

# From Landscape to Inscape— Egypt and Gordon Onslow Ford

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“In the Pyramid we enter the unknown, as everyone agrees, and there we find ourselves in the presence of an original alignment within a planetary order which we look on now in the waste of the world and of the spirit, face to face with a need of direction and for signals difficult and delicate for consciousness...”

—Jacqueline Johnson 1964



Figure 1: Drawing from Notebook, 1963, ink on paper, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

An unexpected, life-changing experience can compel an artist to abandon the comfort of realism and enter new territory: the unexplored inner spaces of the mind. British-born American painter Gordon Onslow Ford underwent just such a transition as a result of his experiences in Egypt in the mid-1930s. The Egyptian experience acted as a spiritual/philosophical/artistic catalyst while bringing Onslow Ford into contact with a patron who thereafter supported his art and life. Little has been written about this episode in Onslow Ford's life: how he resigned his post as a Lieutenant in the British Navy, abandoned landscape painting, and became a member of the Parisian surrealist movement. What follows is a biographical exploration of how his connection with places, people and events in Egypt played a major role in this transition.

Onslow Ford often said, "I was born to be a painter." Throughout childhood he was fortified toward life as a painter, receiving constant encouragement from his immediate family, who were anchors of support for his interest in painting from an early age. According to Onslow Ford's sister, Elisabeth Onslow Ford Roulsin, at formal family gatherings, Gordon was asked to display his latest drawings or paintings. His first art lessons came from his uncle Rudolph Onslow Ford, a landscape painter, and his first oil painting, created at the age of eleven when he was sick with mumps, captured a competent image of the sea.



Figure 2: Gordon Onslow Ford *Untitled*, 1923, oil on wood, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

Onslow Ford's trajectory toward a career as a painter began to veer off course when his father, a doctor who served in the British army, died when Gordon was eight. By the time he was thirteen, Gordon's guardian, his other

uncle, who served in the army, decided that Gordon's career would be in the British Navy. He was sent to the Naval College at Dartmouth, Devon to prepare to be an officer.



Figure 3: Gordon Onslow Ford *Self Portrait*, circa 1932, oil on canvas, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

In college, Gordon was introduced to science, mathematics and other academic disciplines as well as to the crafts of welding, working with molten metal, and carpentry. Onslow Ford was fifteen when he cast a sitting bronze Buddha that he kept with him throughout his life. An affinity with the art and philosophy of Asia and the Middle East had been integral to Onslow Ford's upbringing, as various relatives had traveled to that part of the world and returned with both artifacts and stories. His grandfather, Edward Onslow Ford (1852-1901), a well-known Victorian sculptor, made several works with a Middle Eastern motif, including the sculpture titled *The Egyptian Singer* (also known as *The Singer*), made in 1889.

While in the Navy, Onslow Ford kept a mandatory notebook of daily reports, which included detailed technical illustrations. In an interview in 1984, Onslow Ford explained, "It's a tradition in the British Navy to make watercolours, and the logs of sea captains often have paintings, and it was an attribute which was respected" (Neufert 61). When he was off duty Onslow Ford's art would take on other subjects. After a while, the boundary between his duty to illustrate and his passion for painting began to blur. In a video interview in June 2003, a few months before he died, he spoke with great sense of humor, "I got punished once for painting a rainstorm. They thought it was completely facetious and I got severely reprimanded for painting a rainstorm at sea."



Figure 4: Gordon Onslow Ford *Drifter*, 1931, watercolor on paper, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

Onslow Ford's dilemma – whether to remain in the Navy or be an independent painter – came to a head after his visits to Alexandria, Egypt. His letters to his mother from the Middle East (in particular, from Egypt between 1934 and 1938) offer a glimpse of this daunting struggle. Egypt turned out to be the place where, for Onslow Ford, this struggle was resolved.



The following excerpts from his letters to his mother comprise a collage or tapestry shedding light on Onslow Ford's life as a painter while also serving as a Navy officer, his challenges in leaving the Navy to pursue his dreams, and his important connection with Egypt.

