

# From Nineveh to New York

By: John Malcolm Russell

with contributions by Judith McKenzie and Stephanie Dalley



*The Canford Relief at the Burrell Collection*

## EPILOGUE

"This book examines the presentation and reception of Assyrian art by different cultures, in different contexts, over time. The focus is a group of sculptures from the palaces of Assurnasirpal II at ancient Kalhu and Sennacherib at ancient Nineveh, which were presented in five different contexts: The Assyrian palace, the Nineveh Porch, the antiquities market, the American art museum and the modern press.

### **The Assyrian Palace:**

The sculptured slabs that form the focus of this study were once parts of a continuous wall friezes in the palaces of Assurnasirpal at Nimrud and Sannacherib at Nineveh.

The function of these sculptures seems to have been purely practical. They were carved as visual records of the King's accomplishments and pious deeds, as models for correct behavior and warnings of the consequences of incorrect behavior, as apotropaic guardians of the palace and its inhabitants, and, in the case of Assurnasirpal at least, as reflections of the activities that went on in different parts of the palace.

The Assyrian practice of decorating palaces with wall reliefs apparently originated with Assurnasirpal--there is no evidence that it was the continuation of an earlier tradition. Neither is there any evidence that the Assyrians considered these sculptures to be art, or indeed that they even had a concept comparable to what we call art.

### **The Nineveh Porch:**

This small building is a major rediscovery in the history of nineteenth-century architecture. Built at the time that Assyrian sculpture was first being presented to the British Museum and in *Nineveh And Its Remains*, it

represents the response of Lady Charlotte Guest, a wealthy British citizen with inside access to both the Ninevite discoveries and their discoverer, her cousin Henry Layard, through whom she acquired a magnificent collection of Assyrian sculpture.

While the official debate over the Assyrian sculptures in the British Museum focused on their place in the chain of art, their aesthetic value, if any, and their importance as historical documents, Lady Charlotte shared the popular perception of these monuments as illustrations of Bible times.

In consequence, Lady Charlotte presented her collection of Ninevite art not in a classical architectural context, as in the British Museum, nor in an anti-Classical architectural context, as in Nineveh Court in the Crystal Palace, but rather in a post-Classical Gothic context, an architectural style with strong Christian associations.

### **The antiquities market:**

In 1919, the majority of the Canford sculptures were purchased by the art dealer Dikran Kelekian, who then endeavored to present them as desirable merchandise.

Kelekian focused on the rarity of the pieces, their Layard provenance, and their similarity to works in the British Museum and the Louvre.

This rarity was a mixed blessing, however, since this collection of unfamiliar art was too expensive for museums anxious to please the public with familiar offerings, and too large for private collectors.

The methods, risks, and rewards of selling antiquities in the early twentieth century are seen in the dealer's pitch and its reception by a number of prospective buyers, including museum directors and the philanthropist John D. Rockefeller, Jr., a major figure in the history of collecting.

### **The American art museum:**

The competition between the Metropolitan Museum and the Oriental Institute for permanent possession of the Wimborne Collection seemed to hinge on the question of whether the Assyrian sculptures were works of art or scientific research material.

Both museums presented their view of the significance of the reliefs to Rockefeller, who carefully investigated their claims and decided in favor of the Metropolitan.

The presentation of ancient Assyria and the idea of the ancient Orient in a twentieth-century American museum is then seen in the three successive Assyrian installations at the Metropolitan. In the first installation, the Assyrian colossi were juxtaposed with Classical statuary, emphasizing the perceived art-historical relationship between the two types of art.

The two subsequent installations, however, each presented the Assyrian reliefs in their own room, completely separate from other styles of art, and each of these rooms was designed with the goal of evoking the original Assyrian palatial context of the sculptures. The notion of Assyria as a link in the chain of art was thereby replaced by the assertion that Assyria was a discrete culture.

### **The modern press:**

The author played an inadvertent role in the greatest burst of Assyrian publicity in history. His discovery of an original sculpture still in place in the Nineveh Porch and its sale at auction provide a view of the modes of presentation for ancient art in the modern world. Analysis of the sale, and particularly its presentation by the international press, reveals things that we would perhaps prefer not to know about ourselves.

We have traveled with this group of Assyrian sculptures on their journey through time and space, examining the changing landscape of the presentation and reception of the idea of Assyria (and the idea of

art) as we go. Who can guess what the future holds for these pieces ? Upon seeing the Nimrud bull, the counterpart to the one at Canford, being dragged up the steps into the British Museum in 1850.

D. G. Rossetti speculated that this might not be its last stop:

For as that Bull-god once did stand  
And watched the burial-clouds of sand,  
Till these at last without a hand  
Rose o'er his eyes, another land,  
And blinded him with destiny :---  
So may he stand again; till now,  
In ships of unknown sail and prow,  
Some tribe of the Australian plough  
Bear him afar,--- a relic now  
Of London, not of Nineveh !

