

جيد البديعة (جيد العزير)  
٢٩/٦/٥١

# Rayyane Tabet *Alien Property*





# Rayyane Tabet

## Alien Property

**KIM BENZEL, RAYYANE TABET, AND CLARE DAVIES**

**THE  
MET**

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



## Director's Note

This *Bulletin* and the exhibition it accompanies, *Rayyane Tabet / Alien Property*, tell a fascinating story—actually three intertwined stories—about the power of ancient art to confront the realities of the present. In the first, narrated by Kim Benzel, Curator in Charge of The Met's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, we learn how four carved stone reliefs from the ancient site of Tell Halaf, in modern Syria, came to enter the Museum's collection in 1943. The second, by contemporary artist Rayyane Tabet, is more personal in nature: the unlikely tale of how his great-grandfather came to work for Baron Max von Oppenheim, a member of the German nobility and the original excavator of Tell Halaf. In telling his story, Tabet considers how the objects, documents, and other artifacts connecting his family to Tell Halaf have come to inform not only his work as an artist but also his growing awareness of how art affects each of us in our daily lives. The third component, an essay by Clare Davies, Assistant Curator in The Met's Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, discusses Tabet's work and places it within the broader context of twentieth- and twenty-first century artistic practice.

Presented together, these different perspectives emphasize processes of fragmentation and reunification. In particular, *Rayyane Tabet / Alien Property* highlights how cultural artifacts in museum collections can help expose audiences to the richness of the ancient world while also drawing attention to the plight of peoples who, along with their cultural heritage, have been caught up in cycles of violence. These entangled, complex histories converge in the story of The Met's connection to Tell Halaf and its artifacts, bringing to the surface important contemporary conversations about the evolving role of encyclopedic museums.

Among the works on display in the exhibition is the famed "Venus" unearthed at Tell Halaf in 1912, destroyed during World War II, and painstakingly reconstructed between 2001 and 2009. The figure is now on loan to

The Met from the Vorderasiatisches Museum, Berlin, while that institution is undergoing extended renovations. We are grateful to our colleagues at the Vorderasiatisches Museum, in particular Lutz Martin and Nadja Cholidis; to Christopher Freiherr von Oppenheim and the Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Foundation, Cologne; and to Andrée Sfeir-Semler and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut and Hamburg; and especially to Rayyane Tabet, for being the catalyst for this groundbreaking exhibition. For their critical support of this project, we thank the Friends of Ancient Near Eastern Art. Finally, we acknowledge the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*, for its support of The Met's quarterly *Bulletin* program.

**MAX HOLLEIN**

*Director, The Metropolitan Museum of Art*



1. Excavation of Tell Halaf, 1912

# Rayyane Tabet / Alien Property

KIM BENZEL

For Mesopotamia, the place from which we have the earliest textual and archaeological evidence about concepts of the image and aesthetics, I make the case that images had a diachronic presence; they were seen as objects that transcend time and that carry or embody traces of time itself. They therefore became foci of rituals of history and collective memory, of reinscriptions, burials and recoveries, in continuous dialogic relationships between past and present and present into the past that are somewhat reminiscent of what Aby Warburg would later describe, in his *Mnemosyne* project, as an afterlife of images.

—Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image*<sup>1</sup>

In August 2016, the artist Rayyane Tabet (born 1983, Lebanon) contacted the Metropolitan Museum's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art and asked to see and study four orthostats (carved stone reliefs) from the ancient site of Tell Halaf, in what is today northern Syria. Tabet had just spent several months in Berlin studying and making graphite rubbings of other orthostats from Tell Halaf in the collection of the Pergamon Museum. He arrived at The Met with deep knowledge of the site and its history, but also a surprising personal relationship with Tell Halaf. That initial visit was the catalyst for an exhibition, *Rayyane Tabet/Alien Property*, and this accompanying *Bulletin*, which together pioneer a new approach to connecting ancient and contemporary art by manifesting the "relationships between past and present and present into the past," to use Zainab Bahrani's formulation, that are embedded in the ancient stones themselves.<sup>2</sup>

## *Tell Halaf*

The archaeological story of Tell Halaf begins in the sixth millennium B.C., when the site was first settled. Its remains are considered by modern scholars typical of the Neolithic culture that flourished at the time in the fertile Khabur River region of what was then greater Mesopotamia (now northeastern Syria, near the Turkish border; fig. 1). Tell

Halaf seems to have been abandoned between this early date of initial occupation and the late second millennium B.C., when it experienced a resurgence as one of the many small but mighty political entities known as Syro-Hittite (or Neo-Hittite) kingdoms. These loosely connected but competing Iron Age city-states were variously populated by Aramaic-, Luwian-, and Phoenician-speaking peoples who seized and settled a number of earlier centers of power in northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia (Turkey) after the collapse of the Late Bronze Age Hittite and Mitanni empires. The Aramaeans who ruled in northern Syria, and at Tell Halaf beginning in the eleventh century B.C., were of western Semitic and nomadic origin. By far the most notable feature of their cities were their palaces, called *bit hilani*, in which the new Aramaean rulers regularly incorporated earlier Hittite architectural and sculptural traditions.

Tell Halaf was one such city. Identified at the time as Guzana, it was the capital of the Syro-Hittite kingdom of Bit-Biahiani from the eleventh century B.C. until the kingdom fell under the aegis of the powerful Assyrian empire at the end of the ninth century B.C. The palace excavated at the site has been associated with a ruler named Kapara based on dedications inscribed on various sculptures found within the compound. Many more sculptures adorned the



2. Reconstruction of the palace facade incorporating the original sculptures, Tell Halaf Museum, Berlin, ca. 1930

palace—some fashioned in the round, others in relief—and together created an elaborate decorative program that was integral to Kapara’s image and political power, although exactly how they did so is not yet fully understood.<sup>3</sup> The large sculptures found on the terrace of the palace consisted of basalt male and female figures standing on lions and bulls, caryatid-like, at the entrance to a portico, which was flanked by equally large mythical creatures and hunting scenes carved in relief (fig. 2). Of particular interest to our current story are two hundred or so smaller dark gray basalt and red-painted limestone orthostats that adorned the niched outer wall of the palace on its southern side: slabs carved in relief with scenes of fantastic creatures, realistic animals, ceremonies, banquets, hunting, war, and everyday life. The four Tell Halaf orthostats in The Met collection come from this context (figs. 3a–d).

A wealth of scholarship exists on the excavations at Tell Halaf: on the site, the nature and purpose of the palace, the Aramaeans who settled there, and their relationship with Assyria, among other topics.<sup>4</sup> However, it is the sculptural remains of the palace and their fate within the context

of twentieth- and twenty-first-century world events that form the core of *Alien Property*. A key part of that story involves the larger-than-life persona of the excavator of Tell Halaf, Baron Max von Oppenheim (1860–1946), whose activities likewise play a central role in the history of The Met and that of Rayyane Tabet and his family.

### *The Excavations*

Baron Max von Oppenheim first visited the village of Tell Halaf in 1899, when, as a German diplomat stationed in Cairo, he was charged with establishing a route for the future Baghdad-to-Berlin railroad. Syria at the time was under Ottoman rule, and the baron, who was also an amateur archaeological explorer, had developed a keen interest in the region and its history from living and working there. During his first encounter with Tell Halaf, von Oppenheim spent three days exploring the archaeological mound with men from a nearby village, who reluctantly, and with some degree of fear, told him that stone statues of animals with human heads were buried there. Several large-scale sculptures were, in fact, uncovered in those first few days (fig. 4), only to be reburied until the baron could return with a proper excavation permit from the Ottoman authorities. And thus began the modern saga of the Iron Age site and its sculptural remains, part of many “rituals of history and collective memory, of reinscriptions, burials and recoveries” to come.<sup>5</sup>

In 1911, Baron von Oppenheim returned to Tell Halaf, permit in hand, to begin his official excavations at the site. He hired a team of more than five hundred locals to help with the efforts, paying for the project with money from his family’s banking fortune. The expedition lasted two years, during which von Oppenheim discovered the famed “Venus” (see fig. 1) and the 194 orthostats that adorned the niched outer wall of the palace (fig. 5). Tell Halaf was now beyond doubt a spectacular and important site.





A

**3a-d.** *Orthostat reliefs*, Neo-Hittite, ca. 10th–9th century B.C. Tell Halaf (ancient Guzana), Syria. (a) *Lion Hunt*. Basalt, H. 22 in. (56 cm). (b) *Lion Attacking a Deer*. Limestone and paint, H. 28  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (72 cm). (c) *Winged Human-Headed Lion*. Basalt, H. 26  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (66.5 cm). (d) *Seated Figure Holding a Lotus Flower*. Basalt, 26  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (68 cm). Provenance: 1911–13, excavated by Baron Max von Oppenheim; ceded to Baron Max von Oppenheim in the division of finds; acquired by the Museum in 1943, purchased from the Alien Property Custodian, New York. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Rogers Fund, 1943 (43.135.1–4)







D

The baron decided to go back to Germany, temporarily, in 1913, but was then prevented from returning to Tell Halaf owing to the outbreak of World War I. A portion of the archaeological finds from those two years of excavation were left at the site in what von Oppenheim and his team considered a safe and secure condition. Thirty-one crates containing additional finds—among them fourteen of the small orthostats—left Tell Halaf in the summer of 1914 en route to Germany. The shipment was intercepted by a British naval ship, which seized its cargo as enemy property and brought the finds to Alexandria. The fourteen orthostats were eventually sold to the British Museum in 1920 for £500 and remain in its collection today.<sup>6</sup>

By 1927, with the war long over and the Ottoman Empire partitioned according to the mandate system established by the League of Nations, the baron was able to return to Tell Halaf and was given permission by French authorities to initiate new excavations in what was by then the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon. The discoveries from his earlier 1911–13 excavation campaign had not fared well; the building in which they were housed had collapsed, and they were now under a pile of rubble. In addition to that damage, many of the sculptures had been used as millstones or repurposed as building material, while others, including many of the orthostats, had completely disappeared.<sup>7</sup>



4. Excavation of Tell Halaf, 1899

5. Exterior of the palace at Tell Halaf showing the frieze of orthostats in situ, ca. 1912



Yet the subsequent 1927–29 excavations yielded another wave of spectacular discoveries, culminating in the official division of finds that von Oppenheim had hoped for all along. This was the era of *partager*—from the French verb *partager*, meaning “to share”—a system devised in the early twentieth century in which foreign-led expeditions and the host (or source) country divided between them the artifacts excavated at any given site during one or more seasons. (Often heralded as fair and advantageous for all, the practice of *partage* in the Middle East was halted by the 1970s owing to changes in the antiquities laws of individual source countries; it is now considered by many to have been yet another example of colonial exploitation.) The *partage* agreement for Tell Halaf, arranged between von Oppenheim and the authorities of the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, resulted in the lion’s share of the finds from both the 1911–13 and 1927–29 excavations going to von Oppenheim

for eventual shipment to Berlin, including approximately eighty of the small orthostats.

As for the remainder of what had been excavated at Tell Halaf up until that time, we know that the baron promptly donated two of the orthostats to the Musée du Louvre, Paris, in gratitude to French authorities for their generosity during the *partage* negotiations.<sup>8</sup> From a modern perspective, the fact that von Oppenheim wielded so much personal authority and control over the cultural heritage of Tell Halaf is extraordinary, but it is representative of colonial interventions in the Middle East during the twentieth century. A portion of the Tell Halaf finds, including thirty-four orthostats, did remain in Syria, where they formed part of the founding collection of the National Museum of Aleppo, the country’s first archaeological museum.<sup>9</sup> The original colossal sculptures from the portico of the palace were taken to Germany (see fig. 2), while replicas of the fantastic creatures eventually became part of the Aleppo museum’s entrance (fig. 6). The fate of the orthostats and other excavated finds housed in Aleppo is now uncertain as the present-day destruction in Syria rages on. Perversely, history may yet dictate that the Tell Halaf artifacts that remained in Syria fare better than those shipped to Berlin.

