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## CURRENT CONTRIBUTION

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## NOTE

This contribution is part of a larger dialogue of three articles and one responding piece that form the current issue of JOLCEL. The other contributions are “Two Styles More Opposed’: Harriet Hosmer’s Classicisms between Winckelmann and Bernini,” by Melissa L. Gustin (pp. 1–31) and “The Future of Winckelmann’s Classical Form: Walter Pater and Frederic Leighton” by Elizabeth Prettejohn (pp. 33–56). The response piece is “Bodily Exclusions? Winckelmann’s Victims and the Paradox of Form” by Rosa M. Rodríguez Porto (pp. 80–87).

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# Winckelmann in Nineveh: Assyrian Remains in the Age of Classics

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## ABSTRACT

By the middle of the nineteenth century, French and British diplomats managed excavations in the land of Assyrian kings, where Nineveh had been buried long before classical Greece. This could have been the opportunity to update the way Winckelmann considered ancient art, but when Assyrian remains entered museums, they precisely had been evaluated according to the *History of the Art of Antiquity*, in which Near Eastern items were said to be exact opposites of classical beauty. Aesthetic value of such strange objects has been immediately under notice, and museums themselves were quite reluctant to exhibit this unexpected heritage close to masterpieces of Greek “high art” (Edmund Oldfield). However, Assyria had got too many fans to be forgotten a second time: and instead of highlighting Hellenic pieces as art treasures, the “chain of art” inherited from Winckelmann was used to improve how Assyrian remains, at the very end, had influenced classical standards.

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It may seem surprising to consider the case of Assyria in a paper dedicated to Winckelmann. Not only did Winckelmann die in 1768—that is to say more than seventy years before the rediscovery of Assyria in the North East of the Ottoman Empire—but the notorious art historian did not even mention the scarce illustrations of Near Eastern art of Antiquity that were known by the eighteenth century.

Even if Winckelmann did not have the opportunity to study Assyrian remains (as they had still to be revealed when he was living), the way he emphasized Greek art definitely affected those who found and removed this heritage from Assyria to Western museums. This paper explores this kind of loose influence on museum practices by the second part of the nineteenth century and on the aesthetic debates that occurred in its wake.

## 1 Dreams and contest over a lost empire

Nineveh was one of the most important cities of the ancient Assyrian Empire, located in the North of Mesopotamia (where nowadays is the upper fringe of Iraq), and dominating a large part of the Near-East from the tenth till the seventh century before Christ. After the fall of Nineveh in 612 B.C., Assyria was set to decline and, at last, had been lost for many times. “All traces of it, incredible as that may appear, had passed away from the earth,” wrote M. Jones in 1866.<sup>1</sup> Scientific reports were frequently illustrated by these strange shapeless mounds that were being identified as the poor evidences of Assyrian civilization. Victor Place, who had played a part in the search for the Assyrian remains, noted in 1867 that “if it was easy to figure Romans, Egyptians or ancient Greeks, Assyrians did not leave any acceptable profile.”<sup>2</sup> Greek authors that Winckelmann used to read<sup>3</sup> had themselves said a few things on that matter—and those who did, tried to combine historical and biblical perspectives<sup>4</sup>—but Winckelmann checked many other documents about the East, including the *Travels and observations relating to several Parts of Barbary and the Levant*, published by Thomas Shaw in London around 1757,<sup>5</sup> and Chardin’s chronicles about Persia (*Journal du voyage du Chevalier Chardin en Perse*), edited at the end of the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> It is true that few pages of the *History of Ancient Art* (*Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums*, 1764) mention Eastern art from Antiquity, but Winckelmann focused on Persian gems, although he did know about monumental reliefs from Persepolis<sup>7</sup> that were to be linked, as quoted by George Rawlinson and others,<sup>8</sup> with Assyrian sculptures.

Assyrian remains had to wait till the end of 1842 to be excavated from the sands of North Mesopotamia. Some previous explorations had been done from 1808 by James Claudius Rich but nothing significant were found. Austen Layard, the consul who was to manage the first complete British excavation in Assyria from 1845, wrote in one of its archeological stories that “a case scarcely three feet square enclosed all that remained, not only of the great city of Nineveh, but of Babylon itself!”<sup>9</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jones, *Nineveh and its Story*, 17.

<sup>2</sup> “S’il nous était permis de nous représenter l’image exacte d’un Égyptien, d’un Romain ou d’un Grec, celle d’un Assyrien ne s’offrait à nous sous aucune forme saisissable.” Place, *Ninive et l’Assyrie*, 3.

<sup>3</sup> On Winckelmann’s references as recorded in the nineteenth century, see Winckelmann, translated by Henry Lodge in 1873, 14.

<sup>4</sup> Vlaardingerbroek, “The founding of Nineveh and Babylon in Greek historiography,” 233–241.

<sup>5</sup> Winckelmann referred to a French translation (*Voyages dans plusieurs provinces de la Barbarie et du Levant*, 1743). See Grimm and Mina Zeni, *Winckelmann e l’Egitto*, 21–22.

<sup>6</sup> Décultot, *Johann Joachim Winckelmann*, 264.

