

ESSAYS: DIPLOMACY, ART AND ARCHAEOLOGY

BETWEEN ISTANBUL AND CAIRO: LOUIS FRANÇOIS CASSAS AND THE PANORAMIC PERSPECTIVE

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Louis François Cassas occupies a position of particular interest among the artists who traveled to the Ottoman Empire. He is one of the very few to be equally relevant to our knowledge of both Istanbul and Cairo in the late eighteenth century. Cassas, who has also been described as archaeologist, traveled through the Ottoman Empire depicting Turkey, the Levant, and Egypt. His work was unusual for its time in that it dealt with Ottoman Turkey and Egypt under the same cover, whereas Egypt was more commonly combined with either Syria or Africa or described separately.

Cassas was born the son of a land surveyor in 1756 in Indre. He moved to Tours in 1770 to learn draftsmanship, and in 1775 he went to Paris to join the academy established by the Duke of Rohan Chabot in his palace.¹ There he studied the art of surveying, in particular antique monuments, and was stimulated to travel to the Netherlands and Italy. He worked in Rome between 1779 and 1783 at the school of draftsmanship of the Palazzo Mancini, where he met the artist Baron Dominique Vivant Denont, who later joined Napoleon's expedition to Egypt. After spending some years traveling in Dalmatia, Istria, and Sicily, Cassas met the recently appointed French ambassador to the Porte, Marie-Gabriel-Florent-Auguste de Choiseul-Gouffier, who was also a collector and traveler and who invited Cassas to Istanbul.

¹ A major catalogue dedicated to the life and work of Cassas is the German-French exhibition catalogue, *Louis-François Cassas* 1994; see also Gilet 1989, 279-87.

From 1783 to 1787 Cassas traveled through the Ottoman Empire, collecting material for a publication titled, *Voyage pittoresque de la Syrie, de la Phénicie, de la Palestine, et de la Basse Egypte*, which appeared in 1799. In the meantime, the French Revolution compelled Choiseul-Gouffier to seek refuge in Russia. Cassas thus lost not only his patron, but also the author who was to write the text for his *Voyage pittoresque*. He himself continued to be esteemed under the Revolution regime, notably by the disciples of the painter Jacques-Louis David. Between 1816 and 1827 Cassas served as the chief designer at the Manufacture des Gobelins and was honored in 1821 with the order of the Legion d'Honneur as well as other decorations. He died in 1827 in Versailles.

Cassas visited Istanbul twice, once in 1786 and again on his return from Egypt in 1786-87. He made thirty drawings of the city, mostly from Galata. Since the late Renaissance, Istanbul had been one of European artists' favorite subjects for panoramic views, which by the eighteenth century were a well-established genre. This preference for Constantinople is not surprising considering the status of the city in European culture, its extraordinary topography, and the contribution of Ottoman architecture to the profile of the metropolis. Cassas made his own contributions to the panoramic repertoire of Istanbul and depicted a number of palaces and pavilions, some of which, such as the Kavak Serai in Üsküdar, disappeared in the following century.² He was particularly interested in the mosque of Sultan Ahmad I, to which he dedicated eight drawings, all of which are exterior or courtyard views. He also made an exquisite drawing of the Mihrimah mosque in Üsküdar³ and a pencil drawing of the interior of Hagia Sophia.

Cassas's significance in the tradition of representations of Egypt is more outstanding. He was the first artist ever known to depict Cairo and its Islamic architecture in a documentary manner, making his vision of Cairo singular within Orientalist depictions of

² *Louis-Francois Cassas* 1994, fig. 5, 126, cat. 73, 135.

³ *Ibid.* 119; Necipoğlu 2005, 301.

