

# Introduction

## Destroyed—Disappeared— Lost—Never Were

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This volume assembles a kaleidoscopic array of reflections on works of art, artifacts, and monuments that are no longer extant, have disappeared from view, or perhaps never existed outside of language in the first place. Composed of short essays by specialists working on a diverse range of world cultures during the period from 500 to 1500 CE, the volume explores the formative presence of destruction, loss, obscurity, and existential uncertainty within the history of art and the study of historical material and visual cultures.

Since the 1980s, the influence of new historicism and the rise of visual studies and visual culture paradigms have increasingly expanded the scope of what could and should be encompassed by the project of historical reconstruction or recovery. More and more art historians, not least those focused on premodern periods, have questioned not only evidentiary lacunae—lost works, lost documentation, lost lived experience—but also the forms of occlusion worked by disciplinary definitions of what might count as an object for the art-historical gaze.<sup>1</sup> As a consequence, art historians have turned our attention to previously excluded forms of visual representation, artifacts, and even unworked materials

themselves—a move away from narrow conceptions of art history’s proper objects of study, already presaged in the work of scholars such as Aby Warburg, Erwin Panofsky, and Ernst Gombrich.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, since the late 1990s, the canon of art history has been significantly altered, revised, questioned, and expanded, and artifacts, object constellations, visual/material assemblages, and ensembles have progressively moved to the center of scholarly attention. At the same time, the rise of new conceptions of “global” or “world art history” have both challenged and significantly transformed the scope and priorities of disciplinary art history, decentering the place of Europe and North America within the art-historical landscape and focusing new critical attention on the historical and historiographical consequences of past and present forms of orientalism, colonialism, and racism.<sup>3</sup> This foment of historical and methodological critique and creativity has, in many important ways, expanded the discipline and its collective corpora. And yet, amid this significant opening up of the definitions of what count as art-historical questions, methods, and objects of study, historians of premodern art must still confront the fact of loss, disappearance, and destruction. A more capacious, more inclusive canon, a more critical and cosmopolitan approach to history and historiography, an expanded methodological “tool kit”: none of these welcome developments in the discipline can restore the countless works from 500 to 1500 CE that no longer exist.

### **The Shapes of Absence**

If the destruction, disappearance, and loss of artworks, artifacts, and monuments are phenomena well known to all art historians, their effects within the study of premodern visual and material cultures are especially decisive, if still undertheorized, and, perhaps, impossible to adequately theorize. For every premodern work that survives into our present, countless others do not survive. This is at once an historical fact and an acute epistemological condition of our work.

For art historians (indeed, for historians of all disciplinary stripes) committed to a philosophically positivist historicism, the fact of absence—and its immensurability—is often felt as a limiting condition. To employ a reductive analogy, if the past is a picture puzzle to

be reassembled piece by piece, missing pieces matter. Destroyed, disappeared, and lost works of art—known only in mediated forms or else not at all—remain blank spaces within the puzzle of the past. In some cases, they may indeed be crucial missing links, whose presence shaped the past and whose absence from our historiographies leaves them lacking. Furthermore, to extend the analogy, we cannot know how many pieces of the historical puzzle are missing, or how this might, or might not, matter to the pictures of the past we attempt to (re)assemble. This state of affairs, and its entailments for the historian, are well known; they have profoundly shaped not only the content of arguments about premodern art but also art-historical methodology itself.

Consider, for example, the positing of lost copies in copy-chain accounts of the transmission and transformation of works of art. Practitioners of such stemmatic (or “genetic”) approaches to reconstructing the transmission of iconographic motifs and pictorial formulae have often resorted to hypothesizing lost works whose historical existence can be inferred, it is argued, from the presence of extant works of art. So too, the foundational work of building art-historical chronologies, assembling corpora, and making artistic attributions involves a constant reckoning with “missing data”: those works of art and archival sources that, if they were known, might yield a smooth developmental narrative or reveal a crucial turning point in the history of art’s making and makers.

Even where works and archives have facilitated the creation of dense chronologies, secure attributions, and developmental accounts, the fragmentary state of many premodern corpora and archives has powerfully differentiated the *habitus* of premodernist Europeanist art historians from that of their colleagues working in later periods of European art. Similarly, if yet more perniciously, in subfields dedicated to the art history and archaeology of regions and cultures whose traditions of art making do not lend themselves to the construction of individual artistic oeuvres and whose historical archives do not resemble European textual archives, art history’s traditional approaches to the task of historical reconstruction have come up short or have not yet been thoroughly brought to bear. As Jaś Elsner notes in his essay in this volume, the uneven state of the groundwork in different fields has frustrated

rigorously comparative work and, for too long, has created the appearance of the absence of archives where, in fact, the situation is one of archival difference.

Historians of art made and disappeared or destroyed before 1500 CE must often labor intensely and inventively to amass evidence sufficient to render our historical speculations about the missing tesserae in the mosaic of the past's remaining traces convincing.<sup>4</sup> Galit Noga-Banai and Cheryl Glenn, among others, have suggested that visual evidence can fill gaps where primary textual sources are silent,<sup>5</sup> a proposition that variously animated the proceedings of the Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art (CIHA) conference "Memory and Oblivion."<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, just as the positing of lost works to account for the features of existing works (an approach characteristic of textual and art-historical stemmatic criticism) has been much criticized, so too the use of both texts and images as "documentation" for monuments, objects, and artistic practices otherwise inaccessible to the historian is a tricky business.

