Mesopotamian Art

Last week I dealt with the Protoliterate Period and the Early Dynastic Period, and I promised to show you a slide of a reconstruction of a temple of the Early Dynastic Period. Well here it is. [Slide 1] The temple is built in the heart of the city. Note the surrounding houses. Plans were not always oval, sometimes they were square or oblong. Before the foundations were laid the whole area was excavated down to virgin soil, and filled with clean desert sand, a ritual practice, to ensure the purity of the temple itself. The whole temple area was packed in clay up to a height of about three and a half feet. This podium serving as the artificial mountain, the ziggurat. Stone steps led up to the entrance which was flanked by towers, to the forecourt, where on the left were the offices of the temple administration. The forecourt led to the gate of an inner enclosure. This was quite spacious and contained a well and basin used for ritual ablutions. At the foot of the platform leading to the temple was an altar where animals were sacrificed. The platform was about twelve feet high. The shrine has been given an arch doorway, such arches having been found in a house of the period at Tell Asmar.

Last week I traced Mesopotamian art down to about 2,340BC [the end of the ED Period] Today I shall bring the story down to about 1100BC, that is from the Akkadian to the Kassite Period. [Slide 2, map] First, let us consider the complicated political background of the period, in broad outline. In Mesopotamia, as I said last week, political power oscillated continually between north and south. The Early Dynastic period, with which we ended last week, with its power concentrated in the south did not end in decline; what happened was that a new ruler, Sargon of Akkad, in the north, conquered the neighboring city-states, consolidated his power, and became the dominant ruler of all Mesopotamia. The Akkadian Dynasty, however, was overthrown by a horde of wild mountaineers, the Guti, from the north-east. During their domination Mesopotamian civilization remained in a state of anarchy, only the provincial city of Lagash, in he south, flourished. Perhaps the barbarians passed them by, or perhaps they paid tribute. It was eventually the great cities of Ur and Ereech which rose and overthrew the Guti, driving them back o the mountains. The cultural period which followed, the Neo-Sumerian, was centred upon the political power of the 3rd Dynasty of Ur. It was a time of great cultural achievement. But the Third Dynasty was itself eventually overthrown by invaders: hordes of Elamites from the east, and Amorites from the North West. On this occasion, however, the invaders were able to settle with the local population, and absorbed their civilized habits. A period, so well-known to Mesopotamian history followed, in which a number of independent city-states, sharing a common culture flourished together, this is the period here called the period of Isin, Larsa, and Babylon. Towards the end of the period, Babylon became the dominant city. The end of the period was marked by the widest disturbances throughout the whole of the Near East and Eastern Mediterranean. Hittite warriors came down and dominated Asia Minor; a mixed ethnic group known
as Hyksos, or Shepherd Kings advanced into Syria and Palestine and finally overran Egypt. And in Northern Mesopotamia a band of Aryan warriors, the Kassites, established themselves upon the Kharbur river and dominated most of the north.

The political and ethical condition of the time is as you see a complicated one. Fortunately there is a considerable degree of continuity in the art of the period. This fact may serve to remind us that although art is influenced by the social and political background of the times, it is not by any means wholly determined by them, and that it has, in short, a history of its own.

Let us now turn to art during the Akkadian Period.

The Art of Ancient Mesopotamia
Second Lecture – Monday, 26th March

[In my previous lecture I traced the art of ancient Mesopotamia from its beginnings to the end of the Early Dynastic Period. Although Mesopotamian civilization was widely spread during the Early Dynastic Period, its energy and power lay in the south. The period which followed it, the Akkadian Period, which dates from about 2340 to 2180BC marks an important swing in the political pendulum to the north.]

The Akkadian King Period begins with the rise to power of Sargon, King of Akkad. Sargon, as I said, consolidated his power in the North more completely than his predecessors, and centralized the power of the kingships. Sargon’s rise also marks the increasing influence of the Northern Semitic element in Mesopotamian culture. This element appears always to have been there, but only became politically articulate during Sargon’s reign. Under Sargon, loyalty to the king became a matter of greater importance in Mesopotamia.

A new conception of kingship found expression in Akkadian Sculpture. You will recall that in the earlier periods of Mesopotamian culture, which I dealt with in my previous lecture, it was principally the majesty of the gods which called forth the finest work of the Mesopotamian sculptor, The Akkadian sculptors sought to evoke the same sensations of majesty, power and fear in images of the made of Sargon the king. The idea of kingship began to acquire qualities previously associated only with deities.

