

Works from the British Museum take us on a fascinating journey through the history of the Ancient Middle East, highlighting the importance of luxury in the various empires that arose there

# Luxury.

## From Assyrians to Alexander the Great

The ancient Assyrian, Babylonian, Phoenician and Persian empires shared with Alexander the Great the covetous aim of extending their power beyond their own borders. These empires occupied an area between today's Spain and India and formed an axis of communication and a necessary area of transit between the Mediterranean world and Asia. These territories were the setting for incessant struggles, conquests and pillaging of all kinds, but also of intense trade in raw materials, precious metals and manufactured objects. This has left us reliable evidence of the exceptional quality and refinement of the luxuries acquired by elites over hundreds of years. Now, through more than 200 objects from the British Museum, the exhibition *Luxury. From Assyrians to Alexander the Great* explores the idea of luxury at a moment in history—from 900 to 300 BC, an unprecedented period in the creation of sumptuous objects—when opulence defined the economic and political power of these ancient empires. The exhibition opens for the first time in at Europe CaixaForum Barcelona thanks to the cooperation agreement established between "la Caixa" and the British Museum.

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***Luxury. From Assyrians to Alexander the Great.*** Concept and production: Exhibition organised by "la Caixa" in cooperation with the British Museum. **Curator:** Alexandra Fletcher, Curator for the Ancient Near East, British Museum. **Place:** CaixaForum Barcelona (Av. de Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia, 6-8). **Dates:** From 5 April to 11 August 2019.

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**Barcelona, 4 April 2019.** Sir Richard Lambert, Chairman of the British Museum, Elisa Durán, Deputy General Director of "la Caixa" Banking Foundation, Valentí Farràs, Director of CaixaForum Barcelona, and Alexandra Fletcher, the curator, today presented the exhibition *Luxury. From Assyrians to Alexander the Great*.

In its cultural programme, "la Caixa" Foundation pays particular attention to the great civilisations of the past. The resulting exhibitions are designed to illustrate the various ways in which men and women from different places and times have sought answers to the great universal questions, and to expand our understanding of the world through the latest historical and archaeological investigations.

Exhibitions like *Mediterranean. From Myth to Reason; Before the Flood. Mesopotamia, 3500-2100 BC; Music in Antiquity*; and the more recent *Pharaoh. King of Egypt* highlight the links between the ancient world and present reality, presenting culture as a living reality, the fruit of knowledge and exchanges between peoples.



Flask for perfumed oil. Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan. 500 – 400 BC.  
Gold. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Taking a transversal approach, *Luxury. From Assyrians to Alexander the Great* joins the long list of exhibitions organised by "la Caixa" in recent years that are aimed at presenting the ancient world from an extraordinarily modern perspective based on the interplay of

correspondences and associations generated by contacts between different peoples. The exhibition, organised jointly by "la Caixa" and the British Museum within the framework of the strategic agreement established by the two institutions, offers a unique opportunity to explore how people have created and used luxury goods as seen in the cultures of the Ancient Middle East.

### [Lavish palaces and gardens filled with treasures](#)

From 900 BC to 300 BC powerful rulers in the Middle East created mighty empires and accumulated enormous wealth. They built lavish palaces and pleasure gardens filled with immense quantities of treasure. From the rise of the Assyrian empire to the conquests of Alexander the Great, this was a world

linked across thousands of kilometres, from India to Spain, by the craftsmen, traders and consumers of precious objects.

Political and economic stability was crucial for luxury production: Assyrian kings waged wars to build an empire from the Mediterranean to the Persian Gulf. Their rule reinvigorated trade routes and the demand for luxury goods. The same was true of powerful realms that emerged later, such as the Babylonian and Achaemenid empires.

Alexander the Great played a key role in this story. Avid to seize the incredible wealth of the Achaemenids, he conquered more and more territories until his armies finally reached the Middle East. His successes gave Greece prosperity and refinement and generated a process known as Hellenisation, an eclectic blend of cultural elements.