If the unquantifiable scale of the destruction, loss, and disappearance of works leaves the historian of premodern art in a constant state of epistemological suspension, it must be acknowledged that art historians have continuously and inventively sought "work arounds" to cope with all that we can no longer perceive. Those compensatory methods have, in fact, been foundational for the study of premodern art, so much so that one could describe the history of the history of premodern art as decisively shaped by responses to the "negative spaces" of the historical picture, those known or hypothesized lacunae that are deemed to mark the spots once occupied by unknown and unknowable works of art, artifacts, monuments, and makers.

As in a single work of art, negative space can be an active, constitutive, creative presence. And as in the analysis of works of art, attending to negative space can be illuminating. If art historians have often attempted to overcome or compensate for the dynamics of destruction, loss, and disappearance that have winnowed the record of premodern art to some incalculable fraction of what it "once was," that quixotic project has yielded considerable methodological creativity and insight. A fragmentary archive, however, also has its advantages: premodernists are not confronted with the overwhelming profusion of

potentially relevant sources that colleagues working in later centuries must confront—or else willfully ignore. No doubt, the committed interdisciplinarity of so much premodern art-historical scholarship is, at least in part, due to the scale of our archives and their fragmentary conditions. Last, but not least, as the essays in this volume show, attending to absence itself can be intellectually productive, even liberating. The study and interpretation of works that survive as fragments of some putative lost bigger picture, of works that do not survive or cannot be examined, and of works that may, in fact, have never been realized as material presences, simply cannot be done in a state of epistemological nihilism or exhausted fatalism. It requires intellectual creativity and energy. It has the potential to liberate us from idealized standards of mastery and the tyranny of the definitive “proof” or argument. Pursued critically and with curiosity, it fosters a historical consciousness that apprehends the past’s positive forms and negative spaces in a dynamic, dialectic relation.

### **Absences: Phenomena and Effects**

Several modes of absence and their effects are examined by the essays in this volume. The destruction, disappearance, and loss of artworks, artifacts, and monuments are phenomena well known to art historians. From practices of iconoclasm and *damnatio memoriae*, to erasures effected by environmental disasters and degradation, to the recycling of materials, the destruction of works of art has a history as long as that of the making of art and artifacts. By destruction, in this volume, we envision both the planned and unplanned annihilation of works: actions and events that result in a thoroughgoing, substantial transformation of an object or monument, leaving an absence in place of a presence.

Disappearance and loss are, in our conception, cognate yet distinct phenomena. A disappeared or lost work may yet exist, hidden from view. Works can disappear into the ground, buried under strata unless they are unearthed by geological processes or human effort. Works can disappear thanks to their very materials and facture, as well as by intention: temporary architectures, ephemeral performances, works made from perishable substances—even creations made to be

ingested, consumed by fire, thrown into bodies of water. Such works made to be consumed, destroyed, or otherwise disappeared are abundantly attested in cultures across the globe and through time. Works can also disappear into the private art market, their last known sighting documented in an auction catalog, a former collection's inventory, a beholder's memory.

Loss is an equally capacious designation that spans a spectrum reaching from the irreversible to the contingent and temporary. If, in the parlance of the insurance industry, a work is a "total loss" when it is deemed to be so substantially altered as to no longer have commercial value, other losses are complexly, contentiously conditional. Objects and sites can, in the course of time, lose their names, their function, their significance. Still extant, in whole or in part, such works endure incognito in a state of historical misrecognition or invisibility. The expropriation of artworks, objects, artifacts, and even monumental complexes by imperial, colonial, and academic actors reveal how gain can be predicated on loss, how presence and visibility can index theft, destruction, and violence. And so too, calls and demands for the repatriation of works and reparations for their loss or disappearance testify to the political, economic, cultural, and religious stakes of absence and reclamation. The blind spots of academic art history also produce losses. Art-historical canons, the myopia of Eurocentrism, the forgetting of older questions and insights as publications proliferate and scholarly interests alter, singly and collaboratively, have proven capable of making works disappear from intellectual view.

Although we cannot unwrite prior historiography, and we must not ignore or underestimate its influence, we can collaborate in writing histories that compel us to critically confront how the writing of history always involves exclusions, absences, and privileged perspectives that occlude or obscure other works, other histories, and other analytic perspectives. In a radically changing world impacted by the actual loss of cultural heritage through war, the consequences of climate change, and the redefinition of shared societal values, we need to reflect together about what has been lost, what has disappeared, and what never was in order to collaboratively explore what the past, entangled in the present, might yet be.

“Never were” designates the fourth mode of absence animating this volume. Arguably, it is the mode of absence that has attracted the least reflection and commentary from art historians, and yet it was a vibrant phenomenon in the premodern past and one that art historians today would do well to take seriously. By works that “never were,” we have in mind objects, artifacts, monuments, architectural complexes—indeed even cities—that were only ever fabricated in the human imagination and in language. In some cases, these objects are the stuff of literature: conjured in verse and prose, they existed on the page, in oral performances and acts of listening, perhaps appearing in daydreams or sleep. In other cases, they were produced and preserved in the form of plans, models, drawings, and textual instructions for products and projects never brought to completion. Some works “never were” as they were reported; the stuff of rumor, traveler’s tales, exaggeration, even parody or satire, they circulated, acquired credibility, and became discursive artifacts that could never be verified by autopsy. Premodern imaginative literatures and other textual sources are peppered with such “never were” works. At times their fantastical character alerts us to their fictional substance. In other cases, however, distinguishing between the premodern past’s works of imagination and its *realia* is far from easy.

