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Archaeology of Images:
Context and Intericonicity in Neo-Assyrian Art*

Archaeology and *Bildwissenschaft*: A Fruitful Dialogue?

In 2003, Horst Bredekamp discussed the issue of the definition of art history as *Bildwissenschaft*. This is a topic that is still central in the debate in both art history and, more generally, in visual studies (which is now commonly referred to as the study of production and use of images).[1] We would like to introduce our contribution starting from the final reflection of Bredekamp who states:

> The separation of visual studies from art history and the retreat of the more conservative
> members of this discipline onto precious little islands would put an end to art history as
> *Bildgeschichte.* Seen through the lens of, say, 1930, the success of the turn to the visual in
> our epoch seems to depend on whether art history projects its precision of description,

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*   Both authors devised the main conceptual ideas outlined in paragraph 1 and the conclusions expounded in paragraph 4. The analysis of the two case studies, namely paragraphs 2 and 3, was carried out by Ludovico Portuese and Davide Nadali respectively.

1   Indeed, one of the main difficulties is finding a very general term in English that encompasses all different aspects of the study of images, of any kind and in any field. As rightly pointed by Bredekamp (2003, 418), the German term *Bildwissenschaft* does not have an equivalent in English (Rampley 2012). Therefore, it seems that if problems start with definitional differences between modern languages, the very same problems affect the evaluation of images and, more specifically, of images in the ancient world. In particular, recent trends tried to distinguish between an art history as history of images (*Bildgeschichte*) and an art history that also includes photography and cinema (*Bildwissenschaft*). This dichotomy can however alter and deny the value of images (all kinds) that should be at the centre of the discipline of art history, going beyond the labels of the discipline itself (see the considerations by Elkins 1999, 3–12 on those images that are not art). In the present paper, the assumption of the value of a *Bildwissenschaft* (image science, see Mitchell 2015) will be considered in the evaluation of the meaning and function of images within an archaeological context as the transmission of scientific knowledge of the ancient world as it was perceived by ancient societies.

its formal and contextual analysis towards all fields of historical *Bildwissenschaft* or if it turns itself into a splendid second archaeology.[2]

Looking from the perspective of the dialogue between image studies and archaeology, the statement by Bredekamp is particularly interesting and intriguing. He refers to the transformation of art history into a "second archaeology" that, even if "splendid" – as he explicitly admits –, actually results in the categorization of occurrences and images using a repertoire of beauty. Archaeology is deeply embedded in images as they are both part of the archaeological record; and at the same time, the practice of archaeology also produces images: drawings, sections, photos and other visual documents that eventually enter the large corpus of image studies.[3]

In this respect, archaeology is a discipline that deals with pictures in two separate domains: 1) as source directly from the field (images in contexts) and 2) as metapictures, namely pictures that speak of, reflect on and disclose issues and features about pictures.[4] The risk is that this second domain can prevail over the former. Images from archaeological excavations are too often evaluated for the pictures they display more than for the original context the pictures had and were shaped and thought for. As a consequence, the discovery of image-bearing artefacts or artefacts that are images themselves (bas-reliefs, statues, etc.) opens several questions from the archaeological perspective. It becomes necessary to evaluate the context where statues, bas-reliefs and other visual artefacts were displayed in order to recover the meaning and function of images in and for ancient societies. This requires moving away from an antiquarian judgement towards a more scientific analysis of ancient pictures. Therefore, following Bredekamp's statement, if an art history that does not seek to encompass the whole complexity and categories of images runs the risk of turning itself into a 'splendid archaeology', what can we say about the archaeology that does seek to launch a dialogue with image studies? Can we still speak of a 'splendid archaeology'? Maybe yes, but we definitely think it will be a partial archaeology that has more the value of an antiquarian collection: images *from* the past actually

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2   Bredekamp 2003, 428.

3   The images produced by archaeological practice (during and after the excavations) are indeed scientific products as they rely upon the scientific process of excavating and, conversely, they support scientific research and further reflections after the excavation is over. As a consequence, due to the scientific value and use of those images, they can perfectly enter the domain of (image) science or the theoretical contemporary debate of the *Bildwissenschaft*.

4   On the meaning of metapictures see Mitchell 1994, 35–82. The semantic meaning of metapictures in archaeology seems particularly interesting and intriguing, as archaeology produces images, on the one hand, and relies upon images for studies, on the other. Moreover, the images archaeological research relies on are both the result of excavation itself (photos and drawings made by archaeologists in the field) and archaeological records (image-bearing objects from the past).

became images *of* the past and archaeology runs the risk of entering an unproductive self-referential cycle.

This has been indeed one of the limits of the research on images in archaeology: images have been (too) often treated as the visualization of aspects, objects, moments and places of the life of ancient societies:[5] in our opinion, this tendency is not totally and necessarily wrong, but it is highly restricting and restricted as it confines pictures to the sole purpose of translating, visually, concepts, words and stories.[6] It is therefore time to pass from the idea of images in archaeology to the more fruitful question of the archaeology of images, where images are no longer (or not simply) visual historical documents, but they are (and therefore are treated) as visual scientific products of ancient societies.[7] Within the frame of the archaeology of images (that, mirroring the term *Bildanthropologie*,[8] we could call *Bildarchäologie*), the archaeological approach to images seeks to disclose the antiquity of a picture: this does not imply to verify and establish the exact date of an image, from a pure chronological point of view, but rather the archaeology of images is a process of reconstruction of the life of an image, from the moment it has been created to the later re-use, re-adaptation and eventual loss (burial or even destruction). For this reason, the *Bildarchäologie* is close to Belting's *Bildanthropologie*:

> Der Wechsel der Bilderfahrung drückt auch einen Wechsel der Körpererfahrung aus, weshalb sich die Kulturgeschichte des Bildes in einer analogen Kulturgeschichte der Körpers spiegelt.[9]

As a body, the image is made, i.e. it is conceived; the picture reproduces, on different media, the image via processes of making (the artist physically and concretely shapes the object) and of matching (the artist corrects, modifies, re-adjusts the original prototype).[10] Actually, the principal idea of *Bildarchäologie* is the search for, and identification of the very first image (the archetype) that has then been inflected with different shapes of pictures and in different places.[11]

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5   Juwig – Kost 2010, 14–15.
6   This is what for example happens in the edition of the Assyrian letters of the State Archives of Assyria, where pictures of Assyrian bas-reliefs are used to illustrate texts (Matthiae 2014, 388).
7   Samida 2010, 105.
8   Belting 2001.
9   Belting 2001, 23.
10   Gombrich 1984; Freedberg 2018.
11   On the semantic distinction, based on modern linguistic difference and inference, between "image" and "picture", see Mitchell (1994; 2005, 76–106, esp. 84–85) and Belting (2001, 11–55, esp. 14–18; 2005).

