

Monumental Origins of Art History: Lessons from Mesopotamia*

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I. Introduction

Art history is enamoured of monumentality. Arguably, most of the artefacts art historians study, no matter how small, tend to have found their natural or adapted home in or around monumental structures: palaces, temples, urban public spaces, not to mention modern museums and galleries. This close attachment between art history and monumentality is hardly surprising: after all, it is only natural that those who build monumental structures have the resources to commission or collect elite artworks to populate them with, which in turn attract the art historians' attention. Yet, this fairly straightforward answer barely scratches the surface of the relationship between the two. In a sense to be expounded in this essay, there would be no art history without monumentality: The monumental builder creates objects of art-historical interest, and they do so not by accident, but deliberately, as if laying out for the future art historian their work. Admittedly, this is as an extravagant claim. Art historians typically worry, with good reason, that the flow of influence goes in the reverse direction – that is, they worry more about contaminating their understanding of the past with their own values and concepts. Regardless, it is an essential characteristic of monuments that they transcend their milieu – that they address themselves to other times.¹ And to be successful at this, they need to factor in the potential loss of immediate familiarity. For this reason, monuments

often employ visual idioms understood as perennial or timeproof – in one word, classical. To be sure, appearing classical alone cannot secure a lossless transmission of the monuments' message across vast gulfs in time. What it can achieve with greater success is that a monument visually manifests at least a semblance of meaning, however indeterminate: Its monumentality is apparent even if what it references isn't anymore.² Accordingly, monuments both issue from and deliberately address a sensitivity to such manifestations, a sensitivity that, as I will claim, is in an important sense art-historical. And it is in this sense that art history is born out of monumentality.

II. Art History and Monumentality

When art historiographers try to pinpoint the beginnings of art history, they customarily trace its origins back to the Renaissance or, alternatively, to the Graeco-Roman world. Graeco-Roman antiquity serves as supposedly the first time in history that thinking about art in developmental terms can be identified,³ whereas the Renaissance is 'the period in which the art historian finds the first texts that reflect an activity recognizably related to the work of the modern art historian'.⁴ The activity consists in taking a historicist point of view 'in the sense that phenomena are not only connected in time but also evaluated according to "their time"'.⁵ Thus, when art historians sort artworks into stylistic series or genealogies of technical solutions to artistic problems⁶ or when they try to evaluate artworks 'according to "their time"', they can see themselves as direct descendants of Pliny the Elder or Giorgio Vasari. The problem is, increasingly fewer see it as their mission as art historians to do either the sorting or the evaluating.

The historiographers' way of answering the question about the origin of art history is 'ancestralist': it chooses to focus on the intellectual pedigree of the discipline in its recent or current incarnations. It is, however, questionable whether both the 'Vasarian' and the 'Plinian' traditions help make sense of the intellectual pedigrees of the many varied ways in which art history is carried out today. This may be for various, by now familiar reasons: art historians may feel that whatever

they are historians of is misrepresented by the term ‘art’ (opting instead for substitutes such as ‘material culture’, ‘artefacts/objects’, or even ‘matter’).⁷ Conversely, they may feel uneasy about the label ‘history’, as they see themselves more as akin to cultural critics weaponizing (not necessarily past) art for what they see as more pressing agendas.⁸ But, whatever reasons there may be for disassociating with the traditional accounts of art history’s origin, they are likely to become more urgent in face of the omnipresent demands that the discipline become more diverse and conducted on a global scale while acknowledging the Eurocentric and colonialist undertones of many past efforts at providing global histories of art.⁹

There need not be anything inherently problematic about ‘art history’ providing cover for many diverse and disparate ways of studying objects of visual or material culture without a shared sense of purpose or subject-matter. Except that, seen from an admittedly superficial perspective, the diversity goes only so far. Surveying art history’s recent scholarly output, one may observe that despite the many methodological turns art history has professed in the last decades, it still deals predominantly with metropolitan art worlds. Whether archaic, pre-modern, or contemporary; whether European, Asian, African, or Amerindian, art history remains wedded largely to the study of artefacts and structures either produced or circulated in the orbit of these metropolitan civilizations.¹⁰ Put differently, art history has been strongly attached to elite or luxury goods as well as to the large-scale monumental architecture they were typically housed in. To be sure, this observation is not, in and of itself, a denunciation or an intervention unveiling the discipline’s bad conscience.¹¹ But the observation suggests (a) a perspective that brings together, even if superficially, the vast majority of art-historical approaches past and present and (b) a direction to answering the question about the origins of art history that is not ‘ancestralist’.

Whatever the sense of disconnect between the art historiographers’ origin stories and contemporary scholarly practices, there is a lesson to be learnt from the historiographers’ account: We can learn from them that the bias towards metropolitan elite goods and monumentality goes

beyond any possible modern or contemporary preconceptions. According to their observations, what holds for contemporary art historians applied just as well to Pliny or Vasari; the practice of art history comes to its own in high metropolitan cultures with an institutionalized art world that uses monumental architecture settings as the default context for displaying art – whether these settings are the *pinakothekai* and sculpture gardens of Hellenism, the palaces of Renaissance princes and municipalities, or modern galleries and museums.¹²

The answer to the question ‘When does art history begin?’ would then find the relationship between current and past art-historical practices in shared social conditions rather than a common intellectual ancestry. According to this answer, art history flourishes only in a particular ‘monumental’ or metropolitan constellation that allows for art to be brought to, exhibited, and appreciated at one place. Art history thus begins when social conditions favour collecting and exhibiting art in monumental settings, which in turn stimulates a connoisseurship that helps interpret the art.

Such an answer may help make sense of the superficial observation about art history’s strong attachment to elite goods and monumental structures. However, its materialism prevents one from asking whether the monumental conditions may be conducive to a distinctive mode of thinking or awareness, one that could then be labelled ‘art-historical’. This would be to search for a more profound relation between monumentality and the general conditions necessary for an art-historical mode of thinking to emerge.

