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What/When Is a Portrait? Royal Images of the Ancient Near East[1]

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WHEN WE USE the word "portrait" in modern language(s), there is a strong tendency to assume naturalism in the resulting representation—affected by the photograph, by realism in painting, and by a long history of the genre in the West. Royal images of the ancient Near East— for example, Gudea of Lagash of ca. 2110 BCE (fig. 1), and Assurnasirpal II of Assyria of ca. 875 BCE (fig. 2) —would not necessarily fall into this category, however clear it may be that they represent identifiable rulers of the ancient Near East.

Our conventions for realism hearken back to Roman "portraiture," in which what is presumed to be a reasonable likeness of the deceased was represented on sarcophagus lids (fig. 3), and family busts were carried in procession, where the recognition of persons belonging to known lineages, hence "likeness," was culturally valued.[2] And to the Renaissance, where in a literary invention of 1519, the portrait of Baldassare Castiglione, author of the famous treatise *The Courtier*, was said to provide his wife with solace when the subject himself was absent.[3]

In an article entitled "L'effet de resemblance" [The Resemblance Effect], however, Henri Zerner has argued that various tricks may be employed to suggest verisimilitude in portrait painting.[4] He cites as an

[1] Read 24 April 2008.

[2] Susan Walker and Morris Bierbrier, *Ancient Faces: Mummy Portraits from Roman Egypt* (London, 1997); Maxwell L. Anderson and Leila Nista, *Roman Portraits in Context: Imperial and Private Likenesses from the Museo Nazionale Romano* (Rome, 1988).

[3] Text cited in R. Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991), 20. For the same period, see now F. Ilchman, *Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese: Rivals in Renaissance Venice* (Boston, 2009), esp. 197–200, which makes clear a link between the classical Roman and Renaissance periods, when lineage and family were sufficiently important that the individual represented should be identifiable by resemblance and manifest a lifelike quality.

[4] H. Zerner, "L'effet de resemblance," in *Il ritratto e la memoria. Materiali 3*, ed. Gentili et al., 111–21 (Rome, 1993).

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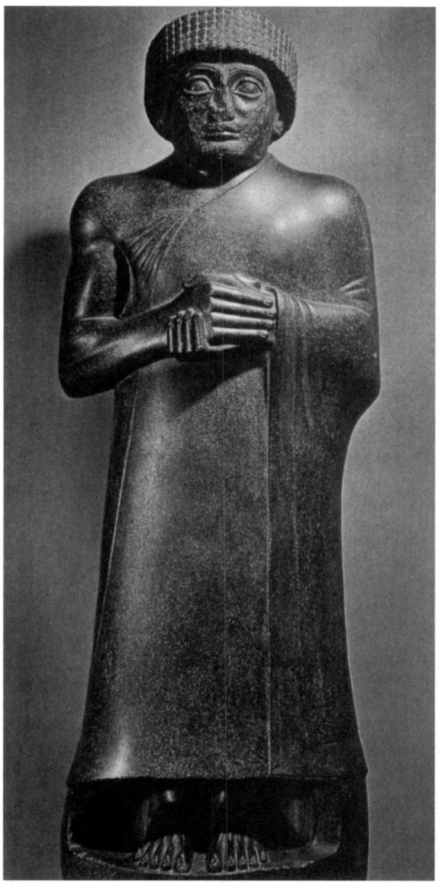

FIGURE 1. Standing sculpture of Gudea, ruler of Lagash, likely from the site of Tello, ancient Girsu. Louvre: AO 20164, purchase 1953; ht. 1.05 m. Courtesy, Département des antiquités orientales, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

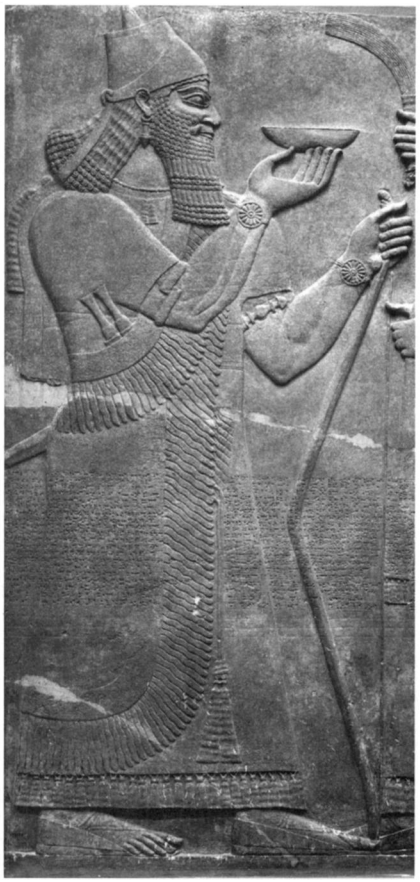

FIGURE 2. Relief of Assurnasirpal II, king of Assyria, Northwest Palace, Nimrud. The British Museum, WA 124569; ht. approx. 2 m. Courtesy, The Trustees, The British Museum, London.

example the expressiveness of the eyes in the Holbein portrait *Sir Thomas More* (Frick Collection, New York, painted 1577), calling it a maneuver, the "likeness *effect*"—based upon accepted convention rather than direct comparison between the image and its model. In such a case, when compared with another portrait by Holbein, for example, *Sir Henry Guildford* (Windsor Castle, painted 1527), one sees the same device deployed, and therefore what appears to be a strong family resemblance between the two men.

