ASSYRIAN AND PERSIAN ART

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A great difficulty in reaching any true understanding of the abilities of ancient peoples is that not enough works of art have survived to give a balanced picture of their achievements. Climate explains the disappearance of some kinds of objects, but it does not account for all, and it is extraordinary how complete the gap is in certain categories of things that could be little affected either by exposure to the elements or by burial underground. For example, Sir Leonard Woolley made a great find at Ur of Sumerian goldsmiths' work of the third millennium B.C., but no comparable number of gold objects of the first millennium was ever discovered in other very extensive excavations, either in the great cities of Assyria or in Babylon itself, although we can be sure that as many were made then as before. Such lacunae may not affect our enjoyment of the antiquities that have survived, but they do affect our comprehension of the art of the past. They prevent us from comparing a particular art of one civilization with that of another. We shall never, for instance, be able to compare the achievements of the Egyptian wood carver with those of the Assyrian or the ancient Persian. That it is not possible to fill these gaps by studying what survives in another material is made clear by comparing the work of the Assyrian seal-cutter with the sculptured stone dadoes of Assyrian palaces. With a change in medium there also come changes in subject matter, in treatment, and in pattern.

From time to time the gaps in knowledge are filled by new discoveries or, in a particular collection, by new acquisitions. The Museum's recent accessions of ancient Near Eastern art, together with a number of pieces generously lent to us, represent not only objects that could not be seen here before but designs that could not even be guessed at.

The antiquities that have been added in the past few years fall into three main groups. The first, found in Assyria, are mostly of ivory and earthenware, ranging in date from the ninth to the end of the seventh century B.C. They came to the Museum as a result of friendly and fruitful co-operation with the British School of Archaeology in Iraq and are from excavations most ably conducted by Professor M. E. L. Mallowan at Nimrud, the ancient Kalhu of the Assyrians. Among those on his staff for the last two seasons was Joan Lines, who, in the April Bulletin, will describe the ivories discovered there.

The second group comes from Zawiyeh, in Kurdistan, in northwest Persia, and consists of a number of pieces of gold, silver, and ivory, many of which were found in a bronze bath or coffin made for an Assyrian prince. Zawiyeh is a small village that can be identified with the ancient fortified city of Zibia in the land of the Manneans, the Minni who are mentioned in Jeremiah: "Prepare the nations against her [Babylon], call together against her the kingdoms of Ararat [Urartu—now Armenia], Minni, and Ashchenaz [Scythia]. . . . Prepare against her the nations with the kings of the Medes." All these names may mean little to us now, that of the Minni, or Manneans, being the least known, but they were important enough from the ninth to the seventh century before Christ, as the written Assyrian records prove. The Manneans were never the dominant power, and they were mostly under the sway of the Assyrians to the west and the Urartians to the northwest. Eventually, like their more powerful rivals, they were absorbed into the empire of the Medes. There was close contact then between all these peoples and many others, not only in the arts of war but in the arts of peace. We can look, therefore, for no simple and consistent style in the works of art of such a country as that of the Manneans, particularly when the art of Assyria showed so many influences.

The third group is from Hamadan, also in northwest Persia. These pieces, mostly gold and silver, were made for the Achaemenian kings,
among them Darius and Artaxerxes, who replaced the empire of the Medes with another that extended from Europe and Egypt to India.

In all three groups there are objects of superb workmanship, but it is easy to see the difficulty of putting some of these things in precise categories. Words like “Assyrian” and “Persian,” like “Greek” and “Roman,” can be and are used in many different ways, often indiscriminately. This is easily understood when one realizes that the races were mixed and their lands and empires elastic. So it should be no surprise that it is not always possible to pigeonhole works of art with the neatness of those who put tidiness above accuracy. It is often true, unfortunately, that the moment one attaches a precise label further thought comes to an end. Examination of these antiquities will reveal something of the interplay of certain forces that were powerful when they were made. We shall discover that in their variety are elements of unity and that among things that seem alike there are almost always points of difference.

