Assyrian Art
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Last Thursday Professor Trendall traced the development of Greek art from the time of its emergence to the end of the Persian wars, that is, from eleventh century to 480B.C. This morning I shall deal with the last phase of Mesopotamian art that will concern us, namely, Assyrian art. It covers a period from about 1350B.C. down to 612B.C. Assyrian art may be taken therefore to be roughly contemporaneous with the first two important phases of Greek art, that is the Geometric and the Orientalising phases. But the spiritual temper of Assyrian art was, remarkably different from that of Greek art.

Assyria arose to power in the northern region of Mesopotamia, when the south was weak under the foreign Kassite dynasty. While other regions of the Near East were engulfed in the disturbances of the fourteenth century due to the incursion of the Hittites and others from the north, a series of able rulers at Assur steadily built up and widened their power. During this period the art of Assyria began to emerge fro the wider and more general context of Mesopotamian art. In its earliest phase, there is little to distinguish Assyrian art from the earlier art of Mesopotamia. But during the fourteenth century a form of art emerged which was distinct both in style and in subject matter. In Assyrian art we meet for the first time in Mesopotamia, possibly for the first time in the history of Western art, a noticeable distinction between the sacred and the secular. In its sacred art, Assyria is formal and conservative—men no longer meet the old gods face to face, they only perform certain established ceremonies before their shrines and emblems. In secular art, however, there is a growing interest in the portrayal of incident and narrative, and in consequence a growing desire to master the problems of representation.

Babylon remained the cultural inspiration of Assyria long after its political decline, just as Greece remained the cultural inspiration of the Roman Empire. And we find that the state-god Assur possessed many feature in common with the god Marduk of Babylon. Assur, like so many other Mesopotamian gods, was a personification of the life of nature which had been worshipped from earliest times. We may examine a representation of one of these goes of natural fertility in our first slide, which was found in the temple of Assur at Assur.

You will observe that both the lower part of the god’s body and his cap possess the scale pattern which signifies the mountain from which the gods as an earth-deity emerges.* You will note, too, that plants spring from the hips and the hands, and that goats fed upon the flowering plants. Again, then, we meet the flowering plants and herbivorous animals by which the fertility gods of Mesopotamia manifested themselves to man. Two subsidiary gods flank the main god carrying the flowing vase. Note the waving lines signifying streams of water drawn upon the lower portions of
their bodies. This relief, therefore, reveals continuity with the earlier art of Mesopotamia. We may compare the formal arrangement of the composition, the style of the carving and the imagery with the terra-cotta relief of the Goddess Lilith,* which belongs to the Isin-Larsa period, and the figures with flowing vases to the god on the Kassite Temple,* which I showed you in a previous lecture. Clearly there was no break between the art of Assyria and the earlier art of Babylon and Sumer.

Such reliefs enabled the suppliant and worshipper to meet the god face to face. But as Assyrian art develops a noticeable change takes place. The gods become withdrawn from the world of man. In an altar of one of the early Assyrian kings this change may be noted.* The relief on the front of the altar depicts the very rite which was performed in front of it. The king is shown in two positions, first approaching the altar holding a scepter in his hand, and then kneeling before it. On either side is the traditional rosette pattern, a familiar feature of Mesopotamian art, and below is the cuneiform inscription. But the image of the god himself does not appear.

The distance between man and the gods suggested here may also be examined in an obelisk of somewhat later date, which is now in the British Museum and is usually referred to as the ‘broken obelisk’. Here we see the kings vassal paying homage to hum. Notice that he is larger in size than they are, a feature of the ancient art of both Mesopotamia and Egypt which is sometimes known as hieratic proportion; the king being at the head of the social hierarchy is drawn larger in size than his subordinates; in short, the greater the rank the greater the size. Now above the vassals you will note two hands appearing from what appears to be a fiery cloud, one hand holds a bow, and this identifies the god as the state god, Assur. On either side are emblems of other deities.

Two themes became 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. We see it placed between two heraldically disposed rams. Notice that the tree is no longer naturalistic as it was in our early Sumerian slide, of the ram caught in a thicket;* it is highly artificial and decorative. These palmette designs were of course carried over, by the agency of the Phoenicians, into Greek art; and these light and delicate animals have much in common with Greek orientalising pottery of the 7th century, sub as Rhodian ware. It is therefore of interest to note that this mural dates to the reign of an Assyrian king who lived in the thirteenth century BC Noe the traditional rosette pattern, and how the decorative tree has already taken on the form of a column with the ionic spiraliform capital.

