

Displaced Forms: Assyrian Reliefs, Ecological Intentionality, and the Ethics of Perception

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"The Stones Cry Out": Returning to an Earlier Work

When I first wrote about the Assyrian reliefs as a graduate student working at the Yale University Art Gallery in *Asia Has Claims Upon New England: Assyrian Reliefs at Yale*, I understood the project primarily as a study in art, religion, and institutional reception. I was interested in how carved stones from the palace of Assurnasirpal II at Nimrud came to rest in New Haven, and how nineteenth-century American religious and educational institutions came to imagine those stones as more than archaeological objects. They were treated as biblical evidence, missionary inspiration, educational prestige, and material proof that the ancient world still had something to say to Protestant New England. The Yale reliefs entered the University's collection in 1854, becoming its first acquisitions of ancient art, and their presence brought together a striking set of worlds: Assyria, Mosul, New Haven, missionary ambition, biblical apologetics, museum formation, and the anxious religious imagination of the American nineteenth century.¹

¹ Sam B. Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims Upon New England: Assyrian Reliefs at Yale* (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 2006)

At the time, I was drawn especially to the phrase that gave the book its title. Yale's Dwight Marsh, writing from within the late 19th-century missionary world that helped carry these objects into American collections, hoped that students looking upon the stones would "*hear the stones cry out, 'Asia has claims upon New England!'*" The sentence is unforgettable, partly because it is so revealing. Marsh intended it as a missionary summons. The stones were to awaken young American Christians to the spiritual needs of Asia and to the triumph of the biblical God over the idols and empires of the ancient Near East. But the phrase has always seemed to exceed the intention that first gave it birth. The stones do cry out, but perhaps not only in the direction Marsh imagined. They do not simply call New England toward Asia as a field of conversion. They call New England into question. They ask how an institution receives what has been removed from another world. They ask what kind of perception turns a palace wall into a cabinet object, an imperial fragment into a missionary lesson, or a sacred and political form into a possession.²

Coming back to that work now, after years of teaching, theological study, ecological writing, and my present work in phenomenology and ecological intentionality, I find that the question has not disappeared, but has widened considerably. My earlier project asked how ancient Assyrian forms entered the religious and cultural imagination of New England. My current work asks how forms appear at all, and what ethical demands emerge when we perceive them not as isolated objects but as presences still bearing the worlds from which they come. That question now reaches beyond the museum and archive into trees, watersheds, damaged landscapes, species, neighborhoods, and the more-than-human communities we so often

² Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 18-19.

encounter through habits of abstraction. Yet the older art-historical question and the newer ecological one are not separate. They meet in the problem of displaced form.³

A displaced form is not merely an object that has moved. Movement alone is not the whole matter. Stones are carried, traded, inherited, studied, displayed, loved, damaged, and reinterpreted. However, displacement becomes ethically and perceptually charged when a form is separated from the relational world that made it intelligible, and then made to serve a new world's desire for confirmation, prestige, beauty, authority, or possession. The Assyrian reliefs at Yale were not originally discrete artworks in the modern sense. They belonged to a palace program, an architectural setting, an imperial theology, a riverine landscape, and a ritual imagination in which kingship, fertility, warfare, divine protection, and cosmic order were carved into stone. To perceive them only as gallery objects is already to perceive them too narrowly.⁴

That narrowing is what interests me most now. The Yale reliefs do not simply illustrate a chapter in the history of collecting. They expose a way of seeing. In the nineteenth century, American missionaries and college leaders could look at Assyrian palace reliefs and see proof of Scripture, evidence of divine judgment, and instruments for stirring missionary zeal. Their perception was not false in the simple sense that they saw nothing. They saw intensely with passion, learning, conviction, and institutional purpose. But their seeing was also disciplined by a prior theological and cultural need. Assyria became legible because it could be fitted into a

3 On the broader American reception of Assyria in the nineteenth century, see Steven W. Holloway, "Nineveh Sails for the New World: Assyria Envisioned by Nineteenth-Century America," *Iraq* 66 (2004): 243-56.

4 For the architectural and ideological setting of the reliefs, see John Malcolm Russell, *The Writing on the Wall: Studies in the Architectural Context of Late Assyrian Palace Inscriptions* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 1-24; Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 4-11.

Protestant story about biblical truth, civilizational inheritance, and the spiritual destiny of America.

This is where the reliefs begin to speak to my present religious ecological work. The ethical problem does not begin only when something is cut, shipped, sold, displayed, or owned. It begins earlier, in the perceptual habits that make such actions appear natural. A tree becomes timber before the chainsaw starts, while a river becomes capacity before the permit is filed. Likewise, a landscape becomes a site before the first survey stake is driven into the ground. A carved stone from Nimrud became an American religious object before it ever reached New Haven, because the institutions receiving it had already learned how to see it within their own frame of need.⁵

The question, then, is not simply whether the Assyrian reliefs belong in New England, though that question remains important. Nor is it simply a matter of whether they should be interpreted as ancient art, biblical evidence, imperial propaganda, or cultural heritage. The deeper question is how they should be perceived once they are here, and what kind of responsibility follows from that perception. If the stones still cry out, perhaps they now ask us to hear more than the missionary summons Marsh imagined. Perhaps they ask us to attend to the worlds that have been broken, translated, obscured, and preserved in their passage. Perhaps they ask us to recognize that form is never only surface, and that possession is never the same thing as understanding.

By returning to the Assyrian reliefs through the lens of ecological phenomenology and ecological intentionality, I want to ask how displaced forms continue to make ethical demands upon those who inherit them. The Assyrian reliefs and a black walnut tree in a Spartanburg yard

⁵ On perception as bodily and situated rather than detached, see Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 77-83.

are not the same kind of being, obviously. A gypsum palace relief is not a watershed, and an artifact is not an organism. But each can be misperceived when form is severed from the world. Each can be reduced to what it offers the viewer, the owner, the institution, or the market. And each can become the occasion for another kind of attention, one that begins not in mastery but in the difficult work of receiving what still stands before us.⁶

Assyrian Reliefs, Sacred Trees, and the World of Kalhu

That world isn't and wasn't merely human in any narrow sense. Assyria occupied the region of what is now northern Iraq and upper Mesopotamia, and its life depended upon the Tigris. In my earlier account of the Yale reliefs, I noted that the river's flooding fertilized the floodplain, that drought could threaten food production, and that canals around Assur, Nineveh, and Nimrud carried water toward orchards and gardens. Fertility was therefore not an ornamental theme added to Assyrian political life. It was a condition of subsistence, a civic concern, and a religious symbol. The land, the river, the canals, the orchards, and the palace were bound together in a field of meaning where imperial power could not be separated from water, agriculture, and the symbolic management of life.⁷

This is one reason the reliefs are so useful for thinking about displaced form. They do not allow a clean division between nature and culture. The palace itself was a political construction, but it was also a material concentration of ecological extraction. Assurnasirpal II's building project required enormous resources, labor, wood, stone, metals, and imperial reach. The Standard Inscription, carved across the slabs, names the king as priest, warrior, shepherd, and

⁶ For eco-phenomenology as a return to embodied and emplaced relations with the earth, see Charles S. Brown and Ted Toadvine, eds., *Eco-Phenomenology: Back to the Earth Itself* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), ix-xxii; David Wood, "What Is Eco-Phenomenology?," *Research in Phenomenology* 31 (2001): 78-95.