We can gain a good idea how the Akkadian sculptor sought to realize this new conception of kingship in our next slide, a bronze head of an Akkadian ruler from Kuyunjik.*

It is three-quarter life-size. Notice that the hair is plaited and bound around the head, a fashion which we have already met in our head from Tell Agrab* in the realistic style of the Early Dynasty. Here is one clear piece of evidence of
the continuity of fashion from Early Dynastic to Akkadian times, and indeed the practice of binding the hair is fine and exercised in great detail. Notice the finely modeled mouth, the formalized and highly symmetrical brows which sweep down in one curve to the bridge of the nose. Our next slide shows the head in profile with the chignon held in place by metal fillets at the back of the head. The spiral twists given to the ends of the head and hair which we have already met in our statue of **Ibbil from Mari**.* The eyes have been gouged out and were doubtless of precious metals. In this fine head I think we may say that something of the virtues of the abstract and the realistic style of Early Dynastic times [*]. It also reveals the high technical level which bronze casting reached in Akkadian times.

Our next slide shows a **stone** head of the Akkadian period:*  

Notice the firm simplicity of the modeling. It is a style again in which naturalistic and formal qualities blend; far more naturalistic than our priest from **Tell Asmar*** with his highly geometrized form, but far more austere than the homely realism of the realistic Early Dynastic style as revealed in the **Priest’s Head from Khafaje**. In this head we might say, if not a more kingly, certainly a more aristocratic note is sounded, which is such a feature of Akkadian work.

The power and majesty of the Akkadian king is admirably revealed to us in the **Stele of Naramsin** in the Louvre.* Naramsin was the grandson of Sargon. He built himself a great palace at Brak in the North-West of Mesopotamia on the Syrian frontier. Under him the idea of kingship was further heightened and brought closer to the idea of the divine. The governors of his cities styled themselves the slaves of the king. Naramsin called himself the King of the Four Quarters; the Four Quarters, that is, of the world.

Now, Stelae, were upright slabs of stone placed in the ground usually with inscriptions to celebrate a military event, often in the provinces subjugated, in order to remind local disturbers of the peace. This stele records the subjugation of one such local ruler.* King Naramsin is shown in high relief, he stands alone greater in size than his men, and unlike them he wears on his helmet a pair of horns, which symbolized divinity. He strides up the mountain, holding a **bow** in one hand and an **arrow** in another, and a **battle-axe** tucked under his arm. The king is bearded. His officers are shaven and wear the same conical helmet but without the horns. They are behind and below him wearing bows and spears and axes, and carry heraldic emblems. The followers of the defeated prince retreat in disorder. The bows and arrows are important: archery was unknown to the Sumerians and appears to have been introduced by the [Semitic].
The reign of Naramsin marks the greatest achievement of Akkadian sculpture. Whether this is true of architecture is not known, since no evidence of importance survives.

A word, finally, about Akkadian seal engravings before we leave the period. Our slide shows how the Akkadian engraver was interested in the substance and appearance of things.* Again we meet the Mesopotamian hero with the great passion for tearing wild animals to pieces. There is a new intensity about these scenes. In earlier times these themes of combat were usually little more than occasions for the display of decorative ingenuity—now the battle is a very real one.

Sometimes interest in the reality does not destroy the sense of an ordered composition. Notice the disposition of the tail, the star and the axe. The space above the flanking antelopes was probably left for the names.

The second scene shows two men pouring a libation over an altar before two weather gods. The lightning is flashing from fiery a fiery dragon mouth as the god of thunder rumbles his noisy chariot across the sky, and he spurs it on with his crackling whip. The rain goddess stands on the back of the dragon sending down her beneficial rain. In such images the Mesopotamians pictured to themselves the onset of one of their local thunderstorms.

I want to turn now to a consideration of two periods which although distinct in the political history of Mesopotamia have been grouped together, because they reveal a great measure of artistic and cultural continuity. These periods are the Neo-Sumerian Period, 2125-2025B.C. and the Period of Isin, Larsa, and Babylon, 2025-1594B.C.

[The Neo-Sumerian Period follows the overthrow of the northern Akkadian dynasty. The Dynasty was overthrown by a wild mountainous tribe known as the Guti who came fro the western slopes of the Zagros mountains. They destroyed the great palace of Naramsin at Brak, and overran the other cities of the plain for about sixty years. They contributed nothing to the culture of Mesopotamia tat need concern us. In this interregnum period of political anarchy only one city Lagash in the South seems to have escaped depredation and flourished.]

The sculpture from Lagash is of great interest. The technical achievements of the Akkadian period certainly survive as we see in this statue of Gudea,* the Governor of Lagash. But the effect of these figures is one of piety rather than vigour.

Seated figure of Gudea. The ability to compose with a formal grasp of large special areas s also clearly evident in our next slide, this Head of Gudea.* Note the even cylindrical sweep of the head, clothed in its woolen cap. Geometric abstraction is present here as it is present in the sculpture of the abstract style of Early Dynastic
style. Note the symmetrical arch of the brows, described by an even chevron pattern, and the spiral design to describe the woolen cap. But on this occasion the abstract conception has been united with a greater interest in portraying the substance and the conformation of flesh.

