



COLNAGHI

Georg Von Rosen
The Memnon Colossus, 1869

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GEORG VON ROSEN
(Paris 1843–1923 Stockholm)

THE MEMNON COLOSSUS, 1869

Signed and dated: "G. Rosen f. 1869"

Watercolour on paper
46.5 × 36 cm (18 5/16 × 14 3/16 in.)

Provenance

Robert Dickson, Göteborg;
Johan Robert Emil Dickson and Emily Dickson, Göteborg;
Robert Dickson.

Exhibitions

Konstakademien, Stockholm, Georg von Rosen-utställningen, 1918.

Literature

Erik Wettergren, *Georg von Rosens konst* dans Sveriges Allmänna Konstförenings Publikation XXVII, 1919, s. 17, 143, nr 62 sous le titre : Forntid/Den ena af Memnonstoderna vid Thebe ; Christian Faerber (red.), *Konst i svenska hem II: målningar och skulpturer från 1800 till våra dagar*, 1943, inclus dans la collection de M. Robert Dickson no. 151, s. 134.

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Erected over three thousand years ago on the western banks of the Nile, the Colossi of Memnon guard the entrance to the Temple of a Million Years, an opulent place of worship built by Pharaoh Amenhotep III. These two stone giants originally represented the pharaoh himself, solemnly seated, gazing eastwards towards the rising sun. Time, sand and war have partially erased the splendour of this religious site. The two sculptures, polished centuries ago, had already lost all reference to the ancient Pharaoh, so much so that the ancient Greeks interpreted them as two portraits of Memnon, the mythical hero, son of the dawn goddess Eos, who fell in battle at the hands of the great Achilles. Ancient sources report that a sound described as a real voice came from the right-hand colossus at dawn. This strange phenomenon, due in fact to the effect of temperature changes on the stone, was interpreted as Memnon's greeting to his mother Eos. According to Greek mythology, the goddess, in despair over the death of her son, pitied Zeus, who granted her the right to hear her son's voice every morning at first light.

In the 19th century, the talking colossus of Memnon, who wakes up in the morning to lament his love for his mother and plunges back into the darkness of night, inspired many artists. From Novalis to Schubert, who set a poem by Johann Mayrhofer to music, this sculpture became the symbol of Romantic poetry, of beauty opposed to the darkness of death. It is in the light of this Romantic reading of Memnon's Colossus that we can fully appreciate this watercolour by Georg von Rosen, where the solitary figure of the speaking colossus is immersed in the desert night, illuminated by the twinkling starlight and the pale light of the moon that cuts its black silhouette. The sky and landscape are reflected in a few puddles that the Nile has forgotten as it retreats into its bed, where animals now drink. Memnon looks eastward, waiting for dawn to awaken him so he can briefly meet his mother, as in Mayrhofer's poem: "Oh to be united with you, goddess of the morning / and, far from this vain restlessness / shine like a pale and silent star / from the spheres of noble freedom and pure love".

Georg von Rosen produced this watercolour in 1869, a few years after his trip to Egypt, Palestine, Greece and Asia Minor. We also know another version of this subject (Fig. 1), less intense, with a lower moon partially hidden behind the mountain. Aware of the notoriety of the talking sculpture, Rosen chose the colossus on the right, creating a mysterious image that demonstrates his talent as an artist, capable of playing with light and evoking all the fascination of a historical fact. Never anecdotal, Rosen always manages to include elements in his compositions that touch the viewer's emotions. Here, the idea of depicting the colossus at night, in the moment before his legendary awakening.

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Georg von Rosen was born in Paris in 1843, the son of Count Adolf Eugène von Rosen, who had been Consul General in Sweden. In 1855, he began his training at the Academy of Fine Arts in Stockholm. He was particularly interested in historical subjects linked to Nordic history and mythology, treated in a style that spared no detail and with a light reminiscent of the Flemish tradition. The first work he made a name for himself was *Sten Sture's Entrance to Stockholm in 1471*, in which he painted, with the taste of an illustrator, a medieval Stockholm with narrow streets and battered houses. In 1862, he visited the Universal Exhibition in London and discovered the art of Hendrik Leys, whose Flemish taste for light he adopted. After the above-mentioned trip to Egypt, North Africa, the Middle East and Greece, he returned to Sweden, laden with notes and sketches. His art was highly appreciated by Swedish high society, and he received a pension from the crown and became a member of the Royal Academy of Stockholm, where he taught from 1880. He was also well known in Europe and France, where he maintained relations with Edouard Manet, who rented Rosen's studio in Paris for a short period between 1878 and 1879. His works are held at Stockholm's National Museum, the Gothenburg Museum of Art and in several public collections.