⁷ Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 3.

ruler, and also the materials of palace-making: cedar, cypress, juniper, boxwood, teak, terebinth, tamarisk, limestone, alabaster, and bronze. The inscription presents the palace as a theological and political achievement, but its own language reveals a world gathered into architecture: forests, mountains, seas, quarries, animals, artisans, captives, and laborers, all drawn into the image of royal permanence.⁸

The reliefs, then, must be read within a double field. On one side, they present the stability and grandeur of the Assyrian order. On the other hand, they bear witness to the force required to produce that order. Assurnasirpal's palace was a beautiful achievement of ancient art. It was also an imperial environment. Its walls taught visitors how to see the king, the gods, the land, animals, enemies, fertility, and violence. The palace did house power, but also educated perception. It arranged the viewer within a world where Assyria appeared as divinely sanctioned, agriculturally blessed, militarily invincible, and ritually protected.⁹

That training of perception becomes especially clear in the Yale reliefs connected with the stylized tree. In several relief programs from the Northwest Palace, figures known as *apkallu*, or guardian spirits if you will, perform a ritual act before a stylized palm or a Sacred Tree. They hold a bucket in one hand and a cone-shaped object in the other. Scholars have often understood the gesture as a form of purification or fertilization, perhaps involving holy water or pollen. The gesture is repeated with an almost liturgical precision. The body turns toward the tree. The wing extends behind. The hand approaches the vegetal form. In the image, political theology becomes a ritual of tending and fertilization.¹⁰

8 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 4-5.

9 For a modern "cultural biography" of comparable Assyrian reliefs, see Ada Cohen and Steven E. Kangas, eds., *Assyrian Reliefs from the Palace of Ashurnasirpal II: A Cultural Biography* (Hanover, NH: Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College, 2010).

10 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 10.

The Sacred Tree itself is not a tree in the ordinary botanical sense. It is highly stylized, patterned, and formalized. Yet that does not make it less important for ecological reading. Its very abstraction shows how vegetal life had become a privileged image through which Assyrian order could be imagined. The tree gathers fertility, kingship, divine protection, agricultural abundance, and cosmic structure into one carved form. In some panels, the king appears where the tree appears elsewhere, while the guardian figures continue the same ritual act. That substitution suggests that the tree, the king, and Assyria itself participate in a shared symbolic economy of nourishment and protection. The tree here is not the background. It is a form through which the whole political and theological world becomes visible.¹¹

The later displacement of the reliefs not only removed stone from the wall, but also removed a form from a field of relations. A fragment of a Sacred Tree in New Haven is still a form of great beauty, but its displacement changes the conditions under which it appears. The viewer no longer stands in that palace. The relief no longer participates in the movement from courtyard to throne room, from gateway to shrine, from inscription to image, from ritual protection to royal ideology. The stone survives, but the world that taught the stone how to be seen has been broken.

This does not mean the reliefs are silent outside Kalhu. They continue to speak, but their speech is altered by their new surroundings. In New Haven, Amherst, Bowdoin, Dartmouth, Wellesley, or Virginia, they speak through museum labels, institutional histories, donor records, missionary letters, conservation reports, and debates over ownership and care. Their meanings multiply, but they also become vulnerable to reduction. They can be treated as specimens of ancient art, as a biblical atmosphere, as an institutional treasure, as a financial asset, or as

¹¹ Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 10-11.

evidence of scholarly prestige. Each frame sees something while also risking refusing something.¹²

The ethical work begins in noticing that refusal. The Sacred Tree reliefs remind us that form always arrives with more than its visible outline. A winged *apkallu* approaching a stylized tree is not only a beautiful arrangement of carved lines in a bas-relief. It is a remnant of a palace ecology in which rivers, trees, empire, ritual, violence, divine protection, and agricultural hope were pressed into stone. To receive such a form rightly is not to recover that world completely. We cannot step back into Kalhu as ninth-century viewers. But we can resist the modern confidence that a form becomes ours simply because it stands before us.

That resistance is where ecological intentionality begins to intersect with the Assyrian material. The question is not whether an Assyrian relief is alive in the way a tree is alive. The question is whether we can learn to perceive form with the world. The same habit that abstracts a relief from Kalhu can abstract a tree from soil, a river from watershed, a creature from habitat, or a landscape from memory. In each case, perception becomes thinner before ethics becomes weaker. Something is first seen without its relations, and only then can it be possessed without sufficient care.¹³

The Sacred Tree, in this sense, is both an ancient image and a contemporary provocation. It asks how a culture pictures the sources of its life. It asks how political power borrows the language of fertility and protection. It asks what happens when the forms of a world are cut away from that world and made to serve another. Importantly, it asks whether our own institutions,

12 For the Virginia Theological Seminary reliefs and their modern institutional afterlife, see Amanda P. Bourne, “The Assyrian Reliefs at Virginia Theological Seminary,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 90, no. 3 (2021): 290-318; Melody D. Knowles and Amanda Bourne, “The Assyrian Reliefs at Virginia Theological Seminary: A Record of Decisions” (Alexandria, VA: Virginia Theological Seminary, 2025).

13 On language and perception in a more-than-human world, see David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-than-Human World* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 47-72.

including schools, churches, museums, and universities, have learned to see more faithfully than the empires and collectors whose fragments they inherit.