On 15 March 1934, at age 22, he writes his first impression from Egypt:

Alexandria is huge. It takes over an hour to get into the town from the ship, but there is an opera and some good art shops. The town is new and dusty — great big blocks of cement and concrete with shuttered windows, columned awning, the canal is charming and there are some very fine gardens... There is something very exciting in the air full of the most wonderful possibilities.



Figure 5: Gordon Onslow Ford *Egypt*, circa 1936, watercolor, crayon on paper, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

Eight months later, Onslow Ford is stationed in Malta and writes to his mother enthusiastically, "I have had only very few chances of dashing off into the blue with my paint box, but I discovered pastels the other day & went over to Chita Vecia [Citta Vecchia], the old Capital." Generally in his correspondence he is more focused on art than other events around him. He writes on 20 December 1934,

Wonderful to buy a reproduction of a masterpiece for 1d or 2d. I now have two of my pictures framed in the gunroom [...]. We have

managed to pick up one or two bits of colour here and there and the gunroom almost gives the appearance of a furnished room instead of the conventional dark cell [...]. There is a charming young Italian sculptor called Apap living here and teaching in the school of art. He has just come back from England where he has done busts of Prince George and Noel Coward. He is almost ignored out here and I have been overjoyed to meet him. We are going out to paint on Saturday at a friend's country house, which will be thrilling.



Figure 6: Gordon Onslow Ford *Alexandria*, circa 1936, watercolor, crayon on paper, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

Back in Egypt in 1935, he writes to his mother on 6 October with full confidence: "I am painting better than ever before. Could have sold a big oil and watercolour at exhibition but luckily not necessary." Required as a Naval officer to stay close to the Port, it was some time before Onslow Ford ventured inland to visit the ancient sites. He wrote about his visit to Ismailia, known as the city of "beauty and enchantment," on 23 October: "The shore is lined with palm trees [...]. I have not been able to paint for three days, but I have found enough subjects to last me a life time." A few months later in Alexandria he travels inland. He writes on 26 March 1936 in a postcard from the desert with an image of the pyramids and camels, "This can never change. I think it will always be free from casinos & dense places. I am fascinated by the camels. I am sure they are philosophers ... the colours in my paint box are quite inadequate to do justice to all the beauty around me."



Figure 7: Postcard from Gordon Onslow Ford of Cairo - Sphinx and Pyramids (front and back), Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

During this time, Onslow Ford met Richard Combe Abdy (1869-1938), a businessman who was a friend of high-ranking Naval officials. In the 1920s, Abdy had owned the famed estate of Michaelstowe Hall in Essex, England, where he took great care to expand and improve the house and created gardens which were notable for their beautiful arranged rock formations and collection of rare flowers. According to Gordon Onslow Ford and his sister Elisabeth, Abdy was generous, had a good sense of humor and was known for his hospitality. Successful as a banker in both London and Egypt, Abdy was twice president of the British Chamber of Commerce in Egypt. In his home in Alexandria, he held frequent social assemblies of military officers.

Onslow Ford noted that he participated in these events not so much to socialize but to find a quiet place in Abdy's luxurious gardens to paint. Over time, Abdy was impressed by Onslow Ford's dedication to his art, and eventually became Onslow Ford's patron. It was Abdy who finally helped Onslow Ford achieve the very difficult task of leaving the British Navy to pursue his life as an artist. Abdy's patronage and support gave Onslow Ford great hope for his future as a painter: "I am hoping to be able to leave the Navy in about a year," Onslow Ford wrote his mother from Haifa on 11 April 1936. "I shall have to work hard for three years, but I am convinced I shall succeed. I hope you are not upset that I am leaving the Navy. I am so sure that it is right that it would be cowardly to throw this chance [...]. I am hoping to paint and paint and paint."

