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Topic of the Year: Museum Archaeology

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Ancient Near Eastern mementoes: The archaeological 'souvenir' industries between replica and invention

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Abstract

This short contribution investigates some preliminary insights concerning the production and dissemination strategies of modern replicas of ancient Near Eastern artefacts housed in museums worldwide. By drawing on a case study of the ancient Near East, this paper intends to illustrate not only the souvenir industry, the most immediate way to promote the museums' public service role, but also the different ways in which the past is experienced through the reproduction, display and use of the modern duplicates.

 Open Access  Peer Reviewed  **Keywords:** ancient Near East, museum, merchandising, archaeological mementoes

'Modelling' materiality to experience the past: from ancient original to modern reproduction

This short paper reports initial ideas and introduces preliminary insights on a novel CNR project investigating the production and dissemination strategies of archaeological souvenirs by museums housing ancient Near Eastern artefacts. In particular, this contribution investigates the theoretical, philosophical and historical tenets that preside over the production of modern reproductions of ancient artefacts discovered during the first excavations in the Near East, beginning in 1842 with the exploration of Khorsabad by the French archaeologist P.E. Botta. By drawing on the case study of the ancient Near East, this paper intends to illustrate the beginnings of the souvenir industry after, and as the result of, the Assyrian discoveries, as well as the intellectual climate that generated this phenomenon. The modern production of small-scale replicas of ancient artworks is the most obvious and immediate way to promote the museums' public service role, given that they serve audiences and communities. However, this contribution concludes by highlighting that these forms of 'remembrance' in three dimensions are not only a modern projection of the physical vestiges of

human activities; in addition, by facilitating the grasping of the materiality and sensory characteristics of the ancient objects, these modern copies allow us to experience the past with different aims and for different types of audiences.

It is not possible to investigate the production strategies of museum merchandising without first knowing the function of museum stores in terms of their educational and financial mission. Because the museum stores impact visitors of all ages who use these spaces to 'play' with the past, which is otherwise experienced seriously in the museum exhibitions, the relationship between the financial and educational aspects becomes particularly relevant, as does the role of museum gadgets: are they entertaining souvenirs, or products to enhance the learning experience?

Post-modernism produced a renewed focus on the relationship between original and copy in the ancient world. The field of action was, first of all, classical Mediterranean civilisation (Graeco-Roman world). In no other period of Western art history has the creation of copies from great masterpieces of the past been so important: from late Republican Rome to the Imperial age, the analysis of texts referring to (lost) originals and the study of their copies opened new perspectives about the relationship

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between One and Many, as well as the value of uniqueness in antiquity (Barbanera 2011, pp. 35-66). An important Italian exhibition entitled *Serializable/Portable Classic. The Greek Canon and Its Mutation*, co-curated by Salvatore Settis, Anna Anguissola and Davide Gasparotto, focused on classical statuary, exploring the ambivalent relationship between originality and imitation as well as the circulation of copies in modern times (Settis, Anguissola & Gasparotto 2015). Imitation means adding something different; different narratives result from 'copied' artefacts, promoting the transformative role of the copy in the modern societies. Specific statuary types have a long history of production from antiquity onwards (Figure 1); they were replicated in major arts and as popular versions for educational purposes (Gazda 2002).

The Hercules type shown as tired after his Labours was a famous Greek bronze statue produced at the end of the 4th century BC, probably by Lysippus. A marble version was created in the Hellenistic period by the Athenian sculptor Glykon, and was transferred to the Baths of Emperor Caracalla at the start

of 3rd century AD and discovered during the excavations carried out by Pope Paul III Farnese (around 1540) on land belonging to his family (hence its designation Farnese Hercules). Few life-size copies have been made due to the statue's size (it is over 3m tall). The act of reproduction involving all of the original features was considered a rule in order to replicate a conventional and recognisable typology, as well as a known storyline inferred from Classical literary sources. A great number of smaller copies (between 15 and 100cm tall) made in different materials (marble, bronze, terracotta, and so on) would have been executed from the 18th century onwards, destined for art academies where the Hercules type was used for anatomical studies (Settis & Gasparotto 2015, pp. 232-234). The modern life-size cast of the Farnese Hercules produced in resin has become a contemporaneous icon: permanently displayed in the underground station serving the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (where the Hellenistic piece has been displayed since 1797), this copy (Figure 2) has its own 'aura' as symbol of the city and his history, as



Fig.1. Pop replicas of the Venus de Milo purchasable in the Louvre shops (photo by the author).

figurative metaphor experiencing a 'place' and as memorial representation communicating information for tourists.

