

Middle Eastern Art: Art of Mesopotamia

4000 BC to 331 BC

During the reign of the Pharaohs in Egypt, human civilization began. Around this time, between the major rivers: Tigris-Euphrates, in Mesopotamia, the second human civilization was emerging. This is believed to be a matter of coincidence; though both these civilizations were entirely different. This difference too is largely owing to Mesopotamia's geographical situation. The Mesopotamian region nestled in the valley within the Tigris-Euphrates river system is like a wide and shallow bowl. It is pervaded by the web created by the flow of these two major rivers and its tributaries. Since it is not surrounded by hilly terrain, this region is not blessed with natural fortifications of the mountains. Therefore, there were frequent invasions here and no single power could rule. Hence, Mesopotamia's political history is full of local rivalry for power, foreign attacks, abrupt rebellions, and sudden downfalls of military rules. Yet, it is astonishing that, despite such conditions, the continuation of the traditional art and culture that developed there has remained unstoppable.

The art in Mesopotamia kept on evolving consistently at various places. Unlike the Egyptians, the people there did not believe in life after death. But they considered animals as Gods, believed in black magic and astrology. Having progressed in hieroglyphics, they could record their mythological and religious thoughts.

The acute scarcity of the availability of hard stones in Mesopotamia led to the bricks dried in the sun being used to build architecture. They discovered how to construct arches and domes. Both these elements were used across all the edifices built. They turned their attention towards metals like brass, gold and silver, besides carving on easily perishable media like bones, wood and ivory. While Mesopotamia's civilization was being built, several people, languages, religion and art genres contributed towards it. The main founders of this civilization were the Sumerian people. They initially formed colonies and stayed in the Sumer region near

the confluence of Tigris and Euphrates rivers; which is how they got the name 'Sumerian'.

Sumerian Art

There is no information on the dwelling origins of the Sumerian people. During the period 4000 BC they came from Persia (Iran) to South Mesopotamia. Later, in about 1000 years they formed several city-states in that region.

Architecture

There was a local deity of every city-state. It was also believed to be its King and Lord. As a representative of this divine emperor, a human ruler looked after the city-state's administration, and issued guidelines to the citizens about the deity's worship. The Sumerian people believed that the function of seeking the welfare and pleading the case of the citizens in the circle of deities that controlled the natural forces such as Air, Water, Fertility and celestial bodies, is taken up by the representative ruler.

White Temple or Ziggurat

The Sumerian temples meant a cluster of several types of structures. The temple being the centre-point of their spiritual and worldly life, it was around its pious grounds that homes, workshops, granaries and storehouses were built. In the middle of all this, built on a high pedestal, used to be the temple of the local deity. That high pedestal was gradually transformed into a man-made massive structure, called 'Ziggurat'. The Tower of Babel is the most famous protuberance, as said to have been referred to in the Bible. It lies destroyed as of now. However, an older ziggurat, predating 3000 BC, built at Uruk or (present day Warka – Iraq), is found to be seen in better condition even today. The temple built over the 40 feet ziggurat, which has bricks-work done on its sloping side. There are winding stairs to ascend and declining paths.



Ancient ziggurat at Ali Air Base
Iraq 2005

There's a prayer hall at the top. Painted with white lime on the outward surface, it is also called the 'White Temple'. The base of the temple is designed with thick walls and parts extending out or receding in at a certain distance. There is the deity's idol in the sanctum sanctorum and oblation or sacrificial rites were performed in front of it. Around this place are small rooms. The ziggurats built later were of increasing heights and complex designs. A notable example of this is the ziggurat built by the Iranians near 'Susa' at 'Dur Untash'. (*Ancient ziggurat at Ali Air Base Iraq 2005.jpg, Wikimedia Commons, CC 3.0*)

Sculpture

There is no idol of the deity in the sanctum of the temple today. It may probably have been destroyed. There has been found though, built around that time, a beautiful white marble head of a woman. She could have been a deity. It seems some white stone or object may have been used to create eyes and eyebrows on this head, from the sockets carved out in their place. Her hair may have been adorned with gold or copper, as it looks from the visible traces. It is a fine artistic sculpture. The curved lips look delicate and the large bulging eyes have a fixed gaze. Also, there is a poise that has been achieved by balancing beauty and simplicity in the sculpture.