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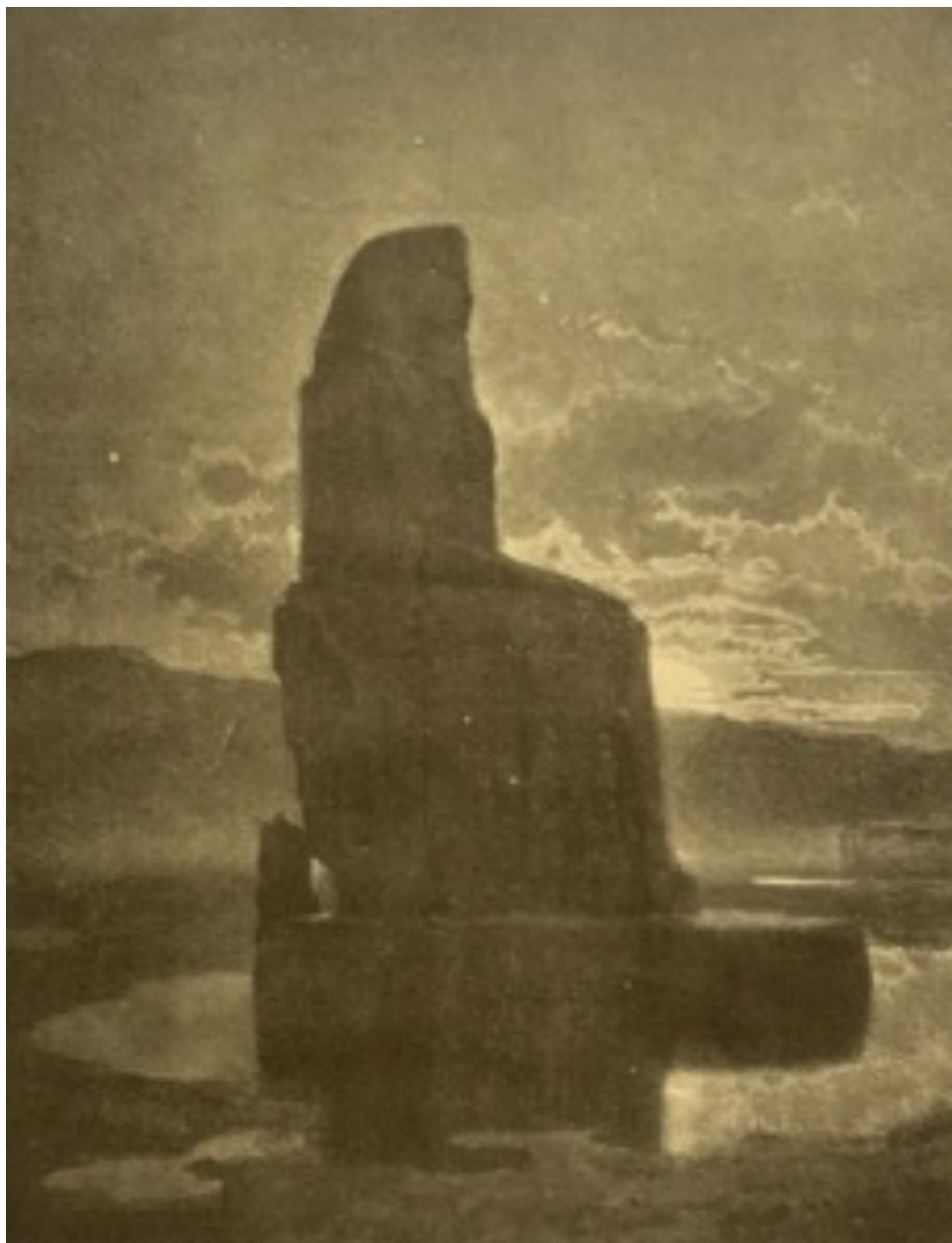


Fig. 1 Georg von Rosen, *Memmonstod vid Thebe*, 1869. Watercolour on paper. Private Collection.

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