The objects in this exhibition, which is divided into seven sections, not only have enormous artisanal value, but were also made with exquisite taste and great refinement. Moreover, they reveal the political context in which they were created and the routes along which they were traded, routes that spanned from present-day India to the Iberian Peninsula.

For many rulers, the acquisition of luxuries was a significant military objective. The Assyrian kings amassed huge amounts of valuable and luxury goods by looting and imposing steep tributes. Displays of luxury and wealth reinforced political power at home and intimidated rivals abroad. Items of military equipment were also embellished to make them statements of prestige.

The intermediaries used to satisfy the governing elite's demand for luxury goods were Phoenician craftsmen and traders. The Phoenicians were based on the Levant coast, but extended their colonies and settlements across the Mediterranean and North Africa. Their artistic styles reflected their connections and trade with Greece, Egypt and the Middle East.

The demand for luxury goods spread to all levels of society, and copies and cheaper versions of such articles were produced. Imitation, adaptation and the



Glazed tile. North West Palace, Nimrud, Iraq. 875 – 850 BC. Clay. © The Trustees of the British Museum

creation of new objects inspired by the originals were the elite's response to new contacts between different regions, which generated new forms of luxury.

The elite shared a taste for ostentatious sensual pleasures and luxurious surroundings (including gardens) accompanied by exotic perfumes and beautiful sounds. They also shared a taste for good food, and the Achaemenid court was famed for its magnificent banquets.

The extraordinary wealth of the Achaemenid empire made it an irresistible prize for Alexander the Great. Alexander's campaigns greatly increased the amount of gold circulating in the western reaches of his empire and brought Greek art and culture to the entire Middle East, effectively ending the diversity of cultures and artistic styles that had characterised previous centuries.

### [From the Palace of Nineveh to the Oxus Treasure: a total of 217 objects](#)



Bowl. Rome, Italy, 175 – 75 BC. Glass. © The Trustees of the British Museum

The exhibition features a total of 217 pieces from the magnificent collections conserved by the British Museum. The objects range from delicate ivory pieces to jewellery, furniture, glass, pottery and precious metal, as well as large Assyrian reliefs.

Particularly outstanding are the reliefs from the walls of the famous Palace of Nineveh and the exquisite objects and miniatures from the Oxus Treasure, the best-known collection of gold and silver from Ancient Persia. The quality of the pieces makes this an extraordinarily important find.

The objects are accompanied by a number of audiovisual resources. Six videos enable visitors to learn how the most commonly-used materials were turned into the luxurious articles seen in the exhibition. Visitors will also find interactive screens and a dynamic map that will help them both to situate themselves geographically and to learn more about some of the pieces.

### [Proposal for an educational space: From common object to treasure](#)

In its aim to make the show accessible to all audiences, "la Caixa" also includes

“Receptacle or Treasure?”, a family educational space. Here, visitors can convert representations of common artefacts from Ancient Middle Eastern civilisations into objects of value by adding specific materials or decorative elements to them.

The exhibition is also accompanied by a full programme of activities for all audiences which includes, apart from the lecture by the curator, Alexandra Fletcher, and special guided tours for senior citizens, families and schools groups, a series of lectures under the title *Luxury. The Image of Power in Antiquity*.

Finally, as usual, the exhibition is complemented by the publication of a catalogue produced by "la Caixa" and Ediciones Invisibles and coordinated by the curator.

#### Fourth joint exhibition with the British Museum



Fitting for a case holding a bow and arrows.  
Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan. 500 – 400 BC. Gold.  
© The Trustees of the British Museum

The exhibition *Luxury. From Assyrians to Alexander the Great* makes its European debut at CaixaForum Barcelona following its presentation at the Hong Kong Museum of History. This is the fourth show produced jointly by "la Caixa" and British Museum. The others, already been seen at various CaixaForum centres, are: *The Pillars of Europe*, the first fruit of this new stage in the cooperation between the two institutions; and the later *Competition in Ancient Greece and Pharaoh. King of Egypt*.

This cooperation is the result of the two institutions' agreement to promote knowledge by jointly organising and presenting major exhibitions based on the collections conserved by the British Museum.

