

The Destruction of Art

Marcus Milwright

Volume 47, numéro 1, 2022

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1091825ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091825ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce document

Milwright, M. (2022). The Destruction of Art. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 47(1), 86–89. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1091825ar>

The Destruction of Art

Marcus Milwright

In 2015 Islamic State (also known as ISIS, ISIL, and Daesh) targeted a series of high-profile archaeological sites in Iraq and Syria. In April of that year video footage was circulated of the detonation of explosives across the ancient city of Nimrud. Other videos showed Islamic State fighters destroying free-standing statuary and relief-carvings in the Mosul Museum. The carved ornaments of the monuments of Hatra were attacked with sledgehammers, the images of these actions also being shared online. Widespread attacks on cultural heritage were recorded in Syria, most prominently at Palmyra. The temples of Bel and Baal Shamin were largely destroyed in explosions in August 2015, while satellite photographs demonstrated that the tomb towers were levelled by September of the same year. The photographs and videos were supported by spoken and written justifications. The Islamic State publication, *al-Hayat*, noted that the Assyrians and Akkadians made sacrifices to gods associated with rain, agriculture and war, concluding: “Since Allah commanded us to shatter and destroy these statues, idols, and remains, it is easy for us to obey, and we do not care [what people think], even if they are worth billions of dollars.”¹ A polemic in another publication, *Dabiq*, cites the precedent of the destruction by the Prophet Muhammad of the idols within the Ka’ba in Mecca, following the conquest of the city in 629/630.²

Marcus Milwright is Professor of Islamic Art and Archaeology in the Department of Art History and Visual Studies at the University of Victoria, BC.
—mmilwrig@uvic.ca

The intimate connection between archaeology and nationalism was explored in another issue of *Dabiq*:

The *kuffar* [infidels] had unearthed these statues and ruins in recent generations and attempted to portray them as part of a cultural heritage and identity that the Muslims of Iraq should embrace and be proud of. Yet this opposes the guidance of Allah and His Messenger and only serves the nationalist agenda that severely dilutes the *walā'* [loyalty] that is required of Muslims towards their Lord.³

This antipathy toward nationalism was highlighted in a video from October 2014 showing the bulldozing of the border crossing between Iraq and Syria, located about 200km east of Raqqa, which made reference to the notorious Sykes-Picot agreement signed in 1916. Nationalism was not, of course, the only offence identified by militants. As noted above, the concern with idolatry (in Arabic, *shirk*) was also voiced in Islamic State media. This, combined with the Prophet's prohibition on the erection of monumental structures above graves, provided the ideological context for the detonation of numerous medieval shrines, including those of Imam Dur, near Samarra, and Imam Yahya ibn al-Qasim in Mosul. Yazidi places of worship have also been razed to the ground during Islamic State campaigns in 2014 around the northern Iraqi town of Sinjar.

These distressing events, culminating in the razing of the Nuri Mosque in Mosul in June 2017, provided the initial motivation for the design of an undergraduate course on the destruction of art. The course concentrates on destruction as a deliberate and expressive act, rather than inadvertent forms, including inappropriate restoration and repair, collateral damage during warfare, looting, and simple neglect. Substantial parts of the course are devoted to the actions of Islamic State and the Taliban in Afghanistan, providing different types of explanatory historical and cultural context. In his critical analysis of the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas in 2001, Finbarr Flood resists the simplistic explanation offered in media outlets

at the time, and in subsequent years, that this event was simply another manifestation of an iconoclastic urge that is somehow fundamental to Islam.⁴ Acknowledging the importance of *hadith* (sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad and the early community) directed against representational art and makers of art in the framing of Islamic legal practice, Flood argues that Taliban attitudes to the Buddhist heritage of Afghanistan developed from diverse factors, including the policies adopted by the conqueror, Mahmud of Ghazni (r. 999–1031), the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya by Hindu nationalists in 1992, and public pronouncements by the director of the Metropolitan Museum. The course takes account of Flood's approach, seeking to introduce students to the history of Muslim writings on representational art, without assuming that recent acts of destruction can be understood solely through an unsophisticated appeal to formative documents like the *hadith* and the early eighth-century document known as the *Covenant of Umar*.

It quickly became apparent that a course on destruction needed to adopt a wider focus, both in chronological and religious terms. An obvious point in this respect was that the legitimacy of the image (particularly representation of humans and animals) had been a contentious issue for Jews and Christians prior to the emergence of Islam. It is likely that these debates contributed to Muslim viewpoints on the image during the seventh and eighth centuries. For both Jewish and Christian communities through Late Antiquity, scriptural authority—most importantly, the Second Commandment (Exodus 20:3–4; Deuteronomy 5:7–8)—was employed in arguing for and against the use of images in religious and secular contexts. The Muslim conquests provided an additional challenge, leading some Christians to question whether reverence for icons was an offence to God. Eastern Christianity went through its phase of Iconoclasm (c. 726–843), while similar disputes were rehearsed by John Calvin (d. 1564), Ulrich Zwingli

1. "Is destroys ancient Artifacts in Mosul Museum," *Al-Hayat* (Al-Hayat Media Center). Quoted in Sofya Shahab, "The Ritualization of Heritage Destruction under Islamic State," *Journal of Social Archaeology* 8, no. 2 (2018): 226–27.

2. "From the Pages of History: Expeditions, Battles and Victories of Ramadan," *al-Dabiq* 10, 28. Quoted in Shahab, "Ritualization," 227.

3. "Erasing the Legacy of a ruined Nation," *al-Dabiq* 8, 22–23. Quoted in Christopher Jones, "Understanding ISIS's Destruction of Antiquities," *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology of Heritage Studies* 6, nos. 1–2 (2018): 45.

4. Finbarr Flood, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum," *The Art Bulletin* 84, no. 4 (2002): 641–59.

(d. 1531), and John Knox (d. 1572) during the Reformation. In all cases, the textual record can be correlated with extant examples of purposeful damage, from scrambling of tesserae on Middle Eastern church and synagogue pavements to the beheading of statuary in northern European cathedrals and churches. Hostile Christian engagement with the pagan past also left its mark on the physical record in the form of defaced statues and reliefs, sometimes emblazoned with crosses.

Inevitably, it is impossible to explore all of these events in the detail that they deserve. Hence, this part of the course makes use of case studies in order to establish the ways that ideology has been put into practice. The other goal is to isolate consistent themes in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim writing about the status of the image, and, more generally, of visual and material culture. This search for connections promotes fertile questions about what distinguishes the attitudes expressed in polemical discourses from different periods and religious traditions. Another important question relates to the insulating quality of time, such that the iconoclastic damage to a medieval church or an ancient temple may seem less immediate and disquieting than the mutilation of a statue by Muslim militant in twenty-first-century Iraq.

This last question is also explored in the section of the course devoted to what might be broadly described as politically-motivated destruction. The Syrian Civil War (2011–present) provides examples of the dismantling of public statues, coupled with forms of ritualized humiliation, including stepping on the head or beating it with shoes. Comparison can be made with the treatment of Saddam Hussein’s public art in 2003 and the images of the Pahlavi shahs after the Iranian Revolution in 1979. The head of the giant statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky (d. 1926), was also stepped on when it was torn down from its plinth in Lubyanka Square in August 1991, prior to its removal to the Fallen Monument Park. The “punishment” of statues and two-di-

mensional images has a much older history, however, and the course examines these practices and the notion of *damnatio memoriae* (the extinguishing of the memory of an individual through the destruction of images and textual references). The Roman empire provides numerous examples of statues bearing signs of damage that accord with sanctions found in the legal code, including rhinotomy and blinding. A bronze bust of Caligula found in the Tiber river exhibits the crude removal of the eyes. Equally notable in this context is that it was the fate of the corpses of the condemned men to be thrown into the Tiber, rather than receiving the conventional funerary rites.

The course remains attentive to contemporary events, with lectures being added to deal with the debates around the removal of the Confederate monuments in the United States, the statues of Cecil Rhodes (d. 1902; in Oriel College, Oxford, and Cape Town University), and the Canadian prime minister, John MacDonald (d. 1891).⁵ In future iterations the course will discuss issues raised by Black Lives Matter protests across the world, including the dismantling of the bronze statue of the slave trader Edward Colston (d. 1721) in 2020, and its subsequent display, covered in graffiti, in the M Shed Museum in Bristol.

The removal of public statues can, therefore, be viewed positively, even if such acts do not enjoy acceptance by all sectors of society. Purposeful destruction can also be deemed legitimate and intellectually engaging in modern and contemporary artistic practice, although again it is important to recognize the mixed receptions that may be generated among art professionals and the general public. Robert Rauschenberg’s (d. 2008), *Erased De Kooning Drawing* (1953) is dealt with in a detailed case study because of its influence on subsequent acts of destruction and erasure. The survey of more recent examples ranges from relatively playful pieces such as Michael Landy’s *Art Bin* (2010) and Banksy’s *Love is in the Bin* (created at Sothebys, New York, on 5 October 2018) to more troubling works, including Chris-

5. On the controversy, see Elian Peltier, “Scholars at Oxford University refuse to teach under Statue of Colonialist,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/06/10/world/europe/cecil-rhodes-statue-oxford.html>.

6. On these artists, see Kerry Brougher, Russell Ferguson, and Dario Gamboni, *Damage Control: Art and Destruction since 1950* (Munich, London, and New York: DelMonico and Prestel), 2014. Also Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (New York: Reaktion Books), 1997.

7. Jonathan Jones, “Look what we did,” *The Guardian*, March 31, 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2003/mar/31/artsfeatures.turnerprize2003>.

tian Marclay's, *Guitar Drag* (1999), Ai Wei Wei's *Dropping of a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), and the "improvements" made to Francisco Goya's (d. 1828) *Disasters of War* etchings by the Chapman Brothers (2003).⁶ Ai Wei Wei's treatment of Chinese antiquities has prompted strong reactions from curators and collectors, while the *Guardian* art critic Jonathan Jones was moved to write of the transformed Goya etchings that: "What the Chapmans have released is something nasty, psychotic and value free."⁷ It can be seen that the status accorded to internationally-recognized artists plays a role in whether a given act of destruction is considered as thought-provoking or simply an act of vandalism.

To return to the targeted attacks by Islamic State on ancient sites and religious monuments, it becomes apparent that their presentation in a lecture course requires a nuanced appreciation of context. This approach does not minimize their profoundly negative impact in cultural and human terms, but allows students to appreciate the interplay of historical factors with contemporary events. It is also apparent that certain strategies and concepts reappear in religious discourse over time. Much hinges on the interpretation of key passages of religious literature and precise definition of idolatry as a practice. Context is

also vital in the political arena, dictating the circumstances in which it might be "appropriate" to dismantle a statue or obscure an inscription. Importantly, we might well support the removal of a public monument erected to glorify Edward Colston, but still be able to engage aesthetically with ancient sculptures of Roman emperors, despite the fact these representations were the product of a polity supported through the institution of slavery. These examples highlight the role of time in diluting the emotional impact of actions, such that the demolition of the temple of Bel in Palmyra or the Bamiyan Buddhas feels more raw to contemporary audiences than the systematic destruction of the Medieval statuary and stained glass in Ely cathedral in the 1540s. What holds these disparate episodes together, however, is the zeal possessed by those who engage in iconoclasm; these are not furtive acts, but ones usually done with personal conviction and the urgent desire to communicate ideological concerns to a wider audience, whether these concerns are religious, political, or some combination of the two. Art historians and students clearly have a duty to come to a better understanding of what leads people to take such extreme positions against art, architecture, and the archaeological record. ¶