

Worth defined communication as a 'social process within a specified context in which signs are produced and transmitted, perceived and treated as messages from which meaning can be inferred.' (1981, p165) Art is a means of encoding and transmitting messages to the viewer. When viewing ancient art, it is useful to try and understand what is being communicated.



Figure 1 Source: British Museum Asset No 2276 Available at
https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_SM-2276

Bahrani believes that art operates in two spheres 'first in the realm of rituals, especially political rituals where power is legitimised by association with supernatural forces in representations, and second in the area of commercial exchange.' (2003, p73) This is important and useful when considering the art from the ancient Near East. There are many examples of symbolic communication for political gain in Assyria, for example a seal (figure 1). This shows a ruler with a sword in one hand in combat with an attacking lion. It is a strong image and is believed to be a royal seal of the Neo-Assyrian period (715BCE). Winter defined it as 'the seal of kingship' (2000, p57). Such seals have been

linked to several rulers including Shalmaneser III (858-824BCE) and Assurbanipal (668 – 627). Interestingly, different rulers have used a similar imagery on orthostats in their palaces too (figure 2). It could be concluded that they are communicating the same message. Therefore, what is encoded in this message and why is it so important?



Figure 2 Source: British Museum Asset No 124874 Assyrian collection, Room 10 (lion hunt)
Available at <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/124874> This shows a close-up of the king battling with the lion during a lion hunt.

An example of symbolic communication are seals. Seals were ‘widely used as tokens validating transactions and identifying authority in state, administrative and commercial affairs.’ (Winter 2000, p53) Whilst smaller than the palace orthostats, their impact was no less significant even though they operated in very different spheres of activity and may have had ‘quite different goals as well as audiences in their visual display.’ (Winter 2000, p53). To the people who came into contact with it, it was sending a very clear message. Was there a link between the two which would make the communication element even stronger? Winter (1993, 2000) considers that if there were lions in the reliefs of the palaces and then lions used as the seal of state by the king himself that it would be critical for the same image to be reflected. There is a strong link between part of Ashurbanipal’s relief from Room S and this seal (see figure 1 and figure 2). Whilst the headdress is different, as addressed in assignment 2, the imagery is very similar. It is worth considering that this exact image must be symbolically important to be communicated both privately and publicly? However, Winter (2000, 1985) was not convinced that the detailed reliefs and this single image should be merged into one message and warns of its inability to communicate the detail and layers of messaging of the reliefs. Whilst it lacks detail as a narrative, could it be that whilst it abbreviates the message it could also summarise it as there is so little space leading the king to choose the most impactful icon of the panel showing his dominance over such a fearful animal? (Cassin 1981).

When considering this method of communication, it is important to consider the target audience and to whom the message is being communicated (Winter 2000). This symbol was important and bore meaning to all who viewed it and additionally to those who were associated with the use of it. This message infers one of power but also one of reverence to the ruler and those working on his behalf. Winter believes the translation of wording linked to these reflects 'kingship' (Winter 2000, p57) or 'seal of my office of kingship' (Winter 1997, 365) and this is a state seal. However, both still linked to the king, would the message not be the same, and reflecting still the power of the state itself as well as the individual? Still, used by staff and not the king directly, they would still want to bask in his power/reflect the state in a positive light. This shows that one message was being communicated from the king using a snapshot of the lion hunt as imagery.

In trying to understand what exactly is being communicated Panofsky's three stages of iconography is useful. At a primary level the factual subject matter is one of a person battling a lion. Considering the second level of drawing meaning from the subject matter and conventions of the time, the person has a type of crown on so we could safely assume a royal link. However, ancient eyes could perhaps draw more detail from the clothing and staging, than today as there could be far more messages encoded. Thirdly, the intrinsic, detailed meaning of the culture, symbolism, religion, societal norms of the time. For Panofsky, this was the fundamental target of iconology as it revealed the 'basic attitude of a nation, a period, a class, a religious or philosophical persuasion – unconsciously qualified by one personality and condensed into one work.' (1972, p7). This is where we have at best a very limited understanding so have to draw meanings from other sources from the wider region which is problematic. Whilst this is communicating with us, and even creating agency, it is not as impactful as it was during its life within its object biography.

