

The Ancient Middle East as ‘White Man’s Burden’: Reception Studies and American Identity Formation

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At a time when 19th-century concepts like Manifest Destiny, ethnic nationalism, and territorial expansionism are resurging and polarizing U.S. politics, academia, and public discourse, reception studies may offer unexpected insights into the prevalence of colonialist attitudes in contemporary ideological trends. This article examines Eva Miller’s *Early Civilization and the American Modern*, a timely contribution to the “Modern Americas” series by UCL,¹ to explore how “Oriental” studies shaped discourses on U.S., or “American,” identity. Drawing on an extensive range of meticulously analyzed case studies and substantial

¹ This series examines historical and contemporary approaches spanning from the 19th century to the present in various fields across North and Latin America, including photography, visual culture, science fiction, urbanism, and social activism. Key contributions include: A. de Souza Santos and K. Hatzikidi’s *The Faces of Authoritarianism and Strategies of Dissent in Contemporary Brazil* (2025); J. Cearns and C. Beach’s *Contraband Cultures: Reframing Smuggling across Latin America and the Caribbean* (2024); E. Miller’s *Early Civilization and the American Modern: Images of Middle Eastern origins in the United States, 1893–1939* (2024); R. Irons and P. Martin’s *Decolonising Andean Identities: Andinxs, Activism, and Social Change* (2024); R. Yeates’ *American Cities in Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction* (2021); J. Page’s *Decolonizing Science in Latin American Art* (2021); J. Scorer’s *Comics Beyond the Page in Latin America* (2020); and P. J. Hatfield’s *Canada in the Frame: Copyright, Collections, and the Image of Canada, 1895–1924* (2018).

archival research, Miller situates her work between 1893 and 1939 to reveal how ancient Middle Eastern studies were “informed by, and informed, broad cultural paradigms for conceptualizing self and other in various times and places” (p. xxii). In doing so, she contributes original and insightful perspectives to the field of critical reception studies. This field has expanded significantly since Hans Robert Jauss introduced the concept of the horizon of expectations in his seminal works on aesthetics of reception (1982a, 1982b). However, it has only recently begun to extend its cultural and geographical scope beyond the Classical world. Miller’s book also serves as a valuable resource for scholars of modern American history and is likely to appeal to researchers across disciplines such as American studies, art history, architecture, and cultural studies.

Colonialist Attitudes in Contemporary Discourse: Insights from Reception Studies

Miller examines how images, ideas, cultures, and peoples journeyed between modern North America and the ancient Middle East, often instrumentalizing or neglecting both native Americans and contemporary Middle Eastern communities. Structured into thematic chapters, the book offers complementary approaches to exploring how ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia were discovered, interpreted, presented, and experienced by scholars, artists, architects, politicians, and the general public in the U.S. between the late 19th century and the early 20th century. Miller conceives her study as a “critical interrogation of the construction of the ancient Middle East in the modern West by academics, artists and their publics,” analyzing how the stories “that Americans told themselves about their own history” were manifested in public spaces (pp. xxiii–xxiv). Particularly significant is her framing of the American reception of ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia as parallel to the development of teleological narratives of world history and human civilization rooted in these “early civilizations”. Her work thus dialogues with contemporary literature that shifts focus from text, image, or object to understanding the cultural norms, assumptions, and prior knowledge shaping audience experience. She places her contribution alongside recent studies by ancient Middle Eastern scholars, such as Zainab Bahrani (1998, 2014), Elliot Colla (2008), and Felix Wiedemann (2019), that emphasize the agentic power of ancient art, challenge modern Western notions that separate art from functionality and spirituality, and question linear progression models stemming from Eurocentric narratives of history.

As a study that examines how shifting aesthetics add new layers of meaning to ancient images, especially when reinterpreted to fit modern popular culture, Miller’s book complements recent anthologies edited by Chi and Azara (2015) and Verderame and García-Ventura (2020). Her focus on the reception of Egypt

and Mesopotamia by American audiences provides a North American counterpart to Maria Gabriella Micale (2008), Brigitte Pedde (2013), and Frederik N. Bohrer’s (2003) studies on the rediscovery and representation of the ancient Middle East in 19th- and early 20th-century Europe. One might miss a wider consideration of whether these forces represented an American singularity, or instead reflected transnational artistic crosscurrents that shaped the reception of the ancient Middle East in the West, as suggested by Donato Esposito (2011). Miller’s approach and methodology, however, do not aim to reveal such an American singularity. Her discussion of the relationship between archaeological practice and American national identity echoes Donald Malcolm Reid’s (2015) study on how classical antiquities were integrated into Egyptian identity, as well as Christina Riggs’ (2021) reflections on the role of historical artifacts in shaping individual and collective memories. As a study that expands our knowledge of how elite groups often control narratives of place to reinforce state ideologies while marginalizing subaltern stories, Miller’s work engages with contemporary authors, such as Lynn Meskell (2018), who examine heritage as a tool of symbolic and political domination.

Civilizational Progress and Cultural Appropriation: The Ancient Middle East in American Modernity

Miller’s book is structured into eight thematic chapters, organized in a roughly chronological order and framed by an introduction and an epilogue. Chapters One and Two explore the contemporary theoretical framework that integrated (re)discovered ancient civilizations, such as Assyria and Egypt, into a progressive historical narrative that legitimized America as both the inheritor and culmination of civilizational progress. Plausibly inspired by Debbie Challis’s *The Archaeology of Race* (2013), Miller compares James Henry Breasted’s promotion of the study of “early civilizations” and theories of cultural transmission (Breasted 1916, 1935) to theories of racial transmission, as defended by the Eugenics movement. Miller argues that both approaches contributed to shaping America’s self-image as the custodian of the old world and the pinnacle of civilizational development; a “melting pot” of world or universal history (p. 47) that represented the authentic descendant of both ancient and European civilizations. Particularly noteworthy is Miller’s detailed analysis of the various design stages and decision-making processes behind the case studies discussed throughout the book. Based on extensive archival documentation and applying an approach similar to Kevin McGeough’s (2021) methodology, she demonstrates how ancient Middle Eastern motifs were adapted into popular culture. Miller examines how public art and monumental architecture—such as Franklin Webster Smith’s

National Galleries of History and Art in Washington, D.C.—served to infuse ancient Middle Eastern imagery with modern aesthetics, and how this aesthetic shift, in turn, contributed to positioning America within the global order. Reflecting the contemporary values of speed, strength, and efficiency associated with American modernity—which sought to distinguish itself from its European predecessors—Miller argues that these projects served to appropriate ancient aesthetics and legitimize America’s emerging role as a world leader. Early civilizations were presented to the American public through grand historical narratives of civilizational origins that intertwined notions of modernity, race, and national identity. At a time when modernity “took the shape of antiquity” (p. 1), ancient Middle Eastern iconography was reinterpreted to reflect American exceptionalism, expansionism, and technological superiority, thereby fulfilling the aims of sectors of white, elite Americans seeking to construct an ethnically homogeneous society.

Miller explores the concept of “civilizational inheritance,” examining the works of American scholars, architects, and artists from this historical period. Her analysis of the “torch-passing” scenes in the decorative programs of the Library of Congress, the U.S. Supreme Court, and the University of Chicago’s Chapel and Oriental Institute (Chapter Three) is particularly compelling. Symbolizing and celebrating the cultural diffusion of ideas—such as law, religion, and science—from the East to the West, these scenes served to construct the idea of America as both a paragon of progress and evolution, simultaneously presented as universal and exceptional. In Chapters Four and Five, Miller explores the social consequences of framing civilizational progress as a series of evolutionary stages, leading to the romanticization, exoticization, othering, and marginalization of indigenous populations in both North America and the Middle East. On the one hand, Miller examines how American “Indians” were “Orientalized” through frequent comparison to cultures of the ancient Middle East, positioning both groups as representing earlier stages in a linear progression toward modern society. She shows how this framework became politically and ideologically useful in debates about the assimilation of non-white populations into the American nation. Miller examines visual programs that embodied these analogies, arguing that they reinforced a sense of continuity between the ancient and modern worlds by linking “American Indians” to the “cradle of civilization” and relegating them to relics of the past.

Meanwhile, Miller’s examination of Americans’ engagement with the Middle East through world’s fairs, tourism, and archaeological excavations reflects how the region was portrayed as an “unchanging” landscape, where antiquity was still accessible, and traveling in space meant traveling back in time. Through this lens, contemporary Middle Eastern societies were portrayed as primitive, “barbarous,” and “unable to stand on their own” (pp.138–139), disempowering local

communities by severing their connection to their ancient predecessors and rendering the region open to cultural appropriation. Miller rightly points out that American (as much as other Western) archaeologists’ glorification of the region’s ancient past contributed to these dynamics, frequently ignoring or dismissing the contributions of local workers and scholars. Western academia often presented the Middle East as a living museum—an archive of relics from antiquity—, in which contemporary communities were erased to emphasize American dominance in the region’s archaeology.

Although these approaches are not original and have been extensively developed since Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), their inclusion in the central chapters of the book contributes to shifting attention from art and architecture to the lived experiences of people whose identities were redefined through these dynamics. This broadens Miller’s analysis to encompass not only cultural artifacts but also the human implications of these processes. Miller’s contribution is valuable because it expands the analysis of how American modernity appropriated the aesthetics, art, and iconography of modern and ancient indigenous communities in both the Middle East and North America. The appropriation of these cultures, perceived as “exotic, unfamiliar, yet strikingly beautiful” (p. 179), served to appease moral concerns in late 19th- and early 20th-century America by framing the displacement and cultural erasure of indigenous populations as part of a natural historical progression. This contributed to shaping American understandings of history, identity, and progress through a Euro-American lens.

From Neo-Assyria to Art Deco: “Oriental” Legacies in Civic Spaces

Miller’s work represents an examination of how Orientalist frameworks influenced American identity-building during an era in which public decorative art in civic spaces was conceived as a democratic, emotionally resonant, and intellectually enriching form of education—a time when civic identity was constructed through monuments that “encapsulated in themselves civilization” (p. 33). Perceived in America as both ancient and modern, these images, Miller states, “led the way” (p. 30) to the simultaneous shaping of both past and future. Chapters Six and Seven examine several works designed by architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, including the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) in Washington, D.C., the Nebraska State Capitol, and the Los Angeles Central Library. She examines how these projects were conceived as collaborative efforts involving artists (such as Lee Lawrie and Hildreth Meière) and scholars (including James Henry Breasted, astronomer Ellery Hale, and Hartley Burr Alexander, who was hired as the official “symbolologist”; pp. 40, 230). Miller’s

systematic description of the decision-making process in these projects effectively reveals how ancient Middle Eastern motifs were integrated with modern aesthetics to create a distinctive monumental architectural style. Sculptures, friezes, and mosaics reinterpreted ancient themes through the lens of Art Deco, projecting a sense of timelessness, authority, and shared human history. These examples perhaps best illustrate how Art Deco was particularly suited to incorporate and reinterpret iconography from ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia as moralizing symbols, thus revealing both the possibilities and limitations of shaping the past according to present cultural expectations. This fusion prompted a unique “revivalism” of the ancient Middle East never since replicated in the U.S., where art and architecture rendered ancient influences “utterly modern” (p. 260). In her approach to these case studies, one feels the influence of Miller’s expertise in the study of Neo-Assyrian palatial architecture, reliefs, and texts (Miller 2017). Irene Winter (1997, 2002) and John Malcolm Russell’s (1991) approaches to the use of visual narratives, inscriptions, and architecture in Neo-Assyrian palaces to convey imperial ideology resonate in Miller’s examination of the visual programs of Modernist, Art Deco monumental public buildings. Perhaps the stronger focus on the aims behind the use of these visual and textual elements—the study of the voice of the authors—eclipses a wider reflection on how these projects were received—the voice of the audiences. Chapter Eight indeed addresses how relatively short-lived these experiences were, giving space again to Neo-Classicism in the post-1929 and post-World War II periods.

This last section of the book also raises the important question of whether or how questions of origin continue to shape contemporary narratives in Western museums and academic institutions, frequently still presented as repositories of a universally shared past, and embracing grand historical narratives equivalent to those of the period under study. Despite the fact that Middle Eastern scholarship, academic institutions, and museums have increasingly taken steps towards the decolonization of narratives and curricula, this commitment is still timid when compared to other fields of North American archaeology. The removal of the term “Oriental” from eminent institutions and departments of Middle Eastern studies is by itself insufficient if it does not involve a stronger commitment to deconstructing the canon and incorporating voices and agencies of non-hegemonic groups in the region. At a time when U.S. discussions about immigration, trade, and military intervention are again framed by extremist theories that we had hoped were long superseded, examining the prevalence of Orientalist legacies in Middle Eastern studies and American identity-making is especially critical.

Miller’s *Early Civilization and the American Modern* might be best approached as a scholarly essay on the dialogue between specialized and non-specialized audiences around the way that American discourses of identity were

(or are still) connected to a long history of the world and human civilization. It is a study that contributes to the understanding of how Western knowledge of the East was constructed and used, and is relevant to students and researchers interested in historical narratives, cultural transformations, and contemporary issues in both the Middle East and North America. Wide-ranging in content and sources, and including a complete bibliography, index, and scholarly apparatus with detailed citations, Miller’s book will resonate particularly with academic audiences, although the clarity of the writing and numerous illustrations render the work accessible to non-specialized audiences aiming to understand how ideas about civilizational origins and progress continue to shape popular historical narratives and public discourse today.

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