Last year, Isidro Fainé, president of "la Caixa" Banking Foundation, and Sir Richard Lambert, Chairman of the British Museum Board of Trustees, signed a new cooperation agreement between the two institutions for the 2020-2024 period. This new agreement will serve to intensify the partnership between the two institutions, which have worked together for decades. The British Museum

has always been a key loaning institution for the exhibitions that "la Caixa" has devoted to the world's major cultures.

Accordingly, the two institutions are already working to prepare five exhibitions to be presented over the next five years at a total of twenty exhibition spaces at CaixaForum centres. The shows will all be based on the iconic collections of the British Museum, from ranging from Egyptian mummies to pop art.

This ambitious cooperation agreement forms part of a line of action implemented by "la Caixa" Banking Foundation in recent years and aimed at establishing strategic alliances with major cultural institutions around the world. The goal is to intensify the Foundation's cultural activities and generate synergies among different leading institutions on the international scene.

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## EXHIBITION SECTIONS

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### 1. An Age of Luxury

Ancient luxuries brought pleasure and asserted status and identity. Often crafted with skill, and made from precious materials, their magnificence resonates with our contemporary view of luxury. Objects which transcend the functional have been created by civilisations across the globe for thousands of years, but there are times when cultures and politics create a context in which they thrive. From 900 BC to 300 BC powerful rulers in the Middle East created mighty empires and accumulated enormous wealth. They built lavish palaces and pleasure gardens filled with immense quantities of treasure. From the rise of the Assyrian empire to the conquests of Alexander the Great, this was a world linked across thousands of kilometres, from India to Spain, by the craftsmen, traders and consumers of precious objects.

Political and economic stability are crucial for luxury production and, from 900 BC, major political changes ushered in a new and unique age. Emerging from a 300 year 'Dark Age,' during which civilisation in the eastern Mediterranean had collapsed, the Assyrian kings waged wars to build an empire from the Mediterranean to the Gulf. Their rule reinvigorated trade routes and the demand for luxury goods. Strong empires, whether Assyrian or later Babylonian and Achaemenid, created an environment in which craftsmanship could flourish, diverse tastes were valued and materials and goods could be traded across the Middle East and beyond.

### 2. War, Plunder and Tribute

#### *The Assyrian empire*

The Assyrian empire grew from the region around the city-state of Ashur in northern Iraq. This area of exposed grassy plains had few natural defensive features and so formidable armies were needed to defend and expand the empire. From 800 BC fearsome Assyrian rulers conquered territories from the Persian Gulf to Egypt. As they forcibly re-settled people from the lands they had defeated, cities became increasingly cosmopolitan. It was not until 630 BC that Assyrian power began to wane. The collapse of the empire was marked by the destruction of its capital, Nineveh, in 612 BC by the allied armies of the Babylonian and Median kings.

#### *Amassing wealth*

For many rulers, the acquisition of luxuries was a significant military objective. Military plunder, and repeated demands for goods as tribute, filled royal stores with vast amounts of treasure. This accumulated wealth financed the building of grand palace complexes and allowed them to be opulently decorated and furnished. Elaborately carved reliefs depicted military successes and conquered subjects bringing tribute and gifts to satisfy their new rulers. Horses, chariots and weapons were paraded as statements of prestige. Such displays reinforced political power at home and intimidated rivals abroad.

### 2.1. Looting

The mighty Assyrian army conquered and looted cities across the Middle East. Some of the finest reliefs depicting these campaigns are from the North Palace at Nineveh, built by one of the last great Assyrian kings, Ashurbanipal (ruled 668–circa 630 BC). The scene depicts the conquest of the Elamite city of Hamanu (southern Iran). Assyrian soldiers demolish the city, while flames leap from the ruins. In front we can see them triumphantly carrying off booty, including large cauldrons and elaborate furniture. Such loot was stockpiled for the use of the king.



