

Assyrian Reliefs

Bowdoin College Museum of Art



Middle School Resource

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Bowdoin

What is a relief?

All words appearing in a **bold color** are defined in the back of this packet. You can also find an answer key for the activities in the back.

Although our Assyrian reliefs hang flat against the walls like paintings, they are still **three-dimensional** objects. A carved relief is a kind of **sculpture** that protrudes (sticks out) from the surface behind it.

There are three basics kinds of relief sculpture:

Low-Relief (Bas Relief):

The carving is raised slightly from the background surface.



Assyrian Dying Lion in Low Relief.



Diptych panel in five parts: the Emperor Triumphant (Justinian?), first half of the 6th century, ivory, traces of inlay, The Louvre Museum

High-Relief:

Parts of the sculpture are carved deeply and may protrude enough to appear to be free standing.



Sunken relief of Akhenaten, Nefertiti and their Daughters, ca. 1440 BCE

Sunken Relief:

An outline of the image is carved out of the material's surface (often found in ancient Egyptian art).



Activity Page

What types of reliefs are pictured in each image: sunken, low, or high?
Write your answer in the blank next to each picture.



A. _____



B. _____



C. _____

- 1.) Can you identify any of these reliefs?
- 2.) Who or what is being depicted in each image above?
- 3.) Where might these reliefs be located?
- 4.) Can you think of any other examples of reliefs?
- 5.) What types of reliefs do we have inside the museum? (sunken, low, or high)

Now that you know reliefs are sculptures, let's look at how artists make sculptures!

How are sculptures made?

There are two basic kinds of sculpture:



Floral Carved Pot



Subtractive sculpture:

Subtractive sculpture is the oldest form of sculpture. It involves removing material to create a finished work.



Additive sculpture:

Additive sculpture is the process of creating sculpture by adding material to the surface of the original material block.



Sean Hunter Williams

Are the Assyrian reliefs examples of subtractive or additive sculpture?

Circle the best answer below.

SUBTRACTIVE

ADDITIVE

Sculpture is created in four basic ways:

Carving:

A subtractive process during which material is removed from the original material block (matrix).



Modeling:

An additive process in which material is shaped to create a form.

Casting:

A process that uses a hollow form to transform liquid material into a solid.



Construction:

Creating sculpture by welding, gluing, or nailing materials together.

Which method do you think was used to create the Assyrian Reliefs?

Circle your answer below.

CARVING

MODELING

CASTING

CONSTRUCTION

Where did the reliefs come from?

In 879 BCE (almost 3,000 years ago!) Ashurnasirpal II, a king of the Assyrian Empire, had over 200 reliefs made, including the ones at Bowdoin, to hang on the walls of his new royal palace. They were designed to highlight the king's power, tell the stories of his battles, and remind visitors of the greatness of the empire. Today, these reliefs are housed in museums and institutions all over the world.



James Fergusson. *The Palaces of Nimrud Restored*. From Austen Henry Layard. *A Second Series of the Monuments of Nineveh*. London: Murray, 1853

The palace was built in an ancient city called **Kalhu** which today is Nimrud, Iraq. The image above is a version of what the city and palace might have looked like when the reliefs were made.

Where in the world?



1. Can you spot three differences between these two maps?

2. Name three ways these maps are the same.

a. _____

b. _____

c. _____

3. What part of the world do you think these maps are depicting?

These maps illustrate the same place. The map above shows cities that would have been active when the Assyrian Reliefs were carved, around the 8th century BCE. The city where the reliefs were created is circled in red.

The map on the right shows the cities and countries that are in this part of the world today. The ancient site where Bowdoin's reliefs originated is in modern-day Iraq.