In 1930, Baron von Oppenheim installed his share of Tell Halaf’s magnificent past in a private museum built with his own funds after he failed in his attempts to have them exhibited at (and his expenses reimbursed by) the newly finished Pergamon Museum. The Tell Halaf Museum, as it was called, was a well-received addition to Berlin’s cultural landscape, popular among locals and tourists alike (fig. 7). In some ways, certain aspects of the display were ahead of their time, conceptually new and fresh in terms of exhibition design. But another casualty was immediately noted: when von Oppenheim went to unpack the crates in which the objects had been shipped, he discovered



6. Entrance to the National Museum at Aleppo flanked by replicas of statues from the palace at Tell Halaf



7. Tell Halaf Museum, Berlin, 1930s

that six orthostats had gone missing somewhere between Tell Halaf and Berlin.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly after the opening of the Tell Halaf Museum, in 1931, von Oppenheim traveled to New York with eight of the orthostats from his share of the finds, apparently with the intention of selling them. It seems that he was having financial difficulties (evident in his efforts to be compensated by the Pergamon Museum), but given that it was shortly after the stock market crash of 1929 and many people and institutions were in the same situation, he did not succeed. Instead, he decided to leave the eight orthostats in a storage facility in New York until the financial crisis was over. During his trip, the baron visited The Metropolitan Museum of Art, dedicating a copy of his recently published book, *Der Tell Halaf*, to then director Herbert Winlock (see fig. 14). *Der Tell Halaf*, which broadcast von Oppenheim's expedition and its discoveries to the wider world, remains popular among archaeology enthusiasts to this day.

What happens next in the Tell Halaf saga is deeply entangled with the history of World War II and its aftermath. While the destruction of archaeological remains is not comparable to the horrific impact of war on the lives of people, nonetheless they, too, are susceptible to the same cycles of violence at acute moments in history. In some cases they become potent weapons in the crafting of political ideologies and narratives that are party to (or the genesis of) such calamities: a phenomenon that, sadly, is being reenacted in the Middle East today. With the outbreak of World War II, the archaeological remains of Tell Halaf became collateral damage.

On November 22, 1943, during an Allied bombing attack on Berlin, a single incendiary bomb struck the Tell Halaf Museum (fig. 8). The museum went up in flames, with the fire smoldering for quite some time at high temperatures before firefighters arrived and doused the building with water. Although the limestone artifacts were destroyed immediately, the basalt sculptures would have been able to withstand the extreme heat. But they, too, were demolished once the cold water hit the hot stone. The sudden, drastic change in temperature caused them either to crack or explode, with some of the merely cracked ones later breaking apart during the recovery efforts. In the end, the



8. Fragments of sculpture in the Tell Halaf Museum following the Allied bombing raid on November 22, 1943



9. Overhead view of statue fragments from Tell Halaf in a sorting facility, Friedrichshagen, Berlin, 2003

magnificent sculptural remains of ancient Tell Halaf were reduced to 27,000 fragments (fig. 9).

Somewhat surprisingly, given that the war was ongoing and the sculptures were considered irretrievably lost, the thousands of Tell Halaf fragments were taken in 1944 to the Pergamon Museum, where they were stored for decades under the museum's care. After the war, the Pergamon Museum became part of East Germany and fell under Soviet control, making it even more unlikely that the fragments would be retained, much less preserved. No one could foresee that by the 1990s, following the reunification of Germany, it would become possible for the curators and conservators at the Pergamon Museum, in close collaboration with the baron's heirs, to discuss a possible restoration project, one of the greatest archaeological recovery and

conservation stories of all time. By 2009, thirty of the sculptures in the round and eighty architectural reliefs, including the orthostats that had been in the Tell Halaf Museum at the time of the fire, had been put back together. With their scars visible, they bear witness to decades of assaults and injuries as "objects that transcend time and that carry or embody traces of time itself," but that also attest to the very best of human intentions (fig. 10).<sup>11</sup>

#### *Office of Alien Property Custodian*

And what of the eight orthostats that von Oppenheim left in storage in New York? They remained at the Hahn Brothers Fireproof Warehouses, where the baron had placed them, for more than a decade. In 1941, shortly after the United States entered the war with Germany, the U.S. government





10. Reverse of the seated figure from Tell Halaf (see fig. 26) after reconstruction

reactivated the Office of Alien Property Custodian, a wartime agency first established during World War I under the 1917 Trading with the Enemy Act. The Office of the Alien Property Custodian (APC) was created to “assume control and dispose of enemy-owned property in the United States and its possessions.”<sup>12</sup> By early 1943, the APC’s mandate and consequent research into the property of German nationals had reached the Hahn Brothers storage facility, and von Oppenheim’s eight orthostats, among other items he had stored there, came under investigation. On April 27, 1943, the APC issued Vesting Order Number 1330, which called for von Oppenheim’s property in the Hahn Brothers Warehouse to be “held, used, administered, liquidated, sold, or otherwise dealt with in the interest of and for the benefit of the United States.”<sup>13</sup>

The baron’s property, including the eight orthostats from Tell Halaf, was offered for sale, with a notice appearing in the *New York Times* and the *New York Herald Tribune* in September 1943. (The actual sale took place in October, with official bidding open to the public on October 20.) The Metropolitan Museum was the highest bidder and for \$4,000 became the owner of the eight orthostats. The official letter awarding the sale of antiquities “formerly owned by Baron Max von Oppenheim to the Metropolitan Museum of Art” was dated November 24, 1943 (fig. 11). Almost immediately thereafter, The Met sold four of the eight reliefs to the Walters Art Gallery (now the Walters Art Museum), Baltimore, through an arrangement that had been worked out in advance of the APC sale.<sup>14</sup>

The practices and ethics of the Alien Property Custodian raise questions about the motivations of the individuals and museums who benefited from the sales conducted by the APC and why the United States and its allies allowed cultural heritage to become party to wartime conflicts, resolutions, and reparations. While a detailed discussion of the APC is beyond the scope of this essay, today similar situations and legislative enactments related to cultural property exist worldwide and continue to engender similar questions and debates. But for Tell Halaf, the Alien Property Custodian chapter is but one of many in a saga that spans antiquity to the present, and one in which Syria itself had very little say. The site’s legacy and the history of its objects ask us to reconsider who “owns” antiquity: who gets to decide (and under what circumstances); who suffers and who benefits from the decisions that are made about the works in question; who is best able to keep them safe; and, perhaps most important, how the many vested interests in these issues should work together to protect and preserve the profound connections that exist, and have always existed, between people and their heritage. In that conversation, relationships between collecting museums and the source



OFFICE OF  
ALIEN PROPERTY CUSTODIAN  
NEW YORK CITY 5

120 Broadway

In replying, please  
refer to: EWF:adm  
File No. F-28-15842

November 24, 1945


Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Fifth Avenue & 82nd Street  
New York 11, New York

Att: Mr. Ambrose Lansing Re: Antiques belonging to  
Curator, Egyptian Baron Max von Oppenheim  
Department

Gentlemen:

Attached hereto please find award and notification awarding the sale of Lot No. 3 as segregated, of antiques formerly owned by Baron Max von Oppenheim to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. We are also enclosing herewith a Bill of Sale whereby the Alien Property Custodian transfers, sells and assigns all his right, title and interest in and to said antiques to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The aforementioned Bill of Sale is forwarded you in view of the fact that we are already in receipt of your checks aggregating \$4,000.00, the purchase price submitted with your bid.

Very truly yours,

  
G. G. McGee, Assistant Chief  
Division of Liquidation

Enclosures - 2

countries whose heritage they collect become particularly significant. Indeed, opportunities exist to forge new paradigms that might conceivably benefit everyone by promoting both shared heritage and shared humanity. *Alien Property* seeks to explore these complex and contradictory relationships between objects and people, past and present. Through Rayyane Tabet's efforts to reunify the orthostats in his own artistic practice (see the essay by Clare Davies in this *Bulletin*), we are once again reminded that objects have powerful afterlives, that they are capable of reaching and affecting us from the distant past, and that they have many surprising stories to tell.

1. Zainab Bahrani, *The Infinite Image: Art, Time and the Aesthetic Dimension in Antiquity* (London: Reaktion Books, 2014), pp. 9–10.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
3. Alessandra Gilibert, "Death, Amusement and the City: Civic Spectacles and the Theatre Palace of Kapara, King of Güzāna," *Kaskal* 10 (2013), pp. 35–68.
4. Max von Oppenheim, *Tell Halaf: A New Culture in Oldest Mesopotamia*, trans. Gerald [Clair] Wheeler (London and New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, [1933]); Nadja Cholidis and Lutz Martin, eds., *Tell Halaf: Im Krieg zerstörte Denkmäler und ihre Restaurierung* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2010); Nadja Cholidis and Lutz Martin, eds., *Die geretteten Götter aus dem Palast vom Tell Halaf* (Regensburg: Schnell & Steiner, 2011).
5. Bahrani, *Infinite Image*, p. 10.
6. Cholidis and Martin, eds., *Tell Halaf*, pp. 367–78.
7. *Ibid.*, pp. 369–75.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 368.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 366. One orthostat fragment was "rediscovered" in 1999 in the Deir ez-Zor Museum, Syria.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 367.
11. Bahrani, *Infinite Image*, p. 10.
12. Guide to Federal Records, National Archives, Washington, D.C.; <https://www.archives.gov/research/guide-fed-records/groups/131.html>.
13. Vesting Order Number 1330, signed by Leo T. Crowley, April 27, 1943, RG 131, Entry P 55, F-9-100-28-13842, Box 764, National Archives, Washington, D.C.
14. See Christine E. Brennan and Yelena Rakic, "Fragmented Histories," in *Making the Met, 1870–2020* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, forthcoming 2020) for a more complete discussion of the Museum's purchase of the eight orthostats from the APC and more broadly on the APC and wartime collecting practices. The provenance and research on Tell Halaf and on the APC with respect to The Met's orthostats has been the tireless work of Yelena Rakic, Associate Curator, and Anne Dunn-Vaturi, Hagop Kevorkian Research Associate, both in the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art. I would like to thank them for generously sharing their research.

11. "Award and Notification of Sale," November 24, 1943. Archives of the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

# Chronology

- 1899** Baron Max von Oppenheim first visits Tell Halaf, then under Ottoman rule, and begins unofficial excavation of the site.
- 1911** Von Oppenheim obtains official permit to excavate from the Ottoman authorities and unearths 194 reliefs created in the 10th–9th century B.C. for the palace of Kapara.
- 1914–20** 14 reliefs are shipped from Tell Halaf to Berlin but seized en route by the British Navy. The reliefs are acquired by the British Museum, London.
- 1927–29** Von Oppenheim returns to Tell Halaf, now under control of the French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon, and discovers that 61 reliefs left at the site have disappeared. The Mandate authorities divide the remaining reliefs: 34 are given toward the creation of the National Museum of Aleppo; 2 are given to the Musée du Louvre, Paris; and approximately 80 are shipped to Berlin as von Oppenheim's share.
- 1930** Von Oppenheim founds the Tell Halaf Museum, Berlin, with his share of the finds.
- 1931** Von Oppenheim takes 8 reliefs to New York to sell but, failing to find buyers, leaves them in storage.
- 1943** The reliefs left in New York are seized by the U.S. Office of the Alien Property Custodian, put up for auction, and enter the collections of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and the Walters Art Gallery (now the Walters Art Museum), Baltimore.
- WWII Allies bomb the Tell Halaf Museum and 14 reliefs are destroyed. A total of 27,000 fragments are eventually recovered from the rubble and kept in storage.
- 1991** Following German reunification in 1989, 59 reliefs are deposited in the Pergamon Museum as part of a long-term loan agreement.
- 2001** The Pergamon Museum launches a nine-year conservation initiative to reconstruct the Tell Halaf artifacts destroyed during World War II.
- 2006** Syrian and German teams resume excavations at Tell Halaf. They are interrupted in 2011 by the outbreak of conflict in Syria.
- 2011** The Pergamon Museum opens an exhibition dedicated to the reconstructed artifacts from the Tell Halaf Museum.
- 2016** Rayyane Tabet visits The Met in August, with a request to produce rubbings of the reliefs in the Museum's Ancient Near East collection.

