Palace Reliefs from Kalhu (Nimrud)

High School Activity Booklet

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Bowdoin

Winged Spirit or Apkallu Anointing Ashurnasirpal II from Kalhu (Nimrud), Iraq, 875–860 BCE. Bowdoin College Museum of Art

WHAT A RELIEF

On November 8, 1845, a young English diplomat named Austen Henry Layard boarded a small raft in Mosul, Iraq and set off down the Tigris River, carrying with him “a variety of guns, spears, and other formidable weapons” as Layard described in his account *Discoveries at Nineveh* (1854). He told his companions that he was off to hunt wild boars in a nearby village but, actually, he was hoping to hunt down the remains of an ancient city. Layard previously noticed large mounds of earth near the village of Nimrud, Iraq and hoped that excavation would reveal ruins. He arrived at his destination that evening under the cover of darkness.

The next morning, Layard began digging with the help of seven hired locals and various tools that he had gathered in secret. He feared that Turkish officials would not grant him permission for the excavation. Within a few hours, dirt and sand gave way to stone; Layard had discovered the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Kalhu.

Layard continued his excavation over the next six years, ultimately discovering “three more palaces, an arsenal, two temples, and the walls of both citadel and city” as Barbara Nevling Porter described in *Trees, Kings, and Politics: Studies in Assyrian Iconography* (2003) At the end of the excavation, Dr. Henri Byron Haskell, an 1855 graduate of the Medical School of Maine at Bowdoin College, asked for five of the carved stone relief panels discovered in the palace for his alma mater. The reliefs were sent by raft down the Tigris to India and then by ship to the United States for a total cost of $728.17.

Examining these reliefs raises many questions:

- Why were the reliefs made? What was their intended effect?
- What are the figures in the relief doing? What are they wearing?
- What do these symbols reveal about Assyrian society?
- Who owns, or who should own, ancient art?
- What makes the reliefs so historically valuable?

What additional questions do you have? List three.

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WHAT IS A RELIEF?

While most people are familiar with drawings, paintings and sculptures, reliefs are less commonly known. Coming from the Italian word *relievare* ("to raise"), a **relief** is an artwork in which the subject matter protrudes from the background, which is usually a flat surface.

The Assyrian reliefs are classified as **bas reliefs** (also known as low reliefs), which means that their subjects protrude only slightly from the background. Though these reliefs were carved, reliefs can also be made by adding material to a surface. Another common type of relief is a **high relief**, in which the subjects protrude from the surface to a greater degree and may be disconnected from it entirely. See the bas relief (left) and high relief (right) below for reference.

(left) Mabel Viola Harris Conkling, *Bust of Frederick MacMonnies*, 1937, bronze relief plaque, Bowdoin College Museum of Art; (right) Unknown Artist, *Marble Relief of a Sleeping Heracles*, ca. 323 BCE-001 BCE, marble, Bowdoin College Museum of Art

List 3-5 everyday objects that could be considered reliefs:

HOW DID KING ASHURNASIRPAL II DECORATE?

The reliefs in the Northwest Palace were commissioned by the king. Painted with colorful images of the king himself, supernatural guardian figures, hunting and war scenes, the relief panels decorated the walls of the throne room, banquet halls, inner courtyards, and more. Now, only remnants of color remain: white pigment can still be seen in some of the figures' eyes and red pigment is visible on one sandal depicted in the Bowdoin reliefs. The reliefs also featured text written in cuneiform, an ancient writing system with wedge-shaped characters. During the time of the king, the palace walls might have looked something like this:

Hand-colored lithograph, 1849, by John Murray. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

SYMBOLISM

Imagine decorating the walls of your bedroom. What might you use? Why? What would people think about you if they didn't know you and only looked at the objects on your walls? Draw some possible decorations in the column on the left and list their meanings and connotations in the column on the right. What do these objects say about you?

DECORATION	MEANING / CONNOTATION

Symbols often add greater meaning to a work of art, revelaing the distinct visual language of an individual culture. A symbol is “a form, sign or emblem that represents something else, often something immaterial, such as an idea or emotion” (MOMA). For example, the color red is often used as a symbol of passion or fury. Bedroom decorations, such as baseball mitts or records, might be symbols of a person’s passion for sports or music.

Examine the Assyrian reliefs to determine which elements could be symbolic. Begin by looking at the example below:

Two Winged, Eagle-Headed Spirits from Kalhu (Nimrud), Iraq, 875–860 BCE. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

What do you see?

