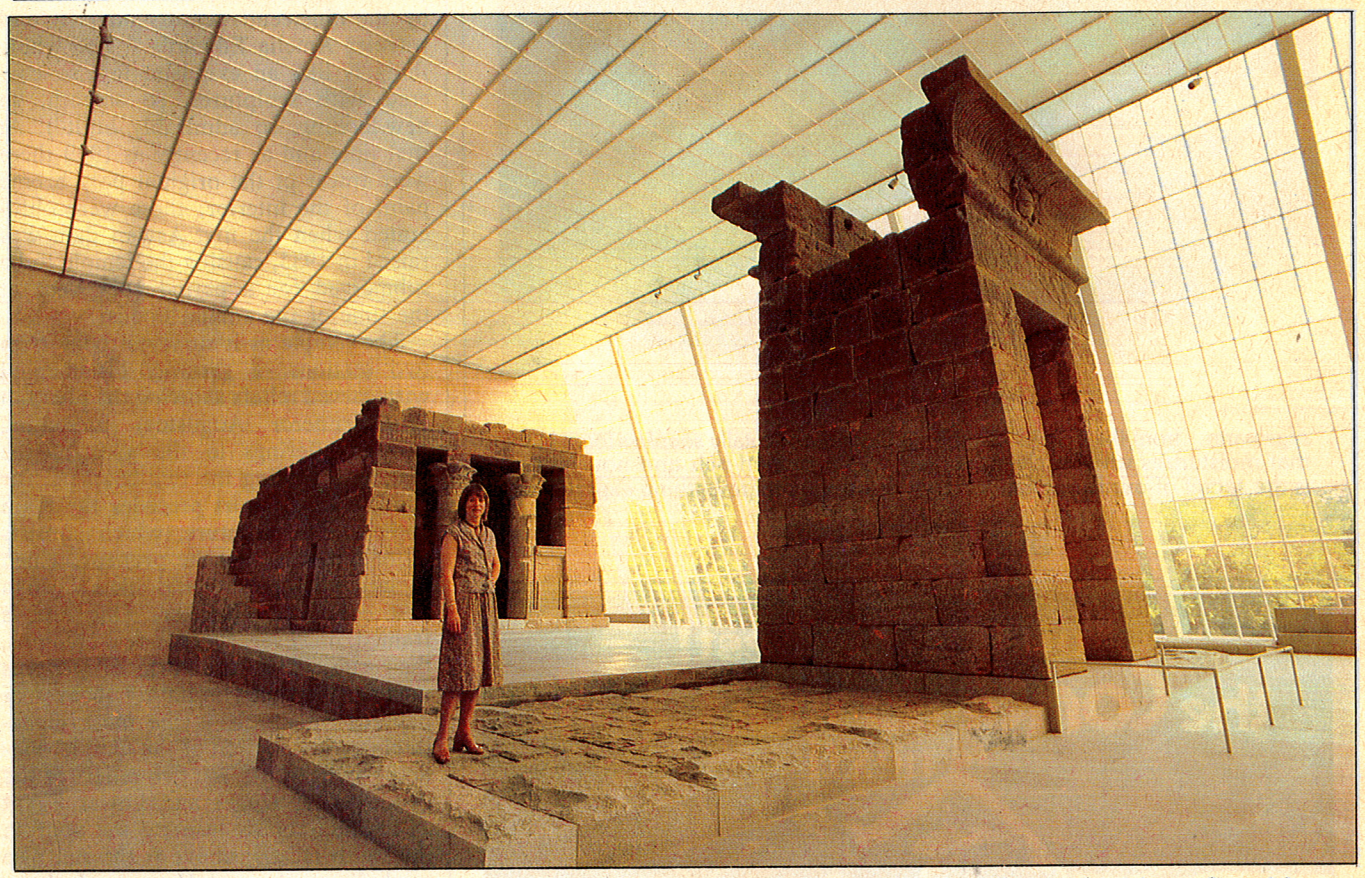
Art / John Ashbery

GIFT FROM THE NILE

"...In situating the temple in an area vast enough to let it breathe, Roche and Dinkeloo have created an exciting new space..."