# Seeing Double

## RAYYANE TABET

### **dou-ble vi-sion**

*noun*

the simultaneous perception of two images, usually overlapping, of a single scene or object

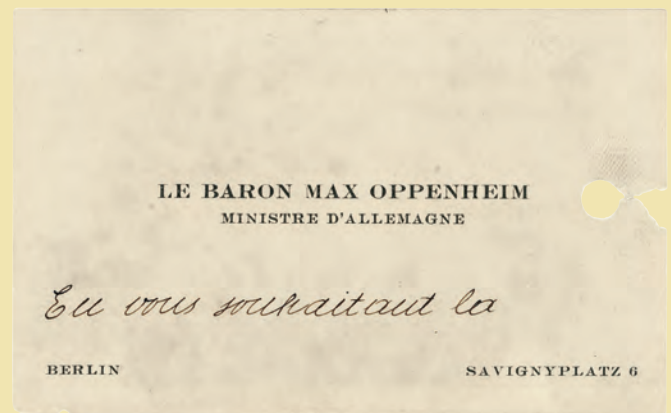
### **dou-ble ex-po-sure**

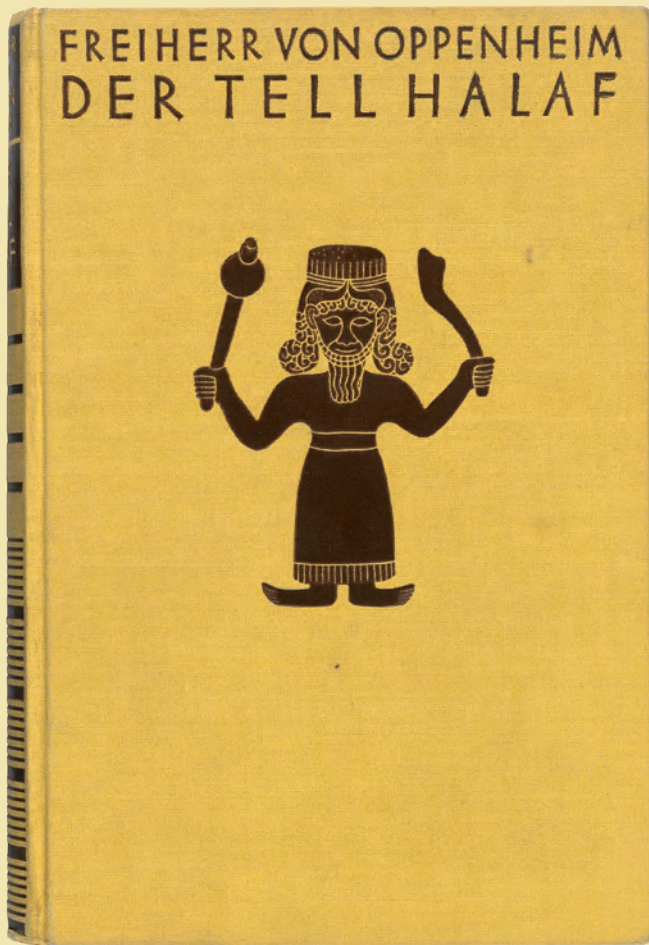
*noun*

the repeated exposure of a photographic plate or film to light, often producing ghost images

Growing up, I ate lunch with my maternal grandparents every other Sunday. They lived in a large, cold apartment in Beirut and showed their affection in a restrained manner, so I spent most of my time sitting in a chair, trying to behave. From that chair I could see hanging on the wall the framed photograph of a man who did not look like anyone in my family (fig. 15, left). There was also a bright yellow book (fig. 12), written in German (a language no one in my family spoke), sitting on a shelf among a pile of other books.

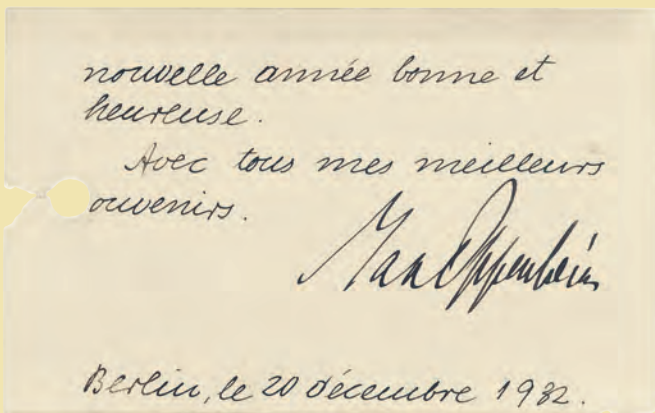
Years later, I went back to that apartment to help my parents move its contents into storage. When taking down the photograph, I noticed that it was signed on the back by a “Baron Max von Oppenheim” (fig. 15, right). I opened the yellow book and found several documents. One was a postcard of what looked like the sculpture of a bird (fig. 17) sent by von Oppenheim to Faik Borkhoche, my great-grandfather. Another was a photograph, taken in Tell Halaf in 1929, of my great-grandfather holding a snake (fig. 19). I was confused. How did memorabilia belonging to a member of the German nobility come to be in the dining room of a relatively quiet Lebanese family, and what was my great-grandfather’s connection to it? My mother’s answer was simple and direct: “It is all a spy story.” This is how it goes...





12.

*Der Tell Halaf: Eine neue Kultur im ältesten Mesopotamien*, by  
Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, 1931 (1st German edition, 354 pages)  
Printed paper and binding, 9 1/8 x 6 1/8 in. (23.2 x 15.6 cm)  
Published by F. A. Brockhaus, Leipzig  
Provenance: Faik Borkhoche (1932–d. 1981; gift from Baron Max  
von Oppenheim); by descent to his great-grandson Rayyane Tabet  
Collection of Rayyane Tabet, Beirut



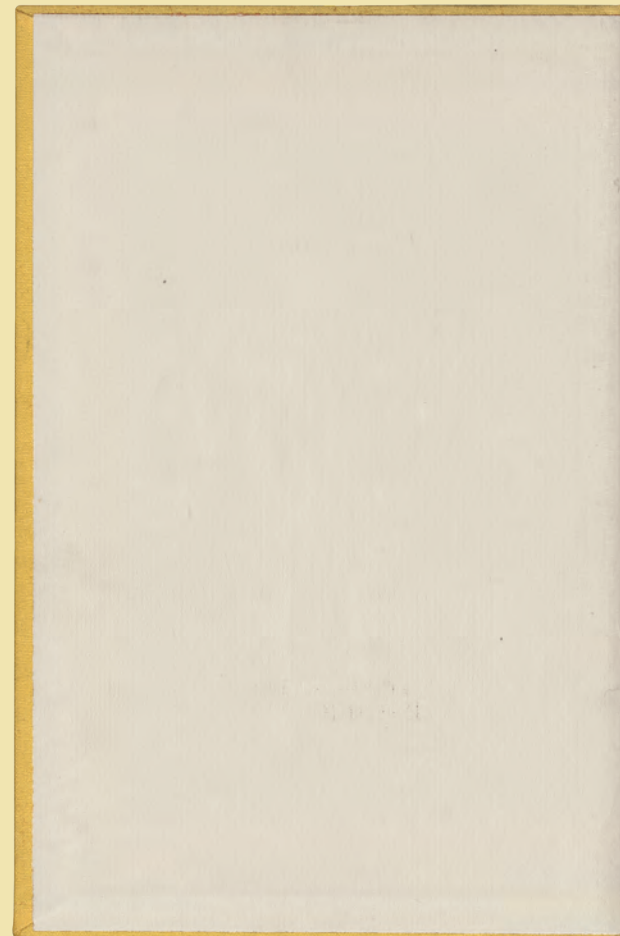
13.

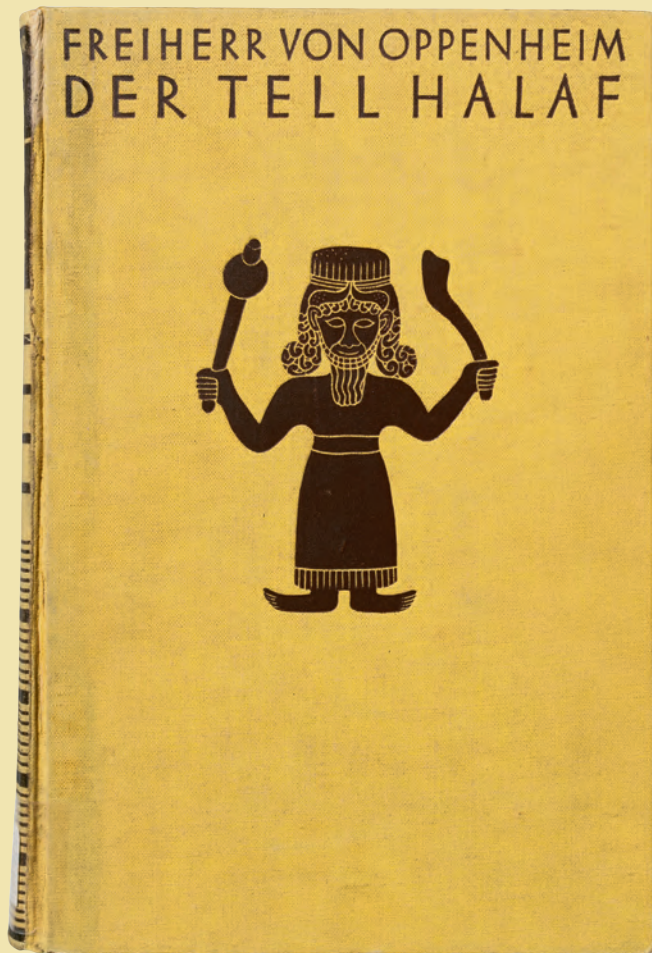
Calling Card of Baron Max von Oppenheim, ca. 1932  
Printed notecard with ink, 2 5/8 x 4 in. (6.7 x 10.2 cm)  
Provenance: Faik Borkhoche (December 20, 1932–d. 1981; sent by  
Baron Max von Oppenheim); by descent to his great-grandson  
Rayyane Tabet  
Translation: THE BARON MAX OPPENHEIM / MINISTER OF GERMANY /  
Wishing you a good and happy new year / With my best regards /  
Max Oppenheim / Berlin, December 20th, 1932 / BERLIN SAVIGNYPLATZ 6  
Collection of Rayyane Tabet, Beirut

Early one morning, a Bedouin tribe went to bury their elder on a hill. While digging his grave, they came upon a large stone sculpture of an animal with a human head. Taken aback and scared, they covered it up and went looking for another burial site. That year, their land suffered from an unprecedented drought and was invaded by a swarm of locusts. There was also a cholera outbreak. The tribe attributed these misfortunes to evil spirits, hidden in the stone, that had been released when the statue was unearthed. They started to think of ways to rid themselves of the curse that had befallen them.

When Max von Oppenheim arrived at the village of Tell Halaf, in the summer of 1899, the tribesmen told him the story of gods, demons, and monsters hiding underground, hoping that the curiosity of this foreigner would lead him to dig up the statue so that the curse would be carried away from them. Max intended to stay in Tell Halaf for only one night. At the time, he was a thirty-nine-year-old German diplomat living in Cairo, on his way to Baghdad to establish a route for the railroad that would connect Baghdad to Berlin. The story fired his imagination, so, armed with a shovel, he went to the site of the buried gods. By the end of the day, he had discovered a few more sculptures. That night, an urgent dispatch arrived at his campground ordering him to return immediately to Berlin. Surprised, he reburied the statues and promised to come back as soon as he could.

It would take von Oppenheim twelve years to obtain the necessary authorization from the Ottoman Empire and return to look for his buried treasure. That was when Max found the remains of an entire city hidden under the plains of Tell Halaf. His greatest discoveries included a palace—whose facade incorporated a five-meter-high portico depicting gods standing on animals—and a burial





SYRIA  
SITE  
REPORT

To  
Mr. Herbert E. Winlock  
Director of the Metropolitan Museum  
with the kindest regards  
of Baron Max Oppenheim.  
New York, Febr. 19<sup>th</sup> 1932.

GIFT FROM CHARLES K. WILKINSON  
TO THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST DEPT.  
9/78

WITHDRAWN  
Thomas J. Watson Library  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

14.

