

A NEW GROUND-BREAKING EXHIBITION AT THE ARAB WORLD INSTITUTE

THE EPIC OF THE SUEZ CANAL

From the Pharaohs to the 21st century

28 March to 5 August 2018

Press preview: 26 March 2018 from 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.



Toward the Seas of the South © GG

"A bit of imagination is a good seed for the hand of human enterprise."
Ferdinand de Lesseps

*"No one is more a canalist than I, but I want the Canal to belong to Egypt,
not Egypt to the Canal."*
Ismail Pasha, Khedive of Egypt

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**INSTITUT
DU MONDE
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Starting on 28 March 2018, the Arab World Institute (IMA) will recount one of the most exciting human undertakings in history: the epic of the Suez Canal. From the Pharaohs to Ferdinand de Lesseps, from Napoleon Bonaparte's plans to nationalisation under Nasser, this extraordinary 4000-year saga is presented in a ground-breaking exhibition bringing together powerful personalities, superhuman challenges, and the critical moments that have marked the singular history of this symbolic location where three continents converge: Asia, Africa, and Europe.

To tell this story is to recount world history and the great civilizations that came together and confronted each other at this nerve centre of trade between peoples, between North and South, East and West. It is also to present the rebirth - political, economic, and cultural - of the world's oldest state, which was also the first of an Arab world in the making.

Employing a cinematic and immersive approach, the exhibition will plunge visitors into the heart of the 1869 inauguration, then take them back in time through the historical development of this epic construction.

Archaeological objects, scale models, photographs, and period films highlight this marathon exhibition that guides visitors through the history of Egypt and the world from the time of the Pharaohs to the most recent extension and parallel construction inaugurated in 2015.

*The journey begins...in 1869: for the inauguration of the Suez Canal, Khedive Isma'il Pasha welcomes representatives of the royal families of Europe, envoys from the Sultan, as well as the Emperor of Austria and the guest of honour, the Empress Eugenie. It is with this grandiose scene – **presented through paintings, vast animated screens, and a diorama from Port Said** – that the exhibition begins, to the sound of the trumpets from *Aida* (the opera commissioned from Verdi by the Khedive for the occasion). The Canal open to navigation and Cairo renovated on the model of a European city: the Egyptian renaissance is underway. The Suez Canal stepped directly into history. A history that began 4000 years earlier.*

ALREADY THE PHARAOHS... (1850 BCE)



"The Worksite" by François Pierre Bernard Barry © Souvenir of Ferdinand de Lesseps and the Suez Canal / Lebas Photographie Paris

It was the pharaoh Sesostri (likely Senusret III) who, by connecting the Nile to the Red Sea, first made it possible, 18 centuries before the common era, to navigate between the Mediterranean and the seas to the south. That ancient canal, often silted up and regularly repaired, continued to exist for nearly 20 centuries. After it became unusable, new projects were developed in Constantinople and Venice, without ever being built.

The exhibition presents ancient works that show the importance of the canal for Egypt: a history that has never stopped shaping the canal. Thanks to

numerous scale models, the visitor will discover the audacity of the Pharaoh's building project, for which machines were invented and used for the first time.

That early canal, a slice through the desert, is described by a **relief map created for the Universal Exhibition of 1878**, but also by **scale models of period machines and boats, engravings, and photographs**, as well as films that reflect the contrasting visions that Egyptians and Europeans later had of the construction.

TOWARDS MODERN EGYPT, OR WHEN THE DREAM BECOMES TRUE (1797-1849)



Dredge used on the Suez Canal in the 1870s. H. Arnoux, 1869 © Souvenir of Ferdinand de Lesseps and the Suez Canal

The Suez Canal was an Egyptian project because it took place in a re-emerging Egypt. After a confrontation with European modernity under Napoleon Bonaparte, Egypt re-emerged during the reign of Muhammad Ali Pasha and his descendants. The new dynasty, increasingly independent of the Ottoman Empire, rapidly modernized the country by bringing in French experts. Among them, **Ferdinand de Lesseps** - a character beyond classification, a brilliant diplomat and adventurer - struggled to keep alive a project already studied by Bonaparte's engineers, and then by the Saint-Simonians, but about which Muhammad

Ali had been very mistrustful: a maritime canal crossing the Isthmus of Suez. Ferdinand de Lesseps and **Saïd Pasha**, a modernist sovereign of Egypt and the grandson of Muhammad Ali who had inherited his grandfather's powers, threw themselves alone into the adventure, up through the spectacular international inauguration in 1869. Egypt was on the move toward progress. The digging of the Canal is presented through numerous archives from the **Association de la mémoire de Ferdinand de Lesseps: sculptures, photographs, maps, engravings, paintings...**



Inauguration of the Suez Canal. Tribune of Souvenirs for Khedive Ismaïl at the Abdeen Palace © Souvenir of Ferdinand de Lesseps and the Suez Canal / Lebas Paris Photographie Paris

THE CANAL AS OBJECT OF DESIRE (1854-1882)

The optimistic era during which Ismaïl Pasha could say that his country was "no longer in Africa, but in Europe" was followed by a darker time: **bankruptcy, foreign stranglehold, English military occupation starting in 1882**. What for Europeans remains a mythical setting became for Egyptians a symbol of servitude where, nonetheless, life went on, cities grew, the countryside became green again. Those very different visions are shown **through images, films, and paintings**. The Suez Canal zone became a world apart within Egypt, extraterritorial, with its own lifestyle and a cosmopolitanism very different from that in Cairo and Alexandria. The visitor can travel the Canal as one still did in 1920 on the way to India or the Far East and dream of the charm of long-distance sea travel.

EGYPTIAN ASPIRATIONS FOR INDEPENDENCE (1914-1945)

During the First World War, the British and French negotiated **the Sykes-Picot Agreement**, which divided the Middle East into zones of influence: France obtained a protectorate over Syria and Lebanon; the United Kingdom over Palestine, Jordan, and Egypt. In 1936, under the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, the Kingdom of Egypt obtained almost complete independence: the protection of the Suez Canal would remain under British monopoly for only twenty years.

THE CANAL FOR THE EGYPTIANS (1956)

"Welcome. We are part of the Arab Nation. We will move forward, united, forming one block, one heart, one hand to lay the foundations and the principles of liberty, glory, and dignity, and to achieve political and economic independence at the same time."

Speech by Gamal Abdel Nasser
(Alexandria, 26 July 1956)

1956: after the Second World War, while seemingly serene, the Arab world was aspiring to independence and revolt was brewing.

After being received at the exhibition by the theatrical pomp of the 1869 inauguration, the exhibition visitor is now immersed into the heart of a central event of 1956: when on the Egyptian national day, Nasser announced to a crowd carried away by enthusiasm that he had nationalised the Suez Canal. **The exhibition dedicates a large space to that critical moment, to the implementation of the decision, to the souvenirs of those who witnessed it, and finally to the military operation and the fiasco that followed.**



Nationalization of the Canal de Suez by Nasser in 1956. D.R

A NEW WORLD EMERGES (1956-1975)

The fiasco of the Franco-Anglo-Israeli expedition of 1956, foiled by the Americans and the Russians, marked the end of European colonial imperialism, though the Russians and the Americans continued to rule in Central Europe and Latin America. The Canal, henceforth Egyptian, continued to function, and the political and financial disputes were settled. But very quickly the Canal again became a war zone: the Six Day war in 1967, to start, followed by the closing of the Canal and six years of sporadic but deadly combat, and then the war of 1973, with its major crossing by the Egyptian. The final result of that achievement, extensively illustrated in the exhibition, was the renewal of navigation and the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel.



The container ship Maersk Sheerness navigating the new Suez Canal on 26 July 2015. DR

THE CANAL OF THE FUTURE (1975-2018)

Between 1975 and 2015, the canal was considerably widened, deepened, and modernised. It became one of the main sources of foreign exchange for Egypt, which, in 2015, launched a new pharaonic project: doubling the canal and building a vast industrial and urban zone intended to draw millions of inhabitants. That is the Egypt of the future that the visitor discovers, before dreaming again of grand journeys. They are still possible, even though the décor has changed, as we see in the **filmed images that close the exhibition, travelling the 193-kilometres of this mythical water route as it is today.**

The visit of the exhibition will be commented by Frédéric Mitterrand in French in an audio guide.






After the IMA, the exhibition will be presented at the Musée d'histoire de Marseille from 17 October 2018 to 31 March 2019, and will then travel to Egypt where the Ministry for Antiquities plans to receive it at the new National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation for the 150th anniversary of the Canal. After that presentation, elements of the exhibition design will be made available to the Suez Canal Authority to contribute to the future Suez Canal Museum planned in Ismailia.

CURATORSHIP

Claude Mollard, exhibition curator
Gilles Gauthier, scientific advisor

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A complete programme of conferences, films, concerts, and workshops will accompany the exhibition. The exhibition catalogue in French will be published by Gallimard, 160 pages, 22€

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