The souvenir industry and the ancient Near East

Archaeology plays a key role in exploring variations from the original. What is perceived as an identity (original) or similarity (imitation, copy) in the material sphere of forms, techniques and materials represent a phenomenon of great interest. In particular, focusing on ancient Near Eastern material culture, the topic of the copy was examined from a historical perspective, taking into account the different connotations given to it in ancient civilisations as a marker of social identity or a medium with ideological and ritual purposes. These aspects are outside the scope and intention of this discussion (examined in detail in Di Paolo 2018, pp. 29-71). But the relationship between Original and Copy still constitutes an important tenet in the modern reproduction of artefacts for museum collections to stimulate public awareness, and the interest in and appreciation of antiquity. The creation of exact modern copies of ancient artefacts also develops a souvenir industry and widens access to cultural heritage, facilitating a more direct approach to the materialisation of the past. This method of presenting 'antiquity' enhances multiple sensorial experiences with past material culture, while simultaneously presenting new questions on how the public relates to the inauthentic.

The recent exhibition *I am Ashurbanipal: King of the world, King of Assyria* (November 2018-February 2019) explored the reign of the Assyrian king through the collections of findings kept in the British Museum, and was also an opportunity to further reflect on the impact of the first Assyrian discoveries on a European audience and the strategies of audience engagement from the 19th century (Brereton 2018). Among the artefacts displayed were some of the first memorabilia replicating ancient Assyrian items produced within the general movement of democratisation of the culture, typical of the Victorian era, as a further manifestation of the pervasive and collective Orientalist taste, which also involved the ancient civilisations and their material expressions. The British Museum welcomed this new 'representation' of the



Fig. 2. Copy of Farnese Hercules executed in 2000-2001 by the Academy of Fine Arts of Naples. 'Museo' Station, Subway Line 1. Neapolitan Mobility Company (photo by the author).

Orient, developed alongside Britain's imperial ambitions and agenda as attempt to stimulate a more active public participation in cultural and museum life. The emerging souvenir industry allowed people to experience the past differently, and prolonged the 'cultural lesson' at home, shared with family and friends. This popular phenomenon involved the creation of a whole series of near-perfect facsimiles of objects: both upgrading the game of the illusion of depth from two-dimensional images of selected monuments from the Nimrud collection to be visualised with the new technique of stereoscopy developed in 1859 (Davidson 2017, pp. 89-93, and fig. 1.16) and facilitating the grasping of materiality and sensory characteristics through the three-dimensionality of the artefacts.

The factory of W.T. Copeland & Sons, headquartered at Stoke-on-Trent, which specialised in the manufacture of fine tiles, ceramic tableware and very fine small statuary parian porcelain (a type of *biscuit* porcelain imitating marble) began producing a set of



Fig. 3. Human-headed winged bull souvenir in parian porcelain in production by 1882 (BM 1987,0109.1). Courtesy of the British Museum (by CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license).

11 statuettes in 1882, partially inspired by the Assyrian stone sculptures that the British archaeologist Austen H. Layard had discovered almost 40 years before at Nimrud and Nineveh and which were displayed in the British Museum together with some gigantic figures from French excavations at Khorsabad (Copeland 2007, pp. 247-268; McCall 2018, p. 313). This production of Assyrian-inspired archaeological souvenirs was clearly intended for wealthy tourists and collectors, and was one of the 'exotic' deviations from the important market of reproductions of the classical statuary that had already expanded in Italy from the later 18th century. In Rome, small-scale copies of antique bronzes were available in store or through printed catalogues by Giovanni Zoffoli and Francesco Righetti, and a factory for the creation of biscuit-porcelain replicas of statues preserved in the Vatican or Capitoline museums was established by Giovanni Volpato in 1785 (Teolato 2018a, p. 70). Unlike the 'classical revival' (neoclassicism) which included the production of everyday

objects, such as the Wedgwood and Spode ceramics featuring designs directly inspired by the Grand Tour (Coltman 2006), these copies of ancient artworks were intended only as decorative objects (for tables and fireplaces) or combined to form elaborate educational centrepieces (Teolato 2018b, pp. 79-82).

