

*Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*

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**The Petries and the Pre-Raphaelites: Hilda Urlin and Henry Holiday**Anna Garnett<sup>1,\*</sup>

**How to cite:** Garnett, A. 'The Petries and the Pre-Raphaelites: Hilda Urlin and Henry Holiday'. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 2021, 30(1): pp. 1–15

Published: 24/02/2021

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**Peer Review:**

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind review.

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*Papers from the Institute of Archaeology* is a peer-reviewed open access journal.

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## RESEARCH PAPER

# The Petries and the Pre-Raphaelites: Hilda Urlin and Henry Holiday

Anna Garnett

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**Abstract:** The Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, University College London (UCL) has recently received a generous donation of a framed pencil study of a young woman's head, identified as Hilda Petrie (née Urlin). Over the past 12 months, the biography of this intriguing sketch has been reconciled from archival and art historical sources in preparation for its display as the centrepiece of the Petrie Museum's newly refurbished entrance gallery. Three key characters are associated with this drawing: the Pre-Raphaelite artist Henry Holiday, Hilda Urlin, and her husband William Matthew Flinders Petrie, whose life stories are closely linked. Here, the background to the artist, the sitter, and her well-known husband will be presented in the contemporary context of late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century archaeology in Egypt.

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**Keywords:** Hilda Petrie, Flinders Petrie, Petrie Museum, Egyptology, Pre-Raphaelites, Henry Holiday, Archaeology

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### Introduction

In March 2019, the Petrie Museum received a generous donation of a framed, delicately executed pencil study of a young woman's head (**Figure 1**). The sitter is a young Hilda Petrie née Urlin (1871–1957), drawn before she met and subsequently married the archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942), and the artist is Henry Holiday (1839–1927), described as an 'eminent Hampstead Victorian' (Mill 1978; **Figure 2** and **Figure 3**).<sup>i</sup> The donor's parents purchased this pencil study, marked with the artist's stylised initials 'HH' in the bottom right corner, in 1977 from the Talbot Gallery, Oxford. Since its purchase, the drawing has been in the possession of the donor's family in Canada. The receipt for the piece, bought as part of a group of four unrelated artworks, gives the artist's name as 'Henry Holiday' and the sitter's as 'Lady Petrie'. Typewritten labels on the back of the frame, added later, describe the sketch as 'Miss Hilda Urlin (later wife of Sir Flinders Petrie) for seated girl in "Aspasia on the Pnyx"', and this same note is present in pencil on the back of the frame.

The drawing has now been conserved, mounted and framed, and formally accessioned into the Petrie Museum collection, and is due to be displayed in the Museum's newly redisplayed entrance gallery in autumn 2020. While serving to draw well-deserved attention to Hilda Petrie's work in her own right, this new acquisition allows us to explore a new interpretive narrative behind the history of the collection: that of the Petries' artistic social circle in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.



**Figure 1:** Hilda Umlin by Henry Holiday, pencil on paper, before 1888. Petrie Museum no. UC80678 (image: UCL Special Collections, courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, UCL)



**Figure 2:** Henry Holiday, unknown photographer, albumen print, 1870s. NPG x18530 (courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery)



**Figure 3:** Henry Holiday by (William) Walker Hodgson (1864-active 1923), monochrome ink wash over pencil on artboard, 1892. NPG 7085 (courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery)

### Henry Holiday, Miss Urlin and *Aspasia*

Henry George Alexander Holiday was an English painter, stained glass designer, illustrator and sculptor, who was proud to describe himself as a member of the Pre-Raphaelite school of art (Cormack 1989: 1; Holiday 1914, 1896).<sup>ii</sup> Holiday was admitted into the Royal Academy in 1854, where he became intrigued by the work of the Pre-Raphaelite artists including John Everett Millais, one of the founders of the movement (Bryant 2013: 174; Geraths and Kennerly 2016: 206). After a visit to Italy in 1867, Holiday began to move away from the Pre-Raphaelite artistic tradition and favoured a more classical approach to representing the human form (Bryant 2013: 174). By the 1870s, Holiday had emerged as an influential and established designer within the British stained glass artistic community, often drawing on ancient Egyptian themes for his stained glass works (Cormack 2007: 2, 1989: 2; Holiday 1896).<sup>iii</sup> Alongside Holiday's prolific and varied output, including illustrations for the author Lewis Carroll (Carroll 1876), his wife Catherine (Kate) Harriet

