

Ancient Near Eastern Art

Time Period: 3500 BCE - 641 CE

Sumerian Art	c. 3500-2340 BCE
Babylonian Art	2000-1750 BCE
Assyrian Art	1200-612 BCE
Persian Art	c. 559-331

Enduring Understanding: Ancient Near Eastern art concentrates on royal figures and Gods.

Essential knowledge:

Ancient Near East Art takes place mostly in city-states of Mesopotamia.
Art from this region is one of the foundations of art history.

ENDURING UNDERSTANDING: Ancient Near East Art is inspired by religion; kings often assume divine attributes.

Essential knowledge:

Figures are constructed within stylistic conventions of the time, including hierarchy of scale, registers, and stylized human forms.
Ancient Near Eastern architecture is characterized by ziggurats and palaces.

Historical Background

The Ancient Near East is where almost everything began first: writing, cities, organized religion, organized government, laws, agriculture, bronze casting, even the wheel. It is hard to think of any other civilization that gave the world as much as the ancient Mesopotamians.

Large populations emerged in the fertile river valleys that lie between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. City centers boomed as urbanization began to take hold. Many different groups of people vied to control the central valleys, taking turns occupying the land and eventually relinquishing it to others. This layering of civilizations has made for a rich archeological repository of successive cultures whose entire history has yet to be uncovered.

Patronage and Artistic Life

Kings sensed from the beginning that artists could help glorify their careers. Artists could aggrandize images, bring Gods to life, and sculpt narrative tales that would outlast a king's lifetime. They could also write in cuneiform, and imprint royal names on everything from a cylinder seals to grand sculptures. This was the start of one of the most symbiotic relationships in art history between patron and artist.

Ancient Near East Art

One of the most fundamental differences between the prehistoric world and the civilizations of the Ancient Near East is the latter's need to urbanize; buildings were constructed to live, govern, and worship in. However, in the Near East, stone was at a premium and wood was scarce but earth was in abundant supply. The first great buildings of the ancient world, ziggurats, were made of baked mud, and they were tall, solid structures that dominated the flat landscape. Although mud needed care to protect it from erosion, it was a cheap material that could be resupplied easily.

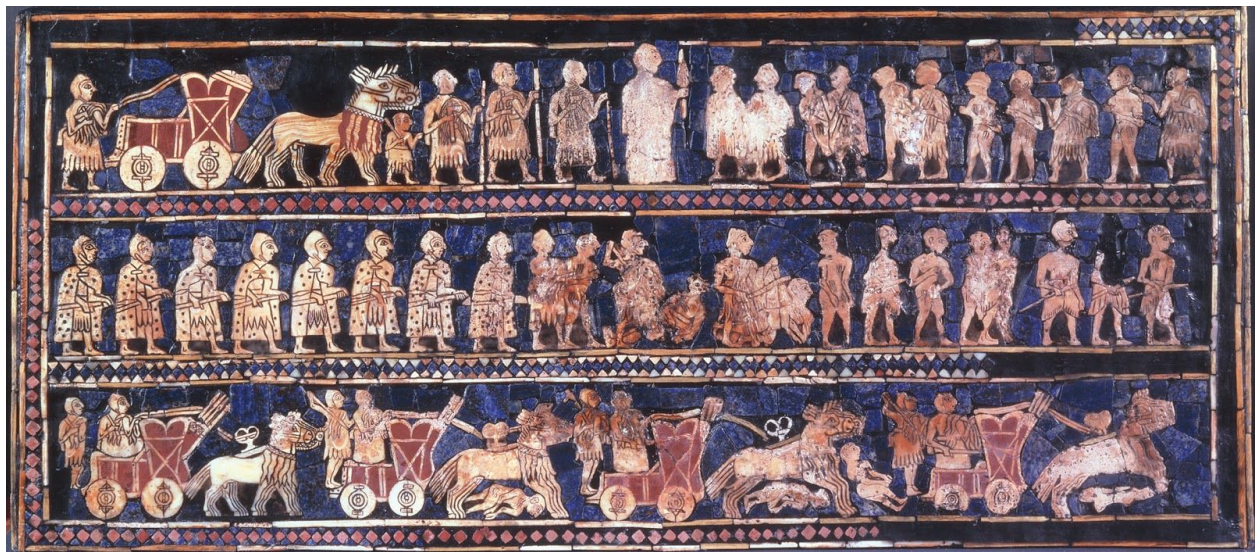
Human beings did not play a central role in prehistoric art. Lascaux has precisely one male figure but six hundred cave paintings of animals. A few human figures like the Anthropomorphic Stele populated a sculptural world full of animals and spirals. However, in the Near East artists were more likely to depict clothed humans with anatomical precision. Near Eastern figures are actively engaged in doing something: Hunting, praying, performing a ritual. One of the characteristics of civilizations that settle down rather than nomadically wander is the size of the sculpture they produce. Nomadic people cannot carry large objects on their migrations, but cities retain monumental objects as a sign of their permanence. Near Eastern sculptures could be very large—the lamassus, man-headed winged bulls, at Persepolis are gigantic. The interiors of palaces were filled with large-scale relief sculptures gently carved into stone surfaces.

