

Viewing art through the lens of an artist wishing to communicate a message through use of symbolism is one of the anthropological perspectives scholars can use in order to examine and interpret art¹. As described by Graburn, art is “like language” as it can send a message which is understood by both the artist and the consumer². This approach, however, is not viewed in any singular manner, and much like art, many different interpretations of its use for examining art, and in this case, ancient Near Eastern art, can be found within scholarship³. This is a result of the fact that many agree that this “language” is not one which can be compared to words, and it appears that to compare it to a language is in fact a difficult comparison to make at all⁴.

Symbolic communication is a method in which the context surrounding the art piece is as equally important as the piece itself⁵. For the artist to use a symbol with the intention for it to be understood, it must be easily known within the culture in which it resides⁶. If it was intended to be viewed or sold to the wider public, the symbol must be one which was very recognisable, and therefore the message sent one which could be understood easily⁷. Symbolic communication does become more challenging, however, to interpret when the art piece incorporates more personal messages, as something which was intended to present a message would not be so easily understandable to anyone but the recipient⁸. The same symbol may also mean different things in different communities, so the context in which the art piece resides in regards to both the culture and the time period is extremely important to consider when using this method⁹.

For Assyrian art in particular, symbolic communication is an immensely valuable tool to help understand and interpret the pieces discovered. This is because much of Assyrian art can be understood as either narrative, projections of power, or (very commonly) both¹⁰. There are a lot of symbolism and narrative which can easily be found within Assyrian art, and as a result, symbolic communication is an immensely valuable tool for interpreting the artistic landscape found within the culture¹¹. In fact, one scholar who talks in depth about this anthropological perspective and is helpful for understanding just how this perspective can be utilised is Robert Layton.

He argues that whilst art is very subjective, cultural imagery is often engrained deeply within a society, and it is therefore logical to conclude that even if the direct message could not be received clearly or thought of as words, the themes needing to be addressed absolutely could¹². Layton’s interpretation of using art as a visual method of communication is that whilst it is intrinsically linked to language, it is not the same, but rather there are “some general principles of communication that are shared”¹³. This idea of symbolic communication is very useful as it accounts for how symbols can be representative of one specific thing which is widely understood within a community¹⁴. It also demonstrates how that motif meaning can simultaneously differ outside that area even if similarities

¹ Layton, 1991, p.148

² Graburn, 2015, p.4

³ Layton, 1991, p.148

⁴ Firth, 1992, p.25

⁵ Firth, 1992, p.25

⁶ Feldman, 2015, p.337

⁷ Feldman, 2015, p.337

⁸ Layton, 1991, p.121; Firth, 1992, p.25

⁹ Feldman, 2015, p.337

¹⁰ Collins, 2014, p.620

¹¹ Collins, 2014, p.620; Layton, 1991, p.148

¹² Layton, 1991, p.148

¹³ Layton, 1991, p.148

¹⁴ Costache, 2012, p.106-107

remain- a contemporary example being traffic signs, or in an Assyrian context, a circle being equated to the divine¹⁵. Ultimately, it demonstrates how art can both be subjective and informative depending on the audience or time period in which it is viewed.

On the other hand, Gell discusses how art can be used as a vehicle for information where words cannot be used, and how an art object is either a language or not something with inherent intended meaning¹⁶. Gell argues that because “language is a unique institution”, should an art object inherently have a recognisable meaning, then they are “part of language”¹⁷. Such ideas are not very convincing when considering how symbolic communication could relate to varying art pieces, as whilst Gell does slightly agree with Layton in the sense that art is not equal to a language, it falls short when needing to think of symbols as part of art rather than part of language¹⁸. Gell rejects ideas of symbolic meaning, and in this sense his ideas of how art conveys messages do not align with many theories behind the perspective of symbolic communication as a method of examining ancient art¹⁹.

The dichotomy between the two opinions is stark, seemingly almost complete opposites, and it is Firth’s words, in fact, which seem to be the most convincing²⁰. Firth aligns much more with Layton’s ideology than Gell’s, but when setting his boundary with what exactly constitutes communication through art, Firth’s opinion holds much more weight²¹. Firth argues, agreeing with Layton, that art is best understood through themes and cultural symbolism which is easily identifiable, but builds upon Layton’s ideas by including mention of increased ability to communicate ideas when there is both some number of linguistic clues and someone close to the art piece who more readily understands it²². When considering his words in an ancient context, the value becomes even more clear- an example being when using such ideas in relation to examining monuments like the Black Obelisk (Figure One)²³.