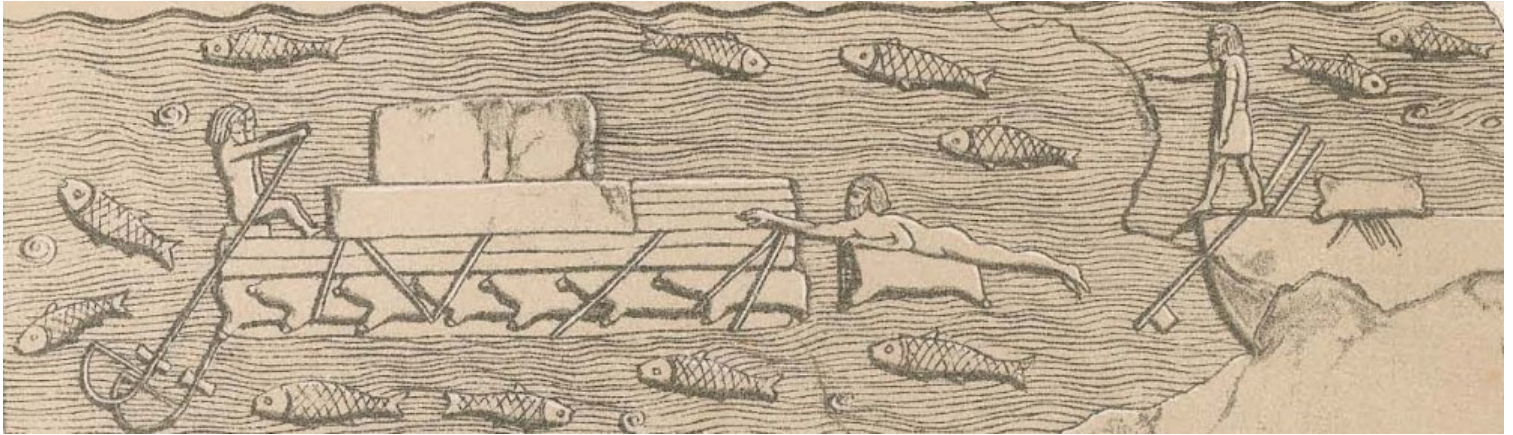


The map to the left displays the location of Iraq and other countries of the region in the world. Can you find the United States? Maine?

Mark them on the map!

How were they found?

Archaeology is a kind of science in which people study human-made objects from the past to learn more about the people and places of history.



Austen Henry Layard, *The Monuments of Nineveh*, London, 1853, plate 71

How did they end up in Maine?

In 1845 Austen Henry Layard, a British **archaeologist**, discovered Kalhu, the ancient city where the palace and reliefs were located.

Layard **excavated** the site until 1851. A few years later, a group of American **missionaries** asked if they could ship some of the reliefs back to the United States. One of these missionaries was Dr. Henri Byron Haskell, an 1855 graduate of the Medical School of Maine at Bowdoin. He asked if Bowdoin would like some of the reliefs. After Bowdoin agreed to accept the reliefs, he shipped five back to Maine.



Shipping was no small event! Each relief weighs several thousand pounds. In order to get the reliefs here, some were cut into smaller pieces. Look at the two reliefs on either side of the doorway; can you see the lines where the reliefs were cut in half?

The reliefs were then attached to rafts, as the images above and the image to the left show, sent down the Tigris River in Iraq, and loaded on ships headed for the United States for a total cost of \$728.17. The reliefs have been at Bowdoin College since 1860.

Cuneiform Inscriptions

Visitors can see carefully carved rows of symbols across each relief. These are an early writing system known as **cuneiform**, which was used by all of the **Mesopotamian** civilizations (including the Assyrians) until it was abandoned in favor of the alphabetic script after 100 BCE.

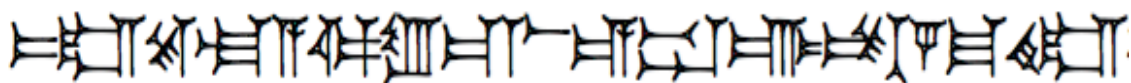
The chart on the right shows how the cuneiform alphabet may have evolved from simpler symbols to the more complex language used by the Assyrians.

	3200 BCE	3000 BCE	2400 BCE	1000 BCE
sag 'head'				
gin 'to walk'				
šu 'hand'				
še 'barley'				
ninda 'bread'				
a 'water'				
ud 'day'				
mušen 'bird'				



Assyrian Relief: Winged Spirit of Apkallu from Kalhu (Nimrud), Iraq, ca. 875–860. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

Scholars have translated much of what is written on the reliefs. The script describes the history of the Assyrian Empire and the city of Kalhu, and goes into great detail about the mighty power of King Ashurnasirpal II. Below is a cuneiform text originally carved into a relief similar to those at Bowdoin. This is an excerpt from a line that describes the king as the “wonderful shepherd, fearless in battle.” Try to copy the cuneiform figures in the box below!