<sup>7</sup> Eppihimer, “Caylus, Winckelmann, and the Art of ‘Persian’ Gems,” 1–27, especially 18.

<sup>8</sup> We may refer to Rawlinson’s *Five Great monarchies of Ancient Eastern World*, 5, where the author reported the similarities between the ornaments of the winged bulls from Khorsabad and those “adopted afterwards by the Persians.”

<sup>9</sup> Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, xxv.

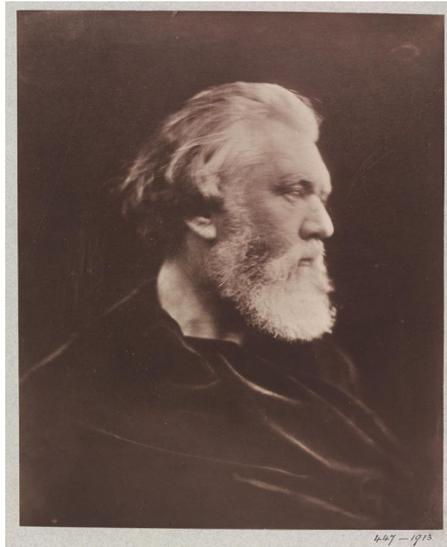


Figure 1: Julia Margaret Cameron, *A.H. Layard M.P.*, 1869, carbon print from copy negative (photographed), London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Prints and Drawings Study Room, 447–1913, given by Miss Enid DuCane, 3 April 1913.

Layard, indeed, had travelled to the land three years before, and was seduced by French discoveries in the same area.<sup>10</sup> In search of Nineveh,<sup>11</sup> the French consul Paul-émile Botta, with whom Layard maintained friendly relations about Near Eastern archaeology,<sup>12</sup> had found spectacular remains in Khorsabad, a little village in North East Mosul. The French government was immediately concerned by Botta’s scientific operations, but did not ignore the political benefit that provided such a foreign success over Great Britain and other European challengers. British opinion quickly urged London to fill the gap with the French and to cover Layard’s second trip in Assyria,<sup>13</sup> from where he was expected to get antiquities “to be added to the National Collections.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Layard, *Autobiography and Letters*, 107–8.

<sup>11</sup> On the advice and request of Jules Mohl, the then president of the Asiatic Society in Paris, see Menant, *Ninive et Babylone*, 12.

<sup>12</sup> Layard, *The Nineveh Court in the Crystal Palace*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> *The Athenaeum*, October 26, 1846, recalled how France was generous towards Botta while Great Britain neglected Layard’s discoveries: “It is painful, after witnessing this munificent patronage of science by the French Government, to think that, up to this moment, nothing has been done to assist Mr. Layard in his researches by our own” (“Mr. Layard’s Excavations at Mossul, *Fine Arts, Foreign correspondence*, September 3rd”: 1016–1017).

<sup>14</sup> Rawlinson, *A Memoir of Major-General Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson*, 172.

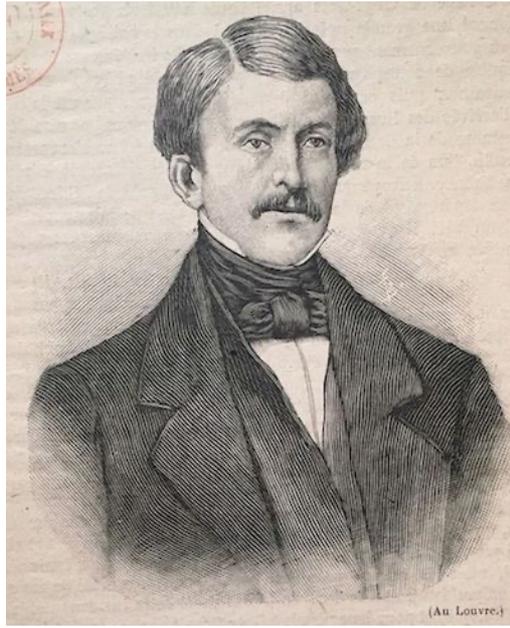


Figure 2: *Paul-Émile Botta*, 1840, etching after a painting by Charles-Émile de Champmartin, *Paul-Émile Botta, orientaliste*, Paris, Musée du Louvre (*Le Contemporain*, August 9th, 1914, p. 1), from the Musée d'Orsay Resource Library.

## 2 Faith and fashion: Assyria in nineteenth-century popular culture

Thus, one could think that the matter did not concern anyone but a few wealthy adventurers and political leaders in search of snap reputation, but discoveries in Assyria, on the contrary, acquired a real mass reputation over the Victorian society and in Imperial Paris—“the discovery created an immense sensation in Europe,” recalled George St Clair in 1892.<sup>15</sup>

Layard and Botta's results were obviously attractive for historians. But, in addition, these findings from the East were interpreted through the holy writings,<sup>16</sup> so that each discovery seemed to enlighten the Bible in a new and amazing way. In his broad circulation books, Layard himself intentionally focused on possible connections between Assyrian relics and the Old Testament,<sup>17</sup> although he preferred to remain cautious on that matter, whereas many publications around 1890 took the opportunity to document how archaeology revealed sacred history—“confirming in a remarkable manner the historical statements of the Bible,” as we

<sup>15</sup> St Clair, *Buried Cities and Bible*, 346.

