Mesopotamian Art
First term 1959

Civilization (‘urban society’), as I said last Thursday, began somewhat earlier in Ancient Mesopotamia than in Egypt. Let us begin by looking at a map of the region. The first settlers in Mesopotamia, the land of the two rivers, appear to have come from the Persian Highlands to the east, those who settled in the marshlands of the Tigris-Euphrates delta developed an urban economy which was at all times more decentralized than Egypt’s—the local towns always retaining a large measure of autonomy in their own affairs. These first settlers were united by a common culture as expressed in the buildings and sculpture, but not by a common language: for Sumerian was spoken in [south Sumer] and Akkadian, a Semitic language in the north. To the west of the Mesopotamia is the Arabian desert, to the north the plains of Syria, and to the north and north-east the Armenian and the Persian Highlands. Note the positions of Al-Ubaid, Ur, Eridu and Larsa situated in southern Mesopotamia, the ancient Sumer. They were at that time quite close to the shores of the Persian Gulf—for the delta of the river has been built up considerably in the past 5,000 years. To the north of Sumer, was Akkad, with such towns as Khafaje, Tell Asmar, Babylon and Tell Agrab. And further to the north were Tel Halaf, Tel Brak, Nineveh, Assur, Tepe Gawra and Samara. Mari was in the extreme west of the cultural area, Susa in the extreme East. The earliest settlement in the region occurred in the north. At Hassuna, Ninevah, and Samara some very fine Neolithic painted pottery has been found. Then later, settlement began in the alluvial south. The plain lacked good timber and stone, but the settlers appear to have brought with them the technique of manufacturing sun-dried bricks.

The transition from Neolithic barbarianism to an urban civilization took place between 3,500BC and 3,000BC during the 500 years known as the protoliterate period, that is, the period prior to the development of a written script.

Let us begin, by looking briefly at the development of architecture in ancient Mesopotamia. As in Egypt, each city possessed its own deity, worshipped by the citizens as their guardian, in a shrine which was usually built within the city. The temples were constructed with mud-dried brick. One of the earliest temples excavated is that at Tepe Gawra in the north.* The temples were buttressed to strengthen the brick walls especially where they held the rafters to the roof and took its weight. Already there is a tendency to separate the central shrine from other parts by means of an entrance porch and subsidiary offices. Our next slide of Temple VII at Abu Sharein [Eridu] reveals the buttressing of external walls become much more regular.* A sense of balance and order appears. Note too the forward thrust of the corner bastions. This affords a close parallel with early temple construction in Egypt. Now the central shrine is surrounded by subsidiary offices, an altar to the civic deity being placed at one end, and an offering table at the other. The temple was entered by means of steps
which led up to the platform on which the temple was built, and entered by means of a
door in the middle of the long axis. As time passed the platform on which the temples
were built increased in size to become a ziggurat or artificial mountain. In
Mesopotamia the mountain became an important religious symbol: it produced the
rain and the vegetation, from it sprang all forms of life, the great mother-goddess was
known as the Lady of the Mountain. In our next slide we see the ziggurat of the White
Temple of Ur [modern Warka, ancient Erech].* Ramps led to the temple top, the plan
of which is rather similar to that at Abu Sharrein [Eridu]; but here the platform and
ramp have greatly increased in size. In later times, when the power of kings and
administrators had grown, as in Akkadian and Neo-Sumerian times, the temple was
often associated with the palace, the religious, with the administrative centre. In the
Neo-Sumerian temple at Tell Asmar. [Gimilsin Temple] for example,* the temple
retains the traditional features: central shrine, altar, niche for the god and an offering
table. But attached is a palace built around two open courtyards. There is a throne
room for the reception of foreign ambassadors, a private entrance to the temple, and
long guard room, which made any attempt to force an entrance very difficult. In our
next slide we have a reconstruction of the temple of Ishtar at [modern] Ishcali built
somewhat later during the Isin-Larsa period. Not that the temple is built in the city
upon raised platform, and that a mass of offices have been built around two courtyards.
The worshipper would have to enter between the two great bastions of the outer gate
proceed through the larger courtyard ad thence into the temple of the goddess in the
extreme right corner.

The plan of Sargon’s Temple at Khorsabad. Assyria, 706B.C.
City-Mile square. Citadel near one corner near wall
Planners aimed at regularity—non-papyrus, imperfect methods of surveying.
courtyard. Public meeting place. Ramp to the Palace. Use of chariots to
guard walls. Temples Ziggurat.