Egypt. Not surprisingly, Cairo's cityscape emerged much later than Istanbul's as a subject in European art. Although Egypt was associated with the biblical locales of the Judeo-Christian tradition, these associations were not specifically related to the city of Cairo, an Islamic foundation. Moreover, Cairo's topography did not lend itself to panoramic representations as well as Istanbul's did. The sixteenth-century Venetian *vedute* of Cairo belong to the domain of cartography, rather than realistic urban representations. Matteo Pagano's famous view of Cairo produced in the early sixteenth century continued to be printed in a variety of versions in the following two centuries.⁴ Much less known is the very different view by Pellegrino Brocardi (1556), now in the Vatican, discovered and published by Ludovico Micara in 1989.⁵ The rich tradition of European textual descriptions of Egypt and its capital between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries by travelers, scholars, and envoys such as Benoît de Maillet, Frederic Louis Norden, Richard Pococke, Claude-Étienne Savary, and Constantin-François de Chassebœuf, comte de Volney was not linked to corresponding visual representations.⁶ Norden drew some views of Alexandria and Cairo without devoting much attention to architectural detail, and Pococke, who was interested mainly in ancient Egyptian monuments, did not provide visual material on Cairo, Alexandria, or any Islamic monument. This paucity of earlier representations of Cairo and Alexandria is why Cassas's work is of particular interest. He was in Egypt between March and December of 1785, preceding the French expedition (1798-1801) by more than a decade; his work was known to Napoleon's explorers, and may have inspired some of their illustrations. His place in time makes Cassas's work a valuable source of information on monuments that vanished in the early nineteenth century in the course of Muhammad 'Ali's transformations of Cairo and Alexandria.

⁴ Warner 2006.

⁵ Micara 1989.

⁶ De Maillet 1735 (not to be confused with the later compendium on Egypt by Napoleon's expedition mentioned below); Norden 1755; Pococke 1743; Savary 1785-86; De Volney 1787.

Alexandria occupies a prominent place in Cassas's drawings. He visited the city twice, at the beginning and the end of his stay in Egypt, and drew a number of panoramic views of the city and its harbor that may have inspired some of those later published in the *Description de l'Égypte*.⁷ They show the monumental medieval fortifications (about which only literary information is available today), the major Gate of Rosetta, and other massive, unidentifiable monuments that he saw in their ruined condition before they were razed by Muhammad 'Ali. Cassas also provided the only known picture of the Western Mosque in Alexandria, called by Europeans "the mosque of thousand columns."⁸ This mosque, already a ruin at that time, displays an archaic layout, hypostyle with a bay-roofing, reminiscent of the architecture of cisterns.⁹

In Cairo, Cassas's engraved view of a wedding procession along the main street, Bayn al-Qasrayn, based on a drawing (figure 1), was published by K.A.C. Creswell to provide rare visual documentation of the vanished *madrassa* of Sultan al-Zahir Baybars (r. 1260-77) before its demolition in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰ Another engraving in Cassas's *Voyage pittoresque* showing the procession of the Ottoman governor at his arrival in Cairo is an impressive display of costume and material culture, although the architectural background seems to be based on a pastiche of sketches rather than a faithful depiction of the urban surroundings (fig.2). His pencil study of minarets in Cairo shows two minarets on the right side that belong to the mosque of al-Hakim near the northern gate of Bab al-Futuh and three other minarets that cannot be associated with specific buildings, although their style is obviously Mamluk (fig. 3). This drawing is the earliest known artistic work on the minarets of Cairo. It reveals the artist's inquisitive mind and sensitivity for Islamic architecture, which

⁷ *Description de l'Égypte* 1812, II, pls. 86, 88, 97, 98.

⁸ *Louis-François Cassas* 1994, 196-206.

⁹ *Louis-François Cassas* 1994 cat. 118, 206; Behrens-Abouseif 1998. *The Description de l'Égypte* includes a plan, a section and an elevation of this mosque (V, pl. 37).

¹⁰ Creswell 1952-59, II, fig. 73, 144. The same sheet shows a study of a Mamluk facade that cannot be identified.

must have been already sharpened by his experience in Istanbul. Cassas was obviously struck by the graceful profiles and the elaborate decoration of the minarets, which conveyed a special character to the medieval city. A comparison with the approach of his contemporary Luigi Mayer (d. 1803), a pre-Napoleonic artist who was born in Germany and worked in the 1770s for the British ambassador to the Porte, Sir Robert Ainslie, reveals Cassas's superior architectural acumen. Mayer devoted his illustrations to genre scenes and ancient Egyptian motifs,¹¹ showing no particular interest for the Islamic city and its architecture. With the exception, perhaps, of his view of the 'Attarin mosque in Alexandria, his illustrations have no documentary value for the architectural historian.