The risk of looking at images as a reflection and illustration of the past is indeed always present and it mainly depends on the way ancient artefacts, and more specifically ancient images, are treated and studied. Indeed, the transfer of images and image-bearing artefacts into museums deeply changes the status and nature of objects. They acquire the new status of a work of art with all aesthetical implications of judgment and appreciation.[12] Moreover, such evaluation has normally followed a western-based canon of reference and vocabulary that, as has been demonstrated, is not absolutely and unanimously valid for all cultures and all periods.[13]

In this respect, the dialogue between archaeology and image studies should result in a prolific interference and contamination: images from the past are indeed part – one could even argue they are the very preludes – of image studies but it must not be forgotten that those images have been thought, conceived and shaped for purposes that are not purely aesthetic according to our modern view and perception of works of art. Based on a strong archaeological background, images must necessarily be seen in the context that is part of the meaning, indeed it affects their meaning and power reciprocally. As a consequence, this re-contextualization of archaeological objects, in general, and of image-bearing artefacts, more specifically, is the very fundamental premise for a correct observation and understanding of the role of images in

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12 Belting 2001, 68. When dealing with ancient (especially non-Western) artefacts the judgment is far from simple. For instance, the classification of low art (or minor art) in contrast to high art (or major art), as well as the distinction between artist and artisan according to our modern and contemporary connotations, can be hardly drawn in past societies. Moreover, some artefacts and even inscriptions coming from the ancient Near East and now exhibited in modern museums were never meant to be seen, read, or contemplated. The consequence is that the museum reality can affect and change their nature and meaning turning some artefacts into what is called today "fine art" or "masterpiece", a notion or distinction that was not used in the Near Eastern societies (Gunter 1990, 9–17; Gunter 2019, 7–9; Sasson 1990; Winter 1992a, 41–47; Winter 2000; Nadali 2014).

13 Until the 1950s, art historical scholarship did not recognize the works of art within a given cultural context as an expression of *Kunstwollen*, but rather maintained as its reference the classical Greek "paradigm" or "canon" – here intended as a group of works recognized within a defined social group as being exemplary (Locher 2012; for a recent analysis of the canon of ancient Near Eastern art, see Feldman 2016). In recent decades, however, new critical perspectives have advanced understanding of the field of art and scholars have sought to identify notions about the aesthetic sphere through an appropriate vocabulary from Sumerian and Akkadian. In this respect, see Winter 1992a, 37–47; Winter 1995; Winter 1997, 364–377; Winter 2008; Bonatz 2002; Bahrani 2003; Nadali 2012, 583–587; Nadali 2018.

ancient societies and the power – if any – they exerted over the user and observer – if such existed.[14]

In archaeology, the value of images is customarily understood as related to their provision of information.[15] The historical and archaeological context, stylistic treatment and physical state of images may provide clues as to their function as social instruments, and also whether or not they were meant to represent political, symbolic, or religious subjects. Archaeologists can approach the image-function in two main ways, namely as 'cognitive function' and 'physical function'. Images contain conceptual messages that may be accepted, negotiated, challenged or denied. Their construction takes place because their producers or artists were applying the "conceptual patterns" associated with the transmission of a specific message.[16] They also played an active role within their physical context and, in turn, the physical context could have affected the arrangement and distribution, the visual impact and consequent consumption of images inside a given space by an audience. Thus, archaeology indicates that images are not passive things to be looked at and consumed as works of art, but should, instead, be approached as dynamic tools used by the groups or 'minds' who produced and consumed them. Accordingly, both the cognitive and physical functions bestow the idea of "flexible intention" upon images, that is to say that, archaeologically, a given image in a given context may be indicative of polyvalent meanings and purposes, since images acquire different connotations and functions (thus with a diverse power) according to degree of accessibility and visibility by people and beholders.[17] In other words, archaeological research may reveal a complex biography of the images it studies as well as an intrinsic dynamism.

In this respect, when we precisely deal with Mesopotamian images, the very special condition and nature of images must be stressed: statues, for example, underwent ritual passages that transformed the stone shaped block into a stone shaped

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14 With special regard to the Assyrian bas-reliefs and to what extent the architectural context affects their meanings: see Ataç 2010; Bagg 2016; Nadali 2016; Portuese 2017. Only with an eye to the original context of the ancient Assyrian bas-reliefs, the question of the power of images can be suitably investigated: as fundamental premises, images had to be visible and accessible to a large number of people if, for example, the purpose was the intimidation and coercion. More in general, it is important to develop the discourse of interaction and embodiment of images, in the balance between mental and material images, as well as the implication of the life, desires and power exerted by images over other images and people (Freedberg 1989; Freedberg 2009; Belting 2001; Freedberg – Gallese 2007; Bredekamp 2010; Mitchell 2005).

15 Moser – Smiles 2005, 1.

16 Wedde 1992, 183.

17 The definition of "flexible intention" is employed by Needham 2001, 287 in relation to the Bronze Age metalwork deposits, and cited by Aldhouse-Green 2004, 1–2 in the context of iconography in Iron Age and Roman Europe.

being, actually acting in the world, hearing and speaking.[18] In Mesopotamian thought, images were definitely living organisms and this aspect surely affected the way those artefacts were looked at and treated with different degrees of interactions and communication – for example, in certain circumstances it was believed that communication could take place between two or more living statues even without the presence of and active participation of human beings.[19]

Moving to art history and its cognate fields, it is a commonplace in these disciplines that images are never innocent.[20] In particular, image science (*Bildwissenschaft*) and visual culture studies actively address research questions into the frameworks that motivate representational strategies and seek to define the numerous conventions that shape meaning and construct knowledge.[21] As a consequence, images are often thought of – using the words of Mitchell –

> as things that have been marked with all the stigmata of personhood and animation, and scholars frequently talk and act as if images had feeling, will, consciousness, agency, and desire. They, indeed, exhibit both physical and virtual bodies; they speak to us, sometimes literally, sometimes figuratively; or they look back at us silently across a 'gulf unbridged by language'.[22]

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18   As textual evidence proves, in the ancient Near East, royal statues underwent rituals such as "the opening of the eyes" and "the opening and washing of the mouth". The animate status of the Mesopotamian image is moreover clearly implied by the fact that every inscribed royal statue of Gudea, ruler of Lagash towards the end of the 3rd millennium BCE, uses the verb for "birthing" rather than the normal verb for the "making" of things, that is to say that the image was turned into a living being, an animate sentient matter. In a nutshell, images exercised both a psychological action, such as impressing a spectator, and physiological, as happens when a holy icon is believed to possess thaumaturgic powers (Gell 1998, 66). On the importance and role of the relationship between rituals and visual media in the ancient Near East, see Walker – Dick 2001; Winter 2000; Bahrani 2003, 121–184; Nadali 2013.

