Assyria to America
October 24, 2019–December 13, 2020
Labels

Assyria to America explores the palace complex of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE), who constructed a lavish and powerful new capital at Nimrud (ancient Kalhu). This urban center thrived for over two centuries before being destroyed by an alliance of Babylonians and Medes around 612 BCE. Its story continues to evolve today.

Largely abandoned for over 2,000 years, the site of Nimrud was rediscovered by Sir Austen Henry Layard, an English explorer, diplomat, and archaeologist who excavated the site from 1845 to 1851. Layard and his successors sent numerous artifacts to the British Museum and other European collections while producing lavishly illustrated publications aimed at the general public. Growing fascination with Assyria coincided with an increased American presence in the region. Dr. Henri Byron Haskell (Bowdoin Medical School Class of 1855), a missionary in the Ottoman province of Mosul, recognized an opportunity and sent five impressive reliefs to the College.

Since the nineteenth century, excavations and studies of ancient Assyria have continued. Today, despite serious damage inflicted on the site by the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2015, resolute efforts to better understand the Assyrians are leading to new ways of interpreting the past.

I just returned from Mosul, Assyria where I have some very fine slabs from Nineveh [sic]*, which I shall be pleased to present to Bowdoin College my Medical School alma mater.*

Henri Byron Haskell
to Professor Parker Cleaveland, July 3, 1857

Generous support for this exhibition comes from the Stevens L. Frost Endowment Fund and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Endowment Fund.

From the palace of Ashurnasirpal, vice-regent of Aššur…
destructive weapon of the great gods,
strong king, king of the universe, king of Assyria…
The ancient city of Kalah… this city had become dilapidated; it lay dormant.
This city I rebuilt…
I founded therein a palace of cedar, cypress, juniper, boxwood,
meskannu-wood, terebinth, and tamarisk
As my royal residence and for my lordly leisure for eternity.
I made beasts of mountains and seas in white limestone and alabaster
and stationed them at the doors.
I decorated it in splendid fashion: I surrounded it with knobbed nails of bronze;
I hung doors of cedar, cypress, juniper, and meskannu-wood in its doorways.
I took in great quantities and put therein silver, gold, tin, bronze, and iron,
Booty from the lands over which I gained dominion.

*Standard Inscription of Ashurnasirpal II (*Condensed*)*

RELIEF WITH SCENE OF KING ASHURNASIRPAL II HUNTING LIONS FROM ROYAL CHARIOT
contemporary resin cast (resin, paint)
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

This plaster cast of a relief panel from the Northwest Palace depicts King Ashurnasirpal II taking part in a favorite pastime: the royal hunt. At the center, the king faces backwards on his chariot, driven by a eunuch and pulled by three stallions. His raised bow, with arrow drawn, is aimed at the head of a ferocious lion, an intimidating and challenging target.

While the Bowdoin reliefs do not show any animals, the libation scene on one (1860.5) may have been part of a larger narrative showing Ashurnasirpal II giving thanks to the gods after a successful expedition. The relief here was originally positioned atop a similar libation scene where a dead lion is shown at the feet of the king. The contemporary resin cast displayed here is based on a plaster copy the British Museum made in the twentieth century.

RELIEF WITH PAIR OF WINGED, EAGLE-HEADED SPIRITS AND SACRED TREE
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 875–860 BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
Northwest Palace, Room H, panel 30
gypsum (Mosul alabaster)
Gift of Dr. Henri Byron Haskell, Medical School Class of 1855
1860.1

Apkallu figures are not great gods but are part of the broad group of divinities that for ancient Mesopotamians animated every part of their world. In Assyrian art they appear as either eagle-headed or human-headed and wear a horned crown to indicate divinity. Both types of figure usually have wings. Often regarded as protective spirits they likely had a variety of roles in Assyrian religion including ones connected to wisdom and fertility. Both of these eagle-headed apkallu hold buckets in their lowered hands with a cone-shaped sprinkler in the form of the male date-palm spathe, or flower sheath, and appear to be "fertilizing" the sacred tree. The "Standard Inscription" of Ashurnasirpal, found across many of the reliefs here, records the King's titles, ancestry, and achievements.

Critical support for the Assyrian Collection at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is provided by the Yadgar Family Endowment.

RELIEF OF WINGED SPIRIT or APKALLU
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 875–860 BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
Northwest Palace, Room S, panel 17
gypsum (Mosul alabaster)
Gift of Dr. Henri Byron Haskell, Medical School Class of 1855
1860.2

This winged figure is often connected to the apkallu spirit mentioned in Assyrian texts as imbued with magical and protective powers. They likely had a variety of roles in Assyrian religion including those connected to wisdom and fertility. The apkallu's horned crown announces his divinity, though his portrait bears an uncanny resemblance to Ashurnasirpal. Tucked into the folds of his tasseled kilt and embroidered robe are two daggers and a whetstone for sharpening the blades. Armlets and rosette-bracelets wrap around the figure's arms and wrists. Remnants of color, red-brown, black and white, that once adorned the sculpture is visible on the apkallu's eye and the soles of his sandals. Shipping the reliefs was a monumental ordeal—the stone slabs weigh around a ton each—and to facilitate transport the slabs were often cut in pieces and their backs trimmed to save weight. The reliefs destined for American collections were moved by camel back to the Mediterranean coast, where they often encountered substantial delays before being shipped by steamer vessels to American ports.