<sup>16</sup> Especially in England. See Mirjam Brusius, “Le Tigre, le Louvre et l'échange,” 34–46, notably 35. British scholars in particular studied similarities between cuneiform tablets and biblical texts; see Menant, *Les langues perdues de la Perse et de l'Assyrie*, XIII.

<sup>17</sup> See Larsen, “Nineveh,” 111–35.

read in a 1889 Philadelphia publishing.<sup>18</sup> In the early 1870s, the discovery by George Smith of a tablet on which was inscribed an ancient story that could recall the Biblical flood, had already stressed the same point, in England as in Germany a few years later.<sup>19</sup> At the very beginning of the discoveries, it was still common to read the history of Assyria in relation to the accounts of the Bible (and especially Genesis), as Brownell did in 1856.<sup>20</sup>

That partly explains why mainstream press, excited by such stunning shortcuts, had informed British lecturers about Layard's adventures from 1846,<sup>21</sup> and why French papers had published on Botta's excavations as soon as the consul was in Khorsabad.<sup>22</sup> Popular medias covered the event when the Louvre opened the first Assyrian gallery in May 1847, and British periodicals wrote about monumental remains from Nimrud that Layard found among Ottoman sands,<sup>23</sup> even if the opening of the Assyrian room in the British museum had to be postponed till 1849. The topic drove the buzz, especially in London, where visitors hurried around the little corridor dedicated to Assyrian slabs in the ground level of the British Museum. In October 1850, the noisy arrival of the iconic colossal sculptures figuring bull and lion<sup>24</sup> had been significant enough for public opinion to require a better and enlarged display in the British Museum.<sup>25</sup> In Paris, so many visitors wanted to see antiquities from Khorsabad that the museum had to remain open all week long.<sup>26</sup>

For many decades, Assyrian matters was the big deal, not only for upper class but also for artists and writers. Painters as Britton Riviere or Edgar Degas did use Assyrian galleries as stimulating models, and many architects (for example Charles Chipiez or Charles Garnier) exploited inferences from Nineveh and Khorsabad in relation with their own researches. Something of a fancy Nineveh-style was appreciated in fashion, design, jewellery,<sup>27</sup> and ceramic.<sup>28</sup> Near Eastern history inspired performing arts as well: in Paris with the 1860 opera *Sémiramis* by Gaetano Rossi,<sup>29</sup> or in London a decade before with the *Sardanapalus* produced by Charles Keans and directly sketched after Botta and Layard.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the amazing bestsellers published by Layard from 1848 (in particular *Nineveh and its Remains*

<sup>18</sup> DeHass, *Buried Cities Recovered*, 412. A part of research in Assyria was seen as a scientific attempt "to describe the indices of the Deluge of Scripture." Ainsworth, *Researches in Assyria, Babylonia and Chaldaea*, 4.

<sup>19</sup> Marchand, *Down from Olympus*, 223.

<sup>20</sup> Brownell, *The Eastern or Old World*, 57.

<sup>21</sup> See Holloway, "Nineveh Sails for the New World," 243–256, especially 248.

<sup>22</sup> See "Fouilles entreprises à Khorsabad pour la découvertes des Antiquités de Ninive," *L'Illustration*, June 27, 1846: 268.

<sup>23</sup> See "The Nimroud sculptures," *The Illustrated London News*, June 26, 1847: 412.

<sup>24</sup> These sculptures instantly became the flagship image of ancient Assyria in Western imagination. See Danrey, "Winged Human-Headed Bulls of Nineveh," 133–39.

<sup>25</sup> Bohrer, "The Times and Space of History," 202–5.

<sup>26</sup> Fontan, "Adrien de Longpérier et la création du musée assyrien du Louvre," 230.

<sup>27</sup> See Roe, "Henry Layard et les arts décoratifs," 260–272.

<sup>28</sup> McCall, "Reinventing Babylon: Victorian Design in the Assyrian Style," 15–23.

<sup>29</sup> Hartmann, "Der Traum von der Fremde," 127–33.

<sup>30</sup> McCall, "Rediscovery and Aftermath," 202.

and *The Monuments of Nineveh*) were considered as a major information source for creators until the end of the 1880s.<sup>31</sup>



Figure 3: Unknown artist, *Assyrian stéle recording the conquest of Jews*, London, *British Museum*, ca. 1880s, Albumen print (photographed), London, Victoria and Albert Museum, Prints, Drawings & Paintings Collection, PH.3255–1897.

### 3 Near Eastern relics and their reception in a classical world

This unexpected Assyrian revival seems to have been enthusiastic,<sup>32</sup> especially when the “oriental renaissance,”<sup>33</sup> far from being a scientific matter only, tended to fix French and British colonialist ambitions.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, such a sudden intrusion of Assyrian aesthetic in the official academic art field generated many controversies because of Greco-Roman reputation. When Assyrian remains had to enter national collections, they had to face what Stephen L. Dyson called “the ghost of Winckelmann,”<sup>35</sup> that is to say, the idea about “the eternal value of Classical art” that still ruled museums by the middle of the nineteenth century.