19   This special encounter between living statues can be for example inferred for the so-called presentation scenes, so commonly depicted on cylinder seals from the Akkadian period and largely used during the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur at the end of the 3rd millennium BCE. Scenes are characterised by the presence of a standing figure (the seal's owner), led by a Lama goddess to the seated figure of the god or the king: at the time of the Third Dynasty of Ur the seal with the presentation scene identified the owner as a member and official of State who acted and worked on behalf of the Crown (Winter 1987). One can therefore argue that the seated figure, either the god or the king, to which the action is directed, is not a person in the flesh, but rather a statue (it can in fact be observed that the throne, on which the god or the king is seated, stands upon a dais). In ancient Mesopotamia, arrangements of statues as *tableaux vivants* were quite common, with the organization of standing and seated statues entertaining a dialogue often in an eye-to-eye contact (Winter 1992b; Nadali 2013). For the Neo-Assyrian period, see the letter SAA XIII 149 where movements of statues are accurately planned and described.

20   Juwig – Kost 2010, 18.

21   Moser – Smiles 2005, 1.

22   Mitchell 2005, 30.

The idea that images have a kind of social or psychological power of their own is the reigning cliché of contemporary visual culture studies. Further, in this field "interpretation and sense-making is about reading *in*, not reading *from* and, on a deeper level, about reaching *through* the image and its thicket of allusions to the author beyond".[23] Images are active elements encoding propositions about the world.[24] They act in the world not exclusively to change it but rather to explain, underpin and substantiate the whole reality:[25] images are integral part of that reality and reality is reflected by images in a kind of a double mirroring effect that precisely explains and defines the interaction and complementarity between the two.

Different approaches apart, archaeology and *Bildwissenschaft* both use the 'act of looking' to interpret and apply meaning to images. Further, both disciplines deal with the final product of the agency, namely the mind behind the making of a given image and its meaning(s). Both disciplines accordingly deal with images which are seen as deeply imbued with the set of ideas of the author who promoted and ordered those images.[26] In sum, in both fields, images are regarded as "Visualisierungen von kulturell verankerten Vorstellungen und kollektiven Lebensentwürfen"[27] and as "remnants of complex communication processes, perception practices, and cultural memories".[28] Of course, for the specific concerns of archaeology, results are sometimes limited by the state of preservation and the difficulty of anchoring images on a solid understanding of a wider cultural milieu.[29]

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23   Balm 2016, 6.

24   Winter 2007; Nadali 2013.

25   The role of statues as depicted in the presentation scenes (see fn. 20) as well as in other contexts (such as the one described in the text of *Esarhaddon's Succession Treaty*, SAA II 6 § 35) shows that images definitely had an active function in the world that cannot be disregarded: they were part of the world, living in the world, underpinning and explaining the reality via a process of continuous interchange and dialogue with other images and the beholders.

26   Winter 2007; Winter 2016, 24; Nadali 2017, 3.

27   Schmidt 2009, 12.

28   Bracker 2016, 19.

29   Images in archaeology need to be looked at from and with an archaeological perspective since a fundamental part of ancient aesthetics depends on and derives from the analysis of context but also of materials, that is of each material component composing the image – what is now called the material turn or materiality issue in archaeology. In detail, the issue of materiality recently opened new debates and researches in archaeology (e.g. Tilley 2004; Meskell 2005; Malafouris 2013; Knappett 2014; Enderwitz – Sauer 2015), stressing the importance of the materials the objects are made of in the process of the making. In this respect, aesthetic must not be intended as the peculiar and exclusive evaluation of the beauty of the built objects: indeed, the concept of aesthetic quality must refer to the study of sensory values, in the precise Greek acceptation of aisthesis as the investigation about the sensory knowledge. The analysis of materials of artefacts – their materiality – reveals the impact of materials on human beings, more precisely in the engagement and response of the senses, going beyond the supremacy of sight we usually assign when speaking of pictures and objects (Winter 1999; Winter 2003).

It must be admitted, however, that while some recent strands of thought in archaeology do already intersect with research into visual culture studies and are enmeshed with that field, mutual dialogue(s) between the two disciplines has often been avoided in the discussion of ancient Mesopotamian Art. In particular, images have too often been analysed without taking due account of their original context, and with biased results and judgments on the aesthetics, meaning and exploitation of images within the ancient societies. In fact, although it is probable that all images were made with a distinct purpose and can be defined as 'permanent images', the context changes and with it the image's message. As a consequence, the interpretations should concentrate on the "Komplexität" of the images and their "kontextuellen Verflechtungen".[30]

Against this background, this paper brings to the fore the dialogue between archaeology and *Bildwissenschaft* by using some case studies from Neo-Assyrian palace bas-reliefs of first millennium BCE according to a twofold topic: *Archaeology* in *Bildwissenschaft*, and *Bildwissenschaft* in *Archaeology*.

Archaeology in Bildwissenschaft

The first topic focuses on the notion of context, here intended in its broadest meaning. We start by considering the context in its most practical terms: the archaeological context or provenance where the artefact was found. This is followed by the context in its more theoretical aspects: context is the general historical frame, such as social structures, political circumstances, religious and cultural premises, collective mentalities that lie 'behind' the artistic production of a specific society. And finally, the context in its concreteness: the situational context in which patrons and artists produced and set up works of art and in which viewers responded to them.[31]

The first case study is represented by the Throne Room (B) of the Northwest Palace of Assurnasirpal II (883–859 BCE) at Nimrud. The Throne Room (B) was a reception room, the most accessible part of the palace, the place where the king was physically present and received people (**Fig. 1**).[32] The warfare theme was dominant inside the room, since both the long south wall and part of the north wall mostly

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30   Juwig – Kost 2010, 15.