The Assyrian set was conceived as a series of elements associated to form a single decorative group, but available individually for use by 'lecturers and teachers' (McCall 2018, p. 313). Among them, the bull and lion statuettes modelled by Aaron Hays and issued by Alfred Jarvis, two British Museum attendants (two specimens are still preserved in this museum; nos. 1987, 0109.1-2 and Figure 3), were based on the gigantic human-headed bull and lion figures that were originally placed in pairs at the entrance-way of gates in Assyrian palaces. These cultural souvenirs were produced as small-scale replicas of the original sculptures of the British Museum. The miniature human-headed winged lion (H. 23.4cm) was the faithful reproduction of one of the pair (BM 118801 and BM 118802) of the Assyrian colossi that had flanked the doorway (Door A) between the Throne Room B and Room C of the North-West Palace of the King Ashurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE) which were displayed in the museum (Assyrian Transept, West) since February 1852 (Gadd 1936, pp. 124-125; Layard 1849, fig. opp. p. 70; *Guide* 1908, pl. IV; Reade 2018, p. 170). Another identical but smaller winged lion serving as model was BM 118873, which had decorated the Entrance B between Rooms G and F of the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II visible in the Nimrud Central Saloon (Gadd 1936, pp. 125-126; Schäfer & Andrae 1925, p. 508).

The human-headed winged bull was a reproduction (H. 22.5cm) of one of the pair of sculptures from the gateway (Gate B) in the citadel wall at Khorsabad, the new capital founded by Sargon II (721-705 BCE). They were discovered by P.E. Botta in 1843-1844 and arrived at London in 1852 (BM 118808 and 118809) to be exhibited in the museum (Assyrian Transept, East), in front of the pair of lions BM 118801-2 mentioned above (Gadd 1936, p. 159; Hall 1928, pl. 28).

The choice to replicate, in parian porcelain, two sculptures not paired in neither the original context (one comes from Nimrud, the other from Khorsabad) nor in the London

museum (they were combined with identical figures) shows that the small reproductions had to illustrate the repertoire of the Assyrian sculpture as it was represented in the British Museum (i.e. with educational intent) rather than being objects produced to be used in pairs. In my opinion, this aspect is important because in this 'phase', the interrelation between image, function and meaning about the archaeological souvenirs is not yet a rule. The general evidence is rather marked by the intention to provide people with objects to analyse, construct and debate those past events that Great Britain had discovered and made available. The gradual acquisition of the characteristics of 'exotic' cultures known from the Bible and substantially foreign to the Western roots remains the main goal of this pervasive taste for artefacts from the Orient, within the intellectual movement aimed to shape the political consensus through education, the media and the arts.

Today, both the British Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art sell bookends directly inspired by gigantic Assyrian figures; their sales strategies are however, different. The British Museum store (both the museum shop and its online version) offers a single winged bull book-end in resin for £55.00 (available on <https://www.britishmuseumshoponline.org/winged-bull-bookend.html>, accessed May 18, 2020). It is listed in different categories (Sculpture, and Homeware) as a replica directly inspired (except for the two-horned tiara) by the guardian human-headed winged bull BM 118872 on display in the museum alongside the winged lion BM 118873. According to a suggestion by C. J. Gadd, reprised by S. M. Paley and R. P. Sobolewski, the stone winged bull was originally placed in the main entrance joining the inner Court Y with Room S of the North-West Palace of Ashurnasirpal II (Gadd 1936, p. 127; Paley & Sobolewski 1987, pp. 38 and 49), alongside another identical specimen, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. In shape and function, the resin bull (weight 1.73kg.) shares some characteristics with the original stone sculpture. In keeping books upright, it is a not-so veiled 'symbol' of knowledge and culture; as a supporting object, it is also connected to the idea of strength and solidity, analogous with the monumental Assyrian figures. In this sense, such a domestic object could be considered the 'Eastern' version of the bookends, inspired by the monumental

Greek columns (reproductions of those from Sardis are in the Metropolitan collection). The specimen for sale in the British Museum is purchasable alone and is thought to be paired (in case one wants to buy two) with another identical specimen, exactly as was conceived of in the past.

However, the Metropolitan Museum sells a pair of 'Assyrian Palace Guard Bookends' in resin at the cost of \$138.00 (<https://store.metmuseum.org/assyrian-palace-guard-bookends>; Figure 4). The pair reproduces a human-headed winged bull and a human-headed winged lion kept in the Museum's collection where they are arbitrarily assembled together. The figures are the replicas of one of the guardian bulls originally placed between inner Court Y and Room S (MMA 321431) and one of the lions at Doorway B between Rooms G and F (MMA 321432), both from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II. They were respectively in pairs with two other figures now kept in London (BM 118872 and BM 118873). The American museum has chosen to prioritise the combination that visitors can appreciate in the museum halls, rather than to recreate the original architectural setting of the two-winged *genii*.

Until 2019, the Met Store (The Metropolitan Museum of Art's gift shop; <https://store>.

