

Luigi Mayer, *Views in Egypt, 1801*

Special Collections featured item for June 2006 by
Fiona Barnard, Rare Books Librarian

Mayer, Luigi d.1803. *Views in Egypt : from the original drawings in the possession of Sir Robert Ainslie, taken during his embassy to Constantinople by Luigi Mayer: engraved by and under the direction of Thomas Milton: with historical observations , and incidental illustrations of the manners and customs of the natives of that country.* London : Thomas Bensley ... for R. Bowyer, 1801

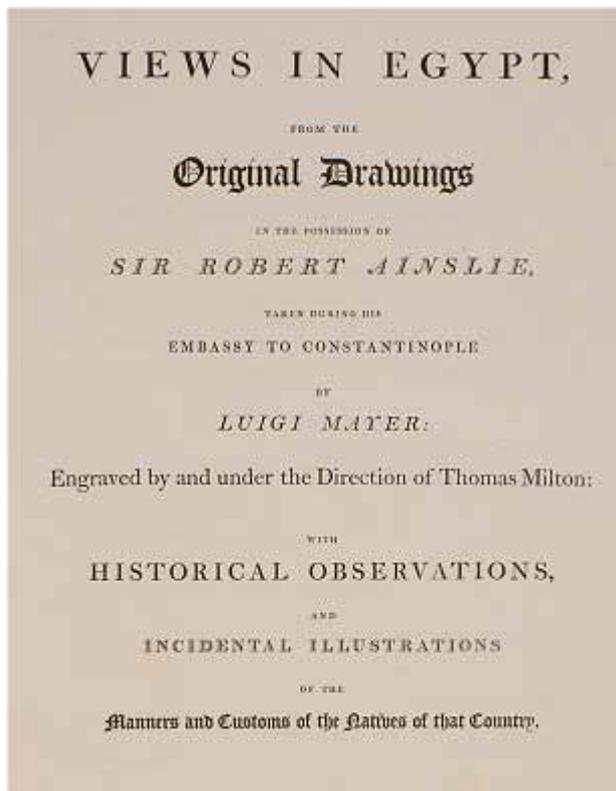
Item held in the Overstone Library, University of Reading Library Special Collections

Books relating to travel and exploration represent one of the key strengths of the Overstone Library in particular, and of the Rare Book collections of Reading University Library in general. This first edition of one of Luigi Mayer's works, offering views of the monuments of Alexandria and Cairo in pre-Napoleonic Egypt, is one of the finest examples. [*See below a view of a mosque on the Nile*]



Luigi Mayer (d. 1803), a watercolourist and draughtsman, is renowned as the most accurate delineator of the Near East before David Roberts, who produced the monumental volumes *The Holy Land* (1842) and *Views in ancient Egypt and Nubia* (1846), copies of which are also held in the Overstone Library. Despite the success of Mayer's publications, very little is known about his life. He is known to have been born in Germany, and lived for several years in Rome where he was a pupil of Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720-1778), one of the finest artists of his day, and well-known for his etchings of ancient and contemporary architecture in Rome. Mayer was employed by a British ambassador to the Ottoman Porte, Sir Robert Ainslie, to produce drawings in Asia Minor and the Near East.

Sir Robert Ainslie, first baronet (1729/30-1812) was the third son of George Ainslie (d. 1773) and his wife, Jean, daughter of Sir Philip Anstruther of Anstrutherfield, Fife. His early life was spent in Bordeaux, France, where his father traded as a merchant. His education and early career are unknown, but he seems to have worked as a spy, as he is believed to have intercepted correspondence from the duc d'Aiguillon to the Spanish court during the Falklands crisis of 1770-71. On 20 September 1775 Ainslie was appointed to succeed John Murray as British ambassador to the Ottoman Porte. He left England in May 1776 for Constantinople, where he arrived in the following October. Ainslie's two main objectives were to further British trading interests, represented by the Levant Company, who paid his



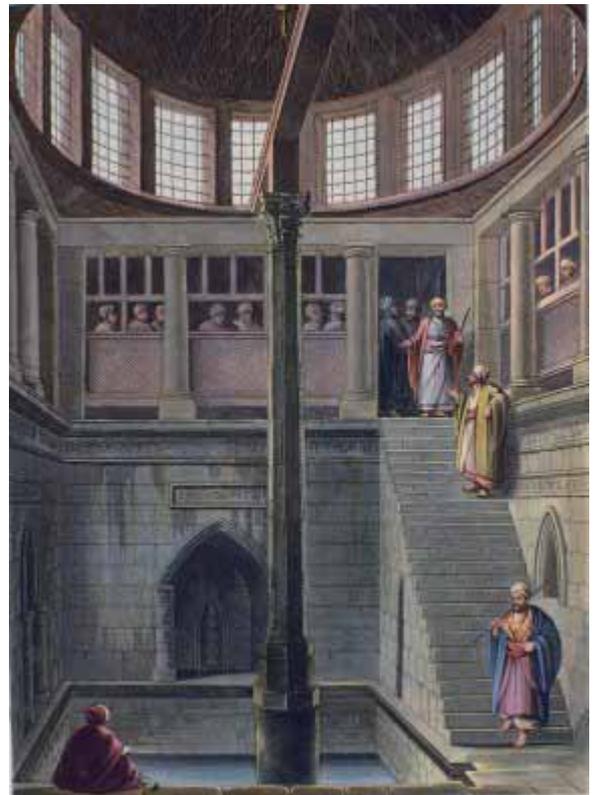
salary, and to maintain peace in the region. France dominated the Levant trade, and relations between Britain and the Ottoman Empire had worsened in the Russo-Turkish War (1768-74), when Britain had lent support to the Russian fleet. However, the new sultan, 'Abd-ul-hamid, who succeeded in 1774, was keen to establish closer political and commercial ties with Britain to offset the latter's long-established interests in Russia, and he struck up an excellent relationship with Ainslie.