31   Hölscher 2014, 670.

32   The Throne Room (B) has been described, since its excavation, as "the largest and the most elaborate in the building" and "planned to hold a large concourse of persons in the presence of the king […]" (Mallowan 1966, 96). Indeed, its size (45.5 x 10.5 m) and the presence of a large throne base at its east end confirm that this was the principal throne room of the palace. The huge dimension of the room could accommodate up to a thousand people. For a recent examination of the throne room in late Assyrian palaces, see Kertai 2014; Kertai 2015, 30–32; 210.
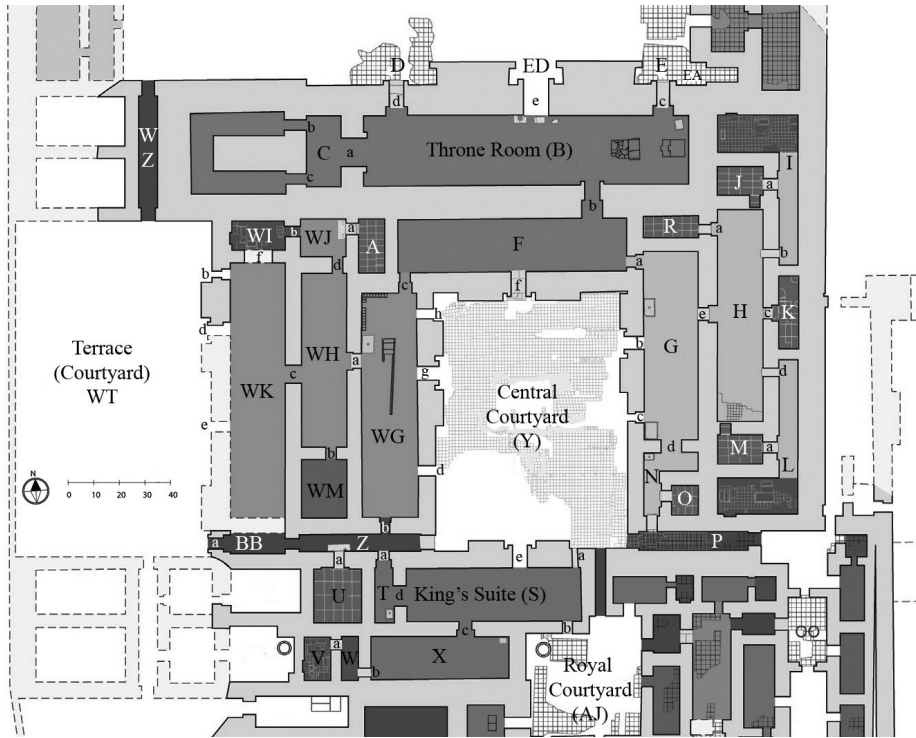
Fig. 1: Northwest Palace (Nimrud): main suites (adapted from Kertai 2014, fig. 3).

displayed bas-reliefs showing the outcomes of the military campaigns of the king (**Fig. 2**).[33] The bas-reliefs were not randomly arranged and the chosen arrangement almost certainly depended on how visitors moved and circulated inside the room. In fact, scholars now unanimously agree that door d, at the west end of the room, was in all likelihood earmarked for visitors, especially because of its distance from the throne, for the axial approach towards the throne, because entering the far side would have taken each visitor along the narrative bas-reliefs decorating the room.[34]

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33   For an in-depth description and analysis of the decorative program of the Throne Room (B), see Reade 1979, 57–64 and Meuszyński 1981, 17–25, pls. 1–3. For a detailed photographic collection of the bas-reliefs from the Throne Room (B), see Collins 2008.

34   Mallowan 1966, 103 was the first scholar to suggest that doors d and c were the entrance and the exit of the Throne Room (B). This reconstruction was recognized by a number of scholars. See bibliography in Portuese 2017, 118, fn. 47.
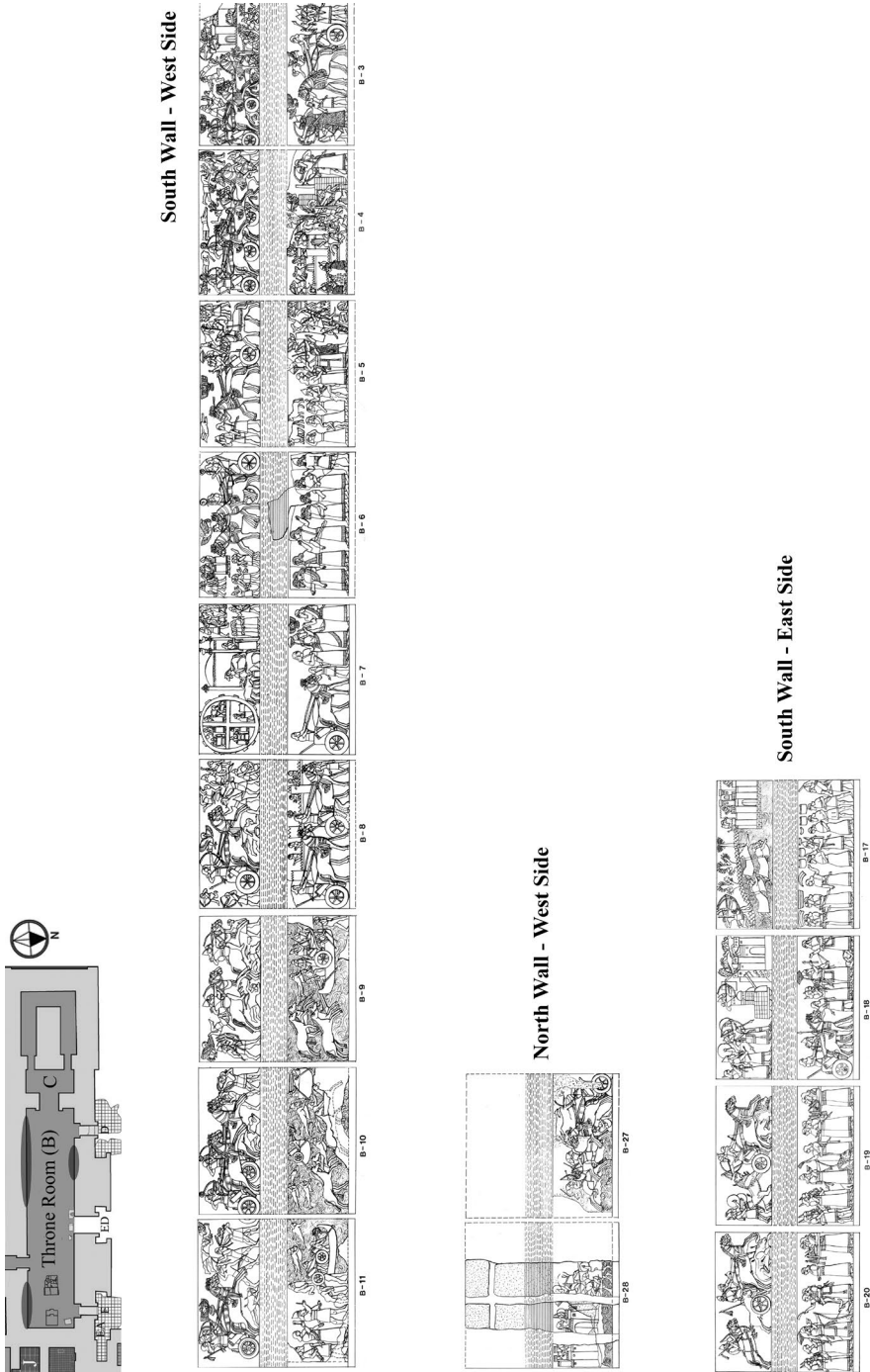
Fig. 2: Northwest Palace (Nimrud): bas-reliefs lining the walls of the Throne Room (B) (CDLI – http://cdli.ucla.edu).

