ORIENTALISM AND VISUAL CULTURE

Imagining Mesopotamia in Nineteenth-Century Europe

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CONTENTS

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION: A NEW ANTIQUITY

"LIKE THE WORLD OF A DREAM"

Toward the beginning of a long stay in Paris in 1885, a cultivated 29-year-old Viennese wrote home about the wonders of the Ancient Near Eastern collections of the Louvre.

> I just had time for a fleeting glance at the Assyrian and Egyptian rooms, which I must visit again several times. There were Assyrian kings–tall as trees and holding lions for lapdogs in their arms, winged bulls with human figures, their hair beautifully dressed, cuneiform inscriptions as clear as if they had been engraved yesterday, and then Egyptian bas-reliefs decorated in fiery colors, colossal kings, real sphinxes, all like the world of a dream [eine Welt wie im Traum] (cf. Figs. 11–12).[1]

Sigmund Freud was writing to his fiancée Martha Bernays. This may have been his last unguarded remark on dreams.

Archaeology, both as activity and metaphor, has a remarkable centrality to Freud's thought.[2] Freud's response to these ancient artifacts resonates throughout this study as well for many reasons. At points in this book, we will find an almost paradigmatic Freudian mechanics in the reaction of some beholders to Assyrian art. The objects first move and overwhelm the viewer in a seemingly visceral, prerational manner only to be later repressed under the control of what seems to be an aesthetically concerned superego, determined to uphold the artistic supremacy of ancient Greek art.

Even more, Freud's response introduces the very interaction between object and viewer that constitutes artistic reception. Considered in light of his own incipient research, his remarks offer insight into the very process of reception, and the particular historical moment to be considered. To get at this, though, we must consider Freud's Assyrian dream world in the social, as much as psychological, dimensions of the public apprehension of archaeological discovery. Just as archaeology served Freud as what has been called "a mighty metaphor" in the analysis of dreams, we can

take Freud's conception of a dream as a perfect metaphor for the nineteenth-century apprehension of the fruits of Ancient Near Eastern archaeology.

Reading Freud's letter more closely helps to place Assyria in its nineteenth-century context. First, it is striking that Freud devotes far more attention to the arts of ancient Assyria than those of Egypt. Indeed, his description of Egyptian "colossal kings" comes across as merely a laconic echo of powerful Assyrian kings "as large as trees, holding lions in their hands as if they were lap dogs." This relation of Assyria to Egypt is precisely the opposite of more recent times, in which ancient Egypt plays the dominant role in public awareness. It is a hint of the period's unique excitement about the Assyrian discoveries, which first brought to light in the West numerous objects of remarkable, virtually unprecedented style and subject, from an ancient culture of great interest but little previous direct trace: a new antiquity.

Also evident in Freud's description is the role of the museum's display in evincing his enthusiasm. It is a compelling sight "which I will have to revisit many times." The "real sphinxes" or cuneiform inscriptions "as clear as if they had been engraved yesterday" would seem to suggest a sort of ideal presence perceived in the display, a historicist window to a distant culture. This was a paradigmatic reaction to viewing Assyrian artifacts in the nineteenth century, which we will find in responses throughout Europe. It is the reaction, for example, of one of Thomas Hardy's characters in *The Hand of Ethelberta* of 1876, in a room at the British Museum "lined with bas-reliefs from Nineveh."

> Only just think that this is not imagined of Assyria, but done in Assyrian times by Assyrian hands. Don't you feel as if you were actually in Nineveh; that as we now walk between these slabs, so walked Ninevites between them once?[3]

Such a response is characteristic of the modern approach to ancient objects. It is the unique category of "age-value," codified in the early twentieth century by Alois Riegl. Riegl distinguished age-value from more established modes of interpretation such as seeing an artifact in terms of its artistic or historical value.[4] As Stephen Bann states, the age-value of an artifact "is defined by its immediate accessibility to perception" in a way prior to any scholarly knowledge or conventional education. It is just this sense of wonderment at "being there" that is celebrated by Hardy's character and highlighted (or constructed) within the space of the museum.