I have paid attention to such arguments, because it has been my mission to be able to bring the sculptural images of Mesopotamia into

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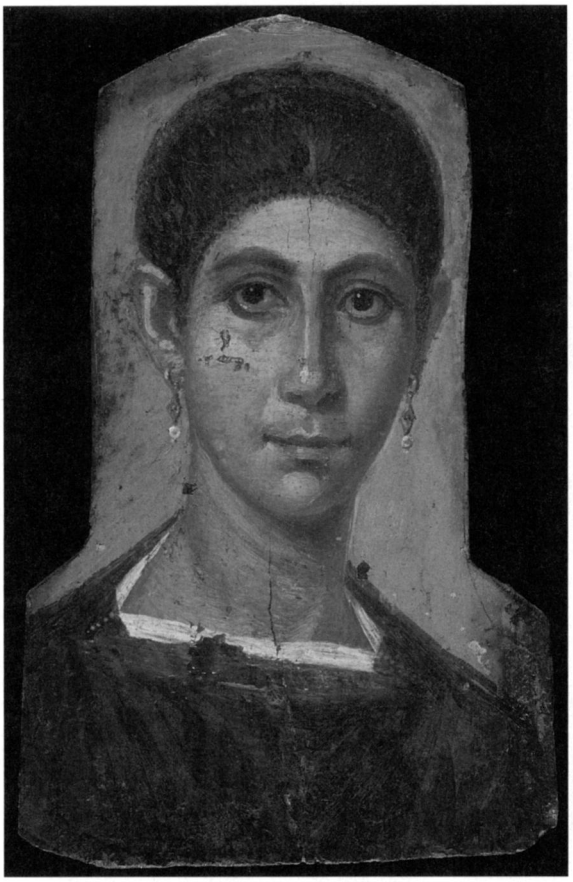

FIGURE 3. Roman mummy portrait, Fayum, Egypt, ca. 130–140 C.E. Harvard Art Museum, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Gift of Dr. Denman W. Ross, 1923.60.

art historical discourse. At issue is whether the identification of the images with the names of known, historical personages, and their endowment with purposeful, culturally-valued properties, is sufficient to warrant referring to these images as royal "portraits."

What is interesting about the Gudea statues, some twenty of which are known, is that there is a consistency in the appearance of his broad face and chin, such that even uninscribed images can be immediately classified as "Gudea" (e.g., fig. 4). Because that chin is recognizable, it has sometimes led to the presumption that it maps a reality in the facial physiognomy of the historical Gudea.[5] I myself have argued in the past that, by normative Western definition, this is only sufficient to

[5] Betty Schlossman, "Portraiture in Mesopotamia in the Late 3rd and Early 2nd Millennia B.C., Part I," *Archiv für Orientforschung* 26 (1978–79): 56–77, and "Portraiture . . . , Part II," *AfO* 28 (1981–82): 143–170; Agnès Spycket, *La statuaire du Proche-Orient ancien* (Leiden, 1981).

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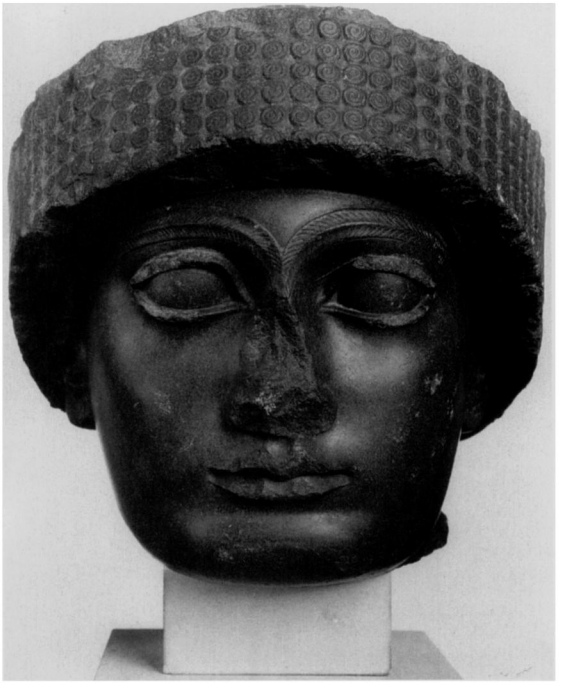

