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(HPAH7016) Art and Representation in the Ancient Near East

Assessment 3: Aesthetics (3500 words)

This essay is less an argument of what aesthetics is and more to do with what counts aesthetically in the study of ancient objects. The certain aspects of aesthetics described below are applied to two groups of statues, not so distant in time from each other and belonging to the same geographic location, which represent a shift in style, namely those of the Tell Asmar Hoard and the statues of the ruler Gudea.

Bence Nanay in *Aesthetics: A Very Short Introduction* opens with the lexicological break down of the word aesthetics, stemming from ‘the Greek word *‘aesthesis’* meaning “perception”¹. Nanay continues highlighting that the ‘concept of ‘Aesthetics’ was the brainchild of the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten (1714 - 1762) and that ‘what he [Baumgarten] meant by it [his term ‘Aesthetics’] was precisely the study of sensory experiences (*scientia cognitionis sensitivae*)’². With this in mind, is the application of the philosophical doctrine of Aesthetics a Western practice and concern alone? Of course, this is not the case (as Nanay continues to highlight in his ...*Introduction*), and caution should be taken when dealing with Western firsts and claims of invention. William Hazlitt, the English 19th Century essayist, painter, and philosopher, opens the matter to include all of Mankind (given that we all have sense). Hazlitt, in his essay ‘*On The Pleasure of Painting*’, states that, ‘to do any thing, to dig a hole in the ground, to plant a cabbage, to hit a mark, to move a shuttle, to work a pattern, - in a word, to attempt to produce any effect, and to *succeed*, has something in it that gratifies the love of power, and carries off the restless activity of the mind of man.’³ That the brain craves information, via the senses, and with that information creates and produces, is universal.

Though certain opinions have been written as statements of fact within the assignment, that which is objective remains personal. There are no absolutes.

An aesthetic evolves but has a beginning, ‘the history of the great works of art tells us about their antecedents, their realization in the age of the artist, their potentially eternal afterlife in succeeding generations.’⁴ Universal narratives remain unchanged, birth-life-death-afterlife, war and peace, love and loss, they can be found in the ‘Art’ of any tradition, whether insider communication (and comprehension) or purposeful revelation to the outside world, for all foreign states contemporary and until the end of time. However, as LSP Detective Rustin ‘Rust’ Cohle reasons in a moment of self-reflection, ‘I suppose I could have been a painter, a historian, old scenes new details’.⁵ Sensory responses/reactions possibly differ with each new set of interactions with an object. Sometimes these ideas translate, or cross-pollinate, sometimes they do not. Often, they can be the ideal of a collective, often

¹ Nanay, 2019, p.2.

² Nanay, 2019, p.2.

³ Hazlitt, 2000, p.22.

⁴ Benjamin, 2015, p.72.

⁵ Pizzolatto, 2014.

they are individual and personal. Things may be alluring at first sight, though an appreciation can also be learnt over time. For example, early in *The Dharma Bums* trip Jack Kerouac recounts a passing conversation between the semi-fictional characters of himself 'Ray Smith' and 'Rol Sturlason' (Will Petersen) about the 'Ryoanji rock garden of Shokokuji monastery in Kyoto', described by Ray as '... nothing but old boulders placed in such a way, supposedly mystically aesthetic, as to cause thousands of tourists and monks every year to journey there to stare at the boulders in the sand and thereby gain peace of mind'.⁶ Less cynically, perhaps more optimistically (as the arrangement presents something/some thing worth considering), Rol, to Ray's question "'Well who placed them in that certain way that's so great?'"', offers "'Nobody knows, some monk, or monks, long ago. But there is a definite mysterious form in the arrangement of rocks. It's only through form that we can realize emptiness.'"'.⁷ This then leads to the concept of emptiness which is complex and has many connotations from the actual to the spiritual [for an example see: Peteet, 2011]. The space and sense of place that the object helps to create should be considered in the study of aesthetics (for example, a museum) and as part of the object's meaning [HPAH7016 Assignment 1 Part 2].