This iconography is achieved in both the seals and palace reliefs (figure 2). The image of the king and the lion is clearly a presentational symbol (Langer 1953) which communicates a message which would not work without each of these characters. Does this symbol become a metaphor for the reign and power of an Assyrian king which everyone would recognise? Dorfles ponders that 'the value of such images, when their symbolic meaning is lost, declines into mere emblematic significance' (1957, p290). This is true as, with modern eyes, we completely lose the meaning and so run the risk of misinterpreting these symbolic messages. Nadali considers that 'visual narratives in this period do not only tell stories but also contribute to the telling of royal power.....which help to make figures and events recognisable' (2019 p69).

When considering using art as communication it is important to consider if the item is it a true representation of what is happening. This may be quite straight forward when viewing a piece of art from today and the same culture as the viewer but becomes far more complex when studying a piece from ancient history. In the Assyrian court art was not created for art's sake. King Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh is a good example of this. Wagner-Durand viewed the orthostats in this palace as 'the most important visual narrative of the Assyrian Kings' (2019 p235) because of their impact and messaging.



Figure 3 Source: British Museum Asset No 124874 and No 12478. Assyrian collection, Room 10 (lion hunt) Available at <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/124874>
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/124878>.

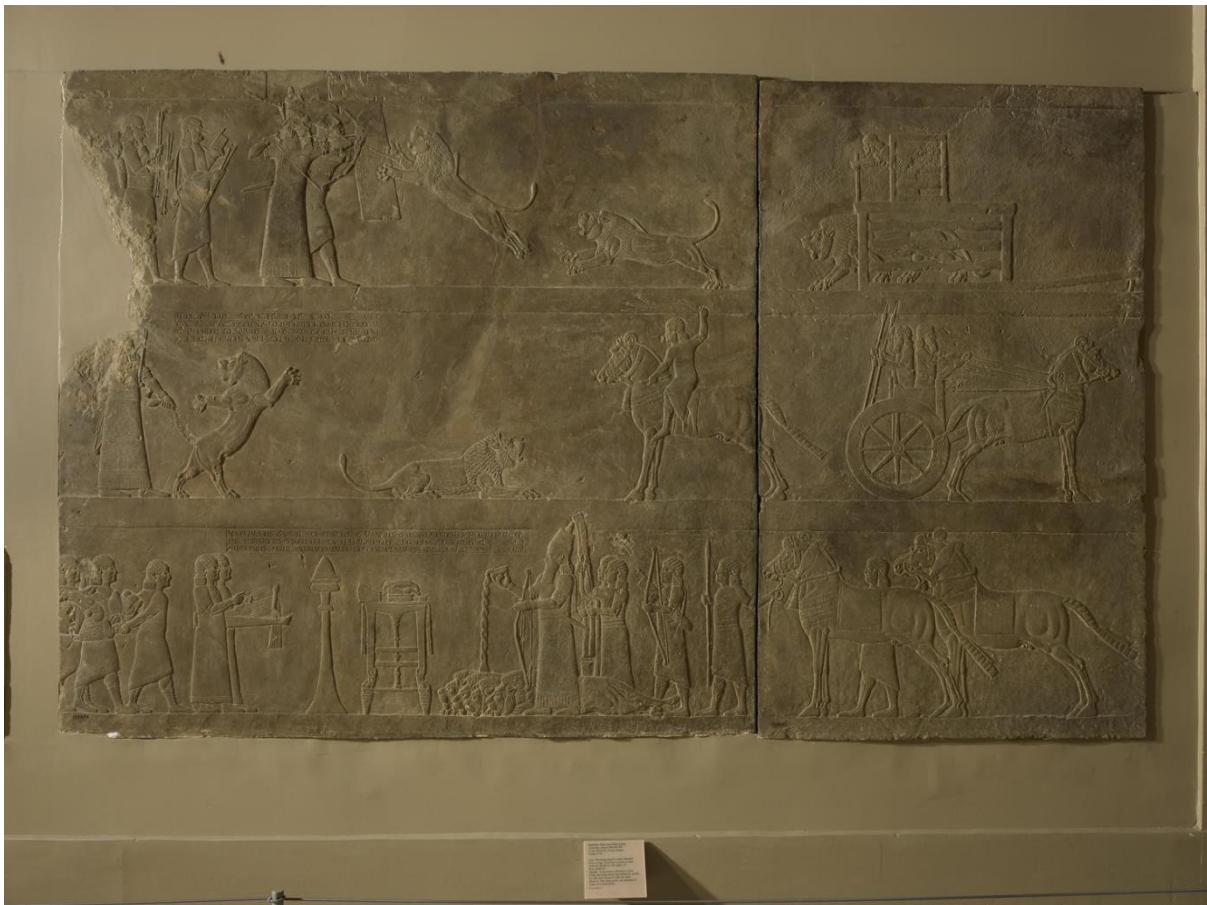


Figure 4 Source: British Museum Asset No 124886 Available at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1856-0909-51_1.

Whilst the theme of a powerful king, lion hunts and war appeared throughout the palace. Figures 3 and 4 are examples of a relief that appears in room S, the private palace area. Whilst in the rest of the palace, the reliefs fulfil Bahrani's sphere of ritual/political art, it is unclear what additional messages are encoded here as it is not as overt as elsewhere in the palace.