Ainslie appears to have enjoyed his new life in Constantinople, and, unlike some of his predecessors, he adapted well to Turkish life. The *St. James's Chronicle* of 9th December 1790 noted that he became strongly attached to the manner of the people ... in his house, his garden, and his table he assumed the style and fashion of a Musselman of rank; in fine, he lived 'en Turk', and pleased the natives so much by

this seeming policy ... that he became more popular than any of the Christian ministers. He amassed a number of Ottoman and Byzantine antiquities, a large collection of ancient coins from North Africa, Eastern Europe and the Near East, and a collection of drawings, many of which he commissioned from Luigi Mayer. Mayer's drawings were engraved and compiled into three volumes entitled *Views in Egypt ...* (1801); *Views in Palestine ...* (1802); and *Views in the Ottoman Empire, chiefly in Caramania, ...* (1803). The books were published in London after Ainslie's return to England, accompanied by Mayer.

In 1804, the three volumes were available bound as one volume, under the general title, *Views in Egypt, Palestine, and other parts of the Ottoman Empire*. *Views in Egypt* is the first volume of the folio-sized series, and contains perhaps the most striking images. The plates accompany one hundred and two pages of text, which provides descriptions of the history, geography, architecture, antiquities and people of Egypt, with detailed descriptions of their customs and dress. This plate [right] shows the Nilometer. This thin column, housed in a round tower between Giza and Cairo, stands in a well and is used to measure the rise of water in the Nile during its periodical flood. From this measurement the level of taxes exacted from the people is determined by the sovereign or grand seignior depending on the fertility of the land.

Napoleon's expedition to Egypt in 1798 had caught the imagination of the British public, and Mayer's publication became a bestseller in Britain in 1801, and was reprinted the following year to satisfy a growing demand. The reprint also included a frontispiece portrait of Mayer. The first edition contains forty-eight coloured aquatint plates produced by Thomas Milton (1742/3-1827) after Mayer's designs. Milton was a printmaker and topographical draughtsman, and was the great-nephew of the poet John Milton, and the son of another John Milton (fl. 1770), a minor marine artist. He worked mainly as a line engraver, and produced plates for other lavish illustrated books such as Thomas Macklin's edition of the *Holy Bible* (1800) and W.Y. Ottley's *The Marquis of Stafford's Collection* (1818) – held in the Reserve Collection).



Some of the most dramatic and beautiful images in this volume are those depicting the exterior and interiors of the Pyramids at Giza, near Cairo, and surrounding sites of antiquity.

The dramatic use of chiaroscuro, or light and shade, in the depiction of modern Egyptians climbing through passageways and exploring underground chambers by torchlight [see right and below], also conveys the sense of wonder and mystery that these antiquities evoke in the viewer. The text, which comprises detailed descriptions and measurements of the Pyramids and their chambers and sarcophagi, also describes the various arguments surrounding the measurements of the structures and also the building of the Pyramids, such as the argument that the lower sections are not artificial structures of stone and mortar, but solid rocks, cut into a pyramidal shape and afterward cased with stone