The splendor that was Dendur: *The Temple of Dendur, reassembled in the Sackler wing of the Metropolitan Museum.*

After surviving the hazards of time, the weather, vandalism, annual flooding, and a transatlantic voyage, the Egyptian **Temple of Dendur** has finally been reassembled and installed in its new home, the Sackler wing of the Metropolitan. And a marvelous thing to behold it is, too: not just the temple itself, a relatively small and modest one after all, but the setting as well, which is the work of Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo, and Associates. In situating the temple in an area vast enough to let it breathe, with nothing to compete with its august lines save a slanting glass wall framing a rather neutral view of Central Park, Roche and Dinkeloo have endowed the city with an exciting and dramatic new space.

The saga of the temple began in the late fifties, at the time of a worldwide campaign organized by UNESCO to save the Nubian monuments (most notably the temples of Abu Simbel), which were about to be submerged forever under the surface of a 3,000-square-mile lake that would be created by the new Aswan High Dam. In recognition of its contribution of $16-million in Egyptian credits, the Arab Republic of Egypt offered the temple to the United States. That was in 1965. After several years of what can only be described as hemming and hawing, the gift was accepted and awarded to the Met, which had promised an indoor installation protected from the elements.

The dismantled temple arrived in New York in August 1968 and now, after a decade (probably much longer than it took to construct the temple in the first century B.C.), it is again erect, reflected in a Nilotic pool—"the only complete Egyptian temple in the western hemisphere."

Dendur was built to commemorate the deaths by drowning in the Nile of Pedesi and Pihor, two sons of Kuper, probably a local chieftain appointed by the Roman occupying forces to govern Nubia. This honor was in accordance with a tradition, mentioned by Herodotus, whereby victims of the Nile were deemed as "something more than human" and given a sacred burial at the spot where their bodies washed up. But the reasons for building the temple were political as well as religious, we are told: The Roman rulers wished to show the Blemmyes, the tribe to which Kuper and his sons belonged, to what extent their collaboration was valued.

Some of the vicissitudes that befell the temple are recorded in graffiti interspersed among the reliefs. One Cop-

Photograph by Charles Wiesehahn

in the experience of this tiny, intimate, oddly touching memorial that has so miraculously survived the encroachments of time and progress.

The Witkin Gallery is showing photographs by **Russell Lee,** who is known particularly for his documentary work in rural America in the thirties, when he was employed by the Farm Security Administration along with other distinguished photographers such as Dorothea Lange and Walker Evans.

Lee recorded the appalling living conditions of southern sharecroppers and miners in Appalachia with a combined objectivity and sympathy that makes his photographs something much more than effective social documents. The eloquent ugliness of these Americans and their surroundings brought out an almost Chekhovian strain in him, as in *FSA Clients at Home, Texas, 1939,* one of his best-known works.

A middle-aged farmer and his wife are seated on either side of a console radio; the rigid composition suggests a triptych with the radio as the central panel. He is reading; she is sewing; each seems imbued with a curious blend of pride and shame as they resolutely avoid the eye of the camera. Their situation seems both tragic and very funny.

Even amid really desperate poverty one senses the subjects' awareness of themselves as humans with only one foot in their squalid environment. A young black boy lying on a decrepit mattress in New Madrid County, Missouri, in 1938 seems only dimly aware of his surroundings, caught in a moment of dream which will probably always be just a dream, but a dream anyway. (41 East 57th Street; to October 14.)

The Schoelkopf Gallery has a very lovely show of drawings, and two sculptures apiece, by two European sculptors who settled in America: **Gaston Lachaise** and **Elie Nadelman.** The drawings of both are, for me, more successful than the rather self-conscious sculpture that grew out of them.

Nadelman's dainty, precise Art Deco sensibility is spontaneous in these sketches, most notably in a reclining figure that is a loose assemblage of shallow arcs. Lachaise's preoccupation with enormous female buttocks and breasts (one drawing here shows a seated nude with breasts hanging down almost to her ankles) perhaps verges on the pathological; at the same time it comes across as breezy and affirmative, with none of the creepiness of, say, a Beardsley. (825 Madison Avenue, at 69th Street; to October 14.)