The acceptance of Onslow Ford's resignation was not so easily achieved. On 19 July 1936 he announces to his family, "I have resigned my commission in the Royal Navy. So far it has only got as far as my Captain, and it will take ages getting to the Admiralty [...]. I am very excited [...]. How I shall have to work. It will mean burying myself for at least two years [...]. No more need

for secrecy. The thing is done." With great hope for his future as a painter and while waiting for his release, Onslow Ford shares his plans from Malta on 3 August:

I expect you have seen in the paper that my relief has been appointed. It should arrive on August 23<sup>rd</sup>. I shall have to turn over my duties and if possible catch the next P & O. My patron, Dick Abdy, is in Switzerland and I have promised to stay with him for about a week on the way home. I hardly know him yet he has been unbelievably nice to me. We have been corresponding regularly & I know we shall get on well. He does not think he has much longer to live and I think I have managed to give him some hope. I have been lent a studio here and so can fling paint about to my heart's content.

Soon a disappointing note arrives, but he relies with great confidence on Richard Abdy when he writes in a letter dated 25 August: "I am not a bit upset that their lordships have refused to accept my resignation. I accept their challenges [...]. Dick Abdy is coming over to try and pull strings. I am sure there will be fireworks, but I am convinced that your son will have his own garret before he is 24 years of age."

By this time, Onslow Ford had begun to refer to Abdy as "uncle Dick." Abdy had organized an exhibition of Onslow Ford's watercolors in a private home in London, inviting Naval officers to the gathering as a way of displaying Onslow Ford's promise as a painter. Although Gordon's artistic abilities impressed the Naval authorities, he still was not released from service. A week after his twenty-fourth birthday, on 31 December, a subsequent note to his mother reads, "I was greeted by another formal letter rejecting my application to resign and saying that I might send it in again in six months – six whole months [...]."

Finally, Abdy succeeded in obtaining Onslow Ford's release from the Royal Navy. On 13 June 1937, Onslow Ford broadcast to his family: "A letter from Admiral Watson bringing the glad tidings. Resignation accepted & I am going to be relieved about July 6<sup>th</sup>, or maybe slightly earlier [...]. I am overjoyed & longing to get down to some hard work, to be *able* to paint undisturbed. It sounds heaven, but I do wish an artist did not have to be so selfish."

In the summer of 1937 Onslow Ford moved to Paris, where he lived at 17, rue de la Tour. While there, he met the painter Roberto Matta and studied with André Lhote and Fernando Legér.





Figure 8: Gordon Onslow Ford *The Gardner: Fellaheen*, 1937, oil on canvas, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

### **In Tutankhamun's Tomb**

In the winter of 1938, Onslow Ford returned to Alexandria. Abdy died of heart failure in Cairo on 7 March of that year and bequeathed Onslow Ford an inheritance to support his artistic life. Onslow Ford stayed for weeks at Abdy's Clairmont House in Alexandria to work with his patron's business affairs and remaining legal matters. While in Egypt this time, Onslow Ford began to take short excursions inland to ancient Egyptian sites. "I am discovering Egypt for the first time and everyday I wake up hoping to realize some of it – perhaps I will," he writes to his mother. In his postcards he mentions visiting Sakkara and Assouan. For Onslow Ford,

yet another unexpected transformative experience took place in the tomb of Tutankhamun, one which affected his trajectory as an artist. In an interview in 2003 about Egypt, Onslow Ford mentioned:

My father had known Howard Carter, who had discovered Tutankhamun's tomb. I went to see him and he was absolutely charming. He put a guide at my disposal [...] and I was taken to a tomb where tourists did not go. I was alone with this Egyptian guide with these memorable wall paintings – absolutely hypnotic images and all alone in their presence. And, I heard a great explosion. I don't know what it was.

Although Onslow Ford was very concerned by the sound, his guide was not alarmed and in fact had not heard anything. The guide checked the environs and found no evidence of an explosion. Onslow Ford explained that he was struck by the experience of being surrounded by the ancient Egyptian iconography and images portraying something beyond perceived reality. In the interview, he continues, revealing an important realization: "It was the first time I became conscious of art. I had taken art for granted, painting landscape. This is art dealing with eternity. I had never experienced that before. Very, very important."