The griffin also appears early, but we may best examine it in a relief from the late Assyrian period, dating to the ninth century.* Here we see winged griffins, heads of vultures and bodies of men, heraldically disposed about a sacred tree, which they are
carefully sprinkling with sacred water. The point to be stressed is that: although as we have seen plants and animals were used to represent the gods from Sumerian times, these sacred plants and animals now take on an increasingly artificial (I am not using that word in its derogatory sense, but in the sense of something made by art, not natural) and decorative form. Bare tree trunks to which metal bands and fillets were attached, were used and worshipped, in the New Year Festival in Assyria—and we may take this increasing prominence of the sacred tree as an emblem of the gods and as yet another example of the increasing separation of the world of the gods and the world of man.

So much for the religious art of Assyria, let us turn now to the secular art. To understand the nature of this secular art we must look briefly at a number of geographical, political and military factors. We have seen already, that geographically Mesopotamia was a region without stable boundaries. The foothills and mountainous regions of the north and east provided strongholds from which tribes made continual raids into the plain. To the north-west there was always a danger of invasion from Asia Minor. The Assyrians solved their geographical problem by a number of remarkable developments in the art of warfare. A standing army was formed which was continually on the march suppressing rebellions in the outlying provinces, this being use in conjunction with a national militia in the times of crisis. They perfected the art of chariot warfare introduced into the Near East by the Hyksos invaders of Egypt, and chariot-warfare was combined with the extensive use of archery. The Assyrian army became an highly efficient fighting machine, adaptable for siege operations, for mountain warfare, or for pitched battles on the plains. They certainly struck terror into the hearts of the smaller nations which lay on the outskirts of the Assyrian Empire. The finest record which we have of this fear of Assyria is contained in the book of the prophet Isaiah, who lived at a time when the power of Assyria was a constant threat to the independence of Israel. Now the secular art of Assyria was the art of a highly militarised society. The palaces of the kings were decorated with ling friezes of paintings and reliefs which show in the greatest detail the never-ending military campaigns undertaken by the rulers. It is essentially a narrative art which records the daily experiences of the Assyrian soldier, and glorifies the military prowess of the rulers.

We can study the military art of Assyria both in its architecture and in its relief sculpture. Let us begin by studying a typical example of an Assyrian palace. This is the palace of Sargon II built at Khorsabad, a little north of Ninevah, and dedicated in the year 706 B.C.* There was a triple entrance which led into a large court, on the right were officers and servants quarters, o the left were three large and three smaller temples. Behind the large court, were the king’s residential apartments, these being accessible only through one single narrow passage. Beyond these were the state rooms grouped around a small square court, with a large but narrow throne room to the right. Foreign embassies and others waiting upon an audience would approach through the
large court at [the] right[.]* The walls of these courts were surrounded by large stone slabs or orthostats, upon which the figures of demons, sphinxes, or the oversize representations of the king and his courtiers were engraved. It is clear that the intention of these great figures was to strike fear and terror into all those who approached the Assyrian throne. Petitioners, ambassadors, or vassals awaiting an audience had to pass through great rooms and galleries lined on wither side with enormous and terrifying images. Our next slide,* shows one of these images, a winged bull which guarded the entrance to the throne room of Sargon’s palace. These guardians of the gates of the palace are neither true reliefs nor sculptures in the round. These bulls are shown, for instance, with five legs, two in front, for the frontal position, and four at the sides for the profile position. In this case the sculpture is subservient to the architecture. These great images are however carved with the greatest precision and finish.

This precision of carving and finish may be seen more clearly in a winged genius from the Citadel gate at Khorsabad.* Notice the fine modelling of the hands and wrists, the exquisite carving of the face and beard, the fine decoration of the wings, the tassels at the end of the kilt, the finely embroidered rosettes. This winged genius serves to remind us that Assyrian relief sculpture I an architectural sculpture of the highest order. The best Assyrian sculpture was indeed always subordinated to an architectural purpose—by comparison their sculpture in the round is second rate.* In this amber statuette of the head of an Assyrian king we meet with little that is not already conventional. The kingl, impersonal expression, the beard carved in spiral twists, the rosette and chevron patterns, and the hands clasped in a ritual gesture we have met with all these things in earlier periods of Mesopotamian art. It is to the relief sculpture which was carved upon slabs which lined the lower portions f the walls and corridors of the palaces that we must turn for the post original form of Assyrian art. In these reliefs we see the unending march of the Assyrian armies, burning, killing, punishing in country after country. Repetition was an essential part of this art. Our next slide shows one of the Assyrian kings Assurnarsipal II attacking a besieged city. The charging chariot, striding over the bodies of the slain, with archers at the ready is a continually recurring motif. The relief cannot be better described than in the words of the prophet Isaiah: their ‘arrows are sharp, and all their bows bent, their horses hoofs shall be counted like flint, and their wheels like a whirlwind.’