Raven (1839–1924) established a successful career as an embroiderer, working with the artist and social activist William Morris (1834–1896) for his company Morris & Co. (Cormack 2007: 2; Mill 1978: 26). While perhaps not as well-known as his fellow Pre-Raphaelite artists, Holiday's work was considered with the highest regard by contemporary commentators:

There is living at the present day an artist and craftsman who is supreme in his own branch of art, and for whom it may be claimed that in some respects at least he has been unsurpassed in any age (Mackay 1902: 391).

Holiday's works can be seen across the UK and beyond: from his drawings and paintings in the British Museum to his stained glass windows throughout Cumbria and Wales.<sup>iv</sup> His oil painting *Dante and Beatrice* (1883)<sup>v</sup>, now on display in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, is widely regarded as his most celebrated work. However, his oil-on-canvas *Aspasia on the Pnyx* (1888, **Figure 4**) should also be considered as one of his most important artistic productions.



**Figure 4:** *Aspasia on the Pnyx* by Henry Holiday, oil on canvas, 1888. Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, no. 086534 (courtesy of the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre)

This work shows Pericles' mistress Aspasia reclining on the Pnyx contemplating the newly completed buildings on the Acropolis, with her young female companion seated at her feet holding a peacock-feather fan (Cormack 1989: 15). Cormack (1989: 15) suggests that the painting is 'a splendid example of Victorian Classicism, Holiday's personal tribute to the artistic tradition which he regarded as supreme'. Holiday's *Aspasia*, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1888, is now part of the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, currently kept in long-term storage (Cormack 1989: 15, no. 85).<sup>vi</sup> The object record for the painting states that 'Miss Holiday'—likely Holiday's daughter, Winifred Raven (1866–1949)—presented it to the Centre in 1927.<sup>vii</sup>

The model for the young girl in this painting was Hilda Urlin, who would later become Lady Petrie (see Geraths and Kennerly 2016: 207). Hilda Petrie became a skilled Egyptologist, archaeologist, artist, and fundraiser, whose work was vital to the success of her husband Flinders Petrie's career as an archaeologist and University professor. Holiday was a family friend of the Urlin family: (Richard) Denny Urlin (1830–1907), a Dublin-based barrister, Mary Elizabeth Urlin née Addis (1832–1922), and their five daughters—including their youngest, Hilda Mary Isobel. The Urlins spent their winters at their London home, and it was in London that they first became acquainted with Holiday (Drower 1985: 232). Hilda was an artist and scholar in her own right: she took classes at Kings College for Women, including in geology and in facsimile drawing, where she excelled (Drower 1985: 232). At the age of 17, Holiday persuaded the young Hilda—properly chaperoned in his London studio by her elder sisters—to sit as a model for Aspasia's young companion in his oil painting (Drower 1985: 232). Holiday describes the development of this work:

I began an Athenian picture, a less serious undertaking than the "Panathenaia", representing Aspasia reclining on a stone seat on the Pnyx, contemplating the recently completed buildings on the Acropolis, with a young girl companion sat at her feet. My wife had met, when staying with her friend, Miss Egerton, in the previous summer, a daughter of Lord Penrhyn's, Miss Kathleen Douglas-Pennant, who became soon after Lady Falmouth.<sup>viii</sup> This lady came to see us at Hampstead, and was so exactly what I wanted for my Aspasia that, at my wife's suggestion, she kindly gave me the necessary sittings. The young girl was painted from Miss Hilda

Urlin, now the wife of Professor Flinders Petrie, the eminent Egyptologist (Holiday 1914: 313).

