NMC 491S: Mesopotamian Material Culture: “Art”

Thursdays 2pm - 4pm BF 415

Instructor: Anne Porter
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YOU MUST PAY CLOSE ATTENTION TO THE SYLLABUS. STUDENTS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR ALL READINGS, ASSIGNMENTS AND DEADLINES.

YOU MUST CHECK YOUR UNIVERSITY EMAIL REGULARLY

Course Description

This class brings together the study of art and artefact with key works in Mesopotamian material culture from 3000-500 BCE. Along with approaches employed by archaeologists, art historians and anthropologists, including typology, kinaesthetics, object-agency, and materiality, you will engage with new approaches to museum display.

Assessment

Three essays @ 15% each. Essays will be submitted Week 3, Week 6, and Week 12.

You will examine your chosen object or group of objects through the lens of three different approaches to material culture.

Analyze and reconstruct a museum display @ 25% Due date Week 10.

This assignment requires an extracurricular trip to the ROM. Date to be determined. You will choose a display, and, on the basis of the literature we will read throughout the course, you will reimagine it. You may present this reimagining any way you would like. The point is to break with traditional distancing approaches to give the museum-goer a more enriching experience. Be imaginative. Be radical. Begin with the following readings:


Two class presentations @ 15%

You will research and present the archaeological, historical and scholarly background to the objects that are your week’s topic.
ALL ASSIGNMENTS MUST BE SUBMITTED IN HARD COPY, DOUBLE-SPACED, 12 POINT, SINGLE-SIDED. REFERENCING SHOULD BE IN SOCIAL SCIENCE FORMAT (NAME DATE: PAGE).

Failure to complete all components of the assessment may result in a failing grade.

Failure to properly reference any written work or to acknowledge source material is considered plagiarism and will result in a failing grade.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism consists of passing off someone else’s work as your own. This may be done in a variety of ways, including, but not limited to: wholesale copying of another person’s writing; getting someone else to write your work for you; quoting someone’s words directly within your own writing but failing to place the quote in quotation marks and/or failing to provide a reference; failing to provide a reference for someone else’s words that you paraphrase; failing to acknowledge information or ideas that have come from someone else. Plagiarism is a serious offence and will be reported. It will be then treated according to school policies and may result in expulsion. Please see the appropriate web page for the school’s plagiarism policy.

Readings

This is a reading intensive course. You will be expected to discuss the assigned passages. Some readings are given as a source of information, but some will apply the techniques or theories we are discussing to a particular subject. Approached critically these sources are also ways of learning how archaeologists do things and why. For this reason you will be expected to do three things with the readings: extract information, analyze the structure and implications of the piece, and break down the argument. Most readings are available online at JSTOR, academia.edu or researchgate.net. Please consult google scholar. Otherwise they will be posted in Blackboard. Please pay attention to the directions in the weekly schedule.

Attendance

It is very difficult to pass this class unless you attend class regularly. There are three reasons for this: one, I will be modeling for you in class the kind of work you are supposed to do for assignments and exams; two, readings do not replace class content; and three, class discussions, because they are the practice of analysis, are as important as any other part of the course. Exam questions are taken directly from class materials and discussions.

Classroom Policies

STUDENTS MAY NOT OPEN THEIR COMPUTERS IN CLASS UNLESS EXPRESSLY PERMITTED BY INSTRUCTOR. No phones or any other digital media are permitted. Class may not be recorded unless by prior arrangement with instructor. Wikipedia is not considered an acceptable source under any situation (so don’t bother consulting it in class). If students persist in inappropriate use of electronic media, they will be asked to leave the class. Behavior that
distracts other students will not be permitted. Students are expected to discuss all topics openly and civilly.

**MARCH 13th IS LAST DAY TO DROP CLASS**

**WEEKLY SCHEDULE**

**Week 1, Thurs Jan 5th. The social relations of things.**

Why do we study material culture – and what is it anyway? What’s the difference between art and artefact? For that matter, what’s the difference between art history and archaeology when it comes to studying the past? We review the artworks selected for this course and you will choose one as the focus of your essay.


**Week 2, Thurs Jan 12th. Typing things, tracking things: what are ceramics good for?**

Somehow, we can’t quite abandon “pots equal people” After all, if they don’t, what’s the point? Clearly, we all believe that in some way we can see through pots to the people that made and used them, and lived in worlds shaped by them. So how do we do better than simplistic identifications of cultural communities based on pots?


**OR**


**PLUS**


**Week 3, Thurs Jan 19th. Things as the biographies of the dead: the cemetery at Ur.**
If things have their own biographies, biographies have their own things. Is there a way we can learn more about who the dead were through this approach? Or are there too many other factors also involved?


**Week 4, Thurs Jan 26th. Archaeological things: context and the self-referential object**

While archaeologists and art historians tend to take very different approaches to objects, maybe they shouldn’t. Examination of the Warka Vase, the Standard of Ur, and the Great Lyre compel the question: can you truly understand the significance of an object without knowing its find-spot? By the same token, can you truly understand the significance of an object without understanding the image? But what is the path to understanding the image?


**Week 5, Thurs Feb 2nd. The agency of things: statues of the Early Dynastic.**

It seems Mesopotamians certainly believed that things had agency. We think this was the purpose of the statue collections from Tell Asmar and similar contexts. Or was it? Who do these statues represent, and how can we understand their function?


**Week 6, Thurs Feb 9th. Making things: how we study cylinder seals.**

If an object and/or an image is functional can it be art? How does patronage affect the production of object/image? Do the people who make the object/image get a say in what goes into it? And if they don’t, how can what they produce be termed art?


So much – and yet so little – has been read into the image of these two figures. If the figure is hybrid, so too is the relationship between image and text, history, cosmology and culture.


Week 8, Thurs Feb 23rd. READING WEEK

Week 9, Thurs Mar 2nd. Giving things: the objects of Naram Sin

There really is no such thing as a free lunch! Divine Kinship and the gifts that keep on giving.


Week 10, Thurs Mar 9th. The Ninhursag Stele and the phenomenology of things.

In order to understand meaning, function, purpose, and effect, surely we have to understand the who, where and how of human experience of things. This means reconstructing, and reconsidering human interaction with things.

Margueron, J-C. Mari TBD


Week 11, Thurs Mar 16th. Ishtar and the materiality of things
Materiality has become a broad umbrella concept. It can refer to the physical properties of things and their effect on people; the embodiment of aspects of the human experience in things; or things as a nexus for human interaction. Do any of these concepts give us greater insight into representations of Ishtar, from cylinder seals to the ubiquitous mold-made plaques?


Ingold, T. 2007. Materials against Materiality. *Archaeological Dialogues* 14/1:1–16

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**Week 12, Thurs Mar 23th. The power of things: efficacy and Old Babylonian plaques**

Efficacy is not the same as agency – or is it?


OR


PLUS


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**Week 13, Thurs Mar 30th. How do things make us? The Assyrian reliefs.**

The use of Assyrian palace reliefs as a form of visual history has long dominated discussions of this iconic material, as has their role in the evolution of art. But two other approaches help us see how deeply affective (and I use that word advisedly) they were: practice theory and kinasethesia.