*Der Tell Halaf: Eine neue Kultur im ältesten Mesopotamien*, by  
Max Freiherr von Oppenheim, 1931 (1st German edition, 354 pages)  
Printed paper and binding, 9 1/8 x 6 1/8 in. (23.2 x 15.6 cm)  
Published by F. A. Brockhaus, Leipzig  
Provenance: Herbert P. Winlock (from February 19, 1932;  
gift from Baron Max von Oppenheim); Charles Wilkinson  
(until 1978; his gift to the Thomas J. Watson Library,  
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; withdrawn  
September 2018)  
Transcription of signature page: SYRIA / SITE / REPORT /  
To Mr. Herbert E. Winlock / Director of the Metropolitan  
Museum with the kindest regards / of Baron Max Oppenheim /  
New York, Febr. 19<sup>th</sup> 1932. / GIFT FROM CHARLES K. WILKINSON /  
TO THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST DEPT. 9/78 / WITHDRAWN /  
Thomas J. Watson Library / The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan  
Museum of Art, New York

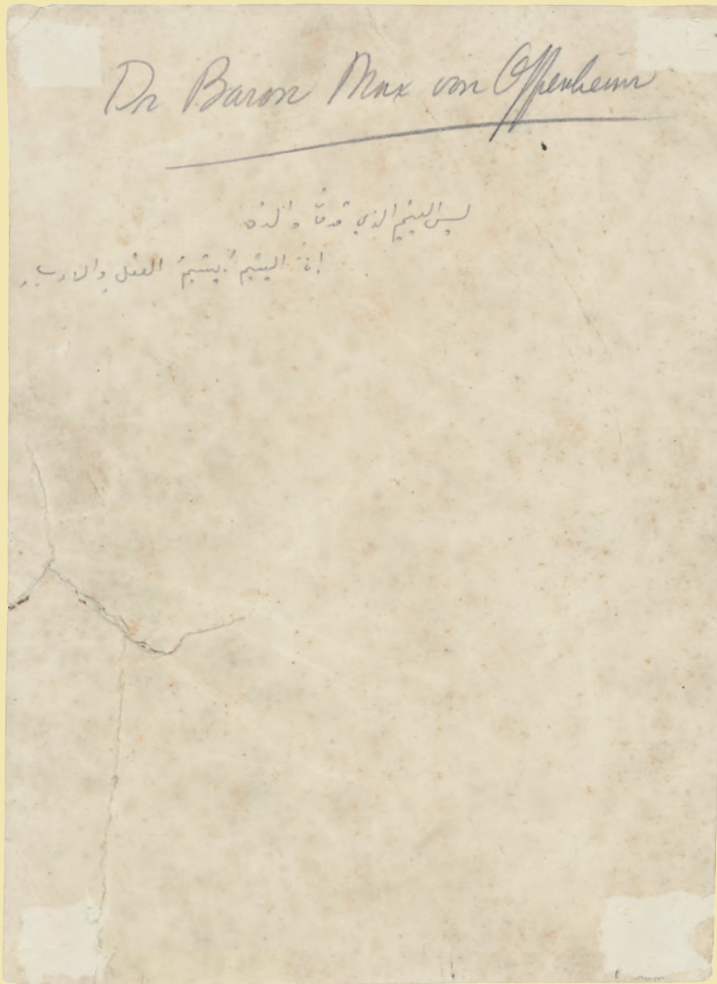
ground with the figure of a seated woman. World War I broke out before Max could share his finds with the Ottomans, and he was forced to evacuate, leaving everything behind.

In 1927, at the age of sixty-seven, Max returned to Tell Halaf for the third time. By then the Ottoman Empire had been dissolved, its territories partitioned, and the village was now in Syria, under the governance of the French Mandate. Max brought along on that visit Igor von Jakimow, a Russian sculptor who specialized in plaster works, to make full-scale replicas of several of the ruins, with the idea that each nation participating in the partage agreement, in addition to their share, would also receive a replica of what they did not own. Following the division of the finds, the material that remained in Syria was transported to Aleppo and formed the major endowment of the National Museum, founded in 1931.

On his return to Berlin, Max tried to find a home for his share of the find. He approached the Pergamon Museum, which was under construction at the time, but was unsuccessful. Undeterred, he decided to establish his own museum, a private institution known as the Tell Halaf Museum, housed in a former factory in Charlottenburg. The Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin quickly became an important tourist attraction, since it did not differentiate the archaeological finds from rugs and costumes and did not follow the usual rules of conservation and chronology. Among its many visitors were the British archaeologist Max Mallowan and his wife, famed crime novelist Agatha Christie, who recalls in her memoirs being shown around by von Oppenheim on a grueling five-hour visit, during which he stopped his enthusiastic commentary to say, lovingly, "Ah, my beautiful Venus!" as he looked up to the statue of the seated figure.







15.

*Baron Max von Oppenheim*, ca. 1930

Gelatin silver print, ink, and pencil, 8 ¼ × 6 ½ in. (21 × 15,6 cm)

Signed by von Oppenheim and annotated at a later date by

Faik Borkhoche with an Arabic proverb

Provenance: Faik Borkhoche (1932–d. 1981; gift from Baron Max von

Oppenheim); by descent to his great-grandson Rayyane Tabet

Transcription and translation: Dr. Baron Max von Oppenheim /

“An orphan is not one without a father / An orphan is one without manners”

Collection of Rayyane Tabet, Beirut

On November 22, 1943, the Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin was hit by a phosphorous bomb. With temperatures exceeding one thousand degrees Celsius, all the artifacts within it were destroyed except for those made of basalt, a volcanic rock that can withstand extreme heat. When firefighters came to douse the flames, however, the sudden temperature change between the cold water and the hot stone shattered the sculptures. Despite logistical difficulties, the director of the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin managed to get the fragments crated up on behalf of von Oppenheim. In August 1944, nine truckloads full of rubble were brought to the cellars of the Pergamon Museum to await an uncertain fate.

Max von Oppenheim died in 1946 at the age of eighty-six. He is buried in Landshut, Bavaria, under a basalt replica of the bottom half of the seated woman he so admired. After the war, the Pergamon Museum was in East Berlin, while the burned-out Tell Halaf Museum was in West Berlin. Nothing could be done with fragments housed in a museum in the East but owned by a family living in the West. It was only after the reunification of Germany, in 1990, that an agreement was reached allowing restorers to handle the fragments. The reconstruction project began in August 2001. Some 27,000 basalt fragments were laid out on 200 wood pallets. By 2011, 25,000 fragments had been reassembled into thirty sculptures and architectural elements. Fractures remained visible, however, and no attempt was made to disguise them; even molten glass from the roof of the destroyed Tell Halaf Museum was left on the surface. The 2,000 remaining fragments that could not be identified or matched with anything else are kept in several crates and cabinets in the storage rooms of the Pergamon Museum, which is currently undergoing a major renovation (due to be completed in 2035).



**16.**

*Baron Max von Oppenheim*, ca. 1930

Gelatin silver print, 9 × 7 in. (22.9 × 17.8 cm)

Provenance: Bundesarchiv (German Federal Archives), Koblenz  
(from 1930)

Transcription and translation of image records: File Information /

Image type: Photograph / Orientation: Portrait / Color: No /

Dimensions: 2778×3823 pixels / File Type: image/jpeg / File Size: 546.8 kB /

Positive print: Yes / Picture negative: No / Inventory: Image #183 /

General German News Agency / Signature: Image183-2009-0113-500 /

Archive title: Portrait Dr. Max Freiherr von Oppenheim / Orient

researcher / Date: 1930 / Retrieved on July 1, 2019 from: <https://www>

[.bild.bundesarchiv.de/cross-search/search/\\_1561967767/](https://www.bild.bundesarchiv.de/cross-search/search/_1561967767/)

Bundesarchiv, Koblenz

When that day comes, the restored facade of the palace of Tell Halaf will serve as the entrance to the Ancient Near East collection. Meanwhile, the conservators at the National Museum of Aleppo are piling up sandbags around the plaster replica of that same facade while they wait for an end to the war in Syria (see fig. 28).

Just then, I interrupted my mother and asked: “I thought this was a spy story; so, where are all the spies?” “Well,” she said, “this is where it gets a little complicated. When I was child, my grandfather, your great-grandfather, Faik Borkhoche, used to tell me how, back in 1929, the governing authorities of the French Mandate stationed in Lebanon sent him to be Max von Oppenheim’s secretary and to gather information on the archaeological dig he was carrying out in Tell Halaf.” At the time, the Germans needed to make detailed maps of North Africa, the Levant, and the Gulf for a possible military attack. Since these areas were under British and French rule, mapmaking had to be done secretly, so intelligence officers disguised as ethnographers or archaeologists were sent on sham survey missions there. The French suspected that von Oppenheim was one of these intelligence officers because they knew that for thirty years he had been going back to the same location on the border between Syria and Turkey. They were afraid that he was radicalizing the Bedouin tribes and preparing an undercover coup against the colonial powers.

It seems, then, that my great-grandfather’s job was to spy on a suspected spy. He wrote a report of everything Max did and sent it back to Beirut for the French to analyze. Along with this material he sent photographs to my great-grandmother, keeping her informed of his movements (fig. 19). The French were never able to find any proof of Max’s spying activities, so when his expedition ended,



17.

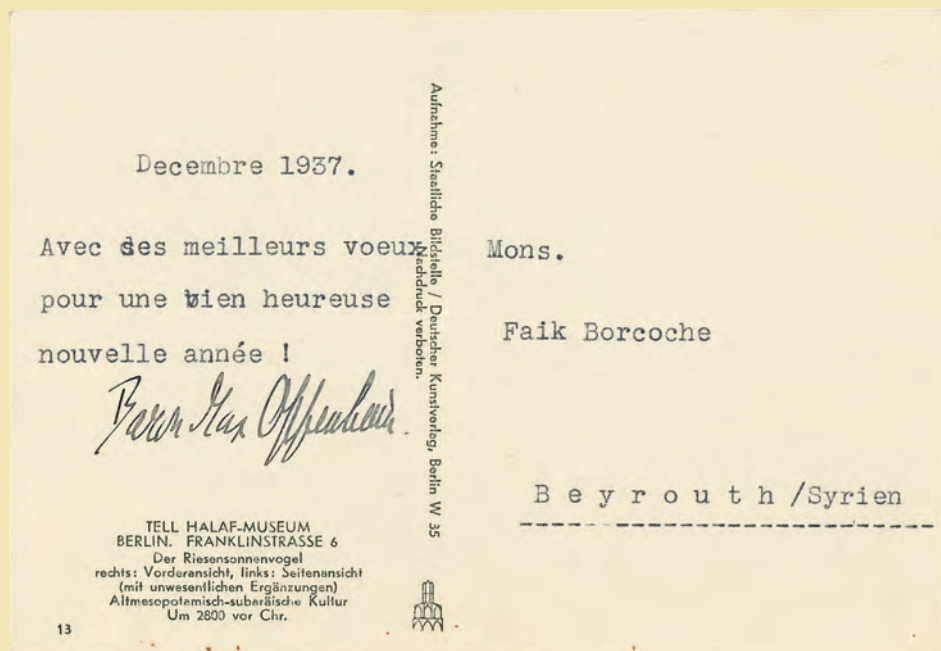
Postcard with image of Tell Halaf artifact, ca. 1937

Printed postcard and ink, 4 1/8 x 5 7/8 in. (10.5 x 14.9 cm)

Provenance: Faik Borkhoche (December 1937–d. 1981; sent by Baron Max von Oppenheim); by descent to his great-grandson Rayyane Tabet

Translation: Mr. Faik Borcoche / Beirut / Syria / December 1937 / With my best wishes for a happy new year / Baron Max Oppenheim

Collection of Rayyane Tabet, Beirut



in the fall of 1929, my great-grandfather's mission was curtailed and he went back to his day job as a government employee, translating documents from Arabic to French.

After returning to Beirut, Faik and Max remained in touch until the beginning of World War II. They exchanged letters, books, photographs, postcards, and greeting cards (fig. 13).

When my great-grandfather died, in 1981, he had nothing of value to leave behind except a goat-hair rug that had been given to him by the Bedouin of Tell Halaf back in 1929. It was his wish that the twenty-meter-long rug should be divided equally among his five children, with the request that they, in turn, divide it among their children, and so on and so forth, until the rug eventually disappeared. As of today, the rug has been divided into twenty-three pieces across five generations.

In February 2016, I moved to Berlin on a one-year artist residency and decided to track down the legacy of Max von Oppenheim and to look for more proof of his unlikely meeting with my great-grandfather. So began a journey into the complex and contradictory world of Max von Oppenheim and his work in Tell Halaf, a world that included the excavation, transportation, display, destruction, and reconstruction of a Neo-Hittite palace; the creation of the National Museum in Aleppo; the dispersal of works from Tell Halaf to museums in Berlin, Paris, London, New York, Baltimore, Aleppo, and Deir ez-Zor; and the discovery of my great-grandfather's diary from his 1929 trip to Tell Halaf in the archives of the S.A.L Oppenheim bank in Cologne. While researching Max's possible involvement in intelligence missions within Syria and the region, I found his portrait (fig. 16) on file in the German Federal Archives in Koblenz. It was identical to the one I had seen hanging on the wall in my grandparent's living room.



18.