Nineteenth-Century New England and the Re-narration of Assyria

If the reliefs first belonged to the world of Kalhu, they came to New England through another world, almost as densely imagined, through the Protestant missionary and educational culture of the mid-nineteenth-century United States. The stones did not arrive as neutral archaeological specimens. They were already interpreted before they crossed the Atlantic. They had been seen, desired, negotiated over, cut down (most notably in thickness to aid packing in local cotton and wood boxes), shipped, and narrated within a particular theological atmosphere. By the time they reached New Haven, they had already been folded into a story about Scripture, empire, providence, and American religious purpose.¹⁴

In *Asia Has Claims Upon New England*, I described the speed with which news of Layard's discoveries moved across the Atlantic. The excavations at Nimrud and Nineveh first stirred the British public imagination, but American missionaries quickly recognized another use for the stones. They were not interested only in Assyrian antiquity as antiquity. They saw in the reliefs a kind of material sermon. The carved figures of kings, divinities, guardians, animals, and ritual attendants could be made to speak within the language of biblical prophecy. Assyria, the terrifying empire of Isaiah, Kings, and Chronicles, had fallen. Its palaces had been buried. Its gods had been reduced to stone fragments. For many American Protestants, this was more than archaeology and proof that Providence had been made visible.¹⁵

¹⁴ Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 17-26; Holloway, "Nineveh Sails," 243-56.

¹⁵ Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 13-17; Austen Henry Layard, *Nineveh and Its Remains*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1849).

That interpretive habit is crucial. The nineteenth-century American reception of Assyrian reliefs wasn't a matter of collecting alone (although that impulse played into institutional politics, as it does today). Rather, the reception was a way of seeing the ancient Near East through the needs of a Protestant culture unsettled by modern biblical criticism, scientific inquiry, and historical consciousness that was shaping the context of the late 19th Century from Schliemann's archaeological discoveries at Troy and Mycenaean towns to Maxwell and Faraday's work on electromagnetism to the publication of the first periodic table of the elements, and Darwin's breakthroughs in evolutionary biology. The very discoveries that opened the ancient Near East to modern study also threatened inherited ways of reading Scripture. Comparative mythology, philology, archaeology, and the decipherment of ancient texts complicated the Bible's singularity. The flood story had parallels thanks to Smith's decipherment of newly discovered Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian texts. Creation stories had antecedents. Empires remembered in Scripture could now speak in their own inscriptions. For some believers, this expanding archive felt dangerous. For others, Assyrian artifacts became a defense. They seemed to prove that the Bible's world was real.¹⁶

This is why the reliefs mattered so much to institutions like Yale, Amherst, Williams, Bowdoin, Dartmouth, and Virginia Theological Seminary. They weren't decorative enrichments for college halls or cabinets of curiosity. They entered a landscape of theological anxiety and institutional ambition. Colleges and seminaries wanted objects that could bring the ancient biblical world into visible proximity. The reliefs gave weight to Scripture, but they also gave weight to the institutions that possessed them. To display *Assyria* was to participate in modern

16 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 24-26; Steven W. Holloway, ed., *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*, Hebrew Bible Monographs 10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006).

learning, to claim a place in the expanding field of biblical archaeology, and to show that American Protestant education had access to the deep past.¹⁷

The missionary logic of this reception comes into sharp focus in the figure of Dwight Marsh. Marsh's famous phrase, which gave my earlier work its title, is worth lingering over because it gathers the whole drama into one sentence. Marsh wanted the stones to stir young Americans to concern for those he regarded as spiritually degraded and endangered. The reliefs became witnesses, not to Assyria on its own terms, but to a missionary geography in which Asia appeared as a field of need and New England as a center of moral and religious response.¹⁸

There is something deeply revealing in this. Marsh did recognize that the stones made a claim. He didn't treat them as mute decorations. He believed they could speak across time and space. Yet the voice he heard from them was already scripted by the missionary imagination. The stones were allowed to cry out, but only in a language New England had prepared for them. Their claim was real, but it was narrowed. It became a summons not to self-interrogation, not to historical humility, not to an encounter with Assyria's own world, but to an expansion of Protestant vocation.

The missionary William Frederic Williams's role in securing the Yale reliefs shows the practical intimacy of this process. The acquisition was not carried out by a detached museum bureaucracy. It moved through friendships, letters, favors, missionary networks, personal loyalties, and institutional hopes. Williams, stationed in Mosul, corresponded with Leonard Bacon in New Haven and arranged the purchase and transport of slabs from Nimrud. His letters to Yale (many of which I was privileged to read in their originals as a student there) reveal both

17 For other American institutional histories of Assyrian reliefs, see John Malcolm Russell, *From Nineveh to New York: The Strange Story of the Assyrian Reliefs in the Metropolitan Museum and the Hidden Masterpiece at Canford School* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997); Cohen and Kangas, *Assyrian Reliefs*.

18 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 18-19.

the ordinary difficulty and the moral complexity of the transaction from the competition among institutions, the pressure of other collectors, the negotiations with local intermediaries, the physical problem of cutting and moving heavy slabs, and the desire to send something worthy back to Yale.¹⁹

One detail from Williams's letters has stayed with me more strongly over time. He decided to saw the slabs down and cut them into thirds so they could be transported more easily on camels. This was obviously practical and was probably necessary, given the conditions under which the objects were being moved (and that a number of shipments had been sunk on the Euphrates by local groups seeking to disrupt the burgeoning trade or charge tolls). But it is also an image of displacement in its most literal form. The palace wall had already become a removable antiquity. Now the removable antiquity became a manageable shipment. Form was altered for transport, and the stone entered the logistical imagination.²⁰

And yet Williams also showed a kind of care. He worried about what might happen to the reliefs once they arrived in New Haven. He warned that those who cleaned them should not wash away the ancient pigment from the hair, beard, shoes, or eyes. He knew that the stones carried traces that could be lost through zeal, ignorance, or over-handling. This warning complicates any simple reading of the missionaries as only extractive agents. Williams participated in the removal of the reliefs, but he also feared the loss of their material integrity. He helped displace them, but he did not want them erased.²¹

The ethical history of the reliefs is not reducible to villains and victims, though power and violence are certainly present. It is a history of mixed perception. The missionaries and

19 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 19-23.

20 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 22.

21 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 23.

college leaders saw something in the stones. They saw antiquity, biblical memory, artistic force, theological usefulness, and institutional value. They sometimes saw enough to preserve, catalog, and protect. But they did not see *enough*. Or perhaps more exactly, they saw through a frame that made certain kinds of responsibility difficult to imagine. They could understand the stones as witnesses to biblical truth, but not fully as displaced forms from a world whose own claims exceeded Protestant usefulness.

This pattern is not unique to the nineteenth century. It is one of the recurrent moral problems of institutions. Institutions often care for what they possess, but possession quietly governs the form that care takes, a college may preserve an artifact because it enriches the college's history, a museum may display an object because it strengthens a collection, while a seminary may retain a relief because it deepens its connection to biblical antiquity. Such care is not meaningless. It may involve real labor, conservation, scholarship, and devotion. But it can remain enclosed within the institution's self-understanding. The object is cared for as part of the institution's world, while the object's prior world remains secondary.²²

The Assyrian reliefs in New England, therefore, reveal a double displacement. First, there is the physical displacement from Nimrud to American colleges, museums, seminaries, and libraries. Second, there is a narrative displacement, in which Assyrian forms are re-narrated through American Protestant needs. The reliefs no longer function within the architectural and ritual order of Assurnasirpal's palace. They now function within the moral and intellectual architecture of New England. They become evidence, atmosphere, treasure, proof, ornament, lesson, and possession.