Onslow Ford related that his first revelation in art was seeing Matta's early automatic drawings for the first time. His second, experienced soon after, was realizing how hieroglyphs provided him with a map to other dimensions of knowing. He said:

He [Howard Carter] initiated me into some of the mysteries of the ancient Egyptian civilization. I drank in all the symbols and made hundreds of drawings of the frescoes and sculpture in the Valley of the Kings and at Karnak; but what gave a new spring to my step was the realization that there could be another way of seeing and conceiving the world than the one which I had been taught to take for granted. (Onslow Ford 11).

When Onslow Ford returned to Paris in the spring of 1938, his perception had been transformed by the experience in Tutankhamun's tomb. He took residence at 67 bis, rue de Rennes, in the Sixth Arrondissement, and spent the summer with Matta in Travingnon, Brittany in homage to the birthplace of their mutually respected surrealist painter, Yves Tanguy. They experimented with drawings and paintings, read and studied art, science and esoteric philosophy, and engaged in intense dialogues. That summer changed the direction of their lives and work forever (Bogzaran "Matta"). While Matta was already immersed in automatic and surrealist imagery, Onslow Ford was struggling to transform his landscapes into a new visual vocabulary that would reflect the unconscious. How could he utilize his experience in

Tutankhamun's tomb to see beyond the horizon of his limited perception of reality? In an interview in 1999, Matta mentions, "Gordon had to give up his trees to become a surrealist."



Figure 9: Gordon Onslow Ford *3 Trees Move Along*, 1938, oil on canvas, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

During that summer, Onslow Ford encouraged and supported Matta by providing him with canvases and paint. Reciprocally, Matta, with his expressive, spontaneous and dynamic personality, assisted Onslow Ford to be free and "automatic," to experiment and find his new language. Transforming "landscape" to "inner-scape," or "inscape," as Matta called it, was a challenge of method and process. Slowly he began to unwind his representational style by introducing new forms and marks in his work. He tore up many drawings and began again and again, finally managing to embrace the technique of automatism by painting spontaneously from an inner vision.

Matta had joined the surrealists first, but Onslow Ford needed time to develop new works to show André Breton. Onslow Ford's automatic technique, *coulage*, ensured his place within the surrealist circle. Pouring Ripolin enamel onto canvas was an unexpected discovery. It came about when his surrealist friend, Victor Brauner, asked to share a section of his studio for a short time. Onslow Ford accepted but could not concentrate on painting in Brauner's presence. He thus began casually pouring paint on top

of a canvas. The swirling, multicolor liquid admixture created atmospheric movement on the surface akin to the ancient Middle Eastern technique of marbling – painting with ink on a surface of water. It was widely practiced in China, Japan and the Middle East, in particular Turkey and Persia (modern Iran). The technique was introduced to Europe in the seventeenth century. Onslow Ford then articulated the space by drawing lines and peeling part of the paint, implying depth.

Onslow Ford made friends with surrealists in Paris, including André Breton, Yves Tanguy, Kay Sage, and Esteban Francés. He also became friends with Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, who recommended to him Château Chémillieu, near their summer home in Bilignin. Onslow Ford rented the Château for the summer of 1939, and it became a refuge for many surrealists before the onset of the war. He also became a patron to many of his surrealist friends by supporting them financially and by collecting their art. Despite the surrealists' Marxist politics, patronage was not uncommon during the war. Prominent art patrons included Edward James, Kay Sage, and Peggy Guggenheim.

### **Transformation in Art**

“...I welcome the day when the work of artists who look into the secret held by the unconscious mind will be regarded as material worthy of profound study.”