The pencil drawing of the ‘seated girl’, now part of the Petrie Museum’s collection, was a study for this painting, and the handwritten notes on the frame indicate that Hilda Urlin was the model for the head. In Holiday’s eyes, Hilda’s distinctly Pre-Raphaelite features, later described by Drower (1985: 232–233) as a ‘heart-shaped face, clear blue eyes and fair hair’, was the ideal contemporary ‘type of beauty’ for *Aspasia*’s young companion in the painting (see Challis 2013: 187). Holiday’s decision to use Hilda as a model for *Aspasia* was to have a profound effect on her life, becoming the catalyst for the future direction of her career and of her personal life.

### Encountering Egypt and University College

In his autobiography *Reminiscences of my Life* (1914), Holiday references his interest in Egypt, a country that ‘has had a great attraction for [him] since boyhood’ (Holiday 1914: 410). Holiday is known to have visited the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851 and its Egyptian Court, aspects of which he copied in his sketch-books together with ancient Egyptian painted reliefs in the British Museum (Cormack 1997: 23; Holiday 1914: 410). Holiday studied Egyptological works and was fascinated by ancient Egyptian costume and architecture, in particular how these elements could be incorporated into his stained glass designs (Holiday 1914: 410). He was also a long-term subscriber of the Egypt Exploration Fund (EEF), now the Egypt Exploration Society (EES), from 1890–1915. Documents relating to Holiday’s subscription in the EES Archive indicate that he frequently paid in retrospect for a few years at a time, and that he contributed to EEF ‘Special Fund’ appeals, including the EEF excavations at the site of Deir el-Bahri (**Figure 5**).<sup>ix</sup> Holiday visited Egypt twice, once in 1872 on his return to England from India and later again in 1906 (Holiday 1914: 226–231). He was fascinated by the country, and by the Egyptian people, and he travelled with artists Jessie Mothersole (1874–1958), his studio assistant from 1899 and a graduate of the Slade School of Art in London, and her friend Florence Walker on his 1906 visit (Cormack 1989: 5).<sup>x</sup> The group travelled to Egypt on the invitation of his friend Charles T. Currelly (1876–1957), Director of the Royal Ontario Museum (Holiday 1914: 414–415).<sup>xi</sup> Holiday learned much from these visits to Egypt, and gained an appreciation for the country and for modern Egyptian people, which influenced his art long after he returned to England:

During my forty years' life in Hampstead I have not acquired a tenth—no, not a hundredth—part of the intimacy with it which I now enjoyed with the Nile (Holiday 1914: 429).

X1.g.20

**Egypt Exploration Fund.**

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Date February 8<sup>th</sup> 1895.

Please enter my name as a donor of £ 1 : 1 : -  
to the **SPECIAL FUND** for **DEIR-EL-BAHARI**.

Name Henry Holiday

Address Oak Tree House  
Hampstead, N.W.

To MISS E. PATERSON,  
37, GREAT RUSSELL STREET,  
LONDON, W.C.

**Figure 5:** Holiday's EEF 'Special Fund' slip recording his financial support for their excavations at Deir el-Bahri. EES Archive no. COR.011.g.20 (courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society)

While Holiday owned an extensive personal Egyptological library, which numbered 170 volumes by 1914, he also undertook research at UCL's Edwards Library:

I was under the pleasant necessity of going to the Edwards Library at University College, Gower Street, to obtain information, and there, on March 24<sup>th</sup>, I first made the acquaintance of Professor Flinders Petrie, who showed me that courtesy with which all are familiar who seek his assistance. There, I had access to the voluminous works of Lepsius, Rossellini and Prisse D'Avennes, from which I got all the details that I needed for my scenes and costumes (Holiday 1914: 412).<sup>xii</sup>