A stylized tree or plant (probably a date palm) with many leaves

What could it symbolize?

The fertility of the land, abundance of resources

What does it suggest about Assyrian society?

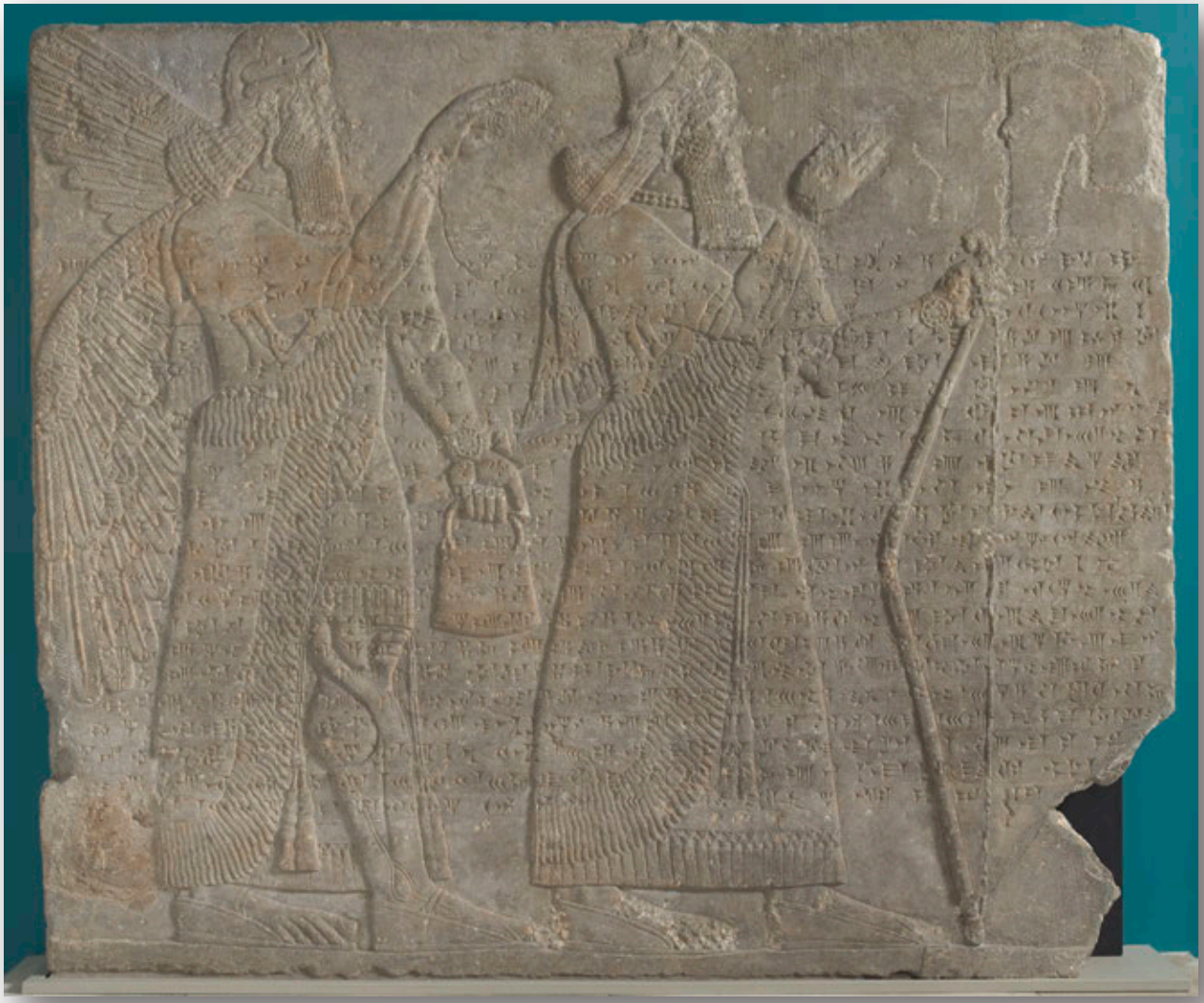
Importance of agriculture

Winged Spirit of Apkallu from Kalhu (Nimrud), Iraq, 875–860 BCE. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

What do you see?

What could it symbolize?

What does it suggest about Assyrian society?



Winged Spirit or Apkallu Anointing Ashurnasirpal II from Kalhu (Nimrud), Iraq, 875–860 BCE. Bowdoin College Museum of Art

What do you see? (Note the carved profile on the right and the damage to the two figures on the left.)

