

The Temple and the Obelisk

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This is not another Upstairs, Downstairs, but an Inside, Outside saga taking place at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Enshrined at the museum in a glass-enclosed new wing that appears to be about the size of a football field is the recently unveiled and long-awaited Temple of Dendur. This tiny temple is modest as Egyptian monuments go, notable chiefly for its small-scale beauty and delicate detail. It now stands on a vast, stony, indoor plaza under a protective enclosure, alone in a stark setting. But Dendur is safe for the ages.

Almost in the Metropolitan's backyard is another Egyptian artifact, Cleopatra's Needle. This is an obelisk of no great rarity, but it shares with the Temple of Dendur one unimpeachable credential — it is genuine. Its freely-accessible, 3,500-year-old granite shaft and time-worn hieroglyphics have been an introduction to antiquity for generations of New Yorkers who may never have been inside the museum itself.

Cleopatra's Needle is in sad shape now, according to the Greensward Foundation, one of Central Park's watchdog groups — less from curious hands exploring the wonder of art and time than from New York's polluted air. The city's atmosphere has done more damage than 3½ millennia in the desert, and in another dozen years the hieroglyphics will probably disappear. And so, while one artifact is elaborately and expensively protected, another fades away.

In the case of Dendur, New York won the temple from Washington with the promise to put the gift from Egypt under glass. Nobody wants to put the Needle under glass, but there are new techniques available which, using fluorocarbon polymers, can protect buildings and statues against erosion and decay. A moderate combination of public and private funds could save many of the city's monuments, including Cleopatra's Needle, at less than the cost of a Nile spectacular.

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