The emergence of age-value in the nineteenth century has fundamental ramifications–social, intellectual, and political–for the history of Assyrian reception. But even more than particular values, this interpretive range itself is crucial. Implicit within it is a fragmentation of the experience of the ancient artifact between different modes of valuation (and different audiences): the antiquarian, the aesthetic, and, based on age-value what we might call the material, focused on the sheer imposing quiddity of the objects.

These three sorts of approaches to antiquities will be central to our inquiry as well. The aesthetic in particular, located somewhere between the omnivorous range of age-value and the rigidly codified social and intellectual boundaries of the antiquarian realm, plays a central role. But these valuative modes appear in differing relations and with fluid boundaries at different times and places. For precisely this reason, we return to one final point in Freud's unique insight on viewing Assyria.

Like Hardy's character, Freud is impressed by the aura of antiquity in the artifacts, but his reaction is not one of naive identity with them. For him, too, the museum creates a "world;" however, it is not one in which everyday experience reigns. Freud suggests instead a certain wonder at the museum's ability to summon an interiorized experience, "like the world of a dream." His concept of the dream, then just being formed, connects us directly to questions of representation and display, to the machinery behind the hallucinatory experience of Hardy's character, and to the means of its broader commodification and promulgation to nineteenth-century audiences.

In his research in the following decade, through the publication in 1900 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud sought to analyze the way normally intelligible elements from waking life were reformulated in dreams to serve other kinds of drives beside those that apparently dominated everyday existence. Extrapolating from the vision of a museum's Assyrian display as the world of a dream, one can posit that the museum too practices a version of what Freud termed "dream-work," a rearrangement or transformation of discrete elements that fit requirements distinct from those of prior, normative experience. As a dream is distant from waking reality but also created from it, so the museum's display is distant from the actuality of ancient Assyria, but at the same time, quite literally, made up of it. Considering the display of ancient artifacts in the context of a dream means considering them in terms of *transformations*, in a fluid setting governed at least as much by the needs and desires of the Western host as by any quality of the individual objects. Rather than inherent values, the properties of ancient Mesopotamian artifacts as perceived by their nineteenth-century viewers are best approached as something like shared dreams: social projections situated in unique, discontinuous contexts (such as personal, communal, institutional, or national), applied to a relatively common repertory of objects.

Such transformations of Assyria and related ancient Mesopotamian cultures are the basic topic of this book. In fact, Assyria was literally made into a dream. Many popular sources on the archaeological rediscovery of Assyria in the nineteenth century begin with references to dreamy, childhood visions of the East, based on texts like *The Thousand and One Nights*. But, as also recognized by Freud, the dream is not only to be taken in a literal sense.

As we shall see in some detail, the work of filtering, revising, and reconstructing Assyria was staged not only in nineteenth-century museums, but throughout its

richly varied visual culture. These dream-like transformations range from those of a primarily political or ideological nature to those controlled by historical or aesthetic postulates to physical or instrumental ones. Further, the ordering, circulation, and emulation of the Ancient Near East (both within and beyond museums) must be seen in connection with larger complexes of social tensions, suppositions, needs, and desires: all the kinds of things manifested, on an individual level, in dreams. That, put most broadly, is the argument of this book.

Freud's thoughts are not merely applicable to the nineteenth-century reception of Ancient Near Eastern archaeology, but, in fact, structurally complicit with it. Following them a bit farther, we find a figure central to our own study. What has been called Freud's "infatuation" with archaeology was focused particularly on the work of one man: Heinrich Schliemann.[5] Transfixing and original as was his success in the later nineteenth century, it had a specific model, as Schliemann himself freely admitted. Schliemann's *Ilios* of 1881, on the rediscovery of Homer's Troy, is dedicated to "the Right Honorable Sir Austen Henry Layard . . . Pioneer in Recovering the Lost History of the Ancient Cities of Western Asia. . . . "

