Only two photographs documenting the outdoor view of the House before its remodeling have been discovered. The first, which even appeared as a postcard, shows the entire building (the main façade and one side). It dates from a time

just after completion of construction, definitely not later than the first decade of XX century. The reason we can be sure of this is the bridge over the Rudawa River visible in the photograph. In 1907-1912 the riverbed was altered and as a result Retoryka Street, formerly on the riverbank, became a large two-way artery with a green belt and pedestrian promenade in the middle.

A second photograph by an unknown photographer, dated 1917, depicts only the right side of the façade – the exterior along Smolensk Street is not shown (Fig. 3). Those two photographs relay to us important information: first of all they prove the project was realized, and secondly reveal unusual additions. First floor window posts were added with full size human figures –the most important modification. Unfortunately, the poor quality of the pictures does not allow to distinguish details, but the Egyptian format of several dozen statues (probably around 50) is unquestionable: the crossed arms of some of them remind us of statue pillars (so called ‘Osirides’)⁵. Looking at the earlier photograph we can notice that the exterior polychromy is richer than project design provided for.

⁵ See: D. Arnold, *The Encyclopedia of Ancient Egyptian Architecture*, 2003, p.228.

Documentation of the building, attached to the reconstruction project of 1929 raises reservations: it seems to be an exact copy of the 1893 design, down to the finest details, while we know from the photographs that the building had been altered. A modernization project executed in the same scale as the “status quo” draft suggests clearing all Egyptianizing details and leaving behind only simple geometric forms.

Today only a few traces of the former “Egyptian House” remain, yet they are typical enough for the old name of the house to still be in use. Wooden doors, both at the main entrance door on Retoryka Street, on the Smolensk side attract the attention of passers-by; they contain reliefs of lotus and papyrus stalks and winged solar disks with uraeuses. Inside one of entrance halls a sculpted stone panel depicts an allegorical “Egyptian” scene. In this somewhat chaotic representation we find an personification of the Nile, figures of sphinxes in nemeses and palm trees. This relief raises some doubts: in the first place it is not made according to the canons of Ancient Egyptian art – rather we can associate it with Hellenistic art. None of the plans for the building include this panel; it might had been added later.

The two most impressive reminders of the “Egyptian” times of this house are two life-size preserved pharaoh statues that had been removed from the portals (Fig.4). They differ slightly from the project drawings: in the original design one of them was wearing a double crown (clearly seen in a drawing), which justifies our designating them as “pharaohs”. Their iconography is unequivocally “Egyptianizing”, although individual elements can raise reservations. The faces, adorned with ceremonial beards, are backed by the nemeses, which in turn are adorned with crowns full of elements at best only loosely linked to Egyptian symbolism, like stylized feathers, horns, a sun disk and a peculiar element resembling a snail shell, but which may have been intended to represent a king’s uraeus. The positioning of the hands is mirrored symmetrically: one hand lies on the lap, the second is crossed on the chest holding a scepter that looks like a *heqa* (first statue, now on the left) or the *ankh* symbol (statue on the right hand side). The sole elements of clothing are ceremonial skirts with marked folds; the statues are barefoot.

As mentioned before, the “Egyptian House” has not been discussed in the literature on the Egyptian Revival Style or “Egyptomania”. Yet this unique manifestation of Polish (and European) “Egyptianizing style” deserves adequate mention in this context.