Some officials could have guided viewers during their visits and would orally have explained the bas-reliefs, thus perhaps even the smallest details were brought to life.[35]

Crossing the threshold of door d, the bas-reliefs on the opposite wall would have come into view (B-3–11). These depict extremely bloody warfare images which would have evoked emotions such as fear, anxiety, disgust, hate, and anger. But how did emotional arousal stimuli work in Assyrian bas-reliefs? In this regard, image science and visual culture studies, more precisely the psychology of art, have identified a range of 'cues' in the image that catch attention by activating a specific significant reaction. These 'cues' are strictly related to our nervous system, which seems to be particularly involved in and activated by artistic representations.[36]

Among these, amplification. In detail, intensified reactions to representations of exaggerated postures and movements have been linked to a hyper-activation of pre-motor neurons, named "mirror neurons" that "fire" both during an action execution and its observation.[37] This cue can be seen in the exaggeration of posture like the dramatic figures of captives under torture, enemy soldiers falling down from the walls or being trampled by chariots. These images exhibit the extreme posture of humans struggling with certain death and inevitably catch the viewer's attention. The probable 'empathy' with the characters' postures possibly activate attention to the image, since it might promote the internal simulation of a posture of struggle and horror (captives being tortured), and of a posture of defeat (enemies being trampled by chariots).

Images draw attention due to their emotional salience. In fact, it was demonstrated that attention is preferentially allocated to emotionally arousing stimuli relative to neutral stimuli, and that emotional arousal increases viewing duration for both pleasant and unpleasant scenes and to capture greater initial attention as well

35 See Nadali 2008, 482 and related bibliography on this matter. That bas-reliefs were intended to be seen or inspected also at close range is demonstrated by a recent exercise on a relief from the North Palace of Assurbanipal, which tested how different lighting angles cast light and shadow over a Neo-Assyrian relief (Sou 2015). In detail, the results demonstrated that a handheld light source may have been the intended means of illumination, carried by a person walking through the palace complex. Additionally, textual evidence proves that interpreters usually accompanied foreign delegations, who probably acted as guides during their visits as well (see Zilberg 2018).

36 This analysis relies on the recent study of Duarte – Stefanakis 2015, which attempts to identify cues for the cognitive process of attention in ancient Greek art.

37 This class of brain cells, called mirror neurons are basically linked to movement and motor actions, and fire and discharge both when we perform an action and when we see someone else performing the same action, leading the observer to mentally simulate and replicate from inside the performance of the action ('embodied simulation'). Consequently, when moving pictures or movements in pictures are involved and observed, then those neurons fire and discharge as well (Rizzolatti – Sinigaglia 2006; Iacoboni 2008; Ramachandran 2011). See Nadali 2012, 587–595 for an application of the neurological field to narrative moving pictures on Assyrian palace bas-reliefs.

as inhibit subsequent disengagement from a stimulus location.[38] Research has moreover shown that negative images mainly catch our attention and stay with us – in particular images showing the pain of the others develop a voyeuristic behaviour.[39] In respect to the Mesopotamian art, it was observed that primary emotions that are somehow universal (i.e. sadness, fear, disgust, anger, surprise, calm, joy/happiness) were on display and their visualization in Assyrian art operated not through facial expression but through movements, gestures, and the overall atmosphere dominating the scene.[40] The bas-reliefs of the west side of the southern wall, along with excruciating scenes of pain and death, also display scattered beheaded bodies together with women acting in gestures of desperation. The fear was thus visually conveyed by warfare scenes and cruel images of physical pain.[41]

Another attention attractor is the content or theme itself expressed in the image. In detail, the representation of significant objects, such as the human body and its parts, especially the face, have a special power to catch attention, due to the existence of visual cortex areas specialized on their processing.[42] In visual arts, studies show that the human eye looks first to the head, makes brief excursions to other parts of the image, and keeps returning to the head. In addition, if the eye watches the eye, then it learns to watch what the eye depicted watches and to insert itself within another's eye. This clearly establishes a sympathetic bond with faces depicted on images.[43] The recurrence of the body thematic and the face is particularly widespread in Assyrian bas-reliefs, thereby suggesting that artists acknowledged its 'magnetic' value. Moreover, the head was considered very important in symbolizing victory over the enemy.[44] On the bas-reliefs of the western side of the Throne Room (B), the enemy's head receives vivid importance, and the artist(s) brings to life the exact sequence of the beheading practice: the act of cutting off heads of enemies in man-to-man

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38 Niu et al. 2012.

39 The increased attention allocated to negative emotional stimuli has been explained with an innate predisposition to negativity bias which is reported "to be an evolutionary adaptive response that facilitates rapid subconscious processing of aversive and potentially threatening information" (Tartar et al. 2011; see also Rozin – Rozyman 2001, 296–320 and Sontag 2003).

40 Bonatz 2017, 55–74; Wagner-Durand 2017; Wagner-Durand 2018.

41 Bonatz 2017, 62–64 believes that extreme emotional situations were mostly intended to reveal the weakness of the defeated enemy and as a vehicle for the representation of power. In a similar vein, Bahrani 2001, 125–127 considers the women's gestures of despair as an "act of mourning after the battle is over" which tell us that "the defeat is final and devastating".

