

Culture–Specific Aesthetics and Ancient Mesopotamian Art

Jeremie Zulaski

2110022

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Module Tutor: Dr. Louise Steel

Art and Representation in the Ancient Near East

Spring 2022

Harvard Reference Style

Introduction

Over the past few decades, scholars addressing visual and material culture in various disciplines have been attempting a reconstruction of an aesthetic framework reflective of an indigenous cultural context. In so doing, critical analysis has been undertaken on the origins and biases of Western aesthetics, acknowledging it as a cultural construction, ideologically driven, and insufficient for achieving an accurate understanding of how patrons, artisans, and audiences interpreted art in their own social settings and historical eras. The reconstruction of a culturally specific aesthetics offers a useful emic framework for considering the values, means of apprehension, and range of responses of the cultural communities generating and receiving artwork, potentially prompting fresh insights on motivations for production and function and as well as value, receptivity, and power.

This paper aims to provide a concise yet thorough overview of key contributions by scholars focused on the Ancient Near East who have made critical observations on how Western aesthetic frameworks and display practices have aligned with the European colonial enterprise. It will present alternative criteria by scholars reconstructing an indigenous, non-Western aesthetics through an analysis of the textual-material record. Additionally, the restored aesthetical model will be applied in analyzing specific artifacts from various classifications of art-object. Based on the focus of the scholars surveyed, the scope will be limited to those objects located in ancient Mesopotamia.

Background

In *The Graven Image* (2003), Zainab Bahrani commits the first chapter to an in-depth critical examination of the emergence of art history as a formal discipline involved in the study of art objects. She asserts that “global art history remains strongly grounded in theories of culture and civilization established during the height of European imperialism.”¹ Bahrani adds that the self-referential category of “Western” is a Eurocentric identity construct—forged in late-eighteenth and nineteenth century Western European discourse—relegating “non-Western” to “other,” which is nearly always situated as the lesser comparative category, whether racially, culturally, socio-historically, or collectively.

She alerts readers to the reality that culture *itself* is the site of colonialism, and definitions, categorizations, and descriptions of aesthetics are formulated by and inseparable

¹ Bahrani 2003: 14.

from discourses of power, asserting that “aesthetics, culture, and civilization were racially defined entities...devices of imperialist ideology, direct results of the political imperatives of imperialism.”² Bahrani’s comments clarify the interrelationship between the domains of abstract intellectual ideas and applied political power that has been the catalyst for post-modern critique across disciplines.

What Western societies have historically presented as “art” and whether this is an appropriate designation for various productions of material culture in the ancient world is in and of itself clearly problematic. The incongruity between Western aesthetics and non-Western art has been highlighted Karen Sonik, who has convincingly reinforced Bahrani’s perspective on colonial practices in art history and anthropology.³ With a focus on Mesopotamian objects, Sonik articulates how non-Western artifacts have been appropriated into Western collection and display practices. However, Mesopotamian art is in important ways dramatically different from Western definitions and standards and was situated in contexts of function that diverge from modern Western notions of pure expression for its own sake.⁴ Those notions are particularly incompatible and inadequate for interpreting Mesopotamian artifacts, which as Sonik confirms, were purposefully endowed with agency and intended to “act in and on the world.”⁵ Alternatively, appropriation of these ancient artifacts includes decontextualizing them from their native frameworks—via isolation, fragmentation and/or alteration—and recontextualizing them for display according to Western systems of value without regard for or acknowledgement of their intended and embedded agencies.⁶ Such systems situate artifacts as passive display items, viewable at safe distance, denying the use of touch and other senses that contribute to material-human interaction, limiting the functional agency of the object, and reinforcing our social “discomfort with sensuality and corporeality.”⁷ Given these poignant critiques, scholars have been advancing more culturally specific aesthetics models in order to more accurately approach and interpret non-Western art and artifacts.

Focusing this project on the Ancient Near East, Irene Winter has made notable contributions with an emphasis on Mesopotamian art. This is no small endeavor; Winter explains that over the course of a three thousand-year history, extant Mesopotamian texts do

² Bahrani 2003: 17.

³ Sonik 2022.

⁴ Winter 1995: 2569.

⁵ Sonik 2014: 267; 2022: 530.