Wall Panel Relief. North Palace, Nineveh. Iraq. 645 – 635 BC. Gypsum. © The Trustees of the British Museum

### 2.2. Tribute

Tribute was the payment of luxury goods and valuable materials to the ruling power. This reinforced a king's political power and impoverished his rivals. The carvings on this obelisk show officials from Syria and nearby regions bringing tribute to the Assyrian king. In one panel, precious carved furniture is brought to the king, in another silver is weighed. The cuneiform inscriptions list the items brought in tribute, including metals, fabrics, furniture, singers, horses, oxen and elephants. Obelisks were used by Assyrian rulers as public monuments to proclaim their triumphs. This example, erected by Ashurnasirpal II (ruled 883–859 BC), was smashed in antiquity.



Obelisk. Nimrud. Iraq. 873 – 859 BC. © The Trustees of the British Museum

### 2.3. Palaces and find surroundings

As the Assyrian empire grew, the capital city was moved by successive kings from Nimrud to Khorsabad and then to Nineveh, with increasingly grand palaces in each. A door sill from the entrance to King Ashurbanipal's (ruled 668–circa 630 BC) throne room provides a glimpse of its sumptuous decoration. The intricate carving replicates the rich carpets that were indispensable to palace decoration, but are now lost. Such copies in stone give us some idea of their quality and decoration. Here a border of rosettes frames flowers created by interlocking circles while, around the edge, lotus buds and blossoms represent the carpet's fringing.



Carved door-sill. North Palace, Nineveh. Iraq. 645 – 640 BC. © The Trustees of the British Museum

### 2.4. Military display

Items associated with war were transformed into status symbols through their materials, fine decoration or complex manufacture. Military equipment such as

chariots, weapons and horse harnesses were embellished beyond their practical use and became statements of prestige.

This Scythian gold plaque, representing a stylised bird's head, decorated a high status leather case for holding a bow and arrows. The Scythians were nomadic peoples living to the north of Assyria in the areas that are now Siberia. The plaque is part of the famous Oxus Treasure, a hoard of objects and coins found in the 19th century on the banks of the River Oxus.



Fitting for a case holding a bow and arrows. Takht-i Kuwad, Tajikistan. 500 – 400 BC. Gold. © The Trustees of the British Museum

### 3. Making and Trading Luxury Goods

#### *The Phoenicians*

From 850 BC, as the Assyrian empire expanded, craftsmen and traders living in cities such as Tyre and Sidon also looked to increase their power and influence. They travelled westwards from the confines of the eastern Mediterranean coast to Italy, Spain and North Africa, developing their maritime trade networks and establishing new settlements. Their distinctive hybrid artistic style reflected the variety of influences and demands from the different markets within which they operated. Their carved ivory, glass and metalwork were particularly prized alongside a purple dye made from the *murex* sea snail. The Greek word for this colour, *phoinix*, gave rise to their name, the Phoenicians.

#### 3.1. A Phoenician memorial

This fine marble *stèle*, or grave marker, is dedicated to the memory of a Phoenician who lived in Athens. He came from Sidon and was one of many Phoenician traders and craftsmen who migrated from their homeland on the eastern Mediterranean coast to settle across the Mediterranean and North Africa. They brought with them their own alphabetic system of writing, which formed the basis of the Greek, Etruscan and Roman alphabets from which many modern European writing systems derive.



Grave monument with bilingual Greek and Phoenician inscription. Athens, Greece. 400 – 300 BC. Marble. © The Trustees of the British Museum

#### 3.2. Buying and selling

Before the invention of coinage, goods were either valued against a weight of metal, usually silver, or obtained through barter. This made transactions inconvenient and slow. However, in around 650 BC in Lydia, a kingdom in western Turkey, the world's first coins appeared. This was transformative, because coinage ensured traders such as the Phoenicians could be more confident in the quantity of metal they were receiving. Transactions became quicker and more efficient and this new way of doing business spread rapidly, with mints to manufacture coins established in Sicily and southern Italy by about 500 BC. The Achaemenid empire adopted coinage after its conquest of Lydia in 547 BC. Currency is still the basis for business transactions today.

