

Making The Met, 1870–2020: A Universal Museum for the 21st Century

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Making The Met, 1870–2020, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 29 August 2020–3 January 2021, curated by Andrea Bayer.

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Large museums like the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York are often compared to ocean liners; they are neither nimble nor can they change course quickly. The Met’s relatively new leadership team of Daniel Weiss and Max Hollein is charting a more open and inclusive course than did previous directors, steering The Met toward a different understanding of the role of the universal museum in the 21st century.¹ *Making The Met, 1870–2020*, celebrates the 150th anniversary of The Met, one of the United States’ leading museums, and embodies this new direction, as the exhibition marks a change in how the museum presents its history and how it envisages its present and future roles.² No doubt when The Met was planning the exhibition, which was slated to have opened on 30 March 2020, they could scarcely have imagined that a global pandemic would close the museum for nearly six months and, when The Met reopened on 29 August 2020, how dramatically different the world would be due to the COVID-19 virus and the Black Lives Matter movement.

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¹ The relatively new and not-unproblematic term “universal museum” is often used to describe large, famous museums in western Europe and the United States with collections of art that aim to be encyclopedic or universal, i.e., to hold representative works from all cultures, civilizations, and times.

² Additional figures can be found with this review on AJA Online (www.ajaonline.org). Figures 2 and 5 are the author’s. All objects reproduced in figures are in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. In full disclosure, the author serves on the Visiting Committee of the Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art of The Met in an unpaid advisory capacity and was not involved in this exhibition.

The exhibition, curated by Andrea Bayer, Deputy Director for Collections and Administration, with the assistance of curators and staff from across the institution, chronicles the history of The Met from its inception in 1870 to today through 10 broadly chronological, episodic stories that focus on moments that transformed the museum. The exhibition is not simply a self-congratulatory victory lap in honor of the museum's sesquicentennial anniversary, but rather it also thoughtfully and purposefully acknowledges past missteps and limitations.³ Overall, *Making The Met* tells the history of the museum through collecting and articulates a future vision for The Met as a universal museum. In this exhibition, The Met is moving toward more—although selective—transparency about its past,⁴ and nowhere is this more evident than in the exhibition's presentation of archaeology, excavation, collecting (and its ethics), and cultural heritage, as well as the reception of ancient art. Not only do these stories play a prominent role in several of the galleries, but also the stories charted around archaeology reflect more progressive stances on cultural heritage issues not often taken by universal museums. Many of the exhibition galleries are devoted to other themes, such as modernism and contemporary art, and so are only lightly touched on in this review.

MAKING THE MET, 1870–2020

Installed in The Met's special exhibition space, the exhibition commences with an introductory gallery, followed by 10 other galleries organized around a long rectangular space called "The Street." The warm gray walls of the opening gallery provide a neutral background for seven exceptional works, which come from across the globe and from different moments in time. According to the label, the gallery "is inspired by the human figure, standing for the stories of art and people at the core of this exhibition." The inclusion of Isamu Noguchi's *Kouros* (1945),⁵ a modern interpretation of an ancient kouros, and a Greek grave stele of a young girl holding a dove (ca. 450–440 BCE)⁶ demonstrates that antiquities and the works of art that they inspire

are central to the story of art at The Met (figs. 1, 2). The mid fifth-century BCE Greek stele, the representative choice for antiquity, is the traditional masterpiece that one would expect The Met to display in such an exhibition. The accompanying label acknowledges that archaeology and research have helped scholars to understand that the details of the sculpture would have been "articulated with color." Throughout the exhibition, the well-written labels not only provide clear information but apprise the visitor of some of the more complex stories behind the works of art on display.

Noguchi's *Kouros* is a mid 20th-century example of modern and contemporary artists engaging in a complex dialogue with ancient artifacts to create new works of art. Located on axis with the main entrance, the sculpture is a showstopper that draws in the visitor. Noguchi had studied casts and an archaic kouros in The Met's collection as a student. The work is a cross-cultural fusion of Japanese and Western aesthetics, demonstrating that art bridges perceived cultural differences, a theme that recurs in this exhibition. The inclusion of this stunning sculpture demonstrates that the reception—that is, the reinterpretation and reimagining—of antiquities is an important way that The Met's collection continues to inspire artists.