An excellent example of Assyrian workmanship—using Assyrian in its restricted sense—is a small carved white stone found at Nimrud (see opp. p.). As it has a cylindrical hole from end to end it was probably a handle or an ornament on a shaft. The grooves around the middle were once filled with white, red, and green mosaic which, with strips of gold foil, formed a guilloche pattern. Only a small scrap of this decoration remains. The double lion head had inlaid eyes, which are also missing, though one socket is still rimmed with lapis lazuli. Above the eyes are inset two circular lapis lazuli “warts of strength,” a typical feature of Assyrian and Persian lions.

The double lion head is a characteristic Assyrian motive used to embellish dagger and sword handles and military standards. Sword blades were probably set parallel to the teeth of the double heads and not at right angles as the drawing on the left on the opposite page suggests to us, who are not familiar with Assyrian conventions. Not only did the Assyrians favor this device of two animal heads, they also went further and combined four, as on a mace in a relief in Sargon’s palace at Khorsabad. Neither form seems to have been used by the Persians, though they often made weapons with the blade issuing from an animal’s head.

Another combination form involving lions is seen in a very striking gold plaque from Zawiyeh (p. 216), embossed in low relief, which has two winged lions standing on their hind legs; they have only one head, in very much higher relief. This head also had inlaid eyes and the usual circular “warts” above. This particular lion motive appeared as early as the first half of the third millennium B.C. in Mesopotamia and at various times in many other countries, including Persia. It was quite fashionable in Corinthian pottery of the early seventh century B.C., and it appears in Christian and Islamic art also. A peculiarity of the lions on this plaque is the “basket-woven” hair on their backs and their bellies. This is a feature not observable on any Assyrian reliefs but occurring on ivories in the Assyrian style, also found at Zawiyeh. It is a marked characteristic of the lions carved on the stone reliefs of a north Syrian palace at Tell Halaf—in the neo-Hittite style. There are other divergencies from Assyrian art as we know it from the sculptures, for instance in the shape of the top of the tree of life above the lions, in the interwoven branches, and in the asymmetrical form of the petals of the palmette between the lions. But in spite of these differences and even though it may not have been made by an Assyrian for an Assyrian, this plaque comes within the orbit of Assyrian art, using the term in its widest sense, art of the Assyrian empire.

One of the most impressive specimens of goldsmiths’ work found in the Assyrian bronze receptacle at Zawiyeh is a thin gold plaque of which the upper part is now in the Museum (p. 217). Enclosed by a guilloche border, a pattern commonly used from the Mediterranean to Persia, are ranged three rows of winged animals, some of them human-headed. They are mostly composite creatures having parts of human beings, birds, animals, and even scorpions. Such monsters express in material form invisible powers that may be beneficent or malevolent to men. They are no strangers in Mesopotamia though they are not without foreign details, which were accepted there, as for example the
skirted sphinxes and griffons. Some of them are immediately recognizable as the Lamassu, the human-headed winged bulls at the entrances to Assyrian palaces, which in a modified form appear again at a later date guarding the doorways of Xerxes' palace at Persepolis during the reign of the Achaemenian kings of Persia.

The complete plaque seems to have had six
Gold plaque from Zawiyeh, VIII–VII century B.C., with chased and repoussé decoration of lions and a tree of life. The holes on the bottom and sides—there were undoubtedly holes also on the missing top rim—indicate that the plaque was sewed to cloth. Fletcher and Pulitzer Bequest Funds, 1951 and 1954. At the left is a fragment of an ivory panel, also from Zawiyeh and about the same date, showing a similar treatment of the lion’s hair. Fletcher Fund, 1931
ABOVE: Part of a gold plaque from Zawiyeh, late VIII–VII century B.C., with decoration of winged monsters and trees of life in repoussé. Some of the monsters are human-headed, others have bird, lion, and goat heads. The lions in the top register have ostrich tails, those below them scorpion tails. The goats in the second register and the sphinxes below have forefeet raised toward the trees of life. On the branches of the trees are pomegranates, pine cones, and lotus flowers, all common in Assyrian art through early contact with Syria. The tree of life survived in cruder form in Scythian art, perhaps merely as decoration (see the upper drawing, p. 219). Dick Fund, 1954.

