The New Criterion

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Week in review

by Jane Coombs

Recent links of note:

"Edward Daniel Clarke—collector of the world"
Edmund Richardson, *Engelsberg Ideas*

Edward Daniel Clarke (1769–1822) was an English polymath and adventurer before specialization delineated disciplines such as history and science. As the classics professor Edmund Richardson recounts in *Engelsberg Ideas*, Clarke found himself in Egypt in 1801 just as Napoleon's forces were capitulating to the British. The French were made to forfeit their looted artifacts and Clarke, one of the only learned men present, was put in charge of sorting them out. Upon his return to London, he published *The Tomb of Alexander* (1805), in which he claimed a sarcophagus he had brought back was the legendary resting place of the great Macedonian—a thrilling story, only it was all a fiction. (He perhaps should have redirected his literary efforts towards writing mummy tales, as did Théophile Gautier to great success for a public still under the grip of Egyptomania several decades later.) As it turns out, Clarke had overlooked another item in his haul that would turn out to be much more valuable than any ruler's tomb: the Rosetta Stone. Copies of its trilingual inscription fell into the hands of more serious scholars across Europe, and, thanks to the efforts of Champollion and others to decipher Egyptian scripts, Clarke's sarcophagus was confirmed to have belonged not to Alexander, but to the pharaoh Nectanebo II. (Richardson notes gleefully, however, that the fourth-century A.D. *Alexander Romance* describes Nectanebo as the true father of Alexander—make of that what you will.)

"Leave me my illusions"
Nicholas Penny, *London Review of Books*

Coins, shells, suits of armor, mummies, fossils—all were collected, categorized, and preserved by the peculiar breed of aristocrats known as "antiquarians" discussed in a new book by Rosemary Hill, *Time's Witness: History in the Age of Romanticism*. Unbound to institutions such as universities, antiquarians were the ancestors of today's paleontologists, archaeologists, geologists, and other researchers of the past, as reports Nicholas Penny, the former director of the National Gallery in

London. In this inspiring review, we see that the threat of cultural destruction can actually generate interest in culture's preservation, such as during the dissolution of the monasteries, when the visibly ruined churches aroused powerful emotions and threw into circulation troves of long-hidden medieval manuscripts. The French Revolution, too, prompted figures such as Alexandre Lenoir to save religious and royal artifacts from destruction, in the same spirit as Chateaubriand's *Génie du christianisme* (1802), written in response to the revolutionaries' attacks on religion. Penny also describes the effect increased interest in Greco-Roman and medieval objects had on culture, especially in the realm of architecture, in which arguments about whether classical or Gothic influences were more appropriate for places of government, study, and worship raged throughout the nineteenth century.

"Fabulous creatures: Moreau at Waddesdon Manor"
Jackie Wullschläger, *The Financial Times*

Visitors to the Met might be familiar with a strange painting in which a young man on a rocky precipice stares nervously at a female-headed, long-winged sphinx pawing on his chest; gray limbs of his less fortunate predecessors lie in a jumble beneath his feet. The artist behind *Oedipus and the Sphinx* (1864), Gustave Moreau, is less famous today than some of his late-nineteenth-century French contemporaries, but he nevertheless exerted a powerful influence on Symbolist painters and writers as well as later surrealists such as André Breton. As Jackie Wullschläger notes in the *Financial Times*, a contemporary compared his prismatic paintings to those of a jeweller who, "drunk on color, had ground up rubies, sapphires, emeralds, topazes, pearls and mother-of-pearl to make his palette." Moreau, who once called himself an "assembler of dreams," was commissioned by his patron Antony Roux to illustrate Jean de La Fontaine's seventeenth-century *Fables*; a new exhibition of these watercolors has just opened at the faux-Renaissance chateau Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire, England. His most famous student, Henri Matisse, recalled that Moreau "didn't show us how to paint; he roused our imagination," and these variegated pictures contain a dreamlike mix of anthropomorphized animals, orientalist motifs, jungle vegetation, and glittering metal objects. Moreau's house museum in Paris, an under-the-radar attraction in the Ninth Arrondissement, will next host the watercolors, not shown publicly since 1906.

Podcasts:

"Music for a While #48: Bach and Bach-ish." *Jay Nordlinger,* The New Criterion*'s music critic, talks music—but, more important, plays music.*

Dispatch:

"New villages," by Seamus Flaherty. *A review of* The Utopians: Six Attempts to Build the Perfect Society *by Anna Neima.*

Jane Coombs was the ninth Hilton Kramer Fellow at *The New Criterion*.