⁶ Sonik 2022: 532.

⁷ Ibid., 540.

not demonstrate a tradition of artistic theory, nor do they provide formal exegesis of personal reactions to artistic endeavor.⁸ At the outset, Winter provides a reasonable working definition for art that allows for its evaluation based on “affective properties according to Mesopotamian standards.”⁹ Highlighting the value of Neo–Assyrian official letters and inscriptions related to works undertaken by and for royal benefactors, Winter proceeds to review textual evidence in order to discover appropriate criteria for assessing Mesopotamian positive value and experience. She identifies numerous attributes related to aesthetic response, ranging from 2500 to 500 BCE and assembles a lexicon for positive valuation of response.¹⁰ From this lexicon, she locates three primary interrelated referential *categories* for positive aesthetic response that collectively suggest “a coherent system of Mesopotamian aesthetics in indigenous terms, the culture–specific forms and foci of aesthetic evaluation.”¹¹ These categories include 1) Making and material treatment; 2) Appearance and inherent visual attributes; and 3) Perception and response.

Relatedly in a subsequent piece from 2002, Winter again examines Sumerian and Akkadian texts to compile criteria using an indigenous lexicon comprised of specific positive attributes for artworks. She further locates three different positive *responses*, each correlating to a pair of *properties*. There appears to be a close relationship and areas of overlap between the three types of response located in 2002 and the prior three categories suggested in 1995 (see Figure 1 below). While acknowledging these are not as rigid nor bound as a basic table allows, this arrangement will serve as a convenient way to summarize Winter’s contributions while applying her findings to distinct examples of Mesopotamian art in a cohesive way.

<i>Categories</i> (1995)	Making and material treatment		Appearance and inherent visual attributes		Perception and response	
<i>Responses</i> (2002)	Positive value judgment		Desirable attributes		Powerful emotional response	
<i>Properties</i> (2002)	Fitness for intended purpose	Perfection of form / “beauty” eliciting allure	Radiance / light indicating divinity	Ornamental embellishment indicating grace / divine favor / fertility	Elicits deep attachment / passionate connectedness	Elicits joy / wonder / intense engagement

Figure 1 – (Top row) Winter’s primary reference categories from the 1995 article, with the subsequent responses and properties deemed as positive identified in 2002 (listed in the rows below).

⁸ Winter 1995: 2569, 2579; 2002: 3.

⁹ Winter 1995: 2570.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid., 2579.

Specific example artifacts from general but recognizable classifications are selected to better illustrate Winter's criteria; the examples are clearly not intended to be entirely representative of the overall class.

To limit the scope of work under examination, I will only be addressing examples of artifacts that have been described as "official" or "elite" as opposed to "popular" or "personal," recognizing natural areas of overlap.¹² The reasons for this are threefold: First, Winter's categorical system is derived from the extant textual corpus—both written by and for a literary social sphere—which I feel situates the evidence examined as itself elite. Aligning the evidence consulted to the objects classifications seems appropriate. Second, Mesopotamia's "popular art," originating in domestic contexts, was primarily made from "inexpensive, widely accessible, and, frequently, perishable" materials.¹³ In contrast, "official art" tends to be crafted from more rare, expensive, and typically durable materials, and is located in more secure spaces, thereby offering a greater degree of uncorrupted material evidence. Lastly, given that such official and elitist material culture was intended to function in the "service of the polity and its ruling authority," it reflects "significant religious, political, and social concerns"¹⁴ which are decidedly relevant to the overall scheme proposed.

While the scope and aim have been appropriately limited and defined, we are reminded that material expression in the Mesopotamian cultural context was perceived as possessing powerful agencies, intended to deeply affect and even interact with Indigenous audiences. As Winter has observed, "in Mesopotamia, no sources separate aesthetic experience from experience of the wondrous and/or of the sacred."¹⁵ Therefore, even while our analysis pertains exclusively to the articulation of aesthetics, operational principles prominently identified through other interpretive methods including symbolic communication and those informed by agency and enchantment theories are inextricably embedded in the material artifacts. The categories and qualities of aesthetics would not have been as fully apprehended or as deeply perceived without those related phenomena simultaneously manifesting. Lastly, while Winter's suggested lexicon is based on a close examination of textual material, we will be applying her findings to select classes of art-objects and specific artifacts without further consultation of associated texts to begin assessing the degree to which the reference categories for positive responses are intrinsic to the work itself.

