

AAA Lectures – Art History & Visual Studies – 2024 Program – April-June

Organizers: Christina Tsouparopoulou & Catherine Draycott

Venue: Zoom (online)

Fridays, 4pm Central European Time/**3pm** Greenwich Mean Time

Programme

26.04.2024

Stephanie Langin-Hooper – “Interpreting miniaturization and the effects of scale in Mesopotamian art”

The description would be: Small-scale artworks are often overlooked as relatively insignificant in the study of Mesopotamian art, with figurines and statuettes considered less consequential than life-size or larger statues and other monuments. Other artworks with small-scale imagery, such as coins or seals, are often augmented with artificially enlarged imagery when they are taught, studied, and displayed in museums. But what does it mean to take these small things seriously as *small*, regarding their size not as an indication of lesser status or an impediment to their appreciation but as an integral part of their affective properties as artworks? This talk will explore how a scale-focused approach on miniature artworks from Mesopotamia can illuminate the relationship these objects were meant to create with the people who used them. Themes of embodiment, sensory perception, intimacy, and wonder will be explored through two case studies of figurines and seals from the Hellenistic period in Babylonia. The paper will conclude with suggestions concerning the wider application of a scale-based approach to art from the ancient Middle East.

03.05.2024

Neil Erskine – “Relational ontologies beyond the momentary: socialisation in the archaeological record”

Recent archaeological theory has expressed enthusiasm for the assemblage thinking of Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, albeit usually filtered through other theorists such as Manuel DeLanda and Jane Bennett. Such approaches frequently place a heavy stress on the transformative qualities of assemblages, which represent constantly changing emergent entities that spring forth from the

relations between material and immaterial components. Less focus is normally given to experiences of assemblages' repercussions for socialisation processes, which are similarly transformative. By returning directly to Deleuzo-Guattarian thought, however, we are furnished with other concepts that help us go beyond the meaningful experience of assemblages to their contributions to individuals' developing perceptions of the world and their place in it. Most important are Deleuze's folds, the process through which social entities internalise their experiences of assemblages; and Deleuze and Guattari's plateaus, momentarily coalescing groups of those internalised experiences that represent the social conditions that inform other experiences. Together, these concepts allow the interpreter to reconstruct the conditions of experience that framed individuals' interactions with places, objects, or practices, and the consequences this had for their ongoing understanding of their world. This paper seeks to demonstrate the usefulness of the wider Deleuzo-Guattarian corpus in exploring ancient socialisation by considering experiences of cult and landscape in ancient West Asia.

10.05.2024

Paul Collins – “Image, identity and agency in Mesopotamia”

Since at least the tenth millennium BC, carved images probably held symbolic and amuletic value that could evoke the agency of the supernatural world. This became especially meaningful when such images were impressed in clay as sealings. With the emergence of urbanism and associated social hierarchies and institutions, temples emerged as a focus for ritual. By the early third millennium BCE visual images of essentially timeless rituals were combined with writing to record contractual transactions involving land, property, and people. Text and images were thus brought together on stone objects in order to preserve memories of ephemeral historical transactions and events, the details recorded in writing, and the agreement made eternal through the ritual act depicted in carved images. Such an understanding allows us to interpret images as active participants in rituals, ultimately acting as a kind of conduit to the divine.

17.05.2024

Tuna Şare – “The Image of Forced Migration in Roman Imperial Propaganda”

War, climate challenges, political turmoil, and economic instabilities have collectively transformed the 21st century into an era marked by widespread migration. The visuals of migratory movements dominate the headlines of contemporary newspapers, underscoring the profound impact on our modern world. This lecture delves into historical perspectives, specifically exploring the representation of "forced migration" in Roman imperial art. The primary focus lies on a sculptural relief, a fragment from the renowned Nicomedia frieze, once adorning the imperial complex of Emperor Diocletian in Nicomedia, Türkiye. The focus of the discussion revolves around the processional scene depicted on this relief, featuring heavily-loaded mules, horses, and people walking in the countryside. The discussion offers a novel interpretation of the image as a portrayal of 'state-enforced migration' during Diocletian's reign. By drawing parallels from analogous imagery found in Roman coinage and sculpture, as well as insights from ancient literary sources,

the lecture contends that forced migration was strategically employed as a facet of imperial propaganda, particularly during the Tetrarchic Period.

