

PERSIAN ART - Ancient Period

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview The Persian Empire, in antiquity, consisted of four distinct dynasties, in total lasting a millennium: Achaemenid, 558-330 B.C.E.; Seleucid Empire 323-83 B.C.E.; Parthian, 247 B.C.E.--224 C.E.; Sassanid Empire, 224-651 C.E. (Alexander the Great's domination of Persia lasted from 336-323 B.C.E.) It is natural, then, that the development of artistic styles would vary greatly from one period of this Empire to another. In fact the duration and complexity of Persian artistic culture far exceeds even the succession of ancient Empires mentioned above, for Persian art was in fact already being created at a high level in the 7th millennium B.C.E. We can only comment briefly on a long enduring style development which rivals the Greek for energy and distinctiveness.

Palaces The Achaemenid dynasty, in which we place the great kings Cyrus (610-560 B.C.E.), Darius (522-486 B.C.E.), and Xerxes (486-465 B.C.E.), enjoyed luxurious lives alternating between high desert and citadel like palaces, where they commissioned residential complexes which were among other things showplaces for visual style. Especially noteworthy were the palace foundations at Pasargadae (Palace of Cyrus), the palace of Artaxerxes at Susa, and the remains of the complexes of Xerxes and Darius at Persepolis.

Palace details What we see in common, to all these vast structures, are huge halls surrounded by columns, and high terraces supporting massive towers. Like Greek temples, these palaces were living repositories of associated visual arts. Double flights of steps, converging at the top, typically addressed each palace; friezes of advancing warriors or Assyrian lions flank the stairs. The columns at Persepolis are narrower and have higher bases than the columns on Greek temples, whereas the Persian capitals are more 'robust' than the Greek, characteristically featuring figures of crouching bulls, set back to back.

Sculpture Nowhere is Persian sculpture more original or cunningly displayed than as ornament on and around palace architecture. Royal staircases, deftly structured porticos, formal hunting gardens for which the Persians were renowned; all these sites were natural display layouts for martial or tribute bearing friezes, or gigantic human-divine statues of sacred bulls. (Cf. especially the *Frieze of Archers* in the Louvre, formerly part of the palace of Darius I at Susa.)

Bronze, gold, and silver arts Pre-Achaemenid art shows us the brilliant pre-Imperial background from which the later Persian decorative arts derived. A treasure of mostly bronze objects, accoutrements of military and cavalry equipment, were found in the mountains of Luristan, in Western Iran, and stunned archeologists with their finesse and richness. A related trove of goldsmith and other arts, was found in Ziwiye; finely formed materials of gold, silver, and ivory. An early find, from the long and abundant millennium ahead, in the Persian sense of the intricate arts.

Pottery The earliest pottery from the Persian world shows a marked influence from Mesopotamia. Examples from Susa and Persepolis, dating to the mid 4th millennium B.C.E., feature geometrical designs, stylized animal forms-- ibex and water birds--and blow us away with their finesse. Many thousands of years later, in the Sassanid Dynasty, the imperial capital at Ctesiphon revealed bowls, ewers, and dishes of undiminished beauty, another testimony to the continuity of the Persian artistic genius.

Readings

Allen, Lindsay, *The Persian Empire*, Chicago, 2005.

Curtis, John; Tallis, Nigel, *Forgotten Empires: The World of Ancient Persia*, Berkeley, 2005.

Discussion questions

Do you see a style or tone continuity throughout the long duration of ancient Persian art? Would you recognize that art, without knowing what it was, as 'Persian'?

What kind of style interrelations do you see, between Persian art and that of its neighbors in Egypt or Mesopotamia?

Vast palace complexes were prioritized by many Persian Emperors. Who were the architects of these complexes? How did they qualify for such assignments? Where did their construction workers come from, and where did they live while working on these projects?