With Holiday and Petrie now well acquainted, and Holiday's keen interest in Egypt clearly expressed, the scene was set for the fateful meeting between Flinders and his future wife Hilda. On a visit to UCL, Petrie made Holiday aware of his need for a skilled artist to



work on his forthcoming monograph on ancient Egyptian costume, and Holiday thought of his young model for *Aspasia*, Hilda Urlin:

On the occasion of one of my visits Professor Petrie told me that he was writing a book on Egyptian Costume, that he had made notes of all the engravings in the published works on Egypt which he proposed to utilise for his illustrations, but that he wanted the co-operation of an artist who would add drawings and letterpress, treating the subject from the artistic point of view, as he had done from the historic, and he asked if I could find somebody willing to do this. I thought over it, and felt that there could be no better means than this of acquiring an accurate knowledge of Egyptian costume, and I wrote that I should be much interested to do what he wanted myself, upon which he sent me his MS. and his notes of all the illustrations.

One of the first things needed was to get tracings made from all the engravings referred to in the notes, and I told Professor Petrie that I knew a young lady who was keenly interested in Egypt, and who would, I believed, be willing to undertake this task. This was my friend Miss Hilda Urlin, who had sat for me for the head of the young girl in my picture of “Aspasia”. Miss Urlin readily consented, I took her to see Professor Petrie, and before many weeks had passed, she had made all the necessary tracings and brought them to me (Holiday 1914: 412).

This chance meeting became the turning point in Petrie’s life, and after gentle rebuffing from Hilda over two years of courting, his marriage proposal was accepted on his return from Egypt in Summer 1896 (Drower 1985: 236). Holiday was evidently pleased about this development:

In November of the following year, 1897, Miss Urlin became Mrs Flinders Petrie. They spent the afternoon of November 23<sup>rd</sup> with us, married on the 29<sup>th</sup> and went straight to Egypt [...] Mrs Petrie’s way of putting the matter was quaint. She said she had long planned to save up her money till she was forty, and then go to Egypt. “Now”, she said, “that’s all knocked on the head” (Holiday 1914: 412–413).

Thus began an important chapter in the lives of Hilda and Flinders, of the history of Egyptology at UCL, and of the management and organisation of Flinders’ archaeological

excavations for the remainder of his life (Janssen 1992: 8). The Petries worked as a team on their excavations until Flinders' death in 1942 and Hilda became an archaeologist in her own right, working on-site in Egypt and later in Palestine with her husband (Sparks 2013, **Figure 6**). Among myriad other tasks, Hilda worked as a skilled excavator, archaeological illustrator and administrator in the field (Drower 1985: 243). She also managed the project finances and the promotion of Flinders' work, which was vital in keeping their archaeological projects afloat (Sparks 2013: 1). Indeed, in the dedication to his autobiography, Flinders declared that it was 'on [Hilda's] toil that most of my work has depended' (Petrie 1931).



**Figure 6:** Hilda and Flinders Petrie in 1903 (courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, UCL)

### **The Petries' artistic social circle**

Holiday's choice of Hilda as a model for his *Aspasia on the Pnyx* not only changed the course of Hilda's life, but also led to new fruitful and collegial artistic relationships for the Petries. Annual archaeological exhibitions were held in London during the Social Season, showcasing the results of the work of the first generations of trained archaeologists

