A SUMERIAN SCULPTURE OF THE THIRD MILLENNIUM B.C.

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Among the objects recently placed on exhibition in the Department of Near Eastern Art is a large Sumerian statuette of a man which dates from the beginning of the third millennium B.C. It is carved of gypsum and was found with a number of similar figures by the expedition of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago at Tell Asmar, near Bagdad. These figures exemplify an early school of Mesopotamian sculpture in the monumental style, and their discovery added an important chapter in the history of the art of Western Asia.

From the earliest antiquity Mesopotamia, the land between the Tigris and the Euphrates, played an important part in the development of oriental sculpture. This territory, which is now the Kingdom of Iraq, was occupied over a period of three thousand years by many races and peoples, and great civilizations flourished there, including the Sumerian, the Babylonian, and the Assyrian.

Excavations at various sites in southern Mesopotamia have acquainted us with many phases of the development of Sumerian art and indicated that sculpture had a special significance in the life of the people. We are all familiar with the magnificent gold objects found in the tombs of the First Dynasty at Ur, represented in the Metropolitan Museum by a set of jewelry, and with stone statues of King Gudea found at Lagash and now in the Louvre and the British Museum. Less generally known is the art of the three cultural periods before 3000 B.C.: the Ubaid period, with its characteristic painted monochrome pottery; the Uruk period, with its plain pottery; and the Jamdat Nasr period, with its polychrome pottery and stone vessels carved with processions of animals. It was during these periods that the Sumerians evolved as a people and introduced the monumental style of sculpture exemplified by a life-size female head from Warka and a statuette of a woman from Khafaja.

The importance and artistic significance of the great quantities of sculpture excavated at Tell Asmar and near-by Khafaja have been ably presented by Professor Henri Frankfort in two monographs, published in 1939 and 1943. The temple in which our statuette was discovered was founded before 3000 B.C. and remained in use until about 2500 B.C., being enlarged and even reconstructed many times during this period. It was dedicated to Abu, god of vegetation and fertility. When it was replanned in the latter part of the Early Dynastic period, it was made square in shape and provided with three sanctuaries. Beneath the third floor of Shrine II, the expedition discovered a hoard of statuettes buried in an oblong cavity beside the altar. This group may have been discarded at the time the temple was restored and later replaced by other images. Two of the figures are thought by Frankfort to represent divinities. A bearded male figure, the largest of all, may be identified, by peculiarities in the treatment of the hair and eyes and by symbols on the base, as the god Abu. A female figure, the next largest in size, probably represents the mother goddess. The rest of the figures are worshipers. Most of the male figures, including that acquired by the Metropolitan Museum, wear long locks and a beard, indicating perhaps a Semitic racial type in contrast to the Sumerian, which is usually portrayed with clean-shaven head and face. It is possible, however, that we have to do here with a fashion prevailing at the time, particularly among Sumerian officials. The costume consists of a simple skirt with a fringe, stylized into a solid
Sumerian statuette of the third millennium B.C. Height 11 3/4 inches. Fletcher Fund, 1940.
Profile view of the stone statuette on the opposite page, representing a worshiper
Statuette from the same group as that on pages 254 and 255. In the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago

cone without the folds that played such an important part in Greek sculpture. It is the garment of the early Sumerian period, later replaced by the *kaunakes*, a heavy garment with tufts, worn by figures from Khafaja and from Mari, in Syria.

This Early Dynastic group from the Square Temple at Tell Asmar shows many features which are peculiar to the ancient Near East. The artistic principles which governed the oriental sculptor were quite different from those which motivated the Greek artist, whose ideal was a naturalistic representation of the human body. The oriental sculptor followed certain strict formulas and conventions of an abstract character. The Museum's statuette, which is artistically one of the best in the group, has the rigid frontality and massive structure typical of both Sumerian and Babylonian art. The figure is reduced to simple geometrical forms. The shoulders are broad, and the upper part of the torso narrows downwards in such a way that the waist becomes almost square in section. The back is flat, with a vertical groove in the center, and the elbows are pointed, a characteristic feature of early Sumerian figures whether in the round or in relief. The hands are clasped in front of the chest in the conventional attitude of adoration. The feet of our statuette are missing, but most of the figures of the group have a round base and heavy legs and feet and, occasionally, a support at the back.

The head is treated in the same abstract manner as the body. The hair, colored with bitumen, is arranged in a series of diagonal ridges and hangs down in front in two long locks. The beard, which together with the locks forms a frame for the face, is rendered by a series of horizontal ridges and vertical notches. The face has eyes of shell inlay, a large beaklike nose, and a mouth which consists of two projecting ridges. The severe, abstract rendering of the face is a peculiarity of the early school of Sumerian sculpture. More realistic treatment of the face and various other parts of the body were introduced later, culminating in the monumental stone sculptures of the Gudea period—about 2400 B.C.