The Black Obelisk has a clear narrative tale and function²⁴. Standing at 197.48 cm, this object combines text and iconography to present the achievements of king and minister²⁵. In this case, more direct messages than simple “themes” need to be conveyed, and as a result, symbolic communication and its use as a lens to view art become immensely important, especially when considering Firth’s words in relation to it. For example, whilst Layton’s approach to art is more than suitable in most instances concerning examination of potential artistic messages, thinking of art as something more akin to a language, albeit differently structured, especially when used as support to written language, is extremely useful when analysing monuments associated with the Assyrian king Shalmaneser III²⁶.



Figure One: The Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III. Trustees of The British Museum

¹⁵ Firth, 1992, p.26; Graburn, 2015, p.1

¹⁶ Gell, 1998, p.6

¹⁷ Gell, 1998, p.6

¹⁸ Gell, 1998, p.6; Layton, 1991, p.148

¹⁹ Gell, 1998, p.6-7

²⁰ Firth, 1992, p.25; Gell, 1998, p.6; Layton, 1991, p.148

²¹ Firth, 1992, p.25

²² Firth, 1992, p.24-25

²³ Gadd, 1934, p.11; Marcus, 1987, p.77

²⁴ Marcus, 1987, p.77

²⁵ Marcus, 1987, p.77; Figure One

²⁶ Marcus, 1987, p.77; Layton, 1991, p.148

Upon the obelisk is a combination of both text and images which inform the viewer of the accomplishments that were being presented (Figure One). The images all have some relation to commercial power centres, along all types of trade routes (land, sea and river)²⁷. For this reason, it seems as though this obelisk rather than being a vehicle to demonstrate military power, is instead an object used to portray economic growth and domination. Furthermore, the supporting text appears to be just that- supporting. It does not mention the campaigns of Musri and Suhi, both of which were featured within the reliefs²⁸. The mention of tribute within the text is also not as prominent as it is within the imagery²⁹. Therefore, it is clear that the text and art serve collaborative but separate purposes, informing the viewer of different aspects of power held by Shalmaneser- an idea, when thinking about what that communicates symbolically, demonstrates that the art does serve as its own form of messaging³⁰. It may not be a language of its own, but when considering Firth and Layton's views of symbolic communication, it is clear that the themes being presented are a lot more intricate than simply portrayal of text or a straightforward narrative art piece, and as a result, the method is very useful for such a piece³¹.

Not only is there clear communication which can be seen even without viewing the Obelisk with intent to seek more cultural messages, but there are also more minor facets of the piece which would likely only be examined if seeking to do so in such a perspective³². Five sections of carved images are engraved upon the upper half of the monument, the top two registers are used to detail tribute being given from Gilzanu (Iran), and Jehu (Israel)³³. When considering what this could communicate, other than the obvious accumulation of power inherent in accepting any sort of tribute, the fact that these two locations were depicted could represent the reach of the empire from east to west³⁴. Such an idea is presented by Marcus, who goes on to argue that this, when looking for how this structure communicates further than the narrative being told, is consistent with other monuments from this period³⁵. It supports Shalmaneser's policy of indefinite expansion and serves to remind the viewer of the power held by the ruler³⁶. Geographical storytelling was also utilised within the Bronze Gates and Throne Base, with this art style also consistent with the area, so it would be reasonable to assume that this was a deliberate intention of the artist to present the growth of power in a geographical manner³⁷.

It was created to serve the purpose of presenting information, and as a result, there is clear intent for the art to be utilised in a manner much akin to either written or spoken language. Therefore, whilst Gell is correct in the sense that language is a specific thing, and that the art is much more subject to interpretation than the text below it- with the text being depicted chronologically rather than geographically adding another layer of clarity- Layton and Firth's interpretation of art is much more useful in this sense³⁸. Looking for the more minor messages which result from symbolism or

²⁷ Marcus, 1987, p.87

²⁸ Marcus, 1987, p.87

²⁹ Marcus, 1987, p.87

³⁰ Firth, 1992, p.25; Marcus, 1987, p.87-88

³¹ Firth, 1992, p.25; Layton, 1991, p.148

³² Gadd, 1934, p.11

³³ Marcus, 1987, p.87

³⁴ Marcus, 1987, p.88

³⁵ Marcus, 1987, p.88

³⁶ Marcus, 1987, p.89

³⁷ Marcus, 1987, p.77

³⁸ Firth, 1992, p.25; Gell, 1998, p.6; Layton, 1991, p.148

cultural context is very similar to a language, it just requires more context or visual clues to reach a conclusion and informs how the language included is perceived.