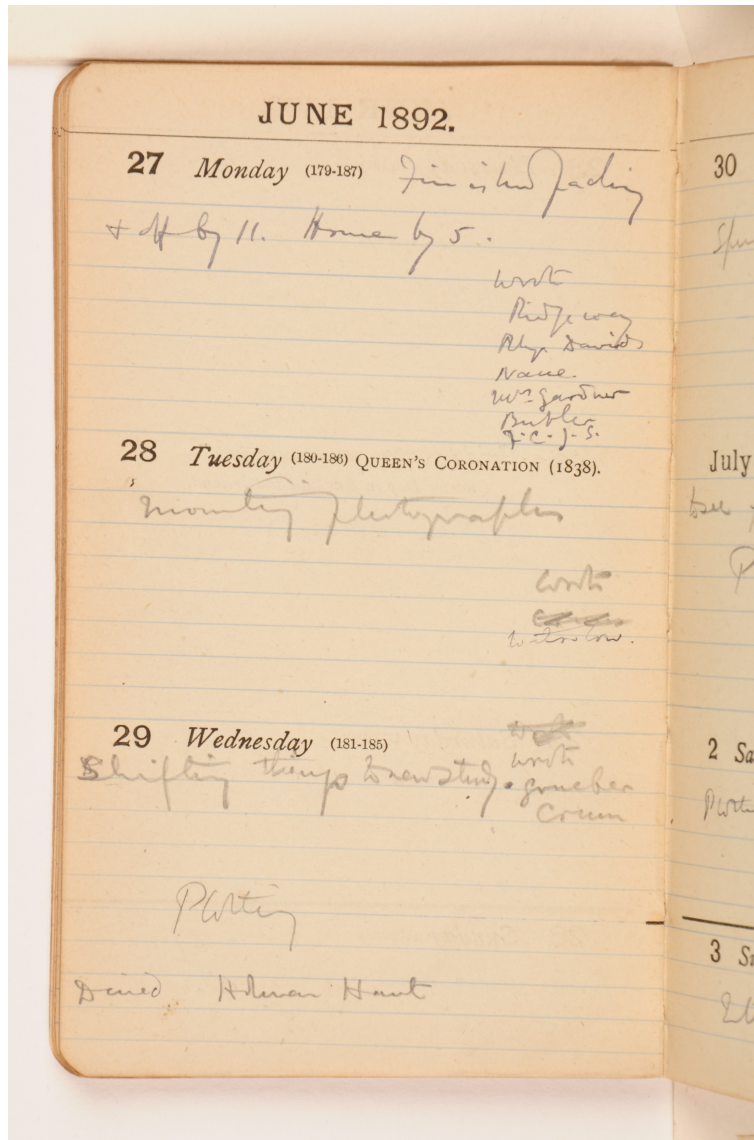
including Flinders Petrie (Thornton 2015: 1; Williams 2020). Petrie held an exhibition of objects from his excavations at the Egyptian site of Hawara at the Egyptian Hall, Piccadilly, in 1888 (Thornton 2015: 3; Williams 2020: 75, 127–128, fig. 7). These objects included the group of so-called ‘mummy portraits’—painted panels which covered the face of the deceased at this site during the Roman Period—which were a popular attraction for visitors, including contemporary painters (Picton et al. 2007).<sup>xiii</sup> Sir Edward Poynter (1836–1919), William Holman Hunt (1827–1910) and Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912) are some of the artists known to have visited this exhibition, as well as the Director of the National Gallery, Sir Frederic Burton (1816–1900) (Challis 2013: 112). After his visit to Petrie’s exhibition, Alma-Tadema was inspired to incorporate elements of these ‘mummy portraits’ into his own Roman paintings (Moser 2019: 371).<sup>xiv</sup> Together with Flinders Petrie and others, Alma-Tadema and Poynter were founding members of the Society for the Preservation of the Monuments of Ancient Egypt (SPMAE), which went on to attract other influential members including Henry Holiday (Drower 1985: 168–169).<sup>xv</sup>

Petrie records meetings with his artistic acquaintances in his ‘pocket diaries’, now kept in the Petrie Museum Archive, including dinner appointments with Holman Hunt in London in June and July 1892 (Drower 1985: 142, **Figure 7**).<sup>xvi</sup> The Petries maintained their friendship with the Holman Hunts until William died in 1910; Petrie’s biographer, Margaret (Peggy) Drower, recounts their relationship:

Hunt’s interest in Egypt had been kindled in 1854, when he had stayed some time in Cairo to paint; in 1893, with his second wife, he determined to make the whole trip up the Nile to Philae; Petrie was not in Egypt that winter, but they invited him to dinner before they went and he, no doubt, briefed them on all they must see. Later they built a cottage at Sonning-on-Thames, and thither Flinders and Hilda were from time to time invited; the old man loved to entertain and was an excellent raconteur. He had gone almost blind, but he enjoyed riverside walks in Flinders’ company; in photographs of the two together they appear to be vying with one another in the length and luxuriance of their beards (Drower 1985: 317).