### Ekphrasis and Uncertainty

The rich tradition of premodern ekphrasis is a case in point. From antiquity through the medieval period, many world cultures produced verbal accounts rhetorically crafted to catalyze vivid, imaginative encounters with works of art, architecture, and artfully designed landscapes or environments. Although the famous ekphrases of Homer’s *Iliad* and Virgil’s *Aeneid* are often taken, *pars pro toto*, to stand for the rich tradition of premodern ekphrasis, medievalists have long known that ekphrastic writing flourished in the centuries spanning late antiquity to early modernity.<sup>7</sup> To consider only European medieval and Byzantine writers, not only Dante—a well-known practitioner of ekphrasis—but also Venantius Fortunatus, Paul the Silentary, Theodulf of Orléans, Michael the Deacon, Constantine Rhodios, Baudri of Bourgueil, Hugh of St. Victor, Suger of St. Denis, Nikolaus Mesarites, Wolfram of Eschenbach,

Albrecht von Scharfenberg, Alanus ab Insulis, Jean de Meun, Christine de Pisan, Konrad Fleck, John Lydgate, William Chaucer, and many other well- and lesser-known medieval writers continued and reinvented the ekphrastic tradition.<sup>8</sup> For good reason, late antique, Byzantine, and medieval European ekphrases have exerted an irresistible attraction upon scholars desiring to reconstruct lost works. Although ekphrasis in non-Western subfields of art history has received significantly less scholarly attention, there are rich written sources that merit art historians' attention.<sup>9</sup>

But the attention we bring to ekphrases and the uses we make of them must involve historically sensitive, critical forms of reading and interpretation. As Lawrence Nees and Vincent Debais have elucidated, some medieval works of art compellingly described by ekphrases only ever existed in textual form and in the imaginations of a text's hearers or readers.<sup>10</sup> Even when the subjects of late antique, Byzantine, and European medieval ekphrasis can be securely identified with once-existing or still-existing buildings and objects, these texts do not provide "objective," impartial accounts of how works of art, architecture, landscape, or other constituents of past visual or material cultures were made, appeared, or were experienced. The varied aims and palpable artfulness of premodern ekphrases defy any naive scholarly attempt to reconstruct lost works or aesthetic experiences: premodern ekphrastic texts (and arguably this has not changed in subsequent centuries) always powerfully remediated works of art and architecture in the medium of language.<sup>11</sup>

As Avinoam Shalem points out, in Islamicate contexts, written sources "demonstrate the great esteem with which artefacts were held" through sophisticated, even lavish deployments of ekphrasis that defy binary conceptions of object and (human) subject.<sup>12</sup> Contrasting Al-Qadi al-Rashid ibn al-Zubayr's eleventh-century *Book of Gifts and Rarities* (*Kitab al-Hadaya wa al-Tuhaf*) with Western medieval inventories, Shalem observes how the text describes objects in a biographical mode, detailing not only their appearance but also their individual histories. The investing of objects with subjecthood by overtly ekphrastic means in Islamicate contexts reaches quite virtuosic levels, Shalem observes, in the widespread and rich tradition of inscribed objects in premodern



Islamicate cultures.<sup>13</sup> Many of the inscriptions worked into objects “when read out aloud give a voice to the objects, as if the objects themselves are speaking.”<sup>14</sup> In certain objects we encounter what we might term “auto-ekphrasis”: prosopopoeia integrated in the very fabric of an object that not only grants it a voice but even addresses the beholder with the language of self-description. Although a vast corpus of premodern Islamicate inscribed objects survive, other object inscriptions are preserved only in the form of transcriptions integrated into (other) texts. For the interpreter of such documents of now lost or destroyed objects, encounters with their auto-ekphrases are tantalizing, like poignant encounters with “disembodied” voices from the past. More broadly, the Islamicate tradition of inscribed objects challenges inherited scholarly understandings of ekphrasis as a remediating project. When an object “speaks” its own (self-)description or interpretation, how should the art historian interpret that discourse? As an unassailable “first-person” testimony? As a proleptic instance of past reception? As an uncanny “voice” still audible despite the distance of time and culture?

When ekphrases and their object-referents cross cultures and periodizations, the challenges to interpretation only ramify. Taking up a particularly complex case of ekphrastic remediation, Christina Han has examined differences between Western and Chinese scholarly interpretations of Yeats’s poem “Lapis Lazuli,” which concludes with an ekphrastic response to a Chinese Lapis Lazuli stone carved with a depiction of a mountain landscape, and a Chinese ekphrasis of that landscape titled “Visiting a Friend in Spring Mountain” (春山訪友).<sup>15</sup> As Han elucidates, the actual carved stone in Yeats’s possession, in both its scenic representation and epigraphy, participates in a painted and poetic thematic tradition inaugurated in the eleventh century. Elucidating how the ekphrasis of the carved stone in Yeats’s poem has involved Western and Chinese scholars in an “ekphrastic clash,” Han argues that “Yeats’s carved rock presents a stumbling block to the poem.”<sup>16</sup> She observes that the carved stone’s “iconic image, which evokes rich cultural memories filled with famous mountains and the poet recluses who lived in them, stands in the way of Chinese scholars when interpreting Yeats’s poem. Their interpretive act . . . is a transcultural as well as a transtextual exercise in which the ekphrastic description of

the scenery by Yeats collides with the ekphrastic tradition of Chinese landscape arts.”<sup>17</sup> As Han’s analysis of modern interpretive responses to Yeats’s creative reworking of a Chinese (possibly eleventh-century) carved stone reveals, the interpretation of ekphrasis (like the writing of ekphrasis) is always enmeshed in traditions of aesthetic production and reception. When ekphrasis reaches across cultures or travels transculturally (geographically, temporally, or both), “complex issues of hermeneutic authority” arise, and interpretive gains may be accompanied by contextualist losses.<sup>18</sup>