Whilst Layton's interpretation of symbolic communication and how to utilise it, is more than useful in most instances, when there is a clear narrative approach to art, ideas built upon by Firth are helpful to keep in mind. There was clear intent in Figure One that the story being told was one which was meant to be understood, and therefore even if it were only meant to be a supplement to oral telling as mentioned by Marcus, the art is intending to communicate and represent the events more clearly than to just express thematic ideas³⁹. As a result, ideas of engrained symbolic meaning specific to a culture are important remember lest ideas of symbolic communication fall too heavily upon thematic interpretation, when specific instances may have been understood by a contemporary audience.

Layton continues to be convincing in his perspective of symbolic communication when he addresses one of the main limitations to the approach. This limitation being that for an artist's intended message to be communicated, it must first be understood⁴⁰. Humans, even within one community, are not a monolith and as a result, one true interpretation of an art piece may not be possible without textual evidence to corroborate ideas⁴¹. Furthermore, even if the symbol being examined was one which was widespread and thought to have some general consensus of meaning within the society, meanings also often naturally shift over time⁴². Layton references this as something to be aware of, and mentions that instead of thinking about art as a way to communicate small details with a high success rate, and for scholars to speak in absolutes when writing about pieces, it is instead best to think of symbolism as being an approximation⁴³. The exact meaning, unless written by the artist or someone aware of it, can never be known, but themes and symbols are only given meaning if the community gives them meaning, so if something is prevalent it is likely important to their culture, and therefore a useful thing to focus on⁴⁴. Morphy's arguments that there are multiple meanings to a piece depending on the consumer, certainly seem reasonable- especially when thought of in tandem with Firth and Layton⁴⁵. Morphy helps one understand how art communicates with shifting perception, whilst Firth, building upon Layton, helps to understand it in relation to

language and culture⁴⁶. Symbolic communication then becomes a very useful tool to help interpret art when all these considerations are taken into place, as it gives different avenues to examine potential messages.

Furthermore, when considering art pieces which were used to demonstrate power, symbolic communication is a very useful perspective to use. For example, when examining the depictions of gardens in Assyria, there is clear evidence of propaganda and representations of power at play⁴⁷. Figure two, for instance, shows two bird-headed, winged figures holding buckets and facing a 'sacred' tree. This



Figure Two: Bird headed figures and tree from Northwest Palace.
Bowdoin College Museum of Art

³⁹ Marcus, 1987, p.87

⁴⁰ Layton, 1991, p.118-119

⁴¹ Layton, 1991, p.103; Gell, 1998, p.6

⁴² Feldman, 2015, p.337, 339

⁴³ Layton, 1991, p.103

⁴⁴ Layton, 1991, p.102-103

⁴⁵ Jones, 2006, p.214

⁴⁶ Jones, 2006, p.214; Firth, 1992, p.25

⁴⁷ Porter, 1993, p.129

specific tree, or at least the presence of this type of tree as scholars are divided over whether it is one tree or many different ones, is depicted many times within the Northwest Palace of the Assyrian king Ashurnasirpal II⁴⁸. Being in such a location, the connection to power, and of the influence that was possessed is an immediate thought⁴⁹. Another is the fact that, not only are trees a common theme within Assyrian art, but this specific scene not only has hybrid figures, but also a specific design of tree with its twisted and intricate design, which is repeatedly found within the palace⁵⁰. It is often thought that they are date palms and that the bucket held by the figures is symbolic of the bucket of water used with pollination practices⁵¹. This theory, is not agreed upon, but with the repetition of the tree scene being shown many times and the fact that even after it disappeared in later Assyrian palaces, the echoes of the image were remaining with the presence of the figures and their connection to the king, the importance of the tree is definitely recognised⁵². It appears to communicate that the ruling leader is one who can provide with the gods help- a clear indication that the society was still one with a focus on agriculture⁵³. Trees and gardens were often used as representations of power or propaganda, and this specific scene being so heavily repeated within the palaces definitely seems to encourage ideas of power within the ruling king⁵⁴.