From the first gallery, one enters "The Street," where one can stroll through time and space, ranging from pharaonic Egypt to 19th-century New York (fig. 3). Arches line the street and provide framed vignette views into different galleries, giving enticing glimpses of the exhibition. Cases line both sides of the street and display objects that are connected to the gallery behind them and represent important moments in the collection's history. The only significant use of technology in the exhibition is in this street gallery. Silent videos show behind-the-scenes moments related to conservation as well as to the museum's inner workings and architectural evolution. Such videos give the general public a sneak peek of how The Met works. One can see how the museum's displays and galleries have gone through regular renewal and transformation as technology, ideas, and sensibilities have changed. Historical black-and-white photographs are projected against the walls of the street at regular intervals and slowly change. Most of the images capture visitors thoughtfully examining art. The broad diversity of people in these carefully curated images affirms The Met's belief that the museum is a place for all people, regardless of age, race, gender, or creed.

³Bayer 2020, 11.

⁴Marstine 2011, 14–17; Marlowe 2020, 330.

⁵Metropolitan Museum of Art 53.87a–i, acq. 1953, Fletcher Fund.

⁶Metropolitan Museum of Art 27.45, acq. 1927, Fletcher Fund.



FIG. 1. Introductory gallery in *Making The Met, 1870–2020*, on view 29 August 2020–3 January 2021 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Isamu Noguchi's *Kouros* at the entrance (courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art).



FIG. 2. Greek stele of a young girl holding a dove, Parian marble, ca. 450–440 BCE, ht. 80.6 cm.

GALLERY 1: THE FOUNDING DECADES

From “The Street,” one passes a plinth with the feet of a colossal male statue⁷ from the Cesnola Collection to enter Gallery 1, “The Founding Decades.” As one enters the gallery—which has lush, Bordeaux-colored walls—a striking, early sixth-century BCE limestone head of a bearded man greets the visitor (online fig. 1).⁸ On the wall behind the statue is American artist Frederic Church’s stunning 1871 view of the Parthenon. This statue’s prominent location (with its own background of painted ruins) affirms that antiquities were of central importance to forming The Met’s early collection. The head is part of the Cesnola Collection. Luigi Palma di Cesnola, who served as the American consul on Cyprus from 1865 to 1876 (with interruptions), was also actively involved in hunting for antiquities on the island. He amassed a collection of 5,756 objects, which he sold to The Met in January 1872.⁹

⁷Metropolitan Museum of Art 74.51.2683, acq. 1874.

⁸Metropolitan Museum of Art 74.51.2857, acq. 1874. See AJA Online for additional, online-only figures.

⁹Baetjer and Mertens 2020, 39.



FIG. 3. “The Street,” gallery in *Making The Met, 1870–2020* (courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art).

He would also become the museum’s first director. Scholars have long acknowledged that the untrained Cesnola was more interested in finding, selling, and possessing antiquities than in studying them. The Met is refreshingly candid about Cesnola’s failings as an archaeologist; the head’s label states that “by today’s standards, his methods of excavation and restoration are unacceptable.”

Within a few decades of The Met’s purchase of the Cesnola Collection, subsequent museum curators, trustees, and directors viewed it as a disappointment. It was not composed of the sort of classical, fifth-century BCE Greek works of art that were valued by Edward Robinson (curator of Greek and Roman art from 1905 to 1925, assistant director from 1905 to 1910, and museum director from 1910 to 1931) and Gisela Richter

(who started at The Met in 1905 and served as curator of Greek and Roman art from 1925 to 1948).¹⁰ The collection and other archaic Cypriot works were eventually relegated to the second floor, where they remain today, far from the Greek and Roman galleries, which occupy prime real estate on the ground floor. The label in the exhibition acknowledges the past problematic treatment of the Cesnola Collection: “In recent decades, the museum has been actively reasserting the collection’s exceptional significance through conservation, display, and publication.” This statement reflects an increased honesty on the part of The Met about

¹⁰Bartman 2018, 66.

how curators and museums influence the perceived value of objects as works of art.