LEFT: Gold finial found in Persia, a typical Scythian piece of a little later date than the plaque, VII century B.C. Anonymous Loan, 1954.
rows and to have been 10 1/4 inches in height and 11 3/4 inches wide at the top, tapering down to 5 5/8 inches. Originally there were two plaques embossed and chased with the same design. The two lowest registers of one plaque are in the Archaeological Museum, Teheran.

Both plaques were pierced from back to front in each of the four corners with a small round hole having a sharp upturned edge to the front. So few holes preclude their use as sheathing for such things as wooden boxes or furniture. Judging by other examples, the usual method of affixing metal was to use brads a short distance apart (see opp. p.). It seems unlikely that the plaques were used as pectoral and backplate, as the size and shape strongly suggest, because they would buckle with any movement. To satisfy practical considerations there is the possibility, and no more than a possibility, that they were fastened to a shroud. The custom of fastening gold ornaments to burial clothes seems on present evidence to be a Scythian rather than an Assyrian or Persian one; nevertheless this use of the plaques should not be ruled out. No untouched burial of a royal person of the Assyrian period has yet been discovered either in Assyria itself or in the adjacent countries.

The Museum's plaque is very closely linked in style with a gold gorget (published by A. Godard in *Le Trésor de Zawiyé*), which, following the Assyrian and Urartean custom, was suspended from the neck. This gorget has on it two small lions treated in a different manner from any on the plaque, with rope-like legs and feet curled up almost to circles, a fashion later common in Scythian art, and heart-shaped ears divided in the center like those on the typical Scythian piece also on page 217. The plaque, then, is contemporary with the very beginnings of the interplay of Scythian and Assyrian art. It is earlier in date than the Scythian antiquities showing marked Assyrian influence that reached the Caucasus and the Dnieper Valley in South Russia, and there is every reason to believe that it was made in the seventh century B.C., when contact was very close not only between the Assyrians and the Manneans but also between these nations and the Scyths. By this time the power of the Scyths had increased, and Partartua, their chief, was in a position to ask for the hand of Essarhaddon's daughter.

Another superb example of goldwork of about this period is the magnificent bracelet kindly lent to the Museum by Mr. and Mrs. A. B. Martin (see above). It is one of a pair, the other being in the Archaeological Museum in Teheran.
(also published by Godard). An interesting feature is the difference in the treatment of the lion heads terminating the hoop, of which one is removable, and those of the two pairs of couchant lions on the front of the bracelet. The former are fierce-looking lions closely resembling some on a gold armlet in the Louvre, which is typically Persian and not Assyrian. The heads of the couchant lions, because of the angular treatment of the neck and the top of the head, have a “gabled” appearance, a peculiarity to be observed in the lions on a bronze throne discovered in Urartu near Lake Van and now in the British Museum. This feature, however, is also seen in lions of the eighth century in south Anatolia and on an ivory of the same date found in Nimrud.

This form of lion head also appears on another gold plaque from Zawiyeh, illustrated above, of which parts are in the Metropolitan Museum, the Archaeological Museum in Teheran, and in other museums. Here the lion heads are the connecting points of a network of curled strokes drawn like the branches of the trees of life on the plaque on page 217. The shape of this pattern is preserved in a bronze strip of a slightly later date from the district of Kars in the Caucasus, but so far it has not been found in any monumental or architectural art. It appears first, if the dating is correct, on an ivory piece of the second millennium from Megiddo in Samaria (see drawings above). Between it and the plaque is a gap of at least five centuries—a long time for such a distinctive design to be neglected or for all traces of it to be lost.

