THE ART OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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Until 1917 every visitor to the Metropolitan Museum who wished to look at the art of Assyria, Babylonia, and the other ancient kingdoms near by had to be content with two Assyrian and four Hittite stone reliefs and some inscribed clay tablets and sealstones. Most of these had been purchased from the collection of the Hebrew scholar William Hayes Ward. It is true that an interested visitor could have got a hint, if he knew enough to recognize it, of the arts of western Asia from the wonderful Cessnola collection of antiquities from Cyprus. But if he wished to compare in any adequate way the work of the craftsmen of Greece, which he had been taught to admire, and that of the Egyptians, at which he had been encouraged to wonder, with the art of this other ancient world he could only do so by going abroad and visiting London, Paris, or Berlin.

In 1917 J. P. Morgan gave, in his father’s name, six Assyrian reliefs, as well as some beautiful Parthian and Sarmatian gold jewelry and the first important example of Sumerian workmanship, a carved steatite vase. The elder Morgan had been interested in Mesopotamian art and had assisted in the acquisition of the pieces from the Ward collection. But it was not until 1930, when John D. Rockefeller, Jr., offered the large and most generous gift of a set of reliefs from Calah, in Assyria, that the Trustees decided that it was absolutely necessary to represent Mesopotamia more adequately. There were already rich Graeco-Roman and Egyptian collections, and it was now realized that the ancient Near East, traditionally the scene of the creation of man and certainly the birthplace of many of his most enduring and far-reaching discoveries, could no longer be neglected.

In 1931 Babylonian art was represented for the first time. Two large panels of glazed bricks made during the reign of King Nebuchadnezzar (604-562 B.C.) were purchased in that year with the German expedition under Koldewey in the great processional street in Babylon. In 1932 Mr. Rockefeller’s gift was placed on exhibition. It consisted of two huge winged, human-headed animals from doorways of a palace of Ashurnasir-pal II (883-859 B.C.), with twelve large stone slabs decorated in low relief from the revetment of the same palace in Calah, and six fragments from a palace of Sennacherib (704-681 B.C.) at Nineveh. These Nineveh reliefs, showing cavalymen leading their horses and other such ordinary earthly scenes, make a pleasant contrast to the Calah reliefs with their strange demons and genii.

There were, then, in 1932, on exhibition in the Museum objects closely associated with names that were familiar, through a common biblical tradition, to everyone. But antiquities from the Palestine of Old Testament days were lacking until 1934, when a collection of pottery and other objects from Tell Duweir, the biblical Lachish, was given by Harris D. Colt and his son, H. Dunscombe Colt, who conducted the expedition that discovered them.

About the same time a small group of bronzes from Luristan in western Persia was purchased, and to these were added other important Luristan pieces by gift from George D. Pratt, who was deeply interested in these ancient arts. Thus another Near Eastern area of great artistic achievement came into the ken of visitors. Also in the nineteen thirties a splendid collection of ivories from Syria, a region hitherto unrepresented, was given by Mr. Pratt and by Mrs. Pratt in his memory.

Since the thirties the art of nearly every ancient civilization of the Near East has come to be represented, however inadequately, in the Museum’s collection, by bequest, gift, loan, and...
1947 was an outstanding year for growth. Not only were we able to purchase some of our finest pieces, but we had the opportunity of adding twenty-four antiquities from prehistoric and Achaemenian Persia, all from scientifically conducted excavations. These last were acquired by exchange from the National Museum, Teheran, in the course of closing out the Persian Expedition. The excellence of some of these more recent acquisitions makes it very clear that the ancient craftsmen of western Asia could produce sculpture, metalwork, and pottery of the finest quality.

