

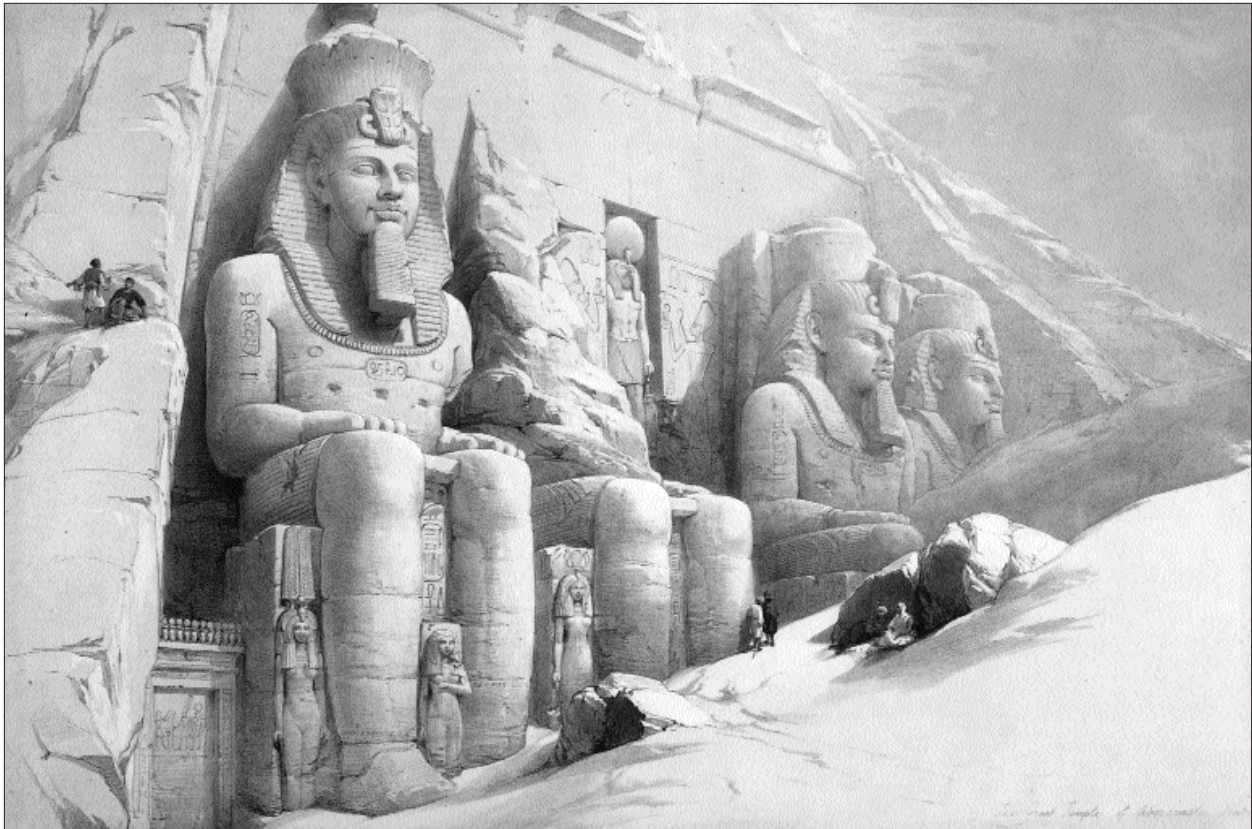


CALIFORNIA ART CLUB NEWSLETTER

David Roberts (1796–1864)

THE LURE OF AN OCCIDENTAL

by Elaine Adams



Abu Simbel

From *Egypt and Nubia*; Published by F.G. Moon, 1846–1849

DAVID ROBERTS WAS NOT BORN TO A privileged class, nor did he have the advantages of a cultured environment — what he did possess, however, were the greatest of all riches — talent, determination, faith, and a sense of adventure.

David Roberts was born on October 24, 1796 in the small village of Stockbridge, Scotland near the capital of Edinburgh. His father, **John Roberts**, was a cobbler, and his mother, **Christine**, took in laundry.

The family lived in a two-room tenement house. Three of the Roberts' five children did not survive past childhood. The financial and emotional agony in caring for their frail children, and then in burying them, were devastating, and left a mark on David who was the eldest.