The fact is that Winckelmann’s writings had a large impact upon European knowledges since the first edition of his *Reflections*, in 1755,<sup>36</sup> and even more in the tiny world of art historians of the next century: Ruskin or Ernst Curtius, to

<sup>31</sup> See Russell, *From Nineveh to New York*, 57.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas, “Assyrian Monsters and Domestic Chimeras,” 901.

<sup>33</sup> Gran-Eymerich, *Naissance de l’archéologie moderne*, specifically 90–91.

<sup>34</sup> See Holloway, “Nineveh Sails for the New World,” 255.

<sup>35</sup> Dyson, *In pursuit of Ancient Pasts*, 167.

<sup>36</sup> See the introduction of Winckelmann, *Letter and Report on the Discoveries at Herculaneum*, 1–62 (especially 3 and 21).

name just two, did share his ideas in the first part of the 1850s,<sup>37</sup> and Walter Pater published the decade after an essay about Winckelmann, in which he particularly mentioned how the librarian considered the main part of art history regarding to Greek spirit.<sup>38</sup>

According to the Winckelmann historical model, ancient civilizations had to be systematically compared to classical culture,<sup>39</sup> and that is precisely the way Assyrian remains had been considered. Maurice Joly, a French writer, soon underlined what he called “the limits” of Assyrian art, opposed to “the infinite diversity and vibrant innate Greek art design.”<sup>40</sup> Layard himself had been surprised to receive a mail from Henry Rawlinson (a renowned officer and scholar who would play a great part in the decipherment of cuneiform), in which his colleague, usually so benevolent with Layard, did question the aesthetic merit of slabs and sculptures that has just arrived from Baghdad. And when Layard replied and tried to stress the Assyrian “knowledge of the art,”<sup>41</sup> Rawlinson found it relevant to call for the Greek model: “When I criticize design and execution, [I hope you will] understand I do so merely because your winged god is not the Apollo Belvedere.”<sup>42</sup> The comment is quite significant as the Apollo Belvedere was precisely the last stop of the walking tour that Winckelmann imagined for the Museo Profano, in Vaticano at the end of the 1760s—not to mention that the guidebook of the museum described the statue as “the most beautiful in existence.”<sup>43</sup> So that, a century later, Rawlinson’s visions about Assyrian marbles were nothing else but a late revival of the device designed by Winckelmann and applied to recent discoveries in East Asia. As a conclusion, Rawlinson emphasized the peculiar aspect of the slabs sent by Layard: “Your cases arrived all right [...] The dying lion and the two Gods are my favorites. The battle pieces are curious, but I do not think they rank very highly as art.”<sup>44</sup>

#### 4 Marbles battle: Museums and the Greek standard

Richard Westmacott, from the British Museum, stated also that the Art of Nineveh was “very curious” (the same word used by Rawlinson) when he was interviewed by the museum in 1853 to judge if that kind of artefacts entered in the museum the year before can be exhibited so close to Greek marbles. The fact is that the gallery dedicated to the Assyrian remains (the “Assyrian” or “Nineveh Gallery”) paved the way to the classical section of the museum, and the “Nimrud Central Saloon” has been displayed precisely alongside the Elgin marbles room.

<sup>37</sup> See Haskell, “Winckelmann et son influence sur les historiens,” 83–100.

<sup>38</sup> Pater, “Winckelmann,” 115.

<sup>39</sup> Haskell, “Winckelmann et son influence sur les historiens,” 92.

<sup>40</sup> “C’est dans ces splendides monolithes que l’art assyrien semble avoir atteint ses dernières limites. Ce n’est certes ni la variété inépuisable, ni la forme si vivante et si naturelle de l’art grec.” Quoted by Hanno, *Les Villes retrouvées*, 148.

<sup>41</sup> Letter to his mother, quoted by Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria*, 96.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Waterfield, *Layard of Nineveh*, 147–148. See also Russell, *From Nineveh to New York*, 37.

<sup>43</sup> Ruprecht, *Winckelmann and the Vatican’s First Profane Museum*, 105.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted by Larsen, *The Conquest of Assyria*, 102.



Figure 4: *The Nimroud Central Saloon* (Ada R. Habershon, *The Bible and the British Museum*, London, Morgan and Scott, 1909, Pl. IV). The Assyrian remains in the British Museum, with Greek masterpieces in the background. With thanks to the Internet Archive, Microsoft, and the UCLA Library for this image.