42 Kandel 2012, 282–283; Kandel 2016, 29–35; Duarte – Stefanakis 2015, 521.

43 Janes 2005, 4–5 stresses that an explanation for the inherent meaning of the head, its symbolic value and its visual implication when separated from the body, might be found in the natural meaning of the head, in its role as the locus of four senses (sight, hearing, taste, smell), the brain, and the mouth, faced by the face. In brief, the head carries many species' social identity.

44 With special regard to the religious symbolism of this practice, see Dolce 2004; Bahrani 2008, 23–55; Radner 2011, 44–48; Karlsson 2016, 121.

combat; the headless bodies; the act of heaping up the severed heads. All these cues drew viewer's attention and evoked negative emotions such as fear, sadness, disgust, anger in the viewer.

Within the room, the sequence of the images would have maintained the high the level of arousal up to slab B-13, which inevitably directs the viewer's attention to slab B-23: the doubling of the body of the king (**Fig. 3**). Here, the visual 'cue' is symmetry: through rotation, the torso turns laterally around a vertical axis centred in the tree, so that the gestures of the right and left arms and the objects held in the respective hands are retained in each of the two depictions of the genie or king; through reflection, the head and lower part of the body are reflective, namely they do not rotate in a three-dimensional space.[45] The mirror, or axial, symmetry of these slabs would have reordered and interrupted the chaos induced by the bas-reliefs of the south wall, acting at the physiological and psychological levels to produce an effect of stability through the central axis and equilibrium through the flanking figures.[46] Thus, symmetry tends to seize viewer's gaze and, being displayed on focal points in the room, it attracts the attention like a kind of 'visual magnet' eliciting feelings of beauty and equilibrium, in an atemporal situation or in a situation where time does not flow and narrative is transcended.[47]

On the opposing east side, close to the throne, the negative images of the west side were interrupted by calmer images (B-17–20). Here, simplification helps the viewer to distract or interrupt his limited attention: the warfare images close to the throne are described by an extremely simple narrative composition, which shows Assyrians and enemies facing each other, but without engaging in actual aggressive fighting. The lack of chaos and the presence of simplification can also be seen in the hunting scene, which is not per se a violent subject.[48] Simplification evokes positive emotions, such as calmness.[49]

As we see, all these cues were selectively distributed in the Throne Room (B): fear-evoking images were set in the west side as to impress and arouse visitor's attention (B-3–11), while calmness-evoking images were set in the east side as to peacefully usher in the visitor (B-17–20). The antithetical contents of these images and, presumably, the intended emotional impacts clearly reflect the bipolar nature of emotions, separating emotions into two major groups: the negative ones far away from the throne and the positive ones in proximity of the king. Reading the whole

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45   Albenda 1998, 12.

46   Winter 1981, 10; Winter 1983, 17.

47   Winter 1996, 329–332; Nadali 2010, 184–185.

48   Portuese 2016, 181–184.

49   Duarte – Stefanakis 2015, 528 use, in this respect, the expression "less is more", namely that simplicity and clarity are more effective, better understood and more appreciated than what is more complicated.
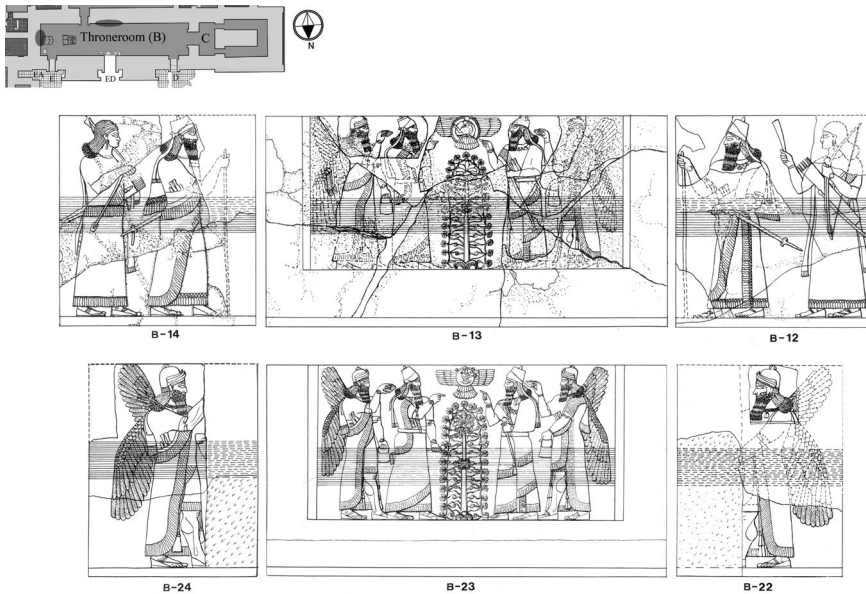
Fig. 3: Northwest Palace (Nimrud): bas-reliefs B-12–14 and B-22–24, from the Throne Room (B) (CDLI – http://cdli.ucla.edu).

relief series in this new light, such a subdivision seems to convey to his audience the opposing political attitudes of the Assyrian king – mercilessness and cruelty (west side), benevolence and paternalism (east side, **Fig. 4**). Interestingly, this is confirmed by the images depicted just outside the Throne Room (B): in the west side, on the façade of the Throne Room (B), the king holds a bow and a pair of arrows, which voices the military aspects of the king; by contrast, in the east side, on the Banquet Stele he holds the long staff, which signifies the king as shepherd.[50] Architecture, in brief, cooperated in presentation of an ideological message: the long room led visitors on a gradual path, thereby presenting the antithetical attitudes of the Assyrian king, starting from his cruelty up to his benevolence. Moreover, the precise East-West confrontation as seen in the display of pictures both within and on the outer façade of the Throne Room (B) is paralleled, and perhaps explained, by the way Assyrians were then looking at the world and moving to war. In this respect, the process of contextualizing images within a larger frame precisely reveals that the placing of slabs actually reflects the East-West pattern of Assyrian military conquest as it is explicitly told in the official annals and in other visual supports, such as the