–Onslow Ford *The Wooden Giants* 10

Onslow Ford's experience within Tutankhamun's tomb not only dictated for him a new direction in art but also new ways of seeing the world. He believed strongly in the spirit of nature and the transpersonal qualities in human nature. He considered painting his spiritual practice, and in most of his writings, he shows a reverence and dedication to “the creative force of the universe.” The Egyptian experiences formed his view concerning the connection between nature, objects and spiritual power. Many surrealists such as Breton, Paalen, Varo and Matta were interested in the power of ancient and ritual objects as well. They appreciated the artifacts not only for their aesthetic quality but also for their spiritual representation and intentions. Like other surrealists who were engaged in esoteric systems, Onslow Ford sought advice from psychics and shamans.

Much of what Onslow Ford painted from the tomb of Tutankhamun was lost in Paris after he left in September 1939 during the Second World War. He later related that the works, perhaps in his realistic style, included illustrations of the figures he had seen in the tomb. There are few explicit



symbolic representations from Egyptian art in his remaining paintings of that era, yet one can see the implicit influences in his work throughout the rest of his lifetime.

Observing how the tomb's images and statues clearly expressed communion with the "other" side through symbols, marks and signs precipitated Onslow Ford's transformative experience in Egypt. The Egyptian figurines, Shabtis (also called as Shawabits or Ushabtis), were known as the "answerers," and great number of them – up to 400 – were found in each tomb (Hawass 124). When not carrying the crook and flail, they hold in each hand an "ankh," symbolizing eternal life; a serpent on their head is a symbol to protect a king's forehead and royalty. A Shabti's position was to perform tasks on behalf of the king in the afterlife. In a similar spirit, Onslow Ford often carried two small stones in his pockets; before starting to paint, he would hold the two stones in his hands to receive inspiration. He also placed stones on top of his canvas to arrange compositions before he painted. Up to the 1980s, one of the objects he held in his hands was the double-sided Vajra, a small iron bolt used in Tibetan Buddhist rituals. A symbol of the Vajra is used to connect practitioners to unwavering spiritual power.

Onslow Ford's pivotal lectures, *Surrealist Painting: Adventures into Human Consciousness*, delivered at The New School for Social Research in New York, January through March 1941, precipitated the groundwork of his philosophy of practice. In the introduction he announces: "The human eye is an imperfect optical instrument, which only gives us a very distorted idea of the reality in which we live" (Sawin 57). He discussed his philosophy of art as a mode of inquiry into the depths of consciousness – a view that was no doubt inspired by his experience in Tutankhamun's tomb.

He explored his orientation to art in the catalog accompanying the 1948 exhibit of his work at the San Francisco Museum of Art, *Towards a New Subject in Painting*, and then articulated it even more fully in his book, *Painting in the Instant*, published in 1964. This text was a culmination of his study of Zen Buddhism and his practice of calligraphy. He asserts, "It is the function of art to create anew [...]. Works of art serve as reference points for profound communication. They stimulate exchange of experience and attitudes towards the mysteries" (Onslow Ford 25-26). These thoughts echo the ancient Egyptian practices of communicating through art.

Several years later Onslow Ford developed his theory of the "inner worlds." In his seminal text, *Creation* (1978), he methodically described the stages of moving from perceived reality to the reality of the inner-worlds. His theory, no doubt, is inspired by his study and the writings of Hegel and the Indian sage Sri Aurobindo's concept of "involution and evolution," yet it also reflects the ancient Egyptian cosmology of permanence. "All that is observed in the outer-world through the senses is in a state of change,"

Onslow Ford wrote, "but the inner-worlds, though expressed in an original way by every painter-voyager, are of a more permanent nature that probably have not changed much since man began to draw" (58).

All of these early influences affected Onslow Ford's art. Viewing hieroglyphic imagery in Tutankhamun's tomb, spending the summer in Travignon with Matta and studying the Fourth Dimension theory of P. D. Ouspensky, joining the surrealists and exploring the unconscious, engaging in inspirational dialogue with Matta on Psychological Morphology and witnessing him creating the painting *Inscape* (1939) can be considered as formative experiences for Onslow Ford's overall direction in art.

