

Object Analysis



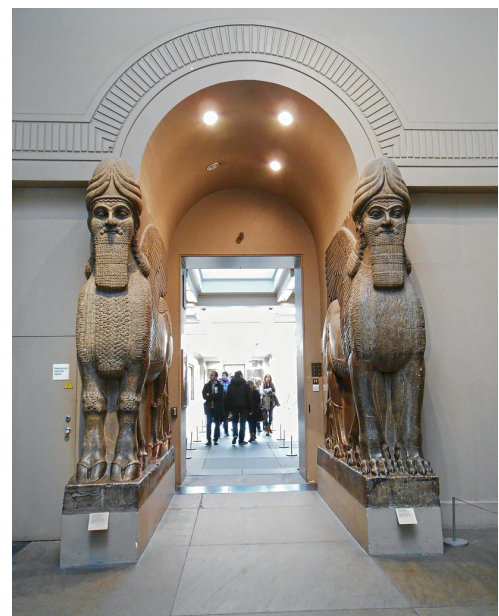
Currently being held in rooms 6a and 6b of the British Museum, London, the object that I have decided to look at during this object analysis is the human-headed, winged lion statue (as seen above). According to the description found on the British Museum website, this statue is of Assyrian descent, and was constructed during the reign of King Ashurnasirpal II. Throughout this essay I will be discussing the object directly in terms of dimensions, material and design, as well as attempting to discuss the context and purpose of the statue in correlation to the time it was created.

As previously mentioned, this statue is of Assyrian descent. The Assyrian civilisation was prominent in the geographical location of Mesopotamia from the early bronze age through to the Iron Age. Although during most of its life, Assyria was a “dependency” of Babylonia until around the 14th century BC, where it became an independent state (Augustyn et al, 2020). Between this time and the 9th century BC, Assyrian rule was complicated, as it rose and fell as an empire. Beginning in the 9th century BC, and before falling in the 7th century BC for good, Assyrian kings united most of the middle-east, stretching from Egypt through to the Persian Gulf (Augustyn et al, 2020). Throughout its history, Assyria was centered around modern-day Iraq, yet during this final period is when Assyria- as not only a civilisation but an empire- was at its largest. During this final empire is when Assyria’s greatest rulers took charge, including Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, Ashurbanipal and Ashurnasirpal II. The latter is the most relevant to me in this essay, as it was this king that my statue dates from the reign of. According to some historians, the reign of Ashurnasirpal II is “one of the most important eras in Mesopotamian history, a fact reflected in the large number of royal inscriptions for this king and the wealth of detail which they contain” (Grayson, 1991).

Around February 2020, I myself visited the British Museum. Although the Egyptian artefacts held most of my attention, the sheer size and presence of the Assyrian Lion-Headed

statue remained in my head, as I had no prior knowledge regarding the history of the culture. That is the main reason as to why I am basing my object analysis on this statue. Standing around 350 centimeters in height, and 371 centimeters in length (British Museum, 2021), the power that this statue exudes in its size is immeasurable. The material that it is made out of is Gypsum, which is a soft, lightweight mineral that is easy to erode. This is interesting, as the statue is in a really good condition, suggesting that the original location may have been found inside of a structure or under a cover. Alongside the size, the other main factor of the statue that catches the eye of on-lookers is its seemingly fantastical design. The body of the statue is that of a lion, whereas the head of the statue is clearly that of a human. The statue also features wings, clearly showing the combination of many species into one. Curiously, I have found some articles discussing similar statues, but where the body of this creature is that of a “bull”, as opposed to a lion (Lendering, 2004). However, I have found many more articles that discuss a lion rather than a bull- including the museum description provided by the British Museum, so I will be referring to the statue as having a lion body for the remainder of this essay. Later on in this essay, I will try to identify the creature depicted, as well as provide a background into the significance of the identity. The head of the statue also clearly has a beard and what looks like a crown atop its head. The final initial observation that can be made when looking at the statue, although maybe not at first, is that the statue has five legs. This can clearly be seen in the image above. The statue has two frontal legs, two rear legs and one more protruding from the middle of its body. Although some may suspect that this is another mystical feature, representing a creature with five legs, I would disagree. I believe that the presence of five legs is to ensure that the statue can be viewed from both the front and the side, without detracting from the statue’s power or presence. From the front it is viewed as a creature standing firm, whereas a side-on view would show the creature moving forwards, possibly ‘against evil’ (Amin, 2014). This would add an extra layer of ‘life’ to the statue, as it would partially be viewed in motion as opposed to standing still.

Although the design, material and dimensions of the statue have already been discussed, arguably the most important point regarding the context of the statue has yet to be mentioned. This is the fact that the statue is one of a pair of statues, both found in the British Museum (118802 being the museum number for my statue (left), 118801 for its counterpart (right)). A look into how these statues are displayed together can be seen on the right. To any viewer at the museum, it is clear that these statues are a set, and the way in which they are displayed would suggest that they were displayed similarly in context. Again, it is apparent that both statues have five legs, which suggests that both statues would have been viewed from the front, as can be



seen in the provided picture, but also from the side as the viewer walks between the pair. According to the British Museum's descriptions of the pair, it is suggested that these were originally found at the entrance to the throne room for the Royal Palace of King Ashurnasirpal II at Nimrud, modern-day Iraq (British Museum, 2022). This city became the capital city of Assyria during Ashurnasirpal II's reign (Met Museum, 2022). It is also worth noting how these statues are now accompanied with both the remains and replicas of the gates of Shalmaneser III at Balawat. This king succeeded his father, Ashurnasirpal II, in 858 BC. Although I cannot say for certain, I would argue that the Balawat gates are being displayed in such a way to show how the statues would have been accompanied by a different gate when they were originally used, although a gate dedicated to Ashurnasirpal II has not been discovered. Due to the size and complexity of these gates, it is highly likely that Ashurnasirpal II was the ruler who initially commissioned the gates, and he unfortunately died before they were complete.

