

London Centre for the Ancient Near East

Autumn Term 2018 Lecture Series

Convenors: Melissa Benson, H el ene Maloigne, Dr Eva Miller, Babette Schnitzlein

Brunei Gallery, London School of Oriental and African Studies, 6.15 pm

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8 October 2018: Professor Christina Riggs – Department of Art History and World Art Studies, University of East Anglia, and Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford

The statue that looked like a sheikh: towards a critical historiography of ancient Egyptian art

Discovered in the desert cemeteries west of Cairo around 1860, an ancient Egyptian statue known as the ‘Sheikh el-Beled’ merited three photographs in the landmark 1872 *Album du Mus e de Boulaq* and was a sensation when exhibited at the Paris *Exposition Universelle* in 1867. By the end of the 19th century, reproductions of the statue were circulating globally in the form of plaster casts, postcards, stereoscope and lantern slides, and book illustrations. The ‘Sheikh’ owed its name, and fame, to the legend of its discovery. According to this tale, when workmen digging on behalf of French Egyptologist Auguste Mariette first uncovered the 112 cm-high statue, they cried out with immediate recognition. There was their village chief carved in wood around the time the pyramids were built. Mixing the bewitching lifelikeness of the statue with the trope of credulous ‘Orientals’, the legend has featured in histories of Egyptian art ever since.

This lecture takes the ‘Sheikh’ as an entry point for a re-evaluation of ancient Egyptian art. I am interested in how encounters with works of ancient art, which are physical objects, have been translated into visual and written forms, and how that translation has shaped the kinds of histories of art composed for the ancient Middle East. What outmoded assumptions (like the gullible ‘Oriental’) still shadow scholarly versions of antiquity, especially within traditional fields like Egyptology, and how do modern images of ancient art enable, or disable, the telling of more global histories?

22 October 2018: Dr Juliette Desplat – The National Archives

‘A large question of policy’: the British government’s perception of archaeology in Iraq, 1917-1936

Archaeology in the Near East had always been a question of prestige, intertwined with complex colonial and political issues. In Iraq, from the moment General Maude entered Baghdad in 1917, the Foreign Office, Colonial Office, War Office and India Office kept close tabs on archaeologists and excavations. A new Law of Antiquities was approved in 1924, as the country was under a British Mandate. Drawn up by Gertrude Bell, it was very generous towards foreign archaeologists, allowing them to receive a substantial share of their findings, and to export this share more easily than it had been under Ottoman rule. This was only really challenged from the 1930s, after the Kingdom of Iraq was granted independence.

Through two case studies, this lecture will examine the British Government’s perception of archaeology in Iraq, and the shift towards a first attempt to decolonise the discipline.

12 November 2018: Babette Schnitzlein – Independent Researcher

Aby Warburg and the liver models: the impact of cuneiform studies on art history

Aby Warburg (1866–1929), an art historian from Hamburg with expertise in Renaissance art, was especially interested in the influence of antiquity on Modern European society. This is also the overall

subject of one of his most famous, yet unfinished works, the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne*. Pictures were pinned on wooden panels covered with black cloth; hardly any captions accompanied the individual panels. Only photographs of the panels have survived. With Warburg being one of the founders of the interdisciplinary approach Kulturwissenschaft (cultural studies), the *Bilderatlas Mnemosyne* has been very much in the centre of research and scholarly discussions of the discipline.

In this lecture, I will address the question of what impact Cuneiform Studies had on the work of Aby Warburg. His correspondence and personal library bear witness to his interest in Ancient Near Eastern studies. Furthermore, these sources deliver important hints for an interpretation of panel 1, especially the liver models depicted.

26 November 2018: Dr Felix Wiedemann – Freie Universität Berlin

Identifying the races of the ancient Near East: how European scholars in the 19th and early 20th centuries used ancient Egyptian representations of humans for racial classification

Excavating is always an act of visualizing the past. The spectacular excavations of representations of human beings in the Near East seemed to give authentic impressions of the ancient Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Hittites or Hebrews. Statues and reliefs that came to light were not taken as artificial or typological portrayals but perceived as exact representations of past peoples and examined with the methods of modern physical or racial anthropology. Thus, assuming that the physical appearance of historical peoples could be directly derived from the monuments, archaeologists, anthropologists and historians produced cartographies of ethnic and racial history, associating the ancient representations of humans with modern populations.

Using some well-known examples from ancient Egypt I will demonstrate how ancient representations of human beings – or rather modern copies and photographs of them – were used for racial identification and classification. To permit an understanding of the epistemic assumptions that underlay these approaches, I will place the images' claims to self-evidence in a broader history-of-knowledge context, reconstructing the history of the racial anthropological reading of relevant objects. The visual positivism on which the interpretations are based will require particular attention in this context, as will the typological function ascribed to the ancient human representations.

10 December 2018: Dr Mirjam Brusius – German Historical Institute, London

Displaying, hiding and replacing artefacts: on connecting the ancient and the modern Middle East in museums and public space

Many museum collections of non-Western artefacts, including those from Mesopotamia, have been formed largely through colonial encounters and imperial expansionism. As such they still play crucial roles in producing concepts of historical narratives, ethnicity, racial identity and difference. Current displays of Mesopotamian artefacts, for example, suggest a period of decline from the birth of Islam onwards, while European narratives link their historical present to mythical beginnings in the Middle East. Many European museums thus show the Middle East's past as 'their own' history, in relation to narratives of the 'cradle of civilization' that first had to be 'discovered' by European archaeologists in the 19th century. Meanwhile, the excavations that were foundational for many collections are still rendered as triumphalist and heroic stories, leaving little room for alternative interpretation. As a result, ancient artefacts are historically disconnected from other histories, including Europe's imperial endeavours and the resulting conflicts in the Middle East today.

At a time when there is increasing demand for the democratization of museum spaces that seeks to recognize and empower diverse ethnic audiences this paper wants to provoke questions not only about the decolonization but also the re-contextualization of non-Western artefacts in European museums. Whose story are they meant to tell, and which stories are left out? Who gets to tell whose story and who gets to hear them? What factors could enable museums to do more in critiquing their own collecting histories? What could be done to respond to the demands of those who ask for new narratives that also reflect other senses of belonging and inclusion?