As Debais has insightfully observed, ekphrastic accounts of works of art and architecture often presume and even require one or several productive gaps or intervals between their own vivid acts of rhetorical description and the object described or produced in language: “Many medieval forms of ekphrasis assume a distance: either a physical distance between the object and its viewer, which is necessary for sensory, visionary, or poetic experiences prior to literary composition; or, a distance between the object and the product of the ekphrastic process—a poem, a narrative, or other literary form.”<sup>19</sup> Working from Debais’s insight, we can recognize that for art historians reading premodern ekphrasis or other textual accounts of works of art, architecture, performance, or landscape—be they rhetorical descriptions of extant, no longer extant, or only verbally existing works—at least two other forms of “distance” come into play. There is the widely recognized (if also questioned and critiqued) experience of historical distance or alterity that separates historians from “history” and situates them in a present removed in any number of ways from the past they seek to analytically describe. But there is also the equally felt and intensely debated “distance” or difference between *pictura* and *poesis*, between things and words. It is in this *Spannungsfeld* (area of tension) that practitioners of art history, architectural history, archaeology, visual studies, and material culture work. And this work usually involves acts of ekphrasis: sometimes dazzling, often fumbling and incomplete, haunted by uncertainty and by any number of desires.

In an essay published in 2010, Elsner (one of the contributors to this volume) provocatively lays bare the ekphrastic heart of disciplinary art history:

Far from being a rigorous pursuit, art history . . . is nothing other than ekphrasis, or more precisely an extended argument built on ekphrasis. That is, it represents the *tendentious* application of rhetorical description to the work of art (or to several works or even to whole categories of art) for the purpose of making an argument of some kind to suit the author's prior intent. Not everything that results from ekphrasis is art history, but that series of uses of interpretive description, which attempt to make a coherent argument on broadly historical or philosophical lines, is definitely art history.<sup>20</sup>

The tendentious character of art history as ekphrasis that Elsner identifies is, arguably, never so patent, so barefaced, as when we attempt to describe and then to make arguments about works that we could never have seen or can no longer see with our own eyes. Attempting to interpret works that have been destroyed, disappeared, lost, or that never existed as nontextual artifacts, our recourse to description—fabricated from second-order testimonies by means of rigorous, disciplined acts of imagination—is irreducibly *tendentious*. As this volume, we hope, demonstrates, it is tendentious in the expansive sense of the adjective's premodern origin in the Latin verb *tendeo, tendere, tetendi, tensum*:

**1 tendere** [CL] 1 to extend outwards or upwards, to hold or stretch out, offer. **b** (goods for sale). **c** (transf.). **d** to point, direct, aim . . . 2 to stretch out to particular, greater, or full length or extent. **b** (geom.). **c** to spread out or over to full extent. **d** to extend or prolong in time . . . 3 to set (up) by stretching out a (tent, canopy, or sim.). **b** (hunting net, snare, or sim., also transf. or fig.) . . . 4 to exert strain on, pull tight. **b** to stretch back (bow or catapult), string (bow), tighten (strings of instrument). **c** to pull tight over a frame. **d** (? as form of repair). **e** (transf.) to strain (mentally) . . . 5 to stretch through fullness or expansion (from within), distend . . . 6 to direct (one's steps, course, or sim.). **b** (sound) . . . 7 (intr.) to proceed, make one's way. **b** (impers. pass.). **c** (transf., in conversation or discussion) . . . 8 (also trans. refl. or pass.) to extend or reach (to,

towards, or as far as in a spec. direction). **b** (transf.) to pertain to, concern . . . **g** to progress or be on the way (to another stage or condition). **b** to verge on, amount to, reach . . . **10** to tend or lead towards (consequence, conclusion, or sim.) . . . **12** (w. dat., *ad*, or *in* & acc.) to aim or strive for, devote oneself to, be intent on, to have as one's end. **b** (w. inf. or *ut* cl.) . . . **13** (p. ppl. f. as sb.) fathom (*v. et. teisa*) . . .<sup>21</sup>

To write about works that are no longer extant or otherwise cannot be sensually perceived involves considerable strain. Absent the object, we must stretch business-as-usual art-historical methods to, or even past, their breaking points. The destroyed or disappeared work does not simply elude the grasp of language; it is also withdrawn from our senses and from the camera's reach. Straining toward it with analysis and imagination, we are confronted with the full expanse of what we cannot see, handle, and know. Despite these tensions—or, perhaps, thanks to them—in our attempts to say something persuasive and hopefully significant about such works, we inevitably become involved in a different kind of progress toward historical consciousness and knowledge. Not the positive knowledge that deals in likely certainties, or convinced and convincing accounts of how things once were, but rather a fathoming that tends to the dim, obscure edges and negative spaces that play crucial roles in shaping our apprehension of the past.

### **Premodern Art History's Affects**

Despite a widespread commitment to interdisciplinarity, the study of premodern art and architecture today is as fixated upon historical objects and monuments as it ever was. Even with the “area studies” orientations of our formations and intellectual communities—we are Mesoamericanists, classicists, sinologists, Islamicists, Byzantinists, Europeanists, as well as art historians—we still retain a longing for objects, for encounters with the visual and material works made by and for cultures that are not in any immediate or simple way our own.