In Cairo as in Istanbul, Cassas dealt mostly with the exterior rather than the interior of monuments, probably because he would not have been allowed to enter a mosque, an issue that obviously would not bother his Napoleonic successors. It is likely that the view of the Western Mosque of Alexandria was possible because the building was already ruined and abandoned. In the citadel of Cairo, his drawing of the interior of the ruined Great *Iwan*, built by the Mamluk sultan al-Nasir Muhammad in 1330 and demolished by Muhammad 'Ali Pasha in the 1830s, was possible probably for the same reason and also because it was not a religious building. His pencil sketch and a ground plan remained the only documentation of the interior of this extraordinary palace, alongside the more detailed engravings and plan later published in the *Description de l'Egypte*.¹²

The most fascinating aspect of Cassas's architectural views are his pencil and ink studies, most of which are preserved today in the graphics collection of the Wallraf-Richartz Museum in Cologne.¹³ These are studies on paper of relatively small size, varying between

¹¹ His album on Egypt was published in 1801; see Barnard 2007.

¹² The sketch is published in *Louis-François Cassas* 1994, cat. 108, 194. The ground plan is included in Cassas's album *Voyage Pittoresque*, and also published in Behrens-Abouseif 1988, fig.9; *Description de l'Egypte* I, pl. 70. There is also an impressive view of the exterior of the palace in Hay 1840.

¹³ The Hittorff Collection.

twenty and fifty centimeters. Their translation to engravings or paintings sometimes proved to be detrimental to the initial character grasped by the “snapshot” taken in pencil. The mosque of Sultan Hasan, for example, which Cassas depicted in two superb pencil and ink drawings,¹⁴ loses something of its authenticity in the engraving published in his *Voyage*, in which its walls are extended to the right and trees are added in the foreground, recalling one of Cassas’s views of Rome.¹⁵ However, his masterful engraving of the gate of Bab al-Futuh with the minaret of the mosque of al-Hakim standing to the left remained faithful to the drawing.¹⁶

As an archaeologist who had worked extensively on classical architecture, Cassas understood his task as one of exploration, as well as interpretation and reconstruction. This view led him to make bold “restorations,” as his portrait of the Sphinx with integral nose and lips demonstrates. A problematic case is a drawing in pencil emphasized with ink, representing a group of Islamic buildings in a cemetery seen from the east with the pyramids of Giza in the far background. As a sketch with explanatory notes, it appears at first sight to be trustworthy (fig.4). The caption inscribed on the image identifies the monuments in the foreground as the mosque of Sultan Mehmet and the tombs of the beys.¹⁷ However, I have not been able to associate buildings in this location with any sultan of this name or with beys; nor was it possible to identify altogether what these monuments could be. I finally came to the conclusion that this view must be a free interpretation and reconstruction of the funerary monuments in the cemetery known as the Suyuti cemetery, located to the southeast of the citadel, which includes the remains of the fourteenth-century funerary complexes of a number of emirs of the Mamluk period (1250-1517). These include the monastery of Emir Qawsun (1336-37), the anonymous Sultaniyya mausoleum (1350s), and an unidentified minaret called

¹⁴ *Louis-François Cassas* 1994, 187, 189.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* 59.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* cat. 99, 225.

¹⁷ A bey is a military title in Ottoman Egypt.

the “Southern,” *al-manara al-qibliyya*. The attribution in the caption could be thus interpreted as tombs of emirs from the reign of Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad.

A photograph of this cemetery taken by Francis Frith in the 1860s is the closest parallel I could find to Cassas’s drawing (fig. 5). It shows the cemetery from the western side, in the direction opposite to that of Cassas’s view, with the citadel in the rear to the east. Unlike Cassas’s reconstruction, which depicts a cluster of buildings in good condition, here the minarets and domes are disconnected amid ruined walls. As lamented by the chronicler and eyewitness al-Jabarti, Napoleon’s soldiers razed many areas of Cairo for security and tactical purposes, blowing up historic monuments in the cemeteries, including this one.¹⁸ These later events imply that at the time of Cassas’s visit, the site must have been in a much better state of repair and probably included more monuments than can be identified today. However, the character of the depicted ensemble strongly suggests that the artist made substantial additions and reconstructions to the site in order to produce an “aesthetic” architectural composition. The resulting fantasy confirms what others have already observed about his interpretation of monuments of classical antiquity: Cassas’s pictures should not be indiscriminately trusted for their documentary value. The fact that he often provides genuine documentary material makes it yet more difficult to guess where fantasy comes into play.