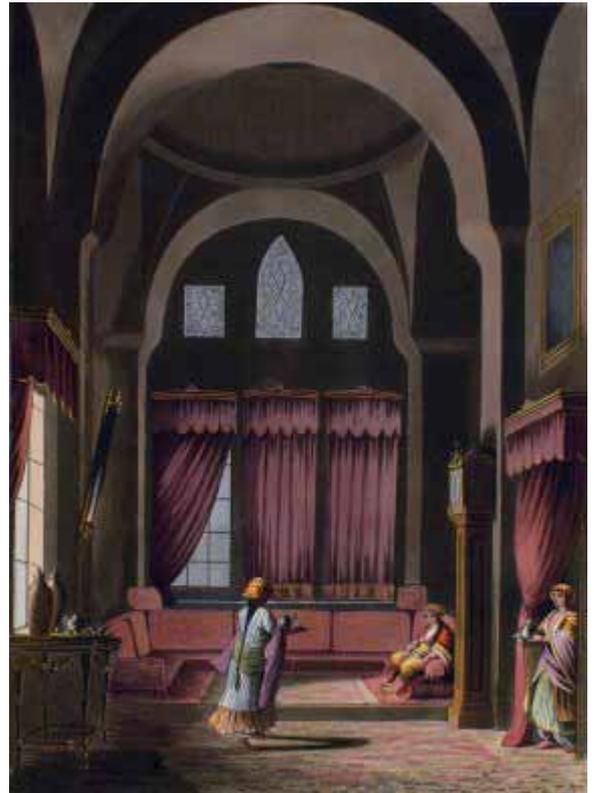


Another plate [below] depicts the Sphinx and it is described as having been *sculptured out of the solid rock into a chimerical figure [with] the head of a woman, the paws of a lion, and the body of a dog*. Reference is made to the writings of Pliny, who wrote that in his time there was a secret passageway between the Sphinx and one of the Pyramids *through which the priest ascended to it's head, whence he issued oracular responses to the multitude below*.



The portraits of Egyptians from a range of different social groups are also notable, and are accompanied by very detailed descriptions of typical dress. This plate depicts an Egyptian bey with servant in typical dress. A bey, a Turkish word which means *prince* or *ruler*, was a provincial governor in the Ottoman Empire. A bey's dress is distinguished by a very high kaouk, or turban. A silk and cotton gown and kaftan are worn beneath a pelisse of ermine or sable, with an india shawl worn as a sash. A red benish, a kind of over-garment, is worn on top, decorated with six gold clasps. Two pairs of long trousers are worn, with the outer ones of yellow leather left at the door when a bey enters a house.

Another plate (right) depicts a merchant's wife at Cairo being attended by her slaves in an opulent room, which may have been similar to the kind of accommodation that Ainslie would have enjoyed. The merchant's wife is also shown in typical dress. A round diadem, like a plate, is worn on her head, covered with an india shawl, which conceals all her hair at the front, except for a few locks of hair at her temples. Her hair behind is interlaced with gold twist, reaching down to the small of her back, and is decorated with various gold ornaments. The rest of her dress is similar to that of the bey, with a silk shirt and gown, a shawl sash, a pelisse of coloured silk lined with fur, a pair of silk trousers and silk shoes embroidered with gold. Her slaves wear a more simple and less opulent form of dress, with a silk and cotton shirt, a short gown, a sash of ordinary muslin and a pair of striped trousers.



The exhibition of public dances is referred to as one of the amusements of Egyptians, and a plate of two dancing girls shown here portrays them in their typical dress of head scarf, gown, sash and long shirt and trousers. The fringe of the silk sash is adorned with small pieces of silver coin and to complete their ornaments, the face, bosom and backs of the hands, are marked with black spots, stars and other figures in black.

An Egyptian peasant and his family are also shown in typical dress. The manner in which Egyptian peasant women carry their children on their shoulders, shown here in the plate, is remarked upon in the text as being *calculated to excite astonishment in a European spectator*. It is observed that *an infant ...sits on one of the mother's shoulders, and preserves it's seat by grasping it's parent's head*. Thus the woman takes it constantly about with her ... Even when washing her clothes at the river's side ... the child clings to her head ... having nothing to secure it from falling into the stream, if it should let go it's hold.



The most striking portrait is of a mamaluke exercising his horse, with Murad Bey's Palace in Cairo in the background. The mamalukes were slaves, who were purchased by beys who would train them as soldiers to manage a horse and are instructed in the use of arms, particularly the javelin and the scymetar. Mayer depicts the mamaluke in typical, multilayered dress, with a cotton shirt under a linen gown covered by a caftan with long sleeves. Over these garments is worn the jouba, a type of coat with sleeves cut at the elbow. Trousers are worn *long enough to reach up to the chin, and so large that each of the legs is big enough to contain a man's body, and the costume is bound up with a sash*.

Another plate [below] shows mamalukes practicing their martial skills in the square of Mourad Bey's palace. When Mayer produced these images, Britain and France were vying for control of colonial territories, and this volume captivated and informed audiences in Europe about the country's culture and political structures. This plate of mamalukes exercising provides a valuable visual record of the military elite's training exercises, and perhaps a hint of the Ottoman ruler's efforts to impose centralized authority. Both the plates and the accompanying text with their highly descriptive content continue to make the publication an invaluable primary source.



Reading University Library holds two other volumes of Mayer's views of the Ottoman Empire, including *Views in the Ottoman Empire, chiefly in Caramania* (1803), which represents the third volume of the series of publications which began with *Views in Egypt*, and a later volume published in 1810 entitled *Views in the Ottoman Dominions, in Europe in Asia*. Both volumes are held in the Printing Collection.

References

Grant, A.H., 'Ainslie, Sir Robert, first baronet (1729/30-1812)' rev. S.J. Skedd, [Oxford Dictionary of National Biography](#). [Accessed 20/06/06]

Houfe, S., *The dictionary of British book illustrators and caricaturists, 1800-1914 : with introductory chapters on the rise and progress of the art*, 1978

Prideaux, S.T., *Aquatint engraving : a chapter in the history of book illustration*, 1909

Travel in aquatint and lithography, 1770-1860 : from the library of J.R. Abbey (v.2), 1957