The destruction of the cities of Assyria was so complete that for many centuries they remained buried in mounds indistinguishable from those that marked the graves of yet more ancient cities in Mesopotamia. No Assyrian palace, even as a ruin, remained standing throughout the ages, like that of Darius and Xerxes at Persepolis, as a witness of a past prosperity. No temple, even serving other uses, stood, as the Parthenon did on the Acropolis of Athens, as evidence of a great civilization. Until the middle of the nineteenth century the Assyrians and all their arts, including their written records beyond an odd exception or two, remained underground, and knowledge of this ancient people had been derived mostly from those who had no cause to love them. When they once again revealed themselves through their own arts and the newly found and translated cuneiform of their own writings, it is doubtful whether they much improved their reputation. They showed themselves to be perhaps even more bloodthirsty than they appeared in the accounts of others. Instead of merely “putting people to the sword” as one reads in the Bible, the Assyrians boasted also of impaling, flaying, and burning their enemies and of mutilating them in various horrible ways, though, being businesslike, they made good economic use of those who escaped such barbarous treatment.

Because of the widespread knowledge of the Bible the Assyrians had been no strangers to most people, and there was more than a superficial interest in the freshly unearthed bas-reliefs. This knowledge provided the necessary foundation to build up a more complete understanding of this ancient people. It was to the Bible that the early excavators and authors principally referred in describing their finds, though classical learning was not ignored. Bonomi, in the second edition of his book, *Nineveh and Its Palaces* (1853) not only gave it the sub-
title The Discoveries of Botta and Layard Applied to the Elucidation of the Holy Writ but in his foreword says: “I had the approbation of the public in reading the sculptures upon the walls together with the Scriptures as I progressed (through the ruined chambers).” This expression of reading the sculptures on the walls is a very happy one, for it gives the clue to the purpose that the scenes, especially those of the chase and the military campaigns, were meant to serve. They were not carved to be admired for their beauty but to tell a tale. The scenes were drawn in such a way as to include within the limited space as many as possible of what were considered the essential features of the events. All else was ignored. The fact that those who carved the bas-reliefs were fettered to their own artistic conventions (or unfettered to those of the nineteenth century) made them easier rather than more difficult to “read.”

The Assyrian wall sculptures were not held up for aesthetic judgment before being allowed entry into the British Museum as had been the fate of the Elgin marbles, which had been disparagingly compared with the Apollo Belvedere, that once greatly admired “Greek” statue. The extravagant claim has never been made for Assyrian art that it is “incomparable, . . . one of the great inspirations which have redeemed the world from mediocrity and vulgarity,” and no one, fortunately, has ever suggested that “searching out and appreciation of . . . unique and ideal beauty in all its phases” is the true task of Assyrian archaeologists. Although Layard and his near plagiarists, such as Bonomi, paid lip service to the artistic standards of the day, admitting the superiority of the Greeks (though pointing out how well earlier peoples portrayed animals), they then proceeded to concentrate on describing the excavations and the antiquities rather than solving or setting aesthetic problems.

The sculptured slabs told stories of an ancient race of whom many people wanted to know more. In these bas-reliefs they could see with their own eyes such beasts as Daniel dreamed of, lions with eagles’ wings. They could behold in stone Jehu, king of Israel, prostrating himself before the Assyrian king as he brought his tribute. Nothing could be plain- er to the eye than the surrender to Sennacherib of Lachish, the city which in the time of Joshua had been “delivered” into the hand of Israel.

The two men chiefly responsible for the removal of this material when excavations were first conducted on a large scale in the 1840’s were Paul Emil Botta and Austen Henry Layard. By 1850 there was a very considerable amount of it in the Louvre and the British Museum. The excavations were continued, and antiquities were unearthed in amazing quantities. Layard speaks of uncovering nearly two miles of bas-reliefs in the palace of Sennacherib at Nineveh near Mosul, and Victor Place, the Frenchman, digging at the palace of Sargon II at Khorsabad found in a single storeroom no
Ivories found at Nimrud in 1951. Above: figure of a calf and heads from the “Burnt” Palace. VII century B.C. Below: Left, a winged female sphinx from the palace of Assurnasirpal II, IX century B.C. Right, a group of four caryatid maidens, VIII century B.C. Rogers Fund, 1951
less than a hundred and sixty tons of iron implements. The percentage of loss of these finds, owing to the lack of experience and means taken to preserve them in the field, together with the perils of transport, was unfortunately very high too, to the sincere regret, among others, of Layard himself.

In the United States public interest in this rediscovered world of Assyria was aroused by books like those written by Layard, which were being reprinted in New York in 1849. American missionaries in the region of the excavations were naturally extremely interested in the sculptured stones that were coming to light, which were so closely related to Biblical history. Such a one was the Rev. W. F. Williams, who was in Syria when Layard and Rawlinson were there. He sent many reliefs to this country, of which a number found their way to colleges and theological institutions.