Layard is central to this narrative. He is the virtual founder of Assyrian archaeology in England, whose finds are the core of the British Museum's extraordinary Assyrian holdings. But Schliemann's dedication to Layard's pioneering work not only commemorates his finds, but also Layard's energetic publicization of his discoveries. Layard's finds were, in fact, both made and mounted in the West slightly later than those of the Frenchman Paul-Émile Botta, whose discoveries Freud was actually viewing in the Louvre. Indeed, France beat England in the great imperial contest to be the first to bring to Europe remains of ancient Assyria. But today Layard's name looms so much larger, due largly to his genius for publicization, within the favorable English milieu analyzed in this book. Indeed, it is in his function as publicist that we will first meet him. Layard's *Nineveh and Its Remains* has been called the greatest archaeological bestseller of the nineteenth century.[6] Freud's fascination with Schliemann and the "ur-narrative" of archaeological discovery pioneered by Layard are also behind his attitude of wonder in the Louvre's Ancient Near Eastern galleries.

As I HOPE all this suggests, this book is not primarily concerned with ancient Assyrian archaeology itself, but rather with what was made of it in Europe during roughly the second half of the nineteenth century and a bit beyond. My goal is to elaborate the matrix of institutions, ideologies, and audiences through which the cultural image and the very artifacts of ancient Assyria (and related portions of the Ancient Near East) were both circulated and continually reinvented among audiences in England, France, and Germany at particular moments between the initial archaeological discoveries and the First World War. Freud is only the first

of a wide range of viewers we will consider: aristocrats and commoners, scholars and amateurs, artists and critics. For many, as for Freud, Mesopotamia had a sort of compulsive, mysterious quality. But it was one very differently construed by different viewers, as varying and even contradictory interests, needs, competencies, fears, and identities were brought to bear.

While Mesopotamia is my goal, I am also fundamentally concerned with the methodological and theoretical tools employed to track it. The first chapter of this book elaborates their role here and continued theoretical considerations are woven throughout the text. This interplay between method and subject is designed to provide opportunity both to theorize history and historicize theory. This sort of dialectical interplay is particularly appropriate to a study of reception. I conceive of reception through the reception theory enunciated by Hans-Robert Jauss as well as the treatment of reception by Walter Benjamin and other figures associated with the Frankfurt School. For both Jauss and Benjamin, reception is a dynamic process in which meaning is not just passively received but also actively produced. Tracking the fragmentations, mediations, and transformations of Mesopotamia through the extraordinary range of audiences active in Western Europe thus involves not only gauging reactions to the original artifacts or considering the circumstances of their display (important as these are), but also considering the mediation, reproduction, and emulation of the objects in contemporary work. Accordingly, we will consider in the context of reception, in addition to the ancient artifacts themselves, an entire range of emulatory production, which is almost a cross-section of contemporary popular and visual culture: poems and panoramas, jewelry and bibelots, theatre, prints, sculpture, architecture, and, most of all, painting.

Mesopotamia as a subject brings up another basic theoretical area from which I draw throughout this book: postcolonial studies. As the past two decades have seen a surge of studies of nineteenth-century exoticism, we may now be at a point where it is worthwhile reconsidering the provisional assumptions under which some of this work was undertaken. If the initial fallout from Edward Said's *Orientalism* did much to raise the topic of the exotic among art historians, the intellectual challenge begun in his work has (with some exceptions) still been largely deferred. My focus is more prospective than retrospective, but this study works also to highlight roads not taken in earlier scholarship, as suggested at points in the first and second chapters.

But reception also must consider Assyria in a further field of representation, which is located between artifacts themselves and the sort of beholding represented by Freud: language. Mesopotamia also provided terms of reference, floating signifiers applied in a variety of contexts. The discursive construction of Assyria is a reception in its own right, an ineffable and essential component of the whole, located both within and beyond particular objects.

COURBET'S BEARD AND "THE MEMBER FROM NINEVEH"

. . . "myself painting, showing the Assyrian profile of my head." Gustave Courbet's description of himself at the center of his *Atelier* of 1855 is among the most famous self-descriptions in all of nineteenth-century art. While it has often been taken as evidence of Courbet's peculiar bravado, referring to his exaggerated features and long, tapered beard, this remark has rarely been considered in connection with the currency of Assyria. Yet Courbet's offhanded remark would have been incomprehensible only a decade earlier and bears a peculiar relation to Assyria itself.

