The artistic discovery of Assyria by Britain and France 1850 to 1950

Abstract
This thesis provides an overview of the engagement with the material culture of Assyria, unearthed in the Middle East from 1845 onwards by British and French archaeologists. It sets the artistic discovery of Assyria within the visual culture of the period through reference not only to painting but also to illustrated newspapers, books, journals, performances and popular entertainments.

The thesis presents a more vigorous, interlinked, and widespread engagement than previous studies have indicated, primarily by providing a comprehensive corpus of artistic responses. The artistic connections between Britain and France were close. Works influenced by Assyria were published, exhibited and reviewed in the contemporary press, on both sides of the English Channel. Some artists, such as Gustave Doré, successfully maintained careers in both London and Paris. It is therefore often meaningless to speak of a wholly ‘French’ or ‘British’ reception, since these responses were coloured by artistic crosscurrents that operated in both directions, a crucial theme to be explored in this dissertation. In Britain, print culture also transported to the regions, away from large metropolitan centres, knowledge of Assyria and Assyrian-inspired art through its appeal to the market for biblical images. Assyria benefited from the explosion in graphical communication.

This thesis examines the artistic response to Assyria within a chronological framework. It begins with an overview of the initial period in the 1850s that traces the first British discoveries. Chapter Two explores the different artistic turn Assyria took in the 1860s. Chapter Three deals with the French reception in the second half of the nineteenth century. Chapter Four concludes the British reception up to 1900, and Chapter Five deals with the twentieth century. The thesis contends that far from being a niche subject engaged with a particular group of artists, Assyrian art was a major rediscovery that affected all fields of visual culture in the nineteenth century.

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Art collections in the United States. 30E.W. Forbes, director of the Fogg Art Museum of Harvard University, was very impressed by the fact that the British Museum had a full-time chemist on staff (Plenderleith) and dreamed of a day when art historians, scientists and conservators, would work together (Stout 1978, I; Muller 2000). Yet, integrating science into museums seemed impossible at the time. The artistic connections between Britain and France were close. Works influenced by Assyria were published, exhibited and reviewed in the contemporary press, on both sides of the English Channel. Some artists, such as Gustave Doré, successfully maintained careers in both London and Paris. It begins with an overview of the initial period in the 1850s that traces the first British discoveries. Chapter Two explores the different artistic turn Assyria took in the 1860s. Chapter Three deals with the French reception in the second half of the nineteenth century. Chapter Four concludes the British reception up to 1900, and Chapter Five deals with the twentieth century.