

News Release

The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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For Immediate Release

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Landmark Metropolitan Museum Exhibition Features Art of First Millennium B.C. from Middle East to Western Europe

Exhibition dates: September 22, 2014–January 4, 2015
Exhibition location: Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Exhibition Hall, Second Floor
Press preview: Monday, September 15, 10:00 a.m.–noon

At its height in the 8th to 7th century B.C., the Assyrian Empire was the dominant power of the ancient Near East and the largest empire the world had yet seen, spanning 1,000 miles in a continuous swathe from Assyria (present-day northern Iraq) to the Mediterranean. As Assyria expanded, the Phoenician city-states of the Levant—precariously located along the edge of Assyrian territory—were compelled to expand and strengthen their maritime trade networks to the west. The mercantile connections they established along the northern coast of Africa and the southern coast of Europe to the strait of Gibraltar and beyond, to the Atlantic, became conduits for raw materials, luxury goods, images, and ideas between the Near East and the Mediterranean.

Opening September 22 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, the landmark exhibition *Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age* will trace—through some 260 works of art on loan from major collections in Western Europe, the Caucasus, the Middle East, North Africa, and the United States—the deep roots of interaction between the ancient Near East and the lands along the shores of the Mediterranean and their impact on the

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artistic traditions that developed in the region. Parallels will also be drawn between works in the exhibition and those in the Metropolitan Museum's permanent collection in the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art.

Major support is provided by The Hagop Kevorkian Fund, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, and Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman. Additional support is provided by an Anonymous Foundation and the Friends of Inanna. The exhibition is supported by an indemnity from the Federal Council on the Arts and the Humanities.

Among the works on view will be monumental sculptures and wall reliefs, masterfully carved ivories, fine metalwork, and luxurious jewelry created by ancient artisans from throughout the Near East and Mediterranean, brought together from 41 museums in 14 countries.

Exhibition Overview

The exhibition is organized around three major themes: Assyria's land-based expansion from northern Mesopotamia westward through military conquests in the early first millennium B.C.; Phoenician expansion by sea through the development of trading relationships and founding of colonies; and the adoption and adaptation of Near Eastern imagery and techniques by artisans in the western Mediterranean. A concluding gallery will display works that represent the shift of power to Babylon after the sack of Nineveh (the Assyrian capital) in 612 B.C. Reference will be made to relevant passages in the Bible, the epics of Homer, and other texts that concern the historical people, places, customs, and events represented in the exhibition.

Assyria's Expansion

At the beginning of the first millennium B.C., Assyrian kings began to push westward by means of annual military campaigns. With each new conquest, vast amounts of booty and tribute—whether as raw materials or luxury goods—flowed into Assyrian coffers. Cities that rebelled or refused to send tribute were attacked and sacked. Large populations of conquered peoples were forcibly resettled from their homelands. Official artworks of the time, created to glorify the kings'

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achievements, also serve as documents of Assyria's aggressive expansionist policy.

One of the first monumental works on display—a rare surviving example of Assyrian sculpture in the round—is a statue of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II (r. 883–859 B.C.). Ashurnasirpal consolidated the kingdom left by his father, exacted tribute, and brutally put down rebellion. The statue was carved of stone that may have been brought back from a foreign campaign. A cuneiform inscription on the torso records the king's campaigns in the west, reaching as far as the “Great Sea”—the Mediterranean. Reliefs from Ashurnasirpal's palace at Nimrud can be seen in the Metropolitan Museum's Assyrian Sculpture Court (Gallery 401).

Multiple scenes of the armies of king Ashurbanipal (r. 668–631 B.C.) defeating the Elamites are found in a frieze from his palace at Nineveh. Elam, in southwestern Iran, was a long-standing enemy of Assyria. Ashurbanipal is also shown feasting while reclining on a couch that appears to have been covered in ornamental ivory panels, similar to the vast number of ivory furniture attachments that entered the palace storerooms as booty or tribute or were produced by Assyrian artisans, outstanding examples of which will be displayed nearby.

Artistic ideas also moved in the opposite direction, from Assyria outward. Frequent contact, usually hostile, between Assyria and Urartu—the biblical kingdom of Ararat, which corresponds to present-day Armenia, eastern Turkey, and northwestern Iran—led to significant Assyrian influence on Urartian art. The exhibition will include Urartian works that incorporate well-known Assyrian motifs, such as winged guardian spirits and sacred trees.

Statues of supernatural guardian divinities were frequently erected at the entrances to monumental buildings in the Near East. In Assyria these statues typically took the form of

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a hybrid creature with elements of a winged lion or bull and the head of a man. Comprised of different creatures, a *Scorpion Bird Man*, from the Aramaean city of Guzana (modern Tell Halaf) in North Syria, served a similar protective function.

The southern Levant, including the kingdoms of Judah and Israel, lay at the southwestern edge of Assyria's empire. There were also Philistine city states on the coast, and all of these kingdoms exchanged ideas and artifacts with the Phoenician cities to the north. The exhibition will include an inscription featuring the only non-biblical attestation of the House of David. Carved ivories from Samaria—the Israelite capital and biblical city of Ahab and Jezebel—are Phoenician and Syrian in style, and reflect interaction with their Phoenician and Aramaean neighbors.