The Petries also kept in touch with Holiday into the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, after the birth of their children John (1907–1972) and Ann (1909–1989). Ann Petrie recalled visiting Henry Holiday as a child in his Hampstead studio, describing him in his later life as ‘a little man

in a velvet knickerbocker suit, with a bald head and a thin beard', at a time when he was devoted to such causes as radical politics, universal suffrage and rational dress (Drower 1985: 339; Mill 1978: 26–27).



**Figure 7:** Flinders Petrie's Pocket Diary entry for 29 June 1892: 'Dined Holman Hunt' (Petrie Museum Archive No. 15-9-1 (11) (courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology, UCL)

### The afterlife of Holiday's 'seated girl'

Henry Holiday's drawing of Hilda Urlin was officially acquired by the Petrie Museum in July 2019, following UCL committee approval. Paper Conservator Isabelle Egan undertook light-touch conservation measures with curatorial input: both surfaces were cleaned and old tape removed from the back of the drawing, and the paper was flattened

and mounted. An early 20<sup>th</sup> century-style gilded wood ‘Whistler’ frame was chosen for the drawing, the sympathetic contemporary design of which compliments the delicate features of the model. The framed drawing is due to be hung in the newly redisplayed entrance gallery at the Petrie Museum in autumn 2020, where it will form a focus for visitors entering the space (Garnett 2020).<sup>xvii</sup> This modern display aims to provide visitors with a critical introduction to some of the key characters linked with the history of the Petrie Museum collection, including Hilda Petrie, whose story is now beautifully highlighted by this important new acquisition. Other characters featured in the new gallery, without whose contributions the collection would not exist today, include Flinders Petrie’s right hand man Ali Suefi, UCL Egyptologist Margaret Murray, founder of the collection Amelia Edwards, and UCL archaeologist Anthony Arkell who worked in Sudan.<sup>xviii</sup>

It is hoped, after seeing this drawing, that future visitors will now leave the Petrie Museum knowing something of Hilda’s life story, as well as that of her better-known husband. Holiday’s artistic legacy also now lives on at the Petrie Museum through the display of his pencil study:

Certainly, Mr. Holiday’s work is of such a quality that time can only add to the appreciation it will receive (Mackay 1902: 200).

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## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Generously donated to the Petrie Museum by Margot Tushingham in memory of her parents, Dr and Mrs A. Douglas Tushingham, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/henry-holiday-23696>, accessed 11.3.20.

<sup>iii</sup> On Holiday’s stained glass design commissions in the United States of America, which span a period of fifty years, see Bryant (2013: 169–170, 175–178). Ancient Egyptian themes in Holiday’s stained glass works include ‘Domestic Arts in Ancient Egypt’, designed in c. 1914 for the Household Sciences Building of the University of Toronto, the watercolour and gouache designs for which are now kept in the Royal Ontario Museum (927.114.1-3, see <https://collections.rom.on.ca/search/henry%20holiday/objects/images?page=1>, accessed 17.8.20).

<sup>iv</sup> See for example Holiday’s study for his painting ‘The Bride and Daughters of Jerusalem’ (1982,0515.22, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1982-0515-22](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1982-0515-22), accessed 17.8.20). A catalogue of Holiday’s extensive stained glass portfolio, including his works across Cumbria and Wales, has been published online by the University of St. Andrews: <https://web.archive.org/web/20121002232413/http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/about/UniversityChapels/ChapelofStSalvator/StainedglassofStSalvators/ThestainedglassofHenryHoliday/>, accessed 17.8.20.