It was generally expected that sons would follow in their father's trade. However, the Roberts' decided to enroll David in a local home-school when he was

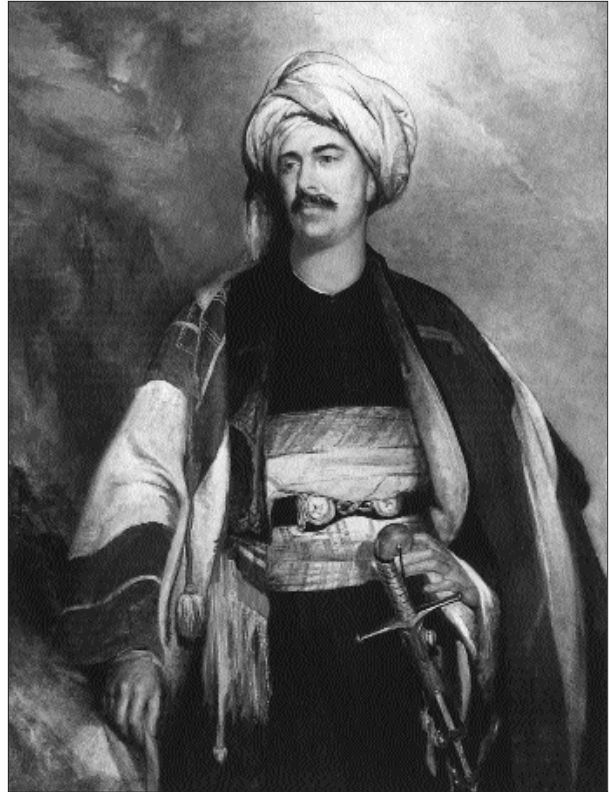
seven. The following year, David attended a school in Edinburgh, but after enduring frequent disciplinary lashings, his parents pulled him out and set him up in an apprenticeship as a cobbler.

At an early age, David already displayed an acumen for drawing. He was able to copy any picture, and at age nine was dubbed “the natural genius.” When the circus would come to the Earthen Mound in Edinburgh, David would eagerly visit and memorize the colourful scenes of brightly decorated caravans, trained animals and strolling players. Upon returning home, he would draw these impressionable images on the kitchen walls. Eventually, his mother would clean the kitchen and whitewash the walls, and David would paint new scenes.

One day, when a customer came by to pick up his shoes, he was amazed over the cobbler’s son’s drawings that were displayed on the kitchen walls, and inquired about the boy’s future. Although David’s father considered art to be a waste of time, his mother was very proud of their son’s talent. The parents decided to show some of his drawings to **Thomas Graham**, a master of the **Trustees’ Academy** in Edinburgh. Graham recognized the boy’s talent, but was also aware that the family lacked funds to afford the education. He suggested that David be apprenticed to a decorative painter of interiors, until he could earn the funds to pay for his training at the academy. At the age of eleven, David entered the workshop of **Gavin Beugo**, and thus began his seven year apprenticeship.

IN THE EARLY PART OF THE NINETEENTH century, it was fashionable for the upper class to embellish their homes with opulent interior designs. Decorative house painters, which included many fine artists, satisfied the taste of the time by becoming highly skilled at creating faux finishes, spatial illusions, indoor gardens and *trompe l’oeil* paintings. David’s duties at Beugo’s studio included opening the shop every morning, sweeping the floor, grinding colours, and stirring vats. Amongst the overwhelming reek of animal hide-glue and Beugo’s raging temper, David managed to learn how to create poetic images and atmospheric effects at rapid speed.

While working for Beugo, Roberts organized a small group of like-minded fellow apprentices to form a drawing studio where they would take turns modelling for each other. He educated himself



Robert Scott Lauder

Portrait of David Roberts in Turkish Clothing, 1840

Oil on canvas

Collection: Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh

through his voracious reading, and his appetite for adventure and travel began to develop during this time. He frequently spent his lunch money at the “penny library” on such action stories as *Blackbeard the Pirate* and *Don Quixote*. He also became intrigued with the possibility of one’s life being predetermined. He discovered that a certain mole on his leg indicated that he was destined to become a great traveller.

After leaving Beugo’s apprenticeship at age eighteen, David Roberts did not enroll at the Trustee’s Academy to further his art training as originally planned, rather, he briefly took the position of independent decorator. He soon realized his childhood fantasies when he became a scene painter for the **James Bannister’s Ring Circus**.

Working for the circus allowed David his first opportunity to travel beyond Edinburgh. The troupe

entertained throughout northern England, and on occasion David would perform as straight man for the clowns. While travelling, he would take opportunities to sketch the local sights. It was during this time that he began to think of himself as an artist.