## Spirit Guardians

During the Second World War, Onslow Ford spent six years in the remote village of Erongaricuaru, Mexico, where he was visited by several of his surrealist friends. He connected to the indigenous way of life there, forming an appreciation for ancient cultures and Pre-Columbian art, which he came to collect, often exchanging his own paintings for indigenous art. He placed Tarascan statues and an Aztec Chac-Mool as guardians in front of his creative places. The Chac-Mool, similar to the Egyptian Sphinx, was seen as a guardian around the temples in Toltec, Mexico. The concept of "spirit guardian" became very important to Onslow Ford. He treated and respected these indigenous art pieces as essential vehicles of invocation into other levels of consciousness. He also placed "power objects," such as special found stones, in the foundations of his new buildings, a practice reminiscent of the objects placed in the ancient Egyptian pyramids.

Onslow Ford also felt very close to animals, birds in particular. He titled numerous paintings with references to birds. One series, *The Future of the Falcon*, which he painted while moving from Mexico to California in 1947, give a bird's-eye view of his inner-world adventures while living in Mexico during the war. In his visual narrative these paintings are perhaps the closest to Egyptian hieroglyphic imagery. The themes are tales of journeys into the unknown. In Egyptian inscriptions, the falcon is identified as Horus, the "sky god," a man with a Falcon head. There are numerous Horus myths in which the symbol is most often interpreted as the eternal protector (see Boulanger). Onslow Ford's paintings from this period display the culmination of years of inner quest to balance feminine and masculine archetypes, as depicted in Figure 10 by a female figure to the right, a male figure to the left, and the birth of a new possibility in the center. Above the center perches a bird-like image. Each figure is surrounded by its "spirit guardians," and all around them are cosmic hieroglyphic marks. Here, the falcon is the seer, and assists the painter towards his new journey to the Pacific West Coast.



Figure 10: Gordon Onslow Ford *Future of the Falcon*, 1947, casein on paper, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

Two years later in California, Onslow Ford painted *Pyramids of the Falcon*, 1949. The painting contains two five-pointed stars (Seba) connected inside an oval shape similar to hieroglyphic shapes seen in Tutankhamun's tomb. At this time Onslow Ford and his wife, Jacqueline, decided to establish their permanent home on the Pacific Coast in the San Francisco Bay Area.



Figure 11: Gordon Onslow Ford *Pyramid of the Falcon*, 1949, oil on canvas, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

During the 1950s, Onslow Ford became deeply involved with Asian philosophy and calligraphy. He focused in his art on using only the archetypal elements of line, circle and dot. But he also collaborated on a painting of an Egyptian Sphinx for the cover of a record album for his friend, composer Harry Partch. However, he chose a non-representational work for the final album cover. He had kept many images of the Sphinx from his visit to the Giza Plateau in Egypt in the 1930s. Although subtle at times, other echoes of his Egyptian experiences persisted. In 1961, for example, he created a painting titled *Egyptian Eyes*.



Figure 12: Cover of Harry Partch Album by Gordon Onslow Ford circa 1954, casein on paper on cardboard, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

Onslow Ford's black-and-white paintings in the early 1960s are not explicitly representational and are unlike any of his previous works. This period of his work can be considered his definitive transit into revealing images of states of consciousness akin to deep meditative states or particular states of non-representational lucid dreaming known as hyperspace lucidity (Bogzaran "Lucid Art"). This period produced one of Onslow Ford's most



intriguing bodies of work. He was no longer a surrealist painter nor a student of calligraphy, yet those elements infuse his work in this period. Finally, he found a visual language to express aspects of the “inner worlds,” layering the canvases with black and white archetypal marks. Onslow Ford hired chemist William Parles to create a specially formulated acrylic-like paint so the black and white would dry simultaneously, allowing him to layer the marks at slow or extremely fast speed. He was creating a way to depict how to explore consciousness while exercising full presence.