These Mesopotamian palaces undoubtedly exercised an influence upon palace
construction on Minoan Crete notably at Knossos and Mallia where palaces were
being constructed from about the year 2000B.C. We have the same great mass of
rooms about a central courtyard, within which shrines were also incorporated, the use
of orthostats or great stone slabs to protect the lower surfaces of walls, the breaking of
walls by buttresses and half-columns, and the rather empirical methods of survey,
whereby one room was added to another—both Mesopotamia and Cretan places lack
the geometrical precision of the Egyptian temple.

Before leaving this brief survey of Mesopotamian architecture, let us look at one
element of a private house at Ur, dating to the Isin-Larsa Period. It has many features
in common with the temples, but on a smaller scale. First it is built around a central
courtyard of baked bricks, surrounded by a single row of rooms, one of which served
as an entrance porch, another as a stair well which led to a balcony which surrounded
the courtyard at first floor level and gave access to the rooms above. Sometimes a room was set aside as a house chapel, and this was distinguished from other rooms by a mud brick altar, decorated with buttresses and recesses [...] 

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[...] built around two open courtyards. There is a throne room for receiving foreign ambassadors and the like, a private entrance to the temple, and long guard rooms, which would make any attempt to force an entrance on the part of enemies, extremely difficult. Our next slide shows a reconstructed view of another temple at Ischali, which reveals a similar plan. The temple complex at one end, the palace at the other.

I turn back now to a piece of Mesopotamian sculpture of the protoliterate period. It is an alabaster vase,* found in a temple, and probably used in a sacred festival. A word first about its iconographical features. The Mesopotamians worshipped rural gods, their great festivals celebrated important events in the farmer’s calendar—and the greatest festival was the spring festival celebrating the revival of nature. It is believed that the vase depicts graphically this spring festival. The three registers are best read from bottom to top. The lowest contains plants (ears of barley and date palms), and animals: these were symbols of the mother-goddess. In the middle register men bring gifts to the goddess. And in the top register we see the Goddess herself receiving a basket of fruit. Behind her gifts are piled up and they include some vases like this one: which suggests its purpose. Beneath we have a stone trough, probably used to water the animals brought to sacrifice. They are disposed, heraldically, about a central pen, from which two young lambs are leaping forth to meet the returning herd. Above the pen we see reed bundles, and the same reed bundles behind the goddess on the vase: these are her naming symbol.

Turning to the style of the vase* [cf Narmer Palette] we may note the shallow but effective cutting of the relief. The laws of frontality, so common to Egyptian art, are for the most part observed, but the conventions are not so faithfully maintained, note the shoulders for example. Note, too, the fine spatial relationship of the three registers, growing in width with the upward swell of the vase, and the rhythmical movement of the procession of men and animals around the vase—such processions are a feature of Mesopotamian sculpture, and, later, influenced greatly the decorative art of Ancient Greece.* [Narmer Palette, 3,200BC]

This vase dates to the Early Protoliterate Period. When we turn to a stone bowl, in our next slide, belonging to the Late Protoliterate Period, we note a change both in style and iconography. The cutting is not shallow now but deep, the heads of the bull and the lion being almost in the round. Anatomical detail is no longer modeled but cut. And a new iconographical theme appears. The theme of combat—a lion is seen attacking a bull and the theme appears again often in later Mesopotamian sculpture.
So too does the naked hero, whom we meet in our next slide on this cup [Tell Agrab]. He wears a rope girdle, mountaineers shoes turned up at the toes, and he holds two lions up by the rump. He has been identified as Gilgamesh, the hero of a Babylonian epic. But there is no direct evidence that this is so.

Our next slide is a stone head of the **Protoliterate period** and provides some indication of the techniques employed by the Mesopotamian sculptor. It is really a stone face and was probably attached to a wooden statue, since it has drill holes near the ears. The eyes were probably inlaid with a precious stone such as lapis-lazuli, or obsidian. It has been suggested that the dead was probably overlaid with copper or gold fastened with metal studs. It is a somber face, sensitively modeled, either of a goddess or a mortal.

But monstrous, demonic gods, such as this Protoliterate demon, in our next slide, are also common to Mesopotamian sculpture. And here too stone is incrusted with pellet of lapis-lazuli, in the mane and the tail. Such inlay work is a feature of Mesopotamian sculpture.

I want to turn now to some pieces of sculpture from the **Early Dynastic period**, which extends from 3,000B.C. to 2,340, and corresponds in part, therefore, to the Old Kingdom of Egypt. This period saw, in many respects, the height of Sumerian civilization. A useful account of it—if we may turn to our indispensable Pelican’s once again, will be found in Sir Leonards Wooley’s *Ur of the Chaldees*.