When in due course the Metropolitan Museum came into being, Assyrian art had no part there until, a few years after the erection of the building in Central Park, the first piece of Assyrian sculpture, a gift of Benjamin Brewster,

Ivory plaques found in a bronze receptacle at Zawiyeh. VIII century B.C. LEFT: Hunting scenes and, at the top, an archer following two officials in Assyrian dress. RIGHT: Above, horseman hunting antelope. His hat indicates that he is not an Assyrian. Below, a battle scene. Behind two archers an Assyrian horseman fells an enemy, who grasps his spear. Fletcher Fund, 1951
was exhibited. This lone representative of the art of an empire that had once wielded power over the island of Cyprus was almost lost in a magnificent collection of Cypriote antiquities. The piece was the head of a winged genius, horned, bearded, and with the frozen countenance usual on such creatures of the ninth century B.C. It came from Nimrud and is still on exhibition. In 1933 as a result of generous gifts by J. Pierpont Morgan and John D. Rockefeller, Jr., a room was devoted to Assyrian sculpture, mostly showing ritualistic scenes. Two large human-headed winged beasts that once guarded doors of Assurnasirpal’s Palace at Nimrud—the Calah of the Bible, were placed in the main hall. Their two original companions, for they are not a pair—one is a bull and the other a lion—are in the British Museum.

In 1951 the Metropolitan Museum had a closer and more direct contact with Nimrud when William K. Simpson of the Egyptian Department went out there to work as an assistant on the excavations that had been restarted under the auspices of the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, under the skilled and experienced leadership of M. E. L. Mallowan. Professor Mallowan selected this site on which Layard, his assistants, and his successors, such as Rassam, Loftus, and others, had worked so long before, but where large areas had been left practically untouched. Here the early excavators had found not only a great mass of sculpture but many other objects, some of them things of beauty as well as of great archaeological interest. Through their great desire to uncover and remove as quickly as possible the great carved slabs of soft stone that formed a high dado, they tunneled round the walls, leaving the center of
the rooms undug. To return to these partly cleared rooms, as well as to extend the work to untouched areas, has been rewarding, and further excavations should prove very fruitful. The association of the Metropolitan Museum with these efforts in the field in 1951 has not only been a pleasant collaboration but has resulted in the acquisition of several important and handsome pieces of ivory as well as other antiquities, such as some plain but fine pottery that was made for palace use, and a necklace of beads of colored “faience.” These are the first of any such objects to come to the Museum from a site in Assyria itself, and it is most appropriate that they should come from the very same place as almost all our other sculptures. By means of these items from Nimrud, and some others acquired by purchase and gift, it is at last possible to show something of Assyrian handiwork besides slabs of sculpture and small stone seals. People here in New York may now compare for themselves some of the arts and crafts of Assyria with those of other countries of the ancient world. They will see that the arts of Assyria have been influenced by others and that others have been influenced by them.

Layard had a subtitle for his widely-read book Nineveh and Babylon. It was An Inquiry into the Manners and Arts of the Ancient Assyrians. He did not choose it for nothing because, even at that early date, the number of objects made of various materials that had been retrieved from the soil of Assyria was extremely large, so that considered with the elaborate details shown on the sculptured reliefs, he had substance for his “Inquiry.” He and others recognized at once that everything discovered in the Assyrian palaces was not Assyrian. The importance of Assyria’s neighbors was not forgotten in the first flush of enthusiasm for Assyrian art. Phoenicia, for one, was considered as the source of some of the metalwork, and eyes were quick to recognize the Egyptian appearance of many of the ivories found, though it was also seen that Egyptians did not make them, their manufacture being credited to the Assyrians.

Ivory was a highly prized material in the first millennium B.C. in many countries. There are references to it in the Old Testament, where one can read of Ahab, king of Israel, and his ivory house. Assyrian records speak of it again and again; it figures largely in the lists of tribute or booty from the reign of Assurnasirpal II to later times. Scenes showing the bringing of tusks by foreign peoples have been preserved, and Layard reported the finding of actual specimens. Ivory was used to decorate couches and tables and other furniture. Many other objects were also made of it, such as toilet articles. Ivory was not only used to decorate things made
of other materials but was itself, on occasion, embellished with gilding and inset with colored frit, glass, and metal. Since Layard's time many more finds of ancient ivory have been made in various places near Assyria: in Samaria, in Megiddo, and in Arslan Tash, which is in North Syria. In the last site, for example, among the many ivories unearthed was a fragment inscribed with the name of Hazael, king of Damascus (844-812 B.C.). Many of these ivories are closely related to those of Nimrud.

