

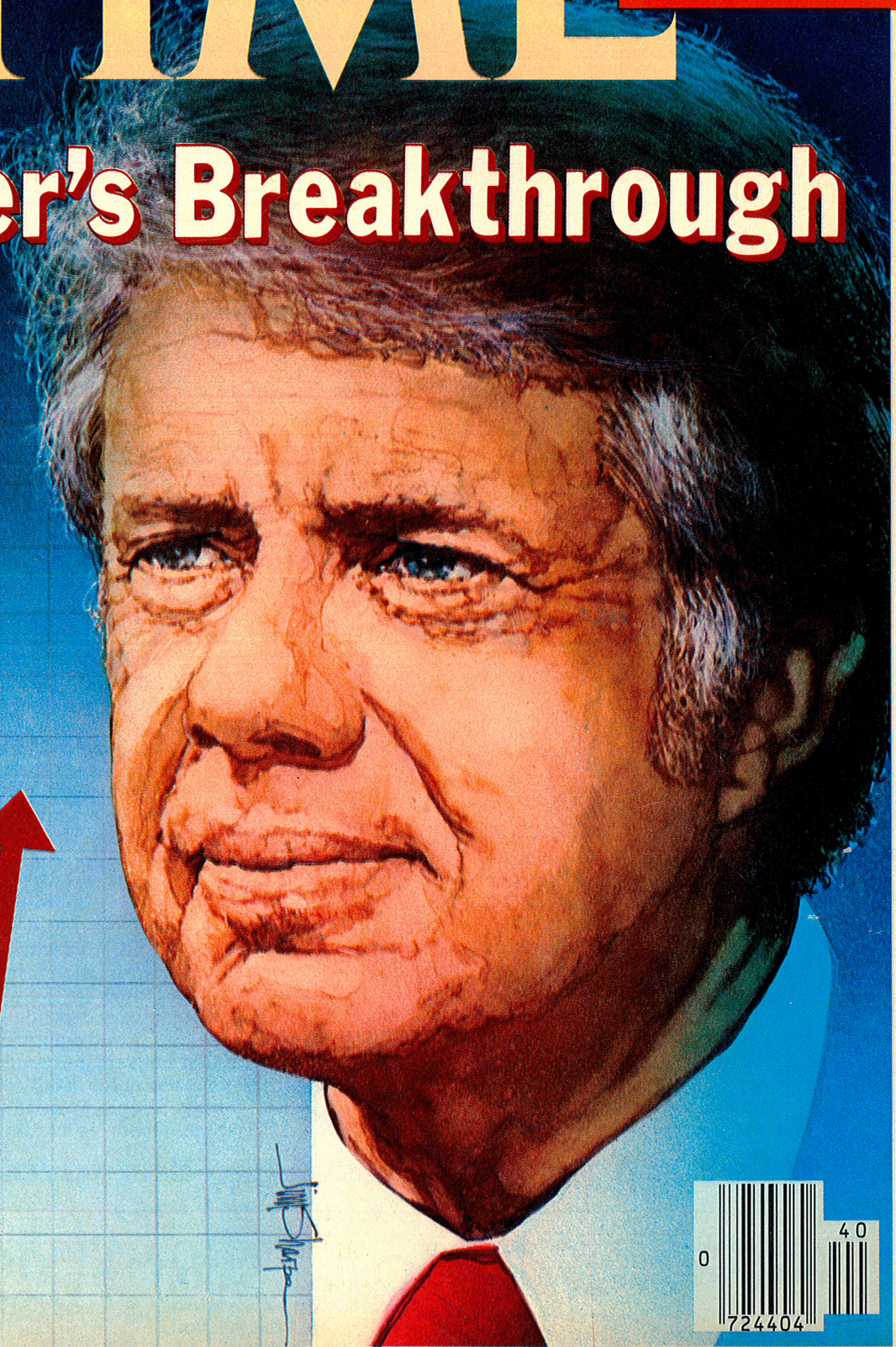
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\$1.00