FIGURE 4. Head of Gudea. Louvre: AO 13; ht. 0.23 m. Courtesy, Département des antiquités orientales, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

claim a "signature trait" as signifier of the person, rather than true portraiture.[6]

But let us step back from Mesopotamia for a moment, to establish the frame within which we might pursue this problem further. Art historian Richard Brilliant has taken the position (in a 1990 exhibition on African art, as well as in his own book, *Portraiture*, of 1991) that portraits "concretize the individual portrayed," allowing for the possibility that "the . . . 'idea' of a particular human being . . . can be both represented and preserved."[7] In just that way, Gertrude Stein defended the distortions of Picasso's early Cubism by insisting that the "idea" of things portrayed could be even more true than the mere representation of what the eye saw. Of her own portrait, painted by Picasso around 1907 and photographed with her by Man Ray in 1922 (fig. 5), it was said that *she* had grown over time to look like *it*, not the other way around![8]

For Brilliant, although descriptive content in portraiture can be minimal, it cannot be absent altogether. The necessary condition is that "a portrait requires identification as the justification of its purpose";

[6] I. J. Winter, review of A. Spycket, *La statuaire*, in *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 36 (1984): 107–08.

[7] Brilliant, *Portraiture*, esp. 13–18.

[8] Ibid., 149–50 and fig. 72.

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FIGURE 5. Man Ray, *Photograph of Gertrude Stein*, 1922

and in order to achieve this, "some degree of resemblance, however construed, seems essential." He further speaks of complicity between the subject and the artist in creating and then perpetuating "an image" of the subject in both the representational and the public relations sense.

In such a framework, Gudea's chin does indeed become his "signature element"—which, in concert with the often inscribed label of his name and titles on the body of the statue, allows for both recognition and the perpetuation of his chosen "PR image." The signature element is something quite familiar from ancient Egypt as well. There, specific elements in the face and/or physiognomy of Old Kingdom "reserve heads," funerary statuary or relief images (as here, from the Fourth Dynasty tomb of Nofer, fig. 6) were reproduced as characteristic of the individual.[9] And indeed, the same questions regarding the appropriate

[9] For discussion, and images of both the reserve head and relief of Nofer, see William Stevenson Smith, *Ancient Egypt as represented in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1960), figs. 14 and 15, and p. 36. In general, see A. O. Bolshakov, "The Ideology of the Old Kingdom Portrait," *Göttingen Miszellen* 117/118 (1990): 89–142.

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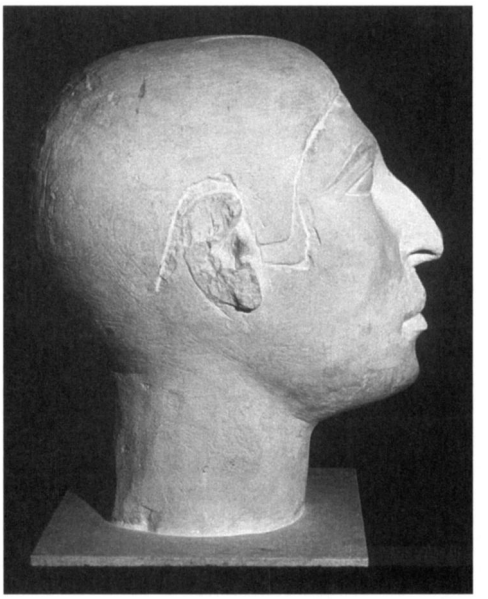

FIGURE 6. Relief of Nofer, Giza; Fourth Dynasty Egypt, Old Kingdom. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: 07.1006.

or inappropriate use of the term "portraiture" have been raised with respect to Egyptian art in general.[10] In the teleology of Western art, at least up to the abstraction of the twentieth century, moves toward ever greater naturalism/realism were deemed of great value.[11] An unusual moment of super-realistic representation in Old Kingdom Egypt was then especially celebrated, as when the plastered and tinted portrait bust of a Fourth Dynasty official, one Ankh-af, was not only seen as high art, but was cast and dressed in the 1940s to illustrate that he was so real one could imagine bumping into him on the street (figs. 7 and 8)![12]

In more recent work, I have taken another tack, and sought in the lexicon of Sumerian and Akkadian, the languages of ancient Mesopotamia, terms related to representation and likeness, in order to consider

[10] Lawrence M. Berman, "The Image of the King in Ancient Egypt," in *Pharaohs: Treasures of Egyptian Art from the Louvre*, ed. L. Berman and B. Letellier, 23–24 (Cleveland, 1996).

[11] Apparent, for example, in E. H. Gombrich, *The Story of Art*, 13th edition (Oxford, 1978), and in many survey texts of the history of art. A critical response may be seen in Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), esp. 12.