¹² Cyinder seals for example are individually attributable but extend to a broader social sphere in their function.

¹³ Sonik 2014: 272.

¹⁴ Sonik 2014: 267–269.

¹⁵ Winter 2002: 19.

Categories of Aesthetic Response Applied to Material Culture

1) Making

Making encompasses the processes of creation, production, assembly, etc. and demonstrates “an investment in aestheticized production”¹⁶ where overall primary importance is placed on “skill” and “expertise of craftsmanship” as those positive, judgeable aspects of manufacture.¹⁷ Winter clarifies that “The assertion of skill in craftsmanship validates inspiration and expertise as part of the creative process and as part of the value inherent in the work.”¹⁸

In considering the positive value of skill and expertise in relation to degree of fitness for the intended purpose, we need look no further than cylinder seals,¹⁹ which were in use in the ancient Near East from approximately the middle of the fourth millennium to the fifth century BCE with the earliest example of the cylindrical shape having been traced Uruk, located in southern Mesopotamia, emerging in approximately 3,500 BCE.²⁰ Seal impressions were commonly used as important administrative tools in the shipping industry and cylinder seals were drilled through allowing personal use as personal adornment, some eventually being assigned apotropaic properties.²¹



Figure 2 – Cylinder seal (and modern impression) with monstrous lions and lion-headed eagle, Mesopotamia, Uruk Period (ca. 3500 BCE–3100 BCE), jasper, 4.6 x 3.9 cm; Department of Oriental Antiquities, acquired 1877; MNB 1167. Photo: Musée du Louvre.

The skill necessary for carving seals is so apparent that it has been suggested that carvers were conditionally affected by myopia (nearsightedness). The quality of such fine

¹⁶ Winter 1995: 2579.

¹⁷ Ibid., 2571.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The most comprehensive treatment is still Frankfort 1939; for a concise, solid alternative, see Collon 1987.

²⁰ Porada 1993: 563; see also Collon 1995: 53–55.

²¹ Porada 1993: 563; Frankfort 1939: 2.

detail, the precision of spatial awareness, and the depiction of volume at such diminutive scale on often precious materials certainly demonstrates a manner of perfection of form, particularly in those compositions that exhibit patterning or symmetry of design on a minute, dimensionally round surface (see Figure 2 above).

Given that most seals of this type are a mere couple of centimeters, they can convey an enormous amount of information, both iconographic as well as textual, per unit and are produced on durable material. Notably, for the cuneiform inscriptions to read correctly, they needed to be composed backward and in reverse (see Figure 3 below). Their “fitness” for the intended task as well as a positive valuation of this object class is evidenced from the fact that cylinder seals, while experiencing changes in production design, scale, and subject, became ubiquitous in the Ancient Near east and were in use for thousands of years.



Figure 3 – Cylinder seal (and modern impression) with goddesses Ninishkun and Ishtar, Akkadian period (ca. 2334 BCE–2154 BCE), limestone, 4.2 × 2.5 cm; Cuneiform inscription: To the deity Niniškun, Ilaknuid, [seal]–cutter, presented (this); The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, acquired 1947; A27903. Photo: The University of Chicago.

Remaining with the reductive process and the primacy of iconographic convention, the relief carvings found on stelae, *kudurru*, and wall panels in palaces and temples warrant mention here. Though at a far greater scale and thus not used for personal adornment but ideal for official scenes, relief carving typically possess narrative or historicizing characteristics and are generally focused on rulers and associate figures.²² Warfare scenes of siege and conquest, ritual presentations to rulers and gods, hunting and garden scenes of all variety were frequently subjects of large panel relief carvings, which were strategically positioned to allow or inhibit viewing access. Publicly displayed stelae may have been carved on both sides, one with image and the other with text, communicating official information

²² Ataç 2006: 69.

that elite administrators wanted known throughout the polity to both literate and non- or semi-literate audiences. Court style relief sculpture from the Neo-Assyrian period (883–612 BCE) set an aesthetic standard that many neighboring craftsmen were influenced by and attempted to emulate.²³ As pertains to skillful production and alignment with purpose, we will examine two rulers from this period and the different themes emphasized on relief panels from two palace spaces.

