

Review

Inside an Ancient Assyrian Palace: Looking at Austen Henry Layard's reconstruction

Ada Cohen and Steven E. Kangas. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, University Press of New England, New Hampshire, 2017. xiv, 88 pages: illustrations, map, 26 cm. ISBN: 9781611689976, 161168997X. Price 334,95 DKK / 24,99 USD

Anna Silberg Poulsen

The book sets out to explore the famed plate 2, *Hall in Assyrian palace, restored*, from Henry Austin Layard's 1849 publication *The Monuments of Nineveh, from drawings made on the spot*. Cohen and Kangas approach the plate from two different research avenues: The first deals with the accuracy of the polychrome interior represented in the reconstruction. The second research avenue dives into the creation of the original plate and who was involved in the creative process. The two research avenues intersect in their frequent discussion and reflection upon the plate and how its representation of ancient Assyria reflects the Victorian worldview.

I will recommend reading this book to get an idea of what Layard excavations meant for their contemporaries in Britain, and the increased attention the ancient Assyrians got following the excavations. It is also a good introduction to how the plate reflects the scientific understandings of polychromy at the time, as well as its Victorian sensibilities and biases.

The book is divided into five chapters: Introduction, Layard's Victorian Palace, Floor with Puzzle, Coloured Drawing and Lithographic Plate, Plate 2 and the History of Art. The publication is well illustrated and a good source for examining the plate in closer detail.

The first two chapters deal mostly with the first research question of uncovering and exploring the accuracy of the plate, as well as providing additional context from Layard's personal correspondence to support the polychromy of the reconstruction. The chapters also draw comparisons between the plate, and the reconstruction of The Nineveh Court in the Crystal Palace which Layard was also responsible for. The chapters are very good at contextualising the plate, and highlighting the Victorians' orientalism. The last three chapters deal with the second question of examining who made the plate. I found this part of the book interesting from an art historical perspective, but not so much from an archaeological one. It demonstrates good detective work, from uncovering an inscription hidden in the scribbles of the floor decoration in plate 2, to reconstructing an artist's life and story. The chapters also provide even more social context to the publication of Layard's *The Monuments of Nineveh, from drawings made on the spot*, and *Nineveh and its remains*, by uncovering the many people involved in its production, particularly those involved in producing the lithographs.

Anna Silberg Poulsen,
MA Near Eastern Archaeology
UCPH.

Contact:
mzc592@alumni.ku.dk

Research interests:
Polychromy, Archaeogaming,
Digital archaeology

The final chapter tries to place plate 2 in art history, and to do so they quote Michael Ann Holly's book *The Melancholy Art*. The quote from Holly's book speaks of the contradiction between fascination for an object and the knowledge that it is impossible to fully grasp the meaning of it, but also that the knowledge does not dim the fascination of the object. Cohen and Kangas use the quote to encourage more transparent fascination and joy in present day research, inspired by how Layard shared his joy and fascination for the field of Assyriology and archaeology. I think the link between the last chapter and the rest of the book would have been clearer if the theories and approaches by Holly had been presented earlier in the work.

The highlight for me was when the authors compared a watercolour of the same subject as plate 2, which are thought to be the prototype for the plate. The watercolour might have been produced by Layard himself, but Cohen and Kangas comment on the depiction of the cuneiform inscriptions depicted in the watercolour, and compares it to Sanskrit, opposed to cuneiform. They point out that Layard was known to have copied and admired the cuneiform script, and the depiction of the inscription seems out of character, even if it was done in a medium like watercolour. They also compare the colours of the watercolour illustration with the published plate 2, and they find that blue is more prevalent in the watercolour, where the plate uses hues of green, which reflects the Victorian ideas of Assyrians preferring green to blue.

The audience of the book is a little unclear to me. The nature of the subject is very specific, but I believe this publication is written in an accessible manner and is able to be read by both a casual reader, and the extensive notes makes it a valuable book for researchers with an interest in the subject.