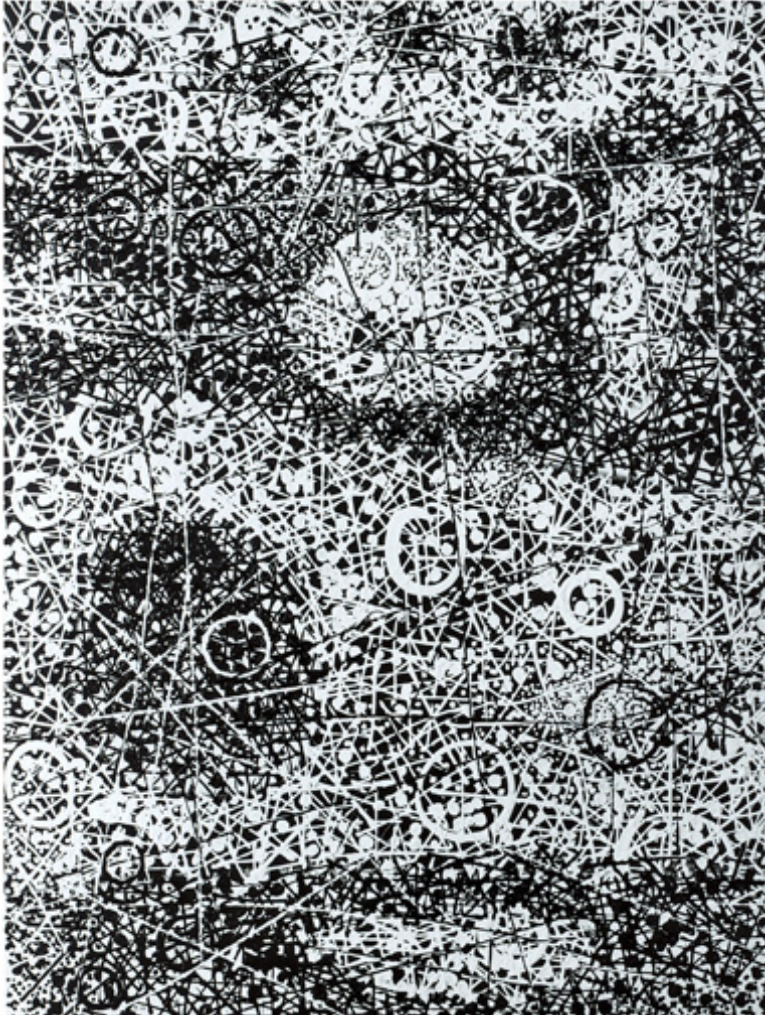


Figure 13: Gordon Onslow Ford *Egyptian Eyes*, 1961, Parle's paint on canvas, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

Within the explicit chaos of the network of lines in these paintings, there can also be seen an implicit order. Within a period of two years (1960-1962), Onslow Ford created monumental works in this genre. Some of the titles he gave to these paintings echoed the spirit of his experiences with Buddhism, indigenous cultures in Mexico, and Egypt: *Basic Language*, *Egyptian Eyes*, *Round See*, *We the Birds*, *See Comers*, *Running Lions*, and *Universal Animal*. Seeing in depth with *Egyptian Eyes* reveals the secret key to his adventure. He wrote: "Inner-worlds interact with outer worlds. Inner-earth enters the spirit of the earth, Inner-sky reflects aspects of the Heaven. The Depths of the Mind evoke the awe of the omnipresent field of existence in all worlds within and without" (Onslow Ford *Insights* np). In Onslow Ford's library of Egyptian books and catalogs, an exhibition publication titled *Tutankhamun Treasures* (1961-63) indicates that he had most likely attended the exhibition. In many of his Egyptian books, he bookmarked images and discussions of guardian spirits, and he often made small representational sketches of female figures copied from a book.