The study of stereotypes can tell us about the 'in-group' (stereotypical ideas of/projected on to themselves), their 'insecurities, fears, concerns, and worldviews'.⁸ However, stereotypes projected from one group on to another create little more than a pastiche, and mimic, and therefore provide little accurate information to the 'out-group' (those being projected on), though still offers greater information on the group projecting.⁹ Therefore, as Douglas Bailey suggests, the study of the stereotypes that a particular group project on themselves (and those they project on another group) can be informative of ideals within (and the making up of) a society's constructs (for example, a particular group's ideas of race, sex, beauty, etc.).¹⁰ Also, as Bailey explains, the act of stereotyping itself, at a base level, can aid in the formation of 'in-group'/'out-group' social groups.¹¹ These ideas clearly have both applications, and implications, in terms of the study of aesthetics. The practice and repetition, which then become an artist/craftsman's peculiar trait or signature style, which is identifiable (from an Art History/Archaeological standpoint) aid in separating the work of one artist from another.¹² This also becomes (to those closer in time) a source of inspiration, an education, and imitation highlighting the process of the development of a theme.¹³ Gombrich suggests that certain 'elements of gesture, that concern the student of art, are the traces of the artist's own emotional state, what might be called the graphological aspect'.¹⁴ Graphology is 'the study of handwriting especially for the purpose of character analysis'.¹⁵ What Gombrich is suggesting then is that the artist's personality, mental (and perhaps physical) state can be discerned by studying the objects he/she creates. Therefore, an object representing a state of devotion is or can be seen or reasoned to be a votive object on behalf of its maker. As

⁶ Kerouac, 2018, p.19.

⁷ Kerouac, 2018, p.19.

⁸ Bailey, 2012, pp.252-253.

⁹ Bailey, 2012, pp.252-253.

¹⁰ Bailey, 2012, pp.252-253.

¹¹ Bailey, 2012, pp.252-253.

¹² Birtacha and Zacharioudakis, 2000.

¹³ Birtacha and Zacharioudakis, 2000.

¹⁴ Gombrich, 1966, p.393.

¹⁵ merriam-webster.com

Gombrich states, 'for the representational element of art, of course, mirrors life at least up to a point. It makes use of gestures that have their meaning in human intercourse.'¹⁶

The Tell Asmar Statues (Early Dynastic Period c.2900 – 2350 BC) and the Statue of Gudea Praying c.2120 BC

Maurice Dimand suggests 'the oriental sculptor followed certain strict formulas and conventions of an abstract character', as opposed to, Dimand's example, the later 'Greek artist, whose ideal was a naturalistic representation of the human body.'¹⁷ However, this 'abstraction' is milder compared to the representation of the human body of the much later still modern period's Cubism phase [see HPAH7016 Assessment 1 'Object Analysis: The Standard of Ur'].

With regards to the statuettes pictured in **Fig.2**, Maurice Dimand states that the 'bearded male figure, the largest of all [the figures found buried in the temple], may be identified, by peculiarities in the treatment of the hair and eyes and by symbols on the base, as the god Abu', the 'female figure, the next largest in size, probably represents the mother goddess'.¹⁸ The rest of the accompanying figures Dimand describes as 'worshippers' [the whole 'hoard' pictured in **Fig.1**].¹⁹ Dimand describes aspects of the rigid formula that can be found recurring in the construction of all the figures, 'the figure[s are] reduced to simple geometric forms', the modelling of the forward facing body displays broad shoulders to tapering downward torso, pointed elbows, 'hands... clasped in front of the chest in the conventional attitude of adoration', similar dress code (separate male and female attire) covering the lower half of the body with forward facing feet exposed beneath.²⁰

The statuettes' heads also follow set formulae (as can be viewed in the images below **Fig.1** and **2**), for example two themes according to Dimand, some of 'the male figures... wear locks and a beard, indicating perhaps a Semitic racial type in contrast to the Sumerian, which is usually portrayed with clean-shaven head and face'.²¹ Interesting features are the pattern of cuts in the material to add realism, replicating the styles of the day, to the hair, the glaring eyes accentuated with inlays of various materials (including shell), pronounced 'beaklike' noses, and 'a mouth which consists of two projecting ridges'.²²

Dimand concludes that a greater level of 'realism' was achieved, with regards to the representation of facial features and other prominently expressed body parts, by the 'monumental stone sculptures' of the later 'Gudea period – about 2400 B.C.' (for example see **Fig.3**).²³ It is difficult to imagine that this abstraction belonging to the 'Hoard', highlighted by Dimand, was anything other than completely deliberate and not due to the

¹⁶Gombrich, 1966, p.394.