In Edinburgh, Roberts worked as both an interior painter and theatre scene painter. However, it was his reputation for elaborate backdrops that kept him in high demand with the theatres in Edinburgh, and later in London. With success came security, and David decided to marry **Margaret McLachlan** in 1820. She was a blonde beauty, three years younger than Roberts, who was then twenty-four. It is believed that Margaret may have been an actress, and it is quite possible that they met at one of the theatres where David was working. The following year, their only child, **Christine**, was born. Unfortunately, Margaret had a drinking problem, and the couple argued frequently. After twelve years of marriage, they separated, but David remained devoted to his daughter.

ALTHOUGH ROBERTS CONTINUED HIS CAREER as a set designer, his dream was to be recognized as a landscape painter. In 1821 he was rejected from the **Fine Arts Institution** in Edinburgh, but he persevered. In 1824 three of his Scottish travel paintings were accepted for exhibition by the **Society of British Artists**. Two of the paintings sold during the exhibition, and he was granted membership into the society.

In 1826 Roberts made his debut at the **Royal Academy** with his painting, *Rouen Cathedral*, which inspired the celebrated artist, **J.M.W. Turner** (1775-1851), to state, "Here is a man we must have our sights upon." The press also gave him favourable reviews, and he soon developed an important

following of wealthy patrons. Roberts continued his association with the **Society of British Artists**, for whom he served as vice-president in 1830 and president in 1831.

Finally feeling confident as an accomplished artist, David Roberts decided to take a sketching tour of the German Rhine region in the summer of 1830. From this trip he created a series of detailed landscape sketches. He successfully sold the series to various publishers who made engravings from them to use as book illustrations for different subjects. In 1834 twenty-seven of his illustrations were used to accompany **Edward Bulwer-Lytton's** melodrama, *Pilgrims of the Rhine*, published by **Saunders and Otley**. Two years later, the London publishers, **W. and E. Finden**, used Roberts' sketches for *Landscape Illustrations of the Bible* and for a three-year series of volumes known as *The Landscape Annual*. Thus, began David Roberts' illustrious reputation as a "travel view artist."

Roberts began to make subsequent travel plans. He initially intended to go to Italy, a popular destination for most artists of the day. However, he changed his mind and decided to go to Spain. He was drawn by the exoticism of the Moorish architecture and the fact



Approach of the Simoon
From *Egypt and Nubia*; Published by F.G. Moon, 1846-1849

that few artists had travelled there. He also recognized that based on novelty alone, art patrons would be eager to buy plein air paintings of Spain.

He arrived in Madrid in mid-December. He complained of the cold and damp weather, and of the local cuisine. He wrote to his sister, "I fear I shall never stomach it... Between oil and garlic it is difficult to tell what you are eating." However, in Granada he felt inspired by the medieval atmosphere and the surrounding influences of the Christians and Moors.

Roberts also travelled to Gibraltar, and then to Morocco. In Morocco, Muslim law restricted his movements. As a Protestant and Scotsman, he was both astounded and intrigued by the exoticism and mystery of this foreign culture. He felt the excitement that he had

as a boy when reading adventure stories. After traveling and painting for ten months, he returned to England with over 200 sketches, and as he predicted, they sold well. Following the success of his Spanish tour, he felt inspired to journey to Egypt and the Holy Land.

EGYPT'S GREAT ARCHITECTURAL FEATS ARE distinguished in their temples, monuments and pyramids. Even the ancient Greeks and Romans marvelled over the accomplishments of the Egyptians. David Roberts was raised on stories of the Bible, this, coupled with his sense of adventure, beckoned him to the Holy Land. He left London in 1838 to embark on a trip that ultimately changed his life and altered the way Europeans viewed this virtually unknown land.