Rossetti doubtless imagined this to be an event of the distant future. In the case of the Nineveh Porch, however, that future is now. Of the 26 Assyrian sculptures originally built into its walls, none now remains at Canford and only three are still in England.

The rest have been carried off, not as Rossetti speculated to Australia, but mostly to another former colony, America, relics of the twentieth-century effort to drag the cultural center of the world westward from the Old World to the New."

### **The Legend of Nineveh**

" The problem with all these " histories" which were solely based on those who drew on the entire Classical and biblical corpus in compiling their great synthetic histories of Assyria and Babylonia, is that their authors neither had first-hand knowledge of the cultures they were recording, nor could they read cuneiform, so their accounts seem today little more than anthologized legends.

They are of interest because, for two and one half millennia, they were all that was available to even the most educated scholar. Concurrent with this " historical " tradition, and for a time supplanting it almost completely, was the Christian exegetical tradition, which was based exclusively on references to Nineveh in the Bible.

Its foremost exponent was Saint Jerome, whose commentaries on Jonah, Nahum, and Zephaniah laid the groundwork for all subsequent Christian exegesis on these prophets. Nineveh plays a unique role in this tradition as a gentile city that was both saved by God's incomprehensible mercy (Jonah) and destroyed by God's unimaginable wrath (Nahum, Zephaniah).

Reliefs on the west portal of Amiens Cathedral, for example, show the forgiven Nineveh, represented as a contemporary European city, as part of the Jonah story, while the destroyed Nineveh illustrates Nahum and Zephaniah. Clearly, the model of urban Nineveh is equated with urban Amiens. Nineveh's role as a moral example falls somewhere between that of two other great cities, Jerusalem, which generally evoked positive associations, and Babylon, whose reputation was very unfavorable.

There are other bodies of tradition about Nineveh in the period between its fall and rediscovery. One is the medieval Hebrew Midrashic and Rabbinic tradition--- R'Bachya, Ibn Ezra, Radak, Rambam, Rashi, and others---which flourished especially from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries and influenced Christian exegesis of the period.

Another is the tradition of the Arab geographers---Mas'udi, Ibn Hawqal, Muqaddasi, Ibn Zubayr, Ibn Battuta, and others---who correctly identified the ruins of Nineveh as they appeared in their own day. Interestingly, though the people who lived in the neighborhood of Nineveh knew its two large mounds by several names, most commonly Kuyunjik ("little lamb") and Nebi Yunus ("Prophet Jonah"), they never

ceased referring to both mounds as "Nineveh" (in contrast to the Classical histories, who could not even agree on whether Nineveh had been on the Tigris or the Euphrates).

Still another is the tradition of the European travelers from the twelfth to early nineteenth centuries--- Benjamin of Tudela, Ricolto Pennini, Leonhard Rauwolff, John Cartwright, Carsten Niebuhr, C. J. Rich, and others---all of whom accurately identified Nineveh's site. Loosely tied to this is the European geographic tradition, inspired by the Crusades and voyages of exploration.

This produced such works as the "Histoire ancienne (ca. 1210)" and Munster's *Cosmographia* (1550), both of which give imaginary physical descriptions of Nineveh, and Ortelius's "Thesaurus geographicus (1596)", which based its nearly correct location of the site on accounts of European travelers.

Finally there is the European romantic tradition of Rubens (defeat of Sennacherib, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, 1616-18), Byron (*Sardanapalus*, 1821), and Delacroix (*Death of Sardanapalus*, Paris, Louver, 1827), who drew on both Classical and biblical traditions for their strikingly original and powerfully expressive renditions of Ninevite subjects.

The most memorable of these, Byron's "The Destruction of Sannacherib" ("The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold / and his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold....."), was penned in 1815, twenty-five hundred years after Sennacherib's siege of Jerusalem, the event it recounts. Thirty-two years later, Layard discovered Sennacherib's own account of the siege, and Byron's biblical source was confronted with the first serious competition it had faced since the fall of Nineveh."

"The success of the Assyrian imperial program as it was embodied in the city of Nineveh can best be judged by looking at the ideas Nineveh generated. Images of Nineveh---center of the world, symbol of empire, moral model, proof of religious truth, encyclopedia of the past--- are formed by the reliefs and needs of those who imagine them. They are not physical entities, but reflections of their creators.

At the same time they are an enduring testament to the evocative power of Nineveh. Whether from the period of ancient Nineveh, the legendary Nineveh, or the rediscovered Nineveh, the significance of these images lies not in their relative truth, but rather in their indication that Nineveh was once so important that after it was gone people found they could not manage without it, and so continued to recreate it in their own image. The Nineveh Porch, which lies on the threshold between the legendary and rediscovered Ninevehs, is one such image."