1. King Ashurbanipal hunting on horseback, 645–640 BC. North Palace, Nineveh, Iraq.

Displaying Assyria

Paul Collins recalls the various ways the Museum has chosen to display its Assyrian treasures in the past, and offers some pointers to the future

Since their arrival at the British Museum some 170 years ago, the Assyrian palace sculptures have drawn crowds of admirers to view what are undoubtedly some of the greatest stone carvings from antiquity. The reliefs were commissioned between the 9th and 7th centuries BC by kings who established one of the world's earliest empires, arguably the very first, embracing large and diverse populations.

The heart of Assyria was the ancient city of Ashur on the river Tigris in what is today northern Iraq. By 1850 BC Ashur had developed into a rich trading centre with a network of merchant colonies reaching deep into the Anatolian highlands. As such, the geographic horizon of the Assyrians was already very broad by the time powerful states like Egypt, Babylonia and Hittite Anatolia were establishing extensive kingdoms by conquest around 1350 BC. Assyrian kings sought to join this 'club' of rulers by extending their control over neighbouring cities, including Nineveh (modern Mosul) and Arbela (modern Erbil).

As the Assyrian kingdom grew into an empire during the first millennium BC, eventually dominating an area from Iran to Egypt, new royal centres were established. Kalhu (modern Nimrud), Dur-Sharrukin (modern Khorsabad) and Nineveh were expanded in succession and transformed into magnificent cities with massive city walls, temples and palaces. This building work was made possible by labourers relocated in their tens of thousands from conquered regions of the Middle East. A system of royal roads linked the Assyrian capitals with the provincial centres and along which the king's commands and messages from state officials, not least about the movement of people, were rapidly transported. In this way Assyrian provincial governors were able to fill gaps in demand for agricultural workers and capital projects across the empire. Many deportees were settled in villages in the Assyrian heartland where they helped to construct canals bringing water to the cities and surrounding fields. The newly settled populations became Assyrian subjects by paying taxes to the crown but there was no attempt by the central authorities to impose their own culture, language or religion.

The Assyrian royal family resided in splendour in their enormous palaces, surrounded by luxurious furnishings and objects made from precious materials. The walls of many rooms and courtyards throughout the principal palaces were lined with massive stone panels carved with painted imagery of the Assyrian king defeating his enemies in battle and siege, reviewing lines of defeated people, undertaking rituals and hunting wild animals. Some of the finest examples include the sculptures of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, a king who placed knowledge alongside military force at the heart of his empire with the creation of the world's first universal library (fig.1).

2. Assyrian reliefs and a human-headed winged bull and lion from NImrud in the Museum's entrance hall. *Illustrated London News*, 1850.

3. View of the 'Nimroud Gallery', about 1880.

In the second half of the 7th century BC a perfect storm brought the empire down. When Ashurbanipal died around 630 BC the empire had been exhausted by decades of conflict. Local rulers took advantage of the weakened centre; the Babylonians to the south of Assyria rebelled while Median armies from Iran plundered the cities. In 612 BC Nineveh fell to invading armies and the ruler of Babylon seized what had been the Assyrian empire. The great cities were abandoned and the mud brick walls of palaces and temples crumbled, burying their contents.

The wall reliefs – along with ceramics, metalwork, seals, carved ivories, glass, and cuneiform tablets – began to be systematically uncovered by European explorers starting in 1842. Many hundreds of sculptures and other objects were packed and shipped to London but they took the British Museum by surprise. The Museum's Greek-revival building, designed by architect Sir Robert Smirke, was reaching completion in the 1840s, but there was no space available for the Assyrian reliefs. After a number of temporary solutions were found, including placing sculptures in the entrance hall (fig. 2), the 1853–4 installation proved to be the most significant and long lasting as it arranged the relief panels along two narrow rooms with glazed roofs separated by a central Saloon with a Transept at the southern end; an arrangement still in place. By 1858 additional space was provided by the Assyrian Saloon, a large double-height space with glazed roof. This would later be described as having the feel of a municipal swimming pool but without the water. Visitors could view the famous lion hunt reliefs of Ashurbanipal at ground floor level by walking around an iron catwalk and then take stairs down to the basement level where more reliefs and table cases with objects were displayed.