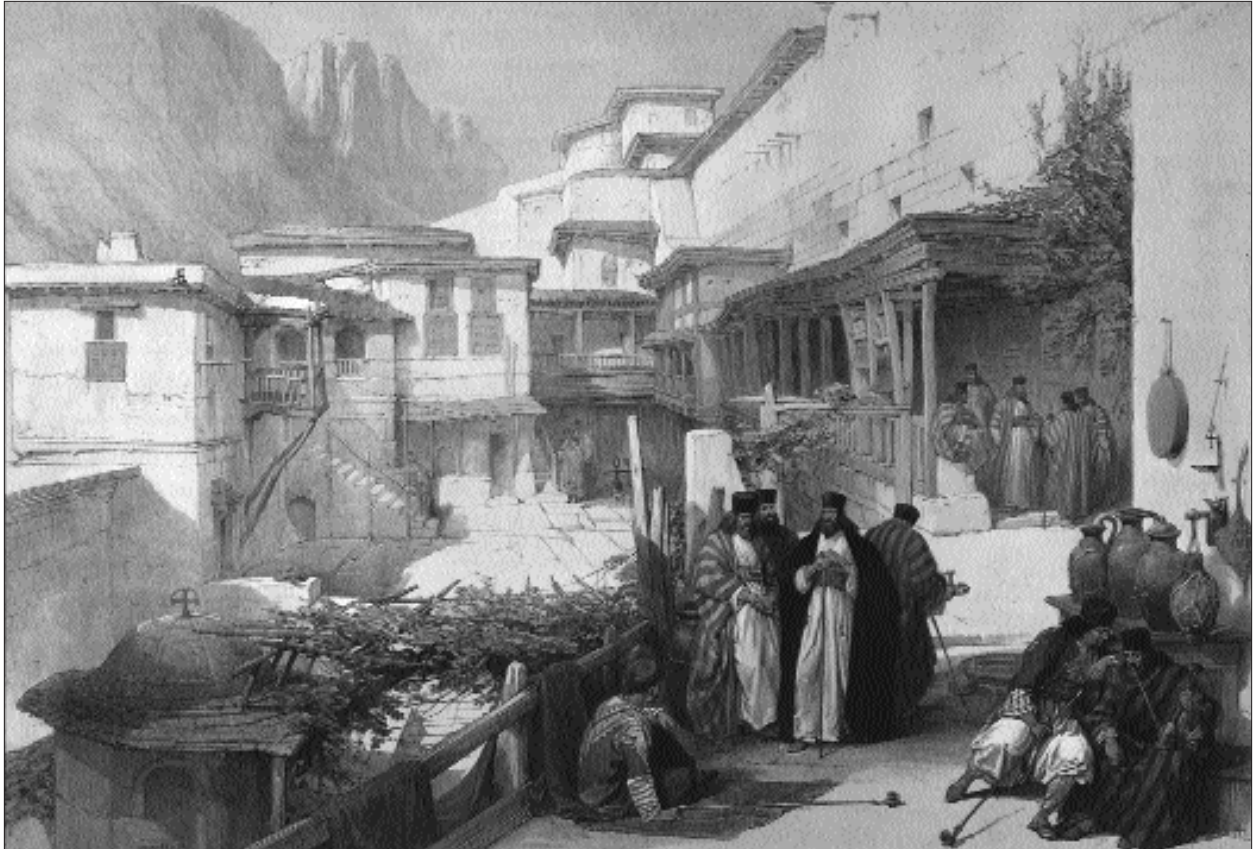
Although he was now a seasoned traveller, Roberts was not accustomed to the Middle Eastern culture or dialects, nor was he knowledgeable with its history or scientific and archaeological studies. However, he possessed a keen eye that could record his personal observations via an accurate sketch. The fact that he was naive to the ways of the Orient gave his work a fresh approach.

When Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798, he took with him 167 scholars, scientists and artists. The **Scientific and Artistic Commission** was led by **Claude-Louis Berthollet**, a physician and chemist, who conducted a three-year research project at the **Egyptian Institute** in Cairo founded by Napoleon. The work resulted in the most accurate and detailed record of European observation of Egypt and its heritage to this date. Despite the recorded knowledge, the general impression of Egypt and the Holy Land in the early nineteenth century continued to be based on the tales of the eleventh through thirteenth century Christian Crusaders — stories that were mostly mystical and filled with fantasy.

At the time Roberts entered Egypt, few Europeans ventured to the Middle East. It was only ten years earlier that the sites of the Orient were added to the "grand tour," a traditional one to five year journey intended to complete a gentleman's education by visiting the art capitals of Europe. Roberts began in Cairo where he spent his time making contact with members of the **British Foreign Service** in preparation for his trip on the Nile. He rented a boat with a cabin measuring approximately five feet square. Before embarking, he submerged the boat in the river for one



Mosque El-Mooristan, Cairo
From *Egypt and Nubia*; Published by F.G. Moon,
1846-1849



Convent of Saint Catherine, Mount Sinai

From *The Holy Land, Syria, Idumea, Arabia*; Published by F. G. Moon, 1842

night until all the inhabitant rats were drowned. He hired eight crewmen, including a captain, and a servant named **Ismail** who would help as interpreter of local customs and language.