The materialistic answer tells us: Art history is enamoured of monumentality because monumental settings come with a high concentration of elite goods. Perhaps it is the straightforward explanation that has prevented art historiographers and theorists to delve deeper into the reasons for the strong attachment between art history and monumentality. Yet, it was already Alois Riegl who sensed a profound relation between them. According to him, any monument (‘Denkmal’) is at the same time an art-historical document.¹³ Riegl extends the meaning of ‘monument’ beyond

‘deliberate’ monuments, to any artefactual evidence whatsoever; any such document can in principle be classified based on its visible features that reveal its place in a stylistic development – and a classification like this is, in Riegl’s view at least, one of the main aims of art history. Granted, the Rieglean notion of art history as the study of monuments’ styles is dated and relies on an extremely broadly construed notion of ‘monument’ that includes ‘unintentional’ monuments (that is, historical documents) too. But it does help amplify a shared interest of the monument builder (hereafter: ‘monumentalist’) and its future historian – an interest in the ‘monumentality’ of artefacts. The idea is deceptively simple: monumentalist raise structures to keep a legacy alive; art historians retrieve the legacy from the structures’ visible traits.

The seemingly simple idea harbours a conception of an art-historical awareness distinguished by its attention to the monumentality of historical documents, that is, to their potential to visibly manifest over time their relevance. Or, to put the same point differently, the consciousness behind the raising of monumental structures is art-historical, only instead of looking backward, it is anticipatory. If this observation is correct, the relationship between monumentality and art history is indeed profound: one implies the other. And we begin to inch closer not just to unveiling deeper roots of art history’s attraction to monumentality but also to shedding a new light on the beginnings of art history.

To be sure, the concept of art history attains here more of a technical meaning: To be an art historian is to have a mind attentive to the visible sustaining of relevance over time.¹⁴ But the point is not to set a norm for what passes as a proper art-historical attitude. The point is rather to make explicit that the monumentalist’s activity necessarily involves an awareness of the historicity of monuments’ looks. To some, this condition may not be enough to associate the monumental attitude with the art-historical: After all, isn’t the monumentalist someone who tries to suppress art’s historicity by uprooting it from its embeddedness in local conditions and idioms? Yet both the future-oriented monumentalist and the backward-looking art historian share the attention to what

can visibly manifest relevance over time. It is only because some artefacts can manifest visibly relevance outside of their original context that the art historian is able to *see* such manifestations despite the temporal remoteness. The monumental awareness deserves the label ‘art-historical’ at the very least because it raises monuments in part to address audiences outside of its time; audiences that will, ideally, be ‘art-historically’ minded too, that is, attentive to the monuments’ visible features that sustain their legacy.

If this notion of art-historicity does not alleviate the sense of disconnect between what art historiographers tell us about the discipline’s origin and the current practices, it is because it is not meant to. Instead, it will help me develop an alternative account of art history’s origin, focused less on genealogy and more on what necessitates something like an art-historical awareness or attention in the first place. The account asserts that art history, understood as a particular mode of awareness, has been much more widespread than the standard narratives about its history would have one believe. The account rises to the challenge of ‘worlding’ art history by providing a global view of the possibilities and perhaps also lost opportunities of art-historical thought,¹⁵ while holding on to its traditional fixation on both temporality and materiality.

III. Archaeological Consciousness

Fragments of an inscription found at Nineveh record the rebuilding of the dilapidated temple Emenue by the Assyrian king Shamshi-Adad I (c.1809 – c.1776 BCE). During the reconstruction, the inscription tells us, foundation tablets were discovered stating that the temple had been built by Manishtushu (c.2270 – 2255 BCE), son of the legendary Akkadian ruler Sargon. Speaking in the name of Shamshi-Adad, the inscription reads:

The monumental inscriptions and clay inscriptions of Man-ištūšu I swear I did not remove but [restored] to their [places]. I deposited [my monumental inscriptions and clay inscriptions ...]

beside his [monumental inscriptions] and clay inscriptions. Therefore the goddess Ištar, my mistress, has given me a term of rule which is constantly renewed.¹⁶

It then asks that the future ruler treat the temple and the inscriptions in the same way.

An inscription on a clay cylinder (c.555 – 540 BCE, British Museum) found at the site of the Ebabbar temple in Sippar, Babylonia, commemorates the restoration of three temples by the last Neo-Babylonian king Nabonidus (556 – 539 BCE), among them the Ebabbar itself, the seat of the god Shamash. The inscription states that one of the temple's past restorers, the king Nebuchadnezzar II, searched in vain for a foundation deposit, which, it is implied, had caused the sagging of its walls after forty five years. The inscription then goes on to claim that Nabonidus excavated 'the foundation deposit of Narām-Sîn, son [grandson, actually] of Sargon, which no king among my predecessors had found in three thousand and two hundred years' (the figure is off by approximately 1,500 years).¹⁷

Some 1,200 years separate the two inscriptions, which are just two examples of an established and well documented practice in Mesopotamia. From the third millennium BCE to the fall of the Neo-Babylonian empire in the sixth century BCE, rulers placed beneath floors or into walls of temples amuletic foundation deposits to prevent their collapse. The deposits often comprised valuable materials and artefacts as well as inscribed tablets, cylinders, or pegs.¹⁸ The royal inscriptions stated the circumstances under which the structures were (re)built and implored, in the name of the commissioning king and in a formulaic manner that changed little over the centuries, the future rulers who would find the temple in a dilapidated state to restore it and not remove the tablet lest they face the wrath of gods. The temples were seen as residences of gods and it was imperative to restore them at the same location favoured by the deities. Discovering a foundation deposit was a crucial step in the process of restoration and a sign that the king was a legitimate ruler

with the god on his side. But it was equally important for the king's standing with the gods that the temple be secured for posterity.¹⁹

The historian of archaeology Alain Schnapp interprets the Mesopotamian practice as the earliest sign of a fully developed 'archaeological consciousness'. For him, 'the power of archaeology' stems from the ability to mark symbolically a territory, to leave traces for others to recover. As he puts it, 'archaeological consciousness is born more of confrontation with the future than with the past'.²⁰ Schnapp's archaeological consciousness is therefore not necessarily or even primarily a matter of an interest in the past. It is an attention to the temporal aspect material objects possess as traces or relics.

Schnapp recognizes that early hunter-gatherers, used to covering their traces, already possessed a 'minimalist archaeology' because 'they were conscious of being located and identified'. He nevertheless insists that a 'significant boundary separates the slight traces of the Palaeolithic hunter-gatherers from the sumptuous monuments of the Eastern Empires'.²¹ Schnapp does not name this significant boundary, perhaps because he deems it self-evident: the large-scale architecture built of stone or brick. He locates archaeology's beginnings in the raising of monuments by early empires to challenge the flow of time: Their rulers 'set out to leave an immutable stamp upon the earth, one which would resist the depredations of the seasons, natural disasters and potential destroyers'.²² To put it in a slogan: Archaeology, Schnapp suggests, is born out of monumentality.

Christopher Wood expresses a similar train of thought, only this time vis à vis the origin of art history, when he says that 'first art histories were told by artifacts themselves'.²³ Elaborating the view, he writes:

The work that tries to overrule fortune – cast the dice back at life – is the monument. The monument imposes order on the landscape or the city, just as an artwork imposes order on a

room. A domineering artifact that preempts and preshapes the work of a future art historian, the monument signals the authority of the state over resources and skills as well as over time itself.²⁴

Like Schnapp, Wood understands the monumental dimension of architecture as a reliable means of keeping a legacy alive. But unlike him, he is more explicit about monumentality's ideological function of consolidating power: The monument's message is not meant just for posterity but also addresses the present: it manifests here and now that the authority behind it is here to stay for generations, if not forever.

Wood's remarks rhyme noticeably with a functionalist approach to monumental architecture developed by the archaeologist Bruce Trigger.²⁵ The 'principal defining feature' of monumental architecture is, according to Trigger, 'that its scale and elaboration exceed the requirements of any practical functions that a building is intended to perform'.²⁶ In its monumentality, it defies 'the principle of least effort' which, Trigger claims, universally informs the expenditure of energy in resource production and distribution within human communities. As Trigger argues, in hierarchical, class-based societies, ruling classes must rely on control mechanisms that include demonstrative acts of power, which often involve conspicuous consumption, that is, 'the ability to expend energy, especially in the form of other people's labour, in non-utilitarian ways'.²⁷ This 'flagrant violation' of the principle often takes the form of monumental architecture and luxury goods. Violating the principle helps consolidate power because monuments and high-end art are very costly to produce and thus demonstrate that the agents behind them can afford to incur the cost at their will.

Monumental architecture as understood by Trigger is a good example of what is called, in the philosophy of biology, a handicap, that is, a signal 'whose reliability is ensured because its cost is greater than required by efficacy requirements'.²⁸ By emitting signals in the form of handicaps one incurs a 'strategic cost' that is required to 'ensure honesty and prevent cheating'.²⁹ And the costly nature of producing the signal is part of its message: the handicap is a reliable signal because it not

just conveys the message of its costliness, but shows it.³⁰ A standard example of a handicap is a peacock's tail, whose size and rich colours serve no other purpose but to convey reliably to the peahen the male's good stock. Similarly, a royal inscription may easily overstate or even fabricate the ruler's exploits and successes, but it is the monumental architecture that makes their power truly visible. Trigger understands this symbolism as mostly intimidatory: 'These structures were evidently designed to impress foreign enemies as well as potential thieves and rebels with the power of the authorities who were able to build and maintain them.'³¹ However, the structures were arguably also meant to symbolically mark a territory, to give visual brand to the reign, so to speak.

Two aims are typically associated with monumentality: (i) to manifest visually a sense of importance or relevance associated with an event, a person, or an idea and (ii) to keep the legacy of the event, person, or idea alive for posterity.³² In fact, one of the reasons why one turns to monumentality is arguably that it allows one to achieve both aims at once – to manifest visibly a sense of relevance and to keep its legacy alive. The monumentalists' aim to produce reliable signals of authority is thus twofold: to convey the authority's lasting character to both their contemporaries and those outside of their time (these may be future audiences, but also entities not sharing human temporality such as gods). And according to the functionalist theory, monumentality is an effective means of manifesting authority because it produces reliable signals of authority: monumental handicaps. The monument 'signals the authority of the state over time itself' by its costliness – its scale and use of durable material. Functionalism thus puts greater emphasis on the first of the two goals of monumentality, to manifest visibly authority. Yet, it is with respect to the second goal (to sustain the authority's legacy for the long haul) that functionalist explanations provide support to the – seemingly extravagant – claim that first art histories (Wood) and archaeologies (Schnapp) were carried out by the monumentalists: The relatively context-independent way the monumental handicap delivers its message – large scale and durable material – makes it fit to serve the purpose of outlasting its immediate context not just as a material object but also as a signal of authority.³³ As

Schnapp puts it, the building of monuments is ‘a monumentalisation of space able to face the erosion of time’.³⁴ It is in this sense that the monumentalist is already an art historian and an archaeologist: they attend to the potential of objects to sustain visibly their currency beyond their time, deliberately creating objects of art historical and archaeological interest.

IV. Monumentality beyond Functionalism

Monumental functionalism explains monuments’ efficacy by their large scale and their use of durable material, which makes them effective handicaps. In this way, it contributes to our understanding of the relationship between monumentality and art history: the monumentalist is mindful of the ‘erosion of time’ in ways that mirror the art historian’s concern; the former produces an artefact meant to signal authority both within and without its milieu, the latter tries to recover and restore the signal.

However, the parallel between Trigger’s functionalism and the handicap theory helps draw out the limits of the former. It suggests that there is something almost instinctive or unreflective about producing and responding to monumental structures: just as the peacock’s tail is a straightforward and very public signal of its owner’s stock, so is the monument’s large scale and durable material a sign of the authority’s endurance for anyone to behold. However, monumental signalling can be more varied and nuanced than that.

First, if the double goal of monumentality is to manifest visually authority and keep its legacy alive, then this aim can be achieved without necessarily having to involve large-scale structures that are easily accessible publicly. The cast copper figure reproduced below (fig. 1) instantiates a visual trope of an upright man bearing a large basket on his head. The basket contains clay out of which a foundation brick of a temple will be ritually moulded. The basket-bearer is a Mesopotamian king who, in his capacity as the keeper of gods’ dwellings, takes part in a ceremonial inauguration of a

temple construction.³⁵ The figure depicts the Neo-Sumerian king Ur-Namma (2112–2095 BCE) and it was part of a foundation deposit.

Fig. 1. Foundation figure of Ur-Namma, c.2112–2095 BCE. Copper, 27cm. New York: Metropolitan Museum. Photo: Metropolitan Museum (CC0 1.0 Universal).

As a foundation deposit, the Ur-Namma figure was buried underground, so it addressed audiences beyond the here and now, perhaps the gods, but also its future excavators.³⁶ Despite its being less than 30cm tall, it is a monument in the technical sense of being intended to manifest visually authority over time. What makes it a monumental handicap is its use of costly and durable material as well as its masterly delivery, yet it does not rely for its signalling efficacy on monumental scale.³⁷

Second, a similar point applies to durable material. To manifest visibly and lastingly authority, a monument does not have to assume the role of an irreplaceable relic, whose lasting currency is secured by its durability. It may just as well be regarded as one of a series of perfectly substitutable, yet legitimate instantiations of a visual type. What establishes the instantiations' mutual equivalence or substitutability is that they all share identity features of the type.³⁸ We can, for example, imagine that the Babylonian ritual of moulding the first brick, as visually documented on the Sumerian Ur-Nanshe plaque (fig. 2), would have involved standardized ways of comportment that would be enacted only on such occasions.³⁹ Importantly, what would manifest the ritual's lasting currency (what would 'monumentalize' it) would not be the material identities of the persons' bodies (mortal as they were), but rather their instantiation of canonical patterns of behaviour.

Fig. 2. Plaque of Ur-Nanshe of Lagash, c.2600 BCE. Limestone, 39cm x 46.5cm. Paris: Musée du Louvre. Photo: Marie-Lan Nguyen, retrieved from

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Relief_Ur-Nanshe_Louvre_AO2344.jpg, Creative Commons BY 2.5 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/>).

And third, while it is correct to say that the monumentalist pursues two goals at once – to manifest authority and to sustain its legacy – there is a more precise way to describe their pursuit. If one intends to manifest visibly and lastingly authority, monuments offer an effective solution not necessarily because they are of massive size (to manifest authority) and durable material (to keep the authority's legacy alive), but rather because they visibly manifest authority-as-lasting. A monumental structure signals authority by showing its lasting currency, that is, by demonstrating to its intended audiences – regardless whether within or without its immediate milieu – that the authority the monument manifests transcends them.

The Ashurbanipal Stele (fig. 3), showing a relief of the Neo-Assyrian king (668–631 BCE), quotes visually in all likelihood the Neo-Sumerian trope of the king as a builder (fig. 1), effectively reviving a fifteen-hundred-year-old mode of royal representation. It is likely that foundation figures like that of Ur-Namma were uncovered during the Neo-Assyrian excavations and reconstructions of Babylonian temples, which would explain why the Ashurbanipal relief deviates from the standards of representing Neo-Assyrian rulers.⁴⁰ The Neo-Assyrian relief is thus 'deliberately archaizing':⁴¹ it borrows an ancient local visual configuration to support the legitimacy of the Assyrian's rule in Babylon. By depicting Ashurbanipal in the posture of his Sumerian predecessors, the stele associates him with a time-honoured tradition sanctioned by the gods. It is as if the relief said: this is how legitimate Babylonian kings tend to gods' dwellings – this is how it has always been, how it always will be.⁴²

Fig. 3. Stele of Ashurbanipal, c.668–655 BCE. Sandstone, 36.8cm x 22.2cm x 10.2cm. London: British Museum. Photo: Zunkir, retrieved from

https://commons.m.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Stela_Ashurbanipal_90864.jpg, Creative Commons BY-SA 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/>).

Unlike the Ur-Namma foundation figure, the Ashurbanipal Stele was not part of a foundation deposit; it was likely prominently displayed in Babylon's central temple Esagila devoted to the god Marduk.⁴³ It was part of the interior of a monumental structure, belonging to that class of objects that populate the inside and outside of monumental architecture to help instil awe and thus manifest authority. Yet, both the Ur-Namma foundation figure and the Ashurbanipal Stele are meant to manifest by their looks the relevance-over-time of the authority behind them. Depicting the king as a builder and cast in durable material, the Ur-Namma figure is to stand out as the manifestation of the Neo-Sumerian ruler's lasting legacy as the keeper and restorer of gods' dwellings. And imparting Ashurbanipal with an archaizing look associates the relief with an old way of portraying Babylonian kings, making the stele an instantiation of a visual trope linked to an immemorial ritual sanctioned by the gods.

A monumental awareness is thus the attention not just to features that visibly and over time manifest a monument's relevance, but rather to those that visibly manifest the monument's relevance-over-time, that is, its relevance beyond its immediate circumstances.⁴⁴ Such an awareness is necessary for constructing deliberate monuments insofar as to build a monument is in large part to imbue it with the potential to manifest visibly the lasting or permanent currency of an idea, a person, or an event; which is another way of saying that raising monuments amounts to communicating whatever meaning they channel by visibly manifesting their relevance-over-time.

It is therefore not enough to say that deliberate monuments are intended to outlast their immediate context. They are also to manifest this very potential. If it is true that first art histories were written by monuments, as Wood asserts, it is not only in the sense that they make it impossible for the future art historian to ignore them precisely because of their nature of monumental

handicaps. Rather, the monumentalists were deliberately producing structures and objects that were not just built to last, but to manifest visibly the lasting nature of their source of relevance.

Monuments are not just simple handicaps; they address themselves to a consciousness able to reflect on their looks as expressions of historical transcendence.

To appreciate a monument for its monumentality, then, means to register its success or failure in manifesting by its appearance a relevance beyond its immediate context. It follows, if perhaps counterintuitively, that a monument will maintain successfully its monumentality even when the nature and content of the relevance it marks has been long forgotten; as long, that is, as it secures at least a semblance of relevance by its monumental means. To be sure, an art-historical awareness cannot be limited to this reflective mode of attending to monumentality, as the former is just any attention to visible manifestations of relevance that have the potential to survive across time. But it is precisely the reflective nature of monumental awareness – its appreciation of intentional visible manifestations of relevance-over-time – that makes the monumentalist such a fitting candidate for the first art historian: the producer of intentional objects of and for art history.

V. 'Hot' and 'Cold' Monumentality

A monumental awareness is art-historical in as much as it aims to attract a kindred mode of awareness, one that is also attentive to the sustaining of relevance over time and sensitive to a potential loss of context. But whereas the former mode of awareness is necessary to produce monuments, the latter is involved in registering and recovering visible traits of the monuments' relevance. To quote from Wood one more time, the former 'preempts and preshapes the work of' the latter.

Art history's birth, however, is not marked by the crossing of Schnapp's 'significant boundary'. To recall, both Schnapp and Wood suggest that the appearance of colossal brick and stone structures of the early empires marks the nascence of both art history and archaeology. This claim finds

support in Trigger's functionalist approach. Trigger suggests that only a consolidated ruling class of the highly stratified and hierarchical early empires could organize the human power needed to produce large-scale monumental projects and also systematically commission artworks as 'elite goods' at a very high strategic cost; individual members or clans of hunter-gatherers or foragers could simply not pull something like that off, too preoccupied with a 'relentless competition for prestige'.⁴⁵

Even if that were the case,⁴⁶ this would not explain why a monument needs to manifest visually its lasting importance by colossal size and durable material (as discussed in § III). But, if monumentality needs to rely on neither material identity nor colossal size for its effects, there is not much reason left to locate its beginnings to the emergence of monumental architecture in early agrarian civilizations. Indeed, any ritualized practice that involves visually manifesting lasting currency of certain cultural meanings would count as monumental and therefore also as involving an art-historical awareness.

The assertion that art-historical awareness has been a global phenomenon at least ever since humans have been producing monuments (widely construed) puts the materialist explanation of the discipline's attachment to monumentality under a different light. It now appears that the monumentality in question is of a particular kind: colossal, durable, and associated with metropolitan and imperial civilizations. Which raises the question: What would an art history look like that would locate its originary scene not within and around imperial palaces and temples, but among hunter-gatherers, pastoralists, foragers, or nomads?

One may be inclined to refuse to entertain the counterfactual because, from a certain perspective, even raising the question makes little sense. For the short answer would simply be that such an art history would not have looked like anything because the nomads and foragers' artefacts, made out of 'wood, bamboo, or reeds', turn into 'biodegradable trash' spread 'thinly across the landscape', and they are thus 'likely to vanish entirely from the archaeological record'.⁴⁷ Something like the

‘anticipatory’ art-historical consciousness we encountered in Mesopotamia would then have no way of effectively ‘preempting or preshaping’ the labour of the reactive, backward-looking art historian and there would be no connection to art history as we know it.

This answer implies that it is immaterial whether archaic societies of hunter-gatherers or foragers constructed monuments (understood, recall, as material objects visually manifesting relevance-over-time) because these societies have not crossed Schnapp’s significant boundary. The line of thinking turns quickly into a self-fulfilling prophecy: It may be that something like an art-historical awareness or attention accompanies the desire to create monuments; but such consciousness can become part of a genealogy of art history only when it produces artefacts that leave material traces for the backward-looking art historian to study. Other products of art-historical consciousness will not survive to be discovered. And perhaps there is some truth to this line of thinking; maybe art history has been enamoured of a distinct, metropolitan kind of monumentality because, in a sense, it was predestined to be drawn to these structures: Their makers (unlike the hunter-gatherers) were intentionally making monuments of durable material to address future audiences. Schnapp’s boundary would then really not be a complete fiction: it would mark the ascendancy of a particular kind of historical consciousness, one that perceives monuments as beacons emitting signals to the future along a linear diachronic timeline.

Claude Lévi-Strauss famously drew a distinction between ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ societies – the latter being those societies that reproduce their structure by suppressing as much as possible the effects of diachronic change and the former taking this change to be the essence of their existence.⁴⁸ This distinction would then help salvage the relevance of the significant boundary: Building large-scale structures out of durable material would mark the advent of a ‘hot’ society and with it an archaeological as well as art-historical consciousness focused on leaving behind lasting monuments as indexes of historical events. This line of argument would contrast ‘hot’ civilizations that produce

colossal structures and costly elite goods as relics for posterity with small-scale ‘cold’ societies that avoid any relics of historicity.

In this scenario, hot societies are distinguished by their veneration of relics, that is, objects whose material identity across time is paramount; they are non-substitutable ‘witnesses’ to historical events. In the ‘cold’ regime, on the other hand, replacing, say, a worn-out ritual mask with a new one, or having more than one mask in circulation does not threaten their equal potential to make ancestral authority present. Thus, the relation between the mask and the authority is made impervious to change; system of classification wins over history, to use another rendering of the difference Lévi-Strauss used.⁴⁹ By contrast, keeping the relation to authority by preserving the artefact’s material identity amounts to privileging authenticity harboured in the linear passage of time: in this regime, replacing a relic with an identical substitute amounts to forgery, to the effective breaking of the temporal relation to authority. History wins over classification.⁵⁰

According to this reading, Schnapp’s significant boundary would describe the appearance of durable monuments in ‘hot’ societies. These monuments would be assigned importance based on their relic-like relation to a source of authority. According to this relic-based ‘hot’ logic, monuments manifest their relation to authority as unique interventions in the temporal order, typically caused by the source of authority. An art-historical or archaeological awareness primed accordingly will look for appropriate visual marks of genuineness such as artistic excellence, material identity, or patina.⁵¹ According to the ‘cold’ logic, ‘monuments’ (in some lesser sense) manifest their relation to authority as substitutable tokens, visually instantiating features associated with the authority, placing themselves in a chain of substitutes that traces back to the source of authority or that attests its eternal presence. An ‘art-historical’ (in a diminished sense) awareness primed accordingly will look for appropriate visual traits that indicate type identity.⁵²

However, his own discussion of Australian churinga shows that for Lévi-Strauss himself ‘hot’ and ‘cold’ were no more than useful analytic models that helped identify tendencies within cultures.

The churinga are oval cultic objects, often bearing carved symbols and usually made of stone or wood by the Arrernte people of central Australia (the southern part of today's Northern Territory). In Lévi-Strauss's description, the Arrernte are a typically 'cold' society geared towards suppressing all signs of diachrony, yet the churinga make the ancestral history present to them *as history*. They are treated as parts of ancestors' bodies and are inherited by those regarded as present reincarnations of respective ancestors. They make 'the past materially present' by introducing its material trace and thus keep a sense of a genealogical relation to their mythic ancestors.⁵³

But Lévi-Strauss does not think that the description of the churinga as parts of ancestral bodies should be taken literally. To him, they play a similar role to that of historical documents Europeans keep in national archives. Both are highly valued treasures, yet they are made of ordinary material and the information they bear may easily be copied. Nevertheless, both are treated as relics:

The churinga are the palpable witnesses of the mythical period, the alcheringa, which, without them, one might still imagine, but which would no longer be physically attested. Similarly, if we were to lose our archives, our past would not be abolished for all that: it would be deprived of what one would be tempted to call its diachronic flavor.⁵⁴

In both cases, the material identity of the objects across time puts its observers 'in contact with pure historicity'.⁵⁵ In other words, no matter what the general character of a given culture, one should not be surprised to find 'hot' practices in 'cold' societies and vice versa.

In fact, I already touched on the matter of 'cold' substitutability in Mesopotamia when discussing the role of durability as a monumental feature (§ III). There, I suggested that manifest durability is not a necessary condition of monumental handicaps. To be sure, it is an effective means of manifesting relevance-over-time. So, for example, to Nabonidus, it mattered that the foundation deposits he excavated were identical with those originally buried, to the extent that he might have

been the target of a scam: at the site of the Ebabbar temple, modern-day archaeologists have excavated an inscribed object, the so-called Cruciform Monument, which records the donation of funds to the temple; but what is supposed to look like an Akkadian inscription turned out to be a Neo-Babylonian forgery.⁵⁶ On the other hand, if his royal inscriptions are to be believed, he took great care in trying to follow the exact ground plans of the earlier temples he reconstructed.⁵⁷ He did not venerate the ruins of the past, but rather built a new structure on the old foundations, a structure that would take on the same role as the previous temple. This practice stands in stark contrast to the efforts of modern archaeologists who painstakingly parse the material found at excavation sites to establish and preserve the material identity of a structure from a particular time period.⁵⁸ That ‘cold’ substitutability of monuments was conceivable in Nabonidus’ Babylonia finds further support in the recorded discovery of the statue (or possibly foundation figure) of Sargon at the excavation and construction site of the Ebabbar temple. The statue’s head was badly damaged, with its face missing, so Nabonidus let craftsmen recreate it and returned it to its place in the Ebabbar. That there is some royal figure of Sargon at its designated place was apparently more important than that it is the same statue.⁵⁹

The attractive option that crossing the significant boundary amounts to the shift from ‘cold’ to ‘hot’ monumentality is thus undermined by the fact that both ‘hot’ (relic-based) and ‘cold’ (substitutive) attitudes play a role on either side of the supposed divide. Nor is there any intrinsic reason to privilege an art-historical awareness attentive to ‘hot’ practices as in any way more appropriate for constructing or indeed thinking monumentally. In societies that seem to show no curiosity in their history and that construe their group identity around things’ always having been the same, manifestations of relevance-over-time may play the crucial role of visualizing the culture’s imperviousness to change. Such societies’ ‘regimes of historicity’ may be very different from those of their ‘hot’ counterparts, but that does not rule out the presence of monumental, and hence also art-historical, consciousness.⁶⁰

The observation with which we began, namely, that there has existed an art history only of metropolitan monumental art worlds finds partial support in the argument that monumental awareness produces monuments as manifestations of relevance-over-time, thus creating objects for future art historians. At the same time, the same explanation undermines the former observation because it shows that monumentality, and art-historical attention along with it, is not a feature endemic to hierarchical metropolitan civilizations: it can be found anywhere humans have invested their environment with visible manifestations of relevance-over-time.

It thus may very well be the case that the kind of discipline art history has become is plausibly explained by its traditional bias towards ‘hot’, relic-based monumentality. But, as I have argued, that does not mean this particular kind of monumentality marks the nascence of art-historical awareness. Rather, any kind of monumentality is its expression. In fact, humans have been art historians for as long as they have been observing in and introducing into their environment monuments: visual traces that manifest a lasting currency of an authority.⁶¹

The central claim of this essay is, therefore, that art-historical thought can be identified whenever and wherever material objects are attended to or produced for their potential to manifest visibly and over time their relevance. The claim that art-historical thought is an inevitable dimension of virtually any culture that uses material artefacts as memory storages radically undermines any notion that only certain kinds of culture (metropolitan ‘hot’ civilizations) develop any sort of art-historical awareness. Whether that idea has any hope of resonating within the discipline in its current state(s) depends on many factors, most importantly on whether one subscribes to the minimal characteristic of art-historical awareness championed here, namely, as the attention to artefacts’ potential to manifest visibly over time their relevance. One attractive potential of broadening our understanding of art-historicity in this direction is that it creates incentives to think beyond institutionalized, academic forms of art history. It invites us to look for local ‘ethno-art-histories’, that is, local ways of creating and responding to visible traits of relevance-over-time.

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¹See, for example, Marita Sturken and James E. Young, ‘Monuments’, in *Encyclopedia of Aesthetics*, ed. Michael Kelly (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 3:272–278.

²For insightful comments on monumental indeterminacy, albeit in a very different context, see Raino Isto, ‘In the Valley of the Time Tombs: Monumentality, Temporality, and History in Science Fiction’, *Science Fiction Studies* 46 (2019): 503–504.

³Udo Kultermann, *The History of Art History* (Norwalk, CT: Abaris, 1993), 2–3; Jeremy Tanner, *The Invention of Art History in Ancient Greece: Religion, Society and Artistic Rationalisation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), chap. 5.

⁴Margaret Iversen and Stephen Melville, *Writing Art History: Disciplinary Departures* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 15.

⁵Erwin Panofsky, ‘The First Page of Giorgio Vasari’s “Libro”’, in *Meaning in the Visual Arts: Papers in and on Art History: Papers in and on Art History* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955), 223–224, quoted in Iversen and Melville, *Writing Art History*, 19.

⁶See, for example, Henri Focillon, *The Life of Forms in Art*, trans. George Kubler (New York: Zone Books, 1992).

⁷For recent examples, see Stephen Houston, *Life Within: Classic Maya and the Matter of Permanence* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014); Ittai Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁸See, for example, Andrew Patrizio, *The Ecological Eye: Assembling an Ecological Art History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019); Amelia Jones and Erin Silver, eds.,

Otherwise: Imagining Queer Feminist Art Histories (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

⁹See, for example, James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge, 2007); Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried van Damme, eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concept and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valis, 2008); Whitney Davis, 'Radical WAS: The Sense of History in World Art Studies', *World Art* 3 (2013): 201–210; 'Questionnaire: Decolonizing Art History', *Art History* 43 (2020): 8–66.

¹⁰This is certainly true of the recent wave of publications on global art circulation, see, for example, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, eds., *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015); Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja, eds., *EurAsian Matters: China, Europe, and the Transcultural Object, 1600–1800* (Cham: Springer, 2018). For a different approach, see Edward S. Cooke, Jr., *Global Objects: Toward a Connected Art History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2022).

¹¹First, it is hardly breaking news. Second (and to state the obvious), writing about imperial elite art hardly makes one an apologist, let alone a propagandist.

¹²See Tanner, *Invention of Art History*, 276.

¹³Alois Riegl, 'The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Origin' (1903), trans. Kurt W. Forster and Diane Ghirardo, *Oppositions*, no. 25 (1982), 22.

¹⁴I use 'relevance' here and throughout as a convenient placeholder for whatever sense of importance or relevance a monument is supposed to convey.

¹⁵See Whitney Davis, 'Comment: World without Art', *Art History* 33 (2010): 710–716. Note that Davis speaks of 'worlding art', whereas my agenda is 'worlding art-historical awareness'.

¹⁶A. Kirk Grayson, *Assyrian Rulers of the Third and Second Millennia BC (to 1115 BC)* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1987), 53–54.

¹⁷Paul-Alain Beaulieu, 'The Sippar Cylinder of Nabonidus (2.123A)', *Context of Scripture Online*, ed. William W. Hallo, http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2211-436X_cos_aCOSB_2_123A.

- ¹⁸See Richard S. Ellis, *Foundation Deposits in Ancient Mesopotamia* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1968).
- ¹⁹See Irene J. Winter, 'Babylonian Archaeologists of The(ir) Mesopotamian Past', in *On Art in the Ancient Near East*, vol. 2, *From the Third Millennium B.C.E.* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 433–460.
- ²⁰Alain Schnapp, *The Discovery of the Past: The Origins of Archaeology*, trans. Ian Kinnes and Gillian Varndell (London: British Museum, 1996), 18.
- ²¹*Ibid.*, 18–19.
- ²²*Ibid.*, 19.
- ²³Christopher S. Wood, *A History of Art History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 21.
- ²⁴*Ibid.*, 21–22.
- ²⁵Bruce G. Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilizations: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 541. For an assessment of its influence as well as detractors, see James F. Osborne, 'Monuments and Monumentality', in *Approaching Monumentality in Archaeology*, ed. James F. Osborne (Albany: SUNY Press, 2014), 5–6.
- ²⁶Bruce G. Trigger, 'Monumental Architecture: A Thermodynamic Explanation of Symbolic Behaviour', *World Archaeology* 22 (1990): 119.
- ²⁷*Ibid.*, 125.
- ²⁸John Maynard-Smith and David Harper, *Animal Signals* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 15.
- ²⁹*Ibid.*, 23.
- ³⁰Mitchell S. Green, *Self-Expression* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 51.
- ³¹Trigger, 'Monumental Architecture', 122.
- ³²For (i), see Sandra Shapshay, 'What Is the Monumental?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 79 (2021): 145–160; for (ii), see Riegl, 'Modern Cult of Monuments', 21–24. See also Sturken and Young, 'Monuments'.

- ³³Arguably, this makes monuments also effective as means of transcending social divisions such as those of class. See Weinryb, *Bronze Object*, 8.
- ³⁴Schnapp, *Discovery of the Past*, 25.
- ³⁵See Julia Linke, ‘Building, Arts, and Politics: Narrative Elements in the Depiction of “Building Kings”’, in *Tales of Royalty: Notions of Kingship in Visual and Textual Narration in the Ancient Near East*, ed. Elisabeth Wagner-Durand and Julia Linke (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 156–185.
- ³⁶*Ibid.*, 175; Claudia E. Suter, ‘Kings and Queens: Representation and Reality’, in *The Sumerian World*, ed. Harriet Crawford (London: Routledge, 2013), 205.
- ³⁷For a similar argument, see Wu Hung, *Monumentality in Early Chinese Art and Architecture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995), 1–4. See also Osborne, ‘Monuments and Monumentality’.
- ³⁸See Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 13, 31.
- ³⁹See Linke, ‘Building, Arts, and Politics’.
- ⁴⁰Barbara Nevling Porter, ‘Ritual and Politics in Assyria: Neo-Assyrian Kanephoric Stelai for Babylonia’, *Hesperia Supplement* 33 (2004): 267–268; Natalie Naomi May, “‘I Read the Inscriptions from before the Flood...’: Neo-Sumerian Influences in Ashurbanipal’s Royal Self-Image’, in *Time and History in the Ancient Near East: Proceedings of the 56th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale*, ed. Lluís Feliu, Jaume Llop, Adelina Millet Albà, and Joaquín Sanmartín (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 199–210.
- ⁴¹Zainab Bahrani, ‘The Babylonian Visual Image’, in *The Babylonian World*, ed. Gwendolyn Leick (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), 155; Marian H. Feldman, *Communities of Style: Portable Luxury Arts, Identity, and Collective Memory in the Iron Age Levant* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 106.
- ⁴²On the religious and political context of the Ashurbanipal Stele, see Porter, ‘Ritual and Politics in Assyria’.

⁴³Ibid., 270n32.

⁴⁴The term ‘relevance-over-time’ extends also to cases when monuments may be addressed not just to future audiences, following a diachronic notion of temporality, but also to transcendent entities such as gods that stand outside of whatever temporality that governs the monuments’ immediate context.

⁴⁵Trigger, *Understanding Early Civilizations*, 543–545.

⁴⁶The premise is convincingly refuted by Graeber and Wengrow who rely on recent archaeology to argue systematically that egalitarian hunter-gatherers and foragers have been perfectly capable of organizing large-scale construction projects (what they call ‘forager monumentality’). See David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (London: Allen Lane, 2021), esp. chap. 3.

⁴⁷James C. Scott, *Against the Grain: Plants, Animals, Microbes, Captives, Barbarians, and a New Story of Civilizations* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2017), 13: ‘the archaeological tradition, until quite recently, [has been that] of excavation and analysis of major historical ruins. Thus if you built, monumentally, in stone and left your debris conveniently at a single place, you were likely to be “discovered” and to dominate the pages of ancient history.’

⁴⁸Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Scope of Anthropology’, in *Structural Anthropology*, vol. 2, trans. Monique Layton (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 28–30.

⁴⁹Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman and John Leavitt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021), 262–263.

⁵⁰On the distinction between relic and substitution, see Nagel and Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance*, 13, 31.

⁵¹For a discussion of genuineness along these lines, see Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Things: In Touch with the Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

⁵²See Jakub Stejskal, ‘The Substitution Principle Revisited’, *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 37 (2018): 150–157.

⁵³Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, 269.

⁵⁴*Ibid.*, 274.

⁵⁵*Ibid.*, 275.

⁵⁶Powell argues that the foundation deposit of Narām-Sîn mentioned by the Sippar cylinder (§ III) is actually this forged Cruciform Monument. See Marvin A. Powell, ‘Narām-Sîn, Son of Sargon: Ancient History, Famous Names, and a Famous Babylonian Forgery’, *Zeitschrift für Assyriologie* 81 (1991): 20–30. Comp. Cécile Michel, ‘Cuneiform Fakes: A Long History from Antiquity to the Present’, in *Fakes and Forgeries of Written Artefacts from Ancient Mesopotamia to Modern China*, ed. Cécile Michel and Michael Friedrich (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020), 30–33.

⁵⁷Winter, ‘Babylonian Archaeologists’, 465.

⁵⁸On Nabonidus’ archaeological and antiquarian agenda, see *ibid.*; Paul-Alain Beaulieu, *The Reign of Nabonidus, King of Babylon, 556–539 B.C.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 138–141.

⁵⁹See Beaulieu, *Reign of Nabonidus*, 133–134, 141; comp. Winter, ‘Babylonian Archaeologists’, 466n3.

⁶⁰Art-historical awareness could then be decoupled from any antiquarian impulse and would be compatible with practices such as the ‘wild museography’ of the Sith Shwala as described by González-Ruibal. See Alfredo González-Ruibal, ‘The Virtues of Oblivion: Africa and the People without Antiquarianism’, in *Antiquarianisms: Contact, Conflict, Comparison*, ed. Benjamin Anderson and Felipe Rojas (Oxford: Oxbow, 2017), 31–48.

⁶¹For a discussion of various instances of (Oceanic) monumentality that do not necessarily involve human tampering, see Chris Ballard and Meredith Wilson, ‘Pacific Monumentalism’, in *Monuments and People in the Pacific*, ed. Helene Martinsson-Wallin and Timothy Thomas (Uppsala: University of Uppsala, 2014), 77–97; Stuart Bedford, ‘The Complexity of Monumentality in Melanesia: Mixed Messages from Vanuatu’, in *The Archaeologies of Island*

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