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APKALLU IN COLOR

While visitors today can appreciate the carved form and detail of Bowdoin's Assyrian reliefs, the ancient viewer was treated to a much more colorful display. Ancient sculptures as a rule were finished with paint that helped accentuate the figural and decorative elements of the composition.

The paints used in antiquity would typically have included two components: a colored pigment and an organic binder. The pigment would have either been based on an organic material derived from a plant or animal extract or an inorganic pigment that comprised a naturally occurring mineral or a simple compound produced synthetically. The organic binders available included gums, resins, eggs, or glues derived from animal sources.

Although surviving colors are sparse and our present understanding of painting schemes on Assyrian panels is limited, it is generally agreed that many of the reliefs were originally painted, either over their entire surface or, perhaps more often, in specific areas. Indeed, traces of color are visible on the relief illuminated here. White paint remains around the pupil of the apkallu figure and a reddish-brown pigment highlights the sole of his sandal. In addition, spectral and chemical analysis of several reliefs in other museum collections have added to our knowledge of the colors employed by Assyrian artists as well as where they applied their paint.

Academic Technology and Consulting working together with Museum staff collaborated in preparing this experimental display. To "restore" color to the relief we used a computer projection to highlight particular sections that likely were painted in ancient times. This experiment is intended to help us visualize how the reliefs may have appeared to ancient visitors to the Northwest Palace at Kalhu in the ninth century BCE, almost 2900 years ago!

RELIEF OF WINGED SPIRIT or APKALLU
ANOINTING ASHURNASIRPAL II
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 875–860 BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
Northwest Palace, Room Unidentified
gypsum (Mosul alabaster)
Gift of Dr. Henri Byron Haskell, Medical School Class of 1855
1860.3

This relief shows the king Ashurnasirpal with an apkallu, a protective spirit, behind. The king wears the fez-and-tiara crown signaling his regal status. His long robe is tasseled with daggers tucked into the folds. The protective spirit wears a horned crown, short kilt, and sports wings that mark his divine status. He anoints the king with a "purifier," which extends a fertile gift to the Assyrian king.

The relief's condition is significant: the bow, a symbol of Ashurnasirpal's martial prowess, has been broken in the middle and the king has suffered systematic mutilation. The king's right hand has been severed, with his eyes, nose, and ears removed. His beard has been carefully cut, and his feet and Achilles tendons surgically excised. On this defaced relief, a ghostly silhouette appears opposite the king. Crudely rendered and executed with obvious haste, the new figure approaches the king as conqueror. This disfigurement coincided with the sack of Kalhu (modern

Nimrud) by the Medes and Babylonians at the end of the seventh century BCE. The conquered had finally exacted revenge on the Assyrians.

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RELIEF OF WINGED SPIRIT
or APKALLU and SACRED TREE
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 875–860 BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
Northwest Palace, Room T, panel 6
gypsum (Mosul alabaster)
Gift of Dr. Henri Byron Haskell, Medical School Class of 1855
1860.4

The winged figure, apkallu, is often mentioned in Assyrian texts. With magical and protective powers, he serves to guard the king and his realm. The horned crown announces his divinity, though his portrait bears an uncanny resemblance to Ashurnasirpal himself. He holds a bucket in his left hand, while in his right, he sprinkles a sacred tree using a "purifier," resembling the spathes, or flower sheaths, from the date palm.

The spirit wears a tasseled kilt and richly embroidered robe, and projects a powerful pose. Tucked into the folds of his robe are two daggers and a whetstone for sharpening the blades. Armlets and rosette-bracelets wrap around the figure's arms and wrists.

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RELIEF OF ASHURNASIRPAL WITH ATTENDANTS CELEBRATING A HUNT
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 875–860 BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
Northwest Palace, West Wing, panel 16
gypsum (Mosul alabaster)
Gift of Dr. Henri Byron Haskell, Medical School Class of 1855
1860.5

This fragment shows Ashurnasirpal and his attendants pouring a libation to the gods in thanks for a successful hunt. The king holds a bow in his left hand and a libation dish in his right, followed by two beardless attendants who are likely eunuchs. One attendant holds a parasol to shade the king, while the other carries a bow and quiver. All three figures are equipped with wide belts with rings that attached to the hunting chariot and aprons that protected the hunters against chafing. The arm that extends into the scene from the right holds a flywhisk and would have belonged to another attendant.