Such a display had to be controversial in England, where the 1851 Great Exhibition had just promoted an idealized vision of classical Greece.<sup>45</sup> In the British Museum, although the Trustees chose to support excavations in Assyria from the second Layard mission, a special committee had to make a decision concerning the value of Assyrian remains, and to estimate their incidence on visitors. Question n° 9057 was particularly straight; the chairman, indeed, asked to Westmacott: “Do you think that giving so very prominent a place [to Nineveh marbles], and drawing attention so much to works of that character, will to a certain extent draw [people] away from models of pure beauty?”<sup>46</sup> In a word, the point was to say not only if Assyrian art could get the same attention than high samples of classical art considered as national treasures (and especially the Elgin marbles, purchased by the British Museum in 1816), but also to care about its effects on public taste.<sup>47</sup> Parthenon marbles were still said to be invaluable,<sup>48</sup> and it is quite significant that when Stratford Canning, the British ambassador in Constantinople, encouraged Layard in Nimrud, he primarily expected his name to be associated with the recovery of Assyrian slabs, as had the name of Lord Elgin been associated with Parthenon masterpieces.<sup>49</sup>

Moreover, Layard himself, who had been charmed by Hellenic ruins when he was young,<sup>50</sup> had at first enhanced Assyrian inscriptions over sculptures, and he

<sup>45</sup> See Challis, “Modern to Ancient,” 174–75.

<sup>46</sup> See Siegel, *The Emergence of the Modern Museum*, 159.

<sup>47</sup> Malley, *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain*, 64–65.

<sup>48</sup> Haskell and Penny, *Taste and the Antique*, 107.

<sup>49</sup> Reade, “Nineteenth-Century Nimrud,” 3.

<sup>50</sup> See Waterfield, *Layard of Nineveh*, 40–41.

asserted that objects “cannot have any intrinsic value for their beauty” (as he wrote to the Ambassador in Spring 1846). Layard concluded: “They are undoubtedly inferior to the most secondary works of Greece.”<sup>51</sup> In France, popular press also argued that these unusual artefacts, despite their attractive appearance, cannot compete with the “unmatched masterpieces by Phidias” (*Le Magasin pittoresque*, Paris, 1852).<sup>52</sup> Taste changed so slowly that the Louvre had to wait till the middle of the 1880s to think about an Assyrian-like decoration, forty years after the first discoveries, for the exhibition room dedicated to Mesopotamian findings<sup>53</sup>—as if the style of the ancient Near East had been too colorful for Parisians when Botta and Place had sent these remains from Khorsabad. Actually, as Seton Lloyd noted, scholar “brains” of the nineteenth century were too much involved in traditional disciplines to consider Near Eastern discoveries apart from classical references.<sup>54</sup> It is particularly revealing how Nineveh’s supporters themselves, in search of key arguments, felt it was more relevant to relate analogies between Near Eastern items and Greek arts, rather than to study Assyrian identity, as if relationships with classical icons was a kind of scientific label. So did Layard himself when he wanted to boast of his findings, which would be said to be “designed with a spirit and truthfulness worthy of a Greek artist,”<sup>55</sup> as he wrote in his book *Nineveh and Babylon*.

At the very end, the way Assyrian remains had been displayed in the British museum by Edward Hawkins, the Antiquities manager, just illustrated the “chain of art [...] derived from Winckelmann and later antiquarian thinkers,” as Frederic Bohrer quoted.<sup>56</sup> Antiquities were ordered so that visitors can discover sequentially Egypt, Assyria, Philageia and, at last, the Elgin marbles. It is quite surprising that a similar staging has been followed by the Louvre, where the first Assyrian Museum had been located just between the Egyptian gallery, as Théophile Gautier himself reported,<sup>57</sup> and the artefacts from Phoenicia and early Greece. Museums, in other words, wanted to show a progress from works of art that Winckelmann’s followers keep to consider archaic, essentially Egyptian, till a kind of transitional Etrusco-Persia-Levantine art that lead, upgraded and completed, to the Greek sense of harmony that defines the classical period.<sup>58</sup> Here was shown (exhibited) the mechanism described in the *Geschichte*, according to which art before Phidias had just expressed a feeling of *grandeur* while Greece had performed the final step of beauty.<sup>59</sup> At best, Assyria was substituted to Persia as the link between the upper level of the Egyptian art, still deficient, and the ideal of ancient Greece.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>51</sup> April 21, 1846. *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>52</sup> “Elles doivent à leur nouveauté, non moins qu’à leur étrangeté, d’attirer en ce moment beaucoup plus leur attention que les admirables œuvres de Phidias; elles ne feront point oublier ces dernières qui leur sont si incomparablement supérieures.” (« Antiquités assyriennes », *Le Magasin pittoresque*, XX, (1852): 243).

<sup>53</sup> See Fontan, “Le décor assyrien de la salle Sarzec au Louvre,” 246.

<sup>54</sup> Lloyd, *The art of the Ancient Near-East*, 8.

<sup>55</sup> Layard, *Discoveries in Nineveh and Babylon*, 120. See Waterfield, *Layard of Nineveh*, 217.

<sup>56</sup> Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, 121 and note 70.

<sup>57</sup> Gautier precisely quoted that the Assyrian Museum was nearby the room dedicated to the “Pharaonic hugeness” (“l’énormité pharaonique”). See *Guide de l’amateur au musée du Louvre*, 189.

<sup>58</sup> Potts, *Flesh and the Ideal*, 34.

<sup>59</sup> Décultot, *Johann Joachim Winckelmann*, 121.

<sup>60</sup> Collins, *Assyrian Palace Sculptures*, 13.