GALLERIES 2 AND 3: ART FOR ALL, AND PRINCELY ASPIRATION

Antiquities play a small part in the next story, “Art for All,” which focuses on the promotion of The Met’s educational mission and goal of reaching and inspiring students, artists, and designers. A stunning fifth-century BCE Cypriot bracelet with lion-head finials¹¹ that Cesnola sold to The Met is displayed alongside an 1878 Tiffany & Co. copy. A label announces that Cesnola falsely marketed this bracelet and other jewelry to the museum as “the Kourion Treasure,” knowing that such a designation would enhance its value. He also hired Tiffany to make replicas of the ancient jewelry to offer for sale. These copies again reflect a reception and engagement with ancient objects, a recurring theme in the exhibition, as well as the commercial underpinnings of Cesnola’s “archaeological” pursuits. It also marks the beginning of a major type of revenue for the museum: selling replicas of ancient objects, which continues today.

The importance of antiquities to the museum is emphasized in the next gallery, “Princely Aspirations,” which examines Gilded Age benefactors who donated their collections to the museum, thereby legitimating their wealth and giving The Met some of its greatest treasures. By the end of the 19th century, a classical education was associated with elite culture and status in the United States.¹² Unsurprisingly, Greek and Roman art were seen as conveyers of status and class; so, if The Met was to be a world-class museum on par with leading European institutions, it needed to have classical art. Following in the footsteps of royal and aristocratic European collectors, wealthy New Yorkers, including John Pierpont Morgan, president of the museum from 1904 to 1913, bought art and antiquities to decorate their homes. Many of these works were later donated to the museum.

A selection of antiquities, including two gifts from Morgan, appears in the “Precious Objects” cabinet: a mold-blown glass jug by Ennion (online fig. 2),¹³ whom scholars consider the greatest ancient Roman

glassmaker, and an Etruscan statuette of a young woman.¹⁴ Also displayed here are a black-figure Panathenaic Prize amphora (ca. 530 BCE)¹⁵ attributed to the Euphiletos Painter and several small Egyptian antiquities. These are masterpieces in the traditional sense. The objects are aesthetically pleasing, and the Roman jug and Greek amphora were both crafted by acknowledged masters. These stunning objects reflect The Met’s preoccupation, especially that of the Department of Greek and Roman Art, with collecting the “right” or canonical objects. None of these objects was collected through excavation, but rather they were purchased. Connoisseurship—rather than archaeology—is on display here.¹⁶ Considering the strength of The Met’s collection of classical antiquities, Greek and Roman art play a surprisingly small part in both this gallery and the exhibition as a whole, a point to which I will return. Furthermore, while the importance of Morgan as a collector and benefactor is emphasized, the roles of curators, such as Gisela Richter, who shaped the collection of classical antiquities, are largely absent.

GALLERY 4: COLLECTING THROUGH EXCAVATION

Archaeology takes center stage in the fourth gallery, “Collecting Through Excavation” (fig. 4). Excavations, conducted from the start of the 20th century through the 1960s, contributed a vast range of objects and architectural remains to The Met’s collection of Egyptian, Ancient Near Eastern, Medieval, and Islamic art. The Met determined that the vagaries of the market, specifically the ability to purchase desirable objects, could prevent the museum from expanding its collection of Egyptian antiquities. Furthermore, there was a concern that Egypt would have no treasures left within a few decades due to excavations (primarily conducted by foreign expeditions). Therefore, The Met joined the excavating race. The museum’s systematic excavations were undertaken in diverse locations—from the Kharga Oasis in Egypt’s Western Desert to Nippur in Iran—focusing on different types of sites from different eras—from pharaonic Deir el-Bahri to Late Antique Ctesiphon—and they made unparalleled

¹¹ Metropolitan Museum of Art 74.51.3559, acq. 1874.

¹² Winterer 2002, 110.

¹³ Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.194.226, acq. 1917.