The scene probably formed part of a larger hunting narrative arranged in superimposed rows, or registers. Adjacent panels from the same room show scenes of the king hunting lions and wild bulls. The missing lower register may have depicted the body of the king's quarry, one of these fearsome creatures. The cuneiform text at the base of the fragment indicates that this relief was positioned high up on a wall, given that the text, as seen in other reliefs in this gallery, ran through the center of the decorative elements.

Critical support for the Assyrian Collection
at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is provided by the Yadgar Family Endowment.

The statue in this niche is a full-scale, 3D-printed copy of the Ashurnasirpal II statue (883–859 BCE) in the British Museum's collection. The model grew out of an imaging project undertaken by BCMA researchers in partnership with the British Museum. To create this printed model, researchers utilized photogrammetry, a technique which involved capturing hundreds of images of the original objects and assembling them into a virtual model, displayed on the touchscreen at left. The model was printed and assembled on campus, in more than two dozen pieces, with the help of Bowdoin's Department of Academic Technology and Consulting.

Portraits of Ashurnasirpal II are rare among the reliefs at Nimrud, and the royal portrait at the British Museum is even rarer, sculpted in the round. Technologies like virtual and 3D models present new ways of sharing ancient art that might otherwise be inaccessible.

ROLL YOUR OWN SEAL!

Cylinder seals are one of the most important and distinctive forms of ancient Mesopotamian art. They were popular for thousands of years, beginning in the 4th millennium BCE. Those who owned them attached great value and personal significance to these small objects; they wore them on their bodies daily and used them to conduct their affairs. Among their many functions, seals were used to sign letters, witness legal documents, and authorize transactions involving goods and labor. Using the replicas at this station—faithful reproductions of ancient seals—we invite you to try your hand at using a cylinder seal!

STEPS

- Choose a cylinder seal!
- Press the seal firmly into the clay tablet.
- Using your forefinger, roll the seal across the surface of the tablet.
- Stop when the design begins to repeat … or keep going!
- Often, seal impressions repeat numerous times across a tablet in order to fill the space.

HEAD OF A BEARDED MAN (Priest?)
Cypro-Greek, from Cyprus, ca. 550–500 BCE
limestone
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1923.116

This portrait likely depicts a priest and once formed part of a dedication in a religious sanctuary. The island of Cyprus, situated on the crossroads between the cultures of the Near East and those of the Aegean world, became part of the Assyrian Empire at the end of the 8th century BCE (ca. 709), during the reign of Sargon II. Local Cypriot rulers asserted their independence briefly during the 7th century BCE, only to come under Egyptian and then Persian control in the 6th. The portrait's style reflects this multicultural history and the influence from Near Eastern portraiture.

TIMELINE

We invite you to engage with this interactive timeline highlighting the story of the Assyrian relief sculptures at the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. The timeline explores three time periods integral to the reliefs: their ancient creation, modern rediscovery, and contemporary status. The timeline explores the implications of these works as they intersect with political and religious forces past and present.

Timeline created by Brooke Wrubel '21

Take a scroll!
Along the bottom of the screen, you can find specific moments of historical importance.
To learn more about a particular episode: click on the rectangular box that frames the title of that event.
To explore the entirety of the timeline: you can click on the arrow on either side of the screen to move to the next historical event in that direction.
You can also drag your finger from the right side of the screen to the left to see the events further right, occurring later in history, and vice versa.

Vessel with Geometric Decoration
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 8th–7th centuries BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
glazed ceramic
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Assyrian ceramicists produced a variety of glazed vessels including bowls and vases with geometric patterns and figural imagery that were popular at Nimrud. The yellow and black glazed chevron bands on the top and bottom mirror patterns that appear in painted scenes or on

glazed bricks that decorated the palace walls seen elsewhere in this case. This large tub-shaped vessel is an unusual form, which some have speculated may have been used for potted plants.

BRONZE LION'S HEAD
Roman, 1st–2nd centuries CE
Syria
bronze
Gift of George Warren Hammond H1900 and Mrs. Hammond
1898.18

This pair of bronze furniture appliques indicate the longevity of visual traditions in the ancient Near East. Dating nearly a millennium after the time of Ashurnasirpal and coming from Roman Syria to the west, the lion's heads harken back to earlier traditions in the art of the region. Throughout Assyrian art, lions— a favorite target of royal hunts—are often shown in combat with Assyrian gods, heroes, and kings.

PAIR OF GLAZED Wall NailS
Hurrian, Mittani period (1500–1350 BCE)
from Nuzi (modern Yorghan Tepe, Iraq)
glazed terracotta
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

Colorfully glazed, ceramic wall nails such as these from the site of Nuzi, north of Nimrud, were used in decorating palaces, temples, and other important buildings across ancient Mesopotamia. Spaced at regular intervals, the protruding nails would have punctuated the mudbrick walls of buildings like the Northwest palace with colorful accents, adding additional visual interest and liveliness to an already sumptuous decor.