### Invention of coinage

These are some of the earliest coins in the world. Made from electrum, a mixture of gold and silver, they were issued by the kingdom of Lydia, which had access to plentiful resources of gold. Both coins have a roaring lion on one side, the royal symbol of Lydia, which guaranteed the amount of precious metal in the coin. On the other side the hammer marks of the punch that created the coin can be seen. It was not without reason that Lydia’s most famous king was immortalised in the expression ‘rich as Croesus’. Coins existed for a century before images of kings appeared on them. The first were gold darics minted by the Achaemenid king, Darius I (ruled 521–486 BC), on which he was depicted as an archer.



Early coins. Lydia, western Turkey. 600 – 550 BC. Electrum. © The Trustees of the British Museum

## **4. Elite Aspirations**

Luxury goods were as important for displaying wealth and status in the ancient world as they are today. Possessing and consuming rare, exotic and expensive items both established and enhanced social position, making such goods irresistible for the socially ambitious. The market for luxuries was always being renewed and refreshed and new status symbols sought. Even when states were at war, the rich copied the artistic styles and cultural practices of other regions. The production of élite goods created new markets in fakes and forgeries, but furniture, dress and decorative styles were also copied in cheaper materials for a wider market that couldn’t afford luxury goods.

## **5. Personal Luxuries**

The elites of the ancient world enjoyed the best of everything. Men and women wore beautiful clothes, adorned themselves with expensive jewellery, enhanced their features with cosmetics and admired themselves in mirrors. Very few of these items survive, but we know of their splendour through their depiction in sculpture and text. These help us visualise the opulent fabrics which made Cyprus famous and imagine the ephemeral pleasure of make-up and perfume as we see the fabulous containers created to hold them.

### 5.1. Royal robes and court fashions

King Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria (ruled 883-859 BC) stands holding a drinking bowl and a bow, possibly making an offering in thanks for a successful hunt. He wears long green robes, bordered with gold and silver tassels and decorated all over with rosettes. The pointed top of his stepped crown just brushes the tasselled canopy under which he stands. The king’s bodyguard and attendants also wear eye-catching clothes and jewellery. The scene gives a rare glimpse of the lavish clothes worn by the king and his court.



Glazed tile, North West Palace, Nimrud. Iraq. 875 – 850 BC. © The Trustees of the British Museum

## 6. Sensual Pleasures

### *The Babylonians*

Towards the end of the 7th century BC, the once mighty Assyrian empire began to enter into decline. In 626 BC Babylonia drove out its Assyrian overlords and an alliance with the Median Empire to the east led to the sacking of the Assyrian capital Nineveh in 612 BC. Babylonian rulers controlled most of Assyria's former empire and Babylon itself was transformed by King Nebuchadnezzar II (ruled 605–562 BC) into a magnificent, cosmopolitan city. The glory of the Babylonian empire lasted less than 100 years. In 539 BC Babylon was conquered and its territories incorporated into the expanding Achaemenid Empire.

### 6.1. Sensual pleasures

The wealthy delighted their senses with exotic scents, beautiful sounds, opulent gardens and fine foods, but by their very nature, none of these survive. Frankincense, a fragrant tree resin native to the furthest reaches of Arabia, was traded over great distances and the difficulty of acquiring such perfumes increased their value. Legend records that King Nebuchadnezzar II's wife missed the sights and scents of her mountainous homeland so much that her husband built her the Hanging Gardens at Babylon. The labour, exotic plants and water supply needed to create such fabulous gardens could only be attained by a mighty ruler. Lush royal gardens charmed the eye and provided places to relax, dine, and listen to music.

#### Exotic gardens

Pleasure gardens were associated with abundance, fertility and sanctity. Here, a gently sloping garden is shaded by trees and watered by streams stocked with fish. Water flows from an aqueduct creating channels that cut across the lush slopes and a path leading to a pavilion. This park was created by the Assyrian king Sennacherib (ruled about 705–681 BC), who built an immense canal network for his capital city, Nineveh, partly to supply his new gardens. Gardeners nurtured species that normally would not have grown alongside each other. Then, as now, gardens were planned to be enjoyed by later generations. This wall relief depicts the same gardens in their mature state during the reign of Sennacherib's grandson King Ashurbanipal.