A most interesting category of Cassas’s representations of Cairo are his panoramic views. Because such views are a rarity in Orientalist portrayals of Egypt, it may be assumed that they were inspired from Cassas’s experience in Istanbul. The absence in Cassas’s repertoire of street views of the city, however, suggests that it may not have been easy at that time for a European, even when dressed in Eastern clothing as Cassas was, to move at ease in Cairo; he may have felt safer looking at the city from outside. In fact, he spent less time in the Egyptian capital than originally planned.¹⁹

¹⁸ al-Jabartî 1979, 215 f., 230, 258f., 316-23.

¹⁹ See Annie Gilet, “L’Egypte,” in *Louis-François Cassas* 1994, 187.

A view of Fustat, also called Old Cairo, is the second to be made of this suburb after that of Norden (figs 6, 7). It shows this southern quarter of greater Cairo against the slopes of the Muqattam Hill in the east, seen from the west shore of the Nile with a lonely boat floating in the foreground. It employs a wider perspective than the view by Norden, which appears more rural in comparison. Another pencil-drawn panoramic sketch depicts the city with its multiple minarets, again seen from the opposite Nile shore, with the citadel to the right (fig. 8). Only one of Cassas's panoramic views of Cairo (fig. 9), with the Citadel to the left and the mosque of Sultan Hasan to the right, has been elaborated as a painting. The ingenious perspective of this spectacular picture brings the two most monumental buildings of medieval Cairo together with the pyramids of Giza emerging between them on the horizon. The aesthetic success of this view lies in the topographic profile of the area, with the citadel on the Muqattam Hill, crowned by the Great *Iwan*, towering over the city, and its stepped fortifications descending towards the mosque of Sultan Hasan. No other artist of the eighteenth or nineteenth century ventured to produce such panoramas of Cairo. Although Norden depicted parts of the Nile shore, he did not represent the city as a whole. The same is true for the views in the *Description de l'Egypte*, which represent the quarter of Nasiriyya or the pond of Azbakiyya.²⁰ Artists of nineteenth century Cairo preferred to focus their view on street perspectives and individual monuments. Although from the panoramic perspective Cairo is less "photogenic" than Istanbul and Jerusalem,²¹ one may speculate that had Cassas's panoramas been translated into engravings or paintings and reached a wider audience, they might have stimulated other artists and created a tradition of Cairene panoramas. Instead, his works remain unpublished and forgotten.

²⁰ *Description de l'Egypte* I, pls. 40, 41, 42, 43, 45.

²¹ Cassas drew an annotated panorama of Jerusalem, the only one of his works to be signed and dated.

Due to his place in time, Louis François Cassas has a particular significance for the history of visual representations of Egypt. His oeuvre, however, is multifaceted and its significance reaches far beyond its documentary value. Cassas was led by the enthusiasm for documentation and the encyclopaedic approach of an architect and archaeologist in the age of Enlightenment, combining a classicist perspective with a romantic fantasy that anticipated the Orientalism of the nineteenth century. Most of all, his superb draftsmanship created works of art that inspire timeless admiration.