What could it symbolize?

What does it suggest about Assyrian society?

ART IS MOVING!

Bowdoin's reliefs were initially displayed in the Chapel and then in the Museum's Rotunda. They were moved to the Assyrian Gallery during the Museum's 2005–2007 renovations. Although the reliefs appear as monolithic slabs, each is composed of two to five fragments, breaks that occurred when they were first removed from the palace walls. The reliefs were disassembled in the Rotunda, moved to the new gallery, and then installed by a team supervised by an art conservator.

After the move to the Assyrian Gallery, nineteenth-century repairs were removed, revealing ancient vandalism to the *Winged Spirit or Apkallu Anointing Ashurnasirpal* II that is significant to the history of the reliefs. The defacement took place during the sack of Kalhu by the Medes and Babylonians at the end of the seventh century BCE.

Look at the reliefs again, after completing the symbolism activities. Do you see anything new? Describe it below:

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REPATRIATION

Recently, there have been several high-profile cases in which pieces of art from museum collections have been returned to their countries of origin, a process known as **repatriation**.

Discuss with a partner:

- Who owns art?
- Who should be able to see art?
- How do museums acquire art?
- How should museums acquire art?

Now, answer the following question independently in writing:

Why do you think a museum would return objects willingly from its own collections?

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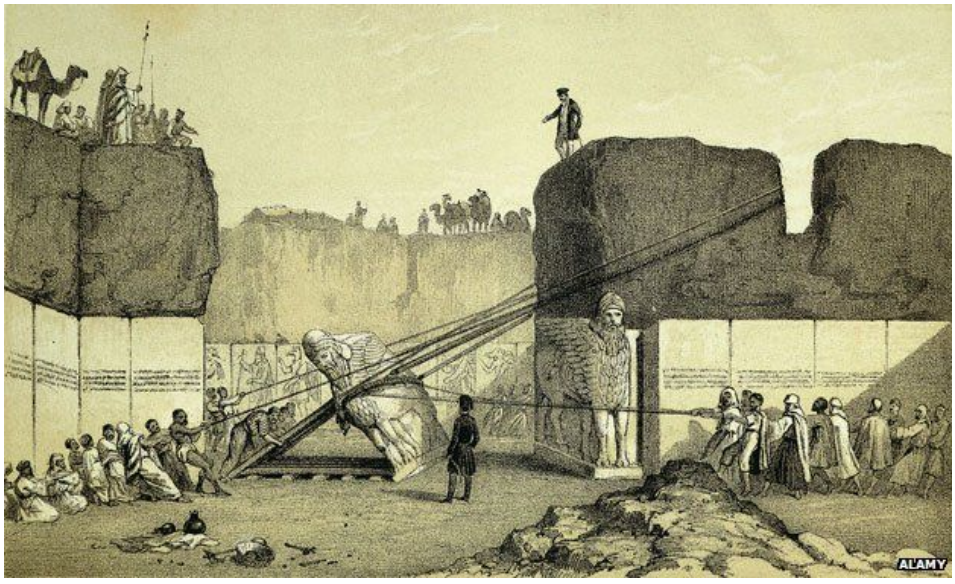

The Excavation of a Winged Bull as portrayed in *Popular Account of Discoveries at Nineveh by* Austen Henry Layard, 1867.

Read the following arguments for and against repatriation

FOR

Most Western museums now acknowledge a strong ethical case for returning objects, especially if they have been found to have left their countries of origin under dubious circumstances, as in the case of the goddess of Morgantina. The Getty, which had bought the statue in 1988 for $18 million, returned to Italy in 2011 after Italian prosecutors found that it had been looted, illegally exported and sold by dealers who very likely dissembled about its provenance.

Some argue that repatriation, particularly of Western antiquities, speaks to the persistence of nations in a globalized world. It's "the stubbornness of objects," said James B. Cuno, the president and chief executive of the J. Paul Getty Trust and the author of "Who Owns Antiquity?"

"It's not the same with music, it's not the same with film, it's not the same with literature — but when it comes to physical objects, these things are kept as evidence of a proud past, as defined by the nation-state government," he said.

Others question whether certain museums have the infrastructure to safeguard the treasures that have been returned — or to make them accessible, far outside well-trafficked capital cities. Critics argue that such questions indicate an almost neocolonial attitude.