The invention of writing enabled people to permanently record business transactions in a wedge-shaped script called **cuneiform**. Laws were written down, taxes were accounted for and collected, and the first written epic, *Gilgamesh*, was copied onto a series of tablets. Stories needed to be illustrated, making narrative painting a necessity. Walls of ancient palaces not only had sculptures of rulers and gods but also had narratives of their exploits.

Near Eastern art begins a popular ancient tradition of representing animals with human characteristics and emotions; some Sumerian animals have human heads. The personification of animals was continued by the Egyptians (the Sphinx) and the Greeks (the Minotaur), sometimes producing dreadful and harmful creations. There was also a trend to combine a hoofed winged animal, animal parts, as in the **Lamassu** (c. 700 B.C.E.) (Figure 2.5), with the human head at the top of a hoofed winged animal.

SUMERIAN ART

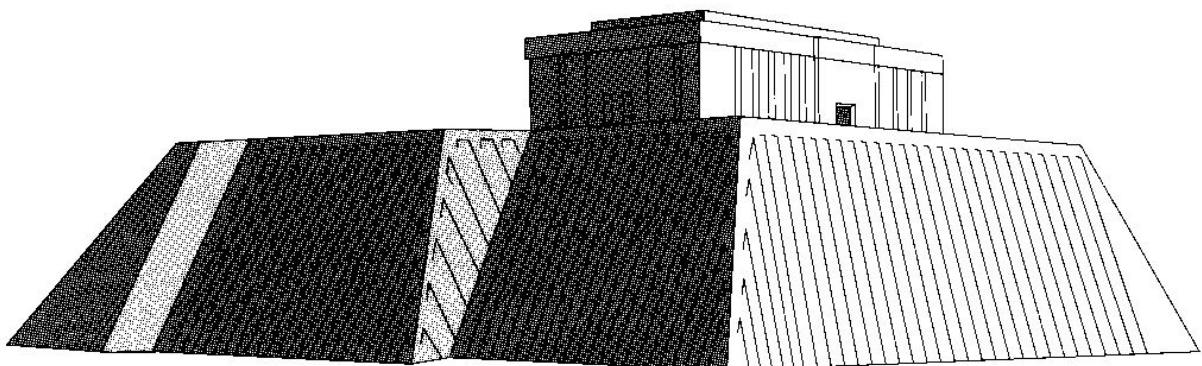
Sumerian art, as contrasted with prehistoric art, has realistic looking figures acting out identifiable narratives. Figures are cut from stone, with **negative space** hollowed out under their arms and between their legs. Eyes are always wide open; men are bare-chested and wear a kilt. Women have their left shoulder covered; their right is exposed. Nudity is a sign of debasement; only slaves and prisoners are nude. Sculptures were placed on stands to hold them upright. There was a free intermixing of animal and human forms, so it is common to see human heads on animal bodies, and vice versa. Humans are virtually emotionless. Important figures are the largest and most centrally placed in a given composition. Such an arrangement is called **hierarchy of scale** and can be seen in the **Standard of Ur** (c. 2600 B.C.E.),



in which the king is the tallest figure, located in the middle of the top register,