The image of a lion is an ancient symbol, even during Ashurbanipal's time to reference kingship and authority. There is great impact in using that and it is a powerful use of communication. Objects such as these Marshall (2008) believed to be inscribed objects which were socially powerful. It is not known if this relief is reality or mythology or a mix of both. We do not know if this is a true representation of what is going on around them although there is realism in the imagery. There is an aesthetic here, but it is also communicating to us, however, and again we are unsure of the layers which are encoded or what the underlying ideologies may be. What it is clearly communicated though is the control of the king.

Figure 4 shows the lion hunt represented as a sequence of events across three registers. It begins in the top register with the release of the lion from a cage, confrontation with the king, to the eventual killing of the lion and a libation scene. Whilst we can look at this as a narrative from the beginning to end of a story, each part is communicating a message. For example, the libation scene can be read as a description of what is happening but there are deeper encoded messages being communicated here which, even if we don't know it, still enhances our understanding of the Assyrian court. The king could be showing he is controlling the communication with the gods on behalf of the people. There are several interpretations. Watanabe (1996), Winter (2000), interpret this as celebrating the divine power behind the king enabling him to be successful in the hunt. However, Cassin (1981) interprets this as the deity commanding the king/prince to go through the ordeal of the lion hunt so that they can support his power and extend it to other lands. Whilst there are common themes of ritual and power, no two interpretations are the same, so the message is still lost to us.

In addition, Watanabe (1996) finds that the positioning of items in this ritual and position of the king problematic. Ashurbanipal is at the centre of the scene whereas this should be a deity. We are unsure of the role of the king beyond Panofsky's most basic level of factual information, which is further supported by the fact there is no background scenery leading the modern-day viewer unable to contextualise this in terms of location or time. This leads us to conclude it is the king who becomes the focal point between myth and reality. (Nadali 2019, Winter 1996) Whilst there is additional communication in the form of text on sections of this panel, it only describes what is happening and thanking the gods for his strength, rather than giving us any details as to context or the reason why.

