André Malraux, in his highly influential book *Le Musée imaginaire*, originally published in 1947, examined the powerful role of photography in the then-modern experience of works of art. An easily reproducible medium, the photographic image had become the means by which those who could not afford to travel to see a given master-work, or purchase an engraving or copy, could none-the-less be brought before a facsimile of the work. Malraux’s point was that with the advent of photographic reproduction, the medium of diffusion had come to substitute for direct experience on an unprecedented scale (1965: 16). The *Museum Without Walls* of the English translation thereby existed in the imagination of the accumulator of mental as well as reproduced images.

Malraux further noted that the relatively inexpensive photograph permitted dissemination not only of the acknowledged great works, but also of works of lesser masters, and, read between the lines, of lesser cultures (ibid. 88). He argued that photography had thus served to change the very notion of the masterpiece itself.

It is relevant to the field of ancient Near Eastern studies that in order to make this point, Malraux included in his carefully-illustrated narrative a photographic detail of the lion hunt slab from Aššurnaṣîrpal II’s Northwest palace at Nimrud (1947: 114, fig. 69 = our fig. 3), along with a modern impression of an Elamite cylinder seal showing a roaring lion (ibid. 115, fig. 70). In the process of such photographic manipulation, it was observed, works lose their scale (“perdent leur


1 “One engraved copies of Michelangelo; one photographs the lesser masters, ‘peinture naïve’, ‘les arts inconnus’.”
échelle”). Malraux concluded that the consequence of all this “création par la photographie” was “considérable” (ibid. 98, emphasis mine).

Malraux’s selection of a sculptural relief and a cylinder seal from the ancient Near East is particularly apt for the purposes of the present inquiry, as was his point that photography permits a selection and a juxtaposition never anticipated by the works’ makers. It was noted that reproduction takes on a particular importance when applied to minor arts (“lorsqu’elle s’applique aux arts mineurs”, ibid. 100). This “new life” of the original, made possible by selection, emphasis, and the elision of scale, was said to take on additional force through the possibilities afforded by dialogue with other monuments (“le rapprochement des photographies”, ibid. 115). Illustration of the point was precisely the example cited above of the Elamite seal impression, which, when set alongside the Assyrian relief in the same photographic format, became itself a bas-relief.

That photographed works lose their scale, even when published with an accompanying caption giving measurements, is well known to anyone who teaches with visual aids—slides or photos: without some referential element consciously included to provide scale for both images, the seal and the architectural relief appear identical in size, and are visually processed as such. This optical phenomenon adds additional meaning to the musée imaginaire as the site where things come together in the mind that were never intended to be so conjoined, and gives to the juxtaposed works an “amplitude” that, according to Malraux they would otherwise lack.

There can be little doubt that Malraux’s thesis was the inspiration for Pierre Amiet when, as Conservateur-en-chef of the Département des Antiquités Orientales of the Musée du Louvre, he mounted the exhibition entitled Bas-reliefs imaginaires in the Hotel de la Monnaie, Paris, in 1973. In the introduction to the catalogue, M. Amiet expressed his opinion that the glyptic art of cylinder seals best encapsulated ancient Mesopotamian civilisation (1973: xxi). He suggested that this tiny art form, “ces monuments minuscules”, capable of being held in the hand, represented better than “les arts ‘majeurs’ ” the range of artistic production of the periods from which he had taken his examples.

Crucial in understanding Amiet’s mission and his chosen strategy for validating the glyptic art of Mesopotamia (although unstated and unillustrated in the catalogue and hence retrievable only in memory and/or behind-the-scenes documentation of the exhibition itself) is that he chose to illustrate the artistic merit of and imagery on the seals not