TIME

TEMPLE OF DENDUR
A Treasure from
The Past

Carter's Breakthrough



Jim Hinton



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Art

Ancient Glory in Manhattan

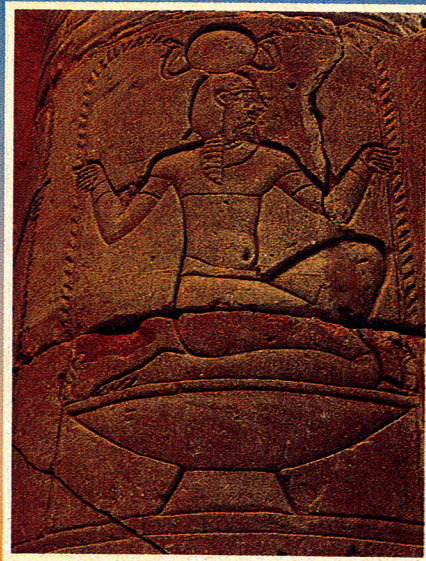
A new site for Dendur's temple

It had been eight years since Cleopatra put an asp to her bosom, Mark Antony had fallen upon his sword, and Rome's victorious Octavian had taken over Egypt. But the Nubian villagers of Dendur, 400 miles up the Nile from Alexandria, had nothing against the Romans. In fact, on the orders of the new Emperor, now called Augustus, visiting Egyptian artisans were building a temple dedicated to two young Nubian princes, Pedesi and Pihor. Both had drowned in the Nile, and victims so chosen by the god of the Nile were automatically apotheosized, as a Greek might be by a lightning bolt from Zeus. From the Roman point of view, the temple was a simple gesture of appeasement and a bid for the allegiance of the local Nubians in the continuing border war with the energetic Kushite kingdom to the south.

Last week, almost exactly two thousand years later, the temple so built stood beneath a gleaming, towering, glassy pavilion newly erected at the north end of Manhattan's Metropolitan Museum of Art overlooking Central Park. Dendur's ancient stones glow softly orange as it stands on a wide granite platform skirted by a moat of lapping water, designed to evoke its old site on the west bank of the Nile. Even the rocky escarpment against which it stood has been simulated. The huge skylight and glass north wall set off its looming 26-ft.-high gateway and the squat bulk of the temple itself. Spotlights etch sharp shadows in the sunken reliefs on its walls, where in panel after panel Emperor Augustus, dressed as a pharaoh, respectfully offers incense, eye paint, wine, crowns or flowers to the two brothers, to the ram-headed Khnum, to the great goddess Isis and her son, the falcon-headed Horus. Two carved lions guard an entrance, and the god Heh kneels to support the heavens as represented on the ceiling. There stylized vultures soar across a sky once painted bright blue and studded with gold stars. The doorway itself is flanked by two goddesses represented as crowned cobras twining around the heraldic plants of Egypt.

The third and innermost chamber, the sanctuary where only priests and an occasional petitioner entered, is bare except for a stela representing the two brothers with Osiris and Isis. A concealed chamber behind it may have contained the embalmed bodies of the brothers or, as some suggest, may have been used by a hidden

Egypt's temple glows in Gotham's night sky
Inset: relief of the god Heh on a pillar