Like all art historians, our work normatively starts and ends with made things that we want, in varied ways, to understand and elucidate.

The art historian's work—and the object relations that are at its center—has been described as pervaded by longing, by a desire to recover or “save” the past, by nostalgia, and by an uneasy, irresolvable drive to either repress or sublimate both psychological and metaphysical forms of loss. Exploring the affective dynamics of writing art history, Michael Ann Holly has observed: “The materiality, the very physicality, of the works of art with which we deal is a challenge to ever seeing the past as over and gone. They exist in the same space as their analysts, yet their sense of time is hardly congruent with ours—of that we are acutely aware. And so we work incessantly at familiarizing the unfamiliar. In the plaintive writing of art history, we have what Giorgio Agamben would call a ‘loss without a lost object.’”<sup>22</sup> But the melancholic situation of the student of premodern art and material culture is, arguably, not quite as Holly describes. If our art-historical work is a melancholic project, it is one determined, from the start, by stark conditions of *partiality*. And partiality in several senses. We know that what survives into the present-tense of the historical cultures we study is a dramatically fractional material record: a mere subset of a far larger multitude of art works, monuments, things, and texts that once existed. And we are also acutely aware of how *longue durée* dynamics of religious, political, ideological, and aesthetic partiality—always historically conditioned—have shaped patterns of survival and loss in equal measure when it comes to the art-historical, archaeological, and material cultural traces of the premodern past, in all parts of the globe.

If historians of modern and contemporary art and visual/material cultures routinely cope with a proverbial evidentiary iceberg by focusing upon its fractional tip, protruding above the surface of the vast modern archival sea, historians of premodern art and visual/material cultures must grapple with a quite different, and differently daunting, situation. Our historical icebergs have been subjected to powerful forces that have caused them to fracture, melt, and evaporate. The resulting floes have been carried by any number of currents; only very rarely can we reconstruct their travels or how their travels have changed them. We encounter these fragments far from their origin points, and from

them we attempt to conjure—in our minds’ eyes, in our analyses, and in our words—what once lay below the surface of the water.

Holly has proposed that the “disciplinary companion” of art history is “*Melancholy*. Or perhaps her twin sister, *Mourning*.”<sup>23</sup> As historians of medieval art, however, we would suggest that two other personifications keep us company: *Imaginatio* and a quixotic form of *Spes*, which today might also be named *Optimism*. Given how much premodern architecture, art, and material culture has *not* survived and given the ways in which premodern works continue to disappear or be destroyed—both by human-made calamities and by the dynamics of the market—we must, of necessity, attend not only to the extant but also to the no-longer existent, to the inaccessible, and to works that were never materially fabricated beyond the written page. How imagination and optimism—in collaboration with melancholy, timidity, frustration, and even outrage—accompany our work inevitably shapes the questions we take up and those we avoid, the ways we see and marshal our evidence, and, not least, the rules of the art-historical game that we recognize and obey—or else reject, break, or bend.<sup>24</sup>

### **Confronting What Is *Not* There: An Invitation and Ten Responses**

It is striking how little art historians focused on the period from 500 to 1500 CE have explored how loss, oblivion, and disappearance condition and even, at times, *enable* our work. Although we are often acutely aware of the incomplete, fragmented, partially obliterated, and materially and intellectually reinvented state of our archive, we rarely explicitly reflect upon how these working conditions, and the physical conditions of the works we encounter, shape the historical questions we ask, the historical claims we advance, and the ways we make our arguments. How hope, melancholy, imagination, optimism, and even the compulsion to speculate condition our work in the “ruins” of past cultures is, all too often, explored in private conversations but banished from the printed page.

In this volume, we invited art historians working in fields spanning the globe from late antiquity to the present to reflect upon the ways in which dynamics of loss, destruction, and nonexistence both haunt

and animate their understanding of what they study, how they interpret it, and why they do the historical work they do. Our aim was to gather together a series of thoughtful reflections on how and why art historians find ways of perceiving and on the words they use to convey an understanding of objects, spaces, and practices that are profoundly shaped by the negative spaces of historical retrospection.

The essays that follow offer varied responses to an open yet pressing series of questions: How do we deal with the loss of memory, the missing pieces in the chain of past evidence, the lost traces, all that we do not and cannot know? How do we embed the resurfacing of such traces within larger historiographic landscapes? How do we address the gaps in our vision of those past and yet present landscapes? How do we deal with the elements of fiction—both historical and historiographical—that inevitably creep into our vision and our arguments, thus blurring or clouding the often posited and desired historically reflective function we impute to objects, monuments, and works of art? If the art-historical archive is a mirror reduced to an incomplete, scattered number of tarnished or irreparably abraded shards, is the art historian condemned to play the part of a frustrated *speculator* or a *bricoleur* mosaicist? Or else, might it be that the historical conditions of loss, destruction, and even uncertainty that shape the premodern archive are the very conditions that enable our work and the experiences of discovery, excitement, and speculative pleasure found in beholding and writing about art from a past deemed “distant” and beyond historiographical “mastery”?