Relief showing the gardens at Nineveh North Palace. Nineveh, Iraq. 645 – 635 BC. Gypsum. © The Trustees of the British Museum

### 6.2. The Achaemenids

The Achaemenids became a significant power under the rule of Cyrus II, the Great (ruled 559–530 BC), who expanded his territories from a heartland in southwest Iran. From 550 BC he conquered the Medes, Lydia, and the Babylonian empire. The city of Babylon itself fell to his troops in 539 BC. Achaemenid rulers eventually controlled an area from Pakistan to Libya and the Black Sea to the Gulf, a far larger territory than had ever been controlled by one king before. Despite repeated attempts however, they

never conquered mainland Greece. Much of what we know about the Achaemenids comes from Greek writers, to whom the power and wealth of their court appeared remarkable.

#### Night time revelry

This richly decorated flask, probably made in or near Athens but found in Italy, once held expensive oil. It shows a bearded man on a camel, surrounded by musicians and dancers. All are dressed in the Achaemenid fashion, with richly decorated patterned trousers, tunics and caps. The man holds a whip and bow-case, symbols of his authority and power, and one attendant holds a fan. In one sense therefore, this is an image of an Achaemenid satrap (regional governor) and his entourage. The revelry and night-time setting – one attendant holds a torch – also refer to the Greek god Dionysus, whom the Greeks believed had travelled in the east, where he learned about the effects of wine. On this vase Dionysus is transformed into an exotic Eastern nobleman, evoking the Greek and especially Athenian fascination with the extravagance of the Achaemenid world.



Flask for oil. Basilicata, Italia. 410 – 400 BC. © The Trustees of the British Museum

#### 6.3. Fine feasts

Achaemenid banquets typically had a large number of courses and involved expensive and opulent food. They were important occasions for decision-making, diplomacy and the exchange of gifts. The foods were complimented by luxury tableware. Platters and dishes for the food were accompanied by equipment for serving and consuming wine such as ladles, strainers, jugs (rhyta) and drinking bowls in metal or glass.

This vessel was made in two parts and might have been used as a drinking cup. The deep funnel is decorated with a bull, legs folded beneath his chest. It can hold up to two bottles of wine. Vessels of this type are shown on Greek vases from around 450 BC onwards and continued to be used after the end of the Achaemenid empire in 330 BC.

### 7. **Conquest and Change**

Alexander the Great became ruler of Macedon, a kingdom in northern Greece in 336 BC. Aged only 20, he had enormous military ambition, and the incredible wealth of the Achaemenids was an irresistible prize. There followed 13 extraordinary years during which he conquered vast territories from India in the east to Libya in the west. His audacity was matched by success; he never lost a battle.

His success gave cities around the Mediterranean access to unimaginable quantities of gold, and established Greek rule, culture and practices across the ancient Middle East, a process known as ‘Hellenisation’. The production and enjoyment of sumptuous goods continued in abundance, but Alexander’s success brought significant change.

The diverse cultures and artistic tastes which defined this era waned in the face of relative uniformity, but their breath-taking achievements continued to influence the creation of precious objects, pleasure and comfort, in a legacy bestowed by this 'Age of Luxury'.

7.1. Alexander's image

Alexander died suddenly at Babylon in 323 BC. As he had no heir, his generals took command of his empire. They used portraits of Alexander on coins to emphasise their rights as his successors. This coin was minted by Lysimachus (ruled 306-281 BC) who ruled an area covering modern Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey. Alexander claimed to be the son of the god Zeus Ammon. As a reminder of his divine status, he is shown on the coin wearing ram's horns.



Coin depicting Alexander the Great. Pergamum, Turkey. 306 – 281 BC. Silver. © The Trustees of the British Museum

7.2. Legacy of the Age of Luxury

Despite the increasing dominance of Greek art and style across Alexander's former empire, there remained echoes of past cultures. The creation and use of animal-headed cups reflected the luxurious dining of the Achaemenid court, with its elaborate tableware and drinking sets. This painted cup comes from southern Italy and, despite its classical imagery, it preserves in the form of the bull's head a memory of the unimaginable luxuries of the East.