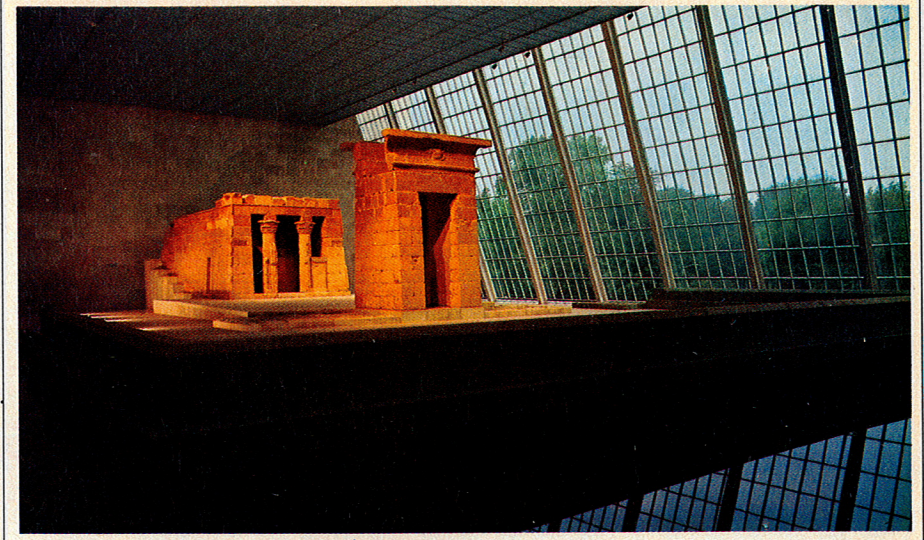


priest to make oracular pronouncements to impress the faithful. But few of them would ever have heard him. For unlike a Christian church, the Egyptian temple was not designed for worshipers to gather to pray. Rather, it was a house built for the god himself, for his comfort and protection from prying eyes when he manifested himself. As a great king, the god did not like the company of common men. Their offerings were accepted on his behalf by the priests, a practice not always appreciated by the villagers. As early as 10, B.C., one Pakhom angrily scrawled an oath on the temple's north wall denouncing the priests' exorbitant demands for tribute.

The temple, now standing in all its ancient dignity just off Fifth Avenue and lighted to be visible at night from Central Park, narrowly escaped drowning itself, the fate suffered by its two deified princes. The threat began as early as 1891-1902, when Egypt erected a stone dam at the Nile's first cataract, bringing the water to the temple's doorsill. The dam was raised further in 1928-34, putting Dendur under water every year for nine months during the Nile's flooding time. The death sentence came in 1953, when Egypt decided to build a high dam at Aswan. An Egyptian team carefully dismantled the temple, and the numbered blocks were stored on an island in the Nile. In 1965 the Egyptian government offered the temple to the U.S. in gratitude for the U.S.'s \$16 million contribution to UNESCO's efforts to save the Nubian monuments that would have been inundated for 300 miles along the Nile when Lake Nasser filled up behind the dam. By offering to build a special enclosure for the temple, the Metropolitan Institution, which wanted to put it outdoors on the banks of the Potomac.

In 1968, 640 tons of stones arrived in Manhattan aboard a freighter and were stacked under an air-bubble tent on the museum's parking lot. There they stayed for seven years, awaiting construction of their spectacular new glass house. In 1974 the parts were moved to the present site and painstakingly reassembled; cracked stones were reinforced with steel rods, steel beams inserted in the lintels to make them secure. Additions made in A.D. 577, when the temple was converted to a Coptic church, were removed, and repairs were done to erase the depredations wrought during the centuries it stood empty after Egypt converted to Islam.

Slowly around Dendur arose its huge glass pavilion, designed by Architects Kevin Roche, John Dinkeloo and Associates. The space, in fact, is almost too vast, seeming to diminish the temple itself, which is small as Egyptian temples go. (A rapturous 19th century visitor to Egypt called it "an exquisite toy, so covered with sculptures, so smooth, so new-looking, so admirably built.") The glass structure is officially called the Sackler Wing, in honor of three brothers Sackler,



Gateway and temple loom behind the glass wall reflected in the moat simulating the Nile

distinguished psychiatrists and medical publishers, who gave a handsome \$3.5 million toward its total \$9.5 million cost. Opening this week, the wing also houses a long balcony gallery where the fabulous Tutankhamun exhibit will be installed in December.

Whether it is a fascination with mysterious Egypt, or all that gold, or young King Tut himself (who with his curse has been a staple of Sunday supplements ever since his tomb was discovered in 1922), the tour of his treasures has drawn a thundering herd of visitors in five cities since it arrived in Washington in late 1976. Certainly the crowds are not all art lovers; a few among the show's 55 objects are of high artistic quality, but the vast majority might be called magnificent artifacts.

The Metropolitan arranged to ease the expected crush by making tickets

available in advance at the museum and at Ticketron outlets. People started lining up in the rain as early as Saturday night, and on Monday, when the Met's ticket office opened, the line stretched from the museum's door for 13 blocks. At some Ticketron offices applicants waited for as long as eleven hours, and by week's end all 900,000 available tickets (stamped with a specific date and half hour) had been distributed. An additional 400,000 people will see the show as part of school or other special groups.

The Tut visitors at the Met will get a bonus. By peering over the balcony's edge, they can have a look at the Temple of Dendur. Although Tut himself would not have been surprised by the "exquisite toy"—the temple he knew were of the same design—it was scarcely contemporary with him, for Dendur was built 1,300 years after he was entombed.



Two stone pillars topped by carved papyrus plants guard the entrance to the inner temple
A 2,000-year-old monument to commemorate two Nubian princes drowned in the Nile.