In the Sumerian world the gods symbolized powers that were manifest in nature. The local god was an advocate for a given city in the assembly of gods. Thus, it was incumbent upon the city to preserve the god and his representative, the king, as well as possible. The temple, therefore, became the center point of both civic and religious pride

White Temple and its ziggurat, c. 3500–3000 B.C.E., mud brick, Uruk, Iraq

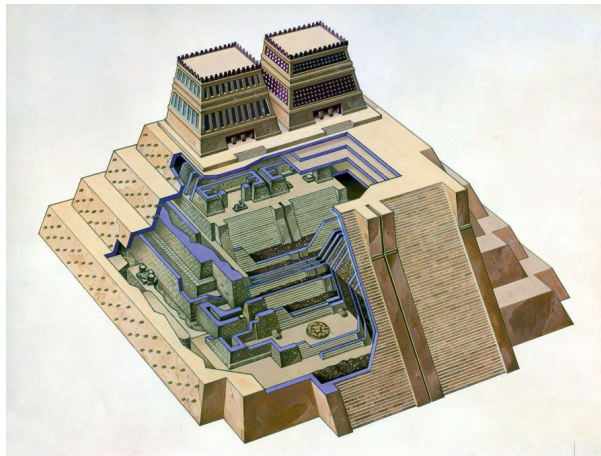


- Large settlement at Uruk of 40,000 based on agriculture and specialized labor.
- Deity was Anu, the god of the sky, the most important Sumerian deity
- Mud-brick building on a colossal scale
- Buttresses spaced across the surface to create a light and shadow pattern

- Whitewash used to disguise the mud appearance
- Tapers down so that rainwater washes off
- Temple on the top was small, set back, and removed from the populace; accessed reserved for royalty and clergy, only base of temple remains
- Temple interior contains a cella, and smaller rooms
- On top of the ziggurat is a terrace for outdoor rituals; temple for indoor rituals
- Entire form resembles a mountain; contrast of vast flat terrain and man-made mountain
- Gods descend from the heavens to a high place on earth, hence the Sumerians built ziggurats as high places
- Four corners oriented to the compass
- **Cross-Cultural Comparisons: Religious Centers on Hilltops**
 - Yaxchilán Structure 40



- Templo Mayor, Tenochtitlan



- Acropolis



Statues of votive figures, from the Square Temple at Eshnunna (modern Tell Asmar, Iraq), c. 2700 B.C.E., gypsum inlaid with shell and black limestone, Iraq Museum, Baghdad and the University of Chicago, Chicago



- Figures are of different heights, denoting hierarchy of scale

- Hands are folded in gesture of prayer
- Huge eyes in awe, spellbound, perhaps staring at the deity
- Men: bare upper chest; skirt from waist down; beard flows in ripple patterns; wear a belt

BABYLONIAN ART

Because of the survival of the famous Stele of Hammurabi (c. 1792–1750 B.C.E.) (Figure 2.4), Babylon comes down to us as a seemingly well-ordered state with a set of strict laws handed down from the god, Shamash, himself. Nothing was spared in the decoration of the capital Babylon, covered with its legendary hanging gardens and walls of glazed tile.

ASSYRIAN ART

Assyrian artists praised the greatness of their king, his ability to kill his enemies, his valor at hunting, and his masculinity. Figures are stoic even while hunting lions or defeating an enemy. Animals, however, possess considerable emotion. Lions are in anguish and cry out for help. This domination over a mighty wild beast expressed the authority of the king over his people and the powerful forces of nature.

Cuneiform appears everywhere in Assyrian art; it is common to see words written across a scene, even over the bodies of figures. Shallow relief sculpture is an Assyrian specialty, although the lamassus are virtually three-dimensional as they project noticeably from the walls they are attached to.

Lamassu, c. 720-705 B.C.E., alabaster, Louvre, Paris



PERSIAN ART

Persia was the largest empire the world had seen up to this time. As the first great em in history, it needed an appropriate capital as a grand stage to impress people at home and dignitaries from abroad. The Persians erected monumental architecture, huge audience halls, and massive subsidiary buildings for grand ceremonies that glorified their country and their rulers. Persian architecture is characterized by columns topped by two bull shaped capitals holding up a wooden roof.

Persepolis, c. 520-465 B.C.E., limestone, Iran