GLAZED BRICK WITH GEOMETRIC PATTERN
Neo-Assyrian, ca. ninth century BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
glazed ceramic
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This glazed brick from Nimrud shows the variety of architectural ornament that decorated the Northwest palace. The guilloche motif appears in Assyrian wall painting, glazed ceramic tiles, and ivories of the Neo-Assyrian period which decorated the rooms of the royal court, official residences, and temples across Nimrud.

FRAGMENTARY RELIEF WITH PORTRAIT OF KING ASHURNASIRPAL II
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 875–860 BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)

Northwest Palace, Throne Room (Room B), Panel 14
gypsum (Mosul alabaster), polychromy
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1906.4

The King Ashurnasirpal II is represented in this fragmentary relief that was once part of a monumental panel from the Throne Room at Nimrud. As recorded in the Standard Inscription, Ashurnasirpal II built his palace for "royal residence and for [his] lordly leisure for eternity." Its walls were lined with relief carvings painted with bold colors—red, white, yellow, and black—some of which are preserved on this relief fragment. The walls and ceilings were painted with vivid geometric patterns, and the floors were laid with fine woven carpets. Carved wooden doors and furniture were inlaid with precious metals and ivories.

GLAZED TILE FRAGMENT WITH FEMALE HEAD
Neo–Assyrian, ca. 9th–8th centuries BCE
terracotta
Loan by a Friend of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art

This fragment, depicting the head of a female, comes from the uppermost section of a stepped, or crenellated, battlement that Assyrian architects used to decorate the tops of walls and towers. External facades and gateways of Assyrian palaces and temples were often decorated with brilliantly colored glazed bricks and tiles such as this one, which includes remnants of colors like those that also covered the Assyrian sculptures.

Jar with Glazed Geometric Decoration
Neo-Babylonian, ca. 6th century BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
glazed ceramic
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This vessel represents a transitional form, dating from a period well after Ashurnasirpal II's time, but nonetheless harkening back to earlier motifs and techniques popular in Assyrian ceramic glazing. While the glaze of this vessel has faded over time, the bold patterning and preserved colors—blue, orange, yellow, and white—hint at the brilliant presence it would have originally had.

Three Drinking Vessels
Hurrian, Mittani period (1500–1350 BCE)
from Nuzi (modern Yorghan Tepe, Iraq)
clay
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

These drinking vessels come from the site of Nuzi, a Mesopotamian city south of ancient Nimrud that was in constant cultural contact with the Assyrian empire. Like the later Assyrian "Palace Wares," these cups represent the height of achievement for Nuzian potters: their gently flaring rims, dimpled bodies, and carination—the round base joined to the flared neck—all anticipate Assyrian "Palace Wares."

Palace Ware Beaker
Neo-Assyrian, 8th–7th centuries BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
ceramic
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This wheel-thrown beaker is a common luxury ware used for drinking wine in the Northwest palace. "Palace Wares" represent the pinnacle of Assyrian ceramic arts and have fine fabrics, expert craftsmanship, and ornament and include cups, bowls, vases, and other dining dishes. Here, the regularly spaced dimples around the beaker's body are a result of its manufacture: potters created impressions with their fingers as they removed the vessel from a potter's wheel.

A HOUSEWARMING FIT FOR A KING

When King Ashurnasirpal II's lavish new palace at Nimrud was completed in 879 BCE, he celebrated by throwing a ten-day "housewarming" party for nearly 70,000 guests from across his empire. The "Banquet Stele," discovered in the Northwest palace, lists different groups of invitees and the local and imported delicacies and foods on which they feasted. These vessels hint at the sumptuous Assyrian dining experience, captured in the famous "Banquet Scene" from the walls of the later North palace at Nineveh, which depicts the later Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE) enjoying refreshments in the palace gardens.

The Banquet Scene from the Northwest Palace. Image courtesy The Trustees of the British Museum.

Bowl Fragment with Procession SCENE
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 9th century BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
white limestone
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Discovered within a temple at Nimrud, this vase fragment contains a processional scene showing emissaries bringing tribute to the Assyrian kingdom. The two tributaries who trail behind an Assyrian officer and court official on the left wear markedly different clothing—turbans and fringed robes—to emphasize their foreignness. The second figure holds out a bowl and leads a horse behind him. Such luxury items and animals were common forms of tribute to the Assyrian empire.

Tripod Bowl
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 8th–7th centuries BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
ceramic
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This bowl is the result of a combination of techniques: a potter created the body on a wheel and allowed it to dry, before forming by hand three legs to attach to the bowl. Such tripod bowls are rare among Assyrian wares and their function is unknown.