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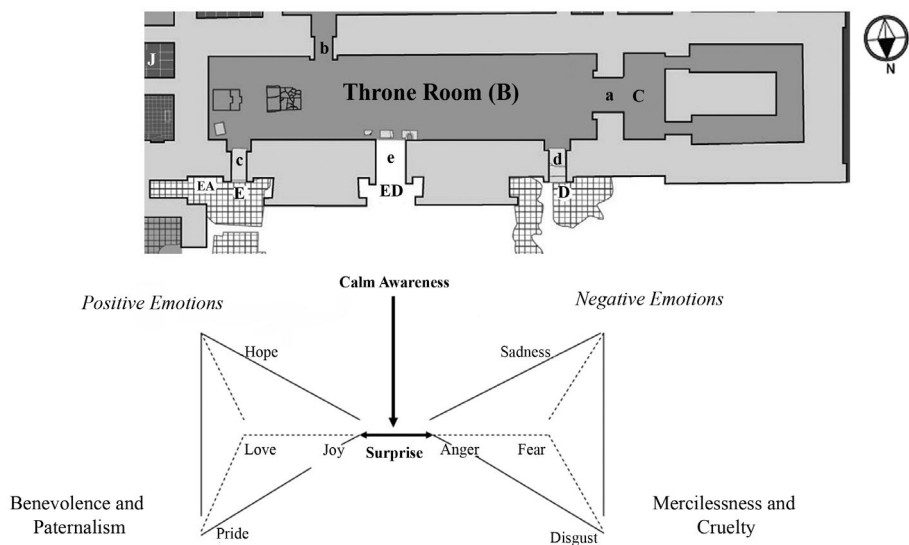50   See discussion and images in Portuese 2016, 181–183; Portuese 2017, 118.

Fig. 4: Northwest Palace (Nimrud): Throne Room (B) plan and a paired tetrahedral representation of generation of bipolar emotions (Portuese 2019, fig. 2.22).

throne dais of Sargon II.[51] The Assyrian expansion followed an East-West direction and it seems therefore logical that military strength and violence increased the more the action moved to the West.

Bildwissenschaft in *Archaeology*

The second topic focuses on the concept of linguistic intertextuality applied to the realm of visual arts, namely intericonicity.[52] Sometimes also called interpictoriality (or *Interbildlichkeit* in German) this notion refers to the process of an image referring to another image. Occurrences of intericonicity spark a kind of 'déjà-vu' effect in the viewer, that is to say a feeling of familiarity, of having already seen that image: the mechanism of intericonicity is evidence for the existence of an implicit and explicit mnemonic atlas of references.[53] The cases of transmission can be diverse, shifting from simple to complex quotation, transformation and re-adaptation of images: it is precisely in this continuous matching that intericonicity can be rec-

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51   Winter 1981, 19; 26; Winter 1983, 24; Blocher 1994, 17–18.
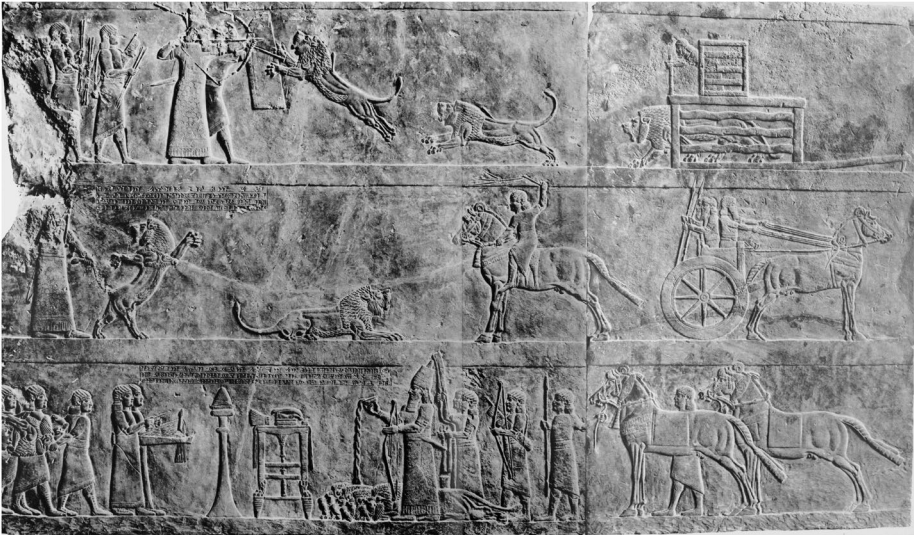52   Laboury 2017.
53   Kandel 2012, 345–346.

Fig. 5: a) Northwest Palace (Nimrud): Assurnasirpal II's royal hunt and hunt ritual, upper and lower registers of bas-relief B-19, from the Throne Room (B) (photo author; BM 124534, BM 124535; © The Trustees of the British Museum); b) North Palace (Nineveh): Assurbanipal's royal hunt and hunt ritual, bas-reliefs D and E, from Room S1 (photo author; BM 124886; © The Trustees of the British Museum).

ognized showing how a picture can keep, cancel, modify, deny and even overturn the original image: the research aims at pointing out the common points of contacts as well as the features that have been purposely altered by the artists. In the past, a variety of terminologies from the domain of linguistics has been used to describe the relation of one work of art to another: allusion, homage, paraphrase, parody, pastiche, persiflage, travesty, variation, or version. All these terms are now captured by the term intericonicity, which discloses both the specificity of the medium and the semantic changes that this physical transfer implies. That is to say that images can be simply copied (direct quotation), but they can also undergo processes of re-adaptation, modification and transformation in the shape, proportions and, eventually, meaning (depending on the context and the type of audience the reframed image is addressed to) and the agency of the different actors in the production of images. Thus, in addition to the questions where from and what, intericonicity asks why and how, casting light on the active role of memory in the process of making and recognizing images, on the conscious and unconscious level.[54]

In this respect, the second case study is represented by the theme of hunt rituals – specifically the scene of the king pouring libations over a dead lion or bull – which emerges as a strong Assyrian tradition in the times of both Assurnasirpal II and Assurbanipal (668–627 BCE) – a gap of around two centuries (**Fig. 5**). Since there are no hunt rituals recorded on palace wall panels between the reigns of these two kings, it seems that Assurbanipal, as a known antiquarian, consciously adopted an antique ritual practice and re-interpreted or re-used the iconographic motif.[55] Thus, they are probably intericonically related, in the sense that they instantiate the same thematic subject, although artists made different stylistic, aesthetic and compositional choices. In detail, specific strategies of representation come in use: the composition, motif or figure of the artwork being referred to is divided or multiplied (strategy of multiplication or division), something is added or taken away from the quoted artwork (strategy of addition or subtraction), or it is replaced with something else (strategy of substitution).

