More than four thousand years after their creation by Sumerian artists, a number of remarkable works of art made from stone, shell, and metal happily enhance our collections from the ancient Near East. Although reaching far back into antiquity, they demonstrate the lively imaginations and the skilled hands of craftsmen living in the third millennium B.C. in Sumer, now southern Iraq.

Among relatively recent acquisitions are pieces of major importance cut in stone and cast in metal. In stone there are a very old illustrated legal document and a statue of Gudea seated; in metal an early masterpiece, the superb realistic figure of a burden bearer, and a later more stylized statuette supposedly of a Sumerian king carrying on his head a basket of mortar for temple construction.

Finally, lest minor works of art be forgotten, a pair of small engraved objects, one in shell which perhaps served as a handle decoration, and the other a seated image incised on an alabaster inlay, deserve our attention. All six pieces are representative of the creations by both mind and hand of Sumerian artists of long ago.

A stone stela from the early third millennium is noteworthy both for its reliefs and for its extensive inscription. The text describes what the figures illustrate. A clear interpretation of what is written, however, is as difficult as the reliefs are crude, because of the formative stage of the Sumerian language at the early date—about 2850 B.C.—when the inscription was cut. At that time the order in which the signs were to be read was frequently not the arrangement in which they were written. Furthermore, certain grammatical elements in the form of prefixes, infixes, and suffixes which are decisive for a more precise understanding of the text either had not appeared or were only beginning to appear in the written language. A lengthy and detailed study of the limited number of comparative documents, most of which are later than the inscription of this piece, would be necessary to achieve clarity in the interpretation of this text. It is readily apparent, therefore, that only a provisional outline of the contents of the document can now be given. For a tentative analysis the writer is deeply indebted to Professor Thorkild Jacobsen of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. With this explanation of the difficulty, and with this acknowledgment to Professor Jacobsen, I shall suggest an interpretation of the inscription and reliefs of the stela. First, though, it is well to note that each actor in the reliefs bears either on or near his likeness his name and/or title and relationship to other persons either present or absent from the scene. Since the correct readings of the personal names is problematic, only the principal figure and the scribe who wrote the inscription are designated by proper names.

A certain official, Ushum-gal (Figure 5a), standing before the model of a building, has bequeathed to certain legatees property consisting of land, animals, and a dwelling. The house illustrated is one which Ushum-gal has built for his priestess daughter, who stands behind the facade of the structure (Figure 5b) ready to receive her father as a guest. In her right hand she holds a narrow-necked jar from which she is preparing to pour a drink for her father. He has either already been given a cup, which he clutches against his breast with his left wrist, or has thoughtfully brought it with him. At his daughter’s feet is a container which holds either food or drink.

Behind Ushum-gal’s daughter waits a second lady (Figure 5c) to whom a legacy has been given. Back of Ushum-gal himself stands an official (Figure 5d) whose duty it may well be to legalize the transfer of property not only to the two women depicted but also to the other two gentlemen (Figure 5d) whose actual relationship to
Ushum-gal is unknown, but who are also recipients of bequests in the transaction represented.

The stela, therefore, is an illustrated legal document nearly five thousand years old, recording the transfer of property, both live and real, by Ushum-gal to his priestess daughter and to three other legatees.

The writing of the inscription is accredited to En-hegal-dim whose name appears on the bottom of the stone.

Southern Iraq is the only logical choice for the provenance of the stela, and the city of Umma in that region is a possible place of origin within that area because of the mention in the text of Shara (?) who was a patron goddess of that metropolis.

A cast copper figure fifteen inches tall, showing a man naked except for a double rope girdle about his waist and bearing a burden on his head, offers a striking example of both Sumerian art and metallurgy. Our statuette, cast by cire-perdue, was produced about 2700 B.C. It is 95 percent copper, less than 5 percent iron, and less than 1 percent arsenic.
The sculptor, even at such an early date, has portrayed with amazing effectiveness the well-proportioned figure of an athlete bearing a heavy load on his head. To appreciate fully the artist’s achievement, one must view the piece from the side where one really feels that the erect carriage of the figure, the bent arms with clenched fists, and the slightly flexed legs convey the idea of balancing a heavy burden. Disappointing only in the physique of the figure in profile is the thin, flat chest. When viewed from the front, however, the statuette shows a pair of wide, strong shoulders which contradict the weak chest.