²² On institutional care and the ethical afterlife of the VTS reliefs, see Morag M. Kersel, "The Moral Maze: A Duty of Care in the Twenty-First Century," *Advances in Archaeological Practice* 13, no. 1 (2025): 1-16.

This is why the title *Asia Has Claims Upon New England* still matters to me. The phrase can now be read against the grain of its original missionary intention. Marsh meant that Asia's spiritual need placed a claim upon New England's missionary conscience. But the deeper and more difficult claim runs in the other direction as well. Asia has claims upon New England because New England has taken Asia into itself materially, imaginatively, and institutionally. To possess a fragment is to inherit an obligation. To display a displaced form is to stand within an unfinished relation. The claim is not exhausted by gratitude, preservation, or historical explanation, but asks for a conversion of perception.

That conversion requires us to notice how easily Assyria became useful. The reliefs were useful to missionary recruitment. They were useful to biblical apologetics. They were useful to institutional prestige. They were useful to the formation of American collections. But usefulness, even when joined to admiration, is not the same as attention. To attend to a displaced form is to ask what has been silenced by its usefulness. What did New England need Assyria to be? What did that need prevent New England from seeing? What worlds were made invisible so that the stones could become so legible?

These questions do not require us to reject the earlier scholarship, conservation, or affection that surrounded the reliefs. I would not have written the Yale book without the care of curators, archivists, historians, and conservators who had preserved the material and documentary traces of the acquisition. Nor do these questions require a purity that history rarely allows. They require something more patient and more demanding: the recognition that

perception itself has a history. The way New England saw Assyria was not natural. It was formed by theology, empire, pedagogy, race, biblical imagination, and institutional desire.²³

To bring this history into conversation with ecological intentionality is not to flatten cultural artifacts into ecosystems. It is to recognize a shared structure of misperception. A form is encountered, its world is simplified, its relations are thinned, and its usefulness becomes obvious. Its claim becomes harder to hear. The Assyrian reliefs entered New England in this way. So too, in different ways, do forests, rivers, soils, and more-than-human lives enter the managerial and economic imagination of the modern world. In both cases, the ethical failure begins not only in what is done, but in how the form has first been made available to sight.

Displaced Form and the Loss of World

A displaced form is not simply an object that has changed location. That definition is too clean and too spatial, as though the whole matter could be resolved by drawing a line between two points on a map. Nimrud to Mosul, Mosul to the Mediterranean, the Mediterranean to New York, New York to New Haven. Such a route matters, of course. The movement of the Yale reliefs required decisions, money, letters, labor, cutting, packing, bargaining, and transport. But displacement is not exhausted by travel. Something deeper occurs when a form is lifted out of the world that once held it and then placed inside another world that teaches viewers to see it otherwise.²⁴

This is why the account of William Frederic Williams's transport arrangements is so striking to me. The slabs were roughly a foot thick, and Williams decided to saw them down by

²³ Edward W. Said's *Orientalism* remains indispensable for the critique of Western scholarly and cultural constructions of the "Orient," even as the Assyrian reception material requires attention to its own American Protestant and institutional particularities; see Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 1-28.

²⁴ Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 21-23.

two-thirds and cut them into thirds so that they could be carried more easily on camels. They were packed in wooden crates with cotton, sent across the desert to the Mediterranean coast, and then shipped across the Atlantic to New York aboard ships such as the *Wolf*. The act is practical, almost mundane in its logistical clarity. Heavy stone had to become movable cargo. A palace wall had to be shipped. Form had to be altered so that it could travel.²⁵

The reliefs were not only removed from their architectural setting but were also physically reconfigured for the conditions of nineteenth-century transport. The carved figure that once stood in relation to other figures, thresholds, inscriptions, rituals, and rooms became a fragment that could be divided, assigned, purchased, and received. This does not mean that the reliefs became meaningless. In fact, they acquired an abundance of new meanings. But the meanings that surrounded them in New England were formed after a prior loss: the loss of the world in which the reliefs had first taught viewers how to see.

That loss of world is not the same as total silence. The stones still bear the marks of Assyrian hands, tools, inscriptions, pigments, and iconography. The Sacred Tree remains visible. The winged apkallu still turns toward its ritual gesture. The courtier still carries the bow, mace, sword, and quiver that signal his position within the visual program of royal service. Even in New Haven, the carved lines continue to carry the force of Kalhu. But their world is no longer given as an environment. It has to be reconstructed through scholarship, conservation, archival work, imagination, and humility. Without that reconstruction, the reliefs easily become what their new setting demands.²⁶

25 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 22.

26 For the visual programs and architectural relations of Assyrian palace reliefs, see Russell, *Writing on the Wall*, 59-97.

This is the danger of displaced form: not that it loses all meaning, but that it becomes too quickly available to new meanings. A displaced form can be made to serve almost any sufficiently powerful story. In the nineteenth century, Assyrian reliefs could become missionary evidence, biblical proof, institutional treasure, or educational ornament. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, they could become cultural heritage, museum masterpieces, financial assets, objects of repatriation debate, conservation challenges, or signs of an institution's global reach. None of them, by itself, receives the form whole.²⁷

Williams's concern about the ancient pigment interrupts that narrowing in a small but powerful way. Despite his warning, only traces of red and black paint remained visible to the naked eye on the sandals of two figures, which we documented in 2002.²⁸

That warning shows that the loss of the world does not always happen through obvious acts of violence. Sometimes it happens through washing. Sometimes through zeal. Sometimes, through preservation practices that do not yet know what they are preserving. Sometimes through institutional confidence. Sometimes, through the desire to make a thing clean enough, legible enough, useful enough, or beautiful enough for its new home. The pigment was part of the reliefs' original appearance, part of the way the figures met the eye in the palace. To lose pigment is to lose one more layer of the form's appearance.²⁹

To speak of the loss of world is not to romanticize origins or imagine that Kalhu itself was innocent. The Northwest Palace was an imperial site. Its world included conquest, forced labor, extraction, animal domination, ritual power, and the performance of royal sovereignty. To restore the form to its world imaginatively is not to purify that world. It is to thicken our

27 On the market and cultural heritage questions surrounding Assyrian reliefs, see Kersel, "Moral Maze," 1-16.

28 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 23.

