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CULTURAL TOURISM THROUGH THE LENS OF THE STEREOSCOPE: UNDERWOOD & UNDERWOOD'S EGYPT, A 1905 STEREOVIEW BOXED SET, CONSIDERED

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Abstract

Using the framework of the *tourist gaze* to investigate Underwood & Underwood's *Egypt*, a 1905 stereoview boxed set with an accompanying book by James Henry Breasted, which is part of a larger collection of stereoview boxed sets by the same company, this paper will define the *tourist gaze*, provide a brief overview of Underwood & Underwood's stereoview boxed sets, and examine how Egypt and its cultural heritage are perceived through an outsider's orientation and set of values as well as the ramifications of this perception. This will be accomplished by focusing on Breasted's textual depictions of the contemporary Egyptian at the beginning of the twentieth century in the set's accompanying book, *Egypt through the Stereoscope*, and included on some of the back sides of the stereoviews in the *Egypt* set.

Keywords: Egypt; cultural tourism; tourist gaze; James Henry Breasted; Underwood & Underwood; stereoscope.

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in America, the stereoscope enabled people to see the familiar and the faraway – to explore distant places and cultures from within their homes, local libraries, and classrooms. For many, the stereoscope would allow them to see places and cultures that they would never visit and could experience and understand only through its lens.

Underwood & Underwood, an American stereoview publishing company founded in 1882, reported in 1901 that it was publishing twenty-five thousand stereoviews a day and manufacturing three hundred thousand stereoscopes a year. Around this time, Underwood & Underwood introduced *The Underwood Travel System*, which consisted of stereoview boxed sets, each with an accompanying book and set of maps to enhance the learning experience – creating a sophisticated virtual tour of a place or event for the armchair traveler (Darrah, 1997, pp. 46–48; Heil, 2017; Nicholson, 2009). These stereoview boxed sets provided virtual tours of such countries as Italy, England, Greece, Palestine, and France.

Underwood & Underwood's 1905 *Egypt* stereoview boxed set, which was the second release the company produced on Egypt, included one hundred stereoviews with an accompanying book and maps to educate users on “the life, customs, history and monuments of the ancient Egyptians” through its early twentieth-century version of a virtual tour (Breasted, 1905, p. 11).

Offering insight into the notion of the *gaze* as an optic through which people understand and interpret the world around them, sociologist John Urry's concept of the *tourist gaze* is a

fitting portal through which to deconstruct the cultural mechanism in which a preconceived set of expectations and understanding of a culture and its heritage is established (Urry, 1992; Urry, 2011). Using the framework of the tourist gaze to investigate Underwood & Underwood's *Egypt*, a stereoview boxed set with an accompanying book by James Henry Breasted, this paper will define the tourist gaze, provide a brief overview of Underwood & Underwood's stereoview boxed sets, and examine how Egypt and its cultural heritage are perceived through an outsider's orientation and set of values as well as the ramifications of this perception. This will be accomplished by focusing on Breasted's textual depictions of the contemporary Egyptian at the beginning of the twentieth century in the set's accompanying book, *Egypt through the Stereoscope*, and included on some of the back sides of the stereoviews in the *Egypt* set. Due to space limitations on the back sides of the stereoviews, the back-side descriptions are excerpts from the full entries written in *Egypt through the Stereoscope*. This essay draws from the full descriptions within Breasted's *Egypt through the Stereoscope* book, as text central to this article's argument on two of the three set's stereoviews discussed are omitted on the back sides. The stereoviews are used in part to illustrate and reinforce Breasted's narrative.

Nineteenth-Century and Early Twentieth-Century Tourism in Egypt and the Tourist Gaze

In the book *The Tourist Gaze 3.0*, gazing is defined as “not merely seeing, but involves cognitive work of interpreting, evaluating, drawing comparisons and making mental connections between signs and their referents, and capturing signs photographically” (Urry and Larsen, 2011, p. 17). The

notion of the tourist gaze is built on a set of expectations and understandings of a culture and its heritage. This preconceived gaze is constructed by one's education, values, and circumstances to create an extraordinary mental representation of a place that is informed and reinforced by travel books, paintings, photography, tour brochures, websites, and other media representations that obscure everyday life to create contrived expectations and experiences for the consumer. This framework of seeing invites the question, "How do these constructions begin and why?"