Before leaving Cairo, he hired a donkey and a guide and rode to Gizeh to see the great pyramids. His first impression of Cheops was that it was rather disappointing and small, that is, until he tried to climb it and realized its grand scale. The Sphinx, on the other hand, truly excited him, and he commented, "What sensations run through us at first sight of these stupendous monuments of antiquity."

On October 6, Roberts set sail up the Nile. The plan was that they would stop only at major sites so that the crew could rest and restock supplies, while Roberts would make preliminary notes on subjects he would want to paint on their return trip. The finished oil paintings would be done after he returned to his

studio in London.

While in Alexandria, the Roberts party expanded when they met with **Captain Nelly** of the 99th East Middlesex Regiment who was followed in a boat by a man named **Vanderhost** and his Maltese servant and Italian chef. Roberts wrote to his daughter, Christine, "There I sat, sketch-book in hand, smoking my long Turkish chabouk, with a servant to attend to all my wants, and a boat with eight men at my command to stop or go on as I liked."

The evenings along the river were filled with relentless insects, but the glowing desert sunsets rewarded Roberts' sensitivities and inspired a significant part of his artistic repertoire. He and Captain Nelly frequently ventured off together for further exploration. At Thebes they were entertained by a group of dancing girls, one that particularly took Roberts' interest, "a black girl, elegant in person and

equally graceful in her dancing with one of the most expressive countenances I ever beheld.” Equally mesmerizing to Roberts seemed to be the crocodiles along the Nile. He was both amazed and terrified by these monstrous reptiles. In Wadi Dobod, he stopped to sketch a crocodile that was over twenty feet long.

At Abu Simbel, Roberts and his travelling companions parted way. The European party continued on to Wadi Halfa, to the treacherous rapids. Roberts turned his boat around to head back down the Nile and to begin making ink-and-pencil and watercolour interpretations of what he had already seen. Along the way, he painted scenes of Abu Simbel, Wady Kardassy, Philae, Kom Ombo, Karnak, Thebes, Luxor, and Gizeh. He was highly intrigued with Dendera with its well-preserved monuments of impressive scale and beauty; these particular sketches completed his series along the Nile. He was eager to return to Cairo to sort out his drawings and to begin work on the city’s mosques and citadels.

Before reaching Cairo, Roberts discovered that his sketchbook containing scenes of Nubia, his furthest point in his journey, was missing. He thought that he might have left it eighty miles behind at Girgeh. He sent his servant, Ismail, and one of his crewmen, **Hassan**, to retrieve it. Six days later, the men miraculously returned with the sketchbook in hand. It was not on a mountain in Girgeh, as Roberts had thought, rather, the men found the sketchbook safely hidden in a cave.

After a two and a half month excursion along the Nile, Roberts returned to Cairo on the twenty-first of December with over 100 sketches. When he arrived, a letter awaited him from his daughter. Amongst all the loving subjects in the letter, she wrote the welcoming news that the coveted **Royal Academy of Art** in London had just elected him as an Associate Member.

In Cairo, Roberts was determined to enter the mosques — a dangerous endeavour to non-Muslims. He tried various means, including special papers that allowed him to move freely about the city and a guide who also kept guard over him. None of these approaches worked. His only alternative was to disguise himself.

Roberts dressed himself in a caftan, loose trousers, a multicoloured cloak, a thick sash around his waist, and a belt from which he suspended a sword, as all men in the city were armed. He shaved his European

mutton chop sideburns and wore a turban over his head. Thus, David Roberts took on the appearance and mannerisms of a high-ranking Turk. With his dark hair and eyes, even he was surprised over his convincing transformation, and later commented that “my dear old mother would never know me.”

ROBERTS SUCCESSFULLY ENTERED THE MOSQUE of **Sultan al-Ghuri**, and began imitating the worshippers. A group of men gathered and kneeled around a cloth, and so Roberts did the same. Suddenly, the men fell silent and struck a gaze at Roberts. One of his guards signalled him by lifting a finger to his lips and then drawing it across his throat. Roberts quickly backed away. The infiltrator had made a mistake! Although he knelt along with the rest of the men, he failed to note that they had also kissed the sacred drape that was made for the tomb of the prophet in Medina. He was fortunate that no one reacted. As an infidel contaminating a holy cloth, David Roberts could have easily been killed.

From Cairo the artist began to prepare for his expedition into less travelled regions. His plan was to cross the desert into Palestine and Syria and finally, into Jerusalem. However, he was running out of funds and worried about affording the necessary provisions for such an arduous journey.