Furniture Plaque with Griffins in a Floral Landscape, Phoenician STyle
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 8th century BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
ivory
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This carved plaque is a particularly fine example of the Phoenician style of ivory carving, identifiable by the clear Egyptian influences, symmetrical composition, and distinctive technique. This ivory is notable for its extensive use of cloisonné-like recesses in wings of the griffins and in the lotus-filled background that carvers originally decorated with pigmented pastes, glass inlays, or stones. Recent scientific analysis conducted by The Metropolitan Museum of Art confirmed the presence of Egyptian Blue, the world's first synthetic color.

HEAD OF A FEMALE FIGURE, NORTH SYRIAN STYLE
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 8th–7th centuries BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
Burnt Palace
ivory
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Women figured rarely in other Assyrian courtly arts but were relatively common among the imported ivories. This detailed ivory head of a woman, carved in the round, shows a considerable depth and naturalism and may have originally been part of a chryselephantine statuette (ivory with gold overlay). Stones or glass were likely once set within the hollowed iris, and she wears a beaded necklace and headband that also previously held colorful inlays.

ANCIENT IVORIES FROM NIMRUD

In antiquity, ivory was a luxury material, costly and widely prized for its exotic and precious qualities. The site of Nimrud was especially rich in ivory objects as Ashurnasirpal II and his successors acquired a taste for ivory inlaid furnishings. Assyrian ivories were imported and

carved from elephant tusks harvested in Africa, a practice now considered unethical and banned in many countries. Many of their decorative motifs betray the foreign origins of the ivories or their makers, especially from Northern Syria and Phoenicia on the coast of the Levant, an area particularly renowned for the skill of its ivory craftsmen in the ancient world. The importation of significant quantities of ivory signals the wealth of the Assyrian empire—derived through constant expansion through military campaigns as well as extensive networks of trade and tribute—and the degree to which the Assyrian empire and the royal court at Nimrud became a major cultural crossroads in the ancient world.

The labels for ivories in this case were prepared by Ayub Tahlil Bowdoin Class of 2022

Furniture Elements with snarling lions, Assyrian style
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 9th–8th century BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
ivory
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

These carved furniture fragments depict snarling lions in an Assyrian style, evident in the lion's defined musculature. Both were likely joined to wooden furniture supports, quite probably royal chairs or thrones in the Northwest palace. Lions featured prominently in Assyrian art and were closely associated with Assyrian kingship. Ashurnasirpal II is depicted hunting lions in scenes throughout the Northwest palace.

FURNITURE Back with a Tree Pattern
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 8th century BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
ivory, wood (modern)
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This furniture back (likely of a couch or chair) illustrates how ivory panels enhanced elite furniture in Nimrud palaces. It is one of twenty similar pieces discovered in the same storeroom at Fort Shalmaneser in Nimrud. It is exceptional as the only one carved solely with a vegetal motif, in comparison to other examples that incorporate human or faunal figures. Here, conservators have painstakingly reassembled the ancient ivory panels in the form of a chair back, as it would have originally appeared.

FURNITURE PANEL, PHOENICIAN STYLE
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 8th–7th centuries BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
ivory
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Carved in the Phoenician style, this ivory plaque captures a fierce and close combat between a man and a lion. The man is wearing a short Egyptian skirt with beading around the edges, his hair is carved as individual blocks in the manner of an Egyptian wig, and he is wearing an Egyptian double crown. The panel's trapezoidal shape suggests that it was previously part of a small box.

FURNITURE PANEL, NORTH SYRIAN STYLE
Neo–Assyrian, ca. 9th–8th centuries BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
Fort Shalmaneser
ivory
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This furniture panel's emphasis on plant life may allude to the agricultural abundance of Mesopotamia and the Levant, aptly referred to today as the Fertile Crescent. A curling and branched plant emerges from a ground made up of lotus blossoms and buds. The plant towers above the human in the scene as it rises towards a winged sun disk at the top of the panel.

FURNITURE PANEL, PHOENICIAN STYLE
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 8th–7th centuries BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
Fort Shalmaneser
ivory
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Egyptians were principal trading partners of the Phoenicians, who spread Egyptian goods and culture throughout the Mediterranean and ancient Near East. This panel includes multiple Egyptian influences that suggest such trade patterns; the figure's headdress, wig, and image of a ram crowned with a sun disk on the scepter all reflect Egyptian imagery.

Prism with the annals of Ashurbanipal
Neo–Assyrian, 668–627 BCE
unbaked clay
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

The prism form, a multi-sided pillar of clay or stone, was used to narrate "annals," or important recent events. Prisms were produced in great numbers and often deposited in the foundations and walls of Assyrian buildings, legitimizing the king and his reign. This fragmentary prism gives an official account of the military campaigns undertaken by Ashurbanipal (668–627), one of the successors of King Ashurnasirpal II.

Cuneiform Foundation Cone
Neo-Sumerian, 2200–2100 BCE
from Girsu (modern Tell Teloh, Iraq)
baked clay
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

This inscribed ceramic cone and similar objects were commonly driven into the walls or inserted in the foundations of temples and other public buildings in ancient Mesopotamia. Their inscriptions were hidden from view and meant to be "read" by the gods. This inscription records the rebuilding of a temple for the god Ningirsu, undertaken by Gudea, who ruled the ancient Mesopotamian state of Lagash from his capital at Girsu from 2144–2124 BCE.

MESOPOTAMIAN CYLINDER SEALS

The distinctive form of the cylinder seal arose in the middle of the 4th millennium in Mesopotamia and is today appreciated as one of the most distinctive and finest of ancient Mesopotamian arts. Seals could be made of many different materials, but most are of semi-precious stone. The intricate designs carved into seals are cut in *intaglio* (reverse), so that when they were pressed into sealing material—typically wet clay—the seals would leave behind a continuous raised impression that could be easily read by the viewer.

Small in size, but of enormous historical significance, cylinder seals had important functions in Mesopotamian societies. The seal was a very personal, intimate item, most often worn as jewelry. They were used daily for a variety of important functions including authenticating documents and goods, identifying ownership and sources, and ratifying or witnessing documents and transactions.

Stone Cuneiform Tablet with Standard Inscription of Ashurnasirpal II
Neo-Assyrian, ca. 883–859 BCE
from Kalhu (modern Nimrud, Iraq)
gypsum alabaster
Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art

This stone tablet, found within the city wall of Nimrud, contains a variant of the Standard Inscription. The tablet was inscribed on both sides, and, much like a smaller clay tablet, was meant to be flipped vertically. The obverse (rear) side of the tablet documents Ashurnasirpal II's founding of the city and the extensive building campaign he undertook.

CUNEIFORM TABLETS AND THE INVENTION OF WRITING

Mesopotamia was a land of firsts: the founding of the first cities, the cradle of first civilizations, the emergence of the first agriculture, and the invention of the first writing systems. Pictographic writing emerged in Mesopotamia around 3400 BCE and developed over time into a system of wedge-shaped signs with phonetic values known as cuneiform (Latin for "wedge-shaped").

Cuneiform was inscribed on a variety of mediums, but baked clay tablets were most common. Over half a million tablets survive today. The tablets and other inscribed artifacts in this case attest to the diverse applications of cuneiform: among them, historical accounts, royal propaganda, bills of sale and transfers of land, civil affairs and marriages, lawsuits, long-distance trade, and personal letters.

FOUR TABLETS FROM THE ARCHIVE OF TULPANNAYA
Hurrian, Mittani period (1500–1350 BCE)
from Nuzi (modern Yorghan Tepe, Iraq)
unbaked clay
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

The four tablets arranged here come from a private family archive and detail the legal affairs of a woman named Tulpannaya, a well-off inhabitant of Nuzi in 15th century BCE. Tulpannaya owned land, traded in goods and people, and sued her neighbors regularly. As court records, the tablets are signed by scribes and "sealed" by witnesses or, in the case of civil suits, judges. Tablets A-D record a marriage, two adoptions, and a lawsuit, respectively.

Clay Tablet with Archaic CUNEIFORM LIST OF COMMODITIES (A)
Jemdet Nasr period, 3200–3000 BCE
Southern Mesopotamia
unbaked clay
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

This clay tablet documents the very early development of the cuneiform script. At this stage, the cuneiform system of signs employed on this tablet is rudimentary, still bearing a close resemblance to the pictographic systems that preceded it.

Clay tablet and Envelope with sumerian Cuneiform receipt of grain and seed (B)
Sumerian (Ur III period), 2100–2000 BCE
from Girsu (modern Tell Telloh, Iraq)
unbaked clay
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

Clay tablets were often enclosed in an outer layer of unbaked clay, forming an ancient envelope. Envelopes were often rolled with a cylinder seal for authentication, preventing intermediaries from manipulating the tablet. The recipient would then break the dried envelope to extract the contents, here a receipt for agricultural products.

Clay Tablet With old-Assyrian cuneiform letter (C)
Old Assyrian Empire, 1950–1850 BCE
from Kanesh, Anatolia (modern Kultepe, Turkey)
unbaked clay
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

Cuneiform tablets were used for correspondence within and beyond the Assyrian empire. This tablet, dating to the Old Assyrian empire (2025–1378 BCE), comes from Kanesh, a site in Anatolia. A colony of Assyrian traders thrived at the town between 21st and 18th centuries BCE, trading in tin and textiles.

Clay Tablet WITH HELLENISTIC CUNEIFORM Record of property sale (D)
Seleucid period, 300–125 BCE
from Uruk (modern Warka, Iraq)
unbaked clay
Lent by the Harvard Semitic Museum

This tablet reflects a late phase of cuneiform's development with its miniscule and carefully written script. The document records a sale in the ancient city of Uruk in southern Mesopotamia, which thrived from the 4th millennium BCE into the Hellenistic period when Alexander the Great's successors ruled in Mesopotamia.