In our next slide we see a group found in the Abu Temple at Tell Asmar. The god Abu is taller than his surrounding attendants, and the conception is formal and geometric, the body itself being reduced to geometrical shapes such as spheres, cones, and cylinders.* A detail of the head again reveals the precious stone inlay technique we have notice earlier and here is a priest in the same style.* This abstract style is succeeded at a later stage in the earlier dynastic period by a naturalistic style that is almost its opposite. Here is a Priest’s head from Khafaje. Note how the flat beak like wedge of the earlier style has been replaced by a carefully modeled mouth which is wrinkled up in a most complacent smile. A double chin adds to the impression of material well-being.* The same stylistic features are to be found in the statue of Abihil from Mari. Notice the bald head, the carefully groomed beard, the chubby folded hands, and the carefully rendered woolen kilt.

The Early Dynastic Period produced some remarkable sculpture in copper and gold. Here is the famous piece now in the British Museum which Sir Leonard Woolley named romantically, ‘The Ram Caught in the Thicket’.* Again we meet the combination of herbivorous animals and plants which symbolized the rural gods of fertility. It was used as a tripod to hold dishes containing offerings. Again the use of many materials. Shell and lapis-lazuli have been stuck into bitumen to make the billy
goat’s coat,* and the body consisting of a wooden core; there is stone inlay at the base, 
and the wood at the back is covered with gold foil. Early dynasty inlay work reached a 
high degree of skill, as upon this harp from Ur. Not the fine head of a Bull. Here is a 
detail of it, and in our net slide* we see some inlay on the soundbox of the harp. The 
scenes could well represent myths or perhaps familiar fables of the times. Here, a bear 
steadies a harp while an ass plays it, beneath him a small animal rattles a sistrum. 
Above them a lion and wolf are serving table. The wolf who just carved the meat and 
stuck the knife in his belt, brings in bear’s head, calf’s head, and a leg of mutton—the 
lion follows with the liquid refreshments. At the top is a scene very common in 
Sumerian art: the hero seeking to restrain two wild bulls—but it always reminds me of 
those embarrassing photographs taken on the beach during the summer holidays.

The Early Dynastic Period ended with the rise to power of Sargon of Akkad, his rise 
marked the increasing influence of the northern Semitic element in the Mesopotamian 
culture. He succeeded in centralizing the whole of the Tigris-Euphrates area under on 
king. It is perhaps not surprising therefore that under Sargon, as under the Pharaoh, 
the idea of kingship became politically important, and that portraits of the king 
evoked the same sensations of majesty, power, and fear, as those evoked by the 
portraits of the Old Kingdom Pharaohs. This very fine head of an Akkadian ruler—it 
may be Sargon himself—testifies to this new interest in the portrayal of kingship.* 
Here is a side view. [Head of Kephren Dyn. IV]

The power and majesty of the Akkadian kings is also portrayed for us in the Stele of 
Naramsin the grandson of Sargon, which we see in our next slide. Naramsin stands 
alone, far larger than his men. And unlike them he wears upon his head a pair of horns 
symbolizing divinity. He strides up the mountain, holding a bow in one hand, an 
arrow in the other, and a battle axe is tucked under his arm. Only the heavenly bodies 
are above him, and he spurns his defeated enemies with his foot.

The Akkadian kingdom was overthrown by wild hill tribes from Persia. During the 
state of anarchy* [600 years of anarchy followed, Neo-Sumerian, Isin-Larsa-Babylon] 
that followed, only one city, that of Lagash, seems to have escaped depredation and 
flourished. Our next slide shows us a statue of Gudea, a Governor of Lagash. The 
high technical achievements of the Akkadian period have been retained, but the 
impression received is now one of reflection and of piety. Gudea is seen as the good 
shepherd of his people, rather than as the imperial adventurer. This suggestion is 
reinforced by some of the texts of the time, which record how Gudea built temples to 
his Gods. Professor Frankfort has translated one as follows:

When, O Faithful shepherd Gudea, 
Thou shalt have started work for me, on Enninu my Royal abode, 
I will call up in heaven a humid wind. 
It shall bring thee abundance from on high
And the country shall spread its ands upon riches in thy time.
Prosperity shall accompany the laying of the foundation of thy house.
All the great fields will bear for thee;
Dykes and canals will swell for thee;
Where the high water is not want to rise
To high ground it will rise for thee.
Oil will be poured abundantly in Sumer in thy time,
Good weight of wool will be given in thy time.