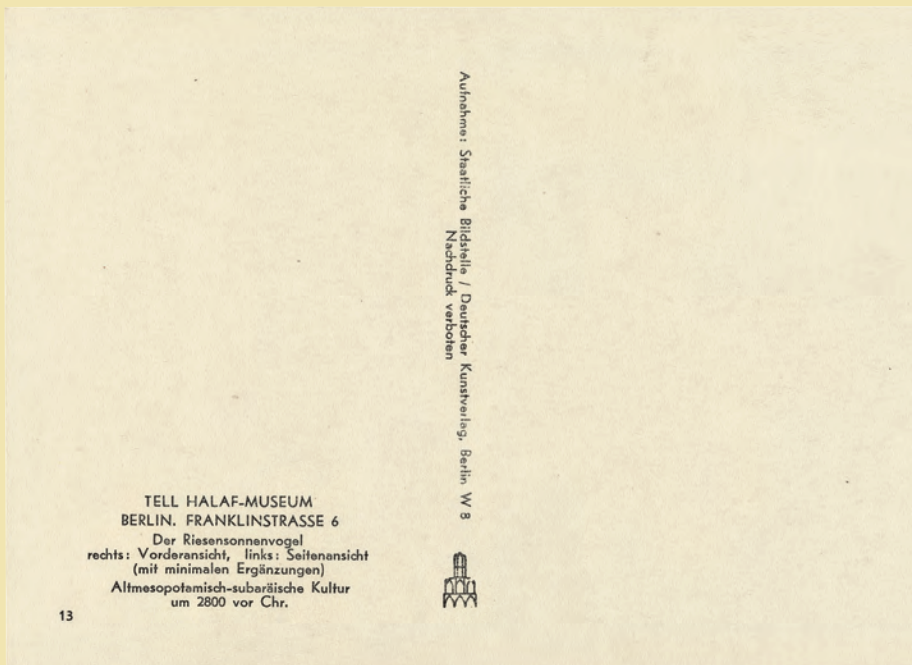
Postcard with image of Tell Halaf artifact, ca. 1931

Printed postcard, 4 1/8 x 5 7/8 in. (10,5 x 14,9 cm)

Provenance: Ernst Herzfeld (from ca. 1930s; gift from Baron Max von Oppenheim); Ernst Herzfeld Papers, Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (from 1944)

Translation: TELL HALAF-MUSEUM / BERLIN. FRANKLINSTRASSE 6 / Giant Sun Bird / right: front view, left: side view / (with unwarranted additions) / Ancient Mesopotamian Culture / 2800 B.C.

Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York



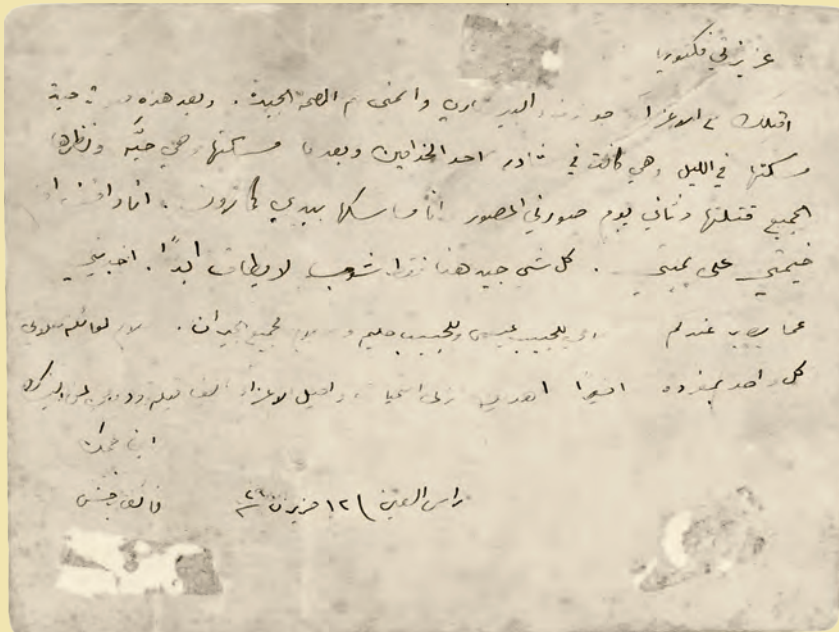
In September 2017, during a meeting in New York with Kim Benzel, Curator in Charge of the Metropolitan Museum's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, I was shown fourteen postcards from the Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin. These postcards came from the Ernst Herzfeld Papers: a collection of thousands of photographs, original drawings and paintings, clippings, correspondence, maps, sketch-books, notebooks, and manuscripts of scholarly work. They had been purchased in 1944 by The Met from Herzfeld—a German archaeologist, philologist, geographer, and historian in the field of Near Eastern Studies—shortly before he left his position as a senior scholar at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton University. One of the postcards from the series (fig. 18) was identical to the one sent by Max to my great-grandfather in 1937.



In May 2018, Yelena Rakic, Associate Curator in The Met's Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, found in a pile of withdrawn books from the Museum's Thomas J. Watson Library a first edition of von Oppenheim's *Der Tell Halaf* (fig. 14). In 1932, while visiting the Museum, von Oppenheim had given the book to Herbert Winlock, then director of The Met. Winlock later gave the book to Charles Wilkinson, curator emeritus of Near Eastern art, who in turn bequeathed it to the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art in 1978. The book was later transferred to the Thomas J. Watson Library and withdrawn from there in early 2018. It was identical to the book Max had sent to my great-grandfather in 1932 and that had stood alongside many others in my grandparents' library.

In January 2019, Yazan Kopty, a friend living in Washington, D. C., took me to the headquarters of the National Geographic Society to show me some of the material he had found in their archive of unpublished works. While researching photographs taken around Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine in the





19.

*Faik Borkhoche Holding a Snake at Tell Halaf*, June 5, 1929

Gelatin silver print and ink, 6 3/4 × 4 3/4 in. (16.2 × 12.1 cm)

Provenance: Victoria Saba Borkhoche, (1929–d. 1983; sent to her by her husband, Faik Borkhoche, with a handwritten note on the reverse); by descent to her great-grandson Rayyane Tabet

Transcription and translation: Dear Victoria, / I kiss you; I kiss Joseph, Albert and Marie and wish you all good health. / This is a photograph of the snake I caught hidden under a Bedouin's tent. After showing it around, I killed it. / The next day a photographer took this portrait of me holding it. I am standing and my tent is behind to my right.

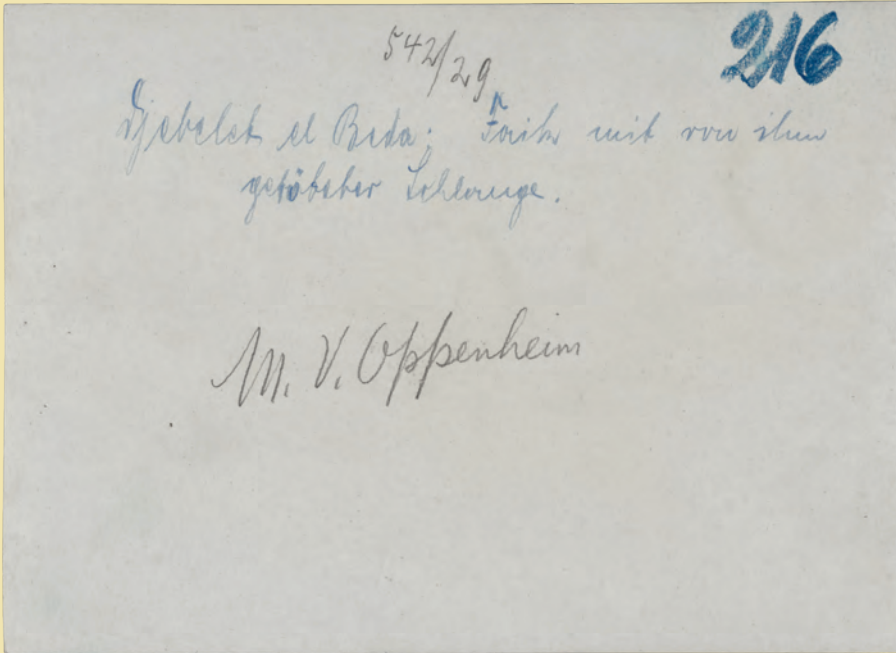
All is well here except the unbearable scorching heat. / Send me your news and send my regards to all the neighbors. My best wishes and a thousand kisses to the kids. / Yours / Faik / Tell Halaf, June 12 1929

Collection of Rayyane Tabet, Beirut

early half of the twentieth century, Yazan had come across a series labeled “Max von Oppenheim.” These 250 photographs were part of a file that also contained the edited manuscript of an article Max had written for *National Geographic* magazine in 1932. The article was never published, however, and the photographs were never seen. While flipping through them I found another print (likely made from the same negative) of the photograph taken in 1929 showing my great-grandfather holding a snake (fig. 20).

These doubles of the four objects I first encountered in my grandparents’ apartment exist in institutional contexts much different from that of a private living room. By finding them elsewhere, so unexpectedly, I became acutely conscious of the possibility for objects to circulate and to tell different stories. Much like an image formed in the brain out of a combination of discrete signals from the eyes, these four objects, each encountered twice, create a web of connections, one that accepts and looks for contradictions and multiplicity rather than a singular, unified account of what happened when Max von Oppenheim and Faik Borkhoche met in Tell Halaf in 1929.





20.

*Faik Borkhoche Holding a Snake at Tell Halaf, June 5, 1929*

Gelatin silver print, ink, and pencil, 7 × 5 in. (17.8 × 12.7 cm)

Provenance: National Geographic Society Archives, Washington, D.C.

(from 1932; sent by Baron Max von Oppenheim to the National Geographic Society)

Transcription and translation: Inventory: 216 / Image: 542/29 / Caption:

Gebeleh el Beda / Faik holding a snake / Signature: M. V. Oppenheim  
National Geographic Society Archives, Washington, D.C.



21a-d. Catalogue cards of the four orthostats from Tell Halaf in The Met collection (see figs. 3a-d).

# The Ghost in the Museum: A Case Study

CLARE DAVIES

Museums are full of things: human-made things displayed in vitrines, set atop pedestals, and hung on walls; things named and catalogued (figs. 21a–d); things described in wall labels. Museums are also brimming with absences. Although these absences often escape our notice, what is *not* there can have a potent, sometimes overwhelming effect on the viewer. This is especially true at an encyclopedic museum such as The Met, where medieval statues inhabit no cathedral, period rooms stand apart from their original buildings, and ancient Egyptian sarcophagi are missing the bodies they once held. The people, rituals, and occasions for which many works on display were originally intended have disappeared. Indeed, one of the Museum's most important tasks is to transform these things—which straddle presence and absence—into autonomous objects worthy of attention. In this context, the art historian and curator become storytellers, creating narratives that guide visitors from the familiar to the foreign (or “alien”) and back again. Any absence is obscured, and the thing thus becomes an artifact.

In science fiction, writes literary historian Gary K. Wolfe, the artifact is “an icon that links the known world with the vast unknown universe that is science fiction's stock in trade.”<sup>1</sup> The artifact on display in the museum serves a similar function, providing visitors with a link to a panoply of temporally or geographically distant cultures and confirming the role of the encyclopedic museum as a portal to the remote past and/or faraway places. This unknown, which becomes an essential component of the museum artifact and is accessible only to us, the viewers, is what philosopher Eelco Runia terms “a ‘presence in absence’ not just in the sense that it presents something that isn't there, but also in the sense that in the absence (or at least the radical inconspicuousness) that *is* there, the thing that isn't there is still present.”<sup>2</sup>

Although Runia's “presence-in-absence” can at first be difficult to appreciate, especially within a museum setting,

once acknowledged it returns consistently as a speck of sand in the eye, irritating and inflaming the surface of the present with this manifestation of the irreducible and unknowable. *Rayyane Tabet / Alien Property* is in part an attempt to see the museum through eyes that have been resensitized to what is missing.

## Stories

*Alien Property* tells two stories: the first is personal, voiced by the artist Rayyane Tabet, while the second is institutional, spoken in the official language of The Met. The first stems from Tabet's great-grandfather's involvement in the excavation of the ancient Neo-Hittite settlement of Guzana (Gozan), located at Tell Halaf, in what is today northeastern Syria, and his research into this familial connection to the site and its artifacts (for more on Tell Halaf, see Kim Benzel's essay in this *Bulletin*). The second story addresses how four stone reliefs from the palace excavated at Tell Halaf entered The Met collection in 1943 (see figs. 3a–d). Both offer ways of accounting for how absences, under certain circumstances, can come to define the present.