¹⁷ Dimand, 1945, p.256.

¹⁸ Dimand, 1945, p.253.

¹⁹ Dimand, 1945, p.253.

²⁰ Dimand, 1945, p.253.

²¹ Dimand, 1945, p.253.

²² Dimand, 1945, p.256.

²³ Dimand, 1945, p.256.

limitations imposed on the craftsman by the selected material or through a lack of skill, but a form of idiosyncratic religious symbolism. Its aspects relating to perceived signs, or characteristics, of human beauty (enlightening) as rarely is anything offered to the divine that is accidental [see comment below on Henri Frankfort's 'spontaneous stylization'²⁴]. A dedication, a thankful compliant form.

Jean Evans states that the particular Asmar hoard photograph (**Fig.1**) has become an 'iconic image', however 'it is not a neutral record of material assemblage', but a constructed 'aesthetic arrangement' on behalf of those involved in its photography and act akin to window dressing.²⁵ As Evans suggests, this combined with its use in the display (in the museum setting of the Metropolitan Museum of Art) of one of the statuettes pushes a certain reception, 'the photograph reinforces the interpretation of the statues as artworks' which, as discussed above, possibly disassociates them from their temple setting and makers.²⁶

When such bodily/facial features (continuing with this example of the 'hoard') are assessed and broken down into categories such as 'abstract' (see Dimand, 1945 and Evans, 2014), the modern Western perceiver searches for the cause of the abstraction, such as the relaying of reality into geometrical shapes and forms. For example, Henri Frankfort states that often 'in archaeological writings... the assumption that all geometric forms in art are the outcome of a process of conventionalization', this being a modern's perspective of his ancient self.²⁷ A presumed primitive way. When considering 'the earlier style' of objects belonging to Early Dynastic II, Frankfort suggests otherwise; the reverse should be considered, these sculpting practices (evident in the hoard) are an example of what Frankfort labels, 'spontaneous stylization'.²⁸ Evidence of the forging of a new path, modern in its contemporary context. Our cultural aesthetics projected onto a foreign object, which (as stated at the beginning) is an approach. However, as Evans suggests, with regards to the study of the Tell Asmar hoard (and for that matter, as well as any other particular object), 'as a result, these statues are divorced from a fuller exploration of their use and meaning in the Early Dynastic temple'.²⁹

The Tell Asmar statues follow a recognisable style, both to them (so as to be read and understood as a dedication, with common musts) and to us (they match, aesthetically; their trend, if not fully understood, at least evident). Each of the statues has its own idiosyncrasies which may represent something personal to the devoted worshipper.³⁰ In dedicating a statue 'prosperity' was the hopeful request, as certain inscribed examples attest.³¹ Given the believed temple restrictions the statues were extensions of the self (again, important that each has its distinguishing features, for the divine to discern who was worthy or owed as the this divine entity surely has senses of its own) which could pass beyond boundaries the devoted could not.³² Evans states, 'symptomatic of this quality of separateness, the temple

²⁴ Frankfort, 1939, p.19.

²⁵ Evans, 2014, p.647.

²⁶ Evans, 2014, p.648.

²⁷ Frankfort, 1939, p.19.

²⁸ Frankfort, 1939, p.19.

²⁹ Evans, 2014, p.648.

³⁰ Evans, 2014, p.650.

³¹ Evans, 2014, p.648.

³² Evans, 2014, p.650.

statue participated in cultic activities after dedication to the temple had occurred'.³³ Bearing in mind Baumgarten's aesthetic intention, that which belongs to sensory experience, and Evans' statement above, the Early Dynastic devoted, with their statuesque offerings, attempt to pass the sensible onto an inanimate object so as to gain an experience. This notion resembles the idea (held by different cultures) of the dead's continuing existence as long as they are held in the memory of the living.

At some point in time certain worshippers, whose images are reflected in the statues, passed on to the Underworld in the knowledge that their projected idea or modicum of imparted sense was stored safely inside the temple. Although the statues' purposes, by the time of their deaths, was spent, there is a sense of unease or remorse over their disinterment and subsequent separation into the meticulously arranged rooms within many museums.