Left:
4. The Assyrian Transept, 1925.

Below:
5. Removing reliefs in the Assyrian Saloon, 1964.

The wall reliefs and the small-scale objects were shown in the same spaces without privileging either. There were very few labels as these were hand-written or hand-painted, the work of a skilled letterer, and so slow and expensive to produce. Visitors therefore relied on official guidebooks published by the Museum. The *Synopsis of the Contents of the British Museum* provided historical introductions to the collections followed by a list of objects on display, each identified by their exhibition number and a short description. It promoted a chronological sequence based an accepted artistic 'progression of civilisation' that was understood to lead from the accomplishments of ancient Egypt to the idealised humanism of ancient Greece. In 1872, for example, the Assyrian reliefs could be described as 'the connecting link between Egyptian and the Persian art, the latter being the forerunner of the Lycian and Grecian art.' In this way the layout of the sculpture galleries in the Museum created a fortuitous arrangement with the Assyrian reliefs physically dividing the Egyptian gallery from those of Greece. The Assyrian sculptures were themselves organised chronologically with the visitor advised by the *Synopsis* to first visit the 'Kouyunjik' (i.e. Nineveh) gallery before progressing to the older material in the 'Nimroud' room.

Between 1881 and 1883 the natural history collections were transferred to a new building in South Kensington. This provided substantially increased exhibition space at Bloomsbury, mostly on the upper floor of the building. As a result, some of the non-sculptural objects were moved upstairs into a so-called 'Assyrian Room', later renamed as the 'Babylonian and Assyrian Room'. This arrangement separated many of the smaller objects from the

6. Dismantling the bulls from Khorsabad, 1964.

relief sculptures on the lower floors. A few table cases were however left in the ground floor galleries to display items that were considered especially important for making historical connections or demonstrating literature and science: these included bronze bowls and carved ivories from Nimrud and the most interesting cuneiform tablets, such as the 'Flood Tablet' and 'Map of the World' (fig. 3).

At the start of the First World War the sculptures on the ground floor were removed from the walls or protected by sandbags and slag wool, and a significant number of portable objects were sent off site. With the end of the war the objects were returned but now all portable objects were displayed on the upper floor in two galleries, the 'Babylonian' and 'Assyrian' rooms. In 1939, however, as the Second World War started, several hundred reliefs panels were again moved from the galleries, this time to the protection of the Aldwych underground station. These were returned to the Museum in 1946–7. Despite a strong desire to make the collections more accessible to non-specialists, the dire financial climate of post-war Britain meant that the opportunity to reorganise the displays was not taken and the galleries were reinstated exactly as they were before the war. The collection therefore remained divided between the Assyrian reliefs on the lower floors, and the densely displayed upper floor galleries (fig. 5).

In 1963 the then Director, Sir Frank Francis, persuaded the Trustees to agree to a major transformation of the Assyrian galleries. The following year some 200 relief panels were moved to various basement stores. Over seven years, a mezzanine floor was introduced in the 'swimming pool' (figs 5 and 6) and the reliefs were reinstalled with a new entrance to the ground floor galleries created by repositioning the pair of human-headed winged bulls from Khorsabad. The aim was to reproduce as far as possible the original arrangement of the reliefs and give the Museum's visitors a sense of being in an Assyrian palace.

But what of the future? The Museum's Masterplan to remodel some of the building and redisplay all the galleries offers opportunities for a rethink intended to meet the needs of 21st-century audiences. New technologies, including projection, digital and sound – some of which are currently being trialled in the galleries – may provide different ways of engagement with the ancient objects. Perhaps, crucially, the Masterplan will allow an integration once again of small- and large-scale objects but in compelling arrangements to provide exciting explorations of Assyria's history and culture that ongoing research continues to reveal. It will also allow for connections across time and between cultures to be explored. The Assyrians had established a blueprint for empire encompassing the Middle East and a succession of powers would follow their model: Babylonian, Persian, Macedonian, Parthian and Sasanian – ancient worlds that will also be explored in the future Museum.

Paul Collins's new book *The Assyrians* is published by Reaktion Books