What might the reliefs have looked like?

The reliefs were originally **polychromatic** (painted with multiple colors).
If you look very closely, you can still see some of the paint!

Can you find any traces of these colors on Bowdoin's reliefs? Where?



Why do you think there is so little color remaining on the surfaces?



Austen Henry Layard. ca. 1849. Northwest Palace



Digital re-colorations of a relief from the exterior of the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad, (© Li Sou & the Trustees of the British Museum).

The image on the left is one **rendition** of how the inside of the palace might have appeared during the reign of King Ashurnasirpal II. This model also includes painted murals that were in the palace which may have included more colors than the reliefs. To the right is another interpretation of color on the reliefs. The truth is, we don't know exactly what the original reliefs looked like; it's something scientists and historians still debate today.



Now, you can “paint” your own Assyrian relief when you get home! If you were the painter in 879 BCE., what colors would you paint the reliefs? Try to imagine what this relief might have looked like when it was new or invent your own color scheme!



Answer Key

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A. High Relief

This is a photo of Mount Rushmore in South Dakota. It is a National Memorial depicting four United States Presidents: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln.



B. Low Relief

This is United States penny. It depicts Abraham Lincoln on one side and the Lincoln Memorial on the other.

C. Sunken Relief

This is a sunken relief sculpture of the crocodile god Sobek (ca.100 BCE), sculpted for the Temple of Kom Ombo in Egypt.



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The Assyrian Reliefs are examples of **subtractive sculpture**.

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Using iron and copper tools, Assyrian sculptors **carved** the surface of the stone named gypsum to create the figures seen in the reliefs.

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Over the course of nearly 3,000 years, the paint once on these reliefs has slowly faded and flaked away. The sand and weather at the original site, shipping the reliefs around the world, and decades of cleaning and restoration have all contributed to the relief's appearance today.

Vocabulary

Additive Sculpture: material is added to an original form in order to create the final product

Archaeology: the study of human history through the excavation (see definition below) of sites and the analysis of artifacts and other physical remains (An **archaeologist** is a person who studies archaeology)

Carving: an object or design cut from hard material

Casting: the process of making a solid form by pouring liquid material into a mold where it then hardens

Construction: the process of making a form by putting different materials or objects together

Cuneiform: a system of writing first developed by the ancient Sumerians of Mesopotamia ca. 3500–3000 BCE; from the Latin word *cuneus* for “wedge” owing to the wedge-shaped style of writing

Empire: an extensive group of countries or states under the rule of a single power

Excavate: to uncover buried objects by carefully removing any earth or debris that surrounds them

High Relief: a carving that is so deep that many forms appear to be nearly detached from the surface behind them

In-the-round: sculpture in which all sides of a form can be seen

Kalhu: ancient Assyrian city, also known as Calah or Caleh. Today it is Nimrud, Iraq

Low Relief (Bas Relief): a carving that is raised slightly from the background surface

Mesopotamia: an ancient region in the eastern Mediterranean that corresponds to today’s Iraq and parts of modern-day Iran, Syria, and Turkey

Missionaries: persons on a religious mission; historically, often someone sent to promote Christianity in a foreign country

Modeling: shaping a pliable (soft) material such as clay to make a form

Monochromatic: using variations of one color

Polychromatic: featuring multiple colors

Rendition: an artistic interpretation of what something might have looked like in the past

Sculpture: three-dimensional (see definition below) artwork created by shaping or combining materials. This term can also be used to describe works including sound, text, and light

Subtractive Sculpture: sculpture created by removing material to create a form

Sunken Relief: a relief in which the outline of an object, person, or design has been carved away from the background

Three-dimensional (3-D): something that can be measured in three directions (depth, height, width)

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from Kalhu (Nimrud), Iraq; gypsum. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

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