¹⁴ Metropolitan Museum of Art 17.190.2066, acq. 1917.

¹⁵ Metropolitan Museum of Art 14.130.12, acq. 1914.

¹⁶ Bartman 2018, 64–67.



FIG. 4. Gallery 4, “Collecting Through Excavation” (courtesy Metropolitan Museum of Art).

contributions to the museum’s collection and to our knowledge of these sites.

Near the gallery’s entrance, a stunning statue of Hatshepsut,¹⁷ regal and serene, found during The Met’s excavations of Deir el-Bahri, sits in front of a large window (boarded up for many years) with wonderful natural light (see fig. 4). Through the window, we see Central Park’s Cleopatra’s Needle, which Egypt gave to the United States in 1879 in an attempt to curry political and economic favor with the young nation on the ascendancy.¹⁸ Here, the exhibition design is at its best:

¹⁷ Metropolitan Museum of Art 29.3.2, acq. 1926–1927 (head, left forearm, and parts of the throne) and 1929 (lower part of statue).

¹⁸ It was erected in Central Park in 1881. For more details, see

one is transported, if for just a moment, to Egypt, and a sense of anticipation and discovery builds. The statue of Hatshepsut is not used to tell the standard story of the great queen and canonical Egyptian art that we might have expected from The Met in previous decades. Rather, the statue and the accompanying labels tell a more complex and honest story of excavation and conservation practices that both an archaeologist and a member of the general public might find fascinating.

The first label in front of Hatshepsut’s feet explains that many fragments of statues, including the head and upper torso of this one, were excavated at Deir el-Bahri. Most of the statue’s body, however, was previously in

D’Alton 1993. The obelisk was legally imported into the United States, and is owned by the City of New York.

Berlin (having been excavated in the 19th century). In 1929, The Met exchanged fragments with the Egyptian Museum in Berlin and reunited the parts of this statue in New York. Although the label does not explicitly state it, this statue embodies the colonial legacy of archaeology in the Middle East and North Africa, especially in Egypt, where different European nations competed to excavate and to build outstanding collections of antiquities at home.

At first glance, Hatshepsut's head appears nearly intact. However, another label and photographs detail its conservation in 1930, 1979, and 1993. The statue's head was defaced in antiquity, as Hatshepsut's stepson and successor, Thutmose III, had sought to banish all traces of his predecessor. Through these photographs and text, one gains an understanding of the statue's history as well as the evolution in conservation practices during the 20th century. The most recent restoration integrated the best aspects of the previous restoration work. This brief explanation, which acknowledges the clumsy execution of the 1930 restoration, again reflects a new and welcome attitude of honesty about past conservation practices at The Met, as well as the evolution and improvement of such practices through the museum's continued embrace of technology.

In this gallery, The Met does not shy away from addressing the practice of *partage*, in which artifacts discovered by foreign expeditions would be shared between the excavators and host country in accordance with the local antiquities laws. This was the means through which The Met legally acquired many of the objects in its collection, and in the exhibition, the museum seeks to explain *partage* and allow the viewer to consider its legacy today. The gallery's introductory label chronicles the history of The Met's sponsorship of excavations, which started in 1906, funded by J.P. Morgan. Importantly, it explains that the sculpture, architectural fragments, mummy, ceramics, and other works of art on display here were acquired through *partage*. Another clear, concise label titled "Archaeology and Partage" explains how the sharing practice worked, from the 19th century until the 1960s and 1970s. The Met also states that it no longer acquires objects through *partage*; the goals of excavations have shifted to expanding knowledge about past cultures rather than acquiring objects. Perhaps most noteworthy are the final sentences on this label, which read,

"The discourse around *partage* continues today. Some see it as fair and advantageous for all, while others consider it a system based on colonialism and exploitation. The Met does not pursue the *partage* of finds in any of its current excavations." This is admirable. Rather than obscuring how it acquired these objects or mounting a defense of *partage*, The Met asks the visitor to consider whether the practice was ethical, unethical, or something in between. Could one imagine one of The Met's peer institutions in the United States or Europe suggesting visitors consider a debate about the legality and ethics of how they acquired their collection of antiquities? I would be inclined to say that most other universal museums would not take such a risk.