On January 12, while sketching in the inner courtyard of the **Mosque of Sultan Hassan**, he met a young Turk by the name of **Haafee Ismail Effendi** who served in the Pasha’s entourage. The two found that they had much in common. Effendi spoke fluent English, was a Christian, baptized in Glasgow, Scotland, and educated in Europe. They became instant friends and agreed to make the long journey together.

Roberts was warned that crossing the **Sinai Desert** was not only difficult climatically, but that it harboured dangerous thieves and wild animals. He prepared himself by getting all the proper travelling documents and letters of introduction, and by stocking up on rifles, pistols and sabres. New acquaintances from Cairo, **John Pell** and **John Kinnear**, the son of an Edinburgh banker, were travelling to Mount Sinai, Petra, Hebron and Jerusalem. Roberts and Effendi decided to join them for part of the journey.

For comfort and disguise, the three British men dressed in Turkish attire, and by this time, Roberts had grown a thick moustache to help hide his Euro-

pean features. They hired fifteen Bedouin escorts led by **Sheik Hussein** from the **Beni Said** tribe. They also hired twenty-one camels, which they rode and used for carrying their supplies, along with some additional donkeys. Thus, Roberts had managed to organize a traditional desert caravan with shared funding.

They began their journey on February 7. The route they chose was the same used by **Moses** when he led the Israelites from Egypt into the Promised Land. Roberts was strong in his Protestant beliefs, and saw each historic site as a confirmation of Christian foundations.

After an inspiring, though trying, three-month trip through the Holy Land, Roberts returned to Alexandria. In Alexandria he was given the honour of a twenty-minute audience with the Viceroy of Egypt, **Pasha Mehemet Ali**. On May 18, he began his journey home. He boarded a steamer for Malta, and after stopping to visit friends in Gibraltar and Cadiz; he finally arrived in London on the 21st of July. With him he brought 272 drawings, three filled sketchbooks, and one impressive panoramic scene of Cairo.

IN LONDON, ROBERTS SOUGHT A PUBLISHER who would be willing to print his work as a series of folio albums with coloured lithographs. Many publishers showed interest, however the cost to complete such a venture was approximately 10,000 pounds, or \$350,000 by today's standards — an exaggerated risk for any publisher.

Finally, the publisher, **Francis Graham Moon**, agreed to print two volumes on Palestine and two volumes on Egypt, with each volume featuring 120 full-page lithographic illustrations. In addition, Moon would publish a volume on modern Cairo, featuring sixty full-page lithographs. The complete series would emphasize image, rather than text. Moon was willing to take the financial risk, as he was more interested in artistic merit.

Moon arranged an audience to meet Roberts and to view his best original works. The audience included **Queen Victoria**, the **Archbishop of Canterbury**, the **Archbishop of York**, and the **Bishop of London**. The eminent guests were impressed, and each immediately signed up for the series. The Queen lent her name, allowing Roberts to dedicate the first volumes to her. Moon and Roberts organized several exhibitions through the major cities of Great Britain fea-

turing selections of the travel sketches. Within a year's promotional efforts, the press coverage was high and orders came pouring in. Francis Moon collected twice the amount he needed to publish the series.

The expert lithographer, **Louis Haghe**, was hired, much to Roberts' delight. For the text portion, Moon hired two clergymen, **George Croly** to write on the Holy Land, and **William Brockedon** to write on Egypt. Roberts found Croly to be "An arrogant proud prelate who just writes and does as he likes with less regard to the subjects." Nevertheless, the focus remained on the images, and the books received tremendous acclaim from the public, as well as from the press. Many editions were printed in several countries for the next several decades.

In 1841 Roberts was elected as a full member of the Royal Academy, and received his first commission from the Queen. On October 19, 1842, a dinner was held in honour of the artist in his hometown of Edinburgh. **Lord Henry Thomas Cockburn** rose to present a toast to Roberts by saying that the artist had "completed the finest pilgrimage of art which has ever perhaps been performed by a single man." It seems that from a small village in Scotland and with very humble beginnings, David Roberts indeed succeeded in climbing the pyramids.

Notes:

*The exhibition, Exploring the Holy Land: The Prints of David Roberts & Beyond, is on view at the Bowers Museum from October 6, 2001 to January 9, 2002 (see Exhibitions listing). A CAC-sponsored special program is scheduled for Sunday, October 14; 1:00 PM, featuring a lecture on "19th Century Orientalist Painters" by **Albert Boime**, and 2:00 – 3:00 tour of the exhibition (see back page for details).*

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