29 On surviving pigment and the reconstructed visual appearance of the Yale reliefs, see Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 23-25; Susan B. Matheson, foreword to Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, n.p.

perception of it. A displaced form should not be sentimentalized into a victim-object, as though its original setting were free of violence and its later setting only corrupt. The reliefs are more complicated than that. They were imperial forms before they became objects within modern imperial and missionary networks.³⁰

This complication matters for ecological intentionality because ecological perception is also tempted by innocence. It can be too easy to imagine “nature” as the untouched world outside human history, just as it can be too easy to imagine heritage as the pure cultural world before modern displacement. But the world is never that simple. Trees grow in yards shaped by property lines, zoning decisions, invasive species, family memory, and older land-use histories. Rivers flow through watersheds marked by mills, dams, industrial withdrawals, stormwater runoff, and legal abstractions. A black walnut in Spartanburg is not outside history. Neither is a gypsum bas-relief from Nimrud. The point is not to find an untouched form. The point is to perceive relations rather than erase them.

This is where displaced form becomes a phenomenological problem. Modern perception often wants the object without its excess. It wants the visible figure without the room, the tree without the soil, the river without the watershed, the artifact without the conditions of removal, the landscape without the people and creatures whose lives are bound to it, much like our plastic water bottles. The form appears, but its relations are backgrounded. It becomes available to a viewer who can admire it without being addressed. The object has presence, but not a claim.³¹

30 For images of ancient Assyria in modern scholarship and the complexity of Assyrian imperial imagery, see Eckart Frahm, “Images of Assyria in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Western Scholarship,” in *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*, ed. Steven W. Holloway, Hebrew Bible Monographs 10 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2006), 74-94.

31 Ted Toadvine, “How Not to Be a Jellyfish: Human Exceptionalism and the Ontology of Reflection,” in *Phenomenology and the Non-Human Animal: At the Limits of Experience*, ed. Corinne Painter and Christian Lotz (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 39-55.

Yet the claim remains, because the form is not exhausted by its current framing. The relief in the gallery still *exceeds* the gallery. The stone still bears the trace of the wall. The pigment, even when nearly lost, still testifies to a more vivid appearance or appearing than the one available now. The Sacred Tree, even as a fragment, still calls attention to the symbolic and ecological imagination of Assyria. The courtier, even severed from the full program of the room, still gestures toward the king, the palace, the inscription, and the world of imperial order in which his carved body once made sense.

The loss of world, therefore, is not final. It's real, but not complete. This is what makes responsibility possible. If displacement destroyed all relation, then the only honest response would be mourning. But displaced forms continue to carry relations, even damaged ones. They ask to be interpreted, not possessed; conserved, not consumed; studied, not mastered; displayed, if displayed at all, in ways that confess the conditions of their displacement. Their claim upon is the claim of unfinished relation rather than innocence.

Duty of Care and the Contemporary Afterlife of the Reliefs

The Assyrian reliefs were moving when they arrived in New England. Their physical movement slowed, but their ethical and interpretive movement continued. They entered libraries, seminaries, museums, classrooms, storage rooms, catalogs, conservation laboratories, donor files, and, more recently, public debates over cultural heritage, institutional responsibility, and the commodification of the past. The reliefs are ancient objects, but their afterlives aren't ancient. They remain active in the present because the question of what it means to care for them has not been settled.³²

32 Bourne, "Assyrian Reliefs at Virginia Theological Seminary," 290-318; Knowles and Bourne, "Record of Decisions."

This is why the recent discussion surrounding the Virginia Theological Seminary reliefs matters so much in this context. The VTS case shows that the moral life of a displaced form does not end with acquisition. Melody Knowles and Amanda Bourne's *Record of Decisions* reconstructs the institutional history of two Neo-Assyrian reliefs at Virginia Theological Seminary, tracing not only their arrival and interpretation but the seminary's later deliberations over conservation, ownership, sale, philanthropy, and repair. Their account is valuable because it does not treat the reliefs as static possessions. It presents them as objects around which a Christian institution had to make decisions, and those decisions revealed what the institution believed care required.³³

Morag Kersel's 2025 essay on the VTS reliefs sharpens this question through the language of duty of care. She begins with the sale of one Neo-Assyrian relief fragment from Virginia Theological Seminary and asks whether that decision should be understood as caring for culture or as commodifying the past. That framing is needed here because it helps make an argument that isn't a simple opposition between ownership and neglect. The seminary studied them, publicized their history, preserved what remained, and directed proceeds from their sale to institutional and philanthropic aims. Yet Kersel presses the harder question of whether the sale of a displaced cultural object can be justified by later good intentions, or whether such a sale repeats the reduction of form to value, of object to asset, of heritage to instrument?³⁴

That question has a direct bearing on the argument I am making here. If displaced form is not merely moved form, but form whose world has been interrupted and overwritten, then care cannot be reduced to legal custody, good preservation, or useful redistribution of financial value. Care must include the discipline of perceiving the form as more than property. It must ask what

33 Knowles and Bourne, "Record of Decisions," 1-34.

34 Kersel, "Moral Maze," 1-3, 12-15.

worlds remain implicated in the object's presence. It must ask who has been excluded from decisions about its meaning and future. It must ask whether the institution is caring for the object itself or caring for the version of the object that strengthens the institution's own narrative.

Eric Jarrard's recent work on the Wellesley Assyrian relief is also useful because he asks how a single object's biography might be written as a necrography, a death-history rather than only a life-history.³⁵ His study of the so-called "Wellesley Eunuch" emphasizes how looted or displaced objects have had their contexts stripped away in the service of Western European and American colonial projects. The language is intentionally severe, and it should be used carefully. The Assyrian reliefs were already images of imperial violence and domination before modern collectors entered the story. They are not innocent bodies whose only death came through nineteenth-century removal. Still, Jarrard's term helps identify something that ordinary object biography can soften. A displaced object does not merely gain new chapters. It may also suffer losses, cuts, silences, and forced reanimations inside institutions that ask it to live as something else.

The language of duty of care, then, must be widened. In ordinary institutional practice, care often means stabilization, conservation, insurance, cataloging, display, access, and scholarly interpretation. Without them, many objects would be damaged, forgotten, or lost. I am grateful for them, and my own earlier work was possible because curators, conservators, librarians, and archivists had preserved both the Yale reliefs and the records of their acquisition. The problem is not institutional care as such. The problem is care enclosed by possession. A possessed object can be carefully maintained while still being narrowly perceived.³⁶

35 Eric X. Jarrard, "The Wellesley Assyrian Relief: A Necrography," *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 14 (2025): 123-46.