"Repatriated Works Now Back in Their Countries of Origin"
by Rachel Donadio, *The New York Times*

AGAINST

Museums have heralded these restitution agreements as a way to take a stand against illegal excavation and forge stronger ties with art-rich nations. In September, the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology agreed to send to Turkey—on "permanent loan"—24 pieces of ancient gold jewelry that it acquired in 1966 and that may have come from Troy.

Although Penn officials concede that the jewels' actual place of discovery, or findspot, is unknown, they say the deal has allowed them to secure continued access to the Aegean sites where their archaeologists have worked for decades.

But giving up objects has done little to halt the international trade in looted antiquities, while rewarding the hardball tactics of foreign governments and impoverishing Americans' access to the ancient world. And while preserving good relations in some cases, these agreements have also spurred a raft of extravagant new claims against museums — backed by menacing legal threats.

Countries like Italy and Greece have used the news media to embarrass museums with alarming stories of rogue curators and nefarious dealers; they have withheld exhibition loans from museums that rebuff them; and they have resorted to aggressive legal action, opening criminal investigations of museum staff and enlisting the help of American federal prosecutors to obtain museum records and seize disputed works.

"The Great Giveback"
by Hugh Eakin, *The New York Times*

THE REPATRIATION SITUATION

In 1970, the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) held a Convention on the “Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property” in response to increasing art thefts in previous years. As of January 2017, 131 countries have signed the treaty that was developed at the Convention, agreeing to enforce national regulations to curtail the theft or purchase of cultural artifacts. As a result, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art does not acquire ancient art that was brought into the U.S. after 1970 unless it has adequate documentation of its origins and provenance.

Today, reliefs from the Northwest Palace can be found in museums in 19 different countries, including the National Museum of Iraq, the National Car Museum of Iran, and the Arkeoloji Müzesi in Turkey. The British Museum and museums throughout the northeastern United States also hold significant numbers of the artifacts.

In April 2015, the reliefs remaining at the Northwest Palace in Iraq were destroyed in a vicious attack by ISIS. Using bulldozers, explosives, and sledgehammers, militants violently removed symbols of polytheism (the belief in multiple gods). Had they not been in museums, other Assyrian reliefs would have been destroyed, as well.

Nimrud, Iraq being destroyed by explosives, AFP/Getty photograph, 2015

Based on what you've read, list compelling reasons that museums should and should not repatriate artwork.

arguments FOR repatriation	arguments AGAINST repatriation

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

With the history and origin story of the BCMA's Assyrian reliefs in mind, who do you think should own and display the reliefs? Why? Do you have enough information to decide? If not, what more would you need to know?

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED?

Now, return to page 3. Can you answer your original questions? If so, try to do so here. If not, ask a docent or security officer for further explanation.

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ANSWER KEY

(answers may vary!)

Page 4:

What everyday objects could be considered reliefs?

- coins, Braille, a sandcastle, etc.

Page 8: Winged Spirit of Apkallu

What do you see?

- two daggers and a whetstone for sharpening their blades tucked into the figure's robe

What could it symbolize?

- the figure's protective powers

What does it suggest about Assyrian society?

- importance of military conquest

Page 9: Winged Spirit or Apkallu Anointing Ashurnasirpal II

What do you see?

- damage to the relief and, specifically, to the King's body

What could it symbolize?

- conquering of the empire, asserting power over the King

What does it suggest about Assyrian society?

- the King's importance and central role in the empire

ANSWER KEY CONTINUED

Page 13: Possible Arguments For and Against Repatriation

arguments FOR repatriation	arguments AGAINST repatriation
--Many objects have been taken from their countries of origin illegally and are rightfully the property of these countries. --Objects are sources of national pride and cultural heritage for their country of origin. --It is neocolonial to say objects must be in international cities where they can be accessed by Westerners. --When objects are returned to their place of origin, it helps museums and other institutions strengthen ties with these art-rich countries, thus increasing the likelihood that they might loan their art willingly in the future. --Museum visitors' understandings of objects may be enhanced by seeing artifacts in their original geographic context.	--During tumultuous political moments or due to environmental concerns, objects may be safer outside of their country of origin. --Some consider objects to be more accessible when kept in high-trafficked international cities and museums. --Returning artifacts to their countries of origin does little to address the larger issue of stopping the international trade of looted objects. --Returning objects to their countries of origin limits access to international art. --Countries asking for their art to be returned may take aggressive legal action against museums.

Acknowledgements

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Cover illustration: *Relief Head of Ashurnasirpal II*, Assyrian, ca. 875–860 BCE, from Kalhu (Nimrud), Iraq; gypsum. Bowdoin College Museum of Art.

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