The sculptural relief program installed at Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh emphasizes lion capture and royal arena "hunting" as depicted on several pieces held in the British Museum (see Figure 4 a–h below). The aesthetic craftsmanship is displayed in scale, form, and method, with the conventionalized yet realistic lions emanating both ferocity and eliciting empathy.²⁴ Without being a spectator in the arena, this is the most visceral and informative portrayal of such events possible which merits their prevalence in a palace setting. The images are skillful enough to clearly depict a temporal sequence as well as elicit powerful psychological responses.



a. Lion hunters with dogs, nets and stakes



b. Releasing the captured lion into the arena



c. Arena dog-keeper with spear



d. Male lion wounded by arrows

²³ Collon 1995: 129.

²⁴ See Sonik (2017) on the elicitation of emotion from lions portrayed on these wall reliefs.



e. Male lion rearing with fatal wound



f. Female lion wounded by arrows



g. Slaughtered lions



h. Removing a slaughtered lion from the arena

Figure 4 (a–h) – Wall panel reliefs Ashurbanipal's North Palace at Nineveh depicted stages of lion hunting, Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 645 BCE–635 BCE), gypsum, variable between 154 × 95 cm; Middle East Department, acquired 1856 (all). Photos: The British Museum.

In contrast, the relief programs carved and situated in the North West Palace and the Temple of Ninurta during Ashurnasirpal II's reign appear to exhibit divine and royal beings in relationship to fertility as a prevalent motif (see Figures 5–7 below): Such forms allow for both symbolic communication as well as appropriate vehicles for driving positive aesthetic attributes.²⁵

Skillful craftsmanship as a positive attribute involves adornment or decoration, which also includes considering overall arrangement, and pertains broadly to objects, architecture, and persons. As an aspect of positive valuation, elaborate yet careful adornment in Mesopotamia endured and remained connected to royal status and reputation throughout its long history. Careful examination of clothing textures and trimming, elaborate adornment, hairstyles, and royal and divine attributes as well as animal hair, bird feathering, and botanical elements

²⁵ While these themes are worth noting, the aim is not in dissecting what the thematic messaging selected by each Neo-Assyrian king is communicating and why it was selected, but to consider the positive aesthetic criteria inherently displayed through such relief programs.

reveals a rigorous attention to detail and thoughtful, deliberate spacing and placement. These Neo-Assyrian period relief panel sculptures are an appropriate bridge to Winter's second aesthetic category pertaining to the appearance of desirable attributes.



Figure 5 – Wall panel relief with King Ashurnasirpal appearing on either side of a sacred tree making a worship gesture to a god as a winged disk, behind him stand protective deities, Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 865 BCE–860 BCE), gypsum, 195 × 432.80 cm; Middle East Department, acquired 1849; 1849,0502.15. Photo: The British Museum.



Figure 6 – Wall panel relief with pair of eagle-headed protective deities fertilizing on either side of sacred tree, Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 865 BCE–860 BCE), gypsum, 112 × 163 cm; Middle East Department, acquired 1849; 1849,1222.21. Photo: The British Museum.



Figure 7 – Wall panel relief with protective deities kneeling at a sacred tree, Neo-Assyrian period (ca. 865 BCE–860 BCE), gypsum, 77 × 156.20 cm; Middle East Department, acquired 1849; 1849,1222.19. Photo: The British Museum.

2) Appearance

Aesthetically desirable values were made terminologically similar for humans and other types of beings as well as themes like those portrayed in Neo-Assyrian relief carvings. Appearance of desirable attributes is a concept developed in relation to *representation*, which in the Mesopotamian context is distinctly different from resemblance.²⁶ This is especially so in the case of rulership, with royal status portrayed through idealized conventions regarding proportion and features with attributes such as headgear, clothing, and weaponry specific to and denoting identity and station (see Figure 11 – Statue of Ashurnasirpal II with ceremonial robes and weaponry, below).²⁷ Attention to such established conventions like headdress, posture, and hand gesture is seen in iconographical convention throughout the ancient world and particularly in Mesopotamian stone carving, as seen in the wall reliefs above as well as in sculptures like the Neo-Sumerian period statuary of Prince Gudea of Lagash, who can be seen wearing a priestly headdress (see Figures 8 and 9 below) with hands in a gesture of worship (see also Figure 10 below). It should be acknowledged that within the Mesopotamian context, the gods were held as instrumental and active in modeling the royal form, granting divine approval of those qualities essential for rulership beyond personal characteristics.²⁸

²⁶ See Bahrani 2003 for an in-depth discussion on representation in the Mesopotamian context, especially chapters 3 and 5–6.

