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Published: June 1, 1997



The Burrell Canford Relief

FROM NINEVEH TO NEW YORK

The Strange Story of the Assyrian Reliefs in the Metropolitan Museum and the Hidden Masterpiece at Canford School.

By John Malcolm Russell with contributions by Judith McKenzie and Stephanie Dalley.

Illustrated. 232 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press in association with the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

I haven't read a more thrilling book in years about archeology and the history of taste than John Malcolm Russell's story of the peregrinations of the spectacular Assyrian reliefs and colossi now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Or one more beautifully organized, scrupulously researched and laden with vivid human characterizations and penetrating observations about the fashions and foibles surrounding artistic styles.

All the elements are there - the treasures themselves, those powerful stones from Nimrud (in present-day Iraq) dating to the time of King Assurnasirpal II (reigned 883-859 B.C.); the dashing adventurer and archeologist, Sir Austen Henry Layard, who unearthed them; the wealthy patroness, Lady Charlotte Guest, to whom Layard gave the stones (and whose husband, Sir John, became wild with jealousy at the friendship); the stingy British Museum, which could have won even more treasures than it did, were it not for artistic prejudices; Lady Charlotte's magical "Nineveh Porch," a gem of the Victorian era, built at her estate, Canford Manor; the forced sale of the artifacts by an heir; their purchase for a song by a pushy and courageous American art dealer, Dikran Kelekian; some feckless American museums that didn't lunge for the prize; a rich philanthropist, John D. Rockefeller Jr., who acquired them definitely not for a song; a most unexpected and lucky gift for the Metropolitan that the institution almost lost; an unexpected find in 1992 by the author himself of a splendid ancient relief painted over and forgotten, which itself became a notable auction item.

"From Nineveh to New York" fairly races along through 11 richly textured chapters (one written by a collaborator, Judith McKenzie), supplemented by notes and six appendixes (one by Stephanie Dalley, who gives a translation of the cuneiform decorating the rediscovered relief). The book provides a succinct and useful overview of the glories of ancient Assyrian art.

For Mr. Russell, the leading expert on Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, the story started in 1992, when he was working on three interlocking projects involving Assyrian archeology. In the process he and a

colleague, Julian Reade of the British Museum, discovered something surprising in the Nineveh Porch at Lady Charlotte's former Canford Manor in Dorset, now a boys' school. It was wholly different from the two plaster casts, depicting a bullfight and King Assurnasirpal II, that he had expected to encounter. Instead, there was what an Assyriologist of the late 19th century described in his notes, which Mr. Russell had just pored over: a lower plaster panel with a stone upper half, painted over and completely obscured. Mr. Russell and Mr. Reade were also shown a fragment of Assyrian carving with three severed heads, which a school official had found while working on the foundations of the porch. As the author says, "We departed Canford pleased with our discovery of not just one but two new Assyrian reliefs, but concerned that these might now be sold as the other Canford reliefs had been."

There the author leaves us a bit in suspense while he takes us on a riveting journey through the history of Nineveh and its stones from ancient times up to today. This is the most lucid description I have seen of the major palaces and their decorations, all proclaiming the ideology of the land and its "power, piety and prosperity." The tradition of Nineveh has always been powerful to us in the West because of the mentions of the city in the Bible. In Jonah it is the gentile city saved by God's mercy, and in Zephaniah it is the very epitome of corruption destroyed by God's wrath.

In 1847 no one could read cuneiform; by 1853 tens of thousands of cuneiform texts had been uncovered and deciphered. In 1845 Henry Layard, then 28 and supported by the British Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire, started digging at Nimrud and acquiring what he found. The letter of approval from the Sultan's Grand Vizier is an art collector's dream: "No obstacle should be put in the way of his taking the stones which . . . are present in desert places." (It should be added that ancient stones were burned for lime in those days - and what remains in the palaces now is being sacked for hard currency by the regime of Saddam Hussein.)

In 1847 Layard, on a British Museum stipend, went to Nineveh and discovered the remains of Sennacherib's palace. He quit because of lack of funds and illness, and soon the first shipment of Assyrian sculptures - 11 wall reliefs and a colossal head - arrived at the museum. Eventually Layard would have shipped back dozens of reliefs.

In a short time things Assyrian became a national rage in Britain, boosted by the arrival of the stones and several books by Layard on his adventures. The flamboyant Assyrian revival manifested itself in popular panoramas, in rip-offs of Layard's books and in a grand Disney-like setting at the newly opened Crystal Palace. Yet the enthusiasm was blunted by classical die-hards who belittled Assyrian work as not real art. The pinnacle of taste still remained the sculptures of the Parthenon and the Apollo Belvedere.

The book recounts sometimes astonishing intrigues as the stones now in the Met moved from their ancient sites into Lady Charlotte's Nineveh Porch, a half-Assyrian, half-Gothic "chapel" to archeology, and then to America and, after years of frustration, to the Met as a gift of John D. Rockefeller Jr.

And what happened to the stones Mr. Russell and his colleague found at the boys' school - the panel depicting Assurnasirpal II and one of his coterie and inscribed with the "standard inscription" giving the name and title of the King and summarizing his military achievements? Or the small fragment with the three severed heads? The large piece sold at Christie's in July 1994 to a Japanese museum for a shocking \$11.9 million - the world's record price for any antiquity, three times what had been previously paid for an ancient work. The small stone fetched \$118,000.

As Mr. Russell cannot help observing at the conclusion of this stunning study of Assyrian art and archeology, the shifting sands of artistic taste, art dealing, philanthropy and the curious behavior of art museums: "Layard's winged God' had finally gotten its revenge on the Apollo Belvedere and the Elgin Marbles."