Some contributors explore the melancholic, mournful, or outraged position of the art historian confronted with the fragmented, effaced, or falsified remnants of past works (Brittenham, Kersey, Liepe, McCoy). Select essays reflect upon the historian’s incomplete knowledge of, and desire for, works that are no longer extant or otherwise inaccessible (Brittenham, Drimmer, Liepe). The absence of works prompts other contributors to reflect on historiography as a practice, to explore the limits and freedom of ekphrasis and/or scholarly interpretation, or else to consider the challenges and pleasures proper to working with, or despite, historical lacunae, probing the contours of what once was or else may never have been (Elsner, Kersey, McCoy). Several essays

explore the dynamics (both historical and contemporary) that lead to the loss of works or to their disappearance from view (Brittenham, Drimmer, McCoy). Other contributions focus on premodern imaginings of a lost past and how knowledge of the past was accessed, imagined, invented, and “re-stored” (Bacci, Joyner). Rather than focusing on the history of invention, one contribution pays special attention to the historical valuation of skill, knowledge preservation, and emotional affect (MacMurdie). In the response to the contributions of this volume, Peter Geimer elucidates “a basic structure of art-historical work: the interference of loss and writing, the peculiar tension between mourning the loss of so many works of art and praising (rather secretly) the productive effects of their absence.”<sup>25</sup> As Geimer acutely observes, most art-historical work is done in the ambiguous and ambivalent space between the poles of absence and presence, between a sense of the past as irretrievably gone and an experience of its powerful, even menacing presence. Fittingly, he closes this volume with a call to resist fixities and to instead recognize how even those works that do survive “do not mean *for* us. They are telling, but they do not communicate.”<sup>26</sup>

This volume was conceived in the long wake of a series of art-historical and archaeological losses that were painfully contemporary: the destruction of the Bamiyan Buddhas, the collapse and extensive water damage to the Cologne city archive, the loss of manuscripts from libraries in Timbuktu, the destruction of archaeological sites and monuments in China, Libya, Mali, Sudan, Syria, Turkey.<sup>27</sup> And this list could go on because the progress of human-induced destruction seems unrelenting. The volume developed over a period of time in which persistent nationalistic, racist, and religiously intolerant revisionist fantasies about the past—not least the premodern past—played an increasingly overt role in the shaping of polemic, policy, and violence in the public sphere. Simultaneously, if belatedly, climate change—its role in the loss of cultural heritage, its threat to the stability of political systems and to national and international institutions charged with the stewardship or protection of artworks and monuments—has compelled us to reflect and respond in new ways, with a different sense of urgency. Most recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic has cast into new salience the profound challenge that the loss of access to museums, archives,



sites, and objects; the loss of presumptions of “normalcy” and of forms of human contact; and, not least, the loss of lives pose both to our understanding of the present and to the work of examining the past.

The occlusion, disappearance, and destruction of works of art, monuments, archives, and lived lives is, at once, always historically conditioned and also an enduring transhistorical phenomenon. And yet—as our contributors elucidate with intellectual acuity and feeling—in loss, all is not lost. If in our work we must critically accept the task of mourning, we are also capable of discerning the negative spaces between the positive forms of fragmentary survivals, of feats of rigorous imagination, of an optimism that does not retreat into false certitude but keeps looking and reaching for words adequate to what survives, what does not, and what never was.

## Notes

1. We employ the adjective “premodern” in this essay to designate the chronological period from 500 to 1500 CE. In our use of this term, we explicitly do not endorse any account of the “modern” or “modernism”—elastic terms, covering a number of concepts, whose premises and entailments rightly continue to be contested, not least by colleagues working in fields other than European and North American art history.

2. Aby Warburg, “Luftschiff und Tauchboot in der mittelalterlichen Vorstellungswelt (1911),” reprinted in *Aby Warburg: Von Michelangelo bis zu den Pueblo-Indianern; Mit Beiträgen von Ernst H. Gombrich* (Warburg: Hermes, 1991), 79–86; Aby Warburg, “Italienische Kunst und internationale Astrologie im Palazzo Schifanoja zu Ferrara,” in *L'Italia e l'arte straniera: Atti del X Congresso internazionale di storia dell'arte, Roma 1912* (Rome: Maglione & Strini, 1922), 179–93; Aby Warburg, “A Lecture on the Serpent Ritual,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 2 (1938/39): 277–92; Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1955); Erwin Panofsky, *Die ideologischen Vorläufer des Rolls-Royce-Kühlers & Stil und Medium im Film* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus, 1993); Ernst H. Gombrich, *Aby Warburg: An Intellectual Biography* (London: The Warburg Institute, University of London, 1970); Ernst H. Gombrich, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse, and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1965); Horst Bredekamp, “Antikensehn-sucht und Maschinenglauben,” in *Forschungen zur Villa Albani*, ed. Herbert Beck and Peter C. Bol (Berlin: Mann, 1982), 507–62; Horst Bredekamp, “A Neglected Tradition? Art History as Bildwissenschaft,” *Critical Inquiry* 29 (2003): 418–28; Peter Geimer, *Ordnungen der Sichtbarkeit: Fotografie in Wissenschaft, Kunst und Technologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2003); Andreas Beyer and Markus Lohoff,

eds., *Bild und Erkenntnis: Formen und Funktionen des Bildes in Wissenschaft und Technik* (Munich: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2005).