The head, shaped like an egg, presents prominent eyebrows, large cowrie-shell-like eyes, a great nose, round cheeks, a straight mouth, and a firm chin. Contrary to the usual practice, the eyes are cast as a part of the figure rather than being inlaid.

What was the purpose of the figure? What is the burden that it carries? Comparable figures from the excavations of the Oriental Institute at Khafajeh and Tell Agrab in the Diyala region were certainly used as stands and supports. Each of a pair of opposed wrestlers to which our figure is most alike in its striking vitality balances a vase on his head. These wrestlers have been described as a copper offering stand. The thin
Fig. 6. Cast copper statuette. Sumerian, about 2700 B.C. Height 15 inches
Dick Fund, 1955
bases which support both our piece and the pair of wrestlers suggest that the objects were not meant to stand alone but were rather fastened in place in order to ensure their upright positions.

Similar figures in reliefs carrying loads on their heads are said to bear loaves of bread. To this suggestion, however, there are a number of objections, especially since our figure stands alone and without context. First, all native bread produced today in the region from which our statuette came is round in shape. Since the ovens used now are the same type as those employed five thousand years ago, it is highly probable that the bread was thin and round then as well as now. Second, while round loaves might appear square on a relief, the burden of our figure is indubitably square in shape. Third, even if our statuette bore twenty thin square pieces of bread, they would not be heavy enough to warrant the flexed legs and the bent arms with clenched fists to enable the bearer to balance his load. No, the burden must be something much heavier. While the cube reminds one of a filled box, a round woven basket would be the more usual container in an area where wood was scarce and where woven baskets were common.

May it not be that the figure carries building bricks for temple construction? The objection at once arises that in Early Dynastic times (about 3000-2350 B.C.) when our piece was made plano-convex bricks were employed, not flat materials such as one observes on our figure’s head. While this objection is valid, it can be demonstrated beyond question that in the later foundation boxes of Ur III (about 2100 B.C.) a stone model of a long outmoded plano-convex brick was included with the foundation figurines instead of the then commonly used flat square brick measuring twelve by twelve by three inches.

May not the “bricks” being carried by our bearer be a throwback to the riemchen of a still earlier period as found at Warka—the riemchen being a brick square in section and approximately three times the measure of that section in length? If so, our figure, probably a priest or leader, might be carrying bricks for temple construction as an act of humility to his god, just as King Shulgi carried mortar in a basket for the same purpose several hundred years later. The statuette could be a foundation figurine, and the burden, bricks. No matter what its use, our statuette is nevertheless the worthy product of a master sculptor and metallurgist.

Two small engraved pieces, the one in shell and the other in alabaster, come from the excavations at Nippur. While these two are of no great importance in themselves, they illustrate well the interesting small pieces which accompanied the larger and more sophisticated works of art. The one made of shell depicts a dancer; the other, of alabaster, a seated drinking man. Although both figures are incised with crude simple lines, the contrast in the subjects could hardly be greater. The dancing man is animated to the extreme, with both feet off the ground, arms in the air, and a tuft of hair that stands almost straight up, while the seated counterpart holding a drinking cup in one hand and a fly whisk in the other could scarcely be more sedate.

Both pieces come from the Inanna temple area at Nippur, but each was found in a disturbed area and not in the Early Dynastic levels in which it properly belonged.