The arts of the Assyrians and the Scyths can be very clearly seen to continue in Persian art of
the Achaemenian period, when the Persians took away the primacy from the Medes, an era that ended soon after the destruction of Persepolis by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. A fine example of goldsmiths' work of this period is a dagger found in the ruins of Hamadan, the capital of the Medes, which later became the site of Achaemenian palaces. It is of superb workmanship, and, in spite of the purity of the gold (about 20 carats), is a dangerous weapon because of the strengthening of the blade with central longitudinal ridges. The blade was broken in modern times; it was evidently cut by a blow from a sharp instrument such as the short, adze-like hoe of the Persian peasant, and then snapped asunder. The hilt, which, unlike the blade, is not solid, is shaped for an easy grasp and is less elaborate than many of Assyrian design. The quillon is formed of lions' feet, substituting for two complete lions. The pommel is composed of two lion heads back to back, a feature not seen on Assyrian swords, although many of them have the blade emerging from the mouth of a double lion head like that on the stone piece on page 215.

But that the Assyrians used a similar arrangement of lion heads we know from those on the military standard of Sargon II (p. 215), just above the bottom rim of the disk. Al-

though the design of the typical Scythian or Medean dagger, worn suspended from the belt in an odd-shaped scabbard, is different from this, a king's sword with two bulls' heads on its hilt was discovered many years ago in a Scythian Valley in South Russia.

Daggers of gold were once more common than one would think. Sargon, who conquered and looted the Urartean city of Musasir, listed no fewer than six as being in the treasury of Urzana, the king of Urartu. And in the later times of the Achaemenian kings of Persia, as we learn from Xenophon in the Anabasis, Cyrus the Younger, shortly before he was slain at Cunaxa (401 B.C.) trying to take the throne from his brother Artaxerxes II, presented one to Syennaes, the king of Tarsus, in Cilicia.

The treatment of the lion heads on the dagger is entirely in the tradition of the Near East, and only minor details indicate that it is Achaemenian. The rounding off of the contracted muscles on the cheeks of snarling lions was a little peculiarity that existed as early as the seventh century B.C., as we know from a plaque lent to the Museum by Mr. and Mrs. Leon Pom erance. During the period of the Achaemenian empire it became almost standard practice. It is another instance of the Near Eastern propensity for slightly changing a natural form by minor details so that it is made into a neat and tidy decorative pattern.
This convention sometimes aids the harmony of the complete design and is far more satisfactory than a more naturalistic expression. Nowhere is this restrained ferocity better exemplified than in the gold rhyton on page 222, probably also from Hamadan. If this piece, so harmonious and consistent in its design and so proper in the technical use of its material, had been furnished with a realistic lion's head it would have been a barbaric piece of work, out of place in the palace of the king of the Medes and Persians, who, though to the Greeks a barbarian, was the head of a highly cultured court. The vessel is hollow, but just where the neck of the lion rises there is a diaphragm that forms the end of the actual cup. The rhyton is not, of course, made from one sheet of metal but is composed of many parts, though it is exceedingly difficult to find any of the joins. The top band of the cup has been decorated with forty-four rows of twisted wires. They are no thicker than .18 millimeter in diameter and the small band no more than five eighths of an inch wide. There must be at least 136 feet of single-strand wire, including allowance for twisting. It was attached in the most delicate way, but modern attempts to reattach it where it showed signs of coming loose were more clumsily done by applying gold solder with a blowpipe and burning the twists against the body of the vessel.

An example of the unusual attention to detail in this piece is shown on page 223 in the ribbing of the roof of the lion's mouth, which, though conventional, is based on reality. The same feature on a much smaller scale is found in the lion heads on the gold dagger. The hair is also treated in a conventional way, and it is this consistent discipline, characteristic of the best specimens of ancient Near Eastern art, that is its great quality.

On the flanks of the beast are two winglike designs which look like stylized ostrich feathers with strongly marked quills. That these were originally thought of as feathers seems to be certain. The substitution of feathers for hair was conceived of at an earlier period, and it is a feature on some of the winged lion sphinxes that decorate some Phoenician bronze bowls discovered in an Assyrian palace at Nimrud. In Assyrian, Babylonian, and Achaemenian lions this area is usually covered with conventional curls of hair, but there is reason to believe that this lion is meant to be not an ordinary lion but a supernatural one, and it is also for this reason that he has a mane en brosse.