During a recent live performance in The Met's Assyrian sculpture court, Tabet, speaking in the first person, narrated the string of events leading up to his arrival at the Museum on the trail of the four reliefs from Tell Halaf (fig. 22; for a version of that story, see his essay in this *Bulletin*). He opened by showing a black-and-white photograph that had once hung in the Beirut apartment of his maternal grandparents (see fig. 15): a familiar image, but one whose significance was unknown to him until his mother recounted the story of her grandfather, Faik Borkhoche (1895–1981), and a certain Baron Max von Oppenheim. The man in the photograph was the baron: an amateur German archaeologist who served as director of the Tell Halaf excavations on the eve of World War I and again during the interwar period. In 1929, the authorities in Beirut for what was then the



22. Rayyane Tabet performing *Dear Victoria*, an earlier iteration of *Alien Property* organized at the Carré d'Art, Musée d'Art Contemporain, Nîmes, 2019

French Mandate for Syria and Lebanon dispatched Borkhoche to the excavation with a directive: keep an eye on von Oppenheim, whom they suspected of carrying out military reconnaissance by using the excavation at Tell Halaf as cover. The authorities worried that the baron, referred to by British contemporaries as “the Kaiser’s spy,” was intent on radicalizing and arming local Bedouin tribes (fig. 23). To complicate matters, the baron likely understood the peculiar decision by the Beirut authorities (assigning an unknown young man to be his personal secretary) for what it was: Faik Borkhoche had been sent to spy on him.

Questions about the photograph led Tabet to search for further evidence of his great-grandfather’s involvement with Tell Halaf. Nearby, on a bookshelf in his grandparents’ apartment, Tabet found a mustard-yellow volume by von Oppenheim titled *Der Tell Halaf* (fig. 24; see also fig. 12). Slipped between the pages of the book were a sepia-toned photograph of the artist’s great-grandfather as well as correspondence between him and von Oppenheim (see figs. 17, 19). In this second photograph, dated 1929, Borkhoche—a compact man with a triumphant smile—holds up the long, limp body of a dead snake. A figure in workers’ clothes appears to his right; in the background we glimpse a tent, part of the transient architecture of the Tell Halaf excavation. Tabet’s deep dive into the history of the excavation and the



24. Frontispiece and title page of von Oppenheim's *Der Tell Halaf* (1931), showing the entryway to the National Museum of Aleppo, based on an archaeological reconstruction of the palace entrance at Tell Halaf. Archives of the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

fate of its finds had begun. Once transformed into a script, the story became part of a performance by the artist, with the photographs and book now props offered to the audience as illustration and evidence.

This type of original research is a key component of Tabet's artistic practice, for which he transforms elements of historical narrative and material culture into new types of investigations. To do so he relies on a variety of media, from three-dimensional objects to site-specific installations to live performance. The story tying his great-grandfather to Tell Halaf is so unlikely that at times it is tempting to assume that all or parts of it have been manufactured. That strategy is familiar to Walid Raad (born 1967, Chbanieh, Lebanon), Tabet's former teacher at Cooper Union, New York, and arguably the most celebrated artist to emerge from Lebanon in the past thirty years. Raad is recognized as a master of parafictional art, a genre that presents partially manufactured histories under the guise of historical fact.<sup>3</sup> This approach encourages viewers to adopt a more circumspect approach to historical modes of representation and to acknowledge the conventions that support museological and mass-media claims to truth. Tabet, in contrast, typically builds sculptures and installations out of stories that more or less adhere to received histories yet are themselves often stranger than fiction. What is at stake in his

work is not the representation of truth per se but the translation of past events into the visual and spatial language of contemporary art.

#### *Object List*

The exhibition *Alien Property* consists of two vitrines of archival material; the four Neo-Hittite stone reliefs (or orthostats) in The Met collection; one Neo-Hittite figurative sculpture; and two works of art by Tabet. The two vitrines contain, respectively, a selection of Borkhoche's personal effects and documents that catalogue The Met's Tell Halaf fragments and record the circumstances of their acquisition. Exhibited nearby is a monumental Neo-Hittite statue unearthed at Tell Halaf: the figure of an enthroned (or seated) figure affectionately referred to by Baron von Oppenheim as his "beautiful Venus" (fig. 25). In 1929, the baron removed the statue from Syria and took it to Berlin, where it became the centerpiece of the museum he established to house his trove of artifacts unearthed at Tell Halaf. Following the destruction of the Tell Halaf Museum during an Allied bombing raid and subsequent fire, fragments of the three-ton basalt statue were among those collected and stored at the Pergamon Museum for six decades until conservators could begin the painstaking work of reassembling the massive figure. Although they



25. Von Oppenheim with the statue of a seated figure (his “beautiful Venus”) in the Tell Halaf Museum, Berlin, 1931

26. *Statue of a Seated Figure* (reconstructed 2001–10), Neo-Hittite, ca. 10th–9th century B.C. Tell Halaf (ancient Guzana), Syria. Basalt, H. 75 5/8 in. (192 cm), W. 32 1/4 in. (82 cm), D. 39 3/8 in. (100 cm). Max Freiherr von Oppenheim-Stiftung, Cologne



managed to resurrect the statue’s impressive bearing and powerful presence, following modern conservation standards they made no efforts to hide her scars (fig. 26). Today the seated woman from ancient Guzana is a mosaic of shards: a record of the violence that war visits upon peoples and culture alike.

The theme of fragmentation and reassembly appears throughout *Alien Property* and in Tabet’s work more generally. *Orthostates*, an ongoing project the artist began in 2017, comprises a series of framed charcoal rubbings, each of which corresponds to one of the orthostats that once





27. Installation of *Orthostates* at the daadgalerie, Berlin, 2017

constituted an extended frieze decorating the exterior base of the palace at Tell Halaf. The work's title is a portmanteau, punning on the archaeological term *orthostat*, meaning "upright stone," and the word *state*. The latter gestures toward the role of various state actors in dislocating and dividing the reliefs as well as the fluid identity (or multiple states) of the work itself. Across the Assyrian relief gallery, *Orthostates* faces another of Tabet's ongoing projects. Begun in 2016, *Genealogy* is composed of five segments from a long, narrow goat-hair rug that have been arranged in the form of a genealogical map or family tree.

Tabet describes *Orthostates* and *Genealogy* as sculptures, even though they resist conventional categories of objecthood. Both works are site specific, and their manner of display in *Alien Property* draws from the artist's ongoing research while also responding to the unique conditions imposed by The Met's galleries. Constructed around themes of division, dispersal, and reassembly, both feature historic objects that have been broken apart and their constituent pieces relocated to various collections. Both are also based on the artist's reassembly of those pieces in an effort to

reconstruct a new representation: in the case of *Orthostates*, the frieze at Tell Halaf, and in *Genealogy*, a family lineage. By necessity, each project makes reference to missing elements, and these absences become powerful, active parts of the works themselves.

#### *Orthostates*

*Orthostates* addresses the excavation, division, and eventual dispersal of sections of the frieze from the palace at Tell Halaf. Tabet began by identifying the extant Tell Halaf reliefs held in museum collections in Berlin, Paris, London, Baltimore, Aleppo, Deir ez-Zor (Syria), and New York. He then set out to make charcoal rubbings of as many of the reliefs as he could, eventually assembling a series of thirty-two individually framed images (fig. 27). Owing to the inaccessibility of many of the reliefs—often because of theft, conflict, or destruction—the artist understood that restaging the frieze was, from the outset, destined to fail. Ultimately, Tabet's efforts are directed not at the creation of a copy or substitute that possesses the completeness and coherence of the original frieze, but rather in assembling



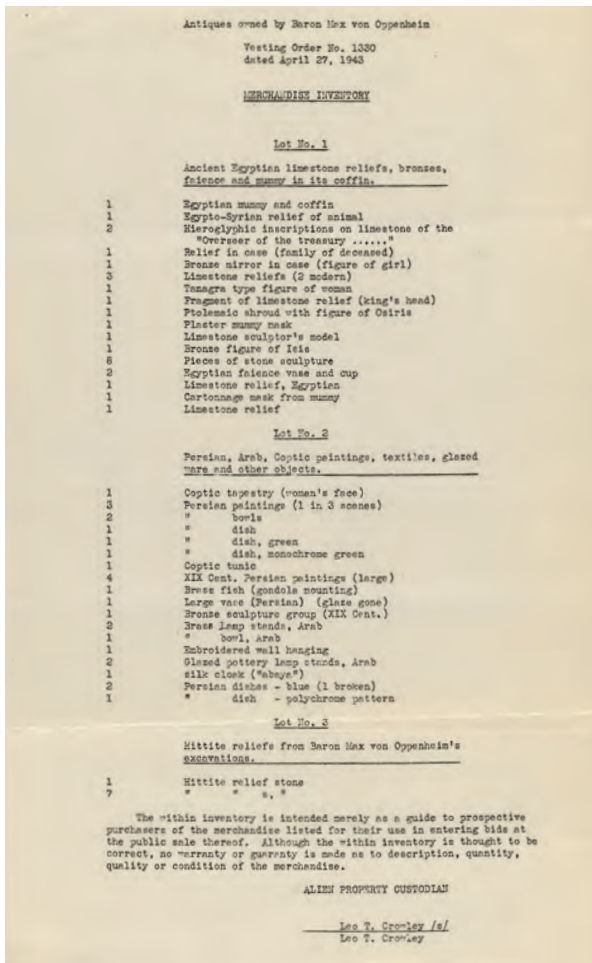
28. Protective enclosure at the entrance to the National Museum of Aleppo, 2013

the combination of (positive) impressions and (negative) absences that constitute its present-day existence. At the same time, perhaps one of the most potent effects of Tabet's efforts to recompose the Tell Halaf frieze through charcoal rubbings has been to muddy the boundary separating the two, since *Orthostates* evokes presence and absence as complementary and entangled, rather than opposing, states of existence.

The technique of charcoal rubbing was deployed widely by art historians and archaeologists in the nineteenth century to record engravings and reliefs. To make a rubbing, a piece of paper is held against or secured to a tombstone or some other surface (such as an elaborately ornamented panel) and a piece of charcoal, crayon, or pencil is scraped across the blank page to create a facsimile impression of the text or image below. Despite their blurriness, the thirty-two rubbings from *Orthostates* can claim a certain success in this documentary vein, as together they form one of the most complete representations of the frieze that exists today outside of a book. Taken from reliefs housed in museum collections across Europe and the United States, they nevertheless represent only about a sixth of the 194 reliefs that constituted the original frieze.

Some of the obstacles Tabet faces in completing his reconstructed frieze are institutional in nature, such as having to request and wait for permission from museums to access the works in their care. Considerations related to the conservation of the reliefs have also reduced the number of possible rubbings. The frieze was originally composed of alternating (black) basalt and (painted red) limestone orthostats; owing to the fragility of limestone, conservation staff have routinely prohibited the artist from making rubbings of the latter.

Other obstacles are tied to the removal of the artifacts from Syria and their subsequent exposure to human destruction, such as the bombing of the Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin and the subsequent splintering of the artifacts into some 27,000 fragments. Even today, armed conflict continues to vex Tabet's restaging. As a condition of the partage agreement to which the baron's excavation was party, a group of thirty-four reliefs remained in French Mandate Syria in 1929 and later became part of the founding collection of the National Museum of Aleppo. These reliefs are now out of reach as Syria's bloody, ongoing civil conflict, which has already destroyed much of Aleppo's historical fabric, rages on (fig. 28). Another group of eight reliefs



29. "Inventory of Antiques Owned by Baron Max von Oppenheim," April 27, 1943. Archives of the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

escaped the bombing of the Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin when they were transported to the United States by von Oppenheim in 1931. The baron's hopes of finding a buyer for the artifacts fell flat, however, and while his status under the Nazi regime was always tenuous (he was of mixed Jewish heritage), the American government nonetheless designated him an "alien" as a national of an Axis power. Consequently, he proved fair game for the state-run Office of the Alien Property Custodian (1917–66), a government agency established by President Woodrow Wilson during World War I charged with identifying and confiscating the property, property rights, and money of citizens of "enemy" nations with which America was at war. The Alien Property Custodian thus seized the eight orthostats von Oppenheim had imported from Germany alongside a substantial list

001	PARTIAL ANIMAL	LIMESTONE	ALEPPO
002	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
003	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
004	TRACES OF AN IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
005	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
006	MAN WITH CLUB AND STAFF	BASALT	BERLIN
007	BIRD	BASALT	BERLIN
008	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
009	FEMALE SPHINX	BASALT	BERLIN
010	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
011	NO IMAGE	BASALT	LOST
012	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
013	FLYING BIRD	BASALT	LONDON
014	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
015	GOOSE	BASALT	BERLIN
016	ARCHER	BASALT	BERLIN
017	LION HUNT / PALM TREE	BASALT	NEW YORK
018	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
019	WINGED CREATURE	BASALT	LOST
020	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST
021	LION	BASALT	ALEPPO
022	RIDER WITH SHIELD AND WEAPON	BASALT	BERLIN
023	NO IMAGE	LIMESTONE	LOST

30. Detail of the index of reliefs that constitute the Tell Halaf frieze. The index accompanies the installation of Rayyane Tabet's *Orthostates* (2017–). Courtesy of the artist

of other ancient artifacts in his possession (fig. 29). Offered at auction, the eight Tell Halaf reliefs were acquired by The Met; four were then subsequently sold to the Walters Art Gallery (now the Walters Art Museum), Baltimore.