Mass deportations in the first millennium B.C.—first by the Assyrians and later by the Babylonians—affected the populations of many smaller states within the empires, including Judah and Israel. A foundation record that describes Sennacherib's destruction of 46 Judean cities, deportation of more than 200,000 people, and exaction of tribute from Hezekiah, king of Judah, mirrors, to an astonishing degree, the biblical description, which describes the same events in terms of a success for Hezekiah, because Sennacherib did not sack Jerusalem itself.

Phoenician Expansion

The Phoenicians, famed for their ships in Homer's *Odyssey*, were enterprising seafarers and master navigators who plied the Mediterranean Sea in swift and sturdy merchant vessels, largely in pursuit of the metal resources of the western Mediterranean. They established trading posts and colonies throughout the area, including Carthage on the North African coast. The raw materials the Phoenicians acquired were transformed into luxury goods that were in demand throughout the ancient Near East and the Mediterranean. Phoenician artisans ably combined elements from a number of cultures,

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with the most prominent being the use of Egyptian motifs.

Phoenician merchants enjoyed a monopoly on trade of the precious purple dye obtained from murex shells (the word *Phoenician* derives from the ancient Greek word for “purple”). And the Phoenicians introduced their phonetic alphabet—the precursor of the alphabet used today throughout the western hemisphere—across the Mediterranean.

Phoenicia’s major cities—Tyre, Sidon, Byblos, and Arwad—were located on a narrow strip of land and on offshore islands along the coast of present-day Lebanon and Syria. They grew wealthy through trade. Although a range of mountains to the east separated them from the Assyrians, an inscribed bronze band from an ancient gate at Balawat features a scene depicting people from Tyre delivering tribute to king Shalmaneser III (r. 858–824 B.C.) on typically Phoenician boats called “hippoi,” because of the horse heads at the stem and stern.

Cyprus was rich in deposits of copper, which had long been an important resource for Near Eastern powers; for the Phoenicians it also provided a starting point for routes farther west across the Mediterranean. Of particular interest was the Phoenician colony at Kition. Magnificent gold jewelry from an elite tomb, dating from the end of the 8th century B.C., indicates a strong Phoenician presence. Also found at Kition was a stele depicting king Sargon II (r.722–705 B.C.), testimony to Assyrian interest in the island. Sargon was apparently able to demand tribute from Cypriot kings, though his claims to control Cyprus have been met with skepticism from scholars.

Adoption of Near Eastern Artistic Traditions

At archaeological sites throughout the Mediterranean, artifacts have been found that are embellished with certain popular Near Eastern motifs—such as sphinxes, human-headed birds, griffins, and the “Mistress of Animals,” among many others. In some instances, the

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objects were made in the Near East, or possibly by resident eastern craftsmen in the west, but frequently these goods were locally produced, by artisans who incorporated Near Eastern-style imagery into their own repertoire.

During the early first millennium B.C., representations of a Near Eastern goddess—Astarte or Ashtart—also began to appear in various locations across the Mediterranean, carried by the Phoenicians. This goddess would later have a significant impact in the west, where aspects of her persona were adopted into the image of the Greek goddess Aphrodite.

Diverse foreign dedications were found at a number of important ancient Greek sanctuaries, including Olympia, Delphi, and the sanctuary of Hera on Samos. The number of foreign bronzes and ivories found at Samos—deriving from various parts of the Near East and Egypt—is quite extraordinary and offers a window onto the complexities of interaction in these ritual settings.

One famous dedication at Delphi was a throne given by king Midas of Phrygia, in Anatolia. According to Herodotus this was the first dedication at the sanctuary by a non-Greek. It has been suggested that a fascinating ivory plaque known as the “lion tamer” of Delphi may even come from the throne itself. Also from Delphi come gold sheets, filled with Near Eastern animal-inspired imagery, that may once have adorned the garments of divine statues: of Apollo, his sister Artemis, and their mother Leto.

The astonishingly broad reach of trade in the period is demonstrated by a display of several large, fluted tridacna (giant clam) shells, decorated with incised human and plant forms. Probably used as cosmetic containers, the shells themselves originated in the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean; the carving was most likely done in the Levant; and the examples on view were found in Babylonia, Assyria, Greece, and Etruria.

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Discovered in elite tombs of the period in Greece and Italy were Near Eastern goods and locally manufactured artifacts with orientalizing traits, among them monumental cauldrons with animal-head attachments at the rim. An exceptional example found at Salamis on Cyprus will be a highlight of the exhibition. Herodotos records seafaring traders from Samos dedicating just such a cauldron, with griffin-head attachments, at the sanctuary of Hera. Another key loan to the exhibition will be several works from the seldom-shown Carambolo Treasure. Discovered near Seville, Spain, the treasure consists of exceptionally finely worked gold jewelry reflecting both Phoenician and local metalworking traditions. More recently, the discovery of a ritual complex nearby has given scholars a social background for understanding these spectacular artifacts.