The Met also posits a future for archaeology and the institution's role in the Middle East with its label "The Future of the Past," which discusses a 2015 project in which museum staff and curators, in conjunction with Prof. Zainab Bahrani of Columbia University, identified ways that they could better support and collaborate with museum professionals who were working to protect cultural heritage in their countries. The museum's staff trained Syrian and Iraqi specialists in Amman, Jordan, to develop an emergency photography field kit to document collections and to produce digital catalogues for their home institutions. By supporting such a project, the museum presents itself as a leader in the field of heritage preservation, where The Met's goal is not to acquire objects or set a research agenda but to assist colleagues in safeguarding their cultural heritage. This lays out a different, more equal relationship between The Met and museums in other countries and offers scope for significant academic and research collaborations in the future.

Other Egyptian antiquities in this gallery include the mummy of Wah.¹⁹ Wah's undecorated tomb was considered unimportant when it was unearthed in 1920. An X-ray of his mummy in 1939 demonstrated that Wah was buried with extensive jewelry. On the basis of the X-ray, the mummy was unwrapped, and a stunning collar of faience beads, which accompanies his funerary mask in this display, was exposed. The use of an X-ray is an example of The Met's embrace of modern technology to study objects in its collection. At

¹⁹Metropolitan Museum of Art 40.3.54, acq. 1920.

the same time, the label notes that today no one would unwrap a mummy but that the jewelry would be recreated digitally. Again, rather than sweeping problematic decisions under the carpet, The Met presents an honest accounting of changing practices in the museum world and its past employment of certain practices now frowned on by curators and conservators.

Most of the other objects displayed in the well-lit cases of the “Collecting Through Excavation” gallery come from Iran and Iraq. The Met undertook excavations in Nishapur, which was located on the network of trading cities along the Silk Road, in 1935–1940 and in 1947–1948. This excavation yielded a broad range of Islamic works of art, including stucco wall fragments and domestic objects. Striking architectural stuccos displayed on the gallery’s rear, eggplant-colored wall were recovered in 1931–1932 from Ctesiphon, one of the Sassanian empire’s leading cultural centers (online fig. 3). Artifacts from Nimrud, Iraq, and Nippur, Iran, that were excavated in the 1950s–1960s, are also displayed. The importance of excavation practices is again emphasized; for example, the label for a small Sumerian standing statue of a female worshiper (ca. 2600–2500 BCE)²⁰ highlights the fact that we know more because it was discovered in its original context, sealed into a mudbrick bench, in the sacred precinct (online fig. 4).

In contrast to the extensive resources The Met invested in excavations in Egypt and the Middle East, the museum did not focus on excavating classical sites to grow its collection. It chose not to join the 1930s excavations of Roman Antioch-on-the-Orontes with the Walters Art Gallery, Worcester Art Museum, Princeton University, and Harvard University’s Fogg Museum and Dumbarton Oaks.²¹ This may be because the curator of the Department of Greek and Roman Art, Gisela Richter, preferred Greek art to Roman and purchased Greek antiquities in the 1930s instead.²² This decision not to excavate based on personal preference seems to underscore that connoisseurship, evident in the previous gallery, remained central to the collecting preferences of the Department of Greek and Roman Art.

GALLERY 8: FRAGMENTED HISTORIES

Galleries 5, 6, and 7 focus on three narratives that were central to the museum but are unconnected to archaeology, thus not reviewed in detail here. Gallery 5 presents “American art,” which The Met defines in this context as art created in the United States, and the creation of a national narrative around it. Gallery 6 is dedicated to the role of important collectors, while Gallery 7 examines The Met’s reluctance to embrace modern art and the important role that photography and design eventually played in the collection.

The eighth story, “Fragmented Histories,” explores the museum’s complicated role in preserving cultural heritage in wartime. During World War II, members of The Met’s staff went to Europe to help evacuate works of art and made important contributions to the Allied response to the looting and destruction of monuments. In the center of the gallery is the uniform of Edith A. Standen, who served as the temporary officer in charge of the Central Collecting Point in Wiesbaden, Germany (fig. 5). In this role, she was tasked with cataloguing and helping return stolen property to its rightful owners.