Seton Lloyd was leading 'the excavations at the time when the sculptures were discovered', a member of the University of Chicago Oriental Institute's 'Iraq Expedition' of the 1930's led by archaeologist Henri Frankfort.³⁴ In J. D. Hawkins' obituary (in the British newspaper *The Independent*) commemorating the life of Professor Seton Lloyd on his death in 1996, Hawkins states Lloyd's 'field career spanned a range of archaeological fashions, extending from the lavishly funded American excavations of pre-war days to the shoestring but resourceful British excavations after the war'.³⁵ The time span of Lloyd's career in the field coincided with the continuing evolution from digging for treasure to 'the beginning of modern archaeology, heavily science-based and directed to maximum data retrieval'.³⁶ Hawkins' laudatory statement continues, 'in... Iraq... his [Lloyd's] name is associated with the breaking of new ground both in location of sites and in the identification of cultures, and his successors have constantly found themselves walking in his footsteps'.³⁷ In 1939 (after accompanying Frankfort in the excavations on the Diyala river in Iraq, Eshunna/Tell Asmar among them) Lloyd took the position of Archaeological Adviser to the Directorate of Antiquities in Baghdad.³⁸ Hawkins states that the taking of this position 'had the unforeseeable consequences that he spent the war largely in Iraq, and was fully caught up in the dramatic political events there, namely the pro-Nazi coup and the British counterstrike and occupation'.³⁹ The above snippets from Lloyd's Obituary only hint at specific person's slight involvement in an important event within perhaps the greatest event in modern history, World War II. What it also partly highlights is that the relationship between the West and the Near East, in this case specifically between Britain and Iraq, is complex, and continues to be so. As another example, Zainab Bahrani recounts the damage done by the looting of the Iraq Museum of Baghdad 'between April 12 and 15, 2003' at the outbreak of war and the invasion of Iraq (March 2003) by coalition forces (which included the British).⁴⁰ These events at the Iraq Museum coincided with the 'majority of other museums and

³³ Evans, 2014, p.650.

³⁴ Frankfort, 1939, p.vii.

³⁵ Hawkins, 1996, online.

³⁶ Hawkins, 1996, online.

³⁷ Hawkins, 1996, online.

³⁸ Hawkins, 1996, online.

³⁹ Hawkins, 1996, online.

⁴⁰ Bahrani, 2003, p.11.

libraries in the country... also [being] looted, burnt, and destroyed'.⁴¹ Bahrani describes these events as the 'theft and destruction of our own history, a history that forms the basis of our identity as the people of this very ancient land'.⁴² Bahrani recalls the effects of first encounters and experiences and their importance in the shaping of young minds, influencing pathways (in multiple respects), and the devastating feeling of loss when these life affirming landmarks are broken, removed, lost, or destroyed.⁴³ After such events there is the nagging fear that one forgets, left unable to revisit, to recharge the memory. These statements and ideas of Bahrani's express the continuing life/lives of objects and the varying experiences of those who come into contact with them, directly or indirectly. Also, how objects, even those (or perhaps especially those, the act of keeping, possessing, and attempting to protect, evidence) from the ancient past play a continuing role in defining, and/or impressing on the modern.

All the above statements highlight how a number of factors and circumstances (and by no means is this an exhaustive list) influence, from an aesthetic standpoint, how an audience experiences the statues from Tell Asmar.

Of course, the first noticeable difference (between the Tell Asmar statues and the statue of Gudea praying [**Fig.3**]) is the choice of material (factors affecting material choice such as politics, culture, access, preference, etc., are also discussed in HPAH7016 Assessment 1 Part 1). Its evolution's aim is to seek the essence of itself, a distillation (a somewhat contradictory statement). Perhaps, an idealised form of Beauty (which is constantly shifting). As Nanay suggests, 'beauty is not a feature of objects that remains the same at all times, in all contexts, for all observers', the above highlighting examples of a particular object/s' involvement in varying contexts.⁴⁴ In Western thought Beauty is inextricably linked with Aesthetics and unavoidable in a discussion on Aesthetics. However, given that experiences are individual, perhaps the meaning of Beauty is meaninglessly unfathomable, but remaining is the idea of Beauty.⁴⁵

Highlighting that the somewhat cyclical nature of the supply, characteristic of materials, etc. allow what can be achieved by the craftsman, to the intended aesthetic result dictating the processes concerning the acquisition and state of the raw material, Guitty Azarpay states that, 'the earliest inscribed statues date from a time when Gudea lacked access to the sources of Magan diorite, evidenced in the use of heterogeneous stones and small scale statues'.⁴⁶ A sea-change then occurs during the 'latest phase of Gudea's reign... [when] large blocks of imported diorite were exceptionally plentiful [and] the stone was readily cut to conform to the requirements of the prevailing artistic canon'.⁴⁷

Bahrani states 'that the majority of Mesopotamian works of art and artifacts were made with an awareness of the future, with an acute awareness of a notion of historical time and

⁴¹ Bahrani, 2003, p.11.