The most striking discoveries at Nippur during
The seasons of 1955-1956 and 1957-1958 have been the foundation deposits of Ur-Nammu, the first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur (about 2100 B.C.), and of his son and successor, Shulgi. To date, three Ur-Nammu and seven Shulgi foundation boxes have been found. All ten boxes were almost identical in construction. Each one was made of big baked bricks approximately twelve inches square and three inches thick. The mortar was bitumen. The length of the box was three bricks, the width two and one-half bricks, and the depth seven courses. The interior opening was one brick in length, one-half brick in width, and six courses deep. When a box was closed a reed mat was placed over the opening at the top, hot bitumen was spread over the mat, and three capping bricks were put into place. The lower side of the capping bricks usually bore the brick stamp inscription of the king in question.

The boxes were discovered beneath the foundations of the structures to which they were related. The subfoundations of corners and of towers either on exterior gates or interior doorways in courtyards proved to be particularly favorable locations for boxes.

The principal object in each box was a cast copper figurine about thirteen inches high. The Ur-Nammu figurines were fully modeled, having a skirt, feet, and base. The Shulgis were tapered from the waist down to a point. Each figurine was modeled and cast separately. None was identical with any other. Originally each statuette was wrapped—not dressed—in cloth, of which vestiges of the imprint still remain. Together with a figurine in each box was a plano-convex brick model, included probably because it represented the type though not the material of the building bricks used for temple construction in earlier times. The model bricks in the Ur-Nammu boxes bore the same inscription as the capping bricks and as the skirt of the cast copper figure itself. The model bricks and figur-
ines in the Shulgi boxes were uninscribed. Also among the contents of a box were frit beads, stone chips, mostly carnelian and agate, and disintegrated bits of wood. In fact, in one of the Shulgi boxes the wood was well enough preserved to show that the box had once contained a wooden statuette similar to the one cast in copper.

The box containing our figurine (Figure 9) and model brick was the first of the ten boxes to be found. The statuette presumably represents King Shulgi bearing on his head a basket of mortar for the construction of the new temple, an act of humility before Inanna, the goddess of love and war, to whom the temple was dedicated.

The seated figure of Gudea, a late third millennium governor of Lagash, is a superb example of Neo-Sumerian sculpture. Although found in southern Iraq about thirty-five years ago, the statue was in private possession in France until 1959. The piece is the only complete Gudea in this country and, in fact, one of the few complete Gudea figures anywhere. Almost all Gudea statues—and ours is no exception—were decapitated in antiquity, perhaps by a conqueror of Lagash. Few of the heads and bodies severed so long ago have been reunited in modern times. Fortunately our piece is one where the fit between the head and the body makes it certain that the two parts were originally one.

Our Gudea sits sedately on a low chair. The statue, intended to remain in the temple to represent Gudea continually in the presence of his god, conveys a sense of dutiful piety. The schematic turban, the carefully draped garment, the unnaturally clasped hands with their exaggeratedly long fingers, the forward gaze of steady eyes, and the erect carriage all contribute to the feeling of conscious devotion. In contradiction to the careful neatness of the figure and the sensitive modeling of the face, the mouth, the firm chin, and the direct attachment of the head to the shoulders without neck suggest without equivocation that Gudea was a strong governor capable of dealing with political emergencies as well as with priestly piety.

The Louvre holds as one of the finest of its unrivaled wealth of Gudea statues a less perfectly preserved twin to our own figure. Both were perhaps cut from the same block of black diorite and differ only three-eighths of an inch in height. Both have lengthy inscriptions which vary only in a slightly altered arrangement of the lines, a small change in the form of an unidentified sign unique to these two statues, and in the verb form employed in the names of the pieces.

Most Gudea statues have their own peculiar name. Our figure is inscribed “It is of Gudea, the man who built the temple: may it make his life long.” While the length of Gudea’s earthly life is unknown, his request at least with regard to the continued preservation of his likeness has been amply granted.

I. H. Frankfort, More Sculpture from the Diyala Region, pls. 54-57, 95.
2. ibid., The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient, pl. 20 (C).
3. Ibid., p. 32 and pl. 33 (A).
5. V. E. Crawford, Archaeology, Vol. 12, No. 2 (cover) and p. 78.

Fig. 11. Gold doe. Sumerian, about 2500 B.C. Length 1 3/4 inches Rogers Fund, 1954