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Illustrations

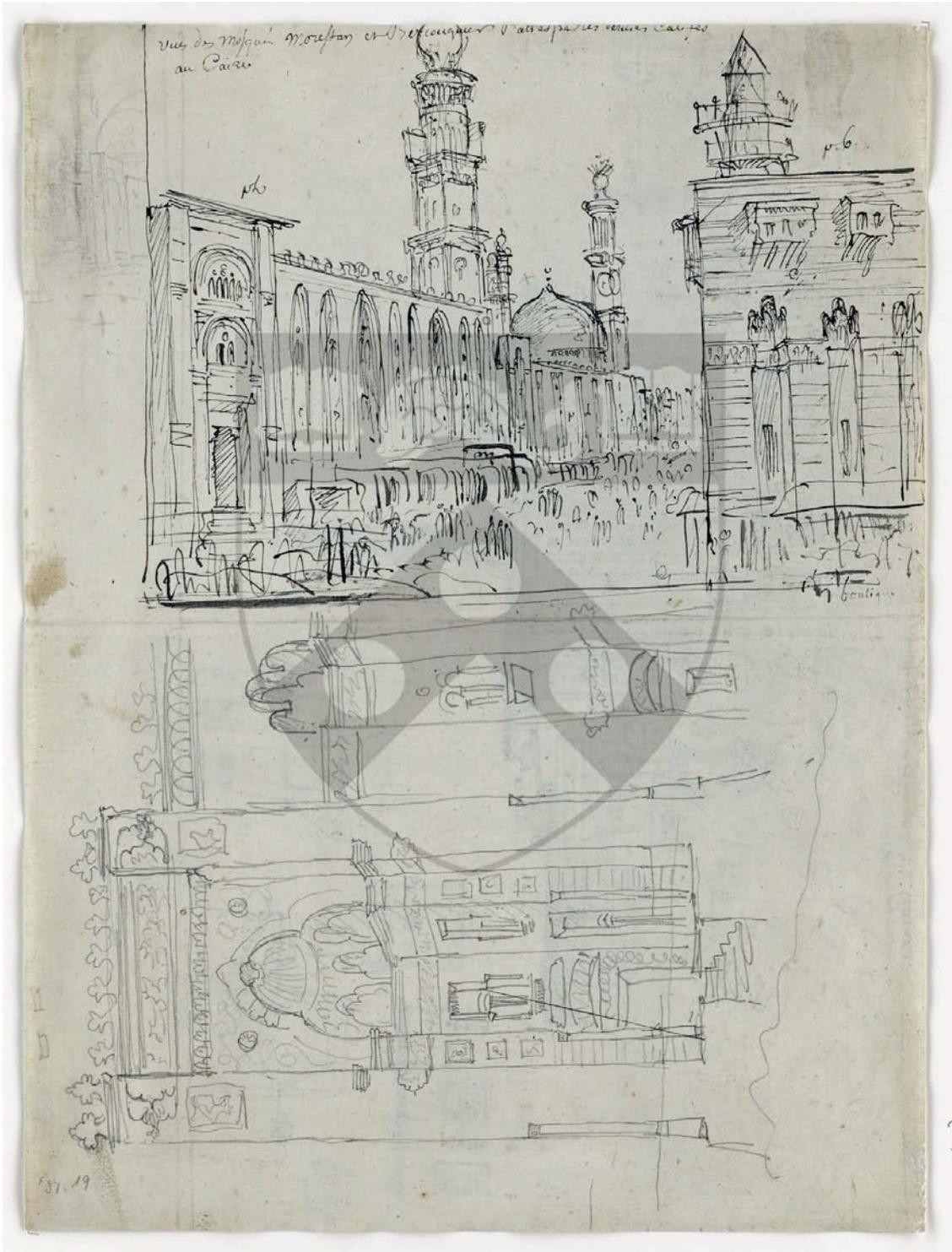


