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Bard Graduate Center

38 West 86th St.  
New York, NY 10024, USA

Dear Members of the Search Committee:

I am writing to apply for the Bard Graduate Center Research Fellowship of the year 2018-19. I am a scholar of ancient Near Eastern art, archaeology, and religion, specializing in the Bronze and Iron Ages in the Levant, as well as ancient furniture, and ancient Mediterranean ivory art. My work is driven by seeking the idiosyncratic features of Levantine artistic practices, cult, and ideology, in an age of global exchange. I am currently an Associate Research Fellow at the Albright Institute of Archaeological Research, and will complete my PhD in December 2017 at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, in the field of Archaeology. During my PhD studies, I have been a Visiting Scholar at Columbia University, New York, and the University of Fribourg, Switzerland.

My dissertation, titled “*Local Art in the Southern Levant: Middle Bronze Age Bone-Inlaid Boxes of the Geometric Family”*, analyzes unique bone-inlaid boxes found in southern Levantine elite tombs during the Middle Bronze Age. Using archaeological and art historical methods, I reveal that the boxes were sophisticated models of temples that were instrumental in creating a common sphere of Levantine funerary rites. I portray a well-defined Levantine school of art, and demonstrate that in stark contrast to contemporary art industries, it was never exported, and was only meaningful within its indigenous cultural setting. My work thus offers an original perspective on a major disciplinary issue: the controversial existence of a local Levantine carving style in a time of growing internationalization. This research was presented in international conferences and seminars, and is also based on my extensive publications of new bone and ivory assemblages from Bronze and Iron Age contexts in high-profiled excavation reports, including Jerusalem, Hazor, and Megiddo. During 2018, I plan to prepare it for book publication.

As a specialist of ancient Mediterranean ivory, I have made a considerable contribution to one of our field’s most debatable problems: differentiating ivory styles during the Iron Age. In my paper titled “*In Search of Identity: The Contribution of Recent Finds to Our Understanding of Iron Age Ivory Objects in the Material Culture of the Southern Levant*” (Naeh 2015), which was the recipient of the Dever Prize, I have argued in favor of a local tradition of wood, bone, and ivory carving, featuring recurring themes known from both the Bronze and Iron Ages in the southern Levant; consequently, I was invited to publish a popular version of my paper in *Biblical Archaeological Review*.

Following my interest in the nexus between art and ideology, I have co-organized an international, interdisciplinary workshop that explored inter-connections between thrones ranging from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Levant, Bronze Age and Classical Greece, to Islamic cultures, focusing on their visuality, materiality, and representations of political power (Vienna 2016). I am currently co-editing the proceedings of the workshop, to be published by the Austrian Academy of Sciences Press under the title: “*The Throne in Art and Archaeology: from the Dawn of the Ancient Near East until the Late Medieval Period”*.

Deepening my interest in Levantine thrones and ivory art, in 2018-19 I expect to complete a monograph titled “*The Ivory Throne of the Levantines*”, in which I identify a previously unknown class of Canaanite Bronze Age ivory thrones. For the completion of my research, I request to spend three months at the Bard Graduate Center, during which I intend to study ivory thrones from Anatolia, ancient Egypt, and Mesopotamia that are held at the Met’s collections. This will allow me to reconstruct the newly found Levantine ivory thrones, and contextualize them within their broader setting. My goal is to portray the Levantine ivory throne as an amalgamation of concepts pertaining to local kingship that also partakes in global exchange of luxury ivory items.

“*The Ivory Throne of the Levantines”* bears on Bard Graduate Center’s annual theme, ‘*What is After?*’ in multiple ways. First, it follows what happens to the ivory *after* death, namely the death of the elephants and hippos that were hunted for the harvesting of their ivory. From this moment, the ivory became an inanimate raw material, a commodity; yet, I posit that for the Levantines, the ivory’s past was still intensely present during its ‘second life’, and was deliberately employed to advertise the Levantine king’s dominion over the life potency of these formidable beasts. By sitting on his ivory throne, the king made public his control over wild, chaotic forces, which, in many ancient Near Eastern narratives, the hero-king needed to succumb and harness, so as to bring order into his civilization. The ivory’s afterlife, however, was anything but docile. In Ugaritic myths, thrones wept, fought, and bled; indeed, in the eyes of the Levantines, their thrones were intensely alive objects. As I will demonstrate, the throne was designed as a hybrid creature, with lion paws and other animalistic features, imbuing its sitter with partly-zoomorphic qualities, which in ancient Near Eastern traditions evoked the spheres of the mythic and supernatural. In West-Semitic languages, chair parts were dubbed 'head', 'back', and 'legs', such as those of an animal or a man. In fact, I will claim that thrones were considered so animate that the Levantines made them placeholders in the absence – or death – of their owners: thrones served in various funerary rituals, and were believed to have accompanied their owners to the underworld. Hence, *after* the ivory’s ‘second life’, a ‘third life’ was also envisioned, with the ivory throne partaking in the afterlife of their owners. The combined effect of the visual and material syntax of the ivory throne thus unfolds two possible answers for the question: ‘*What is After?*’.

Yet a third answer derives not from the Levantines’ own culture, but from an international vantage point. The Bronze Age was a time of dynamic exchange between ancient Near Eastern nations who practiced diplomatic gifting and trading of ivory art objects, including thrones. Once sent abroad and taken outside of its original cultural context, the Levantine ivory throne was transformed from a vivifying object of ritual into a foreign thing of luxury, collectible exotica. Indeed, a similar fate awaited the Iron Age ivory thrones of the Levantines, which by means of trade, tribute, or war spoil, ended at the Assyrian capital of Nimrud. Thus, studying these examples can also provide answers to what occurs *after* the ivory thrones become distanced from their intended audiences.

For these reasons, I am excited to contribute the Levantine viewpoint to the Bard Graduate Center’s annual theme. I consider it a priority to conduct this part of my research within a community who specializes in the study of decorative arts, and can inspire me to raise new, meta-disciplinary questions regarding ancient material culture. Seeing as my own professional identity was forged in a climate of interdisciplinary research – as a fellow in the Mandel-Scolion Interdisciplinary Center, and as co-director of an interdisciplinary group investigating artisans in the ancient world – I envision my fellowship at the Bard Graduate Center as an opportunity for new collaborations. Specifically, my project will greatly benefit from working with Elizabeth Simpson, a specialist of ancient furniture, who first introduced me to the Bard Graduate Center. In addition, I would like to work with Met curators - Sarah Graff, an expert of ancient Near Eastern art, and Niv Allon, an expert of ancient Egyptian art.

Enclosed you will find my CV, project summary and full proposal, as well as a writing sample. Reference letters by Prof. Zainab Bahrani of Columbia University and Prof. Marian Feldman of Johns Hopkins University will arrive under a separate cover. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Liat Naeh