The First Millennium B.C.

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During the last decade there has been a noticeable rekindling of interest in Near Eastern art of the first millennium before our era. There are several contributory causes of the renewed attention to this particular period. One is that excavations were recommenced at Nimrud, the ancient Assyrian city of Kalhu where Sir Austen Henry Layard made his sensational finds just over a century ago. Although he and those who succeeded him in these early efforts recovered a vast amount of material and contributed a great deal to our knowledge, many problems were unrealized or left unsolved. Excavations on this site were recommenced in 1949 by the British School of Archaeology in Iraq, and this new enterprise has greatly increased our historical and artistic knowledge. The finds were intrinsically important, but they also happened to integrate with discoveries made in other lands, more especially in Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Russian Armenia. Links between Assyria and the peripheral powers were seen and recognized in the finds of Gordion in Phrygia, Ziwiye and Hasanlu in the land of the Manneans.

The discovery of sensational numbers of ivory carvings from various places at Nimrud, such as the Palace of Ashurnasirpal, the Burned Palace, and a storeroom in Fort Shalmaneser, focused a good deal of attention on where and by whom they were made, for only a minority could be considered purely Assyrian. This has provided still more material since Richard D. Barnett of the British Museum did so much in revising the original suggestions made in the last century. The three major styles he established—Phoenician, Syrian, and Assyrian—still stand. New artistic forms are to be observed in the decoration of recently discovered ivory plaques which are interesting in that they reveal glimpses not just of aesthetic taste but also of religious beliefs. An example is to be seen in Figure 21, where the sun disk embodies a female deity who holds a budding plant in each outstretched hand. Other novelties are purely decorative ones, such as the patterns on the ivory chair back which, though less richly decorated than most of the others discovered in the storage chambers of Fort Shalmaneser, displays a delicate type of ornament not hitherto known in the design of furniture.

Convincing proof was obtained that our own appreciation of the nature of the surface of ivory was not shared by the ancient craftsmen who fashioned it. Many of these ivory plaques had been covered with gold foil, which in our eyes renders them far less attractive, making them dazzlingly vulgar rather than exquisitely refined. Perhaps this should not come as a total surprise, for a study even of those found by Layard reveals that the surface was often cut into cloisons to be filled with bright colors. One realizes from this that one of the real attractions of ivory for the craftsman who carved it was that its nature enabled him to make clean cuts and recesses that could be separated by the merest wafer of a division between them. It would seem that ivory was chosen for the finest decorative carving on the grounds that it was the best medium, just as in our era pearwood was the preferred material for the making of plank woodcuts.

It is perhaps fortunate that during these past few years ivory carvings of the first millennium have appeared on the market from Near Eastern sites other than Nimrud. Some of these were probably excavated many years ago, such as a group certainly from Arslan Tash in northern...
Fig. 22. Ivory cow and calf in high relief. Phoenician style, from Arslan Tash, Syria, 19th century B.C. Height 2 3/8 inches Fletcher Fund, 1957

Fig. 23. Ivory sphinx. Although Egyptian influence is strong, the tilt of the crown and the nature of the skirt indicate its place of origin. Phoenician style, from Arslan Tash, Syria, 19th century B.C. Height 4 3/4 inches Fletcher Fund, 1957
Fig. 24. Openwork ivory panel. Phoenician style, from Arslan Tash, Syria, second half of 19th century B.C. Height 5 inches Fletcher Fund, 1957

Fig. 25. Ivory lioness, an ornament probably fastened into a metal backing to serve as a furniture decoration. Reputedly from Khorsabad, late 19th century B.C. Height 3 3/4 inches Fletcher Fund, 1958
Ivory chair back. The filling between the ivory billets at the top is not known, but was undoubtedly of a contrasting color. Phoenician style, from Fort Shalmaneser, Nimrud, second half of VIII century B.C. Height 13 3/4 inches Rogers Fund, 1959

Syria, a type known to us from the magnificent collection in the Louvre, found in 1928. These are Phoenician in style; others reputedly from ancient excavations at Khorsabad are particularly interesting in that they are for the most part purely Assyrian, unlike those previously published. The Museum was fortunate enough to acquire a group of these that includes several of the highest artistic quality, although they all bear the destructive marks of time. They draw attention to the fact that despite their prowess in war the Assyrians were also sensible of the finer arts.

The problem of style is rendered still more complicated by another large group of ivory carvings that was found in the ruthless pillage of the rich archaeological site at Ziwiyeh in Kurdistan, in 1947, to which some reference was made in an article in the Bulletin for March 1955. The Museum’s small collection has since been reinforced with generous loans of privately owned pieces from the same hoard by Alastair Bradley Martin, Werner Abegg, and some anonymous lenders. Here in these ivories were new subjects and also old subjects treated in a different way. For the most part they could be recognized as not being part of any group found elsewhere. On the other hand, except for a very few (and they mostly bone), they could not be considered a purely local product. Much as the archaeologist may desire more material, he finds that when he has it, it does not always solve his problems.