All this material of the ancient Near East has been arranged in Gallery D 8. Apart from the seals and a group of Iranian pottery, it has not been possible, because of the plan of the gallery, to make a chronological arrangement to any advantage. The first bay on the east side contains Sumerian and Babylonian antiquities, the second the two large Babylonian panels of glazed brick, a case of clay tablets, and a sequence of seals and seal impressions. The third bay contains pottery from Palestine and ivories from Syria. On the south wall there are carved stone reliefs from Tell Halaf, a site on the present border between Syria and Turkey, and a group of late Hittite sculpture. Achaemenian and Parthian antiquities face the Syrian group. The bay opposite the Babylonian panels is devoted to Iranian pottery, and the final group consists of metalwork. This last comes from a wide area and covers a considerable period of time, but in the juxtaposition of these objects from Luristan, Achaemenian Persia, the Caucasus, and Turkestan we have tried to suggest their stylistic interrelations and dependences. This group has purposely been placed near the corridor which contains antiquities of the Avars and the Franks so that some of the relationships between the arts of the two continents can also be studied.

The Assyrian sculptures remain for the present where they were originally installed. Because of our desire to have a full showing of the more ancient arts it has only been possible to put a few specimens of Parthian art in the newly installed room. Others are to be seen in Gallery H 8 at the far end of the Egyptian galleries.
The antiquities now placed on exhibition are mostly made of clay, stone, and metal. Though the oldest of them happen to be of clay and come from Persia it must not be inferred that the art of making pottery originated there. That discovery was one of man’s early and universal achievements. So necessary was it to the growth of early civilization that one doubts whether the ancient belief that man was created from clay could have existed before the invention of pottery. This belief is common to Sumerian and Babylonian mythology, the Bible, and the Koran. In some stories of the creation the clay is mixed with blood and in others with water. It was also on clay that man first wrote this belief.

It was on clay that ancient man in the Near East made his accounts, plans, and drawings, and wrote his letters. Thousands of such records have been preserved to this day. They made possible the spread of a highly organized society and relations with far away foreign peoples. A collection of correspondence on clay tablets, showing the political and commercial relation between Egypt and western Asia, was found in the state archives at Tell el Amarnah in Egypt. One of these, a letter from King Ashur-Uballit of Assyria to King Akhnaton accompanying a gift of a chariot and horses is shown in the exhibition. It is mostly from such clay records that we have acquired our knowledge of the various peoples of the ancient Near East.

The discovery by the ancient potter of how to make colored glazes enabled him not only to enrich his pottery but to make bricks, and later tiles, surfaced in bright colors for architectural decoration. Our Babylonian panels and the few glazed bricks from an Achaemenian palace at Susa in Persia, made about a century later, hint at the magnificence the potter’s art could bring to large buildings. The making of such decoration was peculiar to the Near East, a “barbarian” art that died at the hands of Alexander the Great and was not revived until Islamic times. Then buildings were again clothed in colored tile, and it is to the mosques of Isfahan and Mashhad that the traveler must now go to get

*Silver antelope of the Achaemenian period from Persia. About 5th century B.C. It was made to be suspended and balances perfectly. Length 4 inches. Rogers Fund, 1947*
an idea how the Ishtar gate looked standing in the sunlight.

Stone is a less workable material than clay and, perhaps because of this, brick, baked and unbaked, has always been the favored building material of Mesopotamia, and even of Persia, where stone is plentiful. Nevertheless in lower Mesopotamia where stone had to be imported, considerable skill was shown in the handling of it by the beginning of the third millennium.

In the art of making sealstones western Asia has been pre-eminent, not only in high antiquity but up to the beginning of this very century. Sealstones from Sumer, Babylonia, Elam, and Assyria are the only objects that have been found in great enough number to give us any over-all picture of the art of these countries through the ages. Much has been learned from careful study of them, but the specific function for which they were made, with its own particular conventions, necessarily imposed limitations. Our general view of the arts of the ancient world is much the same as it would be if, of the products of the last hundred years, more postage stamps had survived than anything else. Sealstones tell us a great deal, but far less than we should like to know.