But, looking through the lens of symbolic communication is a perspective which also requires some degree of restraint. This is because, as mentioned by Meskell, it is very easy to assume something is more important than was intended- a motif could have simply been used because it suited the piece rather than because it was representative of a greater idea, and whilst the trees certainly seem like a sacred or important symbol, that does not mean that all motifs are⁵⁵. In fact, doing so is one of the main reasons behind the “Mother Goddess” idea which emerged from a need to understand why female representation in figurines were so high⁵⁶. The idea of “The Mother Goddess” within modern scholarship is one which is greatly criticised, often being used as an example for when attempting to find symbolism within an art piece can lead to overanalyses⁵⁷. When looking at Assyrian art, there are many common motifs that it seems difficult to argue all would always naturally lend itself to symbolic communication⁵⁸.

⁴⁸ Porter, 1993, p.129-132

⁴⁹ Porter, 1993, p.132

⁵⁰ Porter, 1993, p.129

⁵¹ Albenda, 1993, p.133; Porter, 1993, p.132

⁵² Porter, 1993, p.139

⁵³ Porter, 1993, p.139

⁵⁴ Albenda, 1993, p.130; Porter, 1993, p.138

⁵⁵ Porter, 1993; Meskell et al, 2008, p.157

⁵⁶ Meskell et al, 2008, p.157

⁵⁷ Graff, 2014, p.376-377

⁵⁸ Albenda, 2005, p.84

Figure Three: Restored wall painting in residence K at Khorsabad.
Evidence of both Rosette and Circle motifs. The University of Chicago



For example, it is easy to assume that just because a piece does contain a symbol, such as the very prominent painted rosette, the importance of the art piece to the people consuming it is increased greatly⁵⁹. This, however, may not be the case. Using a rosette, for example, whilst often used in tandem with depictions of power, such as when used within the throne room at Sargon II's residence at Khorsabad, or as a symbolism of a goddess, is not always viewed that way within scholarship⁶⁰. It seems reasonable to assume that when used as decorative pieces which often were used to embellish the headdresses of Assyrian kings, or in some other connection to power- they likely did serve some symbolic use⁶¹. However, whilst entirely possible to indeed hold a great importance in such an instance, is also as equally likely to simply be an object without much grandeur in others. Afterall, the rosette was mostly used for band decorations, and it seems

unlikely that in every instance of use it was as a symbolism for something greater⁶². Therefore, something which does represent symbolic communication, does not have to be something which sends a great message or function. In this sense, symbolic communication could become a hindrance if the person using it was trying to find symbolism where none can be found, and Meskell's interpretation of symbolism within art is therefore important to recognise, even if her name is not often brought up in the same circles as Gell, Layton and Firth⁶³.

Another limitation of this anthropological perspective being so reliant upon the context in which it surrounds itself, is the fact that personal lived experiences can affect how an art piece is interpreted⁶⁴. Not only is it important to not view the society in which the art piece resided as one singular mind which never changed, but also to recognise how contemporary experiences would differ⁶⁵. Layton draws much from Geertz and Bateson in this instance, as their arguments that art can be used to communicate about the subconscious and that themes gain power through societal belief and use, are very useful when considering how art can communicate using symbolic expressions⁶⁶. The meaning or importance may change over time, but this should still be evident in how the culture approaches these art forms, and how they are depicted⁶⁷. Art shifts naturally with societal changes, such as when the trees were no longer depicted as repeatedly within the palaces- likely indicative of the growth of military and imperialism⁶⁸. Art is therefore useful for communicating shifts within society, and such an anthropological approach is an ideal perception to use in order to catch such messages. This can then help inform how the everyday life may have been, as whilst such messages to the average person would not be communicated through art, such a limitation is one which can be

⁵⁹ Albenda, 2005, p.90

⁶⁰ Albenda, 2005, p.85, 90

⁶¹ Albenda, 2005, p.90

⁶² Albenda, 2005, p.90

⁶³ Meskell et al, 2008, p.157; Firth, 1992; Gell, 1998; Layton, 1991

⁶⁴ Jones, 2006, p.214; Firth, 1992, p.25

⁶⁵ Jones, 2006, p.214

⁶⁶ Layton, 1991, p.148

⁶⁷ Layton, 1991, p.148

⁶⁸ Porter, 1993, p.139

found in all anthropological approaches, and is therefore simply a limitation of the evidence rather than indicative of symbolic communication not being as useful as it could⁶⁹.