Winged lion monsters are shown in their more usual form in a gold ornament that likewise was reputedly found in Hamadan (p. 223). Here they have not conventional lions' ears but bulls' ears, and the spines of the manes are upright although the rest is treated as feathers. Their tails encircle two of the five round bosses that are a distinct feature of the design. In almost all these and in other details one can discover peculiarities of conception and design that were used at an earlier time in Mesopotamia, and in the violently curled tips of the wings we can see a link with Lydia, famous for its goldworkers. In spite of all this, the combination is such that the piece is a true and fine example of Achaemenian art. An interesting comparison can be made with the winged lions from Zawiyeh, showing what variety in design is possible within the same tradition. This Achaemenian ornament was cast and chased and originally had ten gold rings for attachment, probably to leather, for they are substantial. It is said to have been found with the gold bowl shown on page 224.

This bowl is extremely simple. In the base, beaten up from below, is a rosette of sixteen
Achaemenian gold rhyton, or drinking vessel, vi–v century B.C. The custom of making drinking cups with bases in the form of animal heads was an old one in both Persia and Assyria. Some of these cups were narrow and hornlike, others were almost cylindrical. They were made in glazed and unglazed pottery as well as in metal. This rhyton is more elaborate in form, and its workmanship is extremely fine. Around the rim is a band of forty-four rows of two-stranded twisted gold wire. Each strand is less than .01 inch in diameter, and the total length is about 136 feet. A detail of the band, seven and a half times actual size, is shown at the left. Fletcher Fund, 1954
petals with sepals between each pair, the design in perfect harmony with the flutes and bosses on the side. Unlike all the other objects mentioned and illustrated here, animals form no part of the design. Also unlike them there is no need to consider its style, positive though that is, to place the bowl, for on it is inscribed the name of the man for whom it was made, in cuneiform characters in three languages, Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian: Darius the Great King. There were, however, three Achaemenian rulers of Persia with that name, the first of whom is perhaps better known to many people for his defeat at Marathon than for the greatness of an empire that included Thrace and Macedonia in Europe, Egypt in Africa, and extended to the Punjab and the Sind in India. Later came Darius II, and finally yet another Darius saw the end of that empire, for he was defeated at Issus in 333 B.C. and his palaces at Persepolis were burned by Alexander the Great three years later.

The style used in Achaemenian palaces and their furnishing seems to be extraordinarily static, so that it is not possible to determine by style for which Darius the bowl was made, but the inscriptions, despite their brevity, indicate that it was certainly not made for Darius III.

The probability is that the king mentioned is Darius I.

But even though it is not possible to date these gold pieces exactly they are truly Achaemenian and can all be called masterpieces of goldsmiths' work. We do not know who made them, but we have a little information concerning gold and goldsmiths from excavations of the royal palaces. On an inscribed tablet of the reign of Xerxes found at Persepolis goldworkers from Caria, on the coast of Asia Minor, are mentioned. Gold, we learn from inscriptions at Susa, was brought from Sardis and from Bactria. It was worked by Medes and Egyptians, and Sardians applied the gold inlays. Obviously skilled goldworkers were moved about from country to country like other skilled craftsmen in Assyrian times. But no matter who made these pieces from Hamadan, or how much was borrowed from elsewhere, they
Achaemenian gold bowl, simply decorated with flutes and bosses and inscribed with the name of Darius. VI–V century B.C. The rosette at the left, hammered up like the flutes and bosses, is on the base of the interior. The cuneiform inscription around the rim repeats in Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian the words Darius the Great King. Dick Fund, 1954

must be considered Achaemenian and Persian. These few illustrations of Achaemenian art show that if, as some have asserted, it was approaching a dead end it could produce superb pieces of work until that end. But art never has an end; it flows and changes like a river. And no matter how complicated the currents and the pattern of merging streams or how contrary to the general direction some of the eddies, they are all part of the same river.