[12] Dows Dunham, "An Experiment with an Egyptian Portrait," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts* 41 (1943): 10. Similarly, heads of the Twelfth Dynasty king Sesostris III, with tired eyes and lined faces, were thought to represent naturalistic renderings, until it was understood that the details referred to a specific trope of kingship in the Middle Kingdom: that of the deeply concerned ruler at work for his people (see Berman, "The Image of the King in Ancient Egypt," 1996).

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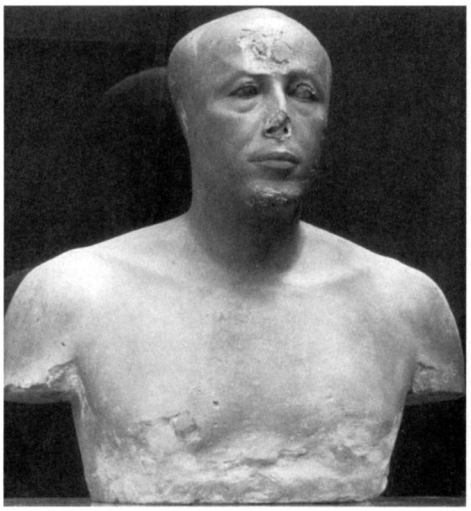

FIGURE 7. Bust of Ankh-af, Giza; Fourth Dynasty Egypt, Old Kingdom. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: 27.442.

FIGURE 8. Cast of Ankh-af, dressed by curator Dows Dunham, 1942

how the phenomenon of the royal image *per se* could have been understood in its own time. It turns out, for example, that Gudea's well-developed arm was not simply an indicator of a moment in which sculptural modeling was an artifact of a period *style* (fig. 9). Rather, the arm signaled the underlying Sumerian logogram for "strength," a necessary attribute of the ruler. Indeed, among Gudea's divinely given attributes, "*arm* put by the god" means he was endowed with strength, just as his large ears signified the ruler, "wide of ear," i.e., one who was wise and could be attentive, while his barrel chest signified one who was broadly endowed with life and vitality. In short, the stylistic traits were to be read as part of the *iconography* of the image.[13]

Just so the Yoruba image of Queen Victoria, executed shortly after her jubilee portrait was circulated in 1887. As Jean Borgatti has shown, the wooden sculpture manifests in its changes not the inability of the copyist, but the re-inscribing of a different set of cultural values: the forehead raised as appropriate to a Yoruba convention of the head as

[13] See, on this, I. J. Winter, "The Body of the Able Ruler: Toward an Understanding of the Statues of Gudea," in *Dumu-E$_2$-Dub-ba-a: Studies in Honor of Åke J. Sjöberg*, ed. H. Behrens et al., 573–83 (Philadelphia, 1989); also "The Affective Properties of Styles: An Inquiry into Analytical Process and the Inscription of Meaning in Art History," in *Picturing Science/Producing Art*, ed. C. A. Jones and P. G. Galison (New York and London, 1998), 55–77.

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FIGURE 9. Seated Gudea, from Tello. Louvre: AO 3293 + 4108; ht. 0.45 m. Courtesy, Département des antiquités orientales, Musée du Louvre, Paris.

the seat of wisdom; the hand emphasized to demonstrate strength; the breasts made prominent to indicate womanly qualities.[14]

The whole Gudea, then, not unlike compartmentalized Charles Atlas ads for body-building common in the comic books of the 1940s and 1950s, was to add up to more than the sum of its parts: *the body of the able ruler*—readable as such by any contemporary. It is perhaps not surprising that similar recognizable physical markers of leadership—strong arm, broad chest, ample proportions—were still evident in local areas of Iraq in the early 1960s of our era, as documented in photographs taken by archaeologist Donald P. Hansen during the years he was excavating at the site of Nippur (fig. 10).

For rhetorical purposes, one could engage in similar plays with the imagery of the Assyrian ruler Assurnasirpal II as compared to contemporary Saudi sheikhs. Twelve hundred years after Gudea, and the ruler of a polity no longer a "city state," but an expanding "territorial state"

[14] J. M. Borgatti, "African Portraits," in *Likeness and Beyond: Portraits from Africa and the World*, ed. J. M. Borgatti and R. Brilliant, p. 33 and figs. 15–16 (New York, 1990).