36 Kersel, "Moral Maze," 8-11.

Many institutions have learned to speak the language of care without undergoing the more difficult work of perceptual conversion. They can publish histories, build interpretive displays, create replicas, fund scholarships, and conserve remaining fragments. All of that can be valuable. But the deeper ethical question remains: has the object been allowed to trouble the institution's self-understanding? Has the institution listened to the displaced form as a claim, or has it only managed the form as a problem? Has care become a way of preserving possession, or has care opened the institution toward accountability?

For theological institutions, this demand is especially acute. Seminaries and church-related colleges often received Assyrian reliefs because the objects seemed to confirm a biblical worldview. Assyria could be made useful to Christian formation as a fallen empire, an archaeological witness, or a stage upon which divine judgment had unfolded. But a more mature theological response would be less interested in using Assyria as evidence and more interested in being judged by the stones themselves. What does it mean for a Christian institution to possess fragments of another people's imperial and sacred world? What does it mean to receive an object through missionary networks and then claim to care for it? What forms of repentance, repair, and humility become necessary once the object is no longer treated as an apologetic tool?³⁷

Here, the phrase "Asia has claims upon New England" begins to sound different. In Marsh's usage, the claim was missionary. Asia's need called upon New England's religious conscience. In the present, the phrase can be turned back toward the institutions that inherited the stones. The claim is not only that New England should act toward Asia. The claim is that New England, Chicago, and the British Museum must reckon with the fact that Asia has already acted upon it, materially and morally, through the displaced forms it chose to possess. The stones are

³⁷ For biblical and theological receptions of Assyria, see Holloway, *Orientalism, Assyriology and the Bible*.

not passive trophies from a completed past. They are ongoing demands upon institutional memory.

Duty of care, in this deeper sense, is not only a museum ethic or a heritage-management principle. It is a way of asking whether perception has become responsible. A displaced form asks to be seen with its wounds, its worlds, its imposed meanings, and its unfinished claims. It asks not to be reduced to what it can do for us now, whether that use is devotional, educational, financial, aesthetic, or reputational. It asks for a form of care that begins with the humility to admit that possession is not understanding, and that preservation is not yet justice.

Ecological Intentionality: Perceiving Form with World

Ecological intentionality begins with the refusal to let a form stand alone. This is not because forms lack integrity, beauty, or presence in themselves. The opposite is true. A form can arrest us because it appears with such force. A carved wing, a stylized tree, the curve of a riverbank, the bark of a black walnut, the surface of a stone worn by time and handling... each can meet perception with a kind of immediate givenness. But the ethical problem begins when immediacy is mistaken for completeness. What appears before me is never only what appears before me. It arrives with relations, histories, dependencies, injuries, and worlds that are not always visible at first glance.³⁸

This is the point at which the Assyrian reliefs and ecological intentionality can speak to one another without being collapsed into the same category. A gypsum bas-relief from Nimrud is not alive in the way a tree is alive. It doesn't photosynthesize, draw water through roots, exchange sugars with fungi, shelter insects, drop leaves into soil, or bend toward light. It is an

³⁸ For an articulation of eco-phenomenology as embodied and emplaced encounter with an environment, see Madalina Diaconu, "Dwelling the World Well: From the Phenomenology of Nature to Eco-Phenomenology," *Studia Phaenomenologica* 25 (2025): 9-33.

artifact, a carved remnant of human and imperial making. But it is still a form whose meaning depends upon a world. However, it isn't self-contained. It bears the pressure of the palace, the river, the empire, the craftsmen, the stone quarry, the Sacred Tree, the inscription, the missionary archive, the museum, and the modern institution that now holds it. The relief isn't "living," but it is relational. To perceive it faithfully requires more than looking at its surface.

Ecological intentionality does not ask us to animate every object in the same way or to blur the difference between artifacts, organisms, landscapes, and persons. It asks us to examine the habits by which modern perception isolates things from their conditions of appearing. A tree becomes a tree in the abstract, rather than this particular tree rooted in this yard, this soil, this water table, this history of land use, this family's daily life, this neighborhood's canopy, this city's heat, this more-than-human network. A river becomes a water supply rather than a moving body of relation. A relief becomes ancient art rather than a displaced form from an imperial palace whose later presence in New England is bound to missionary desire, biblical anxiety, institutional prestige, and cultural extraction.³⁹

The ecological dimension of *intentionality*, as I am using the term, names the way perception is always directed within relations that exceed the perceiving subject. Intentionality is not merely a mental arrow shot from consciousness toward an object. It is a participation in a field of appearing. We perceive from somewhere, through bodies, languages, histories, needs, and inherited interpretive habits. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's account of perception helps here because he refuses the fantasy of detached observation. Perception is bodily, situated, and

39 Petr Prasek, "Ecology, Eco-Phenomenology, and the Immanent Ethics of Nature," *META: Research in Hermeneutics, Phenomenology, and Practical Philosophy* 15, no. 2 (2023): 342-66.

implicated. The world is not laid out before a disembodied mind as a set of neutral data. It is encountered through flesh, movement, orientation, contact, and depth.⁴⁰

Eco-phenomenology extends this insight by pressing phenomenology back toward the earth itself. David Wood, Ted Toadvine, Charles Brown, David Abram, and others have argued, in different ways, that the ecological crisis is also a crisis of perception. Modernity trains us to see the natural world as object, resource, system, scenery, or problem. It does not train us to receive the world as a field of address. Before land is cleared, it is first made visible as empty, underused, available, or economically dormant. Before water is overdrawn, it is first translated into capacity. Before a species is lost, it is often already out of moral attention.⁴¹

The same structure appears in the history of displaced artifacts. Before the Assyrian reliefs could become New England possessions, they had to become removable. Before they became removable, they had to be perceived as detachable from the world of Kalhu. This perception was theological, imperial, and institutional. The reliefs could be cut, purchased, crated, and shipped because they had already been reimagined as objects whose future meaning could be fulfilled elsewhere. American missionaries and colleges did not think they were emptying the stones of meaning. They thought they were giving the stones a powerful new vocation. But that new vocation depended upon a prior abstraction.

Ecological intentionality, therefore, asks us to slow down at the moment of abstraction. What has to be forgotten for this form to become available? What relations have to be backgrounded? What histories have to be simplified? What prior claims have to be silenced so that the present claim of possession, use, or management can appear reasonable? These questions

40 Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 77-83; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130-55.

41 Brown and Toadvine, *Eco-Phenomenology*; Wood, "What Is Eco-Phenomenology?," 78-95; Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, 47-72.

apply differently to artifacts and ecosystems, but they arise from the same discipline of attention. In both cases, the form before us is damaged when its world is treated as incidental.