Bull-headed drinking cup. Basilicata, Puglia. 320 – 310 BC. Clay. © The Trustees of the British Museum

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**ACTIVITIES PARALLEL TO THE EXHIBITION**

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**LECTURE BY THE CURATOR****“Luxury. From Assyrians to Alexander the Great”**

Friday, April 5, 7 pm

Lecture by the exhibition curator, **Alexandra Fletcher**, Doctor of Philosophy and Curator for the Ancient Near East at the British Museum, where she has worked since 2001. Her research focuses on interpreting social change in ancient societies through objects, particularly artefacts related to luxury, trade and feasting.

Lecture in English with simultaneous translation into Spanish and Catalan.

Price per person: €5

**Series of lectures****LUXURY. THE IMAGE OF POWER IN ANTIQUITY**

Coordinated by: HISTORIA Y VIDA

Price per session: €5

- Thursday, 25 April 2019  
“Luxury and its shadow. Past and present”

**Rafael Argullol**, writer and professor at the Faculty of Humanities, Universitat Pompeu Fabra

A reflection on the concept of luxury, both in antiquity and in our times. The lecture will examine opposing ideas of luxury in the Eastern and Greek worlds, as well as discussing constructive and destructive aspects of luxury and its variants. Finally, we will consider different ways of understanding luxury in our own times.

- Thursday, 2 May 2019  
“Luxury, political power and imperial expansion”

**Rocío Da Riva**, professor at the Department of History and Archaeology, Universitat de Barcelona, expert in archaeology and cultures of the Ancient Near East.

This lecture will focus on luxury and the political power of the kings of Babylon in the first millennium BCE. Through the monumental inscriptions left to us by various monarchs of the Neo-Babylonian Empire, but especially the celebrated Nebuchadnezzar II, we will learn how wealth and luxury, the fruit of conquests and imperial expansion, were reflected in the splendour of the monumental buildings (palaces, temples, walls, gates and so on) that adorned the major cities in the empire, particularly Babylon, the great metropolis. After a brief introduction to the Babylonian of the first millennium (with critical discussion of certain aspects that are traditionally and mistakenly associated with it), we will analyse the terminology used in the texts to refer to luxury. We will also read several fragments from royal inscriptions to gain a better idea of the concepts of royalty, power and luxury in that period.

- Thursday, 9 May 2019  
"Fragrance of music. The sensorial pleasures of Assyrian-Babylonian culture"

**Jordi Vidal**, professor of Ancient History, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, specialist in the study of the origins of Assyriology

We will discuss the generic concept of sensory luxury, focusing on two social spheres of Assyrian-Babylonian culture: that of royalty, and that of ordinary people. Mesopotamian monarchs devoted enormous economic resources to creating luxurious architectural and cultural environments. One of the most important manifestations of all this was the construction of artificial paradises in the form of gardens inside palaces. These include the garden of Sennacherib in Nineveh and, perhaps, that of Nebuchadnezzar II in Babylon. The kings also staged sumptuous banquets attended by thousands of people as clear statements of power and wealth. As regards the cultural sphere, palaces were major patrons of artistic expressions such as music, dance and literature, which played a central role in religious rituals and royal celebrations. We will also examine to what extent the Mesopotamian people, who did not share in any of the riches amassed by the palaces, had any relation to these forms of luxury as expressed by royalty. Accordingly, we will discuss the role of food, literature, music, dance and other sensory pleasures in everyday life.

- Thursday, 16 May 2019  
"Merchants of the exotic, craftsmen of luxury"

**Helena Domínguez**, associate professor of Ancient History, Universidad Rey Juan Carlos de Madrid, and doctoral student in Ancient World Studies at the Universidad Complutense

Ever since Homer described them as “men famed for their ships... bringing countless trinkets”, the Phoenicians have been thought of as the quintessential makers and merchants of the most luxurious and exotic goods in Antiquity. Gold, silver, ivory, glass and purple were just some of the raw materials that the Phoenicians used to make sophisticated objects – jewellery, furniture, perfume, fabrics and so on, which reflect that oriental taste, synonymous with opulence, that, even today, so greatly fascinates us. With the Mediterranean as an axis for trade, these merchants connected the Eastern empires with the West, plying their products for the consumption of the elites and the gods. The Phoenicians developed and perfected their own industry, one that operated at the service of luxury for many centuries.