²⁷ Winter 1995: 2572.

²⁸ Ibid., 2573.



Figure 8 – Statue of Prince Gudea of Lagash, wearing headdress of a priest, holding overflowing vase of water, Neo-Sumerian period, (ca. 2120 BCE–2110 BCE), diorite, 62 x 25 cm; Department of Oriental Antiquities, acquired 1967; AO 22126. Photo: Musée du Louvre.



Figure 9 – Statue of Prince Gudea of Lagash, seated with hands folded in traditional prayer gesture, Neo-Sumerian period, with (ca. 2090 BCE), diorite, 44 x 30 cm; acquired 1959, 59.2. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.

In the category of appearance, Winter identifies a further tripartite assembly of descriptive terms such as: A) those denoting general physical attractiveness, pulsating with vital force and virility, replete with “an elusive complex quality simultaneously signaling voluptuousness, luxuriance, lusciousness, and generative power,”²⁹ “well-formed” and “well-bred,” auspicious, possessing physical grace and presence; B) those denoting light or luster, a radiant quality which when mirroring that which emanates from divine astral bodies is felt to be holy, pure and clean, like an aura, especially auspicious, a visible luminous vitality sanctioned by the gods; and C) those denoting radiant intensity denoting aspects of power and awe, a lustrous brilliance emanating with an intensity that arrests, provoking dread, splendor, and awe. This is translated as “an encompassing aura, general radiance, rays, sparks, shimmer, or fiery glow” displayed as outward phenomena associated with powers able to affect significant emotional reactions as indicated. Such reactions were based on phenomena associated with material characteristics visually apprehended. The established and idealized conventions used to depict rulers in stone carved relief and statuary deliberately

²⁹ Winter 1995: 2573.

characterize positive attributes (as outlined in A–C above) in a manner far more coherent and legible than an accurate likeness of the actual person who is the king could exude.³⁰

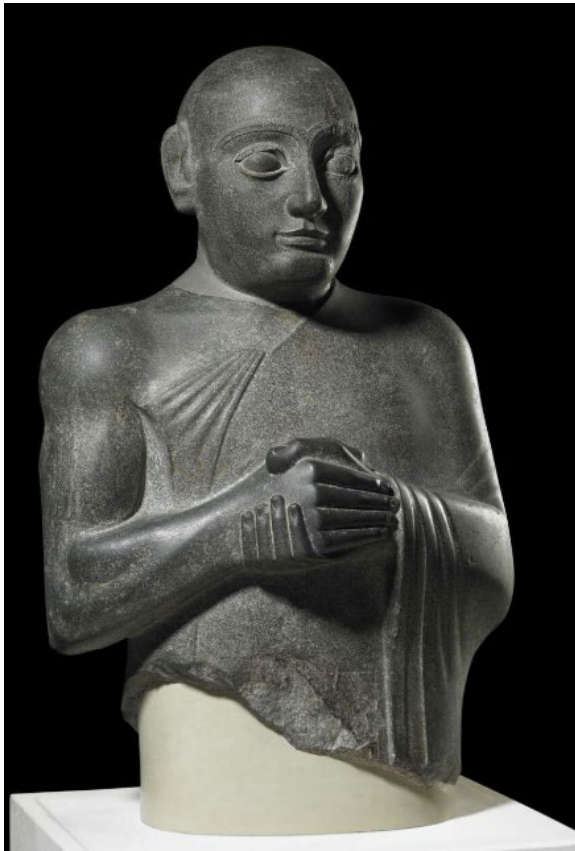


Figure 10 – Statue of Prince Gudea of Lagash (likely), with hands held in gesture of worship, Neo-Sumerian period, (ca. 2130 BCE), diorite, 78 x 50 cm; Middle East Department, acquired 1931; 1931,0711.1. Photo: The British Museum.