At the heart of this Mediterranean system was shipping. The exhibition will include discoveries from ships that were wrecked off the coast of Spain, including metalwork, weights, a Phoenician altar, and elephant tusks, inscribed with the names of Phoenician gods and goddesses.

Babylonian Rule

After three centuries of Assyrian rule, Babylon allied with the Medes of western Iran and repeatedly pushed back and defeated Assyrian armies, ultimately attacking and destroying Nineveh. Nebuchadnezzar II (r. 604–562 B.C.) rebuilt Babylon on a grand scale, and strove to make his name eternal. A series of stelae that tell the story of the transition of power from Assyria to Babylon will be shown.

The exhibition will include a model of Babylon's famed Ishtar Gate and Processional Way, alongside several actual reliefs from these monuments. Babylon was a world center politically, economically, and culturally, while in Mesopotamian terms Babylon was a holy city, with special cultic importance. Nebuchadnezzar's Babylon was not only the culmination of the Mesopotamian imperial age, but would become the focus of much

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later tradition. A section of the exhibition will explore this legacy through images such as the Tower of Babel and Belshazzar's Feast, as well as other famous biblical themes of this period, such as the Temple of Solomon and the Babylonian sack of Jerusalem.

Catalogue and Related Programs

The exhibition will be accompanied by a copiously illustrated catalogue, suitable for students, scholars, and the general public. Edited by Joan Aruz, Curator in Charge, and Yelena Rakic, Associate Curator, and Sarah Graff, Assistant Curator, all of the Metropolitan Museum's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, the book includes essays by experts in ancient Near Eastern and Mediterranean art and culture from leading museums, universities, and other research institutions worldwide. Published by the Metropolitan Museum and distributed by Yale University Press, the catalogue will be available in the Museum's book shops (hardcover, \$65).

The catalogue is made possible by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, The Hagop Kevorkian Fund, and the A. G. Leventis Foundation.

A series of education programs has been organized to complement the exhibition. These include programs for children and families, gallery talks, lectures, a *Sunday at the Met* program, and a workshop for K-12 educators. The academic program will include a two-day symposium with leading international scholars in the field, a scholars' day, and a series of lectures by specialists.

The symposium is made possible by The Charles K. Wilkinson Lecture Series fund.

An audio tour, part of the Museum's Audio Guide program, is available for rental (\$7, \$6 for Members, \$5 for children under 12).

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The Audio Guide is supported by Bloomberg Philanthropies.

The exhibition is featured on the Museum's website at www.metmuseum.org/assyria-to-iberia. Through a series of regular blog posts, specialists will address such topics as: monsters, ancient and modern, including the Mesopotamian demon *pazuzu* and its role in the popular imagination (it was featured in the film *The Exorcist*); Assyrian and Babylonian influences on architecture in New York City; the use of cylinder seals in antiquity; color in the art and architecture of the ancient Near East; and objects in the permanent collection of the Museum's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art that link to the exhibition.

The exhibition is organized by Joan Aruz, Curator in Charge, Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. Exhibition design is by Michael Batista, Exhibition Design Manager; graphics are by Sophia Geronimus, Graphic Design Manager; and lighting is by Clint Ross Coller and Richard Lichte, Lighting Design Managers, all of the Museum's Design Department.

Assyria to Iberia at the Dawn of the Classical Age, which focuses on the early first millennium B.C., is the third in a series of major Metropolitan Museum exhibitions, with related catalogues, focusing on art and regional interconnections during specific eras in the history of the ancient Near East. The first exhibition, *Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium B.C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*, was shown in 2003, and the second, *Beyond Babylon: Art, Trade, and Diplomacy in the Second Millennium B.C.*, in 2008–2009. Together, their catalogues form an authoritative survey of art and interaction across three millennia of ancient Near Eastern history.

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September 15, 2014

VISITOR INFORMATION

[New Hours: As of July 1, 2013, the Main Building and The Cloisters are open 7 days a week.](#)

Main Building

Friday and Saturday 10:00 a.m.–9:00 p.m.

Sunday–Thursday 10:00 a.m.–5:30 p.m.

The Cloisters museum and gardens

March–October: 10:00 a.m.–5:15 p.m.

November–February: 10:00 a.m.–4:45 p.m.

Both locations will be closed January 1, Thanksgiving Day, and December 25, and the main building will also be closed the first Monday in May.

Recommended Admission

(Includes Main Building and The Cloisters museum and gardens within the same week)

Adults \$25.00, seniors (65 and over) \$17.00, students \$12.00

Members and children under 12 accompanied by adult free

Express admission may be purchased in advance at www.metmuseum.org/visit

For More Information (212) 535-7710; www.metmuseum.org

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Accommodations for visitors with disabilities, such as Verbal Imaging tours and Sign Language interpretation, are available by request with advance notice. For more information: (212) 650-2010 or access@metmuseum.org.