Among the most interesting pieces of relief sculpture of these times are small clay reliefs of cult images that were used upon shrines—they represented civic and minor agricultural deities of various kinds. Our next slide shows a goddess, winged and taloned like a bird of prey. She is probably a goddess of death. The two owls symbolize her flight through the night, the double-headed lions, the ferocity with which she brings death to man. At the base is the scale pattern which symbolizes the sacred mountain which was such an important religious symbol in Mesopotamia.

Our next slide represents a state God Assur, which was found in the temple of Assur in the city of Assur. He is an earth deity, emerging from the mountain, here represented again by the scale pattern. Plants spring from his hips and his hands, and the goats feed upon the flowers. Two smaller deities carry flowing vases, signifying mountain [springs] […]

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[‘Assyria’]

Assyria rose to power in the north of Mesopotamia when the south was weak under the Kassite Kings. Under a series of able rulers she built up her power and widened her influence. In its early phases Assyrian art is closely connected with Mesopotamian art. Take this clay plaque of the state god of Assyria, the God Assur of the city of Assur, dating to …. His body and cap possess that scale pattern which we have already seen are emblems of an earth deity. Note the plants which spring from his hips and hands, and that goats feed upon the flowering plants. [Cf Façade of a Kassite temple from Warka] Here again are the flowering plants and herbivorous animals by which Mesopotamian gods manifested themselves to man. Two subsidiary gods flank the main god, and carry flowing vases. Not the wavy lines of water which run down their bodies. Such images of the god enabled the worshipper to meet the god in his epiphany face to face. As Assyrian art develops a notable change takes place. The gods as it were withdraw themselves from the world of man, and make their presence felt by signs and symbols. We have seen already n our study of the statues of Gudea, and in the ka statue of King Hor an expression of withdrawal, of meditation, of otherworldliness in the portrayal of men. Here we meet an expression in art of the
withdrawal of the gods into a non-material world. In this altar of an early Assyrian king for example,* the relief on the front of the altar depicts the very rite which was performed before it. On either side is the traditional rosette pattern. The king bearing a scepter is first shown as he approaches and then as he kneels before the altar, carved with the emblem of the God Nusku. The almost intimate meeting between king and god which was depicted on steles of the kind from the time of Gudea down to the time of Hammurabi is now considered no longer possible.

This distance between man and the gods is also rendered in the so-called broken obelisk.* Here vassals are paying homage to the king, and two hands emerge from the cloud above (c. 1110). A somewhat similar manifestation of a withdrawal of the god is also apparent at one stage in the history of Egyptian art. During the reign of the heretical king Amenhhotep IV (or Ikaton), the worship of the sun disk is also shown with the emblems of loving hands stretching from the heavens.

Two themes become standard motifs quite early in Assyrian religious art: the sacred tree and the crested griffin.* We may study the first of these themes, the sacred tree, in a wall painting from the Palace of an early Assyrian king. It is placed between two heraldically disposed rams. Notice that the tree is no longer naturalistic as it was in or early Sumerian slide of the ram caught in a thicket: it is highly artificial and decorative. Such palmette designs were carried over by the agency largely of the Phoenicians into Greek Art, and these light and delicate animals have much in common with Greek orientalising pottery of the seventh century. Note the traditional rosette pattern and the way the decorative tree has already taken on the form of a column with the ionic spiraliform capital.

The griffin also appears early. Here we see it, in our next slide, in a relief of the ninth century. Here are winged griffins with the heads of vultures and the bodies of men, heraldically disposed about a sacred tree, which they are sprinkling with sacred water.

So much for the sacred art of Assyria. The secular art was remarkably different. Its imagery is remarkably realistic, rather than symbolic. Northern Mesopotamia is a region without natural boundaries. The foothills and mountainous regions of the north and east provided strongholds from which hill tribes made continual raids into the plain. To the north-west there was always the danger of invasion from Asia Minor. The Assyrians solved their defence problem by a number of remarkable developments in the art of warfare. The Hyksos had introduced the chariot but the Assyrians perfected its use, they also developed a standing army, and a national militia-and they perfected the art of archery. The Assyrian army became an highly efficient fighting machine, adaptable for siege operations, mountain warfare, or pitched battles on the plane.
Assyrian palaces were decorated with long friezes of painted reliefs which presented in the greatest detail the never-ending military campaigns undertaken by the rulers. It is essentially a narrative art which recorded the daily experience of the Assyrian soldier, glorified the military might of the king, and struck fear into ambassadors and foreign legations.