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FIGURE 10. Local village chief, Sheikh Adi, Iraq. Photograph by Donald P. Hansen, 1961.

on the verge of empire, Assurnasirpal was also coded for leadership in his images. He is depicted on the architectural walls of his palace (fig. 2), in three-dimensional statues (fig. 11), in free-standing stone stelae (fig. 12), and on rock reliefs that served as billboards at key geographical points across the realm.[15]

All of these representations fall into the same linguistic category in Sumerian and Akkadian, marked by a single term, meaning "image" [Sum. alam; Akk. *ṣalmu*]. When Assurnasirpal refers to "this image" in the text inscribed directly upon his Ninurta Temple stela (fig. 12), it is clear he is labeling himself for perpetuity. But when, in this and other texts, the royal voice describes the images as "having my (form or) fea-

[15] See on this, I. J. Winter, "Art *in* Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology," in *Assyria 1995*, ed. S. Parpola and R. M. Whiting, 359–81 (Helsinki, 1997); also Ann Shafer, "Assyrian Royal Monuments on the Periphery: Ritual and the Making of Imperial Space," in *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context*, ed. Jack Cheng and Marian H. Feldman, 133–60 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2007). For a later Assyrian ruler, see G. Sence, "Dur-Sharrukin: Le portrait de Sargon II. Essai d'analyse structuraliste des bas-reliefs du palais découvert à Khorsabad," *Revue des Etudes Anciennes* 109 (2007): 429–48.

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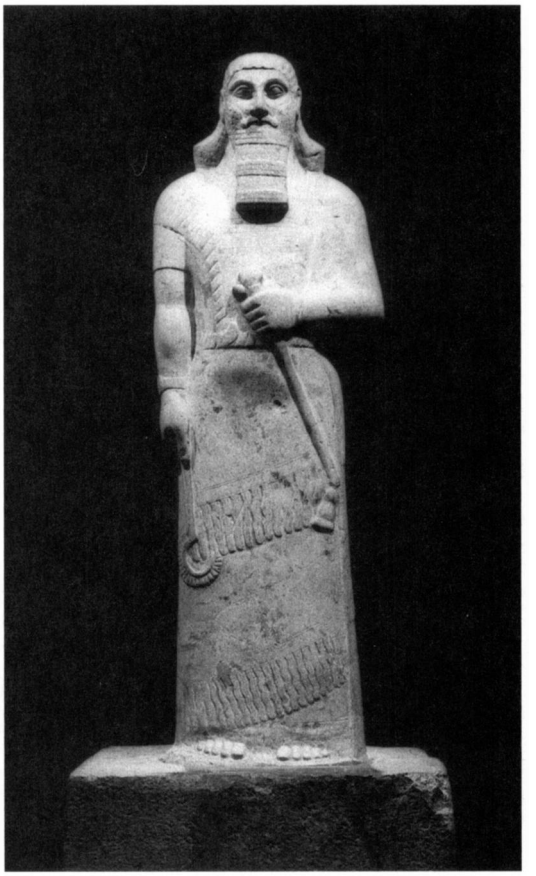

FIGURE 11. Statue of Assurnasirpal II, Ishtar Sharrat-niphi Temple, Nimrud. The British Museum, WA 118871; ht. 0.78 m. Courtesy, The Trustees, The British Museum, London.

tures," or a royal image "in my likeness," or "resembling my (own) features," it is clear that some sort of visual relationship between the king's physical person and the image that bears his name is being suggested.[16]

This vocabulary engages our own category of "portraiture," in which the finished image is judged in terms of whether or not it is a good likeness of the subject. It is certainly true that the image of Assurnasirpal on his stelae and in his free-standing statues is recognizable as stylistically similar to his images on the relief carvings. But did the king actually *look* like that?

In Western art, when we speak of a "portrait," we look mainly to the face, and rather expect that Rembrandt at a certain stage of his life actually looked like his own self-portait, or that Gilbert Stuart really

[16] Once again, very similar issues are raised with respect to vocabulary and imagery in Egyptian art, as discussed by Berman, "The Image of the King in Ancient Egypt," 25.

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FIGURE 12. Detail of the Stela of Assurnasirpal II, known as "The Great Monolith," Ninurta Temple, Nimrud. The British Museum, WA 118805; ht. 2.92 m. Courtesy, The Trustees, The British Museum, London.

captured the likeness of George Washington (fig. 13).[17] Yet, for all of the Assyrian rulers' vocabulary suggesting verisimilitude, we do not really expect that the array of ninth-century BCE Assyrian royal sculptures, including Assurnasirpal's almost identically depicted son, Shalmaneser III, represents accurate, realistic portrayals of the kings whose names the images bear. How, then, can we understand the Assyrians' claim to likeness, resemblance, appearance, when compared with our own judgment of the images as idealized, undifferentiated, and fairly uniform?

[17] Although when a version of that same head appears on an eleven-foot-high marble sculpture of Washington at the Smithsonian, carved by Horatio Greenough in 1840, we are generally willing to acknowledge that the semi-nude and draped figure with raised right arm is to be assigned to the heroic tradition of Rome, toga, gesture, and all, from which we are to read his qualities of classical leadership.