On the other hand, it may also be suitable to look at symbolic communication in some instances as the artist simply communicating more mundane aspects of the culture in which they reside. The circle motif (as evidenced in Figure Three), for example, is also very dominant within Assyrian art and whilst it may appear to just be a favoured geometric shape which suits many different art pieces, there is definitely a potential symbolic reason behind its prevalence⁷⁰. The circle motif commonly symbolises the combination of three astral figures within Assyrian art- the moon, sun and morning star which are representative of the Sin, Shamash, and Ishtar⁷¹. Therefore, whilst in some instances a circle may certainly simply just be a circle, its dominance within Assyrian art being due to it being connected to this symbolism is definitely not unreasonable. Viewed through the lens of symbolic communication, whilst it is easy to assume too far in interpretation as warned by Meskell, a more mundane acknowledgement of deeply engrained culture is also a form of communication in itself⁷².

Repetition of such motifs within art in general and in the same pieces is also important⁷³. This is because repetition within Assyrian art communicated the fact that the Assyrians were powerful and unstoppable⁷⁴. Such an idea of using repetition within art ties firmly into Firth's idea of symbolic communication, and how close examination of smaller details- such as the repetition of a circle motif- could herald further insight into what those motifs may mean⁷⁵. It would not be unreasonable to assume that the most common symbols had a wider applicable meaning, one which was important for the wider audience to understand, and something like repetition reinforces the view that the motif is one which was deeply engrained within culture⁷⁶. This is especially true of motifs in which one meaning is already known- such as the connection of circles to the astral figures, or rosettes having evidence of their connection to both divinity and kingship⁷⁷. Focus may not be upon these symbols within the art pieces itself, but the inclusion of them communicates that certain ideas were simply part of daily life and were likely more subconsciously understood than something narrative. Such inferences, thereby making symbolic communication a very useful approach, as it allows insight into the cultural, everyday understanding, rather than simply the major events or figures which would often be the focal points of the art in which these motifs are included⁷⁸.

But, depending on what examination must further be done, it may be the also wrong mindset to use. This is because whilst it can give some helpful inferences in the sense that a common motif could be indicative of a well-known symbol and thereby important to the community, to progress from this point, it may be more useful to use a different approach, such as agency or aesthetics⁷⁹. As a result, finding art pieces which are more mundane or indicative of mass production is can only really be

⁶⁹ Firth, 1992, p.36

⁷⁰ Albenda, 2005, p.95

⁷¹ Albenda, 2005, p.95

⁷² Meskell et al, 2008, p.157

⁷³ Layton, 1991, p.146-147; Albenda, 1994, p.123

⁷⁴ Collins, 2014, p.621

⁷⁵ Albenda, 2005, p.93; Firth, 1992, p.17, 24-25

⁷⁶ Albenda, 2005, p.84

⁷⁷ Albenda, 2005, p.85, 90, 95

⁷⁸ Firth, 1992, p.26-27

⁷⁹ Gell, 1998, p.6

considered quite useful when looking at a culture or society through the lens of symbolic communication, provided that it is understood that the message being communicated is minimal⁸⁰.

Overall, symbolic communication is a very useful perspective to use when considering a whole range of art styles. Not only is it useful when examining the communication of power, but also for when the symbolism is more lacking. It demonstrates a more mundane communication that may be otherwise overlooked, and shows that a certain symbol is important to a community. Layton and Firth's understanding of artistic communication is very useful to help understand just how such a methodology can be best performed, and whilst Gell does have almost opposite views, his assertion that language is unique is important to keep in mind, along with Meskell, to not allow over-interpretation⁸¹. Symbolic communication is very useful when examining ancient art, and despite differences within scholarship on how to define the "language" being communicated, it is clear that throughout Assyria art was frequently used to communicate thematic, or even narrative, messages⁸².

⁸⁰ Meskell et al, 2008, p.157

⁸¹ Firth, 1992, p.25; Gell, 1998, p.6; Layton, 1991, p.148

⁸² Firth, 1992, p.25

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