It could be argued that the positioning of these images in the palaces is also communication. The reliefs in figures 3 and 4 were in the private rooms of Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh. By limiting who can see these surely the communication is highly targeted. They are depicting what is believed to be the important roles of kingship within the Assyrian society. It could be that they were

prompts in 'remembering how to do it' (Connerton 1989, p72) for the king to help focus on what is important and through these events will helped to enable this and hold a power over the king as the viewer (Nadali 2019). Alternatively it could be for the heir to the throne and what is required of him to enable him to be worthy of the throne (Wagner-Durand 2019). Court was not a safe place with disloyalty and assassinations of Ashurbanipal's predecessors. Reinforcing his power visually was re-emphasising his actual power and control, showing his prowess against such an animal, but also a warning to the heir regarding the power they would need to hold. The future kings will experience 'observer memory' (Goldie 2012, p49) being an outsider looking in on a narrative, whereas the current king experiences 'field memory' (Goldie 2012, p49), a first-hand knowledge and understanding, as they were the person participating. This emphasises Bahrani's view of these images as 'a multilayered reality.' (2003, p127) These reliefs show slaughter, ritual and death. They create agency by provoking a response in the viewer. However, whilst they may create enchantment and fascination from the modern viewer, there is doubt that this would be the case with the original viewers.

Positioning was also a means of communication in the Throne Room of the Northwest Palace of Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud. Winter believed the throne room to be the 'true centre' (1981, p20), where the king performed all the facets of kingship. Nadali and Portuese believes it is important 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' (2020, p136) This is critical to understanding those multi-layers of meaning important to Hodder and Panofsky. The reliefs in the throne room were carefully positioned and linked to the movement of visitors around this room. Visitors would have entered through door D to have had maximum impact of the narrative of the orthostats within (Nadali and Portuese 2020). Nadali (2008) considers that court officials may have even guided visitors around the reliefs explaining the narrative linked to them. If this was the case, this is clear communication of a message of which there could be little opportunity for misinterpretation.

Dorfles sees that the 'symbolic aspect of art and its communicative quality' (1957, p289) is an essential aspect of its aesthetic, and that each work of art is 'symbolic of something' (1957, p289). But the message itself will only come into being the 'moment in which it is communicated to the beholder', and without this the 'art itself will lack all reason for being.' (p289) This was used to great effect as the goriest images of slaughter would have greeted visitors first, depicting 'extremely bloody warfare images which would have evoked emotions such as fear, anxiety, disgust, hate, and anger' (Nadali and Portuese 2020, p137). It was clear what was being communicated and for what purpose. Portuese (2019) even considers how the light would hit these key elements of the relief when the throne room doors were opened. Once again it is propagandic and controlling in nature. However, this time it is using senses and feelings to impact the communication; this, again, is lost to us as we do not have the pleasure of experiencing these in colour and in-situ.

Portuese's (2019) article about the Throne Room of Assurnasirpal, whilst tremendously fascinating, and a comprehensive research on all theories about this palace, including the multisensory experience of the visitor, describes colour, auditory and visual experiences of the visitor ranging from the smells of perfumes to burnt offerings, and the way the light would hit key parts of the reliefs upon visitors entering the throne room. However, this is still conjecture and research drawn from many sources. We have no comprehension of how this art may have impacted people and the many layers of communication. Moving from bright sunlight to darkness was made to be unsettling to the viewer and highlight key parts of the reliefs.

The orthostats used in the palaces are monumental and it could be said that they also communicate by their size. Standing next to these in a room decorated with them would be very intimidating. The viewer would have a sense of how small and inconsequential they are in comparison to these and would have 'elicited a wide range of emotions such as admiration, beauty, delight aesthetic frisson and even fear.' (Portuese 2019, p64) Today, this cannot be experienced to that same level.

Little mention is made of the skilled artists creating these pieces of art which communicated such important messages. This creativity and imagination would have been a way of expressing themselves. However, whilst the artist is skilled, they were not in any way in control of this message. It was the king who was the sender of the message and would have chosen the theme and what was to be communicated as the king 'understood the powerful efficacy of representation.' (Bahrani 2014, p42) The imagery of the lion hunt throughout both Ashbanipal's and Assurnasirpal palaces Orthmann (2008) would consider to be a repetitive message, as the sender and final receiver do not communicate directly, but it is the task of the artist to convey the intended message successfully to the audience.