The next slide shows* a small statuette of green serpentine, belongs to the same style. Once again the cylindrical cap, and this emphasis upon the cylinder is preserved through the whole figure. The hands direct the glance from movement around the body to movement vertically down the edge of the long embroidered shawl which, you will note is worn draped over the left arm.

All the figures of Gudea are at once serene and forceful,* and it is of interest to note that Gudea of Lagash, who maintained peace and prosperity in his city while the rest of the country was being overrun by the invaders, attributed his good fortune to the attention which he paid to the service of the gods. Texts have been preserved which record not only how Gudea built temples to his gods but also his religious experience and his frame of mind as he built them: Frankfort has translated one of these texts for us. Its quiet feeling of devotion affords a close parallel with the contemporary sculpture. The god is speaking:

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 itsands 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.
Oul will be poured abundantly in Sumer in thy time,
Good weight of wool will be given in thy time.

Such text expresses the spirit of [confident devotion?] so clearly revealed in the statue of Gudea we have encountered.

We pass now to the Third Dynasty of Ur. It was not Lagash, which was only a provincial town, but Erech and Ur that eventually drove the Gutu back to their mountains. Sumerian was now used in official documents but the Akkadian language was not abolished, and the new conception of kingship as propounded by Sargon was given a theological expression. Kingship was now supposed to be descended from heaven. It was a period in which some of the greatest works in Mesopotamian
literature were either composed or written down. But only a few works of art have survived from the time.

The first king of the Third Dynasty of Ur erected a great ziggurat to the moon-god at Ur, which has been excavated.* It stands within a court, like the temple platform at Khafaje, which we saw at the beginning of the lecture. It was orientated to the points of the compass. The outer face was built with a batter and decorated with flat buttresses. On the north-east three staircases gave access to the first level, at their crossing a gatehouse gave access to the first level, at their crossing a gatehouse was erected, and the central stair proceeded to a second level. Above this there was supposed to be a third stage.*

We can gain some idea of public building during the Neo-Sumerian period by studying a temple and palace build at Tel Asmar, in our next slide.* The square building is a temple for the worship of Gilmisin the king of Ur. Thus you see the vassalage of a formerly independent city-state was made manifest by the use of an official cult. The king of Ur had come to be worshipped as a God. Note the wide buttresses the temple, the cela, with its altar, the vestry at the left, the porter’s rooms leading to the roof. It is attached to the palace of the local governor—it was entered by a long guard room—note the court, throne room and great hall—at the other end was a palace chapel rather like the main temple.

The appearance of this temple-complex may be imagined from a reconstruction of another temple of a later date which brings us to a consideration of the period of Isin-Larsa.* Again we note the use of flanking towers to street entrances, internal courtyards, and temples within a palace complex.

The sculpture of the Isin-Larsa period is particularly notable for the large number of small clay reliefs of cult images for use on shrines. I remarked in my previous lecture how the cult statue of the god was endowed with a special kind of vitality. In some of the smaller shrines of the period the cult statue in the round was replaced by reliefs in baked clay.* Our next slide shows such a relief. You will notice that this goddess is winged, and the legs between the knee and the talons are feathered. She expresses well the sombre mood of Mesopotamian religion, for she is a death bringer who flies silently in the night. Her attributes may be discerned from the animals which accompany her: the two owls symbolize her flight through the night, and the lion symbolizes the ferocity of the goddess who brings death to man. At the base of the statue you will see a scale pattern: this pattern is used to symbolize ‘the mountain’. The mountain was for the Mesopotamians a central religious symbol—the religious landscape, Frankfort calls it—and therefore the normal place for a deity to reveal itself to man. In her hands she holds what appear to be shortened lengths of rope. The symbols appear in other reliefs and probably signifies a measuring rod, to indicate the span of a man’s life. The goddess is perhaps to be identified with the goddess Lilith.
whose name is translated in the authorised version as ‘screech owl’ in the book of
Isaiah. There were still traces of colour on the relief when discovered: the body of the
goddess was red, the feathers of her wings and also those of the owls were black and
red alternatively; the manes of the lions were black.

Similar small clay reliefs have turned up in large numbers both in temples and in
private homes and they were obviously used upon domestic altars.

Clay relief plaques:
  The demon Humbaba. [search for omens in the entrails of animals]
  God killing the fiery Cyclops.
  Nintu Goddess of Births. [Man playing …]
  Mastiff bitch and puppies.

Of the larger free-standing statues, this one in our next slide from Mari combines a
broad sensitive treatment of the body,* with a richly stylized treatment of all details of
dress and hair capable of being rendered with fine ornamental treatment. The pair of
horns upon the round cap are the horns of divinity, and remind us that the rulers of
Mesopotamian city-states considered themselves to be gods. This statue, you will note,
simplifies the forms most considerably. This is a provincial trait of a frontier town.
Here is another statue from Mari. It represents a goddess who pours water from a
vase.* This statue actually dispensed water being attached to a tank at a higher level;
and the wavy lines below represent water for fishes have been engraved upon them.
The figure affords a striking parallel with some early Greek sculpture of free-standing
sculpture—and this serves to remind us that Mesopotamia, with Egypt and Crete,
constituted the three great sources of Greek art.

One of the greatest surviving works of the period is a head in black granite,* which is
supposed to be a portrait of the greatest ruler of the period, Hammurabi of Babylon.
This may or may not be true. You will note that the ruler, whoever he is, wears a cap
similar to that worn by Gudea of Lagash. The eyebrows meet as before, but now
instead of a herring-bone pattern they are lightly and freely hatched in, and the depth
of the eyelids which were previously cut out in one even geometric curve are now
subtly modelled being thicker at the corner of the eyes than at the middle. Similarly
the sculptor is aware of the way in which the flesh covers the bony structure of the
skull. Nevertheless it is most unlikely that this finely constructed head was intended to
imitate the features of an individual, as in modern portraiture. It is much more
probable, having regard for the nature of the Mesopotamian culture, that the head
represents another conception, though admittedly a more naturalistic conception, of
kingship.

There is also a relief which represents Hammurabi, it is inscribed on the top of the law
code of Hammurabi.* Here we see the king standing before the throne of the sun god,
who was the supreme judge. It is a conventional presentation scene, but one of special significance for here the law-giver confronts the supreme lord of justice. Frankfort recalls one of Hammurabi’s inscriptions which suitably describes the presentation scene: ‘When Shamash with radiant ace had joyfully looked upon me, his favourite shepherd, Hammurabi’ and another clause in the preamble to the legal code ‘to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and evil, that the strong might not oppress the weak’. The carving is worked in heavy round relief, it is interesting to note that no longer the beard or the clothing reveal the fine inscribed detail of the previous period, the conception is more austere, more monumental. The god, it will be noted, holds out the measuring rod of justice to Hammurabi, and the king himself is seated upon the mountain, as revealed in the scale pattern beneath the throne.

Another bronze statuette of the period may show Hammurabi kneeling before the god.* The statue was inscribed showing that it was dedicated to a god for the life of Hammurabi. The face and hands of the king are covered with gold and there is an intense animation in the head and indeed in the whole of the body as the kings kneels and genuflects before the god [Kassite Dynasty 1600-1100].

The cult statues of monstrous gods continued: in this slide* for example of a four-faced god. He places his foot upon the back of a ram which identifies him as a god who embodied the vitality of nature. He originally held a scimitar in his right hand.

During the period of Isin, Larsa, and Babylon, a number of fine stone vases were made. Here is a slide showing a fragment of a stone bowl which was decorated with the mouflon—the wild mountain sheep so common in southern Europe and the Near East. Notice the way the legs have been drawn up under the body in a fashion recalling some of the Altamira bison and some Scythian harness ornaments. Once again an air of vitality is achieved through the use of large simplified—almost geometric forms. The head is rendered in the round, standing out from the vase, while the body remains in relief.

A brief note about Mesopotamian painting. The walls of public buildings were decorated with paintings but very little has survived. Here is an offering scene from a temple at Mari. We see a large figure dressed in a fringed shawl. He appears at the head of two rows of smaller figures, similarly dressed. They lead some sacrificial animals with gilded horns and pendants tied around their necks. There is a freedom in the drawing which may be compared with Cretan works.

I shall only show you one example from the art of the Kassite Period, but it will serve to reveal the continuity of Mesopotamian art from Protoliterate times. [Slide 1] This slide shows us part of the façade of the temple [Slide 2] built by a Kassite king. The elevation shows a new application of an ancient motif. In recesses we observe male and female deities bearing the flowing vase. The figures were not applied to the wall,
but are a part of it, being fashioned in moulded brick. On the robes of the goddesses are to be found again the vertical wavy lines representing water that we noted from the statue from Mari. The male gods are *chthonic* beings, that is, earth gods, the upper part of their bodies emerge from the earth, shown by the scale pattern. The water which flows from the jars wells up and falls in a double stream to the mountain. The buttresses here while remaining functional have taken on a rich decorative effect. Inside the temple was the central shrine, and the side rooms. Figure 23 in Frankfort provides a plan of the temple.

But already in Kassite times another city-state was increasing in wealth and power in the north. We will consider Assyrian art after Easter, but meanwhile Dr Falk will lecture on Egyptian art next Thursday, and Professor Trendall will begin his series of lectures on classical art.
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