## 5 Down the art evolution

We may notice how such gradual typology of Antiquity in museums deals with the idea of progress in civilizations (with the master place to Europeans) built by British scholars in the mid-nineteenth century from the “Great Chain of Art.”<sup>61</sup> Museums, in short, promoted an evolutionary history of art that precisely reminded of how Winckelmann discredited art from Persia and Phoenicia on the grounds that these civilizations skipped the feeling of freedom (*Freiheit*) that would prevail in classical Greece. Following Winckelmann, this idea of a connection between art progress and political environment had been sustained at the turn of the nineteenth century by Friedrich Wolf in its *Prolegomena ad Homerum*,<sup>62</sup> and later in Humboldt and Curtius.<sup>63</sup> Only a minority of academics tried to put an end to “the dominant position” of Winckelmann and “his aesthetic of pure form,” as William McGrath observed.<sup>64</sup>

Moreover, the explicit vision of art as an organic process (from birth to decline), directly inherited from Winckelmann and his lecture of Paolo Rossi,<sup>65</sup> can still be detected in James Fergusson’s *Historical inquiry*, in 1875, where the architect studied “which was born and slowly nurtured on the banks of [the Nile and] the Euphrates, suddenly expanded and reached its manhood of intellectual power in Greece, and perished in decrepitude and crime in Rome.”<sup>66</sup> The “aesthetic credo of Winckelmann” (Simon Goldhill) was a hit in the late nineteenth century, as well as the idea of “calm serenity” did identify the classical era to a kind of “pre-Christian haven”<sup>67</sup> which was quite attractive in Victorian Society—and which definitely disqualified the art of previous times as wild and uncivilized.<sup>68</sup>

Needless to say how degrading for Assyrian remains this vision was. Shawn Malley, from the Bishop University, observed that an 1853 engraving of *The Illustrated London News* figured visitors of the British Museum’s Nineveh gallery as if they did not really care about the Assyrian slabs: one single person seems to be drawn to the winged bull exhibited on the entrance of the museum, while the others look elsewhere, back turned, and are moving to enter the gallery on the left, precisely dedicated to classical collections.<sup>69</sup> Instead of underlining the leading position of Assyrian aesthetic among the history of art, the picture promoted the Nineveh gallery as a kind of crossing point where families can have a walk on their way to the Parthenon masterpieces.

Although Assyrian accounts to history of art can no longer be denied, its aesthetic value has still to face classical relics’ notoriety. That is precisely what P.V. Myers suggested in *Remains of Lost Empires*, a 1875 book, when he argued that

<sup>61</sup> Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 33; see also “History in Revenge,” 18–20.

<sup>62</sup> See Werner, “Textual or Cultural Scholarship,” 95.

<sup>63</sup> See Ehrenberg, “Freedom - Ideal and Reality,” 139.

<sup>64</sup> McGrath, “Freedom in Architecture,” 43.

<sup>65</sup> Jenkins, *Archaeologists & Aesthetes*, 60.

<sup>66</sup> Fergusson, *An Historical Inquiry*, 326.

<sup>67</sup> Goldhill, *Victorian Culture and Classical Antiquity*, 31 and 54.

<sup>68</sup> Allison Karmel Thomason observed how “the trope of the decadent Orient is deeply embedded in the western imagination.” See “From Sennacherib’s Bronzes to Taharqa’s Feet,” 151–162, especially 151.

<sup>69</sup> Malley, *From Archaeology to Spectacle in Victorian Britain*, 67.

Assyrian intentions about art had to wait “the transcendent genius” of Greece to pop up: “The various structural declinations upon the *bassi-relievi* of Nineveh reveal the fact that the Assyrian artists were acquainted with all the first elements of Grecian architecture [...] The Grecians borrowed, in part at least, their mimetic art from the East, but they borrowed only to transform [...] «the hard and rigid lines of Assyria»—we quote the language of Layard—were converted into the flowing draperies and classic forms of the highest orders of art.”<sup>70</sup> The same idea was shared in France, where *L’Illustration*, a large-scale newspaper, was inclined “to believe that the Greeks [and the Etruscans] began by imitating, in order later to perfect, the art of the Assyrians.”<sup>71</sup> This was also the official stance: Eugène Flandin, the artist appointed by the French government to conduct graphic surveys at Khorsabad, conceded that Greeks “had ingeniously improved” the Assyrian art they took inspiration from.<sup>72</sup>

However, we may note how this kind of comments go further than did Winckelmann himself, who remained reluctant to approve that Greece had borrowed a single feature from the other civilizations, not even Egypt, as if each country had had an independent life and a parallel development<sup>73</sup>—we can read in *Gedanken* that “inventions from foreign peoples were only an exploratory seed for Greece.”<sup>74</sup>

## 6 Nineveh’s revenge: Assyrian art as a model for the Greeks

Consequently, in the late nineteenth century, the main contribution to Winckelmann looks like a drift, as scientists interpreted the superiority of classical art neither as a revelation nor as a miracle, but as an accomplishment of previous Near Eastern attempts. In the last part of the eighteenth century, Caylus had already set out against Winckelmann an history of art designed as a chain<sup>75</sup> in which the origins of Greek art were located in Egypt. For the supporters of Assyria, the idea of an efficient hierarchy in the *History of Ancient Art* implied that Antiquity had to be read as a whole—like Winckelmann did before the scholars of the nineteenth century became definitely fond of the idea<sup>76</sup>—but also that each moment of the process was valuable enough to legitimate the most adventurous comparisons. James Fergusson soon underlined how Layard’s discoveries in Assyria showed that “it was from this country that the Greeks got the Ionic form of their art, though it was from Egypt that they borrowed the Doric,” and he confessed “to believe, however, that [...] there is scarcely an idea or a detail in Grecian art that may not be traced to one of these sources.”<sup>77</sup> In another book, Fergusson

<sup>70</sup> Myers, *Remains of Lost Empires*, 131–132.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted by Bohrer, *Orientalism and Visual Culture*, 77.