The fascinating interplay of style and fashion in the art of various lands is further to be seen in other things than in ivory carving of the first millennium. It can well be studied in certain drinking cups of this period and the vessels used to fill them, such as the one in Figure 33. This is especially true of those formed in the shape of animal heads or ending in foreparts of natural or fantastic creatures. Once more Assyria, Iran, Armenia, Turkey, and in this instance Greece, are all involved. The development and the spread of this style—so fashionable at this time—from one country to another, with the various modifi-
Fig. 27. Carved ivory ornament. The eyes, eyebrows, and wings were once inlaid in color. Ziwiyeh, Iran, viii century B.C. Height 2½ inches Fletcher Fund, 1951

Fig. 28. Ivory lion, probably a decorative ornament for furniture. Reputedly from Khorsabad, although the stockiness of the lion suggests North Syrian workmanship during Assyrian rule, about 710 B.C. Height 2½ inches Fletcher Fund, 1958

cations in design due to some extent to the customs ingrained in different peoples, forms in itself a most intricate pattern. There are two main types, one in which the animal forms the lower end of a cylindrical container, and the other where the head or forepart of an animal is at right angles to the container, there being some intermediate ones which are just curved. The first and more simple form was highly developed in the reign of Sargon II of Assyria (721-705 B.C.) and was common in Iran a little later. They were used as both cups and containers and sometimes had ropelike handles. Some peoples preferred "to turn down the empty glass" and inverted their drinking vessels when not using them, whereas others liked to stand them upright and adapted them so that they could do so. The Greeks in particular, who were much influenced by Oriental fashions in drinking vessels, favored long looped handles. It soon becomes apparent that the different usages and customs affected the design. All these vessels were made for use, and many of them are of a high order of craftsmanship, a few superb. The Near Eastern collection now has a considerable group of them, some of glazed and unglazed earthenware, others of stone, of silver, and, in direct line of development a century or so later, of gold. They are well worthy of study both individually and by comparison. As these forms common in Assyria and Iran are reflected and paralleled in Greece and Egypt too, this study can be fruitfully pursued in
Fig. 29. Gold handle or finial in the shape of a ram's head. The horns and ears were made separately. Achaemenian, v century B.C. Length 3 inches
Fletcher Fund, 1958

Fig. 30. Detail of the ram's head, showing the extreme fineness of the work. Encircling the rim are five two-stranded gold wires, and each tiny ball between them is surrounded by twisted wire.

Fig. 31 (left). Small cup or container in the shape of a boar's head. Reputedly from Azerbaijan, probably about VI century B.C. Length 4 1/2 inches
Dick Fund, 1957

Fig. 32 (opposite). Dish made of two partially gilded silver shells. Sasanian, from Iran, about 400 A.D. Length 9 1/4 inches
Fletcher Fund, 1959

other parts of the Museum. Drinking may be considered by some, in theory at least, an art, but there can be no question that the vessels used for it are often themselves very fine examples of man's skill and art.

Persian bronzework is just as impressive as that in precious metals, as a life-size ibex of the Achaemenid period, with great curving horns, bears witness: a masterpiece of skilled craftsmanship as well as of art in our modern sense of the word. Here again examples of this skill are shown against a background of earlier accomplishment in both copper and bronze. Some indication of earlier work has been given by Prudence Oliver in her article on the art of the second millennium B.C. The votive pins, harness trappings, weapons, and other furnishings of warfare from Luristan display an astonishing variety of design that appeals to us in many and various ways. They range from the fantastic to the prosaic, from complex assemblies of archa-
istic forms to simply treated realistic creatures. It is gradually becoming possible to arrange in a more rational way this mass of material that for so long presented so many problems. Some of the pieces can now be assigned to more definite dates and some to more precise places as well. The excavations at Hasanlu of the University Museum, Philadelphia, with which the Metropolitan Museum has recently been co-operating, are casting light on a great deal of material that is as fascinating as it has been obscure.

The later phases of the art of the Near East before the spread of Islam in that area and in so much else of the world are also represented, and it is possible to see, though with but few examples, the influence of Greek art and then the unstable balance of realism and stylization that continued through Parthian, Palmyrene, and Sasanian art, which ended in the seventh century of our era. As to the art of this last period, the Museum has the advantage of having excavated both at Ctesiphon, in conjunction with the German State Museum, and then on its own account at Kasr-i-abu Nasr, the Sasanian site of the city of Shiraz. As a result of this it is possible to study in the Museum architectural details, true Sasanian pottery, and the glyptic art of the period. A small collection of works of art in more precious materials, consisting of Museum purchases together with gifts and loans from public-spirited friends, enables us to show a few representative pieces of this last flowering of Near Eastern art, still so full of the influences of the preceding millennium, before it was transformed into the art of Islam. Of this art, which was to produce its own glory during the course of the centuries, a few recently acquired examples are illustrated as recent acquisitions in the final section of this Bulletin.

Fig. 33. Glazed earthenware vessel in the shape of a gazelle's head, probably used to fill drinking cups. Ziwiyeh, Iran, VII century B.C. Length 11 ¾ inches Rogers Fund, 1956