- Thursday, 23 May 2019  
“And the Babel tower continued to rise: Mesopotamian myths and heroes, from Brueghel to Picasso”

**Pedro Azara**, architect and professor of Aesthetics, Escola Tècnica Superior d'Arquitectura de Barcelona

The Persian and Hellenic invasions heralded the disappearance of the Mesopotamian cultures (Babylonia and Assyria). However, these civilisations were not finally forgotten in the West thanks to the (deformed) image of them that the Bible and Greek literature passed down to us. Myths, such as those of the Tower of Babel and the Flood, cities like Nineveh and Babylon, and powerful kings and queens turned into legendary figures, all helped to shape an image of excessive, ostentatious, cruel, aesthetically and ethically execrable cultures and characters. They represented the antithesis of austere, restrained Greek culture, but also exercised great fascination and were often seen as a bizarre repository of guilty pleasures.

#### **GUIDED TOURS**

See website for times. Price per person: €4

#### **TOURS WITH COFFEE-TALK**

An unhurried tour to explore the themes or aspects that most interest visitors, guided by a mediator. At the end of the tour, participants exchange opinions about the exhibition in a participatory discussion over a cup of coffee (or similar).

Wednesdays, at 4.30 pm. Price per person: €6

**FAMiLiA****FAMILY AND EDUCATIONAL SPACE**  
RECEPTACLE OR TREASURE?

This is a space within the exhibition, designed primarily for family audiences. Here, participants are invited to take part in an activity that encourages them to freely and creatively explore certain aspects of the exhibition. In this case, the chance to experiment with creating luxury objects. You can make a representation of one of the artefacts commonly found in Ancient Middle Eastern civilisations, increasing their value by adding a specific material or decorative element. In short, participants are invited to transform simple objects into goods that were greatly appreciated in the past, taking into account the physical and artistic properties of the piece.

Recommended for families with children from 5 years. Admission free with exhibition ticket.

**FAMILY TOUR**  
"LUXURY" TRADERS

In this guided tour, designed especially for families, we observe the luxury objects and imagine the Ancient world as a great commercial network run by the Phoenicians to satisfy the wishes of the power rulers of those times. Along the way, we will discover what raw materials were considered valuable, how they were turned into fashionable products and how they were acquired before ending up on display in the palaces of the East.

Activity recommended for families with children from 8 years. Price per person: €3 (50% discount for CaixaBank customers). See website for times.

**EduCaixa**  
**SCHOOL TOURS**

Single price: €25/group. Monday to Friday, times by arrangement. Registration: 931 847 142 or [rcaixaforumbcn@magmacultura.net](mailto:rcaixaforumbcn@magmacultura.net)

**Narrated tours****PRECIOUS STORIES OF THE EAST**

Levels: infant and 1st and 2nd year primary school

**Dynamic tours**

Levels: from 3rd year primary and secondary school

**Guided tours**

Levels: secondary school and vocational training

# Luxury.

## From Assyrians to Alexander the Great

**From 5 April to 11 August 2019**

**CaixaForum Barcelona**

Av. de Francesc Ferrer i Guàrdia, 6-8  
08038 Barcelona  
Tel. 934 768 600

**Times**

Monday to Sunday, from 10 am to 8 pm

**"la Caixa" Foundation Information****Service**

Tel. 900 223 040  
Monday to Sunday, from 9 am to 8 pm

**Prices**

Admission free for "la Caixa" customers  
Visitors other than "la Caixa"  
customers: €5 (includes admission to  
all exhibitions)  
Admission free for minors under 16  
years

**Ticket sales**

CaixaForum ticket offices and  
[www.CaixaForum.es](http://www.CaixaForum.es)

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**"la Caixa" Foundation Communication Department**

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