Onslow Ford's later works contain a motif that he called "inner sky." For Onslow Ford, this motif represented cosmological inner realities that also correspond to the spirit of nature. He expressed this direction with spaces containing bursts of star-like explosions, oval and circular black holes, and calligraphic lines he called "Live, Line, Beings." In his poetic book *Insights* he explores how these fluid lines resemble Japanese calligraphy, yet contain a hieroglyphic style as an undercurrent. He explains: "Images of the Great Spaces are primal. At a certain speed of awareness line, circle, dot elements fuse together and become Live-Line-Beings. We are all descended from Live-line Beings. Give respect to "Ancestors to come" (Onslow Ford *Insights* np). In his text *Ecomorphology* he expresses the development of the concept of inner-sky: "When conditions are right, the frontier of awareness can make a sudden leap from inner-earth to inner-sky. The ecomorphology of inner-sky awakens an intimate relationship with the Sky" (7). These thoughts foreshadowed current research in consciousness studies showing a correspondence between images of the "inner worlds" depicted in certain art works and experiences reported in certain dream states (Bogzaran "Lucid Art").

Celestial knowledge was important among the ancient cultures of the Middle East, including the ancient Egyptians. The symbol for stars (Seba) in Egyptian art is comprised of five pointed crossed lines. Onslow Ford's early surrealist paintings created in 1938 and early 1939 include obvious marks related to stars or shapes reminiscent of iconography inside Tutankhamun's tomb. This can be seen in his rendition of Sirius, or "Septit" for the Egyptians. This bright star is sometimes referred to as the Star of Bethlehem or the Star of the Nile – which is also known as the "soul" of the Goddess Isis as well as the "lady of a thousand titles." However, the one title that is most in line

with Onslow Ford's cosmology is *Lady of Heaven* or *Lady of the Sky*. In one of his favorite Egyptian books on Tutankhamen, he has marked on the page with images of the Isis. "The last magical gestures by the new king Ay over the mummy permitted the Osiris, Tutankhamen, to enter the other world where he was received by the "Lady of the Sky, Nut, mistress of the gods", who offered him a libation" (Desroches-Noblecourt 246). There are many renditions of Isis, but the image Onslow Ford chose to display on the wall of his home was the one of Isis depicted on King Tutankhamun's sarcophagus.



Figure 14: From Gordon Onslow Ford's home, 2012 *Isis*, date unknown, magazine clipping, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

It is noteworthy that star markings appear in the background of Onslow Ford's earlier surrealist works. Later, he developed these lines and integrated them more prominently into his work after his second visit to Tutankhamun's tomb, in 1963. Star images became a repeating theme within the body of his work until the early 1990s, and thereafter periodically until 2002. Although not representative of the Egyptian goddess Nut (Nuit), the motif of cosmos or "inner-sky" was predominant in his work. Even his 1951 discovery of the marks "Line Circle Dot" (as "the underlying ground of existence") can be traced back to Egyptian hieroglyphic influences. The line circle dot marks can also be seen in Asian calligraphy and in the Chinese game, *Mahjong*, that



Onslow Ford played as a child. The oval shape he created in the late 1930s continued to appear in his later paintings, but was transformed into clusters of images of a black void before his death in 2003.



Figure 15: Gordon Onslow Ford *All One's Company*, 1993, acrylic on canvas, Gordon Onslow Ford Archive, © The Lucid Art Foundation.

In his last book, *Once Upon a Time*, Onslow Ford included a section called “Mysteries and Priorities” which paid homage to the “marvelous creative power of the Universe” and also to the sky. He writes, “At the endless black and blue depths, awe at the galaxies, stars, planets and moons and the security and continuity that their changing order and movement evoke [...]. Awe at the penetrating, crisscrossing cosmic rays that intercommunicate in ways beyond understanding” (60).

## Conclusion

The intertwining filaments of Gordon Onslow Ford’s experiences – being stationed in Egypt, meeting Richard Abdy, resigning from the Navy, joining the surrealist movement – all served to guide his direction in art and in life. Perhaps more important, his transformative experience in Tutankhamun’s tomb seems to have shaped his predilection for the spiritual power of art that underlies his philosophy of practice. These experiences no doubt informed his belief that “Art is the language of the Spirit” and that one must “have faith in the mysterious functioning of the universe” (Onslow Ford, *Insights* np).



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