3. See, for example, Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, "Körperbilder im Diskurs der Sklaverei," *Kunsthistoriker* 11/12 (1994/95 [appeared in 1996]): 95–102; John Onians, "World Art Studies and the Need for a New Natural History of Art," *Art Bulletin* 78 (1996): 206–9; Olu Oguibe and Okwui Enwezor, eds., *Reading the Contemporary: African Art from Theory to the Marketplace* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999); Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, ed., *Postkolonialismus* (Osnabrück: Universitätsverlag Rasch, 2002); Irene Below and Beatrice von Bismarck, eds., *Globalisierung/Hierarchisierung: Kulturelle Dominanzen in Kunst und Kunstgeschichte* (Marburg: Jonas, 2004); James Elkins, ed., *Is Art History Global?* (New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2007), especially the contribution by Atreyee Gupta and Sugata Ray, "Is Art History Global? Responding from the Margins," 348–57; David Summers, *Real Spaces: World Art History and the Rise of Western Modernism* (London: Phaidon, 2003); John Onians, ed., *Compression Versus Expression: Containing and Explaining the World's Art* (Williamstown: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2006); Kitty Zijlmans and Wilfried Van Damme, eds., *World Art Studies: Exploring Concepts and Approaches* (Amsterdam: Valiz, 2008); Viktoria Schmidt-Linsenhoff, *Ästhetik der Differenz: Postkoloniale Perspektiven vom 16. bis 21. Jahrhundert* (Marburg: Jonas, 2010); Monica Juneja, "Global Art History and the 'Burden of Representation,'" in *Global Studies: Mapping Contemporary Art and Culture*, ed. Hans Belting and Julia T. S. Binter (Ostfildern: Hatje & Cantz, 2011), 274–97; Monica Juneja, "Wanderndes Erbe und die Kräfte der Erinnerung: Mobile Heritage and the Powers of Memory," in *Das Erbe der Anderen—Denkmalpflegerisches Handeln im Zeichen der Globalisierung / The Heritage of the Other: Conservation Considerations in an Age of Globalization*, ed. Gerhard Vinken (Bamberg: Bamberg University Press, 2015), 9–18; Susanne Leeb, Oona Lochner, Johannes Paul Raether, and Kerstin Stake-meier, eds., "Globalismus/Globalism," special issue, *Texte zur Kunst* 23 [= no. 91] (2013); Susanne Leeb, *Die Kunst der Anderen: "Weltkunst" und die anthropologische Konfiguration der Moderne* (Berlin: b-books, 2015); Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, "Art History and the Global: Deconstructing the Latest Canonical Narrative," *Journal of Global History* 14, no. 3 (2019): 413–35.

4. Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

5. Galit Noga-Banai, *Sacred Stimulus: Jerusalem in the Visual Christianization of Rome* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), and Cheryl Glenn, *Unspoken: A Rhetoric of Silence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004).

6. Wessel Reinink and Jeroen Stumpel, eds., *Memory and Oblivion: Proceedings of the XXIXth International Congress of the History of Art Held in Amsterdam, 1–7 September 1996* (Boston: Kluwer Academic, 1999).

7. The following studies provide particularly helpful points of entry into a much larger literature devoted to ekphrasis: Ruth Webb, *Ekphrasis, Imagination and Persuasion in Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Practice* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009); Ruth Webb, "Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern: The Invention of a Genre," *Word and Image* 15 (1999): 7–18; Don P. Fowler, "Narrate and Describe: The Problem

of Ekphrasis,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 81 (1999): 25–35; James A. W. Heffernan, *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993); and the essays in “Towards a Theory of Description,” a special issue, *Yale French Studies* 61 (1981).

8. For a range of recent perspectives on medieval ekphrasis, with citations of antecedent bibliography, see Andrew James Johnston, Ethan Knapp, and Margitta Rouse, eds., *The Art of Vision: Ekphrasis in Medieval Literature and Culture*, Interventions: New Studies in Medieval Culture (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015); Lydia Yaitsky Kertz, “Literal and Literary Ekphrasis: A Medieval Poetics,” *Medievalia et Humanistica*, n.s., 45 (2020): 75–99; Bruce Holsinger, “Lollard Ekphrasis: Situated Aesthetics and Literary History,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005): 67–89; Signe Horn Fuglesang, “Ekphrasis and Surviving Imagery in Viking Scandinavia,” *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 3 (2007): 186–224; Manuel Antonio Castiñeiras González, “Périégésis et ekphrasis: Les descriptions de la cathédrale de Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle entre la cité réelle et la cité idéale,” *Cahiers de Saint-Michel de Cuxa* 44 (2013): 141–55; Vincent Debiais, “La vue des autres: L’ekphrasis au risque de la littérature médiolatine,” *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 55 (2012): 393–404; Vladimír Vavřínek, Paolo Odorico, and Vlastimil Drbal, eds., *Ekphrasis: La représentation des monuments dans les littératures byzantine et byzantino-slaves; Réalités et imaginaires*, Byzantinoslavica 69:3 (Prague: Euroslavica, 2011); Raphael Rosenberg, “Inwiefern Ekphrasis keine Bildbeschreibung ist: Zur Geschichte eines missbrauchten Begriffs,” in *Bildrhetorik*, ed. Joachim Knappe and Elisabeth Grüner (Baden-Baden: Koerner, 2007), 271–84; Robert S. Nelson, “To Say and to See: Ekphrasis and Vision in Byzantium,” in *Visuality Before and Beyond the Renaissance: Seeing As Others Saw*, ed. Robert S. Nelson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 143–68; Christine Ratkowsch, ed., *Die poetische Ekphrasis von Kunstwerken: Eine literarische Tradition der Grossdichtung in Antike, Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit*, Sitzungsberichte—Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Philosophisch-Historische Klasse 735 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2006); Suzanne Conklin Akbari, “Ekphrasis and Commentary in Walter of Chatillon’s *Alexandreis*,” *Zeitsprünge* 24 (2020): 122–38; Alicia Walker, “Middle Byzantine Aesthetics of Power and the Incomparability of Islamic Art: Architectural Ekphrasis of Nikolaos Mesarites,” *Muqarnas* 27 (2010): 79–101; Annette Hoffmann, Lisa Jordan, and Gerhard Wolf, eds., *Parlare dell’arte nel Trecento: Kunstgeschichten und Kunstgespräch im 14. Jahrhundert in Italien* (Berlin: Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2020).