In the corner of Gallery 8 are two 10th- or 9th-century BCE reliefs, of a lion-hunt scene and a seated figure holding a lotus flower, from Tell Halaf in present-day Syria (see fig. 5; online fig. 5).²³ Baron Max von Oppenheim excavated the reliefs in northeastern Syria during the early 20th century, and he later displayed many of these reliefs, as well as other sculpture, in his Tell Halaf Museum in Berlin. Running short of funds, he brought several reliefs to the United States in 1931 to sell but failed to find a purchaser. The reliefs languished in storage until 1943, when the U.S. government seized them as German property through the Office of Alien Property Custodian.²⁴ The Met purchased four of the reliefs at auction in 1943 from the U.S. government. In the same year, the Allies bombed the Tell Halaf Museum, and in response, the fire brigade doused the hot basalt artifacts with water, causing them to shatter into more than 27,000 fragments; these

²⁰ Metropolitan Museum of Art 62.70.2, acq. 1962.

²¹ Bartman 2018, 71.

²² Bartman 2018, 71–72.

²³ Metropolitan Museum of Art 43.135.1 and 43.135.2, both acq. 1943.

²⁴ The Office of Alien Property Custodian also appropriated Japanese property during World War II; see Brennan and Rakic 2020, 187–88.



FIG. 5. Edith A. Standen's uniform and the Tell Halaf reliefs in Gallery 8, "Fragmented Histories."

have recently been reassembled.²⁵ The gallery labels note that "these stories call into question where art is safest during wartime and highlight some of the entanglements of museums in modern politics." Such a statement is, in fact, remarkable. An argument, commonly deployed to justify universal museums in Europe and North America, is that art in their collections is "safe"; indeed, such arguments have resurfaced once again due to the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq. The history of the Tell Halaf reliefs challenges this cherished

²⁵ Brennan and Rakic 2020, 187–88, fig. 204.

narrative.²⁶ The display of Standen's uniform alongside the Tell Halaf reliefs is a striking juxtaposition: The Met is at once both a protector of art in a time of war and a beneficiary of the reversal of fortunes that war can cause.²⁷

Unsurprisingly, antiquities and archaeology do not play a prominent role in the final two galleries, entitled "The Centennial Era" and "Broadening Perspectives." The first of these focuses on the evolution of The Met into an institution for the 21st century. Here, The Met is moving toward a global art history, highlighting its strong collections in Asian and Islamic Art, as well as its commitment to hiring more diverse curators. The gallery acknowledges The Met's failures to engage with more diverse audiences, especially those of color, in the context of the controversial 1969 *Harlem on My Mind* exhibition. The self-reflective quality evident in the narratives around archaeology is also present here; The Met is considering its strengths and weaknesses as an institution in an attempt to make the museum more accessible and demonstrate that the new Met will do better. The final gallery, "Broadening Perspectives," which treats contemporary art, reflects the themes of the exhibition: art is a bridge between cultures and times; art is not simply a beautiful painting, it can also be a pottery sherd, guitar, or 3D printed corset; art is about people and the diversity of humanity. By understanding the museum's past—its collecting and exhibition successes and failures—The Met is celebrating its history and charting a new, more inclusive, global course for the future.

²⁶ Brennan and Rakic 2020, 188.

²⁷ Another exhibition at The Met, titled *Alien Property*, which opened 30 October 2019 also addresses these issues. Featuring etchings of the Tell Halaf reliefs by contemporary artist Rayyane Tabet, as well as the actual documents recording the purchase of the reliefs, this show lays bare the complex history of the museum's collecting (Benzel et al. 2019). The labels explain that The Met bought the reliefs at an auction organized by the Office of Alien Property Custodian, which had seized the reliefs under the Trading with the Enemy Act, the act that had allowed the U.S. government to seize and sell German and Japanese property during World War II. While such seizure was legal, art seized in Europe under similar circumstances was returned in many cases. Also, the display of the Tell Halaf Venus (which was reconstructed from thousands of pieces after the 1943 bombing) underscored that objects are not safe just because they are in a major European city, like Berlin.