Statues of The Deity and Worshippers at Tell Asmar

The stone idols made in the initial period were not realistically styled as in the case of the woman's head mentioned above; they look more geometrical and abstract styled. A very well-known example is the twelve statues altogether known as the 'Tell Asmar Hoard', said to be largely made from gypsum stone. The largest figure among them is the 'Vegetation God', known as 'Abu' standing 75 cm tall. The next large figure in stature is of the 'maternal deity' and the others are of the priests and worshippers. The statues of the maternal deity and 'Abu' are made to stand out among the hoard by showing them larger in form, and having large eyeballs. The inlay work done in the eyes by fixing coloured objects is clearly noticeable even today. Hence their gaze seems more intense. The other statues of the priests and the rest, from the look in their eyes, seem to be conversing with the two deities. The Sumerians were animistic as they believed that God exists in these statues of deities. Therefore, it was

believed that the actual individuals depicted as idols of worshippers were believed to be the link between the Gods and the devotees, conveying prayers of devotees to Gods, and the messages from God to the devotees. The anatomy of the statues in the hoard is simple and symbolic. The shape of the bodies is constructed out of cones and cylinders; the hands and legs seem shaped like pipes. The long robes on the idols are polished and cylindrical with wavy borders look like having spun out from lathe machine.

Besides stone, the Sumerians had used wood, gold and lapis lazuli, etc. to create sculpture. The bronze cast sculptures of the soft medium are found in the tombs near 'Ur'. Among them the sculpture 'Billy Goat & Tree' is said to be famous. There is a goat standing near a tree with its two feet on the bark. This goat is said to be the emblem of the deity 'Tammuz' and the sculpture seems lively and mighty.

Akkadian Era (Around 2340 BC to 2180 BC)

After the decline of the earlier city-states, the Akkadians of the Semitic dynasty of Northern Mesopotamia invaded Sumeria and conquered the region. The Akkadians spoke a different language, yet they accepted the Sumerian script and culture. But it did not create small city-states like Sumeria and began to govern consolidatedly. Therefore, the art there had to carry out the responsibility of exhibiting the emperor's glory. The Bronze portrait-sculpture probably of an Akkadian King found at 'Nineka' is an excellent example of sculpture of that time. This sculpture is 12 inches in height and is seen to have qualities of resemblance, splendour and skill. It is now in the Baghdad museum. Its main characteristics are the skilfully achieved – different planes on the face, the hairstyle, the visualization of the beard, the cast and the polish. It is due to these features that this sculpture has acquired popularity all over the world.

Naram-Sin's Monument

The famous Akkadian King Sargon's grandson Naram-Sin got a victory monument built to depict his triumph. It is popularly known as the 'Victory-Stele of Naram-Sin'. This relief is carved over a six and a half feet stone slab. It depicts Naram-Sin's army climbing up the mountain. At the very top, King Naram-Sin is shown treading on the dead enemy, having pierced the latter with his spear. A horned helmet on the king's head and a

Sun-disk behind are the symbols of royal glory. The king is also shown as a large figure towering over the others, signifying his superiority. The sculptor seems to have successfully achieved a classic composition of a momentous incident. This monument is considered the most ancient victory stele in the world.

Neo-Sumerian Culture (2125 BC to 2025 BC)

The erstwhile Sumerian Kings Ur resurged attacks on the Akkadians and pushed them out. They re-established consolidated rule. Hence what is known as Neo-Sumerian culture prevailed under this reign which lasted for about 100 years. In the famous city-state of Lagash, King Gudea built temples of the local city-gods; which exist in ruins, with not a single temple remaining that would be deemed as a complete structure. Amid one of the temple's foundation, a metal inscription was discovered. This legend bears information about the Neo-Sumerian religious beliefs, as well as the knowledge of benefits of the rain-bearing winds on farming and flooding the canals. The kings understood themselves to be having cordial relations with the Gods, due to which peace and affluence inhabited in the state. Therefore, it seems, they too may have built several statues of themselves in temples, akin to the Akkadian Kings. Roughly twenty such idols have been discovered. Either in a standing or seated posture, these strong looking physiques made from diorite, seem to have been rubbed and polished. Among these, a sculpture of a Gudea King is seen to have a temple's architectural drawings on his laps. This probably may have existed to derive God's permission. Rather than the idols of Tell Asmar based on geometrical shapes, the muscular volume of this statue seems very different.

Babylonian Culture (1760 BC to 1600 BC)

There was constant upheaval in Mesopotamia in the 2nd millennium BC. Around this period, the great King Hammurabi had established his rule in Babylon. Therefore, the art development that took place in Babylon is said to be Babylonian culture. Therefore, the city of Babylon had acquired a grandeur like 'Ur'. Hammurabi was very proud and respectful of the Sumerian culture. He considered himself to be the Sun God's favourite devotee, and believed that he was chosen to see that law prevailed among the people. Therefore, he created codes of law which are called

Hammurabi's Laws. This is the oldest form of law code. He got these laws inscribed on a seven feet diorite stone stele. On this block, after a space of approx. two feet there is a relief carved of the law prescriber 'Shamash' handing over the law manuscript to Hammurabi. Though this relief is made in a later period, after Gudea's sculpture, yet the styles and techniques adopted are similar.

There is a lot of progress that seems to have been achieved in architecture during the Babylonian era. They had built multi-storeyed edifices and ziggurat; all made with burnt bricks. The features of their houses were: small rooms, thick walls, semi-circular arches, spacious courtyard in the middle, and gardens of large trees on the terraces. The Babylonian ziggurat was akin to an eight-stepped pyramid.

Assyrian Culture (1000 BC to 612 BC)

In the upheaval that took place in northern Mesopotamia in the 1st millennium BC, a tribe called 'Bithyni' set up its rule there. Another ancient people who established their empire in the mountainous regions of Anatolia were the 'Hittites'. Later, the valiant kings of the dynasty won the provinces around and had invaded and won Egypt in 671 BC.

Architecture and Sculpture

Taking help of the improvements and progress in the Sumerian culture, the Assyrians had made their own required enhancements. They built the Assyrian temples and ziggurats the Sumerian way. Their palaces were huge and majestic.

In the latter part of the 8th century, the palace of the second Sargon built at Dur-Sharrukin (today's Khorsabad city) was huge. It had a square courtyard in the centre with each side measuring 90 metres. Around the palace, there was a fortification with ramparts. The Assyrian construction, like the Sumerian, was made of bricks. Nevertheless, in spite of the scarcity of stones, the gateway doors and the internal walls on the lower side were made of stones. Bas-reliefs have been carved on these stones and in places like the entrance door tiles of colourful and glazing alabaster stones have been affixed on round and relief constructions.

There are sculptures of two strange doorkeepers near the palace's entrance. These are like the Sphinx statues in Egypt with a human head.

The rest of the body is like a bull with wings attached to it. Carved out of a single rock, its height is 16 feet. The frontal view reveals only two feet; the lateral view allows a view of four and viewed at a diagonal angle, five feet are seen. Twenty-six pairs of such animals are found at Khorsabad. The carving effort is excellent and attempts to show the exact muscles and veins have been made. Therefore, combining human and animal form, sculptures seem to have been created.

On the inner side walls of the palace, several pictures of the king's victory are done in relief sculptures. Illustrations of the battle are seen at many places, and at a few places, a single feature repeats itself. Historical depiction in Assyrian art is believed to be a significant need in the ancient period. In the above-mentioned relief, the portrayal of King Assurbanipal's defeat of Humanu city is famous. Among the representations, the destruction of the city's fortification, the burning of the cities to ashes, the soldiers carrying the weight of the looted wealth, etc.; being various incidents related to an event, are remarkable.

Wounded Lioness

In these depictions discussed above the king's supremacy does not get highlighted, and as the hunting of lions was reserved for royalty, we see many such low relief hunting scenes. The sculpture of the 'wounded lioness' is famous among these reliefs. In this, the rump portion of the lioness is pierced through with arrows, due to which she is unable to move her back. But as a last-ditch effort, she is seen trying to move ahead, and the unbearable pain she suffers elicits an agonized squeal from her. Having rendered such a sad, but unforgettable incident with significant effect in a sculpture, this relief seems to possess unusual vigour, impulse, liveliness and emotion. In spite of it being a relief carving, the minute details of the sculpture provide volume to the form.

Assyrian art is an indicator of Yuyutsu tendencies. They believed that since the bull and lion are symbols of power and strength, they are not harmful to human, and hence they should be used in art. The Kings and Gods were shown to have beard, horns and wings. They believed that a combination of the human face, symbols of divinity, and animal strength are symbols of auspicious and protective power.

Neo-Babylonian Dynasty (612 BC to 539 BC)

The Assyrian empire was invaded and destroyed by the Eastern Medes and Scythian (Shaka in Sanskrit) tribes. An Assyrian General in this hustle, established his rule in Southern Mesopotamia at Babylon. He and his descendants ruled for a brief period. King Nebuchadnezzar was a famous monarch of this lineage. He was one of the rulers known to have rebuilt the 'Tower of Babel'. It is said to be a part of the huge and extensive palace of Sargon. Due to the unavailability of stones, the Neo-Babylonians began to use glazed and colourful burnt tiles on the rugged and uneven parts of the wall. This method was earlier used at some places by the Assyrians, but it came to be more in vogue in the Neo-Babylonian times. The tiles were brought into use for decorating the structures and in the reliefs on them. The Ishtar Gate is famous for this. Bright colourful decorative tiles have been made on the Gate. The tiles are interspersed with reliefs of the bull, dragon and horse. Akin to the Assyrian sculptures, here too, the vigorous and realistic representation of animals can be seen.

Iranian Art (539 BC to 331 BC)

The Iranian reign is considered to have been the most remarkable regime in Mesopotamia. In the year 539 BC, Iran's Emperor Cyrus had established his rule in Babylon; this regime lasted for about 200 years. Later, in the year 331, King Alexander invaded Mesopotamia and brought about a decline of the Iranian reign.

The Iranians were 'Fire' worshippers and believed themselves to be devotees of the prophet 'Zoroaster'. They do not seem to have built religious places of worship. Also, due to their status of being never-settling wanderers there are no evidences of relics of permanent edifices. Yet, the artefacts buried with the dead enables us to imagine about their art. In view of this, objects like weapons, saddles, swords have been discovered also in Central Europe and Siberia. From the decorative designs on these objects, a characteristic style is noticed, which is known as the 'Animal Style'. In this style, which seems to have originated in Iran itself, forms of various animals are used through abstract and imaginative expressions. A fine example of this style is the colourful drinking glass of vertical form found at Susa. In the centre on this glass surface there is a drawing of a mountain goat. It is shown with minimum crooked lines. Two large round circular

lines suggest the horns. On a band above it there are running dogs, and above the band there are standing decorative forms of long-necked birds.

The Iranians seem to have built very huge and aesthetic palaces. The Council Hall at Persepolis is famous. It is square in shape with each side measuring 250 feet. It is said there was earlier a wooden roof over it, which was supported by 36 pillars of 40 feet in height. Each pillar, like the ones of the Mauryan dynasty in India, had at its apex inverted lotus with bulls in the capital. It characteristically shows two bulls with their backs joined. Another distinctive feature seen here is to simplify the animal forms and match them with the forms of the built structures. In the Council Hall of Darius, on the walls of the flights of ascending stairs on two sides, prolonged queues of walking humans have been carved. In the human figure, the pleats pattern on his attire and the protrusions of the hands and shoulders is clearly seen through the clothes. These are the distinct characteristics of the reliefs found here.

Iranian art has been drawn from the exchange of various cultures. The art of Mesopotamia flourished rather independently and in that respect, it is comparable to Egypt. Egyptian art thrived only in the Nile valley. It may have at the most influenced the nearby regions of Africa. But it was different in case of Mesopotamian art. It had spread from Syria and the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean Sea. It encompassed an extensive area. Although, the variety found in the Egyptian art is not seen in the Mesopotamian. The latter had evolved only in case of creating idols of pantheons and kings. Not much information being available about Mesopotamia, we may gauge about it from the art relics and excavations.