



Pyramid Model in Place in Entrance Hall

While the primary focus in Monticello's Entrance Hall this year is on objects illuminating Thomas Jefferson's interest and involvement in the exploration of the American West, a new acquisition with roots in ancient Egypt also merits attention.

A scale model of the Great Pyramid of Cheops at Giza graces the mantel of the Entrance Hall fireplace, as one did in Jefferson's day. This new model was made by Dieter Cöllen, an architect from Cologne, Germany, who has revived the art of cork modeling that was popular in the 1800s.

The original pyramid model, now lost, was given to Jefferson by the French writer and explorer Constantin-François de Chasseboeuf, Comte de Volney, whom Jefferson had met while serving as U.S. minister to France. In their ensuing correspondence, Jefferson expressed his interest in Egypt and its monuments. Jefferson acknowledged the gift from Volney in a letter of 1802, and later recorded the pyramid in an inventory of art objects.

Evidence of the model's appearance and placement can be found in accounts by 19th-century visitors to Monticello. The most vivid testimony comes from the diary of Jane Blair Smith, who visited in the winter of 1823. She wrote that the Entrance Hall "covered with relics from all lands and times was today lifted of its somber aspect: a sleeping statue of Ariadne on the rocks had been removed to another part of the hall: a fireplace had been revealed in which burned a cheery wood fire, produced a somewhat incongruous effect, for projecting over the mantelpiece was a model of the Pyramid of Cheops, the base so contrived as

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-  LEWIS & CLARK
-  LOUISIANA PURCHASE
-  MONTICELLO CABINET
-  NEWS & NOTES
-  PARKWAY DEDICATION
-  PRESIDENT'S LETTER
-  WEB SITE

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE.

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Pyramid Model

CONTINUED, PAGE TWO

to contain a portion of the sand and pebbles of the desert!”

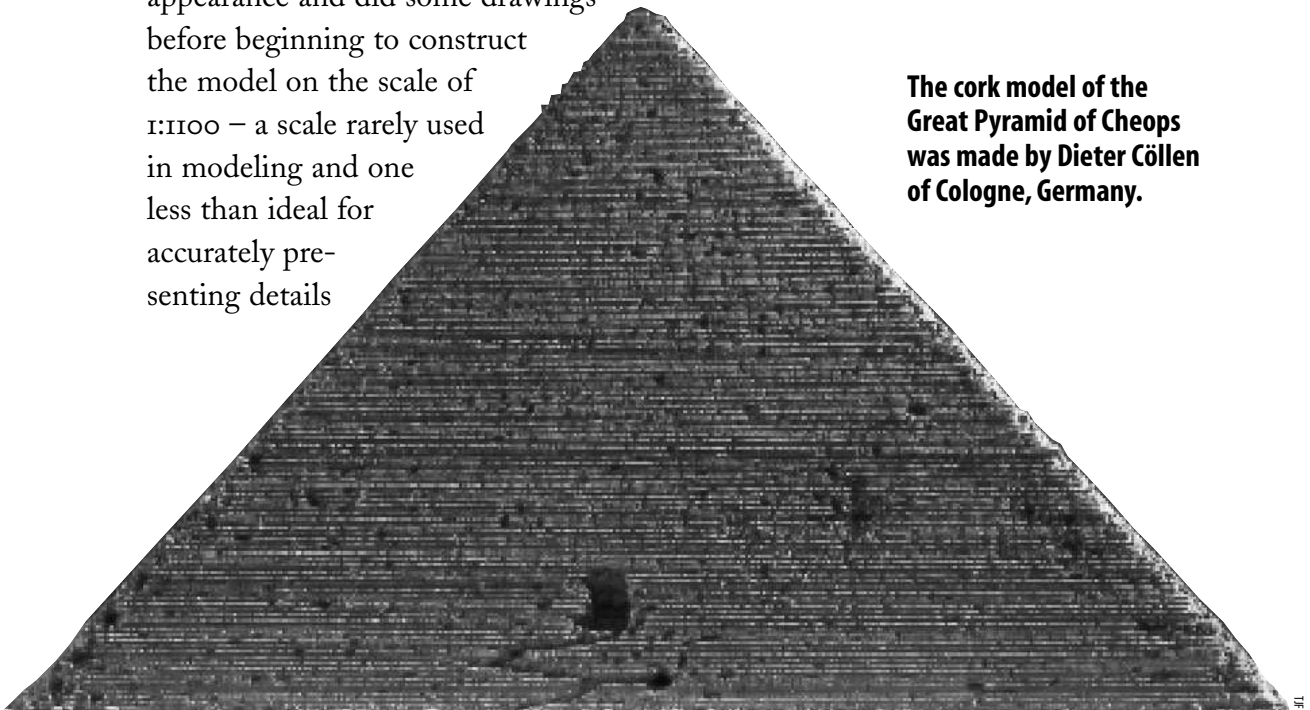
Extensive research and experimentation by Monticello Curatorial Assistant Lisa Williford determined the likely dimensions of the model, matching both Smith’s account and Jefferson’s records. Williford then located Cöllen and contacted him in January 2002, inquiring if he would be interested in making a cork model of the pyramid for Monticello.

Although there is no indication what material Jefferson’s pyramid was made of, cork models were frequently found in the “curiosity cabinets” and collections of the early 19th century. These scale models served as souvenirs of the “Grand Tour” of Europe and as *aides de memoire* for architects and enthusiasts. Despite their popularity at the time, relatively few original cork models survive today.

“I was surprised that Jefferson’s collection included a model of a pyramid,” said Cöllen, who visited Monticello in January during the Lewis and Clark bicentennial events. “Only after learning more about Jefferson’s interests in archaeology and Egypt did I realize how great a value he placed on studying other cultures.”

Cöllen consulted period documents to clarify issues of size and appearance and did some drawings before beginning to construct the model on the scale of 1:1100 – a scale rarely used in modeling and one less than ideal for accurately presenting details

The cork model of the Great Pyramid of Cheops was made by Dieter Cöllen of Cologne, Germany.



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Pyramid Model

CONTINUED, PAGE **THREE**

from a monumental structure. He also took a trip to Egypt to see the pyramid.

“Of utmost importance was observing the true color of the ancient stone produced by the Egyptian atmosphere and sunlight in order to give the object true expression,” Cöllen said.

Cöllen constructed the pyramid to Monticello’s specifications at his studio in Cologne. It was delivered to Monticello in November 2002 and installed in the Entrance Hall in January.

The pyramid model is 6 inches tall and rests on a 9¾-inch square base that includes a final, historically accurate touch – sand from Giza.

COMMENTS? newsletter@monticello.org