This is why the Sacred Tree reliefs are so important to this argument. They are themselves images of relation. The *apkallu* does not stand alone. The tree does not stand alone. The bucket, cone, wing, gesture, inscription, and surrounding palace program form a network of symbolic action. The scene depicts tending, purification, protection, fertility, and imperial order rather than being a still-life portrait. In its original palace setting, this image would have helped sustain a vision of Assyria as a divinely protected and agriculturally ordered world. That world was itself violent, hierarchical, and imperial, but it wasn't abstract. It bound vegetal form, water, ritual, kingship, land, and divine mediation into a single visual grammar.⁴²

Ecological intentionality is the practice of learning to perceive the world without pretending to master it. It is not omniscience. It is not the fantasy that I can fully know the life of a tree, a river, a bird, or a displaced bas-relief. Rather, this is more modest and more demanding. It asks me to let the form exceed my use of it and asks me to recognize that what stands before me has depths of relation I did not create and do not control. Instead, this asks me to become suspicious of the speed with which I convert *presence into function*.

Such a conversion does not make us innocent. We remain latecomers to damaged histories. We inherit institutions, archives, collections, landscapes, economies, and habits of seeing that were shaped before us and often for our benefit. The point is not to imagine a pure perception outside history, but to become more honest about the histories through which we perceive. The Assyrian bas-reliefs at Yale do not allow me to stand outside the problem. They are part of my own intellectual formation. I learned from them and wrote about them. I benefited

⁴² Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 10-11.

from the archival and institutional care that preserved them. To return to them now is not to accuse from a distance, but to listen from within an unfinished relation.

The Assyrian reliefs, then, help clarify ecological intentionality by showing that the loss of world is not only an ecological phenomenon in the narrow sense. It is a perceptual habit that reaches across modern life. We detach forms from their worlds and then wonder why our ethics feel thin. We admire beauty but miss relation. We preserve objects but miss claim. We manage land but miss presence. We know about things, but do not always know how to be addressed by them.

Edith Stein and the Ethics of Form

Edith Stein's work does not belong to archaeology or cultural heritage studies in any direct sense, and she is certainly not writing about Assyrian reliefs, museum collections, or ecological repair. But her phenomenology and metaphysics offer a way of resisting one of the central temptations: the reduction of form to surface, possession, or immediate availability. For Stein, form is never merely outline. It is not simply the visible contour of a thing. Form is bound to being, actuality, intelligibility, and participation. It is the way something comes to presence as what it is, and yet what appears is never exhausted by what can be seen, handled, classified, or used.⁴³

This is already suggested in *On the Problem of Empathy*, where Stein examines the givenness of another person as another subject. The other does not appear to me as a mere physical body to which I later add interiority by inference. Rather, the living body of another is given as expressive of psychic life, though always in a mediated and incomplete way. I do not

⁴³ Edith Stein, *Potency and Act: Studies Toward a Philosophy of Being*, trans. Walter Redmond (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2009), 55-84; Edith Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhardt (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 2002), 227-70.

possess the other's experience from within, but neither am I sealed off from it. Empathy is this strange and disciplined access to another life as another: near enough to receive, distant enough not to collapse into myself. That phenomenological structure is central far beyond interpersonal ethics, because it teaches a restraint that modern perception often lacks. To encounter another rightly is not to absorb the other into my own categories, nor to deny the other's depth because I cannot possess it directly.⁴⁴

An Assyrian relief is not a person. A tree is not a human subject. A watershed is not another ego in Stein's technical sense. Ecological intentionality cannot simply extend interpersonal empathy to every object or organism without distinction. That would blur the differences that careful perception should preserve. But Stein's account of empathy helps discipline the perceiver. It teaches that what appears before me may be genuinely given without being fully possessed. It teaches that access is not mastery. It teaches that the otherness of what appears is not a failure of perception but part of perception's ethical structure.

This becomes even more important when Stein turns to form, essence, potency, and act in her later metaphysical work. In *Finite and Eternal Being* and *Potency and Act*, form is more than an external arrangement imposed upon neutral matter. Form belongs to the intelligibility and actuality of a being. It is through form that a being is this being and not another. Yet, form also points beyond itself, because finite being is never self-grounding. It participates in being rather than possessing being absolutely. This metaphysical language may seem distant from Assyrian reliefs, but it offers a powerful correction to the habits of perception that make displacement seem harmless. If form is only surface, then removing, cutting, selling, displaying, or

44 Edith Stein, *On the Problem of Empathy*, trans. Waltraut Stein (Washington, DC: ICS Publications, 1989), 10-19.

reinterpreting a form is mostly a matter of management. If form participates in a deeper order of intelligibility, then the removal of form from world is a metaphysical and ethical event.⁴⁵

The Assyrian reliefs make this visible. A winged *apkallu* is not only the visible outline of a supernatural figure. It is a form of participation in a world of ritual protection, royal ideology, agricultural fertility, divine mediation, imperial display, and palace architecture. A Sacred Tree is not only a stylized vegetal motif. It is a form through which Assyria imagined nourishment, protection, kingship, cosmic order, and land. When these forms are cut from the walls of Kalhu and brought into New England institutions, they do not cease to be forms. But their appearance changes. They are asked to participate in a different world: the world of Protestant apologetics, missionary longing, biblical archaeology, college prestige, museum display, and later heritage ethics.

Stein helps us resist the temptation to treat that change as merely contextual. Context matters, but context can sound too thin, as if the form itself remains untouched while different interpretive frames simply gather around it. The deeper claim is that forms appear through worlds. They do not float free. Their intelligibility is relational. The stone slab survives displacement, but the way it is received is altered by the loss of the wall, room, pigment, sequence, gesture, language, and ritual architecture. The form remains, but its mode of givenness changes. To recognize that change is not to say that the relief becomes unknowable outside Kalhu, but rather to say that knowing it now requires an ethics of humility.

This is where Stein's nod towards Thomist metaphysics can meet ecological phenomenology. A tree's form extends beyond its surface bark. The black walnut in a Spartanburg yard is visible as trunk, bark, branch, leaf, fruit, and shade. But its form is also the

⁴⁵ Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 227-70; Stein, *Potency and Act*, 55-84.

expression of rootedness, water uptake, seasonal rhythm, soil chemistry, allelopathic relation, insect life, fungal networks, bird presence, family memory, and neighborhood weather. Its form is not separable from its world, even when the eye first receives it as a single tree. To perceive the tree only as a vertical object in a yard is already to reduce it. To perceive it ecologically is not to abandon its form but to receive its form more fully.⁴⁶

Stein's thought is useful here because it refuses both reduction and absorption. She does not allow the other to become a projection of the self, but she also does not make the other wholly inaccessible. That middle path is what displaced forms require. The Assyrian reliefs shouldn't be made into mirrors for New England, reflecting only Protestant anxieties, missionary ambitions, or institutional pride. But neither can they be treated as pure survivals of Assyria, untouched by the conditions of their removal and reception. They stand between worlds. Their form is both ancient and modern, both Assyrian and institutional, both preserved and wounded. Perception must become patient enough to hold these layers together.