It is an art intended to be read in detail. In out next slide* we see the king (Assunasirpae II) bending his bow, supported by his shield bearer. Note the use of repetition and regression to suggest space. Elsewhere Assyrian soldiers are dispatching the enemy, and the winged god Assur with his bow encourages the arm from the clouds. [“The Assyrian came down like the wolf on the fold, / And his cohorts were gleaming in purple and gold.”]

This Assyrian relief sculpture is a highly original form of art: it is concerned with the portrayal of actual historical events, it is almost entirely secular, concerned with the glorification of the state, it is a narrative art concerned with the portrayal of specific events both in place and time. Not until Roman times do we see anything quite like it again.*

In those short intervals when the Assyrians were not amusing themselves killing their enemies they amused themselves by killing their caged animals. In our next slide* we see lions released from a wooden cage. The king shoots at the approaching beast. If he does not kill it his attendants dispatch it with club and spear. Here we see an animal in three positions: emerging, advancing, and springing.

Toward the end, in late Assyrian art, the Assyrian carvers achieved some masterpieces in the observation of animals. During the reign of Assurbanipal on the eve of the overthrow of Assyria by the Persians, Assyrian sculptors reveal an unusual capacity to render the expressions and feeling of animals. Take this illustration of mastiffs* hunting wild asses for instance. We see the wide nostrils and the ears drawn back in terror as one animal is overtaken by the dogs.

Even better known are those reliefs of dying lions. Here are reliefs of a dying lion and lioness. The arrows have paralysed the hind quarters of the lioness and she drags her back legs in pain. The lion is vomiting blood in the agony of death. T would be a mistake probably to read into these reliefs any expression of sympathy for the dying animals. What we do perhaps see is something that is, perhaps, closer to the essential nature of art, a deep sense of identification with the animals, an insight in feeling, into which moral values do not enter. This is sometimes called empathy.

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... rosette flower commonly met with in Mesopotamian decoration. A billy-goat rests it forepaws on the branches. Its coat made of separately cared pieces of shell and lapis lazuli. Originally the post at the back of the head was on the same level as the horns, providing a tripod on which to rest dishes containing offerings. In this combination of herbivore and flowering plant w met again a symbol of the great gods of natural fertility. This offering stand is one of the masterpieces in the Department of Pre-Historic Antiquities in the British Museum.

A variety of materials have also been used in making this bearded bull which figures upon a harp.* Note the inlaid work, the gold foil of the head, the inlaid eyes.

Our next slide shows the Harp as a whole. The sound box of these harps was often carefully decorated. In our next slide we see the scenes inlaid upon the narrow front edge of the sound box.

In the top scene we meet the hero again. Here he is grasping two bulls. It is an informal friendly little group, and they all wear the rather coy expression of people posing for a snapshot on the beach. But it is not possible to say just what this motif means, although it recurs so frequently in Mesopotamian art.

The other scenes, however, are quite specific. We see a lion and a wolf serving at table. The wolf has just carved the meat, and brings in boar’s head, calf’s head, and a leg of mutton. He has stuck the carving knife in his belt. The lion follows with the liquid refreshments. The jar is apparently bound up in wicker-work like a bottle of Chianti.

Music was played at meals in Sumeria, and in the next scene a bear steadies a harp being played by an ass. Below a small animal, either a fawn or a jerboa, rattles a sistrum. It is rather difficult to say whether the scenes depicted are mythological, whether they represent the performance of a ritual, or whether they illustrate fables.

But whatever their explicit intention, there is certainly, surely, an implicit—may I be allowed to use that word again—an implicit sense of humour. It at the dawn of history the arts provide evidence enough of man’s pride it is reassuring that they also provide evidence that he possessed a sense of humour. During the rest of the day he was going to need it.


[Continuity?]

An excavated Kassite temple shows similar deities. They have been built in niches as a part of the wall. Their lower bodies have the scale patterns of the mountain.
I will end this brief survey of Mesopotamian art with a few slides showing some relief sculpture of the Assyrian Empire. The Assyrians dominated Mesopotamia after 1000B.C. until the collapse of the Empire [in ...]. They were probably the most highly militarised of the people of the ancient world, and their relief sculpture which they used to decorate their palaces is concerned with their many campaigns. Our next slide shows some fugitives escaping across a river as the vanguard of the Assyrian army reaches the bank. Not the treatment of rocks and trees to represent a mountainous landscape. Our next slide shows some wild asses pursued by dogs, and our last slide, a dying lion and lioness. It can clearly be seen in the treatment of the lioness that Assyrian sculptors produced sculpture of great distinction, both in technical skill, in draughtsmanship and in expression. Indeed. It is not until the days of classical Greece that we meet relief sculpture of quite the same distinction.

I want to turn now to the art of ancient Crete.