In stone-cutting in the round on a larger scale the sculptor could also work with great skill although many of his creations may seem strange to our eyes. He could on occasion show a sculptural ability that ranged from the starkness of the figure of an ancient worshipper perpetually frozen in prayer, so to speak, to the delicacy of the small head of Ur-ningirsu, a delicacy free from weakness, which even the Greeks could not excel.

Man’s mastery over metal came much later than his ability to make pottery, but by the beginning of the third millennium B.C. he had learned to handle it with great skill. The small Sumerian bull’s head which was once a decorative feature of an ancient lyre, is proof of this.

That the metalworker of the next millennium could not only rival the sculptor and perhaps even surpass him is convincingly shown by the large bronze head of a bearded man (see p. 193) in which realism is limited and enhanced by convention.

Several recent acquisitions show that gold- and silversmiths also were highly expert in the practice of their craft. It is now possible to compare gold jewelry of the second millennium from western Asia with the work of contemporary Egyptian goldsmiths, of which the Museum has such a magnificent collection. Silver vessels of the Achaemenian period and a silver bowl with a gilded edge from Parthian days give some idea of the excellence of the silversmith’s craft at a later but not less luxurious age.

It might be thought when we look at these various antiquities that they would speak fairly for themselves. Unfortunately they do not. We hear them in our language and not in theirs. We cannot be sure what men of their day admired or what they despised, we cannot always know why a thing was fashioned or for what purpose it was used, we cannot even be certain which elements were purely decorative and which practical. Myth, religion, decoration, and use all played their part in what was made then as they do today.

In the new gallery devoted to the art of the ancient Near East, despite the diversity of the races that created it and the great period of time during which it was produced, there are many instances of close resemblance as well as of great divergence. These objects can be studied as a whole, for the development of the arts of closely related peoples, or individually. Either way we shall probably find some repelling and others fascinating. But whether they repel or delight we may do well to believe that

“There’s nothing simply good nor ill alone.

Of every quality comparison

The only measure is, and judge, opinion.”
**Head of Ur-ningirsu, ruler of the Sumerian province of Lagash.** He was the Son of Gudea (see p. 198), the greatest figure of a local dynasty in power when much of the country was under the domination of the Guti from Persia. Hats of this curious type, made of silk, are worn today in Iraq by priests of the Chaldaean church. The meeting eyebrows are still considered a mark of beauty in western Asia.
Sumerian bull’s head of copper, probably an ornamental feature on the front of a lyre, made about 2800 B.C. The inlaid eyes are modern. Bronze bull of the vii century B.C., from southwest Arabia. A similar statue of a cow stood outside the temple of Haldia at Musasir, near Lake Urmia, and it is possible that this bull was made in Azerbaijan, Persia. Length 9 inches. Rogers Fund, 1947

OPPOSITE PAGE: Bronze head of an Elamite ruler found in northwest Persia. Rogers Fund, 1947. Stone head of a Sumerian woman, showing one of many contemporary styles of hairdressing. Gift of E. S. David, 1949. The eyes of both heads were originally inlaid. II millennium B.C.
Clay plaques, II millennium B.C.: left, a god with bull’s ears holding lion-headed maces; right, front of a miniature clay chariot showing the sun god appearing over the mountains. Below, part of a gold necklace found near Babylon. About 1500 B.C. Rogers Fund, 1948, 1947
Silver vessel, Achaemenian, about 5th century B.C. Rogers Fund, 1947. The horse’s forelock, bound by a ribbon, actually stood up, like that of the king’s horse at Persepolis, below. Photograph courtesy Oriental Institute, Chicago.
Silver bowl with a cuneiform inscription saying it was made for Artaxerxes I, the Achaemenian (464-424 B.C.). Rogers Fund, 1947. Silver bowl with gilded rim. From Persia, about 1 century B.C. Lent by Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Martin, 1949
Sumerian head of polished diorite, probably Gudea, ruler of Lagash about 2200 B.C. Some heads of Gudea, for instance that in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, show him with a hat of the same shape as that worn by his son, Ur-ningirsu (see p. 190). Life size. Fletcher Fund