Accompanying *Orthostates* is an index of the subject matter and medium of each of the original reliefs as well as their location (or, if that is unknown, their current status, such as "lost" or "destroyed") (fig. 30). The index—a vinyl label applied directly to the wall—creates a horizon line of information above the framed rubbings, accentuating the sense of loss that accrues in the wide breach between the original elements of the frieze and the number of rubbings that Tabet has been able to make (fig. 31). The format of the index echoes the documentary aesthetic of the rubbings, recalling the lists of names often inscribed on modern-day war memorials. In an online audio recording, the artist intones the contents of the index in Arabic and English, his impassive voice lending further poignancy to the loss already manifest in the ancient frieze.

While *Orthostates* mourns the disappearance of art as a result of war, colonial despoilment, theft, and time, in doing so it also vividly invokes the violence these same phenomena have wrought on human lives and communities. In this regard, the frieze serves as much as an accounting of lost

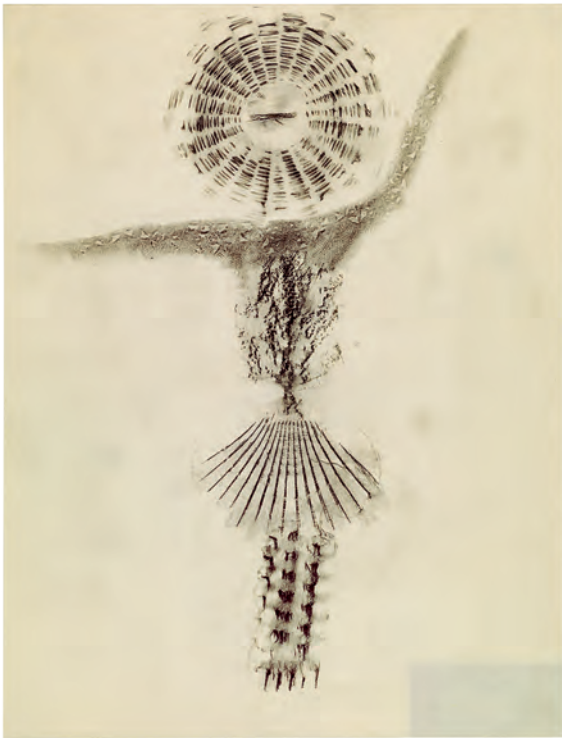


31. Detail of *Orthostates* showing the index of reliefs on the wall above the framed rubbings

lives as lost artifacts, recalling the tendency today among politicians and media outlets to substitute the work of art for the individual, such as the offer extended by François Hollande, then president of France, to provide asylum for Syrian antiquities while limiting the number of refugees accepted into France from the war-torn state. *Orthostates* asks the viewer to register both the artifact and the individual life as inextricably intertwined.

In addition to its position at the nexus of the ancient and contemporary, *Orthostates* is embedded within a specific history of modern art. While excavations were underway at Tell Halaf, interwar avant-garde artistic circles in Western Europe were reinterpreting the role of the rubbing, seeing it not as a document with claims to historical objectivity but an image in service to the artist's subconscious, subjective, and "irrational" mind. The technique was most famously taken up by the French Surrealists, who saw it as a means of escaping the rational, positivist model of knowledge that they believed governed the arts and sciences but also fed the deadly conflicts that had convulsed the early twentieth century. To them, the rubbing promised to serve as a method of achieving the "pure psychic automatism"

championed by Surrealism's best-known theorist, André Breton (fig. 32). By accentuating the effects of chance and leaving surface minutiae and texture to determine the final appearance of a work of art, the rubbing was a technique that ostensibly avoided the role played by conscious decision-making and technical training. In this regard, the function of the rubbing was to index an internal rather than an external world: a seemingly unknowable realm that would gradually come into focus, like an image developing on photographic paper. Perhaps more than any other twentieth-century artist, Max Ernst was responsible for popularizing the rubbing as a Surrealist technique. Ernst—who used the French term *frottage*, suggesting a kind of sexual frisson—published *Histoire Naturelle* (Paris: Éditions Jeanne Boucher, 1926), a portfolio of thirty-four collotypes based on rubbings, which he placed, in unsettling proximity given their documentary claims, next to the fantastic flora and fauna he purported to record (fig. 33). "I insist on the fact that the drawings thus obtained lost more and more, through a series of suggestions and transmutation that offered themselves spontaneously," he declared, taking on "the aspect of images of an unhoped-for precision."<sup>4</sup>



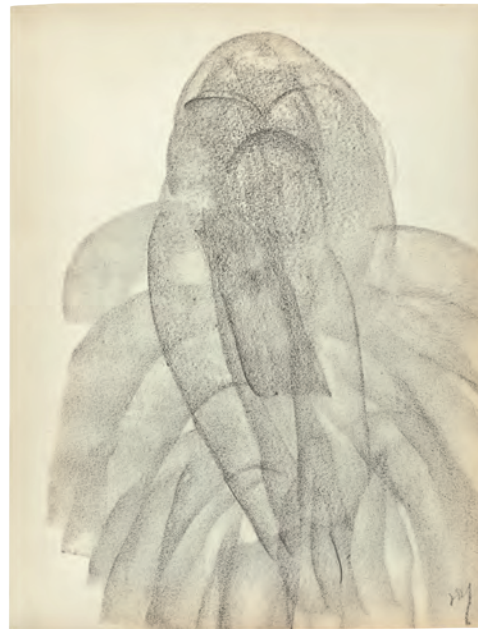
32. André Breton (1896–1966), *Untitled*, 1949. Graphite on paper, 10 1/8 x 7 3/4 in. (25.7 x 19.7 cm). Mayer Gallery, London



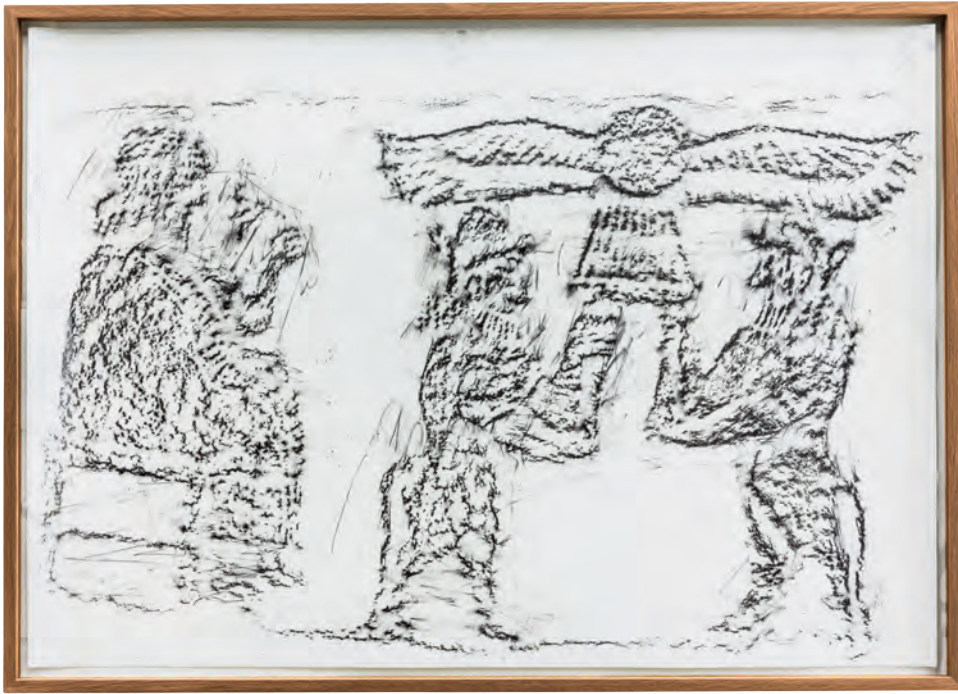
33. Max Ernst (1891–1976), *The Origin of the Clock (L'origine de la pendule)*, in *Histoire Naturelle* (Paris: Éditions Jeanne Boucher, 1926)

In 1946, influenced in part by Ernst but avoiding the “unhoped for precision” of his *frottages*, artist and poet Henri Michaux published his own book of rubbings, *Apparitions* (fig. 34).<sup>5</sup> But these works look less like rubbings than attempts to represent a gust of air, a facial expression, or a dramatic gesture of the hands. Art historian Allegra Pesenti has adopted Michaux’s title to survey the use of the rubbing technique across more than 150 years of art history, finding that the inherent tension between presence and absence evoked by the term “apparition” is fundamental to understanding their affective nature:

The basic function of a rubbing is to create a concrete impression of an object, yet paradoxically this type of drawing can also evoke the elusive and more intangible quality that might exist within an object or the human figure. While rubbings and *frottages* draw from material and physical bodies, they can also encapsulate a sense of immateriality. Their subjects oscillate between presence and absence like ghostly apparitions.<sup>6</sup>



34. Henri Michaux (1899–1984), *Apparitions* (Paris: Le point du jour, Collection “Le Calligraphie,” 1946)



35. Rayyane Tabet, *Orthostat #170*, from *Orthostates* (2017– ). Thirty-two framed charcoal-on-paper rubbings, each  $42\frac{1}{8} \times 30\frac{1}{4}$  in. (107 × 77 cm) or  $30\frac{1}{4} \times 42\frac{1}{8}$  in. (77 × 107 cm). Courtesy of the artist and Sfeir-Semler Gallery, Beirut and Hamburg

Pesenti's definition asserts the ability of the technique to provide a record (or "concrete impression") of the physical world while also making legible an "intangible quality" just out of reach of our powers of observation. The rubbing-as-apparition is positioned precariously between the original surface, of which it provides a visible trace, and its own autonomous existence as an image or object.

To make his rubbings, Tabet runs a thick, dark charcoal stick vigorously over the surface of the paper, producing blurred lines that appear to animate their subjects to such a degree that we almost forget the stasis of the original reliefs, whether they depict a rider on a rearing horse, two men in a tense embrace, or a bird in flight (fig. 35; see also inside back cover). Whereas Ernst's rubbings rely on a combination of different surface textures to evoke chimerical beings, the fantastical creatures that appear in a number of Tabet's rubbings are generated not by the artist but are original to Neo-Hittite culture and religion. Still, Tabet's rubbings evoke a heightened sense of movement in a way that the stone reliefs cannot, fixing a fleeting image on paper while capturing its disappearance in the same moment: a liminal state that characterizes both Michaux's apparitions

and Tabet's rubbings. A sense of melancholy inevitably pervades any attempt to capture or freeze the passage of time, a sadness that is bound to these "apparitional" images.

### *Genealogy*

*Genealogy* serves as a pendant to *Orthostates*, mirroring the latter's divided, reconstituted form and related themes. *Genealogy* takes as its point of departure a rug given to Tabet's great-grandfather, Faik Borkhoche, by Bedouin in the area of Tell Halaf upon his departure from the region (fig. 36). Before his death, Borkhoche divided the rug equally among his children and instructed each of them to do the same until the rug had effectively disappeared. Once installed, *Genealogy* serves as a map linking the artist to the archaeological site and artifacts by way of his ancestor. Tabet has installed the work in various configurations, depending on the venue, but typically, as in *Alien Property* at The Met, the sections of rug are arranged on the wall to form a genealogical table. Rug segments of varying lengths correlate with specific generations and individuals according to the ancestral line. This table is outlined in black, with each rug segment occupying its own cell (fig. 37).