In 2007, Iraqi–American artist Michael Rakowitz began an ongoing project *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* in response to the looting of around 15,000 artworks from the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad in the wake of the American invasion of 2003. While some looted artifacts have since been recovered, many thousands are still missing, and the work of *The Invisible Enemy* continues today. In 2016, Michael added a new phase to *The Invisible Enemy* project, *May the Obdurate Foe Not Stay in Good Health*, which focuses on cultural heritage looted or at risk in the ongoing civil war in Syria. The labels, created by the artist, combine data about the ancient object with quotes from prominent scholars and leading figures in the contemporary Iraqi and Syrian communities. The two works on display in this case from *Obdurate Foe* are based on ancient artifacts at risk in the Syrian conflict.

museum number: unknown

excavation number: unknown

provenience: Mari

dimension(s) (in cm): 7.1 x 7

material: clay

date: 1900–64BC

description: Clay cuneiform tablet on the Emergency Red List of Syria

status: unknown

ISIS capitalized on a pre-existing illegal trade in antiquities, which began during the turmoil in 2012, first charging a 20% tax on "licensed" excavations and then hiring their own archaeologists and equipment to take over trade itself.

-Rachel Shabi

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museum number: unknown

excavation number: ND13225

provenience: Nimrud (SW 37)

dimension(s) (in cm): height: 3.5, length: 6.7, thickness: 1.0

material: ivory

date: Neo Assyrian (ca. 800 BC)

description: Head and neck of a lion attacking the back of a bull of which only part of the back and end of the tail remain; reverse side has horizontal markings

status: unknown

The pattern of destruction made it immediately clear…that this was not a case of random desecration by an oppressed population taking revenge on a hated regime…The looting of the museum involved a faction of professional antiquities thieves who knew exactly what kinds of objects to take, where to find them in the museum, and which ones would fetch the highest prices.

-Zainab Bahrani

museum number: IM65317

excavation number: ND10415

provenience: Nimrud (SW 37)

dimension(s) (in cm): height: 4.6; width: 2.5; thickness: 0.7

material: ivory

date: Neo Assyrian (ca. 800 BC)

description: Winged griffin faces right, stretching up, left foreleg raised

status: unknown

It's not safe to be open, but we are working inside. We are preparing the museum. We are preparing everything. In fact, I can tell you that the storerooms – I have steel padlocks on them. I have welded all the storerooms, because we're afraid that there might be another attack to the museum. In fact, we do have attacks by, you know, shooting on our guards, because the Haifa Street is just behind the museum. So the museum actually is a hot spot in Baghdad. We are working there, but I think it's not the time now to open the museum.

-Dr. Donny George

museum number: IM61891

excavation number: ND8003

provenience: Nimrud (SW 37)

dimension(s) (in cm): height: 14.5; width: at top 3.1; width (at base): 3.7; thickness: 0.8

material: ivory

date: Neo Assyrian (ca. 800 BC)

description: Bull-calf facing right above a stylized tree above a male facing left which is above a winged, human-headed sphinx facing left; male wears short wig and short skirt

status: unknown

I thought they were aware of the importance of the museum.

-McGuire Gibson

museum number: unknown

excavation number: unknown

provenience: Arslan Tash

dimension(s) (in cm): height: 8; width: 9.7; depth: 1.2

material: ivory

date: Iron Age (8th century BC)

description: Ivory plaque of "Woman at the Window"

status: at risk

The land under Syrian feet is dissolving. The latest destruction symbolizes a total rupture with the country's past and presumed future. A people who dared to demand freedom received annihilation instead.

-Robin Yassin-Kassab

museum number: IM65353

excavation number: ND10485

provenience: Nimrud (SW 37)

dimension(s) (in cm): height: 7.5; width: at top 3.4; width: at bas 4.8; thickness: 0.8; diam. ca. 13.0

material: ivory

date: Neo Assyrian (ca. 800 BC)

description: Short-haired male, facing right, sitting on a flower, left hand at his mouth; wears a belt around his waist.

status: unknown

Without provenance an object loses its point of reference, its history, and its context.

-Selma Al-Radi

museum number: unknown

excavation number: ND13496

provenience: Nimrud (SW 37)

dimension(s) (in cm): height: 2.1, width: 2.7, thickness: 0.5

material: ivory

date: Neo Assyrian (ca. 800 BC)

description: Raised right arm holding the shaft of a spear (?); reverse side has horizontal markings.

status: unknown

The offices and archives of the State Board of Antiquities and Heritage (SBAH), which administers all antiquities sites and museums in Iraq, were looted too, and thousands of records, photographs, maps and microfilms destroyed or damaged.