figure 1

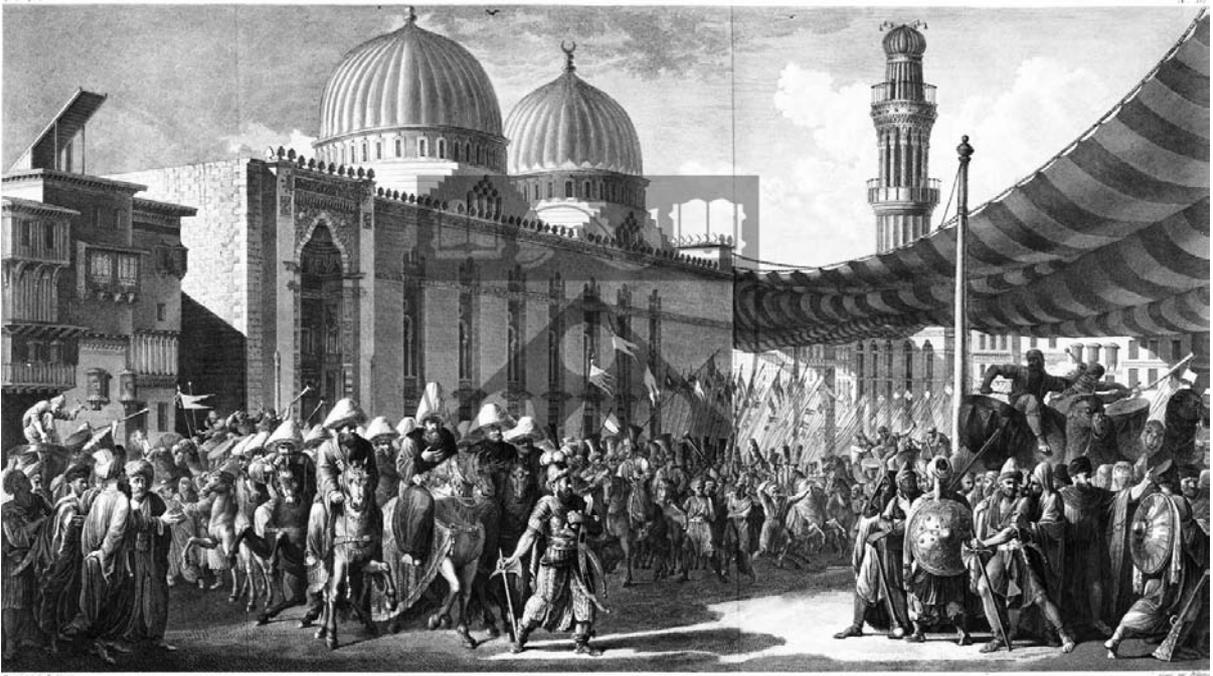


figure 2



figure 3

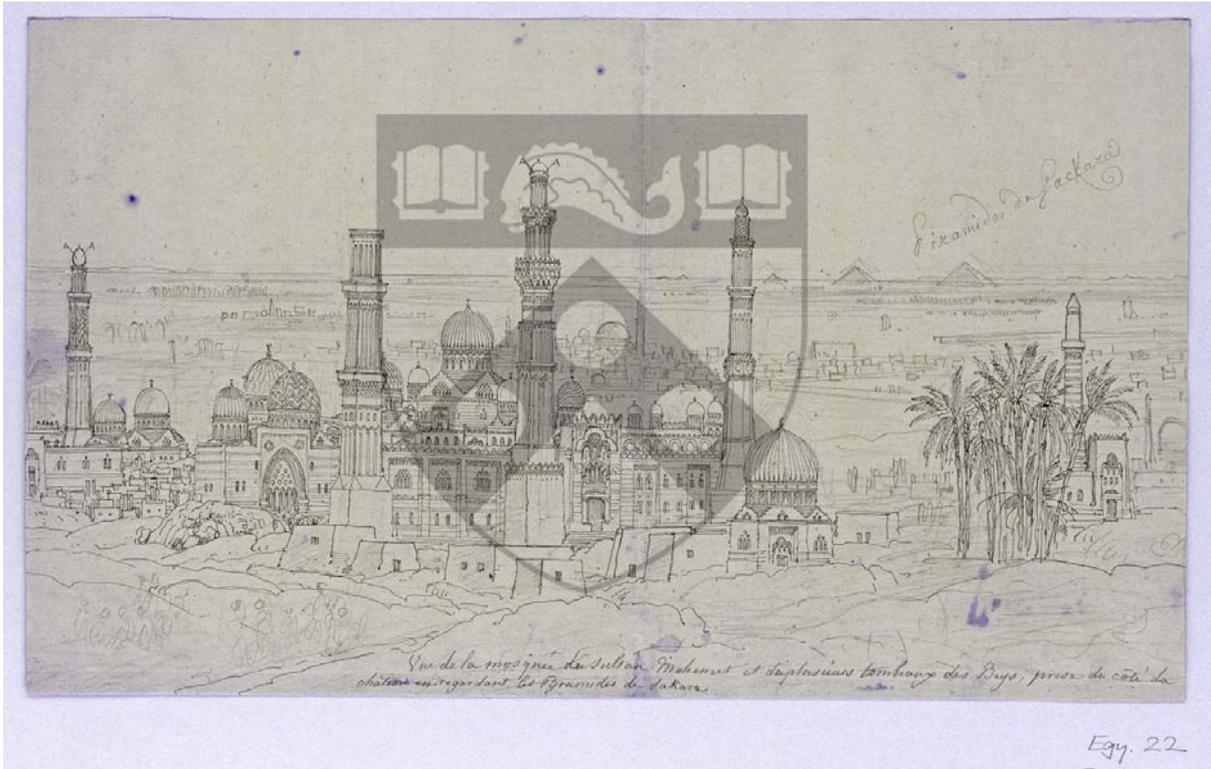


figure 4



figure 5

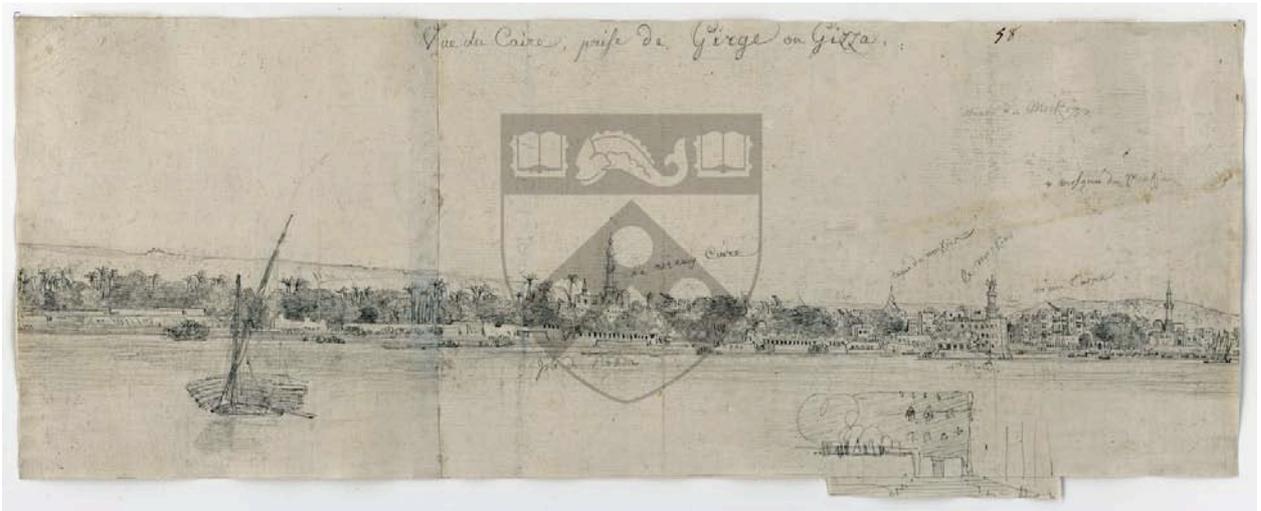


figure 6

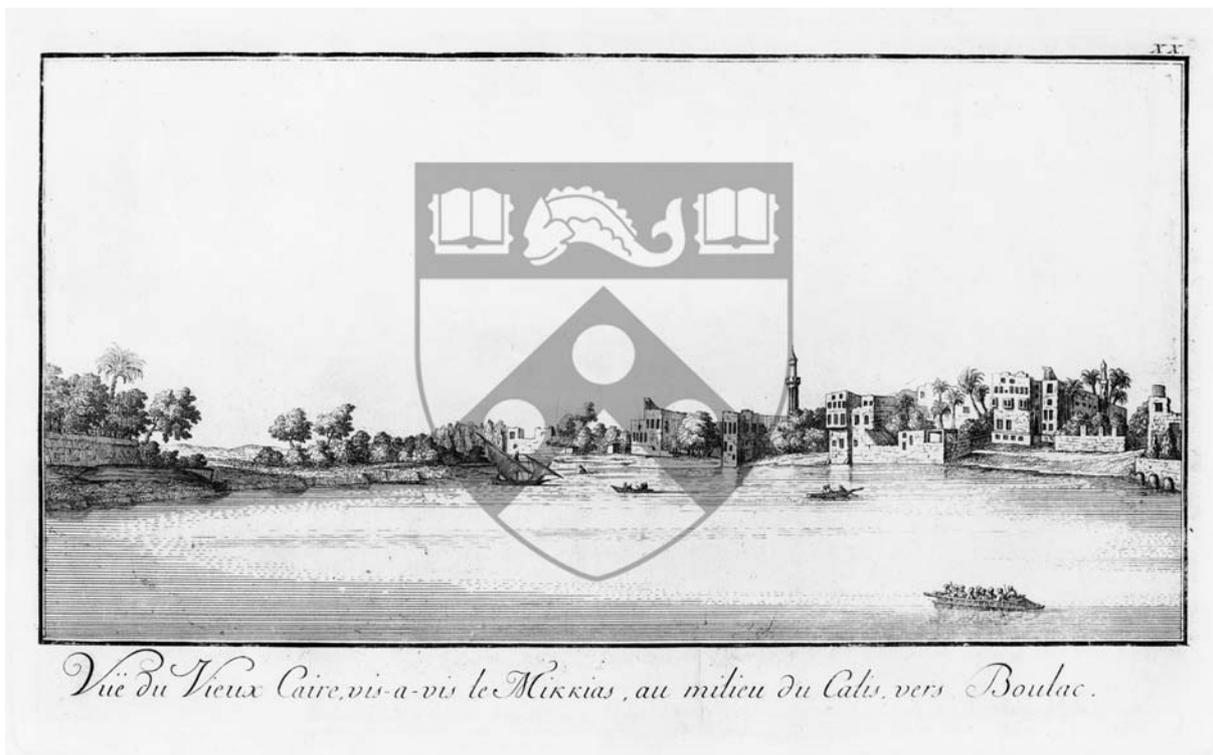