<sup>72</sup> “Sans doute, cet art a été profondément modifié par leur génie, mais on ne peut, sans injustice, leur accorder l’honneur d’avoir imaginé le principe qui a eu l’antique Orient pour berceau.” See Flandin, “Voyage en Mésopotamie,” 78.

<sup>73</sup> About the influence of Shaftesbury on Winckelmann concerning the peculiarity of Greek culture, see Décultot, *Johann Joachim*, 143 and 165.

<sup>74</sup> Quoted by Blanc, “Winckelmann et l’invention de la Grèce,” 25–06.

<sup>75</sup> Jenkins, *Archaeologists & Aesthetes*, 61.

<sup>76</sup> Harloe, *Winckelmann and the Invention of Antiquity*, 126–127.

<sup>77</sup> Fergusson, *An Historical Inquiry*, 278–279.

dedicated the final chapter to convince how Greek art “is derived from the valleys of the Tigris and the Euphrates,”<sup>78</sup> especially in the field of architecture, as the author suggests through his restorations of the Khorsabad palaces. Even Robert Smirke, the architect who designed a smooth Greek revival building for the new British Museum,<sup>79</sup> felt that Assyria announced Greek art.<sup>80</sup> The *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review* explained in the same way that “Assyria may be regarded as the nation which, with Egypt, laid the foundation of that stupendous fabric of fabric of the earth’s civilization, which, progressively rising and accumulating under the intellect of ages, received, as it were, its next story in the era of Greece [...]”<sup>81</sup>

Layard himself changed his mind on Assyrian art<sup>82</sup> and finally wrote that “it has now taken its place amongst other styles of ancient art.”<sup>83</sup> For the opening of the Nineveh Court, a kind of a motley replica of an Assyrian building in Crystal Palace, near London in 1854, he was proud to mention in the guidebook “the sculptures [...] which were evidently the origin of some of the ornaments of classic Greece.”<sup>84</sup> In *Nineveh and its Remains*, he published a few drawings of reliefs from Lycia and from Xanthos to demonstrate how sculpture “is peculiarly Assyrian in its treatment,” and he insisted on the resemblance with images from low-reliefs and seals from Assyria (see Figs. 5, 6, 7 and 8).

If Layard conceded the genius of Greek sculptors, he paid attention to recall their artistic debt to Assyria.<sup>85</sup> No later than 1845, he attributed to Botta’s findings (and to his own) the same merits as the classical masterpieces:

To those who have been accustomed to look upon the Greeks as the true perfectors and the only masters of the imitative arts, they [Botta’s findings] will furnish new matter for inquiry and reflection [...] The extreme beauty and elegance of the various objects introduced on the groups are next to be admired... all designed with the most consummate taste, and rival the productions of the most cultivated period of Greek art.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>78</sup> Fergusson, *The Palaces Of Nineveh and Persepolis Restored*, 340.

<sup>79</sup> Collins, *Assyrian Palace Sculptures*, 12.

<sup>80</sup> Russell, “Saga of the Nineveh Marbles,” 39.

<sup>81</sup> *Westminster and Foreign Quarterly Review*, cited by Malley, “Austen Henry Layard and the Periodical Press,” 159.

<sup>82</sup> Larsen, “Nineveh,” 125.

<sup>83</sup> Layard, *The Nineveh Court*, 12.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>85</sup> Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, 292–293.

<sup>86</sup> *The Times*, January 30, 1845, 6. Quoted by Larsen, “Nineveh,” 129.



Figure 5: “Sennacherib on his Throne before Lachish” (Austen Henry Layard, *Discoveries in the ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, London, John Murray, 1853, p. 150). From the Brigham Young University-Idaho, David O. McKay Library.

Figure 6: “Bas-relief from a monument from Xanthos. In the British Museum” (Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, London, John Murray, 1849, p. 293). With thanks to the Internet Archive, Microsoft, and the UCLA Library for this image.

