

Art and Representation in the Ancient Near East AHAR7007



Defining Art

- Western art: an end in itself produced by original creative genius:
 - “simply in order to be looked at....with an absorbed, exclusive, & disinterested attention” (Sonik 2021: 531)
- Explicitly designed to be displayed and viewed
- Perception of **primitivism** of non-western (non-classical) art:
 - Value judgements embedded



Les Demoiselles d'Avignon

Defining Art

- Any community which possesses a tradition of artistic expression has more than a little sophistication in its culture” (Layton 1991, 3)
- Might encompass multiple media:
 - Performance: oral recitation, dance, music
 - Three dimensional sculpture
 - Two dimensional engravings, use of pigments etc.
 - Human body



Painted handprints, Çatalhöyük

Defining Art: Anthropological Approaches

- Layton (1991):
 - Aesthetics: something designed to look nice
 - Art as symbolic communication
- Gell (1998):
 - Technologies of enchantment
 - Art has agentive capacities



Neolithic figurine, Khirokitia

Art as Aesthetic

- The science of sensuous perception, the perception of the beautiful
- Art is produced with the intention that it is aesthetically pleasing & does not need to be functional
- Essential qualities:
 - Formal organisation
 - Balanced compositions
 - Perceptions of harmony, rhythm & proportion



Saffron gatherer, Thera

Western Enlightenment Aesthetics

- Objectifies art:
 - Dependent upon belonging to us
- Privileges sight over other senses as the noblest (most physically distant sense)
 - Does not take into account how different cultures might variously construct/value sensorial systems
 - Viewing rather than seeing
- “a deliberately distant and disembodied form of attention” (Sonik 2021: 530)



Caryatids, Acropolis Museum

Art as Aesthetic

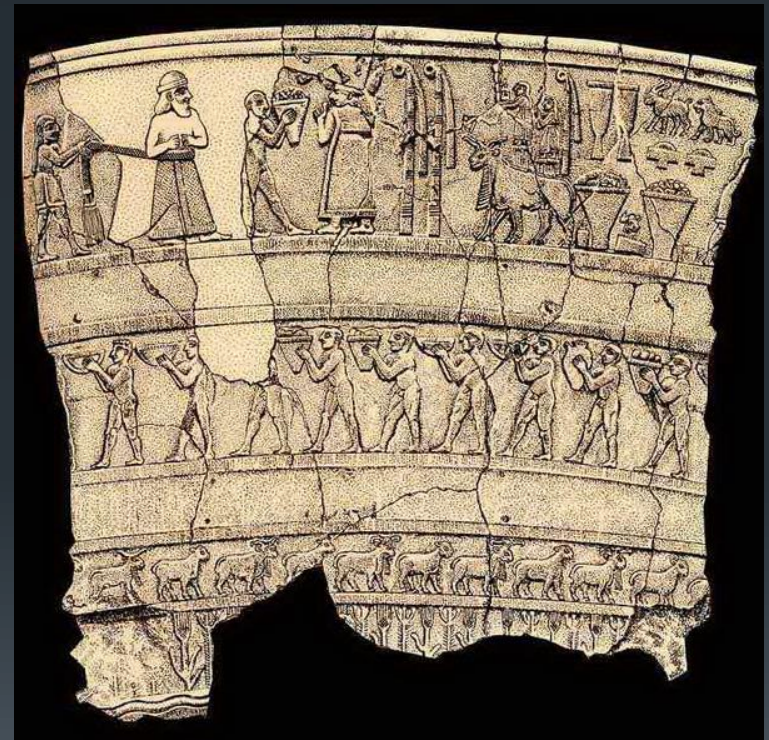
- Aesthetics are culturally ascribed
 - Be careful of applying our own aesthetic values to ancient art forms
- Should consider multiple sensory engagements, not just sight
- How can we in the present demonstrate expression of aesthetic judgment



Cycladic folded arm figurine

Art as Communication

- Art encodes social messages & has symbolic content
- Images are intended to enhance our perception of the world
- Or to convey specific information underlying ideologies
- Morphy: art objects have semantic or aesthetic properties which are used for presentational or representational purposes:
 - Art objects are “sign vehicles” which convey meaning
 - Art objects are made to provoke a culturally endorsed aesthetic response