figure 7

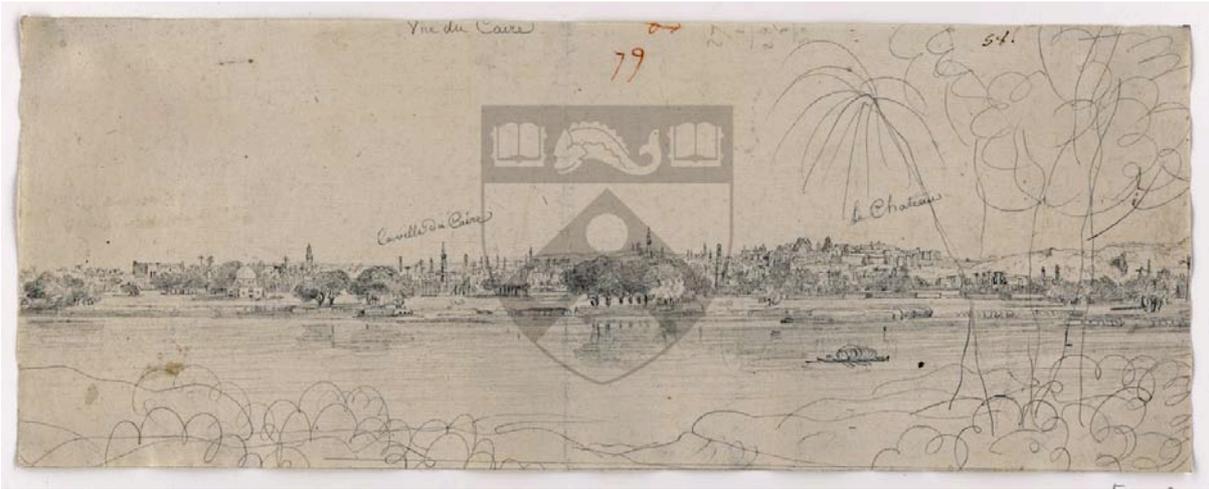


figure 8

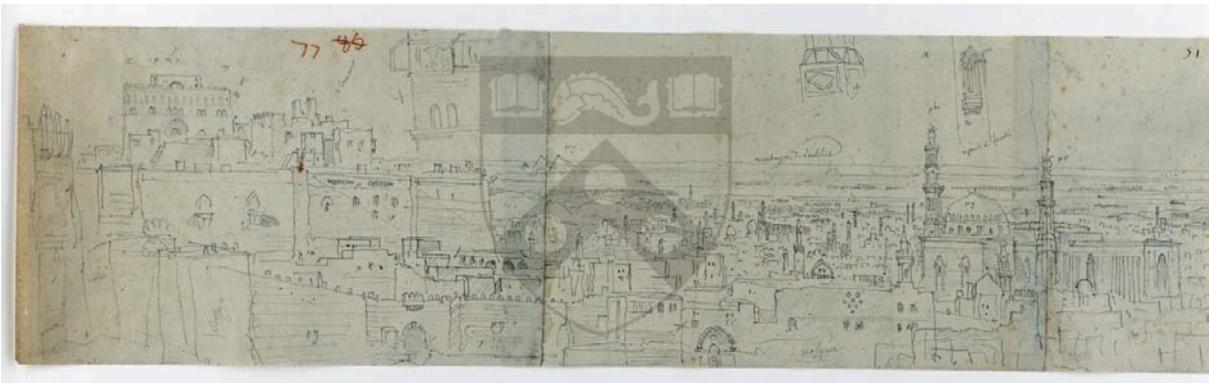


figure 9