Figure 11 – Statue of Ashurnasirpal II, wearing ceremonial robes, holding sickle-sword and mace, Neo-Assyrian period, (ca. 883 BCE–859 BCE), magnesite, 113 x 32 cm; Middle East Department, acquired 1851; 1851,0902.507. Photo: The British Museum.

Winter posits that terms pertaining to this vital luminosity encompass three levels of reference beginning with the manifest visual property, moving to the inherent power correlating to that external signifier, and ending with the elicited viewer response. These levels are correspondent to the extent to which the sacred is considered “manifest through visually affective/aesthetic qualities.”³¹ Appropriately, Mesopotamians were able to make subtle discernments between types of intensely radiant light, resultant phenomena, and viewer affect; light was perceived symbolically as an attribute whose radiance indicates its contact with the divine.³²

³⁰ See Bahrani 2003: 138–145 and 164–174 for discussions on representation and Mesopotamian kingship.

³¹ Winter 1995: 2575.

³² Winter 2002: 13.



Figure 12 – Tell Asmar Hoard votive statues of male and female figures displaying traditional worship gestures, Dynastic I–II period, (ca. 2900 BCE–2550 BCE), gypsum, limestone, and alabaster, various from 21 to 72 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Museum of Iraq, Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, excavated 1933. Photo: Uncredited.

The positive attribute of radiant light is present in the statues of Gudea above, since despite the darker coloration of the stone, a highly polished surface creates sheen whereby light reflects, emanates lustrous radiance, and conveys vitality and a sense of divine sanction.

Beyond stone carved statuary, the materials that most obviously and prominently exhibit symbolically divine light are precious metals, particularly gold (see Figure 14 below). Accordingly, Mesopotamian metalworkers were adeptly skilled in creativity blending rare and expensive metals with colorful, precious materials such as lapis lazuli, coral, and carnelian—which were carved into a variety of bead types—into complex and stunning arrangements (see Figures 13 and 15 below). Materials such as gold, lapis, and carnelian were not native to the region, indicating royal wealth, elite ownership, and a complex and robust trade network having already been established.



Figure 13 – Necklace from Royal Cemetery (Ur) with gold leaf interspersed by lapis lazuli and carnelian beads, Early Dynastic IIIa (ca. 2600 BCE–2500 BCE), gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian, 38.5 cm; Metropolitan Museum of Art, acquired in 1933; 33.35.3. Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Figure 14 – Ornate gold headdress found worn on Queen Puabi in the Royal Cemetery at Ur, Early Dynastic IIIa (ca. 2600 BCE–2500 BCE), gold and carnelian, comb height: 26 cm; diameter of hair rings: 2.7 cm; comb width: 11 cm; Penn Museum, excavated 1929–1934. Photo: Penn Museum.



Figure 15 – Various neckpieces from the Royal Cemetery (Ur) made from gold, lapis lazuli and carnelian beads, Early Dynastic IIIa (ca. 2600 BCE–2500 BCE), Gold, lapis lazuli, carnelian, various; Middle East Department, acquired 1929. Photo: The British Museum.

3) Response and Perception

The final category Winter presents is that of elicited response, or affect, which pertains to the judgement of value within the whole of the work's visual display as well as the associated range of reactions, with the capacity to elicit powerful emotional responses deemed a positive attribute.³³ She identifies this category through language endowing special esteem, characterizing the work as a “treasure” that is “praise-worthy” or suitable for praise, compelling deep attachment, delight, and an impassioned connectedness as if it were a loved one, attractive human form, or fertile landscape.³⁴ Such esteem affirms that the work's value transcends mere material value, even while precious and rare materials

³³ Winter 2002: 12.

³⁴ Ibid.

contribute to valuation given their positive symbolic and especially visual attributes. Precious, valuable, and gifted keepsakes such as the necklaces above might have been worn for very special occasions and evoked such responses, especially when attached to memories of loved ones.