Uruk/Warka vase

Art as Communication

- Is the artist's intent in the production of art the same as reception of art by its audience ?
 - The work of art is the primary means of expression for an artist
 - The reception of art is influenced by the experiences of the audience
- Choice of ornamentation might signal their adherence to community values
- Art can be used to make inferences as to emblems of group identity, individual identity & gender



Early Dynastic statuette

Technologies of Enchantment

- Gell (1992): art demonstrates technically achieved excellence
- One of the means by which individuals are persuaded of the necessity & desirability of the social order
- Art is orientated towards the production of specific social consequences



Great Lyre of Ur

Power of Art

- Technical processes cast a spell over the viewer, enabling them to see the world in enchanted form
- Art objects are designed to dazzle the beholder & affect how they will react
- The attitude of the viewer to an art object is conditioned by their notion of the technical processes & the fact that it was created by the agency of another (more skilled) individual



Hittite fist-shaped vessel

Art and Agency

- Anthropological theory is intended to make sense of human behaviour in the context of social relations
- Therefore the objective of an anthropology of art is to “account for the production & circulation of art objects as a function of **this relational context**” (Gell 1998: 11)
- Rejects notion of symbolic meaning
 - That art is a visual code for communication
- Emphasises agency, intention, causation, and transformation
 - “A system of action intended to change the world rather than encode symbolic propositions about it” (1998: 6)

Art and Agency

- Focuses on practical, mediatory role of art objects within social processes
- Art is a function of the social relational matrix in which it is embedded...
- A work of art is inherently social:
 - it mediates between social agents & provides channels for social relations



Detail, Pu Abi headdress

Art in the Ancient World

- Art operates within two domains:
- Ritual/political art
 - Displayed when political power is legitimated by association with various supernatural forces
- Ceremonial exchange
 - Artistry is lavished on objects to be transacted in the most prestigious spheres of exchange



Ashurnasipal II: tree of life

Art Object as Social Agents

- Art objects mediate social agency acting as social agents
- They affect (& direct) human actions & social praxis
- Distributed agency:
 - Art object does not have intentionality
 - This intentionality is on part of the creator/patron
- Entanglement of objects & people within web/meshwork of social relations



Qatna, ancestor statues

Art and Agency in Practice

- Ironically Gell draws upon Peircean semiology!
- **Index:** the art object
 - A sign: an entity from which the observer can make a casual reference
 - Both the outcome and the instrument of social agency
- **Abduction:** how we infer information from indexes
 - The inference or explanation used to create a new empirical rule
 - It makes predictable what is otherwise mysterious
- **The patient:** the viewer/audience
 - The social actor affected by the actions (being) of the index/agent

Art and Agency & Enchantment

- Art objects are “difficult”: to make, to think, to transact
- They fascinate, compel & entrap the spectator
- “Their peculiarity, intransigence, & oddness is a key factor in their efficacy as social instruments” (Gell 1998: 23)
- Power relations within & between communities are played out through art objects:
 - Iconography of power...



Assyrian lion hunt relief

Value of Art Object

- How difficult is it to acquire?
- High “price”:
 - Made of rare, exotic materials which involve high costs in production
- Hard to produce:
 - Complex & maybe difficult technical processes involved in manufacture
 - Investment of time, energy, skill



Lapis cup, Royal Tombs of Ur

Itinerary of Object

- Objects have life histories, meanings and are part of networks in their ancient context
- Modern reception: we do not recognise these connections
- Modern itineraries separate objects from their contemporary connections:
 - Creates a break between their ancient use/value/meaning and our understanding
 - Places the objects into new networks and relationships



Ivory carving, Mycenae

Itinerary of Object

- Object itinerary allows us to think about reception of ancient objects in the present as part of their life history:
 - Cultural production of the object in the present
 - Entangled relations of objects past and present
- Think about the places of an object's itinerary as event spaces:
 - Museum/art books etc. another node on their journey
 - New criteria for assessing their value, impact, function...



Mycenaean ivory from Delos

Summary

- How then should we think about ancient art?
- Is it a system of **symbolic communication**?
 - Art encodes a system of knowledge
- How can we think about the **aesthetic** of ancient art?
 - Is this relevant to our enquiry?
- Should we focus on the **agency** of art objects: these are intended to affect change?
- How does **itinerary of object** & modern reception affect our analysis?