9. Johann Christoph Bürgel, *Die ekprastischen Epigramme des Abu Talib al-Ma’muni: Literaturkundliche Studie über einen arabischen Conceptisten* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1965); Alma Giese, *Wasf bei Kusagim: Eine Studie zur beschreibenden Dichtkunst der Abbasidenzeit* (Berlin: Klaus Schwarz, 1981); Akiko Motoyoshi Sumi, *Description in Classical Arabic Poetry: Wasf, Ekphrasis, and Interarts Theory* (Leiden: Brill, 2004); Frederik H. Green, “Painted in Oil, Composed in Ink: Late Qing Ekphrastic Poetry and the Encounter with Western-Style Painting,” *Frontiers of Literary Studies in China* 9, no. 4 (2015): 525–50.

10. Lawrence Nees, *A Tainted Mantle: Hercules and the Classical Tradition at the Carolingian Court* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1991), and Vincent Debais, “The Poem of Baudri for Countess Adèle: A Starting Point for a Reading of Medieval Latin Ekphrasis,” *Viator* 44 (2013): 95–106. For an important account of “notional ekphrasis” (i.e., ekphrastic conjuration of works that do not exist outside of language), see John Hollander, “The Poetics of *Ekphrasis*,” *Word and Image* 4 (1988): 209–19.

11. See particularly Ruth Webb, “The Aesthetics of Sacred Space: Narrative, Metaphor, and Motion in ‘Ekphraseis’ of Church Buildings,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 53 (1999): 59–74, and Liz James and Ruth Webb, “‘To Understand Ultimate Things and Enter Secret Places’: Ekphrasis and Art in Byzantium,” *Art History* 14 (1991): 1–17.

12. Avinoam Shalem, “The Otherness in the Focus of Interest, or, If Only the Other Could Speak,” in *Islamic Artefacts in the Mediterranean World: Trade, Gift Exchange, and Artistic Transfer*, ed. Catarina Schmidt Arcangeli and Gerhard Wolf (Venice: Marsilio, 2010), 30.

13. *Ibid.*, 31–34.

14. *Ibid.*, 34.

15. Christina Han, “Ekphrasis as Transtextual and Transcultural Event: Revisiting ‘Lapis Lazuli,’” *Yeats Journal of Korea 한국 예이츠 저널* 51 (2016): 73–96. Yeats’s stone can be seen at the National Library of Ireland, on loan from the Yeats family.

16. *Ibid.*, 92, 84, respectively.

17. *Ibid.*, 85.

18. *Ibid.*, 92.

19. Vincent Debais, “Ekphrasis from the Inside: Notes on the Inscription of the Crown of Light in Bayeux,” *English Language Notes* 53 (2015): 45.

20. Jaś Elsner, “Art History as Ekphrasis,” *Art History* 33 (2010): 11 (emphasis added).

21. R. E. Latham, D. R. Howlett, and R. K. Ashdowne, eds., *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, for the British Academy, 1975–), s.v. “Tendere,” via the *Database of Latin Dictionaries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015–), <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/h/dld>. Since we are interested less in the acts and motivations leading to destruction, loss, or disappearance than in the acts, modes, and potentials of recovery and reconstruction, we do not elaborate further here on the premodern vocabulary of destruction/loss/disappearance, which is a complex tradition in its own right.

22. Michael Ann Holly, “The Melancholy Art,” *Art Bulletin* 89 (2007): 8. For further development of the reflections presented in this essay, see Michael Ann Holly, *The Melancholy Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

23. Holly, “Melancholy Art,” 7.

24. On the “game” of interpretation, see Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Donald G. Marshall and Joel Weinsheimer (New York: Continuum, 2000).

25. Peter Geimer, "Mourning the Loss of Works / Praising their Absence. A Response", this volume, 143.

26. Ibid., 150.

27. Masanori Nagaoka, "The Future of the Bamiyan Buddha Statues—Evolving Conservation Ethics and Principles Concerning Intentionally Destroyed Cultural Heritage," in *The Future of the Bamiyan Buddha Statues*, ed. Masanori Nagaoka (Cham: Springer International, 2020); Finbarr Barry Flood, "Between Cult and Culture: Bamiyan, Islamic Iconoclasm, and the Museum," *Art Bulletin* 84 (2002): 641–59; *Nach dem Einsturz: Das Historische Archiv der Stadt Köln seit dem 3. März 2009* (Berlin: Freunde des Historischen Archivs der Stadt Köln and Martin-Gropius-Bau, 2010); Lynn Meskell, *A Future in Ruins: UNESCO, World Heritage, and the Dream of Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018); Lynn Meskell, *Global Heritage: A Reader* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015); Lynn Meskell, *Archaeology Under Fire: Nationalism, Politics and Heritage in the Eastern Mediterranean and Middle East* (London: Routledge, 1998); Laura Kurgan, "Conflict Urbanism, Aleppo: Mapping Urban Damage," *Architectural Design* (2017): 72–77; Lucia Allais, *Design of Destruction: The Making of Monuments in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018); Marina Lostal, *International Cultural Heritage Law in Armed Conflict: Case-Studies of Syria, Libya, Mali, the Invasion of Iraq, and the Buddhas of Bamiyan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017).