To start with, in Assurbanipal's hunt the overall composition changes orientation, but the king's gaze always turns towards opposite direction so as to centre the attention on the attacking lion and slain lion. Moreover, narrative is dictated by the moving of the lions (even when, once dead, they are transported) to the king who

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54   Heydemann 2015; Laboury 2017, 247–254.
55   This observation was already raised by Reade 2005, 24.

simply stands.[56] The number of lions increases, from one to four, the flywhisk-bearers have doubled and are moved behind the king, and three arms-bearers are omitted. Horses and grooms or soldiers not only participate in the hunt but also in the ritual itself. Attendants bring the slain lion to the king, Assurbanipal holds arrows, and pours liquid from the bowl. Bearded musicians are turned into eunuchs, and incense burner and an offering table substitute the crown prince and high-ranking official who stand before the king.

In sum, Assurbanipal seems to have reintroduced an old motif that had fallen out of use for two centuries. However, the adoption of the older motif seems to form part of the artist's natural environment/language, and its use seems respectful and in no way 'competitive'. In this regard, the motif of the king killing lions was linked to the rite of the god Ninurta slaying monsters.[57] Interestingly, the god Ninurta was exalted in the reign of Assurnasirpal II,[58] and his related myths were found on tablets in Assurbanipal's library.[59] Thus, in both reigns Ninurta and the ritual hunt of lions was treated with importance.

Although the conclusion that the artist has drawn inspiration from a past example appears unavoidable – and this idea is reinforced if one considers that the old palace of Assurnasirpal in Nimrud (with all its bas-reliefs) was still standing and in use, we must equally recognise that formal reinterpretation of the motif occurs at every single step in the process of transmission.[60] In detail, the figures of the crown prince and the high official are no longer the direct audience of the ritual, and atten-

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56 Narrative is in fact one the main differences between lion hunt scenes of Assurnasirpal II and Assurbanipal: the former in fact occupies a central (or nearly central) position and, although movement is clearly indicated, the entire image seems motionless, being built up on a symmetrical arrangement. On the contrary, Assurbanipal does not move but he passively undergoes the movement of the lions and he occupies a marginal position in the scene: a marginality from a geometrical point of view, but a centrality from the narrative perspective, making the Assyrian king the final focal point of the action.

57 Watanabe 1998; Watanabe 2002, 69–82 suggests that both bull hunt and lion hunt have possible mythological connotations. In detail, in the lion hunt, the king establishes and reinforces his kingship by killing lions in the same manner as Ninurta achieves his divine kingship by slaying monsters. Then, concluding the hunt with a libation ritual, which was intended as an act of purification, atonement or symbolic restoration, strongly suggests that the hunt as a whole needs to be seen in a ritual context.

58 Ataç 2018.

59 The Sumerian version of the Ninurta myths (known as *Angim* and *Lugale*) were inscribed on tablets and were considered to be companion compositions (Cooper 1978, 11; 34–36; Watanabe 2002, 78–79).

60 Archaeological evidence shows that Shalmaneser III, Adad-nirari III, Tiglath-pileser III and Sargon II resided in the Northwest palace while they were building their own palace, and legal and other documents from the late 7th century were found in the northern side of the main palace courtyard. Additionally, other buildings at Nimrud were continually repaired or renovated during the 7th century (Postgate – Reade 1976–1980, 311–314; Reade 2011, 116–118).

tion is focused on the ritual itself rather than on its performers. Incense burners and offering table bestow solemn and ideological significance on the ritual, highlighting that it was solely the king's power that was exerted over wild forces, namely the lions, thus reinforcing the supremacy of his kingship.

In sum, intericonicity emphasises two aspects. First, Assurbanipal's art establishes an inextricable link between innovation, on the one hand, and reuse, study and (re)interpretation of previous forms of expression and tradition, on the other: a creative process that bestows originality and innovation on the work of art. Second, intericonicity emphasises the notion of memory in the ancient Mesopotamia. In fact, we can deduce that intericonicity looks backwards and moves forwards, establishing a prime mnemonic figurative code of reference and inference that can be traced across time and beyond space: "while we advance along a timeline that makes us 'facing the future', the Mesopotamians advanced along the same time-line but with their eyes fixed on the past". In brief, "they moved, as it were, back-to-front – backing into the future".[61] Thus, Mesopotamian culture was focused on the past, and, ultimately, the starting point of all existence. The progress of Assyria relied on this conception: king's deeds in the past were "in front" of later kings rather than "behind".[62] The art of memory is based on a common shared system of knowledge (tradition) and an effect of saliency.[63] It is in fact the combination of these two operations that make the mnemonic relations possible, as a continuous dialogue, exchange and interconnections between community and individuals (each person is member of the community). The creation of images is a process that lies between visual and verbal memory. This seems particularly intriguing if one thinks of how writing was invented in Mesopotamia via the use of pictograms that eventually allowed the development of spoken language.

Conclusions

The dialogue between archaeology and *Bildwissenschaft* has melted away the barriers between the two disciplines and domains. The first topic has shown how context affects the value of images in respect of how powerful they are. Their power affects both their capacity to elicit emotions in the viewer and the content with which they populate those emotions. The second topic has shed light on the intericonicity, which has been introduced into the analysis of contemporary art, theories of intermediality and visual studies. This approach leads us into the notion of 'migrat-

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61   Maul 2008, 15–16.
62   Nadali 2016, 86.
63   Severi 2017.

ing images'. Using the words of Mitchell, the migration of images has provided "a picture of the way images move, circulate, thrive, appear, and disappear; and how images mirror ideologies".[64] This sounds even more alluring as this movement and migration occurred, in a time span of 200 years, within the same cultural and political organization: this process also points out the life and dynamism of images that survive in pictures. Images as species are inflected via pictures as living organisms: as a consequence, while pictures can be destroyed, images survive – one would even argue they are immortal, changing only skin and appearance. Images would therefore subsist in some realm of archetypes, awaiting their concrete manifestation in concrete pictures.[65] In this respect, *Bildwissenschaft* is not only the discipline of image studies but it can properly be seen as the scientific approach to images: the encounter with archaeology definitely opens up new trajectories even in the field of art history trying to go beyond the artificiality of *musées imaginaires* that nowadays can be even more intrusive with new, apparently ephemeral, virtual shapes.

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64   Mitchell 2015, 65.
65   See fn. 11.

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