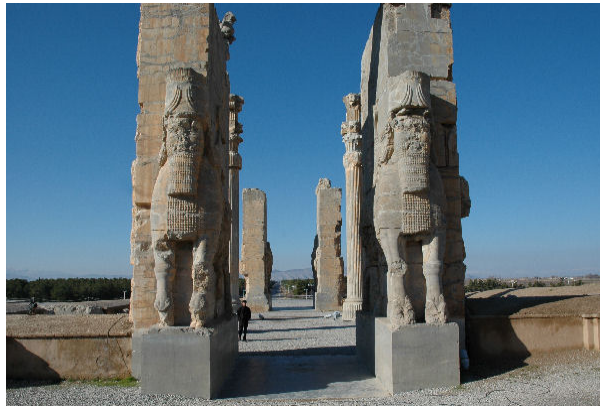
Although the context of the statue(s) has been discussed, the history behind who is being depicted in these pieces of art, as well as what their intended purpose was, needs to be addressed. From my research, I have found that the being depicted in these statues is that of the Assyrian god Lamassu, a 'servant' god who is depicted introducing guests to another, more superior god (Lendering, 2004). However, one conflicting detail that I have come across regards to the gender of this deity. Most sources would agree on the fact that Lamassu is a female protective deity throughout the Assyrian culture (Lendering, 2004). This would seem trouble-free, if it wasn't for the fact that the statues I am discussing clearly have beards, a male-dominated characteristic. To some historians, this would suggest the existence of another god, and a confusion between names. However, I would disagree with this, and would argue that the goddess is sometimes depicted in a more masculine way (with a beard) whilst still remaining the same deity. In Assyrian history, a beard similar to the one found on my statues would suggest the person has power and prestige, so the inclusion of this beard on the statues would have been done to suggest that the person present at the palace or tomb would have a similar level of power. It is clear that the adornments displayed on the statues (the cap on its head and belt around its waist) also further show off the power bestowed on the statues. The Metropolitan Museum touch upon this in their description of similar statues, saying "The horned cap attests to its divinity, and the belt signifies its power". From many articles discussing the purpose of this statue, it is generally agreed that these statues are Apotropaic- meaning to ward off evil. This further shows how the deity presented is added for protective purposes, defending the ruling king from any opposition he may face. During my research, I have also tried to deter the significance of the statue depicting the body of a lion. From my research, I have learnt about the Mesopotamian goddess named Ishtar. Being the goddess of both love and war, she is also the "first known deity for which we have written evidence." (Pryke, 2019). Interestingly, many depictions of Ishtar show her surrounded or accompanied by a lion. Although the connection may not necessarily be present, I do find it interesting how the lion is used in both cases, and the fact that the statues have the bodies of a lion may have also been done to link the two goddesses together, combining

their power. One article I have found quotes the interpretation of a modern historian, who suggests the body, wings and head being different alludes to the combination of “the strength of a bull, the freedom of an eagle, and the intelligence of a human being.” (Lendering, 2004). Although this quote clearly discusses a statue with a bull body instead of a lion body, I do believe that the same could be said when discussing the body of a lion.

As previously mentioned, the statues that I have discussed were not abnormal within the Assyrian culture. Many statues depicting the same creature can be found in many museums from many Assyrian settlements. For example, at Persepolis, the ‘Gate of All Nations’ is accompanied with 2 similar Lammasu statues (left). However, the obvious difference between these statues and the one I have discussed regards erosion. The Persepolis statues have clearly faced the elements, and are not in anywhere near a good quality when compared to the Nimrud statues. This further points to the

assumption I previously made regarding the Nimrud statues being placed indoors, or at least under a cover of some sort, as opposed to being out in the open like the statues above. Another similar, yet more intriguing, statue I have found comes from Dur-Sharrukin, present day Khorsabad. This statue dates to around 150 years later than the Nimrud statues, as they were constructed during the reign of Sargon II. A side-on view of the statue can be seen on the right, and the clear difference that can be observed is the presence of two heads, as opposed to one. This shows that the statue was intended to be viewed both from the front and the side, similarly to the Nimrud statue having five legs. Although it is a clear difference, I am led to believe that there is no significant cultural reason for this stylistic change, and it merely is down to an advancement in cultural ideas, as the statue is 150 years younger than the one I have focussed on, and therefore the way in which to create these statues improved over time.

Overall, I am really pleased with how I have approached this object analysis. From seeing it for the first time in 2020 I have wanted to learn more about the statue, and I am confident and pleased with how much I have discovered when carrying out my research. The statue is more intriguing and detailed than I could have ever first imagined, and I am very pleased with the interpretations that I have put forward regarding the cultural significance of these statues. Not



only do they provide viewers with an insight into the grand, powerful entrances to the residences of kings, they also provide a small amount of mythical and cultural being. In turn, this opens the gates for a rabbit hole of interest.

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