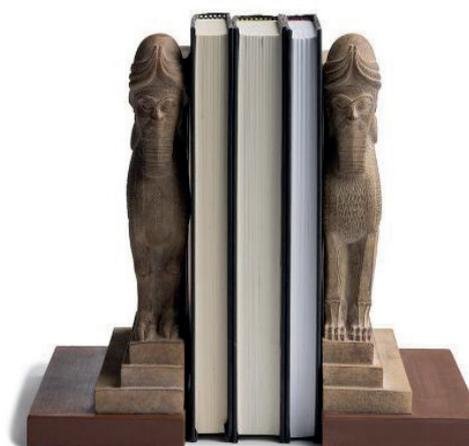


Fig. 4. Bookends replicating the paired Assyrian colossi kept in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (after <https://www.britishmuseumshoponline.org/winged-bull-bookend.html>).

[metmuseum.org](https://www.metmuseum.org)) offered a 'Sumerian Golden Leaves Necklace' for \$395.00, a jewel in gold and semiprecious stones (Figure 5) which was presented as the modern replica of an ancient ornament preserved in the same museum (MMA 33.35.3), purchased in 1933 from the University Museum of Philadelphia and formed by gold leaves, lapis lazuli and carnelian beads (McConnell 1991, p. 52; Benzel et al. 2010, p. 65). The original piece, excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley in the so-called Royal Cemetery of Ur and dated to the middle of the 3rd millennium BCE, was originally worn around the forehead by a woman buried in one of the richest tombs of the necropolis, as can be seen from an excavation photo (Benzel et al. 2010, p. 64, fig. 25), similar to the wreaths adorning Queen Puabi (Hafford & Zettler 2015, p. 95 and endnote 22). Other identical specimens, discovered in the same necropolis and probably worn in the same way, are preserved in the University Museum of Philadelphia (Pittman 1998, pp. 103-104, figs. 47-48). The modern reproduction was sold as a necklace, having 'falsified' its original function. The aim was, obviously, to accommodate the ancient feature with the taste of the modern audience in order to make the piece 'wearable' as well as saleable. Although there was a visual adherence of the replica to the original, the most important thing is that people grasped the object's inherent material and sensory characteristics (such as colour, lustre, strength, etc.) for feeling and understanding ancient artefacts.

What, and how many, approaches to a new materialisation of the past?

In museum studies, the literature pertaining to museum stores and the philosophy of the merchandise is as yet rather sparse. The published studies focused primarily on how to manage a museum store, on the relationship of the store to the museum's mission, as well as on the authenticity issues and uniqueness of the merchandise (Theobald 1991). This happens because the museum stores function as a specific part of the museum, rather than operate as a separate entity. In fact, the uniqueness and quality of items are fundamental features for a successful museum store (Costa & Bamossy 1995). Nevertheless, it is well known that



Fig. 5. 'Sumerian Golden Leaves Necklace' on sale online on the Metropolitan Museum of Art store until 2019 (after <https://store.metmuseum.org/sumerian-golden-leaves-necklace-80035763>).

museums have disseminated reproductions of works in their collections practically since their founding. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, for instance, fulfilled a mandate in its original 1870 Charter to 'encourage and develop the study of the fine arts'. At one of the Museum's first locations, replicas were on sale in the very galleries in which the original paintings were hung (Healy 2018). Still today, the sales operations of the Metropolitan are strongly defended. In one interview, the founder of the first gift shop, Bradford Kelleher (who died in 2007) said that by the 1970s the museum had built its workshops in the museum's basement to ensure the quality of its reproductions: 'Our test is whether the curator concerned with the objects can tell the reproduction from the real thing' (Kennedy 2007).

A large number of museums worldwide house important ancient Near Eastern collections (for a list, see Weeks & de Medeiros 2015, pp. 17-62). Museum merchandising includes the selection of specific subjects to imitate ancient artefacts to replicate the interest in them, curatorial staff, museum directors, marketing experts (often not specialised in ancient Near Eastern civilisations) who investigate the market strategies in order to improve the museums' incomes and to enhance the emotional response of the audience. From a marketing point of

view, modern replicas produced for museums and reflecting the museum collections have to satisfy the criteria of 'quality' and 'uniqueness', reproducing as far as possible the physical qualities of the ancient artefacts (shape, colours, sometimes material, size and so on), and convey accurate ideas of past civilisations. In these cases, the relationship between form, function and significance is consciously manipulated in order to convey specific values present in the original artefact. Scholars and professionals mediate antiquity and gather new knowledge, shaping awareness through the investigation of the processes of manufacture, transformation of form and material, as well as the role of replicas for institutional and political identity. They scientifically explore different themes concerning the issues of interpretation, accuracy, reconstruction and faking: the replica processes themselves are investigated in order to stimulate the reception of the ancient world by contemporary audiences. These aims are realised not only within archaeology but also beyond the academic world, universities, and museums.