The ivories discovered at Nimrud in the nineteenth century, apart from two or three scraps, bore practically no resemblance to the scenes of hunting and warfare sculptured on the stone dadoes that decorated the bottom of the walls of Assyrian palaces. Layard considered that they showed foreign influence but were of Assyrian workmanship. Later it was generally conceded that most of the Nimrud ivories were either Phoenician or North Syrian, the former especially often having a strong Egyptian flavor. This view was strengthened by Phoenician or Aramaic characters written on the reverse side of several of them. Some of the ivories found in Nimrud in 1950 and 1951, of which a few are now in the Museum, show the same characteristics, some indeed duplicate those from the earlier excavations of Loftus. The lady with the long hair held by a fillet with inlaid rosettes and the group of naked women—there are actually four of them—are examples of the style designated North Syrian. These four wear feathered crowns, which were perhaps surmounted by small leafy capitals and are true caryatids even though it is not known for certain what they bore upon their heads. It is very possible, as R. D. Barnett suggested in his article published in IRAQ in 1935 on the ivories from Nimrud, that they supported bowls, most probably of another material.

As a result of the 1951 excavations at Nimrud there are now certain indications that Assyria must not be left too much out of the picture. Several pieces of ivory have been found which were decorated in an Assyrian fashion rather than a foreign one. They supplement a few exceptional pieces taken from Nimrud many years ago and suggest that there were, after all, some close links with Assyrian mural sculptures. Perhaps the most striking resemblance is to be seen in some other ivory plaques, discovered in what is now Persian Kurdistan. In ancient times this region was the land of the Biblical Minni, a people who were sometimes the enemies and sometimes the allies of the Assyrians. The plaques and other ivory fragments from this site were found in a bronze receptacle that was probably a coffin of Assyrian workmanship. It is interesting to see that engraved on the rim of this metal container is a procession of foreigners bearing tribute to their conquerors, among the objects being horns or tusks.

From the chariots included in some of the hunting scenes it is possible to know when this group of ivory plaques were made. The way in which certain details of Assyrian chariots changed during the course of the first millen-
inium B.C. is known to us. The curious object that connected the yoke to the top of the body of the chariot was curved on both sides in the days of Assurnasirpal II (883-850 B.C.) but was sometimes flat on the top in the reign of Tiglath Pileser III (745-727 B.C.) as we know from a relief found in Nimrud and now in the British Museum. After this period, judging from the wall sculptures, it was discarded entirely. There is thus every reason to believe that these ivory plaques were made in the second half of the eighth century B.C.

As the battle scene on page 236 shows an Assyrian victory the question of whether these particular plaques are Assyrian or not is practically settled. The style is Assyrian, they were made for Assyrians, and most probably in Assyria itself. Such details as to whether the man who actually carved them originally came from another place, or lived not in the heart of the country but within the extended boundaries of the kingdom under the reign of Tiglath Pileser III, must remain obscure. Equally Assyrian in style is the narrow band decorated with a tree flanked by kneeling animals and another with rosettes and winged female sphinxes, creatures which by the time of Assurnasirpal had been completely adopted by the Assyrian artist. The row of pretty gazelles, with one of them licking her kid as it sucks its fill, has much closer associations with the art of Phoenicia and North Syria, though none just like these have been discovered elsewhere. A fragment showing a rider hunting antelope is definitely not Assyrian at all. The man wears a hat with the top flapping backwards which in Assyrian art is worn only by foreigners. It is the type of hat worn by Jehu the Israelite of the house of Omri and also by the inhabitants of the lands of North Syria.

There is nothing surprising in the fact that the art of a people who had created a great empire should contain elements that were not peculiar to it alone. The art of Assyria was derived from many sources; it was influenced by others, others in turn were influenced by it, and various elements were bequeathed to later civilizations. The very way the empire was managed ensured a mingling of the arts and crafts of many races. The Assyrians collected tribute from foreign lands, received and gave presents and, on successful campaigns, looted the temples and palaces of their enemies. This is repeatedly written in their records and frequently shown in their sculptured decorations. They moved large numbers of conquered peoples from their own countries into Assyria and elsewhere. In addition to this, craftsmen were valuable, and it has long been the tradition in the Near East to summon them from far places for any major undertaking. The incorporation of a foreign group, often of a different religion but skilled in a particular craft, within the general community has long been practiced in the Near East. There is another factor in the way the art of one place affects that of another, as is illustrated in modern times. In New York there are several structures that are actual copies of others in France. So in the Old Testament we read how “king Ahaz went to Damascus to meet Tiglath Pileser king of Assyria, and saw an altar that was at Damascus: and king Ahaz sent to Urijah the priest the fashion of the altar, and the pattern of it, according to all the workmanship thereof.” In those days, too, there was deliberate copying.

It may not always be possible when looking at specific works of art, whether ancient or modern, to say by whom and for whom they were made; nor exactly when or where. They were created to answer no such questions. The art of the past, like that of the present, was alive and, being alive, had peculiarities and contradictions that cannot always be accounted for. Assyrian art is the expression of a people long since dead, but it is one that has life in it, for it is not completely past either our comprehension or our present enjoyment.

A detailed account of the ivories from Nimrud will be published by Professor Mallowan in a forthcoming number of IRAQ.