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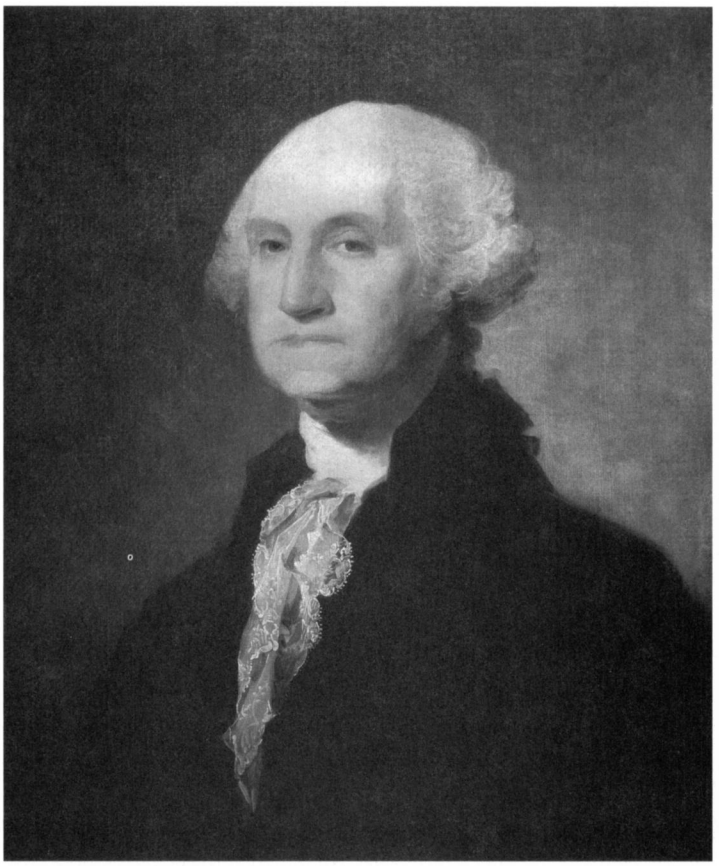

FIGURE 13. Gilbert Stuart, *Portrait of George Washington*. Fine Arts Collection, American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia.

As with Gudea, we are told in inscriptions of Assyrian kings that the gods, to quote two examples, "gave me a splendid figure and made my strength great" and "intervened to alter my appearance to lordly appearance and perfected my features, thereby making of me one fit to rule."[18] Unless one accepts actual divine intervention in the physical body, we must understand that some code is being referenced—less dependent upon visual verification in the physiognomy of the intended referent than in the attributes.

Once again, I believe that the key lies in the ancient lexicon, to which our translations must pay careful attention. Assyrian royal inscriptions often refer to what has been transcribed as the king's "royal image." If

[18] A. K. Grayson, *Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia 2: Assyrian Rulers of the Early First Millennium* [=RIMA 2] (Toronto, 1991), 147, ll. 6–7.

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this were the proper literal translation, one would expect that to the Akkadian word for image, *ṣalmu*, we would find appended the Akkadian word for "king," *šarru*: that is, *ṣalam-šarri*, "image of the king." But instead, what we find appended is the Akkadian word for "king*ship*," *šarrūtu*, as in the compound: *ṣalam- šarrūtia*, "image *of my kingship*"—perhaps translated better as "image *in my office of kingship*." In short, we are told quite literally that this is not a private, but an *official* image.[19]

The ruler's appearance, then, declared to have been molded by the gods in order to make him recognizable as one fit to rule, suggests that his "ideal" qualities were paramount, not the realia consistent with modern notions of portraiture. In the representation, in addition to those signature elements marking the physiognomy, there would also have been signs external to the person: headgear, clothing, accoutrements. These markers would, to the ancients, have been so inseparable from identity that recognition of the office, if not the office holder, was immediate. And at that point, it is the textual inscription *on* the image that particularizes the holder of office into a historical personage.

Seen from this perspective, it must be stressed that the term "portrait" as it is used, and as it signifies a visual genre, is seriously polysemic. Our argument for including images of Mesopotamian rulers in the category is based upon the premise that their attendant qualities and attributes can be seen alongside many rulers of history. Images of the emperor Augustus—for example, the Prima Porta statue of the first century CE—often show the ruler cast in a Classical Greek visual mold, in order to ascribe to him all of the classical virtues appropriate to Roman rulership.[20] Similarly, Hyacinthe Rigaud's state portraits of Louis XIV or XV of France (e.g., fig. 14) convey highly idealized notions of the qualities of the rulers. In fact, it is Louis Marin's study of Louis XIV, *Le portrait du roi* (Portrait of the King), that has most influenced me in work on the royal sculptures of Gudea and the Assyrians. Marin argued that the king in his portrait must be seen as three-fold: first, the specific historical personage—*Louis*, fourteenth or fifteenth of that name; second, the exemplar of the institution of kingship, *le roi*; and third, the *sacral embodiment*, sanctioned by God and pope to rule.[21] By Marin's account, given the warts and bumps and greying hair of reality, the king is ideal *only* in his image!

We come back, then, to Henri Zerner's proposition that physical likeness is not a necessary condition of the portrait; that, rather than a

[19] Winter, "Art *in* Empire," 365.

[20] P. Zanker, *The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus*, trans. A. Shapiro (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1988), p. 190, fig. 148a.

[21] Louis Marin, *Portrait of the King*, trans. Martha M. Houle (Dexter, Mich., 1988), esp. 13.

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FIGURE 14. Detail, Hyacinthe Rigaud, *Portrait of Louis XIV* (1701). Versailles.

retinal comparison between the image and the model, *cognitive recognition* constitutes a sufficient test. This notion of recognition rather than literal resemblance requires a (re-)definition of the term portrait from traditional Western usage, implying that what is essential is an intention to reference a particular individual, accompanied by socially accepted criteria for identification. It also evokes Nelson Goodman's important move in the face of the difficulty of defining "What is art?", which was to shift the question to "*When* is art?"[22] For, once one asks, "When is a portrait?" then Zerner's criteria become both necessary and sufficient.

I find that I *am* willing to employ the term "portrait" with this gloss. For *if* the royal appearance as manifest in the ruler's image in

[22] N. Goodman, *Ways of World-Making* (Indianapolis, 1978), 57–70, esp. 66–67.

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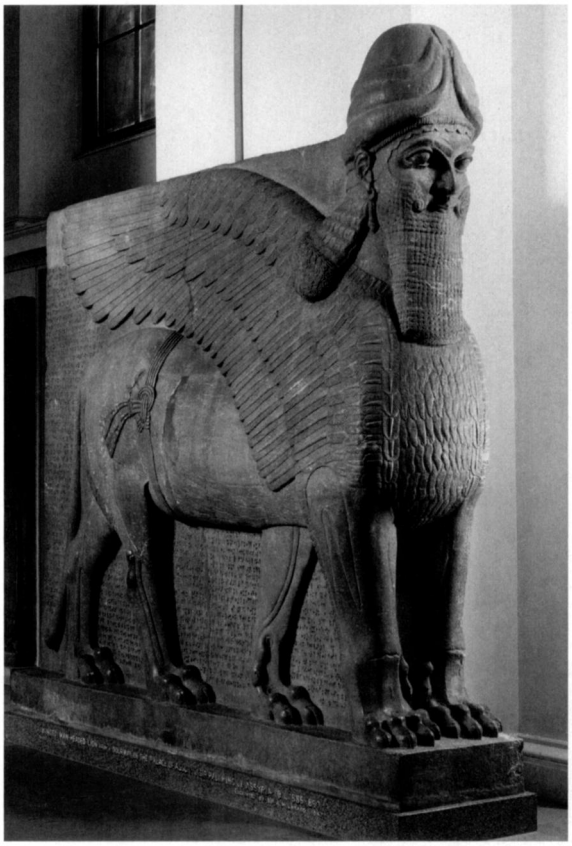

FIGURE 15. Human-headed Gateway Colossus, Northwest Palace, Nimrud. The British Museum, WA 118801. Courtesy, The Trustees, The British Museum, London.

Mesopotamia was constituted by elements and qualities tied to his office, and coded for ideal values rather than absolute physiognomical likeness, then what we have here may not be an individualized portrait of *the* king; but it is certainly the "portrait of *a* king." And let there be no confusion: by the coded references to beard, headgear, attributes, garment, and stature, it is the "portrait of an *Assyrian king*."

This comes quite close to late antique theology regarding "God-befitting" imagery, where the Sumerian or Assyrian images would then be understood as "ruler- or king-befitting."[23]

One more interpretive move may be made before closing. An addi-

[23] See on this, M. Barasch, *Icon: Studies in the History of an Idea* (New York and London, 1992), esp. chap. 4, "Resemblance," 69–71. More recently, with respect to the portrait itself, Paul Barlow, in "The Imagined Hero as Incarnate Sign: Thomas Carlyle and the Mythology of the 'National Portrait' in Victorian Britain," *Art History* 17 (1994): 517–45, has raised the paradox of portraiture as a key to identity and character when, obviously, the sitter him/herself, no less than the artist, can exercise agency in the way the subject is represented (dealt with as well in Winter, "Art *in* Empire," 367f.).

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tional hint of the rhetorical value of an image coded for ideal qualities and attributes may be gleaned from textual references that actually compare the appearance of the king to that of a god. In an Assyrian letter to a ruler, for example, a priest not only acknowledges the king as "the chosen one of the great gods," but closes with the phrase "The king is the perfect likeness of the god."[24] If this is understood as something more than courtly hyperbole, it is possible to suggest that it may actually have been important for the king to be perceived as possessing, and *his image to be perceived as manifesting*, traits undiluted by personal idiosyncrasy and therefore *necessarily* idealized.