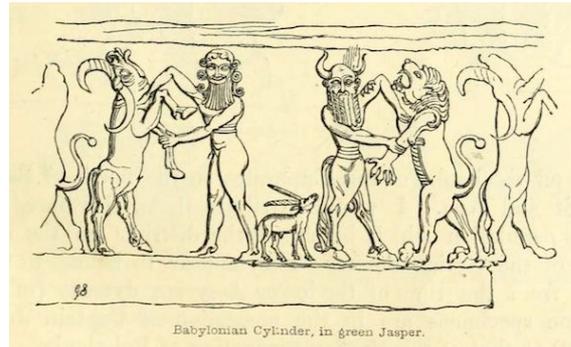
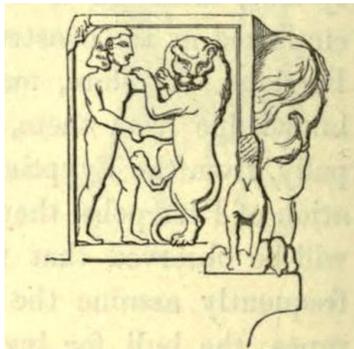


Figure 7: “Fragment of a Lycian Monument in the British Museum” (Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*, London, John Murray, 1849, p. 292). With thanks to the Internet Archive, Microsoft, and the UCLA Library for this image.

Figure 8: “Babylonian Cylinder, in green Jasper” (Austen Henry Layard, *Discoveries in the ruins of Nineveh and Babylon*, London, John Murray, 1853, p. 604). From the Brigham Young University-Idaho, David O. McKay Library.

Conclusions were somewhat identical in France, where Louis Viardot asserted that “Assyrian civilization had certainly had much more influence on Greeks” than on Egyptians,<sup>87</sup> in 1878, while Joachim Menant reported that some Assyrian slabs

<sup>87</sup> “Rivale en antiquité et en durée de celle des Egyptiens, la civilisation assyrienne a certainement exercé plus d’influence sur celle des Grecs et des Étrusques.” See Viardot, *Les merveilles de la sculpture*, 37.

from the British Museum “could be admired at all times.”<sup>88</sup> This was half a surprise: in 1857, Victor Langlois had already written not only that Greeks did nothing more than copy Assyrian style, but that they damaged and ruined such a delicate model.<sup>89</sup> The topic remained polemical during the 1880s, and Hellenists had still many arguments to sweep away orientalist aspirations,<sup>90</sup> but mindset changes were such that, after being used as a model to snipe at Nineveh value, the Greek key was quoted the other way round to claim the merit of Assyrian remains, as we can read in the *North American Review* in 1849 :

Parliament gave £50,000 to pay Lord Elgin for robbing the Parthenon, an enterprise in which his lordship incurred no risk but that of covering his own name with eternal opprobrium, for plundering what even the Goths and the Turks had spared; will it not give at least a quarter as much to unearth the precious remains of Assyria?<sup>91</sup>

It is quite significant that in Germany (Winckelmann's native land), Classics were at last challenged by exotic cultures and were no longer popular neither in the scholarly world nor in a *fin-de-siecle* ideology in search of new heroes.<sup>92</sup> Although Winckelmann was still a major reference (especially for archaeologists), the evolution of historical research required a rigorous method for which this kind of idealized classification had to be replaced by an enlarged vision of civilizations that broke with traditional philhellenism.<sup>93</sup>

This unexpected evolution involved museums practices as well. Krzysztof Pomian, who had actively studied the history of the first Western collections, noted that museums of the late eighteenth century were organized around a kind of so-called Winckelmanian Roman-Greek-Egyptian pole—which was already a break from Winckelmann's chief narrative scheme—and that these departments used to be completed by Near Eastern remains precisely in the nineteenth century.<sup>94</sup> In 1850, indeed, the British Museum had to distort the sequencing of classical sculptures when slabs from Nimrud and Nineveh were transferred to take place in the future Assyrian Transept.<sup>95</sup> And by the middle of the 1880s, the Department of Near Eastern Antiquities, in Paris, combined most of the Hellenic ceramics that had to be relocated in the Greek section forty years later with the recent discoveries from Assyria and Chaldea.<sup>96</sup>

Finally, it is quite amazing that Dante Gabriel Rossetti had himself registered this new way of understanding Antiquity in one of his most famous poems, *The Burdens of Nineveh* (1856), in which he mentioned the British Museum and its

<sup>88</sup> “Le lion blessé, la lionne mourante, sont des chefs-d’œuvre que la sculpture de toutes les époques pourrait envier”. See Menant, *Ninive et Babylone*, 127.

<sup>89</sup> Langlois, “L’art et l’archéologie,” 705.

<sup>90</sup> See Morris, *Classical Greece: ancient histories and modern archaeologies*, 21.

<sup>91</sup> Bowen, “Review of A.H. Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains*,” 110–42. See Holloway, “*Nineveh Sails for the New World*,” 250.

<sup>92</sup> See Hauser, “Not Out of Babylon?” 215–17.

<sup>93</sup> See Stähli, “Vom Ende der Klassischen Archäologie,” 149–153 and 162–64.

<sup>94</sup> Pomian, “Les deux pôles de la curiosité antiquaire,” 63 and 67.

<sup>95</sup> See also Caygill and Date, *Building the British Museum*, 44.

<sup>96</sup> Parrot, *Le Département des Antiquités orientales*, 11.

new display, where precisely "Greece, Egypt, Rome" had to house "an unknown God from Nineveh." And the poet concluded, as a tribute to these Assyrian remains that Winckelmann's legacy had almost buried a second time:

All relics here together.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> About the impact of Assyrian discoveries on poetry, see Stauffer, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti and the Burdens of Nineveh," 369–394.

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