

**ASSYRIA TO AMERICA AT BOWDOIN COLLEGE MUSEUM OF ART
WILL PRESENT ANCIENT ARTIFACTS, EXAMINING BOTH THEIR ORIGINAL CONTEXT
AND THEIR HISTORY IN AMERICA**

Brunswick, Maine—October 3, 2019—This fall, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art (BCMA) will present the exhibition *Assyria to America*, which will explore the cultural and political history of the Neo-Assyrian empire, as well as the collecting history of Assyrian artifacts by American museums. The exhibition, which includes more than three dozen objects, centers on the Museum's six Assyrian reliefs from the Northwest Palace at Nimrud, built by King Ashurnasirpal II around 879 BCE and believed to be one of the most splendid of the period. Drawing on these objects, the exhibition will highlight the cultural wealth and artistic achievements of the largest of the ancient Assyrian empires. Curated by Sean P. Burrus, the Museum's Andrew W. Mellon Postdoctoral Curatorial Fellow, and James Higginbotham, Associate Professor of Classics and Associate Curator of the Ancient Collection at Bowdoin, *Assyria to America* will open October 24, 2019, and remain on view through December 11, 2020.

"We are fortunate to be the stewards of these Assyrian reliefs, and the moment is right to explore both the culture from which they came as well as the histories that led to their excavation and arrival in America," said Burrus, who continued: "This exhibition reflects Bowdoin's larger commitment to restore context to the reliefs." Added Higginbotham, "The period of the Neo-Assyrian empire saw crucial developments in language, trade, agriculture, and, especially, in the techniques needed to administer a massive empire of disparate nations and peoples. That makes the history of the period of interest to general museum audiences, as well as an excellent platform for engaging students in exploring one of the most important early civilizations."

Assyria to America will use Bowdoin's ancient reliefs, along with other artifacts excavated from Nimrud and the broader Mesopotamian region, to explore the courtly arts at Nimrud, and the rich material and cultural life enjoyed by royals during the Neo-Assyrian empire (9th–7th centuries BCE). With an empire that stretched at times as far as Egypt to the southwest, much of Turkey to the northwest, and east through Iran, Assyrians were exposed to a wide network of cultural influences through both political allies and adversaries. Drawing on a range of objects—including loans from The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Harvard Semitic Museum—the exhibition will present a fuller picture of the vibrant court life and the range of exotic and colorful items that would have originally surrounded the reliefs in the palace. These include: an ivory chairback from the storerooms of Fort Shalmaneser at Nimrud; ivory furniture elements and figures carved in the round, with fearsome lions and the head of a woman; and an array of cylinder seals capturing diverse Mesopotamian cultures. Clay tablets on view will demonstrate the rise of cuneiform writing in the region, while vessels included in the exhibition attest to Assyrian and Mesopotamian banqueting and culinary cultures. Attention will also be drawn to the way that the influences from Assyrian culture spread beyond the borders of the empire, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean, with works from the Museum's collection including geometric Greek vases and Cypriot sculptures.

The exhibition will shed light on the Museum's own acquisition of these pieces by exploring the modern history of the reliefs and their arrival on American shores, using original documents, including letters written by Dr. Henri Byron Haskel, a Bowdoin alumnus who arranged for the shipping of the reliefs from Nimrud, and original publications by Sir Austin Henry Layard, the British archeologist and explorer who excavated the site from 1845–1851.

The six reliefs were given to the College in 1860 and have remained on prominent public view since the Museum opened in 1894—but the Museum has not previously organized an exhibition that specifically explores either their origins or the process of excavation that led to their arrival in Brunswick, Maine. For the first time in their modern history at Bowdoin, the reliefs will be united with other ancient objects that reveal a clearer view of the political and artistic culture that created them.

While focused on the art of the ancient past, the exhibition will also take advantage of innovative technologies to help audiences better understand these important artifacts. For example, on view will be a full-scale 3D-printed replica of a statue of Ashurnasirpal II that is in the British Museum's collection, and that was created especially for this exhibition as part of a partnership between Bowdoin and the British Museum. In order to create the replica, hundreds of images were taken of the statue in the museum's storerooms. A virtual model was created from the images, and then printed on campus with the help of Bowdoin's Academic Technology and Consulting group.

New technologies will also help viewers better understand Bowdoin's ancient reliefs, through the development of polychrome projections. While the alabaster currently bears no color visible to the naked eye, spectrographic analysis of the reliefs—as well as research on the color plates taken at the time of their excavation in Nimrud—suggests that they were originally decorated with vibrant shades of gold, red, blue, white. For this project, the Museum will add color virtually to selected reliefs with projected light, in order to give viewers a sense of what these panels might have looked like when first created. Digital touchscreen panels will allow visitors to explore timelines showing the history of the reliefs and the Assyrian empire, and explore the details of the relief panels through advanced imaging techniques, such as Reflectance Transformation Imaging (RTI).

The continuing resonance for audiences today of the Museum's Assyrian Reliefs, like those at other collecting institutions, was made vividly apparent in 2015 when ISIS dramatically destroyed much of what remained at the site of King Ashurnasirpal II's Northwest palace in Nimrud. The larger contemporary significance of these objects will be addressed through the inclusion of 10 works by Michael Rakowitz, an Iraqi-American artist, well-known for his artistic activism. Included in *Assyria to America* will be works from two of Rakowitz's projects, *The Invisible Enemy Shall Not Exist* (2007-ongoing) and *May the Obdurate Foe Not Be in Good Health* (2016-ongoing). Based on artifacts looted from the National Museum of Iraq in the wake of the American invasion of Baghdad in 2007, and on artifacts at risk in the ongoing civil war in Syria, the contemporary sculptures created as part of these projects incorporate Arabic newspapers and colorful packaging materials from the Middle East in order to recreate ancient artworks. In the exhibition, works by Rakowitz based on looted ivories, cylinder seals, and tablets, will be displayed in cases together with ancient artifacts, drawing attention to how present day concerns may frame our understanding of the past deep ongoing and prompting visitors to consider the complex cultural and political circumstances that may imperil our global cultural heritage.

“*Assyria to America* testifies to the nuanced and dynamic interconnections between the ancient past and the world today that museums such as ours are uniquely equipped to explore and share with the public,” noted Anne Collins Goodyear, Co-Director of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. “We are excited to be mounting this innovative project,” continued Co-Director Frank Goodyear. “This represents an important opportunity to contribute to ongoing efforts to study and better understand the important lessons to be gleaned from the art and culture of the ancient Mediterranean world and to place these collections in a broader historical context.”

About the Bowdoin College Museum of Art

The collections of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art are among the most comprehensive of any college museum in the United States. Collecting commenced over 200 years ago with a major gift from the College’s founder James Bowdoin III and his family that included Gilbert Stuart’s magnificent portraits of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

The Museum is housed in the landmark Walker Art Building, designed in 1894 by Charles Follen McKim. Located on the historic quadrangle of Bowdoin College, the building is graced by murals by John La Farge, Kenyon Cox, Elihu Vedder, and Abbott Thayer. A \$20.8-million renovation and expansion in 2007 provided a stunning setting for objects as diverse as monumental Assyrian reliefs from Nimrud, Iraq; European Old Master paintings; and works by American modernists. The Museum is the centerpiece of Bowdoin’s vibrant arts and culture community and offers a wealth of academic and educational programs.

Fully accessible, the Bowdoin College Museum of Art is open to the public free of charge from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Tuesday through Saturday; 10:00 a.m. to 8:30 p.m. on Thursday; and from 1:00 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sunday.

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