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INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

Newsletter 18 Spring 2017



NYU | ISAW

From the Director

As ISAW approaches the end of its first decade of operation, and moves into its quieter estival mode, I can both look back over the activities and accomplishments of the past academic year and anticipate the coming one with unalloyed pleasure. Though still young, our doctoral program has earned a reputation for innovation and quality such as to attract applicants from the most prestigious universities. Classes such as the seminar on Late Bronze Age Northern Mesopotamia described in this issue draw graduate students and other academic participants not just from within ISAW but across NYU and other nearby institutions. Lectures, conferences, and other public programming also continue to be hugely successful, filling our lecture hall with engaged audiences from the broader community.

Our exhibition *Time and Cosmos in Greco-Roman Antiquity* wrapped up in April, and the complex process of deinstallation, involving twenty-seven lenders, went by with astonishing smoothness; for me as the curator it was a bittersweet series of partings with many rare and remarkable objects that had come to feel like old friends. But even before the exhibition closed, our involvement in the Guggenheim Museum's *...circle through New York* project (see back page) had begun with month-long collaborative visits from the other five participants that will continue to run through the end of the summer. Everyone at ISAW will come away with their own highlights from this project; for many of us, the May residency of Pinkie the salmon-crested cockatoo, normally at home at Pet Resources in the South Bronx, was particularly special, and we are also grateful to our Assistant Research Scholar Patrick Burns for bringing out Pinkie's links to the ancient world in two informal talks on parrots in the Classical world.



I wish the ISAW community and all our readers a productive summer!

Alexander Jones
Interim Director and Professor of the Exact Sciences in Antiquity

ABOUT ISAW

The creation of the Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (ISAW) at New York University had its roots in the passion of Shelby White and Leon Levy for the art and history of the ancient world, which led them to envision an institute that would encourage the study of the economic, religious, political, and cultural connections among ancient civilizations across geographic, chronological, and disciplinary boundaries.

The Institute, established in 2006, is an independent center for scholarly research and graduate education.

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Cover Photo: Professors Lorenzo d'Alfonso and Beate Pongratz-Leisten and participants in seminar *The Late Bronze Age in Northern Mesopotamia: Mittanni, Assyria and the Syrian Local Kingdoms* (page 5)

Photo: @Andrea Brizzi

Libraries

David M. Ratzan
Head Librarian

The ISAW Library is very pleased to announce the generous donation of the library of Susan L. Beningson, Assistant Curator of Asian Art at the Brooklyn Museum. The Beningson Collection contains over 1,200 volumes on Chinese art and archaeology, including material on the Silk Road, Buddhist sculpture, and archaeology of sites from the Shang through Qing Dynasties. The ISAW Library will retain materials relating to its core research, the Xia through Tang Dynasties, while material on later periods of Chinese history and art will find a home in the Stephen Chan Library at the Institute of Fine Arts or Bobst Library in Washington Square. The entire collection will be searchable in Bobcat, NYU's online library catalog.

In April, the ISAW Library and Digital Programs organized the ISAW Digital Antiquity Research Showcase 2017, our most recent event in the Linked Ancient World Data Initiative New York (LAWDNY) series. The aim of the event was to highlight ISAW's overall approach to data and scholarly collaboration in the twenty-first century, connecting data, scholars, and departments. Seven speakers from the extended ISAW community, including faculty, students, staff, and affiliated scholars, presented new digital work on linked data in bibliography, libraries, numismatics, and archaeology; imaging and modeling techniques for artifacts and exhibitions; and text tagging and analysis in historical languages.

This year we have added significantly to our capacity to forge these connections, both with the addition of a new staff member, Patrick J. Burns, who serves as the ISAW Library Assistant Research Scholar for Special and Digital Projects, and the offering of a new graduate seminar, "Introduction to Digital Humanities for the Ancient World," which introduces participants to basic methods in programming, text, mapping, modeling, and database design. This new course complements ISAW's existing curricular offerings in Digital Humanities (DH), such as Sebastian Heath's advanced seminars in mapping and data visualization, data structures and querying, and computational photography and 3D modeling. In addition, starting next academic year, ISAW's DH courses will be available to be taken as electives for GSAS's newly launched M.S. and Certificate programs in Digital Humanities and Social Sciences.

Our new staff and curricular offerings seek to help embed digital approaches into the working DNA of ISAW, creating a community that has a critical awareness of the role of machines and data in research, teaching, and communicating about the ancient world. Indeed, one of the aims of the ISAW approach we showcased in April is precisely to foster a digital "second nature," or the habit of thinking beyond the immediate aims of any



particular project towards an overarching scholarly culture of data, taking seriously our responsibility as scholars to curate and link the data we create, whether that is in the field, the lab, the classroom, the library, or the exhibition gallery, in a way that is both open and reusable. Please see isaw.nyu.edu/news/isaw-dh-showcase2017 for more information about the ISAW Digital Showcase 2017, the ISAW Library, and ISAW Digital Programs.



Left to right: Clinical Assistant Professor of Ancient Studies Sebastian Heath, Peter van Alfen, and Andrew Meadows at the 2017 LAWDNY series

Faculty Focus

Seminar on *The Late Bronze Age in Northern Mesopotamia: Mittanni, Assyria and the Syrian Local Kingdoms*

Beate Pongratz-Leisten, Professor of Ancient Near Eastern Studies

Lorenzo d'Alfonso, Associate Professor of Western Asian Archaeology and History

This spring's seminar was attended by graduate students from Hebrew Bible Studies in the Skirball Department, NYU, and Columbia University, visiting research scholars, as well as a faculty member from the Hebrew Bible Studies who with their diverse competences all contributed to a successful research atmosphere.

In the history of the ancient Near East, the geographical space of Upper Mesopotamia (today northern Iraq and Kurdistan) and Northern Syria represented the crossroads where major traffic routes between the Eastern Mediterranean, Anatolia, the Iranian Plateau and Mesopotamia intersected. Due to its character as a transit zone, it was always contested between the major powers surrounding it, featuring for the second half of the 2nd Millennium BCE Hatti in the north, Assyria in the East, and Egypt in the south. Never defined as a unified political entity, it was made up of many petty kingdoms that constantly shifted their alliances between these major powers.



Photo courtesy of Hartmut Kühne

Hartmut Kühne, in idem (ed.), *Umwelt und Subsistenz der assyrischen Stadt Dur-Katlimmu*, 2008, 215-231, 222

Large parts of Syria belonged to the dry-farming belt that could rely on rainfall. In addition, the head of the Habur River, made up of many springs, as well as the entire Habur Basin, formed extensive highly fertile regions with an immense potential for agriculture. This situation was exploited first by the rising Mitanni State of the Hurrians, during the second half of the second millennium BCE, who decided to build their royal residences in the outmost western and eastern parts of the Habur Basin, as well as subsequently by the Assyrians who, after having freed themselves from the Mitannian dominion, expanded towards the west and turned the Habur Basin as well as the valley of the Balikh River into their bread basket.

The geographical regions of Upper Mesopotamia and Northern Syria offer an ideal case study to probe labels that have been introduced in ancient Near Eastern Studies to categorize people, periods, and political spaces, such as the Assyrians, Babylonians, Hurrians, the Old Assyrian and Old Babylonian period, Middle Assyrian and Middle Babylonian periods, Assyria, Mittanni, etc. It is, however, only at a very superficial level that such traditional assumptions about cultural

identity can be used productively. The chronological, ethnic, and spatial distinctions just mentioned include notions of wholeness and purity of cultures and ethnic authenticity, which were originally established by bureaucratized academic institutions in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By contrast, the contemporary age of global mobility has generated a need to formulate "new ways to understand the vitally important dialectic of cultural persistence and change and new theories of hybridity, network theory, and the complex flow of people, commodities, information, and ideas across endlessly shifting social landscapes." (S. Greenblatt, *Cultural Mobility*, 2010, 2). The moment we embarked on investigating particular questions including the formation of political entities such as the Mitanni state or Assyria, their respective creation of administrative districts and provincial systems, the question of style, in particular artifacts, or the question of alloglottography as attested in the Hurrianized Akkadian of the administrative texts in Alalakh, as well as in the letters from Qatna,

archaeological and textual evidence defied clear-cut categorizations of things as simply Hurrian, Assyrian, etc. Rather, textual, archaeological, and artistic evidence testify to immense cultural competences of the various people and polities interacting with each other including the use of the cuneiform writing system for administrative and diplomatic purposes to write in Hittite, Hurrian, Assyrian languages or the appropriation and simplification of it as attested in the Ugaritic language, which used cuneiform to create an alphabetic script. Other cultural competences included the transformation of conquered and controlled territory into provinces to secure the subsistence of a political center, the organization of urban space to serve economic needs, and industrial production on the one hand and political representation on the other.

The seminar culminated in a workshop with archaeologists and philologists who are experts in the Late Bronze Age, including Aslihan Yener, Hartmut Kühne, Eva Cancik-Kirschbaum, Daniel Fleming, and Betina Faist.

Community News

Marc LeBlanc

Assistant Director for Academic Affairs

We are very pleased to announce that ISAW alumnus Randolph Ford '16 has been awarded New York University's 2016-2017 Dean's Outstanding Dissertation Award in the Humanities for his dissertation, "Ethnographic Identities and the Politics of Empire in Late Roman and Early Medieval Chinese Historiography."

Randolph is currently a Moreau Fellowship Postdoctoral Research Associate in the Department of Classics at the University of Notre Dame, where he teaches courses in Latin, late antiquity, and the comparative history of ancient Rome and China.



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Randolph Ford

Digital Programs

Tom Elliott, Associate Director for Digital Programs

Kristen Soule, Information Technology Support Administrator

Videos of twenty-three public lectures are now available to stream for free to your computer or mobile device via the ISAW Website. If you visit the home page at <http://isaw.nyu.edu> and navigate to **Events**, you will find a link to the **Video Archive**, where you can select the lecture you would like to view.

We continue to pursue technical advances in several areas, including a plan for long-term digital archiving of the video content in collaboration with the NYU Libraries, as well as a means for users to download a lecture as a single file for offline viewing.

Our video archive currently spans the period from March 2016 to present. More videos are in post-production now, and will be added to the archive as they are finished. The availability of a video for a particular lecture is dependent on several factors, including: the speaker agrees to a release to post the video, technical factors, and the copyright status of material presented during the lecture. As a result, not all lectures are available to stream.

The ISAW video archive is a joint effort of the Academic Affairs, Administrative, and Digital Programs teams. Over the past few years, we've upgraded our equipment to capture and edit many of our lectures, which are edited only for clarity and consistency. The finished videos are served to the web via the NYU Stream media sharing service.

The screenshot shows the ISAW website interface. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the ISAW logo and menu items: ABOUT ISAW, PEOPLE, LIBRARY, RESOURCES & PUBLICATIONS, RESEARCH, NEWS. Below this is a secondary navigation bar with: INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF THE ANCIENT WORLD, GRADUATE STUDIES, VISITING SCHOLARS, EVENTS, and EXHIBITIONS. The main content area features the event title "Medicine and the Humanities from Ancient to Modern" with the subtitle "The Varied Fortunes of Galen" and the speaker "Claire Bubb, ISAW". A video player is embedded, showing a blurred scene of a lecture hall. To the right, there is an "Event Details" sidebar showing the date "03/09/2017" and time "06:00 PM". Below this is an "Add Event to Calendar" section with buttons for VCAL and ICAL. At the bottom of the screenshot, a dark red banner contains the text: "A screen shot of the video archive as seen on the event's webpage".

Exhibitions

Restoring the Minoans: Elizabeth Price and Sir Arthur Evans

October 5, 2017–January 7, 2018

Rachel Herschman, Curatorial Assistant

The British archaeologist Sir Arthur Evans (1851–1941) fundamentally shaped our understanding of the Minoan world. He excavated the “Palace of Minos” on the island of Crete and believed he had found the remnants of Daedalus’s mythological Minotaur-containing labyrinth. As the first person to recognize the distinctiveness of the Minoans, his contribution to archaeology cannot be underestimated, yet his bold restoration of the site at Knossos confronts viewers with images of an ancient world that appear distinctively modern. Art nouveau-styled women and reinforced concrete structures invite questions about the archaeologist’s boundaries between interpretation and speculation.

When the Turner Prize-winning artist Elizabeth Price (British, b. 1966) was commissioned to create a new artwork based on the collection of the Ashmolean Museum, she was drawn to the modern watercolors and photographs in the Sir Arthur Evans Archive. Her eighteen-minute video installation takes creative license with the museum’s archive in response to Evans’s blurred boundaries between artifact, restoration, and invention. A RESTORATION (2016) reinterprets Evans’s images from his archaeological excavation by layering them with rhythmic electronic music and synthetically voiced narrators to drive a new story that is as much about the past as it is about the future.

Presenting artifacts from Minoan Crete, archival materials from the Sir Arthur Evans Archive, together with the work of Elizabeth Price,



Émile Gilliéron *fils*, Blue Monkey in a Rocky Landscape. Watercolor on paper, H. 60 cm; W. 83 cm, after a fresco from House of the Frescoes, Knossos, ca. 1928. Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford: Evans Fresco Drawing C/6.

this exhibition explores the relationship between restoration and art. How do archaeologists and museums recover long-silent civilizations and make them meaningful for us today? How do contemporary conditions influence the way we understand the past? This exhibition presents the dynamics between recovery and creation using a work of a contemporary video art as a lens on the ancient past.



Watercolor representation of the Minoan “Bluebird” fresco restored by Émile Gilliéron *fils*. From Elizabeth Price, A RESTORATION. Video/installation, 2016. Presented by the Contemporary Art Society, Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford: WA2017.87.

... *circle through New York* Brings Felix Gonzalez-Torres Sculpture to ISAW

Artists Lenka Clayton and Jon Rubin have drawn an imaginary circle through Harlem, the South Bronx, Queens, and Manhattan's Upper East Side and invited six public venues along the circle's path—including ISAW—to participate in a Social Practice Art initiative. A co-creation of the artists and each partner institution, each venue will share an aspect that represents its identity (material or social), and that thing or activity will rotate among the locations over a period of six months.

As part of ISAW's participation in ... *circle through New York*, a project commissioned by the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, we will exhibit *Untitled (Public Opinion)* by Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957–1996) in our gallery this July. A 700-pound pile of black licorice candy, this conceptual and participatory sculpture from the Guggenheim's permanent collection will be interpreted by ISAW's Exhibitions Team with reference to conceptions of the polis in antiquity and how notions of a community have changed over time. We look forward to welcoming our collaborators from the Guggenheim and discussions that bridge the ancient world and contemporary art.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres

"Untitled" (Public Opinion), 1991

Black rod licorice candies individually wrapped in cellophane

Endless supply, ideal weight: 700 lbs (317.5 kg),

dimensions variable

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York Purchased with funds

contributed by the Louis and Bessie Adler Foundation, Inc., and the

National Endowment for the Arts Museum Purchase Program, 1991

Image © The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation