

The art of ancient Sumer

The Art of the First Cities at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City

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Art of the First Cities: The Third Millennium B. C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus; through August 17, 2003 at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.

Joan Aruz (ed). *Art of the First Cities. The Third Millennium B. C. from the Mediterranean to the Indus*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2003, 540 pp.

“Ancient, apparently long-forgotten things are preserved within us, continue to work upon us—often without our realizing it—and then, suddenly, they come to the surface and speak to us like the shadows in Hades whom Odysseus fed with his blood.”— Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art*

Art of the First Cities features sculpture, jewelry, cylinder seals, clay tablets and other artifacts (about 400 items in all) from the world’s earliest complex society: Sumer in southern Iraq in the millennium after 3,000 BC.

While the geographical breadth of the exhibition extends from the Aegean Sea to the Persian Gulf to central Asia, at its core is exactly the same sort of artwork that has recently been plundered from or destroyed at archaeological sites and museums all over Iraq, beginning with the looting of Baghdad’s National Museum in April.

The continuing loss of this material to history and art is incalculable. As the exhibition shows, it is among humanity’s most precious creative work. Merely to view it or discuss it is to bring us closer to one of the major cultural catastrophes of the modern world. Whatever the intentions of its curators, *Art of the First Cities* is a protest against the policies of British and American imperialism in Iraq.

The Sumerians (they called themselves “the black-headed ones”) had, by the middle of the fourth millennium BC, become one of the most socially and technologically sophisticated peoples on earth. They farmed the arid land with canal-water from the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, constructed cities and large buildings, and were the first people we know of to write. They were perhaps the first even to organize their society into distinct social classes.

They were by no means unique in these developments: cities, monumental architecture, social stratification, and, in some cases, writing had emerged independently toward the end of the fourth millennium BC in Egypt, Peru, along the Indus river valley in Pakistan and later the Yellow River in China.

The Sumerians created a cultural region that the Greeks named Mesopotamia, the land between the rivers. This area, including roughly modern Iraq, parts of Iran at the foot of the Zagros mountains and southeastern Syria, had, more or less, a single, organic history that unfolded from the middle of the fourth millennium until the Persian conquest of 539 BC.

In spite of frequent invasions by less developed peoples, Mesopotamia possessed a unique economy, set of social relations and culture. The later Babylonians, Arameans and Assyrians all assimilated the culture initially prepared by the Sumerians.

In the Iraq of five thousand years ago, large, bureaucratic institutions centered on temples, and later royal palaces, dominated the social and political life of the Sumerian city-states (*uru* in Sumerian). They controlled a huge portion of the working population (whom we call, somewhat inaccurately “serfs,” farmers who had no or little land of their own) and the surplus that it produced.

The temple- or palace-serfs supported a ruling group of temple administrators, priests, or monarchs and palace officials, who lived at a much higher standard.

There were also groups of smaller or larger independent farmers, craftsmen and merchants. They had to pay taxes in the form of produce or labor-duties, but do appear to have enjoyed certain rights, at least in the earlier period, including even a kind of limited political representation.

The art of the Sumerian cities was almost universally oriented toward religious expression or the prerogatives of one or another monarch; that is, the sensibilities of the ruling classes dominated the work displayed in *Art of the First Cities*.

One of the first pieces in the exhibition that struck me was a small stone carving of a demon with a muscular male human body and the head of a lioness. (exhibit no. 14, magnesite or crystalline limestone, 8.8 x 6.2 cm., Proto-Elamite period in Iran [ca. 3200-2800 BC]). The twist of the upper body of this little figure is powerful and very human. Perhaps that is why it is startling to see the head of an animal on the shoulders.

Animals banqueting in what are believed to be religious ceremonies is a feature of the art of Elam [1], that came to be a motif in Sumerian art, as a number of cylinder seals in the exhibition show. (Cylinder seals, a unique Mesopotamian invention, were cylinders meant to be rolled in clay to seal property. Often the images have writing or mythological scenes on them.)

Some of most impressive objects in the exhibition are those removed from the city of Ur in the 1926-30 excavations lead by the British archaeologist Sir Leonard Woolley. The so-called Royal Graves of Ur contain mass graves, probably of monarchs and their servants who were put to death along with them. In spite of this gruesome fact, some of the artifacts found with the dead—three well-known objects in particular thought to date to the Early Dynastic period (ca. 2700-2334 BC)—are particularly beautiful:

* “The Standard of Ur” (no. 52, wood with shell, lapis lazuli, red limestone, 20 x 47 cm.) is an inlaid wooden box (the wood has been restored) wrongly thought by Woolley to have been carried on a pole. Its real use is unknown.

The box has three registers of figures on each side, on one, banqueting scenes with religious overtones; on the other, scenes from a war (chariots running people down and bound, naked captives). Their exact meaning is still unclear, but there is something moving about the juxtaposition of two sides of life in this early class society.

* “The Great Lyre” with bull’s head and inlaid front panel. (no. 58, gold, silver, lapis lazuli, shell, bitumen; head is 35.6 cm high, plaque is 35 cm). The eyeballs in the head are made of white shell and the lids and pupils are made of lapis lazuli, which matches the bull’s long flowing beard of lapis lazuli backed in silver.

The plaque underneath has several images of humans, mythological figures (a scorpion-man), and animals (a seated ass plays a lyre identical to the Great Lyre).

* “Puabi’s Headdress” (nos. 61a-e, comb with six-pointed stars, wreathes and ribbons; gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian; bands, etc. with accompanying huge gold earrings). There is a fringe of golden willow and beech leaves on the headdress. We do not understand the symbolism of the elaborate headgear, which was found in the grave with a cylinder seal of a woman named Queen Puabi.

Light seems to emanate from all of these things, as diverse as their uses may have been, and we can only wonder at their presence in their original world—a world with altogether less wealth than ours.

As the third millennium progressed, the Sumerian city more and more became dominated by a ruler, an *ensi* who became the largest landowner in the community. He waged war with an army equipped with bronze weapons and the ass-drawn chariot, the armored tank of its day.

In roughly the last third of the millennium our knowledge of history and social life becomes enriched through the many readable baked and unbaked clay tablets with writing: economic data, myths and even

personal letters. (The unbaked variety is precisely the sort of artifact that disintegrate when exposed to the air; an untold number is being destroyed in Iraq at present).

Some baked tablets are represented in the exhibition. There are not only tablets from Sumer in the third millennium (e.g., no. 321), but one containing a mathematical text (no. 322) or a record of monthly consignments of cloth from Syria. The exhibition has a number of tablets from the second millennium BC in the old Babylonian period (ca.1740 BC) including one of the famous “Sumerian King List” (no.330).

These also have a certain physical beauty in the incisions of the wedge-shaped writing, although the main value of these objects is the information they transmit—the “Sumerian King List” being one such important document. Not the least valuable piece of information is the fact that the different classes of Sumer came into conflict with each other.

In one document, King Urukagina of Lagash (r. 2351-2342) brags that he undertook broad social reforms to protect the poor from the incursions of palace officials. It is here that we encounter, for the first time in history, the word for freedom (*amargi*) [2].

In about 2350 BC, Sargon (Sharru-kin), speaking Akkadian, a distant cousin of Arabic and Hebrew, conquered the region, creating the world’s first known empire, a state with multiple cities ruled from a single capital, Agade, which he founded and which has not been located.

The art of the Sargonic period—especially the fragments of victory steles (pillars) incised with scenes of war (foreshadowing the Assyrian art of centuries later)—is well represented at the Metropolitan.

One realistic copper-alloy head of an Akkadian ruler (no. 132) stands out, though it serves to remind us that there is a gaping hole in the exhibition: the more detailed and truly stunning copper-alloy head of a ruler often thought to be one of Sargon’s descendants could not be borrowed from the National Museum in Baghdad. It was subsequently stolen during the April looting [3].

An invasion by mountaineers from the Zagros range of Iran overthrew Sargon’s dynasty. Once again rival city-states contended until Ur-Nammu, a Sumerian from the city of Ur, reconquered the region in 2112 BC. A new period of Sumerian florescence, splendidly documented in this exhibition, began.

While Ur-Nammu’s legacy is well represented here, it was the work of the very beginning of this “neo-Sumerian” period that really caught my attention. For some reason, many artifacts remain of a local ruler from the city of Lagash slightly before Ur-Nammu’s empire, named Gudea (r. 2141-2122 BC).

Many of these are solemn and moving statues of Gudea himself: solid, short-limbed in black diorite (no. 305, 44 cm high) or more elongated in blue-white paragonite (no. 306, 41 cm high). They seem less egotistical (after all, Gudea only ruled a city), and even less ferocious, than images of Sargon or Ur-Nammu. One in particular is captivating: a headless statue of Gudea, covered in cuneiform writing, holds in his lap the blueprint of a temple, one of the first known representations of an architectural plan.

The third millennium also saw the expansion of urban and class culture to other parts of the world. One of the remarkable things about this exhibition is the light it casts on developments in Syria, Iran, Anatolia, the Aegean, India and central Asia, with several rooms devoted to these regions.

The many artifacts from the city of Mari in Syria repaid close examination (as did the museum’s gallery notes on Mari): especially the lion-headed eagle (no. 81, lapis lazuli, gold, bitumen, copper alloy, 12.8 cm x 11.9 cm). The inhabitants of Mari seem to have been completely Sumerian in culture from an early period, but apparently Akkadian linguistically and ethnically.

Then there was the Harappan material from Pakistan. The Harappans built cities beginning in the fourth millennium in the Indus River valley. The material presented here from this key civilization that had (as yet

undeciphered) writing and cylinder seals does not compare well, at least aesthetically, with the Iraqi material, but its presence marks a valuable contrast between two early urban cultures that developed apart from each other, yet clearly according to the same basic social laws. The exhibition is quite enlightening concerning the trade between the Harappan cities and Mesopotamia.

There is more ceramic work in the non-Mesopotamian displays, and this is dimmed, somewhat unfairly, by the luster and precision of the artwork left behind in the graves of Ur, or by Sargon, Gudea or Ur-Nammu, though there were notable works from each culture represented here. The golden goblets and ewers from Anatolia (nos. 186, 187a, b, late third millennium BC) are some fine examples.

It was a pleasure to read the clear explanation in the gallery notes of the central Asian third-millennium cultures, accompanied by the large maps of trade routes stretching from modern Tajikistan into Oman in the Persian Gulf. [4].

Art of the First Cities posed some major challenges from the start. It was impossible to display items from the National Museum of Baghdad because of UN-imposed sanctions on Iraq. Cultural or political tensions with other countries also caused problems in borrowing objects.

According to the review of this exhibition in the *New York Times*, statues from Saudi Arabian collections, for example, were loaned reluctantly because of the prohibitions in Wahhabi Islam against depicting the human body. By all accounts, the curators did a painstaking job in putting months and months of work in several countries to secure specific pieces.

There are also challenges to the viewer: the huge amount of information obtained from clay tablets deeply enriches our view of Sumerian society, but this information can only be hinted at in an exhibition devoted to visual art.

In addition, one has to look patiently at a good number of miniatures, especially imprints from cylinder seals, to fully appreciate the mythological and aesthetic scope of the art on display here.

Visitors to this exhibition should also be sure to see the Metropolitan's Near Eastern galleries, with more third-millennium artifacts from Mesopotamia as well as the impressive Assyrian reliefs from the palace of Nineveh. Nineveh, near Mosul in Northern Iraq, has also been plundered in the last few months.

Notes:

1. Elam, whose capital was at Susa, was a part of Sumerian-Mesopotamian cultural region although the Elamite language does not seem to be related to Sumerian. The Elamites also began writing quite early in the still-undeciphered Proto-Elamite script.

2. Samuel Noah Kramer. *The Sumerians: Their History, Culture, and Character*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963, p. 79.

3. See Donald P. Hanson, "Art of the Akkadian Dynasty" in the exhibition catalogue, p. 194. Images and a description of this piece can be seen in the Oriental Institute's database of stolen Iraqi art at: <http://www.oi.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/53.htm>

4. See Maurizio Tosi and C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky, "Pathways across Eurasia" in the exhibition catalogue, pp. 347-376.



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