Figure 16 – High relief lamassu wall statues from the palace of King Sargon II at Dur-Sharrukin, Neo-Assyrian Period (ca. 721 BCE–705 BCE), gypsum alabaster, 420 x 436 cm; Department of Oriental Antiquities, acquired in 1847. Photo: Musée du Louvre, by Hans Ollermann.

Winter highlights how rulers in Neo-Assyrian texts use formulaic expressions of satisfaction regarding completion of monumental architectural projects as reflective of a comprehensive aesthetic appraisal. Such pronouncements apply to the fully realized interrelationship between manufacture, adornment, placement, and resultant affect in relation to a projected purpose or ideal. The lamassu wall statues from the palace of King Sargon II (see Figures 16 above, also Figure 17 below) could be seen as likely imbuing these aspects

and warranting this type of response, given the articulation of fine detail, massive scale, and strategic placement at the threshold of a royal, and thus divinely licensed, space.



Figure 17 – High relief wall statues from the palace of King Sargon II at Dur-Sharrukin, Neo-Assyrian Period (ca. 721 BCE–705 BCE), gypsum alabaster, 420 x 436 cm; Department of Oriental Antiquities, acquired in 1847. Photo: Musée du Louvre, by Hans Ollermann.

As well, the culmination of this interrelationship and the formulaic royal expression of gratification would certainly have applied to King Nebuchadnezzar II when he beheld the completion of the Ishtar Gate of Babylon (see Figures 18 and 19 below), which though one of several, is both striking in appearance and monumental in scale. The symmetry, decorative element and signification of animal symbols notwithstanding, the combination of the lustrously abundant imported lapis of the glazed tiles against the brick and earth tones perceived during such a threshold encounter would register as an immersive, awesome, and memorable experience, able to elicit both intimidation and admiration from distance.



Figure 18 (a–b) – Architectural reconstructions of Ishtar Gate, Neo–Babylonian Period (ca. 575 BCE), glazed ceramic tiles, 14.75 x 26.41 m; Near Eastern Museum, acquired in 1918. Photos: Near Eastern Museum of the State Museums in Berlin – Prussian cultural heritage.



Figure 19 (a–b) – Digital reconstructions of Ishtar Gate to the city of Babylon, Neo–Babylonian Period (ca. 575 BCE). Photos: <https://madainproject.com/>.

The Mesopotamian tradition prominently emphasizes *seeing* as the ultimate means of assessment and appreciation. Interestingly, Winter proposes that seeing requires the concentration of affective energy into the object itself, an investment of visual power she terms *cathexion*.³⁵ This is notable, since the act of seeing is undertaken by gods, rulers, and general audiences alike; the perception and reaction of each class of viewer varies and serves differing purposes in society.

Winter distinguishes two types of reaction based upon viewer classification. The first reaction is that of direct gratification, joy, or delight experienced by the gods, the *intended audience* or primary recipients of temples, sculpture, and votive objects. Here we might consider the Tell Asmar Hoard votive statues (see Figure 12 above) as being intended to have had elicited such a reaction, with their exaggerated and attentively wide eyes and constant

³⁵ Winter 1995: 2577.

gestures of praise to the temple deity. Alternately, a divine audience may be assumed to have been fulfilled in this manner by the carved wall reliefs of the Neo-Assyrian Kings Ashurnasirpal and Ashurnasirpal II, with their displays of symbolic power and skill, directly attributable and authorized by the gods.

The second type is the evoked sense of intense admiration or awe felt by the *spectators* or general populace, whose committed gaze is rewarded by the affective force elicited. We might consider the attachment and connectedness felt by citizens returning to Babylon, with the Ishtar Gate among the prominent reminders of how deeply and meaningfully place shapes experience.

Conclusion

The interplay between material treatment and attributable positive value, viewer and object, and *cathexis* and affective response is clearly distinctly unique in the ancient Mesopotamian context and vastly different than the generally detached and passive modern Western gaze languidly draped on those same artifacts. The efforts aimed at developing aesthetic frameworks for analyzing material culture that are more in alignment with original indigenous contexts seek practical alternatives to Eurocentric and colonially informed, ideologically corrupted, and therefore ostensibly inadequate models. Such models' analytical paradigms and ideologies are reflective of significantly divergent values and norms that are vastly removed in space and time and yet have been awkwardly, if not forcefully, superimposed onto ancient socio-cultural material expressions.

