

Picture This – Image-Making Iconoclasm and the Islamic State

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In both the media coverage of the destruction and the international community's reactions to it, the Islamic State's actions were presented as unparalleled acts of destruction. However, the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage – or, more broadly, the contestation of culturally loaded objects – is not a new phenomenon. The destruction of images and representations has served as both a strategy in and as the basis of wars and conflicts for centuries and iconoclasm has been used to both oppose the established power and to mark political or religious changes. In that sense, there is nothing new about neither the Islamic State's acts of destruction nor the religious or political goals of the destruction. However, in hindsight, the Islamic State's destruction of cultural heritage ushered in an era, where images destruction goes hand in hand with image creation. With the recent years contestation of monuments commemorating questionable aspects of European and American history and climate activists' protests in museums as a backdrop, this lecture examines the destruction of cultural heritage by the Islamic State as a

contemporary form of iconoclasm that it is more focused on the images it creates through destruction than on the images it actually destroys. The lecture also addresses the challenges that these acts present to museums as well as policy makers: How do we protect cultural heritage if it is its status as such that puts it in danger? How should we react to the destruction of cultural heritage if our outrage only encourages further destruction?

Terne Thorsen is a PhD student working on contemporary iconoclasm. She is based at the Institute of Art and Cultural Studies at the University of Copenhagen, where she graduated with an MA in Modern Culture. Through a case study of the Islamic State's destruction of cultural heritage in Iraq and Syria, she investigates and theorizes the modern destruction of images. Her research addresses the pressing challenges that attacks on and destruction of cultural heritage present to museums and policy makers and seeks to create a theoretical framework on contemporary iconoclasm by analyzing the Islamic State's acts of destruction and placing them in the historical use of iconoclasm.

