

A Gateway into the Past through Mold and Plaster

Many students, regardless of their educational training, have seen pictures of ancient Mesopotamian art, giving them a view of the lives of ancient Mesopotamian peoples. However, not a lot have physically touched such objects, and fewer still could be involved in their reproduction. The casting project of Ancient Lives gave twelve lucky students the chance to take part in this process. These students were led by Curator Adam J. Aja from the Harvard Semitic Museum, and over the last few months, these students put in 20 hours each working on their casting projects. As part of their work, these students had the chance to repair badly damaged replicas of previous castings, as well as make new ones from varying sources of artwork.

As students climbed up the stairs leading to the attic of the Harvard Semitic Museum, the smell of mold and plaster became more apparent. The stairs on the way were increasingly covered with dried droplets of whitish plaster, and were getting narrower with each step. Finally, after opening the door to the attic, the strong smell was at its full potential, but the sight was one to behold. The windows to the right of the room let in rays of sunshine that descended upon the castings, and diligent pupils were busy with their respective castings. On this Friday afternoon, these students working in the casting room with Curator Adam Aja monitoring their progress were Adelaida Arjona '20, Denise Kwong '19 and Antonio Soriano '19. Students were assigned distinct pieces of casting to either replicate or repair.

When working on the castings, students had to focus on very minute details, and make sure that the said details were not lost in the recasting. Adelaida Arjona shared that on that day, she was tasked with repairing the casts of a group of men in one relief. With her sharp tool, she added little marks on this ancient Mesopotamian man's face, being careful that each mark looked as natural and as faithful to the original as possible. For if her hand slipped, or if at one point she did not devote one hundred percent of her attention, the results could be disastrous—and more time-consuming. "It takes some work to do it right, but it takes a lot more to fix a mistake." She later explained that a wrong mark would mean that she would have to add plaster on the man's face, and some detail that she had already added might go away, as the plaster would go over even the corrected parts of the casting. "It's stressful, yes, but very a rewarding experience."

While some members of the casting project were charged with adding detail, some were there to fix the mistakes of others before them, or degeneration caused by time. As some of the castings that the students were working on were those attempted by anthropologists going as far back as eighty to one hundred years, many of the molds could not capture as much detail due to the kinds of technology available at that time. Students Denise Kwong and Antonio Soriano were charged with removing the air bubbles that had formed in the casting as a result of both poor casting techniques and time that led in miniscule amounts of air in the even tinier holes in the mold. Denise and Antonio both concede that although doing this specific task is manual labor, they do get the chance to observe the specifics of the casts, such as the muscular detail that went into this human's body, in very close detail. "Although these pieces are not related to my academic field, I find them very fascinating."

Casting is dirty work, and at the end of the day, there is much cleanup to be done. At the end of each working day, Aja makes his students clean up the remaining residue from their buckets, because the residue will stick and be harder to take off later. Denise, Antonio and Adelaida have all said that this last task is a bit monotonous; but, this is their time to share with each other the tasks they had completed for the day as well as time to talk about other things and socialize.

With their work in the casting project, these students touched and felt history that spans more than four thousand years. These students got the chance to physically work with casts that they learned about in class through Professor Gojko's lectures, albeit without his witty remarks and live commentary while doing the castings. Overall, these students agreed that the casting project has made a good impression on them about ancient Mesopotamian history, and that they witnessed a gateway into the past using just mold and plaster.