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IN CONSERVATION



A history of destruction

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A stirring article by Simon Schama was published in the FT on March 13th - *Artefacts under attack* and instead of travelling directly to Nimrud and the smashing of Assyrian statuary with sledgehammers or the even more efficient use of bulldozers in Hatra - he first reflects on less recent but nonetheless equally wanton destruction. He talks about the first English Civil War when a Puritan military official named William "Basher" Dowsing energetically destroyed whatever he could of sacred art in the churches and colleges of East Anglia, his area of jurisdiction, which sadly included Cambridge among the many ancient towns founded there around religious institutions.

Schama goes back another hundred years to the protestant Reformation in England as it continued under young Edward VI where he says England lost as much as 90 per cent of its Christian art.

Civil war, religion and revolution throw up some frighteningly iconoclastic people and cults who force others to adopt their worlds of subjection and he mentions a number of these to press home the point that the present horrors are nothing very new.

Schama returns to the recent history of destruction and reflects on - not just Bamiyan and Nimrud but, but a long list.... Syria and what has happened in Aleppo and other sites, Timbuktu's ancient manuscripts, Minya's Malawi Museum in Egypt, Haa Fteah in Libya - this list is of recent atrocities - but we know it stretches back through history.

Nimrud was the site of Assyrian King Ashurnasirpal II's palace (see March's Newsletter) with its throne room - decorated with a story book like carved and inscribed frieze in painted marble including the human headed/lions at the entrance, mostly discovered and now we might say luckily, removed in the 1850's by Austin Layard. Factum Arte painstakingly recorded the panels from the throne room in their new locations, it was not safe to send a team in 2005 to do more, nor would it be now, though they wanted to.....but the Foundation would like to train and equip local people so that these things can be done. Not just in Iraq but all the other places at risk - and those suffering from other potentially fatal effects - even the Sistine Chapel where, to repeat the Newsletter "neglect allows things to decay but too much attention is equally destructive".

This recording is deeply important. Think of the heritage we lost in the churches in England, France, Timbuktu, what we are losing in Iraq, Syria, all were - and what's left still is - vulnerable to man's anger, vanity, stupidity, cupidity, carelessness and careand to nature.

We need to record them - we need to record, digitally and permanently, to preserve exactly what we inherited for our descendents. We have an obligation - and we should recognise that not only do fanatics or thugs do terrible things but so do we, perhaps inadvertently - so we need to record before these artefacts too become history.