It appears that there are two primary bodies of writing that have shaped the West's understanding of Egypt – its gaze – in the nineteenth century and beyond. The first is the Institut d'Égypte's *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–1822), a twenty-volume comprehensive resource of text and images of Egypt that was the result of an expedition led by Napoleon Bonaparte between 1798 and 1801; over 150 civilian scholars and scientists and over 2,000 artists and technicians contributed to the work. This massive catalogue was considered the cornerstone of European knowledge of Egypt for nearly a half century (Lyth, 2013). The other is the work of British Orientalist Edward William Lane. His book *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836) and his annotated translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* (1839–1841) played a significant role in how the West perceived Egypt in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Gregory, 2005). Lane's version of *The Thousand and One Nights* was thought to capture nineteenth-century Cairo, and his other book, *Modern Egyptians*, described contemporary Egyptian customs and practices, especially of those who lived in Cairo (Gregory, 2005, pp. 2–6). All these texts along with Orientalist paintings, photography

and travel writings contributed to Europeans' and Americans' perceptions of Egypt and would provide the foundation on which the Egyptian travel industry would be built.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century, the French and English assimilated the achievements of ancient Egypt into Europe's heritage because of Egypt's contributions to Greece and Rome, and conceptually separated Egypt's then-contemporary inhabitants from those of the past, treating contemporary Egyptians as curiosities. Egypt as Europe's heritage and the conception of the present-day Egyptian as the "other" were used as the basis for the marketing of Egypt as a tourist destination for Europeans and Americans (Lyth, 2013, p. 178; Gregory, 2005, p. 11). For the Victorian-era visitor, Egypt offered adventure, culture, history, and comfortable amenities. Winter was the height of the tourist season as it was and still is considered the best time to visit Egypt. Tourists typically entered Egypt by way of Alexandria, traveled to Cairo, and then departed for a cruise on the Nile to visit ancient Egyptian heritage sites (Lyth, 2013, p. 181).

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 expanded tourism and commercial photography opportunities in Egypt and many countries in Asia (Pérez González, 2014, p. 30; Osman, 1997). In the mid-1870s, the travel company Thomas Cook & Sons transformed tourism by operating steamships up and down the Nile from November to March, providing luxury services for Western tourists along with a network of guides, porters, and servants across Egypt. Tourists were able to purchase inclusive package tours that offered easy travel experiences. In the nineteenth century, the Egyptian tourism industry primarily served British tourists, whose tourist gaze consisted



Fig. 1 "Before the giant sphinx," n.d., Underwood & Underwood stereoview. Private collection.

of mental constructions of Egypt shaped by such books as the Bible, *The Thousand and One Nights*, and *Modern Egyptians* as well as Egypt guidebooks by leading publishers like John Murray and Karl Baedeker. The Egyptian tourism industry created a type of open-air exhibition of ancient monuments and artifacts along with contemporary Egyptian society experiences that would reinforce the West's nineteenth-century perception of Egypt, which had become an expectation for Western tourists visiting the country (Hazbun, 2016, pp. 124–128; Gregory, 2002; Gregory, 2005; Lyth, 2013; Pérez González, 2014). Figure 1 is an Underwood & Underwood stereoview of an early twentieth-century tourist on a camel in front of the Great Sphinx of Giza (this image is not part of Underwood &

Underwood's 1905 stereoview boxed set *Egypt*), which illustrates that there was a robust tourism economy with many modern amenities in Egypt at this time.