The sense of the past and fascination that merchandise options stimulate is usually related to the intellectual standards of the visitors: entering in a museum store, they can improve their museum experience, buying things while also enlivening their visit. Today, thanks to technology, it is possible to illustrate and describe the museums' products with detailed information online and make sure the meaning behind the products is fully understood by the visitors (Mottner & Ford 2005, pp. 828-840). Modern museum souvenirs are sometimes based on the idea that shape, function and significance are interrelated, because these three conceptual categories better accomplish an educational purpose (to teach ancient history) as well as a sensitivity towards the material objects on display. A different trend for museum stores is the development of their own product line. They are related to the museum's permanent collections, as design inspirations rather than replicas. The offering of always new products is coordinated with previously merchandise: the goal is to translate the same design inspiration into multiple gadgets (Farr 2000, pp. 16-17). Nowadays, there are also numerous private companies worldwide focused on delivering product development services to museum stores and cultural brands. Among them are:

Museum Reproduction (2020); Etsy (2020); Museum Reproductions (2020); Museum Company (2020); M Hart Pottery (2020). This philosophy is bringing what was previously confined within museum walls out to the public. Ancient artefacts represent a source of inspiration differently modulated and applied: the discerning of 'timeless' shapes and designs must influence and encourage the public to take a piece of history home. Marketing strategies are moving toward a free fruition of the museums and their own merchandises, through the dissociation between form and function, and favouring the museum experience through 'immersive shops' outside museums dedicated to monocultural brands. On the other hand, there is a free use of the replicas by a public which equally conveys meanings and issues through the modern copies, although curatorial approval including the proposed size, materials and price range of the final product is a *conditio sine qua* to start and manage a business of museum reproductions. Generally speaking, no analysis on the value of the replicas and their role in the development of the public awareness for the past has yet been developed.

I think that it is necessary to investigate replicas as a specific category of objects in order to explore how the past was reinvented and how archaeological knowledge is represented in modern societies. Certain forms of 'remembrance' in three dimensions are not only a modern projection of the physical vestiges of human activities. The modern replicas, in fact, facilitate the grasping of materiality and sensory characteristics of the ancient objects, allowing us to experience the past with different aims and for different types of audiences. In this way, the creation of exact modern copies of ancient artefacts widens access to cultural heritage, permitting a more direct approach to the materialisation of the past. This way of presentation enhances multiple sensorial experiences with past material culture while simultaneously presenting new questions on how the public relates to the archaeology (Di Paolo 2018, pp. 31-32).

The new frontier of 3D printing perfect copies of ancient artefacts, for instance, allows the further development of an interest in public audiences beyond physical museums through making, and in scholarship, through the implementation of tools for research, preservation and educational purposes. In



Fig. 6. Reproduction on ceramic wall tiles of a war frieze inspired by the sculptures from Persepolis. Teheran. Private house (photo by the Author).

2012, the Harvard Semitic Museum promoted a high-tech project aimed at creating a digital duplicate of an intact ceramic lion discovered at Nuzi (the modern Yorghan Tepe in northern Mesopotamia) during the excavations promoted by this institution and the Fogg Museum in the 1930s and preserved in the University of Pennsylvania. The animal was originally placed in pairs in the shrine dedicated to the goddess Ishtar. This project allowed researchers to assemble the fragments of one of the original statues held by the Semitic Museum with pieces created through 3-D scans of its intact mirror image which was on the other side of the temple. The software attempted to use the 3-D model of the complete lion to re-create the missing parts for the broken one (Powell 2012); examples of this genre are proliferating.

One of these is worthy of note, because is in support of equitable access to the museum and its collections. Since 2016 the Oriental Institute of Chicago, which has one of the most important collection of ancient Near Eastern artefacts, developed an accessibility programme

(multi-sensory tours and verbal imaging tours), increasing access for people who are visually impaired. The object replicas used for this project had good tactile quality or interesting forms. The educators selected objects that were general enough to be of use in many contexts in order to provide a palpable sensory connection with the material culture and to be representative of their holdings (Livingston & Haines-Trautman 2018, in particular figs. 4, 8, 10). These experiences are directly promoted and managed by scholars, curators, and museum professionals.

This short paper approached the issue of modern replicas in museums with ancient Near Eastern artefacts. Further studies are needed to explore the circumstances in which replicas are used, the audiences and markets by which reproductions are acquired, as well as the ideas, aesthetics, reception of the antiquity by each group of people visiting museums, and also the most diverse uses and consumption of perfect replicas or free reproductions (Figure 6).

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