Here, I believe, we are provided with a glimpse into the politics of representation. What we are presented with in the image of the king "in his office of kingship" is a semiotic, rather than a mimetic, representation. The king, in accord with his craftsmen, is, after all, in a perfect position to determine that his image should resemble the divine figures equally marking his palace and temples, by ensuring that the gods' images are subject to the same criteria of representation as his own. This is evident in a comparison of the relief images of Assurnasirpal with those of semi-divine genii and human-headed composite animal colossi from the same royal palace (compare, for example, figs. 2 and 12 with figs. 15–16). Specifically, the self the ruler presents through his (re-)presentation, or representation, is that very divinely molded persona possessed of the authority he would wish politically, through similarity to the (semi-)divine figures that grace his palace's sculptural program.

This is, in the end, Heidegger's "work of the artwork *as work*": the royal image, hence, the king, as "the perfect likeness of the god," possessing signs for all of the attributes, external and internal, appropriate to the exercise of rule.[25]

I certainly do not advocate cutting down the Assyrian reliefs to meet the formatting and size standards of Western, largely painted, portraits (as was the case in the nineteenth century with a number of the seven-foot slabs from Nimrud—for example, in the collections of the Harvard University Art Museums, or the Kimball Art Museum,

[24] S. Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars* (State Archives of Assyria X) (Helsinki, 1993), p. 166: 207, reverse ll. 12–13; pp. 180–81: 228, ll. 18–20. See on this also Peter Machinist, "Kingship and Divinity in Imperial Assyria," in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion*, Brown Judaic Studies, ed. Gary M. Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis, 152–88 (Providence, 2006).

[25] Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (New York, 1971), 36 (italics original). It also replicates what has been argued by Jeremy Tanner with respect to late Republican Roman and Greek portraiture: the role of the portrait statue within broader social hierarchies of authority, legitimacy, and power. J. Tanner, "Portraits, Power and Patronage in the Late Roman Republic," 46.

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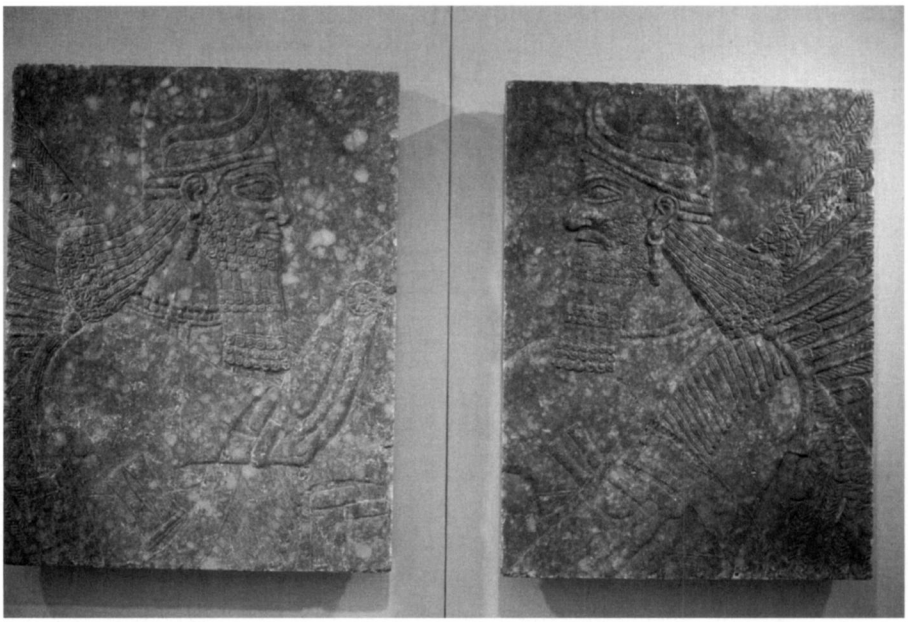

FIGURE 16. Reliefs of Winged Genii, Northwest Palace, Nimrud. Ancient Art Gallery, Kimball Art Museum, Fort Worth, Tex. Photograph by the author.

Fort Worth, Texas, fig. 16). Nevertheless, in the end, I would argue for retaining the term, and the genre, "portrait," in discussing these images —not because of any obvious truth in representation, but rather because "portrait" in our world constitutes a special case: the three-way relationship between image, identifiable referent, and meaning. By considering *when* an image was intended to function as a portrait, then, we are pressed further to grapple with the larger questions of the presentation and representation of known historical figures that bring the Mesopotamian sculptures not just into the survey texts, but into the discourses of art history.

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