The American Stereoview Company Underwood & Underwood

In 1882, brothers Bert and Elmer Underwood established the stereoview company Underwood & Underwood in Ottawa, Kansas. Initially, they focused their sales efforts on the region west of the Mississippi River by reselling stereoviews by Charles Bierstadt, J. F. Jarvis, and the Littleton View Company (Darrah, 1997, p. 46; Nicholson, 2009, p. 385). By 1891, the

Underwood brothers had expanded their market eastward by opening offices in Baltimore and New York (Darrah, 1997, p. 47; Nicholson, 2009, p. 385).

In the winter of 1895–1896, the Underwood brothers first developed their notion of the “boxed set” when they made sequential stereographic images of Egypt, which became the first release the company produced on Egypt (Ellison, 1901, p. 33; DeLeskie, 2000, p. 73). Underwood & Underwood’s second release on Egypt is the focus of this paper. *The Underwood Travel System* consisted of a boxed set of sequentially ordered stereoviews (usually one hundred) along with an optional accompanying book and set of maps. Each point on the map showed the exact position of the camera where the photograph was taken (Darrah, 1997, p. 48; Nicholson, 2009, pp. 391–392).

Underwood & Underwood targeted schools, colleges, libraries, and individuals. The company used direct mail, endorsements, display advertising, and door-to-door salesmen to promote and sell their merchandise (Plunkett, 2008; DeLeskie, 2000). Individual sales were primarily focused on households and businesses in small towns and rural areas (Davis, 2015, pp. 70–71). The Underwoods designed their travel system and stereoview boxed sets with their customers in mind – appealing to their curiosities and dispositions – and provided a form of sophisticated educational entertainment for learning about the world.

Underwood & Underwood’s *Egypt*: An Overview

Underwood & Underwood’s *Egypt* includes a boxed set of one hundred stereoviews, a book, and a set of maps to educate users on “the life, customs, history and monuments of the ancient Egyptians” (Breasted, 1905, p. 11). The 1905 stereoview set’s book, *Egypt through the Stereoscope*, written by James Henry Breasted – a noted American Egyptologist who would found the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago in 1919 – plays a significant role in the formation of the viewer’s gaze, as it informs the viewer’s understanding of Egypt, both past and present. The Underwoods approached Breasted to write the book, and he subsequently selected the one hundred stereoviews to support his narrative (Nicholson, 2009, p. 392). Providing a context and narrative for the set of stereoviews, the book includes a forward by Breasted, a brief synopsis of the history of ancient Egypt (“The Story of Egypt”), and short descriptions in an “Itinerary” section numerically linked to each stereoview. These passages include archaeological, ethnographic, and historical information about Egypt, along with Breasted’s own anecdotes. These descriptions are also located on the back sides of the stereoviews. The accompanying maps and site plans enable users to understand their unique vantage point in relation to Egypt’s geography or heritage site by identifying its location on the map and the direction from which the stereoview was taken.

While the chapter “The Story of Egypt” is formally written, the “Itinerary” chapter, which forms the actual tour, is written more informally, as if Breasted is casually talking to his readers. Breasted’s tour begins in Alexandria at Pompey’s Pillar. It proceeds to Cairo to visit the Egyptian Museum and



Fig. 2 (27) “The great Sphinx of Gizeh, the largest royal portrait ever hewn—Egypt,” 1896, Underwood & Underwood stereoview. Private collection.

significant heritage sites including the Citadel and Muhammad Ali Mosque. From there, the tour takes the viewer to Giza to see the pyramids and then up the Nile, finishing in Sudan. Along the Nile, the tour introduces the viewer to historical monuments and archaeological sites such as the Temples of Luxor, Karnak, Edfu, and Horus, the Island of Philae, and Abu Simbel. Breasted interlaces this tour of ancient Egyptian sights with an introduction to contemporary Egyptian culture, providing personal reflections on the existing conditions in Egypt. The stereoviews, guide book, and map system present a mediated experience through Breasted’s lens.