36. Faik Borkhoche in Oriental dress at Tell Halaf, 1929. Max Freiherr von Oppenheim-Stiftung, Cologne

Like *Orthostates*, *Genealogy* serves as the foundation for a storytelling performance by the artist. Gesturing toward the work, Tabet recites the division of the rug into shorter and shorter sections, his voice assuming a deadpan quality as though he were reciting mathematical equations or entries in a bank statement. At the same time, the repetition of certain words and numbers renders the passage incantatory, a kind of lamentation that transforms the original rug from a single object into a network of individuals linked by a single figure:

His youngest daughter did not marry, so her piece,  
which is  $\frac{1}{5}$  of the original rug, remained intact.  
His second son, my grandfather, had two children:  
my mother and my uncle.  
My uncle's piece is  $\frac{1}{2}$  of  $\frac{1}{5}$  of the original rug.  
My mother has two children: My sister and me.  
My piece is  $\frac{1}{2}$  of  $\frac{1}{2}$  of  $\frac{1}{5}$  of the original rug.  
My sister has two daughters: Yasmina and Nour.  
Each of their pieces is  $\frac{1}{2}$  of  $\frac{1}{2}$  of  $\frac{1}{2}$  of  $\frac{1}{5}$  of the  
original rug.  
As of today, the rug has been divided in twenty-three  
pieces across five generations.

As viewers and listeners, we follow this progression through the rhythm of the artist's voice, noting how each segment gets smaller as we approach the lowest rung in the genealog-

ical table, which represents the latest generation of heirs but also, in terms of time, the present moment. The artist gathered as many of the segments as he could, installing them to reveal the underlying logic of the rug's division and the relationship of each segment to the original whole. At the same time, the segments remain separate from one another and will return to their individual owners, making the reconstructed rug a fleeting presence, another species of apparition.

Discussing the work of artist Kader Attia (born 1970, France), art historian Noémie Étienne has defined genealogy as "the creation of connections."<sup>7</sup> "Being contemporary, being alive, today," she asserts, "means suturing wounds and pulling fragments together. It means repairing bodies, objects, histories. It means rewriting genealogies and lines of descent, at some remove from the grand narratives. Such actions do not turn back, but rather look to the future."<sup>8</sup> Étienne's medical metaphor grasps the emphasis on embodiment in Attia's practice: a focus on the human body or physical object and the tendency to anthropomorphize the effects of colonial-era violence.

Michael Rakowitz (born 1973, United States), another artist whose work addresses the question of genealogy in the sense described by Étienne, is more closely aligned with Tabet's focus on presence and absence. His ongoing project *The Invisible Enemy Should Not Exist* (begun in 2007)



37. Installation of *Genealogy* at the Kunstverein, Hamburg, part of the exhibition *BRUCHSTÜCKE/FRAGMENTS*, 2017–18

reconstructs artifacts missing or stolen from the National Museum of Iraq during the U.S. occupation using cheap food packaging and newspapers of Middle Eastern origin. Describing his recent project for the Fourth Plinth in London’s Trafalgar Square (originally intended to support an equestrian statue of William IV and now a site hosting contemporary art commissions), Rakowitz states: “It’s meant to do two things; to be a ghost that’s supposed to haunt, but also a spectral presence that’s supposed to offer some kind of light.”<sup>9</sup>

Tabet’s rubbings, similarly, are manifestations of a troubled past that claim enigmatic agency in the present. In contrast to Rakowitz, however, Tabet demonstrates how “the ghost” is critical to any reckoning with the past. Rather than focus on the artifact as a body that demands healing or has disappeared, Tabet defines “presence-in-absence” in terms of process. He asks the viewer to focus on the potentially infinite series of substitutions upon which the artifact and its history are constructed.

### *Apparitions*

One consequence of thinking about museums in relation to absences is that doing so tends to unsettle the categories we use to define the objects in our care and the stories we tell about them. *Alien Property* presents the visitor with a series of objects related to the story of Tabet’s great-grandfather and The Met’s acquisition of reliefs from Tell Halaf. Each belongs to more than one typology—the contemporary work of art, the historical artifact, the family heirloom, the archival record, and the theatrical prop—sometimes all at once.

Questions proliferate in the wake of this confusion of conventions. Does *Genealogy* qualify as an heirloom or a family record, a historical artifact or a work of art? After it is disassembled and its elements returned to family members, can it even be said to belong to the artist or exist as a coherent whole? Similarly, *Orthostates* can be described as a record of the frieze, a stand-in for the artifact, and a contemporary work of art. The seated woman from Guzana,



the baron's famous "Venus," is both original and reconstructed, an artifact and a record of war. The four reliefs in The Met's collection are artifacts, parts of a larger frieze, and elements in a twentieth-century history of war in Europe and colonial incursions in the Middle East. The personal and institutional archival material—including Borkhoche's contract with the baron, their correspondence, and the notice of sale from the Office of the Alien Property Custodian to The Met—are at once *prima facie* documents and official records, but they are also elements of a broader installation of contemporary art.

Tabet's work emphasizes the difficulties in consigning the things in a museum to one category at the expense of others. It does so, moreover, against the backdrop of an art-historical tradition that insists on situating the West and non-West within a binary, often oppositional relationship, assigning certain classes of things to each. Modern and contemporary works produced outside Europe and the United States over the past two centuries, for example, are typically treated as foils by which to understand and describe non-Westerners. The tendency to map historical time onto geopolitical space identifies the West as "modern" while conflating the non-West with the past. That this approach is fundamental to art history as a field of study—as it also informs the traditional museum layout and exhibition design—helps to explain some of the challenges facing those who advocate today for the "decolonization" of art history and its institutions as well as the importance of questioning its hierarchy of categories and typologies.

And what of *Alien Property* itself? In some ways, the project is a collection of parts that never resolves into a defined whole. A stage set for an artist's performance, it is also an intervention in The Met's galleries: a form of institutional critique that is labeled an "exhibition." It represents a collaboration between the curators and the artist, but also, on an institutional level, between two departments

(Ancient Near Eastern Art and Modern and Contemporary Art) that rarely intersect either within the galleries or as part of the Museum's broader program of activities. In presenting multiple, entangled historical narratives, it responds to contemporary conversations about the history of the museum, writ large. Specifically, *Alien Property* draws attention to how and under what circumstances ancient works from the non-Western world often entered major museum collections in Europe and the United States, a vital part of the ongoing process of reimagining the role of the encyclopedic museum. In doing so, it envisions a museum organized around the occurrence of the caesura, the missing fragment, the crack: all forms of an evolving "presence-in-absence."

1. Gary K. Wolfe, "The Artifact as Icon in Science Fiction," *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts* 1, no. 1 (1988), p. 55.

2. Eelco Runia, "Presence," *History and Theory: Studies in the Philosophy of History* 45, no. 1 (February 2006), p. 20.

3. For a discussion of the term *parafiction*, see Carrie Lambert-Beatty's "Make-Believe: Parafiction and Plausibility," *October*, no. 129 (Summer 2009), pp. 51–84.

4. Max Ernst, "Au delà de la peinture," *Cahiers d'art* 11, nos. 6–7 (1936). Translated and republished in *Max Ernst: Beyond Painting, and Other Writings by the Artist and His Friends*, edited by Robert Motherwell (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), p. 8.

5. Henri Michaux, *Apparitions, Le Calligraphe 2* (Paris: Éditions du Point du Jour, 1946).

6. Allegra Pesenti, *Apparitions: Frottages and Rubbings from 1860 to Now*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum; Houston: The Menil Collection, 2015), pp. 18–19.

7. Noémie Étienne, "Bodies, Spaces, and Artifacts: Montage and Reparation as Forms of History," in *Kader Attia: Les blessures sont là*, by Kobena Mercer et al., exh. cat. (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2015), p. 76.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Naomi Rea, "The Ghost of Iraq's Lost Heritage Comes to Trafalgar Square as Michael Rakowitz Unveils His Fourth Plinth Sculpture," *Artnet News* (March 27, 2018); <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/michael-rakowitz-fourth-plinth-1254095> (August 23, 2019).

## Acknowledgments

We are grateful to many Met colleagues for their unflagging support of this groundbreaking, collaborative project, and whom space constraints dictate that we thank, democratically, in an alphabetical list: Elsie Alonso, Jennifer Bantz, Andrea Bayer, Hilary Becker, Amy Bogansky, Melissa Bowling, Brian Butterfield, Maanik Singh Chauhan, Sharon Cott, Monica Eisner, Max Hollein, Quincy Houghton, Kristine Kamiya, Lauren Bebry Kenter, Tiffany Kim, Lauren Knighton, Matthew Lytle, Taylor Miller, James Moske, Bryanna O'Mara, Mark Nelson, Mehgan Pizarro, Mark Polizzotti, Anna Rieger, Marina Ruiz-Molina, Lea St. Arnaud-Boffa, Jenn Sherman, Pari Steve, Daira Szostak, Dale Tucker, Sheena Wagstaff, Leonard A. Lauder Chairman of the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art, and Daniel Weiss.

We are also indebted to the generous lenders to the exhibition who enabled us to mount this focused intervention: Nadja Cholidis and Lutz Martin; Christopher Freiherr von Oppenheim and the Max Freiherr von Oppenheim Foundation, Cologne; and Andrée Sfeir-Semler and Léa Chikhani of Galerie Sfeir-Semler, Hamburg and Beirut. Finally, we thank the Friends of Ancient Near Eastern Art for making the exhibition possible.

This publication is issued in conjunction with the exhibition *Alien Property/Rayyane Tabet*, on view at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, from October 30, 2019, through January 18, 2020.

The exhibition is made possible by the Friends of Ancient Near Eastern Art.

The Met's quarterly *Bulletin* program is supported in part by the Lila Acheson Wallace Fund for The Metropolitan Museum of Art, established by the cofounder of *Reader's Digest*.

*The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Fall 2019

Volume LXXVII, Number 2

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*The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (ISSN 0026-1521) is published quarterly by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028-0198. Periodicals postage paid at New York NY and additional mailing offices.

POSTMASTER: Send address changes to Membership Department, *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10028-0198. Four weeks' notice required for change of address. The *Bulletin* is provided as a benefit to Museum members and is available by subscription. Subscriptions \$30.00 a year. Back issues available on microfilm from National Archive Publishing Company, 300 N. Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, MI 48106. Volumes 1–XXXVII (1905–42) available as a clothbound reprint set or as individual yearly volumes from Ayer Company Publishers, Suite B-213, 400 Bedford Street, Manchester, NH 03101, or from the Metropolitan Museum, 66–26 Metropolitan Avenue, Middle Village, NY 11381-0001.

### Published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Mark Polizzotti, Publisher and Editor in Chief  
Gwen Roginsky, Associate Publisher and General Manager  
Peter Antony, Chief Production Manager  
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Editor of the *Bulletin*: Dale Tucker

Designed by McCall Associates, New York

Production by Lauren Knighton

Image acquisitions and permissions by Jenn Sherman

Bibliographic editing by Penny Jones

Typeset in Adobe Kepler and Adobe Miller Display and Monotype FF Scala Sans

Separations by Professional Graphics, Inc., Rockford, Illinois

Printed and bound in the United States of America

Cover illustrations: front and back, details of *Faik Borkhoche Holding a Snake at Tell Halaf*, 1929 (see figs. 19, 20); inside front, detail of *Relief with Winged Human-Headed Lion*, ca. 9th century B.C. (see fig. 3c); inside back, detail of Rayyane Tabet, *Orthostat #081*, from *Orthostates*, 2017– (see figs. 31, 35)

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The Metropolitan Museum of Art  
1000 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10028  
metmuseum.org

### Statement of Ownership, Management, and Circulation

Publication title: *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*

Publication number: 885-660

Date of filing: October 1, 2019

Issue frequency: Quarterly

Number of issues published annually: Four

Annual subscription price: \$30.00, or free to Museum Members

Complete mailing address of known office of publication: 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10028-0198

Complete mailing address of headquarters or general business office of publisher: 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10028-0198

Full names and addresses of publisher, editor, and managing editor:

Publisher: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y.

10028-0198 Editor: Dale Tucker, Publications and Editorial Department, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10028-0198

Managing Editor: None

Owner: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1000 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y.

10028-0198 Known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding one percent or more of the total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities: None

Tax status: The purpose, function, and nonprofit status of this organization and the exempt status for federal income tax purposes has not changed during the preceding 12 months.

Average no. copies each issue during preceding 12 months (Oct. 2018–Sept. 2019) /

No. copies of single issue published nearest to filing date (August 2019)

A. Total number of copies (net press run)	129,714	99,935
B. Paid circulation (by mail and outside the mail)		
1. Mailed outside-county paid subscriptions	117,850	89,600
2. Mailed in-county paid subscriptions	0	0
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4. Paid distribution by other classes of mail through the USPS	9,150	7,600
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E. Total free or nominal rate distribution (sum of D1–D4)	0	0
F. Total distribution (sum of C and E)	127,000	97,200
G. Copies not distributed	2,714	2,735
H. Total (sum of F and G)	129,714	99,935
I. Percent paid	100%	100%





649/29