

Ancient Mesopotamian Art

Overview Mesopotamian art, like that of Persia or Egypt, begins four or five millennia B.C.E., and lasts until, say, the Fall of Babylon (539 B.C.E.). Sumerian, Akkadian, and Babylonian art traditions all had their distinctive themes and styles, and yet there is coherence, to the artistic creations of the Fertile Crescent, that results both from their milieu--the kinds of materials available for art--and from their perforce heavy involvement both with the gods and with military affairs. We will sketch a few examples of this multi-millenia achievement.

The ziggurat The ziggurat was a raised rectangular mountain, constructed from baked clay, with sloping, fortress-like walls, which served as a base for the temple, which would serve as the seat of power in a Mesopotamian city. While we have little evidence concerning these clay temple structures, which naturally break down rapidly, we have many ziggurats to contemplate. One of the most 'powerful' is the ziggurat-temple of King Nanna, from Ur in Iraq, (2500--2050 B.C.E.). Like all those massive desert structures of worship, In Egypt and Mesopotamia, this structure heaves up potently out of the flatland, making a strong statement out of itself.

Miscellaneous Sumerian work Apart from such massive remains as ziggurats, we have some figurines and statuettes, often small and short, like that of a standing male figure (2600 B.C.E., thought to represent the god of vegetation. We have a three tiered inlaid band, depicting figures participating in a royal military triumph--as the king's retinue and as prisoners of war. Almost no painting remains, and with it the strong color of other ancient arts--Indian, Egyptian--is swallowed up in the massiveness of the desert.

Akkadian art The art of Akkad is noteworthy, to pick a single example, for a precise, stone stele (2300 B.C.E.) depicting a regal victory and indicating the ruler enlarged and superior, standing near the summit of the carved slab. We deal in much of this ancient sculptural work with hard materials finely carved, and for military occasions directed to display the current ruling monarch in helmeted and cuirassed power. The present slab is, characteristic of such work, six feet six inches tall.

Babylonia We think first of another stele (1760 B.C.E.) which presents the Law Code of Hammurabi. The importance of this text, to the citizen of Babylon, would have lain first of all in the formally carved scene at the top, which shows Shamash, the sun god, the controller of the weather and of plant life, and the representative of order and justice, handing over the laws to the ruler. This seven foot tall basalt stele is as rigid, direct, and intricately carved as possible in such material.

Assyria The Assyrians (9th-7th centuries B.C.E.) excelled both in the creation of stone reliefs and gate guarding myth-figures--guardian monsters placed at royal gateways, and melding man and winged best in a surreal (and fascinating) mixture--and in fascinating, semi-surreal reliefs of military prowess, such as the depiction of Ashurnasirpal II killing lions. This latter relief is both fierce and purely ornamental, as though its purpose was to delight the eye with planes and variations in relief.

Afterthought Mesopotamian art, unlike ancient Egyptian art, offers the eye little in the way of color, or personal expression. Line, action, and hard demanding materials like basalt and stone, set the Mesopotamian tone, as does Its general preoccupation both with military prowess and divine favor.

Readings

Frankfort, Henri, *The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient*, London, 1970.

Crawford, Harriett E.W., *Sumer and the Sumerians*, Cambridge, 2004.

Discussion questions

What kind of presence does the religious experience exercise in ancient Mesopotamian Art? How can we today best relate to art which depicts the more than a thousand Mesopotamian deities, and does so sternly, in materials fit only for relief and inscriptions?

Cuneiform is initially, like hieroglyphics, a pictorial language, which impresses itself onto soft clay with a reed stylus. Is the cuneiform lettering system itself an expression of artistic sensitivity?

Would it be fair to say that the ancient Mesopotamians had no interest in art for its own sake, but only in art contextualized by war, power, or control?