For example, in Position 27, “The great Sphinx of Gizeh, the largest royal portrait ever hewn – Egypt” (Figure 2), an Egyptian man sits on a camel in the foreground wearing traditional clothing and carrying a rifle. Another Egyptian man in the lower left corner of the image peers from atop a dune out to the Sphinx. In the far background, the second pyramid rises from the desert, and two men on camels traverse the sands. While this composition provides a three-dimensional view with a definite foreground, midground, and background, it also presents Egypt and its people as the exotic “other” to the American viewer, as no tourists or modern features are found in the composition. Breasted writes:

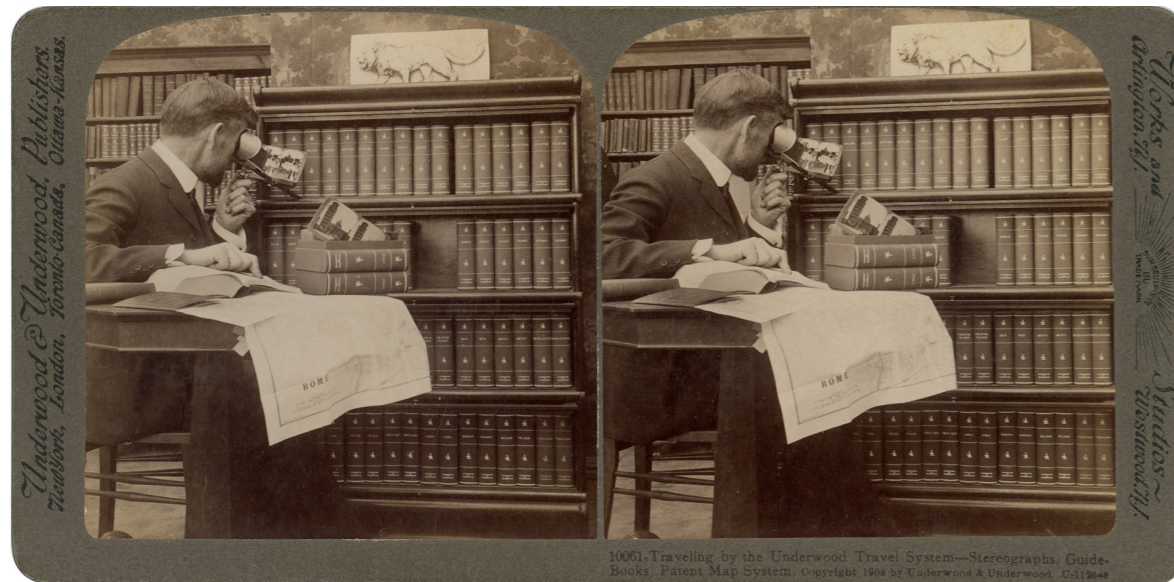


Fig. 3 "Traveling by the Underwood Travel System—Stereographs, Guide-Books, Patent Map System," 1908, Underwood & Underwood stereoview. Private collection.

How puny appear these futile moderns, thus contrasted so sharply with the work of their great ancestors! For it was thirty feet from side to side of that massive royal head-dress, the face is fourteen feet wide and the mouth is seven feet and seven inches in length. What a misfortune for the Sphinx that the Moslems are forbidden images of every sort! For what with their iconoclastic zeal, and the vandalism of the Mamlukes, who used it for a rifle target ... it has lost all its original comeliness. (Breasted, 1905, p. 142)

From this interpretation, the reader gathers that Breasted believes not only that there is a distinction between the people of ancient and contemporary Egypt but also that the latter should be considered inferior to their ancestors by his Western readers (Figure 3).

Position 17, "The Great Pyramid of Gizeh, a tomb of 5,000 years ago from S.E. Egypt" (Figure 4), reaffirms that interpretation of Breasted's text. In this view, a group of young Egyptian men wearing traditional clothing congregate and chat among themselves. Three of them sit on camels, while the



Fig. 4 (17) "The Great Pyramid of Gizeh, a tomb of 5,000 years ago from S.E. Egypt," 1904, Underwood & Underwood stereoview. Private collection.

others look as though they are tending to the camels amid a conversation. In midground are three isolated trees within Egypt's barren desert as well as a donkey found at midpoint between the trees and the group of young men. Underneath the left tree are grave markers of more contemporary Egyptians and in the far background is a monumental pyramid. Breasted writes:

This contrast between the humble sepulchers of the men of yesterday and the vast tombs of their ancestors, is one which is symbolical of the fallen

fortunes of the present-day Egyptians. ... The wild hordes of Arabia, surging in across the Delta plain, with the breath of the desert hot upon their lips as they brought to the children of the Nile the language and religion of Mohammed; nine centuries later it saw the baleful gleam of the star and crescent rising in the isthmus and heralding the oppression and misrule that have ever followed the footprints of the Turk. (Breasted, 1905, pp. 109–110)



Fig. 5 (9) "The harem windows in the court of a wealthy Cairene's house, Egypt," 1896, Underwood & Underwood stereoview. Private collection.

The reader draws from this text that Breasted believes the downfall of Egypt was due to the introduction of Islam in Egypt – crushing the greatness of the past and causing its culture to become stagnant and backward.

Position 9, "The harem windows in the court of a wealthy Cairene's house, Egypt" (Figure 5), shows the exterior of a wealthy Egyptian household in Cairo from street view. The streets are narrow, so in the description, Breasted comments on the difficulty for a photographer to capture a proper view of a building. After introducing the reader to appropriate behaviour before entering an Egyptian home, he draws the

viewer to the upper floor of the home and to the "harem window." He writes:

Yonder elaborately and exquisitely carved windows are those of the harem, and there the ladies of the house spend their time listlessly lounging, and rarely going out for an airing. They lead the most uninteresting of lives, possess no culture or next to none, and by the men of their own race are given an exceedingly bad character, probably far worse than they actually deserve. ... But the women are not the only sufferers. Said one of Lane's friends to him: "How many men in Cairo have lost their lives on account of women?"

A very handsome young libertine, who lived in this house which you now occupy, was beheaded here in the street before his own door, for an intrigue with the wife of a Bey, and all the women of Cairo wept for him." (Breasted, 1905, pp. 84–85)

In *Egypt through the Stereoscope*, Breasted perpetuates the myths that Edward Lane propagates through his books *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* and *The Thousand and One Nights*, which played a significant role in shaping the West's perceptions of Egypt. The set establishes a distinction between the viewer of the stereoview set as modern and civilized and those within the stereoviews as often exotic and primitive – making agendas and aesthetics indistinguishable.

Concluding Remarks

In *The Tourist Gaze*, John Urry and Jonas Larsen write, "People gaze upon the world through a particular filter of ideas, skills, desires and expectations, framed by social class, gender, nationality, age and education. ... Gazing at particular sights is conditioned by personal experiences and memories and framed by rules and styles, as well as by circulating images and texts" (Urry & Larsen, 2011, p. 2). The tourist gaze is a socially constructed framework in which viewers interpret the world around them.

Building on contemporary thought and scholarship of the time as well as his own research and findings, Breasted asserts that Pharaonic Egypt is an antecedent to Western civilization "to whom [the] classic world of Europe, and through

it we ourselves, owe the fundamentals of civilization, which were there developed from the most primitive beginnings to a high degree of perfection, and then transmitted to the European nations in the basin of the Mediterranean" (Breasted, 1905, pp. 17–18). By arguing that ancient Egypt belonged to the history of Western civilization as he disassociates Egypt's Pharaonic history from the people of contemporary Egypt, Breasted perpetuates the notion of the "other" (Said, 1994; Behdad, 2016). It should be noted that other stereoview sets of Egypt and the greater Middle East, such as Edward Wilson's *Scenes in the Orient* set and Stereo-Travel's *Egypt* boxed set, present inhabitants of the region with greater dignity and accomplishment, which will be examined in future research papers by this author. Nevertheless, the *Egypt* boxed set is a significant historical artifact that must be understood within a colonial context as it reconfigures Egypt's contemporary cultural landscape as primitive and its people as exotic "others" providing precedent for contemporary concerns regarding ethical boundaries and manipulation for social and political agendas.

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