This relief art was essentially a narrative art intended to be read in detail. At the left we see the king being his bow at the enemy. He is supported by his shield bearer behind. Note the way the relief sculpture is able to suggest background by a kind of primitive perspective. The horses, although drawn upon the same base, are shown with the legs and heads in continuous regression from the frontal plane. Beneath these heads we note an enemy charioteer who is vainly endeavouring to regain control of his chariot, but an enemy chief has just fallen from it, and one of the horses is already pawing the ground. Elsewhere we see Assyrian soldiers dispatching the enemy, while
high above, the winged state god Assur with his bow, encourages the conquering army from the clouds. The figure who looks as though he is fallen from the tower is actually intended to represent one of the Assyrian dead, lying on the ground. Elements of landscape are introduced. Water is indicated beneath the wheels of the chariot, suggesting that the battle was fought near a river, and foot soldiers are shown engaged in combat among trees near the enemy stronghold.

Details of a campaign were rendered with considerable elaboration. In our next slide the vanguard of the Assyrian army has reached the edge of a rocky stream.* A party of the enemy who have been surprised are endeavouring to cross the stream. One of them strikes out with a vigorous crawl, but the Assyrian archers have already got his range, and the arrows are already sticking into him. The other two have had no time to prepare their wings. So they are trying to blow them up, and perform a rather ineffective dog paddle at the same time. Note the enemy king frozen into inactivity, and the buttressed fortress, with its battlement top.

Another relief shows the arrival of the Assyrian king Shalmaneser at the source of the river Tigris.* The text accompanying the relief reads: “I entered the sources of the river; I offered sacrifices to the gods; my royal image I set up”. The event was described in greater detail in the black obelisk of Shalmaneser now in the British Museum. It reads:

In the seventh year of my reign I marched against the cities of Khabini of Til-Abni. Til Abni, his stronghold, together with the cities round about it, I captured. I marched to the source of the Tigris, the place where the water comes forth. I cleansed the weapons of Assur therein; I took victims of my gods; I held a joyful feast. A mighty image of my majesty I fashioned; the glory of Assur, my lord, my deeds of valour, all I had accomplished in the lands, I inscribed thereon and I set it up there.

In our relief we see a ram and a bull being brought to the king’s sacrifice. The mountainous region is represented in the conventional way, by the scale patter. Now the particular headstream of the Tigris flows out through a natural tunnel in limestone hills, the river issuing from a subterranean grotto. This is represented in the relief by a series of three men standing waist deep in the water who appear to be gathering firebrands for the sacrifice. The mountain has been cut away, as it were, to show the men moving in the subterranean cavern. At the mouth of the cave, the official war artist has thrown a rock into the stream. He stands on this, and we see him engraving a figure of Shalmaneser on the face of the natural rock. In the frieze above we are taken to the mouth of the grotto itself. Here we see water dropping from the ceiling of the cave onto the stalagmites below. Inside we see a sculptor at work. On this occasion he appears to be engraving an inscription for a scribe stands beside him apparently reading from a tablet. A bull is being dragged up for sacrifice at the mouth of the
grotto. In the corner one of the local aborigines peers through the rocks rather amazed at what is going on.

It is important to emphasize that the Assyrian narrative relief was a truly original form of art. There is nothing like it before in the history of art, an we have to wait until the time of the Romans before we met with such a narrative art again in the columns of Trajan and Marcus Aurelius. Earlier Mesopotamian commemorative reliefs, like the Stele of Naramsin depicts a single significant moment in a campaign, and this is used to signify the whole campaign. But in their long friezes the Assyrians south to describe all the important incidents that occurred in their campaigns.

The carving of these friezes is also a matter of considerable interest.* In this next relief showing men bringing offerings from Khorsabad we may not that the relief is quite low, and often quite flat. Spatial depth is not realized or rendered. Note that the legs are carefully rendered in profile, and notice that the careful but conventionalized forms used to render the muscles of the leg. The chest and shoulders, however, are rendered in a frontal position. Frequently an arm in profile will be placed upon shoulders in a frontal position. The Assyrian sculptors had a clear, unambiguous repertoire of forms and motifs for hands, legs, and gestures which could be applied upon all occasions. A certain amount of modelling was carried out, as in this example, in the careful modelling of the ram’s head, and of hands and arms. But most of the detail was indicated by means of engraving rather than modelling. A further peculiarity about these engraving was that inscriptions were frequently cut right across the figures.

One of the significant facts about Assyrian narrative relief is that it tended to elaborate the environmental setting in which the military actions depicted took place. We have already seen how landscape motifs played an important part in the illustration of Shalmaneser’s visit to the source of the Tigris. In our next slide we see an illustration depicting the scenery at the other end of the great river system.* Here we see Asshurib conducting a campaign in the marshes at the mouth of the Tigris-Euphrates. We see the boats with their armed warriors, penetrating the channels of the river, which were surrounded on all sides by the high reeds of marshy wilderness. These marshes offered an excellent hiding place for opponents of Assyrian rule, just as the mountains did. The local inhabitants are depicted living upon reed mats, hiding away among the reeds, crabs and fish are shown swimming in the channels. Assyrian art provides us with an abundance of examples which reveals that narrative art and the portrayal of landscape are often closely related. This is natural enough, because, in order to tell what occurred, it is usually necessary to tell where it occurred. On rare occasions in Assyrian art, indeed, the landscape interest predominates over the interest in action as in this scene of Lions in a Royal Park, from Kuyunjik. We see the lion and lioness at rest among palms and trees, about which vines laden with apes are clinging, and lilies and daisies are in bloom. But such scenes are exceptional. The
lions were kept to be slaughtered. Between the wars the Assyrians ad to content themselves with killing animals. Our scene below shows how the lions were released and slain. The lions were released from wooden cages by men who were themselves protected by wooden cages. The king shoots at the approaching beast. If he does not kill it, the bodyguard dispatches it with shield and spear. Here an animal is shown in three positions, emerging from the cave, advancing and springing.

On some occasions the king is shown killing the lion with a sword.* It has already been wounded with arrows, and the moment is shown when the sword strikes home, the forepaws are suddenly paralysed, and we feel that the animal’s angry snarl has become a howl of pain. The Assyrian sculptors were remarkable observers of animals, it is perhaps their greatest achievement. Many relief sculptures produced during the reign of Assurbanipal on the eve of the overthrow of Assyria, reveal unusual capacity to render the expressions and emotions of animals. In this illustration of mastiffs hunting wild asses for instance, we see the wide nostrils and ears drawn back in terror as one animal is overtaken by the dogs. Another looks back before her deserting foal, another rolls over and draws up its legs in agony.

On rare occasions animals are shown grazing peacefully, as in this relief of a heard of gazelles, quite a pastoral idyll, delightfully spaced; but already the alarmed buck turns his head to see the hunters approaching.*

More famous than these reliefs are those of a dying lion and lioness.* The arrows have paralysed the hind quarters of the lioness and she drags her back legs in ain. The lion is crouched up vomiting blood in the agony of death. Such scenes are among the most memorable in the whole range of Assyrian relief. This is not altogether surprising, for the lion is a frequently recurring, indeed we might almost say an obsessive image in Assyrian art. In seeking to describe the power and cruelty of the Assyrians, the prophet Isaiah compared them to lions: ‘Their cruelty’ he wrote ‘shall be like a lion, they shall roar like young lions; yea they shall roar and lay hold of the prey, and shall carry it away safe, and none shall deliver it.’ And we know from the lion-like animals with which the Assyrians adorn their palaces how much they identified their power with the power of lion. And it worth noting too that this interest in the pathos of animals only occurs in time of Assurbanipal, when Assyria itself was impoverished by increasing campaigns and internal dissensions. The written cuneiform record provides us with evidence of the mental agony and disquiet that accompanied Assurbanipal’s declining years:

“Why” runs the text “Why have sickness, ill-health, misery and misfortune befallen me? I cannot away with the strife in my own country and the dissensions in my family. Disturbing scandals oppress me always. Misery of mind and flesh bow me down; with cries of woe I bring my days to an end. Death is seizing hold on me and bears me down. How long O lord, wilt thou
deal thus with me? Even as one who hath not feared god and goddess am I reckoned.”

Now this confession of the ailing king, is said to be just as remarkable, in the long series of Assyrian cuneiform documents, as is the pathetic treatment of the animals which decorated his palace. It is not too fanciful to suggest surely that in the image of his dying lions is to be found a small deal of what psychologists call identification, and that the dying lion became for the sculptors of Assyria an unconscious, or dimly apprehended emblem of the dying empire. For the Empire was certainly dying. Within ten years of Assurbanipal’s death in 626BC the empire was entirely overthrown, and we may note that the Hebrew prophet Nahum, exalting in the downfall of Assyria, imagined it as a savage…

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