There also would have been no consideration of how these artworks would have been received. They had a purpose which they fulfilled, they were not decorative but propagandic with encoded messages throughout this work. Each figure, decoration, weapon and motif were carefully chosen. Part of this would have also been consideration of the gestures used as 'both behaviour and non-behaviour may constitute messages'. (Jonsson & Hall 2002) In figure 3, King Ashurbanipal has rescued foreign princes from a lion. With the lions lying dead amongst them, they are kneeling in thanks to the king who is standing with his arms outstretched. The image is infused with power of the king and his mastery of weapons and his strength. These reliefs also communicate an understanding of the king's role and the gestures he uses in his performance of his kingship. It reflects the relationship 'between the gesture we see represented in art and those performed in real life' (Gombrich 1966, p395). These reliefs are the only source we have of the king's interactions and how he behaves. It is clear that the message being portrayed is one of a commanding, dominant king, rescuing weaker, less knowledgeable royalty, holding his hand out in an encouraging, forgiving gesture. However, this is just speculation and equally they could be servants of the court begging forgiveness as they had done something wrong and this was showing a benevolent, forgiving king and this is where the use of communication alone fails in trying to understand ancient art.



Figure 5 – Northwest Palace (Kalhu): winged genie carrying a stalk of pomegranates and holding a mace, from room S, door d (S-d-1) (Source: CDLI – <http://cdli.ucla.edu>).

Throughout the places, and especially Assurnasirpal palace, were ‘protective deities or entities’ (Portuese 2020, p254) part human and part animal carrying ritual objects such as pomegranates, rosettes, pinecones and goats. Their purpose was to guard doorways and were linked to the functions in each room. Each character was ‘full of magic and symbolism with potential for either good or evil.’ (Portuese 2020, p254) Figure 5 shows a very masculine genie holding pomegranates. Whilst magnificent pieces of art; and our assumption of their role in ritual; ‘there is no explicit or concrete evidence that demonstrates the performance rituals and how often these took place.’ (Portuese 2020, p256) Pomegranates have through history been normally linked to females and fertility although in this image it is linked to a very masculine character carrying a mace - the two items are at odds with each other. Suggestions as to this genie’s purpose range from protection from witchcraft, potency problems or fertility in the king’s suite. (Porteuse 2020)

Whilst we do not fully understand these genies, Hodder (1987) believes that such systems of symbolic communication are important to the development of societies and their economic and political structures. To help analyse these Hodder refers to three types of meaning to help with interpreting symbolic communication. Firstly, the

function of the object, its structural meaning and finally its symbolic meaning. Just like Panofsky's model, we are limited to what we can answer and when considering mythical beings we struggle to even consider the most basic function meaning of the item. Hays further supports this by commenting 'only through the study of symbolic systems can archaeologists learn anything of interest.' (1993, p 82)

'Successful communication, presupposes a common code' (Jonsson & Hall 2002, p7) Assyrian Art would have been hugely successful it communicating messages during the life part of their object biography. However, communicating as a tool for examining and interpreting now is limited. It can only be successful, in Hays' opinion, when it is 'decoded by viewers who know the meaning of the visual signs.' (1993 p81) Today's observers do not have this depth of understanding sadly. Ghosh further argues that 'works of art are capable of transmitting concrete and definite messages' and that 'communicability is the defining feature of all art.' (1987, p319). We are just unable to translate these messages accurately as we do not understand all the cultural factors and societal influences during a time when little was recorded.

Morphy considers that art as 'objects having semantic and/or aesthetic properties that are used for presentational and representational purposes' (1994, p655). The art of Assyria has all of these. There is no doubt they are beautiful and have a meaning which makes them distinct. Whilst we as a viewer can appreciate the aesthetic of them as a piece of art, and even give us some form of understanding of their society. The language by which it is communicating is lost to us and we can only draw best guesses which is always frustrating. We can appreciate it for its aesthetic but the importance of the semantic should be at the forefront of our considerations in trying to understand what the encoded messages are.