Layard ultimately spent most of his life involved in politics, capitalizing upon his fame gained as archaeologist. In the witty, confrontational realm of Parliamentary debate, he was sometimes addressed as "the Member from Nineveh." In both the cases of Courbet and Layard, Assyria is a discursive site, an idea founded on a complex of references and expectations. Each reference takes on further meaning through analysis of its enunciatory context, the milieu in which it is spoken. We will see in Courbet's case, in the third chapter, how his description crystallizes the fundamentally constrained situation in which the image of Assyria circulated in mid-nineteenth-century France. Layard's moniker, in the same way, accords with the archaeologist's appropriation of the fame of his discoveries, a pattern explored especially in the fifth chapter. The later adoption by Joséphin Péladan of both Mesopotamian form and identity considered in the seventh chapter, marks a fascinating combination of features of these earlier situations.

As these examples attest, the term Assyrian was applied to many more things than artifacts in a museum. The very nature and pattern of this discursive appropriation says much about the perceived identity and nature of the various referents. Looking at Mesopotamia from the standpoint of reception must also involve considering the iterations of the very term, however "impurely" and contingently they apply. The concept of hybridity, as developed in postcolonial theory particularly by Homi Bhabha, is of great importance in this respect. Not only does hybridity focus exactly on the development of the kinds of discursive permutations that are of interest here, but it also speaks directly to the nature of power relations involved. Despite the often very different, and even conflicting, interests and capabilities that were brought to the objects, the imbalance of power between nineteenth-century Mesopotamia and the dominant European colonial powers that appropriated its buried antiquities suffuses this entire history and is among the few common assumptions about the place that can be found throughout Europe.

The relative continuity of an imperialist relation between Europe and the lands beyond it is fundamental to understanding the reception of Mesopotamia. But I am most concerned with the ways in which even this assumption of power is itself variously transformed and turned to different functions by the different audiences

involved. For this reason, the greatest attention in this book is paid to the one sort of interpretation of Mesopotamian artifacts that evoked the greatest controversy in Europe itself: the vexed, persistent question of its aesthetic potential. More than any other approach, tracking the reception of Mesopotamia during the period of these acquisitions, not only in art, but as art itself, illuminates its complex treatment. In the process, the West itself is revealed as far from monolithic. The aesthetic reception of ancient Assyrian and other Mesopotamian artifacts was staged in realms of conflict and contestation through which even the objects themselves were fundamentally mediated. At the same time, however new and striking were the artifacts, they were identified, and ultimately assimilated, largely as contributions to preexistent schemes and suppositions about art, history, and Mesopotamian culture. I say "largely," but not completely, in the same way Bhabha describes the stance toward power of the colonialist mimic as "the same, but different."[7] For even as the artifacts of ancient Mesopotamia were located within the larger European worldview, they also worked subtly to amend that view, especially in the changing estimations of their aesthetic potential.

Most postcolonial studies focus on modern cultures and objects relatively contemporaneous to them. Here, by contrast, we are concerned with the lesser examined area of historical exoticism, focusing on the modern reception of ancient artifacts. Accordingly, the overlap of history and exoticism must also be examined in its own right, as treated at the end of the first chapter.

Having filtered Freud's dream-like wonder over Mesopotamian discoveries through some of the concerns of this book, we can restate it more explicitly in the words of Walter Benjamin. Though this book has roots in a number of theoretical and methodological areas, its greatest debt is to Benjamin. The start of Benjamin's 1939 prospectus for his "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" (now better known as the Arcades Project) describes succinctly the material system and ideological effect of the accretion of artifacts. It is worth quoting at length:

> The subject of this book is an illusion expressed by Schopenhauer in the following formula: to seize the essence of history, it suffices to compare Herodotus and the morning newspaper. What is expressed here is a feeling of vertigo characteristic of the nineteenth century's conception of history. It corresponds to a viewpoint according to which the course of the world is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things. The characteristic residue of this conception is what has been called the "History of Civilization," which makes an inventory, point by point, of humanity's life forms and creations. The riches thus amassed in the aerarium [i.e., storehouse] of civilization henceforth appear as though identified for all time. This conception of history minimizes the fact that such riches owe not only their existence but also their transmission to a constant effort of society – an effort, moreover, by which these riches are strangely altered. Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of this reifying representation of

civilization, the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. These creations undergo this "illumination" not only in a theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition, but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence.[8]