Christian thought has often spoken of creation as a world of signs, forms, and creatures that disclose divine meaning. At its best, this tradition can deepen attention. It can teach that the visible world is not spiritually empty, that matter is not mute, that finite beings participate in a mystery beyond themselves. But at its worst, Christian perception has often turned the world into a message for itself too quickly. Assyria became evidence for Scripture while the land became entrusted property. Trees became symbols before they were neighbors, and more-than-human creatures became moral illustrations before they were fellow participants in creation. The problem isn't that Christian imagination sees meaning. The problem is that it is often seen too quickly, and with too much confidence that the meaning is already known.

⁴⁶ For a phenomenological account of nature as more than objecthood, see Merleau-Ponty, *Nature: Course Notes from the College de France*, trans. Robert Vallier (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2003), 204-24.

For me, this is where the Assyrian reliefs, Stein, and ecological intentionality converge most clearly. Stein gives language for the depth of form. Ecological phenomenology gives language for form's worldedness. The Assyrian reliefs give a material history in which form, world, displacement, possession, and care are all entangled. Together, they suggest that the ethical task is not merely to look more closely, but to perceive more truthfully. A truthful perception does not flatten differences. It does not pretend that artifact, tree, river, animal, and person are the same. It receives each according to its own mode of being, while refusing to reduce any of them to availability.

Asia, New England, and the More-Than-Human Claim

The phrase Asia has claims upon New England began, at least in the form that first drew my attention, as a missionary appeal. That original framing from Marsh now appears deeply entangled with the assumptions of nineteenth-century Protestantism, Orientalism, empire, and American institutional ambition. Yet the phrase still has power because it says more than Marsh intended. Asia does have claims upon New England, but not only because Asia was imagined as a mission field. Asia has claims upon New England because New England received, possessed, displayed, interpreted, and benefited from forms taken from Asian worlds. The claim runs not from New England's imagined benevolence outward, but from the displaced form back toward the institutions that claimed to hold it.⁴⁷

This reversal changes the ethical direction of the phrase. The Assyrian reliefs do not ask what New England should do for Asia. They ask what New England has done with Asia, what stories it has told about Asia, what fragments it has incorporated into its own theological and educational self-understanding, and what responsibilities remain because of that incorporation.

⁴⁷ Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 18-19, 26.

The stones are not passive remnants of a completed past. They are present-tense demands upon perception, memory, and care.

Asia Has Claims Upon New England was written as an art-historical and religious-historical study of the Yale reliefs. It introduced the palace world of Assurnasirpal II, the movement of the slabs into American institutions, and the missionary and biblical imagination that surrounded their acquisition. But from where I now stand, I can see that my old project was already raising a question that has become central to my current work: what happens when a form is received apart from the world that formed it? That question has followed me from museum objects to trees, from ancient palace reliefs to watersheds, from New England collections to ecological intentionality and the Carolinas.⁴⁸

Cultural displacement is not the same as habitat destruction, and heritage ethics cannot simply be absorbed into ecological ethics. But the analogy is still important because the habit of perception is similar. Modern institutions, economies, and theologies repeatedly learn to see forms without worlds. Something appears, but it appears under the discipline of availability. The form is not denied. It is narrowed.

This narrowing is the danger ecological intentionality seeks to resist. To perceive ecologically is not only to notice nature more often, or to become more appreciative of beauty. It is to learn to perceive form with relation, form with history, form with damage, form with obligation, form with world. The Assyrian reliefs teach this because their displacement is so visible once we know how to look. The cut stone, the lost pigment, the broken architectural sequence, the missionary letters, the institutional catalogs, the modern debates over sale and care:

48 Harrelson, *Asia Has Claims*, 1-26.

all of these belong to the reliefs' present appearing. To see only the carved figure is to see too little. To see only the artifact is to miss the claim.

Stein's language of form helps deepen this conclusion. Form is not merely surface. It is the way a being, object, or creature comes to intelligibility, but that intelligibility is never exhausted by what is immediately available to the observer. The visible asks for patience. It asks to be received without being consumed by the perceiver's needs. In this sense, the ethics of perception begins before ownership, before interpretation, before policy, and before use. It begins in the moment when I ask whether I am allowing the form before me to exceed my possession of it.⁴⁹

Perhaps this is what the stones now ask of us. Not that we stop interpreting them, but that we interpret them under the pressure of their displacement. Not that we imagine their original world as innocent, but that we refuse to let their modern afterlives become innocent either. Not that every institution must answer the same way, but that every institution must learn to ask better questions: What world does this form bear? What violence made it available to us? What meanings have we imposed upon it? What care is possible after possession? What kind of viewer, student, scholar, minister, or citizen are we forming by the way we display and describe it?

These questions also follow us outside the museum. They follow us into yards, forests, church grounds, county meetings, development plans, water permits, energy debates, and the daily practices by which we decide what is allowed to remain. The black walnut in my Spartanburg yard, the trees cut down across the street, the rivers of the Carolina Piedmont, and

⁴⁹ Stein, *Finite and Eternal Being*, 227-70; Stein, *Potency and Act*, 55-84.

the ancient stones at Yale do not make the same claims. But each interrupts the fantasy that the world is simply available. Each asks to be perceived with more care than usefulness requires.⁵⁰

The displaced form, then, becomes a teacher of attention. It stands before us as a presence whose world is damaged but not wholly lost, whose meaning is altered but not exhausted, whose claim is unfinished. To receive such a form rightly is not to restore innocence or undo history by force of interpretation. It is to remain answerable to the relations still carried in the form's appearance. It is to admit that possession is not understanding, preservation is not justice, and admiration is not yet care.

The stones still cry out. But what they cry is no longer simply Marsh's missionary summons. They cry out against the narrowness of the possessive imagination. They cry out from Kalhu, from Mosul, from New Haven, from seminary halls and museum galleries, from footnotes and catalogs and conservation reports. They ask us to hear the world that still speaks through displaced form. And if ecological intentionality means anything here, it is the discipline of hearing that claim before we decide what the form is for.

⁵⁰ For a general account of ecological crisis as requiring shifts in perception and attention, see Wood, "What Is Eco-Phenomenology?," 78-95; Prasek, "Ecology, Eco-Phenomenology," 342-66.

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