Introduction

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The Museum's realization some years back that the art of western Asia, one of the greatest cultural and artistic centers of the ancient world, was inadequately represented has resulted in a notable growth of our collection of art from the ancient Near East. This has been aided to a very considerable extent by a number of friends who have most generously given or lent works of art that in many cases are of superb quality. These efforts have adjusted to some degree the imbalance of our presentation of ancient art.

Although the collection will probably never be so representative as the superb Egyptian one, nor approach the numerical superiority of the works of art from Greece, Cyprus, and the Roman world, it now suggests even to the most casual visitor that Mesopotamia, Persia, and the other lands in the west of Asia produced from very early times impressive works of art as well as other objects of great interest. Scholars and cognoscenti, who used to be completely dependent on the two-dimensional assistance provided by our excellent library, can now add to their knowledge and pleasure by examining a very considerable number of objects.

A hall of Assyrian sculpture forms the central part of the collection, an area which is purposely left free and open. Although the limitations of the collection prevent the erection of the slabs of sculpture as they were originally (for they come from many rooms even though only one palace) or the re-creation of a true entranceway exact in every detail of decoration, it has, nevertheless, been possible to make a portal that accurately reproduces a particular plan habitually used by the Assyrians in their palace doorways. This plan does not consist of a flat wall punctured by an opening, but is composed of several planes. The flanking human-headed creatures that form the jambs of the opening project beyond short adjacent wall surfaces. The main surface of the façade projects again in front of these and the winged beasts by means of short walls set at right angles. The whole design is one of considerable decorative richness quite apart from any carving of the surfaces.

Before and behind the Assyrian hall is the rest of the collection, a large part of which has been assembled in the last decade, although some of the objects have been in the Museum since the 1870s. Inevitably the collection reflects some of the interests and fashions of archaeology.

Fig. 1. Cast bronze finial. From Luristan, Iran, about 800 B.C. Height 3 3/4 inches
Gift of Mrs. Paul Moore, 1936
Fig. 2. Bronze sphinx. The flamelike pattern on the hind legs was very common at the time and appears on some ivories from Ziwiye, Hama, and Nimrud. Syrian, ix-viii century B.C. Height 5 3/4 inches Rogers Fund, 1953

and of artistic taste during the period of its formation. Firstly there is, as the Assyrian doorway and court clearly show, the reflection of the original interest in Assyrian art that a century ago formed a principal starting point for the study of the art of the ancient Near East.

The clay tablets remind us of the early fascination with the problem of reading Akkadian cuneiform and the later search backwards in time to the yet earlier Sumerian art and language. These are now represented in some degree by a collection of artifacts of various kinds: sculptures, earthenware, plaques, seals, and tablets, of which the culminating work of art undoubtedly is the statue of the famous Neo-Sumerian ruler, Gudea of Lagash. These early beginnings of Mesopotamian art are described elsewhere in this Bulletin by Vaughn E. Crawford.

After a period when intensive work was done in the field and in the study, and much information was gleaned on these early eras, interest reverted once more to the Assyrian and related civilizations of the first millennium B.C. This was spurred by some finds by the British School of Archaeology, under the able direction of Professor Max E. L. Mallowan; it was still further stimulated by excavations in Russian Armenia, where the rivals of the Assyrians, the Urartaeans, lived, and by remarkable finds in northwestern Iran in the land of the Manneans. Objects made by all of these ancient peoples are now in the Metropolitan Museum, although some are rather sparsely represented.

Since 1930 when Iran was opened to archaeological work by countries other than France, there has been much activity there and a vast mass of ancient remains has been discovered. Unfortunately but a small percentage was unearthed under properly controlled supervision. The result has been much needless confusion despite the often exceedingly high intrinsic value of the finds. A number of these objects with problems of dating and true provenance are now in the Museum and are valuable additions to our ancient works of art. However, there have been some very proper and orderly excavations by French and American expeditions; from these too we have gained, either by exchanges with the Teheran Museum or, more recently, by participation in actual excavations such as those by the University Museum in Philadelphia.

One of the most fascinating groups collected during the last thirty years is of those ancient Persian bronzes usually known comprehensively but often incorrectly as Luristan bronzes. Very

Fig. 3. Openwork ivory panel with carved back. Phoenician style, from Fort Shalmaneser, Nimrud, second half of viii century B.C. Height 4 3/4 inches Rogers Fund, 1958
few of them were unearthed with any real object but that of financial gain. The genuine antiquities have been diluted with recastings, false assemblies of various original parts, and so on. The real bronzes, however, remain a source of fascination. They appeal to that present-day taste which to no small extent has fled away from the representation of natural forms, more especially those of complex subtlety such as the human figure, and prefers an exaggerated simplicity, emphasis on certain characteristics, and the development of patterns in which natural forms, if present, are but the starting point. All these features are obviously present both in these ancient bronzes from Iran and in much other Near Eastern art. So close is this gearing of taste today to that of a very remote yesterday that one is faced with the paradoxical situation of seeing in some recently found objects, of a type hitherto unknown, characteristics which might reasonably be considered to have influenced the work of a modern artist. The pottery zebu of Figure 19 is such an instance.

But no matter what the fluctuations of archaeological interest or activity or the material available in the market, the aim of the collection is to present a reasonably complete indication of the art of the past, and in doing so to acquire certain masterpieces which one hopes will outlive all temporary fashions and styles.

Earlier Bulletin articles on the Museum’s collection of ancient Near Eastern art are: “The Assyrians in the Last Hundred Years,” by Edith Porada (Summer 1943); “The Art of the Ancient Near East” (March 1949); “Some New Contacts with Nimrud and Assyria” (April 1952), and “Assyrian and Persian Art” (March 1955), all by Charles K. Wilkinson. See also Twenty-five Years of Mesopotamian Discovery, by M. E. L. Mallowan, London, 1956.

**Fig. 4. Gold ornament, once inlaid. Scythian, from Ziiwiyeh, Iran, vii century B.C. Length 5 3/4 inches** Purchase, 1958