24.05.2024

Rubina Raja – “Images in context: Contextualising Palmyrene Portraits”

Palmyrene funerary portraits make up the largest group of portrait sculpture from the Roman imperial period, the first three centuries CE, stemming from outside Rome itself, the corpus totals app. 4,000 portraits stemming from loculus reliefs, sarcophagi, and banqueting reliefs as well as sculpture in the round and a few wall paintings. Over the last decade these portraits have been collected and studied within the framework of the Palmyra Portrait Project. As part of the project a detailed study of the contexts of each single portrait or object on which the portrait was situated, including their collection histories, has been conducted. This study has investigated exactly how many of these come with any kind of in-situ information and still are or was until recently in-situ. It is a staggering low number where in-situ contexts can be traced, leaving us with a few – but important cases of in-situ situations. This lecture introduces the corpus of Palmyrene funerary sculpture and discusses the conclusions of the project as well as the implications that the results of the project have for the way in which we need rethink images – in this case portraits – in or out of contexts - not only in Palmyra - but in a much broader context within the Roman Empire.

31.05.2024

S. Rebecca Martin - “How (not) to Interpret Gender in Phoenician Anthropoid Sarcophagi”

The image-representation relationship in Phoenicia is complex thanks to an established habit of artistic receptivity. The Phoenician anthropoid sarcophagus is a good example of imagery born from culture contact. They first appear in Sidon during the Persian period (ca. 525-300 BCE) and were from the start clearly indebted to Egyptian and Greek cultural practices while still being exclusively Phoenician. The sarcophagi are uniquely concerned with the representation of the body and accordingly should tell us something about how Phoenicians perceived bodies and the relationship between bodies, representation, and identity—including gender identity. Although there is a good deal of scholarship focused on interpreting the appearance of these objects, we still cannot claim to fully understand what they show. The assessment of gender presentation in this corpus has been hampered by a loose grasp of its logic in its Egyptian and Greek prototypes and a tendency to misread the images through modern stereotypes, especially with respect to hairstyles. I will discuss how scholarship arrived at these interpretations and how new evidence has upended them, opening up a path for novel thinking about gender presentation and the image-representation relationship in Phoenician art.

07.06.2024

Oya Topcuoğlu – “All the King’s (Wo)men: Seal Imagery and the Representation of Royal Women in the Early Second Millennium”

Glyptic studies show that the figure-with-mace facing the interceding goddess emerged as the official motif of both Šamši-Adad’s Kingdom of Upper Mesopotamia and the small independent kingdoms that succeeded it during the 19th-18th centuries B.C. Seal legends indicate that this motif was restricted to kings and male officials who occupied the highest ranks of administration. However, the same motif was also used on the seals of royal women, who, as texts show, were powerful, wealthy, and influential individuals with political, commercial, and administrative duties. Nonetheless, only the seal inscriptions communicated their identity as women, while the imagery emphasized their role in the affairs of the state and their position as royal servants. By combining seal imagery, textual evidence, and archaeological information, this paper aims to show that royal women were not simply invisible in the visual record of Mesopotamia but were hidden behind iconographic conventions typically reserved for men. Rather than using seals where the imagery reflected their gender identity, they communicated their prominent role and status in public affairs and administration by adopting the official iconography of the state, which renders them virtually unrecognizable from a visual perspective.

14.06.2024

Alessandro Poggio – “Looking at images to understand social dynamics: the fourth-century BC Eastern Mediterranean”

The analysis of images can convey several useful information on the socio-historical contexts that have produced them: the materials used, the style, the choice of specific iconographies and their manipulation give information about the process of creation and the message conveyed. Such a complex analysis appears particularly fruitful in ancient contexts for which we don’t have enough information from other sources. In this paper I will analyse some case studies from the fourth-century BC Eastern Mediterranean, the territories of which, included into the Achaemenid Persian Empire and at the crossroad of complex intercultural contacts, experienced unique artistic dynamics. Here, a well-defined corpus of funerary monuments, attributed to local rulers, are lavishly decorated with complex figurative programs related to the life of these important personages and their retinue (e.g., battles, hunts, banquets) or connected with the mythical sphere. My paper will thus test whether and how these images could be used as a tool for decoding the structure of local societies and understanding relevant cultural processes at work.