With the intention of increasing cultural knowledge through honing visual literacy, this paper analyzed several examples of art-object belonging to various classifications including sculptural carvings such as cylinder seals, wall reliefs, and statuary, personal adornment in the form of decorative neckpieces, and monumental architecture. These artifacts were produced across expansive periods of time using a wide array of materials whose inherent characteristics had been ascribed positive attributes. Those characteristics, while profoundly heightened through highly skilled craftsmanship, reflect properties distinctive and innate to the material itself. Such valued properties were brought into correspondence with impactful conventional motifs, each component enhancing the other.

To more competently transition toward a culturally specific and contextually appropriate aesthetic framework, this paper situates the reference categories for positive aesthetic responses identified by Winter, not merely from texts related to artwork from

ancient Mesopotamia but, as the ancient Mesopotamians heralded seeing as the ultimate means of assessment and appreciation, in the artwork itself. In so doing, we have suggested potential approaches to begin seeing ancient artifacts with responsivity to their dynamic materials and associative affective properties through the frame of Mesopotamian aesthetics on its own unique terms.

Appendix

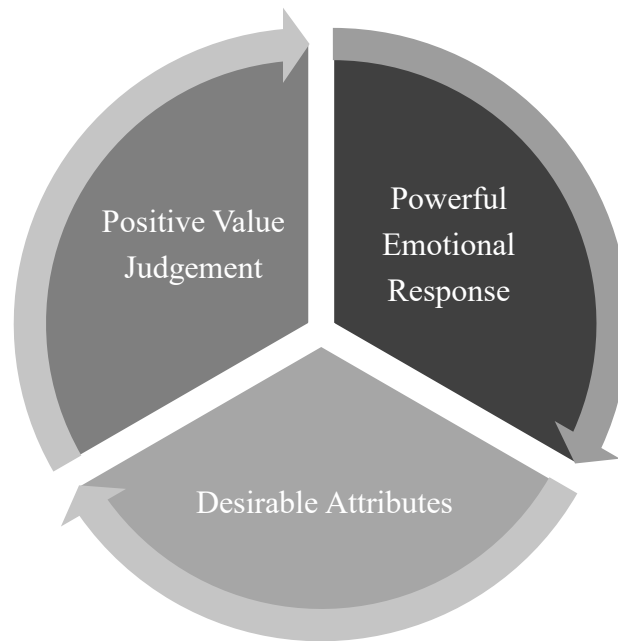


Diagram 1 – Winter’s three reference categories for positive aesthetic response shown as a recurring cycle.

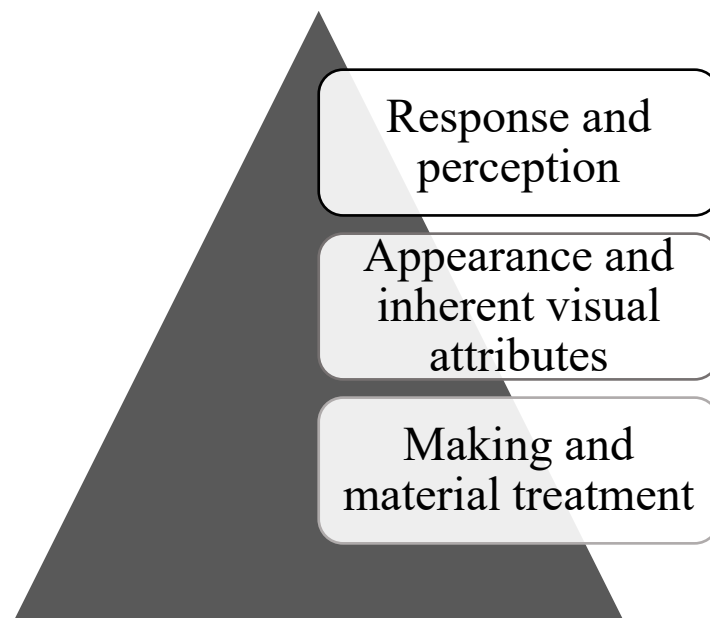


Diagram 2 – Winter’s three reference categories for positive aesthetic response shown in proposed hierarchical order.

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