For example, everyone is impacted by art, and draws their own interpretation of what is being communicated. It creates a relationship with the viewer, provoking a response and creating agency. In addition to communication, Gell's object agency (1998) enables us to reflect that these reliefs have been created to have an impact and influence on people. Just like communication, agency will vary from person-to-person dependent upon their understanding of the reliefs and the message being conveyed to the different audiences. Messages to the original viewer was clear and overt, even the messages that were encoded. However, it is impossible for us to have the same level of understanding now. Bahrani's belief that 'the idea that visual representations are windows into the past, that they can be read directly as evidence of daily life and details of social and historical contexts or hierarchies in antiquity, remains prevalent in the scholarship of antiquity' (2014, p35) has limited success as we are unable to truly understand the deeper meanings encoded in these artworks. Analysing communication always needs to be undertaken, but it needs to form part of a framework with other anthropological perspectives such as agency, aesthetic and enchantment for us to get a more rounded and considered understanding of art.

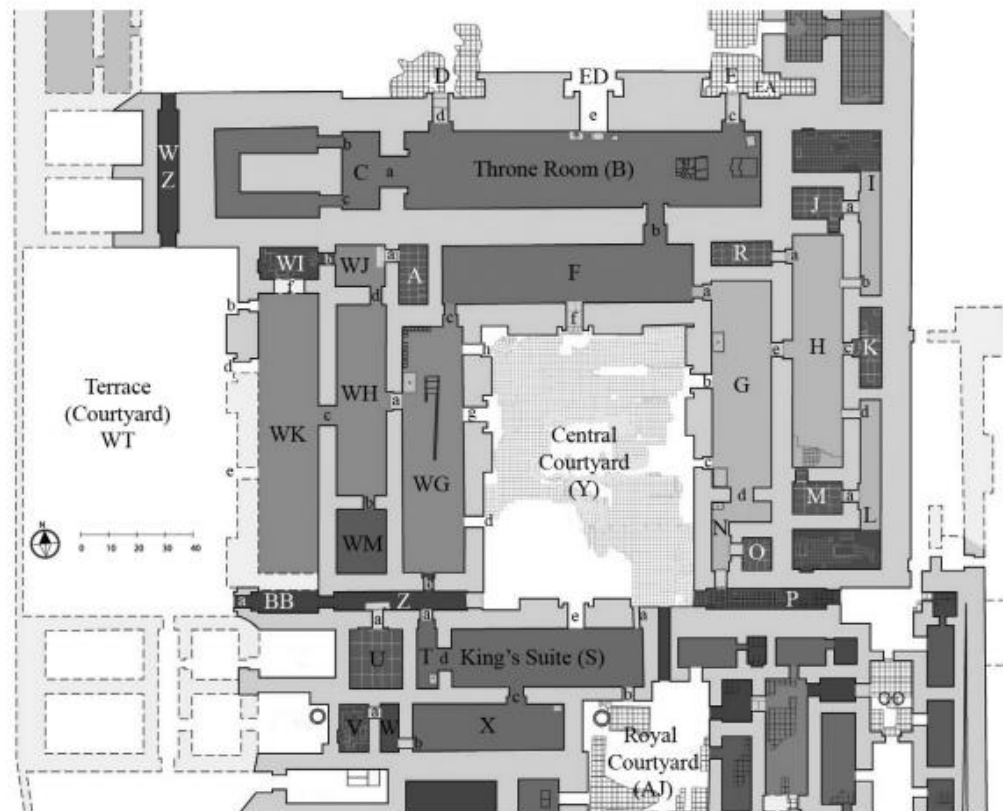


Fig. 1: Northwest Palace (Nimrud): main suites (adapted from Kertai 2014, fig. 3).

Figure 6 Map of the Northwest Palace at Nimrud showing the location of the throne room and the entry doors. Source: Portuese L, 'The Throne Room of Assurnasirpal: a Multisensory Experience' P93 – 92, in Hawthorn, A. and Rendu Loisel, A.C., 2019. Distant impressions: the senses in the ancient Near East

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