⁴² Bahrani, 2003, p.11.

⁴³ Bahrani, 2003.

⁴⁴ Nanay, 2019, p.9.

⁴⁵ Nanay, 2019, pp.8-11.

⁴⁶ Azarpay, 1990, p.661.

⁴⁷ Azarpay, 1990, p.660.

its relationship to man-made monuments'.⁴⁸ The many statues representing Gudea [an example below, **Fig.3**, no exception] are objects 'enfolded with memory and identity'.⁴⁹ As can be clearly seen, when comparing the statues [**Fig.1** and **2** to the example in **Fig.3**] this culture was not only forward thinking. It seems obviously progressively politically, to maintain certain vital cultural links to the past, it is how we recognise ourselves creating a distinction between peoples. There are certain aspects of Gudea's image that are 'new', but in keeping with an aesthetic tradition found in the Tell Asmar statues (these Gudea statues themselves also 'are linked by... formal features with antecedents from Lagash').⁵⁰

In relation to Western ideals, Bahrani believes that objects such as this abstract representation of Gudea [**Fig.3**] should be termed 'portraiture', even though it does not meet certain Western 'standards' of the 'genre' such as 'mimetic resemblance' (key to the Western ideal and expectation).⁵¹ Bahrani states that objects such as this qualify 'because they represent the person in an image'.⁵² It is also understandable that this was completely intentional and how the subject wanted to be represented. As alluded to above, this manipulated and cemented a contemporaneous political position, then later an ideal, within said culture, in part, with the aid of an aesthetical choice. Irene Winter goes further stating that statues such as those of Gudea, surrounded by their contemporaneous community, were 'far from being mere reminders or representations, sculptural images of rulers'.⁵³ Winter continues, stating that these images 'were subject to complex rituals of consecration, installation, and maintenance, as a result of which they were deemed to be living manifestations, empowered to act and speak on a ruler's behalf'.⁵⁴ This affect, is in part, achieved via the connection, highlighted by Anne Sheppard, between the 'imagination' and 'aesthetic experience'.⁵⁵ As Sheppard suggests, 'sometimes in aesthetic experience we are stimulated to go *beyond* what is seen or heard' (aesthetics relating not only to the visual).⁵⁶ Sheppard explores whether it is the concern of the 'imagination' or not, but for the purpose of this essay it is sufficient to acknowledge that there is something within the workings of our consciousness, which is 'employed in order to appreciate non-realistic modes of art [such as the 'abstract'] which employ parable, symbolism, and allegory'.⁵⁷ These combinations create something perhaps akin to having a religious significance, but an otherwise unexplainable, experience and relationship, far removed from the relationship (though perhaps this is due to their modern aesthetical presentation) that a modern audience has with these particular objects.

word count 3465

⁴⁸ Bahrani, 2003, p.11.

⁴⁹ Bahrani, 2003, p.11.

⁵⁰ Azarpay, 1990, p.660.

⁵¹ Bahrani, 2003, p.14.

⁵² Bahrani, 2003, p.14.

⁵³ Winter, 1992, p.13.

⁵⁴ Winter, 1992, p.13.

⁵⁵ Sheppard, 1991.

⁵⁶ Sheppard, 1991, p.36.

⁵⁷ Sheppard, 1991, p.36.

Images



Fig. 1 - Worshipping Figures. limestone, alabaster, gypsum, ca. 2700-2600 B.C.E. *JSTOR*, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.18108328>.



Fig. 2 - *Stone Statues of the God Abu and His Consort from the Abu Temple, Tell Asmar (Tall al-Asmar). marble, c. 2600 BCE. Iraq Museum, JSTOR, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.16002249>.*



Fig. 3 - *Statue of Gudea Praying*. c. 2120 BCE. Louvre (Paris, France), *JSTOR*, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.14451195>.

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