-McGuire Gibson

museum number: unknown
excavation number: ND13398
provenience: Nimrud (SW 37)
dimension(s) (in cm): height: 6.0; width: 2.1; thickness: 0.7
material: ivory
date: Neo Assyrian (ca. 800 BC)
description: Male head, front of face missing, facing right; wears short wig
status: unknown

T*hese items will appear for sale for $50 or $100 in antique stores all over the Middle East, Europe, and North America, or on eBay.*

-Eleanor Robson

MEDITERRANEAN CONNECTIONS

Between 8th and 7th centuries BCE the Neo-Assyrian Empire controlled much of the eastern Mediterranean from present-day Egypt to Anatolia, including the island of Cyprus. Contacts through trade and colonization linked Greece to the Near East and other Mediterranean cultures, greatly impacting Greek art and architecture. New eastern designs – palmettes, lotuses, and floral motifs—appeared on artifacts accompanied by figural representations both human and animal, Greek and Assyrian. The artifacts displayed here illustrate the Greek response to these important cultural influences.

ONE-HANDLED MUG WITH BIRDS (Ducks or Herons?)
Greek (Attica), Geometric Period, ca. 750–725 BCE
clay
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1915.31

The elegant form of this vessel with its flaring rim and single looped handle embodies the stylistic traditions coming from the Near East into the Greek world. The Assyrian Empire regulated trade in the eastern Mediterranean during this period of the 8th through 7th centuries BCE and helped shape the styles adopted by Greek artists.

FIGURINE OF A HORSE
Greek, Geometric Period, ca. 8th century BCE

solid-cast bronze
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1927.14

The horse figured prominently in ancient Mediterranean culture and art and was among the earliest and most commonly depicted subjects explored by Greek artists. Horses symbolized wealth, power, and prestige but also were treasured companions of humans and the gods. Early sculptures, in profile, closely mimicked painted silhouettes of the animals.

TRE-FOIL OINOCHOE WITH HORSE
Greek (Attica), Geometric Period, ca. 750–700 BCE
clay
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1915.42

PYXIS WITH CHARIOTS (above)
Greek (Attica), Geometric Period, late 8th century BCE
clay
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1913.6

Pyxides, frequently found in Greek burials, may have served as containers for small objects or perishable offerings during the owner's lifetime. In 8th century BCE, figural representations became more common. The main frieze of this pyxis depicts a procession of warriors driving chariots, separated by geometric panels, possibly referring to the deceased's military exploits.

PLAQUETTE OF A WINGED SPHINX
Greek (Melian), ca. 470 BCE
terracotta

Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26

1923.7

The Greek sphinx is a composite typically represented with the body of a lion, wings, and a human head. Winged versions are typically found in Near Eastern contexts. Assyrian texts identify this fantastic creature as the protective figure *lamassu* (feminine *apsasu*). The Greek version here recalls the Near Eastern type.

BLACK-FIGURE AMPHORA FRAGMENT WITH PANTHER, GRIFFIN, AND OTHERS
Greek (Attica), ca. 575–550 BCE

clay
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1913.10

Athenian artists, inspired by Corinthian examples, were quick adopt Near Eastern styles with exotic animals arrayed in horizontal bands or registers.

CALDRON PROTOME IN THE FORM OF A GRIFFIN
Greek, ca. 620–600 BCE
hollow-cast bronze
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1923.16

Protomes were figural projections used on ancient cauldrons. They were also given as prizes to victorious athletes and dedicated at Greek sanctuaries. Exotic and mythical beasts, such as lions, griffins, and sphinxes, were favorite subjects. Griffins, in particular, alluded to Near Eastern influences and suggested connections to a world beyond Greece.

The city of Corinth, strategically situated on an isthmus, served as the gateway between Greece and the outside world. Corinth became a natural conduit for trade goods from the eastern Mediterranean and export to the west. Corinthian art was among the earliest to reflect the reopening contact with the Near East and Egypt.

BLACK-FIGURE ARYBALLOS WITH LIONESSES AND A BULL
Greek (Proto-Corinthian), 650–640 BCE
clay
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1915.35

BLACK-FIGURE ALABASTRON
by the "Dolphin Painter"
Greek (Corinthian), ca. 625–600 BCE
clay
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1928.3

ONE-HANDLED FOOTED GOBLET
Iranian, from Khorvinstan (Alborz Province), ca 1000 BCE
clay
Gift of Professor and Mrs. Robert Walkling
1968.12

This Iranian-made goblet shares formal similarities with the shapes of Assyrian palace wares and illustrates the cross-cultural influences in the region. Though undecorated and fashioned from coarse clay, the ancient potter endeavored to emulate more elegant cups used by near-eastern elites.

POMEGRANATE MODEL (Rattle?)
Greek (Attica), Geometric Period, ca. 750–735 BCE
clay
Gift of Edward Perry Warren, Esq. H'26
1915.15

This pomegranate-shaped artifact likely came from a funerary context. The vase's shape is formed from a hollow clay shell, covered with painted geometric and figural decoration. Images of pomegranates, a symbol of fertility, frequently appear in ancient art, clothing, and jewelry throughout the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean.