

Conversations From the Field

ADAM J. AJA WITH ANTONIETTA CATANZARITI

REVIVING NEO-ASSYRIAN CASTS

In July 2025, the art historian and archaeologist Antonietta Catanzariti conducted an interview with Adam J. Aja, chief curator at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, about the ongoing exhibition *From Stone to Silicone: Recasting Mesopotamian Monuments* at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, which addressed the role and function of casts (figs. 1, 2).

Adam J. Aja: Since 2009, I have worked as a curator at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, formerly the Semitic Museum, which was founded in 1902 by David Gordon Lyon, an Assyriologist. The purpose-built museum housed ancient objects related to the history, culture, and languages of the Semitic-speaking peoples in the Eastern Mediterranean (fig. 3).

The top two floors were given over to display spaces, including one large gallery that was called the Assyrian room. It displayed plaster casts that Lyon had purchased, mostly from the British Museum and the Louvre, as well as from Berlin and Istanbul. They were the teaching tools of their day.

The turn of the twentieth century was the heyday of cast use. Casts of Greek and Roman sculptures were critical in museums and universities for teaching, but Assyrian works were less well-known. Not everyone was able to get over to the British Museum and the Louvre to see authentic Assyrian antiquities. It was a big win for Lyon to have casts of their pieces shipped over, and in fact, he had some of the Assyrian casts specially commissioned for the Semitic Museum.

As archaeological works became available in the antiquities market and were exhibited in universities and museums around the world, these cast collections were no longer seen as providing authentic experiences for museum visitors. The casts were pushed aside, and many museums literally destroyed their cast collections. We were lucky that the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East retained its collection even after its 1958 closure, when all the objects and casts used in teaching and in display were taken off view.

Antonietta Catanzariti: Let's discuss the exhibition *From Stone to Silicone* and how you realized it.

Adam J. Aja: I was especially interested in rebuilding our public display spaces after the museum installed an elevator around twelve years ago. If you go online to our website, you can see the third floor, with its glorious skylight, that I coveted as an exhibition space. A part of this exhibition originated from the idea of bringing the public back to the museum to give visitors a rewarding experience. I knew that the museum had several plaster casts, but they were not suitable for exhibition.

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FIGURE 1. Entrance to the ongoing exhibition *From Stone to Silicone*, Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East. Image courtesy of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East

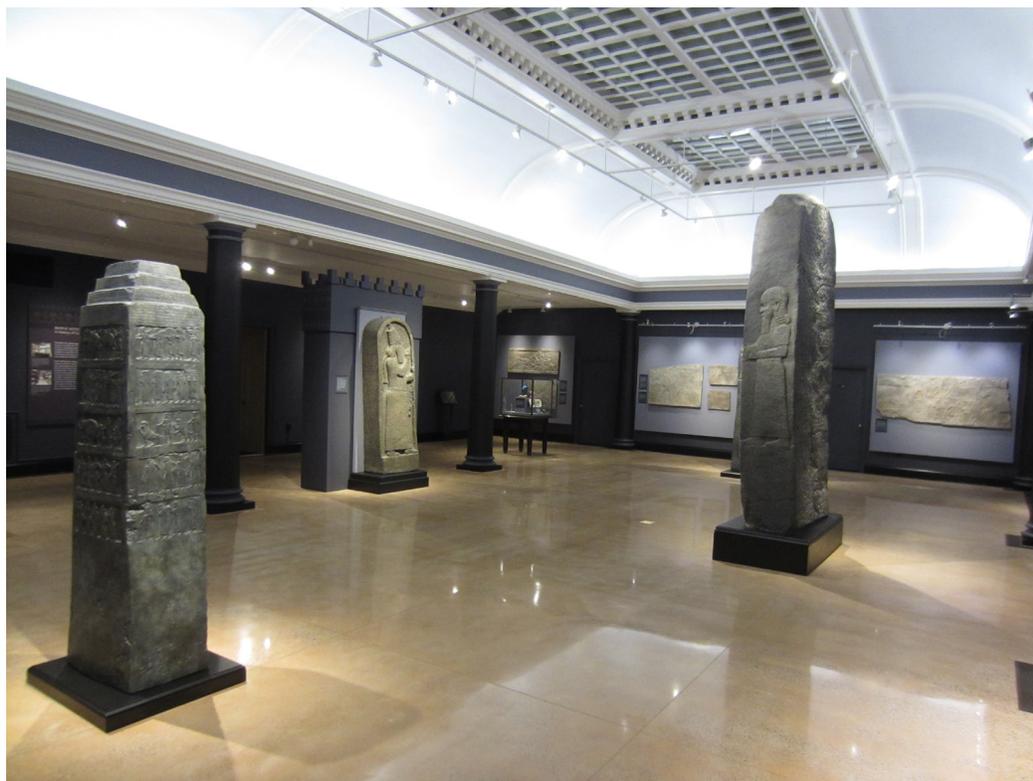


FIGURE 2. Installation view of *From Stone to Silicone* at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East. Image courtesy of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East



FIGURE 3. Gallery view of the Semitic Museum, Harvard University, ca. 1905. Image courtesy of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East

Plaster is wonderful for picking up all sorts of details from the original molds, but it is also fragile and can fracture easily. It can dissolve through exposure to water, and in the past there had been a leak in the attic, where many of the plaster pieces had been stored. Unfortunately, some of the casts had water stains; others were damaged and cracked; and still others were missing parts. A number of the casts had been stacked against each other without any protection, so there were signs of wear (fig. 4). With the newly renovated gallery, I saw a chance for the casts to be shown again, after recasting them with new materials.

The plan for the new galleries designated the third floor for Mesopotamia, the second floor for ancient Egypt, and the first floor for other ancient cultures of the Eastern Mediterranean. The re-created casts placed on the walls of the third floor were meant to serve several purposes: to explain why museums have casts, why casts are important, and the future of casts in 3D scanning and printing. Moreover, it was an opportunity for the Mesopotamian and Neo-Assyrian narrative scenes to serve as the backdrop for future exhibitions that would focus on art, empire, history, and the language of the region. The origin of the project started with visualizing the long-term use of the third-floor gallery space to create an installation that would, years down the line, look coherent, cohesive, and comprehensive.

The cast selection was done in consultation with my colleague the Assyriologist Gojko Barjamovic. We went through some of our early catalogues and descriptions of these well-known original works from the British Museum and the Louvre, and assessed the condition of these



FIGURE 4. Damages to casts, fall 2016. Images courtesy of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East



FIGURE 5. Students working on the Neo-Assyrian relief casts, March 2015. Image courtesy of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East

pieces to determine if they could be re-created. Barjamovic chose scenes that told several different stories (religion, military aspects, the movement of people around the region) or covered different time periods to see some of the artistic transformations. This enabled students working on the project to focus specifically on different details of the ancient world.

Antonietta Catanzariti: Can you tell us more about the restoration of these casts and how the students were involved?

Adam A. Aja: The recasting was one of the options for students and took place over several semesters (other elements included the preparation of gallery materials etc.). I worked with them to remove the casts from storage, to clean them, and to fill holes and cracks. We would then complete a cosmetic restoration of the pieces. If casts were in multiple fragments, we would reunite them and fill the seams just at the surface (figs. 5, 6). If we had two parts of one scene that could be reunited, we would fill the gaps between them. We made new molds and poured a lighter-weight urethane resin into those molds (fig. 7). The new resin casts, which were essentially plastic, could easily be hung on the wall. Later, I worked on painting and coloring the casts to look like ancient stone.

Following one course related to the project, I collaborated with Sarah Milton, a student and an artist. She knew I was experimenting with different colors, so she volunteered to help me develop a color palette that would work. We chose a color that was evocative of stone and added different layers of dry-brushing and smearing techniques. It was almost impossible for



FIGURE 6. Adam Aja working on Neo-Assyrian reliefs, January 2017. Image Courtesy of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East

us to replicate the actual piece, so we opted for a stone-like look that was based on existing ancient stone fragments (fig. 8).

I did not want visitors to see a flat-white cast on the wall, which is the way they usually experience casts. As scholars, we know that the original objects were all vibrantly painted. One of the early concepts I had was to paint the pieces as they might have appeared in the ancient Assyrian palace where they originated. However, long ago I visited the touring exhibition *Gods in Color*, and I recall visitors reacting negatively to seeing ancient Greek statue casts painted in colors. Their experience of ancient art is often with colorless stone or unpainted white plaster. Since I wanted the gallery to serve different purposes and did not want to create an exhibition just about color, I opted for this “faux stone” look. The decision then led to the use of an app to teach visitors about the color of the original stone reliefs while keeping their stoniness. I wanted the public to dive into the scenes and the stories behind all the artwork.

Antonietta Catanzariti: The digital feature for *From Stone to Silicone* tries to engage with the public at different levels. Can you explain to us the app developed for the exhibition?

Adam J. Aja: Peter Manuelian, director of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, has always been interested in using digital technology to teach audiences about the past and to contextualize objects. When he asked me how we could use the casts for storytelling, I started thinking about how we might use modern technology. One idea was exploring video games. I thought perhaps we could use this medium to tell visitors more about the narrative of the plaster-cast scenes.



FIGURE 7. Pouring resin, November 2016. Image courtesy of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East



FIGURE 8. Adam Aja painting with Sarah Milton, December 2017. Image courtesy of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East

We started building our digital assets in 2018, but with the arrival of Covid, the project fell apart. More recently, we experimented with a new app for the galleries. For the floor with the Assyrian relief casts, we decided to use Snapchat with a filter to apply animation over the Assyrian scenes. The app is called *Art of Intimidation: Journey to Ancient Assyria*, because it deals with the artistic expression of political propaganda. The casts in the exhibit show scenes of the king as all-powerful and dominating his enemies. They clearly communicate what would happen to individuals if they revolted against the empire. It is art—intimidating art!

The premise behind the app is that members of the public are cast as visiting dignitaries who bring tribute to the Assyrian king. They are greeted by a little figure in the corner of the screen (fig. 9); he is the palace overseer, and he speaks to them directly in the first person. For example, he says (and I’m paraphrasing):

I see that you’re tired and dirty from your journey. The king is busy, he can’t meet with you right now, but while you wait, please enjoy the splendors of the palace and the gardens. If you have any questions about these beautiful scenes, please approach me, let me know, and I’ll tell you about them.

The Snapchat app is also available in the museum through an iPad, for visitors who don’t have Snapchat on their phone or if they don’t want to download it. When you activate the app and point your device’s camera at a relief, it recognizes the cast and animates the scene with sound and color. The palace overseer–narrator returns and begins to tell a unique story related to the scene, such as: “Oh yes, I see you’re admiring this scene. This reminds me of my days in the army. Those Elamites were like sand in my bread, irritating!” The narrator recounts



FIGURE 9. The app entitled *Art of Intimidation: Journey to Ancient Assyria* showing the overseer-narrator and animating the scene with sounds and colors. Image courtesy of the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East

these stories from his perspective, and in the meantime, the visitor is learning about the color of the pieces and the story of the scenes. Ancient visitors would probably have understood the scenes the way we understand a comic book or a graphic novel today. Our narrator helps museum visitors to experience the art as if they lived during the Assyrian period.

We have found that visitors spend a lot more time in the gallery when they use the app, looking at the works and learning about them beyond what is on the labels. If they want to learn more, they can still do so by reading the label text. The app can also be accessed at home; if you bring up our tour, which is found on our website, you can navigate to the third floor, zoom into one of the casts, bring up Snapchat on your phone, and point it at your screen.

Antonietta Catanzariti: Museums today are trying to balance digital presence in the galleries with the experience of the physical object. How did you ensure that the app and the objects would be complementary to each other?