THE EXHIBITION ONLINE AND THE CATALOGUE

The exhibition has a robust online presence. Because many of the museum's international and domestic visitors are absent due to the pandemic, the website is essential in making the exhibition and content accessible. Even for those who can visit, the extensive website gives visitors another way to examine the exhibition and works of art in more detail. From the Exhibition Overview landing page, one can access an introductory video and other information.²⁸ One may, from the comfort of home, listen to the complete audio guide, take a virtual tour, and watch the videos that are on display in the exhibition. A digital catalogue of the 298 exhibition objects and the complete labels are also accessible online,²⁹ thereby allowing scholars and visitors to understand the narratives constructed in each gallery and around each object. The exhibition Primer provides an extensive archive-based multimedia web experience,³⁰ charting the history and collection of The Met through an introduction and the themes of Artworks, People, and Spaces. These digital resources are an excellent alternative for visiting The Met, and they permit the museum to share its collection, history, and ambitions for the future with the world.

The beautifully executed, richly illustrated catalogue, which can be previewed online,³¹ is of the high standard that one has come to expect of The Met's exhibition publications. Ten of its chapters, each by a curator with different expertise, expand on the exhibition stories; an 11th chapter details the evolution of the museum's architecture. In particular, three of the essays elaborate on the role of archaeology and excavation in the formation of The Met's collection, as well as the museum's history of collecting and purchasing antiquities. That said, it is not a catalogue in the traditional sense, as the objects in the exhibition are simply

listed. This omission reminds one that the Departments of Greek and Roman Art and of the Ancient Near East still lack complete catalogues—in print or digital form—of their collections, which would allow scholars to understand the curatorial choices made in collecting and the provenance of the collection.³²

Though space limitation prevents a full review of the catalogue here, some points are worth highlighting. In the essay "The Founding Decades," Cesnola gets his comeuppance; his poor archaeological methods, financial motivations for excavating, and effective pillaging of Cyprus are laid out.³³ The essay "Collecting Through Excavation" is an excellent starting point for understanding archaeology's role in the formation of The Met's Ancient Near Eastern, Egyptian, and Islamic collections and the Met's own role in the history of archaeology in Egypt, Iraq, and Iran.³⁴ The Met excavated to build its collection because the market could not meet its collecting goals. This chapter effectively details The Met's involvement in archaeology and chronicles the important role that director Edward Robinson and later curators played in promoting excavation to build the collection. The role that the curators of Greek and Roman art played in shaping the collections through their purchases and the strong preference for Greek art are not discussed;³⁵ this may be because this department did not excavate and so their history of collecting does not fit nicely into the narratives that The Met is crafting here. The catalogue's essay "Fragmented Histories" examines the impact that World War II had on The Met, chronicling the museum's vital role in supporting Allied efforts to protect and safeguard cultural heritage and the art of Europe that were threatened by Nazi Germany.³⁶ This story is contrasted with the contemporaneous story of The Met's acquisition of the four seized Tell Halaf reliefs through auction during World War II. As the authors note, the story of the reliefs' acquisition

²⁸ *Making The Met, 1870–2020*, Exhibition Overview, www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2020/making-the-met-1870-to-2020.

²⁹ *Making The Met, 1870–2020*, opening web page, click to download PDF booklet of all in-gallery labels.

³⁰ *Making The Met, 1870–2020*, Exhibition Primer, www.metmuseum.org/primer/making-the-met#introduction.

³¹ *Making The Met, 1870–2020*, www.metmuseum.org/art/metpublications/Making_The_Met_1870-2020.

³² Picón et al. 2007 is not a complete catalogue in the traditional sense, where all of the objects are listed; however, it is a comprehensive overview of much of the collection.

³³ Baetjer and Mertens 2020, 38–40.

³⁴ Roehrig 2020.

³⁵ Bartman 2018.

³⁶ Brennan and Rakic 2020.

“provides an entry to the debates concerning the safeguarding of art today.”³⁷

All told, *Making The Met* takes a commendable step toward greater transparency about the museum’s past. Still, both the catalogue and exhibition are noticeably silent about The Met’s purchasing of unprovenanced antiquities through the market and accepting loans of antiquities with unverified provenance from collectors, even after the 1970 UNESCO convention condemned such practices. The Met purchased the looted Euphronios krater in 1972,³⁸ and it was returned to Italy in 2008 (an agreement was reached in 2006).³⁹ These problematic collecting practices have persisted. In 2019, The Met returned the gold coffin of Nedjemankh,⁴⁰ which it had purchased for \$4 million in 2017, to Egypt, because it had been looted in 2011 and sold with fake papers.⁴¹ Such purchases reflect an enduring emphasis on connoisseurship and suggest that certain departments at The Met remain willing to collect antiquities in 2020 despite the clear ethical, financial, and legal concerns. The Greek and Roman objects displayed in Gallery 3 of the exhibition, like many of the works in the Greek and Roman permanent galleries, are largely divorced from their complicated and sometimes shadowy collecting histories. The exhibition does not acknowledge these issues, nor does it suggest a way forward for these objects or galleries. Considering that The Met acknowledged the complicated colonial implications of *partage* in the exhibition, one would have hoped to see some discussion around the purchasing of antiquities and unprovenanced objects. Yet the exhibition does not hint at the stance that the museum might take on purchasing antiquities in the future. Rather than collecting antiquities, one wonders if some of The Met’s departments could acquire

works of art inspired by or that engage with the museum’s collections of ancient art—like Noguchi’s *Kouros* in the introductory gallery. The Department of Ancient Near Eastern Art has already done this, purchasing some of Rayyane Tabet’s etchings of the Tell Halaf reliefs,⁴² suggesting it is a viable collecting strategy.

In conclusion, *Making The Met, 1870–2020*, is an ambitious exhibition that marks an important shift in how The Met envisages and presents itself as a universal museum. Archaeology, the history of collecting, and excavation are central to several of the stories told here. While one can critique the exhibition’s failings, including the glaring omissions about the museum’s problematic purchases of looted antiquities after 1970, The Met is being more transparent about its past collecting of antiquities. The honesty about *partage* and the purchase of the Tell Halaf reliefs during World War II is significant, and one can only hope that peer institutions will adopt similar attitudes and honesty. This exhibition establishes that, in the 21st century, archaeology will continue to have an important place at The Met, but it will take on new roles—in the forms of collaborating with colleagues in other countries, using new technology to understand objects already in its collection, and engaging contemporary artists with the museum’s antiquities. Overall, the exhibition outlines possible futures for universal museums: they can be honest about their successes and failures in the past. As major cultural institutions, they can help decolonize and globalize art history and archaeology by staging innovative and more inclusive exhibitions to engage with wider audiences, as The Met has done. It also demonstrates that there are multiple, diverse narratives that the collection can tell. For universal institutions to thrive in the 21st century, The Met and its peer institutions will need to tell innovative and different stories that connect people—of all origins and backgrounds—to art.

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³⁷ Brennan and Rakic 2020, 184.

³⁸ Metropolitan Museum of Art 72.11.10, acq. 1972.

³⁹ E. Povoledo, “Ancient Vase Comes Home to a Hero’s Welcome,” *New York Times* (19 January 2008), sec. Arts. The krater was displayed at the Museo Nazionale Etrusco di Villa Giulia from 2008 to 2014; currently, it is on display in Cerveteri, Museo Archaeologico, inv. no. n/a.

⁴⁰ Metropolitan Museum of Art 2017.255b, acq. 2017.

⁴¹ C. Moynihan, “Met Museum to Return Prize Artifact Because It Was Stolen,” *New York Times* (15 February 2019), sec. Arts. The coffin was returned to the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, Cairo (inv. no. n/a) in 2019.

⁴² Metropolitan Museum of Art 2019.288.1–32, acq. 2019.

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