

ASSYRIA

PALACE ART OF ANCIENT IRAQ

In the ninth through seventh centuries BC, the kings of Assyria forged the greatest empire the region had known. Its armies conquered lands from Egypt, the eastern Mediterranean coast, and parts of Anatolia (Turkey) in the west to the mountains of Iran in the east.

The Assyrian heartland itself lay astride the Tigris River in Mesopotamia, in what is today northern Iraq. Its original capital was the city of Ashur, known by this name since at least the mid-third millennium BC. In the period of the Assyrian Empire, the capital moved successively to Kalhu (Nimrud), Dur-Sharrukin (Khorsabad), and finally—the grandest city of all—Nineveh. At each of these sites the kings built palaces to glorify their reigns, adorning the walls with superbly carved reliefs in gypsum and limestone. The scenes, which were originally brightly painted, presented an idealized image of the ruler through vivid depictions of battles, hunting, rituals, building works, mythological creatures, and court life.



The maximum extent of the Assyrian Empire in the seventh century BC

The reliefs in this exhibition come from the palaces of Ashurnasirpal II (883–859 BC) and Tiglath-pileser III (745–727 BC) at Kalhu; Sargon II (722–705 BC) at Dur-Sharrukin; and the last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC), at Nineveh. Together these works, which include some of the masterpieces of Assyrian art, provide a representative overview of the primary subjects, styles, and artistic achievements of Assyrian sculpture.

The Classical World in Context

This gallery is devoted to the cultures that influenced and interacted with the classical world of ancient Greece and Rome. In the mid-eighth century BC the Assyrian Empire expanded westward to the shores of the Mediterranean, coming into contact with the Greeks in Phoenicia, on Cyprus, and along the southern coast of Anatolia, as well as in trading colonies in northern Syria. Assyrian records speak of the Greeks as marauding pirates, captives, sailors, and mercenaries serving in the Assyrian army.

The works in this exhibition represent an exceptional loan from the British Museum in London. As a result of the excavations of the British explorer Sir Austen Henry Layard in the nineteenth century, that museum is home to the largest collection of Assyrian reliefs, as well as many other finds.

Assyrian Palaces

Assyrian palaces were imposing complexes that served both as residences for kings and their families and as the venues for official diplomatic and ceremonial functions. Suites of rooms enclosed courtyards and provided royal living quarters, a throne room, reception halls, and spaces for administrative activities. Surrounding gardens and orchards were carefully maintained for the king's enjoyment.

The Assyrians used mud brick as their primary building material, but the palace facades were often covered in white gypsum plaster that gleamed in the sunlight. Polychrome glazed bricks and wall paintings enhanced the architecture. Colossal stone sculptures depicting winged, human-headed bulls and lions guarded the entrances.

The most important rooms within the palaces were decorated with reliefs carved from gypsum or limestone, which were painted in vivid colors. Scenes in the throne room and reception halls emphasized the king's military prowess and his status as the all-powerful ruler and builder. The subjects of the reliefs in the king's private quarters included beneficent mythological creatures, rituals, and other themes.

This material was published in 2019 to coincide with the J. Paul Getty Museum exhibition *Assyria: Palace Art of Ancient Iraq*, October 2, 2019–September 5, 2022, at the Getty Villa.

To cite this material, please use: *Assyria: Palace Art of Ancient Iraq*, published online 2019, the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, <http://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/assyria/>