Benjamin proceeds immediately to the arcades themselves, the locus of the new objects, and social norms he wished to examine. But his analysis can be applied equally well to the arcade-like grandeur of the museum, which was also a fundamental product of the nineteenth century. Indeed, Benjamin's "universe of a phantasmagoria" directly summons Freud's own Assyrian dreamworld in the Louvre. Freud's reaction is conceived through the gathering of "riches" in the museum as "aerarium of civilization," and staged directly in reaction to "the immediacy of their perceptible presence."

Freud's concern (in a private letter, after all) is framed purely in terms of individual beholding. Taking Benjamin's more systematic view, we cannot ignore his key observation that the "transmission" of these treasures "through a constant effort of society" leaves them "strangely altered." This observation applies not only to "actual" beholding, but even more to beholding mediated by the machinery of reproduction, which flourished in the later nineteenth century and was a concern of Benjamin's as well. Taking this cue from Benjamin, we will examine in detail the crucial role of contemporary reproductive technology – particularly that of the illustrated magazine – in the circulation of Mesopotamia in all three countries to be considered.

Also explicit in Benjamin's formulation is a critique of a formulaic "History of Civilization." Focus on the work of reception undermines the "endless series of facts" of a positivist and totalizing world history. It presents a stance structurally complementary to that of hybridity in postcolonial theory. Both highlight varieties of transformation, brushing conventional arrangements of history and power against the grain.

We must, however, defer this consideration to the following chapter, which presents in more detail the theoretical and methodological concerns of this study. For now, Benjamin's analysis orients Freud's perception within the context of this book.

This book consists of eight chapters that are divided into two parts. The first part of this book is devoted to articulating a theoretical and methodological approach to exoticism and reception, which then opens onto Mesopotamian exoticism. The first chapter draws particularly on studies in artistic exoticism, reception theory, the Frankfurt school, and postcolonial studies. The second chapter begins to insert the analysis of exoticism as reception into nineteenth-century European art and

visual culture. In the process, it examines some key images of Mesopotamia from the period before the archaeological discoveries, analyzing the specific nature of Mesopotamia as a term of exoticist reference.

The second part of the book looks in detail at central milieux of Mesopotamian reception. The third chapter deals with the strangely unenthusiastic French reception at mid-century of Botta's Assyrian finds, before turning, in chapters four through six, to the remarkably deep and sustained English reaction to Layard's finds of similar objects at roughly the same time. Considering, in turn, such topics as the institutional history of the objects in the British Museum, patterns of publicity for Layard and the finds, and emulatory Mesopotamian production from the second half of the nineteenth century, we find many of the same themes as in France, yet now transformed. In the final two chapters, we recross the channel to consider the reception of further Ancient Near Eastern discoveries, in later nineteenth-century France and early twentieth-century Germany. The later French milieu far surpasses that of Botta's time in its interest and specificity about the Ancient Near East, while it also splits the identity of Mesopotamia between Assyria and other referents derived from more recent French archaeological successes. The German milieu, developed around the German excavations at Babylon, presents another set of priorities, which in many ways brings this account full circle. In an atmosphere constrained by physical limitations and ideological pressures, we find a retreat to the identity of Assyria, despite the actual German discovery of the one site, Babylon, with potential to rival Assyria (and its capital, Nineveh) in the Western imagination. Further, the very nature of visual circulation in early twentieth-century Berlin is transmuted in a way that fundamentally undermines the nineteenth-century technologies of presence that had driven the situation begun with Layard and Botta.

This book, then, belongs to the genre known in German as "Antikenrezeption." It focuses not on ancient Mesopotamian art itself so much as what was made of it, engaging the varied, complex, and even perverse fragmentations of form and meaning that accrue in reception. Dedicated to several moments in Europe's reception of Mesopotamia, its methodological tools are designed to illuminate the subtle and shifting nature of the many transformations involved in Mesopotamia's European reception and the (still continuing) shocks of its assimilation.