<sup>v</sup> Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (No. WAG3125).

<sup>vi</sup> Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, no. 086534 (<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/aspasia-on-the-pnyx-123266>, accessed 11.3.20).

<sup>vii</sup> A further preparatory pencil study for Holiday’s *Aspasia* for the background details of the Acropolis (1885) was also exhibited at the William Morris Gallery in 1989 for their ‘Henry Holiday’ exhibition, as well as a pen-and-ink line drawing after the oil painting, made for reproduction for the Royal Academy exhibition in 1888 (Cormack 1989: 15, nos. 84, 86).

<sup>viii</sup> Kathleen Douglas-Pennant was an acquaintance of Holiday’s wife (Holiday 1914: 313).

<sup>ix</sup> Egypt Exploration Society archive no. COR.011.g.20. Pers. Comm. Brigitte Balanda.

<sup>x</sup> Florence Walker dates unknown. Pers. Comm. Amara Thornton.

<sup>xi</sup> Holiday and Mothersole collaborated on designs for stained glass windows, including for Lincoln Cathedral, and held an exhibition together at Walker's Art Gallery, New Bond Street, entitled 'Exhibition of Sketches in Egypt and Other Works' (<https://www.exhibitionculture.arts.gla.ac.uk/exhibition.php?eid=1223>, accessed 17.8.20; Holiday 1914: 441). Mothersole also went on to work with Margaret Murray in Egypt at Saqqara in 1903–1904 (Mothersole 1908; Murray 1963: 125).

<sup>xii</sup> The 'Edwards Library' refers to the Egyptological library bequeathed by Amelia Edwards to UCL on her death in 1892 (Janssen 1992: 2–3).

<sup>xiii</sup> For further information on the so-called Hawara 'mummy portraits' and Flinders Petrie's 1888 exhibition see Picton et al. 2007 and Thornton 2015.

<sup>xiv</sup> Alma-Tadema is also known to have attended, and given the vote of thanks, at Petrie's lecture on ancient Egyptian architecture at the Royal Institute of British Architects in 1901 (Moser 2019: 371). A letter of Petrie's to Amelia Edwards, now kept in the Petrie Museum Archive, comments on distinguished visitors to his 1888 Piccadilly Hall exhibition, including Holman Hunt and his wife Edith (July 12 1888, PMA/3/1/PEN/38).

<sup>xv</sup> This Society worked closely with the Foreign Office during its 22-year history to campaign for the investment of funds generated through increased tourism into the preservation of Egypt's ancient monuments (<https://www.ees.ac.uk/a-society-of-its-time-the-society-for-the-preservation-of-the-monuments-of-ancient-egypt>, accessed 10.4.20).

<sup>xvi</sup> Petrie Pocket Diary entry, 29 June 1892 (Petrie Museum Archive No. 15-9-1 (11)).

<sup>xvii</sup> The display of the drawing, originally planned for spring 2020, was delayed due to the coronavirus pandemic.

<sup>xviii</sup> See Stevenson and Challis (2015).

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**Acknowledgements:** For their support with the formal acquisition and my research of the drawing, grateful thanks are due to Debbie Challis, Jan Marsh, Caroline Pegum, Liz Prettejohn, Stephen Quirke, Amara Thornton, and UCL colleagues. I would also like to thank the Camden Local Studies and Archives Centre, the Egypt Exploration Society, my Petrie Museum colleagues, Isabelle Egan and Nathalie Martin for their thoughtful conservation and exquisite framing work, and the Editorial team and peer reviewers of this volume. Above all, thanks are due to Dr and Mrs A. Douglas Tushingham for their generous donation, and to Margot Tushingham for reaching out to the Petrie Museum and for kindly sharing details of the purchase and of the subsequent history of the drawing with Museum staff.

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**Competing Interests:** The author is the Curator of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology.

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