Adam J. Aja: It is indeed a balance. The footprint of our museum is fairly small. While you certainly could spend a great deal of time reading every label, visitors can probably see all three galleries in an hour. Manuelian's vision for using digital teaching tools was instrumental in helping me shape my ideas. You do not want to distract from the authentic objects or the casts, yet you also want to make sure you appeal to a wide audience. I think digital content can be applied judiciously; for example, you can have a touch screen in the gallery or a phone app for visitors to explore the objects. If they want to learn more, they can also access the web. We are always delighted when they do so, for it means that we have interested them enough to go beyond what is in the gallery.

I think that casts are extremely important. Some visitors have expressed disappointment that some of our works on view are "just copies," a mindset I wanted to address. We were not hiding that the objects in the gallery were copies. We wanted to celebrate them and explore why casts were and are important to museums, especially now. People are talking about the repatriation of material: How did you get it? Why is it here? To have a replica of a work that is not here because it is in its home institution, or it is in its country of origin, is very valuable.

I wanted to emphasize that casts are useful teaching tools that allow us to experience an object in a way that just looking at a photograph or a 3-D reconstruction on your phone is not going to make possible.

Antonietta Catanzariti: One issue with implementing digital applications is that they require maintenance. How have you been able to address this? How sustainable is the digital app?

Adam J. Aja: We have wrestled with this issue, and I think there's a certain allowance for museums to use established technical tools. We first developed our own app, but it was constantly breaking down and needed updates. We then opted for Snapchat because it has the advantage to be an off-the-shelf product that was regularly maintained and updated. I think this is a much more successful approach and has allowed us to provide content without having to spend the time and money on something that other people do well.

We also do in-house 3-D scanning of our objects and provide platforms for scholars and those individuals interested in the ancient world to view that content. Three-dimensional scans are especially important for specialists who want to be able to turn and rotate tablets, for example.

I'm always interested in understanding how to reach different audiences. My father is visually impaired, so I always want to make sure there is something tangible in each gallery. In our ground-floor gallery, for example, we have 3-D prints of objects that are accompanied by an audio box, which speaks to visitors. As a result, they can handle the objects and also hear about them. In conjunction with our education department, we have developed special touch tours for our Mesopotamian gallery with its Neo-Assyrian palace art. On these tours, we encourage visitors to touch and handle the different reliefs, so they are not just objects behind glass. We make sure we provide accessible options for visitors of different ages and those with physical impairment, as well as Spanish-language interactives.

The university is actively reaching out to promote these collections and underline their importance to visitors. We have seen the number of visitors increase over the last decade primarily because of this initiative and our effort to expand and renovate our exhibition spaces. We also hope to replicate the third-floor app experience in other spaces so that our visitors can have layered experiences in the different galleries.

Adam J. Aja, PhD (Harvard University), 2009, is chief curator at the Harvard Museum of the Ancient Near East, where he has redesigned and rebuilt the artifact storage facilities, planned and implemented new exhibits, and developed digital and replica gallery augmentation. He is also a field archaeologist, having worked on numerous projects in Israel and Turkey since 1992. The bulk of his publications are directed toward the discoveries from the Leon Levy Expedition to Ashkelon, Israel, including the most recent co-authored volume, *Ashkelon 10: The Philistine Cemetery*.

Antonietta Catanzariti, PhD (University of California, Berkeley), 2015, is associate curator for the ancient Near East at the Smithsonian's National Museum of Asian Art, where she oversees the ancient Near East collection and has organized the exhibitions *Shaping Clay in Ancient Iran* (2018), *Ancient Yemen: Incense, Art and Trade* (2022), and *A Collector's Eye: Freer in Egypt* (2023). As a field archaeologist, Catanzariti has worked in Italy, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, and directed field projects in Iraqi-Kurdistan and Armenia. Her publications reflect her excavations work on the ground and her interest in ancient economies and cultural interaction.
